

Chapter 67. The Man in the Mask.

The snow was falling thick and icy. Aramis was the next to come in and to discover Athos almost insensible. But at the first words he uttered the comte roused himself from the kind of lethargy in which he had sunk.

"Well," said Aramis, "beaten by fate!"

"Beaten!" said Athos. "Noble and unhappy king!"

"Are you wounded?" cried Aramis.

"No, this is his blood."

"Where were you, then?"

"Where you left me--under the scaffold."

"Did you see it all?"

"No, but I heard all. God preserve me from another such hour as I have just passed."

"Then you know that I did not leave him?"

"I heard your voice up to the last moment."

"Here is the order he gave me and the cross I took from his hand; he desired they should be returned to the queen."

"Then here is a handkerchief to wrap them in," replied Athos, drawing from his pocket the one he had steeped in the king's blood.

"And what," he continued, "has been done with the poor body?"

"By order of Cromwell royal honors will be accorded to it. The doctors are embalming the corpse, and when it is ready it will be placed in a lighted chapel."

"Mockery," muttered Athos, savagely; "royal honors to one whom they have murdered!"

"Well, cheer up!" said a loud voice from the staircase, which Porthos had just mounted. "We are all mortal, my poor friends."

"You are late, my dear Porthos."

"Yes, there were some people on the way who delayed me. The wretches were dancing. I took one of them by the throat and three-quarters throttled him. Just then a patrol rode up. Luckily the man I had had most to do with was some minutes before he could speak, so I took advantage of his silence to walk off."

"Have you seen D'Artagnan?"

"We got separated in the crowd and I could not find him again."

"Oh!" said Athos, satirically, "I saw him. He was in the front row of the crowd, admirably placed for seeing; and as on the whole the sight was curious, he probably wished to stay to the end."

"Ah Comte de la Fere," said a calm voice, though hoarse with running, "is it your habit to calumniate the absent?"

This reproof stung Athos to the heart, but as the impression produced by seeing D'Artagnan foremost in a coarse, ferocious crowd had been very strong, he contented himself with replying:

"I am not calumniating you, my friend. They were anxious about you here; I simply told them where you were. You didn't know King Charles; to you he was only a foreigner and you were not obliged to love him."

So saying, he stretched out his hand, but the other pretended not to see it and he let it drop again slowly by his side.

"Ugh! I am tired," cried D'Artagnan, sitting down.

"Drink a glass of port," said Aramis; "it will refresh you."

"Yes, let us drink," said Athos, anxious to make it up by hobnobbing with D'Artagnan, "let us drink and get away from this hateful country."

The felucca is waiting for us, you know; let us leave to-night, we have nothing more to do here."

"You are in a hurry, sir count," said D'Artagnan.

"But what would you have us to do here, now that the king is dead?"

"Go, sir count," replied D'Artagnan, carelessly; "you see nothing to keep you a little longer in England? Well, for my part, I, a bloodthirsty ruffian, who can go and stand close to a scaffold, in order to have a better view of the king's execution--I remain."

Athos turned pale. Every reproach his friend uttered struck deeply in his heart.

"Ah! you remain in London?" said Porthos.

"Yes. And you?"

"Hang it!" said Porthos, a little perplexed between the two, "I suppose, as I came with you, I must go away with you. I can't leave you alone in this abominable country."

"Thanks, my worthy friend. So I have a little adventure to propose to you when the count is gone. I want to find out who was the man in the mask, who so obligingly offered to cut the king's throat."

"A man in a mask?" cried Athos. "You did not let the executioner escape,

then?"

"The executioner is still in the cellar, where, I presume, he has had an interview with mine host's bottles. But you remind me. Mousqueton!"

"Sir," answered a voice from the depths of the earth.

"Let out your prisoner. All is over."

"But," said Athos, "who is the wretch that has dared to raise his hand against his king?"

"An amateur headsman," replied Aramis, "who however, does not handle the axe amiss."

"Did you not see his face?" asked Athos.

"He wore a mask."

"But you, Aramis, who were close to him?"

"I could see nothing but a gray beard under the fringe of the mask."

"Then it must be a man of a certain age."

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, "that matters little. When one puts on a mask, it is not difficult to wear a beard under it."

"I am sorry I did not follow him," said Porthos.

"Well, my dear Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "that's the very thing it came into my head to do."

Athos understood all now.

"Pardon me, D'Artagnan," he said. "I have distrusted God; I could the more easily distrust you. Pardon me, my friend."

"We will see about that presently," said D'Artagnan, with a slight smile.

"Well, then?" said Aramis.

"Well, while I was watching--not the king, as monsieur le comte thinks, for I know what it is to see a man led to death, and though I ought to be accustomed to the sight it always makes me ill--while I was watching the masked executioner, the idea came to me, as I said, to find out who he was. Now, as we are wont to complete ourselves each by all the rest and to depend on one another for assistance, as one calls his other hand to aid the first, I looked around instinctively to see if Porthos was there; for I had seen you, Aramis, with the king, and you, count, I knew would be under the scaffold, and for that reason I forgive you," he added, offering Athos his hand, "for you must have suffered much. I was looking around for Porthos when I saw near me a head which had been broken, but which, for better or worse, had been patched with plaster and with black silk. 'Humph!' thought I, 'that looks like my handiwork;

I fancy I must have mended that skull somewhere or other.' And, in fact, it was that unfortunate Scotchman, Parry's brother, you know, on whom Groslow amused himself by trying his strength. Well, this man was making signs to another at my left, and turning around I recognized the honest Grimaud. 'Oh!' said I to him. Grimaud turned round with a jerk, recognized me, and pointed to the man in the mask. 'Eh!' said he, which meant, 'Do you see him?' 'Parbleu!' I answered, and we perfectly understood one another. Well, everything was finished as you know. The mob dispersed. I made a sign to Grimaud and the Scotchman, and we all three retired into a corner of the square. I saw the executioner return into the king's room, change his clothes, put on a black hat and a large cloak and disappear. Five minutes later he came down the grand staircase."

"You followed him?" cried Athos.

"I should think so, but not without difficulty. Every few minutes he turned around, and thus obliged us to conceal ourselves. I might have gone up to him and killed him. But I am not selfish, and I thought it might console you all a little to have a share in the matter. So we followed him through the lowest streets in the city, and in half an hour's time he stopped before a little isolated house. Grimaud drew out a pistol. 'Eh?' said he, showing it. I held back his arm. The man in the mask stopped before a low door and drew out a key; but before he placed it in the lock he turned around to see if he was being followed. Grimaud and I got behind a tree, and the Scotchman having nowhere to hide himself, threw himself on his face in the road. Next moment the door opened and the man disappeared."

"The scoundrel!" said Aramis. "While you have been returning hither he will have escaped and we shall never find him."

"Come, now, Aramis," said D'Artagnan, "you must be taking me for some one else."

"Nevertheless," said Athos, "in your absence----"

"Well, in my absence haven't I put in my place Grimaud and the Scotchman? Before he had taken ten steps beyond the door I had examined the house on all sides. At one of the doors, that by which he had entered, I placed our Scotchman, making a sign to him to follow the man wherever he might go, if he came out again. Then going around the house I placed Grimaud at the other exit, and here I am. Our game is beaten up. Now for the tally-ho."

Athos threw himself into D'Artagnan's arms.

"Friend," he said, "you have been too good in pardoning me; I was wrong, a hundred times wrong. I ought to have known you better by this time; but we are all possessed of a malignant spirit, which bids us doubt."

"Humph!" said Porthos. "Don't you think the executioner might be Master Cromwell, who, to make sure of this affair, undertook it himself?"

"Ah! just so. Cromwell is stout and short, and this man thin and lanky, rather tall than otherwise."

"Some condemned soldier, perhaps," suggested Athos, "whom they have pardoned at the price of regicide."

"No, no," continued D'Artagnan, "it was not the measured step of a foot soldier, nor was it the gait of a horseman. If I am not mistaken we have to do with a gentleman."

"A gentleman!" exclaimed Athos. "Impossible! It would be a dishonor to all the nobility."

"Fine sport, by Jove!" cried Porthos, with a laugh that shook the windows. "Fine sport!"

"Are you still bent on departure, Athos?" asked D'Artagnan.

"No, I remain," replied Athos, with a threatening gesture that promised no good to whomsoever it was addressed.

"Swords, then!" cried Aramis, "swords! let us not lose a moment."

The four friends resumed their own clothes, girded on their swords, ordered Mousqueton and Blaisois to pay the bill and to arrange everything for immediate departure, and wrapped in their large cloaks left in search of their game.

The night was dark, snow was falling, the streets were silent and deserted. D'Artagnan led the way through the intricate windings and

narrow alleys of the city and ere long they had reached the house in question. For a moment D'Artagnan thought that Parry's brother had disappeared; but he was mistaken. The robust Scotchman, accustomed to the snows of his native hills, had stretched himself against a post, and like a fallen statue, insensible to the inclemency of the weather, had allowed the snow to cover him. He rose, however, as they approached.

"Come," said Athos, "here's another good servant. Really, honest men are not so scarce as I thought."

"Don't be in a hurry to weave crowns for our Scotchman. I believe the fellow is here on his own account, for I have heard that these gentlemen born beyond the Tweed are very vindictive. I should not like to be Groslow, if he meets him."

"Well?" said Athos, to the man, in English.

"No one has come out," he replied.

"Then, Porthos and Aramis, will you remain with this man while we go around to Grimaud?"

Grimaud had made himself a kind of sentry box out of a hollow willow, and as they drew near he put his head out and gave a low whistle.

"Soho!" cried Athos.

"Yes," said Grimaud.

"Well, has anybody come out?"

"No, but somebody has gone in."

"A man or a woman?"

"A man."

"Ah! ah!" said D'Artagnan, "there are two of them, then!"

"I wish there were four," said Athos; "the two parties would then be equal."

"Perhaps there are four," said D'Artagnan.

"What do you mean?"

"Other men may have entered before them and waited for them."

"We can find out," said Grimaud. At the same time he pointed to a window, through the shutters of which a faint light streamed.

"That is true," said D'Artagnan, "let us call the others."

They returned around the house to fetch Porthos and Aramis.

"Have you seen anything?" they asked.

"No, but we are going to," replied D'Artagnan, pointing to Grimaud, who had already climbed some five or six feet from the ground.

All four came up together. Grimaud continued to climb like a cat and succeeded at last in catching hold of a hook, which served to keep one of the shutters back when opened. Then resting his foot on a small ledge he made a sign to show all was right.

"Well?" asked D'Artagnan.

Grimaud showed his closed hand, with two fingers spread out.

"Speak," said Athos; "we cannot see your signs. How many are there?"

"Two. One opposite to me, the other with his back to me."

"Good. And the man opposite to you is----

"The man I saw go in."

"Do you know him?"

"I thought I recognized him, and was not mistaken. Short and stout."

"Who is it?" they all asked together in a low tone.

"General Oliver Cromwell."

The four friends looked at one another.

"And the other?" asked Athos.

"Thin and lanky."

"The executioner," said D'Artagnan and Aramis at the same time.

"I can see nothing but his back," resumed Grimaud. "But wait. He is moving; and if he has taken off his mask I shall be able to see. Ah----"

And as if struck in the heart he let go the hook and dropped with a groan.

"Did you see him?" they all asked.

"Yes," said Grimaud, with his hair standing on end.

"The thin, spare man?"

"Yes."

"The executioner, in short?" asked Aramis.

"Yes."

"And who is it?" said Porthos.

"He--he--is----" murmured Grimaud, pale as a ghost and seizing his master's hand.

"Who? He?" asked Athos.

"Mordaunt," replied Grimaud.

D'Artagnan, Porthos and Aramis uttered a cry of joy.

Athos stepped back and passed his hand across his brow.

"Fatality!" he muttered.