

## Chapter 76. The Ambassadors.

The two friends rode rapidly down the declivity of the Faubourg, but on arriving at the bottom were surprised to find that the streets of Paris had become rivers, and the open places lakes; after the great rains which fell in January the Seine had overflowed its banks and the river inundated half the capital. The two gentlemen were obliged, therefore, to get off their horses and take a boat; and in that strange manner they approached the Louvre.

Night had closed in, and Paris, seen thus, by the light of lanterns flickering on the pools of water, crowded with ferry-boats of every kind, including those that glittered with the armed patrols, with the watchword, passing from post to post--Paris presented such an aspect as to strongly seize the senses of Aramis, a man most susceptible to warlike impressions.

They reached the queen's apartments, but were compelled to stop in the ante-chamber, since her majesty was at that moment giving audience to gentlemen bringing her news from England.

"We, too," said Athos, to the footman who had given him that answer, "not only bring news from England, but have just come from there."

"What? then, are your names, gentlemen?"

"The Comte de la Fere and the Chevalier d'Herblay," said Aramis.

"Ah! in that case, gentlemen," said the footman, on hearing the names which the queen had so often pronounced with hope, "in that case it is another thing, and I think her majesty will pardon me for not keeping you here a moment. Please follow me," and he went on before, followed by Athos and Aramis.

On arriving at the door of the room where the queen was receiving he made a sign for them to wait and opening the door:

"Madame," he said, "I hope your majesty will forgive me for disobeying your orders, when you learn that the gentlemen I have come to announce are the Comte de la Fere and the Chevalier d'Herblay."

On hearing those two names the queen uttered a cry of joy, which the two gentlemen heard.

"Poor queen!" murmured Athos.

"Oh, let them come in! let them come in," cried the young princess, bounding to the door.

The poor child was constant in her attendance on her mother and sought by her filial attentions to make her forget the absence of her two sons and her other daughter.

"Come in, gentlemen," repeated the princess, opening the door herself.

The queen was seated on a fauteuil and before her were standing two or three gentlemen, and among them the Duc de Chatillon, the brother of the nobleman killed eight or nine years previously in a duel on account of Madame de Longueville, on the Place Royale. All these gentlemen had been noticed by Athos and Aramis in the guardhouse, and when the two friends were announced they started and exchanged some words in a low tone.

"Well, sirs!" cried the queen, on perceiving the two friends, "you have come, faithful friends! But the royal couriers have been more expeditious than you, and here are Monsieur de Flamarens and Monsieur de Chatillon, who bring me from Her Majesty the Queen Anne of Austria, the very latest intelligence."

Aramis and Athos were astounded by the calmness, even the gayety of the queen's manner.

"Go on with your recital, sirs," said the queen, turning to the Duc de Chatillon. "You said that His Majesty, King Charles, my august consort, had been condemned to death by a majority of his subjects!"

"Yes, madame," Chatillon stammered out.

Athos and Aramis were more and more astonished.

"And that being conducted to the scaffold," resumed the queen--"oh, my lord! oh, my king!--and that being led to the scaffold he had been saved by an indignant people."

"Just so madame," replied Chatillon, in so low a voice that though the two friends were listening eagerly they could hardly hear this affirmation.

The queen clasped her hands in enthusiastic gratitude, whilst her daughter threw her arms around her mother's neck and kissed her--her own eyes streaming with tears.

"Now, madame, nothing remains to me except to proffer my respectful homage," said Chatillon, who felt confused and ashamed beneath the stern gaze of Athos.

"One moment, yes," answered the queen. "One moment--I beg--for here are the Chevalier d'Herblay and the Comte de la Fere, just arrived from London, and they can give you, as eye-witnesses, such details as you can convey to the queen, my royal sister. Speak, gentlemen, speak--I am listening; conceal nothing, gloss over nothing. Since his majesty still lives, since the honor of the throne is safe, everything else is a matter of indifference to me."

Athos turned pale and laid his hand on his heart.

"Well!" exclaimed the queen, who remarked this movement and his paleness. "Speak, sir! I beg you to do so."

"I beg you to excuse me, madame; I wish to add nothing to the recital of these gentlemen until they perceive themselves that they have perhaps

been mistaken."

"Mistaken!" cried the queen, almost suffocated by emotion; "mistaken! what has happened, then?"

"Sir," interposed Monsieur de Flamarens to Athos, "if we are mistaken the error has originated with the queen. I do not suppose you will have the presumption to set it to rights--that would be to accuse Her Majesty, Queen Anne, of falsehood."

"With the queen, sir?" replied Athos, in his calm, vibrating voice.

"Yes," murmured Flamarens, lowering his eyes.

Athos sighed deeply.

"Or rather, sir," said Aramis, with his peculiar irritating politeness, "the error of the person who was with you when we met you in the guardroom; for if the Comte de la Fere and I are not mistaken, we saw you in the company of a third gentleman."

Chatillon and Flamarens started.

"Explain yourself, count!" cried the queen, whose anxiety grew greater every moment. "On your brow I read despair--your lips falter ere you announce some terrible tidings--your hands tremble. Oh, my God! my God! what has happened?"

"Lord!" ejaculated the young princess, falling on her knees, "have mercy on us!"

"Sir," said Chatillon, "if you bring bad tidings it will be cruel in you to announce them to the queen."

Aramis went so close to Chatillon as almost to touch him.

"Sir," said he, with compressed lips and flashing eyes, "you have not the presumption to instruct the Comte de la Fere and myself what we ought to say here?"

During this brief altercation Athos, with his hands on his heart, his head bent low, approached the queen and in a voice of deepest sorrow said:

"Madame, princes--who by nature are above other men--receive from Heaven courage to support greater misfortunes than those of lower rank, for their hearts are elevated as their fortunes. We ought not, therefore, I think, to act toward a queen so illustrious as your majesty as we should act toward a woman of our lowlier condition. Queen, destined as you are to endure every sorrow on this earth, hear the result of our unhappy mission."

Athos, kneeling down before the queen, trembling and very cold, drew from his bosom, inclosed in the same case, the order set in diamonds which the queen had given to Lord de Winter and the wedding ring which Charles I. before his death had placed in the hands of Aramis. Since the

moment he had first received these two mementoes Athos had never parted with them.

He opened the case and offered them to the queen with deep and silent anguish.

The queen stretched out her hand, seized the ring, pressed it convulsively to her lips--and without being able to breathe a sigh, to give vent to a sob, she extended her arms, became deadly pale, and fell senseless in the arms of her attendants and her daughter.

Athos kissed the hem of the robe of the widowed queen and rising, with a dignity that made a deep impression on those around:

"I, the Comte de la Fere, a gentleman who has never deceived any human being, swear before God and before this unhappy queen, that all that was possible to save the king of England was done whilst we were on English ground. Now, chevalier," he added, turning to Aramis, "let us go. Our duty is fulfilled."

"Not yet." said Aramis; "we have still a word to say to these gentlemen."

And turning to Chatillon: "Sir, be so good as not to go away without giving me an opportunity to tell you something I cannot say before the queen."

Chatillon bowed in token of assent and they all went out, stopping at

the window of a gallery on the ground floor.

"Sir," said Aramis, "you allowed yourself just now to treat us in a most extraordinary manner. That would not be endurable in any case, and is still less so on the part of those who came to bring the queen the message of a liar."

"Sir!" cried De Chatillon.

"What have you done with Monsieur de Bruy? Has he by any possibility gone to change his face which was too like that of Monsieur de Mazarin? There is an abundance of Italian masks at the Palais Royal, from harlequin even to pantaloon."

"Chevalier! chevalier!" said Athos.

"Leave me alone," said Aramis impatiently. "You know well that I don't like to leave things half finished."

"Conclude, then, sir," answered De Chatillon, with as much hauteur as Aramis.

"Gentlemen," resumed Aramis, "any one but the Comte de la Fere and myself would have had you arrested--for we have friends in Paris--but we are contented with another course. Come and converse with us for just five minutes, sword in hand, upon this deserted terrace."

"One moment, gentlemen," cried Flamarens. "I know well that the



proposition is tempting, but at present it is impossible to accept it."

"And why not?" said Aramis, in his tone of raillery. "Is it Mazarin's proximity that makes you so prudent?"

"Oh, you hear that, Flamarens!" said Chatillon. "Not to reply would be a blot on my name and my honor."

"That is my opinion," said Aramis.

"You will not reply, however, and these gentlemen, I am sure, will presently be of my opinion."

Aramis shook his head with a motion of indescribable insolence.

Chatillon saw the motion and put his hand to his sword.

"Willingly," replied De Chatillon.

"Duke," said Flamarens, "you forget that to-morrow you are to command an expedition of the greatest importance, projected by the prince, assented to by the queen. Until to-morrow evening you are not at your own disposal."

"Let it be then the day after to-morrow," said Aramis.

"To-morrow, rather," said De Chatillon, "if you will take the trouble of coming so far as the gates of Charenton."

"How can you doubt it, sir? For the pleasure of a meeting with you I would go to the end of the world."

"Very well, to-morrow, sir."

"I shall rely on it. Are you going to rejoin your cardinal? Swear first, on your honor, not to inform him of our return."

"Conditions?"

"Why not?"

"Because it is for victors to make conditions, and you are not yet victors, gentlemen."

"Then let us draw on the spot. It is all one to us--to us who do not command to-morrow's expedition."

Chatillon and Flamarens looked at each other. There was such irony in the words and in the bearing of Aramis that the duke had great difficulty in bridling his anger, but at a word from Flamarens he restrained himself and contented himself with saying:

"You promise, sir--that's agreed--that I shall find you to-morrow at Charenton?"

"Oh, don't be afraid, sir," replied Aramis; and the two gentlemen

shortly afterward left the Louvre.

"For what reason is all this fume and fury?" asked Athos. "What have they done to you?"

"They--did you not see what they did?"

"No."

"They laughed when we swore that we had done our duty in England. Now, if they believed us, they laughed in order to insult us; if they did not believe it they insulted us all the more. However, I'm glad not to fight them until to-morrow. I hope we shall have something better to do to-night than to draw the sword."

"What have we to do?"

"Egad! to take Mazarin."

Athos curled his lip with disdain.

"These undertakings do not suit me, as you know, Aramis."

"Why?"

"Because it is taking people unawares."

"Really, Athos, you would make a singular general. You would fight only

by broad daylight, warn your foe before an attack, and never attempt anything by night lest you should be accused of taking advantage of the darkness."

Athos smiled.

"You know one cannot change his nature," he said. "Besides, do you know what is our situation, and whether Mazarin's arrest wouldn't be rather an encumbrance than an advantage?"

"Say at once you disapprove of my proposal."

"I think you ought to do nothing, since you exacted a promise from these gentlemen not to let Mazarin know that we were in France."

"I have entered into no engagement and consider myself quite free. Come, come."

"Where?"

"Either to seek the Duc de Beaufort or the Duc de Bouillon, and to tell them about this."

"Yes, but on one condition--that we begin by the coadjutor. He is a priest, learned in cases of conscience, and we will tell him ours."

It was then agreed that they were to go first to Monsieur de Bouillon, as his house came first; but first of all Athos begged that he might go

to the Hotel du Grand Charlemagne, to see Raoul.

They re-entered the boat which had brought them to the Louvre and thence proceeded to the Halles; and taking up Grimaud and Blaisois, they went on foot to the Rue Guenegaud.

But Raoul was not at the Hotel du Grand Charlemagne. He had received a message from the prince, to whom he had hastened with Olivain the instant he had received it.