

Chapter 82. Precautions.

After quitting Anne, Mazarin took the road to Rueil, where he usually resided; in those times of disturbance he went about with numerous followers and often disguised himself. In military dress he was, indeed, as we have stated, a very handsome man.

In the court of the old Chateau of Saint Germain he entered his coach, and reached the Seine at Chatou. The prince had supplied him with fifty light horse, not so much by way of guard as to show the deputies how readily the queen's generals dispersed their troops and to prove that they might be safely scattered at pleasure. Athos, on horseback, without his sword and kept in sight by Comminges, followed the cardinal in silence. Grimaud, finding that his master had been arrested, fell back into the ranks near Aramis, without saying a word and as if nothing had happened.

Grimaud had, indeed, during twenty-two years of service, seen his master extricate himself from so many difficulties that nothing less than Athos's imminent death was likely to make him uneasy.

At the branching off of the road toward Paris, Aramis, who had followed in the cardinal's suite, turned back. Mazarin went to the right hand and Aramis could see the prisoner disappear at the turning of the avenue. Athos, at the same moment, moved by a similar impulse, looked back also.

The two friends exchanged a simple inclination of the head and Aramis put his finger to his hat, as if to bow, Athos alone comprehending by that signal that he had some project in his head.

Ten minutes afterward Mazarin entered the court of that chateau which his predecessor had built for him at Rueil; as he alighted, Comminges approached him.

"My lord," he asked, "where does your eminence wish Monsieur Comte de la Fere to be lodged?"

"In the pavilion of the orangery, of course, in front of the pavilion where the guard is. I wish every respect to be shown the count, although he is the prisoner of her majesty the queen."

"My lord," answered Comminges, "he begs to be taken to the place where Monsieur d'Artagnan is confined--that is, in the hunting lodge, opposite the orangery."

Mazarin thought for an instant.

Comminges saw that he was undecided.

"'Tis a very strong post," he resumed, "and we have forty good men, tried soldiers, having no connection with Frondeurs nor any interest in the Fronde."

"If we put these three men together, Monsieur Comminges," said Mazarin,

"we must double the guard, and we are not rich enough in fighting men to commit such acts of prodigality."

Comminges smiled; Mazarin read and construed that smile.

"You do not know these men, Monsieur Comminges, but I know them, first personally, also by hearsay. I sent them to carry aid to King Charles and they performed prodigies to save him; had it not been for an adverse destiny, that beloved monarch would this day have been among us."

"But since they served your eminence so well, why are they, my lord cardinal, in prison?"

"In prison?" said Mazarin, "and when has Rueil been a prison?"

"Ever since there were prisoners in it," answered Comminges.

"These gentlemen, Comminges, are not prisoners," returned Mazarin, with his ironical smile, "only guests; but guests so precious that I have put a grating before each of their windows and bolts to their doors, that they may not refuse to continue my visitors. So much do I esteem them that I am going to make the Comte de la Fere a visit, that I may converse with him tete-a-tete, and that we may not be disturbed at our interview you must conduct him, as I said before, to the pavilion of the orangery; that, you know, is my daily promenade. Well, while taking my walk I will call on him and we will talk. Although he professes to be my enemy I have sympathy for him, and if he is reasonable perhaps we shall arrange matters."

Comminges bowed, and returned to Athos, who was awaiting with apparent calmness, but with real anxiety, the result of the interview.

"Well?" he said to the lieutenant.

"Sir," replied Comminges, "it seems that it is impossible."

"Monsieur de Comminges," said Athos, "I have been a soldier all my life and I know the force of orders; but outside your orders there is a service you can render me."

"I will do it with all my heart," said Comminges; "for I know who you are and what service you once performed for her majesty; I know, too, how dear to you is the young man who came so valiantly to my aid when that old rogue of a Broussel was arrested. I am entirely at your service, except only for my orders."

"Thank you, sir; what I am about to ask will not compromise you in any degree."

"If it should even compromise me a little," said Monsieur de Comminges, with a smile, "still make your demand. I don't like Mazarin any better than you do. I serve the queen and that draws me naturally into the service of the cardinal; but I serve the one with joy and the other against my will. Speak, then, I beg of you; I wait and listen."

"Since there is no harm," said Athos, "in my knowing that D'Artagnan is

here, I presume there will be none in his knowing that I am here."

"I have received no orders on that point."

"Well, then, do me the kindness to give him my regards and tell him that I am his neighbor. Tell him also what you have just told me--that Mazarin has placed me in the pavilion of the orangery in order to make me a visit, and assure him that I shall take advantage of this honor he proposes to accord to me to obtain from him some amelioration of our captivity."

"Which cannot last," interrupted Comminges; "the cardinal said so; there is no prison here."

"But there are oubliettes!" replied Athos, smiling.

"Oh! that's a different thing; yes, I know there are traditions of that sort," said Comminges. "It was in the time of the other cardinal, who was a great nobleman; but our Mazarin--impossible! an Italian adventurer would not dare to go such lengths with such men as ourselves. Oubliettes are employed as a means of kingly vengeance, and a low-born fellow such as he is would not have recourse to them. Your arrest is known, that of your friends will soon be known; and all the nobility of France would demand an explanation of your disappearance. No, no, be easy on that score. I will, however, inform Monsieur d'Artagnan of your arrival here."

Comminges then led the count to a room on the ground floor of a

pavilion, at the end of the orangery. They passed through a courtyard as they went, full of soldiers and courtiers. In the centre of this court, in the form of a horseshoe, were the buildings occupied by Mazarin, and at each wing the pavilion (or smaller building), where D'Artagnan was confined, and that, level with the orangery, where Athos was to be. From the ends of these two wings extended the park.

Athos, when he reached his appointed room, observed through the gratings of his window, walls and roofs; and was told, on inquiry, by Comminges, that he was looking on the back of the pavilion where D'Artagnan was confined.

"Yes, 'tis too true," said Comminges, "'tis almost a prison; but what a singular fancy this is of yours, count--you, who are the very flower of our nobility--to squander your valor and loyalty amongst these upstarts, the Frondist! Really, count, if ever I thought that I had a friend in the ranks of the royal army, it was you. A Frondeur! you, the Comte de la Fere, on the side of Broussel, Blancmesnil and Viole! For shame! you, a Frondeur!"

"On my word of honor," said Athos, "one must be either a Mazarinist or a Frondeur. For a long time I had these words whispered in my ears, and I chose the latter; at any rate, it is a French word. And now, I am a Frondeur--not of Broussel's party, nor of Blancmesnil's, nor am I with Viole; but with the Duc de Beaufort, the Ducs de Bouillon and d'Elbeuf; with princes, not with presidents, councillors and low-born lawyers. Besides, what a charming outlook it would have been to serve the cardinal! Look at that wall--without a single window--which tells you

fine things about Mazarin's gratitude!"

"Yes," replied De Comminges, "more especially if it could reveal how Monsieur d'Artagnan for this last week has been anathematizing him."

"Poor D'Artagnan!" said Athos, with the charming melancholy that was one of the traits of his character, "so brave, so good, so terrible to the enemies of those he loves. You have two unruly prisoners there, sir."

"Unruly," Comminges smiled; "you wish to terrify me, I suppose. When he came here, Monsieur D'Artagnan provoked and braved the soldiers and inferior officers, in order, I suppose, to have his sword back. That mood lasted some time; but now he's as gentle as a lamb and sings Gascon songs, which make one die of laughing."

"And Du Vallon?" asked Athos.

"Ah, he's quite another sort of person--a formidable gentleman, indeed. The first day he broke all the doors in with a single push of his shoulder; and I expected to see him leave Rueil in the same way as Samson left Gaza. But his temper cooled down, like his friend's; he not only gets used to his captivity, but jokes about it."

"So much the better," said Athos.

"Do you think anything else was to be expected of them?" asked Comminges, who, putting together what Mazarin had said of his prisoners and what the Comte de la Fere had said, began to feel a degree of

uneasiness.

Athos, on the other hand, reflected that this recent gentleness of his friends most certainly arose from some plan formed by D'Artagnan. Unwilling to injure them by praising them too highly, he replied: "They? They are two hotheads--the one a Gascon, the other from Picardy; both are easily excited, but they quiet down immediately. You have had a proof of that in what you have just related to me."

This, too, was the opinion of Comminges, who withdrew somewhat reassured. Athos remained alone in the vast chamber, where, according to the cardinal's directions, he was treated with all the courtesy due to a nobleman. He awaited Mazarin's promised visit to get some light on his present situation.