

Chapter 83. Strength and Sagacity.

Now let us pass the orangery to the hunting lodge. At the extremity of the courtyard, where, close to a portico formed of Ionic columns, were the dog kennels, rose an oblong building, the pavilion of the orangery, a half circle, inclosing the court of honor. It was in this pavilion, on the ground floor, that D'Artagnan and Porthos were confined, suffering interminable hours of imprisonment in a manner suitable to each different temperament.

D'Artagnan was pacing to and fro like a caged tiger; with dilated eyes, growling as he paced along by the bars of a window looking upon the yard of servant's offices.

Porthos was ruminating over an excellent dinner he had just demolished.

The one seemed to be deprived of reason, yet he was meditating. The other seemed to meditate, yet he was more than half asleep. But his sleep was a nightmare, which might be guessed by the incoherent manner in which he sometimes snored and sometimes snorted.

"Look," said D'Artagnan, "day is declining. It must be nearly four o'clock. We have been in this place nearly eighty-three hours."

"Hem!" muttered Porthos, with a kind of pretense of answering.

"Did you hear, eternal sleeper?" cried D'Artagnan, irritated that any one could doze during the day, when he had the greatest difficulty in sleeping during the night.

"What?" said Porthos.

"I say we have been here eighty-three hours."

"'Tis your fault," answered Porthos.

"How, my fault?"

"Yes, I offered you escape."

"By pulling out a bar and pushing down a door?"

"Certainly."

"Porthos, men like us can't go out from here purely and simply."

"Faith!" said Porthos, "as for me, I could go out with that purity and that simplicity which it seems to me you despise too much."

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders.

"And besides," he said, "going out of this chamber isn't all."

"Dear friend," said Porthos, "you appear to be in a somewhat better humor to-day than you were yesterday. Explain to me why going out of this chamber isn't everything."

"Because, having neither arms nor password, we shouldn't take fifty steps in the court without knocking against a sentinel."

"Very well," said Porthos, "we will kill the sentinel and we shall have his arms."

"Yes, but before we can kill him--and he will be hard to kill, that Swiss--he will shriek out and the whole picket will come, and we shall be taken like foxes, we, who are lions, and thrown into some dungeon, where we shall not even have the consolation of seeing this frightful gray sky of Rueil, which no more resembles the sky of Tarbes than the moon is like the sun. Lack-a-day! if we only had some one to instruct us about the physical and moral topography of this castle. Ah! when one thinks that for twenty years, during which time I did not know what to do with myself, it never occurred to me to come to study Rueil."

"What difference does that make?" said Porthos. "We shall go out all the same."

"Do you know, my dear fellow, why master pastrycooks never work with their hands?"

"No," said Porthos, "but I should be glad to be informed."

"It is because in the presence of their pupils they fear that some of their tarts or creams may turn out badly cooked."

"What then?"

"Why, then they would be laughed at, and a master pastrycook must never be laughed at."

"And what have master pastrycooks to do with us?"

"We ought, in our adventures, never to be defeated or give any one a chance to laugh at us. In England, lately, we failed, we were beaten, and that is a blemish on our reputation."

"By whom, then, were we beaten?" asked Porthos.

"By Mordaunt."

"Yes, but we have drowned Monsieur Mordaunt."

"That is true, and that will redeem us a little in the eyes of posterity, if posterity ever looks at us. But listen, Porthos: though Monsieur Mordaunt was a man not to be despised, Mazarin is not less strong than he, and we shall not easily succeed in drowning him. We must, therefore, watch and play a close game; for," he added with a sigh, "we two are equal, perhaps, to eight others; but we are not equal to the four that you know of."

"That is true," said Porthos, echoing D'Artagnan's sigh.

"Well, Porthos, follow my examples; walk back and forth till some news of our friends reaches us or till we are visited by a good idea. But don't sleep as you do all the time; nothing dulls the intellect like sleep. As to what may lie before us, it is perhaps less serious than we at first thought. I don't believe that Monsieur de Mazarin thinks of cutting off our heads, for heads are not taken off without previous trial; a trial would make a noise, and a noise would get the attention of our friends, who would check the operations of Monsieur de Mazarin."

"How well you reason!" said Porthos, admiringly.

"Well, yes, pretty well," replied D'Artagnan; "and besides, you see, if they put us on trial, if they cut off our heads, they must meanwhile either keep us here or transfer us elsewhere."

"Yes, that is inevitable," said Porthos.

"Well, it is impossible but that Master Aramis, that keen-scented bloodhound, and Athos, that wise and prudent nobleman, will discover our retreat. Then, believe me, it will be time to act."

"Yes, we will wait. We can wait the more contentedly, that it is not absolutely bad here, but for one thing, at least."

"What is that?"

"Did you observe, D'Artagnan, that three days running they have brought us braised mutton?"

"No; but if it occurs a fourth time I shall complain of it, so never mind."

"And then I feel the loss of my house, 'tis a long time since I visited my castles."

"Forget them for a time; we shall return to them, unless Mazarin razes them to the ground."

"Do you think that likely?"

"No, the other cardinal would have done so, but this one is too mean a fellow to risk it."

"You reconcile me, D'Artagnan."

"Well, then, assume a cheerful manner, as I do; we must joke with the guards, we must gain the good-will of the soldiers, since we can't corrupt them. Try, Porthos, to please them more than you are wont to do when they are under our windows. Thus far you have done nothing but show them your fist; and the more respectable your fist is, Porthos, the less attractive it is. Ah, I would give much to have five hundred louis, only."

"So would I," said Porthos, unwilling to be behind D'Artagnan in

generosity; "I would give as much as a hundred pistoles."

The two prisoners were at this point of their conversation when Comminges entered, preceded by a sergeant and two men, who brought supper in a basket with two handles, filled with basins and plates.

"What!" exclaimed Porthos, "mutton again?"

"My dear Monsieur de Comminges," said D'Artagnan, "you will find that my friend, Monsieur du Vallon, will go to the most fatal lengths if Cardinal Mazarin continues to provide us with this sort of meat; mutton every day."

"I declare," said Porthos, "I shall eat nothing if they do not take it away."

"Remove the mutton," cried Comminges; "I wish Monsieur du Vallon to sup well, more especially as I have news to give him that will improve his appetite."

"Is Mazarin dead?" asked Porthos.

"No; I am sorry to tell you he is perfectly well."

"So much the worse," said Porthos.

"What is that news?" asked D'Artagnan. "News in prison is a fruit so rare that I trust, Monsieur de Comminges, you will excuse my

impatience--the more eager since you have given us to understand that the news is good."

"Should you be glad to hear that the Comte de la Fere is well?" asked De Comminges.

D'Artagnan's penetrating gray eyes were opened to the utmost.

"Glad!" he cried; "I should be more than glad! Happy--beyond measure!"

"Well, I am desired by him to give you his compliments and to say that he is in good health."

D'Artagnan almost leaped with joy. A quick glance conveyed his thought to Porthos: "If Athos knows where we are, if he opens communication with us, before long Athos will act."

Porthos was not very quick to understand the language of glances, but now since the name of Athos had suggested to him the same idea, he understood.

"Do you say," asked the Gascon, timidly, "that the Comte de la Fere has commissioned you to give his compliments to Monsieur du Vallon and myself?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you have seen him?"

"Certainly I have."

"Where? if I may ask without indiscretion."

"Near here," replied De Comminges, smiling; "so near that if the windows which look on the orangery were not stopped up you could see him from where you are."

"He is wandering about the environs of the castle," thought D'Artagnan. Then he said aloud:

"You met him, I dare say, in the park--hunting, perhaps?"

"No; nearer, nearer still. Look, behind this wall," said De Comminges, knocking against the wall.

"Behind this wall? What is there, then, behind this wall? I was brought here by night, so devil take me if I know where I am."

"Well," said Comminges, "suppose one thing."

"I will suppose anything you please."

"Suppose there were a window in this wall."

"Well?"

"From that window you would see Monsieur de la Fere at his."

"The count, then, is in the chateau?"

"Yes."

"For what reason?"

"The same as yourself."

"Athos--a prisoner?"

"You know well," replied De Comminges, "that there are no prisoners at Rueil, because there is no prison."

"Don't let us play upon words, sir. Athos has been arrested."

"Yesterday, at Saint Germain, as he came out from the presence of the queen."

The arms of D'Artagnan fell powerless by his side. One might have supposed him thunderstruck; a paleness ran like a cloud over his dark skin, but disappeared immediately.

"A prisoner?" he reiterated.

"A prisoner," repeated Porthos, quite dejected.

Suddenly D'Artagnan looked up and in his eyes there was a gleam which scarcely even Porthos observed; but it died away and he appeared more sorrowful than before.

"Come, come," said Comminges, who, since D'Artagnan, on the day of Broussel's arrest, had saved him from the hands of the Parisians, had entertained a real affection for him, "don't be unhappy; I never thought of bringing you bad news. Laugh at the chance which has brought your friend near to you and Monsieur du Vallon, instead of being in the depths of despair about it."

But D'Artagnan was still in a desponding mood.

"And how did he look?" asked Porthos, who, perceiving that D'Artagnan had allowed the conversation to drop, profited by it to put in a word or two.

"Very well, indeed, sir," replied Comminges; "at first, like you, he seemed distressed; but when he heard that the cardinal was going to pay him a visit this very evening----"

"Ah!" cried D'Artagnan, "the cardinal is about to visit the Comte de la Fere?"

"Yes; and the count desired me to tell you that he should take advantage of this visit to plead for you and for himself."

"Ah! our dear count!" said D'Artagnan.

"A fine thing, indeed!" grunted Porthos. "A great favor! Zounds! Monsieur the Comte de la Fere, whose family is allied to the Montmorency and the Rohan, is easily the equal of Monsieur de Mazarin."

"No matter," said D'Artagnan, in his most wheedling tone. "On reflection, my dear Du Vallon, it is a great honor for the Comte de la Fere, and gives good reason to hope. In fact, it seems to me so great an honor for a prisoner that I think Monsieur de Comminges must be mistaken."

"What? I am mistaken?"

"Monsieur de Mazarin will not come to visit the Comte de la Fere, but the Comte de la Fere will be sent for to visit him."

"No, no, no," said Comminges, who made a point of having the facts appear exactly as they were, "I clearly understood what the cardinal said to me. He will come and visit the Comte de la Fere."

D'Artagnan tried to gather from the expression of his eyes whether Porthos understood the importance of that visit, but Porthos did not even look toward him.

"It is, then, the cardinal's custom to walk in his orangery?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Every evening he shuts himself in there. That, it seems, is where he

meditates on state affairs."

"In that case," said D'Artagnan, "I begin to believe that Monsieur de la Fere will receive the visit of his eminence; he will, of course, have an escort."

"Yes--two soldiers."

"And will he talk thus of affairs in presence of two strangers?"

"The soldiers are Swiss, who understand only German. Besides, according to all probability they will wait at the door."

D'Artagnan made a violent effort over himself to keep his face from being too expressive.

"Let the cardinal take care of going alone to visit the Comte de la Fere," said D'Artagnan; "for the count must be furious."

Comminges began to laugh. "Oh, oh! why, really, one would say that you four were anthropophagi! The count is an affable man; besides, he is unarmed; at the first word from his eminence the two soldiers about him would run to his assistance."

"Two soldiers," said D'Artagnan, seeming to remember something, "two soldiers, yes; that, then, is why I hear two men called every evening and see them walking sometimes for half an hour, under my window."

"That is it; they are waiting for the cardinal, or rather for Bernouin, who comes to call them when the cardinal goes out."

"Fine-looking men, upon my word!" said D'Artagnan.

"They belong to the regiment that was at Lens, which the prince assigned to the cardinal."

"Ah, monsieur," said D'Artagnan, as if to sum up in a word all that conversation, "if only his eminence would relent and grant to Monsieur de la Fere our liberty."

"I wish it with all my heart," said Comminges.

"Then, if he should forget that visit, you would find no inconvenience in reminding him of it?"

"Not at all."

"Ah, that gives me more confidence."

This skillful turn of the conversation would have seemed a sublime manoeuvre to any one who could have read the Gascon's soul.

"Now," said D'Artagnan, "I've one last favor to ask of you, Monsieur de Comminges."

"At your service, sir."

"You will see the count again?"

"To-morrow morning."

"Will you remember us to him and ask him to solicit for me the same favor that he will have obtained?"

"You want the cardinal to come here?"

"No; I know my place and am not so presumptuous. Let his eminence do me the honor to give me a hearing; that is all I want."

"Oh!" muttered Porthos, shaking his head, "never should I have thought this of him! How misfortune humbles a man!"

"I promise you it shall be done," answered De Comminges.

"Tell the count that I am well; that you found me sad, but resigned."

"I am pleased, sir, to hear that."

"And the same, also, for Monsieur du Vallon----"

"Not for me," cried Porthos; "I am not by any means resigned."

"But you will be resigned, my friend."

"Never!"

"He will become so, monsieur; I know him better than he knows himself.
Be silent, dear Du Vallon, and resign yourself."

"Adieu, gentlemen," said De Comminges; "sleep well!"

"We will try."

De Comminges went away, D'Artagnan remaining apparently in the same attitude of humble resignation; but scarcely had he departed when he turned and clasped Porthos in his arms with an expression not to be doubted.

"Oh!" cried Porthos; "what's the matter now? Have you gone mad, my dear friend?"

"What is the matter?" returned D'Artagnan; "we are saved!"

"I don't see that at all," answered Porthos. "I think we are all taken prisoners, except Aramis, and that our chances of getting out are lessened since one more of us is caught in Mazarin's mousetrap."

"Which is far too strong for two of us, but not strong enough for three of us," returned D'Artagnan.

"I don't understand," said Porthos.

"Never mind; let's sit down to table and take something to strengthen us for the night."

"What are we to do, then, to-night?"

"To travel--perhaps."

"But----"

"Sit down, dear friend, to table. When one is eating, ideas flow easily. After supper, when they are perfected, I will communicate my plans to you."

So Porthos sat down to table without another word and ate with an appetite that did honor to the confidence that was ever inspired in him by D'Artagnan's inventive imagination.