

Chapter 85. The Oubliettes of Cardinal Mazarin.

At first, on arriving at the door through which Mazarin had passed, D'Artagnan tried in vain to open it, but on the powerful shoulder of Porthos being applied to one of the panels, which gave way, D'Artagnan introduced the point of his sword between the bolt and the staple of the lock. The bolt gave way and the door opened.

"As I told you, everything can be attained, Porthos, women and doors, by proceeding with gentleness."

"You're a great moralist, and that's the fact," said Porthos.

They entered; behind a glass window, by the light of the cardinal's lantern, which had been placed on the floor in the midst of the gallery, they saw the orange and pomegranate trees of the Castle of Rueil, in long lines, forming one great alley and two smaller side alleys.

"No cardinal!" said D'Artagnan, "but only his lantern; where the devil, then, is he?"

Exploring, however, one of the side wings of the gallery, after making a sign to Porthos to explore the other, he saw, all at once, at his left, a tub containing an orange tree, which had been pushed out of its place and in its place an open aperture.

Ten men would have found difficulty in moving that tub, but by some mechanical contrivance it had turned with the flagstone on which it rested.

D'Artagnan, as we have said, perceived a hole in that place and in this hole the steps of a winding staircase.

He called Porthos to look at it.

"Were our object money only," he said, "we should be rich directly."

"How's that?"

"Don't you understand, Porthos? At the bottom of that staircase lies, probably, the cardinal's treasury of which folk tell such wonders, and we should only have to descend, empty a chest, shut the cardinal up in it, double lock it, go away, carrying off as much gold as we could, put back this orange-tree over the place, and no one in the world would ever ask us where our fortune came from--not even the cardinal."

"It would be a happy hit for clowns to make, but as it seems to be unworthy of two gentlemen----" said Porthos.

"So I think; and therefore I said, 'Were our object money only;' but we want something else," replied the Gascon.

At the same moment, whilst D'Artagnan was leaning over the aperture

to listen, a metallic sound, as if some one was moving a bag of gold, struck on his ear; he started; instantly afterward a door opened and a light played upon the staircase.

Mazarin had left his lamp in the gallery to make people believe that he was walking about, but he had with him a waxlight, to help him to explore his mysterious strong box.

"Faith," he said, in Italian, as he was reascending the steps and looking at a bag of reals, "faith, there's enough to pay five councillors of parliament, and two generals in Paris. I am a great captain--that I am! but I make war in my own way."

The two friends were crouching down, meantime, behind a tub in the side alley.

Mazarin came within three steps of D'Artagnan and pushed a spring in the wall; the slab turned and the orange tree resumed its place.

Then the cardinal put out the waxlight, slipped it into his pocket, and taking up the lantern: "Now," he said, "for Monsieur de la Fere."

"Very good," thought D'Artagnan, "'tis our road likewise; we will go together."

All three set off on their walk, Mazarin taking the middle alley and the friends the side ones.

The cardinal reached a second door without perceiving he was being followed; the sand with which the alleys were covered deadened the sound of footsteps.

He then turned to the left, down a corridor which had escaped the attention of the two friends, but as he opened the door he paused, as if in thought.

"Ah! Diavolo!" he exclaimed, "I forgot the recommendation of De Comminges, who advised me to take a guard and place it at this door, in order not to put myself at the mercy of that four-headed combination of devils." And with a movement of impatience he turned to retrace his steps.

"Do not give yourself the trouble, my lord," said D'Artagnan, with his right foot forward, his beaver in his hand, a smile on his face, "we have followed your eminence step by step and here we are."

"Yes--here we are," said Porthos.

And he made the same friendly salute as D'Artagnan.

Mazarin gazed at each of them with an affrighted stare, recognized them, and let drop his lantern, uttering a cry of terror.

D'Artagnan picked it up; by good luck it had not been extinguished.

"Oh, what imprudence, my lord," said D'Artagnan; "'tis not good to

be about just here without a light. Your eminence might knock against something, or fall into a hole."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan!" muttered Mazarin, unable to recover from his astonishment.

"Yes, my lord, it is I. I have the honor to present to you Monsieur du Vallon, that excellent friend of mine, in whom your eminence had the kindness to interest yourself formerly."

And D'Artagnan held the lamp before the merry face of Porthos, who now began to comprehend the affair and be very proud of the whole undertaking.

"You were going to visit Monsieur de la Fere?" said D'Artagnan. "Don't let us disarrange your eminence. Be so good as to show us the way and we will follow you."

Mazarin was by degrees recovering his senses.

"Have you been long in the orangery?" he asked in a trembling voice, remembering the visits he had been paying to his treasury.

Porthos opened his mouth to reply; D'Artagnan made him a sign, and his mouth, remaining silent, gradually closed.

"This moment come, my lord," said D'Artagnan.

Mazarin breathed again. His fears were now no longer for his hoard, but for himself. A sort of smile played on his lips.

"Come," he said, "you have me in a snare, gentlemen. I confess myself conquered. You wish to ask for liberty, and--I give it you."

"Oh, my lord!" answered D'Artagnan, "you are too good; as to our liberty, we have that; we want to ask something else of you."

"You have your liberty?" repeated Mazarin, in terror.

"Certainly; and on the other hand, my lord, you have lost it, and now, in accordance with the law of war, sir, you must buy it back again."

Mazarin felt a shiver run through him--a chill even to his heart's core. His piercing look was fixed in vain on the satirical face of the Gascon and the unchanging countenance of Porthos. Both were in shadow and the Sybil of Cuma herself could not have read them.

"To purchase back my liberty?" said the cardinal.

"Yes, my lord."

"And how much will that cost me, Monsieur d'Artagnan?"

"Zounds, my lord, I don't know yet. We must ask the Comte de la Fere the question. Will your eminence deign to open the door which leads to the count's room, and in ten minutes all will be settled."

Mazarin started.

"My lord," said D'Artagnan, "your eminence sees that we wish to act with all formality and due respect; but I must warn you that we have no time to lose; open the door then, my lord, and be so good as to remember, once for all, that on the slightest attempt to escape or the faintest cry for help, our position being very critical indeed, you must not be angry with us if we go to extremities."

"Be assured," answered Mazarin, "that I shall attempt nothing; I give you my word of honor."

D'Artagnan made a sign to Porthos to redouble his watchfulness; then turning to Mazarin:

"Now, my lord, let us enter, if you please."