

Chapter 86. Conferences.

Mazarin turned the lock of a double door, on the threshold of which they found Athos ready to receive his illustrious guests according to the notice Comminges had given him.

On perceiving Mazarin he bowed.

"Your eminence," he said, "might have dispensed with your attendants; the honor bestowed on me is too great for me to be unmindful of it."

"And so, my dear count," said D'Artagnan, "his eminence didn't actually insist on our attending him; it is Du Vallon and I who have insisted, and even in a manner somewhat impolite, perhaps, so great was our longing to see you."

At that voice, that mocking tone, and that familiar gesture, accenting voice and tone, Athos made a bound of surprise.

"D'Artagnan! Porthos!" he exclaimed.

"My very self, dear friend."

"Me, also!" repeated Porthos.

"What means this?" asked the count.

"It means," replied Mazarin, trying to smile and biting his lips in the attempt, "that our parts are changed, and that instead of these gentlemen being my prisoners I am theirs; but, gentlemen, I warn you, unless you kill me, your victory will be of very short duration; people will come to the rescue."

"Ah! my lord!" cried the Gascon, "don't threaten! 'tis a bad example. We are so good and gentle to your eminence. Come, let us put aside all rancor and talk pleasantly."

"There's nothing I wish more," replied Mazarin. "But don't think yourselves in a better position than you are. In ensnaring me you have fallen into the trap yourselves. How are you to get away from here? remember the soldiers and sentinels who guard these doors. Now, I am going to show you how sincere I am."

"Good," thought D'Artagnan; "we must look about us; he's going to play us a trick."

"I offered you your liberty," continued the minister; "will you take it? Before an hour has passed you will be discovered, arrested, obliged to kill me, which would be a crime unworthy of loyal gentlemen like you."

"He is right," thought Athos.

And, like every other reflection passing in a mind that entertained none

but noble thoughts, this feeling was expressed in his eyes.

"And therefore," said D'Artagnan, to clip the hope which Athos's tacit adhesion had imparted to Mazarin, "we shall not proceed to that violence save in the last extremity."

"If on the contrary," resumed Mazarin, "you accept your liberty----"

"Why you, my lord, might take it away from us in less than five minutes afterward; and from my knowledge of you I believe you will so take it away from us."

"No--on the faith of a cardinal. You do not believe me?"

"My lord, I never believe cardinals who are not priests."

"Well, on the faith of a minister."

"You are no longer a minister, my lord; you are a prisoner."

"Then, on the honor of a Mazarin, as I am and ever shall be, I hope," said the cardinal.

"Hem," replied D'Artagnan. "I have heard speak of a Mazarin who had not much religion when his oaths were in question. I fear he may have been an ancestor of your eminence."

"Monsieur d'Artagnan, you are a great wit and I am really sorry to be on

bad terms with you."

"My lord, let us come to terms; I ask nothing better."

"Very well," said Mazarin, "if I place you in security, in a manner evident, palpable----"

"Ah! that is another thing," said Porthos.

"Let us see," said Athos.

"Let us see," said D'Artagnan.

"In the first place, do you accept?" asked the cardinal.

"Unfold your plan, my lord, and we will see."

"Take notice that you are shut up--captured."

"You well know, my lord, that there always remains to us a last resource."

"What?"

"That of dying together."

Mazarin shuddered.

"Listen," he said; "at the end of yonder corridor is a door, of which I have the key, it leads into the park. Go, and take this key with you; you are active, vigorous, and you have arms. At a hundred steps, on turning to the left, you will find the wall of the park; get over it, and in three leaps you will be on the road and free."

"Ah! by Jove, my lord," said D'Artagnan, "you have well said, but these are only words. Where is the key you speak of?"

"Here it is."

"Ah, my lord! You will conduct us yourself, then, to that door?"

"Very willingly, if it be necessary to reassure you," answered the minister, and Mazarin, who was delighted to get off so cheaply, led the way, in high spirits, to the corridor and opened the door.

It led into the park, as the three fugitives perceived by the night breeze which rushed into the corridor and blew the wind into their faces.

"The devil!" exclaimed the Gascon, "'tis a dreadful night, my lord. We don't know the locality, and shall never find the wall. Since your eminence has come so far, come a few steps further; conduct us, my lord, to the wall."

"Be it so," replied the cardinal; and walking in a straight line he went to the wall, at the foot of which they all four arrived at the same

instant.

"Are you satisfied, gentlemen?" asked Mazarin.

"I think so, indeed; we should be hard to please if we were not. Deuce take it! three poor gentlemen escorted by a prince of the church! Ah! apropos, my lord! you remarked that we were all active, vigorous and armed."

"Yes."

"You are mistaken. Monsieur du Vallon and I are the only two who are armed. The count is not; and should we meet with one of your patrol we must defend ourselves."

"'Tis true."

"Where can we find another sword?" asked Porthos.

"My lord," said D'Artagnan, "will lend his, which is of no use to him, to the Comte de la Fere."

"Willingly," said the cardinal; "I will even ask the count to keep it for my sake."

"I promise you, my lord, never to part with it," replied Athos.

"Well, well," cried D'Artagnan, "this reconciliation is truly touching;

have you not tears in your eyes, Porthos?"

"Yes," said Porthos; "but I do not know if it is feeling or the wind that makes me weep; I think it is the wind."

"Now climb up, Athos, quickly," said D'Artagnan. Athos, assisted by Porthos, who lifted him up like a feather, arrived at the top.

"Now, jump down, Athos."

Athos jumped and disappeared on the other side of the wall.

"Are you on the ground?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Yes."

"Without accident?"

"Perfectly safe and sound."

"Porthos, whilst I get up, watch the cardinal. No, I don't want your help, watch the cardinal."

"I am watching," said Porthos. "Well?"

"You are right; it is more difficult than I thought. Lend me your back--but don't let the cardinal go."

Porthos lent him his back and D'Artagnan was soon on the summit of the wall, where he seated himself.

Mazarin pretended to laugh.

"Are you there?" asked Porthos.

"Yes, my friend; and now----"

"Now, what?" asked Porthos.

"Now give me the cardinal up here; if he makes any noise stifle him."

Mazarin wished to call out, but Porthos held him tight and passed him to D'Artagnan, who seized him by the neck and made him sit down by him; then in a menacing tone, he said:

"Sir! jump directly down, close to Monsieur de la Fere, or, on the honor of a gentleman, I'll kill you!"

"Monsieur, monsieur," cried Mazarin, "you are breaking your word to me!"

"I--did I promise you anything, my lord?"

Mazarin groaned.

"You are free," he said, "through me; your liberty was my ransom."



"Agreed; but the ransom of that immense treasure buried under the gallery, to which one descends on pushing a spring hidden in the wall, which causes a tub to turn, revealing a staircase--must not one speak of that a little, my lord?"

"Diavolo!" cried Mazarin, almost choked, and clasping his hands; "I am a lost and ruined man!"

But without listening to his protestations of alarm, D'Artagnan slipped him gently down into the arms of Athos, who stood immovable at the bottom of the wall.

Porthos next made an effort which shook the solid wall, and by the aid of his friend's hand gained the summit.

"I didn't understand it all," he said, "but I understand now; how droll it is!"

"You think so? so much the better; but that it may prove laughter-worthy even to the end, let us not lose time." And he jumped off the wall.

Porthos did the same.

"Attend to monsieur le cardinal, gentlemen," said D'Artagnan; "for myself, I will reconnoitre."

The Gascon then drew his sword and marched as avant guard.

"My lord," he said, "which way do we go? Think well of your reply, for should your eminence be mistaken, there might ensue most grave results for all of us."

"Along the wall, sir," said Mazarin, "there will be no danger of losing yourselves."

The three friends hastened on, but in a short time were obliged to slacken the pace. The cardinal could not keep up with them, though with every wish to do so.

Suddenly D'Artagnan touched something warm, which moved.

"Stop! a horse!" he cried; "I have found a horse!"

"And I, likewise," said Athos.

"I, too," said Porthos, who, faithful to the instructions, still held the cardinal's arm.

"There's luck, my lord! just as you were complaining of being tired and obliged to walk."

But as he spoke the barrel of a pistol was presented at his breast and these words were pronounced:

"Touch it not!"

"Grimaud!" he cried; "Grimaud! what art thou about? Why, thou art posted here by Heaven!"

"No, sir," said the honest servant, "it was Monsieur Aramis who posted me here to take care of the horses."

"Is Aramis here?"

"Yes, sir; he has been here since yesterday."

"What are you doing?"

"On the watch----"

"What! Aramis here?" cried Athos.

"At the lesser gate of the castle; he's posted there."

"Are you a large party?"

"Sixty."

"Let him know."

"This moment, sir."

And believing that no one could execute the commission better than himself, Grimaud set off at full speed; whilst, enchanted at being all

together again, the friends awaited his return.

There was no one in the whole group in a bad humor except Cardinal Mazarin.