

Chapter 87. In which we begin to think that Porthos will be at last a Baron, and D'Artagnan a Captain.

At the expiration of ten minutes Aramis arrived, accompanied by Grimaud and eight or ten followers. He was excessively delighted and threw himself into his friends' arms.

"You are free, my brothers! free without my aid! and I shall have succeeded in doing nothing for you in spite of all my efforts."

"Do not be unhappy, dear friend, on that account; if you have done nothing as yet, you will do something soon," replied Athos.

"I had well concerted my plans," pursued Aramis; "the coadjutor gave me sixty men; twenty guard the walls of the park, twenty the road from Rueil to Saint Germain, twenty are dispersed in the woods. Thus I was able, thanks to the strategic disposition of my forces, to intercept two couriers from Mazarin to the queen."

Mazarin listened intently.

"But," said D'Artagnan, "I trust that you honorably sent them back to monsieur le cardinal!"

"Ah, yes!" said Aramis, "toward him I should be very likely to practice

such delicacy of sentiment! In one of the despatches the cardinal declares to the queen that the treasury is empty and that her majesty has no more money. In the other he announces that he is about to transport his prisoners to Melun, since Rueil seemed to him not sufficiently secure. You can understand, dear friend, with what hope I was inspired by that last letter. I placed myself in ambuscade with my sixty men; I encircled the castle; the riding horses I entrusted to Grimaud and I awaited your coming out, which I did not expect till to-morrow, and I didn't hope to free you without a skirmish. You are free to-night, without fighting; so much the better! How did you manage to escape that scoundrel Mazarin? You must have much reason to complain of him."

"Not very much," said D'Artagnan.

"Really!"

"I might even say that we have some reason to praise him."

"Impossible!"

"Yes, really; it is owing to him that we are free."

"Owing to him?"

"Yes, he had us conducted into the orangery by Monsieur Bernouin, his valet-de-chambre, and from there we followed him to visit the Comte de la Fere. Then he offered us our liberty and we accepted it. He even went

so far as to show us the way out; he led us to the park wall, which we climbed over without accident, and then we fell in with Grimaud."

"Well!" exclaimed Aramis, "this will reconcile me to him; but I wish he were here that I might tell him that I did not believe him capable of so noble an act."

"My lord," said D'Artagnan, no longer able to contain himself, "allow me to introduce to you the Chevalier d'Herblay, who wishes--as you may have heard--to offer his congratulations to your eminence."

And he retired, discovering Mazarin, who was in great confusion, to the astonished gaze of Aramis.

"Ho! ho!" exclaimed the latter, "the cardinal! a glorious prize! Halloo! halloo! friends! to horse! to horse!"

Several horsemen ran quickly to him.

"Zounds!" cried Aramis, "I may have done some good; so, my lord, deign to receive my most respectful homage! I will lay a wager that 'twas that Saint Christopher, Porthos, who performed this feat! Apropos! I forgot----" and he gave some orders in a low voice to one of the horsemen.

"I think it will be wise to set off," said D'Artagnan.

"Yes; but I am expecting some one, a friend of Athos."

"A friend!" exclaimed the count.

"And here he comes, by Jupiter! galloping through the bushes."

"The count! the count!" cried a young voice that made Athos start.

"Raoul! Raoul!" he ejaculated.

For one moment the young man forgot his habitual respect--he threw himself on his father's neck.

"Look, my lord cardinal," said Aramis, "would it not have been a pity to have separated men who love each other as we love? Gentlemen," he continued, addressing the cavaliers, who became more and more numerous every instant; "gentlemen, encircle his eminence, that you may show him the greater honor. He will, indeed give us the favor of his company; you will, I hope, be grateful for it; Porthos, do not lose sight of his eminence."

Aramis then joined Athos and D'Artagnan, who were consulting together.

"Come," said D'Artagnan, after a conference of five minutes' duration, "let us begin our journey."

"Where are we to go?" asked Porthos.

"To your house, dear Porthos, at Pierrefonds; your fine chateau is

worthy of affording its princely hospitality to his eminence; it is, likewise, well situated--neither too near Paris, nor too far from it; we can establish a communication between it and the capital with great facility. Come, my lord, you shall be treated like a prince, as you are."

"A fallen prince!" exclaimed Mazarin, piteously.

"The chances of war," said Athos, "are many, but be assured we shall take no improper advantage of them."

"No, but we shall make use of them," said D'Artagnan.

The rest of the night was employed by these cavaliers in traveling with the wonderful rapidity of former days. Mazarin, still sombre and pensive, permitted himself to be dragged along in this way; it looked a race of phantoms. At dawn twelve leagues had been passed without drawing rein; half the escort were exhausted and several horses fell down.

"Horses, nowadays, are not what they were formerly," observed Porthos; "everything degenerates."

"I have sent Grimaud to Dammartin," said Aramis. "He is to bring us five fresh horses--one for his eminence, four for us. We, at least, must keep close to monseigneur; the rest of the start will rejoin us later. Once beyond Saint Denis we shall have nothing to fear."

Grimaud, in fact, brought back five horses. The nobleman to whom he

applied, being a friend of Porthos, was very ready, not to sell them, as was proposed, but to lend them. Ten minutes later the escort stopped at Ermenonville, but the four friends went on with well sustained ardor, guarding Mazarin carefully. At noon they rode into the avenue of Pierrefonds.

"Ah!" said Mousqueton, who had ridden by the side of D'Artagnan without speaking a word on the journey, "you may think what you will, sir, but I can breathe now for the first time since my departure from Pierrefonds;" and he put his horse to a gallop to announce to the other servants the arrival of Monsieur du Vallon and his friends.

"We are four of us," said D'Artagnan; "we must relieve each other in mounting guard over my lord and each of us must watch three hours at a time. Athos is going to examine the castle, which it will be necessary to render impregnable in case of siege; Porthos will see to the provisions and Aramis to the troops of the garrison. That is to say, Athos will be chief engineer, Porthos purveyor-in-general, and Aramis governor of the fortress."

Meanwhile, they gave up to Mazarin the handsomest room in the chateau.

"Gentlemen," he said, when he was in his room, "you do not expect, I presume, to keep me here a long time incognito?"

"No, my lord," replied the Gascon; "on the contrary, we think of announcing very soon that we have you here."

"Then you will be besieged."

"We expect it."

"And what shall you do?"

"Defend ourselves. Were the late Cardinal Richelieu alive he would tell you a certain story of the Bastion Saint Gervais, which we four, with our four lackeys and twelve dead men, held out against a whole army."

"Such feats, sir, are done once--and never repeated."

"However, nowadays there's no need of so much heroism. To-morrow the army of Paris will be summoned, the day after it will be here! The field of battle, instead, therefore, of being at Saint Denis or at Charenton, will be near Compiègne or Villars-Cotterets."

"The prince will vanquish you, as he has always done."

"'Tis possible; my lord; but before an engagement ensues we shall move your eminence to another castle belonging to our friend Du Vallon, who has three. We will not expose your eminence to the chances of war."

"Come," answered Mazarin, "I see it will be necessary for me to capitulate."

"Before a siege?"

"Yes; the conditions will be better than afterward."

"Ah, my lord! as to conditions, you would soon see how moderate and reasonable we are!"

"Come, now, what are your conditions?"

"Rest yourself first, my lord, and we--we will reflect."

"I do not need rest, gentlemen; I need to know whether I am among enemies or friends."

"Friends, my lord! friends!"

"Well, then, tell me at once what you want, that I may see if any arrangement be possible. Speak, Comte de la Fere!"

"My lord," replied Athos, "for myself I have nothing to demand. For France, were I to specify my wishes, I should have too much. I beg you to excuse me and propose to the chevalier."

And Athos, bowing, retired and remained leaning against the mantelpiece, a spectator of the scene.

"Speak, then, chevalier!" said the cardinal. "What do you want? Nothing ambiguous, if you please. Be clear, short and precise."

"As for me," replied Aramis, "I have in my pocket the very programme



of the conditions which the deputation--of which I formed one--went yesterday to Saint Germain to impose on you. Let us consider first the ancient rights. The demands in that programme must be granted."

"We were almost agreed on those," replied Mazarin; "let us pass on to private and personal stipulations."

"You suppose, then, that there are some?" said Aramis, smiling.

"I do not suppose that you will all be quite so disinterested as Monsieur de la Fere," replied the cardinal, bowing to Athos.

"My lord, you are right, and I am glad to see that you do justice to the count at last. The count has a mind above vulgar desires and earthly passions. He is a proud soul--he is a man by himself! You are right--he is worth us all, and we avow it to you!"

"Aramis," said Athos, "are you jesting?"

"No, no, dear friend; I state only what we all know. You are right; it is not you alone this matter concerns, but my lord and his unworthy servant, myself."

"Well, then, what do you require besides the general conditions before recited?"

"I require, my lord, that Normandy should be given to Madame de Longueville, with five hundred thousand francs and full absolution. I

require that his majesty should deign to be godfather to the child she has just borne; and that my lord, after having been present at the christening, should go to proffer his homage to our Holy Father the Pope."

"That is, you wish me to lay aside my ministerial functions, to quit France and be an exile."

"I wish his eminence to become pope on the first opportunity, allowing me then the right of demanding full indulgences for myself and my friends."

Mazarin made a grimace which was quite indescribable, and then turned to D'Artagnan.

"And you, sir?" he said.

"I, my lord," answered the Gascon, "I differ from Monsieur d'Herblay entirely as to the last point, though I agree with him on the first. Far from wishing my lord to quit Paris, I hope he will stay there and continue to be prime minister, as he is a great statesman. I shall try also to help him to down the Fronde, but on one condition--that he sometimes remembers the king's faithful servants and gives the first vacant company of musketeers to a man that I could name. And you, Monsieur du Vallon----"

"Yes, you, sir! Speak, if you please," said Mazarin.

"As for me," answered Porthos, "I wish my lord cardinal, in order to do honor to my house, which gives him an asylum, would in remembrance of this adventure erect my estate into a barony, with a promise to confer that order on one of my particular friends, whenever his majesty next creates peers."

"You know, sir, that before receiving the order one must submit proofs."

"My friends will submit them. Besides, should it be necessary, monseigneur will show him how that formality may be avoided."

Mazarin bit his lips; the blow was direct and he replied rather dryly:

"All this appears to me to be ill conceived, disjointed, gentlemen; for if I satisfy some I shall displease others. If I stay in Paris I cannot go to Rome; if I became pope I could not continue to be prime minister; and it is only by continuing prime minister that I can make Monsieur d'Artagnan a captain and Monsieur du Vallon a baron."

"True," said Aramis, "so, as I am in a minority, I withdraw my proposition, so far as it relates to the voyage to Rome and monseigneur's resignation."

"I am to remain minister, then?" said Mazarin.

"You remain minister; that is understood," said D'Artagnan; "France needs you."

"And I desist from my pretensions," said Aramis. "His eminence will continue to be prime minister and her majesty's favorite, if he will grant to me and my friends what we demand for France and for ourselves."

"Occupy yourselves with your own affairs, gentlemen, and let France settle matters as she will with me," resumed Mazarin.

"Ho! ho!" replied Aramis. "The Frondeurs will have a treaty and your eminence must sign it before us, promising at the same time to obtain the queen's consent to it."

"I can answer only for myself," said Mazarin. "I cannot answer for the queen. Suppose her majesty refuses?"

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, "monseigneur knows very well that her majesty refuses him nothing."

"Here, monseigneur," said Aramis, "is the treaty proposed by the deputation of Frondeurs. Will your eminence please read and examine?"

"I am acquainted with it."

"Sign it, then."

"Reflect, gentlemen, that a signature given under circumstances like the present might be regarded as extorted by violence."

"Monseigneur will be at hand to testify that it was freely given."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"Then," said D'Artagnan, "your eminence must expect the consequences of a refusal."

"Would you dare to touch a cardinal?"

"You have dared, my lord, to imprison her majesty's musketeers."

"The queen will revenge me, gentlemen."

"I do not think so, although inclination might lead her to do so, but we shall take your eminence to Paris, and the Parisians will defend us."

"How uneasy they must be at this moment at Rueil and Saint Germain," said Aramis. "How they must be asking, 'Where is the cardinal?' 'What has become of the minister?' 'Where has the favorite gone?' How they must be looking for monseigneur in all corners! What comments must be made; and if the Fronde knows that monseigneur has disappeared, how the Fronde must triumph!"

"It is frightful," murmured Mazarin.

"Sign the treaty, then, monseigneur," said Aramis.

"Suppose the queen should refuse to ratify it?"

"Ah! nonsense!" cried D'Artagnan, "I can manage so that her majesty will receive me well; I know an excellent method."

"What?"

"I shall take her majesty the letter in which you tell her that the finances are exhausted."

"And then?" asked Mazarin, turning pale.

"When I see her majesty embarrassed, I shall conduct her to Rueil, make her enter the orangery and show her a certain spring which turns a box."

"Enough, sir," muttered the cardinal, "you have said enough; where is the treaty?"

"Here it is," replied Aramis. "Sign, my lord," and he gave him a pen.

Mazarin arose, walked some moments, thoughtful, but not dejected.

"And when I have signed," he said, "what is to be my guarantee?"

"My word of honor, sir," said Athos.

Mazarin started, turned toward the Comte de la Fere, and looking for an instant at that grand and honest countenance, took the pen.

"It is sufficient, count," he said, and signed the treaty.

"And now, Monsieur d'Artagnan," he said, "prepare to set off for Saint Germain and take a letter from me to the queen."

