

Chapter XV. The Proscribed.

D'Artagnan had not reached the bottom of the staircase, when the king called his gentleman. "I have a commission to give you, monsieur," said he.

"I am at your majesty's commands."

"Wait, then." And the young king began to write the following letter, which cost him more than one sigh, although, at the same time, something like a feeling of triumph glittered in his eyes:

"MY LORD CARDINAL,--Thanks to your good counsels, and, above all, thanks to your firmness, I have succeeded in overcoming a weakness unworthy of a king. You have too ably arranged my destiny to allow gratitude not to stop me at the moment when I was about to destroy your work. I felt I was wrong to wish to make my life turn from the course you had marked out for it. Certainly it would have been a misfortune to France and my family if a misunderstanding had taken place between me and my minister. This, however, would certainly have happened if I had made your niece my wife. I am perfectly aware of this, and will henceforth oppose nothing to the accomplishment of my destiny. I am prepared, then, to wed the infanta, Maria Theresa. You may at once open the conference.--Your affectionate LOUIS."

The king, after re-perusing the letter, sealed it himself.

"This letter for my lord cardinal," said he.

The gentleman took it. At Mazarin's door he found Bernouin waiting with anxiety.

"Well?" asked the minister's valet de chambre.

"Monsieur," said the gentleman, "here is a letter for his eminence."

"A letter! Ah! we expected one after the little journey of the morning."

"Oh! you know, then, that his majesty--"

"As first minister, it belongs to the duties of our charge to know everything. And his majesty prays and implores, I presume."

"I don't know, but he sighed frequently whilst he was writing."

"Yes, yes, yes; we understand all that; people sigh sometimes from

happiness as well as from grief, monsieur."

"And yet the king did not look very happy when he returned, monsieur."

"You did not see clearly. Besides, you only saw his majesty on his return, for he was only accompanied by the lieutenant of the guards. But I had his eminence's telescope; I looked through it when he was tired, and I am sure they both wept."

"Well! was it for happiness they wept?"

"No, but for love, and they vowed to each other a thousand tendernesses, which the king asks no better to keep. Now this letter is a beginning of the execution."

"And what does his eminence think of this love, which is, by the bye, no secret to anybody?"

Bernouin took the gentleman by the arm, and whilst ascending the staircase,--"In confidence," said he, in a low voice, "his eminence looks for success in the affair. I know very well we shall have war with Spain; but, bah! war will please the nobles. My lord cardinal, besides, can endow his niece royally, nay, more than royally. There will be money, festivities, and fire-works--everybody will be delighted."

"Well, for my part," replied the gentleman, shaking his head, "it appears to me that this letter is very light to contain all that."

"My friend," replied Bernouin, "I am certain of what I tell you. M. d'Artagnan related all that passed to me."

"Ay, ay! and what did he tell you? Let us hear."

"I accosted him by asking him, on the part of the cardinal, if there were any news, without discovering my designs, observe, for M. d'Artagnan is a cunning hand. 'My dear Monsieur Bernouin,' he replied, 'the king is madly in love with Mademoiselle de Mancini, that is all I have to tell you.' And then I asked him: 'Do you think, to such a degree that it will urge him to act contrary to the designs of his eminence?' 'Ah! don't ask me,' said he; 'I think the king capable of anything; he has a will of iron, and what he wills he wills in earnest. If he takes it into his head to marry Mademoiselle de Mancini, he will marry her, depend upon it.' And thereupon he left me and went straight to the stables, took a horse, saddled it himself, jumped upon its back, and set off as if the devil were at his heels."

"So that you believe, then--"

"I believe that monsieur the lieutenant of the guards knew more than he

was willing to say."

"In your opinion, then, M. d'Artagnan--"

"Is gone, according to all probability, after the exiles, to carry out all that can facilitate the success of the king's love."

Chatting thus, the two confidants arrived at the door of his eminence's apartment. His eminence's gout had left him; he was walking about his chamber in a state of great anxiety, listening at doors and looking out of windows. Bernouin entered, followed by the gentleman, who had orders from the king to place the letter in the hands of the cardinal himself. Mazarin took the letter, but before opening it, he got up a ready smile, a smile of circumstance, able to throw a veil over emotions of whatever sort they might be. So prepared, whatever was the impression received from the letter, no reflection of that impression was allowed to transpire upon his countenance.

"Well," said he, when he had read and reread the letter, "very well, monsieur. Inform the king that I thank him for his obedience to the wishes of the queen-mother, and that I will do everything for the accomplishment of his will."

The gentleman left the room. The door had scarcely closed before the cardinal, who had no mask for Bernouin, took off that which had so recently covered his face, and with a most dismal expression,--"Call M. de Brienne," said he. Five minutes afterward the secretary entered.

"Monsieur," said Mazarin, "I have just rendered a great service to the monarchy, the greatest I have ever rendered it. You will carry this letter, which proves it, to her majesty the queen-mother, and when she shall have returned it to you, you will lodge it in portfolio B., which is filed with documents and papers relative to my ministry."

Brienne went as desired, and, as the letter was unsealed, did not fail to read it on his way. There is likewise no doubt that Bernouin, who was on good terms with everybody, approached so near to the secretary as to be able to read the letter over his shoulder; so that the news spread with such activity through the castle, that Mazarin might have feared it would reach the ears of the queen-mother before M. de Brienne could convey Louis XIV.'s letter to her. A moment after orders were given for departure, and M. de Conde having been to pay his respects to the king on his pretended rising, inscribed the city of Poitiers upon his tablets, as the place of sojourn and rest for their majesties.

Thus in a few instants was unraveled an intrigue which had covertly occupied all the diplomacies of Europe. It had nothing, however, very clear as a result, but to make a poor lieutenant of musketeers lose his commission and his fortune. It is true, that in exchange he gained his

liberty. We shall soon know how M. d'Artagnan profited by this. For the moment, if the reader will permit us, we shall return to the hostelry of les Medici, of which one of the windows opened at the very moment the orders were given for the departure of the king.

The window that opened was that of one of the rooms of Charles II. The unfortunate prince had passed the night in bitter reflections, his head resting on his hands, and his elbows on the table, whilst Parry, infirm and old, wearied in body and in mind, had fallen asleep in a corner. A singular fortune was that of this faithful servant, who saw beginning for the second generation the fearful series of misfortunes which had weighed so heavily on the first. When Charles II. had well thought over the fresh defeat he had experienced, when he perfectly comprehended the complete isolation into which he had just fallen, on seeing his fresh hope left behind him, he was seized as with a vertigo, and sank back into the large armchair in which he was seated. Then God took pity on the unhappy prince, and sent to console him sleep, the innocent brother of death. He did not wake till half-past six, that is to say, till the sun shone brightly into his chamber, and Parry, motionless with fear of waking him, was observing with profound grief the eyes of the young man already red with wakefulness, and his cheeks pale with suffering and privations.

At length the noise of some heavy carts descending towards the Loire awakened Charles. He arose, looked around him like a man who has forgotten everything, perceived Parry, shook him by the hand, and commanded him to settle the reckoning with Master Cropole. Master Cropole, being called upon to settle his account with Parry, acquitted himself, it must be allowed, like an honest man; he only made his customary remark, that the two travelers had eaten nothing, which had the double disadvantage of being humiliating for his kitchen, and of forcing him to ask payment for a repast not consumed, but not the less lost. Parry had nothing to say to the contrary, and paid.

"I hope," said the king, "it has not been the same with the horses. I don't see that they have eaten at your expense, and it would be a misfortune for travelers like us, who have a long journey to make, to have our horses fail us."

But Cropole, at this doubt, assumed his majestic air, and replied that the stables of les Medici were not less hospitable than its refectory.

The king mounted his horse; his old servant did the same, and both set out towards Paris, without meeting a single person on their road, in the streets or the faubourgs of the city. For the prince the blow was the more severe, as it was a fresh exile. The unfortunates cling to the smallest hopes, as the happy do to the greatest good; and when they are obliged to quit the place where that hope has soothed their hearts, they experience the mortal regret which the banished man feels when he places

his foot upon the vessel which is to bear him into exile. It appears that the heart already wounded so many times suffers from the least scratch; it appears that it considers as a good the momentary absence of evil, which is nothing but the absence of pain; and that God, into the most terrible misfortunes, has thrown hope as the drop of water which the rich sinner in hell entreated of Lazarus.

For one instant even the hope of Charles II. had been more than a fugitive joy;--that was when he found himself so kindly welcomed by his brother king; then it had taken a form that had become a reality; then, all at once, the refusal of Mazarin had reduced the fictitious reality to the state of a dream. This promise of Louis XIV., so soon retracted, had been nothing but a mockery; a mockery like his crown--like his scepter--like his friends--like all that had surrounded his royal childhood, and which had abandoned his proscribed youth. Mockery! everything was a mockery for Charles II. except the cold, black repose promised by death.

Such were the ideas of the unfortunate prince while sitting listlessly upon his horse, to which he abandoned the reins: he rode slowly along beneath the warm May sun, in which the somber misanthropy of the exile perceived a last insult to his grief.