

Chapter XXIV. The Treasure.

The French gentleman whom Spithead had announced to Monk, and who, closely wrapped in his cloak, had passed by the fishermen who left the general's tent five minutes before he entered it,--the French gentleman went through the various posts without even casting his eyes around him, for fear of appearing indiscreet. As the order had been given, he was conducted to the tent of the general. The gentleman was left alone in the sort of ante-chamber in front of the principal body of the tent, where he awaited Monk, who only delayed till he had heard the report of his people, and observed through the opening of the canvas the countenance of the person who solicited an audience.

Without doubt, the report of those who had accompanied the French gentleman established the discretion with which he had behaved, for the first impression the stranger received of the welcome made him by the general was more favorable than he could have expected at such a moment, and on the part of so suspicious a man. Nevertheless, according to his custom, when Monk found himself in the presence of a stranger, he fixed upon him his penetrating eyes, which scrutiny, the stranger, on his part, sustained without embarrassment or notice. At the end of a few seconds, the general made a gesture with his hand and head in sign of attention.

"My lord," said the gentleman, in excellent English, "I have requested an interview with your honor, for an affair of importance."

"Monsieur," replied Monk, in French, "you speak our language well for a son of the continent. I ask your pardon--for doubtless the question is indiscreet--do you speak French with the same purity?"

"There is nothing surprising, my lord, in my speaking English tolerably; I resided for some time in England in my youth, and since then I have made two voyages to this country." These words were spoken in French, and with a purity of accent that bespoke not only a Frenchman, but a Frenchman from the vicinity of Tours.

"And what part of England have you resided in, monsieur?"

"In my youth, London, my lord; then, about 1635, I made a pleasure trip to Scotland; and lastly, in 1648, I lived for some time at Newcastle, particularly in the convent, the gardens of which are now occupied by your army."

"Excuse me, monsieur; but you must comprehend that these questions are necessary on my part--do you not?"

"It would astonish me, my lord, if they were not asked."

"Now, then, monsieur, what can I do to serve you? What do you wish?"

"This, my lord;--but, in the first place, are we alone?"

"Perfectly so, monsieur, except, of course, the post which guards us."
So saying, Monk pulled open the canvas with his hand, and pointed to the soldier placed at ten paces from the tent, and who, at the first call, could have rendered assistance in a second.

"In that case, my lord," said the gentleman, in as calm a tone as if he had been for a length of time in habits of intimacy with his interlocutor, "I have made up my mind to address myself to you, because I believe you to be an honest man. Indeed, the communication I am about to make to you will prove to you the esteem in which I hold you."

Monk, astonished at this language, which established between him and the French gentleman equality at least, raised his piercing eye to the stranger's face, and with a sensible irony conveyed by the inflection of his voice alone, for not a muscle of his face moved,--"I thank you, monsieur," said he; "but, in the first place, to whom have I the honor of speaking?"

"I sent you my name by your sergent, my lord."

"Excuse him, monsieur, he is a Scotsman,--he could not retain it."

"I am called the Comte de la Fere, monsieur," said Athos, bowing.

"The Comte de la Fere?" said Monk, endeavoring to recollect the name.
"Pardon me, monsieur, but this appears to be the first time I have ever heard that name. Do you fill any post at the court of France?"

"None; I am a simple gentleman."

"What dignity?"

"King Charles I. made me a knight of the Garter, and Queen Anne of Austria has given me the cordon of the Holy Ghost. These are my only dignities."

"The Garter! the Holy Ghost! Are you a knight of those two orders, monsieur?"

"Yes."

"And on what occasions have such favors been bestowed upon you?"

"For services rendered to their majesties."

Monk looked with astonishment at this man, who appeared to him so simple and so great at the same time. Then, as if he had renounced endeavoring to penetrate this mystery of a simplicity and grandeur upon which the stranger did not seem disposed to give him any other information than that which he had already received,--"Did you present yourself yesterday at our advanced posts?"

"And was sent back? Yes, my lord."

"Many officers, monsieur, would permit no one to enter their camp, particularly on the eve of a probable battle. But I differ from my colleagues, and like to leave nothing behind me. Every advice is good to me; all danger is sent to me by God, and I weigh it in my hand with the energy He has given me. So, yesterday, you were only sent back on account of the council I was holding. To-day I am at liberty,--speak."

"My lord, you have done much better in receiving me, for what I have to say has nothing to do with the battle you are about to fight with General Lambert, or with your camp; and the proof is, that I turned away my head that I might not see your men, and closed my eyes that I might not count your tents. No, I came to speak to you, my lord, on my own account."

"Speak then, monsieur," said Monk.

"Just now," continued Athos, "I had the honor of telling your lordship that for a long time I lived in Newcastle; it was in the time of Charles I., and when the king was given up to Cromwell by the Scots."

"I know," said Monk, coldly.

"I had at that time a large sum in gold, and on the eve of the battle, from a presentiment perhaps of the turn which things would take on the morrow, I concealed it in the principal vault of the covenant of Newcastle, in the tower whose summit you now see silvered by the moonbeams. My treasure has then remained interred there, and I have come to entreat your honor to permit me to withdraw it before, perhaps, the battle turning that way, a mine or some other war engine has destroyed the building and scattered my gold, or rendered it so apparent that the soldiers will take possession of it."

Monk was well acquainted with mankind; he saw in the physiognomy of this gentleman all the energy, all the reason, all the circumspection possible; he could therefore only attribute to a magnanimous confidence the revelation the Frenchman had made him, and he showed himself profoundly touched by it.

"Monsieur," said he, "you have augured well of me. But is the sum worth the trouble to which you expose yourself? Do you even believe that it can be in the same place where you left it?"

"It is there monsieur, I do not doubt."

"That is a reply to one question; but to the other. I asked you if the sum was so large as to warrant your exposing yourself thus."

"It is really large; yes, my lord, for it is a million I inclosed in two barrels."

"A million!" cried Monk, at whom this time, in turn, Athos looked earnestly and long. Monk perceived this, and his mistrust returned.

"Here is a man," said he to himself, "who is laying a snare for me. So you wish to withdraw this money, monsieur," replied he, "as I understand?"

"If you please, my lord."

"To-day?"

"This very evening, and that on account of the circumstances I have named."

"But, monsieur," objected Monk, "General Lambert is as near the abbey where you have to act as I am. Why, then, have you not addressed yourself to him?"

"Because, my lord, when one acts in important matters, it is best to consult one's instinct before everything. Well, General Lambert does not inspire with me so much confidence as you do."

"Be it so, monsieur. I shall assist you in recovering your money, if, however, it can still be there; for that is far from likely. Since 1648 twelve years have rolled away, and many events have taken place." Monk dwelt upon this point to see if the French gentleman would seize the evasions that were open to him, but Athos did not hesitate.

"I assure you, my lord," he said firmly, "that my conviction is, that the two barrels have neither changed place nor master." This reply had removed one suspicion from the mind of Monk, but it had suggested another. Without doubt this Frenchman was some emissary sent to entice into error the protector of the parliament; the gold was nothing but a lure; and by the help of this lure they thought to excite the cupidity of the general. This gold might not exist. It was Monk's business, then, to seize the Frenchman in the act of falsehood and trick, and to draw from the false step itself in which his enemies wished to entrap him, a

triumph for his renown. When Monk was determined how to act,--

"Monsieur," said he to Athos, "without doubt you will do me the honor to share my supper this evening?"

"Yes, my lord," replied Athos, bowing; "for you do me an honor of which I feel myself worthy, by the inclination which drew me towards you."

"It is so much the more gracious on your part to accept my invitation with such frankness, as my cooks are but few and inexperienced, and my providers have returned this evening empty-handed; so that if it had not been for a fisherman of your nation who strayed into our camp, General Monk would have gone to bed without his supper to-day; I have, then, some fresh fish to offer you, as the vendor assures me."

"My lord, it is principally for the sake of having the honor to pass an hour with you."

After this exchange of civilities, during which Monk had lost nothing of his circumspection, the supper, or what was to serve for one, had been laid upon a deal table. Monk invited the Comte de la Fere to be seated at this table, and took his place opposite to him. A single dish of boiled fish, set before the two illustrious guests, was more tempting to hungry stomachs than to delicate palates.

Whilst supping, that is, while eating the fish, washed down with bad ale, Monk got Athos to relate to him the last events of the Fronde, the reconciliation of M. de Conde with the king, and the probable marriage of the infanta of Spain; but he avoided, as Athos himself avoided it, all allusion to the political interests which united, or rather which disunited at this time, England, France and Holland.

Monk, in this conversation, convinced himself of one thing, which he must have remarked after the first words exchanged: that was, that he had to deal with a man of high distinction. He could not be an assassin, and it was repugnant to Monk to believe him to be a spy; but there was sufficient finesse and at the same time firmness in Athos to lead Monk to fancy he was a conspirator. When they had quitted the table, "You still believe in your treasure, then, monsieur?" asked Monk.

"Yes, my lord."

"Quite seriously?"

"Seriously."

"And you think you can find the place again where it was buried?"

"At the first inspection."

"Well, monsieur, from curiosity I shall accompany you. And it is so much the more necessary that I should accompany you, that you would find great difficulties in passing through the camp without me or one of my lieutenants."

"General, I would not suffer you to inconvenience yourself if I did not, in fact, stand in need of your company; but as I recognize that this company is not only honorable, but necessary, I accept it."

"Do you desire we should take any people with us?" asked Monk.

"General, I believe that would be useless, if you yourself do not see the necessity for it. Two men and a horse will suffice to transport the two casks on board the felucca which brought me hither."

"But it will be necessary to pick, dig, and remove the earth, and split stones; you don't intend doing this work yourself, monsieur, do you?"

"General, there is no picking or digging required. The treasure is buried in the sepulchral vault of the convent, under a stone in which is fixed a large iron ring, and under which there are four steps leading down. The two casks are there, placed end to end, covered with a coat of plaster in the form of a bier. There is, besides, an inscription, which will enable me to recognize the stone; and as I am not willing, in an affair of delicacy and confidence, to keep the secret from your honor, here is the inscription:--'Hic jacet venerabilis, Petrus Gulielmus Scott, Canon Honorab. Conventus Novi Castelli. Obiit quarta et decima Feb. ann. Dom. MCCVIII. Requiescat in pace.'"

Monk did not lose a single word. He was astonished either at the marvelous duplicity of this man and the superior style in which he played his part, or at the good loyal faith with which he presented his request, in a situation in which concerning a million of money, risked against the blow from a dagger, amidst an army that would have looked upon the theft as a restitution.

"Very well," said he; "I shall accompany you; and the adventure appears to me so wonderful, that I shall carry the torch myself." And saying these words, he girded on a short sword, placed a pistol in his belt, disclosing in this movement, which opened his doublet a little, the fine rings of a coat of mail, destined to protect him from the first dagger-thrust of an assassin. After which he took a Scottish dirk in his left hand, and then turning to Athos, "Are you ready, monsieur?" said he.

"I am."

Athos, as if in opposition to what Monk had done, unfastened his

poniard, which he placed upon the table; unhooked his sword-belt, which he laid close to his poniard; and, without affectation, opening his doublet as if to look for his handkerchief, showed beneath his fine cambric shirt his naked breast, without weapons either offensive or defensive.

"This is truly a singular man," said Monk; "he is without any arms; he has an ambuscade placed somewhere yonder."

"General," said he, as if he had divined Monk's thought, "you wish we should be alone; that is very right, but a great captain ought never to expose himself with temerity. It is night, the passage of the marsh may present dangers; be accompanied."

"You are right," replied he, calling Digby. The aid-de-camp appeared. "Fifty men with swords and muskets," said he, looking at Athos.

"That is too few if there is danger, too many if there is not."

"I will go alone," said Monk; "I want nobody. Come, monsieur."