

Chapter XXVII. The Next Day.

It was seven o'clock in the morning, the first rays of day lightened the pools of the marsh, in which the sun was reflected like a red ball, when Athos, awakening and opening the window of his bed-chamber, which looked out upon the banks of the river, perceived, at fifteen paces' distance from him, the sergeant and the men who had accompanied him the evening before, and who, after having deposited the casks at his house, had returned to the camp by the causeway on the right.

Why had these men come back after having returned to the camp? That was the question which first presented itself to Athos. The sergeant, with his head raised, appeared to be watching the moment when the gentleman should appear to address him. Athos, surprised to see these men, whom he had seen depart the night before, could not refrain from expressing his astonishment to them.

"There is nothing surprising in that, monsieur," said the sergeant; "for yesterday the general commanded me to watch over your safety, and I thought it right to obey that order."

"Is the general at the camp?" asked Athos.

"No doubt he is, monsieur; as when he left you he was going back."

"Well, wait for me a moment; I am going thither to render an account of the fidelity with which you fulfilled your duty, and to get my sword, which I left upon the table in the tent."

"This happens very well," said the sergeant, "for we were about to request you to do so."

Athos fancied he could detect an air of equivocal bonhomie upon the countenance of the sergeant; but the adventure of the vault might have excited the curiosity of the man, and it was not surprising that he allowed some of the feelings which agitated his mind to appear in his face. Athos closed the doors carefully, confiding the keys to Grimaud, who had chosen his domicile beneath the shed itself, which led to the cellar where the casks had been deposited. The sergeant escorted the Comte de la Fere to the camp. There a fresh guard awaited him, and relieved the four men who had conducted Athos.

This fresh guard was commanded by the aid-de-camp Digby, who, on their way, fixed upon Athos looks so little encouraging, that the Frenchman asked himself whence arose, with regard to him, this vigilance and this severity, when the evening before he had been left perfectly free. He

nevertheless continued his way to the headquarters, keeping to himself the observations which men and things forced him to make. He found in the general's tent, to which he had been introduced the evening before, three superior officers: these were Monk's lieutenant and two colonels. Athos perceived his sword; it was still on the table where he left it. Neither of the officers had seen Athos, consequently neither of them knew him. Monk's lieutenant asked, at the appearance of Athos, if that were the same gentleman with whom the general had left the tent.

"Yes, your honor," said the sergeant; "it is the same."

"But," said Athos, haughtily, "I do not deny it, I think; and now, gentlemen, in turn, permit me to ask you to what purpose these questions are asked, and particularly some explanations upon the tone in which you ask them?"

"Monsieur," said the lieutenant, "if we address these questions to you, it is because we have a right to do so, and if we make them in a particular tone, it is because that tone, believe me, agrees with the circumstances."

"Gentlemen," said Athos, "you do not know who I am; but I must tell you that I acknowledge no one here but General Monk as my equal. Where is he? Let me be conducted to him, and if he has any questions to put to me, I will answer him and to his satisfaction, I hope. I repeat, gentlemen, where is the general?"

"Eh! good God! you know better than we do where he is," said the lieutenant.

"I?"

"Yes, you."

"Monsieur," said Athos; "I do not understand you."

"You will understand me--and, in the first place, do not speak so loudly."

Athos smiled disdainfully.

"We don't ask you to smile," said one of the colonels warmly; "we require you to answer."

"And I, gentlemen, declare to you that I will not reply until I am in the presence of the general."

"But," replied the same colonel who had already spoken, "you know very well that is impossible."

"This is the second time I have received this strange reply to the wish I express," said Athos. "Is the general absent?"

This question was made with such apparent good faith, and the gentleman wore an air of such natural surprise, that the three officers exchanged a meaning look. The lieutenant, by a tacit convention with the other two, was spokesman.

"Monsieur, the general left you last night on the borders of the monastery."

"Yes, monsieur."

"And you went--"

"It is not for me to answer you, but for those who have accompanied me. They were your soldiers, ask them."

"But if we please to question you?"

"Then it will please me to reply, monsieur, that I do not recognize any one here, that I know no one here but the general, and that it is to him alone I will reply."

"So be it, monsieur; but as we are the masters, we constitute ourselves a council of war, and when you are before judges you must reply."

The countenance of Athos expressed nothing but astonishment and disdain, instead of the terror the officers expected to read in it at this threat.

"Scottish or English judges upon me, a subject of the king of France; upon me, placed under the safeguard of British honor! You are mad, gentlemen!" said Athos, shrugging his shoulders.

The officers looked at each other. "Then, monsieur," said one of them, "do you pretend not to know where the general is?"

"To that, monsieur, I have already replied."

"Yes, but you have already replied an incredible thing."

"It is true, nevertheless, gentlemen. Men of my rank are not generally liars. I am a gentleman, I have told you, and when I have at my side the sword which, by an excess of delicacy, I left last night upon the table whereon it still lies, believe me, no man says that to me which I am unwilling to hear. I am at this moment disarmed; if you pretend to be my judges, try me; if you are but my executioners, kill me."

"But, monsieur--" asked the lieutenant, in a more courteous voice, struck with the lofty coolness of Athos.

"Sir, I came to speak confidentially with your general about affairs of importance. It was not an ordinary welcome that he gave me. The accounts your soldiers can give you may convince you of that. If, then, the general received me in that manner, he knew my titles to his esteem. Now, you do not suspect, I should think, that I should reveal my secrets to you, and still less his."

"But these casks, what do they contain?"

"Have you not put that question to your soldiers? What was their reply?"

"That they contained powder and ball."

"From whom had they that information? They must have told you that."

"From the general; but we are not dupes."

"Beware, gentlemen; it is not to me you are now giving the lie, it is to your leader."

The officers again looked at each other. Athos continued: "Before your soldiers the general told me to wait a week, and at the expiration of that week he would give me the answer he had to make me. Have I fled away? No; I wait."

"He told you to wait a week!" cried the lieutenant.

"He told me that so clearly, sir, that I have a sloop at the mouth of the river, which I could with ease have joined yesterday, and embarked. Now, if I have remained, it was only in compliance with the desire of your general; his honor having requested me not to depart without a last audience, which he fixed at a week hence. I repeat to you, then, I am waiting."

The lieutenant turned towards the other officers, and said, in a low voice: "If this gentleman speaks truth, there may still be some hope. The general may be carrying out some negotiations so secret, that he thought it imprudent to inform even us. Then the time limited for his absence would be a week." Then, turning towards Athos: "Monsieur," said he, "your declaration is of the most serious importance; are you willing to repeat it under the seal of an oath?"

"Sir," replied Athos, "I have always lived in a world where my simple word was regarded as the most sacred of oaths."

"This time, however, monsieur, the circumstance is more grave than any you may have been placed in. The safety of the whole army is at stake. Reflect; the general has disappeared, and our search for him has been in vain. Is this disappearance natural? Has a crime been committed? Are we not bound to carry our investigations to extremity? Have we any right to wait with patience? At this moment, everything, monsieur, depends upon the words you are about to pronounce."

"Thus questioned, gentlemen, I no longer hesitate," said Athos. "Yes, I came hither to converse confidentially with General Monk, and ask him for an answer regarding certain interests; yes, the general being, doubtless, unable to pronounce before the expected battle, begged me to remain a week in the house I inhabit, promising me that in a week I should see him again. Yes, all this is true, and I swear it by God who is the absolute master of my life and yours." Athos pronounced these words with so much grandeur and solemnity, that the three officers were almost convinced. Nevertheless, one of the colonels made a last attempt.

"Monsieur," said he, "although we may now be persuaded of the truth of what you say, there is yet a strange mystery in all this. The general is too prudent a man to have thus abandoned his army on the eve of a battle without having at least given notice of it to one of us. As for myself, I cannot believe but some strange event has been the cause of this disappearance. Yesterday some foreign fishermen came to sell their fish here; they were lodged yonder among the Scots; that is to say, on the road the general took with this gentleman, to go to the abbey, and to return from it. It was one of these fishermen that accompanied the general with a light. And this morning, bark and fishermen have all disappeared, carried away by the night's tide."

"For my part," said the lieutenant, "I see nothing in that that is not quite natural, for these people were not prisoners."

"No; but I repeat it was one of them who lighted the general and this gentleman to the abbey, and Digby assures us that the general had strong suspicions concerning those people. Now, who can say whether these people were not connected with this gentleman; and that, the blow being struck, the gentleman, who is evidently brave, did not remain to reassure us by his presence, and to prevent our researches being made in a right direction?"

This speech made an impression upon the other two officers.

"Sir," said Athos, "permit me to tell you, that your reasoning, though specious in appearance, nevertheless wants consistency, as regards me. I have remained, you say, to divert suspicion. Well! on the contrary, suspicions arise in me as well as in you; and I say, it is impossible, gentlemen, that the general, on the eve of a battle, should leave his army without saying anything to at least one of his officers. Yes, there

is some strange event connected with this; instead of being idle and waiting, you must display all the activity and all the vigilance possible. I am your prisoner, gentlemen, upon parole or otherwise. My honor is concerned in ascertaining what has become of General Monk, and to such a point, that if you were to say to me, 'Depart!' I should reply: 'No, I will remain!' And if you were to ask my opinion, I should add: 'Yes, the general is the victim of some conspiracy, for, if he had intended to leave the camp he would have told me so.' Seek, then, search the land, search the sea; the general has not gone of his own good will."

The lieutenant made a sign to the two other officers.

"No, monsieur," said he, "no; in your turn you go too far. The general has nothing to suffer from these events, and, no doubt, has directed them. What Monk is now doing he has often done before. We are wrong in alarming ourselves; his absence will, doubtless, be of short duration; therefore, let us beware, lest by a pusillanimity which the general would consider a crime, of making his absence public, and by that means demoralize the army. The general gives a striking proof of his confidence in us; let us show ourselves worthy of it. Gentlemen, let the most profound silence cover all this with an impenetrable veil; we will detain this gentleman, not from mistrust of him with regard to the crime, but to assure more effectively the secret of the general's absence by keeping among ourselves; therefore, until fresh orders, the gentleman will remain at headquarters."

"Gentlemen," said Athos, "you forget that last night the general confided to me a deposit over which I am bound to watch. Give me whatever guard you like, chain me if you like, but leave me the house I inhabit for my prison. The general, on his return, would reproach you, I swear on the honor of a gentleman, for having displeased him in this."

"So be it, monsieur," said the lieutenant; "return to your abode."

Then they placed over Athos a guard of fifty men, who surrounded his house, without losing sight of him for a minute.

The secret remained secure, but hours, days passed away without the general's returning, or without anything being heard of him.