

Chapter XXX. The Shares of Planchet and Company rise again to Par.

During the passage, Monk only spoke to D'Artagnan in cases of urgent necessity. Thus, when the Frenchman hesitated to come and take his meals, poor meals, composed of salt fish, biscuit, and Hollands gin, Monk called him, saying,--"To table, monsieur, to table!"

This was all. D'Artagnan, from being himself on all great occasions, extremely concise, did not draw from the general's conciseness a favorable augury of the result of his mission. Now, as D'Artagnan had plenty of time for reflection, he battered his brains during this time in endeavoring to find out how Athos had seen King Charles, how he had conspired his departure with him, and lastly, how he had entered Monk's camp; and the poor lieutenant of musketeers plucked a hair from his mustache every time that he reflected that the horseman who accompanied Monk on the night of the famous abduction must have been Athos.

At length, after a passage of two nights and two days, the patron Keyser touched at the point where Monk, who had given all the orders during the voyage, had commanded they should land. It was exactly at the mouth of the little river, near where Athos had chosen his abode.

Daylight was waning, a splendid sun, like a red steel buckler, was plunging the lower extremity of its disc beneath the blue line of the sea. The felucca was making fair way up the river, tolerably wide in that part, but Monk, in his impatience, desired to be landed, and Keyser's boat set him and D'Artagnan upon the muddy bank, amidst the reeds. D'Artagnan, resigned to obedience, followed Monk exactly as a chained bear follows his master; but the position humiliated him not a little, and he grumbled to himself that the service of kings was a bitter one, and that the best of them was good for nothing. Monk walked with long and hasty strides; it might be thought that he did not yet feel certain of having reached English land. They had already begun to perceive distinctly a few of the cottages of the sailors and fishermen spread over the little quay of this humble port, when, all at once, D'Artagnan cried out,--"God pardon me, there is a house on fire!"

Monk raised his eyes, and perceived there was, in fact, a house which the flames were beginning to devour. It had begun at a little shed belonging to the house, the roof of which had caught. The fresh evening breeze agitated the fire. The two travelers quickened their steps, hearing loud cries, and seeing, as they drew nearer, soldiers with their glittering arms pointed towards the house on fire. It was doubtless this menacing occupation which had made them neglect to signal the felucca. Monk stopped short for an instant, and, for the first time, formulated his thoughts into words. "Eh! but," said he, "perhaps they are not my

soldiers but Lambert's."

These words contained at once a sorrow, and apprehension, and a reproach perfectly intelligible to D'Artagnan. In fact, during the general's absence, Lambert might have given battle, conquered, and dispersed the parliament's army, and taken with his own the place of Monk's army, deprived of its strongest support. At this doubt, which passed from the mind of Monk to his own, D'Artagnan reasoned in this manner:--"One of two things is going to happen; either Monk has spoken correctly, and there are no longer any but Lambertists in the country--that is to say, enemies, who would receive me wonderfully well, since it is to me they owe their victory; or nothing is changed, and Monk, transported with joy at finding his camp still in the same place, will not prove too severe in his settlement with me." Whilst thinking thus, the two travelers advanced, and began to mingle with a little knot of sailors, who looked on with sorrow at the burning house, but did not dare to say anything on account of the threats of the soldiers. Monk addressed one of these sailors:--"What is going on here?" asked he.

"Sir," replied the man, not recognizing Monk as an officer, under the thick cloak which enveloped him, "that house was inhabited by a foreign gentleman, and this foreigner became suspected by the soldiers. They wanted to get into his house under pretense of taking him to the camp; but he, without being frightened by their number, threatened death to the first who should cross the threshold of his door; and as there was one who did venture, the Frenchman stretched him on the earth with a pistol-shot."

"Ah! he is a Frenchman, is he?" said D'Artagnan, rubbing his hands. "Good!"

"How good?" replied the fisherman.

"No, I don't mean that.--What then--my tongue slipped."

"What then, sir?--why, the other men became as enraged as so many lions: they fired more than a hundred shots at the house; but the Frenchman was sheltered by the wall, and every time they tried to enter by the door they met with a shot from his lackey, whose aim is deadly, d'ye see? Every time they threatened the window, they met with a pistol-shot from the master. Look and count--there are seven men down."

"Ah! my brave countryman," cried D'Artagnan, "wait a little, wait a little. I will be with you; and we will settle with this rabble."

"One instant, sir," said Monk, "wait."

"Long?"

"No; only the time to ask a question." Then, turning towards the sailor, "My friend," asked he, with an emotion which, in spite of all his self-command, he could not conceal, "whose soldiers are these, pray tell me?"

"Whose should they be but that madman, Monk's?"

"There has been no battle, then?"

"A battle, ah, yes! for what purpose? Lambert's army is melting away like snow in April. All come to Monk, officers and soldiers. In a week Lambert won't have fifty men left."

The fisherman was interrupted by a fresh discharge directed against the house, and by another pistol-shot which replied to the discharge and struck down the most daring of the aggressors. The rage of soldiers was at its height. The fire still continued to increase, and a crest of flame and smoke whirled and spread over the roof of the house. D'Artagnan could no longer contain himself. "Mordioux!" said he to Monk, glancing at him sideways: "you are a general, and allow your men to burn houses and assassinate people, while you look on and warm your hands at the blaze of the conflagration? Mordioux! you are not a man."

"Patience, sir, patience!" said Monk, smiling.

"Patience! yes, until that brave gentleman is roasted--is that what you mean?" And D'Artagnan rushed forward.

"Remain where you are, sir," said Monk, in a tone of command. And he advanced towards the house, just as an officer had approached it, saying to the besieged: "The house is burning, you will be roasted within an hour! There is still time--come, tell us what you know of General Monk, and we will spare your life. Reply, or by Saint Patrick--"

The besieged made no answer; he was no doubt reloading his pistol.

"A reinforcement is expected," continued the officer; "in a quarter of an hour there will be a hundred men around your house."

"I reply to you," said the Frenchman. "Let your men be sent away; I will come out freely and repair to the camp alone, or else I will be killed here!"

"Mille tonnerres!" shouted D'Artagnan; "why, that's the voice of Athos! Ah canailles!" and the sword of D'Artagnan flashed from its sheath. Monk stopped him and advanced himself, exclaiming, in a sonorous voice: "Hola! what is going on here? Digby, whence this fire? why these cries?"

"The general!" cried Digby, letting the point of his sword fall.

"The general!" repeated the soldiers.

"Well, what is there so astonishing in that?" said Monk, in a calm tone. Then, silence being re-established,--"Now," said he, "who lit this fire?"

The soldiers hung their heads.

"What! do I ask a question, and nobody answers me?" said Monk. "What! do I find a fault, and nobody repairs it? The fire is still burning, I believe."

Immediately the twenty men rushed forward, seizing pails, buckets, jars, barrels, and extinguishing the fire with as much ardor as they had, an instant before, employed in promoting it. But already, and before all the rest, D'Artagnan had applied a ladder to the house, crying, "Athos! it is I, D'Artagnan! Do not kill me, my dearest friend!" And in a moment the count was clasped in his arms. In the meantime, Grimaud, preserving his calmness, dismantled the fortification of the ground-floor, and after having opened the door, stood, with his arms folded, quietly on the sill. Only, on hearing the voice of D'Artagnan, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. The fire being extinguished, the soldiers presented themselves, Digby at their head.

"General," said he, "excuse us; what we have done was for love of your honor, whom we thought lost."

"You are mad, gentlemen. Lost! Is a man like me to be lost? Am I not permitted to be absent, according to my pleasure, without giving formal notice? Do you, by chance, take me for a citizen from the city? Is a gentleman, my friend, my guest, to be besieged, entrapped, and threatened with death, because he is suspected? What signifies the word, suspected? Curse me if I don't have every one of you shot like dogs, that the brave gentleman has left alive!

"General," said Digby, piteously, "there were twenty-eight of us, and see, there are eight on the ground."

"I authorize M. le Comte de la Fere to send the twenty to join the eight," said Monk, stretching out his hand to Athos. "Let them return to camp. Mr. Digby, you will consider yourself under arrest for a month."

"General--"

"That is to teach you, sir, not to act, another time, without orders."

"I had those of the lieutenant, general."

"The lieutenant had no such orders to give you, and he shall be placed under arrest, instead of you, if he has really commanded you to burn this gentleman."

"He did not command that, general; he commanded us to bring him to the camp; but the count was not willing to follow us."

"I was not willing that they should enter and plunder my house," said Athos to Monk, with a significant look.

"And you were quite right. To the camp, I say." The soldiers departed with dejected looks. "Now we are alone," said Monk to Athos, "have the goodness to tell me, monsieur, why you persisted in remaining here, whilst you had your felucca--"

"I waited for you, general," said Athos. "Had not your honor appointed to meet me in a week?"

An eloquent look from D'Artagnan made it clear to Monk that these two men, so brave and so loyal, had not acted in concert for his abduction. He knew already it could not be so.

"Monsieur," said he to D'Artagnan, "you were perfectly right. Have the kindness to allow me a moment's conversation with M. le Comte de la Fere?"

D'Artagnan took advantage of this to go and ask Grimaud how he was. Monk requested Athos to conduct him to the chamber he lived in.

This chamber was still full of smoke and rubbish. More than fifty balls had passed through the windows and mutilated the walls. They found a table, inkstand, and materials for writing. Monk took up a pen, wrote a single line, signed it, folded the paper, sealed the letter with the seal of his ring, and handed over the missive to Athos, saying, "Monsieur, carry, if you please, this letter to King Charles II., and set out immediately, if nothing detains you here any longer."

"And the casks?" said Athos.

"The fisherman who brought me hither will assist you in transporting them on board. Depart, if possible, within an hour."

"Yes, general," said Athos.

"Monsieur D'Artagnan!" cried Monk, from the window. D'Artagnan ran up precipitately.

"Embrace your friend and bid him adieu, sir; he is returning to Holland."

"To Holland!" cried D'Artagnan; "and I?"

"You are at liberty to follow him, monsieur; but I request you to remain," said Monk. "Will you refuse me?"

"Oh, no, general; I am at your orders."

D'Artagnan embraced Athos, and only had time to bid him adieu. Monk watched them both. Then he took upon himself the preparations for the departure, the transportation of the casks on board, and the embarking of Athos; then, taking D'Artagnan by the arm, who was quite amazed and agitated, he led him towards Newcastle. Whilst going along, the general leaning on his arm, D'Artagnan could not help murmuring to himself,--"Come, come, it seems to me that the shares of the firm of Planchet and Company are rising."