

was not equal to present circumstances. D'Artagnan therefore took the post, and chose a horse which he soon caused to demonstrate, with good spurs and a light hand, that deer are not the swiftest animals in nature.

Chapter LXXIV. In which D'Artagnan makes all Speed, Porthos snores, and Aramis counsels.

From thirty to thirty-five hours after the events we have just related, as M. Fouquet, according to his custom, having interdicted his door, was working in the cabinet of his house at Saint-Mande, with which we are already acquainted, a carriage, drawn by four horses steaming with sweat, entered the court at full gallop. This carriage was, probably, expected; for three or four lackeys hastened to the door, which they opened. Whilst M. Fouquet rose from his bureau and ran to the window, a man got painfully out of the carriage, descending with difficulty the three steps of the door, leaning upon the shoulders of the lackeys. He had scarcely uttered his name, when the valet upon whom he was not leaning, sprang up to the perron, and disappeared in the vestibule. This man went to inform his master; but he had no occasion to knock at the door: Fouquet was standing on the threshold.

"Monseigneur, the Bishop of Vannes," said he.

"Very well!" replied his master.

Then, leaning over the banister of the staircase, of which Aramis was beginning to ascend the first steps,--

"Ah, dear friend!" said he, "you, so soon!"

"Yes; I, myself, monsieur! but bruised, battered, as you see."

"Oh! my poor friend," said Fouquet, presenting him his arm, on which Aramis leant, whilst the servants drew back respectfully.

"Bah!" replied Aramis, "it is nothing, since I am here; the principal thing was that I should get here, and here I am."

"Speak quickly," said Fouquet, closing the door of the cabinet behind Aramis and himself.

"Are we alone?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"No one observes us?--no one can hear us?"

"Be satisfied; nobody."

"Is M. du Vallon arrived?"

"Yes."

"And you have received my letter?"

"Yes. The affair is serious, apparently, since it necessitates your attendance in Paris, at a moment when your presence was so urgent elsewhere."

"You are right, it could not be more serious."

"Thank you! thank you! What is it about? But, for God's sake! before anything else, take time to breathe, dear friend. You are so pale, you frighten me."

"I am really in great pain. But, for Heaven's sake, think nothing about me. Did M. du Vallon tell you nothing, when he delivered the letter to you?"

"No; I heard a great noise; I went to the window; I saw at the foot of the perron a sort of horseman of marble; I went down, he held the letter out to me, and his horse fell down dead."

"But he?"

"He fell with the horse; he was lifted, and carried to an apartment. Having read the letter, I went up to him, in hopes of obtaining more ample information; but he was asleep, and, after such a fashion, that it was impossible to wake him. I took pity on him; I gave orders that his boots should be cut from off his legs, and that he should be left quite undisturbed."

"So far well; now, this is the question in hand, monseigneur. You have seen M. d'Artagnan in Paris, have you not?"

"Certes, and think him a man of intelligence, and even a man of heart; although he did bring about the death of our dear friends, Lyodot and D'Eymeris."

"Alas! yes, I heard of that. At Tours I met the courier who was bringing the letter from Gourville, and the dispatches from Pelisson. Have you seriously reflected on that event, monsieur?"

"Yes."

"And in it you perceived a direct attack upon your sovereignty?"

"And do you believe it to be so?"

"Oh, yes, I think so."

"Well, I must confess, that sad idea occurred to me likewise."

"Do not blind yourself, monsieur, in the name of Heaven! Listen attentively to me,--I return to D'Artagnan."

"I am all attention."

"Under what circumstances did you see him?"

"He came here for money."

"With what kind of order?"

"With an order from the king."

"Direct?"

"Signed by his majesty."

"There, then! Well, D'Artagnan has been to Belle-Isle; he was disguised; he came in the character of some sort of an intendant, charged by his master to purchase salt-mines. Now, D'Artagnan has no other master but the king: he came, then, sent by the king. He saw Porthos."

"Who is Porthos?"

"I beg your pardon, I made a mistake. He saw M. du Vallon at Belle-Isle; and he knows, as well as you and I do, that Belle-Isle is fortified."

"And you think that the king sent him there?" said Fouquet, pensively.

"I certainly do."

"And D'Artagnan, in the hands of the king, is a dangerous instrument?"

"The most dangerous imaginable."

"Then I formed a correct opinion of him at the first glance."

"How so?"

"I wished to attach him to myself."

"If you judged him to be the bravest, the most acute, and the most

adroit man in France, you judged correctly."

"He must be had then, at any price."

"D'Artagnan?"

"Is that not your opinion?"

"It may be my opinion, but you will never get him."

"Why?"

"Because we have allowed the time to go by. He was dissatisfied with the court, we should have profited by that; since that, he has passed into England; there he powerfully assisted in the restoration, there he gained a fortune, and, after all, he returned to the service of the king. Well, if he has returned to the service of the king, it is because he is well paid in that service."

"We will pay him even better, that is all."

"Oh! monsieur, excuse me; D'Artagnan has a high respect for his word, and where that is once engaged he keeps it."

"What do you conclude, then?" said Fouquet, with great inquietude.

"At present, the principal thing is to parry a dangerous blow."

"And how is it to be parried?"

"Listen."

"But D'Artagnan will come and render an account to the king of his mission."

"Oh, we have time enough to think about that."

"How so? You are much in advance of him, I presume?"

"Nearly ten hours."

"Well, in ten hours--"

Aramis shook his pale head. "Look at these clouds which flit across the heavens; at these swallows which cut the air. D'Artagnan moves more quickly than the clouds or the birds; D'Artagnan is the wind which carries them."

"A strange man!"

"I tell you, he is superhuman, monsieur. He is of my own age, and I have known him these five-and-thirty years."

"Well?"

"Well, listen to my calculation, monsieur. I send M. du Vallon off to you two hours after midnight. M. du Vallon was eight hours in advance of me; when did M. du Vallon arrive?"

"About four hours ago."

"You see, then, that I gained four upon him; and yet Porthos is a staunch horseman, and he has left on the road eight dead horses, whose bodies I came to successively. I rode post fifty leagues; but I have the gout, the gravel, and what else I know not; so that fatigue kills me. I was obliged to dismount at Tours; since that, rolling along in a carriage, half dead, sometimes overturned, drawn upon the sides, and sometimes on the back of the carriage, always with four spirited horses at full gallop, I have arrived--arrived, gaining four hours upon Porthos; but, see you, D'Artagnan does not weigh three hundred-weight, as Porthos does; D'Artagnan has not the gout and gravel, as I have; he is not a horseman, he is a centaur. D'Artagnan, look you, set out for Belle-Isle when I set out for Paris; and D'Artagnan, notwithstanding my ten hours' advance, D'Artagnan will arrive within two hours after me."

"But, then, accidents?"

"He never meets with accidents."

"Horses may fail him."

"He will run as fast as a horse."

"Good God! what a man!"

"Yes, he is a man whom I love and admire. I love him because he is good, great, and loyal; I admire him because he represents in my eyes the culminating point of human power; but, whilst loving and admiring him, I fear him, and am on my guard against him. Now then, I resume, monsieur; in two hours D'Artagnan will be here; be beforehand with him. Go to the Louvre, and see the king, before he sees D'Artagnan."

"What shall I say to the king?"

"Nothing; give him Belle-Isle."

"Oh! Monsieur d'Herblay! Monsieur d'Herblay," cried Fouquet, "what projects crushed all at once!"

"After one project that has failed, there is always another project that may lead to fortune; we should never despair. Go, monsieur, and go at once."

"But that garrison, so carefully chosen, the king will change it directly."

"That garrison, monsieur, was the king's when it entered Belle-Isle; it is yours now; it is the same with all garrisons after a fortnight's occupation. Let things go on, monsieur. Do you see any inconvenience in having an army at the end of a year, instead of two regiments? Do you not see that your garrison of to-day will make you partisans at La Rochelle, Nantes, Bordeaux, Toulouse--in short, wherever they may be sent to? Go to the king, monsieur; go; time flies, and D'Artagnan, while we are losing time, is flying, like an arrow, along the high-road."

"Monsieur d'Herblay, you know that each word from you is a germ which fructifies in my thoughts. I will go to the Louvre."

"Instantly, will you not?"

"I only ask time to change my dress."

"Remember that D'Artagnan has no need to pass through Saint-Mande; but will go straight to the Louvre; that is cutting off an hour from the advantage that yet remains to us."

"D'Artagnan may have everything except my English horses. I shall be at the Louvre in twenty-five minutes." And, without losing a second, Fouquet gave orders for his departure.

Aramis had only time to say to him, "Return as quickly as you go; for I shall await you impatiently."

Five minutes after, the superintendent was flying along the road to Paris. During this time, Aramis desired to be shown the chamber in which Porthos was sleeping. At the door of Fouquet's cabinet he was folded in the arms of Pelisson, who had just heard of his arrival, and had left his office to see him. Aramis received, with that friendly dignity which he knew so well how to assume, these caresses, respectful as earnest; but all at once stopping on the landing-place, "What is that I hear up yonder?"

There was, in fact, a hoarse, growling kind of noise, like the roar of a hungry tiger, or an impatient lion. "Oh, that is nothing," said Pelisson, smiling.

"Well; but--"

"It is M. du Vallon snoring."

"Ah! true," said Aramis: "I had forgotten. No one but he is capable of making such a noise. Allow me, Pelisson, to inquire if he wants anything."

"And you will permit me to accompany you?"

"Oh, certainly;" and both entered the chamber. Porthos was stretched upon the bed; his face was violet rather than red; his eyes were swelled; his mouth was wide open. The roaring which escaped from the deep cavities of his chest made the glass of the windows vibrate. To those developed and clearly defined muscles starting from his face, to his hair matted with sweat, to the energetic heaving of his chin and shoulders, it was impossible to refuse a certain degree of admiration. Strength carried to this point is semi-divine. The Herculean legs and feet of Porthos had, by swelling, burst his stockings; all the strength of his huge body was converted into the rigidity of stone. Porthos moved no more than does the giant of granite which reclines upon the plains of Agrigentum. According to Pelisson's orders, his boots had been cut off, for no human power could have pulled them off. Four lackeys had tried in vain, pulling at them as they would have pulled capstans; and yet all this did not awaken him. They had hacked off his boots in fragments, and his legs had fallen back upon the bed. They then cut off the rest of his clothes, carried him to a bath, in which they let him soak a considerable time. They then put on him clean linen, and placed him in a well-warmed bed--the whole with efforts and pains which might have roused a dead man, but which did not make Porthos open an eye, or interrupt for a second the formidable diapason of his snoring. Aramis wished on his part, with his nervous nature, armed with extraordinary courage, to outbrave fatigue, and employ himself with Gourville and Pelisson, but he fainted in the chair in which he had persisted sitting. He was carried into the adjoining room, where the repose of bed soon soothed his failing brain.