Chapter LII

Captivity: The First Day

Let us return to Milady, whom a glance thrown upon the coast of France has made us lose sight of for an instant.

We shall find her still in the despairing attitude in which we left her, plunged in an abyss of dismal reflection—a dark hell at the gate of which she has almost left hope behind, because for the first time she doubts, for the first time she fears.

On two occasions her fortune has failed her, on two occasions she has found herself discovered and betrayed; and on these two occasions it was to one fatal genius, sent doubtlessly by the Lord to combat her, that she has succumbed. D'Artagnan has conquered her—her, that invincible power of evil.

He has deceived her in her love, humbled her in her pride, thwarted her in her ambition; and now he ruins her fortune, deprives her of liberty, and even threatens her life. Still more, he has lifted the corner of her mask—that shield with which she covered herself and which rendered her so strong.

D'Artagnan has turned aside from Buckingham, whom she hates as she hates everyone she has loved, the tempest with which Richelieu threatened him in the person of the queen. D'Artagnan had passed himself upon her as De Wardes, for whom she had conceived one of those tigerlike fancies common to women of her character. D'Artagnan knows that terrible secret which she has sworn no one shall know without dying. In short, at the moment in which she has just obtained from Richelieu a *carte blanche* by the means of which she is about to take vengeance on her enemy, this precious paper is torn from her hands, and it is d'Artagnan who holds her prisoner and is about to send her to some filthy Botany Bay, some infamous Tyburn of the Indian Ocean.

All this she owes to d'Artagnan, without doubt. From whom can come so many disgraces heaped upon her head, if not from him? He alone could have transmitted to Lord de Winter all these frightful secrets which he has discovered, one after another, by a train of fatalities. He knows her brother-in-law. He must have written to him.

What hatred she distills! Motionless, with her burning and fixed glances, in her solitary apartment, how well the outbursts of passion which at times escape from the depths of her chest with her respiration, accompany the sound of the surf which rises, growls, roars, and breaks itself like an eternal and powerless despair against the rocks on which is built this dark and lofty castle! How many magnificent projects of vengeance she conceives by the light of the flashes which her tempestuous passion casts over her mind against Mme. Bonacieux, against Buckingham, but above all against d'Artagnan—projects lost in the distance of the future.

Yes; but in order to avenge herself she must be free. And to be free, a prisoner has to pierce a wall, detach bars, cut through a floor—all undertakings which a patient and strong man may accomplish, but before which the feverish irritations of a woman must give way. Besides, to do all this, time is necessary—months, years; and she has ten or twelve days, as Lord de Winter, her fraternal and terrible jailer, has told her.

And yet, if she were a man she would attempt all this, and perhaps might succeed; why, then, did heaven make the mistake of placing that manlike soul in that frail and delicate body?

The first moments of her captivity were terrible; a few convulsions of rage which she could not suppress paid her debt of feminine weakness to nature. But by degrees she overcame the outbursts of her mad passion; and nervous tremblings which agitated her frame disappeared, and she remained folded within herself like a fatigued serpent in repose.

'Go to, go to! I must have been mad to allow myself to be carried away so,' says she, gazing into the glass, which reflects back to her eyes the burning glance by which she appears to interrogate herself. 'No violence; violence is the proof of weakness. In the first place, I have never succeeded by that means. Perhaps if I employed my strength against women I might perchance find them weaker than myself, and consequently conquer them; but it is with men

'Bravo, Monsieur Grimaud!' said Athos; 'and now take this. That's well. We dispense with your saying grace.'

Grimaud silently swallowed the glass of Bordeaux wine; but his eyes, raised toward heaven during this delicious occupation, spoke a language which, though mute, was not the less expressive.

'And now,' said Athos, 'unless Monsieur Cardinal should form the ingenious idea of ripping up Grimaud, I think we may be pretty much at our ease respecting the letter.'

Meantime, his Eminence continued his melancholy ride, murmuring between his moustaches, 'These four men must positively be mine.'

Adieu, my dear cousin. Tell us news of yourself as often as you can; that is to say, as often as you can with safety.

I embrace you.

MARIE MICHON

'Oh, what do I not owe you, Aramis?' said d'Artagnan. 'Dear Constance! I have at length, then, intelligence of you. She lives; she is in safety in a convent; she is at Béthune! Where is Béthune, Athos?'

'Why, upon the frontiers of Artois and of Flanders. The siege once over, we shall be able to make a tour in that direction.'

'And that will not be long, it is to be hoped,' said Porthos; 'for they have this morning hanged a spy who confessed that the Rochellais were reduced to the leather of their shoes. Supposing that after having eaten the leather they eat the soles, I cannot see much that is left unless they eat one another.'

'Poor fools!' said Athos, emptying a glass of excellent Bordeaux wine which, without having at that period the reputation it now enjoys, merited it no less, 'poor fools! As if the Catholic religion was not the most advantageous and the most agreeable of all religions! All the same,' resumed he, after having clicked his tongue against his palate, 'they are brave fellows! But what the devil are you about, Aramis?' continued Athos. 'Why, you are squeezing that letter into your pocket!'

'Yes,' said d'Artagnan, 'Athos is right, it must be burned. And yet if we burn it, who knows whether Monsieur Cardinal has not a secret to interrogate ashes?'

'He must have one,' said Athos.

'What will you do with the letter, then?' asked Porthos.

'Come here, Grimaud,' said Athos. Grimaud rose and obeyed. 'As a punishment for having spoken without permission, my friend, you will please to eat this piece of paper; then to recompense you for the service you will have rendered us, you shall afterward drink this glass of wine. First, here is the letter. Eat heartily.'

Grimaud smiled; and with his eyes fixed upon the glass which Athos held in his hand, he ground the paper well between his teeth and then swallowed it.

that I struggle, and I am but a woman to them. Let me fight like a woman, then; my strength is in my weakness.'

Then, as if to render an account to herself of the changes she could place upon her countenance, so mobile and so expressive, she made it take all expressions from that of passionate anger, which convulsed her features, to that of the most sweet, most affectionate, and most seducing smile. Then her hair assumed successively, under her skillful hands, all the undulations she thought might assist the charms of her face. At length she murmured, satisfied with herself, 'Come, nothing is lost; I am still beautiful.'

It was then nearly eight o'clock in the evening. Milady perceived a bed; she calculated that the repose of a few hours would not only refresh her head and her ideas, but still further, her complexion. A better idea, however, came into her mind before going to bed. She had heard something said about supper. She had already been an hour in this apartment; they could not long delay bringing her a repast. The prisoner did not wish to lose time; and she resolved to make that very evening some attempts to ascertain the nature of the ground she had to work upon, by studying the characters of the men to whose guardianship she was committed.

A light appeared under the door; this light announced the reappearance of her jailers. Milady, who had arisen, threw herself quickly into the armchair, her head thrown back, her beautiful hair unbound and disheveled, her bosom half bare beneath her crumpled lace, one hand on her heart, and the other hanging down.

The bolts were drawn; the door groaned upon its hinges. Steps sounded in the chamber, and drew near.

'Place that table there,' said a voice which the prisoner recognized as that of Felton.

The order was executed.

'You will bring lights, and relieve the sentinel,' continued Felton.

And this double order which the young lieutenant gave to the same individuals proved to Milady that her servants were the same men as her guards; that is to say, soldiers.

Felton's orders were, for the rest, executed with a silent rapidity that gave a good idea of the way in which he maintained discipline.

At length Felton, who had not yet looked at Milady, turned toward her.

'Ah, ah!' said he, 'she is asleep; that's well. When she wakes she can sup.' And he made some steps toward the door.

'But, my lieutenant,' said a soldier, less stoical than his chief, and who had approached Milady, 'this woman is not asleep.'

'What, not asleep!' said Felton; 'what is she doing, then?'

'She has fainted. Her face is very pale, and I have listened in vain; I do not hear her breathe.'

'You are right,' said Felton, after having looked at Milady from the spot on which he stood without moving a step toward her. 'Go and tell Lord de Winter that his prisoner has fainted—for this event not having been foreseen, I don't know what to do.'

The soldier went out to obey the orders of his officer. Felton sat down upon an armchair which happened to be near the door, and waited without speaking a word, without making a gesture. Milady possessed that great art, so much studied by women, of looking through her long eyelashes without appearing to open the lids. She perceived Felton, who sat with his back toward her. She continued to look at him for nearly ten minutes, and in these ten minutes the immovable guardian never turned round once.

She then thought that Lord de Winter would come, and by his presence give fresh strength to her jailer. Her first trial was lost; she acted like a woman who reckons up her resources. As a result she raised her head, opened her eyes, and sighed deeply.

At this sigh Felton turned round.

'Ah, you are awake, madame,' he said; 'then I have nothing more to do here. If you want anything you can ring.'

'Oh, my God, my God! how I have suffered!' said Milady, in that harmonious voice which, like that of the ancient enchantresses, charmed all whom she wished to destroy.

And she assumed, upon sitting up in the armchair, a still more graceful and abandoned position than when she reclined.

Felton arose.

'You will be served, thus, madame, three times a day,' said he. 'In the morning at nine o'clock, in the day at one o'clock, and in the evening at eight. If that does not suit you, you can point out what other hours you prefer, and in this respect your wishes will be complied with.'

you stood, stammering, stupefied, annihilated. One might have supposed the Bastille appeared before you, and that the gigantic Medusa had converted you into stone. Is being in love conspiring? You are in love with a woman whom the cardinal has caused to be shut up, and you wish to get her out of the hands of the cardinal. That's a match you are playing with his Eminence; this letter is your game. Why should you expose your game to your adversary? That is never done. Let him find it out if he can! We can find out his!'

'Well, that's all very sensible, Athos,' said d'Artagnan.

'In that case, let there be no more question of what's past, and let Aramis resume the letter from his cousin where the cardinal interrupted him.'

Aramis drew the letter from his pocket; the three friends surrounded him, and the three lackeys grouped themselves again near the wine jar.

'You had only read a line or two,' said d'Artagnan; 'read the letter again from the commencement.'

'Willingly,' said Aramis.

My dear cousin,

I think I shall make up my mind to set out for Béthune, where my sister has placed our little servant in the convent of the Carmelites; this poor child is quite resigned, as she knows she cannot live elsewhere without the salvation of her soul being in danger. Nevertheless, if the affairs of our family are arranged, as we hope they will be, I believe she will run the risk of being damned, and will return to those she regrets, particularly as she knows they are always thinking of her. Meanwhile, she is not very wretched; what she most desires is a letter from her intended. I know that such viands pass with difficulty through convent gratings; but after all, as I have given you proofs, my dear cousin, I am not unskilled in such affairs, and I will take charge of the commission. My sister thanks you for your good and eternal remembrance. She has experienced much anxiety; but she is now at length a little reassured, having sent her secretary away in order that nothing may happen unexpectedly.

'Well, well!' said he, 'you are brave young men, proud in daylight, faithful in darkness. We can find no fault with you for watching over yourselves, when you watch so carefully over others. Gentlemen, I have not forgotten the night in which you served me as an escort to the Red Dovecot. If there were any danger to be apprehended on the road I am going, I would request you to accompany me; but as there is none, remain where you are, finish your bottles, your game, and your letter. Adieu, gentlemen!'

And remounting his horse, which Cahusac led to him, he saluted them with his hand, and rode away.

The four young men, standing and motionless, followed him with their eyes without speaking a single word until he had disappeared. Then they looked at one another.

The countenances of all gave evidence of terror, for notwithstanding the friendly adieu of his Eminence, they plainly perceived that the cardinal went away with rage in his heart.

Athos alone smiled, with a self-possessed, disdainful smile.

When the cardinal was out of hearing and sight, 'That Grimaud kept bad watch!' cried Porthos, who had a great inclination to vent his ill-humour on somebody.

Grimaud was about to reply to excuse himself. Athos lifted his finger, and Grimaud was silent.

'Would you have given up the letter, Aramis?' said d'Artagnan.

'I,' said Aramis, in his most flutelike tone, 'I had made up my mind. If he had insisted upon the letter being given up to him, I would have presented the letter to him with one hand, and with the other I would have run my sword through his body.'

'I expected as much,' said Athos; 'and that was why I threw myself between you and him. Indeed, this man is very much to blame for talking thus to other men; one would say he had never had to do with any but women and children.'

'My dear Athos, I admire you, but nevertheless we were in the wrong, after all.'

'How, in the wrong?' said Athos. 'Whose, then, is the air we breathe? Whose is the ocean upon which we look? Whose is the sand upon which we were reclining? Whose is that letter of your mistress? Do these belong to the cardinal? Upon my honour, this man fancies the world belongs to him. There

'But am I to remain always alone in this vast and dismal chamber?' asked Milady.

'A woman of the neighbourhood has been sent for, who will be tomorrow at the castle, and will return as often as you desire her presence.'

'I thank you, sir,' replied the prisoner, humbly.

Felton made a slight bow, and directed his steps toward the door. At the moment he was about to go out, Lord de Winter appeared in the corridor, followed by the soldier who had been sent to inform him of the swoon of Milady. He held a vial of salts in his hand.

'Well, what is it—what is going on here?' said he, in a jeering voice, on seeing the prisoner sitting up and Felton about to go out. 'Is this corpse come to life already? Felton, my lad, did you not perceive that you were taken for a novice, and that the first act was being performed of a comedy of which we shall doubtless have the pleasure of following out all the developments?'

'I thought so, my lord,' said Felton; 'but as the prisoner is a woman, after all, I wish to pay her the attention that every man of gentle birth owes to a woman, if not on her account, at least on my own.'

Milady shuddered through her whole system. These words of Felton's passed like ice through her veins.

'So,' replied de Winter, laughing, 'that beautiful hair so skilfully disheveled, that white skin, and that languishing look, have not yet seduced you, you heart of stone?'

'No, my Lord,' replied the impassive young man; 'your Lordship may be assured that it requires more than the tricks and coquetry of a woman to corrupt me.'

'In that case, my brave lieutenant, let us leave Milady to find out something else, and go to supper; but be easy! She has a fruitful imagination, and the second act of the comedy will not delay its steps after the first.'

And at these words Lord de Winter passed his arm through that of Felton, and led him out, laughing.

'Oh, I will be a match for you!' murmured Milady, between her teeth; 'be assured of that, you poor spoiled monk, you poor converted soldier, who has cut his uniform out of a monk's frock!'

'By the way,' resumed de Winter, stopping at the threshold of the door, 'you must not, Milady, let this check take away your appetite. Taste that fowl

and those fish. On my honour, they are not poisoned. I have a very good cook, and he is not to be my heir; I have full and perfect confidence in him. Do as I do. Adieu, dear sister, till your next swoon!'

This was all that Milady could endure. Her hands clutched her armchair; she ground her teeth inwardly; her eyes followed the motion of the door as it closed behind Lord de Winter and Felton, and the moment she was alone a fresh fit of despair seized her. She cast her eyes upon the table, saw the glittering of a knife, rushed toward it and clutched it; but her disappointment was cruel. The blade was round, and of flexible silver.

A burst of laughter resounded from the other side of the ill-closed door, and the door reopened.

'Ha, ha!' cried Lord de Winter; 'ha, ha! Don't you see, my brave Felton; don't you see what I told you? That knife was for you, my lad; she would have killed you. Observe, this is one of her peculiarities, to get rid thus, after one fashion or another, of all the people who bother her. If I had listened to you, the knife would have been pointed and of steel. Then no more of Felton; she would have cut your throat, and after that everybody else's. See, John, see how well she knows how to handle a knife.'

In fact, Milady still held the harmless weapon in her clenched hand; but these last words, this supreme insult, relaxed her hands, her strength, and even her will. The knife fell to the ground.

'You were right, my Lord,' said Felton, with a tone of profound disgust which sounded to the very bottom of the heart of Milady, 'you were right, my Lord, and I was wrong.'

And both again left the room.

But this time Milady lent a more attentive ear than the first, and she heard their steps die away in the distance of the corridor.

'I am lost,' murmured she; 'I am lost! I am in the power of men upon whom I can have no more influence than upon statues of bronze or granite; they know me by heart, and are steeled against all my weapons. It is, however, impossible that this should end as they have decreed!'

In fact, as this last reflection indicated—this instinctive return to hope—sentiments of weakness or fear did not dwell long in her ardent spirit. Milady sat down to table, ate from several dishes, drank a little Spanish wine, and felt all her resolution return.

'Oh, as to that, Monseigneur, it is true,' said Athos; 'we do conspire, as your Eminence might have seen the other morning. Only we conspire against the Rochellais.'

'Ah, you gentlemen of policy!' replied the cardinal, knitting his brow in his turn, 'the secret of many unknown things might perhaps be found in your brains, if we could read them as you read that letter which you concealed as soon as you saw me coming.'

The colour mounted to the face of Athos, and he made a step toward his Eminence.

'One might think you really suspected us, monseigneur, and we were undergoing a real interrogatory. If it be so, we trust your Eminence will deign to explain yourself, and we should then at least be acquainted with our real position.'

'And if it were an interrogatory!' replied the cardinal. 'Others besides you have undergone such, Monsieur Athos, and have replied thereto.'

'Thus I have told your Eminence that you had but to question us, and we are ready to reply.'

'What was that letter you were about to read, Monsieur Aramis, and which you so promptly concealed?'

'A woman's letter, monseigneur.'

'Ah, yes, I see,' said the cardinal; 'we must be discreet with this sort of letters; but nevertheless, we may show them to a confessor, and you know I have taken orders.'

'Monseigneur,' said Athos, with a calmness the more terrible because he risked his head in making this reply, 'the letter is a woman's letter, but it is neither signed Marion de Lorme, nor Madame d'Aiguillon.'

The cardinal became as pale as death; lightning darted from his eyes. He turned round as if to give an order to Cahusac and Houdinière. Athos saw the movement; he made a step toward the muskets, upon which the other three friends had fixed their eyes, like men ill-disposed to allow themselves to be taken. The cardinalists were three; the Musketeers, lackeys included, were seven. He judged that the match would be so much the less equal, if Athos and his companions were really plotting; and by one of those rapid turns which he always had at command, all his anger faded away into a smile.

'Lackeys?' grumbled the cardinal. 'Lackeys who have the order to warn their masters when anyone passes are not lackeys, they are sentinels.'

'Your Eminence may perceive that if we had not taken this precaution, we should have been exposed to allowing you to pass without presenting you our respects or offering you our thanks for the favour you have done us in uniting us. D'Artagnan,' continued Athos, 'you, who but lately were so anxious for such an opportunity for expressing your gratitude to Monseigneur, here it is; avail yourself of it.'

These words were pronounced with that imperturbable phlegm which distinguished Athos in the hour of danger, and with that excessive politeness which made of him at certain moments a king more majestic than kings by birth.

D'Artagnan came forward and stammered out a few words of gratitude which soon expired under the gloomy looks of the cardinal.

'It does not signify, gentlemen,' continued the cardinal, without appearing to be in the least swerved from his first intention by the diversion which Athos had started, 'it does not signify, gentlemen. I do not like to have simple soldiers, because they have the advantage of serving in a privileged corps, thus to play the great lords; discipline is the same for them as for everybody else.'

Athos allowed the cardinal to finish his sentence completely, and bowed in sign of assent. Then he resumed in his turn: 'Discipline, Monseigneur, has, I hope, in no way been forgotten by us. We are not on duty, and we believed that not being on duty we were at liberty to dispose of our time as we pleased. If we are so fortunate as to have some particular duty to perform for your Eminence, we are ready to obey you. Your Eminence may perceive,' continued Athos, knitting his brow, for this sort of investigation began to annoy him, 'that we have not come out without our arms.'

And he showed the cardinal, with his finger, the four muskets piled near the drum, on which were the cards and dice.

'Your Eminence may believe,' added d'Artagnan, 'that we would have come to meet you, if we could have supposed it was Monseigneur coming toward us with so few attendants.'

The cardinal bit his moustache, and even his lips a little.

'Do you know what you look like, all together, as you are armed and guarded by your lackeys?' said the cardinal. 'You look like four conspirators.'

Before she went to bed she had pondered, analyzed, turned on all sides, examined on all points, the words, the steps, the gestures, the signs, and even the silence of her interlocutors; and of this profound, skillful, and anxious study the result was that Felton, everything considered, appeared the more vulnerable of her two persecutors.

One expression above all recurred to the mind of the prisoner: 'If I had listened to you,' Lord de Winter had said to Felton.

Felton, then, had spoken in her favour, since Lord de Winter had not been willing to listen to him.

'Weak or strong,' repeated Milady, 'that man has, then, a spark of pity in his soul; of that spark I will make a flame that shall devour him. As to the other, he knows me, he fears me, and knows what he has to expect of me if ever I escape from his hands. It is useless, then, to attempt anything with him. But Felton—that's another thing. He is a young, ingenuous, pure man who seems virtuous; him there are means of destroying.'

And Milady went to bed and fell asleep with a smile upon her lips. Anyone who had seen her sleeping might have said she was a young girl dreaming of the crown of flowers she was to wear on her brow at the next festival.

The other three were occupied in opening an enormous flagon of Collicure wine; these were the lackeys of these gentlemen.

The cardinal was, as we have said, in very low spirits; and nothing when he was in that state of mind increased his depression so much as gaiety in others. Besides, he had another strange fancy, which was always to believe that the causes of his sadness created the gaiety of others. Making a sign to La Houdinière and Cahusac to stop, he alighted from his horse, and went toward these suspected merry companions, hoping, by means of the sand which deadened the sound of his steps and of the hedge which concealed his approach, to catch some words of this conversation which appeared so interesting. At ten paces from the hedge he recognized the talkative Gascon; and as he had already perceived that these men were Musketeers, he did not doubt that the three others were those called the Inseparables; that is to say, Athos, Porthos, and Aramis.

It may be supposed that his desire to hear the conversation was augmented by this discovery. His eyes took a strange expression, and with the step of a tiger-cat he advanced toward the hedge; but he had not been able to catch more than a few vague syllables without any positive sense, when a sonorous and short cry made him start, and attracted the attention of the Musketeers.

'Officer!' cried Grimaud.

'You are speaking, you scoundrel!' said Athos, rising upon his elbow, and transfixing Grimaud with his flaming look.

Grimaud therefore added nothing to his speech, but contented himself with pointing his index finger in the direction of the hedge, announcing by this gesture the cardinal and his escort.

With a single bound the Musketeers were on their feet, and saluted with respect.

The cardinal seemed furious.

'It appears that Messieurs the Musketeers keep guard,' said he. 'Are the English expected by land, or do the Musketeers consider themselves superior officers?'

'Monseigneur,' replied Athos, for amid the general fright he alone had preserved the noble calmness and coolness that never forsook him, 'Monseigneur, the Musketeers, when they are not on duty, or when their duty is over, drink and play at dice, and they are certainly superior officers to their lackeys.'