

On entering the court of his hôtel, Buckingham sprang from his horse, and without thinking what became of the animal, threw the bridle on his neck, and sprang toward the vestibule. D'Arragnan did the same, with a little more concern, however, for the noble creatures, whose merits he fully appreciated; but he had the satisfaction of seeing three or four grooms run from the kitchens and the stables, and busy themselves with the steeds.

The duke walked so fast that d'Arragnan had some trouble in keeping up with him. He passed through several apartments, of an elegance of which even the greatest nobles of France had not even an idea, and arrived at length in a bedchamber which was at once a miracle of taste and of richness. In the alcove of this chamber was a door concealed in the tapestry which the duke opened with a little gold key which he wore suspended from his neck by a chain of the same metal. With discretion d'Arragnan remained behind; but at the moment when Buckingham crossed the threshold, he turned round, and seeing the hesitation of the young man, 'Come in!' cried he, 'and if you have the good fortune to be admitted to her Majesty's presence, tell her what you have seen.'

Encouraged by this invitation, d'Arragnan followed the duke, who closed the door after them. The two found themselves in a small chapel covered with a tapestry of Persian silk worked with gold, and brilliantly lighted with a vast number of candles. Over a species of altar, and beneath a canopy of blue velvet, surmounted by white and red plumes, was a full-length portrait of Anne of Austria, so perfect in its resemblance that d'Arragnan uttered a cry of surprise on beholding it. One might believe the queen was about to speak. On the altar, and beneath the portrait, was the casket containing the diamond studs.

The duke approached the altar, knelt as a priest might have done before a crucifix, and opened the casket. 'There,' said he, drawing from the casket a large bow of blue ribbon all sparkling with diamonds, 'there are the precious studs which I have taken an oath should be buried with me. The queen gave them to me, the queen requires them again. Her will be done, like that of God, in all things.'

Then, he began to kiss, one after the other, those dear studs with which he was about to part. All at once he uttered a terrible cry.

'What is the matter?' exclaimed d'Arragnan, anxiously; 'what has happened to you, my Lord?'

'All is lost!' cried Buckingham, becoming as pale as a corpse; 'two of the studs are wanting, there are only ten.'

'Can you have lost them, my Lord, or do you think they have been stolen?' 'They have been stolen,' replied the duke, 'and it is the cardinal who has dealt this blow. Hold; see! The ribbons which held them have been cut with scissors.'

'If my Lord suspects they have been stolen, perhaps the person who stole them still has them in his hands.'

'Wait, wait!' said the duke. 'The only time I have worn these studs was at a ball given by the king eight days ago at Windsor. The Comtesse de Winter, with whom I had quarrelled, became reconciled to me at that ball. That reconciliation was nothing but the vengeance of a jealous woman. I have never seen her from that day. The woman is an agent of the cardinal.'

'He has agents, then, throughout the world?' cried d'Arragnan.

'Oh, yes,' said Buckingham, grating his teeth with rage. 'Yes, he is a terrible antagonist. But when is this ball to take place?'

'Monday next.'

'Monday next! Still five days before us. That's more time than we want. Patrick!' cried the duke, opening the door of the chapel, 'Patrick! His confidential valet appeared.'

'My jeweller and my secretary.'

The valet went out with a mute promptitude which showed him accustomed to obey blindly and without reply.

But although the jeweller had been mentioned first, it was the secretary who first made his appearance. This was simply because he lived in the hôtel. He found Buckingham seated at a table in his bedchamber, writing orders with his own hand.

'Mr. Jackson,' said he, 'go instantly to the Lord Chancellor, and tell him that I charge him with the execution of these orders. I wish them to be promulgated immediately.'

'But, my Lord, if the Lord Chancellor interrogates me upon the motives which may have led your Grace to adopt such an extraordinary measure, what shall I reply?'

'That such is my pleasure, and that I answer for my will to no man.'

‘Will that be the answer,’ replied the secretary, smiling, ‘which he must transmit to his Majesty if, by chance, his Majesty should have the curiosity to know why no vessel is to leave any of the ports of Great Britain?’

‘You are right, Mr. Jackson,’ replied Buckingham. ‘He will say, in that case, to the king that I am determined on war, and that this measure is my first act of hostility against France.’

The secretary bowed and retired.

‘We are safe on that side,’ said Buckingham, turning toward d’Arragnan. ‘If the studs are not yet gone to Paris, they will not arrive till after you.’

‘How so?’

‘I have just placed an embargo on all vessels at present in his Majesty’s ports, and without particular permission, not one dare lift an anchor.’

D’Arragnan looked with stupefaction at a man who thus employed the unlimited power with which he was clothed by the confidence of a king in the prosecution of his intrigues. Buckingham saw by the expression of the young man’s face what was passing in his mind, and he smiled.

‘Yes,’ said he, ‘yes, Anne of Austria is my true queen. Upon a word from her, I would betray my country, I would betray my king, I would betray my God. She asked me not to send the Protestants of La Rochelle the assistance I promised them; I have not done so. I broke my word, it is true; but what signifies that? I obeyed my love; and have I not been richly paid for that obedience? It was to that obedience I owe her portrait.’

D’Arragnan was amazed to note by what fragile and unknown threads the destinies of nations and the lives of men are suspended. He was lost in these reflections when the goldsmith entered. He was an Irishman—one of the most skilful of his craft, and who himself confessed that he gained a hundred thousand livres a year by the Duke of Buckingham.

‘Mr. O’Reilly,’ said the duke, leading him into the chapel, ‘look at these diamond studs, and tell me what they are worth apiece.’

The goldsmith cast a glance at the elegant manner in which they were set, calculated, one with another, what the diamonds were worth, and without hesitation said, ‘Fifteen hundred pistoles each, my Lord.’

‘How many days would it require to make two studs exactly like them? You see there are two wanting.’

‘Eight days, my Lord.’

Chapter XXI

The Countess de Winter



As they rode along, the duke endeavoured to draw from d’Arragnan, not all that had happened, but what d’Arragnan himself knew. By adding all that he heard from the mouth of the young man to his own remembrances, he was enabled to form a pretty exact idea of a position of the seriousness of which, for the rest, the queen’s letter, short but explicit, gave him the clue. But that which astonished him most was that the cardinal, so deeply interested in preventing this young man from setting his foot in England, had not succeeded in arresting him on the road. It was then, upon the manifestation of this astonishment, that d’Arragnan related to him the precaution taken, and how, thanks to the devotion of his three friends, whom he had left scattered and bleeding on the road, he had succeeded in coming off with a single sword thrust, which had pierced the queen’s letter and for which he had repaid M. de Wardes with such terrible coin. While he was listening to this recital, delivered with the greatest simplicity, the duke looked from time to time at the young man with astonishment, as if he could not comprehend how so much prudence, courage, and devotedness could be allied with a countenance which indicated not more than twenty years.

The horses went like the wind, and in a few minutes they were at the gates of London. D’Arragnan imagined that on arriving in town the duke would slacken his pace, but it was not so. He kept on his way at the same rate, heedless about upsetting those whom he met on the road. In fact, in crossing the city two or three accidents of this kind happened; but Buckingham did not even turn his head to see what became of those he had knocked down. D’Arragnan followed him amid cries which strongly resembled curses.

'I will give you three thousand pistoles apiece if I can have them by the day after tomorrow.'

'My Lord, they shall be yours.'

'You are a jewel of a man, Mr. O'Reilly; but that is not all. These studs cannot be trusted to anybody; it must be done in the palace.'

'Impossible, my Lord! There is no one but myself can so execute them that one cannot tell the new from the old.'

'Therefore, my dear Mr. O'Reilly, you are my prisoner. And if you wish ever to leave my palace, you cannot; so make the best of it. Name to me such of your workmen as you need, and point out the tools they must bring.'

The goldsmith knew the duke. He knew all objection would be useless, and instantly determined how to act.

'May I be permitted to inform my wife?' said he.

'Oh, you may even see her if you like, my dear Mr. O'Reilly. Your captivity shall be mild, be assured; and as every inconvenience deserves its indemnification, here is, in addition to the price of the studs, an order for a thousand pistoles, to make you forget the annoyance I cause you.'

D'Arragnan could not get over the surprise created in him by this minister, who thus open-handed, sported with men and millions.

As to the goldsmith, he wrote to his wife, sending her the order for the thousand pistoles, and charging her to send him, in exchange, his most skilful apprentice, an assortment of diamonds, of which he gave the names and the weight, and the necessary tools.

Buckingham conducted the goldsmith to the chamber destined for him, and which, at the end of half an hour, was transformed into a workshop. Then he placed a sentinel at each door, with an order to admit nobody upon any pretence but his *valet de chambre*, Patrick. We need not add that the goldsmith, O'Reilly, and his assistant, were prohibited from going out under any pretext. This point, settled, the duke turned to d'Arragnan. 'Now, my young friend,' said he, 'England is all our own. What do you wish for? What do you desire?' 'A bed, my Lord,' replied d'Arragnan. 'At present, I confess, that is the thing I stand most in need of.'

Buckingham gave d'Arragnan a chamber adjoining his own. He wished to have the young man at hand—not that he at all mistrusted him, but for the sake of having someone to whom he could constantly talk of the queen.

In one hour after, the ordinance was published in London that no vessel bound for France should leave port, not even the packet boat with letters. In the eyes of everybody this was a declaration of war between the two kingdoms.

On the day after the morrow, by eleven o'clock, the two diamond studs were finished, and they were so completely imitated, so perfectly alike, that Buckingham could not tell the new ones from the old ones, and experts in such matters would have been deceived as he was. He immediately called d'Arragnan. 'Here,' said he to him, 'are the diamond studs that you came to bring; and be my witness that I have done all that human power could do.'

'Be satisfied, my Lord, I will tell all that I have seen. But does your Grace mean to give me the studs without the casket?'

'The casket would encumber you. Besides, the casket is the more precious from being all that is left to me. You will say that I keep it.'

'I will perform your commission, word for word, my Lord.'

'And now,' resumed Buckingham, looking earnestly at the young man, 'how shall I ever acquit myself of the debt I owe you?'

D'Arragnan blushed up to the whites of his eyes. He saw that the duke was searching for a means of making him accept something and the idea that the blood of his friends and himself was about to be paid for with English gold was strangely repugnant to him.

'Let us understand each other, my Lord,' replied d'Arragnan, 'and let us make things clear beforehand in order that there may be no mistake. I am in the service of the King and Queen of France, and form part of the company of Monsieur Dessessart, who, as well as his brother-in-law, Monsieur de Tréville, is particularly attached to their Majesties. What I have done, then, has been for the queen, and not at all for your Grace. And still further, it is very probable I should not have done anything of this, if it had not been to make myself agreeable to someone who is my lady, as the queen is yours.'

'Yes,' said the duke, smiling, 'and I even believe that I know that other person; it is—'

'My Lord, I have not named her!' interrupted the young man, warmly.

'That is true,' said the duke; 'and it is to this person I am bound to discharge my debt of gratitude.'

'You have said, my Lord; for truly, at this moment when there is question of war, I confess to you that I see nothing in your Grace but an Englishman,

'The young man who one evening sought a quarrel with him on the Pont Neuf, opposite the Samaritaine.'

'A singular introduction!'

'You will find that it is as good as another.'

Patrick galloped off, reached the duke, and announced to him in the terms directed that a messenger awaited him.

Buckingham at once remembered the circumstance, and suspecting that something was going on in France of which it was necessary he should be informed, he only took the time to inquire where the messenger was, and recognizing from afar the uniform of the Guards, he put his horse into a gallop, and rode straight up to d'Arragnan. Patrick discreetly kept in the background. 'No misfortune has happened to the queen?' cried Buckingham, the instant he came up, throwing all his fear and love into the question.

'I believe not; nevertheless I believe she runs some great peril from which your Grace alone can extricate her.'

'I!' cried Buckingham. 'What is it? I should be too happy to be of any service to her. Speak, speak!'

'Take this letter,' said d'Arragnan.

'This letter! From whom comes this letter?'

'From her Majesty, as I think.'

'From her Majesty?' said Buckingham, becoming so pale that d'Arragnan feared he would faint as he broke the seal.

'What is this rent?' said he, showing d'Arragnan a place where it had been pierced through.

'Ah,' said d'Arragnan, 'I did not see that; it was the sword of the Comte de Wardes which made that hole, when he gave me a good thrust in the breast.'

'You are wounded?' asked Buckingham, as he opened the letter.

'Oh, nothing but a scratch,' said d'Arragnan.

'Just heaven, what have I read?' cried the duke. 'Patrick, remain here, or rather join the king, wherever he may be, and tell his Majesty that I humbly beg him to excuse me, but an affair of the greatest importance recalls me to London. Come, monsieur, come!' and both set off towards the capital at full gallop.

He leaped with Planchet into the boat, and five minutes after they were on board. It was time; for they had scarcely sailed half a league, when d'Aragnan saw a flash and heard a detonation. It was the cannon which announced the closing of the port.

He had now leisure to look to his wound. Fortunately, as d'Aragnan had thought, it was not dangerous. The point of the sword had touched a rib, and glanced along the bone. Still further, his shirt had struck to the wound, and he had lost only a few drops of blood.

D'Aragnan was worn out with fatigue. A mattress was laid upon the deck for him. He threw himself upon it, and fell asleep.

On the morrow, at break of day, they were still three or four leagues from the coast of England. The breeze had been so light all night, they had made but little progress. At ten o'clock the vessel cast anchor in the harbour of Dover, and at half past ten d'Aragnan placed his foot on English land, crying, 'Here I am at last!'

But that was not all; they must get to London. In England the post was well served. D'Aragnan and Planchet took each a post horse, and a postillion rode before them. In a few hours they were in the capital.

D'Aragnan did not know London; he did not know a word of English; but he wrote the name of Buckingham on a piece of paper, and everyone pointed out to him the way to the duke's hôtel.

The duke was at Windsor hunting with the king. D'Aragnan inquired for the confidential valet of the duke, who, having accompanied him in all his voyages, spoke French perfectly well; he told him that he came from Paris on an affair of life and death, and that he must speak with his master instantly.

The confidence with which d'Aragnan spoke convinced Patrick, which was the name of this minister of the minister. He ordered two horses to be saddled, and himself went as guide to the young Guardsman. As for Planchet, he had been lifted from his horse as stiff as a rush; the poor lad's strength was almost exhausted. D'Aragnan seemed iron.

On their arrival at the castle they learned that Buckingham and the king were hawking in the marshes two or three leagues away. In twenty minutes they were on the spot named. Patrick soon caught the sound of his master's voice calling his falcon.

'Whom must I announce to my Lord Duke?' asked Patrick.

and consequently an enemy whom I should have much greater pleasure in meeting on the field of battle than in the park at Windsor or the corridors of the Louvre—all which, however, will not prevent me from executing to the very point my commission or from laying down my life, if there be need of it, to accomplish it; but I repeat it to your Grace, without your having personally on that account more to thank me for in this second interview than for what I did for you in the first.'

'We say, "Proud as a Scotsman,"' murmured the Duke of Buckingham.

'And we say, "Proud as a Gascon,"' replied d'Aragnan. 'The Gascons are the Scots of France.'

D'Aragnan bowed to the duke, and was retiring.

'Well, are you going away in that manner? Where, and how?'

'That's true!'

'Fore Gad, these Frenchmen have no consideration!'

'I had forgotten that England was an island, and that you were the king of it.'

'Go to the riverside, ask for the brig *Sund*, and give this letter to the captain; he will convey you to a little port, where certainly you are not expected, and which is ordinarily only frequented by fishermen.'

'The name of that port?'

'St. Valery; but listen. When you have arrived there you will go to a mean tavern, without a name and without a sign—a mere fisherman's hut. You cannot be mistaken; there is but one.'

'Afterward?'

'You will ask for the host, and will repeat to him the word "Forward!"'

'Which means?'

'In French, *En avant*. It is the password. He will give you a horse all saddled, and will point out to you the road you ought to take. You will find, in the same way, four relays on your route. If you will give at each of these relays your address in Paris, the four horses will follow you thither. You already know two of them, and you appeared to appreciate them like a judge. They were those we rode on; and you may rely upon me for the others not being inferior to them. These horses are equipped for the field. However proud you may be, you will not refuse to accept one of them, and to request your three companions to

accept the others—that is, in order to make war against us. Besides, the end justified the means, as you Frenchmen say, does it not?

‘Yes, my Lord, I accept them,’ said d’Artagnan; ‘and if it please God, we will make a good use of your presents.’

‘Well, now, your hand, young man. Perhaps we shall soon meet on the field of battle; but in the meantime we shall part good friends, I hope.’

‘Yes, my Lord; but with the hope of soon becoming enemies.’

‘Be satisfied; I promise you that.’

‘I depend upon your word, my Lord.’

D’Artagnan bowed to the duke, and made his way as quickly as possible to the riverside. Opposite the Tower of London he found the vessel that had been named to him, delivered his letter to the captain, who after having it examined by the governor of the port made immediate preparations to sail.

Fifty vessels were waiting to set out. Passing alongside one of them, d’Artagnan fancied he perceived on board it the woman of Meung—the same whom the unknown gentleman had called Mllady; and whom d’Artagnan had thought so handsome; but thanks to the current of the stream and a fair wind, his vessel passed so quickly that he had little more than a glimpse of her.

The next day about nine o’clock in the morning, he landed at St. Valery. D’Artagnan went instantly in search of the inn, and easily discovered it by the riotous noise which resounded from it. War between England and France was talked of as near and certain, and the jolly sailors were having a carousal.

D’Artagnan made his way through the crowd, advanced toward the host, and pronounced the word ‘Forward!’ The host instantly made him a sign to follow; went out with him by a door which opened into a yard, led him to the stable, where a saddled horse awaited him, and asked him if he stood in need of anything else.

‘I want to know the route I am to follow,’ said d’Artagnan.

‘Go from hence to Blangy and from Blangy to Neufchâtel. At Neufchâtel, go to the tavern of the Golden Harrow, give the password to the landlord, and you will find, as you have here, a horse ready saddled.’

‘Have I anything to pay?’ demanded d’Artagnan.

‘Everything is paid,’ replied the host, ‘and liberally. Begone, and may God guide you!’

‘Amen!’ cried the young man, and set off at full gallop.

‘It appears that his Eminence is anxious to prevent someone from crossing to England?’

‘Yes; a certain d’Artagnan, a Béarnese gentleman who left Paris in company with three of his friends, with the intention of going to London.’

‘Do you know him personally?’ asked the governor.

‘Whom?’

‘This d’Artagnan.’

‘Perfectly well.’

‘Describe him to me, then.’

‘Nothing more easy.’

And d’Artagnan gave, feature for feature, a description of the Comte de Wardes.

‘Is he accompanied?’

‘Yes; by a lackey named Lubin.’

‘We will keep a sharp lookout for them; and if we lay hands on them his Eminence may be assured they will be reconducted to Paris under a good escort.’

‘And by doing so, Monsieur the Governor,’ said d’Artagnan, ‘you will deserve well of the cardinal.’

‘Shall you see him on your return, Monsieur Count?’

‘Without a doubt.’

‘Tell him, I beg you, that I am his humble servant.’

‘I will not fail.’

Delighted with this assurance the governor countersigned the passport and delivered it to d’Artagnan. D’Artagnan lost no time in useless compliments. He thanked the governor, bowed, and departed. Once outside, he and Planchet set off as fast as they could; and by making a long detour avoided the wood and reentered the city by another gate.

The vessel was quite ready to sail, and the captain was waiting on the wharf. ‘Well?’ said he, on perceiving d’Artagnan.

‘Here is my pass countersigned,’ said the latter.

‘And that other gentleman?’

‘He will not go today,’ said d’Artagnan; ‘but here, I’ll pay you for us two.’

‘In that case let us go,’ said the shipmaster.

‘Let us go,’ repeated d’Artagnan.

'And one for me—the best for last!' cried d'Arragnan, furious, nailing him to the earth with a fourth thrust through his body.

This time the gentleman closed his eyes and fainted. D'Arragnan searched his pockets, and took from one of them the order for the passage. It was in the name of Comte de Wardes.

Then, casting a glance on the handsome young man, who was scarcely twenty-five years of age, and whom he was leaving in his gore, deprived of sense and perhaps dead, he gave a sigh for that unaccountable destiny which leads men to destroy each other for the interests of people who are strangers to them and who often do not even know that they exist. But he was soon aroused from these reflections by Lubin, who uttered loud cries and screamed for help with all his might.

Planchet grasped him by the throat, and pressed as hard as he could. 'Monsieur,' said he, 'as long as I hold him in this manner, he can't cry, I'll be bound; but as soon as I let go he will howl again. I know him for a Norman, and Normans are obstinate.'

In fact, tightly held as he was, Lubin endeavoured still to cry out.

'Stay!' said d'Arragnan, and taking out his handkerchief, he gagged him.

'Now,' said Planchet, 'let us bind him to a tree.'

This being properly done, they drew the Comte de Wardes close to his servant, and as night was approaching, and as the wounded man and the bound man were at some little distance within the wood, it was evident they were likely to remain there till the next day.

'And now,' said d'Arragnan, 'to the Governor's.'

'But you are wounded, it seems,' said Planchet.

'Oh, that's nothing! Let us attend to what is more pressing first, and then we will attend to my wound; besides, it does not seem very dangerous.'

And they both set forward as fast as they could toward the country house of the worthy functionary.

The Comte de Wardes was announced, and d'Arragnan was introduced.

'You have an order signed by the cardinal?' said the governor.

'Yes, monsieur,' replied d'Arragnan; 'here it is.'

'Ah, ah! It is quite regular and explicit,' said the governor.

'Most likely,' said d'Arragnan; 'I am one of his most faithful servants.'

Four hours later he was in Neufchâtel. He strictly followed the instructions he had received. At Neufchâtel, as at St. Valery, he found a horse quite ready and awaiting him. He was about to remove the pistols from the saddle he had quit to the one he was about to fill, but he found the holsters furnished with similar pistols.

'Your address at Paris?'

'Hôtel of the Guards, company of Desessart.'

'Enough,' replied the questioner.

'Which route must I take?' demanded d'Arragnan, in his turn.

'That of Rouen; but you will leave the city on your right. You must stop at the little village of Eccuis, in which there is but one tavern—the Shield of France. Don't condemn it from appearances; you will find a horse in the stables quite as good as this.'

'The same password?'

'Exactly.'

'Adieu, master!'

'A good journey, gentlemen! Do you want anything?'

D'Arragnan shook his head, and set off at full speed. At Eccuis, the same scene was repeated. He found as provident a host and a fresh horse. He left his address as he had done before, and set off again at the same pace for Pontoise. At Pontoise he changed his horse for the last time, and at nine o'clock galloped into the yard of Tréville's hôtel. He had made nearly sixty leagues in little more than twelve hours.

M. de Tréville received him as if he had seen him that same morning; only, when pressing his hand a little more warmly than usual, he informed him that the company of Desessart was on duty at the Louvre, and that he might repair at once to his post.

‘That’s impossible,’ said the gentleman; ‘I have travelled sixty leagues in forty hours, and by tomorrow at midday I must be in London.’

‘I have performed that same distance in forty hours, and by ten o’clock in the morning I must be in London.’

‘Very sorry, monsieur; but I was here first, and will not sail second.’

‘I am sorry, too, monsieur; but I arrived second, and must sail first.’

‘The king’s service!’ said the gentleman.

‘My own service!’ said d’Artagnan.

‘But this is a needless quarrel you seek with me, as it seems to me.’

‘*Parbleu!* What do you desire it to be?’

‘What do you want?’

‘Would you like to know?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Well, then, I wish that order of which you are bearer, seeing that I have not one of my own and must have one.’

‘You jest, I presume.’

‘I never jest.’

‘Let me pass!’

‘You shall not pass.’

‘My brave young man, I will blow out your brains. *Hola*, Lubin, my pistols!’

‘Planchet,’ called out d’Artagnan, ‘take care of the lackey; I will manage the master.’

Planchet, emboldened by the first exploit, sprang upon Lubin; and being strong and vigorous, he soon got him on the broad of his back, and placed his knee upon his breast.

‘Go on with your affair, monsieur,’ cried Planchet; ‘I have finished mine.’

Seeing this, the gentleman drew his sword, and sprang upon d’Artagnan; but he had too strong an adversary. In three seconds d’Artagnan had wounded him three times, exclaiming at each thrust, ‘One for Athos, one for Porthos; and one for Aramis!’

At the third hit the gentleman fell like a log. D’Artagnan believed him to be dead, or at least insensible, and went toward him for the purpose of taking the order; but the moment he extended his hand to search for it, the wounded man, who had not dropped his sword, plunged the point into d’Artagnan’s breast, crying, ‘One for you!’