

"Moreover, these same Dutchmen are building for the King at the present moment, six vessels, designed after the best models of their own navy. Destouches — ah! perhaps you don't know Destouches?"

"No, monsieur," replied D'Artagnan.

"He is a man with a singularly sure eye for the good and bad qualities of a ship that has just been launched. A valuable talent, that! Nature is really very whimsical. Well, I thought Destouches just the right sort of a man to have in port, and he is watching the construction of the six vessels the United Provinces are building for his Majesty. They will have each seventy-eight guns. You must see from all this, my dear M. d'Artagnan, that if the King wanted to quarrel with the United Provinces, he would have a pretty fair sort of a fleet. Now, you know yourself better than any one the splendid condition of our land forces."

D'Artagnan and Aramis stared at each other in surprise and admiration at the mysterious changes accomplished by the man in a few years.

Colbert understood them. This unintentional flattery moved him more than anything else could have done.

"If we in France knew nothing of all this, outside France they must know still less," said D'Artagnan.

"Just what I have been remarking to M. l'Ambassadeur," returned Colbert; "so that if Spain is neutral and England aids us —"

"If England aids you," interrupted Aramis, "I can promise you the neutrality of Spain."

"Your hand on that," exclaimed Colbert, with his blustering joviality. "And, by the way, speaking of Spain, you have not the Golden Fleece, M. d'Alaméda? I heard the King say the other day he should prefer seeing you wear the ribbon of St. Michael."

Aramis bowed.

"Alas!" thought D'Artagnan, "and Porthos is not here! When all these largesses are going about, there would have been a few ells of ribbon for him, surely! honest Porthos!"

"M. d'Artagnan," resumed Colbert, "I fancy, between ourselves, you would have no objection to leading your musketeers into Holland. Do you know how to swim?"

And he burst out laughing, like a man who is in a very good humor indeed.