

"Five!" exclaimed Aramis.

"They will be afloat before the end of the year, gentlemen. The King will have fifty ships of the line. We can do something with them, can we not?"

"To build vessels may be difficult, but is not impossible," observed D'Artagnan. "But to arm them—that is another story. In France we have neither foundries nor military workshops."

"Bah!" cried Colbert, his face lighting up, "why, I have been busy constructing them for the last year and a half, and you did not know it? Are you acquainted with M. d'Infreville?"

"D'Infreville?" repeated D'Artagnan. "No."

"He's a man I have discovered. He has his specialty. He knows how to set men to work. He has been casting cannon at Toulon and cutting timber in the Burgundy woods. And then, you may not believe what I am going to tell you, M. l'Ambassadeur, but I had another idea."

"Oh! monsieur," courteously answered the ambassador, "I can easily believe anything you say."

"Well, having a pretty good idea of the character of our Dutch allies, I said to myself: They are tradesmen, they are the King's allies, they will be delighted to sell him their manufactures. Therefore, the more we buy of them—ah! I was forgetting Forant—are you acquainted with Forant, D'Artagnan?"

Colbert had forgotten himself. He had addressed the captain quite simply as D'Artagnan, like the King. But the captain only smiled.

"No," said he, "I don't know him."

"Another one of my discoveries. His specialty is as a buyer. This Forant has purchased for me 350,000 pounds of iron in balls, 200,000 pounds of gunpowder, twelve cargoes of northern timber, matches, grenades, pitch, tar,—more things than I can describe to you,—and has saved us seven per cent. on what these things would cost if manufactured in France."

"That, certainly, is an idea," replied D'Artagnan, "getting the Dutch to cast balls for you, which you intend afterward to cast back at them."

"And cast as damaged articles, eh?"

Colbert laughed aloud, with his rather dry, coarse laugh. He was delighted with his joke.