

Chapter XXVI. The Last Adieux.

Raoul uttered a cry, and affectionately embraced Porthos. Aramis and Athos embraced like old men; and this embrace itself being a question for Aramis, he immediately said, "My friend, we have not long to remain with you."

"Ah!" said the comte.

"Only time to tell you of my good fortune," interrupted Porthos.

"Ah!" said Raoul.

Athos looked silently at Aramis, whose somber air had already appeared to him very little in harmony with the good news Porthos hinted.

"What is the good fortune that has happened to you? Let us hear it," said Raoul, with a smile.

"The king has made me a duke," said the worthy Porthos, with an air of mystery, in the ear of the young man, "a duke by brevet."

But the asides of Porthos were always loud enough to be heard by everybody. His murmurs were in the diapason of ordinary roaring. Athos heard him, and uttered an exclamation which made Aramis start. The latter took Athos by the arm, and, after having asked Porthos's permission to say a word to his friend in private, "My dear Athos," he began, "you see me overwhelmed with grief and trouble."

"With grief and trouble, my dear friend?" cried the comte; "oh, what?"

"In two words. I have conspired against the king; that conspiracy has failed, and, at this moment, I am doubtless pursued."

"You are pursued!--a conspiracy! Eh! my friend, what do you tell me?"

"The saddest truth. I am entirely ruined."

"Well, but Porthos--this title of duke--what does all that mean?"

"That is the subject of my severest pain; that is the deepest of my wounds. I have, believing in infallible success, drawn Porthos into my conspiracy. He threw himself into it, as you know he would do, with all his strength, without knowing what he was about; and now he is as much compromised as myself--as completely ruined as I am."

"Good God!" And Athos turned towards Porthos, who was smiling complacently.

"I must make you acquainted with the whole. Listen to me," continued Aramis; and he related the history as we know it. Athos, during the recital, several times felt the sweat break from his forehead. "It was a great idea," said he, "but a great error."

"For which I am punished, Athos."

"Therefore, I will not tell you my entire thought."

"Tell it, nevertheless."

"It is a crime."

"A capital crime; I know it is. Lese majeste."

"Porthos! poor Porthos!"

"What would you advise me to do? Success, as I have told you, was certain."

"M. Fouquet is an honest man."

"And I a fool for having so ill-judged him," said Aramis. "Oh, the wisdom of man! Oh, millstone that grinds the world! and which is one day stopped by a grain of sand which has fallen, no one knows how, between its wheels."

"Say by a diamond, Aramis. But the thing is done. How do you think of acting?"

"I am taking away Porthos. The king will never believe that that worthy man has acted innocently. He never can believe that Porthos has thought he was serving the king, whilst acting as he has done. His head would pay my fault. It shall not, must not, be so."

"You are taking him away, whither?"

"To Belle-Isle, at first. That is an impregnable place of refuge. Then, I have the sea, and a vessel to pass over into England, where I have many relations."

"You? in England?"

"Yes, or else in Spain, where I have still more."

"But, our excellent Porthos! you ruin him, for the king will confiscate all his property."

"All is provided for. I know how, when once in Spain, to reconcile

myself with Louis XIV., and restore Porthos to favor."

"You have credit, seemingly, Aramis!" said Athos, with a discreet air.

"Much; and at the service of my friends."

These words were accompanied by a warm pressure of the hand.

"Thank you," replied the comte.

"And while we are on this head," said Aramis, "you also are a malcontent; you also, Raoul, have griefs to lay to the king. Follow our example; pass over into Belle-Isle. Then we shall see, I guarantee upon my honor, that in a month there will be war between France and Spain on the subject of this son of Louis XIII., who is an Infante likewise, and whom France detains inhumanly. Now, as Louis XIV. would have no inclination for a war on that subject, I will answer for an arrangement, the result of which must bring greatness to Porthos and to me, and a duchy in France to you, who are already a grandee of Spain. Will you join us?"

"No; for my part I prefer having something to reproach the king with; it is a pride natural to my race to pretend to a superiority over royal races. Doing what you propose, I should become the obliged of the king; I should certainly be the gainer on that ground, but I should be a loser in my conscience.--No, thank you!"

"Then give me two things, Athos,--your absolution."

"Oh! I give it you if you really wished to avenge the weak and oppressed against the oppressor."

"That is sufficient for me," said Aramis, with a blush which was lost in the obscurity of the night. "And now, give me your two best horses to gain the second post, as I have been refused any under the pretext of the Duc de Beaufort being traveling in this country."

"You shall have the two best horses, Aramis; and again I recommend poor Porthos strongly to your care."

"Oh! I have no fear on that score. One word more: do you think I am maneuvering for him as I ought?"

"The evil being committed, yes; for the king would not pardon him, and you have, whatever may be said, always a supporter in M. Fouquet, who will not abandon you, he being himself compromised, notwithstanding his heroic action."

"You are right. And that is why, instead of gaining the sea at once,

which would proclaim my fear and guilt, that is why I remain upon French ground. But Belle-Isle will be for me whatever ground I wish it to be, English, Spanish, or Roman; all will depend, with me, on the standard I shall think proper to unfurl."

"How so?"

"It was I who fortified Belle-Isle; and, so long as I defend it, nobody can take Belle-Isle from me. And then, as you have said just now, M. Fouquet is there. Belle-Isle will not be attacked without the signature of M. Fouquet."

"That is true. Nevertheless, be prudent. The king is both cunning and strong." Aramis smiled.

"I again recommend Porthos to you," repeated the count, with a sort of cold persistence.

"Whatever becomes of me, count," replied Aramis, in the same tone, "our brother Porthos will fare as I do--or better."

Athos bowed whilst pressing the hand of Aramis, and turned to embrace Porthos with emotion.

"I was born lucky, was I not?" murmured the latter, transported with happiness, as he folded his cloak round him.

"Come, my dear friend," said Aramis.

Raoul had gone out to give orders for the saddling of the horses. The group was already divided. Athos saw his two friends on the point of departure, and something like a mist passed before his eyes and weighed upon his heart.

"It is strange," thought he, "whence comes the inclination I feel to embrace Porthos once more?" At that moment Porthos turned round, and he came towards his old friend with open arms. This last endearment was tender as in youth, as in times when hearts were warm--life happy. And then Porthos mounted his horse. Aramis came back once more to throw his arms round the neck of Athos. The latter watched them along the high-road, elongated by the shade, in their white cloaks. Like phantoms they seemed to enlarge on their departure from the earth, and it was not in the mist, but in the declivity of the ground that they disappeared. At the end of the perspective, both seemed to have given a spring with their feet, which made them vanish as if evaporated into cloud-land.

Then Athos, with a very heavy heart, returned towards the house, saying to Bragelonne, "Raoul, I don't know what it is that has just told me that I have seen those two for the last time."

"It does not astonish me, monsieur, that you should have such a thought," replied the young man, "for I have at this moment the same, and think also that I shall never see Messieurs du Vallon and d'Herblay again."

"Oh! you," replied the count, "you speak like a man rendered sad by a different cause; you see everything in black; you are young, and if you chance never to see those old friends again, it will be because they no longer exist in the world in which you have yet many years to pass. But I--"

Raoul shook his head sadly, and leaned upon the shoulder of the count, without either of them finding another word in their hearts, which were ready to overflow.

All at once a noise of horses and voices, from the extremity of the road to Blois, attracted their attention that way. Flambeaux-bearers shook their torches merrily among the trees of their route, and turned round, from time to time, to avoid distancing the horsemen who followed them. These flames, this noise, this dust of a dozen richly caparisoned horses, formed a strange contrast in the middle of the night with the melancholy and almost funereal disappearance of the two shadows of Aramis and Porthos. Athos went towards the house; but he had hardly reached the parterre, when the entrance gate appeared in a blaze; all the flambeaux stopped and appeared to enflame the road. A cry was heard of "M. le Duc de Beaufort"--and Athos sprang towards the door of his house. But the duke had already alighted from his horse, and was looking around him.

"I am here, monseigneur," said Athos.

"Ah! good evening, dear count," said the prince, with that frank cordiality which won him so many hearts. "Is it too late for a friend?"

"Ah! my dear prince, come in!" said the count.

And, M. de Beaufort leaning on the arm of Athos, they entered the house, followed by Raoul, who walked respectfully and modestly among the officers of the prince, with several of whom he was acquainted.