

Chapter XLV. The Ancestors of Porthos.

When D'Artagnan left Aramis and Porthos, the latter returned to the principal fort, in order to converse with greater liberty. Porthos, still thoughtful, was a restraint on Aramis, whose mind had never felt itself more free.

"Dear Porthos," said he, suddenly, "I will explain D'Artagnan's idea to you."

"What idea, Aramis?"

"An idea to which we shall owe our liberty within twelve hours."

"Ah! indeed!" said Porthos, much astonished. "Let us hear it."

"Did you remark, in the scene our friend had with the officer, that certain orders constrained him with regard to us?"

"Yes, I did notice that."

"Well! D'Artagnan is going to give in his resignation to the king, and during the confusion that will result from his absence, we will get away, or rather you will get away, Porthos, if there is possibility of flight for only one."

Here Porthos shook his head and replied: "We will escape together, Aramis, or we will stay together."

"Thine is a right, a generous heart," said Aramis, "only your melancholy uneasiness affects me."

"I am not uneasy," said Porthos.

"Then you are angry with me."

"I am not angry with you."

"Then why, my friend, do you put on such a dismal countenance?"

"I will tell you; I am making my will." And while saying these words, the good Porthos looked sadly in the face of Aramis.

"Your will!" cried the bishop. "What, then! do you think yourself lost?"

"I feel fatigued. It is the first time, and there is a custom in our family."

"What is it, my friend?"

"My grandfather was a man twice as strong as I am."

"Indeed!" said Aramis; "then your grandfather must have been Samson himself."

"No; his name was Antoine. Well! he was about my age, when, setting out one day for the chase, he felt his legs weak, the man who had never known what weakness was before."

"What was the meaning of that fatigue, my friend?"

"Nothing good, as you will see; for having set out, complaining still of weakness of the legs, he met a wild boar, which made head against him; he missed him with his arquebuse, and was ripped up by the beast and died immediately."

"There is no reason in that why you should alarm yourself, dear Porthos."

"Oh! you will see. My father was as strong again as I am. He was a rough soldier, under Henry III. and Henry IV.; his name was not Antoine, but Gaspard, the same as M. de Coligny. Always on horseback, he had never known what lassitude was. One evening, as he rose from table, his legs failed him."

"He had supped heartily, perhaps," said Aramis, "and that was why he staggered."

"Bah! A friend of M. de Bassompierre, nonsense! No, no, he was astonished at this lassitude, and said to my mother, who laughed at him, 'Would not one believe I was going to meet with a wild boar, as the late M. du Vallon, my father did?'"

"Well?" said Aramis.

"Well, having this weakness, my father insisted upon going down into the garden, instead of going to bed; his foot slipped on the first stair, the staircase was steep; my father fell against a stone in which an iron hinge was fixed. The hinge gashed his temple; and he was stretched out dead upon the spot."

Aramis raised his eyes to his friend: "These are two extraordinary circumstances," said he; "let us not infer that there may succeed a third. It is not becoming in a man of your strength to be superstitious, my brave Porthos. Besides, when were your legs known to fail? Never have you stood so firm, so haughtily; why, you could carry a house on your shoulders."

"At this moment," said Porthos, "I feel myself pretty active; but at times I vacillate; I sink; and lately this phenomenon, as you say, has occurred four times. I will not say this frightens me, but it annoys me. Life is an agreeable thing. I have money; I have fine estates; I have horses that I love; I have also friends that I love: D'Artagnan, Athos, Raoul, and you."

The admirable Porthos did not even take the trouble to dissimulate in the very presence of Aramis the rank he gave him in his friendship. Aramis pressed his hand: "We will still live many years," said he, "to preserve to the world such specimens of its rarest men. Trust yourself to me, my friend; we have no reply from D'Artagnan, that is a good sign. He must have given orders to get the vessels together and clear the seas. On my part I have just issued directions that a bark should be rolled on rollers to the mouth of the great cavern of Locmaria, which you know, where we have so often lain in wait for the foxes."

"Yes, and which terminates at the little creek by a trench where we discovered the day that splendid fox escaped that way."

"Precisely. In case of misfortunes, a bark is to be concealed for us in that cavern; indeed, it must be there by this time. We will wait for a favorable moment, and during the night we will go to sea!"

"That is a grand idea. What shall we gain by it?"

"We shall gain this--nobody knows that grotto, or rather its issue, except ourselves and two or three hunters of the island; we shall gain this--that if the island is occupied, the scouts, seeing no bark upon the shore, will never imagine we can escape, and will cease to watch."

"I understand."

"Well! that weakness in the legs?"

"Oh! better, much, just now."

"You see, then, plainly, that everything conspires to give us quietude and hope. D'Artagnan will sweep the sea and leave us free. No royal fleet or descent to be dreaded. Vive Dieu! Porthos, we have still half a century of magnificent adventure before us, and if I once touch Spanish ground, I swear to you," added the bishop with terrible energy, "that your brevet of duke is not such a chance as it is said to be."

"We live by hope," said Porthos, enlivened by the warmth of his companion.

All at once a cry resounded in their ears: "To arms! to arms!"

This cry, repeated by a hundred throats, piercing the chamber where the two friends were conversing, carried surprise to one, and uneasiness to the other. Aramis opened the window; he saw a crowd of people running with flambeaux. Women were seeking places of safety, the armed population were hastening to their posts.

"The fleet! the fleet!" cried a soldier, who recognized Aramis.

"The fleet?" repeated the latter.

"Within half cannon-shot," continued the soldier.

"To arms!" cried Aramis.

"To arms!" repeated Porthos, formidably. And both rushed forth towards the mole to place themselves within the shelter of the batteries. Boats, laden with soldiers, were seen approaching; and in three directions, for the purpose of landing at three points at once.

"What must be done?" said an officer of the guard.

"Stop them; and if they persist, fire!" said Aramis.

Five minutes later, the cannonade commenced. These were the shots that D'Artagnan had heard as he landed in France. But the boats were too near the mole to allow the cannon to aim correctly. They landed, and the combat commenced hand to hand.

"What's the matter, Porthos?" said Aramis to his friend.

"Nothing! nothing!--only my legs; it is really incomprehensible!--they will be better when we charge." In fact, Porthos and Aramis did charge with such vigor, and so thoroughly animated their men, that the royalists re-embarked precipitately, without gaining anything but the wounds they carried away.

"Eh! but Porthos," cried Aramis, "we must have a prisoner, quick! quick!" Porthos bent over the stair of the mole, and seized by the nape of the neck one of the officers of the royal army who was waiting to embark till all his people should be in the boat. The arm of the giant lifted up his prey, which served him as a buckler, and he recovered himself without a shot being fired at him.

"Here is a prisoner for you," said Porthos coolly to Aramis.

"Well!" cried the latter, laughing, "did you not calumniate your legs?"

"It was not with my legs I captured him," said Porthos, "it was with my arms!"