

Chapter 17

The Encounter.

The king signified with an imperious gesture, first to the musketeer, then to Saint-Aignan, "On your lives, not a word." D'Artagnan withdrew, like a sentinel, to a corner of the room; Saint-Aignan, in his character of a favorite, leaned over the back of the king's chair. Manicamp, with his right foot properly advanced, a smile upon his lips, and his white and well-formed hands gracefully disposed, advanced to make his reverence to the king, who returned the salutation by a bow. "Good evening, M. de Manicamp," he said.

"Your majesty did me the honor to send for me," said Manicamp.

"Yes, in order to learn from you all the details of the unfortunate accident which has befallen the Comte de Guiche."

"Oh! sire, it is grievous indeed."

"You were there?"

"Not precisely, sire."

"But you arrived on the scene of the accident, a few minutes after it took place?"

"Sire, about half an hour afterwards."

"And where did the accident happen?"

"I believe, sire, the place is called the Rond-point du Bois-Rochin."

"Oh! the rendezvous of the hunt."

"The very spot, sire."

"Good; give me all the details you are acquainted with, respecting this unhappy affair, Monsieur de Manicamp."

"Perhaps your majesty has already been informed of them, and I fear to fatigue you with useless repetition."

"No, do not be afraid of that."

Manicamp looked round him; he saw only D'Artagnan leaning with his back against the wainscot - D'Artagnan, calm, kind, and good-natured as usual - and Saint-Aignan whom he had accompanied, and who still leaned over the

king's armchair with an expression of countenance equally full of good feeling. He determined, therefore, to speak out. "Your majesty is perfectly aware," he said, "that accidents are very frequent in hunting."

"In hunting, do you say?"

"I mean, sire, when an animal is brought to bay."

"Ah, ah!" said the king, "it was when the animal was brought to bay, then, that the accident happened?"

"Alas! sire, unhappily it was."

The king paused for a moment before he said: "What animal was being hunted?"

"A wild boar, sire."

"And what could possibly have possessed De Guiche to go to a wild boar-hunt by himself; that is but a clownish idea of sport, only fit for that class of people who, unlike the Marechal de Gramont, have no dogs and huntsmen, to hunt as gentlemen should do."

Manicamp shrugged his shoulders. "Youth is very rash," he said, sententiously.

"Well, go on," said the king.

"At all events," continued Manicamp, not venturing to be too precipitate and hasty, and letting his words fall very slowly one by one, "at all

events, sire, poor De Guiche went hunting - all alone."

"Quite alone? indeed? - What a sportsman! And is not M. de Guiche aware that the wild boar always stands at bay?"

"That is the very thing that really happened, sire."

"He had some idea, then, of the beast being there?"

"Yes, sire, some peasants had seen it among their potatoes."

Transcriber's note: Potatoes were not grown in France at this time. Le Siecle insists that the error is theirs, and that Dumas meant tomatoes. - JB

"And what kind of animal was it?"

"A short, thick beast."

"You may as well tell me, monsieur, that De Guiche had some idea of committing suicide; for I have seen him hunt, and he is an active and vigorous hunter. Whenever he fires at an animal brought to bay and held in check by the dogs, he takes every possible precaution, and yet he fires with a carbine, and on this occasion he seems to have faced the boar with pistols only."

Manicamp started.

"A costly pair of pistols, excellent weapons to fight a duel with a man and not a wild boar. What an absurdity!"

"There are some things, sire, which are difficult of explanation."

"You are quite right, and the event which we are now discussing is certainly one of them. Go on."

During the recital, Saint-Aignan, who probably would have made a sign to Manicamp to be careful what he was about, found that the king's glance was constantly fixed upon himself, so that it was utterly impossible to communicate with Manicamp in any way. As for D'Artagnan, the statue of Silence at Athens was far more noisy and far more expressive than he. Manicamp, therefore, was obliged to continue in the same way he had begun, and so contrived to get more and more entangled in his explanation. "Sire," he said, "this is probably how the affair happened. Guiche was waiting to receive the boar as it rushed towards him."

"On foot or on horseback?" inquired the king.

"On horseback. He fired upon the brute and missed his aim, and then it dashed upon him."

"And the horse was killed."

"Ah! your majesty knows that, then."

"I have been told that a horse has been found lying dead in the cross-roads of the Bois-Rochin, and I presume it was De Guiche's horse."

"Perfectly true, sire, it was his."

"Well, so much for the horse, and now for De Guiche?"

"De Guiche, once down, was attacked and worried by the wild boar, and wounded in the hand and in the chest."

"It is a horrible accident, but it must be admitted it was De Guiche's own fault. How could he possibly have gone to hunt such an animal merely armed with pistols; he must have forgotten the fable of Adonis?"

Manicamp rubbed his ear in seeming perplexity. "Very true," he said, "it was very imprudent."

"Can you explain it, Monsieur Manicamp?"

"Sire, what is written is written!"

"Ah! you are a fatalist."

Manicamp looked very uncomfortable and ill at ease.

"I am angry with you, Monsieur Manicamp," continued the king.

"With me, sire?"

"Yes. How was it that you, who are De Guiche's intimate friend, and who know that he is subject to such acts of folly, did not stop him in time?"

Manicamp no longer knew what to do; the tone in which the king spoke was anything but that of a credulous man. On the other hand, it did not indicate any particular severity, nor did he seem to care very much about the cross-examination. There was more of raillery in it than menace.

"And you say, then," continued the king, "that it was positively De Guiche's horse that was found dead?"

"Quite positive, sire."

"Did that astonish you?"

"No, sire; for your majesty will remember that, at the last hunt, M. de Saint-Maure had a horse killed under him, and in the same way."

"Yes, but that one was ripped open."

"Of course, sire."

"Had Guiche's horse been ripped open like M. de Saint-Maure's horse, I should not have been astonished."

Manicamp opened his eyes very wide.

"Am I mistaken," resumed the king, "was it not in the frontal bone that De Guiche's horse was struck? You must admit, Monsieur de Manicamp, that that is a very singular place for a wild boar to attack."

"You are aware, sire, that the horse is a very intelligent animal, and he doubtless endeavoured to defend himself."

"But a horse defends himself with his heels and not with his head."

"In that case, the terrified horse may have slipped or fallen down," said Manicamp, "and the boar, you understand sire, the boar - "

"Oh! I understand that perfectly, as far as the horse is concerned; but how about his rider?"

"Well! that, too, is simple enough; the boar left the horse and attacked the rider; and, as I have already had the honor of informing your majesty, shattered De Guiche's hand at the very moment he was about to

discharge his second pistol at him, and then, with a gouge of his tusk, made that terrible hole in his chest."

"Nothing is more likely; really, Monsieur de Manicamp, you are wrong in placing so little confidence in your own eloquence, and you can tell a story most admirably."

"Your majesty is exceedingly kind," said Manicamp, saluting him in the most embarrassed manner.

"From this day henceforth, I will prohibit any gentleman attached to my court going out to a similar encounter. Really, one might just as well permit duelling."

Manicamp started, and moved as if he were about to withdraw. "Is your majesty satisfied?"

"Delighted; but do not withdraw yet, Monsieur de Manicamp," said Louis, "I have something to say to you."

"Well, well!" thought D'Artagnan, "there is another who is not up to the mark;" and he uttered a sigh which might signify, "Oh! the men of our stamp, where are they now?"

At this moment an usher lifted up the curtain before the door, and announced the king's physician.

"Ah!" exclaimed Louis, "here comes Monsieur Valot, who has just been to see M. de Guiche. We shall now hear news of the man maltreated by the boar."

Manicamp felt more uncomfortable than ever.

"In this way, at least," added the king, "our conscience will be quite clear." And he looked at D'Artagnan, who did not seem in the slightest degree discomposed.