

Chapter 54

Porthos's Plan of Action.

The great number of individuals we have introduced into this long story is the reason why each of them has been forced to appear only in turn, according to the exigencies of the recital. The result is, that our readers have had no opportunity of meeting our friend Porthos since his return from Fontainebleau. The honors which he had received from the king had not changed the easy, affectionate character of that excellent-hearted man; he may, perhaps, have held up his head a little higher than usual, and a majesty of demeanor, as it were, may have betrayed itself since the honor of dining at the king's table had been accorded him. His majesty's banqueting-room had produced a certain effect on Porthos. Le Seigneur de Bracieux et de Pierrefonds delighted to remember that, during that memorable dinner, the numerous array of servants, and the large number of officials in attendance on the guests, gave a certain tone and effect to the repast, and seemed, as it were, to furnish the room.

Porthos undertook to confer upon Mouston a position of some kind or other, in order to establish a sort of hierarchy among his other domestics, and to create a military household, which was not unusual among the great captains of the age, since, in the preceding century, this luxury had been greatly encouraged by Messieurs de Treville, de Schomberg, de la Vieuville, without alluding to M. de Richelieu, M. de Conde, and de Bouillon-Turenne. And, therefore, why should not he, Porthos, the friend of the king, and of M. Fouquet, a baron, and engineer, etc., why should not he, indeed, enjoy all the delightful

privileges which large possessions and unusual merit invariably confer? Somewhat neglected by Aramis, who, we know, was greatly occupied with M. Fouquet; neglected, also, on account of his being on duty, by D'Artagnan; tired of Truchen and Planchet, Porthos was surprised to find himself dreaming, without precisely knowing why; but if any one had said to him, "Do you want anything, Porthos?" he would most certainly have replied, "Yes." After one of those dinners, during which Porthos attempted to recall to his recollection all the details of the royal banquet, gently joyful, thanks to the excellence of the wines; gently melancholy, thanks to his ambitious ideas, Porthos was gradually falling off into a placid doze, when his servant entered to announce that M. de Bragelonne wished to speak to him. Porthos passed into an adjoining room, where he found his young friend in the disposition of mind we are already aware of. Raoul advanced towards Porthos, and shook him by the hand; Porthos, surprised at his seriousness of aspect, offered him a seat. "Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "I have a service to ask of you."

"Nothing could happen more fortunately, my young friend," replied Porthos; "I have eight thousand livres sent me this morning from Pierrefonds; and if you want any money - "

"No, I thank you; it is not money."

"So much the worse, then. I have always heard it said that that is the rarest service, but the easiest to render. The remark struck me; I like to cite remarks that strike me."

"Your heart is as good as your mind is sound and true."

"You are much too kind, I declare. You will dine here, of course?"

"No; I am not hungry."

"Eh! not dine? What a dreadful country England is!"

"Not too much so, indeed - but - "

"Well, if such excellent fish and meat were not to be procured there, it would hardly be endurable."

"Yes, I came to - "

"I am listening. Only just allow me to take a little sip. One gets thirsty in Paris;" and he ordered a bottle of champagne to be brought; and, having first filled Raoul's glass, he filled his own, drank it down at a gulp, and then resumed: "I needed that, in order to listen to you with proper attention. I am now entirely at your service. What do you wish to ask me, dear Raoul? What do you want?"

"Give me your opinion on quarrels in general, my dear friend."

"My opinion! Well - but - Explain your idea a little more coherently,"

replied Porthos, rubbing his forehead.

"I mean - you are generally good-humored, good-tempered, whenever any misunderstanding arises between a friend of yours and a stranger, for instance?"

"Oh! in the best of tempers."

"Very good; but what do you do, in such a case?"

"Whenever any friend of mine gets into a quarrel, I always act on one principle."

"What is that?"

"That lost time is irreparable, and one never arranges an affair so well as when everything has been done to embroil the disputants as much as possible."

"Ah! indeed, is that the principle on which you proceed?"

"Precisely; so, as soon as a quarrel takes place, I bring the two parties together."

"Exactly."

"You understand that by this means it is impossible for an affair not to be arranged."

"I should have thought that, treated in this manner, an affair would, on the contrary - "

"Oh! not the least in the world. Just fancy, now, I have had in my life something like a hundred and eighty to a hundred and ninety regular duels, without reckoning hasty encounters, or chance meetings."

"It is a very handsome aggregate," said Raoul, unable to resist a smile.

"A mere nothing; but I am so gentle. D'Artagnan reckons his duels by hundreds. It is very true he is a little too hard and sharp - I have often told him so."

"And so," resumed Raoul, "you generally arrange the affairs of honor your friends confide to you."

"There is not a single instance in which I have not finished by arranging every one of them," said Porthos, with a gentleness and confidence that surprised Raoul.

"But the way in which you settle them is at least honorable, I suppose?"

"Oh! rely upon that; and at this stage, I will explain my other principle

to you. As soon as my friend has intrusted his quarrel to me, this is what I do; I go to his adversary at once, armed with a politeness and self-possession absolutely requisite under such circumstances."

"That is the way, then," said Raoul, bitterly, "that you arrange affairs so safely."

"I believe you. I go to the adversary, then, and say to him: 'It is impossible, monsieur, that you are ignorant of the extent to which you have insulted my friend.'" Raoul frowned at this remark.

"It sometimes happens - very often, indeed," pursued Porthos - "that my friend has not been insulted at all; he has even been the first to give offense; you can imagine, therefore, whether my language is or is not well chosen." And Porthos burst into a peal of laughter.

"Decidedly," said Raoul to himself while the merry thunder of Porthos's laughter was resounding in his ears, "I am very unfortunate. De Guiche treats me with coolness, D'Artagnan with ridicule, Porthos is too tame; no one will settle this affair in the only way I wish it to be settled. And I came to Porthos because I wanted to find a sword instead of cold reasoning at my service. My ill-luck dogs me."

Porthos, who had recovered himself, continued: "By one simple expression, I leave my adversary without an excuse."

"That is as it may happen," said Raoul, absently.

"Not at all, it is quite certain. I have not left him an excuse; and then it is that I display all my courtesy, in order to attain the happy issue of my project. I advance, therefore, with an air of great politeness, and taking my adversary by the hand, I say to him: 'Now that you are convinced of having given the offense, we are sure of reparation; between my friend and yourself, the future can only offer an exchange of mutual courtesies of conduct, and consequently, my mission now is to acquaint you with the length of my friend's sword.'"

"What!" said Raoul.

"Wait a minute. 'The length of my friend's sword. My horse is waiting below; my friend is in such and such a spot and is impatiently awaiting your agreeable society; I will take you with me; we can call upon your second as we go along:' and the affair is arranged."

"And so," said Raoul, pale with vexation, "you reconcile the two adversaries on the ground."

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Porthos. "Reconcile! What for?"

"You said that the affair was arranged."

"Of course! since my friend is waiting for him."

"Well! what then? If he is waiting - "

"Well! if he is waiting, it is merely to stretch his legs a little. The adversary, on the contrary, is stiff from riding; they place themselves in proper order, and my friend kills the opponent, and the affair is ended."

"Ah! he kills him, then?" cried Raoul.

"I should think so," said Porthos. "Is it likely I should ever have as a friend a man who allows himself to get killed? I have a hundred and one friends; at the head of the list stand your father, Aramis, and D'Artagnan, all of whom are living and well, I believe?"

"Oh, my dear baron," exclaimed Raoul, as he embraced Porthos.

"You approve of my method, then?" said the giant.

"I approve of it so thoroughly, that I shall have recourse to it this very day, without a moment's delay, - at once, in fact. You are the very man I have been looking for."

"Good; here I am, then; you want to fight, I suppose?"

"Absolutely."

"It is very natural. With whom?"

"With M. de Saint-Aignan."

"I know him - a most agreeable man, who was exceedingly polite to me the day I had the honor of dining with the king. I shall certainly acknowledge his politeness in return, even if it had not happened to be my usual custom. So, he has given you an offense?"

"A mortal offense."

"The deuce! I can say so, I suppose?"

"More than that, even, if you like."

"That is a very great convenience."

"I may look upon it as one of your arranged affairs, may I not?" said Raoul, smiling.

"As a matter of course. Where will you be waiting for him?"

"Ah! I forgot; it is a very delicate matter. M. de Saint-Aignan is a very great friend of the king's."

"So I have heard it said."

"So that if I kill him - "

"Oh! you will kill him, certainly; you must take every precaution to do so. But there is no difficulty in these matters now; if you had lived in our early days, - ah, those were days worth living for!"

"My dear friend, you do not quite understand me. I mean, that M. de Saint-Aignan being a friend of the king, the affair will be more difficult to manage, since the king might learn beforehand - "

"Oh! no; that is not likely. You know my method: 'Monsieur, you have just injured my friend, and - '"

"Yes, I know it."

"And then: 'Monsieur, I have horses below.' I carry him off before he can have spoken to any one."

"Will he allow himself to be carried off like that?"

"I should think so! I should like to see it fail. It would be the first time, if it did. It is true, though, that the young men of the present day - Bah! I would carry him off bodily, if that were all," and Porthos, adding gesture to speech, lifted Raoul and the chair he was sitting on

off the ground, and carried them round the room.

"Very good," said Raoul, laughing. "All we have to do is to state the grounds of the quarrel with M. de Saint-Aignan."

"Well, but that is done, it seems."

"No, my dear M. du Vallon, the usage of the present day requires that the cause of the quarrel should be explained."

"Very good. Tell me what it is, then."

"The fact is - "

"Deuce take it! how troublesome all this is! In former days we had no occasion to say anything about the matter. People fought for the sake of fighting; and I, for one, know no better reason than that."

"You are quite right, M. du Vallon."

"However, tell me what the cause is."

"It is too long a story to tell; only, as one must particularize to a certain extent, and as, on the other hand, the affair is full of difficulties, and requires the most absolute secrecy, you will have the kindness merely to tell M. de Saint-Aignan that he has, in the first

place, insulted me by changing his lodgings."

"By changing his lodgings? Good," said Porthos, who began to count on his fingers; "next?"

"Then in getting a trap-door made in his new apartments."

"I understand," said Porthos; "a trap-door: upon my word, that is very serious; you ought to be furious at that. What the deuce does the fellow mean by getting trap-doors made without first consulting you? Trap-doors! _mordioux!_ I haven't got any, except in my dungeons at Bracieux."

"And you will please add," said Raoul, "that my last motive for considering myself insulted is, the existence of the portrait that M. de Saint-Aignan well knows."

"Is it possible? A portrait, too! A change of residence, a trap-door, and a portrait! Why, my dear friend, with but one of these causes of complaint there is enough, and more than enough, for all the gentlemen in France and Spain to cut each other's throats, and that is saying but very little."

"Well, my dear friend, you are furnished with all you need, I suppose?"

"I shall take a second horse with me. Select your own rendezvous, and while you are waiting there, you can practice some of the best passes, so

as to get your limbs as elastic as possible."

"Thank you. I shall be waiting for you in the wood of Vincennes, close to Minimes."

"All goes well, then. Where am I to find this M. de Saint-Aignan?"

"At the Palais Royal."

Porthos ran a huge hand-bell. "My court suit," he said to the servant who answered the summons, "my horse, and a led horse to accompany me." Then turning to Raoul, as soon as the servant had quitted the room, he said: "Does your father know anything about this?"

"No; I am going to write to him."

"And D'Artagnan?"

"No, nor D'Artagnan either. He is very cautious, you know, and might have diverted me from my purpose."

"D'Artagnan is a sound adviser, though," said Porthos, astonished that, in his own loyal faith in D'Artagnan, any one could have thought of himself, so long as there was a D'Artagnan in the world.

"Dear M. du Vallon," said Raoul, "do not question me any more, I implore

you. I have told you all that I had to say; it is prompt action I now expect, sharp and decided as you know how to arrange it. That, indeed, is my reason for having chosen you."

"You will be satisfied with me," replied Porthos.

"Do not forget, either, that, except ourselves, no one must know anything of this meeting."

"People generally find these things out," said Porthos, dryly, "when a dead body is discovered in a wood. But I promise everything, my dear friend, except the concealment of the dead body. There it is, and it must be seen, as a matter of course. It is a principle of mine, not to bury bodies. That has a smack of the assassin about it. Every risk has its peculiarities."

"To work, then, my dear friend."

"Rely upon me," said the giant, finishing the bottle, while a servant spread out upon a sofa the gorgeously decorated dress trimmed with lace.

Raoul left the room, saying to himself, with a secret delight,

"Perfidious king! traitorous monarch! I cannot reach thee. I do not wish it; for kings are sacred objects. But your friend, your accomplice, your panderer - the coward who represents you - shall pay for your crime. I will kill him in thy name, and, afterwards, we will bethink

ourselves of - _Louise_."