

Chapter 55

The Change of Residence, the Trap-Door, and the Portrait.

Porthos, intrusted, to his great delight, with this mission, which made him feel young again, took half an hour less than his usual time to put on his court suit. To show that he was a man acquainted with the usages of high society, he had begun by sending his lackey to inquire if Monsieur de Saint-Aignan were at home, and heard, in answer, that M. le Comte de Saint-Aignan had had the honor of accompanying the king to Saint-Germain, as well as the whole court; but that monsieur le comte had just that moment returned. Immediately upon this reply, Porthos made as much haste as possible, and reached Saint-Aignan's apartments just as the latter was having his boots taken off. The promenade had been delightful. The king, who was in love more than ever, and of course happier than ever, behaved in the most charming manner to every one. Nothing could possibly equal his kindness. M. de Saint-Aignan, it may be remembered, was a poet, and fancied that he had proved that he was so under too many a memorable circumstance to allow the title to be disputed by any one. An indefatigable rhymester, he had, during the whole of the journey, overwhelmed with quatrains, sextains, and madrigals, first the king, and then La Valliere. The king, on his side, was in a similarly poetical mood, and had made a distich; while La Valliere, delighting in poetry, as most women do who are in love, had composed two sonnets. The day, then, had not been a bad one for Apollo; and so, as soon as he had returned to Paris, Saint-Aignan, who knew beforehand that his verse would

be sure to be extensively circulated in court circles, occupied himself, with a little more attention than he had been able to bestow during the promenade, with the composition, as well as with the idea itself. Consequently, with all the tenderness of a father about to start his children in life, he candidly interrogated himself whether the public would find these offsprings of his imagination sufficiently elegant and graceful; and in order to make his mind easy on the subject, M. de Saint-Aignan recited to himself the madrigal he had composed, and which he had repeated from memory to the king, and had promised to write out for him on his return. All the time he was committing these words to memory, the comte was engaged in undressing himself more completely. He had just taken off his coat, and was putting on his dressing-gown, when he was informed that Monsieur le Baron du Vallon de Bracieux de Pierrefonds was waiting to be received.

"Eh!" he said, "what does that bunch of names mean? I don't know anything about him."

"It is the same gentleman," replied the lackey, "who had the honor of dining with you, monseigneur, at the king's table, when his majesty was staying at Fontainebleau."

"Introduce him, then, at once," cried Saint-Aignan.

Porthos, in a few minutes, entered the room. M. de Saint-Aignan had an excellent recollection of persons, and, at the first glance, he

recognized the gentleman from the country, who enjoyed so singular a reputation, and whom the king had received so favorably at Fontainebleau, in spite of the smiles of some of those who were present. He therefore advanced towards Porthos with all the outward signs of consideration of manner which Porthos thought but natural, considering that he himself, whenever he called upon an adversary, hoisted a standard of the most refined politeness. Saint-Aignan desired the servant to give Porthos a chair; and the latter, who saw nothing unusual in this act of politeness, sat down gravely and coughed. The ordinary courtesies having been exchanged between the two gentlemen, the comte, to whom the visit was paid, said, "May I ask, monsieur le baron, to what happy circumstance I am indebted for the favor of a visit from you?"

"The very thing I am about to have the honor of explaining to you, monsieur le comte; but, I beg your pardon - "

"What is the matter, monsieur?" inquired Saint-Aignan.

"I regret to say that I have broken your chair."

"Not at all, monsieur," said Saint-Aignan; "not at all."

"It is the fact, though, monsieur le comte; I have broken it - so much so, indeed, that if I do not move, I shall fall down, which would be an exceedingly disagreeable position for me in the discharge of the very serious mission which has been intrusted to me with regard to yourself."

Porthos rose; and but just in time, for the chair had given way several inches. Saint-Aignan looked about him for something more solid for his guest to sit upon.

"Modern articles of furniture," said Porthos, while the comte was looking about, "are constructed in a ridiculously flimsy manner. In my early days, when I used to sit down with far more energy than is now the case, I do not remember ever to have broken a chair, except in taverns, with my arms."

Saint-Aignan smiled at this remark. "But," said Porthos, as he settled himself down on a couch, which creaked, but did not give way beneath his weight, "that unfortunately has nothing whatever to do with my present visit."

"Why unfortunately? Are you the bearer of a message of ill-omen, monsieur le baron?"

"Of ill-omen - for a gentleman? Certainly not, monsieur le comte," replied Porthos, nobly. "I have simply come to say that you have seriously insulted a friend of mine."

"I, monsieur?" exclaimed Saint-Aignan - "I have insulted a friend of yours, do you say? May I ask his name?"

"M. Raoul de Bragelonne."

"I have insulted M. Raoul de Bragelonne!" cried Saint-Aignan. "I really assure you, monsieur, that it is quite impossible; for M. de Bragelonne, whom I know but very slightly, - nay, whom I know hardly at all - is in England, and, as I have not seen him for a long time past, I cannot possibly have insulted him."

"M. de Bragelonne is in Paris, monsieur le comte," said Porthos, perfectly unmoved; "and I repeat, it is quite certain you have insulted him, since he himself told me you had. Yes, monsieur, you have seriously insulted him, mortally insulted him, I repeat."

"It is impossible, monsieur le baron, I swear, quite impossible."

"Besides," added Porthos, "you cannot be ignorant of the circumstance, since M. de Bragelonne informed me that he had already apprised you of it by a note."

"I give you my word of honor, monsieur, that I have received no note whatever."

"This is most extraordinary," replied Porthos.

"I will convince you," said Saint-Aignan, "that have received nothing in any way from him." And he rang the bell. "Basque," he said to the

servant who entered, "how many letters have or notes were sent here during my absence?"

"Three, monsieur le comte - a note from M. de Fiesque, one from Madame de Laferte, and a letter from M. de las Fuentes."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, monsieur le comte."

"Speak the truth before this gentleman - the truth, you understand. I will take care you are not blamed."

"There was a note, also, from - from - "

"Well, from whom?"

"From Mademoiselle - de - "

"Out with it!"

"De Laval."

"That is quite sufficient," interrupted Porthos. "I believe you, monsieur le comte."

Saint-Aignan dismissed the valet, and followed him to the door, in order to close it after him; and when he had done so, looking straight before him, he happened to see in the keyhole of the adjoining apartment the paper which Bragelonne had slipped in there as he left. "What is this?" he said.

Porthos, who was sitting with his back to the room, turned round. "Aha!" he said.

"A note in the keyhole!" exclaimed Saint-Aignan.

"That is not unlikely to be the missing letter, monsieur le comte," said Porthos.

Saint-Aignan took out the paper. "A note from M. de Bragelonne!" he exclaimed.

"You see, monsieur, I was right. Oh, when I say a thing - "

"Brought here by M. de Bragelonne himself," the comte murmured, turning pale. "This is infamous! How could he possibly have come here?" And the comte rang again.

"Who has been here during my absence with the king?"

"No one, monsieur."

"That is impossible! Some one must have been here."

"No one could possibly have entered, monsieur, since the keys have never left my pocket."

"And yet I find the letter in yonder lock; some one must have put it there; it could not have come here of its own accord."

Basque opened his arms as if signifying the most absolute ignorance on the subject.

"Probably it was M. de Bragelonne himself who placed it there," said Porthos.

"In that case he must have entered here."

"How could that have been, since I have the key in my own pocket?" returned Basque, perseveringly.

Saint-Aignan crumpled the letter in his palm, after having read it.

"There is something mysterious about this," he murmured, absorbed in thought. Porthos left him to his reflections; but after a while returned to the mission he had undertaken.

"Shall we return to our little affair?" Porthos resumed, addressing Saint-

Aignan after a brief pause.

"I think I can now understand it, from this note, which has arrived here in so singular a manner. Monsieur de Bragelonne says that a friend will call."

"I am his friend. I am the person he alludes to."

"For the purpose of giving me a challenge?"

"Precisely."

"And he complains that I have insulted him?"

"Mortally."

"In what way, may I ask; for his conduct is so mysterious, that, at least, it needs some explanation?"

"Monsieur," replied Porthos, "my friend cannot but be right; and, as far as his conduct is concerned, if it be mysterious, as you say, you have only yourself to blame for it." Porthos pronounced these words with an amount of confidence which, for a man who was unaccustomed to his ways, must have revealed an infinity of sense.

"Mystery, so be it; but what is all the mystery about?" said Saint-Aignan.

"You will think it the best, perhaps," Porthos replied, with a low bow, "if I do not enter in to particulars."

"Oh, I perfectly understand. We will touch very lightly upon it, then, so speak, monsieur, I am listening."

"In the first place, monsieur," said Porthos, "you have changed your apartments."

"Yes, that is quite true," said Saint-Aignan.

"You admit it," said Porthos, with an air of satisfaction.

"Admit it! of course I admit it. Why should I not admit it, do you suppose?"

"You have admitted it. Very good," said Porthos, lifting up one finger.

"But how can my having moved my lodgings have done M. de Bragelonne any

harm? Have the goodness to tell me that, for I positively do not comprehend a word of what you are saying."

Porthos stopped him, and then said, with great gravity, "Monsieur, this is the first of M. de Bragelonne's complaints against you. If he makes a

complaint, it is because he feels himself insulted."

Saint-Aignan began to beat his foot impatiently on the ground. "This looks like a spurious quarrel," he said.

"No one can possibly have a spurious quarrel with the Vicomte de Bragelonne," returned Porthos; "but, at all events, you have nothing to add on the subject of your changing your apartments, I suppose?"

"Nothing. And what is the next point?"

"Ah, the next! You will observe, monsieur, that the one I have already mentioned is a most serious injury, to which you have given no answer, or rather, have answered very indifferently. Is it possible, monsieur, that you have changed your lodgings? M. de Bragelonne feels insulted at your having done so, and you do not attempt to excuse yourself."

"What!" cried Saint-Aignan, who was getting annoyed at the perfect coolness of his visitor - "what! am I to consult M. de Bragelonne whether I am to move or not? You can hardly be serious, monsieur."

"I am. And it is absolutely necessary, monsieur; but under any circumstances, you will admit that it is nothing in comparison with the second ground of complaint."

"Well, what is that?"

Porthos assumed a very solemn expression as he said: "How about the trap-door, monsieur?"

Saint-Aignan turned exceedingly pale. He pushed back his chair so abruptly, that Porthos, simple as he was, perceived that the blow had told. "The trap-door," murmured Saint-Aignan.

"Yes, monsieur, explain that if you can," said Porthos, shaking his head.

Saint-Aignan held down his head, as he murmured: "I have been betrayed, everything is known!"

"Everything," replied Porthos, who knew nothing.

"You see me perfectly overwhelmed," pursued Saint-Aignan, "overwhelmed to a degree that I hardly know what I am about."

"A guilty conscience, monsieur. Your affair is a bad one, and when the public learns all about it, it will judge - "

"Oh, monsieur!" exclaimed the count, hurriedly, "such a secret ought not to be known even by one's confessor."

"That we will think about," said Porthos; "the secret will not go far, in fact."

"Surely, monsieur," returned Saint-Aignan, "since M. de Bragelonne has penetrated the secret, he must be aware of the danger he as well as others run the risk of incurring."

"M. de Bragelonne runs no danger, monsieur, nor does he fear any either, as you, if it please Heaven, will find out very soon."

"This fellow is a perfect madman," thought Saint-Aignan. "What, in Heaven's name, does he want?" He then said aloud: "Come, monsieur, let us hush up this affair."

"You forget the portrait," said Porthos, in a voice of thunder, which made the comte's blood freeze in his veins.

As the portrait in question was La Valliere's portrait, and no mistake could any longer exist on the subject, Saint-Aignan's eyes were completely opened. "Ah!" he exclaimed - "ah! monsieur, I remember now that M. de Bragelonne was engaged to be married to her."

Porthos assumed an imposing air, all the majesty of ignorance, in fact, as he said: "It matters nothing whatever to me, nor to yourself, indeed, whether or not my friend was, as you say, engaged to be married. I am even astonished that you should have made use of so indiscreet a remark. It may possibly do your cause harm, monsieur."

"Monsieur," replied Saint-Aignan, "you are the incarnation of intelligence, delicacy, and loyalty of feeling united. I see the whole matter now clearly enough."

"So much the better," said Porthos.

"And," pursued Saint-Aignan, "you have made me comprehend it in the most ingenious and the most delicate manner possible. I beg you to accept my best thanks." Porthos drew himself up, unable to resist the flattery of the remark. "Only, now that I know everything, permit me to explain - "

Porthos shook his head, as a man who does not wish to hear, but Saint-Aignan continued: "I am in despair, I assure you, at all that has happened; but how would you have acted in my place? Come, between ourselves, tell me what you would have done?"

Porthos drew himself up as he answered: "There is now no question of all of what I should have done, young man; you have been made acquainted with the three causes of complaint against you, I believe?"

"As for the first, my change of rooms, and I now address myself to you as a man of honor and of great intelligence, could I, when the desire of so august a personage was so urgently expressed that I should move, ought I to have disobeyed?"

Porthos was about to speak, but Saint-Aignan did not give him time to answer. "Ah! my frankness, I see, convinces you," he said, interpreting the movement according to his own fancy. "You feel that I am right."

Porthos did not reply, and so Saint-Aignan continued: "I pass by that unfortunate trap-door," he said, placing his hand on Porthos's arm, "that trap-door, the occasion and means of so much unhappiness, and which was constructed for - you know what. Well, then, in plain truth, do you suppose that it was I who, of my own accord, in such a place, too, had that trap-door made? - Oh, no! - you do not believe it; and here, again, you feel, you guess, you understand the influence of a will superior to my own. You can conceive the infatuation, the blind, irresistible passion which has been at work. But, thank Heaven! I am fortunate in speaking to a man who has so much sensitiveness of feeling; and if it were not so, indeed, what an amount of misery and scandal would fall upon her, poor girl! and upon him - whom I will not name."

Porthos, confused and bewildered by the eloquence and gestures of Saint-Aignan, made a thousand efforts to stem this torrent of words, of which, by the by, he did not understand a single one; he remained upright and motionless on his seat, and that was all he could do. Saint-Aignan continued, and gave a new inflection to his voice, and an increasing vehemence to his gesture: "As for the portrait, for I readily believe the portrait is the principal cause of complaint, tell me candidly if you think me to blame? - Who was it who wished to have her portrait? Was it I? - Who is in love with her? Is it I? - Who wishes to gain her

affection? Again, is it I? - Who took her likeness? I, do you think?
No! a thousand times no! I know M. de Bragelonne must be in a state of despair; I know these misfortunes are most cruel. But I, too, am suffering as well; and yet there is no possibility of offering any resistance. Suppose we were to fight? we would be laughed at. If he obstinately persist in his course, he is lost. You will tell me, I know, that despair is ridiculous, but then you are a sensible man. You have understood me. I perceived by your serious, thoughtful, embarrassed air, even, that the importance of the situation we are placed in has not escaped you. Return, therefore, to M. de Bragelonne; thank him - as I have indeed reason to thank him - for having chosen as an intermediary a man of your high merit. Believe me that I shall, on my side, preserve an eternal gratitude for the man who has so ingeniously, so cleverly arranged the misunderstanding between us. And since ill luck would have it that the secret should be known to four instead of three, why, this secret, which might make the most ambitious man's fortune, I am delighted to share with you, monsieur, from the bottom of my heart I am delighted at it. From this very moment you can make use of me as you please, I place myself entirely at your mercy. What can I possibly do for you? What can I solicit, nay, require even? You have only to speak, monsieur, only to speak."

And, according to the familiarly friendly fashion of that period, Saint-Aignan threw his arms round Porthos, and clasped him tenderly in his embrace. Porthos allowed him to do this with the most perfect indifference. "Speak," resumed Saint-Aignan, "what do you require?"

"Monsieur," said Porthos, "I have a horse below: be good enough to mount him; he is a very good one and will play you no tricks."

"Mount on horseback! what for?" inquired Saint-Aignan, with no little curiosity.

"To accompany me to where M. de Bragelonne is waiting us."

"Ah! he wishes to speak to me, I suppose? I can well believe that; he wishes to have the details, very likely; alas! it is a very delicate matter; but at the present moment I cannot, for the king is waiting for me."

"The king must wait, then" said Porthos.

"What do you say? the king must wait!" interrupted the finished courtier, with a smile of utter amazement, for he could not understand that the king could under any circumstances be supposed to have to wait.

"It is merely the affair of a very short hour," returned Porthos.

"But where is M. de Bragelonne waiting for me?"

"At the Minimes, at Vincennes."

"Ah, indeed! but are we going to laugh over the affair when we get there?"

"I don't think it likely," said Porthos, as his face assumed a look of utter hardness.

"But the Minimes is a rendezvous where duels take place, and what can I have to do at the Minimes?"

Porthos slowly drew his sword, and said: "That is the length of my friend's sword."

"Why, the man is mad!" cried Saint-Aignan.

The color mounted to Porthos's face, as he replied: "If I had not the honor of being in your own apartment, monsieur, and of representing M. de Bragelonne's interests, I would throw you out of the window. It will be merely a pleasure postponed, and you will lose nothing by waiting. Will you come with me to the Minimes, monsieur, of your own free will?"

"But - "

"Take care, I will carry you if you do not come quickly."

"Basque!" cried Saint-Aignan. As soon as Basque appeared, he said, "The king wishes to see monsieur le comte."

"That is very different," said Porthos; "the king's service before anything else. We will wait until this evening, monsieur."

And saluting Saint-Aignan with his usual courtesy, Porthos left the room, delighted at having arranged another affair. Saint-Aignan looked after him as he left; and then hastily putting on his court dress again, he ran off, arranging his costume as he went along, muttering to himself, "The Minimes! the Minimes! We shall see how the king will fancy this challenge; for it is for him after all, that is certain."