

Chapter 20

Sword-Thrusts in the Water (concluded).

D'Artagnan's apartment was not unoccupied; for the Comte de la Fere, seated in the recess of a window, awaited him. "Well," said he to D'Artagnan, as he saw him enter.

"Well," said the latter, "M. de Wardes has done me the honor to pay me a visit, in company with some of his own friends, as well as of ours." In fact, behind the musketeer appeared De Wardes and Manicamp, followed by De Guiche and Buckingham, who looked surprised, not knowing what was expected of them. Raoul was accompanied by two or three gentlemen; and, as he entered, glanced round the room, and perceiving the count, he went and placed himself by his side. D'Artagnan received his visitors with all the courtesy he was capable of; he preserved his unmoved and unconcerned look. All the persons present were men of distinction, occupying posts of honor and credit at the court. After he had apologized to each of them for any inconvenience he might have put them to, he turned towards De Wardes, who, in spite of his customary self-command, could not prevent his face betraying some surprise mingled with not a little uneasiness.

"Now, monsieur," said D'Artagnan, "since we are no longer within the precincts of the king's palace, and since we can speak out without failing in respect to propriety, I will inform you why I have taken the

liberty to request you to visit me here, and why I have invited these gentlemen to be present at the same time. My friend, the Comte de la Fere, has acquainted me with the injurious reports you are spreading about myself. You have stated that you regard me as your mortal enemy, because I was, so you affirm, that of your father."

"Perfectly true, monsieur, I have said so," replied De Wardes, whose pallid face became slightly tinged with color.

"You accuse me, therefore, of a crime, or a fault, or of some mean and cowardly act. Have the goodness to state your charge against me in precise terms."

"In the presence of witnesses?"

"Most certainly in the presence of witnesses; and you see I have selected them as being experienced in affairs of honor."

"You do not appreciate my delicacy, monsieur. I have accused you, it is true; but I have kept the nature of the accusation a perfect secret. I entered into no details; but have rested satisfied by expressing my hatred in the presence of those on whom a duty was almost imposed to acquaint you with it. You have not taken the discreetness I have shown into consideration, although you were interested in remaining silent. I can hardly recognize your habitual prudence in that, M. d'Artagnan."

D'Artagnan, who was quietly biting the corner of his moustache, said, "I have already had the honor to beg you to state the particulars of the grievances you say you have against me."

"Aloud?"

"Certainly, aloud."

"In that case, I will speak."

"Speak, monsieur," said D'Artagnan, bowing; "we are all listening to you."

"Well, monsieur, it is not a question of a personal injury towards myself, but one towards my father."

"That you have already stated."

"Yes; but there are certain subjects which are only approached with hesitation."

"If that hesitation, in your case, really does exist, I entreat you to overcome it."

"Even if it refer to a disgraceful action?"

"Yes; in every and any case."

Those who were present at this scene had, at first, looked at each other with a good deal of uneasiness. They were reassured, however, when they saw that D'Artagnan manifested no emotion whatever.

De Wardes still maintained the same unbroken silence. "Speak, monsieur," said the musketeer; "you see you are keeping us waiting."

"Listen, then: - My father loved a lady of noble birth, and this lady loved my father." D'Artagnan and Athos exchanged looks. De Wardes continued: "M. d'Artagnan found some letters which indicated a rendezvous, substituted himself, under disguise, for the person who was expected, and took advantage of the darkness."

"That is perfectly true," said D'Artagnan.

A slight murmur was heard from those present. "Yes, I was guilty of that dishonorable action. You should have added, monsieur, since you are so impartial, that, at the period when the circumstance which you have just related happened, I was not one-and-twenty years of age."

A renewed murmur was heard, but this time of astonishment, and almost of doubt.

"It was a most shameful deception, I admit," said D'Artagnan, "and I have not waited for M. de Wardes's reproaches to reproach myself for it, and

very bitterly, too. Age has, however, made me more reasonable, and, above all, more upright; and this injury has been atoned for by a long and lasting regret. But I appeal to you, gentlemen; this affair took place in 1626, at a period, happily for yourselves, known to you by tradition only, at a period when love was not over-scrupulous, when consciences did not distill, as in the present day, poison and bitterness. We were young soldiers, always fighting, or being attacked, our swords always in our hands, or at least ready to be drawn from their sheaths. Death then always stared us in the face, war hardened us, and the cardinal pressed us sorely. I have repented of it, and more than that - I still repent it, M. de Wardes."

"I can well understand that, monsieur, for the action itself needed repentance; but you were not the less the cause of that lady's disgrace. She, of whom you have been speaking, covered with shame, borne down by the affront you brought upon her, fled, quitted France, and no one ever knew what became of her."

"Stay," said the Comte de la Fere, stretching his hand towards De Wardes, with a peculiar smile upon his face, "you are mistaken; she was seen; and there are persons even now present, who, having often heard her spoken of, will easily recognize her by the description I am about to give. She was about five-and-twenty years of age, slender in form, of a pale complexion, and fair-haired; she was married in England."

"Married?" exclaimed De Wardes.

"So, you were not aware she was married? You see we are far better informed than yourself. Do you happen to know she was usually styled 'My Lady,' without the addition of any name to that description?"

"Yes, I know that."

"Good Heavens!" murmured Buckingham.

"Very well, monsieur. That woman, who came from England, returned to England after having thrice attempted M. d'Artagnan's life. That was but just, you will say, since M. d'Artagnan had insulted her. But that which was not just was, that, when in England, this woman, by her seductions, completely enslaved a young man in the service of Lord de Winter, by name Felton. You change color, my lord," said Athos, turning to the Duke of Buckingham, "and your eyes kindle with anger and sorrow. Let your Grace finish the recital, then, and tell M. de Wardes who this woman was who placed the knife in the hand of your father's murderer."

A cry escaped from the lips of all present. The young duke passed his handkerchief across his forehead, which was covered with perspiration. A dead silence ensued among the spectators.

"You see, M. de Wardes," said D'Artagnan, whom this recital had impressed more and more, as his own recollection revived as Athos spoke, "you see that my crime did not cause the destruction of any one's soul, and that

the soul in question may fairly be considered to have been altogether lost before my regret. It is, however, an act of conscience on my part. Now this matter is settled, therefore, it remains for me to ask, with the greatest humility, your forgiveness for this shameless action, as most certainly I should have asked it of your father, if he were still alive, and if I had met him after my return to France, subsequent to the death of King Charles I."

"That is too much, M. d'Artagnan," exclaimed many voices, with animation.

"No, gentlemen," said the captain. "And now, M. de Wardes, I hope all is finished between us, and that you will have no further occasion to speak ill of me again. Do you consider it completely settled?"

De Wardes bowed, and muttered to himself inarticulately.

"I trust also," said D'Artagnan, approaching the young man closely, "that you will no longer speak ill of any one, as it seems you have the unfortunate habit of doing; for a man so puritanically conscientious as you are, who can reproach an old soldier for a youthful freak five-and-thirty years after it happened, will allow me to ask whether you, who advocate such excessive purity of conscience, will undertake on your side to do nothing contrary either to conscience or the principle of honor. And now, listen attentively to what I am going to say, M. de Wardes, in conclusion. Take care that no tale, with which your name may be associated, reaches my ear."

"Monsieur," said De Wardes, "it is useless threatening to no purpose."

"I have not yet finished, M. de Wardes, and you must listen to me still further." The circle of listeners, full of eager curiosity, drew closer. "You spoke just now of the honor of a woman, and of the honor of your father. We were glad to hear you speak in that manner; for it is pleasing to think that such a sentiment of delicacy and rectitude, and which did not exist, it seems, in our minds, lives in our children; and it is delightful, too, to see a young man, at an age when men from habit become the destroyers of the honor of women, respect and defend it."

De Wardes bit his lip and clenched his hands, evidently much disturbed to learn how this discourse, the commencement of which was announced in so threatening a manner, would terminate.

"How did it happen, then, that you allowed yourself to say to M. de Bragelonne that he did not know who his mother was?"

Raoul's eyes flashed, as, darting forward, he exclaimed, - "Chevalier, this is a personal affair of my own!" At which exclamation, a smile, full of malice, passed across De Wardes's face.

D'Artagnan put Raoul aside, saying, - "Do not interrupt me, young man." And looking at De Wardes in an authoritative manner, he continued: - "I am now dealing with a matter which cannot be settled by means of the

sword. I discuss it before men of honor, all of whom have more than once had their swords in their hands in affairs of honor. I selected them expressly. These gentlemen well know that every secret for which men fight ceases to be a secret. I again put my question to M. de Wardes. What was the subject of conversation when you offended this young man, in offending his father and mother at the same time?"

"It seems to me," returned De Wardes, "that liberty of speech is allowed, when it is supported by every means which a man of courage has at his disposal."

"Tell me what the means are by which a man of courage can sustain a slanderous expression."

"The sword."

"You fail, not only in logic, in your argument, but in religion and honor. You expose the lives of many others, without referring to your own, which seems to be full of hazard. Besides, fashions pass away, monsieur, and the fashion of duelling has passed away, without referring in any way to the edicts of his majesty which forbid it. Therefore, in order to be consistent with your own chivalrous notions, you will at once apologize to M. de Bragelonne; you will tell him how much you regret having spoken so lightly, and that the nobility and purity of his race are inscribed, not in his heart alone, but still more in every action of his life. You will do and say this, M. de Wardes, as I, an old officer,

did and said just now to your boy's moustache."

"And if I refuse?" inquired De Wardes.

"In that case the result will be - "

"That which you think you will prevent," said De Wardes, laughing; "the result will be that your conciliatory address will end in a violation of the king's prohibition."

"Not so," said the captain, "you are quite mistaken."

"What will be the result, then?"

"The result will be that I shall go to the king, with whom I am on tolerably good terms, to whom I have been happy enough to render certain services, dating from a period when you were not born, and who, at my request, has just sent me an order in blank for M. Baisemeaux de Montlezun, governor of the Bastille; and I shall say to the king: 'Sire, a man has in a most cowardly way insulted M. de Bragelonne by insulting his mother; I have written this man's name upon the *lettre de cachet* which your majesty has been kind enough to give me, so that M. de Wardes is in the Bastille for three years.'" And D'Artagnan, drawing the order signed by the king from his pocket, held it towards De Wardes.

Remarking that the young man was not quite convinced, and received the

warning as an idle threat, he shrugged his shoulders and walked leisurely towards the table, upon which lay a writing-case and a pen, the length of which would have terrified the topographical Porthos. De Wardes then saw that nothing could well be more seriously intended than the threat in question, for the Bastile, even at that period, was already held in dread. He advanced a step towards Raoul, and, in an almost unintelligible voice, said, - "I offer my apologies in the terms which M. d'Artagnan just now dictated, and which I am forced to make to you."

"One moment, monsieur," said the musketeer, with the greatest tranquillity, "you mistake the terms of the apology. I did not say, 'and which I am forced to make'; I said, 'and which my conscience induces me to make.' This latter expression, believe me, is better than the former; and it will be far preferable, since it will be the most truthful expression of your own sentiments."

"I subscribe to it," said De Wardes; "but submit, gentlemen, that a thrust of the sword through the body, as was the custom formerly, was far better than tyranny like this."

"No, monsieur," replied Buckingham; "for the sword-thrust, when received, was no indication that a particular person was right or wrong; it only showed that he was more or less skillful in the use of the weapon."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed De Wardes.

"There, now," interrupted D'Artagnan, "you are going to say something very rude, and I am rendering a service by stopping you in time."

"Is that all, monsieur?" inquired De Wardes.

"Absolutely everything," replied D'Artagnan; "and these gentlemen, as well as myself, are quite satisfied with you."

"Believe me, monsieur, that your reconciliations are not successful."

"In what way?"

"Because, as we are now about to separate, I would wager that M. de Bragelonne and myself are greater enemies than ever."

"You are deceived, monsieur, as far as I am concerned," returned Raoul; "for I do not retain the slightest animosity in my heart against you."

This last blow overwhelmed De Wardes. He cast his eyes around him like a man bewildered. D'Artagnan saluted most courteously the gentlemen who had been present at the explanation; and every one, on leaving the room, shook hands with him; but not one hand was held out towards De Wardes. "Oh!" exclaimed the young man, "can I not find some one on whom to wreak my vengeance?"

"You can, monsieur, for I am here," whispered a voice full of menace in

his ear.

De Wardes turned round, and saw the Duke of Buckingham, who, having probably remained behind with that intention, had just approached him.

"You, monsieur?" exclaimed De Wardes.

"Yes, I! I am no subject of the king of France; I am not going to remain on the territory, since I am about setting off for England. I have accumulated in my heart such a mass of despair and rage, that I, too, like yourself, need to revenge myself upon some one. I approve M. d'Artagnan's principles profoundly, but I am not bound to apply them to you. I am an Englishman, and, in my turn, I propose to you what you proposed to others to no purpose. Since you, therefore, are so terribly incensed, take me as a remedy. In thirty-four hours' time I shall be at Calais. Come with me; the journey will appear shorter if together, than if alone. We will fight, when we get there, upon the sands which are covered by the rising tide, and which form part of the French territory during six hours of the day, but belong to the territory of Heaven during the other six."

"I accept willingly," said De Wardes.

"I assure you," said the duke, "that if you kill me, you will be rendering me an infinite service."

"I will do my utmost to make myself agreeable to you, duke," said De

Wardes.

"It is agreed, then, that I carry you off with me?"

"I shall be at your commands. I needed some real danger and some mortal risk to run, to tranquilize me."

"In that case, I think you have met with what you are looking for.

Farewell, M. de Wardes; to-morrow morning, my valet will tell you the exact hour of our departure; we can travel together like two excellent friends. I generally travel as fast as I can. Adieu."

Buckingham saluted De Wardes, and returned towards the king's apartments;

De Wardes, irritated beyond measure, left the Palais Royal, and hurried through the streets homeward to the house where he lodged.