

Chapter 14. The Castle of Bragelonne.

Whilst this scene was going on, D'Artagnan remained with open mouth and a confused gaze. Everything had turned out so differently from what he expected that he was stupefied with wonder.

Athos, who had been observing him and guessing his thoughts, took his arm and led him into the garden.

"Whilst supper is being prepared," he said, smiling, "you will not, my friend, be sorry to have the mystery which so puzzles you cleared up."

"True, monsieur le comte," replied D'Artagnan, who felt that by degrees Athos was resuming that great influence which aristocracy had over him.

Athos smiled.

"First and foremost, dear D'Artagnan, we have no title such as count here. When I call you 'chevalier,' it is in presenting you to my guests, that they may know who you are. But to you, D'Artagnan, I am, I hope, still dear Athos, your comrade, your friend. Do you intend to stand on ceremony because you are less attached to me than you were?"

"Oh! God forbid!"

"Then let us be as we used to be; let us be open with each other. You are surprised at what you see here?"

"Extremely."

"But above all things, I am a marvel to you?"

"I confess it."

"I am still young, am I not? Should you not have known me again, in spite of my eight-and-forty years of age?"

"On the contrary, I do not find you the same person at all."

"I understand," cried Athos, with a gentle blush. "Everything, D'Artagnan, even folly, has its limit."

"Then your means, it appears, are improved; you have a capital house--your own, I presume? You have a park, and horses, servants."

Athos smiled.

"Yes, I inherited this little property when I quitted the army, as I told you. The park is twenty acres--twenty, comprising kitchen-gardens and a common. I have two horses,--I do not count my servant's bobtailed nag. My sporting dogs consist of two pointers, two harriers and two setters. But then all this extravagance is not for myself," added Athos, laughing.

"Yes, I see, for the young man Raoul," said D'Artagnan.

"You guess aright, my friend; this youth is an orphan, deserted by his mother, who left him in the house of a poor country priest. I have brought him up. It is Raoul who has worked in me the change you see; I was dried up like a miserable tree, isolated, attached to nothing on earth; it was only a deep affection that could make me take root again and drag me back to life. This child has caused me to recover what I had lost. I had no longer any wish to live for myself, I have lived for him. I have corrected the vices that I had; I have assumed the virtues that I had not. Precept something, but example more. I may be mistaken, but I believe that Raoul will be as accomplished a gentleman as our degenerate age could display."

The remembrance of Milady recurred to D'Artagnan.

"And you are happy?" he said to his friend.

"As happy as it is allowed to one of God's creatures to be on this earth; but say out all you think, D'Artagnan, for you have not yet done so."

"You are too bad, Athos; one can hide nothing from you," answered D'Artagnan. "I wished to ask you if you ever feel any emotions of terror resembling----"

"Remorse! I finish your phrase. Yes and no. I do not feel remorse,

because that woman, I profoundly hold, deserved her punishment. Had she one redeeming trait? I doubt it. I do not feel remorse, because had we allowed her to live she would have persisted in her work of destruction. But I do not mean, my friend that we were right in what we did. Perhaps all blood demands some expiation. Hers had been accomplished; it remains, possibly, for us to accomplish ours."

"I have sometimes thought as you do, Athos."

"She had a son, that unhappy woman?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever heard of him?"

"Never."

"He must be about twenty-three years of age," said Athos, in a low tone.

"I often think of that young man, D'Artagnan."

"Strange! for I had forgotten him," said the lieutenant.

Athos smiled; the smile was melancholy.

"And Lord de Winter--do you know anything about him?"

"I know that he is in high favor with Charles I."

"The fortunes of that monarch now are at low water. He shed the blood of Strafford; that confirms what I said just now--blood will have blood. And the queen?"

"What queen?"

"Madame Henrietta of England, daughter of Henry IV."

"She is at the Louvre, as you know."

"Yes, and I hear in bitter poverty. Her daughter, during the severest cold, was obliged for want of fire to remain in bed. Do you grasp that?" said Athos, shrugging his shoulders; "the daughter of Henry IV. shivering for want of a fagot! Why did she not ask from any one of us a home instead of from Mazarin? She should have wanted nothing."

"Have you ever seen the queen of England?" inquired D'Artagnan.

"No; but my mother, as a child, saw her. Did I ever tell you that my mother was lady of honor to Marie de Medici?"

"Never. You know, Athos, you never spoke much of such matters."

"Ah, mon Dieu, yes, you are right," Athos replied; "but then there must be some occasion for speaking."

"Porthos wouldn't have waited for it so patiently," said D'Artagnan, with a smile.

"Every one according to his nature, my dear D'Artagnan. Porthos, in spite of a touch of vanity, has many excellent qualities. Have you seen him?"

"I left him five days ago," said D'Artagnan, and he portrayed with Gascon wit and sprightliness the magnificence of Porthos in his Chateau of Pierrefonds; nor did he neglect to launch a few arrows of wit at the excellent Monsieur Mouston.

"I sometimes wonder," replied Athos, smiling at that gayety which recalled the good old days, "that we could form an association of men who would be, after twenty years of separation, still so closely bound together. Friendship throws out deep roots in honest hearts, D'Artagnan. Believe me, it is only the evil-minded who deny friendship; they cannot understand it. And Aramis?"

"I have seen him also," said D'Artagnan; "but he seemed to me cold."

"Ah, you have seen Aramis?" said Athos, turning on D'Artagnan a searching look. "Why, it is a veritable pilgrimage, my dear friend, that you are making to the Temple of Friendship, as the poets would say."

"Why, yes," replied D'Artagnan, with embarrassment.

"Aramis, you know," continued Athos, "is naturally cold, and then he is always involved in intrigues with women."

"I believe he is at this moment in a very complicated one," said D'Artagnan.

Athos made no reply.

"He is not curious," thought D'Artagnan.

Athos not only failed to reply, he even changed the subject of conversation.

"You see," said he, calling D'Artagnan's attention to the fact that they had come back to the chateau after an hour's walk, "we have made a tour of my domains."

"All is charming and everything savors of nobility," replied D'Artagnan.

At this instant they heard the sound of horses' feet.

"'Tis Raoul who has come back," said Athos; "and we can now hear how the poor child is."

In fact, the young man appeared at the gate, covered with dust, entered the courtyard, leaped from his horse, which he consigned to the charge of a groom, and then went to greet the count and D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur," said Athos, placing his hand on D'Artagnan's shoulder, "monsieur is the Chevalier D'Artagnan of whom you have often heard me speak, Raoul."

"Monsieur," said the young man, saluting again and more profoundly, "monsieur le comte has pronounced your name before me as an example whenever he wished to speak of an intrepid and generous gentleman."

That little compliment could not fail to move D'Artagnan. He extended a hand to Raoul and said:

"My young friend, all the praises that are given me should be passed on to the count here; for he has educated me in everything and it is not his fault that his pupil profited so little from his instructions. But he will make it up in you I am sure. I like your manner, Raoul, and your politeness has touched me."

Athos was more delighted than can be told. He looked at D'Artagnan with an expression of gratitude and then bestowed on Raoul one of those strange smiles, of which children are so proud when they receive them.

"Now," said D'Artagnan to himself, noticing that silent play of countenance, "I am sure of it."

"I hope the accident has been of no consequence?"

"They don't yet know, sir, on account of the swelling; but the doctor is afraid some tendon has been injured."

At this moment a little boy, half peasant, half foot-boy, came to announce supper.

Athos led his guest into a dining-room of moderate size, the windows of which opened on one side on a garden, on the other on a hot-house full of magnificent flowers.

D'Artagnan glanced at the dinner service. The plate was magnificent, old, and appertaining to the family. D'Artagnan stopped to look at a sideboard on which was a superb ewer of silver.

"That workmanship is divine!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, a chef d'oeuvre of the great Florentine sculptor, Benvenuto Cellini," replied Athos.

"What battle does it represent?"

"That of Marignan, just at the point where one of my forefathers is offering his sword to Francis I., who has broken his. It was on that occasion that my ancestor, Enguerrand de la Fere, was made a knight of the Order of St. Michael; besides which, the king, fifteen years afterward, gave him also this ewer and a sword which you may have seen formerly in my house, also a lovely specimen of workmanship. Men were giants in those times," said Athos; "now we are pigmies in comparison. Let us sit down to supper. Call Charles," he added, addressing the boy who waited.

"My good Charles, I particularly recommend to your care Planchet, the laquais of Monsieur D'Artagnan. He likes good wine; now you have the

key of the cellar. He has slept a long time on a hard bed, so he won't object to a soft one; take every care of him, I beg of you." Charles bowed and retired.

"You think of everything," said D'Artagnan; "and I thank you for Planchet, my dear Athos."

Raoul stared on hearing this name and looked at the count to be quite sure that it was he whom the lieutenant thus addressed.

"That name sounds strange to you," said Athos, smiling; "it was my nom de guerre when Monsieur D'Artagnan, two other gallant friends and myself performed some feats of arms at the siege of La Rochelle, under the deceased cardinal and Monsieur de Bassompierre. My friend is still so kind as to address me by that old and well beloved appellation, which makes my heart glad when I hear it."

"'Tis an illustrious name," said the lieutenant, "and had one day triumphal honors paid to it."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired Raoul.

"You have not forgotten St. Gervais, Athos, and the napkin which was converted into a banner?" and he then related to Raoul the story of the bastion, and Raoul fancied he was listening to one of those deeds of arms belonging to days of chivalry, so gloriously recounted by Tasso and Ariosto.

"D'Artagnan does not tell you, Raoul," said Athos, in his turn, "that he was reckoned one of the finest swordsmen of his time--a knuckle of iron, a wrist of steel, a sure eye and a glance of fire; that's what his adversary met with. He was eighteen, only three years older than you are, Raoul, when I saw him set to work, pitted against tried men."

"And did Monsieur D'Artagnan come off the conqueror?" asked the young man, with glistening eye.

"I killed one man, if I recollect rightly," replied D'Artagnan, with a look of inquiry directed to Athos; "another I disarmed or wounded, I don't remember which."

"Wounded!" said Athos; "it was a phenomenon of skill."

The young man would willingly have prolonged this conversation far into the night, but Athos pointed out to him that his guest must need repose. D'Artagnan would fain have declared that he was not fatigued, but Athos insisted on his retiring to his chamber, conducted thither by Raoul.