

Chapter 20. One of Marie Michon's Adventures.

Whilst these projects were being formed by the Duc de Beaufort and Grimaud, the Comte de la Fere and the Vicomte de Bragelonne were entering Paris by the Rue du Faubourg Saint Marcel.

They stopped at the sign of the Fox, in the Rue du Vieux Colombier, a tavern known for many years by Athos, and asked for two bedrooms.

"You must dress yourself, Raoul," said Athos, "I am going to present you to some one."

"To-day, monsieur?" asked the young man.

"In half an hour."

The young man bowed. Perhaps, not being endowed with the endurance of Athos, who seemed to be made of iron, he would have preferred a bath in the river Seine of which he had heard so much, and afterward his bed; but the Comte de la Fere had spoken and he had no thought but to obey.

"By the way," said Athos, "take some pains with your toilet, Raoul; I want you to be approved."

"I hope, sir," replied the youth, smiling, "that there's no idea of a

marriage for me; you know of my engagement to Louise?"

Athos, in his turn, smiled also.

"No, don't be alarmed, although it is to a lady that I am going to present you, and I am anxious that you should love her----"

The young man looked at the count with a certain uneasiness, but at a smile from Athos he was quickly reassured.

"How old is she?" inquired the Vicomte de Bragelonne.

"My dear Raoul, learn, once for all, that that is a question which is never asked. When you can find out a woman's age by her face, it is useless to ask it; when you cannot do so, it is indiscreet."

"Is she beautiful?"

"Sixteen years ago she was deemed not only the prettiest, but the most graceful woman in France."

This reply reassured the vicomte. A woman who had been a reigning beauty a year before he was born could not be the subject of any scheme for him. He retired to his toilet. When he reappeared, Athos received him with the same paternal smile as that which he had often bestowed on D'Artagnan, but a more profound tenderness for Raoul was now visibly impressed upon his face.

Athos cast a glance at his feet, hands and hair--those three marks of race. The youth's dark hair was neatly parted and hung in curls, forming a sort of dark frame around his face; such was the fashion of the day. Gloves of gray kid, matching the hat, well displayed the form of a slender and elegant hand; whilst his boots, similar in color to the hat and gloves, confined feet small as those of a boy twelve years old.

"Come," murmured Athos, "if she is not proud of him, she must be hard to please."

It was three o'clock in the afternoon. The two travelers proceeded to the Rue Saint Dominique and stopped at the door of a magnificent hotel, surmounted with the arms of De Luynes.

"'Tis here," said Athos.

He entered the hotel and ascended the front steps, and addressing a footman who waited there in a grand livery, asked if the Duchess de Chevreuse was visible and if she could receive the Comte de la Fere?

The servant returned with a message to say, that, though the duchess had not the honor of knowing Monsieur de la Fere, she would receive him.

Athos followed the footman, who led him through a long succession of apartments and paused at length before a closed door. Athos made a sign to the Vicomte de Bragelonne to remain where he was.

The footman opened the door and announced Monsieur le Comte de la Fere.

Madame de Chevreuse, whose name appears so often in our story "The Three Musketeers," without her actually having appeared in any scene, was still a beautiful woman. Although about forty-four or forty-five years old, she might have passed for thirty-five. She still had her rich fair hair; her large, animated, intelligent eyes, so often opened by intrigue, so often closed by the blindness of love. She had still her nymph-like form, so that when her back was turned she still was not unlike the girl who had jumped, with Anne of Austria, over the moat of the Tuileries in 1563. In all other respects she was the same mad creature who threw over her amours such an air of originality as to make them proverbial for eccentricity in her family.

She was in a little boudoir, hung with blue damask, adorned by red flowers, with a foliage of gold, looking upon a garden; and reclined upon a sofa, her head supported on the rich tapestry which covered it. She held a book in her hand and her arm was supported by a cushion.

At the footman's announcement she raised herself a little and peeped out, with some curiosity.

Athos appeared.

He was dressed in violet-tinted velvet, trimmed with silk of the same color. His shoulder-knots were of burnished silver, his mantle had no gold nor embroidery on it; a simple plume of violet feathers adorned his hat; his boots were of black leather, and at his girdle hung that sword with a magnificent hilt that Porthos had so often admired in the Rue

Feron. Splendid lace adorned the falling collar of his shirt, and lace fell also over the top of his boots.

In his whole person he bore such an impress of high degree, that Madame de Chevreuse half rose from her seat when she saw him and made him a sign to sit down near her.

Athos bowed and obeyed. The footman was withdrawing, but Athos stopped him by a sign.

"Madame," he said to the duchess, "I have had the boldness to present myself at your hotel without being known to you; it has succeeded, since you deign to receive me. I have now the boldness to ask you for an interview of half an hour."

"I grant it, monsieur," replied Madame de Chevreuse with her most gracious smile.

"But that is not all, madame. Oh, I am very presuming, I am aware. The interview for which I ask is of us two alone, and I very earnestly wish that it may not be interrupted."

"I am not at home to any one," said the Duchess de Chevreuse to the footman. "You may go."

The footman went out

There ensued a brief silence, during which these two persons, who at

first sight recognized each other so clearly as of noble race, examined each other without embarrassment on either side.

The duchess was the first to speak.

"Well, sir, I am waiting with impatience to hear what you wish to say to me."

"And I, madame," replied Athos, "am looking with admiration."

"Sir," said Madame de Chevreuse, "you must excuse me, but I long to know to whom I am talking. You belong to the court, doubtless, yet I have never seen you at court. Have you, by any chance, been in the Bastile?"

"No, madame, I have not; but very likely I am on the road to it."

"Ah! then tell me who you are, and get along with you upon your journey," replied the duchess, with the gayety which made her so charming, "for I am sufficiently in bad odor already, without compromising myself still more."

"Who I am, madame? My name has been mentioned to you--the Comte de la Fere; you do not know that name. I once bore another, which you knew, but you have certainly forgotten it."

"Tell it me, sir."

"Formerly," said the count, "I was Athos."

Madame de Chevreuse looked astonished. The name was not wholly forgotten, but mixed up and confused with ancient recollections.

"Athos?" said she; "wait a moment."

And she placed her hands on her brow, as if to force the fugitive ideas it contained to concentration in a moment.

"Shall I help you, madame?" asked Athos.

"Yes, do," said the duchess.

"This Athos was connected with three young musketeers, named Porthos, D'Artagnan, and----"

He stopped short.

"And Aramis," said the duchess, quickly.

"And Aramis; I see you have not forgotten the name."

"No," she said; "poor Aramis; a charming man, elegant, discreet, and a writer of poetical verses. I am afraid he has turned out ill," she added.

"He has; he is an abbe."

"Ah, what a misfortune!" exclaimed the duchess, playing carelessly with her fan. "Indeed, sir, I thank you; you have recalled one of the most agreeable recollections of my youth."

"Will you permit me, then, to recall another to you?"

"Relating to him?"

"Yes and no."

"Faith!" said Madame de Chevreuse, "say on. With a man like you I fear nothing."

Athos bowed. "Aramis," he continued, "was intimate with a young needlewoman from Tours, a cousin of his, named Marie Michon."

"Ah, I knew her!" cried the duchess. "It was to her he wrote from the siege of Rochelle, to warn her of a plot against the Duke of Buckingham."

"Exactly so; will you allow me to speak to you of her?"

"If," replied the duchess, with a meaning look, "you do not say too much against her."

"I should be ungrateful," said Athos, "and I regard ingratitude, not as a fault or a crime, but as a vice, which is much worse."



"You ungrateful to Marie Michon, monsieur?" said Madame de Chevreuse, trying to read in Athos's eyes. "But how can that be? You never knew her."

"Eh, madame, who knows?" said Athos. "There is a popular proverb to the effect that it is only mountains that never meet; and popular proverbs contain sometimes a wonderful amount of truth."

"Oh, go on, monsieur, go on!" said Madame de Chevreuse eagerly; "you can't imagine how much this conversation interests me."

"You encourage me," said Athos, "I will continue, then. That cousin of Aramis, that Marie Michon, that needlewoman, notwithstanding her low condition, had acquaintances in the highest rank; she called the grandest ladies of the court her friend, and the queen--proud as she is, in her double character as Austrian and as Spaniard--called her her sister."

"Alas!" said Madame de Chevreuse, with a slight sigh and a little movement of her eyebrows that was peculiarly her own, "since that time everything has changed."

"And the queen had reason for her affection, for Marie was devoted to her--devoted to that degree that she served her as medium of intercourse with her brother, the king of Spain."

"Which," interrupted the duchess, "is now brought up against her as a great crime."

"And therefore," continued Athos, "the cardinal--the true cardinal, the other one--determined one fine morning to arrest poor Marie Michon and send her to the Chateau de Loches. Fortunately the affair was not managed so secretly but that it became known to the queen. The case had been provided for: if Marie Michon should be threatened with any danger the queen was to send her a prayer-book bound in green velvet."

"That is true, monsieur, you are well informed."

"One morning the green book was brought to her by the Prince de Marsillac. There was no time to lose. Happily Marie and a follower of hers named Kitty could disguise themselves admirably in men's clothes. The prince procured for Marie Michon the dress of a cavalier and for Kitty that of a lackey; he sent them two excellent horses, and the fugitives went out hastily from Tours, shaping their course toward Spain, trembling at the least noise, following unfrequented roads, and asking for hospitality when they found themselves where there was no inn."

"Why, really, it was all exactly as you say!" cried Madame de Chevreuse, clapping her hands. "It would indeed be strange if----" she checked herself.

"If I should follow the two fugitives to the end of their journey?" said Athos. "No, madame, I will not thus waste your time. We will accompany them only to a little village in Limousin, lying between Tulle and Angouleme--a little village called Roche-l'Abeille."

Madame de Chevreuse uttered a cry of surprise, and looked at Athos with an expression of astonishment that made the old musketeer smile.

"Wait, madame," continued Athos, "what remains for me to tell you is even more strange than what I have narrated."

"Monsieur," said Madame de Chevreuse, "I believe you are a sorcerer; I am prepared for anything. But really--No matter, go on."

"The journey of that day had been long and wearing; it was a cold day, the eleventh of October, there was no inn or chateau in the village and the homes of the peasants were poor and unattractive. Marie Michon was a very aristocratic person; like her sister the queen, she had been accustomed to pleasing perfumes and fine linen; she resolved, therefore, to seek hospitality of the priest."

Athos paused.

"Oh, continue!" said the duchess. "I have told you that I am prepared for anything."

"The two travelers knocked at the door. It was late; the priest, who had gone to bed, cried out to them to come in. They entered, for the door was not locked--there is much confidence among villagers. A lamp burned in the chamber occupied by the priest. Marie Michon, who made the most charming cavalier in the world, pushed open the door, put her head in and asked for hospitality. 'Willingly, my young cavalier,' said the

priest, 'if you will be content with the remains of my supper and with half my chamber.'

"The two travelers consulted for a moment. The priest heard a burst of laughter and then the master, or rather, the mistress, replied: 'Thank you, monsieur le cure, I accept.' 'Sup, then, and make as little noise as possible,' said the priest, 'for I, too, have been on the go all day and shall not be sorry to sleep to-night.'"

Madame de Chevreuse evidently went from surprise to astonishment, and from astonishment to stupefaction. Her face, as she looked at Athos, had taken on an expression that cannot be described. It could be seen that she had wished to speak, but she had remained silent through fear of losing one of her companion's words.

"What happened then?" she asked.

"Then?" said Athos. "Ah, I have come now to what is most difficult."

"Speak, speak! One can say anything to me. Besides, it doesn't concern me; it relates to Mademoiselle Marie Michon."

"Ah, that is true," said Athos. "Well, then, Marie Michon had supper with her follower, and then, in accordance with the permission given her, she entered the chamber of her host, Kitty meanwhile taking possession of an armchair in the room first entered, where they had taken their supper."

"Really, monsieur," said Madame de Chevreuse, "unless you are the devil in person I don't know how you could become acquainted with all these details."

"A charming woman was that Marie Michon," resumed Athos, "one of those wild creatures who are constantly conceiving the strangest ideas. Now, thinking that her host was a priest, that coquette took it into her head that it would be a happy souvenir for her old age, among the many happy souvenirs she already possessed, if she could win that of having damned an abbe."

"Count," said the duchess, "upon my word, you frighten me."

"Alas!" continued Athos, "the poor abbe was not a St. Ambroise, and I repeat, Marie Michon was an adorable creature."

"Monsieur!" cried the duchess, seizing Athos's hands, "tell me this moment how you know all these details, or I will send to the convent of the Vieux Augustins for a monk to come and exorcise you."

Athos laughed. "Nothing is easier, madame. A cavalier, charged with an important mission, had come an hour before your arrival, seeking hospitality, at the very moment that the cure, summoned to the bedside of a dying person, left not only his house but the village, for the entire night. The priest having all confidence in his guest, who, besides, was a nobleman, had left to him his house, his supper and his chamber. And therefore Marie came seeking hospitality from the guest of the good abbe and not from the good abbe himself."

"And that cavalier, that guest, that nobleman who arrived before she came?"

"It was I, the Comte de la Fere," said Athos, rising and bowing respectfully to the Duchess de Chevreuse.

The duchess remained a moment stupefied; then, suddenly bursting into laughter:

"Ah! upon my word," said she, "it is very droll, and that mad Marie Michon fared better than she expected. Sit down, dear count, and go on with your story."

"At this point I have to accuse myself of a fault, madame. I have told you that I was traveling on an important mission. At daybreak I left the chamber without noise, leaving my charming companion asleep. In the front room the follower was also still asleep, her head leaning back on the chair, in all respects worthy of her mistress. Her pretty face arrested my attention; I approached and recognized that little Kitty whom our friend Aramis had placed with her. In that way I discovered that the charming traveler was----"

"Marie Michon!" said Madame de Chevreuse, hastily.

"Marie Michon," continued Athos. "Then I went out of the house; I proceeded to the stable and found my horse saddled and my lackey ready. We set forth on our journey."

"And have you never revisited that village?" eagerly asked Madame de Chevreuse.

"A year after, madame."

"Well?"

"I wanted to see the good cure again. I found him much preoccupied with an event that he could not at all comprehend. A week before he had received, in a cradle, a beautiful little boy three months old, with a purse filled with gold and a note containing these simple words: '11 October, 1633.'"

"It was the date of that strange adventure," interrupted Madame de Chevreuse.

"Yes, but he couldn't understand what it meant, for he had spent that night with a dying person and Marie Michon had left his house before his return."

"You must know, monsieur, that Marie Michon, when she returned to France in 1643, immediately sought for information about that child; as a fugitive she could not take care of it, but on her return she wished to have it near her."

"And what said the abbe?" asked Athos.

"That a nobleman whom he did not know had wished to take charge of it, had answered for its future, and had taken it away."

"That was true."

"Ah! I see! That nobleman was you; it was his father!"

"Hush! do not speak so loud, madame; he is there."

"He is there! my son! the son of Marie Michon! But I must see him instantly."

"Take care, madame," said Athos, "for he knows neither his father nor his mother."

"You have kept the secret! you have brought him to see me, thinking to make me happy. Oh, thanks! sir, thanks!" cried Madame de Chevreuse, seizing his hand and trying to put it to her lips; "you have a noble heart."

"I bring him to you, madame," said Athos, withdrawing his hand, "hoping that in your turn you will do something for him; till now I have watched over his education and I have made him, I hope, an accomplished gentleman; but I am now obliged to return to the dangerous and wandering life of party faction. To-morrow I plunge into an adventurous affair in which I may be killed. Then it will devolve on you to push him on in that world where he is called on to occupy a place."



"Rest assured," cried the duchess, "I shall do what I can. I have but little influence now, but all that I have shall most assuredly be his. As to his title and fortune----"

"As to that, madame, I have made over to him the estate of Bragelonne, my inheritance, which will give him ten thousand francs a year and the title of vicomte."

"Upon my soul, monsieur," said the duchess, "you are a true nobleman! But I am eager to see our young vicomte. Where is he?"

"There, in the salon. I will have him come in, if you really wish it."

Athos moved toward the door; the duchess held him back.

"Is he handsome?" she asked.

Athos smiled.

"He resembles his mother."

So he opened the door and beckoned the young man in.

The duchess could not restrain a cry of joy on seeing so handsome a young cavalier, so far surpassing all that her maternal pride had been able to conceive.

"Vicomte, come here," said Athos; "the duchess permits you to kiss her

hand."

The youth approached with his charming smile and his head bare, and kneeling down, kissed the hand of the Duchess de Chevreuse.

"Sir," he said, turning to Athos, "was it not in compassion to my timidity that you told me that this lady was the Duchess de Chevreuse, and is she not the queen?"

"No, vicomte," said Madame de Chevreuse, taking his hand and making him sit near her, while she looked at him with eyes sparkling with pleasure; "no, unhappily, I am not the queen. If I were I should do for you at once the most that you deserve. But let us see; whatever I may be," she added, hardly restraining herself from kissing that pure brow, "let us see what profession you wish to follow."

Athos, standing, looked at them both with indescribable pleasure.

"Madame," answered the youth in his sweet voice, "it seems to me that there is only one career for a gentleman--that of the army. I have been brought up by monsieur le comte with the intention, I believe, of making me a soldier; and he gave me reason to hope that at Paris he would present me to some one who would recommend me to the favor of the prince."

"Yes, I understand it well. Personally, I am on bad terms with him, on account of the quarrels between Madame de Montbazon, my mother-in-law, and Madame de Longueville. But the Prince de Marsillac! Yes, indeed,

that's the right thing. The Prince de Marsillac--my old friend--will recommend our young friend to Madame de Longueville, who will give him a letter to her brother, the prince, who loves her too tenderly not to do what she wishes immediately."

"Well, that will do charmingly," said the count; "but may I beg that the greatest haste may be made, for I have reasons for wishing the vicomte not to sleep longer than to-morrow night in Paris!"

"Do you wish it known that you are interested about him, monsieur le comte?"

"Better for him in future that he should be supposed never to have seen me."

"Oh, sir!" cried Raoul.

"You know, Bragelonne," said Athos, "I never speak without reflection."

"Well, comte, I am going instantly," interrupted the duchess, "to send for the Prince de Marsillac, who is happily, in Paris just now. What are you going to do this evening?"

"We intend to visit the Abbe Scarron, for whom I have a letter of introduction and at whose house I expect to meet some of my friends."

"'Tis well; I will go there also, for a few minutes," said the duchess; "do not quit his salon until you have seen me."

Athos bowed and prepared to leave.

"Well, monsieur le comte," said the duchess, smiling, "does one leave so solemnly his old friends?"

"Ah," murmured Athos, kissing her hand, "had I only sooner known that Marie Michon was so charming a creature!" And he withdrew, sighing.