

Chapter 25. An Adventure on the High Road.

The musketeers rode the whole length of the Faubourg Saint Antoine and of the road to Vincennes, and soon found themselves out of the town, then in a forest and then within sight of a village.

The horses seemed to become more lively with each successive step; their nostrils reddened like glowing furnaces. D'Artagnan, freely applying his spurs, was in advance of Porthos two feet at the most; Mousqueton followed two lengths behind; the guards were scattered according to the varying excellence of their respective mounts.

From the top of an eminence D'Artagnan perceived a group of people collected on the other side of the moat, in front of that part of the donjon which looks toward Saint Maur. He rode on, convinced that in this direction he would gain intelligence of the fugitive. In five minutes he had arrived at the place, where the guards joined him, coming up one by one.

The several members of that group were much excited. They looked at the cord, still hanging from the loophole and broken at about twenty feet from the ground. Their eyes measured the height and they exchanged conjectures. On the top of the wall sentinels went and came with a frightened air.

A few soldiers, commanded by a sergeant, drove away idlers from the place where the duke had mounted his horse. D'Artagnan went straight to the sergeant.

"My officer," said the sergeant, "it is not permitted to stop here."

"That prohibition is not for me," said D'Artagnan. "Have the fugitives been pursued?"

"Yes, my officer; unfortunately, they are well mounted."

"How many are there?"

"Four, and a fifth whom they carried away wounded."

"Four!" said D'Artagnan, looking at Porthos. "Do you hear, baron? They are only four!"

A joyous smile lighted Porthos's face.

"How long a start have they?"

"Two hours and a quarter, my officer."

"Two hours and a quarter--that is nothing; we are well mounted, are we not, Porthos?"

Porthos breathed a sigh; he thought of what was in store for his poor

horses.

"Very good," said D'Artagnan; "and now in what direction did they set out?"

"That I am forbidden to tell."

D'Artagnan drew from his pocket a paper. "Order of the king," he said.

"Speak to the governor, then."

"And where is the governor?"

"In the country."

Anger mounted to D'Artagnan's face; he frowned and his cheeks were colored.

"Ah, you scoundrel!" he said to the sergeant, "I believe you are impudent to me! Wait!"

He unfolded the paper, presented it to the sergeant with one hand and with the other took a pistol from his holsters and cocked it.

"Order of the king, I tell you. Read and answer, or I will blow out your brains!"

The sergeant saw that D'Artagnan was in earnest. "The Vendomois road,"

he replied.

"And by what gate did they go out?"

"By the Saint Maur gate."

"If you are deceiving me, rascal, you will be hanged to-morrow."

"And if you catch up with them you won't come back to hang me," murmured the sergeant.

D'Artagnan shrugged his shoulders, made a sign to his escort and started.

"This way, gentlemen, this way!" he cried, directing his course toward the gate that had been pointed out.

But, now that the duke had escaped, the concierge had seen fit to fasten the gate with a double lock. It was necessary to compel him to open it, as the sergeant had been compelled to speak, and this took another ten minutes. This last obstacle having been overcome, the troop pursued their course with their accustomed ardor; but some of the horses could no longer sustain this pace; three of them stopped after an hour's gallop, and one fell down.

D'Artagnan, who never turned his head, did not perceive it. Porthos told him of it in his calm manner.

"If only we two arrive," said D'Artagnan, "it will be enough, since the duke's troop are only four in number."

"That is true," said Porthos

And he spurred his courser on.

At the end of another two hours the horses had gone twelve leagues without stopping; their legs began to tremble, and the foam they shed whitened the doublets of their masters.

"Let us rest here an instant to give these poor creatures breathing time," said Porthos.

"Let us rather kill them! yes, kill them!" cried D'Artagnan; "I see fresh tracks; 'tis not a quarter of an hour since they passed this place."

In fact, the road was trodden by horses' feet, visible even in the approaching gloom of evening.

They set out; after a run of two leagues, Mousqueton's horse sank.

"Gracious me!" said Porthos, "there's Phoebus ruined."

"The cardinal will pay you a hundred pistoles."

"I'm above that."

"Let us set out again, at full gallop."

"Yes, if we can."

But at last the lieutenant's horse refused to go on; he could not breathe; one last spur, instead of making him advance, made him fall.

"The devil!" exclaimed Porthos; "there's Vulcan foundered."

"Zounds!" cried D'Artagnan, "then we must stop! Give me your horse, Porthos. What the devil are you doing?"

"By Jove, I am falling, or rather, Bayard is falling," answered Porthos.

All three then cried: "All's over."

"Hush!" said D'Artagnan.

"What is it?"

"I hear a horse."

"It belongs to one of our companions, who is overtaking us."

"No," said D'Artagnan, "it is in advance."

"That is another thing," said Porthos; and he listened toward the

quarter indicated by D'Artagnan.

"Monsieur," said Mousqueton, who, abandoning his horse on the high road, had come on foot to rejoin his master, "Phoebus could no longer hold out and----"

"Silence!" said Porthos.

In fact, at that moment a second neighing was borne to them on the night wind.

"It is five hundred feet from here, in advance," said D'Artagnan.

"True, monsieur," said Mousqueton; "and five hundred feet from here is a small hunting-house."

"Mousqueton, thy pistols," said D'Artagnan.

"I have them at hand, monsieur."

"Porthos, take yours from your holsters."

"I have them."

"Good!" said D'Artagnan, seizing his own; "now you understand, Porthos?"

"Not too well."

"We are out on the king's service."

"Well?"

"For the king's service we need horses."

"That is true," said Porthos.

"Then not a word, but set to work!"

They went on through the darkness, silent as phantoms; they saw a light glimmering in the midst of some trees.

"Yonder is the house, Porthos," said the Gascon; "let me do what I please and do you what I do."

They glided from tree to tree till they arrived at twenty steps from the house unperceived and saw by means of a lantern suspended under a hut, four fine horses. A groom was rubbing them down; near them were saddles and bridles.

D'Artagnan approached quickly, making a sign to his two companions to remain a few steps behind.

"I buy those horses," he said to the groom.

The groom turned toward him with a look of surprise, but made no reply.

"Didn't you hear, fellow?"

"Yes, I heard."

"Why, then, didn't you reply?"

"Because these horses are not to be sold," was the reply.

"I take them, then," said the lieutenant.

And he took hold of one within his reach; his two companions did the same thing.

"Sir," cried the groom, "they have traversed six leagues and have only been unsaddled half an hour."

"Half an hour's rest is enough," replied the Gascon.

The groom cried aloud for help. A kind of steward appeared, just as D'Artagnan and his companions were prepared to mount. The steward attempted to expostulate.

"My dear friend," cried the lieutenant, "if you say a word I will blow out your brains."

"But, sir," answered the steward, "do you know that these horses belong to Monsieur de Montbazon?"

"So much the better; they must be good animals, then."

"Sir, I shall call my people."

"And I, mine; I've ten guards behind me, don't you hear them gallop? and I'm one of the king's musketeers. Come, Porthos; come, Mousqueton."

They all mounted the horses as quickly as possible.

"Halloo! hi! hi!" cried the steward; "the house servants, with the carbines!"

"On! on!" cried D'Artagnan; "there'll be firing! on!"

They all set off, swift as the wind.

"Here!" cried the steward, "here!" whilst the groom ran to a neighboring building.

"Take care of your horses!" cried D'Artagnan to him.

"Fire!" replied the steward.

A gleam, like a flash of lightning, illumined the road, and with the flash was heard the whistling of balls, which were fired wildly in the air.

"They fire like grooms," said Porthos. "In the time of the cardinal

people fired better than that, do you remember the road to Crevecoeur, Mousqueton?"

"Ah, sir! my left side still pains me!"

"Are you sure we are on the right track, lieutenant?"

"Egad, didn't you hear? these horses belong to Monsieur de Montbazon; well, Monsieur de Montbazon is the husband of Madame de Montbazon----"

"And----"

"And Madame de Montbazon is the mistress of the Duc de Beaufort."

"Ah! I understand," replied Porthos; "she has ordered relays of horses."

"Exactly so."

"And we are pursuing the duke with the very horses he has just left?"

"My dear Porthos, you are really a man of most superior understanding," said D'Artagnan, with a look as if he spoke against his conviction.

"Pooh!" replied Porthos, "I am what I am."

They rode on for an hour, till the horses were covered with foam and dust.

"Zounds! what is yonder?" cried D'Artagnan.

"You are very lucky if you see anything such a night as this," said Porthos.

"Something bright."

"I, too," cried Mousqueton, "saw them also."

"Ah! ah! have we overtaken them?"

"Good! a dead horse!" said D'Artagnan, pulling up his horse, which shied; "it seems their horses, too, are breaking down, as well as ours."

"I seem to hear the noise of a troop of horsemen," exclaimed Porthos, leaning over his horse's mane.

"Impossible."

"They appear to be numerous."

"Then 'tis something else."

"Another horse!" said Porthos.

"Dead?"

"No, dying."

"Saddled?"

"Yes, saddled and bridled."

"Then we are upon the fugitives."

"Courage, we have them!"

"But if they are numerous," observed Mousqueton, "'tis not we who have them, but they who have us."

"Nonsense!" cried D'Artagnan, "they'll suppose us to be stronger than themselves, as we're in pursuit; they'll be afraid and will disperse."

"Certainly," remarked Porthos.

"Ah! do you see?" cried the lieutenant.

"The lights again! this time I, too, saw them," said Porthos.

"On! on! forward! forward!" cried D'Artagnan, in his stentorian voice; "we shall laugh over all this in five minutes."

And they darted on anew. The horses, excited by pain and emulation, raced over the dark road, in the midst of which was now seen a moving mass, denser and more obscure than the rest of the horizon.

