

Chapter 26. The Rencontre.

They rode on in this way for ten minutes. Suddenly two dark forms seemed to separate from the mass, advanced, grew in size, and as they loomed up larger and larger, assumed the appearance of two horsemen.

"Aha!" cried D'Artagnan, "they're coming toward us."

"So much the worse for them," said Porthos.

"Who goes there?" cried a hoarse voice.

The three horsemen made no reply, stopped not, and all that was heard was the noise of swords drawn from the scabbards and the cocking of the pistols with which the two phantoms were armed.

"Bridle in mouth!" said D'Artagnan.

Porthos understood him and he and the lieutenant each drew with the left hand a pistol from their bolsters and cocked it in their turn.

"Who goes there?" was asked a second time. "Not a step forward, or you're dead men."

"Stuff!" cried Porthos, almost choked with dust and chewing his bridle as a horse chews his bit. "Stuff and nonsense; we have seen plenty of

dead men in our time."

Hearing these words, the two shadows blockaded the road and by the light of the stars might be seen the shining of their arms.

"Back!" shouted D'Artagnan, "or you are dead!"

Two shots were the reply to this threat; but the assailants attacked their foes with such velocity that in a moment they were upon them; a third pistol-shot was heard, aimed by D'Artagnan, and one of his adversaries fell. As for Porthos, he assaulted the foe with such violence that, although his sword was thrust aside, the enemy was thrown off his horse and fell about ten steps from it.

"Finish, Mouston, finish the work!" cried Porthos. And he darted on beside his friend, who had already begun a fresh pursuit.

"Well?" said Porthos.

"I've broken my man's skull," cried D'Artagnan. "And you----"

"I've only thrown the fellow down, but hark!"

Another shot of a carbine was heard. It was Mousqueton, who was obeying his master's command.

"On! on!" cried D'Artagnan; "all goes well! we have the first throw."

"Ha! ha!" answered Porthos, "behold, other players appear."

And in fact, two other cavaliers made their appearance, detached, as it seemed, from the principal group; they again disputed the road.

This time the lieutenant did not wait for the opposite party to speak.

"Stand aside!" he cried; "stand off the road!"

"What do you want?" asked a voice.

"The duke!" Porthos and D'Artagnan roared out both at once.

A burst of laughter was the answer, but finished with a groan.

D'Artagnan had, with his sword, cut in two the poor wretch who had laughed.

At the same time Porthos and his adversary fired on each other and D'Artagnan turned to him.

"Bravo! you've killed him, I think."

"No, wounded his horse only."

"What would you have, my dear fellow? One doesn't hit the bull's-eye every time; it is something to hit inside the ring. Ho! parbleau! what is the matter with my horse?"

"Your horse is falling," said Porthos, reining in his own.

In truth, the lieutenant's horse stumbled and fell on his knees; then a rattling in his throat was heard and he lay down to die. He had received in the chest the bullet of D'Artagnan's first adversary. D'Artagnan swore loud enough to be heard in the skies.

"Does your honor want a horse?" asked Mousqueton.

"Zounds! want one!" cried the Gascon.

"Here's one, your honor----"

"How the devil hast thou two horses?" asked D'Artagnan, jumping on one of them.

"Their masters are dead! I thought they might be useful, so I took them."

Meantime Porthos had reloaded his pistols.

"Be on the qui vive!" cried D'Artagnan. "Here are two other cavaliers."

As he spoke, two horsemen advanced at full speed.

"Ho! your honor!" cried Mousqueton, "the man you upset is getting up."

"Why didn't thou do as thou didst to the first man?" said Porthos.

"I held the horses, my hands were full, your honor."

A shot was fired that moment; Mousqueton shrieked with pain.

"Ah, sir! I'm hit in the other side! exactly opposite the other! This hurt is just the fellow of the one I had on the road to Amiens."

Porthos turned around like a lion, plunged on the dismounted cavalier, who tried to draw his sword; but before it was out of the scabbard, Porthos, with the hilt of his had struck him such a terrible blow on the head that he fell like an ox beneath the butcher's knife.

Mousqueton, groaning, slipped from his horse, his wound not allowing him to keep the saddle.

On perceiving the cavaliers, D'Artagnan had stopped and charged his pistol afresh; besides, his horse, he found, had a carbine on the bow of the saddle.

"Here I am!" exclaimed Porthos. "Shall we wait, or shall we charge?"

"Let us charge them," answered the Gascon.

"Charge!" cried Porthos.

They spurred on their horses; the other cavaliers were only twenty steps from them.

"For the king!" cried D'Artagnan.

"The king has no authority here!" answered a deep voice, which seemed to proceed from a cloud, so enveloped was the cavalier in a whirlwind of dust.

"'Tis well, we will see if the king's name is not a passport everywhere," replied the Gascon.

"See!" answered the voice.

Two shots were fired at once, one by D'Artagnan, the other by the adversary of Porthos. D'Artagnan's ball took off his enemy's hat. The ball fired by Porthos's foe went through the throat of his horse, which fell, groaning.

"For the last time, where are you going?"

"To the devil!" answered D'Artagnan.

"Good! you may be easy, then--you'll get there."

D'Artagnan then saw a musket-barrel leveled at him; he had no time to draw from his holsters. He recalled a bit of advice which Athos had once given him, and made his horse rear.

The ball struck the animal full in front. D'Artagnan felt his horse

giving way under him and with his wonderful agility threw himself to one side.

"Ah! this," cried the voice, the tone of which was at once polished and jeering, "this is nothing but a butchery of horses and not a combat between men. To the sword, sir! the sword!"

And he jumped off his horse.

"To the swords! be it so!" replied D'Artagnan; "that is exactly what I want."

D'Artagnan, in two steps, was engaged with the foe, whom, according to custom, he attacked impetuously, but he met this time with a skill and a strength of arm that gave him pause. Twice he was obliged to step back; his opponent stirred not one inch. D'Artagnan returned and again attacked him.

Twice or thrice thrusts were attempted on both sides, without effect; sparks were emitted from the swords like water spouting forth.

At last D'Artagnan thought it was time to try one of his favorite feints in fencing. He brought it to bear, skillfully executed it with the rapidity of lightning, and struck the blow with a force which he fancied would prove irresistible.

The blow was parried.

"Sdeath!" he cried, with his Gascon accent.

At this exclamation his adversary bounded back and, bending his bare head, tried to distinguish in the gloom the features of the lieutenant.

As to D'Artagnan, afraid of some feint, he still stood on the defensive.

"Have a care," cried Porthos to his opponent; "I've still two pistols charged."

"The more reason you should fire the first!" cried his foe.

Porthos fired; the flash threw a gleam of light over the field of battle.

As the light shone on them a cry was heard from the other two combatants.

"Athos!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"D'Artagnan!" ejaculated Athos.

Athos raised his sword; D'Artagnan lowered his.

"Aramis!" cried Athos, "don't fire!"

"Ah! ha! is it you, Aramis?" said Porthos.



And he threw away his pistol.

Aramis pushed his back into his saddle-bags and sheathed his sword.

"My son!" exclaimed Athos, extending his hand to D'Artagnan.

This was the name which he gave him in former days, in their moments of tender intimacy.

"Athos!" cried D'Artagnan, wringing his hands. "So you defend him! And I, who have sworn to take him dead or alive, I am dishonored--and by you!"

"Kill me!" replied Athos, uncovering his breast, "if your honor requires my death."

"Oh! woe is me! woe is me!" cried the lieutenant; "there's only one man in the world who could stay my hand; by a fatality that very man bars my way. What shall I say to the cardinal?"

"You can tell him, sir," answered a voice which was the voice of high command in the battle-field, "that he sent against me the only two men capable of getting the better of four men; of fighting man to man, without discomfiture, against the Comte de la Fere and the Chevalier d'Herblay, and of surrendering only to fifty men!"

"The prince!" exclaimed at the same moment Athos and Aramis, unmasking as they addressed the Duc de Beaufort, whilst D'Artagnan and Porthos

stepped backward.

"Fifty cavaliers!" cried the Gascon and Porthos.

"Look around you, gentlemen, if you doubt the fact," said the duke.

The two friends looked to the right, to the left; they were encompassed by a troop of horsemen.

"Hearing the noise of the fight," resumed the duke, "I fancied you had about twenty men with you, so I came back with those around me, tired of always running away, and wishing to draw my sword in my own cause; but you are only two."

"Yes, my lord; but, as you have said, two that are a match for twenty," said Athos.

"Come, gentlemen, your swords," said the duke.

"Our swords!" cried D'Artagnan, raising his head and regaining his self-possession. "Never!"

"Never!" added Porthos.

Some of the men moved toward them.

"One moment, my lord," whispered Athos, and he said something in a low voice.

"As you will," replied the duke. "I am too much indebted to you to refuse your first request. Gentlemen," he said to his escort, "withdraw. Monsieur d'Artagnan, Monsieur du Vallon, you are free."

The order was obeyed; D'Artagnan and Porthos then found themselves in the centre of a large circle.

"Now, D'Herblay," said Athos, "dismount and come here."

Aramis dismounted and went to Porthos, whilst Athos approached D'Artagnan.

All four once more together.

"Friends!" said Athos, "do you regret you have not shed our blood?"

"No," replied D'Artagnan; "I regret to see that we, hitherto united, are opposed to each other. Ah! nothing will ever go well with us hereafter!"

"Oh, Heaven! No, all is over!" said Porthos.

"Well, be on our side now," resumed Aramis.

"Silence, D'Herblay!" cried Athos; "such proposals are not to be made to gentlemen such as these. 'Tis a matter of conscience with them, as with us."

"Meantime, here we are, enemies!" said Porthos. "Gramercy! who would ever have thought it?"

D'Artagnan only sighed.

Athos looked at them both and took their hands in his.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is a serious business and my heart bleeds as if you had pierced it through and through. Yes, we are severed; there is the great, the distressing truth! But we have not as yet declared war; perhaps we shall have to make certain conditions, therefore a solemn conference is indispensable."

"For my own part, I demand it," said Aramis.

"I accept it," interposed D'Artagnan, proudly.

Porthos bowed, as if in assent.

"Let us choose a place of rendezvous," continued Athos, "and in a last interview arrange our mutual position and the conduct we are to maintain toward each other."

"Good!" the other three exclaimed.

"Well, then, the place?"

"Will the Place Royale suit you?" asked D'Artagnan.

"In Paris?"

"Yes."

Athos and Aramis looked at each other.

"The Place Royale--be it so!" replied Athos.

"When?"

"To-morrow evening, if you like!"

"At what hour?"

"At ten in the evening, if that suits you; by that time we shall have returned."

"Good."

"There," continued Athos, "either peace or war will be decided; honor, at all events, will be maintained!"

"Alas!" murmured D'Artagnan, "our honor as soldiers is lost to us forever!"

"D'Artagnan," said Athos, gravely, "I assure you that you do me wrong in dwelling so upon that. What I think of is, that we have crossed swords

as enemies. Yes," he continued, sadly shaking his head, "Yes, it is as you said, misfortune, indeed, has overtaken us. Come, Aramis."

"And we, Porthos," said D'Artagnan, "will return, carrying our shame to the cardinal."

"And tell him," cried a voice, "that I am not too old yet for a man of action."

D'Artagnan recognized the voice of De Rochefort.

"Can I do anything for you, gentlemen?" asked the duke.

"Bear witness that we have done all that we could."

"That shall be testified to, rest assured. Adieu! we shall meet soon, I trust, in Paris, where you shall have your revenge." The duke, as he spoke, kissed his hand, spurred his horse into a gallop and disappeared, followed by his troop, who were soon lost in distance and darkness.

D'Artagnan and Porthos were now alone with a man who held by the bridles two horses; they thought it was Mousqueton and went up to him.

"What do I see?" cried the lieutenant. "Grimaud, is it thou?"

Grimaud signified that he was not mistaken.

"And whose horses are these?" cried D'Artagnan.

"Who has given them to us?" said Porthos.

"The Comte de la Fere."

"Athos! Athos!" muttered D'Artagnan; "you think of every one; you are indeed a nobleman! Whither art thou going, Grimaud?"

"To join the Vicomte de Bragelonne in Flanders, your honor."

They were taking the road toward Paris, when groans, which seemed to proceed from a ditch, attracted their attention.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan.

"It is I--Mousqueton," said a mournful voice, whilst a sort of shadow arose out of the side of the road.

Porthos ran to him. "Art thou dangerously wounded, my dear Mousqueton?" he said.

"No, sir, but I am severely."

"What can we do?" said D'Artagnan; "we must return to Paris."

"I will take care of Mousqueton," said Grimaud; and he gave his arm to his old comrade, whose eyes were full of tears, nor could Grimaud tell whether the tears were caused by wounds or by the pleasure of seeing him

again.

D'Artagnan and Porthos went on, meantime, to Paris. They were passed by a sort of courier, covered with dust, the bearer of a letter from the duke to the cardinal, giving testimony to the valor of D'Artagnan and Porthos.

Mazarin had passed a very bad night when this letter was brought to him, announcing that the duke was free and that he would henceforth raise up mortal strife against him.

"What consoles me," said the cardinal after reading the letter, "is that, at least, in this chase, D'Artagnan has done me one good turn--he has destroyed Broussel. This Gascon is a precious fellow; even his misadventures are of use."

The cardinal referred to that man whom D'Artagnan upset at the corner of the Cimetiere Saint Jean in Paris, and who was no other than the Councillor Broussel.