

Chapter 28. The Place Royale.

They proceeded silently to the centre of the Place, but as at this very moment the moon had just emerged from behind a cloud, they thought they might be observed if they remained on that spot and therefore regained the shade of the lime-trees.

There were benches here and there; the four gentlemen stopped near them; at a sign from Athos, Porthos and D'Artagnan sat down, the two others stood in front of them.

After a few minutes of silent embarrassment, Athos spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said, "our presence here is the best proof of former friendship; not one of us has failed the others at this rendezvous; not one has, therefore, to reproach himself."

"Hear me, count," replied D'Artagnan; "instead of making compliments to each other, let us explain our conduct to each other, like men of right and honest hearts."

"I wish for nothing more; have you any cause of complaint against me or Monsieur d'Herblay? If so, speak out," answered Athos.

"I have," replied D'Artagnan. "When I saw you at your chateau at

Bragelonne, I made certain proposals to you which you perfectly understood; instead of answering me as a friend, you played with me as a child; the friendship, therefore, that you boast of was not broken yesterday by the shock of swords, but by your dissimulation at your castle."

"D'Artagnan!" said Athos, reproachfully.

"You asked for candor and you have it. You ask what I have against you; I tell you. And I have the same sincerity to show you, if you wish, Monsieur d'Herblay; I acted in a similar way to you and you also deceived me."

"Really, monsieur, you say strange things," said Aramis. "You came seeking me to make to me certain proposals, but did you make them? No, you sounded me, nothing more. Very well what did I say to you? that Mazarin was contemptible and that I wouldn't serve Mazarin. But that is all. Did I tell you that I wouldn't serve any other? On the contrary, I gave you to understand, I think, that I adhered to the princes. We even joked very pleasantly, if I remember rightly, on the very probable contingency of your being charged by the cardinal with my arrest. Were you a party man? There is no doubt of that. Well, why should not we, too, belong to a party? You had your secret and we had ours; we didn't exchange them. So much the better; it proves that we know how to keep our secrets."

"I do not reproach you, monsieur," said D'Artagnan; "'tis only because Monsieur de la Fere has spoken of friendship that I question your

conduct."

"And what do you find in it that is worthy of blame?" asked Aramis, haughtily.

The blood mounted instantly to the temples of D'Artagnan, who arose, and replied:

"I consider it worthy conduct of a pupil of Jesuits."

On seeing D'Artagnan rise, Porthos rose also; these four men were therefore all standing at the same time, with a menacing aspect, opposite to each other.

Upon hearing D'Artagnan's reply, Aramis seemed about to draw his sword, when Athos prevented him.

"D'Artagnan," he said, "you are here to-night, still infuriated by yesterday's adventure. I believed your heart noble enough to enable a friendship of twenty years to overcome an affront of a quarter of an hour. Come, do you really think you have anything to say against me? Say it then; if I am in fault I will avow the error."

The grave and harmonious tones of that beloved voice seemed to have still its ancient influence, whilst that of Aramis, which had become harsh and tuneless in his moments of ill-humor, irritated him. He answered therefore:

"I think, monsieur le comte, that you had something to communicate to me at your chateau of Bragelonne, and that gentleman"--he pointed to Aramis--"had also something to tell me when I was in his convent. At that time I was not concerned in the adventure, in the course of which you have so successfully estopped me! However, because I was prudent you must not take me for a fool. If I had wished to widen the breach between those whom Monsieur d'Herblay chooses to receive with a rope ladder and those whom he receives with a wooden ladder, I could have spoken out."

"What are you meddling with?" cried Aramis, pale with anger, suspecting that D'Artagnan had acted as a spy on him and had seen him with Madame de Longueville.

"I never meddle save with what concerns me, and I know how to make believe that I haven't seen what does not concern me; but I hate hypocrites, and among that number I place musketeers who are abbés and abbés who are musketeers; and," he added, turning to Porthos "here's a gentleman who's of the same opinion as myself."

Porthos, who had not spoken one word, answered merely by a word and a gesture.

He said "yes" and he put his hand on his sword.

Aramis started back and drew his. D'Artagnan bent forward, ready either to attack or to stand on his defense.

Athos at that moment extended his hand with the air of supreme command

which characterized him alone, drew out his sword and the scabbard at the same time, broke the blade in the sheath on his knee and threw the pieces to his right. Then turning to Aramis:

"Aramis," he said, "break your sword."

Aramis hesitated.

"It must be done," said Athos; then in a lower and more gentle voice, he added. "I wish it."

Then Aramis, paler than before, but subdued by these words, snapped the serpent blade between his hands, and then folding his arms, stood trembling with rage.

These proceedings made D'Artagnan and Porthos draw back. D'Artagnan did not draw his sword; Porthos put his back into the sheath.

"Never!" exclaimed Athos, raising his right hand to Heaven, "never! I swear before God, who seeth us, and who, in the darkness of this night heareth us, never shall my sword cross yours, never my eye express a glance of anger, nor my heart a throb of hatred, at you. We lived together, we loved, we hated together; we shed, we mingled our blood together, and too probably, I may still add, that there may be yet a bond between us closer even than that of friendship; perhaps there may be the bond of crime; for we four, we once did condemn, judge and slay a human being whom we had not any right to cut off from this world, although apparently fitter for hell than for this life. D'Artagnan, I

have always loved you as my son; Porthos, we slept six years side by side; Aramis is your brother as well as mine, and Aramis has once loved you, as I love you now and as I have ever loved you. What can Cardinal Mazarin be to us, to four men who compelled such a man as Richelieu to act as we pleased? What is such or such a prince to us, who fixed the diadem upon a great queen's head? D'Artagnan, I ask your pardon for having yesterday crossed swords with you; Aramis does the same to Porthos; now hate me if you can; but for my own part, I shall ever, even if you do hate me, retain esteem and friendship for you. I repeat my words, Aramis, and then, if you desire it, and if they desire it, let us separate forever from our old friends."

There was a solemn, though momentary silence, which was broken by Aramis.

"I swear," he said, with a calm brow and kindly glance, but in a voice still trembling with recent emotion, "I swear that I no longer bear animosity to those who were once my friends. I regret that I ever crossed swords with you, Porthos; I swear not only that it shall never again be pointed at your breast, but that in the bottom of my heart there will never in future be the slightest hostile sentiment; now, Athos, come."

Athos was about to retire.

"Oh! no! no! do not go away!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, impelled by one of those irresistible impulses which showed the nobility of his nature, the native brightness of his character; "I swear that I would give the

last drop of my blood and the last fragment of my limbs to preserve the friendship of such a friend as you, Athos--of such a man as you, Aramis." And he threw himself into the arms of Athos.

"My son!" exclaimed Athos, pressing him in his arms.

"And as for me," said Porthos, "I swear nothing, but I'm choked. Forsooth! If I were obliged to fight against you, I think I should allow myself to be pierced through and through, for I never loved any one but you in the wide world;" and honest Porthos burst into tears as he embraced Athos.

"My friends," said Athos, "this is what I expected from such hearts as yours. Yes, I have said it and I now repeat it: our destinies are irrevocably united, although we now pursue divergent roads. I respect your convictions, and whilst we fight for opposite sides, let us remain friends. Ministers, princes, kings, will pass away like mountain torrents; civil war, like a forest flame; but we--we shall remain; I have a presentiment that we shall."

"Yes," replied D'Artagnan, "let us still be musketeers, and let us retain as our battle-standard that famous napkin of the bastion St. Gervais, on which the great cardinal had three fleurs-de-lis embroidered."

"Be it so," cried Aramis. "Cardinalists or Frondeurs, what matters it? Let us meet again as capital seconds in a duel, devoted friends in business, merry companions in our ancient pleasures."

"And whenever," added Athos, "we meet in battle, at this word, 'Place Royale!' let us put our swords into our left hands and shake hands with the right, even in the very lust and music of the hottest carnage."

"You speak charmingly," said Porthos.

"And are the first of men!" added D'Artagnan. "You excel us all."

Athos smiled with ineffable pleasure.

"'Tis then all settled. Gentlemen, your hands; are we not pretty good Christians?"

"Egad!" said D'Artagnan, "by Heaven! yes."

"We should be so on this occasion, if only to be faithful to our oath," said Aramis.

"Ah, I'm ready to do what you will," cried Porthos; "even to swear by Mahomet. Devil take me if I've ever been so happy as at this moment."

And he wiped his eyes, still moist.

"Has not one of you a cross?" asked Athos.

Aramis smiled and drew from his vest a cross of diamonds, which was hung around his neck by a chain of pearls. "Here is one," he said.



"Well," resumed Athos, "swear on this cross, which, in spite of its magnificent material, is still a cross; swear to be united in spite of everything, and forever, and may this oath bind us to each other, and even, also, our descendants! Does this oath satisfy you?"

"Yes," said they all, with one accord.

"Ah, traitor!" muttered D'Artagnan, leaning toward Aramis and whispering in his ear, "you have made us swear on the crucifix of a Frondeuse."