

Chapter 35. A Dinner in the Old Style.

The second interview between the former musketeers was not so formal and threatening as the first. Athos, with his superior understanding, wisely deemed that the supper table would be the most complete and satisfactory point of reunion, and at the moment when his friends, in deference to his deportment and sobriety, dared scarcely speak of some of their former good dinners, he was the first to propose that they should all assemble around some well spread table and abandon themselves unreservedly to their own natural character and manners--a freedom which had formerly contributed so much to that good understanding between them which gave them the name of the inseparables. For different reasons this was an agreeable proposition to them all, and it was therefore agreed that each should leave a very exact address and that upon the request of any of the associates a meeting should be convoked at a famous eating house in the Rue de la Monnaie, of the sign of the Hermitage. The first rendezvous was fixed for the following Wednesday, at eight o'clock in the evening precisely.

On that day, in fact, the four friends arrived punctually at the hour, each from his own abode or occupation. Porthos had been trying a new horse; D'Artagnan was on guard at the Louvre; Aramis had been to visit one of his penitents in the neighborhood; and Athos, whose domicile was established in the Rue Guenegaud, found himself close at hand. They were, therefore, somewhat surprised to meet altogether at the door of

the Hermitage, Athos starting out from the Pont Neuf, Porthos by the Rue de la Roule, D'Artagnan by the Rue des Fosse Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, and Aramis by the Rue de Bethisy.

The first words exchanged between the four friends, on account of the ceremony which each of them mingled with their demonstration, were somewhat forced and even the repast began with a kind of stiffness. Athos perceived this embarrassment, and by way of supplying an effectual remedy, called for four bottles of champagne.

At this order, given in Athos's habitually calm manner, the face of the Gascon relaxed and Porthos's brow grew smooth. Aramis was astonished. He knew that Athos not only never drank, but more, that he had a kind of repugnance to wine. This astonishment was doubled when Aramis saw Athos fill a bumper and toss it off with all his former enthusiasm. His companions followed his example. In a very few minutes the four bottles were empty and this excellent specific succeeded in dissipating even the slightest cloud that might have rested on their spirits. Now the four friends began to speak loud, scarcely waiting till one had finished before another began, and each assumed his favorite attitude on or at the table. Soon--strange fact--Aramis undid two buttons of his doublet, seeing which, Porthos unfastened his entirely.

Battles, long journeys, blows given and received, sufficed for the first themes of conversation, which turned upon the silent struggles sustained against him who was now called the great cardinal.

"Faith," said Aramis, laughing, "we have praised the dead enough, let

us revile the living a little; I should like to say something evil of Mazarin; is it permissible?"

"Go on, go on," replied D'Artagnan, laughing heartily; "relate your story and I will applaud it if it is a good one."

"A great prince," said Aramis, "with whom Mazarin sought an alliance, was invited by him to send him a list of the conditions on which he would do him the honor to negotiate with him. The prince, who had a great repugnance to treat with such an ill-bred fellow, made out a list, against the grain, and sent it. In this list there were three conditions which displeased Mazarin and he offered the prince ten thousand crowns to renounce them."

"Ah, ha, ha!" laughed the three friends, "not a bad bargain; and there was no fear of being taken at his word; what did the prince do then?"

"The prince immediately sent fifty thousand francs to Mazarin, begging him never to write to him again, and offered twenty thousand francs more, on condition that he would never speak to him. What did Mazarin do?"

"Stormed!" suggested Athos.

"Beat the messenger!" cried Porthos.

"Accepted the money!" said D'Artagnan.

"You have guessed it," answered Aramis; and they all laughed so heartily that the host appeared in order to inquire whether the gentlemen wanted anything; he thought they were fighting.

At last their hilarity calmed down and:

"Faith!" exclaimed D'Artagnan to the two friends, "you may well wish ill to Mazarin; for I assure you, on his side he wishes you no good."

"Pooh! really?" asked Athos. "If I thought the fellow knew me by my name I would be rebaptized, for fear it might be thought I knew him."

"He knows you better by your actions than your name; he is quite aware that there are two gentlemen who greatly aided the escape of Monsieur de Beaufort, and he has instigated an active search for them, I can answer for it."

"By whom?"

"By me; and this morning he sent for me to ask me if I had obtained any information."

"And what did you reply?"

"That I had none as yet; but that I was to dine to-day with two gentlemen, who would be able to give me some."

"You told him that?" said Porthos, a broad smile spreading over his

honest face. "Bravo! and you are not afraid of that, Athos?"

"No," replied Athos, "it is not the search of Mazarin that I fear."

"Now," said Aramis, "tell me a little what you do fear."

"Nothing for the present; at least, nothing in good earnest."

"And with regard to the past?" asked Porthos.

"Oh! the past is another thing," said Athos, sighing; "the past and the future."

"Are you afraid for your young Raoul?" asked Aramis.

"Well," said D'Artagnan, "one is never killed in a first engagement."

"Nor in the second," said Aramis

"Nor in the third," returned Porthos; "and even when one is killed, one rises again, the proof of which is, that here we are!"

"No," said Athos, "it is not Raoul about whom I am anxious, for I trust he will conduct himself like a gentleman; and if he is killed--well, he will die bravely; but hold--should such a misfortune happen--well--" Athos passed his hand across his pale brow.

"Well?" asked Aramis.

"Well, I shall look upon it as an expiation."

"Ah!" said D'Artagnan; "I know what you mean."

"And I, too," added Aramis; "but you must not think of that, Athos; what is past, is past."

"I don't understand," said Porthos.

"The affair at Armentieres," whispered D'Artagnan.

"The affair at Armentieres?" asked he again.

"Milady."

"Oh, yes!" said Porthos; "true, I had forgotten it!"

Athos looked at him intently.

"You have forgotten it, Porthos?" said he.

"Faith! yes, it is so long ago," answered Porthos.

"This affair does not, then, weigh upon your conscience?"

"Faith, no."

"And you, D'Artagnan?"

"I--I own that when my mind returns to that terrible period I have no recollection of anything but the rigid corpse of poor Madame Bonancieux. Yes, yes," murmured he, "I have often felt regret for the victim, but never the very slightest remorse for the assassin."

Athos shook his head doubtfully.

"Consider," said Aramis, "if you admit divine justice and its participation in the things of this world, that woman was punished by the will of heaven. We were but the instruments, that is all."

"But as to free will, Aramis?"

"How acts the judge? He has a free will, yet he fearlessly condemns. What does the executioner? He is master of his arm, yet he strikes without remorse."

"The executioner!" muttered Athos, as if arrested by some recollection.

"I know that it is terrible," said D'Artagnan; "but when I reflect that we have killed English, Rochellais, Spaniards, nay, even French, who never did us any other harm but to aim at and to miss us, whose only fault was to cross swords with us and to be unable to ward off our blows--I can, on my honor, find an excuse for my share in the murder of that woman."

"As for me," said Porthos, "now that you have reminded me of it, Athos, I have the scene again before me, as if I now were there. Milady was there, as it were, where you sit." (Athos changed color.) "I--I was where D'Artagnan stands. I wore a long sword which cut like a Damascus--you remember it, Aramis for you always called it Balizarde. Well, I swear to you, all three, that had the executioner of Bethune--was he not of Bethune?--yes, egad! of Bethune!--not been there, I would have cut off the head of that infamous being without thinking of it, or even after thinking of it. She was a most atrocious woman."

"And then," said Aramis, with the tone of philosophical indifference which he had assumed since he had belonged to the church and in which there was more atheism than confidence in God, "what is the use of thinking of it all? At the last hour we must confess this action and God knows better than we can whether it is a crime, a fault, or a meritorious deed. I repent of it? Egad! no. Upon my honor and by the holy cross; I only regret it because she was a woman."

"The most satisfactory part of the matter," said D'Artagnan, "is that there remains no trace of it."

"She had a son," observed Athos.

"Oh! yes, I know that," said D'Artagnan, "and you mentioned it to me; but who knows what has become of him? If the serpent be dead, why not its brood? Do you think his uncle De Winter would have brought up that young viper? De Winter probably condemned the son as he had done the mother."

"Then," said Athos, "woe to De Winter, for the child had done no harm."

"May the devil take me, if the child be not dead," said Porthos. "There is so much fog in that detestable country, at least so D'Artagnan declares."

Just as the quaint conclusion reached by Porthos was about to bring back hilarity to faces now more or less clouded, hasty footsteps were heard upon the stair and some one knocked at the door.

"Come in," cried Athos.

"Please your honors," said the host, "a person in a great hurry wishes to speak to one of you."

"To which of us?" asked all the four friends.

"To him who is called the Comte de la Fere."

"It is I," said Athos, "and what is the name of the person?"

"Grimaud."

"Ah!" exclaimed Athos, turning pale. "Back already! What can have happened, then, to Bragelonne?"

"Let him enter," cried D'Artagnan; "let him come up."

But Grimaud had already mounted the staircase and was waiting on the last step; so springing into the room he motioned the host to leave it. The door being closed, the four friends waited in expectation. Grimaud's agitation, his pallor, the sweat which covered his face, the dust which soiled his clothes, all indicated that he was the messenger of some important and terrible news.

"Your honors," said he, "that woman had a child; that child has become a man; the tigress had a little one, the tiger has roused himself; he is ready to spring upon you--beware!"

Athos glanced around at his friends with a melancholy smile. Porthos turned to look at his sword, which was hanging on the wall; Aramis seized his knife; D'Artagnan arose.

"What do you mean, Grimaud?" he exclaimed.

"That Milady's son has left England, that he is in France, on his road to Paris, if he be not here already."

"The devil he is!" said Porthos. "Are you sure of it?"

"Certain," replied Grimaud.

This announcement was received in silence. Grimaud was so breathless, so exhausted, that he had fallen back upon a chair. Athos filled a beaker with champagne and gave it to him.

"Well, after all," said D'Artagnan, "supposing that he lives, that he comes to Paris; we have seen many other such. Let him come."

"Yes," echoed Porthos, glancing affectionately at his sword, still hanging on the wall; "we can wait for him; let him come."

"Moreover, he is but a child," said Aramis.

Grimaud rose.

"A child!" he exclaimed. "Do you know what he has done, this child? Disguised as a monk he discovered the whole history in confession from the executioner of Bethune, and having confessed him, after having learned everything from him, he gave him absolution by planting this dagger into his heart. See, it is on fire yet with his hot blood, for it is not thirty hours since it was drawn from the wound."

And Grimaud threw the dagger on the table.

D'Artagnan, Porthos and Aramis rose and in one spontaneous motion rushed to their swords. Athos alone remained seated, calm and thoughtful.

"And you say he is dressed as a monk, Grimaud?"

"Yes, as an Augustine monk."

"What sized man is he?"

"About my height; thin, pale, with light blue eyes and tawny flaxen hair."

"And he did not see Raoul?" asked Athos.

"Yes, on the contrary, they met, and it was the viscount himself who conducted him to the bed of the dying man."

Athos, in his turn, rising without speaking, went and unhooked his sword.

"Heigh, sir," said D'Artagnan, trying to laugh, "do you know we look very much like a flock of silly, mouse-evading women! How is it that we, four men who have faced armies without blinking, begin to tremble at the mention of a child?"

"It is true," said Athos, "but this child comes in the name of Heaven."

And very soon they left the inn.