

Chapter 41. Paternal Affection.

Whilst this terrible scene was passing at Lord de Winter's, Athos, seated near his window, his elbow on the table and his head supported on his hand, was listening intently to Raoul's account of the adventures he met with on his journey and the details of the battle.

Listening to the relation of those emotions so fresh and pure, the fine, noble face of Athos betrayed indescribable pleasure; he inhaled the tones of that young voice, as harmonious music. He forgot all that was dark in the past and that was cloudy in the future. It almost seemed as if the return of this much loved boy had changed his fears to hopes. Athos was happy--happy as he had never been before.

"And you assisted and took part in this great battle, Bragelonne!" cried the former musketeer.

"Yes, sir."

"And it was a fierce one?"

"His highness the prince charged eleven times in person."

"He is a great commander, Bragelonne."

"He is a hero, sir. I did not lose sight of him for an instant. Oh! how fine it is to be called Conde and to be so worthy of such a name!"

"He was calm and radiant, was he not?"

"As calm as at parade, radiant as at a fete. When we went up to the enemy it was slowly; we were forbidden to draw first and we were marching toward the Spaniards, who were on a height with lowered muskets. When we arrived about thirty paces from them the prince turned around to the soldiers: 'Comrades,' he said, 'you are about to suffer a furious discharge; but after that you will make short work with those fellows.' There was such dead silence that friends and enemies could have heard these words; then raising his sword, 'Sound trumpets!' he cried."

"Well, very good; you will do as much when the opportunity occurs, will you, Raoul?"

"I know not, sir, but I thought it really very fine and grand!"

"Were you afraid, Raoul?" asked the count.

"Yes, sir," replied the young man naively; "I felt a great chill at my heart, and at the word 'fire,' which resounded in Spanish from the enemy's ranks, I closed my eyes and thought of you."

"In honest truth, Raoul?" said Athos, pressing his hand.

"Yes, sir; at that instant there was such a rataplan of musketry that one might have imagined the infernal regions had opened. Those who were not killed felt the heat of the flames. I opened my eyes, astonished to find myself alive and even unhurt; a third of the squadron were lying on the ground, wounded, dead or dying. At that moment I encountered the eye of the prince. I had but one thought and that was that he was observing me. I spurred on and found myself in the enemy's ranks."

"And the prince was pleased with you?"

"He told me so, at least, sir, when he desired me to return to Paris with Monsieur de Chatillon, who was charged to carry the news to the queen and to bring the colors we had taken. 'Go,' said he; 'the enemy will not rally for fifteen days and until that time I have no need of your service. Go and see those whom you love and who love you, and tell my sister De Longueville that I thank her for the present that she made me of you.' And I came, sir," added Raoul, gazing at the count with a smile of real affection, "for I thought you would be glad to see me again."

Athos drew the young man toward him and pressed his lips to his brow, as he would have done to a young daughter.

"And now, Raoul," said he, "you are launched; you have dukes for friends, a marshal of France for godfather, a prince of the blood as commander, and on the day of your return you have been received by two queens; it is not so bad for a novice."

"Oh sir," said Raoul, suddenly, "you recall something, which, in my haste to relate my exploits, I had forgotten; it is that there was with Her Majesty the Queen of England, a gentleman who, when I pronounced your name, uttered a cry of surprise and joy; he said he was a friend of yours, asked your address, and is coming to see you."

"What is his name?"

"I did not venture to ask, sir; he spoke elegantly, although I thought from his accent he was an Englishman."

"Ah!" said Athos, leaning down his head as if to remember who it could be. Then, when he raised it again, he was struck by the presence of a man who was standing at the open door and was gazing at him with a compassionate air.

"Lord de Winter!" exclaimed the count.

"Athos, my friend!"

And the two gentlemen were for an instant locked in each other's arms; then Athos, looking into his friend's face and taking him by both hands, said:

"What ails you, my lord? you appear as unhappy as I am the reverse."

"Yes, truly, dear friend; and I may even say the sight of you increases my dismay."

And De Winter glancing around him, Raoul quickly understood that the two friends wished to be alone and he therefore left the room unaffectedly.

"Come, now that we are alone," said Athos, "let us talk of yourself."

"Whilst we are alone let us speak of ourselves," replied De Winter. "He is here."

"Who?"

"Milady's son."

Athos, again struck by this name, which seemed to pursue him like an echo, hesitated for a moment, then slightly knitting his brows, he calmly said:

"I know it, Grimaud met him between Bethune and Arras and then came here to warn me of his presence."

"Does Grimaud know him, then?"

"No; but he was present at the deathbed of a man who knew him."

"The headsman of Bethune?" exclaimed De Winter.

"You know about that?" cried Athos, astonished.

"He has just left me," replied De Winter, "after telling me all. Ah! my friend! what a horrible scene! Why did we not destroy the child with the mother?"

"What need you fear?" said Athos, recovering from the instinctive fear he had at first experienced, by the aid of reason; "are we not men accustomed to defend ourselves? Is this young man an assassin by profession--a murderer in cold blood? He has killed the executioner of Bethune in an access of passion, but now his fury is assuaged."

De Winter smiled sorrowfully and shook his head.

"Do you not know the race?" said he.

"Pooh!" said Athos, trying to smile in his turn. "It must have lost its ferocity in the second generation. Besides, my friend, Providence has warned us, that we may be on our guard. All we can now do is to wait. Let us wait; and, as I said before, let us speak of yourself. What brings you to Paris?"

"Affairs of importance which you shall know later. But what is this that I hear from Her Majesty the Queen of England? Monsieur d'Artagnan sides with Mazarin! Pardon my frankness, dear friend. I neither hate nor blame the cardinal, and your opinions will be held ever sacred by me. But do you happen to belong to him?"

"Monsieur d'Artagnan," replied Athos, "is in the service; he is a soldier and obeys all constitutional authority. Monsieur d'Artagnan is

not rich and has need of his position as lieutenant to enable him to live. Millionaires like yourself, my lord, are rare in France."

"Alas!" said De Winter, "I am at this moment as poor as he is, if not poorer. But to return to our subject."

"Well, then, you wish to know if I am of Mazarin's party? No. Pardon my frankness, too, my lord."

"I am obliged to you, count, for this pleasing intelligence! You make me young and happy again by it. Ah! so you are not a Mazarinist? Delightful! Indeed, you could not belong to him. But pardon me, are you free? I mean to ask if you are married?"

"Ah! as to that, no," replied Athos, laughing.

"Because that young man, so handsome, so elegant, so polished----"

"Is a child I have adopted and who does not even know who was his father."

"Very well; you are always the same, Athos, great and generous. Are you still friends with Monsieur Porthos and Monsieur Aramis?"

"Add Monsieur d'Artagnan, my lord. We still remain four friends devoted to each other; but when it becomes a question of serving the cardinal or of fighting him, of being Mazarinists or Frondeists, then we are only two."

"Is Monsieur Aramis with D'Artagnan?" asked Lord de Winter.

"No," said Athos; "Monsieur Aramis does me the honor to share my opinions."

"Could you put me in communication with your witty and agreeable friend?
Is he much changed?"

"He has become an abbe, that is all."

"You alarm me; his profession must have made him renounce any great undertakings."

"On the contrary," said Athos, smiling, "he has never been so much a musketeer as since he became an abbe, and you will find him a veritable soldier."

"Could you engage to bring him to me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, on the Pont du Louvre?"

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Athos, smiling, "you have a duel in prospect."

"Yes, count, and a splendid duel, too; a duel in which I hope you will take your part."

"Where are we to go, my lord?"

"To Her Majesty the Queen of England, who has desired me to present you to her."

"This is an enigma," said Athos, "but it matters not; since you know the solution of it I ask no further. Will your lordship do me the honor to sup with me?"

"Thanks, count, no," replied De Winter. "I own to you that that young man's visit has subdued my appetite and probably will rob me of my sleep. What undertaking can have brought him to Paris? It was not to meet me that he came, for he was ignorant of my journey. This young man terrifies me, my lord; there lies in him a sanguinary predisposition."

"What occupies him in England?"

"He is one of Cromwell's most enthusiastic disciples."

"But what attached him to the cause? His father and mother were Catholics, I believe?"

"His hatred of the king, who deprived him of his estates and forbade him to bear the name of De Winter."

"And what name does he now bear?"

"Mordaunt."

"A Puritan, yet disguised as a monk he travels alone in France."

"Do you say as a monk?"

"It was thus, and by mere accident--may God pardon me if I blaspheme--that he heard the confession of the executioner of Bethune."

"Then I understand it all! he has been sent by Cromwell to Mazarin, and the queen guessed rightly; we have been forestalled. Everything is clear to me now. Adieu, count, till to-morrow."

"But the night is dark," said Athos, perceiving that Lord de Winter seemed more uneasy than he wished to appear; "and you have no servant."

"I have Tony, a safe if simple youth."

"Halloo, there, Grimaud, Olivain, and Blaisois! call the viscount and take the musket with you."

Blaisois was the tall youth, half groom, half peasant, whom we saw at the Chateau de Bragelonne, whom Athos had christened by the name of his province.

"Viscount," said Athos to Raoul, as he entered, "you will conduct my lord as far as his hotel and permit no one to approach him."

"Oh! count," said De Winter, "for whom do you take me?"

"For a stranger who does not know Paris," said Athos, "and to whom the

viscount will show the way."

De Winter shook him by the hand.

"Grimaud," said Athos, "put yourself at the head of the troop and beware of the monk."

Grimaud shuddered, and nodding, awaited the departure, regarding the butt of his musket with silent eloquence. Then obeying the orders given him by Athos, he headed the small procession, bearing the torch in one hand and the musket in the other, until it reached De Winter's inn, when pounding on the portal with his fist, he bowed to my lord and faced about without a word.

The same order was followed in returning, nor did Grimaud's searching glance discover anything of a suspicious appearance, save a dark shadow, as it were, in ambuscade, at the corner of the Rue Guenegaud and of the Quai. He fancied, also, that in going he had already observed the street watcher who had attracted his attention. He pushed on toward him, but before he could reach it the shadow had disappeared into an alley, into which Grimaud deemed it scarcely prudent to pursue it.

The next day, on awaking, the count perceived Raoul by his bedside. The young man was already dressed and was reading a new book by M. Chapelain.

"Already up, Raoul?" exclaimed the count.

"Yes, sir," replied Raoul, with slight hesitation; "I did not sleep well."

"You, Raoul, not sleep well! then you must have something on your mind!" said Athos.

"Sir, you will perhaps think that I am in a great hurry to leave you when I have only just arrived, but----"

"Have you only two days of leave, Raoul?"

"On the contrary, sir, I have ten; nor is it to the camp I wish to go."

"Where, then?" said Athos, smiling, "if it be not a secret. You are now almost a man, since you have made your first passage of arms, and have acquired the right to go where you will without consulting me."

"Never, sir," said Raoul, "as long as I possess the happiness of having you for a protector, shall I deem I have the right of freeing myself from a guardianship so valuable to me. I have, however, a wish to go and pass a day at Blois. You look at me and you are going to laugh at me."

"No, on the contrary, I am not inclined to laugh," said Athos, suppressing a sigh. "You wish to see Blois again; it is but natural."

"Then you permit me to go, you are not angry in your heart?" exclaimed Raoul, joyously.

"Certainly; and why should I regret what gives you pleasure?"

"Oh! how kind you are," exclaimed the young man, pressing his guardian's hand; "and I can set out immediately?"

"When you like, Raoul."

"Sir," said Raoul, as he turned to leave the room, "I have thought of one thing, and that is about the Duchess of Chevreuse, who was so kind to me and to whom I owe my introduction to the prince."

"And you ought to thank her, Raoul. Well, try the Hotel de Luynes, Raoul, and ask if the duchess can receive you. I am glad to see you pay attention to the usages of the world. You must take Grimaud and Olivain."

"Both, sir?" asked Raoul, astonished.

"Both."

Raoul went out, and when Athos heard his young, joyous voice calling to Grimaud and Olivain, he sighed.

"It is very soon to leave me," he thought, "but he follows the common custom. Nature has made us thus; she makes the young look ever forward, not behind. He certainly likes the child, but will he love me less as his affection grows for her?"

And Athos confessed to himself that, he was unprepared for so prompt a departure; but Raoul was so happy that this reflection effaced everything else from the consideration of his guardian.

Everything was ready at ten o'clock for the departure, and as Athos was watching Raoul mount, a groom rode up from the Duchess de Chevreuse. He was charged to tell the Comte de la Fere, that she had learned of the return of her youthful protege, and also the manner he had conducted himself on the field, and she added that she should be very glad to offer him her congratulations.

"Tell her grace," replied Athos, "that the viscount has just mounted his horse to proceed to the Hotel de Luynes."

Then, with renewed instructions to Grimaud, Athos signified to Raoul that he could set out, and ended by reflecting that it was perhaps better that Raoul should be away from Paris at that moment.