

Chapter 43. In which it is proved that first Impulses are oftentimes the best.

The three gentlemen took the road to Picardy, a road so well known to them and which recalled to Athos and Aramis some of the most picturesque adventures of their youth.

"If Mousqueton were with us," observed Athos, on reaching the spot where they had had a dispute with the paviers, "how he would tremble at passing this! Do you remember, Aramis, that it was here he received that famous bullet wound?"

"By my faith, 'twould be excusable in him to tremble," replied Aramis, "for even I feel a shudder at the recollection; hold, just above that tree is the little spot where I thought I was killed."

It was soon time for Grimaud to recall the past. Arriving before the inn at which his master and himself had made such an enormous repast, he approached Athos and said, showing him the airhole of the cellar:

"Sausages!"

Athos began to laugh, for this juvenile escapade of his appeared to be as amusing as if some one had related it of another person.

At last, after traveling two days and a night, they arrived at Boulogne

toward the evening, favored by magnificent weather. Boulogne was a strong position, then almost a deserted town, built entirely on the heights; what is now called the lower town did not then exist.

"Gentlemen," said De Winter, on reaching the gate of the town, "let us do here as at Paris--let us separate to avoid suspicion. I know an inn, little frequented, but of which the host is entirely devoted to me. I will go there, where I expect to find letters, and you go to the first tavern in the town, to L'Epee du Grand Henri for instance, refresh yourselves, and in two hours be upon the jetty; our boat is waiting for us there."

The matter being thus decided, the two friends found, about two hundred paces further, the tavern indicated. Their horses were fed, but not unsaddled; the grooms supped, for it was already late, and their two masters, impatient to return, appointed a place of meeting with them on the jetty and desired them on no account to exchange a word with any one. It is needless to say that this caution concerned Blaisois alone--long enough since it had been a useless one to Grimaud.

Athos and Aramis walked down toward the port. From their dress, covered with dust, and from a certain easy manner by means of which a man accustomed to travel is always recognizable, the two friends excited the attention of a few promenaders. There was more especially one upon whom their arrival had produced a decided impression. This man, whom they had noticed from the first for the same reason they had themselves been remarked by others, was walking in a listless way up and down the jetty. From the moment he perceived them he did not cease to look at them and

seemed to burn with the wish to speak to them.

On reaching the jetty Athos and Aramis stopped to look at a little boat made fast to a pile and ready rigged as if waiting to start.

"That is doubtless our boat," said Athos.

"Yes," replied Aramis, "and the sloop out there making ready to sail must be that which is to take us to our destination; now," continued he, "if only De Winter does not keep us waiting. It is not at all amusing here; there is not a single woman passing."

"Hush!" said Athos, "we are overheard."

In truth, the walker, who, during the observations of the two friends, had passed and repassed behind them several times, stopped at the name of De Winter; but as his face betrayed no emotion at mention of this name, it might have been by chance he stood so still.

"Gentlemen," said the man, who was young and pale, bowing with ease and courtesy, "pardon my curiosity, but I see you come from Paris, or at least that you are strangers at Boulogne."

"We come from Paris, yes," replied Athos, with the same courtesy; "what is there we can do for you?"

"Sir," said the young man, "will you be so good as to tell me if it be true that Cardinal Mazarin is no longer minister?"

"That is a strange question," said Aramis.

"He is and he is not," replied Athos; "that is to say, he is dismissed by one-half of France, but by intrigues and promises he makes the other half sustain him; you will perceive that this may last a long time."

"However, sir," said the stranger, "he has neither fled nor is in prison?"

"No, sir, not at this moment at least."

"Sirs, accept my thanks for your politeness," said the young man, retreating.

"What do you think of that interrogator?" asked Aramis.

"I think he is either a dull provincial person or a spy in search of information."

"And you replied to him with that notion?"

"Nothing warranted me to answer him otherwise; he was polite to me and I was so to him."

"But if he be a spy----"

"What do you think a spy would be about here? We are not living in the

time of Cardinal Richelieu, who would have closed the ports on bare suspicion."

"It matters not; you were wrong to reply to him as you did," continued Aramis, following with his eyes the young man, now vanishing behind the cliffs.

"And you," said Athos, "you forget that you committed a very different kind of imprudence in pronouncing Lord de Winter's name. Did you not see that at that name the young man stopped?"

"More reason, then, when he spoke to you, for sending him about his business."

"A quarrel?" asked Athos.

"And since when have you become afraid of a quarrel?"

"I am always afraid of a quarrel when I am expected at any place and when such a quarrel might possibly prevent my reaching it. Besides, let me own something to you. I am anxious to see that young man nearer."

"And wherefore?"

"Aramis, you will certainly laugh at me, you will say that I am always repeating the same thing, you will call me the most timorous of visionaries; but to whom do you see a resemblance in that young man?"

"In beauty or on the contrary?" asked Aramis, laughing.

"In ugliness, in so far as a man can resemble a woman."

"Ah! Egad!" cried Aramis, "you set me thinking. No, in truth you are no visionary, my dear friend, and now I think of it--you--yes, i'faith, you're right--those delicate, yet firm-set lips, those eyes which seem always at the command of the intellect and never of the heart! Yes, it is one of Milady's bastards!"

"You laugh Aramis."

"From habit, that is all. I swear to you, I like no better than yourself to meet that viper in my path."

"Ah! here is De Winter coming," said Athos.

"Good! one thing now is only awaiting and that is, that our grooms should not keep us waiting."

"No," said Athos. "I see them about twenty paces behind my lord. I recognize Grimaud by his long legs and his determined slouch. Tony carries our muskets."

"Then we set sail to-night?" asked Aramis, glancing toward the west, where the sun had left a single golden cloud, which, dipping into the ocean, appeared by degrees to be extinguished.

"Probably," said Athos.

"Diable!" resumed Aramis, "I have little fancy for the sea by day, still less at night; the sounds of wind and wave, the frightful movements of the vessel; I confess I prefer the convent of Noisy."

Athos smiled sadly, for it was evident that he was thinking of other things as he listened to his friend and moved toward De Winter.

"What ails our friend?" said Aramis, "he resembles one of Dante's damned, whose neck Apollyon has dislocated and who are ever looking at their heels. What the devil makes him glower thus behind him?"

When De Winter perceived them, in his turn he advanced toward them with surprising rapidity.

"What is the matter, my lord?" said Athos, "and what puts you out of breath thus?"

"Nothing," replied De Winter; "nothing; and yet in passing the heights it seemed to me----" and he again turned round.

Athos glanced at Aramis.

"But let us go," continued De Winter; "let us be off; the boat must be waiting for us and there is our sloop at anchor--do you see it there? I wish I were on board already," and he looked back again.

"He has seen him," said Athos, in a low tone, to Aramis.

They had reached the ladder which led to the boat. De Winter made the grooms who carried the arms and the porters with the luggage descend first and was about to follow them.

At this moment Athos perceived a man walking on the seashore parallel to the jetty, and hastening his steps, as if to reach the other side of the port, scarcely twenty steps from the place of embarking. He fancied in the darkness that he recognized the young man who had questioned him. Athos now descended the ladder in his turn, without losing sight of the young man. The latter, to make a short cut, had appeared on a sluice.

"He certainly bodes us no good," said Athos; "but let us embark; once out at sea, let him come."

And Athos sprang into the boat, which was immediately pushed off and which soon sped seawards under the efforts of four stalwart rowers.

But the young man had begun to follow, or rather to advance before the boat. She was obliged to pass between the point of the jetty, surmounted by a beacon just lighted, and a rock which jutted out. They saw him in the distance climbing the rock in order to look down upon the boat as it passed.

"Ay, but," said Aramis, "that young fellow is decidedly a spy."

"Which is the young man?" asked De Winter, turning around.



"He who followed us and spoke to us awaits us there; behold!"

De Winter turned and followed the direction of Aramis's finger. The beacon bathed with light the little strait through which they were about to pass and the rock where the young man stood with bare head and crossed arms.

"It is he!" exclaimed De Winter, seizing the arm of Athos; "it is he! I thought I recognized him and I was not mistaken."

"Whom do you mean?" asked Aramis.

"Milady's son," replied Athos.

"The monk!" exclaimed Grimaud.

The young man heard these words and bent so forward over the rock that one might have supposed he was about to precipitate himself from it.

"Yes, it is I, my uncle--I, the son of Milady--I, the monk--I, the secretary and friend of Cromwell--I know you now, both you and your companions."

In that boat sat three men, unquestionably brave, whose courage no man would have dared dispute; nevertheless, at that voice, that accent and those gestures, they felt a chill access of terror cramp their veins. As for Grimaud, his hair stood on end and drops of sweat ran down his brow.

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, "that is the nephew, the monk, and the son of Milady, as he says himself."

"Alas, yes," murmured De Winter.

"Then wait," said Aramis; and with the terrible coolness which on important occasions he showed, he took one of the muskets from Tony, shouldered and aimed it at the young man, who stood, like the accusing angel, upon the rock.

"Fire!" cried Grimaud, unconsciously.

Athos threw himself on the muzzle of the gun and arrested the shot which was about to be fired.

"The devil take you," said Aramis. "I had him so well at the point of my gun I should have sent a ball into his breast."

"It is enough to have killed the mother," said Athos, hoarsely.

"The mother was a wretch, who struck at us all and at those dear to us."

"Yes, but the son has done us no harm."

Grimaud, who had risen to watch the effect of the shot, fell back hopeless, wringing his hands.

The young man burst into a laugh.

"Ah, it is certainly you!" he cried. "I know you even better now."

His mocking laugh and threatening words passed over their heads, carried by the breeze, until lost in the depths of the horizon. Aramis shuddered.

"Be calm," exclaimed Athos, "for Heaven's sake! have we ceased to be men?"

"No," said Aramis, "but that fellow is a fiend; and ask the uncle whether I was wrong to rid him of his dear nephew."

De Winter only replied by a groan.

"It was all up with him," continued Aramis; "ah I much fear that with all your wisdom such mercy yet will prove supernal folly."

Athos took Lord de Winter's hand and tried to turn the conversation.

"When shall we land in England?" he asked; but De Winter seemed not to hear his words and made no reply.

"Hold, Athos," said Aramis, "perhaps there is yet time. See if he is still in the same place."

Athos turned around with an effort; the sight of the young man was

evidently painful to him, and there he still was, in fact, on the rock, the beacon shedding around him, as it were, a doubtful aureole.

"Decidedly, Aramis," said Athos, "I think I was wrong not to let you fire."

"Hold your tongue," replied Aramis; "you would make me weep, if such a thing were possible."

At this moment they were hailed by a voice from the sloop and a few seconds later men, servants and baggage were aboard. The captain was only waiting for his passengers; hardly had they put foot on deck ere her head was turned towards Hastings, where they were to disembark. At this instant the three friends turned, in spite of themselves, a last look on the rock, upon the menacing figure which pursued them and now stood out with a distinctness still. Then a voice reached them once more, sending this threat: "To our next meeting, sirs, in England."