

Chapter 59. In which it is shown that under the most trying Circumstances noble Natures never lose their Courage, nor good Stomachs their Appetites.

The little troop, without looking behind them or exchanging a word, fled at a rapid gallop, fording a little stream, of which none of them knew the name, and leaving on their left a town which Athos declared to be Durham. At last they came in sight of a small wood, and spurring their horses afresh, rode in its direction.

As soon as they had disappeared behind a green curtain sufficiently thick to conceal them from the sight of any one who might be in pursuit they drew up to hold a council together. The two grooms held the horses, that they might take a little rest without being unsaddled, and Grimaud was posted as sentinel.

"Come, first of all," said Athos to D'Artagnan, "my friend, that I may shake hands with you--you, our rescuer--you, the true hero of us all."

"Athos is right--you have my adoration," said Aramis, in his turn pressing his hand. "To what are you not equal, with your superior intelligence, infallible eye, your arm of iron and your enterprising mind!"

"Now," said the Gascon, "that is all well, I accept for Porthos and myself everything--thanks and compliments; we have plenty of time to

spare."

The two friends, recalled by D'Artagnan to what was also due to Porthos, pressed his hand in their turn.

"And now," said Athos, "it is not our plan to run anywhere and like madmen, but we must map up our campaign. What shall we do?"

"What are we going to do, i'faith? It is not very difficult to say."

"Tell us, then, D'Artagnan."

"We are going to reach the nearest seaport, unite our little resources, hire a vessel and return to France. As for me I will give my last sou for it. Life is the greatest treasure, and speaking candidly, ours hangs by a thread."

"What do you say to this, Du Vallon?"

"I," said Porthos, "I am entirely of D'Artagnan's opinion; this is a 'beastly' country, this England."

"You are quite decided, then, to leave it?" asked Athos of D'Artagnan.

"Egad! I don't see what is to keep me here."

A glance was exchanged between Athos and Aramis.

"Go, then, my friends," said the former, sighing.

"How, go then?" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Let us go, you mean?"

"No, my friend," said Athos, "you must leave us."

"Leave you!" cried D'Artagnan, quite bewildered at this unexpected announcement.

"Bah!" said Porthos, "why separate, since we are all together?"

"Because you can and ought to return to France; your mission is accomplished, but ours is not."

"Your mission is not accomplished?" exclaimed D'Artagnan, looking in astonishment at Athos.

"No, my friend," replied Athos, in his gentle but decided voice, "we came here to defend King Charles; we have but ill defended him--it remains for us to save him!"

"To save the king?" said D'Artagnan, looking at Aramis as he had looked at Athos.

Aramis contented himself by making a sign with his head.

D'Artagnan's countenance took an expression of the deepest compassion; he began to think he had to do with madmen.

"You cannot be speaking seriously, Athos!" said he; "the king is surrounded by an army, which is conducting him to London. This army is commanded by a butcher, or the son of a butcher--it matters little--Colonel Harrison. His majesty, I can assure you, will be tried on his arrival in London; I have heard enough from the lips of Oliver Cromwell to know what to expect."

A second look was exchanged between Athos and Aramis.

"And when the trial is ended there will be no delay in putting the sentence into execution," continued D'Artagnan.

"And to what penalty do you think the king will be condemned?" asked Athos.

"The penalty of death, I greatly fear; they have gone too far for him to pardon them, and there is nothing left to them but one thing, and that is to kill him. Have you never heard what Oliver Cromwell said when he came to Paris and was shown the dungeon at Vincennes where Monsieur de Vendome was imprisoned?"

"What did he say?" asked Porthos.

"Princes must be knocked on the head."

"I remember it," said Athos.

"And you fancy he will not put his maxim into execution, now that he has got hold of the king?"

"On the contrary, I am certain he will do so. But then that is all the more reason why we should not abandon the august head so threatened."

"Athos, you are becoming mad."

"No, my friend," Athos gently replied, "but De Winter sought us out in France and introduced us, Monsieur d'Herblay and myself, to Madame Henrietta. Her majesty did us the honor to ask our aid for her husband. We engaged our word; our word included everything. It was our strength, our intelligence, our life, in short, that we promised. It remains now for us to keep our word. Is that your opinion, D'Herblay?"

"Yes," said Aramis, "we have promised."

"Then," continued Athos, "we have another reason; it is this--listen: In France at this moment everything is poor and paltry. We have a king ten years old, who doesn't yet know what he wants; we have a queen blinded by a belated passion; we have a minister who governs France as he would govern a great farm--that is to say, intent only on turning out all the gold he can by the exercise of Italian cunning and invention; we have princes who set up a personal and egotistic opposition, who will draw from Mazarin's hands only a few ingots of gold or some shreds of power granted as bribes. I have served them without enthusiasm--God knows that I estimated them at their real value, and that they are not high in my esteem--but on principle. To-day I am engaged in a different affair.

I have encountered misfortune in a high place, a royal misfortune, a European misfortune; I attach myself to it. If we can succeed in saving the king it will be good; if we die for him it will be grand."

"So you know beforehand you must perish!" said D'Artagnan.

"We fear so, and our only regret is to die so far from both of you."

"What will you do in a foreign land, an enemy's country?"

"I traveled in England when I was young, I speak English like an Englishman, and Aramis, too, knows something of the language. Ah! if we had you, my friends! With you, D'Artagnan, with you, Porthos--all four reunited for the first time for twenty years--we would dare not only England, but the three kingdoms put together!"

"And did you promise the queen," resumed D'Artagnan, petulantly, "to storm the Tower of London, to kill a hundred thousand soldiers, to fight victoriously against the wishes of the nation and the ambition of a man, and when that man is Cromwell? Do not exaggerate your duty. In Heaven's name, my dear Athos, do not make a useless sacrifice. When I see you merely, you look like a reasonable being; when you speak, I seem to have to do with a madman. Come, Porthos, join me; say frankly, what do you think of this business?"

"Nothing good," replied Porthos.

"Come," continued D'Artagnan, who, irritated that instead of listening

to him Athos seemed to be attending to his own thoughts, "you have never found yourself the worse for my advice. Well, then, believe me, Athos, your mission is ended, and ended nobly; return to France with us."

"Friend," said Athos, "our resolution is irrevocable."

"Then you have some other motive unknown to us?"

Athos smiled and D'Artagnan struck his hand together in anger and muttered the most convincing reasons that he could discover; but to all these reasons Athos contented himself by replying with a calm, sweet smile and Aramis by nodding his head.

"Very well," cried D'Artagnan, at last, furious, "very well, since you wish it, let us leave our bones in this beggarly land, where it is always cold, where fine weather is a fog, fog is rain, and rain a deluge; where the sun represents the moon and the moon a cream cheese; in truth, whether we die here or elsewhere matters little, since we must die."

"Only reflect, my good fellow," said Athos, "it is but dying rather sooner."

"Pooh! a little sooner or a little later, it isn't worth quarreling over."

"If I am astonished at anything," remarked Porthos, sententiously, "it is that it has not already happened."

"Oh, it will happen, you may be sure," said D'Artagnan. "So it is agreed, and if Porthos makes no objection----"

"I," said Porthos, "I will do whatever you please; and besides, I think what the Comte de la Fere said just now is very good."

"But your future career, D'Artagnan--your ambition, Porthos?"

"Our future, our ambition!" replied D'Artagnan, with feverish volubility. "Need we think of that since we are to save the king? The king saved--we shall assemble our friends together--we will head the Puritans--reconquer England; we shall re-enter London--place him securely on his throne----"

"And he will make us dukes and peers," said Porthos, whose eyes sparkled with joy at this imaginary prospect.

"Or he will forget us," added D'Artagnan.

"Oh!" said Porthos.

"Well, that has happened, friend Porthos. It seems to me that we once rendered Anne of Austria a service not much less than that which to-day we are trying to perform for Charles I.; but, none the less, Anne of Austria has forgotten us for twenty years."

"Well, in spite of that, D'Artagnan," said Athos, "you are not sorry



that you were useful to her?"

"No, indeed," said D'Artagnan; "I admit even that in my darkest moments I find consolation in that remembrance."

"You see, then, D'Artagnan, though princes often are ungrateful, God never is."

"Athos," said D'Artagnan, "I believe that were you to fall in with the devil, you would conduct yourself so well that you would take him with you to Heaven."

"So, then?" said Athos, offering his hand to D'Artagnan.

"'Tis settled," replied D'Artagnan. "I find England a charming country, and I stay--but on one condition only."

"What is it?"

"That I am not forced to learn English."

"Well, now," said Athos, triumphantly, "I swear to you, my friend, by the God who hears us--I believe that there is a power watching over us, and that we shall all four see France again."

"So be it!" said D'Artagnan, "but I--I confess I have a contrary conviction."

"Our good D'Artagnan," said Aramis, "represents among us the opposition in parliament, which always says no, and always does aye."

"But in the meantime saves the country," added Athos.

"Well, now that everything is decided," cried Porthos, rubbing his hands, "suppose we think of dinner! It seems to me that in the most critical positions of our lives we have always dined."

"Oh! yes, speak of dinner in a country where for a feast they eat boiled mutton, and as a treat drink beer. What the devil did you come to such a country for, Athos? But I forgot," added the Gascon, smiling, "pardon, I forgot you are no longer Athos; but never mind, let us hear your plan for dinner, Porthos."

"My plan!"

"Yes, have you a plan?"

"No! I am hungry, that is all."

"Pardieu, if that is all, I am hungry, too; but it is not everything to be hungry, one must find something to eat, unless we browse on the grass, like our horses----"

"Ah!" exclaimed Aramis, who was not quite so indifferent to the good things of the earth as Athos, "do you remember, when we were at Parpailot, the beautiful oysters that we ate?"

"And the legs of mutton of the salt marshes," said Porthos, smacking his lips.

"But," suggested D'Artagnan, "have we not our friend Mousqueton, who managed for us so well at Chantilly, Porthos?"

"Yes," said Porthos, "we have Mousqueton, but since he has been steward, he has become very heavy; never mind, let us call him, and to make sure that he will reply agreeably----

"Here! Mouston," cried Porthos.

Mouston appeared, with a most piteous face.

"What is the matter, my dear M. Mouston?" asked D'Artagnan. "Are you ill?"

"Sir, I am very hungry," replied Mouston.

"Well, it is just for that reason that we have called you, my good M. Mouston. Could you not procure us a few of those nice little rabbits, and some of those delicious partridges, of which you used to make fricassees at the hotel----? 'Faith, I do not remember the name of the hotel."

"At the hotel of----," said Porthos; "by my faith--nor do I remember it either."

"It does not matter; and a few of those bottles of old Burgundy wine, which cured your master so quickly of his sprain!"

"Alas! sir," said Mousqueton, "I much fear that what you ask for are very rare things in this detestable and barren country, and I think we should do better to go and seek hospitality from the owner of a little house we see on the fringe of the forest."

"How! is there a house in the neighborhood?" asked D'Artagnan.

"Yes, sir," replied Mousqueton.

"Well, let us, as you say, go and ask a dinner from the master of that house. What is your opinion, gentlemen, and does not M. Mouston's suggestion appear to you full of sense?"

"Oh!" said Aramis, "suppose the master is a Puritan?"

"So much the better, mordieux!" replied D'Artagnan; "if he is a Puritan we will inform him of the capture of the king, and in honor of the news he will kill for us his fatted hens."

"But if he should be a cavalier?" said Porthos.

"In that case we will put on an air of mourning and he will pluck for us his black fowls."

"You are very happy," exclaimed Athos, laughing, in spite of himself, at the sally of the irresistible Gascon; "for you see the bright side of everything."

"What would you have?" said D'Artagnan. "I come from a land where there is not a cloud in the sky."

"It is not like this, then," said Porthos stretching out his hand to assure himself whether a chill sensation he felt on his cheek was not really caused by a drop of rain.

"Come, come," said D'Artagnan, "more reason why we should start on our journey. Halloo, Grimaud!"

Grimaud appeared.

"Well, Grimaud, my friend, have you seen anything?" asked the Gascon.

"Nothing!" replied Grimaud.

"Those idiots!" cried Porthos, "they have not even pursued us. Oh! if we had been in their place!"

"Yes, they are wrong," said D'Artagnan. "I would willingly have said two words to Mordaunt in this little desert. It is an excellent spot for bringing down a man in proper style."

"I think, decidedly," observed Aramis, "gentlemen, that the son hasn't

his mother's energy."

"What, my good fellow!" replied Athos, "wait awhile; we have scarcely left him two hours ago--he does not know yet in what direction we came nor where we are. We may say that he is not equal to his mother when we put foot in France, if we are not poisoned or killed before then."

"Meanwhile, let us dine," suggested Porthos.

"I faith, yes," said Athos, "for I am hungry."

"Look out for the black fowls!" cried Aramis.

And the four friends, guided by Mousqueton, took up the way toward the house, already almost restored to their former gayety; for they were now, as Athos had said, all four once more united and of single mind.