

Chapter 69. Conversational.

Though Mordaunt had been so completely taken by surprise and had mounted the stairs in such utter confusion, when once seated he recovered himself, as it were, and prepared to seize any possible opportunity of escape. His eye wandered to a long stout sword on his flank and he instinctively slipped it around within reach of his right hand.

D'Artagnan was waiting for a reply to his remark and said nothing. Aramis muttered to himself, "We shall hear nothing but the usual commonplace things."

Porthos sucked his mustache, muttering, "A good deal of ceremony to-night about crushing an adder." Athos shrunk into his corner, pale and motionless as a bas-relief.

The silence, however, could not last forever. So D'Artagnan began:

"Sir," he said, with desperate politeness, "it seems to me that you change your costume almost as rapidly as I have seen the Italian mummers do, whom the Cardinal Mazarin brought over from Bergamo and whom he doubtless took you to see during your travels in France."

Mordaunt did not reply.

"Just now," D'Artagnan continued, "you were disguised--I mean to say, attired--as a murderer, and now----"

"And now I look very much like a man who is going to be murdered."

"Oh! sir," said D'Artagnan, "how can you talk like that when you are in the company of gentlemen and have such an excellent sword at your side?"

"No sword is excellent enough to be of use against four swords and daggers."

"Well, that is scarcely the question. I had the honor of asking you why you altered your costume. The mask and beard became you very well, and as to the axe, I do not think it would be out of keeping even at this moment. Why, then, have you laid it aside?"

"Because, remembering the scene at Armentieres, I thought I should find four axes for one, as I was to meet four executioners."

"Sir," replied D'Artagnan, in the calmest manner possible, "you are very young; I shall therefore overlook your frivolous remarks. What took place at Armentieres has no connection whatever with the present occasion. We could scarcely have requested your mother to take a sword and fight us."

"Aha! It is a duel, then?" cried Mordaunt, as if disposed to reply at once to the provocation.

Porthos rose, always ready for this kind of adventure.

"Pardon me," said D'Artagnan. "Do not let us do things in a hurry. We will arrange the matter rather better. Confess, Monsieur Mordaunt, that you are anxious to kill some of us."

"All," replied Mordaunt.

"Then, my dear sir; I am convinced that these gentlemen return your kind wishes and will be delighted to kill you also. Of course they will do so as honorable gentlemen, and the best proof I can furnish is this----"

So saying, he threw his hat on the ground, pushed back his chair to the wall and bowed to Mordaunt with true French grace.

"At your service, sir," he continued. "My sword is shorter than yours, it's true, but, bah! I think the arm will make up for the sword."

"Halt!" cried Porthos coming forward. "I begin, and without any rhetoric."

"Allow me, Porthos," said Aramis.

Athos did not move. He might have been taken for a statue. Even his breathing seemed to be arrested.

"Gentlemen," said D'Artagnan, "you shall have your turn. Monsieur Mordaunt dislikes you sufficiently not to refuse you afterward. You can

see it in his eye. So pray keep your places, like Athos, whose calmness is entirely laudable. Besides, we will have no words about it. I have particular business to settle with this gentleman and I shall and will begin."

Porthos and Aramis drew back, disappointed, and drawing his sword D'Artagnan turned to his adversary:

"Sir, I am waiting for you."

"And for my part, gentlemen, I admire you. You are disputing which shall fight me first, but you do not consult me who am most concerned in the matter. I hate you all, but not equally. I hope to kill all four of you, but I am more likely to kill the first than the second, the second than the third, and the third than the last. I claim, then, the right to choose my opponent. If you refuse this right you may kill me, but I shall not fight."

"It is but fair," said Porthos and Aramis, hoping he would choose one of them.

Athos and D'Artagnan said nothing, but their silence seemed to imply consent.

"Well, then," said Mordaunt, "I choose for my adversary the man who, not thinking himself worthy to be called Comte de la Fere, calls himself Athos."

Athos sprang up, but after an instant of motionless silence he said, to the astonishment of his friends, "Monsieur Mordaunt, a duel between us is impossible. Submit this honour to somebody else." And he sat down.

"Ah!" said Mordaunt, with a sneer, "there's one who is afraid."

"Zounds!" exclaimed D'Artagnan, bounding toward him, "who says that Athos is afraid?"

"Let him have his say, D'Artagnan," said Athos, with a smile of sadness and contempt.

"Is it your decision, Athos?" resumed the Gascon.

"Irrevocably."

"You hear, sir," said D'Artagnan, turning to Mordaunt. "The Comte de la Fere will not do you the honor of fighting with you. Choose one of us to replace the Comte de la Fere."

"As long as I don't fight with him it is the same to me with whom I fight. Put your names into a hat and draw lots."

"A good idea," said D'Artagnan.

"At least that will conciliate us all," said Aramis.

"I should never have thought of that," said Porthos, "and yet it is very

simple."

"Come, Aramis," said D'Artagnan, "write this for us in those neat little characters in which you wrote to Marie Michon that the mother of this gentleman intended to assassinate the Duke of Buckingham."

Mordaunt sustained this new attack without wincing. He stood with his arms folded, apparently as calm as any man could be in such circumstances. If he had not courage he had what is very like it, namely, pride.

Aramis went to Cromwell's desk, tore off three bits of paper of equal size, wrote on the first his own name and on the others those of his two companions, and presented them open to Mordaunt, who by a movement of his head indicated that he left the matter entirely to Aramis. He then rolled them separately and put them in a hat, which he handed to Mordaunt.

Mordaunt put his hand into the hat, took out one of the three papers and disdainfully dropped it on the table without reading it.

"Ah! serpent," muttered D'Artagnan, "I would give my chance of a captaincy in the mousquetaires for that to be my name."

Aramis opened the paper, and in a voice trembling with hate and vengeance read "D'Artagnan."

The Gascon uttered a cry of joy and turning to Mordaunt:

"I hope, sir," said he, "you have no objection to make."

"None, whatever," replied the other, drawing his sword and resting the point on his boot.

The moment that D'Artagnan saw that his wish was accomplished and his man would not escape him, he recovered his usual tranquillity. He turned up his cuffs neatly and rubbed the sole of his right boot on the floor, but did not fail, however, to remark that Mordaunt was looking about him in a singular manner.

"Are you ready, sir?" he said at last.

"I was waiting for you, sir," said Mordaunt, raising his head and casting at his opponent a look it would be impossible to describe.

"Well, then," said the Gascon, "take care of yourself, for I am not a bad hand at the rapier."

"Nor I either."

"So much the better; that sets my mind at rest. Defend yourself."

"One minute," said the young man. "Give me your word, gentlemen, that you will not attack me otherwise than one after the other."

"Is it to have the pleasure of insulting us that you say that, my little

viper?"

"No, but to set my mind at rest, as you observed just now."

"It is for something else than that, I imagine," muttered D'Artagnan, shaking his head doubtfully.

"On the honor of gentlemen," said Aramis and Porthos.

"In that case, gentlemen, have the kindness to retire into the corners, so as to give us ample room. We shall require it."

"Yes, gentlemen," said D'Artagnan, "we must not leave this person the slightest pretext for behaving badly, which, with all due respect, I fancy he is anxious still to do."

This new attack made no impression on Mordaunt. The space was cleared, the two lamps placed on Cromwell's desk, in order that the combatants might have as much light as possible; and the swords crossed.

D'Artagnan was too good a swordsman to trifle with his opponent. He made a rapid and brilliant feint which Mordaunt parried.

"Aha!" he cried with a smile of satisfaction.

And without losing a minute, thinking he saw an opening, he thrust his right in and forced Mordaunt to parry a counter en quarte so fine that the point of the weapon might have turned within a wedding ring.



This time it was Mordaunt who smiled.

"Ah, sir," said D'Artagnan, "you have a wicked smile. It must have been the devil who taught it you, was it not?"

Mordaunt replied by trying his opponent's weapon with an amount of strength which the Gascon was astonished to find in a form apparently so feeble; but thanks to a parry no less clever than that which Mordaunt had just achieved, he succeeded in meeting his sword, which slid along his own without touching his chest.

Mordaunt rapidly sprang back a step.

"Ah! you lose ground, you are turning? Well, as you please, I even gain something by it, for I no longer see that wicked smile of yours. You have no idea what a false look you have, particularly when you are afraid. Look at my eyes and you will see what no looking-glass has ever shown you--a frank and honorable countenance."

To this flow of words, not perhaps in the best taste, but characteristic of D'Artagnan, whose principal object was to divert his opponent's attention, Mordaunt did not reply, but continuing to turn around he succeeded in changing places with D'Artagnan.

He smiled more and more sarcastically and his smile began to make the Gascon anxious.

"Come, come," cried D'Artagnan, "we must finish with this," and in his turn he pressed Mordaunt hard, who continued to lose ground, but evidently on purpose and without letting his sword leave the line for a moment. However, as they were fighting in a room and had not space to go on like that forever, Mordaunt's foot at last touched the wall, against which he rested his left hand.

"Ah, this time you cannot lose ground, my fine friend!" exclaimed D'Artagnan. "Gentlemen, did you ever see a scorpion pinned to a wall? No. Well, then, you shall see it now."

In a second D'Artagnan had made three terrible thrusts at Mordaunt, all of which touched, but only pricked him. The three friends looked on, panting and astonished. At last D'Artagnan, having got up too close, stepped back to prepare a fourth thrust, but the moment when, after a fine, quick feint, he was attacking as sharply as lightning, the wall seemed to give way, Mordaunt disappeared through the opening, and D'Artagnan's blade, caught between the panels, shivered like a sword of glass. D'Artagnan sprang back; the wall had closed again.

Mordaunt, in fact, while defending himself, had manoeuvred so as to reach the secret door by which Cromwell had left, had felt for the knob with his left hand, pressed it and disappeared.

The Gascon uttered a furious imprecation, which was answered by a wild laugh on the other side of the iron panel.

"Help me, gentlemen," cried D'Artagnan, "we must break in this door."

"It is the devil in person!" said Aramis, hastening forward.

"He escapes us," growled Porthos, pushing his huge shoulder against the hinges, but in vain. "Sblood! he escapes us."

"So much the better," muttered Athos.

"I thought as much," said D'Artagnan, wasting his strength in useless efforts. "Zounds, I thought as much when the wretch kept moving around the room. I thought he was up to something."

"It's a misfortune, to which his friend, the devil, treats us," said Aramis.

"It's a piece of good fortune sent from Heaven," said Athos, evidently much relieved.

"Really!" said D'Artagnan, abandoning the attempt to burst open the panel after several ineffectual attempts, "Athos, I cannot imagine how you can talk to us in that way. You cannot understand the position we are in. In this kind of game, not to kill is to let one's self be killed. This fox of a fellow will be sending us a hundred iron-sided beasts who will pick us off like sparrows in this place. Come, come, we must be off. If we stay here five minutes more there's an end of us."

"Yes, you are right."

"But where shall we go?" asked Porthos.

"To the hotel, to be sure, to get our baggage and horses; and from there, if it please God, to France, where, at least, I understand the architecture of the houses."

So, suiting the action to the word, D'Artagnan thrust the remnant of his sword into its scabbard, picked up his hat and ran down the stairs, followed by the others.