

## Chapter 79. The Road to Picardy.

On leaving Paris, Athos and Aramis well knew that they would be encountering great danger; but we know that for men like these there could be no question of danger. Besides, they felt that the denouement of this second Odyssey was at hand and that there remained but a single effort to make.

Besides, there was no tranquillity in Paris itself. Provisions began to fail, and whenever one of the Prince de Conti's generals wished to gain more influence he got up a little popular tumult, which he put down again, and thus for the moment gained a superiority over his colleagues.

In one of these risings, the Duc de Beaufort pillaged the house and library of Mazarin, in order to give the populace, as he put it, something to gnaw at. Athos and Aramis left Paris after this coup-d'etat, which took place on the very evening of the day in which the Parisians had been beaten at Charenton.

They quitted Paris, beholding it abandoned to extreme want, bordering on famine; agitated by fear, torn by faction. Parisians and Frondeurs as they were, the two friends expected to find the same misery, the same fears, the same intrigue in the enemy's camp; but what was their surprise, after passing Saint Denis, to hear that at Saint Germain people were singing and laughing, and leading generally cheerful lives.

The two gentlemen traveled by byways in order not to encounter the Mazarinists scattered about the Isle of France, and also to escape the Frondeurs, who were in possession of Normandy and who never failed to conduct captives to the Duc de Longueville, in order that he might ascertain whether they were friends or foes. Having escaped these dangers, they returned by the main road to Boulogne, at Abbeville, and followed it step by step, examining every track.

Nevertheless, they were still in a state of uncertainty. Several inns were visited by them, several innkeepers questioned, without a single clew being given to guide their inquiries, when at Montreuil Athos felt upon the table that something rough was touching his delicate fingers. He turned up the cloth and found these hieroglyphics carved upon the wood with a knife:

"Port.... D'Art.... 2d February."

"This is capital!" said Athos to Aramis, "we were to have slept here, but we cannot--we must push on." They rode forward and reached Abbeville. There the great number of inns puzzled them; they could not go to all; how could they guess in which those whom they were seeking had stayed?

"Trust me," said Aramis, "do not expect to find anything in Abbeville. If we had only been looking for Porthos, Porthos would have stationed himself in one of the finest hotels and we could easily have traced him. But D'Artagnan is devoid of such weaknesses. Porthos would have found it very difficult even to make him see that he was dying of hunger; he has

gone on his road as inexorable as fate and we must seek him somewhere else."

They continued their route. It had now become a weary and almost hopeless task, and had it not been for the threefold motives of honor, friendship and gratitude, implanted in their hearts, our two travelers would have given up many a time their rides over the sand, their interrogatories of the peasantry and their close inspection of faces.

They proceeded thus to Peronne.

Athos began to despair. His noble nature felt that their ignorance was a sort of reflection upon them. They had not looked carefully enough for their lost friends. They had not shown sufficient pertinacity in their inquiries. They were willing and ready to retrace their steps, when, in crossing the suburb which leads to the gates of the town, upon a white wall which was at the corner of a street turning around the rampart, Athos cast his eyes upon a drawing in black chalk, which represented, with the awkwardness of a first attempt, two cavaliers riding furiously; one of them carried a roll of paper on which were written these words: "They are following us."

"Oh!" exclaimed Athos, "here it is, as clear as day; pursued as he was, D'Artagnan would not have tarried here five minutes had he been pressed very closely, which gives us hopes that he may have succeeded in escaping."

Aramis shook his head.

"Had he escaped we should either have seen him or have heard him spoken of."

"You are right, Aramis, let us travel on."

To describe the impatience and anxiety of these two friends would be impossible. Uneasiness took possession of the tender, constant heart of Athos, and fearful forecasts were the torment of the impulsive Aramis. They galloped on for two or three hours as furiously as the cavaliers on the wall. All at once, in a narrow pass, they perceived that the road was partially barricaded by an enormous stone. It had evidently been rolled across the pass by some arm of giant strength.

Aramis stopped.

"Oh!" he said, looking at the stone, "this is the work of either Hercules or Porthos. Let us get down, count, and examine this rock."

They both alighted. The stone had been brought with the evident intention of barricading the road, but some one having perceived the obstacle had partially turned it aside.

With the assistance of Blaisois and Grimaud the friends succeeded in turning the stone over. Upon the side next the ground were scratched the following words:

"Eight of the light dragoons are pursuing us. If we reach Compiègne we shall stop at the Peacock. It is kept by a friend of ours."

"At last we have something definite," said Athos; "let us go to the Peacock."

"Yes," answered Aramis, "but if we are to get there we must rest our horses, for they are almost broken-winded."

Aramis was right; they stopped at the first tavern and made each horse swallow a double quantity of corn steeped in wine; they gave them three hours' rest and then set off again. The men themselves were almost dead with fatigue, but hope supported them.

In six hours they reached Compiègne and alighted at the Peacock. The host proved to be a worthy man, as bald as a Chinaman. They asked him if some time ago he had not received in his house two gentlemen who were pursued by dragoons; without answering he went out and brought in the blade of a rapier.

"Do you know that?" he asked.

Athos merely glanced at it.

"'Tis D'Artagnan's sword," he said.

"Does it belong to the smaller or to the larger of the two?" asked the host.

"To the smaller."

"I see that you are the friends of these gentlemen."

"Well, what has happened to them?"

"They were pursued by eight of the light dragoons, who rode into the courtyard before they had time to close the gate."

"Eight!" said Aramis; "it surprises me that two such heroes as Porthos and D'Artagnan should have allowed themselves to be arrested by eight men."

"The eight men would doubtless have failed had they not been assisted by twenty soldiers of the regiment of Italians in the king's service, who are in garrison in this town so that your friends were overpowered by numbers."

"Arrested, were they?" inquired Athos; "is it known why?"

"No, sir, they were carried off instantly, and had not even time to tell me why; but as soon as they were gone I found this broken sword-blade, as I was helping to raise two dead men and five or six wounded ones."

"'Tis still a consolation that they were not wounded," said Aramis.

"Where were they taken?" asked Athos.

"Toward the town of Louvres," was the reply.

The two friends having agreed to leave Blaisois and Grimaud at Compiègne with the horses, resolved to take post horses; and having snatched a hasty dinner they continued their journey to Louvres. Here they found only one inn, in which was consumed a liqueur which preserves its reputation to our time and which is still made in that town.

"Let us alight here," said Athos. "D'Artagnan will not have let slip an opportunity of drinking a glass of this liqueur, and at the same time leaving some trace of himself."

They went into the town and asked for two glasses of liqueur, at the counter--as their friends must have done before them. The counter was covered with a plate of pewter; upon this plate was written with the point of a large pin: "Rueil... D.."

"They went to Rueil," cried Aramis.

"Let us go to Rueil," said Athos.

"It is to throw ourselves into the wolf's jaws," said Aramis.

"Had I been as great a friend of Jonah as I am of D'Artagnan I should

have followed him even into the inside of the whale itself; and you would have done the same, Aramis."

"Certainly--but you make me out better than I am, dear count. Had I been alone I should scarcely have gone to Rueil without great caution. But where you go, I go."

They then set off for Rueil. Here the deputies of the parliament had just arrived, in order to enter upon those famous conferences which were to last three weeks, and produced eventually that shameful peace, at the conclusion of which the prince was arrested. Rueil was crowded with advocates, presidents and councillors, who came from the Parisians, and, on the side of the court, with officers and guards; it was therefore easy, in the midst of this confusion, to remain as unobserved as any one might wish; besides, the conferences implied a truce, and to arrest two gentlemen, even Frondeurs, at this time, would have been an attack on the rights of the people.

The two friends mingled with the crowd and fancied that every one was occupied with the same thought that tormented them. They expected to hear some mention made of D'Artagnan or of Porthos, but every one was engrossed by articles and reforms. It was the advice of Athos to go straight to the minister.

"My friend," said Aramis, "take care; our safety lies in our obscurity. If we were to make ourselves known we should be sent to rejoin our friends in some deep ditch, from which the devil himself could not take us out. Let us try not to find them out by accident, but from our



notions. Arrested at Compiègne, they have been carried to Rueil; at Rueil they have been questioned by the cardinal, who has either kept them near him or sent them to Saint Germain. As to the Bastille, they are not there, though the Bastille is especially for the Frondeurs. They are not dead, for the death of D'Artagnan would make a sensation. As for Porthos, I believe him to be eternal, like God, although less patient. Do not let us despond, but wait at Rueil, for my conviction is that they are at Rueil. But what ails you? You are pale."

"It is this," answered Athos, with a trembling voice.

"I remember that at the Castle of Rueil the Cardinal Richelieu had some horrible 'oubliettes' constructed."

"Oh! never fear," said Aramis. "Richelieu was a gentleman, our equal in birth, our superior in position. He could, like the king, touch the greatest of us on the head, and touching them make such heads shake on their shoulders. But Mazarin is a low-born rogue, who can at the most take us by the collar, like an archer. Be calm--for I am sure that D'Artagnan and Porthos are at Rueil, alive and well."

"But," resumed Athos, "I recur to my first proposal. I know no better means than to act with candor. I shall seek, not Mazarin, but the queen, and say to her, 'Madame, restore to us your two servants and our two friends.'"

Aramis shook his head.

"'Tis a last resource, but let us not employ it till it is imperatively called for; let us rather persevere in our researches."

They continued their inquiries and at last met with a light dragoon who had formed one of the guard which had escorted D'Artagnan to Rueil.

Athos, however, perpetually recurred to his proposed interview with the queen.

"In order to see the queen," said Aramis, "we must first see the cardinal; and when we have seen the cardinal--remember what I tell you, Athos--we shall be reunited to our friends, but not in the way you wish. Now, that way of joining them is not very attractive to me, I confess. Let us act in freedom, that we may act well and quickly."

"I shall go," he said, "to the queen."

"Well, then," answered Aramis, "pray tell me a day or two beforehand, that I may take that opportunity of going to Paris."

"To whom?"

"Zounds! how do I know? perhaps to Madame de Longueville. She is all-powerful yonder; she will help me. But send me word should you be arrested, for then I will return directly."

"Why do you not take your chance and be arrested with me?"

"No, I thank you."

"Should we, by being arrested, be all four together again, we should not, I am not sure, be twenty-four hours in prison without getting free."

"My friend, since I killed Chatillon, adored of the ladies of Saint Germain, I am too great a celebrity not to fear a prison doubly. The queen is likely to follow Mazarin's counsels and to have me tried."

"Do you think she loves this Italian so much as they say she does?"

"Did she not love an Englishman?"

"My friend, she is a woman."

"No, no, you are deceived--she is a queen."

"Dear friend, I shall sacrifice myself and go and see Anne of Austria."

"Adieu, Athos, I am going to raise an army."

"For what purpose?"

"To come back and besiege Rueil."

"Where shall we meet again?"

"At the foot of the cardinal's gallows."

The two friends departed--Aramis to return to Paris, Athos to take measures preparatory to an interview with the queen.