

Chapter 84. Strength and Sagacity--Continued.

Supper was eaten in silence, but not in sadness; for from time to time one of those sweet smiles which were habitual to him in moments of good-humor illumined the face of D'Artagnan. Not a scintilla of these was lost on Porthos; and at every one he uttered an exclamation which betrayed to his friend that he had not lost sight of the idea which possessed his brain.

At dessert D'Artagnan reposed in his chair, crossed one leg over the other and lounged about like a man perfectly at his ease.

Porthos rested his chin on his hands, placed his elbows on the table and looked at D'Artagnan with an expression of confidence which imparted to that colossus an admirable appearance of good-fellowship.

"Well?" said D'Artagnan, at last.

"Well!" repeated Porthos.

"You were saying, my dear friend----"

"No; I said nothing."

"Yes; you were saying you wished to leave this place."

"Ah, indeed! the will was never wanting."

"To get away you would not mind, you added, knocking down a door or a wall."

"'Tis true--I said so, and I say it again."

"And I answered you, Porthos, that it was not a good plan; that we couldn't go a hundred steps without being recaptured, because we were without clothes to disguise ourselves and arms to defend ourselves."

"That is true; we should need clothes and arms."

"Well," said D'Artagnan, rising, "we have them, friend Porthos, and even something better."

"Bah!" said Porthos, looking around.

"Useless to look; everything will come to us when wanted. At about what time did we see the two Swiss guards walking yesterday?"

"An hour after sunset."

"If they go out to-day as they did yesterday we shall have the honor, then, of seeing them in half an hour?"

"In a quarter of an hour at most."

"Your arm is still strong enough, is it not, Porthos?"

Porthos unbuttoned his sleeve, raised his shirt and looked complacently on his strong arm, as large as the leg of any ordinary man.

"Yes, indeed," said he, "I believe so."

"So that you could without trouble convert these tongs into a hoop and yonder shovel into a corkscrew?"

"Certainly." And the giant took up these two articles, and without any apparent effort produced in them the metamorphoses suggested by his companion.

"There!" he cried.

"Capital!" exclaimed the Gascon. "Really, Porthos, you are a gifted individual!"

"I have heard speak," said Porthos, "of a certain Milo of Crotona, who performed wonderful feats, such as binding his forehead with a cord and bursting it--of killing an ox with a blow of his fist and carrying it home on his shoulders, et cetera. I used to learn all these feat by heart yonder, down at Pierrefonds, and I have done all that he did except breaking a cord by the corrugation of my temples."

"Because your strength is not in your head, Porthos," said his friend.

"No; it is in my arms and shoulders," answered Porthos with gratified naivete.

"Well, my dear friend, let us approach the window and there you can match your strength against that of an iron bar."

Porthos went to the window, took a bar in his hands, clung to it and bent it like a bow; so that the two ends came out of the sockets of stone in which for thirty years they had been fixed.

"Well! friend, the cardinal, although such a genius, could never have done that."

"Shall I take out any more of them?" asked Porthos.

"No; that is sufficient; a man can pass through that."

Porthos tried, and passed the upper portion of his body through.

"Yes," he said.

"Now pass your arm through this opening."

"Why?"

"You will know presently--pass it."

Porthos obeyed with military promptness and passed his arm through the opening.

"Admirable!" said D'Artagnan.

"The scheme goes forward, it seems."

"On wheels, dear friend."

"Good! What shall I do now?"

"Nothing."

"It is finished, then?"

"No, not yet."

"I should like to understand," said Porthos.

"Listen, my dear friend; in two words you will know all. The door of the guardhouse opens, as you see."

"Yes, I see."

"They are about to send into our court, which Monsieur de Mazarin crosses on his way to the orangery, the two guards who attend him."

"There they are, coming out."

"If only they close the guardhouse door! Good! They close it."

"What, then?"

"Silence! They may hear us."

"I don't understand it at all."

"As you execute you will understand."

"And yet I should have preferred----"

"You will have the pleasure of the surprise."

"Ah, that is true."

"Hush!"

Porthos remained silent and motionless.

In fact, the two soldiers advanced on the side where the window was, rubbing their hands, for it was cold, it being the month of February.

At this moment the door of the guardhouse was opened and one of the soldiers was summoned away.

"Now," said D'Artagnan, "I am going to call this soldier and talk

to him. Don't lose a word of what I'm going to say to you, Porthos.
Everything lies in the execution."

"Good, the execution of plots is my forte."

"I know it well. I depend on you. Look, I shall turn to the left, so that the soldier will be at your right, as soon as he mounts on the bench to talk to us."

"But supposing he doesn't mount?"

"He will; rely upon it. As soon as you see him get up, stretch out your arm and seize him by the neck. Then, raising him up as Tobit raised the fish by the gills, you must pull him into the room, taking care to squeeze him so tight that he can't cry out."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "Suppose I happen to strangle him?"

"To be sure there would only be a Swiss the less in the world; but you will not do so, I hope. Lay him down here; we'll gag him and tie him--no matter where--somewhere. So we shall get from him one uniform and a sword."

"Marvelous!" exclaimed Porthos, looking at the Gascon with the most profound admiration.

"Pooh!" replied D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Porthos, recollecting himself, "but one uniform and one sword will not suffice for two."

"Well; but there's his comrade."

"True," said Porthos.

"Therefore, when I cough, stretch out your arm."

"Good!"

The two friends then placed themselves as they had agreed, Porthos being completely hidden in an angle of the window.

"Good-evening, comrade," said D'Artagnan in his most fascinating voice and manner.

"Good-evening, sir," answered the soldier, in a strong provincial accent.

"'Tis not too warm to walk," resumed D'Artagnan.

"No, sir."

"And I think a glass of wine will not be disagreeable to you?"

"A glass of wine will be extremely welcome."

"The fish bites--the fish bites!" whispered the Gascon to Porthos.

"I understand," said Porthos.

"A bottle, perhaps?"

"A whole bottle? Yes, sir."

"A whole bottle, if you will drink my health."

"Willingly," answered the soldier.

"Come, then, and take it, friend," said the Gascon.

"With all my heart. How convenient that there's a bench here. Egad! one would think it had been placed here on purpose."

"Get on it; that's it, friend."

And D'Artagnan coughed.

That instant the arm of Porthos fell. His hand of iron grasped, quick as lightning, firm as a pair of blacksmith's pincers, the soldier's throat. He raised him, almost stifling him as he drew him through the aperture, at the risk of flaying him in the passage. He then laid him down on the floor, where D'Artagnan, after giving him just time enough to draw his breath, gagged him with his long scarf; and the moment he had done so began to undress him with the promptitude and dexterity of a man who had

learned his business on the field of battle. Then the soldier, gagged and bound, was placed upon the hearth, the fire of which had been previously extinguished by the two friends.

"Here's a sword and a dress," said Porthos.

"I take them," said D'Artagnan, "for myself. If you want another uniform and sword you must play the same trick over again. Stop! I see the other soldier issue from the guardroom and come toward us."

"I think," replied Porthos, "it would be imprudent to attempt the same manoeuvre again; it is said that no man can succeed twice in the same way, and a failure would be ruinous. No; I will go down, seize the man unawares and bring him to you ready gagged."

"That is better," said the Gascon.

"Be ready," said Porthos, as he slipped through the opening.

He did as he said. Porthos seized his opportunity, caught the next soldier by his neck, gagged him and pushed him like a mummy through the bars into the room, and entered after him. Then they undressed him as they had done the first, laid him on their bed and bound him with the straps which composed the bed--the bedstead being of oak. This operation proved as great a success as the first.

"There," said D'Artagnan, "this is capital! Now let me try on the dress of yonder chap. Porthos, I doubt if you can wear it; but should it be

too tight, never mind, you can wear the breastplate and the hat with the red feathers."

It happened, however, that the second soldier was a Swiss of gigantic proportions, so, save that some few of the seams split, his uniform fitted Porthos perfectly.

They then dressed themselves.

"'Tis done!" they both exclaimed at once. "As to you, comrades," they said to the men, "nothing will happen to you if you are discreet; but if you stir you are dead men."

The soldiers were complaisant; they had found the grasp of Porthos pretty powerful and that it was no joke to fight against it.

"Now," said D'Artagnan, "you wouldn't be sorry to understand the plot, would you, Porthos?"

"Well, no, not very."

"Well, then, we shall go down into the court."

"Yes."

"We shall take the place of those two fellows."

"Well?"

"We will walk back and forth."

"That's a good idea, for it isn't warm."

"In a moment the valet-de-chambre will call the guard, as he did yesterday and the day before."

"And we shall answer?"

"No, on the contrary, we shall not answer."

"As you please; I don't insist on answering."

"We will not answer, then; we will simply settle our hats on our heads and we will escort his eminence."

"Where shall we escort him?"

"Where he is going--to visit Athos. Do you think Athos will be sorry to see us?"

"Oh!" cried Porthos, "oh! I understand."

"Wait a little, Porthos, before crying out; for, on my word, you haven't reached the end," said the Gascon, in a jesting tone.

"What is to happen?" said Porthos.

"Follow me," replied D'Artagnan. "The man who lives to see shall see."

And slipping through the aperture, he alighted in the court. Porthos followed him by the same road, but with more difficulty and less diligence. They could hear the two soldiers shivering with fear, as they lay bound in the chamber.

Scarcely had the two Frenchmen touched the ground when a door opened and the voice of the valet-de-chambre called out:

"Make ready!"

At the same moment the guardhouse was opened and a voice called out:

"La Bruyere and Du Barthois! March!"

"It seems that I am named La Bruyere," remarked D'Artagnan.

"And I, Du Barthois," added Porthos.

"Where are you?" asked the valet-de-chambre, whose eyes, dazzled by the light, could not clearly distinguish our heroes in the gloom.

"Here we are," said the Gascon.

"What say you to that, Monsieur du Vallon?" he added in a low tone to Porthos.

"If it but lasts, most capital," responded Porthos.

These two newly enlisted soldiers marched gravely after the valet-de-chambre, who opened the door of the vestibule, then another which seemed to be that of a waiting-room, and showing them two stools:

"Your orders are very simple," he said; "don't allow anybody, except one person, to enter here. Do you hear--not a single creature! Obey that person implicitly. On your return you cannot make a mistake. You have only to wait here till I release you."

D'Artagnan was known to this valet-de-chambre, who was no other than Bernouin, and he had during the last six or eight months introduced the Gascon a dozen times to the cardinal. The Gascon, therefore, instead of answering, growled out "Ja! Ja!" in the most German and the least Gascon accent possible.

As for Porthos, on whom D'Artagnan had impressed the necessity of absolute silence and who did not even now begin to comprehend the scheme of his friend, which was to follow Mazarin in his visit to Athos, he was simply mute. All that he was allowed to say, in case of emergencies, was the proverbial *Der Teufel!*

Bernouin shut the door and went away. When Porthos heard the key turn in the lock he began to be alarmed, lest they should only have exchanged one prison for another.

"Porthos, my friend," said D'Artagnan, "don't distrust Providence! Let me meditate and consider."

"Meditate and consider as much as you like," replied Porthos, who was now quite out of humor at seeing things take this turn.

"We have walked eight paces," whispered D'Artagnan, "and gone up six steps, so hereabouts is the pavilion called the pavilion of the orangery. The Comte de la Fere cannot be far off, only the doors are locked."

"That is a slight difficulty," said Porthos, "and a good push with the shoulders----"

"For God's sake, Porthos my friend, reserve your feats of strength, or they will not have, when needed, the honor they deserve. Have you not heard that some one is coming here?"

"Yes."

"Well, that some one will open the doors."

"But, my dear fellow, if that some one recognizes us, if that some one cries out, we are lost; for you don't propose, I imagine, that I shall kill that man of the church. That might do if we were dealing with Englishmen or Germans."

"Oh, may God keep me from it, and you, too!" said D'Artagnan. "The young

king would, perhaps, show us some gratitude; but the queen would never forgive us, and it is she whom we have to consider. And then, besides, the useless blood! never! no, never! I have my plan; let me carry it out and we shall laugh."

"So much the better," said Porthos; "I feel some need of it."

"Hush!" said D'Artagnan; "the some one is coming."

The sound of a light step was heard in the vestibule. The hinges of the door creaked and a man appeared in the dress of a cavalier, wrapped in a brown cloak, with a lantern in one hand and a large beaver hat pulled down over his eyes.

Porthos effaced himself against the wall, but he could not render himself invisible; and the man in the cloak said to him, giving him his lantern:

"Light the lamp which hangs from the ceiling."

Then addressing D'Artagnan:

"You know the watchword?" he said.

"Ja!" replied the Gascon, determined to confine himself to this specimen of the German tongue.

"Tedesco!" answered the cavalier; "va bene."

And advancing toward the door opposite to that by which he came in, he opened it and disappeared behind it, shutting it as he went.

"Now," asked Porthos, "what are we to do?"

"Now we shall make use of your shoulder, friend Porthos, if this door proves to be locked. Everything in its proper time, and all comes right to those who know how to wait patiently. But first barricade the first door well; then we will follow yonder cavalier."

The two friends set to work and crowded the space before the door with all the furniture in the room, as not only to make the passage impassable, but so to block the door that by no means could it open inward.

"There!" said D'Artagnan, "we can't be overtaken. Come! forward!"

