So Porthos sat down to table without another word, and ate with an appetite that did honor to the confidence which D'Artagnan's imagination had inspired him with.

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CHAPTER LXXXII.

STRENGTH AND SACRIFICE—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 his moments of good-humor illuminated the face of D'Artagnan. Not one of these smiles 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 another, and lounged about like a man perfectly at his ease.

"Well?" he said, at last.

"Well!" repeated Porthos.

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

"No; I said nothing!"

"Well, you were saying you wished to leave this place."

"Ah, indeed! will it not want!"

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

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

"At what o'clock did we see, pray, the two Swiss guards walk last night?"

"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," he said, "pretty good."

"So that you could without trouble convert these tongs into a hook, and the shovel into a corkscrew?"

"Certainly." And the guest took up these two articles, and, without any apparent effort, produced in them the metamorphosis requested 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 Crete, 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, etc. I used to learn all these feats by heart, yonder, down at P:intofonda, and I have done all that he did except breaking a cord by the swelling 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 naïveté.

"Well, my dear friend, let us go near the window, and try your strength in severing an iron bar."

Porthos approached the window, took a bar in his hands, chunck 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 trunk of his body through.

"Yes," he said.

"Now pass your arm through this opening."

"Wh—?"

"You will know presently—pass it."

"I wish to know, however, that I may understand," said Porthos.

"You will know directly; see, the door of the guard-room opens. They are going to send into the court the two guards who accompany Monsieur Mazarin when he crosses into the orangery. See, they are coming out, and have closed the door of the guard-room after them.

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 guard-house 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 hear a word of what I'm going to say to you, Porthos. Everything is in the execution."

"Good, the execution of a plot 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 on it. As soon as you see him get up, stretch out your arm and seize him by his neck. Then, raising him up as Tobi raised the fish by the pips, you must pull him into your room, taking care to squeeze him so tight, that he can't cry out."

"Oh!" said Porthos. "Suppose I were 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.

"Poh!" replied D'Artagnan.

"Yes," said Porthos, recollecting himself, "but one uniform and one sword are not enough 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 very 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 to 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. Eheu! 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, and firm as a pair of pincers, the soldier's throat. He raised him, almost stifling him as he drew him through the aperture at the risk of slaying him as he pulled him through.

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 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 carried inside the heart of 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 guard room, and come toward us."

"I think," replied Porthos, "it would be imprudent to attempt the same maneuver again; a failure would be ruinous. No; I will go down, seize the man unawares, and bring him to you ready gagged."

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 compassed the bed—the bed stead being of oak. This operation proved as successful as the first.

"There," said D'Artagnan, "'tis 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 breast-plate, and the hat with the red feathers."

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

They then dressed themselves.

"This 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 rather powerful, and that it was no joke to contend against.

D'Artagnan then made Porthos aware of his plan of action, which Porthos then only partially comprehended.

"What is to happen?" he asked.

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

And, slipping through the aperture, he alighted in the court.

Scurrying had the two Frenchmen touched the ground than a door opened, and the voice of the valet-de-chambre called out:

"Make ready!"

At the same moment the guard-house was opened, and a voice called out:

"La Bruyère and Du Bartolomé! March!"

"It seems that I am named La Bruyère," said D'Artagnan.


"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 last, it is capital," answered 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 a person, to enter here. Do you hear—not a single creature!? Obey that person completely. 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 "Jaf, jaf!" in the most German and the least Gascon accent possible.

As to Porthos, with whom D'Artagnan had insisted on a perfect silence, and who did not even now begin to comprehend the scheme of his friend, which was to follow Mazarin in his visit to Athes. He was mute. All that he was allowed to say, in case of emergencies, being the proverbial and solemn "Der Testef!"

Bernouin went away and shut the door. When Porthos heard the key of the lock turn, 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 Fère cannot be far off, only the doors are locked."

"A grand difficulty!" cried Porthos.

"Hush!" said D'Artagnan.

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 lanter in his hand, and a large beaver hat pulled down over his eyes.

Porthos stood with his face 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.

"I beg your pardon," answered the cavalier; "we have.

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 should 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, and 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, so as not only to make the passage impassable, but that the door could not open inward.

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

CHAPTER LXXXIII.

THE QUELLETTS OF CARDINAL MAZARIN.

At first, on arriving at the door through which Mazarin had passed, D'Artagnan tried in vain to open it, but on the powerful shoulder of Porthos being applied to one of the panels, which gave way, D'Artagnan introduced the point of his sword between the bolt and the staple of the lock. The bolt gave way, and the door opened.

"As I told you, everything can be got, Porthos, by means of women and doors."

"You're a great moralist, and that's the fact," said Porthos.

They entered: behind a glass window, by the light of the Cardinal's lantern, which had been placed on the floor in the midst of the gallery, they saw the orange and pomegranate trees of the castle.