



THE THREE MUSKETEERS

ALEXANDRE DUMAS

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ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Alexandre Dumas was a mixed-race French playwright, historian and prolific novelist, who penned a string of successful and celebrated books including *The Three Musketeers* (1844) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1845). His novels have been translated into a hundred different languages and inspired over two hundred films. In his day Dumas was as famous for his financial insouciance and flamboyant lifestyle as for his writing. His contemporary, Watts Phillips, remarked, 'He was the most generous, large-hearted being in the world. He was also the most delightfully amusing and egotistical creature on the face of the earth. His tongue was like a windmill – once set it in motion you never knew when he might stop.' Dumas died in 1870, remarking of Death, 'I shall tell her a story, and she shall be kind to me.'

WILL HOBSON

Will Hobson is a writer and translator from French and German. His translations include the Goncourt Prize-winning *The Battle* by Patrick Rambaud, *The Collector of Worlds* by Iliya Troyanov and *Being Arab* by Samir Kassir, which won the Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award 2007.

ALSO BY ALEXANDRE DUMAS

Georges

The Count of Monte Cristo

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The Three Musketeers

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INTRODUCTION

AN IMMEDIATE, AND COLOSSAL, SUCCESS, *The Three Musketeers* was serialised in the Parisian newspaper *Le Siècle* from March to July 1844 (and promptly followed in August of the same year, in a rival publication, by *The Count of Monte Cristo*). Its sequel, *Twenty Years After*, came out the following year, and the third, and longest, of the d'Artagnan romances, *The Viscount of Bragelonne* (a novel Robert Louis Stevenson loved so much, he read it six times) two years later – not to mention, in the same period, seven plays and fifteen other novels. No wonder Dumas, who had always worked on several things at once but, even by his standards, was now in a golden period, was called the ‘inextinguishable volcano’ by a contemporary critic. Already renowned, he became wildly famous, earned – and gleefully spent – huge sums of money, had countless affairs, travelled, built a theatre and a mansion, the Château de Monte Cristo, which he was forced by bankruptcy to sell six years later – and never stopped writing. The incredible momentum of *The Three Musketeers* – its repeated cry of *En avant!*, ‘Forward!’ – is therefore no coincidence. One of the reasons *The Three Musketeers* is so memorable, in fact, is the degree to which it bears the stamp of Dumas’s personality. Its relish for life, humour, warmth, flaws, comic bravado, and overriding sense of being undaunted, no matter what storm clouds are brewing, are all distinctly autobiographical.

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Alexandre Dumas *père* (1802–1870) was born at Villers-Cotterêts, fifty miles north-east of Paris. His mother, Marie-Louise Labouret, was a local innkeeper's daughter. His father, General Thomas-Alexandre Dumas, was the son of a white, dissolute French aristocrat, Marquis Alexandre-Antoine Davy de la Pailleterie, and a black slave, Marie Cessette Dumas, born in what is now Haiti.

When Dumas was three and a half, his father died of cancer, an event stirringly described in his memoirs. He had been sent with his two sisters to a neighbour's house on the day of the General's death. At midnight, there was a loud knock on the door. He got out of bed, convinced it was his father coming to say goodbye. The next morning, when he was told his father had died at midnight – or rather, 'that God had taken him back' – he went home, took one of his father's pistols and set off upstairs. When his distraught mother found him on the landing, she asked him what he was doing:

'I am going to heaven!'

'And what are you going to do in heaven, my poor child?'

'I am going to kill God who has killed Papa.'

It is a quintessential Dumas story, winning both for its exaggeration and for the kernel of truth it contains, for in a sense he repeated that scene for the rest of his life – left alone with his mother, whom he idealised, trying to emulate his father, whom he idolised, and permanently going into battle. The Goncourt brothers spoke for their contemporaries when they called him, 'An enormous, overflowing ego, but sparkling with wit and agreeably wrapped up in childish vanity'. Essential qualities for a storyteller, but even Alexandre Dumas *fils*, who did not find it easy being his son, is affectionate when he says, 'My father is a great big child whom I had when I was a boy. [He] was the

kind of man who would get up on the back of his own carriage and ride through the fashionable streets of Paris so people would exclaim: “Oh, look, Alexandre Dumas has his own Negro!”’

Fathers are obviously a central theme of *The Three Musketeers*, but *The Black Count* (Harvill Secker, 2012), Tom Reiss’s biography of Dumas’s actual father, is still electrifying. Thomas-Alexandre had a dizzying rise – joining the army just before the French Revolution as a private under his mother’s name (some scholars have suggested Dumas is in fact not a family name but a slave designation: *du mas* [property] ‘of the farm’), he had become General-in-Chief of the French Army of the Alps within seven years. And then an equally dizzying fall – a committed Republican, he quarrelled with Napoleon over the latter’s imperial ambitions; sent back to France, he was shipwrecked in Naples and imprisoned for almost two years; returning partly paralysed and deaf in one ear, he was unable to draw a pension and died leaving his wife and three children penniless.

In its derring-do, therefore, *The Three Musketeers* seems to be a homage to Thomas-Alexandre Dumas at the height of his powers, and Porthos Dumas’s way of keeping him alive. The bluff soldier dreaming of home comforts, the giant of a man under whose cloak d’Artagnan gets lost like a little boy, the only musketeer to find love and financial security, Porthos was Dumas’s favourite character. When the newspaper courier came to pick up one of the last instalments of the trilogy, so the story goes, he emerged from his office in tears, saying, ‘I have had to kill Porthos.’

But, of course, *The Three Musketeers* is a myriad other things, not least a supreme piece of storytelling. Besides his gifts for plotting, dialogue, and humour, Dumas’s genius as a storyteller lay in his ability to make his autobiographical preoccupations universal. For the first time, a mass audience existed – literacy

increased exponentially in the nineteenth century – and technological innovations, notably cheaper paper and the introduction of inked roller press, meant that the first modern newspapers such as *Le Siècle*, funded solely by advertisements, could achieve mass circulation. Dumas knew not only how to entertain with his tales of romance and adventure, but also how to appeal directly to the imaginations of his huge audience then, and ever since; to conjure up the spirit of youth, the challenge of setting out into the world, the need for friendship and loyalty, the open-hearted embrace of life, the quest for self-respect.

There's no need, therefore, to know about Dumas's life to respond to his novels. Once hooked, however, his autobiography is a huge pleasure. It is endlessly fascinating to read how, like d'Artagnan, he set off to Paris aged twenty-one with two louis d'or and a letter of introduction in his pocket, there 'to throw himself into literature as his father had thrown himself upon the enemy'; how he was as generous as Athos, as fond of ostentation as Porthos, as quick to respond to a slur, whether racial or literary, as any musketeer. His response to one bigot, for instance, has become famous. 'My father was a mulatto, my grandfather was a Negro, and my great-grandfather a monkey. You see, Sir, my family starts where yours ends.' As Mike Phillips has written, 'Dumas was what he was in a completely unselfconscious way. He emerged new and innovative into a society just recovering from the slaughters of previous decades. Innocent of almost everything but ready for everything, he pushed himself to the top, which is where he wanted to be, and in that sense his life is the most ambitious and interesting of his melodramas.'

Two questions arise: All this talk about men is all very well, but what about women: the damsels in distress; Aramis's dismal nonsense about women being the cause of all evil; Milady, the utterly evil villainess – how is that OK? And how on earth did

he publish, for instance, 43,000 pages between 1843 and 1846? Was he a conman?

I don't think that, in a minor sense, Dumas would have tried to defend himself against either of these charges. As I've said, he idealised his mother, whom he brought to Paris as soon as he could – he was supporting her, Laure Labay, Alexandre's mother, Alexandre and himself at the age of twenty-two. He could never form lasting relationships, always falling thunderously in and out of love. But he wasn't proud of it – witness his castigation of d'Artagnan's behaviour. And, in a larger sense, he might appeal to more unfashionable concepts, such as innocence, or that the musketeers' code applies to everyone, not just men; or indeed, he might plead his childlike egotism and vanity. Milady, after all, is so central that she is almost the book's anti-heroine, or rather, another part of her creator. She comes from nowhere, like d'Artagnan, and fights her way to the top. She is the one imprisoned, like Dumas's father and the Count of Monte Cristo; she is the one who has to tell a story to survive. But, in any case, Dumas would have left it up to the reader to judge. As a female admirer of his plays at the time wrote, 'The great talent of Dumas is to move souls; one does not worry about the means; one cries and is happy.' If he didn't move a reader, then obviously he wouldn't expect to be read.

Similarly, he was quite open about using collaborators, notably Auguste Maquet, whose arrival in his life triggered his golden period. And on occasion he definitely signed his names to things he hadn't written. A book of his was once criticised in his presence, for instance. 'That sounds a very poor novel,' he interjected. 'Who's it by?' When told it was by him, he said, 'Ah. In that case I shall have to have few words with Maquet.' So, as Stevenson said, he was 'alas, of doubtful honesty'. Or, to put it in a more contemporary way, a Pop artist *avant la lettre*, who knew the signature was all. But when it came to all the countless books

he did write, and for which we have the manuscripts in his writing, he would have simply explained his method. As the great Dumas scholar Claude Schopp has written, 'It has been suggested that Dumas did not have an inventive but a combinative imagination; most of the subjects he developed often came from others who had nothing more to sell than a primordial idea. Dumas executed the work, repaired the plan and then his hand took off on the paper.' Maquet, 'a theatrical jobber with good historical knowledge', had more to offer. He worked up drafts on Dumas's instructions, wrote scenes, did research. But then Dumas completely rewrote them, or rather used them as a starting point for something completely different. Charles Samaran's annotated edition of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* published in the Classiques Garnier (Paris, 1956), of which this is a translation, includes passages of Maquet's draft in an appendix. Maquet's first steps are not unrecognisable from the finished article, but they are totally dead. Dumas is obviously the author of the finished book, and when he and Maquet finally fell out, it was over royalties rather than anything else.

With his historical novels, Dumas sometimes came up with the story first. 'I try to make it romantic, moving, dramatic, and when scope has been found for the emotions and the imagination, I search through the annals of the past to find a frame in which to set it.' But in the case of *The Three Musketeers*, as he says in the preface, the idea came from *The Memoirs of M. d'Artagnan* (1700) by Courtilz de Sandras (1644–1712), which he chanced upon in Marseilles's library. A racy and apocryphal reworking of the more mundane life of Charles de Batz-Castelmore (c.1615–1673), who was a d'Artagnan on his mother's side, Courtilz describes his hero losing his letter of introduction in a quarrel on the way to Paris, meeting Athos, Porthos and Aramis in Monsieur de Tréville's antechamber,

falling foul of a ruthless Englishwoman called 'Milédi', travelling to England, and eventually becoming a musketeer. Taking this as his starting point, Dumas read other memoirs, in which he found episodes such as those of the diamond tags and the branding, set Maquet to work, and then, as was his way, told the story he wanted to tell.

Having decided to focus on the siege of La Rochelle in 1627–1628, he gleefully bends chronology to his ends – the historical d'Artagnan was ten in 1625, for instance. Grains of truth sprout in prodigious fashion – Richelieu's memoirs, for instance, suggest Buckingham's feelings for Anne of Austria played a part in his support for La Rochelle; Dumas seizes on this to sweep aside all military and political considerations and make him a man acting solely for love. Partisanship abounds: Richelieu, most obviously, is done a disservice as part of the book's general anti-clericalism, but Buckingham would also be unrecognisable to a seventeenth-century English reader; detested for his military incompetence, his assassination by John Felton was popularly acclaimed.

In a word, Dumas lets nothing get in the way of a good story, and spotting his historical inaccuracies, like his continuity errors, is one of the pleasures of reading him. If he had been a different writer, there would, of course, be no Athos, Porthos and Aramis. They are mentioned briefly in Courtilz, and their historical names are known – Athos was Armand de Sillègue d'Athos d'Autevielle, Porthos Isaac de Portau, and Aramis Henri d'Aramitz – but Dumas would have had nothing to go on if he had confined himself to historical fact.

His style is similarly beholden to no one. As Robert Louis Stevenson says about *The Viscount of Bragelonne*, 'Good souls, I suppose, must sometimes read it in the blackguard travesty of a translation. But there is no style so untranslatable; light as a

whipped trifle, strong as silk; wordy like a village tale; pat like a general's despatch; with every fault, yet never tedious; with no merit, yet inimitably right.' It should be read in French, therefore. But, failing that, William Barrow, *The Three Musketeers's* first translator in 1846, rose to the occasion, and Richard Pevear, its most recent and best in 2006, soared.

Pevear, of course, is renowned for his and Larissa Volokhon-sky's translations of Russian writers such as Tolstoy, so I turned eventually to his version with trepidation. It is, unsurprisingly, immaculate, resolving all the textual questions and triumphantly bringing the English text up to date. Apart from anything else, it reverses a bowdlerising tendency on the part of its Victorian translators to cast a veil over the musketeers' amorous exploits. In this, and every other respect, it is wonderful. But, such is the nature of translation, the number of minute literary judgements it involves (I have translated the text's stream of oaths and irreverent expostulations rather than leave them in French, for instance), I was not left feeling I had nothing to offer. The reader, of course, will be the judge of whether I was correct to do so.

Translating Dumas is partly a question of getting out of the way. His language, while occasionally purple (especially when indulging in the pathetic fallacy – 'It was a dark and stormy night!'), is plain and direct. His dialogue is sparkling, all parry and riposte. His way with action is unparalleled. But unsurprisingly, given the speed at which he wrote (no time to put in accents, or, indeed, any form of punctuation), his exposition sometimes suffers from the faults of which Stevenson speaks – pile ups, relative clauses stretching into the far distance, and so on. He was notably blithe about these. When one of his secretaries, for instance, drew his attention to a sentence in which the syntax was so muddled it was impossible to tell what he meant, he joked, '*Il n'y a que des tirets qui puissent nous tirer de là*,' which,

without the pun, could be translated as, ‘Dashes are our only hope here.’

Taking this as my cue, therefore, I have inserted dashes, actual and metaphorical, where they have seemed appropriate. In terms of diction, I have tried to steer a course between excessive fruitiness and dusty bookishness. Immediacy rather than notional period colour; pace rather than clunkiness. Anything that failed to capture the book as it reads in French – namely, as a supremely compelling and entertaining piece of storytelling for all ages – I avoided.

As I say, I look up to Pevear, not only for his translation but also his notes. David Coward’s wonderful annotated edition (Oxford University Press, 1991) has been invaluable. His introduction, like those of Anthony Burgess, Allan Massie, George Macdonald Fraser and Keith Wren, has been revelatory. This translation would also have been impossible, and without any merit, without Dominique Buchan, Frances Macmillan, Lorna Russell, Laura Hassan, Charlotte Marsden, Catherine Tice, Rachel Pole, Giles O’Bryen, Emma Kay, Derek Linzey, Roland Chambers, Annie Pesskin, Doug Lavin, Lusiné Kerobyan and Anthony Hobson. I am very grateful to them all.

Will Hobson, 2013

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PREFACE

In which it is established that, despite their names ending in -os, and -is, the heroes of the story we shall have the honour of telling our readers are not remotely mythical.

A YEAR OR SO AGO, while I was researching my history of Louis XIV¹ in the Bibliothèque Royale, I chanced upon the *Memoirs of M d'Artagnan*, which was printed – like the great majority of works from that period, when authors were keen to tell the truth without having to take a turn of any duration in the Bastille – in Amsterdam, by Pierre Rouge. The title caught my fancy; I took the memoirs home, with the librarian's permission of course, and devoured them.

My purpose here is not to analyse this curious work; I will simply refer those readers of mine who appreciate picturesque evocations of the time to its pages. There they will find portraits drawn by a masterly hand, and, although the sketches are mostly rendered on barrack doors and tavern walls, they will nonetheless recognise the likenesses of Louis XIII, Anne of Austria, Richelieu, Mazarin and most of the courtiers of the age, all as true to life as their equivalents in Monsieur Anquetil's history².

But, as we know, what strikes the poet's capricious mind is not always what makes an impression on the general reader. Now, whilst admiring, as others no doubt will also admire, the details we have mentioned, the thing that preoccupied us most

is something to which certainly no one before us had paid the least attention.

D'Artagnan relates that, on his first visit to Monsieur de Tréville, the captain of the king's musketeers, he met three young men in his antechamber who were serving in the illustrious corps, into which he was requesting the honour of being admitted, and who were called Athos, Porthos and Aramis.

We confess we were struck by these three strange names, and it immediately occurred to us that they were pseudonyms employed by d'Artagnan to disguise genuine, possibly illustrious alternatives – unless, that is, the bearers of these assumed names hadn't themselves chosen them on the day when, out of caprice, dissatisfaction or lack of fortune, they had donned the simple tabard of a musketeer.

From that moment on we did not rest until we had found in other works of the period some trace of these extraordinary names, which had roused our curiosity to such a pitch.

The catalogue of books we read to achieve this goal would in itself fill an entire instalment⁹, which might be highly educational but certainly not highly entertaining for our readers. We will, therefore, simply inform them that, just as we were about to abandon our researches, discouraged by endless unrewarding enquiry, we finally found, guided by the advice of our illustrious and erudite friend Paulin Paris, a manuscript folio numbered 4772 or 4773 – we don't remember this detail very clearly – entitled:

Memoirs of the Count de La Fère, concerning some of the events that transpired in France towards the end of the reign of King Louis XIII and the start of the reign of King Louis XIV.

One may imagine our jubilation when, leafing through this manuscript, our last hope, we found on the twentieth page the name Athos, on the twenty-seventh the name Porthos, and on the thirty-first the name Aramis.

The discovery of a completely unknown manuscript, in an age when historical science has progressed to such a high level, seemed well-nigh miraculous to us. We therefore hastened to request permission to have it printed, with the aim of presenting ourselves one day at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres with other men's baggage, in the unlikely event of us not having succeeded in entering the Académie Française⁴ with our own. This permission, we are duty bound to say, was graciously granted; which fact we here put on record to publicly refute those malicious persons who claim that we are living under a government that is less than entirely sympathetic to men of letters.

Now, it is the first part of this precious manuscript we are offering today to our readers; we have reinstated the title that suits it and if, as we have no doubt, this first part meets with the success it deserves, we undertake to publish the second forthwith⁵.

In the meantime, as a godfather is a second father, we ask our readers to hold us, rather than the Count de La Fère, responsible for their pleasure or tedium.

This being granted, let us proceed to our story.

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I

THE THREE GIFTS OF MONSIEUR D'ARTAGNAN PÈRE

ON THE FIRST MONDAY in the month of April 1625, the little market town of Meung¹, birthplace of the author of *The Romance of the Rose*, appeared to be in the throes of as full-blown a revolution as if the Huguenots had come to make it a second La Rochelle. Several townsmen, seeing women running off in the direction of the High Street and hearing children wailing on doorsteps, hurriedly strapped on their breastplates and, stiffening their somewhat uncertain resolve with a musket or a halberd, made for the Honest Miller inn², in front of which swarmed a dense, noisy, intensely curious throng that was growing larger by the minute.

Alarms were frequent in those times, and few days passed without one or other town recording an event of this sort in its archives. There were the nobles, who were warring among themselves; there was the king, who was making war on the cardinal; there were the Spanish, who were making war on the king³. And then, besides these veiled or public, clandestine or overt wars, there were also the robbers, the beggars, the Huguenots, the wolves and the lackeys, who made war on everybody. The townspeople always armed themselves against the robbers, the wolves and the lackeys; more often than not against the nobles and the Huguenots; occasionally against the king; but never against the cardinal and the Spanish. This settled way of

doing things meant, therefore, that when the townspeople heard a commotion on the aforesaid first Monday in April 1625 and saw neither the yellow and red flag⁺ nor the Duke de Richelieu's livery, they rushed to the Honest Miller.

When they got there, the cause of the uproar was plain for all to see and identify.

A young man . . . Let's sketch his likeness with a quick stroke of the pen. Imagine Don Quixote at eighteen, Don Quixote not in body armour, without coat of mail, without cuisses, Don Quixote in a woollen doublet that had once been blue but was now an indefinable shade of wine dregs and azure. He had a long, tanned face, high cheekbones – a sign of astuteness – bulging jaw muscles – a sure-fire way to recognise a Gascon, even when there's no beret in evidence, and our young man was wearing a beret adorned with a feather of some sort – alert, intelligent eyes, and a finely chiselled, if hooked, nose. Too tall for an adolescent, too short for a grown man, an unseasoned observer might have taken him for a farmer's son on a journey if it weren't for the long sword hanging from a leather baldric that banged against its owner's calves when he walked, and against his mount's shaggy coat when he rode.

For our young man had a mount – he had such a remarkable mount, in fact, that it did not go unremarked. It was a little Béarnais nag, about thirteen years old, with a yellow coat, no hair on its tail, no lack of sores on its legs, and the ability, despite walking with its head below its knees, which made the use of the martingale pointless, to plod along for its regulation eight leagues a day. Unfortunately this steed's qualities were so well concealed under its strange coat and bizarre gait that, in an age when everyone was an expert on horses, the appearance of the aforementioned little nag in Meung, into which it had ridden a quarter of an hour earlier by the Beaugency gate, caused a sensation that reflected equally badly on its rider.

This sensation had been all the more mortifying for young d'Artagnan (as this Rocinante's⁵ Don Quixote was called) because he was under no illusions as to how ridiculous such a mount made him look, however good a horseman he might be. Consequently he had accepted it as a present from the elder Monsieur d'Artagnan with a heavy sigh. He was not blind to the fact that such an animal was worth at least twenty livres, but it was equally true that the speech accompanying its presentation had been beyond price.

'My son,' the Gascon gentleman had said in that thick Béarnais twang⁶ Henri IV had never managed to shake off, 'this horse was born in your father's household getting on for thirteen years ago, and it has remained here ever since – this alone should give you grounds to love it. Never sell it, let it die peacefully and honourably of old age, and if you take it on a campaign, nurse it as you would an old servant. At court,' the elder Monsieur d'Artagnan continued, 'if, that is, you have the honour to go – an honour to which, incidentally, your ancient lineage entitles you – uphold with dignity your noble name, which has been borne by your ancestors with dignity for over five hundred years. For your sake and for that of your kind – by your kind, I mean your relations and your friends – don't stand for anything from anyone except the cardinal and the king. You have to understand that it is by his courage – by his courage alone – that a gentleman makes his way today. A man who trembles for a second may let slip the prize that at that very second fortune is holding out to him. You are young and you should be brave for two reasons: first, because you are Gascon, and second, because you are my son. Never be afraid of opportunities, always be on the lookout for adventures. I have taught you to handle a sword, you have legs of iron and a fist of steel, so fight at every turn – and be all the more ready to fight because duels are forbidden and hence require double the

courage. All I have to give you, my son, is fifteen écus, my horse and the advice you've just heard. Your mother will add the recipe of a certain balm she got from a Bohemian woman, which has a wondrous healing effect on any wound that has not reached the heart. Make the most of everything, and live happily and to an old age. I have only one thing to add, to offer you an example – not mine, because for my part I have never appeared at court, and only served in the wars of religion⁷ as a volunteer. No, I mean Monsieur de Tréville's, who was my neighbour once, and who had the honour when he was a little child of playing with our king, Louis XIII, may God preserve him! Sometimes their games degenerated into scraps and the king didn't always prove to be the strongest. The blows he received gave him a good deal of esteem and affection for Monsieur de Tréville. Later, on his first trip to Paris, Monsieur de Tréville fought five duels; from the death of the late king until the young heir's coming of age, setting aside wars and sieges, he fought a further seven, and from that majority until today, perhaps a hundred more!

'And so, despite all the edicts, ordinances and decrees, here he is, captain of the musketeers – that is, commander of a legion of Caesars which the king sets great store by and the cardinal stands in dread of, although he is a gentleman who, as everyone knows, stands in dread of very little. Furthermore, Monsieur de Tréville makes ten thousand écus a year, so he is a very great lord. He started out like you; go and see him with this letter, and model yourself on him so that you may attain all that he has accomplished.'

With this, Monsieur d'Artagnan père girded his own sword round his son's waist, tenderly kissed him on both cheeks and gave him his blessing.

Leaving his father's room, the young man found his mother waiting for him with the famous recipe, which, thanks to the

advice we have just reported, was sure to enjoy regular use. The farewells in this instance were longer and more tender than they had been in the previous one, not because Monsieur d'Artagnan did not love his son, who was his only child, but because Monsieur d'Artagnan was a man and he would have considered it unworthy for a man to give in to his feelings, whereas Madame d'Artagnan was a woman and, what's more, a mother.

She wept abundantly and, we say this in praise of the younger Monsieur d'Artagnan, however hard he tried to be staunch, as befitted a future musketeer, nature won out and he shed copious tears, half of which he managed with a great effort to hide.

The young man set out that same day, equipped with his father's three gifts, which, as we have said, consisted of fifteen écus, the horse and the letter for Monsieur de Tréville. The advice, understandably enough, was included by way of a supplement.

With such a vade-mecum, d'Artagnan was, mentally as well as physically, the very double of Cervantes' hero to whom we compared him so felicitously when our historian's duty impelled us to sketch his likeness. Don Quixote took the windmills for giants and the sheep for armies; d'Artagnan, for his part, took every smile for an insult and every look for a provocation. He thus had his fist clenched the whole way from Tarbes to Meung and clapped his hand to his sword on average ten times a day, and yet this fist of his didn't land on any jaw, nor did this sword ever leave its scabbard. This wasn't because the sight of the unfortunate yellow pony didn't engender plenty of smiles on passers-by's faces, but rather that, since a sword of respectable size clanked above this mount and an eye glinted with ferocity rather than pride above this sword, the passers-by repressed their mirth – or, if their mirth got the better of their prudence, they at least tried to laugh out of only one side of their mouths,

like classical masks. And so d'Artagnan proceeded majestically on his way, his finer feelings intact, until the unfortunate town of Meung⁸.

But there, as he was dismounting at the gate of the Honest Miller without anyone, innkeeper, waiter or stable boy, coming to hold his stirrup at the mounting-block, d'Artagnan spotted a gentleman at an open window on the ground floor – a haughty-looking, fine figure of a man, with a somewhat dour expression, who was conversing with two individuals who appeared to be hanging deferentially on his every word. D'Artagnan naturally assumed, as was his habit, that he was the subject of their conversation, and listened in. This time he was only partly mistaken; they weren't talking about him, but they were talking about his horse. The gentleman appeared to be enumerating all its qualities for his listeners' benefit and since, as I've said, his audience was inordinately deferential, they were constantly roaring with laughter. Now, as the intimation of a smile was enough to rouse the young man's ire, it is easy to understand the effect such rollicking hilarity had on him.

Before anything, though, d'Artagnan wanted to examine the features of the impertinent fellow who was ridiculing him. He trained his proud gaze on the stranger and saw a man aged between forty and forty-five with black, piercing eyes, a pale complexion, a strongly pronounced nose, and an impeccably trimmed, black moustache. He was dressed in violet breeches and a violet doublet with tags of similarly coloured lace, which was plain apart from the usual slashes for the shirt. Although new, the breeches and doublet looked rumpled, like travelling clothes that had been kept folded away in a portmanteau for a long time. D'Artagnan took in all these details with the alacrity of the most meticulous observer, no doubt also instinctively sensing that this stranger would have a great effect on the course his life was to take.

Now, since d'Artagnan trained his gaze on the gentleman in the violet doublet just as the object of his scrutiny was propounding one of his most erudite and profound theories about the Béarnais nag, the two men listening burst out laughing, and, contrary to his usual practice, the gentleman himself allowed a bleak smile to visibly hover, if one may use that expression, over his face. This time it was conclusive: d'Artagnan had genuinely been insulted. Convinced of this, he therefore pulled his beret down over his eyes and, attempting to copy some of the courtly airs he had seen displayed by noblemen on their travels in Gascony, stepped forward with one hand on his sword-hilt and the other on his hip. Unfortunately the further he went, the more his anger blinded him, so that instead of the dignified, lordly speech he had prepared to issue his challenge, at the moment of truth all he found on the tip of his tongue was a crude personal remark which he accompanied with a furious gesture.

'Hey, sir!' he cried. 'You sir, skulking there behind that shutter . . . yes, you! Tell me a jot of what's making you laugh and we can all laugh together.'

The gentleman slowly raised his eyes from mount to rider, as if he needed some time to take in the fact that such a strange rebuke was being addressed to him, and then, when there was no longer any room for doubt, his brow furrowed slightly, and after a rather long pause, with an indescribable note of irony and insolence in his voice, he replied to d'Artagnan, 'I am not speaking to you, sir.'

'I am, though!' the young man cried out, exasperated by this mixture of insolence and good manners, of etiquette and contempt. 'I am speaking to you.'

The stranger looked at him for another moment with his faint smile and then, stepping away from the window, sauntered out of the tavern to station himself in front of the horse, a few

paces away from d'Artagnan. His serene air and mocking expression had provoked even greater hilarity among his companions who remained by the window.

D'Artagnan, seeing him come out, drew his sword a foot from its scabbard.

'This horse unquestionably is, or has been in its youth, a buttercup,' said the stranger, continuing his disquisitions which he addressed to his listeners at the window, apparently oblivious to the mounting exasperation of d'Artagnan, even though he was drawing himself up to his full height between the man and his audience. 'It's a very common shade in botany, but, as yet, very rarely found in horses.'

'A man laughs at a horse who wouldn't dare laugh at its master!' Tréville's emulator cried furiously.

'I don't laugh much, sir,' replied the stranger, 'as you can see yourself from the cast of my features. But I am keen nevertheless to retain the privilege of laughing when it pleases me.'

'And I,' cried d'Artagnan, 'I do not want people laughing when it displeases me!'

'Indeed, sir?' said the stranger, calmer than ever. 'Well, that's perfectly reasonable.' And with that, he turned on his heel and made to go back into the inn by the main entrance, under which d'Artagnan had noticed on his arrival a saddled horse.

But d'Artagnan wasn't the type to let a man who had had the impudence to laugh at him just saunter away. He drew his sword fully from its scabbard and set off after him, crying, 'Turn, turn, won't you, Mr Snide, unless you wish me to strike you in the back.'

'Strike me!' said the other, swivelling on his heels and looking at the young man with equal parts surprise and contempt. 'Come now, what nonsense, dear boy, you're mad!' Then, in a low voice, as if he were talking to himself, he went on, 'It's

tiresome – what a find for His Majesty in his quest for stout fellows to recruit into his musketeers.’

He had barely finished when d’Artagnan aimed such a furious thrust at him that, if he hadn’t smartly jumped back, in all probability he would have made his last crack. The stranger saw then that matters had gone beyond a joke, and, drawing his sword, he saluted his adversary and gravely put himself on guard. But as he did so his two listeners, with the innkeeper in tow, fell on d’Artagnan and began belabouring him with sticks, shovels and tongs. Theirs was such a rapid and comprehensive diversionary attack that while d’Artagnan turned to face the hail of blows, his adversary sheathed his sword with the same crisp snap and reverted from would-be participant in the fight to spectator, a role he performed with his habitual impassivity, although not without muttering, ‘A plague on these Gascons! Put him back on his orange horse and let him be on his way.’

‘Not before I’ve killed you, you coward!’ cried d’Artagnan, bearing up as best he could and not yielding an inch to his three enemies who were pounding him with blows.

‘More Gascon bluster,’ muttered the gentleman. ‘On my honour, these Gascons are incorrigible! Well, on with the dance then, since he has his heart set on it. He’ll say he’s had enough when he gets tired.’

But the stranger didn’t know what manner of pig-headed individual he was dealing with yet; d’Artagnan wasn’t a man to seek quarter in any circumstances. So the fight went on for a few more seconds until finally, exhausted, d’Artagnan lost his grip on his sword which was broken in two by the blow of a stick. Another blow almost simultaneously split open his forehead and laid him out on the ground, barely conscious and covered in blood.

It was at this point that the townspeople came flocking from

all sides on to the scene. Fearing a scandal, the landlord carried the wounded man with the help of his stable boys into the kitchen where he was given some rudimentary attention.

As for the gentleman, he resumed his place at the window and stared out with a certain impatience at the great throng, which seemed by its continued presence to annoy him keenly.

‘Well, how is that mad dog?’ he said, turning when he heard the door open and addressing the innkeeper who had come to inquire after his health.

‘Your Excellency is safe and sound?’ inquired the landlord.

‘Yes, perfectly safe and sound, my dear innkeeper, that’s why I’m asking for news of our young man.’

‘He’s better,’ said the landlord. ‘He has fainted dead away.’

‘Really?’ said the gentleman.

‘But before he did, he summoned up all his strength to challenge and defy you in one and the same breath.’

‘My God, this strapping lad is the devil himself,’ cried the stranger.

‘Oh no, Your Excellency, the devil he is not,’ replied the landlord with a grimace of contempt. ‘We searched him when he was out cold and all he has is a shirt in his bundle and twelve écus⁹ in his purse. Not that that prevented him saying as he was going under that if such a thing had happened in Paris, you would have repented of it immediately, whereas here you’ll only repent of it at your leisure.’

‘Then he must be some prince of the blood in disguise,’ the stranger said coldly.

‘I thought I should inform you of this, sir,’ said the landlord, ‘so you could be on your guard.’

‘He didn’t mention any names in his rant?’

‘He did. He slapped his pocket and said, “We’ll see what Monsieur de Tréville thinks of this insult to his protégé.”’

‘Monsieur de Tréville?’ said the stranger, pricking up his

ears. 'He slapped his pocket and uttered Monsieur de Tréville's name? Look here, my dear innkeeper, while this young man of yours was dead to the world, I'm sure you didn't omit to have a look in that pocket as well. What did it contain?'

'A letter addressed to Monsieur de Tréville, captain of the musketeers.'

'Indeed.'

'It is as I have the honour to tell you, Excellency.'

The landlord, who wasn't endowed with great perspicacity, didn't notice the expression his words had produced on the stranger's face. The man moved away from the windowsill, which he had been leaning on with his elbow, and furrowed his brow like a worried man.

'Confound it,' he muttered, 'could Tréville have sent this Gascon after me? He's very young! Still, a sword thrust is a sword thrust, however old the person who deals it, and one's always less wary of a child. Sometimes a flimsy obstacle is enough to thwart a great plan.'

The stranger fell to thinking for a few minutes.

'Come now, innkeeper,' he said, 'can't you get rid of this maniac for me? In all conscience, I can't kill him, and yet,' he added with a coldly menacing expression, 'yet he bothers me. Where is he?'

'In my wife's room having his wounds dressed, on the first floor.'

'His clothes and bundle are with him? He hasn't taken off his doublet?'

'No, all that's downstairs in the kitchen. But since he bothers you, this young lunatic . . .'

'Most certainly. He's caused a scandal in your hostelry that no decent person could tolerate. Go up to your room, make out my bill and tell my valet.'

'What, monsieur is leaving us already?'

'You know that perfectly well since I've given you orders to have my horse saddled. Haven't they been obeyed?'

'They have, and as Your Excellency perhaps saw, his horse is under the main gate, accoutred and ready for the road.'

'All right. Do as I've told you then.'

Oh my word, the landlord thought, could he be afraid of this little lad? But an imperious glance from the stranger stopped him in his tracks. He bowed humbly and left the room.

'Milady¹⁰ mustn't be seen by that joker,' continued the stranger. 'It can't be long before she gets here; she's already late in fact . . . I should mount up and go to meet her, that would be best . . . If only I could find out the contents of this letter to Tréville . . .'

Still muttering to himself, the stranger headed towards the kitchen.

The innkeeper, meanwhile, who was certain it was the young lad's presence that was driving the stranger from his establishment, had gone up to his wife's room and discovered that d'Artagnan had finally come round. Impressing upon him that there was every chance the police would give him a beating for picking a quarrel with a lord – because, in the innkeeper's opinion, the stranger couldn't be anything but a lord – he convinced him, despite his weakened state, that he should get up and be on his way. D'Artagnan, therefore, half-stunned, without his doublet, his head swathed in bandages, got up and, with the innkeeper shoving him in the back, started down the stairs. But, when he got to the kitchen, the first thing he saw was his antagonist who was quietly conversing at the step of a heavy carriage drawn by two big Norman horses.

The person he was talking to, whose head was framed by the door, was a woman of around twenty or twenty-two. We have already said how quickly and appraisingly d'Artagnan took in the whole cast of a person's features, and so he saw at

a glance that the woman was young and beautiful. Her beauty struck him all the more forcibly because it was entirely alien to the southern parts of the country he had lived in until then. The woman was pale and blonde, with long curly hair that fell on her shoulders, large, languorous blue eyes, rosy lips and hands like alabaster. She was talking very animatedly to the stranger.

‘So, His Eminence bids me . . .’ she was saying.

‘To return immediately to England and inform him directly if the duke¹¹ should leave London.’

‘And my other instructions?’ asked the beautiful traveller.

‘They are in this box which you are not to open until you’ve crossed the Channel.’

‘Very well. What about you, what will you do?’

‘I’m going back to Paris.’

‘Without chastising that insolent little boy?’ asked the woman.

The stranger was going to reply but, as he was opening his mouth, d’Artagnan, who had heard everything, rushed out to the doorway.

‘That insolent little boy is the one who will mete out chastisement,’ he cried, ‘and I hope this time the man he has to chastise won’t escape him as he did before.’

‘Won’t escape him?’ the stranger repeated, frowning.

‘No, I assume you wouldn’t dare run away in front of a lady.’

‘Think,’ cried Milady, seeing the gentleman clapping his hand to his sword, ‘even a slight delay could ruin everything.’

‘You’re right,’ cried the gentleman. ‘You go off your way and I’ll go mine.’

With a nod of farewell to the woman, he leapt on to his horse while the coachman vigorously whipped his team. And then the two interlocutors set off at a gallop, each departing in opposite directions down the street.

'Ho there, your bill!' yelled the landlord, whose affection for the traveller was turning into deep contempt at the sight of him receding into the distance without having settled up.

'Pay, you good-for-nothing,' the traveller, without slackening his pace, yelled at his valet, who threw two or three silver coins at the innkeeper's feet, and then started off at a gallop after his master.

'Oh, you coward! You villain! You impostor!' cried d'Artagnan, taking off in turn after the valet.

But the wounded man was still too weak to take such a buffeting. He had barely gone ten paces before his ears were buzzing, he felt dizzy, a cloud of blood passed before his eyes, and he fell off his horse in the middle of the street, still shouting, 'Coward! Coward! Coward!'

'Such a coward, I agree,' murmured the landlord, going up to d'Artagnan, and attempting by this piece of flattery, like the heron and the snail¹² in the fable, to patch things up with the poor lad.

'Yes, an unqualified coward,' murmured d'Artagnan. 'Ah, but she, an unqualified beauty.'

'She who?' asked the innkeeper.

'Milady,' stammered d'Artagnan.

And then he passed out a second time.

It's much of a muchness, reflected the innkeeper. Two of them have packed their bags, but this one remains and I should be able to hang on to him for at least a few days. So that still leaves me eleven écus to the good.

Eleven écus, as we know, was the exact amount left in d'Artagnan's purse.

The innkeeper had reckoned on a convalescence of eleven days at an écu a day; he hadn't, however, reckoned on his traveller. The next day d'Artagnan got up at five in the morning, made his own way down to the kitchen and asked for a list of

ingredients, which, apart from those that have not been vouchsafed to posterity, included some wine, some oil and some rosemary. Then, his mother's recipe in hand, he prepared a balm with which he anointed his numerous wounds, and, refusing the assistance of a doctor, changed the compresses himself. Thanks, no doubt, to the efficacy of the Bohemian balm, and possibly also to the lack of any intervention from a medical practitioner, d'Artagnan was back on his feet that evening and virtually cured the following day.

But when he came to pay for the rosemary, oil and wine, which were the only extra expenses he had incurred (he had observed a starvation diet, whereas his yellow horse, according to the innkeeper at least, had eaten three times more than one would reasonably expect for an animal its size), all that d'Artagnan found in his pocket was his little worn velvet purse and the eleven écus it contained. As for the letter addressed to Monsieur de Tréville, that had disappeared.

The young man started by looking for this letter very patiently, turning out his pockets and fobs twenty times, repeatedly searching through his bundle, opening and shutting his purse, but when he was convinced it was gone for good, he flew into a third fit of rage which almost earned him a fresh dose of the spiced wine and oil. When they saw this young renegade getting into a lather and threatening to smash everything in the establishment if his letter wasn't found, the landlord reached for a pike, his wife for a broom handle and his waiters for the sticks that had served them the day before yesterday.

'My letter of introduction!' cried d'Artagnan. 'My letter of introduction, God's blood, or I'll skewer you all like ortolans¹³!'

Unfortunately a circumstance militated against the young man carrying out his threat; namely that, as we've said, his sword had been snapped in two in the first set-to, a detail that

had entirely slipped his mind. So when d'Artagnan came to draw in earnest, he found himself armed simply and solely with a sword-stump eight or so inches long, which had been carefully replaced in its scabbard by the innkeeper. As for the rest of the blade, the chef had deftly made off with it to use as a larding pin.

This reversal probably wouldn't have stopped our impetuous young man, however, if the innkeeper hadn't considered his guest's request perfectly reasonable.

'Now you say it,' he said, lowering his pike, 'where is this letter?'

'Yes, where is it?' cried d'Artagnan. 'First, I'll have you know, this letter is for Monsieur de Tréville and it must be found; otherwise, if you don't find it, he will have it found.'

This threat thoroughly intimidated the innkeeper. After the king and the cardinal, Monsieur de Tréville was the man whose name was probably most often on the soldiers', and even the townspeople's, lips. Father Joseph¹⁴ was another candidate for that title, certainly, but his name was only ever spoken in a whisper, such was the terror inspired by the Grey Eminence, as the cardinal's familiar was called.

So, throwing down his pike and telling his wife to do the same with her broom handle and his servants with their sticks, the innkeeper led by example and starting looking for the lost letter himself.

'Did it contain anything valuable?' he asked after a bout of fruitless rummaging.

'Beggars' blood, I should think so!' cried the Gascon, who was counting on the letter to help him make his way at court. 'It contained my whole fortune.'

'Savings bonds?' asked the innkeeper anxiously.

'Bonds on His Majesty's private treasury,' replied d'Artagnan who, hoping as he did that this letter of introduction would be his entry into the king's service, thought he could hazard this slightly rash response without actually telling a lie.

‘Confound it!’ said the landlord, in complete despair.

‘Never mind though,’ continued d’Artagnan with his native aplomb, ‘never mind, the money was nothing; the letter was everything. I would sooner have lost a thousand pistoles than lose it.’

He might just as well have said twenty thousand but a certain youthful reticence restrained him.

A ray of light suddenly struck the innkeeper’s mind as he was cursing his failure to find anything.

‘This letter isn’t lost at all!’ he cried.

‘Ah!’ said d’Artagnan.

‘No, it’s been taken from you.’

‘Taken? By whom?’

‘By the gentleman from yesterday. He went down to the kitchen where your doublet was. He was alone there. I’ll lay odds he stole it.’

‘Do you think so?’ d’Artagnan replied noncommittally, since he knew better than anyone the letter’s purely personal significance, and didn’t see how it could tempt the covetous. The fact was, none of the servants or travellers there stood to gain anything from possessing that piece of paper.

‘So you’re saying,’ d’Artagnan went on, ‘you suspect that impertinent gentleman?’

‘I tell you I’m certain of it,’ said the innkeeper. ‘When I told him Your Lordship was Monsieur de Tréville’s protégé, and that you even had a letter for this illustrious gentleman, he seemed very troubled, asked me where this letter was, and immediately went down to the kitchen where he knew your doublet had been left.’

‘Then he’s my thief,’ replied d’Artagnan. ‘I shall complain to Monsieur de Tréville, and Monsieur de Tréville shall complain to the king.’ Saying this, he majestically drew two écus from his pocket and gave them to the innkeeper, who accompanied him,

hat in hand, to the gate. He remounted his yellow horse which conveyed him without further incident to Paris's Porte Saint-Antoine, where it was sold by its owner for three écus, an excellent price, considering that d'Artagnan had exhausted the animal on the last stage of his journey. The horse dealer to whom d'Artagnan gave up the horse for the aforesaid nine livres left the young man in no doubt that he was only paying this exorbitant sum because of the originality of its colour.

D'Artagnan thus entered Paris on foot, carrying his little bundle under his arm, and he kept walking until he found a room to rent that suited his slender means. This room was a sort of garret in Rue des Fossoyeurs¹⁵, near the Luxembourg.

As soon as he had paid the key money, d'Artagnan took possession of his lodgings and spent the rest of the daylight hours sewing on to his doublet and stockings a set of lace trimmings that his mother had unpicked from one of the elder Monsieur d'Artagnan's all-but-new doublets, and given to him in secret. He then went to the Quai de La Ferraille¹⁶ to have his sword fitted with a new blade, and afterwards returned to the Louvre to inquire of the first musketeer he met the whereabouts of Monsieur de Tréville's residence. This proved to be on Rue du Vieux-Colombier¹⁷, that's to say in the vicinity of the room that d'Artagnan had rented, a circumstance that seemed to him to bode well for the success of his journey.

After which, satisfied with the way he had conducted himself at Meung, free of remorse for the past, confident in the present, and full of hope for the future, he went to bed and slept the sleep of the just.

This sleep, still every inch a country fellow's, saw him through to nine o'clock the next morning, at which hour he rose to make his way to the residence of the celebrated Monsieur de Tréville, in his father's estimation the third most eminent personage in the kingdom.

II

MONSIEUR DE TRÉVILLE'S ANTECHAMBER

MONSIEUR DE TROISVILLES, as his family was still called in Gascony, or Monsieur de Tréville, as he had ended up choosing to call himself in Paris, genuinely had started out like d'Artagnan, that's to say without two pennies to rub together, but with that store of audacity, wit and good judgement that means that the poorest Gascon squirrelling often receives more in his expectations than the richest gentleman from Périgord or Berry does in reality. His insolent bravery and if anything still more insolent good fortune at a time when blows rained down like hail had seen him rise to the top of that slippery ladder known as the favour of the court, and he had scaled it four rungs at a time.

He was counted a friend by the king, who, as is well known, revered the memory of his father Henri IV. Monsieur de Tréville's father had served the latter so faithfully in his wars against the League¹ that, lacking ready cash – something the Béarnais was short of all his life, constantly paying his debts with the only thing he never needed to borrow, namely wit – lacking ready cash, as we were saying, the king had granted him, after the surrender of Paris, the right to take as his coat of arms² a lion passant or on a field gules, with the motto *Fidelis et fortis*. This was a great boon for his honour, but only a middling one for his wellbeing. Consequently, when the great Henri's illustrious companion died, all he left his son were his sword and his motto. Thanks to this twofold legacy and the spotless name that went with it, Monsieur de Tréville was admitted into the young prince's household, where he served him so well with his sword and was so faithful to his motto that Louis XIII, one of the finest swordsmen of the realm, was in the habit of saying

that, if a friend of his had contracted to fight a duel and was looking for a second, his advice would be to choose him first and Tréville next, or perhaps even the other way round.

Louis XIII thus felt genuine affection for Tréville: affection of a regal, egotistical kind, it is true, but no less affection for all that. People went to great lengths in those ill-starred times to surround themselves with men of Tréville's stamp. Many gentlemen could take as their motto the epithet 'strong', which formed the second part of his device, but few could claim the epithet 'faithful', which formed the first. Tréville was one of them: his was one of those rare natures, as obedient and intelligent as a mastiff, possessed of blind courage, a quick eye and a ready hand, and it seemed as if he had been given the gift of sight solely to see if the king was displeased with someone, and that of strength solely to strike the offending party, a Besme, a Maurevers, a Poltrot de Méré or a Vitry³. In short, all Tréville needed in time was an opportunity, but he watched for it and promised himself he would grab it by its three hairs if it ever came within reach. And so Louis XIII made Tréville captain of his musketeers⁴, which in their devotion, or rather their fanaticism, were Louis XIII's equivalent of Henri III's regulars or Louis XI's Scots Guard⁵.

The cardinal, for his part, did not lag behind the king in this respect. When he saw the formidable elite with which Louis XIII was surrounding himself, this second, or rather this first, king of France wanted a guard of his own. Thus he had his musketeers, as Louis XIII had his, and the two rival potentates could be seen scouting all the provinces of France, and even all the foreign states, picking out renowned swordsmen to enter their service. Over their evening game of chess, Richelieu and Louis XIII would frequently debate their servants' merits. Each boasted of the demeanour and courage of his men, and while railing in public against duels and brawls, in private they

urged them to fight, and felt genuine sorrow and unbridled joy at their respective defeats and victories. Or so at least we are told by the memoirs of a man who participated in a number of these defeats and a great deal of these victories.

Tréville knew how to play on his master's weakness, a skill that earned him the long and constant favour of a king who has not left a reputation for being very faithful to his friendships. He paraded his musketeers in front of Cardinal Armand du Plessis with a mocking air that made His Eminence's grey moustache bristle with rage. Tréville unerringly understood the nature of war in those times when, if you weren't living at your enemy's, you were living at your countrymen's expense, and his soldiers formed a legion of lawless devils, who ran riot except when he called them to order.

Slovenly, drunken, scarred, the king's musketeers, or rather Monsieur de Tréville's, ranged through the taverns, the public walks and the gaming houses, yelling and twirling their moustaches, rattling their swords, gleefully barging into the cardinal's guards whenever they encountered them, then drawing their swords in the middle of the street with a thousand quips, sometimes to be killed, but certain in that case to be mourned and avenged, and often to kill, in which case they were certain not to rot in prison, since Monsieur de Tréville was there to claim them. And so Monsieur de Tréville was praised in every register, hymned in every key, by these men who adored him and who, thoroughgoing scoundrels though they were, trembled before him like schoolboys in the presence of their master, obeying his least word, and ready to go to their deaths to clear themselves of his least reproach.

Monsieur de Tréville had used this powerful lever primarily for the benefit of the king and the king's friends, and only secondarily for himself and his friends. Besides, in none of the memoirs of a time that has left so many memoirs, does one find

this worthy gentleman accused, even by his enemies – and he had as many of those among men of letters as he did among men at arms – nowhere, as we were saying, does one find this worthy gentleman accused of profiting personally from his fanatical adherents' support. Despite a rare gift for intrigue, which made him a match for the finest intriguers, he had remained an honest man. Furthermore, despite the swingeing swordplay that gives a soldier his stiff-hipped gait, and the endless, gruelling drills, he had become one of the most feted socialites, one of the most discriminating ladies' men, and one of the most honeyed and most delicate word-spinners of his age. People spoke of Tréville's conquests as they'd spoken twenty years earlier of Bassompierre's, and that is saying a great deal. Thus the captain of the musketeers was admired, feared and loved, which constitutes the apogee of human fortunes.

Whereas Louis XIV absorbed the light of all the lesser stars of his court into his vast effulgence, his father, a sun *pluribus impar⁶*, transmitted his personal splendour to each of his favourites, his individual merit to each of his courtiers. Apart from the levees of the king and the cardinal, Paris at the time numbered over two hundred smaller, relatively select levees. And of these two hundred smaller levees, Tréville's was one of the best attended.

From six o'clock in the morning in summer, and from eight o'clock in winter, the courtyard of his mansion on Rue du Vieux-Colombier resembled an army camp. Fifty to sixty musketeers, who seemed to take it in turns to maintain an imposing throng, paraded about constantly, armed as if for war and ready for every eventuality. Up and down the stairs – one of those great flights of steps that soar over an expanse our civilisation would consider fit for a whole house – flowed the petitioners from Paris, bent on securing some favour or other, the gentlemen from the provinces, with their eager hopes of enlistment, and

the valets decked out in every colour, bearing their masters' messages for Monsieur de Tréville. In the antechamber, on long circular benches, reclined the elect, that is, those who had been summoned for an interview. A buzz of voices lasted there from morning till night, while Monsieur de Tréville, in his office adjoining the antechamber, received visits, heard complaints, gave orders and, like the king from his balcony at the Louvre, only had to go to his window to review his men and their arms.

The day d'Artagnan presented himself, the crowd was daunting, especially to a country lad just up from his province – although it is true that, in this case, the country lad was a Gascon, and, in those times particularly, d'Artagnan's countrymen had a reputation for not being easily intimidated. But still, once one had gone through the massive door, studded with long square-headed nails, one found oneself in the midst of a mass of swordsmen milling around in the courtyard, hailing, quarrelling and playing games with one another. To clear a path through that eddying tide, one would have had to be an officer, a great lord or a pretty woman.

It was in the thick of this press and confusion that our young man made his way, his heart racing, tucking his long rapier down by his thin legs and holding one hand to the brim of his felt hat with the half-smile of the embarrassed provincial who wants to cut a good figure. Every time he passed a gang, he breathed more freely, but he sensed them turning round to look at him, and, for the first time in his life, d'Artagnan, who until then had entertained a fairly high opinion of himself, felt ridiculous.

When he reached the stairs, it was even worse. The bottom steps were occupied by four musketeers who were amusing themselves with the following exercise, while ten or twelve of their comrades waited on the landing until it was their turn to take part in the game.

The player on the upper step, drawn sword in hand, had to prevent, or at least try to prevent, the three others from ascending, while they went at him with a will, swords flying.

At first d'Artagnan took their weapons for fencing foils and assumed they were buttoned, but he soon realised from various nicks that in fact every blade was flawlessly whetted and sharpened. Whenever someone took a hit, not only the spectators but the protagonists themselves found it uproariously funny.

The fellow occupying the upper step at that moment was wonderfully adept at keeping his adversaries at arm's length. A circle formed around them. The rules were that every time someone was hit, he would leave the game and surrender his turn on Monsieur de Tréville's waiting list to the scorer. Within five minutes, the defender of the step had nicked three of his attackers, one on the wrist, another on the chin, and another on the ear, without getting a scratch in return – a display of skill which, according to the conventions, meant he jumped three places in the queue.

However blasé he aspired to be, rather than actually was, our young traveller was astonished by this pastime. He had seen a fair few preludes to duels in his province, which after all is a land where feelings are inordinately quick to run high, and yet the bravado of these four players seemed more fearless than anything he had heard of, even in Gascony. He thought he had been transported to that famous land of giants where Gulliver was to go later and be so terrified⁷. And yet that wasn't the end of it. The landing and the antechamber were still to come.

On the landing, the fighting was forgotten; instead they told stories of women, and in the antechamber, stories of court. On the landing, d'Artagnan blushed, and in the antechamber, he shuddered. His vivid, roving imagination, which in Gascony had made him the scourge of young chambermaids, and sometimes even of their young mistresses, had never dreamt, even in

its moments of wildest delirium, of half of these amorous marvels or a quarter of these feats of seduction, embellished with the most celebrated names and the least cryptic descriptions. But if his love of virtue was shocked on the landing, his respect for the cardinal was scandalised in the antechamber. There, to his complete astonishment, d'Artagnan heard openly criticised not only the politics that made all Europe tremble, but also the cardinal's private life, which so many eminent, powerful lords had been punished for trying to delve into. This great man, whom the elder Monsieur d'Artagnan held in such reverence, was the laughing stock of Monsieur de Tréville's musketeers. They mocked his bandy legs and round shoulders, sang halleluiahs about Madame d'Aiguillon, his mistress, and Madame de Combalet, his niece^s, and plotted forays against the cardinal- duke's pages and guards, all things which struck d'Artagnan as monstrous impossibilities. But when the king's name cropped up unexpectedly in the middle of all these cardinal-like gibes, a sort of gag muffled the mocking mouths for a minute. Everyone looked hesitantly around and seemed to fear the indiscretion of Monsieur de Tréville's office wall. But in no time an allusion would bring the conversation back to His Eminence, and then the sallies would start up with a vengeance and every possible light would be shone on his deeds.

These people are going to be thrown in the Bastille and strung up by the neck, every one of them, thought d'Artagnan, terrified, and I am too – of course I am, I've listened to them now and heard what they're saying, so I'll be accused of being their accomplice. My father gave me such strict instructions to respect the cardinal. What would he say if he knew I was in the company of such heathens?

Consequently, as you will have guessed without my needing to spell it out, d'Artagnan did not dare join in the conversation. He simply watched and listened, eagerly straining all his five

senses so as not to miss a thing, and despite his faith in his father's advice, found himself prompted by his tastes and inclined by his instincts to praise rather than blame the extraordinary behaviour he was witnessing.

As he was a complete stranger to Monsieur de Tréville's throng of courtiers, however, and this was the first time anyone had seen him in the place, someone came to inquire what he wanted. D'Artagnan very humbly gave his name, relying on the title of fellow countryman, and asked the valet, who had come to put this question, to solicit a moment's audience of Monsieur de Tréville on his behalf. In a patronising voice, the valet said he would pass on the request at an appropriate juncture.

Somewhat recovered from his initial surprise, d'Artagnan then had an opportunity to study a little the outfits and faces in the room.

In the middle of the most animated group was a tall musketeer, with a haughty face and an outlandish get-up that made him the centre of attention. He was not wearing a musketeer's tabard at the time – an item of uniform, incidentally, which was not absolutely obligatory in that age of lesser freedom but greater independence – but a sky-blue jerkin, ever so slightly faded and worn, and over this jacket, a magnificent gold-embroidered baldric that glittered like a fish's scales dripping with water in the noonday sun. A long crimson velvet cloak was draped gracefully over his shoulders, framing the front of the splendid baldric from which hung a gigantic rapier.

This musketeer, who had come off guard that minute, was complaining of a cold and coughing pointedly from time and time. Hence the decision to wear the cloak, he told all and sundry, and as he talked at the top of his voice and disdainfully curled up the ends of his moustache, everyone enthusiastically admired the embroidered baldric, d'Artagnan most of all.

'What would you have me do?' the musketeer was saying.

'Fashion has come to this. It's foolishness, I know, but it's the fashion. Besides, one has to spend one's inheritance on something.'

'Ah, Porthos!' cried out one of the onlookers. 'Don't try to make us believe it was fatherly generosity that added this bal-dric to your wardrobe. Surely it was the veiled lady I met you with the other Sunday near the Porte Saint-Honoré who gave it to you.'

'No, on my honour, and as I am a gentleman, I bought it myself, with my own money,' replied the man who had just been called Porthos.

'Yes indeed, just as I bought this purse with what my mistress put in the old one,' said another musketeer.

'No, it's true,' said Porthos, 'and the proof is I paid twelve pistoles.'

The general admiration increased, although some doubt seemed to persist.

'Isn't that so, Aramis?' said Porthos, turning to another musketeer.

This musketeer formed a perfect contrast to the individual who, in putting the question, had called him Aramis. He was a young man of barely twenty-two or twenty-three, with an artless, cherubic face – almost cloyingly so – black, gentle eyes, and rosy cheeks as downy as an autumn peach. His thin moustache traced a perfectly straight line along his upper lip; his hands seemed to be afraid to fall below the vertical lest their veins swelled, and from time to time he pinched the tip of his ears to make sure they remained a tender, transparent pink. He spoke sparingly and slowly, bowed a great deal, and laughed noiselessly, showing his teeth, which were handsome and apparently, like the rest of his person, the object of lavish care. He responded with an affirmative nod of the head to his friend's question.

This affirmation seemed to have resolved all doubt about the baldric. It continued to be admired, but no one talked about it any more, and by one of those sudden changes of thought, the conversation abruptly turned to another subject.

‘What do you think of the story of Chalais’s equerry?’ asked another musketeer, throwing the question out to the assembled company rather than addressing anyone in particular.

‘What story is this?’ asked Porthos condescendingly.

‘He says he found Rochefort, the Cardinal’s hound, in Brussels, disguised as a Capuchin friar, and that, thanks to this disguise, that cursed Rochefort had played Monsieur de Laigues like the fool he is.’

‘A cap-and-bells fool,’ said Porthos. ‘Do we know this for a fact though?’

‘I have it from Aramis,’ replied the musketeer.

‘Really?’

‘You know all about this, Porthos,’ said Aramis. ‘I told you the story yesterday, I made a point of it. So let’s talk about something else.’

‘Your opinion is that we should talk about something else?’ retorted Porthos. ‘Let’s talk about something else! By God, you wrap things up quickly! What, the cardinal gives orders for a gentleman to be spied on, has his correspondence stolen by a traitor, a felon, a gallows-bird, and then, with the help of this spy and by means of this correspondence, manages to have Chalais beheaded on the ridiculous grounds that he wanted to kill the king and marry the queen to the king’s brother! No one had an inkling of this riddle. You told it to us yesterday, to the stupefaction of all, and today, while we’re still reeling from the news, you come out and say, “Let’s talk about something else!”’

‘Very well, let’s not talk about something else then, if you’d rather not,’ Aramis said patiently.

'That Rochefort,' cried Porthos, 'if I was poor Chalais's equerry, would pass a nasty moment or two in my company.'

'And you would pass an awkward quarter of an hour in the Red Duke's,' said Aramis.

'Ah, "the Red Duke"! Bravo, bravo,' replied Porthos, clapping his hands and nodding approvingly. 'The "Red Duke" is charming. I will circulate the witticism, my dear fellow, don't you worry. Oh Aramis, what a wit! It's such a pity you couldn't pursue your vocation, my dear fellow. What a delightful priest you would have made.'

'Oh, it's only a temporary delay,' replied Aramis. 'I will be one, one day. You know I have kept up my theology studies, Porthos.'

'He'll be as good as his word,' said Porthos. 'Sooner or later, it will happen.'

'Sooner,' said Aramis.

'He is only waiting for one thing to convince him,' said a musketeer, 'then he'll dust down the cassock that's hanging up behind his uniform.'

'And what is that?' asked another.

'He is waiting for the queen to provide the crown of France with an heir⁹.'

'Let's have no joking on that subject, gentlemen,' said Porthos. 'God be thanked, the queen is still of an age to do so.'

'They say the Duke of Buckingham is in France . . .' said Aramis, with a sardonic laugh that made his ostensibly innocuous remark sound more than a little scandalous.

'Aramis, my friend, you've blundered this time,' interrupted Porthos. 'Your obsession with wit always makes you go too far. If Monsieur de Tréville heard you, you'd be in trouble for that remark.'

'Don't lecture me, Porthos!' cried Aramis, a flash of something like lightning passing through his mild eyes.

‘My dear fellow, be a musketeer or a priest! Be one or the other, but not one and the other,’ replied Porthos. ‘Wait, Athos said it again the other day: you have a foot in every camp. Ah, let’s not lose our tempers, please, that won’t serve any purpose, you know what we agreed, Athos, you, and I. You go to Madame d’Aiguillon’s and you pay her court; then you go to Madame de Bois-Tracy’s¹⁰, Madame de Chevreuse’s cousin, and word has it that you stand very high in that lady’s good graces too. Oh, my God, don’t confess your good fortunes! No one’s asking you to reveal your secrets, everyone knows your discretion. But since you are capable of this virtue, hang it, then apply it to Her Majesty. Anyone can treat the king and the cardinal in any way they please, but the queen is sacred, and if one is going to talk about her, then let it be in good part.’

‘I tell you, Porthos, you are as vain as Narcissus,’ replied Aramis. ‘You know I hate moralising, except when it comes from Athos. Besides, my dear fellow, you have far too magnificent a baldric for morals to be your strong point. I will be a priest if it suits me. In the meantime, I am a musketeer. And as such, I say what I please, and, at this moment, it pleases me to say that I am out of patience with you.’

‘Aramis!’

‘Porthos!’

‘Ho there, gentlemen, gentlemen,’ exclaimed the people around them.

‘Monsieur de Tréville awaits Monsieur d’Artagnan,’ interrupted the valet, opening the office door.

At this announcement, during which the door remained open, a hush fell on the room, and, in complete silence, the young Gascon walked part of the length of the antechamber and went in to the captain of the musketeers’ office, heartily congratulating himself on having escaped by the skin of his teeth the conclusion of that strange quarrel.

III

THE AUDIENCE

DESPITE BEING IN A FOUL MOOD at that particular moment, Monsieur de Tréville still politely greeted the young man, who bowed to the ground, and smilingly accepted his compliments, the Béarnais accent of which reminded him of both his youth and his birthplace, twin memories that will bring a smile to a man's face whatever his age. But then, he almost immediately went over to the antechamber and, holding up his hand to d'Artagnan, as if asking his permission to finish some outstanding business before starting on his, he called out three times, increasingly loudly, his voice covering all the tones between imperative and exasperated, 'Athos! Porthos! Aramis!'

The two musketeers, whose acquaintance we have already made and who answered to the last two of those three names, immediately left the groups they were part of and made their way to the office, the door of which closed behind them as soon as they had stepped over the threshold. Although not entirely unruffled, their free and easy manner, dignified and submissive in equal measure, filled d'Artagnan with admiration. They reminded him of demigods and their leader of an Olympian Jupiter, armed with his panoply of thunderbolts.

When the two musketeers had gone in, when the door had closed behind them, when the buzzing murmur of the antechamber had started up again, no doubt afforded fresh fuel by the summons just made, and when, finally, Monsieur de Tréville had paced up and down his office three or four times, silent and frowning, passing each time in front of Porthos and Aramis, who stood ramrod straight and silent as if on parade, he suddenly stopped so that he was staring them in the face, scanned

them from head to foot with an irritated look, and cried, 'Do you know what the king said to me, as recently as yesterday evening? Do you know, gentlemen?'

'No,' replied the two musketeers after a moment's silence. 'No, sir, we do not know.'

'But I hope you will do us the honour of telling us,' added Aramis, in his politest tone and with a most gracious bow.

'He told me that from now on he was going to recruit his musketeers from the cardinal's guards!'

'From the cardinal's guards? And why is that?' Porthos demanded warmly.

'Because he could see his cooking wine needed bucking up with a decent vintage.'

The two musketeers blushed to the roots of their hair. D'Artagnan felt completely lost and wished himself a hundred feet under ground.

'Yes, yes,' Monsieur de Tréville continued, increasingly incensed, 'and His Majesty was right, because, on my honour, it's true the musketeers cut a sorry figure at court. Yesterday, at his game of chess with the king, the cardinal told me with an air of commiseration, which displeased me profoundly, that the previous day those cursed musketeers, those devils incarnate – he gave the words an ironic stress, which displeased me even more – those swaggerers, he added, looking at me with his tiger-cat expression, had been found carousing in the early hours in a tavern on Rue Férou¹, and a watch patrol of his guardsmen – I thought he was going to laugh in my face – were forced to arrest them for disturbing the peace. Confound it, you must know something about this business. Musketeers being arrested! You were there, sirs, don't deny it, you were recognised and the cardinal mentioned you by name. Ah, this is all down to me. Yes, yes, it's all my doing, since I'm the one who chooses my men. Look here, you, Aramis, why the devil did you

ask me for a tabard when a cassock would have suited you better? And you, Porthos, come now, do you own such a beautiful gold baldric just so you can hang a straw sword off it? And Athos? I don't see Athos. Where is he?

'Sir,' Aramis replied sadly, 'he is ill, seriously ill.'

'Ill, seriously ill, you say? With what?'

'They're afraid it might be the smallpox,' answered Porthos, eager to add his bit to the conversation, 'which would be unfortunate, since it would certainly do his looks no favours.'

'Smallpox! Here's another tall tale you have for me, Porthos. Sick with the smallpox at his age? No, for pity's sake. But wounded, I daresay, dying, that may be . . . Ah, if I'd known . . . God's blood, musketeers, gentlemen, I won't have you frequenting scurrilous places like this, picking quarrels in the street and indulging in swordplay at the crossroads. And, above all, I won't have you making yourselves the laughing stock of the cardinal's guards, who are worthy, peaceable, clever fellows, who never put themselves in a position to be arrested, and, in any case, would never let themselves be arrested even if they did. I'm sure of it. They would rather die where they stand than yield an inch. Bolting, cutting and running, taking to their heels in headlong flight – that's what the king's musketeers do!'

Porthos and Aramis shook with rage. They would gladly have strangled Monsieur de Tréville if they hadn't sensed deep down that it was his great love for them that was making him talk to them like that. They drummed their feet on the carpet, bit their lips hard enough to draw blood, and gripped their sword hilts with all their might. The throng outside, as we've said, had heard Athos, Porthos and Aramis being summoned, and had surmised from Monsieur de Tréville's tone that he was in a towering rage. Ten curious heads pressed to the curtain hanging over his office door were paling with fury, as their ears glued to the tapestry caught every syllable of what was being

said and their mouths relayed the captain's every insulting word to the antechamber's assembled company. Within an instant the entire building, from the door of the office to the door on to the street, was in uproar.

'So, the king's musketeers allow themselves to be arrested by the cardinal's guards,' continued Monsieur de Tréville, no less furious than his men, but speaking in a staccato, plunging his words one by one, as it were, like so many dagger thrusts into his listeners' breasts. 'Ah, six of His Eminence's guards arrest six of His Majesty's guards! By heaven, I've made my decision: I shall go to the Louvre this instant, I shall hand in my resignation as captain of the king's musketeers and request a lieutenancy in the cardinal's guards, and if he refuses me, by heaven, I shall turn priest!'

At these words, the murmurs outside erupted; oaths and curses were all that could be heard on every side. The cries of 'By heaven', 'God's blood' and 'Death to all the devils in hell' crossed in mid-air. D'Artagnan looked for a tapestry to hide behind and felt an overwhelming desire to crawl under the desk.

'Well, captain,' Porthos said, beside himself, 'it's true we were six against six, but they caught us off guard, and before we had time to draw our swords, two of our men had already fallen dead, and Athos, who was gravely wounded, wasn't much better off. You know Athos: well, captain, twice he tried to get up from his knees and twice he fell back down. But we didn't surrender for a moment – they were dragging us off by force when we managed to get away. As for Athos, we thought he was dead, and we left him in peace on the field of battle, not thinking it worth the effort to carry him away. And that's the whole story! Hang it, captain, you can't win every battle. The great Pompey lost Pharsalus, and King François I, although, from what I hear, he was a match for any man, still lost the battle at Pavia.'

'And I have the honour to assure you that I killed one of them

with his own sword,' said Aramis, 'since mine had broken on the first parry. Killed or stabbed, sir, as you wish.'

'I didn't know that,' replied Monsieur de Tréville in a milder tone. 'The cardinal exaggerated, I see.'

'For pity's sake though, sir,' continued Aramis, who, seeing his captain somewhat appeased, ventured to make a request, 'don't say Athos was wounded. He would be in despair if it reached the king's ears and, as it is very serious, since the sword-point went down through his shoulder into his chest, it is to be feared . . .'

At that moment, the door curtain lifted and a noble, handsome, shockingly pale face appeared under its fringe.

'Athos!' cried the two musketeers.

'Athos!' repeated Monsieur de Tréville.

'You sent for me, sir,' Athos said to Monsieur de Tréville in a weakened but perfectly composed voice. 'You requested my presence, my comrades tell me, and I hasten to obey your orders. Here I am, sir, what do you wish of me?'

With these words, the musketeer, impeccably dressed and as buttoned up tight in his uniform as ever, stepped firmly into the office. Profoundly moved by this show of courage, Monsieur de Tréville rushed towards him.

'I was saying to these gentlemen,' he said, 'that I forbid my musketeers to expose their lives needlessly because brave men are very dear to the king, and the king knows that his musketeers are the bravest on earth. Your hand, Athos.'

And without waiting for the new arrival to respond to this display of affection, Monsieur de Tréville seized his right hand and shook it with all his might without noticing that Athos, for all his powers of self-control, couldn't help wincing with pain and growing even paler, something one might have thought impossible.

The door had been left ajar, such was the sensation produced by the arrival of Athos whose wound, despite being kept a

secret, was known to all. A brouhaha of satisfaction greeted the captain's last words and two or three faces, carried away by their enthusiasm, appeared through the openings in the tapestry. Monsieur de Tréville was undoubtedly about to sharply correct this breach of etiquette when he suddenly felt Athos's hand clench in his own, and, looking round, saw he was about to faint. At the same moment Athos, who had summoned up all his strength to fight the pain, was finally undone and fell to the floor as though dead.

'A surgeon!' cried Monsieur de Tréville. 'Mine, the king's, the best! A surgeon, or, God's blood, my brave Athos will die!'

At Monsieur de Tréville's shouts, everyone rushed into his office before it occurred to him to shut the door on any of them and crowded round the wounded man. But all this zeal would have been futile if the requested doctor hadn't already been in the building. He elbowed his way through the crowd, went up to the still-unconscious figure of Athos and, as it was too hard for him to work in that noise and crush, asked first, and most urgently, that the musketeer be moved to a neighbouring room. Monsieur de Tréville immediately opened a door and pointed the way to Porthos and Aramis, who carried off their comrade in their arms. Behind this group walked the surgeon, and behind the surgeon the door closed.

Then Monsieur de Tréville's office, ordinarily such a revered sanctum, became a temporary extension of the antechamber. Everyone speechified and spouted their opinions and talked at the tops of their voices, cursing and blinding and wishing the cardinal and his guards in hell.

Moments later, Porthos and Aramis reappeared; the surgeon and Monsieur de Tréville had stayed on their own with the wounded man.

Eventually Monsieur de Tréville also reappeared. The invalid had regained consciousness. The surgeon declared that

there was nothing in his condition for his friends to be alarmed about; he had merely fainted from loss of blood.

At a wave of Monsieur de Tréville's hand, everyone then withdrew, except d'Artagnan, who had not forgotten he had an audience and, with his characteristic Gascon tenacity, had not stirred an inch.

When everyone had left and the door had been closed again, Monsieur de Tréville turned and found himself alone with the young man. Recent events had made him lose the thread of his thoughts a little. He inquired what the stubborn petitioner wanted. D'Artagnan gave his name and Monsieur de Tréville, recalling in an instant all his memories of the present and of the past, understood the situation.

'Forgive me,' he said, smiling, 'forgive me, my dear countryman, but I had completely forgotten you. What would you have me do? A captain is merely a father of a family with greater responsibilities than an ordinary paterfamilias. Soldiers are overgrown children, you know. But since I insist that the king's and, above all, the cardinal's orders are carried out . . .'

D'Artagnan couldn't repress a smile. Seeing it, Monsieur de Tréville realised he wasn't dealing with an idiot, and, changing the subject, came straight to the point. 'I loved your father very much,' he said. 'What can I do for his son? Be quick, my time isn't mine.'

'Sir,' said d'Artagnan, 'when I left Tarbes to come here, I intended, in remembrance of that friendship which lives on in your memory, to ask you for a musketeer's tabard. But after everything I've seen in the last two hours, I realise that that would be an enormous favour and am very much afraid I would not merit it.'

'It is a favour, certainly, young man,' replied Monsieur de Tréville, 'but it may not be so very far out of your reach as you think, or at least appear to. A ruling by His Majesty, however, has anticipated this situation, and I regret to tell you that no one can be admitted into the musketeers before passing a

preliminary test, either by fighting several campaigns, performing certain feats of arms, or serving for two years in another less favoured regiment.'

D'Artagnan bowed without replying. The difficulties to be surmounted in acquiring the musketeer's uniform only made him all the keener to wear it.

'However,' continued Tréville, fixing his fellow countryman with such a piercing gaze it was as if he wanted to read to the depths of his heart, 'in consideration of your father, my old companion, I want, as I said, to do something for you, young man. Our cadets from Béarn tend not to be rich, and I doubt things have changed drastically since I left the province. You cannot therefore have too much of the money you brought with you left to live on.'

D'Artagnan drew himself up with a proud air signifying that he would never ask for alms from anyone.

'All right, young man, all right,' continued Tréville, 'I know that look. I came to Paris with four écus in my pocket, and I'd have fought any man who implied I couldn't buy the Louvre.'

D'Artagnan drew himself up still further. Thanks to the sale of his horse, he was embarking on his career with four écus more than Monsieur de Tréville had had in his pockets when he'd started his.

'So I'm sure, as I was saying, you need to nurse the funds you already have, however healthy they may be. But I'm equally sure you need to refine your mastery of the accomplishments that become a gentleman. I will write a letter to the director of the Académie Royale² today and tomorrow he will take you on without a fee. Don't refuse this small consideration. Gentlemen from the noblest, wealthiest families have been known to solicit it in vain. You will learn horsemanship, fencing and dancing; you will form desirable acquaintances, and from time to time you will come back to see me and tell me how you are progressing, and whether there is anything I can do for you.'

Unversed as he was in the ways of the court, d'Artagnan still thought he noticed a certain coolness about this reception.

'Alas, sir,' he said, 'I see how grievously I miss my father's letter of introduction to you.'

'I am surprised, it's true,' remarked Monsieur de Tréville, 'that you embarked on such a long journey without this essential viaticum, the only capital we Béarnais have.'

'I had it, sir, and everything was in order, thank God,' exclaimed d'Artagnan. 'But I was treacherously robbed of it.'

Then he recounted the events at Meung, describing the unknown gentleman in minute detail, and did so with a warmth and a sincerity that delighted Monsieur de Tréville.

'That's strange,' said the latter thoughtfully. 'So you spoke about me openly?'

'Yes, sir, doubtless I was that reckless. But how could I be otherwise? A name as illustrious as yours was to be my shield on my travels. You may imagine how often I sheltered behind it.'

Flattery was extremely common in those days, and Monsieur de Tréville loved fulsome praise as much as a king or a cardinal. He couldn't, therefore, help smiling with visible satisfaction, but his smile soon faded and, returning of his own accord to the incident at Meung, he asked, 'Tell me, this gentleman didn't have a slight scar on his temple, did he?'

'Yes, the sort of mark that could have been made by a bullet grazing it.'

'Was he a good-looking man?'

'Yes.'

'Tall?'

'Yes.'

'Pale complexion, brown hair?'

'Yes, yes, that's the one. How is it, sir, that you know this man? Ah, if ever I find him, and I will find him, I swear, even if it's in hell . . .'

‘He was waiting for a woman?’ continued Tréville.

‘At least he left after conversing for a moment with the woman he was waiting for.’

‘You don’t know what they were talking about?’

‘He gave her a box, said it contained her instructions, and told her not to open it until she was in London.’

‘This woman was English?’

‘He called her “Milady”.’

‘It’s he!’ muttered Tréville. ‘It’s he. I thought he was still in Brussels!’

‘Oh sir, if you know this man,’ cried d’Artagnan, ‘tell me who he is and where he’s from, and I will acquit you of any responsibility you might have to me, even of your promise to have me enrolled in the musketeers, because I must be avenged, that’s all that matters to me.’

‘Don’t even think of it, young man!’ cried Tréville. ‘If you see him coming on one side of the street, cross to the other. Don’t dash yourself on a rock like that, he will shatter you like glass.’

‘Nevertheless,’ said d’Artagnan, ‘if I ever find him . . .’

‘But don’t go looking for him in the meantime,’ said Tréville, ‘if I have one piece of advice to give you . . .’

Tréville suddenly paused, struck by a sudden suspicion. This loathing the young traveller was giving vent to in such emphatic terms for a man who supposedly, but hardly very plausibly, had robbed him of his father’s letter – couldn’t this be a cover for some deviousness? Couldn’t His Eminence have sent this young man? Couldn’t he have come to lay a trap? Couldn’t the cardinal be trying to introduce an agent, this so-called d’Artagnan, into his household, his intimate circle, with a view to ferreting out his secrets and then turning them against him, as had been attempted so many times before? Tréville studied d’Artagnan again, more intently this time than the first. He was only moderately reassured by his expression, sparkling with shrewd wit and affected humility.

I know he's a Gascon, he thought, but he could just as easily be the cardinal's Gascon as mine. Well, let's put him to the test.

'My friend,' he said slowly, 'I want, as you are the son of my old friend, since I believe this story of the lost letter to be true, I want, as I say, as recompense for the coolness you noticed at first in your reception, to let you into the secret of politics here. The king and the cardinal are the best of friends; their apparent differences are merely distractions to deceive fools. I do not intend for a fellow countryman, a dashing young spark, a brave lad with all the prerequisites to rise high, to be taken in by all these feints and walk dumbly into the trap, following in the footsteps of so many others who have gone that way to their ruin. Always bear in mind that I am devoted to these two all-powerful masters, and no serious undertaking of mine could ever have any other aim than to serve the king and the cardinal, who is one of the most illustrious geniuses France has ever produced. So now, young man, be guided by this, and if, either from family, or relations, or even instinct, you have conceived one of those enmities for the cardinal that we see flare up among the nobility, then bid me farewell and let us part. I will help you in a thousand circumstances, but without attaching you to my person. At all events, I trust that my frankness will make you my friend, for you are the only young man I have ever spoken to this way.'

If the cardinal did send me this young fox, Tréville thought to himself, he is bound, knowing how I execrate him, to have told his spy that the best way to court me is to enumerate his worst failings. So, despite my protestations, his cunning accomplice is now going to tell me he abominates the Eminence.

In fact, turning Tréville's expectations on their head, d'Artagnan replied with the utmost simplicity, 'Sir, I have come to Paris with exactly the same intentions. My father told me not to stand for anything from anyone except the king, the cardinal and you, whom he considers the three pre-eminent men of France.'

It will be noticed that d'Artagnan included Monsieur de Tréville in his list with the other two, but he didn't think the addition could do any harm.

'Therefore I hold the cardinal in highest veneration,' he continued, 'and I have the most profound respect for his actions. It is all the better for me, sir, if, as you say, you speak frankly to me; you will then be doing me the honour of respecting this affinity of taste between us. But if you entertain any misgivings with regards to me, as would be all too natural, I sense telling the truth will be my undoing. But there it is: you will esteem me all the same, and I value that more above all else.'

Monsieur de Tréville was taken completely by surprise. Such acumen, such candour, indeed, commanded his admiration, without entirely allaying his doubts: the greater this young man's merits compared to others his age, the more of a threat he posed if he misjudged him. Nevertheless he shook d'Artagnan's hand and said to him, 'You are an honest fellow, but at present I can only do what I offered just now. My door will always be open to you. In time, with leave to ask for me at any hour and so avail yourself of every opportunity, I am certain you will attain what you desire.'

'In other words, sir,' said d'Artagnan, 'you are waiting for me to prove myself worthy. Well, don't worry,' he added with Gascon familiarity, 'you won't have to wait long.'

And then, with a bow, he made to leave, as if it was all up to him from now on.

'Wait,' Monsieur de Tréville said, stopping him, 'I promised you a letter for the director of the Academy. Are you too proud to accept it, my young gentleman?'

'No, sir,' said d'Artagnan. 'And I promise you it won't meet the same fate as the previous one. I shall take such good care of it that nothing, I swear, will prevent it reaching its destination, and heaven help the person who tries to take it from me!'

Monsieur de Tréville smiled at this fanfaronade, and, leaving

his young companion in the embrasure of the window where they had been talking, he went to sit at his desk and started to write the promised testimonial. D'Artagnan, meanwhile, having nothing better to do, began rapping out a march on the window-panes and looking at the occasional musketeer who left the building, watching them until they disappeared around the corner of the street.

When he had written the letter, Monsieur de Tréville sealed it, got to his feet and went over to the young man to give it to him. But just as d'Artagnan was holding out his hand to take it, Monsieur de Tréville was amazed to see his would-be protégé start, flush with rage, and then storm out of the office, yelling, 'Ah, God's blood, he won't escape me this time!'

'Who?' asked Monsieur de Tréville.

'He, my thief,' replied d'Artagnan. 'Ah, you snake!'

Then he disappeared.

'Mad devil,' muttered Monsieur de Tréville. 'Unless that was a ruse to get away when he saw his plan hadn't worked.'

IV

ATHOS'S SHOULDER, PORTHOS'S BALDRIC AND ARAMIS'S HANDKERCHIEF

D'ARTAGNAN HAD CROSSED THE ANTECHAMBER in three furious bounds and was rushing towards the stairs, intending to take them four at a time, when, caught up in the heat of chase, he crashed into a musketeer who was coming out of Monsieur de Tréville's office by a side door, and, colliding headfirst with the man's shoulder, caused him to let out a cry, or rather, a howl.

‘Excuse me,’ said d’Artagnan, trying to race off, ‘excuse me, but I’m in a hurry.’

He had barely gone down the first step before an iron fist seized him by his sash and stopped him in his tracks.

‘You’re in a hurry,’ cried the musketeer, white as a sheet. ‘On that pretext, you bang into me, and say, “Excuse me,” and you think that’s enough? Not quite, young man. Do you think, because you heard Monsieur de Tréville speak somewhat cavalierly to us today, that anyone can treat us in that fashion? Wake up, friend, you are not Monsieur de Tréville.’

‘My faith,’ replied d’Artagnan, recognising Athos who was returning to his lodgings after being bandaged up by the doctor, ‘I didn’t do it on purpose, and, not having done so, I said, “Excuse me”. So, yes, that does seem enough to me. But I’ll say again – and perhaps this is more than enough – on my word of honour, I am in a hurry, a great hurry. So let me go, please, and allow me to go about my business.’

‘Sir,’ said Athos, letting him go, ‘you are not polite. One can see you come from far away.’

D’Artagnan had already leapt down three or four steps but Athos’s remark brought him up short.

‘Good grief, sir!’ he said. ‘However far away I’ve come from, it won’t be you who gives me a lesson in manners, I’ll have you know.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Athos.

‘Ah, if I weren’t in such a hurry,’ cried d’Artagnan, ‘if I weren’t running after someone . . .’

‘Mr I’m-in-a-hurry, you won’t need to run to find me, do you understand?’

‘And where, if you please, will I do that?’

‘Near the Carmes-Déschaux¹.’

‘When?’

‘Around midday.’

‘Around midday, very well. I’ll be there.’

‘Try not to keep me waiting because at a quarter past, I warn you, I’ll be the one running after you and I’ll cut off your ears at full tilt.’

‘Good!’ d’Artagnan called to him. ‘I’ll be there at ten to.’

And then he broke into a run as if the devil were at his back, still hoping to find his stranger, whose leisurely pace couldn’t have taken him very far.

At the street door, however, Porthos was talking with one of the guards. There was a space between the two talkers more or less the width of a man. Thinking this should give him ample room, d’Artagnan picked up speed to fly like an arrow between the two of them. But he hadn’t allowed for the wind. As he was about to charge through the gap, a gust caught Porthos’s long cloak and d’Artagnan sailed straight into it. Porthos must have had his reasons not to be parted from this essential piece of his attire because, rather than let go of the side he was holding, he yanked it towards him so stubbornly that d’Artagnan was spun round and rolled up in the velvet.

Hearing the musketeer cursing, d’Artagnan struggled to free himself, blindly seeking a way through the billowing cloak. More than anything, he was afraid he had marred the pristine, dazzling baldric with which we are familiar, but when he timidly opened his eyes, he found himself with his nose jammed between Porthos’s shoulder blades, that is, directly against this item.

Alas, like most of the things of this world that are merely outward show, the baldric was gold in front and plain buff-leather behind. Confirmed peacock that he was, if he couldn’t have a complete gold baldric, Porthos was going to at least have half one, which explained the strategic importance of his cold and the indispensable nature of his cloak.

‘God’s teeth!’ cried Porthos, making strenuous efforts to disentangle himself from d’Artagnan who was squirming around

behind his back, 'You must be mad, throwing yourself on people like this.'

'Excuse me,' said d'Artagnan, reappearing under the giant's shoulder, 'but I am in a great hurry, I am running after someone and . . .'

'Do you forget your eyes when you're running, by any chance?'

'Not at all,' d'Artagnan replied, taking offence. 'They even show me things other people don't see.'

Whether Porthos understood this or not, he still lost his temper, declaring, 'You will earn yourself a trouncing, sir, I tell you, if you provoke musketeers in this fashion.'

'Trouncing, sir,' said d'Artagnan. 'That's a strong word.'

'It is the right word for a man who is accustomed to looking his enemies in the face.'

'Ah, by God, I know you won't turn your back on yours!'

And then, delighted with his waggishness, the young man set off, laughing uproariously.

Foaming with rage, Porthos made as if to hurl himself at d'Artagnan.

'Later, later,' d'Artagnan cried, 'when you've got rid of your cloak.'

'At one o'clock then, behind the Luxembourg.'

'Very good, at one o'clock,' replied d'Artagnan, turning the corner.

But he didn't see a soul, either in the street he had run down, or in the one he now took in at a glance. However slowly the stranger had been walking, he had still gone a fair way, or perhaps he had ducked into one of the houses. D'Artagnan inquired after him of everyone he met, went down to the ferry², came back up Rue de Seine and Rue la Croix-Rouge, but nothing, not a sniff. All this running, however, was helpful to him because, even as his forehead became bathed in sweat, so his ardour cooled.

Then he began to reflect on the recent sequence of events: a great deal had happened, all of it inauspicious. It was barely eleven o'clock in the morning, and already the day had brought his fall from favour with Monsieur de Tréville, who was bound to have thought his exit a little off-hand.

Furthermore, he had acquired two prime duels with two men, each of whom was capable of killing three d'Artagnans. To cap it all, they were two musketeers, that is, two of those beings he held in such high esteem that, in his heart and mind, he placed them above all other mortals.

It was a sorry state of affairs. Certain he'd be killed by Athos, the young man, understandably enough, didn't trouble himself greatly about Porthos. However, as hope is the last thing to be extinguished in a man's heart, hope began to stir in him that he might have a chance of surviving, with terrible wounds, of course, these two duels, and, if so, he took himself to task as to his future conduct in the following terms: 'What a featherbrain I was, and what a clumsy lout I am! That brave, unfortunate Athos was wounded in the very shoulder I had to butt into like a ram. The only surprise is that he didn't kill me there and then; he had every right to, and he must be in agony. As for Porthos . . . Ah, as for Porthos, gracious me . . .'

And in spite of himself the young man started laughing, while looking round to check that this solitary and, to an onlooker, apparently groundless laughter wasn't going to offend any passers-by.

'As for Porthos, that's a funnier business, but I am no less of a hair-brained wretch. Does one throw oneself on people like this without warning them? No! Does one look under their cloak to see what's missing? He would have certainly forgiven me . . . He would have forgiven me if I hadn't mentioned that cursed baldric. I only alluded to it, it's true . . . yes, that was beautifully done! Ah, cursed Gascon that I am, I would make

witticisms as I leapt from the frying pan into the fire. Come on now, d'Artagnan my friend,' he continued, addressing himself with all the amiability he felt was his due, 'If you get through this, which is not likely, the thing to do in future is be impeccably polite. From now on you must be admired, you must be held up as a model. There's nothing cowardly about being considerate and courteous. Look at Aramis: Aramis is gentleness itself, grace personified. Well then, has anyone ever taken it into his head to say Aramis is a coward? No, certainly not. So, from now on that's whom I shall model myself on in every respect. Ah, speaking of which, here he is.'

Striding along, talking to himself as he went, d'Artagnan had come to within a few paces of the d'Aiguillon mansion³ and had caught sight of Aramis in front of this building, merrily chatting with three gentlemen of the king's guards. Aramis had caught sight of d'Artagnan too, but since he hadn't forgotten it was in this young man's presence that Monsieur de Tréville had flown into such a rage that morning, and since a witness to the musketeers' upbraiding did not appeal to him in the slightest, he pretended not to see him. D'Artagnan could not have felt more differently. Full of his newfound resolve to radiate goodwill and courtesy, he approached the four young men with a low bow and his most winning smile. Aramis inclined his head slightly, but did not return the smile, and, at the same moment, all four men broke off their conversation.

D'Artagnan was not so obtuse as to fail to see that he was intruding, but nor was he sufficiently experienced in the ways of fashionable society to be able to extract himself elegantly from the sort of awkward situation that tends to arise when a man goes up to people he barely knows and joins in a conversation that doesn't concern him. He was thinking how to effect as poised a retreat as possible when he noticed that Aramis had dropped his handkerchief and, no doubt inadvertently, had stepped on it. This seemed

to be his opportunity to make amends for his gracelessness. He bent down and, with all the civility he could muster, pulled the handkerchief out from under the musketeer's foot, despite encountering some resistance, and said, as he handed it back to him, 'I believe, sir, this is a handkerchief you would be sorry to lose.'

The handkerchief was indeed richly embroidered and had a coronet and arms in one corner. Aramis blushed violently and snatched rather than took it from the Gascon's hands.

'Aha!' cried one of the guardsmen. 'Aramis, you discreet soul, are you still going to insist you are on bad terms with Madame de Bois-Tracy when this gracious lady is so kind as to lend you her handkerchiefs?'

Aramis shot d'Artagnan one of those looks which tell a man he has acquired a mortal enemy, and then, reverting to his soft-spoken self, smoothly replied, 'You are labouring under a misapprehension, gentlemen. The handkerchief doesn't belong to me, and I don't know why the fancy took monsieur to give it to me rather than to one of you – and here, as proof of this, is mine in my pocket.'

Saying which, he produced his own handkerchief, which was equally elegant and of fine cambric, an expensive material at the time, but lacking embroidery or arms, and, for decoration, having merely its owner's monogram.

D'Artagnan didn't utter a word this time, realising his blunder, but Aramis's friends weren't satisfied with his denials, and one of them, addressing the young musketeer with feigned solemnity, declared, 'If what you claim is true, then I should be compelled, my dear Aramis, to request you return the handkerchief because, as you know, Bois-Tracy is one of my intimates and I will not have people sporting his wife's personal effects as trophies.'

'You phrase your request poorly,' replied Aramis, 'so, while I might acknowledge its essential soundness, I should be obliged to refuse it on a point of form.'

‘The fact is,’ d’Artagnan ventured timidly, ‘that I didn’t see the handkerchief come out of Monsieur Aramis’s pocket. He had his foot on it, that’s all, and I thought that, since he had his foot on it, the handkerchief was his.’

‘And you were mistaken, my dear sir,’ Aramis replied coldly, impervious to his attempt to make amends. Then, turning to the guardsman who had declared he was a friend of Bois-Tracy, he said, ‘Besides, my dear intimate of Bois-Tracy, I think that my friendship with him cannot be any the less tender than yours, which means, strictly speaking, that this handkerchief could just as easily have come out of your pocket as out of mine.’

‘No, on my honour!’ cried His Majesty’s guardsman.

‘You will swear on your honour and I on my word, and evidently one of the two of us will be lying. Wait, there’s a better way. Monteran, let’s each take half.’

‘Of the handkerchief?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perfect!’ cried the two other guardsmen. ‘The Judgement of Solomon. Aramis, you are wise beyond your years.’

The young people burst out laughing and, as might be imagined, that was an end to the matter. After a moment, the conversation drew to a close and, with a cordial handshake, the three guards and the musketeer parted, the guards going their way and Aramis going his.

Now’s the time to make my peace with this gentleman, d’Artagnan thought to himself, having hung back a little during the last part of the conversation. And, with these good intentions, he went up to Aramis, who was walking off without paying him any more attention, and said, ‘Sir, you will forgive me, I trust . . .’

‘Ah, sir,’ Aramis cut in, ‘allow me to observe that you did not conduct yourself as a man of honour in this affair.’

‘What, sir!’ cried d’Artagnan. ‘You suppose . . .’

'I suppose, sir, that you are not an idiot, and that you are well aware, even though you've only just arrived from Gascony, that one does not tread on pocket handkerchiefs without a reason. Hang it, Paris is not paved with cambric!'

'It is wrong of you to seek to humiliate me, sir,' said d'Artagnan, his quarrelsome nature getting the better of his pacifist intentions. 'I am from Gascony, it's true, and since you know as much, I hardly need tell you that Gascons are not very long-suffering, so that when they have apologised once, even if it is for a stupid blunder, they are convinced they have not only done what they ought, but half as much again.'

'My remarks, sir, are not intended to pick a quarrel,' replied Aramis. 'I am no brawler, thank God, and as I am merely a provisional musketeer, I only fight when I am compelled to, and always with the utmost repugnance. But this is a serious business, since a lady has here been compromised by you.'

'By us, you mean,' cried d'Artagnan.

'Why were you so indiscreet as to give me the handkerchief?'

'Why were you to drop it?'

'I have said, and I will say again, sir, that this handkerchief did not come out of my pocket.'

'Well then, you have lied twice, sir, because I saw it come out of there with my own eyes!'

'Ah, so this is the tone you take with me, is it, Monsieur le Gascon? Well then, I will give you a lesson in manners.'

'And I will send you back to your mass, Monsieur l'abbé! Draw, if you please, this instant.'

'No indeed, if you please, my fair friend . . . Not here, at least. Can't you see we are outside the d'Aiguillon place, which is teeming with the cardinal's creatures? In point of fact, who's to say His Eminence didn't order you to bring him my head? Now, I am ridiculously attached to it, my head that is, since it seems to go pretty well with my shoulders. So I am looking

forward to killing you, don't worry on that score, but I wish to do so in peace and quiet, in a closed and covered place, where you won't be able to brag about your demise to any onlookers.'

'As you wish, but I wouldn't be too confident of the outcome. And bring that handkerchief with you, whether it's yours or not: you may have a chance to use it.'

'Monsieur wouldn't be a Gascon, would he?' asked Aramis.

'He would. Monsieur wouldn't be putting off a meeting out of prudence, would he?'

'Prudence, sir, is a fairly superfluous virtue for a musketeer, I know, but it is indispensable for the clergy, and as I am only a musketeer temporarily, I am keen to remain prudent. I will have the honour, therefore, of expecting you at Monsieur de Tréville's at two o'clock. I will direct you to suitable places from there.'

The two young men bowed to each other, then Aramis went away up the street leading to the Luxembourg, while d'Artagnan, seeing time was getting on, set off for Carmes-Déschaux, saying to himself, There's no escaping now, but at least if I'm killed, I'll be killed by a musketeer.

V

THE KING'S MUSKETEERS AND THE CARDINAL'S GUARDS

D'ARTAGNAN DIDN'T KNOW A SOUL in Paris. So he went to meet Athos without taking a second, ready to make do with those his adversary had chosen. In any case, he had made up his mind to offer the brave musketeer all the appropriate apologies, with all due staunchness, because he was afraid their duel would have

the unfortunate outcome that always attends affairs of this sort, when a young, vigorous man takes on a wounded, weakened adversary: if he is defeated, his opponent's triumph is all the greater, while if he is victorious, he is accused of a breach of honour and posturing.

Now, unless we have failed to convey the character of our adventure seeker, our reader will already have gathered that d'Artagnan wasn't an ordinary man. Hence, while he kept telling himself his death was inevitable, he wasn't in the least resigned to going meekly to his grave, as another less courageous, more moderate person would have been in his place. Instead he turned over his adversaries' respective characters in his mind and began to see his situation more clearly. Through the sincere apologies he intended to offer Athos, he hoped to make a friend of this gentleman, whose aristocratic air and austere manner pleased him greatly. He flattered himself that he had put the wind up Porthos with the baldric episode, on which he could, if he wasn't killed on the spot, dine out. Judiciously heightened for effect, the story should cover Porthos with ridicule. And finally, as for Aramis the fox, he wasn't that scared of him and, assuming he made it that far, he undertook to dispatch him fair and square, or, at the very least, strike him in the face, as Caesar had told his men to do to Pompey's soldiers¹, and so rob him forever of those good looks on which he prided himself so much.

D'Artagnan could draw on that unwavering store of resolve which his father's advice had fixed in his heart, advice which, in essence, declared: 'Don't stand for anything from anyone except the king, the cardinal and Monsieur de Tréville.' So he flew more than walked towards the Convent of the Carmes Déchaussés, or rather Déschaux as it was known then, a windowless building that was a chapel of ease for the Pré-aux-Clercs², which was surrounded by barren fields that served as a duelling ground for people in a hurry.

When d'Artagnan caught sight of the stretch of waste ground at the foot of the convent, Athos had only been waiting for five minutes and it was striking midday. He was thus as punctual as the Samaritaine clock³, and the most demanding expert in duelling protocol could not have faulted him.

Athos, who was still suffering acutely from his wound, despite its dressing having been changed by Monsieur de Tréville's surgeon, had sat down on a boundary-stone to await his adversary with his perennial calm expression and dignified air. Seeing d'Artagnan, he stood up and politely took several steps to meet him. D'Artagnan approached his adversary with his hat in his hand and its plume trailing on the ground.

'Sir,' said Athos, 'I have sent word to two of my friends who will act as my seconds, but they haven't arrived yet. I'm surprised they're late; it's not like them.'

'I haven't any seconds myself, sir,' said d'Artagnan. 'Having only arrived in Paris yesterday, I haven't made the acquaintance of anyone except Monsieur de Tréville, to whom I was referred by my father who, in some small measure, has the honour of being one of his friends.'

Athos reflected for a moment.

'Monsieur de Tréville is the only person you know?' he asked.

'Yes, sir, I know no one else.'

'Ah, but then . . .' continued Athos, half to himself and half to d'Artagnan, 'if I kill you, people will think I am a monster who preys on children.'

'Not entirely, sir,' d'Artagnan replied with a bow which was not devoid of dignity, 'since you do me the honour of crossing swords while afflicted by a wound that must put you to great inconvenience.'

'My word, to extreme inconvenience. I am in infernal pain thanks to you, I have to say. But I will use my left hand, as I