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## The Three Guardsmen

By Alexandre Dumas.

These two women need each other for an instant in a close embrace. "That's my strength," she said. "But my strength has been equal to her hatred. Mme. Bonacieux would have never escaped alive from that embrace. But not being able to strangle her, she smiled upon her."

"Tomorrow," she said, "this evening perhaps, I shall see her again, and then the past will no longer exist," said Mme. Bonacieux.

"This evening?" asked Milady. "What do you mean? Do you expect any news from him?"

"Expect him himself?" "But that's impossible! He is at the siege of La Rochelle."

"Read," said the unhappy young woman in the excess of her pride and joy, presenting a letter to Milady.

"Humph! The writing of Mme. de Chevreuse," said Milady to herself. And she opened it.

"My dear child—Read yourself in readiness. My friend will see you soon, and he will only see you to release you from that imprisonment in which your safety required you should be concealed. Prepare, then, for your departure and never despair of us. Tell him that certain parties are ready to help him for the ransom he has given."

At that moment the galloping of a horse was heard.

"Oh," cried Mme. Bonacieux, darting to the window, "can it be he?"

"Hush!" said Mme. Bonacieux. "Somebody is coming. In fact, the door opened, and the superior entered."

"Do you come from Boulogne?" demanded she of Milady.

"A man who will not tell his name, but who comes from the cardinal."

"Then let him come in, if you please."

"I will leave you with this stranger, but as soon as he is gone, if you will permit me, I will return," said Mme. Bonacieux.

"Certainly! I beg you will." The superior and Mme. Bonacieux retired. Milady uttered a cry of joy. This man was the Count de Rochefort, the agent of the cardinal.

"My brother," she said, "has presented himself here as the emissary of the cardinal, and in an hour or two a carriage will come to take me away by the orders of his eminence."

"I understand. Your brother sends the carriage," said Milady.

"Exactly so. But that is not all. That letter you have received and which you believe to be from Mme. de Chevreuse is a snare to prevent your making any resistance when the persons come to fetch you."

"But it is D'Artagnan that will come."

"Do not deceive yourself. D'Artagnan and his friends are detained at the siege of La Rochelle. My brother has sent emissaries of the cardinal in the uniform of musketeers. You would have thought you went to meet friends, you would have been carried off and conducted back again to Paris."

inspire confidence as that poor little man, Bonacieux."

"That's true. Now where shall I find you?"

"At Armentieres, a little town upon the Lys. I shall only have to cross the river and I shall be in a foreign country."

"Write that name on a piece of paper, lest I should forget it. There is no fear of compromising yourself in that. A name of a town, is it not?"

"No," said Mme. Bonacieux, "never mind," said Milady, writing the name upon half a sheet of paper. "I will commit myself for once by writing."

"That will do," said Rochefort, taking the paper from Milady, folding it and placing it in the lining of his hat. "Besides, to make sure I will repeat the name as I go along."

An hour afterward Rochefort set out at his horse's best speed. Five hours after that he passed through Arras.

Our readers already know that he was recognized by D'Artagnan and how that recognition, by inspiring fear in the four musketeers, had given fresh activity to their journey.

Rochefort had scarcely departed when Mme. Bonacieux returned. She found Milady with a smiling countenance.

"Well," said Mme. Bonacieux, "what you dreaded has happened. This evening or tomorrow the cardinal will send some one to take you away. I heard it from the messenger."

"Come and sit down close to me," said Milady. "Then he has well played his part. That man is my brother. Coming to my assistance to take me away, by force if necessary, he will not with the emissary of the cardinal, who was coming in search of me. He requested the messenger to deliver up to him the papers of which he was the bearer. The messenger related. My brother killed him."

"Oh!" said Mme. Bonacieux, with a shudder.

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"But it is D'Artagnan that will come."

seir upon our chair to avoid falling. Nothing was yet to be seen, only they heard the galloping draw near. The horses could not be more than a hundred paces distant. If they were not yet to be seen it was because the road made the glitter of laced hats and the waving of feathers; she counted two, then five, then eight horsemen. One of them preceded the rest by double the length of his horse. Milady uttered a stifled groan. In the first horseman she recognized D'Artagnan.

"They are the cardinal's guards," cried Milady, endeavoring to drag Constance along by the arm. "Thanks to the garden, we yet can fly. I have the key, but make haste! In five minutes it will be too late!"

Mme. Bonacieux endeavored to walk, made two steps and sank upon her knees.

At that moment they heard the roll of the carriage, which at the approach of the musketeers, set off at a gallop. Then three or four shots were fired.

"The last time, will you come?" cried Milady.

"I cannot walk. Fly alone!"

"Fly alone, and leave you here! No, no, never!" cried Milady.

All at once she remained still, a livid flush darted from her face: she ran to the table, poured into Mme. Bonacieux's glass the contents of a ring which she opened with singular quickness. It was a grain of a reddish color, which melted immediately.

"Then, taking the glass with a firm hand,"

"Drink," said she; "this wine will give you strength, drink!"

And she put the glass to the lips of the young woman, who drank mechanically.

"This is not the way that I wished to see you die," said Milady, replacing the glass upon the table with an infernal smile, "but we do what we can!" And she rushed out of the room.

At length Mme. Bonacieux heard the grating of the hinges of the opening gates, the noise of boots and spurs resounded on the stairs; there was a great murmur of voices. All at once she uttered a loud cry of joy.

"D'Artagnan, D'Artagnan!" cried she. "Is it you? This way! This way!"

"Constance, Constance," replied the young man, "where are you? Where are you?"

Several men rushed into the chamber, Milady had sunk into a chair, without the power of moving.

"Oh, D'Artagnan, my beloved D'Artagnan, thou art come, then, at last! Thou hast not deceived me! It is indeed thou! Oh, it was in vain my companion told me you would not come!"

"Your companion," cried D'Artagnan, becoming more pale than the white veil of his mistress, "of what companion are you speaking dear Constance?"

"Of her whose carriage was at the gate, of a woman who calls herself your friend, of a woman to whom you have sworn to do everything. But my head swims, I cannot see!"

"Help, my friends! Her hands are icy cold!" cried D'Artagnan. "She will faint! Great God, she is losing her senses!"

Athos, standing before the table, his hair rising from his head, was looking at one of the glasses.

in search of a woman was, issued he, with a terrible smile, "must have passed this way, for I see a corpse. I am the Lord de Winter, brother-in-law of that woman."

"Athos arose and, offering him his hand, said:

"You are welcome, milord," said he; "I set out five hours after her from Portsmouth," said Lord de Winter. "I arrived three hours after her at Boulogne. I missed her by twenty minutes at St. Omer. At last at Lille I lost all trace of her. I was going about at hazard inquiring of everybody when I saw you gallop past. I recognized M. D'Artagnan, and both dead!"

"No," replied Athos. "Fortunately M. D'Artagnan has only fainted."

At that moment D'Artagnan opened his eyes. He tore himself from the arms of Porthos and Aramis and threw himself like a madman on the corpse of his mistress.

Athos said to him, with his noble and persuasive voice:

"You are one of us. Women weep for the dead, men avenge them!"

Athos took advantage of the moment of strength which the hope of vengeance restored to his unfortunate friend to make a sign to Porthos and Aramis to go and fetch the superior.

"Madame," said Athos, passing his arm under the arm of D'Artagnan, "we abandon to your pious care the body of that unfortunate woman."

D'Artagnan concealed his face in the bosom of Athos and sobbed aloud. Then all five, followed by their lackeys, leading their horses, took their way to the town of Bethune and stopped before the first inn they came to.

"But," said D'Artagnan, "shall we not pursue that woman?"

"Presently," said Athos. "I have measures to take."

"She will escape us," replied the young man. "She will escape us, and it will be your fault, Athos."

"I will be accountable for her," said Athos. "Now, gentlemen, said he, 'let every one retire to his own apartment. I take charge of everything.'"

"It appears, however," said Lord de Winter, "that if there are any measures to be taken against the countess it will be particularly concerning M. de Winter's sister-in-law."

"And," said Athos, "who is my wife?"

D'Artagnan smiled, for he was satisfied Athos was sure of his vengeance when he revealed such a secret as that. Porthos and Aramis looked at each other and changed color.

Mad de Winter thought Athos was mad.

CHAPTER XLV.  
The Man With the Red Cloak.

THE despair of Athos had given place to a concentrated grief, which only rendered more lucid the brilliant mental faculties of that extraordinary man. He procured a map of the province, perceived that there were four different roads from Bethune to Armentieres and called Porthos, Grimaud, Basin and Mousqueton, who received clear, positive and serious orders.

They were to set out for Armentieres the next morning at daybreak and to go to Armentieres, each by a different route.

soon be back."

In a quarter of an hour he returned, accompanied by a tall man, masked and enveloped in a large red cloak. At 8 o'clock, guided by Flanchet, the little cavalier set out, taking the route Milady's carriage had taken.

It was a stormy and dark night. Vast clouds covered the heavens, concealing the stars. The moon would not rise much before midnight.

At every instant Athos was forced to restrain D'Artagnan, who had but one thought, which was to go forward.

Several times Lord de Winter, Porthos or Aramis endeavored to enter into conversation with the man in the red cloak, but to every interrogation put to him he bowed without making any reply.

A little before they came to Fromelles the storm burst in all its fury upon them, and they unfolded their cloaks. They had still three leagues to travel, and they performed it amid tempests of rain.

At the moment the little troop had passed Goskel a man advanced into the middle of the road with his finger on his lips. Athos recognized Grimaud.

"What's the matter?" cried Athos.

"Has he left Armentieres?"

Grimaud made a sign in the affirmative. D'Artagnan ground his teeth.

"Where is he?" asked Athos.

Grimaud stretched out his hands in the direction of the Lys.

"Alone?" asked Athos.

Grimaud made a sign that she was a gentleman. "Athos," said he, "she is alone in the direction of the river."

"That's well," said D'Artagnan.

"Lead us on, Grimaud."

Another flash enlightened all around them. Grimaud extended his arm, and they distinguished a little isolated house on the banks of the river within a hundred paces of a ferry.

"This is the place," said Athos.

"At this moment a man who had been crouching in a ditch jumped up and came toward them. It was Mousqueton. He pointed with his finger to a window with a light."

"She is there," said he.

"Athos Basin," said Athos.

in for me to reply to him." And the man in the red cloak came forward.

All eyes were turned toward this man, for to all except Athos he was unknown. And even Athos looked at him with as much stupefaction as the rest.

"The executioner of Lille!" cried Milady, a prey to wild terror. "Oh, pardon, pardon!" cried the miserable woman, falling on her knees.

All eyes were fixed upon the unknown, who said:

"That woman was formerly a young maiden as beautiful as she is now. She was a nun in the convent of the Benedictines of Templier. A young priest, of a simple and trustful heart, performed the duties of the church of that convent. She undertook his education and succeeded. She prevailed upon him to leave the country, so to leave the country money was necessary. The priest stole the sacred vessels and sold them. But they were both arrested."

"Within a week she seduced the son of the jailer and got away. The young priest was condemned to ten years of imprisonment and to be branded. I was executioner of the city of Lille, as this woman has said, and the guilty man, gentlemen, was my brother. I then swore that this woman who had ruined him should at least share his punishment. I followed her, I caught her and I imprisoned the same disgraceful mark upon her."

"The day after my return to Lille my brother in his turn succeeded in making his escape. I was accused of complicity and was condemned to remain in his place till he should be again a prisoner. My poor brother was ignorant of this sentence. He rejoined this woman. They fled together into Berry, and there he obtained a little curacy. This woman passed for his sister."

"The lord of the estate upon which the church of the curacy was situated saw this pretended sister and became enamored of her so much so that he offered to marry her. Then she left him she had ruined for him she was destined to ruin and became the Countess de la Ferre."

All eyes were turned toward Athos, whose real name that was and who made a sign with his hand that all was true that the executioner had said.

"Then," resumed he, "mad, desperate, my poor brother returned to Lille and, learning of my sentence, surrendered himself and hung himself from the iron bar of the loophole of his prison. I was set at liberty. That is the crime of which I accuse her; that is the crime of which she has been branded."

"M. de Winter, Porthos, Aramis, de Winter," said Athos, "what is the penalty you demand against this woman?"

"The punishment of death," replied the four in stern, hollow voices.

At these words Milady raised herself up to her feet and endeavored to speak, but her strength failed her. She felt that a powerful and implacable hand seized her by the hair and dragged her away.

Lord de Winter, D'Artagnan, Athos, Porthos and Aramis went out close behind her and the executioner. The lackeys followed their masters.

Two of the lackeys now led, rather dragged, along Milady by her arms. The executioner walked behind them, and Lord de Winter, D'Artagnan, Porthos and Aramis walked behind the executioner.

The two lackeys led Milady to the banks of the river. Being a few paces in advance, she whispered to the lackeys:

"A thousand pistoles to each of you if you will assist my escape, but if you deliver me up to your masters I have near at hand avengers who will make you pay for my death very dearly."


Athos, who heard Milady's voice, came sharply up. "Change these lackeys," said he. "She has spoken to them. They are no longer safe."

When they arrived on the banks of the river the executioner approached Milady and bound her hands and feet. Then she broke silence to cry out:

"You are base cowards, miserable assassins, ten men combined to murder one woman! Beware! If I am not saved I shall be avenged!"

"You are not a woman," said Athos coldly and sternly. "You are a demon escaped from hell, to which place we are going to send you back again."

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