

fantastic ADVENTURES

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The WANDERING SWORDSMEN

by William P. McGivern



D'Artagnan parried the sword thrust with his gun, and then lashed out with it . . .

THE clerk at the Personnel desk was obviously harassed and tired.

"All I can do is take your name and address, buddy," he said. "We're going out on strike any day now anyway."

Phillip Poincare nodded understandingly but he couldn't keep a discouraged frown from flitting across his face.

"This is about the tenth place I've been to this morning," he said. "I thought your concern wouldn't be affected by the labor conditions, but—"

"It's like this," the clerk said pa-

tiently. "We make office equipment, but our union is affiliated with the steel unions, so we go the same way they do." He glanced down at Phillip's application. "Have you been over to the union office yet?"

"I'm an office worker," Phillip said. "At least I was before—"

"Before the war you mean," the clerk said. He looked down at Phillip's application again. "There's nothing in here about your service record. What outfit were you in?"

Phillip smiled tiredly. He'd been

The Musketeers were back from the war and looking for jobs—but the only real trade they knew was fighting, so—



asked the same question everywhere he went and he still hadn't figured out an answer that sounded reasonable.

He wondered what the young clerk would say if he told him the simple truth; that he'd spent the war in Paris as a member of the French underground. That of course wasn't too remarkable. But supposing he then added that his comrades during those three incredible years had been four men known to the rest of the world only as characters in a novel called the Three Musketeers and written by a man dead for over a hundred years?

The clerk would probably call the plant guards and have him escorted from the place as a potentially violent lunatic.

So he simply shook his head.

"I wasn't in the army. "I—I was abroad."

"So was I," the clerk said. "Took a long joy ride with the Third Army. Just got out a few months ago. Well I've got your name and when things get straightened out we may give you a ring."

"Thank you," Phillip said.

Outside it was raining. He walked along slowly through the grayness of the chilly afternoon, a neat little man with pleasant undistinguished features, whom no one would bother to glance at twice. His room was only a few blocks away and he decided to walk, partly for exercise and partly to conserve his dwindling savings.

Perhaps it was the somberness of the afternoon but soon his thoughts were drifting nostalgically over the past few years of his life—the years which had been so excitingly enlivened by the Musketeers and D'Artagnan.

Their existence in Paris had been precarious, but Phillip found himself forgetting the hunger and uncertainty and fear and remembering instead

memorable nights when they'd been fortunate to find a warm room and a bottle of wine. Aramis—Aramis, the gracious, fastidious one—had never been able to drink the Parisian cognac or worse still the horrible concoction called calvados, which was made from cider in the south of France, but Porthos, whose huge frame contained a stomach like a concrete mixer, always found it delightful.

And Phillip remembered the electric, charged air which D'Artagnan brought into a room, his keen face as bright as a flashing sword when he was planning one of his reckless campaigns against the Germans.

Phillip pulled his coat collar tighter against the wind. Those had been days and nights which would live with him as long as he drew breath.

WHEN the Americans had entered Paris their paths had separated. American Intelligence needed Phillip then, but the Musketeers had scornfully refused to accept anything so peaceful as simply informing on the Nazis who had disappeared into the slums and alleys of Montmartre and Pigalle.

They considered their score far too personal to be satisfyingly settled in that manner. One night, after a last solemn drink, they said goodbye to Phillip, and he had seen them no more.

Occasionally reports had come to his attention, stories of former Nazis who had come to sudden and violent ends somewhere in the labyrinth of Paris, and while there were usually no witnesses who cared to talk about such things, he felt sure that the Musketeers were striking their silent blows in the only way they would consider satisfying and honorable.

He came out of his reverie as he approached the house in which he lived. The past was full of ghosts and mem-

ories that were better forgotten. He squared his shoulders and tried to throw off the weight of his depression. It was over and done with and his job now was to try and fit himself back into this post-war world, which was in many ways a more difficult thing than fighting the Nazis in Paris . . .

He opened the door and tiptoed up the shabbily-carpeted steps, hoping he wouldn't meet his landlady. He didn't owe her any money as yet but he wasn't in a mood to tell her of his failure to find a job, and to listen to her inevitable sympathetic encouragement.

With his mind still miles and years away from the present he opened the door of his room and snapped on the light. The usually cheerless furnishings met his eye, and it wasn't until he had hung up his coat and hat that he noticed the presence of a strange bottle on one of the tables.

The bottle was placed directly in the center of the table and he saw it was full and that the seal was unbroken. Wonderingly he picked it up and looked at the label.

For a moment he couldn't believe his eyes. What was a bottle of French cognac doing in his room? It didn't belong to him he was sure.

The last time he had seen this brand of cognac had been the night he had said goodbye for the last time to the Three Musketeers and D'Artagnan. Porthos had brought the bottle and Aramis had considered his palate everlastingly insulted by its vileness.

Phillip smiled at the bottle in his hands, forgetting in his sudden rush of memory, the mystery of its presence here in his room.

Then he heard a low smothered sound from behind the closed bathroom door!

Phillip's heart began pounding. He looked at the bottle again and then at the bathroom door, while the smile

on his face spread in an unbelieving grin.

He set the bottle down slowly on the table while his reason kept insisting that his hopes were foolish and his deductions insane. It simply couldn't be!

Hardly conscious of moving he started for the door, but as his hand reached for the knob, it swung open suddenly and a huge figure towered over him, grinning broadly.

"Phillip! *mon ami*," a booming voice cried, and hands the size of two ordinary man's were on his shoulders shaking him affectionately.

Phillip tried to speak. His mouth opened, his lips moved, but there were no words.

"Out of the way, you overgrown cow," another familiar voice shouted behind Porthos, and a well-built, handsome young man squeezed through the doorway and grasped Phillip's hand.

"Athos!" Phillip said. He looked from Athos' genial smiling face to Porthos, too speechless to say the words that were tumbling in his breast.

"I know it's a surprise," Athos said, "but you should be accustomed to surprises after the life you led in Paris."

Another voice said, "When all this confusion is over will you kindly let me out of this vile place."

PORTHOS moved aside and Phillip saw the plump figure of Aramis behind him. Aramis' face wore its usual expression of martyred toleration, which was habitual with him unless the appointments of wherever he happened to be were of the most exquisite type. He relaxed enough when he saw Phillip to grin warmly and extended a slim, graceful hand.

"This is excellent," he said. "We are all so happy to see you that it is hard to speak. But why are you living

in this place? After the past hard years you deserve something luxurious, something graceful and pleasant."

"Aramis," Athos said pleasantly, "still has his usual exquisite taste and execrable manners."

Porthos had picked up the bottle of cognac and was industriously removing the cork.

"Enough of this talk," he said. "Phillip, get glasses. For old time's sake we must drink."

Phillip got glasses and watched in a happy silence while Porthos poured a stiff drink. They raised their glasses and looked inquiringly at Phillip.

"To what shall we drink?" Athos asked.

Phillip was regaining his composure gradually and now he noticed that one was absent.

"Where, my friends, is D'Artagnan?" he asked.

"He is here," Athos said. "We're expecting him shortly; don't worry. But our toast."

"To happy days," Phillip said. "Will that do?"

"Excellent," Athos said.

They drank the cognac in one breath and Porthos lumbered about immediately to fill the glasses.

Aramis placed one hand over his glass and shook his head.

"I refuse to drink more than one glass of that vile slop. Sentiment alone prompted me to even drink that much." He sighed and sat down wearily. "Happy days. That was the perfect toast, Phillip. That is what we are yearning for. I want to dine and drink and live in a lovely, pleasant apartment and do nothing at all for years and years."

"Food is the thing," Porthos said enthusiastically. "I dream, *mon ami*, of huge steaks, of mounds of butter, of all I can eat—of everything I want."

"We must work, naturally," Athos said, "for we must have money. But we want jobs which do not tax us too heavily. For," he smiled, "there would be no point in working all day and being too tired at night to enjoy ourselves."

Phillip sat down slowly and regarded them as a parent might look at naive, innocent children. They were smiling so confidently that he hated to tell them the bitter truth. So he stalled.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"On a disgusting boat," Aramis said. "Because of our unique status as Nationals of the seventeenth century Paris we were forced to stow away on a ship which wasn't fit to carry pigs. Porthos did not mind," he added caustically.

Porthos grinned hugely.

"*Mais certainement*, I did not mind. Were we not coming to America, our adopted country? The land of sunshine and plenty? Where everyone is fed so well? Of course I did not mind."

"You have no money?" Phillip asked, although he knew it was an unnecessary question.

"Not a sou," Athos said grandly.

"That is why we came here directly," Aramis said.

Phillip shook his head sorrowfully. He saw that their clothes were not good, that their shoes were broken and dusty, that they all looked tired and hungry.

"It is difficult to explain," he said.

"What is difficult?" Porthos asked. "Now all is fine. The war is over. The days of privation and suffering are behind us. Now we must begin to enjoy ourselves."

"Things are not perfect here," Phillip said. "There is a very serious housing shortage for one thing. Also many things are still rationed. In addition there are more and more strikes in the country."

Unconsciously he dropped his eyes as he spoke, for he felt he couldn't look

at them while he blasted their dreams. Now he looked up, hoping they would understand, would adjust themselves to the fact that all was not milk and honey in this land they had adopted.

The Musketeers were smiling genially at him.

"But what is difficult?" Porthos asked.

"You don't understand," Phillip insisted. "You can't get a place to live."

Aramis smiled indulgently.

"We know it will take time," he said. "We will be patient. Even a week is not too long."

"A week," Phillip said weakly.

"YES, even a week," Aramis went on. "And we do not insist on luxury. Enough room to move around in, that's all."

"And," Phillip asked, "just what would you consider adequate?"

He tried not to be sarcastic, for he realized that he was talking, in a very literal sense, to absolute children.

Aramis waved one plump hand carelessly.

"Ten rooms," he said, with the air of a man who has suddenly decided to be magnanimous and is cutting his request in half.

"You can't get ten rooms," Phillip said. "You can't even get one room unless you're willing to wait your turn for about six weeks. You'll have to live right here and maybe my landlady won't even allow you to do that."

"So we will live here," Porthos said amiably. "We will cook huge meals and drink barrels of wine and cognac. We must make the best of things." This last he threw in as a concession to Phillip, just to indicate that he understood.

"I will not live here," Aramis announced flatly. "I am sick to the death of small hovels. I want space,

I want comfort."

"You'll have to live in the park then," Phillip said.

"This will be satisfactory," Athos said. "Porthos thinks only of his stomach, Aramis only of his comfort. I want good things also but I also intend to work."

"That will also be difficult," Phillip said. "What can you do?"

"I was the second best swordsman in France," Athos said. "I can ride, hunt, shoot," he shrugged eloquently, "surely I will have no trouble."

"You aren't a union member for one thing," Phillip said, "and, secondly, there are so many strikes right now that it isn't easy to get a job. Thirdly, service men get preference in jobs and you weren't a service man. I know this all sounds confusing to you, but believe me, I'm only trying to explain that everything isn't as simple as you think."

"First," Athos said, "what is this union thing?"

"It's like a club, an organization which helps its members get more money, better working conditions, things like that. If you aren't a member you can't work."

Athos smiled. "I will have no difficulty. I will join a union. I was a member of the Order of Louis, and that I am sure was harder to join than any of these unions."

"What Athos says is quite true," Porthos said, nodding sagely. "A man must have killed fifty of the Cardinal's troops in fair fight before he was admitted to the Order of Louis. Although some unscrupulous ones gained admittance by including the Cardinal's men they ran down with their horses in their tally. Remember, Athos, Coquelin, the Briton, was such a rogue. If the truth were known, the scoundrel didn't kill half the required number in fair duels."

"That is true," Athos nodded. "I never cared for Coquelin," he added, as an afterthought.

Phillip felt baffled and helpless. These were children, brave, gay, reckless children, and how could he make them understand the present difficult situation? They had been magnificent against the Nazis in Paris, because that simply was another fight to them, an inspiring, happy battle against the traditional enemies of their beloved France. This was very different.

"What," Athos asked, "is this business about service men?"

"They are the men who fought the war," Phillip explained. "A service man is any member of the armed forces. Now that the war is over those men who fought for our country are given first preference in jobs."

"Did we not fight?" Porthos asked indignantly.

"Of course you did," Phillip said, "but not as members of the United States armed forces. You aren't citizens of the United States. You aren't even citizens of France."

Porthos got up and put a fatherly hand on Phillip's shoulder.

"You mustn't worry about us, *mon ami*," he said. "We will take care of you."

Phillip almost groaned.

"Actually," Athos said, "I have already found a job, so you see your worries are groundless."

"You've got a job!" Phillip said. "Where?"

Impressively Athos removed a newspaper clipping from his pocket. From its creased and worn condition it was obvious that it had been read and handled considerably. With a flourishing gesture he handed it to Phillip.

PHILLIP saw that it was a section clipped from the Help Wanted col-

umn of a local newspaper, the Chicago *Express*, and his eye shifted down the list of positions listed, he finally came to one which had been circled in pencil. This advertisement read:

"Positions available for metal workers. Must have knowledge in tempering steel for blades and foils, also a knowledge of hilt design and foil balance. Apply in person."

"So you see," Athos said, "we have nothing to worry about. Who knows more about swords than we do?"

"I don't know," Phillip said wearily. "I know you can fight with swords, but can you make them? Do you know how to temper steel, design hilts and balance them? That's what this ad asks for."

Athos smiled modestly.

"There is nothing about the making and using of swords we do not know. In the good old days we made our own swords and they were unsurpassed in all France. So please do not worry anymore about us, Phillip."

"Well," Phillip said, "we won't worry any more about it now. We can talk the situation over in the morning. Now I suggest we talk of other things and plan to get a good night's sleep."

"Excellent," Porthos said, reaching happily for the bottle.

The next morning Phillip awoke with an unaccustomed dark brown taste in his mouth. He was lying on the floor, on top of his overcoat and with one blanket over him. He remembered that that had seemed the most feasible sleeping arrangement when he had gone to bed the previous night. Athos and Porthos had shared the bed, while he and Aramis, losing the toss, had turned in on the floor.

He raised himself to a sitting position, groaning slightly. He was chilled and stiff. And he had the beginnings

of a nasty hangover. They had finished the bottle of cognac, and then nothing would do but they get another. That process had been repeated several times before they finally went to bed.

He put his hands to his aching head and looked about the room.

For a moment he didn't notice anything unusual, but when he did, he sprang to his feet in alarm.

The Musketeers were gone!

He strode across the room and jerked open the bathroom door. They weren't there, of course. He looked anxiously about the room, trying to think of where they might have gone.

The job, that was it!

But where was the newspaper clipping? That had the address of the firm that wanted swordsmiths. Maybe he could trace them, find them before they got themselves into some sort of trouble. He remembered with a shudder the first time, years before, when they had ventured out into modern society.

He looked frantically about the room. Under the bed, on top of the tables, in the closet, bathroom, in the rumpled bedclothes, but then he remembered that the clipping had been in the evening edition of the *Express*. Maybe he could call them and get the address of the firm that had posted the ad.

He hurried out to the hall phone and in a few seconds, that seemed like years to him, he was talking to a bored girl in the classified ad department.

He told her what he wanted and she said she'd do what she could, and a few minutes later he was frantically scribbling down an address that was located on the west side of the city.

It was only about a half hour's ride from his room. He didn't bother shaving, just splashed cold water on his face and hurried out.

Phillip's imagination worked over-

time on the short street car ride. He knew the Musketeers and he knew the things that might happen to them in this new and bewildering environment.

With a prayer that he wasn't too late, he swung off the street car and hurried to the entrance of the small factory building which bore the same address as the ad.

HE OPENED the door and stepped into a dingy reception room, which boasted one battered desk, two rickety chairs and a calendar dated nineteen forty-three. Seated behind the desk, with a newspaper before him, was an untidy, gray-haired little man with a gray hat on his head.

"I beg your pardon," Phillip said breathelessly, "but I'm looking for some friends of mine who might have come here by mistake. One is very big and one is quite plump. I'm sure you'd remember them if they've—"

The weasel-faced man was looking at him with interest.

"What makes you think they came here by mistake?" he asked.

Phillip was stopped short. "They aren't quite what you want I'm sure," he said. "They saw an ad of yours and I think they may have come here, but—"

The little man waved his sentence aside with a small, grimy hand.

"They been here," he said.

"Where did they go?" Phillip demanded.

"Go? They ain't gone nowhere. We put 'em to work."

Phillip sat down slowly on the vacant chair, trying to get his thoughts assembled. "You put them to work," he said hoarsely.

"Sure," the little man said. "We need men. They needed the job. What's so funny about that?"

"Could I see them a moment?" Phillip asked.

The little man frowned. "What are you so excited about? You act like there might be something funny about this deal."

"I'm—I'm just surprised, that's all," Phillip said. "Please, may I see them just a minute?"

After a moment's hesitation, during which he eyed Phillip sharply, the little man finally stood up and walked to a door leading out the rear of the office.

"Come along," he said over his shoulder.

Phillip followed him into a small shop in which six or eight men were working. There were benches along the walls, and several pieces of precision grinding equipment in the center of the floor. These were not operating. The men were bent over the benches, but Phillip noted that none of them seemed to be doing anything more important than polishing their tools. The shop in general had an untidy, unbusinesslike, idle look.

As they passed the presses in the middle of the room, Phillip saw another bench which had been hidden from sight, and at it were standing the three Musketeers, talking animatedly with a florid-faced, dark-haired man, whose beautifully tailored clothes and buttonaire seemed incongruous with the grimy atmosphere of the shop.

Athos was holding a sword, a fine gleaming blade, in his hand and the attention of the little group was centered on it. They didn't notice Phillip until he tapped Aramis on the arm.

"Sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I was worried. You should have told me where you were going."

The Musketeers looked properly downcast for a moment, but then their cheerful smiles returned.

"We thought you would worry less if

we just slipped out, Phillip," Athos said, good-naturedly. "And you see? Your fears were groundless." He nodded to the impressively dressed gentleman on his right. "Soleri, may I present our friend, Phillip Poincare."

The prosperous looking Mr. Soleri extended a huge, well-manicured paw, which Phillip shook dutifully.

"Mr. Soleri has put us to work," Porthos said triumphantly. "And you with your talk of unions and service men!" He laughed cheerfully and slapped Phillip on the back.

Phillip thought he detected a slight start on the part of Mr. Soleri. Perhaps it was his imagination but when Porthos had mentioned unions and service men Mr. Soleri's twinkling, but unexpressive eyes had narrowed slightly.

"I'm very glad to hear it," Phillip said.

"We are helping him with the design of his sword," Athos said. He displayed the sword he was holding to Phillip. "This is a very bad blade. Poorly balanced, poorly tempered. It would do nicely for some farm hand to use it sticking pigs."

"Well," Mr. Soleri said, speaking for the first time, "we don't really want to use them for anything so bloodthirsty. As I explained to your friends," he went on, glancing at Phillip, "they are to be used as symbols of membership in an organization in which I'm interested. Naturally we want good looking blades, but we don't intend to fight with them."

"What are you going to fight with?" Phillip asked. He wasn't conscious until he'd spoken of the implications of his questions. But it seemed a natural enough question under the circumstances.

Mr. Soleri smiled, displaying a set of brilliant teeth. But there wasn't any humor in his voice as he said: "Rather an awkward question, I should

say. Who is there to fight now?"

"No one, I hope," Phillip said.

"Precisely," Mr. Soleri nodded.

Phillip felt there was something wrong with the situation, but it wasn't anything he could put his finger on. Mr. Soleri seemed to be on the level, but it simply wasn't reasonable that the Musketeers, without references, without union cards, without even citizenship papers, should find a job so easily.

"Have you," he asked Athos, "made any arrangements with the union?"

Athos shrugged indifferently.

"It is not necessary. Mr. Soleri has taken care of everything for us."

"And now," Mr. Soleri said, with a bland smile, "I think it's time to get to work. Will you excuse us, Mr. Poincare?"

Phillip felt the unmistakable touch of the brush-off and there was nothing he could do but make as graceful an exit as possible.

HE SPENT the day in his room, obsessed with a vague, intangible worry. When he heard the tramp of the Musketeers on the stairway he felt a quick surge of relief.

"Is everything all right?" was his first question, as they entered the room.

"But of course," Athos said.

Porthos poured himself a drink from the remains of the cognac and sat down tiredly.

"We must tell Phillip," he said. "There is no point in deceiving him."

"What happened?" Phillip asked.

"Our plant is on strike," Athos said. "This afternoon a gentleman from the unions came and told us all that we must stop working. Everyone left but us."

Phillip shook his head. He knew with a dull certainty that the rest of the story was not going to be good.

"Go on," he said.

"Well," Athos said, crossing his legs, "about a half hour after that three men came in the shop. They were big, capable looking fellows. They told us that we must stop working. Porthos, Aramis and I were busy. We told them to go away. They again insisted we stop." He paused and lifted one shoulder eloquently.

"What happened then?"

Porthos set his glass down with a bang.

"What do you think? We threw the dogs out into the street. We are honest men, working hard, and they tell us we must not work. We threw them out and went back to our work."

"This is bad," Phillip said.

"And why?" asked Porthos. "Can we not work if we like?"

"I wish you'd try to understand," Phillip said. "There is an industrial and economic arrangement in this country that has been developed by a lawful, democratic process. You can't just barge in and do things as you please."

"Mr. Soleri told us about the unions," Porthos said darkly.

"What did he tell you?" Phillip asked.

"The truth," Porthos went on. "He told us they were a great evil, that they must be destroyed, so honest men could work when and where they wanted."

"He told you all that, did he?" Phillip said thoughtfully.

"Yes," Athos said. He frowned down at the floor. "I did not like him at first, but he has treated us decently. And he seems to be speaking the truth."

"We have jobs," Porthos said, "and we are going to keep them."

"You can't go back to work," Phillip cried. "Not until the strike is over. You'd be beaten to pulps if you tried."

Phillip realized instantly that he'd said the wrong thing. Such an ap-

proach would only strengthen them in their determination.

"We have never dodged a fight," Porthos growled.

"We will be at work in the morning," Athos said, with quiet finality.

Phillip knew there was no point arguing with them. They knew what they were going to do. But he also knew what he was going to do.

THE next morning he awoke early, dressed and left the house before his friends were stirring. It was a cold, raw morning, still dark.

Phillip's first stop was an all-night drug store in the neighborhood, where he made two telephone calls. It took a long time to get the parties he wanted, and longer still to explain his story and when he finished the first streaks of dawn were feeling their way through the dark.

He called a cab then and drank two cups of coffee while he was waiting for it. He glanced at his watch when the cab arrived. It was going to be close.

He gave the driver an address and told him to hurry . . .

The address was a middle-class apartment building on Chicago's North side. Phillip rang and the buzzer sounded immediately. He started up the steps and a voice said, "Second floor."

At the second floor a door was open, and a man stood in the doorway. He had obviously been dressing hurriedly when Phillip rang. His tie was still draped over his shoulder and his graying hair had been given a quick brushing which hadn't completely removed its sleep-tousled look. He was a tall, slender man with square shoulders and a lean waist. He might have been forty-five, but he looked in excellent shape. His face was tanned and his hair had once been black but now it

was streaked with gray.

"Are you Poincare, the man who phoned me a while ago?" he asked.

Phillip nodded. "And you're Nelson, business agent of the Metal Workers, Local 3000?"

"Come in," Nelson said. "We haven't too much time to talk."

Phillip followed him into a neatly furnished living room and took a chair. Nelson picked up a paper from a coffee table and handed it to him.

"This is the morning paper. Your friends got quite a bit of publicity out of that deal yesterday afternoon."

Phillip spread the paper and read a front page story on the fight the Musketeers had had with the agents of the Union. The story was a lurid, over-emphasized account, which gave the impression that this was a very mild example of incidents which were occurring all over the country.

"This is just the kind of thing the country can't stand right now," Nelson said. "Things are bad enough without publicity like this. Now tell me about these friends of yours and do it quickly. If they intend to go to work this morning—" He broke off and started tying his tie. "Tell me on the way. We've got to prevent them from crossing that picket line at all costs."

Racing across the city in Nelson's car, Phillip told him as much as he could. He explained that the Musketeers were expatriated Frenchmen, who had wound up in America as the result of the war. They didn't understand conditions in America. They were not trying to cause trouble. They were just simple men who wanted to work and couldn't understand why anyone should tell them they shouldn't.

Nelson listened and nodded.

"I hope I can talk some sense into their heads," he said. "I may be able to if—"

"If what?" Phillip said.

"If we get there on time," Nelson said grimly.

They were nearing the address now. The car swung around the last corner on two wheels and a prayer. Ahead was the small building that housed the company where the Musketeers had gone to work. And Phillip's heart sank as he saw the battle that was raging before the entrance.

There were at least a dozen men fighting in a rocking, swaying group, in the middle of which Phillip could make out the battling figures of the Musketeers.

"We're too late," he groaned.

Nelson braked his car to a skidding halt.

"Maybe not," he snapped. "Follow me."

PHILLIP piled out of the car and raced after Nelson's tall figure. Nelson was shouting as he hit the fringes of the struggling group, but his voice was lost in the clamor of shouting voices.

Phillip saw Porthos, with a wide happy smile on his face, pick up one of the men, lift him high above his head and hurl him straight at two others who were trying to close in. The man's flying figure hit the other two like a battering ram, sending them sprawling.

This created a breach in the solid wall of battling human figures and, before it could close, Phillip darted in and grabbed Porthos by the arm.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Porthos shook him aside impatiently.

"Stop!" he bellowed. "I am only starting on these dogs."

But Nelson had been able by this time to get the attention of the attacking union men. With a crisp order that snapped like a cracking whip he backed them away from the Musketeers, but

their angry flushed faces made it anybody's guess how long his authority would restrain them.

The Musketeers stood grimly silent, fists doubled, waiting and ready for any development. The air was charged and tense.

Nelson turned to Phillip.

"Can you do anything with them?" he asked.

"I'll try," Phillip said. He turned slowly to the Musketeers. "I want you to listen a moment to me, my friends. Then you may do what you like."

"The time for talking is over," Athos said, almost gently.

"Then just listen," Phillip said. "This man with me is honest. He wants to say a few words to you. I want you to listen to him. Not because it will change your minds or keep you out of trouble. And not because it is right. But I ask you to listen simply as a favor to me."

Porthos scowled and looked at the ground.

"You take an unfair advantage of us, Phillip," he said. "How can we refuse you a favor?"

Athos sighed. "The only appeal that would avail against our anger and he must use it."

Nelson turned to the strikers.

"It's all right now, men. Break it up."

When they had drifted back to their picket line he said to the Musketeers, "You didn't need us to stop the fight. You'd have ended it yourselves in a few more minutes."

Phillip thanked his stars that Nelson apparently was a better than average psychologist. That touch of flattery would do more to soften the Musketeers than a two-hour lecture based on reason and logic.

The Musketeers, pleased as always when their fighting prowess was recog-

nized, smirked at each other like big kids. It was obvious that they were ready to recognize Nelson as a man of discernment, at least.

Nelson began talking to them. He wasn't eloquent, but he managed to be impressive, something which was far more difficult. He didn't talk about Labor and Capital. He simply talked about human beings. And he made his point.

When he stopped talking Phillip could tell from the faces of the Musketeers that they were impressed.

"What," Athos said slowly, "do you wish us to do?"

Nelson smiled. "I was hoping you would ask that. I'm not sure but I think this outfit you started to work with is far from being on the level. I think they're a front for someone bigger who is interested in promoting discord between labor and capital. But you can help us. Your escapades yesterday and this little fracas just now haven't helped things. So this is what I've got in mind. There is a union rally tonight and I'd like you all to be there, say a few words. I'll see that the newspapers are there, and if you can do a good job it will help a lot to counteract the bad publicity we're going to get because of this thing this morning and the deal yesterday. How about it?"

"Will there be food?" Porthos asked.

"And drink?" asked Aramis.

"We will be there," Athos said. "I am still confused but I want to understand and do right."

"Good," Nelson said. He gave Phillip a card with an address on it. "Will you see that they are there before eight?"

"With pleasure," said Phillip.

THEY left Phillip's room at seven, and because of the importance of the evening, Phillip felt justified in

taking a cab. They arrived at the union hall with time to spare.

The space in front of the hall was crowded and the driver had to let them out almost a block from the entrance. The neighborhood was not of the best and the street was dark.

The Musketeers were in a jubilant mood. They were clean shaven, well pressed, and all their debonair dash had returned. The prospects of food and drink and the realization that they were now on the right side had cheered immensely.

"I will speak to them," Porthos said. "I will bring tears to their eyes as I tell them of our sad betrayal."

Aramis made an unpleasant sound with pursed lips.

"You were always a posturing fool," he said caustically. "You will do best to remain silent while Athos speaks."

Porthos was rumbling an indignant reply which was interrupted when a small man hurrying along in the opposite direction collided with him.

"Beg your pardon," he said. "Didn't see you coming. Can I borrow a match from any of you gentlemen?"

The Musketeers and Phillip had been walking abreast on the sidewalk and they all stopped.

"I have a match," Phillip said. He took a folder of matches from his pocket and handed them to the man.

The man took the matches but made no effort to light one.

"Going to the union meeting?" he asked.

"Yes," Porthos said. "I am going to talk to them. I am going to tell them—"

"Shut up," Aramis said disgustedly. "He is not interested in what you are going to do."

The little man chuckled. "Oh, but I am," he said.

Phillip felt a sudden warning of

danger.

"Let's be getting along," he said.

"Yes, it's about time," the little man said. He tore a match from the packet and struck it deliberately.

Later Phillip realized it must have been a signal.

For as the tiny flame sputtered into the blackness a figure materialized behind Porthos, an arm raised, descended viciously, and Phillip heard a thudding smack, and then Porthos pitched forward, groaning.

Athos wheeled and leaped back as a sudden rush of figures closed in on them. Phillip never struck a blow, and he didn't see the man who struck him. He was hit from behind, a hard, paralyzing blow that set off a pin-wheeling display of pyrotechnics in his skull. He remembered falling, trying to strike out at the blackness that was sweeping him. And that was all. . . .

PAIN that stabbed the base of his skull drove away the blackness. He opened his eyes slowly. For an instant they wouldn't focus. Then he discovered that he was half-sitting, half-lying in a soft chair, and that his arms were bound to his sides. Twisting his head to one side he saw that Athos, Porthos and Aramis were similarly secured.

Athos was shaking his head groggily from side to side, but the other two were still unconscious.

"Where are we?" Phillip asked stupidly.

Athos screwed his eyes tight, then opened them with an effort.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he muttered.

Phillip glanced around the room, saw that it was large, luxuriously furnished, with huge windows across one entire wall, probably the street side.

The furniture was done in tan, the

carpet was the color of an expensive camel's hair coat and there was a small bar, a baby grand piano, and a combination record-player and radio that looked big enough to live in. The whole set-up looked like money. Big money.

While he was trying to force his aching head to think, a door opened quietly and several men drifted into the room. They were quiet, nondescript types in gray suits. They wore their hats, and their right hands, Phillip noticed, stayed close to their coat pockets.

Following them, grinning expansively, was Mr. Soleri, as beautifully dressed as ever, his black hair pomaded tight against his skull.

"Nice to see you all again," he said. He glanced at Porthos' and Aramis' unconscious figures and pursed his lips sympathetically. "Too bad your friends haven't come around yet."

"You will regret what you have done," Athos said evenly. "That you may consider a promise."

"I don't think so," Mr. Soleri said, as if the matter didn't interest him one way or the other.

"What is the idea of all this?" Phillip asked.

"It's really quite simple," Soleri said. He took an expensive cigar from his coat pocket and lit it carefully. "Your interference made all the strong-arm tactics inevitable. I hired your friends because they seemed stupid enough to believe anything I told them. My ambitions weren't high. I simply wanted to create a little disturbance, get a little publicity, that's all. Things were working beautifully until you came along this morning and talked them out of going to work. That wasn't so bad but when I learned they were going to have a hearts and flowers reunion at the rally tonight I simply had to prevent it. That would have undone a lot of the good work. So that's why you're here.

And I don't know quite what to do with you."

"What do you get out of causing trouble?" Phillip asked.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Soleri said blandly. "I am a free agent, so to speak. The organization wants certain jobs done and I do the work. They want a little strike trouble here, a bit of anti-semitism in the next place, a few negroes lynched somewhere else. I try and arrange things, that's all."

He strolled to the wall and took down a sword, one very similar to that which Phillip had seen the day before at the machine shop.

"This is the symbol of their order," he said. "Perhaps you didn't notice, but there's a striking snake curling very cleverly toward the hilt. No one is familiar with it today, but tomorrow it might become quite popular. After all, the swastika took a few years to catch one. Maybe it's the coming thing, who knows? There is a lot of smart money behind it and smart money generally gets what it wants. But to get back to our immediate problem. What am I going to do with you people? There will be quite a hue and cry when the union realizes you aren't going to attend their little love feast. That's well and good, but when it is discovered that I kidnaped you it will not be so good." He paused and smiled reflectively. "Now if you had been so obliging as to get yourself killed by a few hot headed union men that would have been perfect. Public opinion wouldn't like that a bit. It would be quite a mess. Just the thing we want." He was still smiling as he said, "we must see if we can't arrange something like that."

"You're out of date," Phillip said. "You won't get away with it."

"Maybe," Soleri said.

He turned to one of his men.

"Tony, get out the car," he said.

THE man addressed as Tony nodded silently and left, closing the door behind him.

Phillip knew they didn't have much chance of getting out of this spot, but he had seen too much in Paris to let his worry show on his face. There was a thick silence in the room while they waited for Tony to return. Soleri licked the tip of his cigar and kept his eyes fixed dreamily on its glowing tip. His men leaned against the walls and waited.

The door behind Soleri opened.

He said, "car ready?"

The man in the doorway wasn't Tony. He wore a dark suit, snap brim hat and his lean face was as bright as a flashing sword. In his hand he held a short, very business-like automatic.

He said, "I wouldn't do anything suddenly, gentlemen. It would please me to shoot you all very quickly."

Soleri turned slowly, his jaw dropping with astonishment.

Athos and Phillip were grinning widely. Phillip hadn't recognized the new arrival immediately, and even now he couldn't believe his eyes; couldn't believe that *D'Artagnan*, the smiling, reckless, *D'Artagnan*, was actually standing in the room.

"*Bravo, mon ami*," Athos cried.

D'Artagnan took his eyes from Soleri long enough to glance at the bound figures of the Musketeers and Phillip. "As usual," he sighed, "if I leave you *enfants* for a minute you are in trouble."

Soleri shifted suddenly. The sword he held in his hand leaped forward, driving like a striking snake at *D'Artagnan's* heart.

D'Artagnan's lithe body moved faster. He parried the thrust with the barrel of his automatic, causing it to slide harmlessly past him. Then he stepped in close and swung the gun like a club.

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The blow caught Soleri on the forehead. The sword fell from his fingers. He staggered forward pressing his hands to his face, knees buckling.

His henchmen made swift moves for their pockets but *D'Artagnan* had swung the gun to cover them. And the reckless smile was gone from his face, leaving it cold and hard.

"I wouldn't," he said.

They didn't. Hands inches from guns, they froze.

There was a sudden battering on the front door.

D'Artagnan backed to the door, opened it and stepped aside. Several policemen, two or three plain-clothes men and Nelson charged into the room.

"It is all over," *D'Artagnan* said.

One of the plain-clothes men glared at him. "You were supposed to wait for us to come in the front way before you started anything."

D'Artagnan hung his head guiltily.

"I'm afraid I let my excitement carry me away," he said.

Nelson untied Phillip while the policemen were releasing the Musketeers. "We traced you back to your room and met this young friend of yours. He wanted to come along. We suspected Soleri might have been the one who kidnaped you, so we made a bee-line for here. He didn't get rid of the evidence fast enough."

"He was trying to," Phillip said.

"I've called the FBI," Nelson said. "They'll crack Soleri wide open and find out who's behind him. And I want to put you and your friends to work.

I'll give you the details later. Just in brief I want you to go on a speaking tour, telling just what happened yesterday and today. It might wake some people up to the fact that while the war is over there's still work ahead."

"Sounds fine," Phillip said.

* * *

A week later Phillip and the Musketeers were sitting in quiet luxury in what had formerly been Soleri's apartment, sipping cognac.

"So you see," Porthos was saying, "you were wrong. We have this lovely apartment, beautiful food and drink and we are even working. What is difficult about America? It is wonderful, it is magnificent! It has no difficulties at all."

At that moment the doorbell rang. Athos opened the door and a uniformed messenger handed him four bulky forms.

"Mr. Nelson sent these over," he said.

Athos looked at them with a frown. Then he shrugged and tossed them on a table. "Nothing to worry about," he said.

"What was it?" Phillip asked.

Athos shrugged. "I don't know. But it cannot be bad. Everything here is good." He picked up the forms again and read aloud, "Income Tax Return —," He tossed them back on the table. "There's a lot more writing but it isn't important."

"Of course not," Porthos said. He lifted his glass and then glanced sharply at Phillip.

"What are you laughing about?"

THE END