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DAVID AND PORTHOS COMPARED

BUT Mary spoilt it all, when I sent David back to her in the morning, by inquiring too curiously into his person and discovering that I had put his combinations on him with the buttons to the front. For this I wrote her the following insulting letter. When Mary does anything that specially annoys me I send her an insulting letter. I once had a photograph taken of David being hanged on a tree. I sent her that. You can't think of all the subtle ways of grieving her I have. No woman with the spirit of a crow would stand it.

'Dear Madam,' I wrote, 'it has come to my knowledge that when you walk in the Gardens with the boy David you listen avidly for encomiums of him and of your fanciful dressing of him by passers-by, storing them in your heart the while you make vain pretence to regard them not: wherefore lest you be swollen by these very small

things, I, who now know David both by day and by night, am minded to compare him and Porthos the one with the other, both in this matter and in other matters of graver account. And touching this matter of outward show, they are both very lordly, and neither of them likes it to be referred to, but they endure in different ways. For David says "Oh, bother!" and even at times hits out, but Porthos droops his tail and lets them have their say. Yet is he extolled as beautiful and a darling ten times for the once that David is extolled.

'The manners of Porthos are therefore prettier than the manners of David, who when he has sent me to hide from him behind a tree sometimes comes not in search, and on emerging tamely from my concealment I find him playing other games entirely forgetful of my existence. Whereas Porthos always comes in search. Also, if David wearies of you he scruples not to say so, but Porthos, in like circumstances, offers you his paw, meaning "Farewell," and to bearded men he does this all the time (I think because of a hereditary distaste for goats), so that they conceive him to be enamoured of them when he is only begging them courteously to go. Thus

while the manners of Porthos are more polite, it may be argued that those of David are more efficacious.

‘In gentleness David compares ill with Porthos, for whereas the one shoves, and has been known to kick, on slight provocation, the other, who is noisily hated of all small dogs by reason of his size, remonstrates not, even when they cling in froth and fury to his chest, but carries them along tolerantly until they drop off from fatigue. Again, David will not unbend when in the company of babies, expecting them unreasonably to rise to his level; but contrariwise Porthos, though terrible to tramps, suffers all things of babies, even to an exploration of his mouth in an attempt to discover what his tongue is like at the other end. The comings and goings of David are unnoticed by perambulators, which lie in wait for the advent of Porthos. The strong and wicked fear Porthos but no little creature fears him, not the hedgehogs he conveys from place to place in his mouth, nor the sparrows that steal his straw from under him.

‘In proof of which gentleness I adduce his adventure with the rabbit. Having gone for a time to reside in a rabbit country, Porthos was elated to

discover at last something small that ran from him, and developing at once into an ecstatic sportsman, he did pound hotly in pursuit, though always overshooting the mark by a hundred yards or so and wondering very much what had become of the rabbit. There was a steep path, from the top of which the rabbit suddenly came into view, and the practice of Porthos was to advance up it on tiptoe, turning near the summit to give me a knowing look and then bounding forward. The rabbit here did something tricky with a hole in the ground, but Porthos tore onwards in full faith that the game was being played fairly, and always returned panting and puzzled but glorious.

‘I sometimes shuddered to think of his perplexity should he catch the rabbit, which, however, was extremely unlikely ; nevertheless he did catch it, I know not how, but presume it to have been another than the one of which he was in chase. I found him with it, his brows furrowed in the deepest thought. The rabbit, terrified but uninjured, cowered between his paws. Porthos gave me a happy look, and again dropped into a weighty frame of mind. “What is the next thing one does?” was obviously the puzzle with him, and the position was scarcely less awkward for the

rabbit, which several times made a move to end this intolerable suspense. Whereupon Porthos immediately gave it a warning tap with his foot, and again fell to pondering. The strain on me was very great.

‘At last they seemed to hit upon a compromise. Porthos looked over his shoulder very self-consciously, and the rabbit, at first slowly, and then in a flash, withdrew. Porthos pretended to make a search for it, but you cannot think how relieved he looked. He even tried to brazen out his disgrace before me and waved his tail appealingly. But he could not look me in the face, and when he saw that this was what I insisted on he collapsed at my feet and moaned. There were real tears in his eyes, and I was touched, and swore to him that he had done everything a dog could do, and though he knew I was lying he became happy again. For so long as I am pleased with him, ma’am, nothing else greatly matters to Porthos. I told this story to David, having first extracted a promise from him that he would not think the less of Porthos. And now I must demand the same promise of you. Also, an admission that in innocence of heart, for which David has been properly commended, he can nevertheless teach

Porthos nothing, but on the contrary may learn much from him.

‘And now to come to those qualities in which David excels over Porthos—the first is that he is no snob, but esteems the girl Irene (pretentiously called his nurse) more than any fine lady, and envies every ragged boy who can hit to leg. Whereas Porthos would have every class keep its place, and though fond of going down into the kitchen, always barks at the top of the stairs for a servile invitation before he graciously descends. Most of the servants in our street have had the loan of him to be photographed with, and I have but now seen him stalking off for that purpose with a proud little housemaid who is looking up to him as if he were a warrior for whom she had paid a shilling.

‘Again, when David and Porthos are in their bath, praise is due to the one and must be withheld from the other. For David, as I have noticed, loves to splash in his bath and to slip back into it from the hands that would transfer him to a towel. But Porthos stands in his bath drooping abjectly like a shamed figure cut out of some limp material.

‘Furthermore, the inventiveness of David is be-

yond that of Porthos, who cannot play by himself, and knows not even how to take a solitary walk, while David invents playfully all day long. Lastly, when David is discovered of some offence and expresses sorrow therefor, he does that thing no more for a time, but looks about him for other offences, whereas Porthos incontinently repeats his offence—in other words, he again buries his bone in the back-yard, and marvels greatly that I know it, although his nose be crusted with earth.

‘Touching these matters, therefore, let it be granted that David excels Porthos; and in divers similar qualities the one is no more than a match for the other, as in the quality of curiosity; for, if a parcel comes into my chambers Porthos is miserable until it is opened, and I have noticed the same thing of David.

‘Also there is the taking of medicine. For at production of the vial all gaiety suddenly departs from Porthos and he looks the other way; but if I say I have forgotten to have the vial refilled he skips joyfully, yet thinks he still has a right to a chocolate; and when I remarked disparagingly on this to David, he looked so shy that there was revealed to me a picture of a certain lady treating him for youthful maladies.

‘A thing to be considered of in both is their receiving of punishments, and I am now reminded that the girl Irene (whom I take in this matter to be your mouthpiece) complains that I am not sufficiently severe with David, and do leave the chiding of him for offences against myself to her in the hope that he will love her less and me more thereby. Which we have hotly argued in the Gardens to the detriment of our dignity. And I here say that if I am slow to be severe to David, the reason thereof is that I dare not be severe to Porthos, and I have ever sought to treat the one the same with the other.

‘Now I refrain from raising hand or voice to Porthos because his great heart is nigh to breaking if he so much as suspects that all is not well between him and me, and having struck him once some years ago never can I forget the shudder which passed through him when he saw it was I who had struck; and I shall strike him, ma’am, no more. But when he is detected in any unseemly act now, it is my stern practice to cane my writing-table in his presence, and even this punishment is almost more than he can bear. Wherefore if such chastisement inflicted on David encourages him but to enter upon fresh trespasses

(as the girl Irene avers), the reason must be that his heart is not like unto that of the noble Porthos.

‘And if you retort that David is naturally a depraved little boy, and so demands harsher measure, I have still my answer, to wit, what is the manner of severity meted out to him at home? And lest you should shuffle in your reply, I shall mention a notable passage that has come to my ears.

‘As thus, that David having heard a horrid word in the street, uttered it with unction in the home. That the mother threatened corporal punishment, whereat the father tremblingly inter-vened. That David continuing to rejoice exceedingly in his word, the father spoke darkly of a cane, but the mother rushed between the combatants. That the problematical chastisement became to David an object of romantic interest. That this darkened the happy home. That casting from his path a weeping mother, the goaded father at last dashed from the house yelling that he was away to buy a cane. That he merely walked the streets white to the lips because of the terror David must now be feeling. And that when he returned, it was David radiant with hope who opened the door and then burst into tears because

there was no cane. Truly, ma'am, you are a fitting person to tax me with want of severity. Rather should you be giving thanks that it is not you I am comparing with Porthos.

'But to make an end of this comparison, I mention that Porthos is ever wishful to express gratitude for my kindness to him, so that looking up from my book I see his mournful eyes fixed upon me with a passionate attachment, and then I know that the well-nigh unbearable sadness which comes into the face of dogs is because they cannot say 'Thank you' to their masters. Whereas David takes my kindness as his right. But for this, while I should chide him I cannot do so, for of all the ways David has of making me to love him the most poignant is that he expects it of me as a matter of course. David is all for fun, but none may plumb the depths of Porthos. Nevertheless I am most nearly doing so when I lie down beside him on the floor and he puts an arm about my neck. On my soul, ma'am, a protecting arm. At such times it is as if each of us knew what was the want of the other.

'Thus weighing Porthos with David, it were hard to tell which is the worthier. Wherefore, do you keep your boy while I keep my dog, and so we shall both be pleased.'