TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

the blow was so great that he rushed out, overcome, and forgot to shut the door.

The two friends remained alone to speak of the future and to build castles in the air. The good wine which Musqueton had placed before them gave to D'Artagnan a perspective, sliding with quadrupeds and pistols, and showed to Porthos a blue ribbon and a ducal mantle: they were, in fact, asleep on the table when the servants came to beg them to go to bed.

Musqueton was, however, a little consulted by D'Artagnan, who, the next day, told him that in all probability war would always be carried on in the heart of Paris, and within reach of the Château du Vallois, which was near Corbeil, or Bois-Rousses, which was near Melun, and of Pierrefonds, which was between Compiegne and Villars-Cotterets.

"But,—formerly—-it appears," began Musqueton, timidly.

"Oh!" said D'Artagnan, "we don't now make war as we did formerly. To-day it's a sort of diplomatic arrangement; ask Panchet."

Musqueton inquired, therefore, the state of the care of his old friend, who confirmed the statement of D'Artagnan. "But," he added, "in this war prisoners stand a chance of being hung."

"The decency they do!" said Musqueton; "I think I should like the siege of Rochelle better than this war, then!"

Porthos, meantime, asked D'Artagnan to give him his instructions how to proceed on his journey.

"Four days," replied his friend, "are necessary to reach Blois; one day to rest there: three or four days to return to Paris. Set out, therefore, in a week, with your wife, and go to the Hôtel de la Chevrette, Rue Turgotonne, and wait for me there."

"That's agreed," said Porthos.

"As to myself, I shall go round to see Athos; for though I don't think his aid worth much, one must, with one's friends, observe all due politeness," said D'Artagnan.

The friends then took leave of each other on the very border of the estate of Pierrefonds, to which Porthos escorted his friend.

"At least," D'Artagnan said to himself, as he took the road to Villars-Cotterets, "at least I shall not be alone in my undertaking. That said, Porthos, is a man of immense strength; still, if Athos joins us, well—we shall be three of us to laugh at Aramis—that little coward with his good luck."

At Villars-Cotterets he wrote to the Cardinal:

"My Lord,—I have already one man to offer to your Eminence, and he is well worth twenty men. I am just setting out for Blois. The Comte de la Fère inhabits the castle of Brézé, and in the environs of that city."

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO ANGELIC PARCHES.

The road was long, but the horses upon which D'Artagnan and Panchet rode had been refreshed in the well-supplied stables of the Lord of Bracelux; the master and servant rode side by side, cou
versing as they went, for D'Artagnan had, by degrees, thrown off the master, and Planchet had entirely ceased to assume the manners of a servant. He had been raised by circumstances to the rank of a confidant to his master. It was many years since D'Artagnan had opened his heart to any one; it happened, however, that these two men, on meeting again, assimilated perfectly. Planchet was, in truth, no vulgar companion in these new adventures; he was a man of good sense. Without seeking danger, he never sat rank from an attack; in short, he had been a soldier, and arms ennoble a man; it was, therefore, on the footing of friends that D'Artagnan and Planchet arrived in the neighborhood of Budis.

Going along, D'Artagnan, shaking his head, said:

"I know that my going to Athos is useless and absurd; but I owe this step to my old friend, a man who had in him materials for the most noble and generous of characters."

"Oh, Monsieur Athos was a noble gentleman," said Planchet.

"was he not? Scattering money about him as Heaven scatters hail.

Do you remember, sir, that duel with the Englishman in the inclosure des Carmes? Ah! how lofty, how magnificent Monsieur Athos was that day, when he said to his adversary, "You have insisted on knowing my name, sir; so much the worse for you, since I shall be obliged to kill you." I was near him, those were his exact words; when he stabbed his foe as he said he would, and his adversary fell without saying, Oh! 'Tis a noble gentleman—Monsieur Athos."

"Yes, true as Gospel," said D'Artagnan, "but one single fault has swallowed up all those fine qualities."

"I remember well," said Planchet—"he was fond of drinking—

in truth, he drank, but not as other men do. One seemed, as he raised the wine to his lips, to hear him say, 'Come, juice of the grape, and chase away my sorrows.' And how he used to break the stem of a glass, or the neck of a bottle! There was no one like him for that."

"And now," replied D'Artagnan, "behold the sad spectacle that awakes us. This noble gentleman with his lofty glance, this handsome cavalier, so brilliant in feats of arms, that every one was surprised that he held in his hand a sword only instead of a baton of command! Alas! we shall find him changed into a beaten old man, with red nose, and eyes that water; we shall find him extended on some lawn, whence he will look at us with a languid eye, and, perhaps, not recognize us. God knows, Planchet, that I should say from a sight so sad, if I did not wish to show my respect for the illustrious shadow of what was once the Comte de la Ferre, whom we loved so much."

Planchet shook his head and said nothing.

"And then," resumed D'Artagnan, "to this decrepitude he probably added poverty—for he must have neglected the little that he had, and the dirty soundcoat, Grimaud, more tattered than ever, and still more drunken than his master—stay, Planchet, all this breaks my heart to think of."

"I fancy myself there and that I see him staggering and hear him stammering," said Planchet, in a piteous tone, "but at all events we shall soon know the real state of things, for I think those lofty walls, rebounded by the setting sun, are the walls of Budis."
"Probably; and you steeples, pointed and sculptured, that we catch a glimpse of yonder, are like what I have heard described at Chaumont."

At this moment, one of those heavy waggons, drawn by bullocks, which carry the wood cut in the fine forests of the country to the ports of the Loire, came out of a by-road full of ruts, and turned so that which the two horsemen were following. A man carrying a long switch with a nail at the end of it, with which he urged on his slow team, was walking with the cart.

"Ho! friend," cried Planchet.

"What's your pleasure, gentleman?" replied the peasant, with a purity of accent peculiar to the people of that district, and which might have put to shame the polished dwellers of the Sorbonne and the Rue de l'Université.

"We are looking for the house of Monsieur de la Fare," said D'Artagnan.

"The peasant took off his hat on hearing this revered name.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the wood that I am carrying is his--I cut it in his copse, and I am taking it to the château."

D'Artagnan determined not to question this man; he did not wish to hear from another what he had himself said to Planchet.

"The château," he said to himself; "what château? Ah, I understand; Athos is not a man to be thwarted, he has obliged his parrasity, as Porthos has done his, to call him my lord," and to call his polly place a château. He had a heavy hand—that dear Athos—after drinking."

D'Artagnan, after asking the man the right way, continued his route, agitated, in spite of himself, at the idea of seeing once more that singular man whom he had so truly loved, and who had contributed so much by his advice and example to his education as a gentleman. He slackened the pace of his horse, and went on, his head drooping as if in deep thought.

Soon as the road turned, the Château de la Villeure appeared in view, then a quarter of a mile further a white house, encircled in sycamore, was visible at the further end of a group of trees, which spring had powdered with a snow of flowers.

On beholding this house, D'Artagnan, calm as he was in general, felt an unusual disturbance within his heart—so powerful during the whole course of his life were the recollections of his youth. He proceeded, nevertheless, and came opposite to an iron gate, ornamented in the taste which marked the works of that period.

Through the gate was seen kitchen-gardens, carefully attended to, a spacious court-yard, in which neighed several horses held by valets in various liveries, and a carriage, drawn by two horses of the country.

"We are mistaken," said D'Artagnan, "this cannot be the house of Athos. Good heavens! suppose he is dead, and that this property now belongs to some one who bears his name. Alight, Planchet, and inquire, for I confess I have not courage to do so."

Planchet alighted.

"Theu must add," said D'Artagnan, "that a gentleman who is passing by, wishes to have the honor of paying his respects to the
Comte de la Fere, and if thou art satisfied with what thou hast seen, mention my name!"

Planchet obeyed these instructions. An old servant opened the door, and took in the message which D'Artagnan had ordered Planchet to deliver, in case that his servant was satisfied that this was the Comte de la Fere whom they sought. Whilst Planchet was standing on the steps before the house, he heard a voice say:

"Well, where is this gentleman, and why do they not bring him here?"

This voice—the sound of which reached D'Artagnan—awakened in his heart a thousand sentiments, a thousand reminiscences that he had forgotten. He sprang hastily from his horse, while Planchet, with a smile on his lips, was advancing toward the master of the house.

"But I know him, I know the lad yonder," said Athos, appearing on the threshold.

"Oh, yes—Monsieur le Comte, you know me, and I know you. I am Planchet, Planchet whom you know well." But the honest servant could say no more, so much was he overcome by this unexpected interview.

"What, Planchet, is Monsieur D'Artagnan here?"

"Here I am, my friend, dear Athos!" cried D'Artagnan, in a faltering voice, and almost staggering from agitation.

At these words a visible emotion was expressed on the beautiful countenance and calm features of Athos. He rushed toward D'Artagnan with eyes fixed upon him, and clasped him in his arms. D'Artagnan, equally moved, pressed him also closely to him, whilst tears stood in his eyes. Athos then took him by the hand and led him into the drawing-room, where there were several people. Every one rose.

"I present to you," he said, "Monsieur le Chevalier D'Artagnan, lieutenant of His Majesty's Musketeers, a devoted friend, and one of the most excellent and brave gentlemen that I have ever known."

D'Artagnan received the compliments of those who were present in his own way: and whilst the conversation became general, he looked earnestly at Athos.

Strange! Athos was scarcely aged at all! His fine eyes, no longer surrounded by that dark line which nights of dissipation drew round them, seemed larger, more liquid than ever. His face, a little elongated, had gained in calm dignity what it had lost in feverish excitement. His hand, always wonderfully beautiful and strong, was set off by a ruffle lace, like certain bands by Titian and Vandyck. He was less still than formerly. His long dark hair scattered here and there with gray locks, fell elegantly over his shoulders with a wavy curl; his voice was still youthful, as if at only twenty-five years old; and his magnificent teeth, which he had preserved white and sound, gave an indescribable charm to his smile.

Meanwhile, the guests seeing that the two friends were longing to be alone, prepared to depart, when a noise of dogs barking resounded through the courtyard, and many persons said, at the same moment:

"Ah! 'tis Raoul, who is come home."
 twenty years after.

Athos, as the name of Raoul was pronounced, looked intently at D'Artagnan, in order to see if any curiosity was painted on his face. But D'Artagnan was still in confusion, and turned round almost mechanically, when a fine young man of fifteen years of age, dressed simply, but in perfect taste, entered the room, raising, as he came, his hat, adorned with a long plume of red feathers.

Nevertheless, D'Artagnan was struck by the appearance of this new personage. It seemed to explain to him the change in Athos; a resemblance between the boy and the man explained the mystery of this regenerated existence. He remained listening and gazing.

"Here you are, home again, Raoul," said the Conte.

"Yes, sir," replied the youth, with deep respect, "and I have performed the commission that you gave me."

"But what's the matter, Raoul?" said Athos, very anxiously.

"You are pale and agitated."

"Sir," replied the young man; "it is on account of an accident which has happened to our little neighbor."

"To Mademoiselle de la Valliere?" asked Athos, quickly.

"What is it?" cried many persons present.

She was walking with her nurse Marie, in the place where the woodmen cut the wood, when, passing on horseback, I stopped. She saw me also, and, in trying to jump from the end of a pile of wood on which she had mounted, the poor child fell, and was not able to rise again. She has, I fear, splintered her ankle."

"Oh, heavens!" cried Athos. "And her mother, Madame de Saint-Renay, have they told her of it?"

"No, sir; Madame de Saint-Renay is at Blois with the Duchess of Orleans. I am afraid that what first done was unskillful and useless. I am come, sir, to ask your advice."

"Send directly to Blois, Raoul; or rather take your horse, and ride there yourself."

Raoul bowed.

"But where is Louise?" asked the Conte.

"I have brought her here, sir, and I have deposited her in the charge of Charlotte, who, till better advice comes, has put the foot into cold water."

The guests now all took leave of Athos, excepting the old Duke de Berne, who, as an old friend of the family of de la Villiere, went to see little Louise, and offered to take her to Blois in his carriage.

"You are right, sir," said Athos. "She will be better with her mother. As for you, Raoul, I am sure it is your fault; some giddiness or folly."

"No, sir, I assure you," muttered Raoul, "it is not."

"Oh, no, no, I declare it is not!" cried the young girl, while Raoul turned pale at the idea of his being, perhaps, the cause of her disaster.

"Nevertheless, Raoul, you must go to Blois, and you must make your excuses and mine to Madame de Saint-Renay."

The youth looked pleased. He again took in his strong arms the little girl whose pretty golden head and smiling face rested on his shoulder, and placed her gently in the carriage; then jumping on his horse with the elegance and agility of a first-rate esquire, after
hewing to Athos and D'Artagnan, he went off close by the door of
the carriage, in the inside of which his eyes were incessantly riveted.

CHAPTER XIV.
THE CASTLE OF BRAGELONE.

While this scene was going on, D'Artagnan remained with open
mouth and a confused gaze. Everything had turned out so differ-
cently from what he expected that he was stupefied with wonder.
Athos, who had been observing him, and guessing his thoughts,
took his arm and led him into the garden.
"Whist, supper is being prepared," he said, smiling, "you will
not, my friend, be sorry to have the mystery which so puzzles you
cleared up."
"True, Monseur le Comte," replied D'Artagnan, who felt that
by degrees Athos was resuming that great influence which aristocracy
had over him.
Athos smiled.
"First and foremost, dear D'Artagnan, we have no title such as
count here. When I call you 'chevalier,' it is in presenting you
to my guests, that they may know who you are. But to you,
D'Artagnan, I am, I hope, still dear Athos, your comrade, your
friend. Do you intend to be ceremonious because you are less at-
tached to me than you were?"
"Oh! God forbid!"
"Then let me be as we used to be; let us be open to each other.
You are surprised at what you see here?"
"Extremely."
"But above all things, I am a marvel to you?"
"I confess it."
"I am still young: am I not? Should you not have known me
again, in spite of my eight and forty years of age?"
"On the contrary, I do not find you the same person at all."
"Ah, I understand," cried Athos, with a slight blush.
"Everything, D'Artagnan, even folly, has its limit."
"Then your means, it appears, are improved; you have a capital
house, your own, I presume? You have a park, horses, servants."
Athos smiled.
"Yes, I inherited this little property when I quitted the army,
as I told you. The park is twenty acres—twenty, comprising
kitchen-gardens and a common. I have two horses—I don't count
my servant's short-tailed nag. My sporting dogs consist of two
pointers, two hares, and two setters. And then all this extrav-
cance is not for myself," added Athos, laughing.
"Yes, I see, for the young man Raoul," said D'Artagnan.
"You guess right, my friend; this youth is an orphan, deserted
by his mother, who left him in the house of a poor country priest.
I have brought him up. It is he who has worked in me the change
you see: I was dried up like a miserable tree, isolated, attached to
nothing on earth; it was only a deep affection which could make me
take root again, and bind me to life. This child has repaired to