TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

They descended the great staircase, taking with them all the guards that they found on their road, and crying out, "To horse! To horse!" and they spurred on their horses, which set off along the Rue St. Honoré with the speed of a whirlwind.

"Well, baron! I promised you some good exercise!" said the Gascon.

"Yes, my captain,"

As they went, the citizens, awakened, left their doors, and the fierce dogs followed the cavaliers, barking. At the corner of the Cimetière Saint Jean, D'Artagnan upset a man; it was too slight an occurrence to delay people so eager to get on. The troop continued its course as if their steeds were winged.

And there were no unimportant events in this world! and we shall see that this apparently slight one was near endangering the monarchy.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE HIGH ROAD.

The Musketeers rode the whole length of the Faubourg St. Antoine, and of the road to Viennes, and soon found themselves out of the town, then in a forest, and then in sight of a village.

From the top of an eminence D'Artagnan perceived a group of people collected on the other side of the moat, in front of that part of the donjon which looks toward Saint Maur. He rode on, convinced that he should in that direction gain intelligence of the fugitive; and he learned from the people that composed that group, that the duke had been pursued without success; that his party consisted of four able men, and one wounded, and that they were two hours and a quarter in advance of their pursuers.

"Only four!" cried D'Artagnan, looking at Porthos; "baron, only four of them!"

Porthos smiled.

"And only two hours and a quarter before us, and we so well mounted, Porthos!"

Porthos sighed, and thought of all that was awaiting his poor horses.

The troop then pursued their course with their wonted ardor; but some of them could no longer sustain this rapidity; three of them stopped after an hour's march, and one fell down.

"D'Artagnan, who never turned his head, did not perceive it.

Porthos told him of it in his calm manner.

"If we can only keep two," said D'Artagnan, "it will be enough, since the duke's troop are only four in number."

And he spurred his horse on.

At the end of another two hours the horses had gone twelve leagues without stopping; their legs began to tremble; and the foam that they shed whitened the doublets of their masters.

"Let us rest here an instant to give these miserable creatures breathing time," said Porthos.

"Let us rather kill them! yes, kill them!" cried D'Artagnan; "1
TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

see fresh tracks: 'tis not a quarter of an hour since they passed this place.'

In fact, the road was trodden by horses' feet, visible even in the approaching gloom of evening.

'They set out; after a run of two leagues, Musqueton's horse sank.'

"Gracious me!" said Porthos, "there's Phoebus ruined."

"The Cardinal will pay you a hundred pistoles." "I am above that." "Let us set out then again, on a full gallop." "Yes, if we can." But, at last, the lieutenant's horse refused to go on; he could not breathe; one last spur, instead of making him advance, made him fall.

"The devil!" exclaimed Porthos, "there's Vulcan foundered."

"Zounds!" cried D'Artagnan, "we must then stop! Give me your horse, Porthos. What the devil are you doing?"

"By Jove, I am falling, or rather, Bayard is falling," answered Porthos.

All three then called out: "All's over."

"Hush!" said D'Artagnan.

"What is it?"

"I hear a horse; 'tis on before; it is at a hundred steps from hence, and in advance of us." There was, in truth, the neighing of a horse ahead.

"Sir," said Musqueton, "at a hundred steps from us there's a little hunting seat."

"Musqueton, my pistols."

"They are in my hand, sir."

"Porthos, keep yours in your saddle-bags."

"I have them."

"Now, we require horses for the king's service."

"For the king's service," repeated Porthos.

"Then not a word, and to work!"

They went on, through the night, as silent as phantoms; they saw a light shine in the midst of some trees.

"There is the house, Porthos," said the Gascon; "let me do what I please, and do you what I do."

They glided from tree to tree, till they arrived at twenty steps from the house, unperceived, and saw, by means of a lantern sus- pended under a hut, four fine horses. A groom was rubbing them down; near them were saddles and bridles.

"I want to buy thy horses," said D'Artagnan, approaching the groom.

"These horses are not to be sold." was the reply.

"I take them, then," said the lieutenant.

And he took hold of one within his reach; his two companions did the same thing.

"Sir," cried the groom, "they have just been six leagues, and have only been unharnesssed about half an hour."

"Half an hour's rest is enough," replied the Gascon.

The groom called aloud for help. A kind of steward appeared,
just as D'Artagnan and his companions were prepared to mount, the steward was heard to exclaim:

"My dear friend," cried the lieutenant, "if you say a word I will blow out your brains."

"But, sir," answered the steward, "do you know that these horses belong to Monsieur de Montbazan?"

"So much the better; they must be good animals, then."

"Sir, I shall call my people."

"And I, mine; I've ten guards behind me; don't you hear them gallop; and I'm one of the king's Musketeers; come, Porthos; come, Athos."

They all mounted the horses as quickly as possible.

"Here! here!" cried the steward; "the house servants with the carabines."

"Out on!" cried D'Artagnan; "there'll be firing! on!"

They all set off, swift as the wind.

"Here!" cried the steward, "here!" whilst the groom ran to a neighboring building.

"Take care of your horses," cried D'Artagnan, to him.

"Fire!" replied the steward.

A gleam, like a flash of lightning, illumined the road, and, with the flash, was heard the whistling of balls, which were fired in the air.

"They fire like grooms," said Porthos; "in the time of the Cardinal, people fired better, than that; do you remember the road to Greveceur, Musquetares?"

"Ah, sir! my left side still pains me!"

"Are you sure we are on the right track, lieutenant?"

"Egal, didn't you hear—these horses belong to Monsieur de Montbazan: well, Monsieur de Montbazan is the husband of Madame de Montbazan—"

"And—"

"And Madame de Montbazan is the mistress of the Duc de Beaufort—"

"Aha! I understand," replied Porthos; "she has ordered relays of horses."

"Exactly so."

"And we are pursuing the duke with the very horses he has just left!"

"My dear Porthos, you are really a man of superior understanding!" said D'Artagnan, with a look as if he spoke against his convictions.

"Pooh!" replied Porthos, "I am what I am."

They rode on for an hour, till the horses were covered with foam and dust.

"Zounds! what is yonder?" cried D'Artagnan.

"You are very lucky, if you see anything in such a night as this," said Porthos.

"Something bright."

"I, too," cried Musquetares, "saw them also."

"Yes, a dead horse," said D'Artagnan, pulling up his horse, which asked, "It seems that they also are broken-winded as well as ourselves."
"I seem to hear the noise of a troop of horsemen," exclaimed
Porthos, leaning over his horse's mane.

"Impossible!"

"They appear to be numerous,"

"Then, 'tis something else."

"Another horse!" said Porthos.

"Deadly!"

"No; dying."

"Saddled?"

"Yes, saddled and bridled."

"Then 'tis the fugitives."

"Courage, we have them!"

"But, if they are numerous," observed Musqueton, "'tis not
we, who have them, but they who have us."

"Nonsense!" cried D'Artagnan. "They'll suppose us to be
stronger than themselves, as we're in pursuit, they'll be afraid, and
disperse."

"Certainly," remarked Porthos.

"Ah! do you see?" cried the lieutenant.

"The lights again! this time I too saw them," said Porthos.

"Out on forward! forward!" cried D'Artagnan, in his stentor-
ian voice, "we shall laugh over all this in five minutes."

And they darted on anew. The horses, excited by pain and emu-
lation, raced over the dark road, in the midst of which was now
seen a moving mass, more dense and obscure than the rest of the
horizon.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE ENCOUNTER.

They rode on in this way for ten minutes. Suddenly, two dark
forms seemed to separate from the mass, advanced, grew in size,
and as they grew larger and larger, assumed the appearance of two
horsemen.

"Oh, oh!" cried D'Artagnan, "they're coming toward us."

"So much the worse for them," said Porthos.

"Who goes there?" cried a hoarse voice.

The three horsemen made no reply; stopped not, and all that
was heard was the noise of swords, drawn from the scabbards, and
of the cocking of the pistols with which the two phantoms were
armed.

"Arm to the teeth," said D'Artagnan.

Porthos understood him, and he and the lieutenant each took
from his left hand a pistol, and armed himself each in his turn.

"Who goes there?" was asked a second time. "Not a step for-
warder, or you're dead men."

"Stuff!" cried Porthos, almost choked with dust. "Stuff and
nonsense; we have seen plenty of dead men in our time."

Hearing these words, the two shadows blocked the road, and
by the light of the stars might be seen the shining of their arms.

"Back!" cried D'Artagnan, "or you are dead!"

Two shots were the reply to this threat; but the assailants at-