"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, "it's 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! out! forward! forward!" cried D'Artagnan, in his stentorian voice, "we shall laugh over all this in five minutes."

And they darted on anew. The horses, excited by pain and emulation, 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.

Thus 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.

"Aim 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 forward, or you're dead men."

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

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

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

Two shots were the reply to this threat; but the assailants at
tacked their foes with such velocity that in a moment they were upon them; a third pistol-shot was heard, aimed by D'Artagnan, and one of his adversaries fell. As to Porthos, he assailed his with such violence, that although his sword was thrust aside, the enemy was thrown off his horse, and fell about ten steps from it.

"Finish! Monseigneur—finish the work!" cried Porthos. And he darted on, beside his friend, who had already begun a fresh pursuit.

"Well?" said Porthos.

"I've broken his skull," cried D'Artagnan. "And you—-"

"I've only thrown him down; but luck!

Another shot of a carbine was heard. It was Musqueton, who was obeying his mam's command.

"On! on!" cried D'Artagnan; "all goes well! we have the first throw."

"Ha! ha!" answered Porthos: "behold, other players appear."

And, in fact, two other cavaliers made their appearance, detached, as it seemed, from the principal group; they again disputed the road.

This time the Lieutenant did not wait for the opposite party to speak.

"Stand aside," he cried: "stand off the road."

"What do you want?" asked a voice.

"The duel!" Porthos and D'Artagnan ran out both at once.

A burst of laughter was the answer, but finished with a groan. D'Artagnan had, with his sword, cut the poor wretch in two who had laughed.

At the same time Porthos and his adversary fired on each other, and D'Artagnan turned to him:

"Brave!—you've killed him, I think."

"No, wounded his horse only."

"But what ails my horse?"

"What ails your horse is, that he's falling down," replied Porthos.

In truth, the Lieutenant's horse stumbled, and fell on his knees; then a writhing in his throat was heard, and he lay down to die.

D'Artagnan swore loud enough to be heard in the skies above.

"Does your honor want a horse?" asked Musqueton.

"Zounds! want one!" cried the Gascon.

"Here's one, your honor—-"

"How the devil hast thou two horses?" asked D'Artagnan, jumping on one of them.

"Their masters are dead! I thought they might be useful, so I took them."

Meantime Porthos had reloaded his pistols.

"Be on the alert!" cried D'Artagnan. "Here are two other cavaliers."

As he spoke, two horsemen advanced at full speed.

"Ho! your honor!" cried Musqueton, "the man you upset is getting up."

"Why didn't thou do as thou didst to the first man?" said Porthos.

"I held the horses, my hands were full, your honor."

A shot was fired that moment—Musqueton shrieked with pain.
"Ah, sir! I'm hit in the other side! exactly in the other! This hurt is just the fellow of that I had on the road to Amiens."

Porthos turned round like a lion—plunged on the dismounted cavalier, who tried to draw his sword; but, before he was out of the scabbard, Porthos, with the hilt of his had hit him such a terrible blow on the head that he fell like an ox beneath the butcher's knife. Musketeon, groaning, slipped down from his horse, his wound not allowing him to sit in his saddle.

On perceiving the cavaliers, D'Artagnan had stopped and charged his pistol afresh; besides, his horse, he found, had a carbine on the bow of the saddle.

"Here I am!" exclaimed Porthos. "Shall we wait, or shall we charge?"

"Let us charge them," answered the Gascon.

"Charge!" said Porthos.

They spurred on their horses; the other cavaliers were only twenty steps from them.

"For the king!" cried D'Artagnan.

"The king has no authority here!" answered a deep voice, which seemed to proceed from a cloud, so enveloped was the cavalier in a whirlwind of dust.

"'Tis well, we will see if the king's name is not a passport everywhere," replied the Gascon.

"See!" answered the voice.

Two shots were fired at once—one by D'Artagnan, the other by the adversary of Porthos. D'Artagnan's ball took off his enemy's hat. The ball fired by Porthos's foe went through the throat of his horse, which fell, groaning.

"Ah! this," cried the voice, the tone of which was at once piercing and jeering—"this 'tis nothing but a butchery of horses, and not a combat between men. To the sword, sir!—the sword!"

And he jumped off his horse.

"To our swords—be it so!" replied D'Artagnan—"that's just what I want."

D'Artagnan, in two steps, was engaged with the foe, whom, according to his custom, he attacked impetuously: but he met, this time, with a skill and a strength of arm which made him pause. Twice he was obliged to step back; his opponent stirred not one inch. D'Artagnan returned, and again attacked him.

Twice or thrice blows were struck on both sides without effect; sparks were emitted from the swords like water spouting out.

At last D'Artagnan thought it was time to try one of his favorite feats in fencing. He brought it to bear; skillfully executed it with the rapidity of lightning, and struck the blow with a force which he fancied would prove irresistible.

The blow was parried.

"Sic transit!" he cried, with his Gascon accent.

At this exclamation his adversary bounded back, and, bending his bare head, tried to distinguish, in the gloom, the features of the lieutenant.

As to D'Artagnan, afraid of some feint, he still stood on the offensive.
"Have a care," cried Porthos to his opponent; "I've still two pistols charged."

"The more reason you should fire the first," cried his foe.

Porthos fired; a flash threw a gleam of light over the field of battle.

As the light shone on them, a cry was heard from the other two combatants.

"Athos!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

"D'Artagnan!" ejaculated Athos.

Athos raised his sword—D'Artagnan lowered his.

"Arnaud!" cried Athos—"don't fire!"

"Ah! but is it you, Arnaud?" said Porthos.

And he threw away his pistol.

Arnaud pushed his back into his saddle-bags, and sheathed his sword.

"My son!" exclaimed Athos, extending his hand to D'Artagnan.

This was the name which he gave him in former days—in their moments of tender intimacy.

"Athos!" cried D'Artagnan, wringing his hands. "So you defend him! And I, who have sworn to take him dead or alive, I am dishonored by you!"

"Kill me!" replied Athos, uncovering his breast. "If your honor requires my death."

"Oli! woe's me! woe's me!" cried the lieutenant: "there's only one man in the world who could stay my hand; by a fatality that very man comes across my way. What shall I say to the Cardinal?"

"You can tell him, sir," answered a voice, which was the voice of high command in the battle-field. "that he sent against me the only two men capable of getting the better of four men; of fighting man to man, without discomfiture, against the Count de la Fere and the Chevalier D'Herblay, and of surrendering only to fifty men!"

"The prince!" exclaimed at the same moment Athos and Arnaud, unmasking as they spoke the Duc de Beaufort, whilst D'Artagnan and Porthos stepped backward.

"Fifty cavaliers!" cried the Gascon and Porthos.

"Look round you, gentlemen, if you doubt the fact," said the duke.

The two friends looked to the right—to the left; they were encompassed by a troop of horsemen.

"Hearing the noise of the fight," resumed the duke, "I fancied you had about twenty men with you, so I came back with those around me, tired of always running away, and wishing to draw my sword for my own cause; but you are only two."

"Yes, my lord; but, as you have said, two equal to twenty," said Athos.

"Come, gentlemen, your swords," said the duke.

"Our swords!" cried D'Artagnan, raising his head and regaining his self-possession. "Never!"

"Never!" added Porthos.

Some of the men moved toward them.

"One moment, my lord," whispered Athos; and he said something in a low voice.

"As you will," replied the duke. "I am too much indebted to
you to refuse your first request. Gentlemen," he said to his escort
"withdraw. Mousieur d'Artagnan, Mousieur du Vallon, you are
free."

The order was obeyed; D'Artagnan and Porthos then found
themselves in the center of a large circle.

"Now, D'Hervay," said Athos, "dismount, and come here."

Aramis dismounted, and went to Porthos; while Athos ap
proached D'Artagnan. All the four were together.

"Friends!" said Athos, "do you regret that you have not seen
our blood?"

"No," replied D'Artagnan; "I regret to see that we, hitherto,
united, are opposed to each other. Ah! nothing will ever go well
with us now!"

"Oh! Heaven! No, all is over!" said Porthos.

"Well—be on our side now," resumed Aramis.

"Silence, D'Hervay!" cried Athos; "such proposals are not to
be made to gentlemen such as these. "Tis a matter of conscience,
with them, as with us."

"Meantime, here we are, enemies!" said Porthos. "Granercy,
who would ever have thought it?"

D'Artagnan only sighed.

Athos looked at them both, and took their hands in his.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is a serious business, and my heart
bleeds as if you had pierced it through and through. Yes, we are
severed: there is the great—the sad truth! but we have not as yet
declared war; perhaps we shall have to make certain conditions,
therefore a solemn conference is indispensable."

"For my own part, I demand it," said Aramis.

"I accept it," interposed D'Artagnan, promptly.

Porthos bowed, as if in ascent.

"Let us choose a place of rendezvous," continued Athos; "and
in a last interview arrange our mutual position, and the conduct we
are to maintain toward each other."

"Good!" the other three exclaimed.

"Well, then, the place?"

"Will the Place Royale suit you?" asked D'Artagnan.

"In Paris?"

"Yes."

Athos and Aramis looked at each other.

"The Place Royale—be it so!" replied Athos.

"When?"

"To-morrow evening, if you please."

"At what hour?"

"At ten in the evening, if that suits you—we shall be returned."

"Good."

"There," continued Athos, "either peace or war will be decided
—our honor, at all events, will be secured."

"Ah!" murmured D'Artagnan, "our honor as soldiers is lost
to us forever! Now, Porthos, now we must hence, to bear back our
name on our heads to the Cardinal."

"And tell him," cried a voice, "that I am not too old to be still a
man of action."

D'Artagnan recognized the voice of De Rochefort.
TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

"Can I do anything for you, gentlemen?" asked the duke.

"Be a witness that we have done what we have done."

"That shall be done, be assured. Ah! let us not meet soon, I trust in Paris, where you shall have your revenge. The Duke, as he spoke, kissed his hand, spurred his horse into a gallop, and disappeared; followed by his troop, who were soon lost in distance and darkness.

D'Artagnan and Porthos were now alone with a man who held their two horses; they thought it was Musqueton, and went up to him.

"What do I see?" cried the lieutenant. "Grimaud, is it thou?"

Grimaud affirmed he was not mistaken.

"And whose horses are those?" cried D'Artagnan.

"Who has given them to us?" said Porthos.

"The Count de la Fère."

"Ah! at least, Musqueton!" muttered D'Artagnan; "you think of every one; you are indeed a gentleman! Where art thou bound to Grimaud?"

"To join the Vicomte de Bragelonne in Flanders, your honor."

They were taking the road toward Paris, when a groan, which seemed to proceed from a ditch, attracted their attention.

"What is that?" asked D'Artagnan.

"It is I, Musqueton," said a mournful voice, while a sort of shadow arose out of the side of the road.

Musqueton ran to him. "Art thou dangerously wounded, my dear Musqueton?" he said.

"No, sir, but I am severely wounded."

"What can we do?" said D'Artagnan; "we must return to Paris."

"I will take care of Musqueton," said Grimaud; and he gave his arm to his old comrade, whose eyes were full of tears, and Grimaud could not tell whether the tears were caused by his wounds, or by the pleasure of seeing him again.

D'Artagnan and Porthos went on, meantime, to Paris. They were passed by a sort of courier, covered with dust, the bearer of a letter from the duke to the Cardinal, giving testimony to the valor of D'Artagnan and Porthos.

Mazarin had passed a very bad night, when this letter was brought to him, announcing that the duke was free, and that he should henceforth raise up a mortal strife against him.

"What consoles me," said the Cardinal, after reading the letter, "is, that at least, in this case, D'Artagnan has done me one good turn, he has destroyed Broussel. This Guise is a precious fellow—even his mistakes are useful."

The Cardinal referred to that man whom D'Artagnan upset at the corner of the Cimetière Saint Jean in Paris, and who was no other than the Councilor Broussel.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FOUR OLD FRIENDS PREPARE TO MEET AGAIN.

"Well," said Porthos, seated in the court-yard of the Hôtel de la Chevrette, to D'Artagnan, who, with a long and melancholy