TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

The king, in return, looked at the four gentlemen, and drank with a smile full of nobleness and gratitude.

"Come, gentlemen," cried Harrison, quite regardless of his illustrious captive, "let’s be off."

"Where do we sleep, Colonel?"

"At Thirsk," replied Harrison.

"Parry," said the king, rising, too, "my horse: I desire to go to Thirsk."

"Egal!" said D’Artagnan to Athos, "your king has thoroughly taken me, and I am quite at his service."

"If what you say is sincere," replied Athos, "he will never reach London."

"How so?"

"Because, before then, we shall have carried him off."

"Well, this time, Athos," said D’Artagnan, "upon my word, you are mad."

"Have you some plan in your head, then?" asked Aramis.

"Aye!" said Porthos, "the thing would not be impossible with a good plan."

"I have none," said Athos. "but D’Artagnan will discover one."

D’Artagnan shrugged his shoulders and went on.

CHAPTER LIX.

D’ARTAGNAN HITS ON A PLAN.

As night closed in they arrived at Thirsk.

D’Artagnan was thoughtful, and assured for the moment to have lost his usual equanimity. Porthos, who could never see anything that was not self-evident, talked to him as usual. He replied in monosyllables, and Athos and Aramis looked significantly at one another.

Next morning D’Artagnan was the first to rise. He had gone down to the stables, had already had a look at the horses, and given all the necessary orders for the day, while Athos and Aramis were still in bed, and Porthos snoring.

At eight o’clock, the march was resumed in the same order as the night before, except that D’Artagnan left his friends and began to renew the acquaintance which he had already struck up with Monsieur Grosly.

"Really, sir," D’Artagnan said to him, "I am happy to find some with whom to talk in my own poor tongue. My friend, Monsieur du Vallon, is of a very melancholy disposition, so much so, that one can scarcely get three words a day out of him. As for our two prisoners, you can imagine, that they are but little in the humor for conversation."

"They are but royals," said Grosly.

"The more reason they should be sulky with us for having captured the Stuart, for whom, I hope, you’re preparing a pretty trial."

"Why," said Grosly, "that is just what we are taking him to London for."

"And you don’t lose sight of him, I presume?"
"I should think not, indeed. You see he has a truly royal escort."
"Ay, there's no fear in the daytime; but at night?"
"We double our precautions."
"And what method of surveillance do you employ?"
"Eight men remain constantly in his room."
"The door, he is well guarded, then. But, besides these eight men, you doubtless place some guard outside?"
"Oh, not! Just think. What would you have two men without arms do against eight armed men?"
"Two men—how do you mean?"
"Yes, the king and his lacquey."
"Oh! then they allow the lacquey to remain with him?"
"Yes; Stuart begged for this favor, and Brunswick consented. Under pretense that he's a king, it appears he cannot dress or undress without assistance."
"Really, captain," said D'Artagnan, determined to continue on the laudatory tack on which he had commenced—"the more I listen to you, the more surprised I am at the easy and elegant manner in which you speak French. You have lived three years in Paris? May I ask what you were doing there?"
"My father, who is a merchant, placed me with his correspondent, who, in turn, sent his son to my father's."
"Were you pleased with Paris, sir?"
"Yes, but you are much in want of a revolution like ours; not against your king, who is merely a child, but against that bear of an Italian, the queen's favorite."
"Ah! I am quite of your opinion, sir; and we should soon make an end of Mazarin, if we had only a dozen officers like yourself, without prejudices, vigilant, and incorruptible."
"But," said the officer, "I thought you were in his service, and that it was he who had sent you to General Cromwell."
"That is to say I am in the king's service, and that knowing he wanted to send some one to England, I solicited the appointment, so great was my desire to know the man of genius who now governs the three kingdoms. So that when he proposed to us to draw our swords in honor of old England, you see how we snatched at the proposition."
"Yes, I know that you charged by the side of Mortain."
"On his right and left, sir. Ah! that's another brave and excellent young man."
"Do you know him?" asked the officer.
"Yes, very well. Monsieur du Valon and myself came from France with him."
"It appears, too, you kept him waiting a long time at Bordeaux."
"What would you have? I was like you, and had a king in keeping."
"Ahah!" said Groslov; "what king?"
"Our own, to be sure—the little one. Louis XIV."
"And how long had you to take care of him?"
"Three nights; and, by my troth, I shall always remember those three nights with pleasure."
"How do you mean?"
"I meant by my friends, officers in the guards and 'Monsieurs,' come to keep me company, and we passed the night in
sitting and play.
"'Ah! true,' said the Englishman, with a sigh, 'you Frenchmen
are jovial boon companions.'
"'And don't you play, too, when you are on guard?'
"'Never,' said the Englishman.
"'In that case you must be terribly bored, and I pity you.'
"'The fact is, I look to my turn for keeping guard with horror.
It's dreary work to keep awake a whole night.'
"'Yes, but with a jovial partner, and the gold and dice rolling on
the table, the night passes like a dream. You don't like playing,
then?'
"'On the contrary, I do.'
"'Lansquenet, for instance?'
"'I'm devoted to it. I used to play almost every night in France.'
"'And since your return to England?'
"'I have not handled a single card or dice box.'
"'I sincerely pity you,' said D'Artagnan, with an air of profound
compassion.
"'Look here!' said the Englishman.
"'Well?'
"'To-morrow I am on guard.'
"'In Stuart's room?'
"'Yes: come and pass the night with me.'
"'Impossible!'
"'Impossible! why so?'
"'I play with Monsieur du Vallon every night. Sometimes we
don't go to bed at all.'
"'Well, what of that?'
"'Why, he would be annoyed if I did not play with him!'
"'Does he play well?'
"'I have seen him lose as much as two thousand pistoles—laugh-
ing all the while till the tears rolled down.'
"'Bring him with you, then.'
"'But how about our prisoners?'
"'Let your servants guard them.'
"'Yes, and give them a chance of escaping,' said D'Artagnan.
"'Why, one of them is a rich lord from Touraine, and the other a
knight of Malta, of noble family. We have arranged the ransom of
each of them—£3,000 on arriving in France.'
"'Aha!' exclaimed Groslov. 'But come,' he continued, 'are
they dangerous men?'
"'In what respect?'
"'Are they capable of attempting violence?'
D'Artagnan burst out laughing at the idea.
"'Well, then,' said Groslov, 'bring them with you.'
"'But really—' said D'Artagnan.
'I have eight men on guard, you know. Four of them can
guard the king, and the other four your prisoners. I shall manage
it somehow you will see.'
"'But,' said D'Artagnan, 'now I think of it—what is to prevent
our beginning to-night?'}
"Nothing at all," said Groslow.
"Just so. Come to us this evening, and to-morrow we'll return your visit."
"Capital! This evening with you, to-morrow at Stuart's, the next day with me."
"You see one can lead a merry life everywhere," said D'Artagnan.
"Yes, with Frenchmen, and Frenchmen like you."
"And Monsieur du Vallon," added the other. "You will see what a fellow he is: a man who nearly killed Mazarin between two doors. They employ him because they are afraid of him. Ah, there he is, calling me now. You'll excuse me, I know."
They exchanged bows, and D'Artagnan returned to his companions.
"What on earth can you have been saying to that bull-dog?" exclaimed Porthos.
"My dear fellow, don't speak like that of Monsieur Groslow. He's one of my intimate friends."
"One of your friends!" cried Porthos; "this butcher of peasants?"
"Hush! my dear Porthos. Monsieur Groslow is perhaps rather quick, it's true, but at bottom I have discovered good qualities in him. He is conceited and stupid."
Porthos opened his eyes in amazement; Athos and Aramis looked at one another and smiled.
"But," continued D'Artagnan, "you shall judge of him for yourself. He is coming to play with us this evening."
"Oho," said Porthos, his eyes glistening at the news. "Is he rich?"
"He's the son of one of the wealthiest merchants in London."
"And knows Lannequinet?"
"He adores it."
"Basset?"
"His niece."
"Bride?"
"He revels in it."
"Good," said Porthos; "we shall pass an agreeable evening."
"The more so, as it will be the prelude to a better."
"How so?"
"We invite him to play to-night; he has invited us in return to-morrow. But wait. To-night we stop at Derby, and if there is a bottle of wine in the town, let Musquenet buy it. It will be well to prepare a light supper, of which you, Athos and Aramis, are not to partake. Athos, because I told him you had a fever; Aramis, because you are a knight of Malta, and won't mix with fellows like us. Do you understand?"
"Yes," said Porthos; "but d'you take me if I understand at all."
"Porthos, my friend, you know that I am descended on the father's side from the Prophets, and on the mother's from the Sybils, and that I only speak in parables and riddles. That is all I can say for the present."
"The fact is," said Porthos, with an air of assurance, "I am rather incredulous."

D'Artagnan gave him a clap on the shoulder, and as they had reached the gallery where they were to breakfast, the conversation ended there.

At five in the evening they sent Mousqueton on before as agreed upon.

In crossing the principal street in Derby, the four friends perceived their man standing in the doorway of a handsome house. It was there that their lodging was prepared for them.

At the hour agreed upon Grosio came. D'Artagnan received him as he would have done a friend of twenty years' standing. Porthos scanned him from head to foot, and smiled when he discovered that in spite of the blow he had administered to Parry's brother, he was not so strong as himself.

Athos and Aramis kept to the parts they had to play, and at midnight they retired to their room, leaving the door open. D'Artagnan accompanied them, and left Porthos to win fifty pistoles of Grosio, and to come to the conclusion when he left that he was not such bad company as he had first imagined.

Grosio left with the determination of retrieving his losses the next night, and reminded the Gascon of the appointment.

The day passed as usual. In his ordinary relations D'Artagnan was the same as ever, but with his friends, that is to say, Athos and Aramis, his gaiety was at fever-heat.

Arrived at Rysiou, D'Artagnan assembled his friends. His face had lost the expression of careless gaiety which it had worn like a mask the whole day. Athos pinched Aramis's hand.

"The moment is at hand," he said.

"Yes," said D'Artagnan, who had overheard him, "to-night, gentlemen, we rescue the king."

"D'Artagnan," said Athos, "this is not a joke, I trust? It would quite cut me up."

"You are very odd, Athos," he replied, "to doubt me thus. Where and when have you seen me trite with a friend's heart and a king's life? I have told you, and I repeat it, that to-night we rescue Charles I. You left it to me to discover the means of doing so, and I have done so."

Porthos looked at D'Artagnan with an expression of profound admiration. Aramis smiled as one who hopes. Athos was pale, and trembled in every limb.

"Speak," said Athos.

"We are invited," replied D'Artagnan, "to pass the night with Mr. Grosio. But do you know where?"

"No."

"In the king's room."

"The king's room?" cried Athos.

"Yes, gentlemen, in the king's room. Grosio is on guard there this evening, and, to pass the time, has invited us to keep him company."

"Ah ha!" exclaimed Aramis.

"We are going, then, we two with our swords, you with daggers. We four are to make ourselves masters of these eight fools..."
and their stupid captain. Monsieur Portos, what do you say to it?"

"That it is easy enough," answered Portos.

"We dress the king in Groslov's clothes. Muskets, Grimart, and Blasios have our horses saddled at the end of the first street. We mount them, and before daylight are twenty leagues distant." Athos placed his two hands on D'Artagnan's shoulders, and gazed at him with his calm, sad smile.

"I declare, my friends," said he, "that there is not a creature under the sky who equals you in prowess and courage."

"And to think that I couldn't find that out," said Portos, scratching his head; "it is so simple."

"But," said Aramis, "if I understand rightly, we are to kill them all, eh?"

Athos shrugged and turned pale.

"Nonplusax," answered D'Artagnan; "I believe we must. I confess I can discover no help for it."

"Let us see," said Aramis; "how are we to act?"

"I have arranged two plans. Firstly, at a given signal, which shall be the words 'At last,' you each plunge a dagger into the heart of the soldier nearest to you. We, on our side, do the same. That will be four killed. We shall then be matched, four against the remaining five. If those five men give themselves up we gug them, if they resist, we kill them."

"Very good," said Portos; "it will be a nice little thrust-cutting."

"Horrible, horrible," exclaimed Athos.

"Nonsense," said D'Artagnan; "you would do as much, Mr. Sensitive, in a battle. But, if you think the king's life is not worth what it must cost, there's an end of the matter, and I send to Groslov to say I am ill."

"No, you are right," said Athos.

At this moment a soldier entered to inform them that Groslov was waiting for them.

"Where?" asked D'Artagnan.

"In the room of the English Nebuchadnezzar," replied the stanch Puritan.

"Go on," replied Athos, whose blood mounted to his face at the insult offered to royalty; "tell the captain we are coming."

"Faith," said Groslov, as the four friends entered, "I had almost given you up."

D'Artagnan went up to him, and whispered in his ear:

"The fact is, we, that is, Monsieur du Vallon and I, hesitated a little."

"And why?"

D'Artagnan looked significantly toward Athos and Aramis.

"Aha," said Groslov; "on account of opinions. No matter. On the contrary," he added, laughing; "if they want to see their Stuart, they shall see him."

"Are we to pass the night in the king's room?" asked D'Artagnan.

"No, but in the one next to it; and as the door will remain open
TWO YEARS AFTER.

It's the same thing. Have you provided yourself with money? I assure you I intend to play the devil's game to-night."

D'Artagnan rattled the gold in his pockets.

"Very good," said Grosbow, and opened the door of the room.

"I will show you the way," and he went in first.

D'Artagnan turned to look at his friends. Porthos was perfectly indifferent; Athos, pale, but resolute. Aramis was wiping a slight moisture from his brow.

The eight guards were at their posts. Four in the king's room, two at the door between the rooms, and two at that by which the friends had entered. Athos smiled when he saw their bare swords; he felt it was no longer to be a butchery but a fight, and his usual good humor returned to him.

Charles was perceived through the door, lying dressed upon his bed, at the head of which Parry was seated, reading, in a low voice, a chapter from the Bible.

A candle of course shone on a black table lit up the resigned face of the king, and that of his faithful retainer, far less calm.

From time to time Parry stopped, thinking the king, whose eyes were closed, was really asleep, but Charles would open his eyes, and say with a smile:

"Go on, my good Parry, I am listening."

Grosbow advanced to the door of the king's room, replaced on his head the hat which he had taken off to receive his guests, looked for a moment contemptuously at this simple and touching scene, and, turning again to D'Artagnan, assumed an air of triumph at what he had achieved.

"Capital," cried the Gascon, "you would make a distinguished general."

"And do you think," asked Grosbow, "that Stuart will ever escape while I am on guard?"

"No, to be sure," replied D'Artagnan: "unless, forsooth, the sky raises friends upon him."

Grosbow's face brightened.

It is impossible to say whether Charles, who kept his eyes constantly closed, had noticed the insolence of the Puritan captain, but the moment he heard the clear tone of D'Artagnan's voice, his eyelids rose in spite of himself.

Parry, too, started and stopped reading.

"What are you thinking about," said the king; "go on, my good Parry, unless you are tired."

Parry resumed his reading.

On a table in the next room were lighted candles, cards, two dice-boxes, and dice.

"That's it," said D'Artagnan; "you, Monsieur le Comte de la Ferre, to the right of Monsieur Grosbow. You, Chevalier D'Herblay, to his left. Du Vallon next me. You'll bet for me, and those gentleman for Monsieur Grosbow."

By this arrangement D'Artagnan could nudge Porthos with his knee, and make signs with the eyes to Athos and Aramis.

At the names of Comte de la Ferre and Chevalier D'Herblay, Charles opened his eyes, and raising his noble head in spite of himself, threw a glance at all the actors in the scene.
"You asked me just now if I was in funds," said D'Artagnan, placing some twenty pistoles upon the table. "Well, in my turn I advise you to keep a sharp look out on your treasure, my dear Monsieur Groslov, for I can tell you we shall not leave this without robbing you of it."

"Not without my defending it," said Groslov.

"So much the better," said D'Artagnan. "Fright, my dear captain, fright. You know, or you don't know, that that is what we ask of you."

"Oh! yes," said Groslov, bursting with his usual boisterous laugh,

"I know you Frenchmen want nothing but cuts and bruises."

Charles had heard and understood it all. A slight color mounted to his cheeks. The soldiers then saw him stretch his limbs little by little, and under the pretense of much heat, throw off the Scotch plaid which covered him.

Athos and Aramis started with delight to find that the king was lying with his clothes on.

The game began. The luck had turned, and Groslov having won some hundred pistoles was in the merriest possible humor.

Portos, who had lost the fifty pistoles, he had won the night before, and thirty more besides, was very cross, and questioned D'Artagnan with a nudge of the knee, as to whether it would not soon be time to change the game. But D'Artagnan remained impossible.

It struck ten. They heard the guard going its rounds.

"How many rounds do they make a night?" asked D'Artagnan, drawing more pistoles from his pocket.

"Fifteen," answered Groslov, "one every two hours."

D'Artagnan glanced at Athos and Aramis, and for the first time replied to Portos's nudge of the knee by a nudge responsive. Meanwhile the soldiers, whose duty it was to remain in the king's room, attracted by that love of play so powerful in all men, had stolen little by little toward the table, and standing on tiptoe, were watching the game over the shoulders of D'Artagnan and Portos. Those on the other side had followed their example, thus favoring the views of the four friends.

D'Artagnan turned, mechanically looking behind him, and between the figures of two soldiers he could see Pary standing up, and Charles leaning on his elbow, with his hands clasped, and apparently offering a fervent prayer to God.

D'Artagnan saw that the moment was come. He darted a preparatory glance at Athos and Aramis, who gently pushed back their chairs a little so as to leave themselves space for action. He gave Portos a second nudge of the knee; and Portos got up as if to stretch his legs, and took care at the same time to ascertain that his sword could be drawn glibly from the scabbard.

"Hang it!" cried D'Artagnan, "another twenty pistoles lost. Really, Captain Groslov, you are too much in luck's way. This can't last!" and he drew another twenty from his pocket.

"One more turn, captain; twenty pistoles on one throw—only one, the last."

"Done for twenty," replied Groslov.
And he turned up two cards, as usual, a king for D'Artagnan, and an ace for himself.

"A king," said D'Artagnan; "it's a good one, Master Graslow, look out for the king."

And in spite of his power over himself, there was a strange vibration in the Gascon's voice, which made his partner start.

Graslow began turning the cards one after another. If he turned up an ace first he won; if a king he lost.

He turned up a king.

"At last!" cried D'Artagnan.

At this word Athos and Aramis jumped up. Porthos drew back a step. Daggers and swords were just about to shine, when suddenly the door was thrown open, and Harrison appeared in the doorway, accompanied by a man enveloped in a large cloak. Behind this man could be seen the glistening muskets of five or six soldiers.

Graslow jumped up, ashamed at being surprised in the midst of wine, cards, and dice. But Harrison paid no attention to him, and entering the king's room, followed by his companion:

"Charles Stuart," said he, "an order has come to conduct you to London without stopping day or night. Prepare yourself, then, to start at once."

"And by whom is this order given?" asked the king.

"By General Oliver Cromwell. And here is Mr. Mordaunt, who has brought it, and is charged with its execution."

"Mordaunt!" muttered the four friends, exchanging looks.

D'Artagnan swept up the money that he and Porthos had lost, and buried it in his huge pocket. Athos and Aramis placed themselves behind him. At this movement Mordaunt turned round, recognized them, and uttered an exclamation of savage delight.

"I'm afraid we are taken," whispered D'Artagnan to his friend.

"Not yet," replied Porthos.

"Colonel, colonel," cried Mordaunt, "you are betrayed. These four Frenchmen have escaped from Newcastle, and so doubt want to carry off the king. Arrest them."

"All my young men," said D'Artagnan, drawing his sword: "that is an order sooner given than executed. Fly, friends, fly," he added, whirling his sword around him.

The next moment he darted to the door, and knocked down two of the soldiers, who guarded it, before they had time to cock their muskets. Athos and Aramis followed him. Porthos brought up the rear, and before soldiers, officers, or colonel had time to recover their surprise, all four were in the street.

"Fire!" cried Mordaunt; "fire upon them!"

Three or four shots were fired, but with no other result than to show the four fugitives turning the corner of the street safe and sound.

The horses were at the place fixed upon, and they leapt lightly into their saddles.

"Forward!" cried D'Artagnan, "and put the spur in!"

They galloped away, and took the road they had come by in the morning, namely, in the direction toward Scotland. A few yards beyond the town, D'Artagnan drew rein.
“Halt!” he cried; “this time we shall be pursued. We must let them leave the village and ride after us on the northern road, and when they are passed we will take the opposite direction.”

There was a stream close by, and a bridge across it. D’Artagnan led his horse under the arch of the bridge. The others followed. Ten minutes later they heard the rapid gallop of a troop of horsemen. A few minutes more and the troop passed over their heads.

CHAPTER LX.

LONDON.

As soon as the noise of the hoofs was lost in the distance, D’Artagnan remounted the bank of the stream, and spurred the plain, followed by his three friends, directing himself as much as possible towards London.

“This time,” said D’Artagnan, when they were sufficiently distant to proceed at a trot, “I think all is lost, and we have nothing better to do than to reach France. What do you think, Athos?”

“True,” said Athos; “but we ought, I think, to see this great tragedy played out. Do not let us leave England before the crisis. Don’t you agree with me, Aramis?”

“Entirely, my dear count. Then, too, I confess I should not be sorry to come across Mordaunt again. It appears to me that we have an account to settle with him, and that it is not our custom to leave a place without paying our debts, of this kind, at least.”

“Aha! that’s another thing,” said D’Artagnan, “and I should not mind waiting in London a whole year for a chance of meeting this Mordaunt in question. Only let us lodge with some one on whom we can count; for I imagine, that, just now, Mr. Cromwell would not be inclined to trifle with us. Athos, do you know any fun in the whole town where one can find white sheets, roast beef reasonably cooked, and wine which is not made of hops and gin?”

“I think I know what you want,” replied Athos. “Do Winter took us to the house of a Spaniard, who, he said, has been naturalized in England by his fellow countrymen’s guineas.”

“Well, we must take every precaution.”

“Yes, and among others, that of changing our clothes.”

“Changing our clothes!” exclaimed Porthos. “I don’t see why; we are very comfortable in those we have on.”

“To prevent recognition,” said D’Artagnan. “Our clothes have a cut which would denounce the Frenchman at first sight. Now, I don’t care sufficiently about the cut of my jerkin to risk being hung at Tyburn, or sent for change of scene to the Indies. I shall buy a chestnut-colored suit. I’ve remarked that your Puritans revel in that color.”

“But can you find your man?” said Aramis to Athos.

“Oh! to be sure, yes. He lives at the Bedford Tavern, Greenwich Street. Besides, I can find my way about the city with my eyes shut.”

Athos was right. He went direct to the Bedford Tavern, and the host, who recognized him, was delighted to see him again with such worthy and numerous company.