The four friends looked at one another.
"And the other?" asked Athos.
"Thin and haggard," said D'Artagnan and Aramis at the same
time.
"I can see nothing but his back," resumed Grimaud. "But
wait. He is moving; and if he has taken off his mask, I shall be
able to see. Ah——!"
And, as if struck in the heart, he let go the hook, and dropped
with a groan.
"Did you see him?" they all asked.
"Yes," said Grimaud, with his hair standing on end.
"The thin and spare man?"
"Yes."
"The executioner in short?" asked Aramis.
"Yes."
"And who is it?" said Porthos.
"He—he——" murmured Grimaud, pale as death, and seizing
his master's hand.
"Who? He?" asked Athos.
"Mordaunt," replied Grimaud.
D'Artagnan, Porthos, and Aramis uttered a cry of joy.
Athos stepped back, and passed his hand over his brow.
"Futility!" he muttered.

CHAPTER LXVI.
CROMWELL'S HOUSE.

It was, in fact, Mordaunt whom D'Artagnan had followed, with
out knowing it. On entering the house he had taken off his mask
and the false beard, and mounting a staircase, had opened a door,
and in a room lighted by a single lamp, found himself face to face
with a man seated behind a desk.

This man was Cromwell.

Cromwell had two or three of these retreats in London, unknown
except to the most intimate of his friends. Now Mordaunt was
among these.
"It is you, Mordaunt," he said. "You are late."
"General, I wished to see the ceremony to the end, which delayed
me."
"Ah! I scarcely thought you were so curious as that."
"I am always curious to see the downfall of your honor's enemies,
and that one was not among the least of them. But, you, general,
did you not at Whitehall?"
"No," said Cromwell.
"There was a moment's silence.
"Have you had any account of it?"
"None. I have been here since the morning. I only know that
there was a conspiracy to rescue the king."
"Ah, you knew that?" said Mordaunt.
"It matters little. Four men, disguised as workmen, were to
TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

get the king out of prison, and take him to Greenwich, where a skill was waiting."
"And knowing all that, your honor remained here, far from the city, calm and inactive."
"Calm? yes," replied Cromwell. "But who told you I was inactive?"
"But—if the plot had succeeded?"
"I wished it to do so."
"I thought your Excellence considered the death of Charles I. as a misfortune necessary to the welfare of England?"
"Yes, his death; but it would have been better not on the scaffold."
"Why so?" asked Mordaunt.
Cromwell smiled. "Because it could have been said that I had had him condemned for the sake of justice, and had let him escape out of pity."
"But if he had escaped?"
"Impossible; my precautions were taken."
"And does your honor know the four men who undertook to rescue him?"
"The four Frenchmen, of whom two were sent by the queen to her husband, and two by Mazarin to me."
"And do you think Mazarin commissioned them to act as they have done?"
"It is possible. But he will not avow it."
"How so?"
"Because they failed."
"Your honor gave me two of these Frenchmen when they were only guilty of fighting for Charles I. Now that they are guilty of a conspiracy against England, will your honor give me all four of them?"
"Take them," said Cromwell.
Mordaunt bowed with a smile of triumphant ferocity.
"Did the people shout at all?" asked Cromwell.
"Very little, except 'Long live Cromwell!'"
"Where were you placed?"
Mordaunt tried for a moment to read in the general's face if this was simply a useless question, or whether he knew everything. But his piercing eye could not penetrate the somber depths of Cromwell's."
"I was placed so as to hear and see everything," he answered.
It was now Cromwell's turn to look fixedly at Mordaunt, and Mordaunt to make himself impenetrable.
"It appears," said Cromwell, "that this improvised executioner did his duty very well. The blow, so they told me at least, was struck with a master's hand."
Mordaunt remembered that Cromwell had told him he had had no detailed account, and he was now quite convinced that the general had been present at the execution, hidden behind some curtain of blind.
"Perhaps it was some one in the trade?" said Cromwell.
"Do you think so, sir? He did not look like an executioner."
And who else than an executioner would have wished to fill that horrible office?"
"But," said Mordaunt, "it might have been some personal enemy of the king, who may have made a vow of vengeance, and accomplished it in this manner."
"Possibly!"
"And if that were the case, would your honor condemn his action?"
"It is not for me to judge. It rests between him and God."
"But if your honor knew this man?"
"I neither know, nor wish to know him. Provided Charles is dead, it is the ax, not the man, we must thank."
"And yet, without the man, the king would have been rescued."
Cromwell smiled.
"They would have carried him to Greenwich," he said, "and put him on board a ship, with five barrels of powder in the hold. Once out to sea, you are too good a politician not to understand the rest, Mordaunt."
"Yes, they would all have been blown up."
"Just so. The explosion would have done what the ax had failed to do. They would have said that the king had escaped human justice, and been overtaken by God's arm. You see now why I did not care to know your gentleman in the mask."
Mordaunt bowed humbly. "Sir," he said, "you are a profound thinker, and your plan was sublime."
"Say absurd, since it has become useless. The only sublime ideas in politics are those which bear fruit. So, to-night, Mordaunt, go to Greenwich, and ask for the captain of the ship Lightning. Show him a white handkerchief knotted at the four corners, and tell the crew to disarm it, and carry the powder back to the arsenal, unless indeed——"
"Unless?"
"This ship might be of use to you for your personal projects."
"Oh, my lord, my lord!"
"That title," said Cromwell laughing, "is all very well here, but take care a word like that does not escape you in public."
"But your honor will soon be called so generally."
"Hope so, at least," said Cromwell, rising and putting on his cloak.
"Then," said Mordaunt, "your honor gives me full power!"
"Certainly."
"Thank you, thank you."
Cromwell turned as he was going.
"Are you armed?" he asked.
"I have my sword."
"And no one waiting for you outside?"
"No."
"Then you had better come with me."
"Thank you, sir, but the way by the subterranean passage would take too much time, and I have none to lose."
Cromwell placed his hand on a hidden handle, and opened a door so well concealed by the tapestry, that the most practiced eye could not have discovered it, and which closed after him with a spring.
TWENTY YEARS AFTER.

This door communicated with a subterranean passage, leading under the street to a grotto in the garden of a house about a hundred yards from that of the future Projector.

It was just before this that Grimaud had perceived the two men seated together.

"D’Artagnan was the first to recover from his surprise, "Monsieur," he cried, "thank heaven!"

"Yes," said Porthos, "let us knock the door in, and fall upon him."

"No," replied D’Artagnan, "no noise. Now, Grimaud, you come here, climb up to the window again, and tell us if Mondrain is alone, and whether he is preparing to go out or to go to bed. If he comes out, we shall catch him. If he stays in, we will break in the window. It is easier and less noisy than the door."

Grimaud began to scale the wall again.

"Keep guard at the other door, Athos and Aramis. Porthos and I will stay here."

The friends obeyed.

"He is alone," said Grimaud.

"We did not see his companion come out."

"He may have gone by the other door."

"What is he doing?"

"Putting on his cloak and gloves."

"He’s ours," muttered D’Artagnan.

Porthos mechanically drew his dagger from his scabbard.

"Put it up again, my friend," said D’Artagnan. "We must proceed in an orderly manner."

"Hush," said Grimaud, "he is coming out. He has put out the lamp. I can see nothing now."

"Get down then, get down."

Grimaud kept down, and the snow deadened the noise of his fall.

"Now, go and tell Athos and Aramis to stand on each side of their door, and to clasp their hands if they catch him. We will do the same."

The next moment the door opened and Mondrain appeared on the threshold, face to face with D’Artagnan. Porthos clapped his hands, and the other two came running round. Mondrain was livid, but he uttered no cry, nor called for assistance. D’Artagnan quietly pushed him in again, and by the light of a lamp on the staircase, made him ascend the steps backward one by one, keeping his eyes all the time on Mondrain’s hands, who, however, knowing that it was useless, attempted no resistance. At last they stood face to face in the very room where ten minutes before Mondrain had been talking to Crunwell.

Porthos came up behind, and unhooking the lamp on the staircase re-lit that in the room. Athos and Aramis entered last, and locked the door after them.

"Oblige me by taking a seat," said D’Artagnan, pushing a chair toward Mondrain, who sat down, pale but calm. Aramis, Porthos, and D’Artagnan, drew their chairs near him. Athos alone kept away, and sat in the farthest corner of the room, as if determined to be merely a spectator of the proceedings. He seemed to be quite
overcome. Porthos rubbed his hands in feverish impatience. Aramis bit his lips till the blood came.

D'Artagnan alone was calm, at least in appearance.

"Monseigneur Mordaunt," he said, "since after running after one another so long, chance has at last brought us together, let us have a little conversation, if you please."

CHAPTER LXVII.

CONVERSATIONAL.

Thirteen Mordaunt had been so completely taken by surprise, and had mounted the stairs under the impression of utter confusion, when once seated he recovered himself, as it were, and prepared to seize any possible opportunity of escaping. His eye wandered to a long stout sword on his flank, and he instinctively slipped it round within reach of his right hand.

D'Artagnan was waiting for a reply to his remark, and said nothing. Aramis muttered to himself, "We shall hear nothing but the usual commonplace things."

Porthos sucked his mustache, muttering, "A good deal of ceremony here about crushing an adder." Athos shrunk into his corner, pale and motionless as a bas-relief.

The silence, however, could not last forever. So D'Artagnan began:

"Sir," he said, with desperate politeness, "it seems to me that you change your costume almost as rapidly as I have seen the Italian mummers do, whom the Cardinal Mazarin brought over from Bergamo, and whom he doubtless took you to see, during your travels in France."

Mordaunt did not reply.

"Just now," D'Artagnan continued, "you were disguised—I mean to say, attired—as a murderer, and now—"

"And now I look very much like a man who is going to be murdered."

"Oh! sir," answered D'Artagnan, "how can you talk like that, when you are in the company of gentlemen, and have such an excellent sword at your side?"

"No sword is good enough to be of any use against four swords and four daggers."

"Well, that is scarcely the question. I had the honor of asking you why you altered your costume. Surely the mask and beard suited you very well, and as to the ax, I do not think it would be out of keeping even at this moment."

"Because, remembering the scene at Armentières, I thought I should find four axes for one, as I was to meet four executioners."

"Sir," replied D'Artagnan, "in the calmest manner possible, you are very young, I shall therefore overlook your frivolous remarks. What took place at Armentières has no connection whatever with the present occasion. We could scarcely have requested your mother to take a sword and fight with us."

"And! It's a duel then?" cried Mordaunt, as if disposed to reply at once to the provocation.