CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE BATTLE OF CHARETTON.

As Athos and Aramis proceeded, and passed different companies on the road, they became aware that they were arriving near the field of battle.

"Ah! my friend!" cried Athos, suddenly, "where have you brought us? I fancy I perceive around us faces of different officers in the royal army; is it not the Duke de Chatillon himself who is coming toward us with his brigadiers?"

"Good day, sir," said the duke, advancing; "you are puzzled by what you see here, but one word will explain everything. There is now a truce and a conference. The prince, Monseigneur de Rohan, the Duke de Beaufort, the Duke de Bourbon, are talking over public affairs. Now, one of two things must happen: either matters will be arranged, or they will not be arranged, in which case I shall be relieved of my command, and we shall still meet again."

"This conference has not then been preconcerted?"

"No; in the result of certain propositions made yesterday by Cardinal Mazarin to the Parisians."

"Where, then, are the plenipotentiaries?" asked Athos.

"At the house of Monseigneur de Chaulnes, who commands your troops at Charetton. I say your troops, for I presume that you gentlemen are Frenchmen?"

"Yes—almost," said Aramis.

"We are for the king, and the princes," added Athos.

"We must understand each other," said the duke; "the king is with us, and his generals are the Duke of Orleans and the Prince de Conti, although I must add, it's almost impossible now to know what party one is on."

"Yes," answered Athos, "but his right place is in our ranks, with the Prince de Conti, De Beaufort, De Noailles, and De Bourbon; but, my lord, supposing that the conferences are broken off, are you going to try to take Charetton?"

"Such are my orders."

"My lord, since you command the cavalry——"

"Pardon me, I am commander-in-chief."

"So much the better. There is a youth, of fifteen years of age, the Vicomte de Bragdonne, attached to the Prince de Conti; has he the honor of being known to you?" inquired Athos, diffident in allowing the skeptical Aramis to perceive how strong were his paternal feelings.

"Yes, surely, he came with the prince; a charming young man; he is one of your friends, then, Monseigneur le Comte?"

"Yes, sir," answered Athos, slightly agitated; "so much so that I wish to see him, if possible."

"Quite possible, sir; do me the favor to accompany me, and I will conduct you to head-quarters."

"Hello, there!" cried Aramis, turning round; "what a noise behind us."
"A stout cavalier coming toward us," said Chatillon, "I recognize the Condéjor by his plumed hat!"

"And I, the Duke de Beaufort, by his plume of white feathers."

"They are coming, full gallop; the prince is with them; ah! he is leaving them!"

"They are beating the recap!" cried Chatillon; "we must find out what's going on."

In fact, they saw the soldiers running to their arms; the trumpets sounded; the drums beat; the Duke de Beaufort drew his sword. On his side, the prince sounded a rappel, and all the officers of the royal army, mingled momentarily with the Parisian troops, ran to him.

"Gentlemen," cried Chatillon, "the trace is broken, that's evident; they are going to fight; go, then, into Charenton, for I shall be back in a short time—hark! there's a signal from the prince!"

The corner of a troop had, in fact, just marked the standard of the prince.

"Farewell, till the next time!" cried Chatillon, and he set off, full gallop.

Aramis and Athos turned also, and went to salute the Condéjor, and the Duke de Beaufort. As to the Duke de Bouillon, he had such a fit of gout as obliged him to return to Paris in a litter; but his place was supplied by the Duc d'Elbeuf and his four sons, ranged around him like a staff. Meanwhile, between Charenton and the royal army, was left a long space, which seemed prepared to serve as a last resting place for the dead.

"Gentlemen," cried the Condéjor, tightening his sash, which he wore after the fashion of the ancient military archlites, over his archbishopal surplice. "There's the enemy approaching us, we shall, I hope, save them half of their journey."

And, without caring whether he were followed or not, he set off; his re innent, which bore the same name of the regiment of Corinth, from the name of his Archbishopric, darted after him, and began the fight. Monsieur de Beaufort sent his cavalry toward Ennepes, and Monsieur de Chasten, who defended the place, was ready to resist an assault, or, if the enemy were resolved to attempt a sortie.

The battle soon became general, and the Condéjor performed miracles of valor. His proper vocation had always been the sword, and he was delighted whenever he could draw it from the scabbard, no matter for whom, or against whom.

Chasten, whose fire at one time repulsed the royal regiments, thought that the moment was come to pursue it; but it was re-formed, and led again to the charge, by the Duke de Chatillon in person.

This charge was so fierce, so skilfully conducted, that Chasten was almost surrounded. He commanded a retreat, which began, step by step, fast by fast—unhappily, in an instant, he fell, mortally wounded. De Chatillon saw him fall, and announced it, in a loud voice, to his men, which raised their spirits, and completely disheartened their enemies, so that every man thought only of his personal safety and tried to regain the trenches, where the Condéjor was trying to re-form his disorganized regiment.

Suddenly a squadron of cavalry came to an encounter with the royal troops who were entering pêle-mêle into the intrenchments..."
with the fugitives. Athos and Aramis charged at the head of their squadron; Aramis with his sword and pistol in his hands; Athos, with his sword in his scabbard, his pistol in his saddle-bags; calm and cool as if on the parade, except that his noble and beautiful countenance became sad as he saw, slaughtered, so many men who were sacrificed on the one side to the obstinacy of royalty, and on the other to the rancorous party feeling of the princes. Aramis, on the contrary, struck right and left, and was almost delirious with excitement. His bright eyes kindled, and his mouth, so finely formed, assumed a dark smile; every blow he aimed was sure, and his pistol finished the deed—and annihilated the wounded wretch who tried to rise again.

On the opposite side two cavaliers, one covered with a gilt cuirass, the other wearing simply a buff doublet, from which fell the sleeves of a vest of blue velvet, charged in front. The cavalier in the gilt cuirass fell upon Aramis, and hit him a blow that Aramis parried with his wounded arm.

"Ah! 'tis you, Monsieur de Chatillon," cried the cavalier, "welcome to you—I await you."

"I hope I have not made you wait too long, sir," said the duke; "at all events, here I am."

"Monsieur de Chatillon," cried Aramis, taking from his saddle-bags a second pistol, "I think if your pistols have been discharged, you are a dead man."

"Thank God, sir, they are not!"

And the duke, pointing his pistol at Aramis, fired. But Aramis instantly beat his head, and the ball passed without touching him.

"Oh! you've missed me," cried Aramis; "but I swear to Heaven, I will not miss you."

"If I give you time!" cried the duke, spurring on his horse, and rushing upon him with his drawn sword.

Aramis awaited him with that terrible smile which was peculiar to him on such occasions; and Athos, who saw the duke advancing toward Aramis with the rapidity of lightning, was just going to cry out "Fire! fire! then!" when the shot was fired. De Chatillon opened his arms and fell back on the crumplers of his horse.

The ball had penetrated into his chest through the crack of his cuirass.

"I am a dead man," he said, and he fell from his horse to the ground.

"I told you this; I am now grieved I have kept my word. Can I be of any use to you?"

Chatillon made a sign with his hand, and Aramis was about to dismount, when he received a violent shock in the side; 'twas a thrust from a sword, but his cuirass turned aside the blow.

He turned round and seized his new antagonist by the wrist, when he started back, exclaiming, "Raoul!"

"Raoul!" cried Athos.

The young man recognized at the same time the voice of his father and that of the Chevalier d'Herblay; several cavaliers in the Parisian forces rushed at that instant on Raoul, but Aramis protected him with his sword.

"My prisoner!" he cried.
At this crisis of the battle, the Prince who had seconded De Chatillon, in the second line, appeared in the midst of the fight; his eagle eye made him known, and his blows proclaimed the hero.

On seeing him the regiment of Corsica, which the Condutor had not been able to reorganize in spite of his efforts, threw itself into the midst of the Parisian forces, put them into confusion, and re-entered Charenton flying. The Condutor, dragged along with his fugitive forces, passed near the group formed by Athos, Raoul, and Aramis. Aramis could not in his folly avoid being pleased at the Condutor’s misfortune, and was about to make some bon-mot, more witty than correct, when Athos stopped him.

"On, on!" he cried, "this is no moment for compliments: rather back, for the battle seems to be lost by the Frontenacs."

"That’s a matter of indifference to me," said Aramis, "I came here only to meet De Chatillon; I have met him, I am contented, ’ts something to have met De Chatillon in a duel!"

The three cavaliers continued their ride on full gallop. "What were you doing in the battle, my friend?" inquired Athos of the youth; "’twas not your right place, I think, as you were not equipped for an engagement."

"I had no intention of fighting to-day, sir; I was charged, indeed, with a mission for the Cardinal, and had set out for Raoul, when, seeing Monsieur de Chatillon charge, a wish possessed me to charge at his side. Two cavaliers from the Parisian troops told me that you were there."

"What! you knew we were there, and yet wished to kill your friend and the chevalier?"

"I did not recognize the chevalier in his armor, sir!" said Raoul, blushing; "though I might have known him by his skill and coolness in danger."

"Thank you for the compliment, my young friend," replied Aramis, "we can see from whom you learnt lessons of courtesy; you were going, then, to Raoul?"

"Yes! I have a dispatch from the Prince to his Eminence."

"You must deliver it," said Athos.

"No false generosity, count! the fate of our friends—to say nothing of our own—is, perhaps, in that very dispatch."

"This young man must not, however, fail in his duty," said Athos.

"In the first place, count, this youth is our prisoner; you seem to forget that. What I propose to do is fair in war, and the conquered must not be disdainful in the true choice of means."

"Give him the dispatch, Raoul; you are the chevalier’s prisoner."

Raoul gave it up reluctantly; Aramis instantly seized and read it. "You," he said, "you, who are so trusting, read and reflect that there is something in this letter important for us to see."

Athos took the letter, frowning, but an idea that he should hear something in this letter about D’Artagnan conquered his unwillingness to finish it.

"My lord, I shall send this evening to your Eminence, in order to reinforce the troop of Monsieur de Comminges, the ten men whom you demand. They are good soldiers, fit to support the two violent
adversaries whose address and resolution your Eminence is fearful of."

"Oh!" cried Athos.

"Well," said Aramis, "why think you about these two enemies when it requires, besides Conminges' troop, ten good soldiers to guard; are they not as like two drops of water to D'Artagnan and Portos?"

"We'll search Paris all to-day," said Athos, "and if we have no news this evening, we will return to the road to Picardy; and I feel no doubt that, thanks to D'Artagnan's ready invention, we shall then find some clue which will solve our doubts."

It was, then, with a sentiment of uneasiness whether Planchet, who alone could give them information, was alive or not, that the friends returned to the Place Royale; to their great surprise they found all the citizens still encamped there, drinking and bantering each other; although, doubtless, in truth by their families, who thought they were at Charenton in the thick of the firing.

Athos and Aramis again questioned Planchet, but he had seen nothing of D'Artagnan; they wished to take Planchet with them, but he could not leave his troop, who, at five o'clock, returned home, saying, that they were returning from the battle, whereas they had never lost sight of the equestrian statue in bronze of Louis XIII.

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CHAPTER LXXVII.
THE ROAD TO PICARDY.

In leaving Paris, Athos and Aramis well knew that they would be encountering great danger; but no one can imagine how such men look at a question of personal risk. Paris, however, itself, was not tranquil; food began to be scarce; and whereas any of the Prince de Conti's generals wanted to succeed him in his command, some little "encoute," which he always put a stop to instantly, took place.

In one of these risings, the Duc de Beaufort pillaged the house and library of Mazarrin, in order to give the populace, as he said, something to gnaw at. Athos and Aramis left Paris after this "coup-d'etat," which took place on the very evening of the day in which the Parisians had been beaten at Charenton.

They quitted Paris, beholding it abandoned to extreme want bordering on famine; agitated by fear, torn by faction. Parisians and Prandurts as they were, the two friends expected to find the same misery, the same fears, the same intrigue in the enemy's camp; but what was their surprise, after passing St. Denis, to hear that, at St. Germanus, people were singing and laughing, and leading a cheerful life. The two gentlemen traveled by byways, in order not to encounter Mazarrinitas who were scattered about the isle of France, and also to escape the Prandurts, who were in possession of Normandy, and who never failed to conduct them to the Duc de Longueville, in order that he might know whether they were friends or enemies. Having escaped these dangers, they retreated by the main road to Boulogne, at Abbeville, and followed it step by step—examining every track.