

Chapter LVI. The Old Age of Athos.

While these affairs were separating forever the four musketeers, formerly bound together in a manner that seemed indissoluble, Athos, left alone after the departure of Raoul, began to pay his tribute to that foretaste of death which is called the absence of those we love. Back in his house at Blois, no longer having even Grimaud to receive a poor smile as he passed through the parterre, Athos daily felt the decline of vigor of a nature which for so long a time had seemed impregnable. Age, which had been kept back by the presence of the beloved object, arrived with that cortege of pains and inconveniences, which grows by geometrical accretion. Athos had no longer his son to induce him to walk firmly, with head erect, as a good example; he had no longer, in those brilliant eyes of the young man, an ever-ardent focus at which to kindle anew the fire of his looks. And then, must it be said, that nature, exquisite in tenderness and reserve, no longer finding anything to understand its feelings, gave itself up to grief with all the warmth of common natures when they yield to joy. The Comte de la Fere, who had remained a young man to his sixty-second year; the warrior who had preserved his strength in spite of fatigue; his freshness of mind in spite of misfortune, his mild serenity of soul and body in spite of Milady, in spite of Mazarin, in spite of La Valliere; Athos had become an old man in a week, from the moment at which he lost the comfort of his later youth. Still handsome, though bent, noble, but sad, he sought, since his solitude, the deeper glades where sunshine scarcely penetrated. He discontinued all the mighty exercises he had enjoyed through life, when Raoul was no longer with him. The servants, accustomed to see him stirring with the dawn at all seasons, were astonished to hear seven o'clock strike before their master quitted his bed. Athos remained in bed with a book under his pillow--but he did not sleep, neither did he read. Remaining in bed that he might no longer have to carry his body, he allowed his soul and spirit to wander from their envelope and return to his son, or to God. [6]

His people were sometimes terrified to see him, for hours together, absorbed in silent reverie, mute and insensible; he no longer heard the timid step of the servant who came to the door of his chamber to watch the sleeping or waking of his master. It often occurred that he forgot the day had half passed away, that the hours for the two first meals were gone by. Then he was awakened. He rose, descended to his shady walk, then came out a little into the sun, as though to partake of its warmth for a minute in memory of his absent child. And then the dismal monotonous walk recommenced, until, exhausted, he regained the chamber and his bed, his domicile by choice. For several days the comte did not speak a single word. He refused to receive the visits that were paid him, and during the night he was seen to relight his lamp and pass long hours in writing, or examining parchments.

Athos wrote one of these letters to Vannes, another to Fontainebleau;

they remained without answers. We know why: Aramis had quitted France, and D'Artagnan was traveling from Nantes to Paris, from Paris to Pierrefonds. His valet de chambre observed that he shortened his walk every day by several turns. The great alley of limes soon became too long for feet that used to traverse it formerly a hundred times a day. The comte walked feebly as far as the middle trees, seated himself upon a mossy bank that sloped towards a sidewalk, and there waited the return of his strength, or rather the return of night. Very shortly a hundred steps exhausted him. At length Athos refused to rise at all; he declined all nourishment, and his terrified people, although he did not complain, although he wore a smile upon his lips, although he continued to speak with his sweet voice--his people went to Blois in search of the ancient physician of the late Monsieur, and brought him to the Comte de la Fere in such a fashion that he could see the comte without being himself seen. For this purpose, they placed him in a closet adjoining the chamber of the patient, and implored him not to show himself, for fear of displeasing their master, who had not asked for a physician. The doctor obeyed. Athos was a sort of model for the gentlemen of the country; the Blaisois boasted of possessing this sacred relic of French glory. Athos was a great seigneur compared with such nobles as the king improvised by touching with his artificial scepter the parched-up trunks of the heraldic trees of the province.

People respected Athos, we say, and they loved him. The physician could not bear to see his people weep, to see flock round him the poor of the canton, to whom Athos had so often given life and consolation by his kind words and his charities. He examined, therefore, from the depths of his hiding-place, the nature of that mysterious malady which bent and aged more mortally every day a man but lately so full of life and a desire to live. He remarked upon the cheeks of Athos the hectic hue of fever, which feeds upon itself; slow fever, pitiless, born in a fold of the heart, sheltering itself behind that rampart, growing from the suffering it engenders, at once cause and effect of a perilous situation. The comte spoke to nobody; he did not even talk to himself. His thought feared noise; it approached to that degree of over-excitement which borders upon ecstasy. Man thus absorbed, though he does not yet belong to God, already appertains no longer to the earth. The doctor remained for several hours studying this painful struggle of the will against superior power; he was terrified at seeing those eyes always fixed, ever directed on some invisible object; was terrified at the monotonous beating of that heart from which never a sigh arose to vary the melancholy state; for often pain becomes the hope of the physician. Half a day passed away thus. The doctor formed his resolution like a brave man; he issued suddenly from his place of retreat, and went straight up to Athos, who beheld him without evincing more surprise than if he had understood nothing of the apparition.

"Monsieur le comte, I crave your pardon," said the doctor, coming up to the patient with open arms; "but I have a reproach to make you--you

shall hear me." And he seated himself by the pillow of Athos, who had great trouble in rousing himself from his preoccupation.

"What is the matter, doctor?" asked the comte, after a silence.

"The matter is, you are ill, monsieur, and have had no advice."

"I! ill!" said Athos, smiling.

"Fever, consumption, weakness, decay, monsieur le comte!"

"Weakness!" replied Athos; "is it possible? I do not get up."

"Come, come! monsieur le comte, no subterfuges; you are a good Christian?"

"I hope so," said Athos.

"Is it your wish to kill yourself?"

"Never, doctor."

"Well! monsieur, you are in a fair way of doing so. Thus to remain is suicide. Get well! monsieur le comte, get well!"

"Of what? Find the disease first. For my part, I never knew myself better; never did the sky appear more blue to me; never did I take more care of my flowers."

"You have a hidden grief."

"Concealed!--not at all; the absence of my son, doctor; that is my malady, and I do not conceal it."

"Monsieur le comte, your son lives, he is strong, he has all the future before him--the future of men of merit, of his race; live for him--"

"But I do live, doctor; oh! be satisfied of that," added he, with a melancholy smile; "for as long as Raoul lives, it will be plainly known, for as long as he lives, I shall live."

"What do you say?"

"A very simple thing. At this moment, doctor, I leave life suspended within me. A forgetful, dissipated, indifferent life would be beyond my strength, now I have no longer Raoul with me. You do not ask the lamp to burn when the match has not illumed the flame; do not ask me to live amidst noise and merriment. I vegetate, I prepare myself, I wait. Look, doctor; remember those soldiers we have so often seen together at the

ports, where they were waiting to embark; lying down, indifferent, half on one element, half on the other; they were neither at the place where the sea was going to carry them, nor at the place the earth was going to lose them; baggage prepared, minds on the stretch, arms stacked--they waited. I repeat it, the word is the one which paints my present life. Lying down like the soldiers, my ear on the stretch for the report that may reach me, I wish to be ready to set out at the first summons. Who will make me that summons? life or death? God or Raoul? My baggage is packed, my soul is prepared, I await the signal--I wait, doctor, I wait!"

The doctor knew the temper of that mind; he appreciated the strength of that body; he reflected for the moment, told himself that words were useless, remedies absurd, and left the chateau, exhorting Athos's servants not to quit him for a moment.

The doctor being gone, Athos evinced neither anger nor vexation at having been disturbed. He did not even desire that all letters that came should be brought to him directly. He knew very well that every distraction which should arise would be a joy, a hope, which his servants would have paid with their blood to procure him. Sleep had become rare. By intense thinking, Athos forgot himself, for a few hours at most, in a reverie most profound, more obscure than other people would have called a dream. The momentary repose which this forgetfulness thus gave the body, still further fatigued the soul, for Athos lived a double life during these wanderings of his understanding. One night, he dreamt that Raoul was dressing himself in a tent, to go upon an expedition commanded by M. de Beaufort in person. The young man was sad; he clasped his cuirass slowly, and slowly he girded on his sword.

"What is the matter?" asked his father, tenderly.

"What afflicts me is the death of Porthos, ever so dear a friend," replied Raoul. "I suffer here the grief you soon will feel at home."

And the vision disappeared with the slumber of Athos. At daybreak one of his servants entered his master's apartment, and gave him a letter which came from Spain.

"The writing of Aramis," thought the comte; and he read.

"Porthos is dead!" cried he, after the first lines. "Oh! Raoul, Raoul! thanks! thou keepest thy promise, thou warnest me!"

And Athos, seized with a mortal sweat, fainted in his bed, without any other cause than weakness.