

Chapter XXXVII. The Two Lighters.

D'Artagnan had set off; Fouquet likewise was gone, and with a rapidity which doubled the tender interest of his friends. The first moments of this journey, or better say, this flight, were troubled by a ceaseless dread of every horse and carriage to be seen behind the fugitive. It was not natural, in fact, if Louis XIV. was determined to seize this prey, that he should allow it to escape; the young lion was already accustomed to the chase, and he had bloodhounds sufficiently clever to be trusted. But insensibly all fears were dispersed; the surintendant, by hard traveling, placed such a distance between himself and his persecutors, that no one of them could reasonably be expected to overtake him. As to his position, his friends had made it excellent for him. Was he not traveling to join the king at Nantes, and what did the rapidity prove but his zeal to obey? He arrived, fatigued, but reassured, at Orleans, where he found, thanks to the care of a courier who had preceded him, a handsome lighter of eight oars. These lighters, in the shape of gondolas, somewhat wide and heavy, containing a small chamber, covered by the deck, and a chamber in the poop, formed by a tent, then acted as passage-boats from Orleans to Nantes, by the Loire, and this passage, a long one in our days, appeared then more easy and convenient than the high-road, with its post-hacks and its ill-hung carriages. Fouquet went on board this lighter, which set out immediately. The rowers, knowing they had the honor of conveying the surintendant of the finances, pulled with all their strength, and that magic word, the finances, promised them a liberal gratification, of which they wished to prove themselves worthy. The lighter seemed to leap the mimic waves of the Loire. Magnificent weather, a sunrise that empurpled all the landscape, displayed the river in all its limpid serenity. The current and the rowers carried Fouquet along as wings carry a bird, and he arrived before Beaugency without the slightest accident having signalized the voyage. Fouquet hoped to be the first to arrive at Nantes; there he would see the notables and gain support among the principal members of the States; he would make himself a necessity, a thing very easy for a man of his merit, and would delay the catastrophe, if he did not succeed in avoiding it entirely. "Besides," said Gourville to him, "at Nantes, you will make out, or we will make out, the intentions of your enemies; we will have horses always ready to convey you to Poitou, a bark in which to gain the sea, and when once upon the open sea, Belle-Isle is your inviolable port. You see, besides, that no one is watching you, no one is following." He had scarcely finished when they discovered at a distance, behind an elbow formed by the river, the masts of a huge lighter coming down. The rowers of Fouquet's boat uttered a cry of surprise on seeing this galley.

"What is the matter?" asked Fouquet.

"The matter is, monseigneur," replied the patron of the bark, "that it is a truly remarkable thing--that lighter comes along like a hurricane."

Gourville started, and mounted to the deck, in order to obtain a better view.

Fouquet did not go up with him, but said to Gourville, with restrained mistrust: "See what it is, dear friend."

The lighter had just passed the elbow. It came on so fast, that behind it might be plainly seen the white wake illumined with the fires of the day.

"How they go," repeated the skipper, "how they go! They must be well paid! I did not think," he added, "that oars of wood could behave better than ours, but yonder oarsmen prove the contrary."

"Well they may," said one of the rowers, "they are twelve, and we but eight."

"Twelve rowers!" replied Gourville, "twelve! impossible."

The number of eight rowers for a lighter had never been exceeded, even for the king. This honor had been paid to monsieur le surintendant, more for the sake of haste than of respect.

"What does it mean?" said Gourville, endeavoring to distinguish beneath the tent, which was already apparent, travelers which the most piercing eye could not yet have succeeded in discovering.

"They must be in a hurry, for it is not the king," said the patron.

Fouquet shuddered.

"By what sign do you know that it is not the king?" said Gourville.

"In the first place, because there is no white flag with fleurs-de-lis, which the royal lighter always carries."

"And then," said Fouquet, "because it is impossible it should be the king, Gourville, as the king was still in Paris yesterday."

Gourville replied to the surintendant by a look which said: "You were there yourself yesterday."

"And by what sign do you make out they are in such haste?" added he, for the sake of gaining time.

"By this, monsieur," said the patron; "these people must have set out a long while after us, and they have already nearly overtaken us."

"Bah!" said Gourville, "who told you that they do not come from Beaugency or from Moit even?"

"We have seen no lighter of that shape, except at Orleans. It comes from Orleans, monsieur, and makes great haste."

Fouquet and Gourville exchanged a glance. The captain remarked their uneasiness, and, to mislead him, Gourville immediately said:

"Some friend, who has laid a wager he would catch us; let us win the wager, and not allow him to come up with us."

The patron opened his mouth to say that it was quite impossible, but Fouquet said with much hauteur,--"If it is any one who wishes to overtake us, let him come."

"We can try, monseigneur," said the man, timidly. "Come, you fellows, put out your strength; row, row!"

"No," said Fouquet, "on the contrary; stop short."

"Monseigneur! what folly!" interrupted Gourville, stooping towards his ear.

"Pull up!" repeated Fouquet. The eight oars stopped, and resisting the water, created a retrograde motion. It stopped. The twelve rowers in the other did not, at first, perceive this maneuver, for they continued to urge on their boat so vigorously that it arrived quickly within musket-shot. Fouquet was short-sighted, Gourville was annoyed by the sun, now full in his eyes; the skipper alone, with that habit and clearness which are acquired by a constant struggle with the elements, perceived distinctly the travelers in the neighboring lighter.

"I can see them!" cried he; "there are two."

"I can see nothing," said Gourville.

"You will not be long before you distinguish them; in twenty strokes of their oars they will be within ten paces of us."

But what the patron announced was not realized; the lighter imitated the movement commanded by Fouquet, and instead of coming to join its pretended friends, it stopped short in the middle of the river.

"I cannot comprehend this," said the captain.

"Nor I," cried Gourville.

"You who can see so plainly the people in that lighter," resumed

Fouquet, "try to describe them to us, before we are too far off."

"I thought I saw two," replied the boatman. "I can only see one now, under the tent."

"What sort of man is he?"

"He is a dark man, broad-shouldered, bull-necked."

A little cloud at that moment passed across the azure, darkening the sun. Gourville, who was still looking, with one hand over his eyes, became able to see what he sought, and all at once, jumping from the deck into the chamber where Fouquet awaited him: "Colbert!" said he, in a voice broken by emotion.

"Colbert!" repeated Fouquet. "Too strange! but no, it is impossible!"

"I tell you I recognized him, and he, at the same time, so plainly recognized me, that he is just gone into the chamber on the poop. Perhaps the king has sent him on our track."

"In that case he would join us, instead of lying by. What is he doing there?"

"He is watching us, without a doubt."

"I do not like uncertainty," said Fouquet; "let us go straight up to him."

"Oh! monseigneur, do not do that, the lighter is full of armed men."

"He wishes to arrest me, then, Gourville? Why does he not come on?"

"Monseigneur, it is not consistent with your dignity to go to meet even your ruin."

"But to allow them to watch me like a malefactor!"

"Nothing yet proves that they are watching you, monseigneur; be patient!"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Do not stop; you were only going so fast to appear to obey the king's order with zeal. Redouble the speed. He who lives will see!"

"That is better. Come!" cried Fouquet; "since they remain stock-still yonder, let us go on."

The captain gave the signal, and Fouquet's rowers resumed their task with all the success that could be looked for from men who had rested. Scarcely had the lighter made a hundred fathoms, than the other, that with the twelve rowers, resumed its rapid course. This position lasted all day, without any increase or diminution of distance between the two vessels. Towards evening Fouquet wished to try the intentions of his persecutor. He ordered his rowers to pull towards the shore, as if to effect a landing. Colbert's lighter imitated this maneuver, and steered towards the shore in a slanting direction. By the merest chance, at the spot where Fouquet pretended to wish to land, a stableman, from the chateau of Langeais, was following the flowery banks leading three horses in halts. Without doubt the people of the twelve-oared lighter fancied that Fouquet was directing his course to these horses ready for flight, for four or five men, armed with muskets, jumped from the lighter on to the shore, and marched along the banks, as if to gain ground on the horseman. Fouquet, satisfied of having forced the enemy to a demonstration, considered his intention evident, and put his boat in motion again. Colbert's people returned likewise to theirs, and the course of the two vessels was resumed with fresh perseverance. Upon seeing this, Fouquet felt himself threatened closely, and in a prophetic voice--"Well, Gourville," said he, whisperingly, "what did I say at our last repast, at my house? Am I going, or not, to my ruin?"

"Oh! monseigneur!"

"These two boats, which follow each other with so much emulation, as if we were disputing, M. Colbert and I, a prize for swiftness on the Loire, do they not aptly represent our fortunes; and do you not believe, Gourville, that one of the two will be wrecked at Nantes?"

"At least," objected Gourville, "there is still uncertainty; you are about to appear at the States; you are about to show what sort of man you are; your eloquence and genius for business are the buckler and sword that will serve to defend you, if not to conquer with. The Bretons do not know you; and when they become acquainted with you your cause is won! Oh! let M. Colbert look to it well, for his lighter is as much exposed as yours to being upset. Both go quickly, his faster than yours, it is true; we shall see which will be wrecked first."

Fouquet, taking Gourville's hand--"My friend," said he, "everything considered, remember the proverb, 'First come, first served!' Well! M. Colbert takes care not to pass me. He is a prudent man is M. Colbert."

He was right; the two lighters held their course as far as Nantes, watching each other. When the surintendant landed, Gourville hoped he should be able to seek refuge at once, and have the relays prepared. But, at the landing, the second lighter joined the first, and Colbert, approaching Fouquet, saluted him on the quay with marks of the profoundest respect--marks so significant, so public, that their result

was the bringing of the whole population upon La Fosse. Fouquet was completely self-possessed; he felt that in his last moments of greatness he had obligations towards himself. He wished to fall from such a height that his fall should crush some of his enemies. Colbert was there--so much the worse for Colbert. The surintendant, therefore, coming up to him, replied, with that arrogant semi-closure of the eyes peculiar to him--"What! is that you, M. Colbert?"

"To offer you my respects, monseigneur," said the latter.

"Were you in that lighter?"--pointing to the one with twelve rowers.

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Of twelve rowers?" said Fouquet; "what luxury, M. Colbert. For a moment I thought it was the queen-mother."

"Monseigneur!"--and Colbert blushed.

"This is a voyage that will cost those who have to pay for it dear, Monsieur l'Intendant!" said Fouquet. "But you have, happily, arrived!--You see, however," added he, a moment after, "that I, who had but eight rowers, arrived before you." And he turned his back towards him, leaving him uncertain whether the maneuvers of the second lighter had escaped the notice of the first. At least he did not give him the satisfaction of showing that he had been frightened. Colbert, so annoyingly attacked, did not give way.

"I have not been quick, monseigneur," he replied, "because I followed your example whenever you stopped."

"And why did you do that, Monsieur Colbert?" cried Fouquet, irritated by the base audacity; "as you had a superior crew to mine, why did you not either join me or pass me?"

"Out of respect," said the intendant, bowing to the ground.

Fouquet got into a carriage which the city had sent to him, we know not why or how, and he repaired to la Maison de Nantes, escorted by a vast crowd of people, who for several days had been agog with expectation of a convocation of the States. Scarcely was he installed when Gourville went out to order horses on the route to Poitiers and Vannes, and a boat at Paimboef. He performed these various operations with so much mystery, activity, and generosity, that never was Fouquet, then laboring under an attack of fever, more nearly saved, except for the counteraction of that immense disturber of human projects,--chance. A report was spread during the night, that the king was coming in great haste on post horses, and would arrive in ten or twelve hours at the latest. The people, while waiting for the king, were greatly rejoiced to see the musketeers, newly

arrived, with Monsieur d'Artagnan, their captain, and quartered in the castle, of which they occupied all the posts, in quality of guard of honor. M. d'Artagnan, who was very polite, presented himself, about ten o'clock, at the lodgings of the surintendant to pay his respectful compliments; and although the minister suffered from fever, although he was in such pain as to be bathed in sweat, he would receive M. d'Artagnan, who was delighted with that honor, as will be seen by the conversation they had together.