

Chapter XL: The White Horse and the Black.

"That is rather surprising," said D'Artagnan; "Gourville running about the streets so gayly, when he is almost certain that M. Fouquet is in danger; when it is almost equally certain that it was Gourville who warned M. Fouquet just now by the note which was torn into a thousand pieces upon the terrace, and given to the winds by monsieur le surintendant. Gourville is rubbing his hands; that is because he has done something clever. Whence comes M. Gourville? Gourville is coming from the Rue aux Herbes. Whither does the Rue aux Herbes lead?" And D'Artagnan followed, along the tops of the houses of Nantes, dominated by the castle, the line traced by the streets, as he would have done upon a topographical plan; only, instead of the dead, flat paper, the living chart rose in relief with the cries, the movements, and the shadows of men and things. Beyond the inclosure of the city, the great verdant plains stretched out, bordering the Loire, and appeared to run towards the pink horizon, which was cut by the azure of the waters and the dark green of the marshes. Immediately outside the gates of Nantes two white roads were seen diverging like separate fingers of a gigantic hand. D'Artagnan, who had taken in all the panorama at a glance by crossing the terrace, was led by the line of the Rue aux Herbes to the mouth of one of those roads which took its rise under the gates of Nantes. One step more, and he was about to descend the stairs, take his trellised carriage, and go towards the lodgings of M. Fouquet. But chance decreed, at the moment of plunging into the staircase, that he was attracted by a moving point then gaining ground upon that road.

"What is that?" said the musketeer to himself; "a horse galloping,--a runaway horse, no doubt. What a rate he is going at!" The moving point became detached from the road, and entered into the fields. "A white horse," continued the captain, who had just observed the color thrown luminously against the dark ground, "and he is mounted; it must be some boy whose horse is thirsty and has run away with him."

These reflections, rapid as lightning, simultaneous with visual perception, D'Artagnan had already forgotten when he descended the first steps of the staircase. Some morsels of paper were spread over the stairs, and shone out white against the dirty stones. "Eh! eh!" said the captain to himself, "here are some of the fragments of the note torn by M. Fouquet. Poor man! he has given his secret to the wind; the wind will have no more to do with it, and brings it back to the king. Decidedly, Fouquet, you play with misfortune! the game is not a fair one,--fortune is against you. The star of Louis XIV. obscures yours; the adder is stronger and more cunning than the squirrel." D'Artagnan picked up one of these morsels of paper as he descended. "Gourville's pretty little hand!" cried he, whilst examining one of the fragments of the note; "I was not mistaken." And he read the word "horse." "Stop!" said he; and he examined another, upon which there was not a letter traced. Upon a third he read the word "white;" "white horse," repeated he, like a child that

is spelling. "Ah, mordieux!" cried the suspicious spirit, "a white horse!" And, like that grain of powder which, burning, dilates into ten thousand times its volume, D'Artagnan, enlightened by ideas and suspicions, rapidly reascended the stairs towards the terrace. The white horse was still galloping in the direction of the Loire, at the extremity of which, melting into the vapors of the water, a little sail appeared, wave-balanced like a water-butterfly. "Oh!" cried the musketeer, "only a man who wants to fly would go at that pace across plowed lands; there is but one Fouquet, a financier, to ride thus in open day upon a white horse; there is no one but the lord of Belle-Isle who would make his escape towards the sea, while there are such thick forests on land, and there is but one D'Artagnan in the world to catch M. Fouquet, who has half an hour's start, and who will have gained his boat within an hour." This being said, the musketeer gave orders that the carriage with the iron trellis should be taken immediately to a thicket situated just outside the city. He selected his best horse, jumped upon his back, galloped along the Rue aux Herbes, taking, not the road Fouquet had taken, but the bank itself of the Loire, certain that he should gain ten minutes upon the total distance, and, at the intersection of the two lines, come up with the fugitive, who could have no suspicion of being pursued in that direction. In the rapidity of the pursuit, and with the impatience of the avenger, animating himself as in war, D'Artagnan, so mild, so kind towards Fouquet, was surprised to find himself become ferocious--almost sanguinary. For a long time he galloped without catching sight of the white horse. His rage assumed fury, he doubted himself,--he suspected that Fouquet had buried himself in some subterranean road, or that he had changed the white horse for one of those famous black ones, as swift as the wind, which D'Artagnan, at Saint-Mande, had so frequently admired and envied for their vigor and their fleetness.

At such moments, when the wind cut his eyes so as to make the tears spring from them, when the saddle had become burning hot, when the galled and spurred horse reared with pain, and threw behind him a shower of dust and stones, D'Artagnan, raising himself in his stirrups, and seeing nothing on the waters, nothing beneath the trees, looked up into the air like a madman. He was losing his senses. In the paroxysms of eagerness he dreamt of aerial ways,--the discovery of following century; he called to his mind Daedalus and the vast wings that had saved him from the prisons of Crete. A hoarse sigh broke from his lips, as he repeated, devoured by the fear of ridicule, "I! I! duped by a Gourville! I! They will say that I am growing old,--they will say I have received a million to allow Fouquet to escape!" And he again dug his spurs into the sides of his horse: he had ridden astonishingly fast. Suddenly, at the extremity of some open pasture-ground, behind the hedges, he saw a white form which showed itself, disappeared, and at last remained distinctly visible against the rising ground. D'Artagnan's heart leaped with joy. He wiped the streaming sweat from his brow, relaxed the tension of his knees,--by which the horse breathed more freely,--and, gathering up his

reins, moderated the speed of the vigorous animal, his active accomplice on this man-hunt. He had then time to study the direction of the road, and his position with regard to Fouquet. The superintendent had completely winded his horse by crossing the soft ground. He felt the necessity of gaining a firmer footing, and turned towards the road by the shortest secant line. D'Artagnan, on his part, had nothing to do but to ride straight on, concealed by the sloping shore; so that he would cut his quarry off the road when he came up with him. Then the real race would begin,--then the struggle would be in earnest.

D'Artagnan gave his horse good breathing-time. He observed that the superintendent had relaxed into a trot, which was to say, he, too, was favoring his horse. But both of them were too much pressed for time to allow them to continue long at that pace. The white horse sprang off like an arrow the moment his feet touched firm ground. D'Artagnan dropped his head, and his black horse broke into a gallop. Both followed the same route; the quadruple echoes of this new race-course were confounded. Fouquet had not yet perceived D'Artagnan. But on issuing from the slope, a single echo struck the air; it was that of the steps of D'Artagnan's horse, which rolled along like thunder. Fouquet turned round, and saw behind him, within a hundred paces, his enemy bent over the neck of his horse. There could be no doubt--the shining baldrick, the red cassock--it was a musketeer. Fouquet slackened his hand likewise, and the white horse placed twenty feet more between his adversary and himself.

"Oh, but," thought D'Artagnan, becoming very anxious, "that is not a common horse M. Fouquet is upon--let us see!" And he attentively examined with his infallible eye the shape and capabilities of the courser. Round full quarters--a thin long tail--large hocks--thin legs, as dry as bars of steel--hoofs hard as marble. He spurred his own, but the distance between the two remained the same. D'Artagnan listened attentively; not a breath of the horse reached him, and yet he seemed to cut the air. The black horse, on the contrary, began to puff like any blacksmith's bellows.

"I must overtake him, if I kill my horse," thought the musketeer; and he began to saw the mouth of the poor animal, whilst he buried the rowels of his merciless spurs into his sides. The maddened horse gained twenty toises, and came up within pistol-shot of Fouquet.

"Courage!" said the musketeer to himself, "courage! the white horse will perhaps grow weaker, and if the horse does not fall, the master must pull up at last." But horse and rider remained upright together, gaining ground by difficult degrees. D'Artagnan uttered a wild cry, which made Fouquet turn round, and added speed to the white horse.

"A famous horse! a mad rider!" growled the captain. "Hola! mordieux! Monsieur Fouquet! stop! in the king's name!" Fouquet made no reply.

"Do you hear me?" shouted D'Artagnan, whose horse had just stumbled.

"Pardieu!" replied Fouquet, laconically; and rode on faster.

D'Artagnan was nearly mad; the blood rushed boiling to his temples and his eyes. "In the king's name!" cried he again, "stop, or I will bring you down with a pistol-shot!"

"Do!" replied Fouquet, without relaxing his speed.

D'Artagnan seized a pistol and cocked it, hoping that the double click of the spring would stop his enemy. "You have pistols likewise," said he, "turn and defend yourself."

Fouquet did turn round at the noise, and looking D'Artagnan full in the face, opened, with his right hand, the part of his dress which concealed his body, but he did not even touch his holsters. There were not more than twenty paces between the two.

"Mordioux!" said D'Artagnan, "I will not assassinate you; if you will not fire upon me, surrender! what is a prison?"

"I would rather die!" replied Fouquet; "I shall suffer less."

D'Artagnan, drunk with despair, hurled his pistol to the ground. "I will take you alive!" said he; and by a prodigy of skill which this incomparable horseman alone was capable, he threw his horse forward to within ten paces of the white horse; already his hand was stretched out to seize his prey.

"Kill me! kill me!" cried Fouquet, "'twould be more humane!"

"No! alive--alive!" murmured the captain.

At this moment his horse made a false step for the second time, and Fouquet's again took the lead. It was an unheard-of spectacle, this race between two horses which now only kept alive by the will of their riders. It might be said that D'Artagnan rode, carrying his horse along between his knees. To the furious gallop had succeeded the fast trot, and that had sunk to what might be scarcely called a trot at all. But the chase appeared equally warm in the two fatigued athletes. D'Artagnan, quite in despair, seized his second pistol, and cocked it.

"At your horse! not at you!" cried he to Fouquet. And he fired. The animal was hit in the quarters--he made a furious bound, and plunged forward. At that moment D'Artagnan's horse fell dead.

"I am dishonored!" thought the musketeer; "I am a miserable wretch! for

pity's sake, M. Fouquet, throw me one of your pistols, that I may blow out my brains!" But Fouquet rode away.

"For mercy's sake! for mercy's sake!" cried D'Artagnan; "that which you will not do at this moment, I myself will do within an hour, but here, upon this road, I should die bravely; I should die esteemed; do me that service, M. Fouquet!"

M. Fouquet made no reply, but continued to trot on. D'Artagnan began to run after his enemy. Successively he threw away his hat, his coat, which embarrassed him, and then the sheath of his sword, which got between his legs as he was running. The sword in his hand itself became too heavy, and he threw it after the sheath. The white horse began to rattle in its throat; D'Artagnan gained upon him. From a trot the exhausted animal sunk to a staggering walk--the foam from his mouth was mixed with blood. D'Artagnan made a desperate effort, sprang towards Fouquet, and seized him by the leg, saying in a broken, breathless voice, "I arrest you in the king's name! blow my brains out, if you like; we have both done our duty."

Fouquet hurled far from him, into the river, the two pistols D'Artagnan might have seized, and dismounting from his horse--"I am your prisoner, monsieur," said he; "will you take my arm, for I see you are ready to faint?"

"Thanks!" murmured D'Artagnan, who, in fact, felt the earth sliding from under his feet, and the light of day turning to blackness around him; then he rolled upon the sand, without breath or strength. Fouquet hastened to the brink of the river, dipped some water in his hat, with which he bathed the temples of the musketeer, and introduced a few drop between his lips. D'Artagnan raised himself with difficulty, and looked about him with a wandering eye. He beheld Fouquet on his knees, with his wet hat in his hand, smiling upon him with ineffable sweetness. "You are not off, then?" cried he. "Oh, monsieur! the true king of royalty, in heart, in soul, is not Louis of the Louvre, or Philippe of Sainte-Marguerite; it is you, proscribed, condemned!"

"I, who this day am ruined by a single error, M. d'Artagnan."

"What, in the name of Heaven, is that?"

"I should have had you for a friend! But how shall we return to Nantes? We are a great way from it."

"That is true," said D'Artagnan, gloomily.

"The white horse will recover, perhaps; he is a good horse! Mount, Monsieur d'Artagnan; I will walk till you have rested a little."

"Poor beast! and wounded, too?" said the musketeer.

"He will go, I tell you; I know him; but we can do better still, let us both get up, and ride slowly."

"We can try," said the captain. But they had scarcely charged the animal with this double load, when he began to stagger, and then with a great effort walked a few minutes, then staggered again, and sank down dead by the side of the black horse, which he had just managed to come up to.

"We will go on foot--destiny wills it so--the walk will be pleasant," said Fouquet, passing his arm through that of D'Artagnan.

"Mordioux!" cried the latter, with a fixed eye, a contracted brow, and a swelling heart--"What a disgraceful day!"

They walked slowly the four leagues which separated them from the little wood behind which the carriage and escort were in waiting. When Fouquet perceived that sinister machine, he said to D'Artagnan, who cast down his eyes, ashamed of Louis XIV., "There is an idea that did not emanate from a brave man, Captain d'Artagnan; it is not yours. What are these gratings for?" said he.

"To prevent your throwing letters out."

"Ingenious!"

"But you can speak, if you cannot write," said D'Artagnan.

"Can I speak to you?"

"Why, certainly, if you wish to do so."

Fouquet reflected for a moment, then looking the captain full in the face, "One single word," said he; "will you remember it?"

"I will not forget it."

"Will you speak it to whom I wish?"

"I will."

"Saint-Mande," articulated Fouquet, in a low voice.

"Well! and for whom?"

"For Madame de Belliere or Pelisson."

"It shall be done."

The carriage rolled through Nantes, and took the route to Angers.