

Chapter XLII. Belle-Ile-en-Mer.

At the extremity of the mole, against which the furious sea beats at the evening tide, two men, holding each other by the arm, were conversing in an animated and expansive tone, without the possibility of any other human being hearing their words, borne away, as they were, one by one, by the gusts of wind, with the white foam swept from the crests of the waves. The sun had just gone down in the vast sheet of the crimsoned ocean, like a gigantic crucible. From time to time, one of these men, turning towards the east, cast an anxious, inquiring look over the sea. The other, interrogating the features of his companion, seemed to seek for information in his looks. Then, both silent, busied with dismal thoughts, they resumed their walk. Every one has already perceived that these two men were our proscribed heroes, Porthos and Aramis, who had taken refuge in Belle-Isle, since the ruin of their hopes, since the discomfiture of the colossal schemes of M. d'Herblay.

"If it is of no use your saying anything to the contrary, my dear Aramis," repeated Porthos, inhaling vigorously the salt breeze with which he charged his massive chest, "It is of no use, Aramis. The disappearance of all the fishing-boats that went out two days ago is not an ordinary circumstance. There has been no storm at sea; the weather has been constantly calm, not even the lightest gale; and even if we had had a tempest, all our boats would not have foundered. I repeat, it is strange. This complete disappearance astonishes me, I tell you."

"True," murmured Aramis. "You are right, friend Porthos; it is true, there is something strange in it."

"And further," added Porthos, whose ideas the assent of the bishop of Vannes seemed to enlarge; "and, further, do you not observe that if the boats have perished, not a single plank has washed ashore?"

"I have remarked it as well as yourself."

"And do you not think it strange that the two only boats we had left in the whole island, and which I sent in search of the others--"

Aramis here interrupted his companion by a cry, and by so sudden a movement, that Porthos stopped as if he were stupefied. "What do you say, Porthos? What!--You have sent the two boats--"

"In search of the others! Yes, to be sure I have," replied Porthos, calmly.

"Unhappy man! What have you done? Then we are indeed lost," cried the bishop.

"Lost!--what did you say?" exclaimed the terrified Porthos. "How lost,

Aramis? How are we lost?"

Aramis bit his lips. "Nothing! nothing! Your pardon, I meant to say--"

"What?"

"That if we were inclined--if we took a fancy to make an excursion by sea, we could not."

"Very good! and why should that vex you? A precious pleasure, *ma foi!* For my part, I don't regret it at all. What I regret is certainly not the more or less amusement we can find at Belle-Isle: what I regret, Aramis, is Pierrefonds; Bracieux; le Vallon; beautiful France! Here, we are not in France, my dear friend; we are--I know not where. Oh! I tell you, in full sincerity of soul, and your affection will excuse my frankness, but I declare to you I am not happy at Belle-Isle. No; in good truth, I am not happy!"

Aramis breathed a long, but stifled sigh. "Dear friend," replied he: "that is why it is so sad a thing you have sent the two boats we had left in search of the boats which disappeared two days ago. If you had not sent them away, we would have departed."

"Departed! And the orders, Aramis?"

"What orders?"

"Parbleu! Why, the orders you have been constantly, in and out of season, repeating to me--that we were to hold Belle-Isle against the usurper. You know very well!"

"That is true!" murmured Aramis again.

"You see, then, plainly, my friend, that we could not depart; and that the sending away of the boats in search of the others cannot prove prejudicial to us in the very least."

Aramis was silent; and his vague glances, luminous as that of an albatross, hovered for a long time over the sea, interrogating space, seeking to pierce the very horizon.

"With all that, Aramis," continued Porthos, who adhered to his idea, and that the more closely from the bishop having apparently endorsed it,--"with all that, you give me no explanation about what can have happened to these unfortunate boats. I am assailed by cries and complaints whichever way I go. The children cry to see the desolation of the women, as if I could restore the absent husbands and fathers. What do you suppose, my friend, and how ought I to answer them?"

"Think all you like, my good Porthos, and say nothing."

This reply did not satisfy Porthos at all. He turned away grumbling something in ill-humor. Aramis stopped the valiant musketeer. "Do you remember," said he, in a melancholy tone, kneading the two hands of the giant between his own with affectionate cordiality, "do you remember, my friend, that in the glorious days of youth--do you remember, Porthos, when we were all strong and valiant--we, and the other two--if we had then had an inclination to return to France, do you think this sheet of salt water would have stopped us?"

"Oh!" said Porthos; "but six leagues."

"If you had seen me get astride of a plank, would you have remained on land, Porthos?"

"No, pardieu! No, Aramis. But, nowadays, what sort of a plank should we want, my friend! I, in particular." And the Seigneur de Bracieux cast a profound glance over his colossal rotundity with a loud laugh. "And do you mean seriously to say you are not tired of Belle-Isle a little, and that you would not prefer the comforts of your dwelling--of your episcopal palace, at Vannes? Come, confess."

"No," replied Aramis, without daring to look at Porthos.

"Let us stay where we are, then," said his friend, with a sigh, which, in spite of the efforts he made to restrain it, escaped his echoing breast. "Let us remain!--let us remain! And yet," added he, "and yet, if we seriously wished, but that decidedly--if we had a fixed idea, one firmly taken, to return to France, and there were not boats--"

"Have you remarked another thing, my friend--that is, since the disappearance of our barks, during the last two days' absence of fishermen, not a single small boat has landed on the shores of the isle?"

"Yes, certainly! you are right. I, too, have remarked it, and the observation was the more naturally made, for, before the last two fatal days, barks and shallops were as plentiful as shrimps."

"I must inquire," said Aramis, suddenly, and with great agitation. "And then, if we had a raft constructed--"

"But there are some canoes, my friend; shall I board one?"

"A canoe!--a canoe! Can you think of such a thing, Porthos? A canoe to be upset in. No, no," said the bishop of Vannes; "it is not our trade to ride upon the waves. We will wait, we will wait."

And Aramis continued walking about with increased agitation. Porthos, who grew tired of following all the feverish movements of his friend--Porthos, who in his faith and calmness understood nothing of the sort of exasperation which was betrayed by his companion's continual convulsive starts--Porthos stopped him. "Let us sit down upon this rock," said he. "Place yourself there, close to me, Aramis, and I conjure you, for the last time, to explain to me in a manner I can comprehend--explain to me what we are doing here."

"Porthos," said Aramis, much embarrassed.

"I know that the false king wished to dethrone the true king. That is a fact, that I understand. Well--"

"Yes?" said Aramis.

"I know that the false king formed the project of selling Belle-Isle to the English. I understand that, too."

"Yes?"

"I know that we engineers and captains came and threw ourselves into Belle-Isle to take direction of the works, and the command of ten companies levied and paid by M. Fouquet, or rather the ten companies of his son-in-law. All that is plain."

Aramis rose in a state of great impatience. He might be said to be a lion importuned by a gnat. Porthos held him by the arm. "But what I cannot understand, what, in spite of all the efforts of my mind, and all my reflections, I cannot comprehend, and never shall comprehend, is, that instead of sending us troops, instead of sending us reinforcements of men, munitions, provisions, they leave us without boats, they leave Belle-Isle without arrivals, without help; it is that instead of establishing with us a correspondence, whether by signals, or written or verbal communications, all relations with the shore are intercepted. Tell me, Aramis, answer me, or rather, before answering me, will you allow me to tell you what I have thought? Will you hear what my idea is, the plan I have conceived?"

The bishop raised his head. "Well! Aramis," continued Porthos, "I have dreamed, I have imagined that an event has taken place in France. I dreamt of M. Fouquet all the night, of lifeless fish, of broken eggs, of chambers badly furnished, meanly kept. Villainous dreams, my dear D'Herblay; very unlucky, such dreams!"

"Porthos, what is that yonder?" interrupted Aramis, rising suddenly, and pointing out to his friend a black spot upon the empurpled line of the water.

"A bark!" said Porthos; "yes, it is a bark! Ah! we shall have some news at last."

"There are two!" cried the bishop, on discovering another mast; "two! three! four!"

"Five!" said Porthos, in his turn. "Six! seven! Ah! mon Dieu! mon Dieu! it is a fleet!"

"Our boats returning, probably," said Aramis, very uneasily, in spite of the assurance he affected.

"They are very large for fishing-boats," observed Porthos, "and do you not remark, my friend, that they come from the Loire?"

"They come from the Loire--yes--"

"And look! everybody here sees them as well as ourselves; look, women and children are beginning to crowd the jetty."

An old fisherman passed. "Are those our barks, yonder?" asked Aramis.

The old man looked steadily into the eye of the horizon.

"No, monseigneur," replied he, "they are lighter boars, boats in the king's service."

"Boats in the royal service?" replied Aramis, starting. "How do you know that?" said he.

"By the flag."

"But," said Porthos, "the boat is scarcely visible; how the devil, my friend, can you distinguish the flag?"

"I see there is one," replied the old man; "our boats, trade lighters, do not carry any. That sort of craft is generally used for transport of troops."

"Ah!" groaned Aramis.

"Vivat!" cried Porthos, "they are sending us reinforcements, don't you think they are, Aramis?"

"Probably."

"Unless it is the English coming."

"By the Loire? That would have an evil look, Porthos; for they must have

come through Paris!"

"You are right; they are reinforcements, decidedly, or provisions."

Aramis leaned his head upon his hands, and made no reply. Then, all at once,--"Porthos," said he, "have the alarm sounded."

"The alarm! do you imagine such a thing?"

"Yes, and let the cannoniers mount their batteries, the artillerymen be at their pieces, and be particularly watchful of the coast batteries."

Porthos opened his eyes to their widest extent. He looked attentively at his friend, to convince himself he was in his proper senses.

"I will do it, my dear Porthos," continued Aramis, in his blandest tone; "I will go and have these orders executed myself, if you do not go, my friend."

"Well! I will--instantly!" said Porthos, who went to execute the orders, casting all the while looks behind him, to see if the bishop of Vannes were not deceived; and if, on recovering more rational ideas, he would not recall him. The alarm was sounded, trumpets brayed, drums rolled; the great bronze bell swung in horror from its lofty belfry. The dikes and moles were quickly filled with the curious and soldiers; matches sparkled in the hands of the artillerymen, placed behind the large cannon bedded in their stone carriages. When every man was at his post, when all the preparations for defense were made: "Permit me, Aramis, to try to comprehend," whispered Porthos, timidly, in Aramis's ear.

"My dear friend, you will comprehend but too soon," murmured M. d'Herblay, in reply to this question of his lieutenant.

"The fleet which is coming yonder, with sails unfurled, straight towards the port of Belle-Isle, is a royal fleet, is it not?"

"But as there are two kings in France, Porthos, to which of these two kings does this fleet belong?"

"Oh! you open my eyes," replied the giant, stunned by the insinuation.

And Porthos, whose eyes this reply of his friend's had at last opened, or rather thickened the bandage which covered his sight, went with his best speed to the batteries to overlook his people, and exhort every one to do his duty. In the meantime, Aramis, with his eye fixed on the horizon, saw the ships continually drawing nearer. The people and the soldiers, perched on the summits of the rocks, could distinguish the masts, then the lower sails, and at last the hulls of the lighters, bearing at the masthead the royal flag of France. It was night when

one of these vessels, which had created such a sensation among the inhabitants of Belle-Isle, dropped anchor within cannon shot of the place. It was soon seen, notwithstanding the darkness, that some sort of agitation reigned on board the vessel, from the side of which a skiff was lowered, of which the three rowers, bending to their oars, took the direction of the port, and in a few instants struck land at the foot of the fort. The commander jumped ashore. He had a letter in his hand, which he waved in the air, and seemed to wish to communicate with somebody. This man was soon recognized by several soldiers as one of the pilots of the island. He was the captain of one of the two barks retained by Aramis, but which Porthos, in his anxiety with regard to the fate of the fishermen who had disappeared, had sent in search of the missing boats. He asked to be conducted to M. d'Herblay. Two soldiers, at a signal from a sergeant, marched him between them, and escorted him. Aramis was upon the quay. The envoy presented himself before the bishop of Vannes. The darkness was almost absolute, notwithstanding the flambeaux borne at a small distance by the soldiers who were following Aramis in his rounds.

"Well, Jonathan, from whom do you come?"

"Monseigneur, from those who captured me."

"Who captured you?"

"You know, monseigneur, we set out in search of our comrades?"

"Yes; and afterwards?"

"Well! monseigneur, within a short league we were captured by a chasse maree belonging to the king."

"Ah!" said Aramis.

"Of which king?" cried Porthos.

Jonathan started.

"Speak!" continued the bishop.

"We were captured, monseigneur, and joined to those who had been taken yesterday morning."

"What was the cause of the mania for capturing you all?" said Porthos.

"Monsieur, to prevent us from telling you," replied Jonathan.

Porthos was again at a loss to comprehend. "And they have released you to-day?" asked he.

"That I might tell you they have captured us, monsieur."

"Trouble upon trouble," thought honest Porthos.

During this time Aramis was reflecting.

"Humph!" said he, "then I suppose it is a royal fleet blockading the coasts?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Who commands it?"

"The captain of the king's musketeers."

"D'Artagnan?"

"D'Artagnan!" exclaimed Porthos.

"I believe that is the name."

"And did he give you this letter?"

"Yes, monseigneur."

"Bring the torches nearer."

"It is his writing," said Porthos.

Aramis eagerly read the following lines:

"Order of the king to take Belle-Isle; or to put the garrison to the sword, if they resist; order to make prisoners of all the men of the garrison; signed, D'ARTAGNAN, who, the day before yesterday, arrested M. Fouquet, for the purpose of his being sent to the Bastile."

Aramis turned pale, and crushed the paper in his hands.

"What is it?" asked Porthos.

"Nothing, my friend, nothing."

"Tell me, Jonathan?"

"Monseigneur?"

"Did you speak to M. d'Artagnan?"



"Yes, monseigneur."

"What did he say to you?"

"That for ampler information, he would speak with monseigneur."

"Where?"

"On board his own vessel."

"On board his vessel!" and Porthos repeated, "On board his vessel!"

"M. le mousquetaire," continued Jonathan, "told me to take you both on board my canoe, and bring you to him."

"Let us go at once," exclaimed Porthos. "Dear D'Artagnan!"

But Aramis stopped him. "Are you mad?" cried he. "Who knows that it is not a snare?"

"Of the other king's?" said Porthos, mysteriously.

"A snare, in fact! That's what it is, my friend."

"Very possibly; what is to be done, then? If D'Artagnan sends for us--"

"Who assures you that D'Artagnan sends for us?"

"Well, but--but his writing--"

"Writing is easily counterfeited. This looks counterfeited--unsteady--"

"You are always right; but, in the meantime, we know nothing."

Aramis was silent.

"It is true," said the good Porthos, "we do not want to know anything."

"What shall I do?" asked Jonathan.

"You will return on board this captain's vessel."

"Yes, monseigneur."

"And will tell him that we beg he will himself come into the island."

"Ah! I comprehend!" said Porthos.

"Yes, monseigneur," replied Jonathan; "but if the captain should refuse

to come to Belle-Isle?"

"If he refuses, as we have cannon, we will make use of them."

"What! against D'Artagnan?"

"If it is D'Artagnan, Porthos, he will come. Go, Jonathan, go!"

"Ma foi! I no longer comprehend anything," murmured Porthos.

"I will make you comprehend it all, my dear friend; the time for it has come; sit down upon this gun-carriage, open your ears, and listen well to me."

"Oh! pardieu! I will listen, no fear of that."

"May I depart, monseigneur?" cried Jonathan.

"Yes, begone, and bring back an answer. Allow the canoe to pass, you men there!" And the canoe pushed off to regain the fleet.

Aramis took Porthos by the hand, and commenced his explanations.