

Chapter XLIX. An Homeric Song.

It is time to pass to the other camp, and to describe at once the combatants and the field of battle. Aramis and Porthos had gone to the grotto of Locmaria with the expectation of finding there their canoe ready armed, as well as the three Bretons, their assistants; and they at first hoped to make the bark pass through the little issue of the cavern, concealing in that fashion both their labors and their flight. The arrival of the fox and dogs obliged them to remain concealed. The grotto extended the space of about a hundred toises, to that little slope dominating a creek. Formerly a temple of the Celtic divinities, when Belle-Isle was still called Kalonese, this grotto had beheld more than one human sacrifice accomplished in its mystic depths. The first entrance to the cavern was by a moderate descent, above which distorted rocks formed a weird arcade; the interior, very uneven and dangerous from the inequalities of the vault, was subdivided into several compartments, which communicated with each other by means of rough and jagged steps, fixed right and left, in uncouth natural pillars. At the third compartment the vault was so low, the passage so narrow, that the bark would scarcely have passed without touching the side; nevertheless, in moments of despair, wood softens and stone grows flexible beneath the human will. Such was the thought of Aramis, when, after having fought the fight, he decided upon flight--a flight most dangerous, since all the assailants were not dead; and that, admitting the possibility of putting the bark to sea, they would have to fly in open day, before the conquered, so interested on recognizing their small number, in pursuing their conquerors. When the two discharges had killed ten men, Aramis, familiar with the windings of the cavern, went to reconnoiter them one by one, and counted them, for the smoke prevented seeing outside; and he immediately commanded that the canoe should be rolled as far as the great stone, the closure of the liberating issue. Porthos collected all his strength, took the canoe in his arms, and raised it up, whilst the Bretons made it run rapidly along the rollers. They had descended into the third compartment; they had arrived at the stone which walled the outlet. Porthos seized this gigantic stone at its base, applied his robust shoulder, and gave a heave which made the wall crack. A cloud of dust fell from the vault, with the ashes of ten thousand generations of sea birds, whose nests stuck like cement to the rock. At the third shock the stone gave way, and oscillated for a minute. Porthos, placing his back against the neighboring rock, made an arch with his foot, which drove the block out of the calcareous masses which served for hinges and cramps. The stone fell, and daylight was visible, brilliant, radiant, flooding the cavern through the opening, and the blue sea appeared to the delighted Bretons. They began to lift the bark over the barricade. Twenty more toises, and it would glide into the ocean. It was during this time that the company arrived, was drawn up by the captain, and disposed for either an escalade or an assault. Aramis watched over everything, to favor the labors of his friends. He saw the

reinforcements, counted the men, and convinced himself at a single glance of the insurmountable peril to which fresh combat would expose them. To escape by sea, at the moment the cavern was about to be invaded, was impossible. In fact, the daylight which had just been admitted to the last compartments had exposed to the soldiers the bark being rolled towards the sea, the two rebels within musket-shot; and one of their discharges would riddle the boat if it did not kill the navigators. Besides, allowing everything,--if the bark escaped with the men on board of it, how could the alarm be suppressed--how could notice to the royal lighters be prevented? What could hinder the poor canoe, followed by sea and watched from the shore, from succumbing before the end of the day? Aramis, digging his hands into his gray hair with rage, invoked the assistance of God and the assistance of the demons. Calling to Porthos, who was doing more work than all the rollers--whether of flesh or wood--"My friend," said he, "our adversaries have just received a reinforcement."

"Ah, ah!" said Porthos, quietly, "what is to be done, then?"

"To recommence the combat," said Aramis, "is hazardous."

"Yes," said Porthos, "for it is difficult to suppose that out of two, one should not be killed; and certainly, if one of us was killed, the other would get himself killed also." Porthos spoke these words with that heroic nature which, with him, grew grander with necessity.

Aramis felt it like a spur to his heart. "We shall neither of us be killed if you do what I tell you, friend Porthos."

"Tell me what?"

"These people are coming down into the grotto."

"Yes."

"We could kill about fifteen of them, but no more."

"How many are there in all?" asked Porthos.

"They have received a reinforcement of seventy-five men."

"Seventy-five and five, eighty. Ah!" sighed Porthos.

"If they fire all at once they will riddle us with balls."

"Certainly they will."

"Without reckoning," added Aramis, "that the detonation might occasion a collapse of the cavern."

"Ay," said Porthos, "a piece of falling rock just now grazed my shoulder."

"You see, then?"

"Oh! it is nothing."

"We must determine upon something quickly. Our Bretons are going to continue to roll the canoe towards the sea."

"Very well."

"We two will keep the powder, the balls, and the muskets here."

"But only two, my dear Aramis--we shall never fire three shots together," said Porthos, innocently, "the defense by musketry is a bad one."

"Find a better, then."

"I have found one," said the giant, eagerly; "I will place myself in ambuscade behind the pillar with this iron bar, and invisible, unattackable, if they come in floods, I can let my bar fall upon their skulls, thirty times in a minute. Hein! what do you think of the project? You smile!"

"Excellent, dear friend, perfect! I approve it greatly; only you will frighten them, and half of them will remain outside to take us by famine. What we want, my good friend, is the entire destruction of the troop. A single survivor encompasses our ruin."

"You are right, my friend, but how can we attract them, pray?"

"By not stirring, my good Porthos."

"Well! we won't stir, then; but when they are all together--"

"Then leave it to me, I have an idea."

"If it is so, and your idea proves a good one--and your idea is most likely to be good--I am satisfied."

"To your ambuscade, Porthos, and count how many enter."

"But you, what will you do?"

"Don't trouble yourself about me; I have a task to perform."

"I think I hear shouts."

"It is they! To your post. Keep within reach of my voice and hand."

Porthos took refuge in the second compartment, which was in darkness, absolutely black. Aramis glided into the third; the giant held in his hand an iron bar of about fifty pounds weight. Porthos handled this lever, which had been used in rolling the bark, with marvelous facility. During this time, the Bretons had pushed the bark to the beach. In the further and lighter compartment, Aramis, stooping and concealed, was busy with some mysterious maneuver. A command was given in a loud voice.

It was the last order of the captain commandant. Twenty-five men jumped from the upper rocks into the first compartment of the grotto, and having taken their ground, began to fire. The echoes shrieked and barked, the hissing balls seemed actually to rarefy the air, and then opaque smoke filled the vault.

"To the left! to the left!" cried Biscarrat, who, in his first assault, had seen the passage to the second chamber, and who, animated by the smell of powder, wished to guide his soldiers in that direction. The troop, accordingly, precipitated themselves to the left--the passage gradually growing narrower. Biscarrat, with his hands stretched forward, devoted to death, marched in advance of the muskets. "Come on! come on!" exclaimed he, "I see daylight!"

"Strike, Porthos!" cried the sepulchral voice of Aramis.

Porthos breathed a heavy sigh--but he obeyed. The iron bar fell full and direct upon the head of Biscarrat, who was dead before he had ended his cry. Then the formidable lever rose ten times in ten seconds, and made ten corpses. The soldiers could see nothing; they heard sighs and groans; they stumbled over dead bodies, but as they had no conception of the cause of all this, they came forward jostling each other. The implacable bar, still falling, annihilated the first platoon, without a single sound to warn the second, which was quietly advancing; only, commanded by the captain, the men had stripped a fir, growing on the shore, and, with its resinous branches twisted together, the captain had made a flambeau. On arriving at the compartment where Porthos, like the exterminating angel, had destroyed all he touched, the first rank drew back in terror. No firing had replied to that of the guards, and yet their way was stopped by a heap of dead bodies--they literally walked in blood. Porthos was still behind his pillar. The captain, illumining with trembling pine-torch this frightful carnage, of which he in vain sought the cause, drew back towards the pillar behind which Porthos was concealed. Then a gigantic hand issued from the shade, and fastened on the throat of the captain, who uttered a stifled rattle; his stretched-out arms beating the air, the torch fell and was extinguished in blood. A second after, the corpse of the captain dropped close to

the extinguished torch, and added another body to the heap of dead which blocked up the passage. All this was effected as mysteriously as though by magic. At hearing the rattling in the throat of the captain, the soldiers who accompanied him had turned round, caught a glimpse of his extended arms, his eyes starting from their sockets, and then the torch fell and they were left in darkness. From an unreflective, instinctive, mechanical feeling, the lieutenant cried:

"Fire!"

Immediately a volley of musketry flamed, thundered, roared in the cavern, bringing down enormous fragments from the vaults. The cavern was lighted for an instant by this discharge, and then immediately returned to pitchy darkness rendered thicker by the smoke. To this succeeded a profound silence, broken only by the steps of the third brigade, now entering the cavern.