

Chapter LI. Porthos's Epitaph.

Aramis, silent and sad as ice, trembling like a timid child, arose shivering from the stone. A Christian does not walk on tombs. But, though capable of standing, he was not capable of walking. It might be said that something of dead Porthos had just died within him. His Bretons surrounded him; Aramis yielded to their kind exertions, and the three sailors, lifting him up, carried him to the canoe. Then, having laid him down upon the bench near the rudder, they took to their oars, preferring this to hoisting sail, which might betray them.

On all that leveled surface of the ancient grotto of Locmaria, one single hillock attracted their eyes. Aramis never removed his from it; and, at a distance out in the sea, in proportion as the shore receded, that menacing proud mass of rock seemed to draw itself up, as formerly Porthos used to draw himself up, raising a smiling, yet invincible head towards heaven, like that of his dear old honest valiant friend, the strongest of the four, yet the first dead. Strange destiny of these men of brass! The most simple of heart allied to the most crafty; strength of body guided by subtlety of mind; and in the decisive moment, when vigor alone could save mind and body, a stone, a rock, a vile material weight, triumphed over manly strength, and falling upon the body, drove out the mind.

Worthy Porthos! born to help other men, always ready to sacrifice himself for the safety of the weak, as if God had only given him strength for that purpose; when dying he only thought he was carrying out the conditions of his compact with Aramis, a compact, however, which Aramis alone had drawn up, and which Porthos had only known to suffer by its terrible solidarity. Noble Porthos! of what good now are thy chateaux overflowing with sumptuous furniture, forests overflowing with game, lakes overflowing with fish, cellars overflowing with wealth! Of what service to thee now thy lackeys in brilliant liveries, and in the midst of them Mousqueton, proud of the power delegated by thee! Oh, noble Porthos! careful heaper-up of treasure, was it worth while to labor to sweeten and gild life, to come upon a desert shore, surrounded by the cries of seagulls, and lay thyself, with broken bones, beneath a torpid stone? Was it worth while, in short, noble Porthos, to heap so much gold, and not have even the distich of a poor poet engraven upon thy monument? Valiant Porthos! he still, without doubt, sleeps, lost, forgotten, beneath the rock the shepherds of the heath take for the gigantic abode of a dolmen. And so many twining branches, so many mosses, bent by the bitter wind of ocean, so many lichens solder thy sepulcher to earth, that no passers-by will imagine such a block of granite could ever have been supported by the shoulders of one man.

Aramis, still pale, still icy-cold, his heart upon his lips, looked, even till, with the last ray of daylight, the shore faded on the horizon. Not a word escaped him, not a sigh rose from his deep breast.

The superstitious Bretons looked upon him, trembling. Such silence was not that of a man, it was the silence of a statue. In the meantime, with the first gray lines that lighted up the heavens, the canoe hoisted its little sail, which, swelling with the kisses of the breeze, and carrying them rapidly from the coast, made bravest way towards Spain, across the dreaded Gulf of Gascony, so rife with storms. But scarcely half an hour after the sail had been hoisted, the rowers became inactive, reclining on their benches, and, making an eye-shade with their hands, pointed out to each other a white spot which appeared on the horizon as motionless as a gull rocked by the viewless respiration of the waves. But that which might have appeared motionless to ordinary eyes was moving at a quick rate to the experienced eye of the sailor; that which appeared stationary upon the ocean was cutting a rapid way through it. For some time, seeing the profound torpor in which their master was plunged, they did not dare to rouse him, and satisfied themselves with exchanging their conjectures in whispers. Aramis, in fact, so vigilant, so active--Aramis, whose eye, like that of the lynx, watched without ceasing, and saw better by night than by day--Aramis seemed to sleep in this despair of soul. An hour passed thus, during which daylight gradually disappeared, but during which also the sail in view gained so swiftly on the bark, that Goenne, one of the three sailors, ventured to say aloud:

"Monseigneur, we are being chased!"

Aramis made no reply; the ship still gained upon them. Then, of their own accord, two of the sailors, by the direction of the patron Yves, lowered the sail, in order that that single point upon the surface of the waters should cease to be a guide to the eye of the enemy pursuing them. On the part of the ship in sight, on the contrary, two more small sails were run up at the extremities of the masts. Unfortunately, it was the time of the finest and longest days of the year, and the moon, in all her brilliancy, succeeded inauspicious daylight. The balancelle, which was pursuing the little bark before the wind, had then still half an hour of twilight, and a whole night almost as light as day.

"Monseigneur! monseigneur! we are lost!" said the captain. "Look! they see us plainly, though we have lowered sail."

"That is not to be wondered at," murmured one of the sailors, "since they say that, by the aid of the devil, the Paris-folk have fabricated instruments with which they see as well at a distance as near, by night as well as by day."

Aramis took a telescope from the bottom of the boat, focussed it silently, and passing it to the sailor, "Here," said he, "look!" The sailor hesitated.

"Don't be alarmed," said the bishop, "there is no sin in it; and if

there is any sin, I will take it on myself."

The sailor lifted the glass to his eye, and uttered a cry. He believed that the vessel, which appeared to be distant about cannon-shot, had at a single bound cleared the whole distance. But, on withdrawing the instrument from his eye, he saw that, except the way which the balancelle had been able to make during that brief instant, it was still at the same distance.

"So," murmured the sailor, "they can see us as we see them."

"They see us," said Aramis, and sank again into impassibility.

"What!--they see us!" said Yves. "Impossible!"

"Well, captain, look yourself," said the sailor. And he passed him the glass.

"Monseigneur assures me that the devil has nothing to do with this?" asked Yves.

Aramis shrugged his shoulders.

The skipper lifted the glass to his eye. "Oh! monseigneur," said he, "it is a miracle--there they are; it seems as if I were going to touch them. Twenty-five men at least! Ah! I see the captain forward. He holds a glass like this, and is looking at us. Ah! he turns round, and gives an order; they are rolling a piece of cannon forward--they are loading it--pointing it. Misericorde! they are firing at us!"

And by a mechanical movement, the skipper put aside the telescope, and the pursuing ship, relegated to the horizon, appeared again in its true aspect. The vessel was still at the distance of nearly a league, but the maneuver sighted thus was not less real. A light cloud of smoke appeared beneath the sails, more blue than they, and spreading like a flower opening; then, at about a mile from the little canoe, they saw the ball take the crown off two or three waves, dig a white furrow in the sea, and disappear at the end of it, as inoffensive as the stone with which, in play, a boy makes ducks and drakes. It was at once a menace and a warning.

"What is to be done?" asked the patron.

"They will sink us!" said Goenne, "give us absolution, monseigneur!" And the sailors fell on their knees before him.

"You forget that they can see you," said he.

"That is true!" said the sailors, ashamed of their weakness. "Give us

your orders, monseigneur, we are prepared to die for you."

"Let us wait," said Aramis.

"How--let us wait?"

"Yes; do you not see, as you just now said, that if we endeavor to fly, they will sink us?"

"But, perhaps," the patron ventured to say, "perhaps under cover of night, we could escape them."

"Oh!" said Aramis, "they have, no doubt, Greek fire with which to lighten their own course and ours likewise."

At the same moment, as if the vessel was responsive to the appeal of Aramis, a second cloud of smoke mounted slowly to the heavens, and from the bosom of that cloud sparkled an arrow of flame, which described a parabola like a rainbow, and fell into the sea, where it continued to burn, illuminating a space of a quarter of a league in diameter.

The Bretons looked at each other in terror. "You see plainly," said Aramis, "it will be better to wait for them."

The oars dropped from the hands of the sailors, and the bark, ceasing to make way, rocked motionless upon the summits of the waves. Night came on, but still the ship drew nearer. It might be imagined it redoubled its speed with darkness. From time to time, as a vulture rears its head out of its nest, the formidable Greek fire darted from its sides, and cast its flame upon the ocean like an incandescent snowfall. At last it came within musket-shot. All the men were on deck, arms in hand; the cannoniers were at their guns, the matches burning. It might be thought they were about to board a frigate and to fight a crew superior in number to their own, not to attempt the capture of a canoe manned by four people.

"Surrender!" cried the commander of the balancelle, with the aid of his speaking-trumpet.

The sailors looked at Aramis. Aramis made a sign with his head. Yves waved a white cloth at the end of a gaff. This was like striking their flag. The pursuer came on like a race-horse. It launched a fresh Greek fire, which fell within twenty paces of the little canoe, and threw a light upon them as white as sunshine.

"At the first sign of resistance," cried the commander of the balancelle, "fire!" The soldiers brought their muskets to the present.

"Did we not say we surrendered?" said Yves.

"Alive, alive, captain!" cried one excited soldier, "they must be taken alive."

"Well, yes--living," said the captain. Then turning towards the Bretons, "Your lives are safe, my friends!" cried he, "all but the Chevalier d'Herblay."

Aramis stared imperceptibly. For an instant his eye was fixed upon the depths of the ocean, illumined by the last flashes of the Greek fire, which ran along the sides of the waves, played on the crests like plumes, and rendered still darker and more terrible the gulfs they covered.

"Do you hear, monseigneur?" said the sailors.

"Yes."

"What are your orders?"

"Accept!"

"But you, monseigneur?"

Aramis leaned still more forward, and dipped the ends of his long white fingers in the green limpid waters of the sea, to which he turned with smiles as to a friend.

"Accept!" repeated he.

"We accept," repeated the sailors; "but what security have we?"

"The word of a gentleman," said the officer. "By my rank and by my name I swear that all except M. le Chevalier d'Herblay shall have their lives spared. I am lieutenant of the king's frigate the 'Pomona,' and my name is Louis Constant de Pressigny."

With a rapid gesture, Aramis--already bent over the side of the bark towards the sea--drew himself up, and with a flashing eye, and a smile upon his lips, "Throw out the ladder, messieurs," said he, as if the command had belonged to him. He was obeyed. When Aramis, seizing the rope ladder, walked straight up to the commander, with a firm step, looked at him earnestly, made a sign to him with his hand, a mysterious and unknown sign at sight of which the officer turned pale, trembled, and bowed his head, the sailors were profoundly astonished. Without a word Aramis then raised his hand to the eyes of the commander and showed him the collet of a ring he wore on the ring-finger of his left hand. And while making this sign Aramis, draped in cold and haughty majesty, had the air of an emperor giving his hand to be kissed. The commandant,

who for a moment had raised his head, bowed a second time with marks of the most profound respect. Then stretching his hand out, in his turn, towards the poop, that is to say, towards his own cabin, he drew back to allow Aramis to go first. The three Bretons, who had come on board after their bishop, looked at each other, stupefied. The crew were awed to silence. Five minutes after, the commander called the second lieutenant, who returned immediately, ordering the head to be put towards Corunna. Whilst this order was being executed, Aramis reappeared upon the deck, and took a seat near the bastingage. Night had fallen; the moon had not yet risen, yet Aramis looked incessantly towards Belle-Isle. Yves then approached the captain, who had returned to take his post in the stern, and said, in a low and humble voice, "What course are we to follow, captain?"

"We take what course monseigneur pleases," replied the officer.

Aramis passed the night leaning upon the bastingage. Yves, on approaching him next morning, remarked that "the night must have been a very damp one, for the wood on which the bishop's head had rested was soaked with dew." Who knows?--that dew was, it may be, the first tears that had ever fallen from the eyes of Aramis!

What epitaph would have been worth that, good Porthos?