

Chapter LVII. Athos's Vision.

When this fainting of Athos had ceased, the comte, almost ashamed of having given way before this superior natural event, dressed himself and ordered his horse, determined to ride to Blois, to open more certain correspondences with either Africa, D'Artagnan, or Aramis. In fact, this letter from Aramis informed the Comte de la Fere of the bad success of the expedition of Belle-Isle. It gave him sufficient details of the death of Porthos to move the tender and devoted heart of Athos to its innermost fibers. Athos wished to go and pay his friend Porthos a last visit. To render this honor to his companion in arms, he meant to send to D'Artagnan, to prevail upon him to recommence the painful voyage to Belle-Isle, to accomplish in his company that sad pilgrimage to the tomb of the giant he had so much loved, then to return to his dwelling to obey that secret influence which was conducting him to eternity by a mysterious road. But scarcely had his joyous servants dressed their master, whom they saw with pleasure preparing for a journey which might dissipate his melancholy; scarcely had the comte's gentlest horse been saddled and brought to the door, when the father of Raoul felt his head become confused, his legs give way, and he clearly perceived the impossibility of going one step further. He ordered himself to be carried into the sun; they laid him upon his bed of moss where he passed a full hour before he could recover his spirits. Nothing could be more natural than this weakness after then inert repose of the latter days. Athos took a bouillon, to give him strength, and bathed his dried lips in a glassful of the wine he loved the best--that old Anjou wine mentioned by Porthos in his admirable will. Then, refreshed, free in mind, he had his horse brought again; but only with the aid of his servants was he able painfully to climb into the saddle. He did not go a hundred paces; a shivering seized him again at the turning of the road.

"This is very strange!" said he to his valet de chambre, who accompanied him.

"Let us stop, monsieur--I conjure you!" replied the faithful servant; "how pale you are getting!"

"That will not prevent my pursuing my route, now I have once started," replied the comte. And he gave his horse his head again. But suddenly, the animal, instead of obeying the thought of his master, stopped. A movement, of which Athos was unconscious, had checked the bit.

"Something," said Athos, "wills that I should go no further. Support me," added he, stretching out his arms; "quick! come closer! I feel my muscles relax--I shall fall from my horse."

The valet had seen the movement made by his master at the moment he received the order. He went up to him quickly, received the comte in his

arms, and as they were not yet sufficiently distant from the house for the servants, who had remained at the door to watch their master's departure, not to perceive the disorder in the usually regular proceeding of the comte, the valet called his comrades by gestures and voice, and all hastened to his assistance. Athos had gone but a few steps on his return, when he felt himself better again. His strength seemed to revive and with it the desire to go to Blois. He made his horse turn round: but, at the animal's first steps, he sunk again into a state of torpor and anguish.

"Well! decidedly," said he, "it is willed that I should stay at home." His people flocked around him; they lifted him from his horse, and carried him as quickly as possible into the house. Everything was prepared in his chamber, and they put him to bed.

"You will be sure to remember," said he, disposing himself to sleep, "that I expect letters from Africa this very day."

"Monsieur will no doubt hear with pleasure that Blaisois's son is gone on horseback, to gain an hour over the courier of Blois," replied his valet de chambre.

"Thank you," replied Athos, with his placid smile.

The comte fell asleep, but his disturbed slumber resembled torture rather than repose. The servant who watched him saw several times the expression of internal suffering shadowed on his features. Perhaps Athos was dreaming.

The day passed away. Blaisois's son returned; the courier had brought no news. The comte reckoned the minutes with despair; he shuddered when those minutes made an hour. The idea that he was forgotten seized him once, and brought on a fearful pang of the heart. Everybody in the house had given up all hopes of the courier--his hour had long passed. Four times the express sent to Blois had repeated his journey, and there was nothing to the address of the comte. Athos knew that the courier only arrived once a week. Here, then, was a delay of eight mortal days to be endured. He commenced the night in this painful persuasion. All that a sick man, irritated by suffering, can add of melancholy suppositions to probabilities already gloomy, Athos heaped up during the early hours of this dismal night. The fever rose: it invaded the chest, where the fire soon caught, according to the expression of the physician, who had been brought back from Blois by Blaisois at his last journey. Soon it gained the head. The physician made two successive bleedings, which dislodged it for the time, but left the patient very weak, and without power of action in anything but his brain. And yet this redoubtable fever had ceased. It besieged with its last palpitations the tense extremities; it ended by yielding as midnight struck.

The physician, seeing the incontestable improvement, returned to Blois, after having ordered some prescriptions, and declared that the comte was saved. Then commenced for Athos a strange, indefinable state. Free to think, his mind turned towards Raoul, that beloved son. His imagination penetrated the fields of Africa in the environs of Gigelli, where M. de Beaufort must have landed with his army. A waste of gray rocks, rendered green in certain parts by the waters of the sea, when it lashed the shore in storms and tempest. Beyond, the shore, strewn over with these rocks like gravestones, ascended, in form of an amphitheater among mastic-trees and cactus, a sort of small town, full of smoke, confused noises, and terrified movements. All of a sudden, from the bosom of this smoke arose a flame, which succeeded, creeping along the houses, in covering the entire surface of the town, and increased by degrees, uniting in its red and angry vortices tears, screams, and supplicating arms outstretched to Heaven.

There was, for a moment, a frightful pele-mele of timbers falling to pieces, of swords broken, of stones calcined, trees burnt and disappearing. It was a strange thing that in this chaos, in which Athos distinguished raised arms, in which he heard cries, sobs, and groans, he did not see one human figure. The cannon thundered at a distance, musketry madly barked, the sea moaned, flocks made their escape, bounding over the verdant slope. But not a soldier to apply the match to the batteries of cannon, not a sailor to assist in maneuvering the fleet, not a shepherd in charge of the flocks. After the ruin of the village, the destruction of the forts which dominated it, a ruin and destruction magically wrought without the co-operation of a single human being, the flames were extinguished, the smoke began to subside, then diminished in intensity, paled and disappeared entirely. Night then came over the scene; night dark upon the earth, brilliant in the firmament. The large blazing stars which spangled the African sky glittered and gleamed without illuminating anything.

A long silence ensued, which gave, for a moment, repose to the troubled imagination of Athos; and as he felt that that which he saw was not terminated, he applied more attentively the eyes of his understanding on the strange spectacle which his imagination had presented. This spectacle was soon continued for him. A mild pale moon rose behind the declivities of the coast, streaking at first the undulating ripples of the sea, which appeared to have calmed after the roaring it had sent forth during the vision of Athos--the moon, we say, shed its diamonds and opals upon the briars and bushes of the hills. The gray rocks, so many silent and attentive phantoms, appeared to raise their heads to examine likewise the field of battle by the light of the moon, and Athos perceived that the field, empty during the combat, was now strewn with fallen bodies.

An inexpressible shudder of fear and horror seized his soul as he recognized the white and blue uniforms of the soldiers of Picardy,

with their long pikes and blue handles, and muskets marked with the fleur-de-lis on the butts. When he saw all the gaping wounds, looking up to the bright heavens as if to demand back of them the souls to which they had opened a passage,--when he saw the slaughtered horses, stiff, their tongues hanging out at one side of their mouths, sleeping in the shiny blood congealed around them, staining their furniture and their manes,--when he saw the white horse of M. de Beaufort, with his head beaten to pieces, in the first ranks of the dead, Athos passed a cold hand over his brow, which he was astonished not to find burning. He was convinced by this touch that he was present, as a spectator, without delirium's dreadful aid, the day after the battle fought upon the shores of Gigelli by the army of the expedition, which he had seen leave the coast of France and disappear upon the dim horizon, and of which he had saluted with thought and gesture the last cannon-shot fired by the duke as a signal of farewell to his country.

Who can paint the mortal agony with which his soul followed, like a vigilant eye, these effigies of clay-cold soldiers, and examined them, one after the other, to see if Raoul slept among them? Who can express the intoxication of joy with which Athos bowed before God, and thanked Him for not having seen him he sought with so much fear among the dead? In fact, fallen in their ranks, stiff, icy, the dead, still recognizable with ease, seemed to turn with complacency towards the Comte de la Fere, to be the better seen by him, during his sad review. But yet, he was astonished, while viewing all these bodies, not to perceive the survivors. To such a point did the illusion extend, that this vision was for him a real voyage made by the father into Africa, to obtain more exact information respecting his son.

Fatigued, therefore, with having traversed seas and continents, he sought repose under one of the tents sheltered behind a rock, on the top of which floated the white fleur-de-lised pennon. He looked for a soldier to conduct him to the tent of M. de Beaufort. Then, while his eye was wandering over the plain, turning on all sides, he saw a white form appear behind the scented myrtles. This figure was clothed in the costume of an officer; it held in its hand a broken sword; it advanced slowly towards Athos, who, stopping short and fixing his eyes upon it, neither spoke nor moved, but wished to open his arms, because in this silent officer he had already recognized Raoul. The comte attempted to utter a cry, but it was stifled in his throat. Raoul, with a gesture, directed him to be silent, placing his finger on his lips and drawing back by degrees, without Athos being able to see his legs move. The comte, still paler than Raoul, followed his son, painfully traversing briars and bushes, stones and ditches, Raoul not appearing to touch the earth, no obstacle seeming to impede the lightness of his march. The comte, whom the inequalities of the path fatigued, soon stopped, exhausted. Raoul still continued to beckon him to follow him. The tender father, to whom love restored strength, made a last effort, and climbed the mountain after the young man, who attracted him by gesture and by

smile.

At length he gained the crest of the hill, and saw, thrown out in black, upon the horizon whitened by the moon, the aerial form of Raoul. Athos reached forth his hand to get closer to his beloved son upon the plateau, and the latter also stretched out his; but suddenly, as if the young man had been drawn away in his own despite, still retreating, he left the earth, and Athos saw the clear blue sky shine between the feet of his child and the ground of the hill. Raoul rose insensibly into the void, smiling, still calling with gesture:--he departed towards heaven. Athos uttered a cry of tenderness and terror. He looked below again. He saw a camp destroyed, and all those white bodies of the royal army, like so many motionless atoms. And, then, raising his head, he saw the figure of his son still beckoning him to climb the mystic void.