

Chapter 55. The Scotchman.

And now our readers must leave the Standard to sail peaceably, not toward London, where D'Artagnan and Porthos believed they were going, but to Durham, whither Mordaunt had been ordered to repair by the letter he had received during his sojourn at Boulogne, and accompany us to the royalist camp, on this side of the Tyne, near Newcastle.

There, placed between two rivers on the borders of Scotland, but still on English soil, the tents of a little army extended. It was midnight. Some Highlanders were listlessly keeping watch. The moon, which was partially obscured by heavy clouds, now and then lit up the muskets of the sentinels, or silvered the walls, the roofs, and the spires of the town that Charles I. had just surrendered to the parliamentary troops, whilst Oxford and Newark still held out for him in the hopes of coming to some arrangement.

At one of the extremities of the camp, near an immense tent, in which the Scottish officers were holding a kind of council, presided over by Lord Leven, their commander, a man attired as a cavalier lay sleeping on the turf, his right hand extended over his sword.

About fifty paces off, another man, also appareled as a cavalier, was talking to a Scotch sentinel, and, though a foreigner, he seemed to understand without much difficulty the answers given in the broad

Perthshire dialect.

As the town clock of Newcastle struck one the sleeper awoke, and with all the gestures of a man rousing himself out of deep sleep he looked attentively about him; perceiving that he was alone he rose and making a little circuit passed close to the cavalier who was speaking to the sentinel. The former had no doubt finished his questions, for a moment later he said good-night and carelessly followed the same path taken by the first cavalier.

In the shadow of a tent the former was awaiting him.

"Well, my dear friend?" said he, in as pure French as has ever been uttered between Rouen and Tours.

"Well, my friend, there is not a moment to lose; we must let the king know immediately."

"Why, what is the matter?"

"It would take too long to tell you, besides, you will hear it all directly and the least word dropped here might ruin all. We must go and find Lord Winter."

They both set off to the other end of the camp, but as it did not cover more than a surface of five hundred feet they quickly arrived at the tent they were looking for.

"Tony, is your master sleeping?" said one of the two cavaliers to a servant who was lying in the outer compartment, which served as a kind of ante-room.

"No, monsieur le comte," answered the servant, "I think not; or at least he has not long been so, for he was pacing up and down for more than two hours after he left the king, and the sound of his footsteps has only ceased during the last ten minutes. However, you may look and see," added the lackey, raising the curtained entrance of the tent.

Lord Winter was seated near an aperture, arranged as a window to let in the night air, his eyes mechanically following the course of the moon, intermittently veiled, as we before observed, by heavy clouds. The two friends approached Winter, who, with his head on his hands, was gazing at the heavens; he did not hear them enter and remained in the same attitude till he felt a hand upon his shoulder.

He turned around, recognized Athos and Aramis and held out his hand to them.

"Have you observed," said he to them, "what a blood-red color the moon has to-night?"

"No," replied Athos; "I thought it looked much the same as usual."

"Look, again, chevalier," returned Lord Winter.

"I must own," said Aramis, "I am like the Comte de la Fere--I can see

nothing remarkable about it."

"My lord," said Athos, "in a position so precarious as ours we must examine the earth and not the heavens. Have you studied our Scotch troops and have you confidence in them?"

"The Scotch?" inquired Winter. "What Scotch?"

"Ours, egad!" exclaimed Athos. "Those in whom the king has confided--Lord Leven's Highlanders."

"No," said Winter, then he paused; "but tell me, can you not perceive the russet tint which marks the heavens?"

"Not the least in the world," said Aramis and Athos at once.

"Tell me," continued Winter, always possessed by the same idea, "is there not a tradition in France that Henry IV., the evening before the day he was assassinated, when he was playing at chess with M. de Bassompierre, saw clots of blood upon the chessboard?"

"Yes," said Athos, "and the marechal has often told me so himself."

"Then it was so," murmured Winter, "and the next day Henry IV. was killed."

"But what has this vision of Henry IV. to do with you, my lord?" inquired Aramis.

"Nothing; and indeed I am mad to trouble you with such things, when your coming to my tent at such an hour announces that you are the bearers of important news."

"Yes, my lord," said Athos, "I wish to speak to the king."

"To the king! but the king is asleep."

"I have something important to reveal to him."

"Can it not be put off till to-morrow?"

"He must know it this moment, and perhaps it is already too late."

"Come, then," said Lord Winter.

Lord Winter's tent was pitched by the side of the royal marquee, a kind of corridor communicating between the two. This corridor was guarded, not by a sentinel, but by a confidential servant, through whom, in case of urgency, Charles could communicate instantly with his faithful subject.

"These gentlemen are with me," said Winter.

The lackey bowed and let them pass. As he had said, on a camp bed, dressed in his black doublet, booted, unbelted, with his felt hat beside him, lay the king, overcome by sleep and fatigue. They advanced, and

Athos, who was the first to enter, gazed a moment in silence on that pale and noble face, framed in its long and now untidy, matted hair, the blue veins showing through the transparent temples, his eyes seemingly swollen by tears.

Athos sighed deeply; the sigh woke the king, so lightly did he sleep.

He opened his eyes.

"Ah!" said he, raising himself on his elbow, "is it you, Comte de la Fere?"

"Yes, sire," replied Athos.

"You watch while I sleep and you have come to bring me some news?"

"Alas, sire," answered Athos, "your majesty has guessed aright."

"It is bad news?"

"Yes, sire."

"Never mind; the messenger is welcome. You never come to me without conferring pleasure. You whose devotion recognizes neither country nor misfortune, you who are sent to me by Henrietta; whatever news you bring, speak out."

"Sire, Cromwell has arrived this night at Newcastle."

"Ah!" exclaimed the king, "to fight?"

"No, sire, but to buy your majesty."

"What did you say?"

"I said, sire, that four hundred thousand pounds are owing to the Scottish army."

"For unpaid wages; yes, I know it. For the last year my faithful Highlanders have fought for honor alone."

Athos smiled.

"Well, sir, though honor is a fine thing, they are tired of fighting for it, and to-night they have sold you for two hundred thousand pounds--that is to say, for half what is owing them."

"Impossible!" cried the king, "the Scotch sell their king for two hundred thousand pounds! And who is the Judas who has concluded this infamous bargain?"

"Lord Leven."

"Are you certain of it, sir?"

"I heard it with my own ears."

The king sighed deeply, as if his heart would break, and then buried his face in his hands.

"Oh! the Scotch," he exclaimed, "the Scotch I called 'my faithful,' to whom I trusted myself when I could have fled to Oxford! the Scotch, my brothers! But are you well assured, sir?"

"Lying behind the tent of Lord Leven, I raised it and saw all, heard all!"

"And when is this to be consummated?"

"To-day--this morning; so your majesty must perceive there is no time to lose!"

"To do what? since you say I am sold."

"To cross the Tyne, reach Scotland and rejoin Lord Montrose, who will not sell you."

"And what shall I do in Scotland? A war of partisans, unworthy of a king."

"The example of Robert Bruce will absolve you, sire."

"No, no! I have fought too long; they have sold me, they shall give me up, and the eternal shame of treble treason shall fall on their heads."

"Sire," said Athos, "perhaps a king should act thus, but not a husband and a father. I have come in the name of your wife and daughter and of the children you have still in London, and I say to you, 'Live, sire,'--it is the will of Heaven."

The king raised himself, buckled on his belt, and passing his handkerchief over his moist forehead, said:

"Well, what is to be done?"

"Sire, have you in the army one regiment on which you can implicitly rely?"

"Winter," said the king, "do you believe in the fidelity of yours?"

"Sire, they are but men, and men are become both weak and wicked. I will not answer for them. I would confide my life to them, but I should hesitate ere I trusted them with your majesty's."

"Well!" said Athos, "since you have not a regiment, we are three devoted men. It is enough. Let your majesty mount on horseback and place yourself in the midst of us; we will cross the Tyne, reach Scotland, and you will be saved."

"Is this your counsel also, Winter?" inquired the king.

"Yes, sire."

"And yours, Monsieur d'Herblay?"

"Yes, sire."

"As you wish, then. Winter, give the necessary orders."

Winter then left the tent; in the meantime the king finished his toilet.

The first rays of daybreak penetrated the aperture of the tent as Winter re-entered it.

"All is ready, sire," said he.

"For us, also?" inquired Athos.

"Grimaud and Blaisois are holding your horses, ready saddled."

"In that case," exclaimed Athos, "let us not lose an instant, but set off."

"Come," added the king.

"Sire," said Aramis, "will not your majesty acquaint some of your friends of this?"

"Friends!" answered Charles, sadly, "I have but three--one of twenty years, who has never forgotten me, and two of a week's standing, whom I shall never forget. Come, gentlemen, come!"

The king quitted his tent and found his horse ready waiting for him. It was a chestnut that the king had ridden for three years and of which he was very fond.

The horse neighed with pleasure at seeing him.

"Ah!" said the king, "I was unjust; here is a creature that loves me. You at least will be faithful to me, Arthur."

The horse, as if it understood these words, bent its red nostrils toward the king's face, and parting his lips displayed all its teeth, as if with pleasure.

"Yes, yes," said the king, caressing it with his hand, "yes, my Arthur, thou art a fond and faithful creature."

After this little scene Charles threw himself into the saddle, and turning to Athos, Aramis and Winter, said:

"Now, gentlemen, I am at your service."

But Athos was standing with his eyes fixed on a black line which bordered the banks of the Tyne and seemed to extend double the length of the camp.

"What is that line?" cried Athos, whose vision was still rather obscured by the uncertain shades and demi-tints of daybreak. "What is that line?"

I did not observe it yesterday."

"It must be the fog rising from the river," said the king.

"Sire, it is something more opaque than the fog."

"Indeed!" said Winter, "it appears to me like a bar of red color."

"It is the enemy, who have made a sortie from Newcastle and are surrounding us!" exclaimed Athos.

"The enemy!" cried the king.

"Yes, the enemy. It is too late. Stop a moment; does not that sunbeam yonder, just by the side of the town, glitter on the Ironsides?"

This was the name given the cuirassiers, whom Cromwell had made his body-guard.

"Ah!" said the king, "we shall soon see whether my Highlanders have betrayed me or not."

"What are you going to do?" exclaimed Athos.

"To give them the order to charge, and run down these miserable rebels."

And the king, putting spurs to his horse, set off to the tent of Lord Leven.

"Follow him," said Athos.

"Come!" exclaimed Aramis.

"Is the king wounded?" cried Lord Winter. "I see spots of blood on the ground." And he set off to follow the two friends.

He was stopped by Athos.

"Go and call out your regiment," said he; "I can foresee that we shall have need of it directly."

Winter turned his horse and the two friends rode on. It had taken but two minutes for the king to reach the tent of the Scottish commander; he dismounted and entered.

The general was there, surrounded by the more prominent chiefs.

"The king!" they exclaimed, as all rose in bewilderment.

Charles was indeed in the midst of them, his hat on his head, his brows bent, striking his boot with his riding whip.

"Yes, gentlemen, the king in person, the king who has come to ask for some account of what has happened."

"What is the matter, sire?" exclaimed Lord Leven.

"It is this, sir," said the king, angrily, "that General Cromwell has reached Newcastle; that you knew it and I was not informed of it; that the enemy have left the town and are now closing the passages of the Tyne against us; that our sentinels have seen this movement and I have been left unacquainted with it; that, by an infamous treaty you have sold me for two hundred thousand pounds to Parliament. Of this treaty, at least, I have been warned. This is the matter, gentlemen; answer and exculpate yourselves, for I stand here to accuse you."

"Sire," said Lord Leven, with hesitation, "sire, your majesty has been deceived by false reports."

"My own eyes have seen the enemy extend itself between myself and Scotland; and I can almost say that with my own ears I have heard the clauses of the treaty debated."

The Scotch chieftains looked at each other in their turn with frowning brows.

"Sire," murmured Lord Leven, crushed by shame, "sire, we are ready to give you every proof of our fidelity."

"I ask but one," said the king; "put the army in battle array and face the enemy."

"That cannot be, sire," said the earl.

"How, cannot be? What hinders it?" exclaimed the king.

"Your majesty is well aware that there is a truce between us and the English army."

"And if there is a truce the English army has broken it by quitting the town, contrary to the agreement which kept it there. Now, I tell you, you must pass with me through this army across to Scotland, and if you refuse you may choose betwixt two names, which the contempt of all honest men will brand you with--you are either cowards or traitors!"

The eyes of the Scotch flashed fire; and, as often happens on such occasions, from shame they passed to effrontery and two heads of clans advanced upon the king.

"Yes," said they, "we have promised to deliver Scotland and England from him who for the last five-and-twenty years has sucked the blood and gold of Scotland and England. We have promised and we will keep our promise. Charles Stuart, you are our prisoner."

And both extended their hands as if to seize the king, but before they could touch him with the tips of their fingers, both had fallen, one dead, the other stunned.

Aramis had passed his sword through the body of the first and Athos had knocked down the other with the butt end of his pistol.

Then, as Lord Leven and the other chieftains recoiled before this

unexpected rescue, which seemed to come from Heaven for the prince they already thought was their prisoner, Athos and Aramis dragged the king from the perjured assembly into which he had so imprudently ventured, and throwing themselves on horseback all three returned at full gallop to the royal tent.

On their road they perceived Lord Winter marching at the head of his regiment. The king motioned him to accompany them.