

Chapter 56. The Avenger.

They all four entered the tent; they had no plan ready--they must think of one.

The king threw himself into an arm-chair. "I am lost," said he.

"No, sire," replied Athos. "You are only betrayed."

The king sighed deeply.

"Betrayed! yes betrayed by the Scotch, amongst whom I was born, whom I have always loved better than the English. Oh, traitors that ye are!"

"Sire," said Athos, "this is not a moment for recrimination, but a time to show yourself a king and a gentleman. Up, sire! up! for you have here at least three men who will not betray you. Ah! if we had been five!" murmured Athos, thinking of D'Artagnan and Porthos.

"What do you say?" inquired Charles, rising.

"I say, sire, that there is now but one way open. Lord Winter answers for his regiment, or at least very nearly so--we will not split straws about words--let him place himself at the head of his men, we will place ourselves at the side of your majesty, and we will mow a swath through

Cromwell's army and reach Scotland."

"There is another method," said Aramis. "Let one of us put on the dress and mount the king's horse. Whilst they pursue him the king might escape."

"It is good advice," said Athos, "and if the king will do one of us the honor we shall be truly grateful to him."

"What do you think of this counsel, Winter?" asked the king, looking with admiration at these two men, whose chief idea seemed to be how they could take on their shoulders all the dangers that assailed him.

"I think the only chance of saving your majesty has just been proposed by Monsieur d'Herblay. I humbly entreat your majesty to choose quickly, for we have not an instant to lose."

"But if I accept, it is death, or at least imprisonment, for him who takes my place."

"He will have had the glory of having saved his king," cried Winter.

The king looked at his old friend with tears in his eyes; undid the Order of the Saint Esprit which he wore, to honor the two Frenchmen who were with him, and passed it around Winter's neck, who received on his knees this striking proof of his sovereign's confidence and friendship.

"It is right," said Athos; "he has served your majesty longer than we

have."

The king overheard these words and turned around with tears in his eyes.

"Wait a moment, sir," said he; "I have an order for each of you also."

He turned to a closet where his own orders were locked up, and took out two ribbons of the Order of the Garter.

"These cannot be for us," said Athos.

"Why not, sir?" asked Charles.

"Such are for royalty, and we are simple commoners."

"Speak not of crowns. I shall not find amongst them such great hearts as yours. No, no, you do yourselves injustice; but I am here to do you justice. On your knees, count."

Athos knelt down and the king passed the ribbon down from left to right as usual, raised his sword, and instead of pronouncing the customary formula, "I make you a knight. Be brave, faithful and loyal," he said, "You are brave, faithful and loyal. I knight you, monsieur le comte."

Then turning to Aramis, he said:

"It is now your turn, monsieur le chevalier."

The same ceremony recommenced, with the same words, whilst Winter unlaced his leather cuirass, that he might disguise himself like the king. Charles, having proceeded with Aramis as with Athos, embraced them both.

"Sire," said Winter, who in this trying emergency felt all his strength and energy fire up, "we are ready."

The king looked at the three gentlemen. "Then we must fly!" said he.

"Flying through an army, sire," said Athos, "in all countries in the world is called charging."

"Then I shall die, sword in hand," said Charles. "Monsieur le comte, monsieur le chevalier, if ever I am king----"

"Sire, you have already done us more honor than simple gentlemen could ever aspire to, therefore gratitude is on our side. But we must not lose time. We have already wasted too much."

The king again shook hands with all three, exchanged hats with Winter and went out.

Winter's regiment was ranged on some high ground above the camp. The king, followed by the three friends, turned his steps that way. The Scotch camp seemed as if at last awakened; the soldiers had come out of their tents and taken up their station in battle array.

"Do you see that?" said the king. "Perhaps they are penitent and preparing to march."

"If they are penitent," said Athos, "let them follow us."

"Well!" said the king, "what shall we do?"

"Let us examine the enemy's army."

At the same instant the eyes of the little group were fixed on the same line which at daybreak they had mistaken for fog and which the morning sun now plainly showed was an army in order of battle. The air was soft and clear, as it generally is at that early hour of the morning. The regiments, the standards, and even the colors of the horses and uniforms were now clearly distinct.

On the summit of a rising ground, a little in advance of the enemy, appeared a short and heavy looking man; this man was surrounded by officers. He turned a spyglass toward the little group amongst which the king stood.

"Does this man know your majesty personally?" inquired Aramis.

Charles smiled.

"That man is Cromwell," said he.

"Then draw down your hat, sire, that he may not discover the

substitution."

"Ah!" said Athos, "how much time we have lost."

"Now," said the king, "give the word and let us start."

"Will you not give it, sire?" asked Athos.

"No; I make you my lieutenant-general," said the king.

"Listen, then, Lord Winter. Proceed, sire, I beg. What we are going to say does not concern your majesty."

The king, smiling, turned a few steps back.

"This is what I propose to do," said Athos. "We will divide our regiments into two squadrons. You will put yourself at the head of the first. We and his majesty will lead the second. If no obstacle occurs we will both charge together, force the enemy's line and throw ourselves into the Tyne, which we must cross, either by fording or swimming; if, on the contrary, any repulse should take place, you and your men must fight to the last man, whilst we and the king proceed on our road. Once arrived at the brink of the river, should we even find them three ranks deep, as long as you and your regiment do your duty, we will look to the rest."

"To horse!" said Lord Winter.

"To horse!" re-echoed Athos; "everything is arranged and decided."

"Now, gentlemen," cried the king, "forward! and rally to the old cry of France, 'Montjoy and St. Denis!' The war cry of England is too often in the mouths of traitors."

They mounted--the king on Winter's horse and Winter on that of the king; then Winter took his place at the head of the first squadron, and the king, with Athos on his right and Aramis on his left, at the head of the second.

The Scotch army stood motionless and silent, seized with shame at sight of these preparations.

Some of the chieftains left the ranks and broke their swords in two.

"There," said the king, "that consoles me; they are not all traitors."

At this moment Winter's voice was raised with the cry of "Forward!"

The first squadron moved off; the second followed, and descended from the plateau. A regiment of cuirassiers, nearly equal as to numbers, issued from behind the hill and came full gallop toward it.

The king pointed this out.

"Sire," said Athos, "we foresaw this; and if Lord Winter's men but do their duty, we are saved, instead of lost."

At this moment they heard above all the galloping and neighing of the horses Winter's voice crying out:

"Sword in hand!"

At these words every sword was drawn, and glittered in the air like lightning.

"Now, gentlemen," said the king in his turn, excited by this sight, "come, gentlemen, sword in hand!"

But Aramis and Athos were the only ones to obey this command and the king's example.

"We are betrayed," said the king in a low voice.

"Wait a moment," said Athos, "perhaps they do not recognize your majesty's voice, and await the order of their captain."

"Have they not heard that of their colonel? But look! look!" cried the king, drawing up his horse with a sudden jerk, which threw it on its haunches, and seizing the bridle of Athos's horse.

"Ah, cowards! traitors!" screamed Lord Winter, whose voice they heard, whilst his men, quitting their ranks, dispersed all over the plain.

About fifteen men were ranged around him and awaited the charge of



Cromwell's cuirassiers.

"Let us go and die with them!" said the king.

"Let us go," said Athos and Aramis.

"All faithful hearts with me!" cried out Winter.

This voice was heard by the two friends, who set off, full gallop.

"No quarter!" cried a voice in French, answering to that of Winter, which made them tremble.

As for Winter, at the sound of that voice he turned pale, and was, as it were, petrified.

It was the voice of a cavalier mounted on a magnificent black horse, who was charging at the head of the English regiment, of which, in his ardor, he was ten steps in advance.

"'Tis he!" murmured Winter, his eyes glazed and he allowed his sword to fall to his side.

"The king! the king!" cried out several voices, deceived by the blue ribbon and chestnut horse of Winter; "take him alive."

"No! it is not the king!" exclaimed the cavalier. "Lord Winter, you are not the king; you are my uncle."

At the same moment Mordaunt, for it was he, leveled his pistol at Winter; it went off and the ball entered the heart of the old cavalier, who with one bound on his saddle fell back into the arms of Athos, murmuring: "He is avenged!"

"Think of my mother!" shouted Mordaunt, as his horse plunged and darted off at full gallop.

"Wretch!" exclaimed Aramis, raising his pistol as he passed by him; but the powder flashed in the pan and it did not go off.

At this moment the whole regiment came up and they fell upon the few men who had held out, surrounding the two Frenchmen. Athos, after making sure that Lord Winter was really dead, let fall the corpse and said:

"Come, Aramis, now for the honor of France!" and the two Englishmen who were nearest to them fell, mortally wounded.

At the same moment a fearful "hurrah!" rent the air and thirty blades glittered about their heads.

Suddenly a man sprang out of the English ranks, fell upon Athos, twined arms of steel around him, and tearing his sword from him, said in his ear:

"Silence! yield--you yield to me, do you not?"

A giant had seized also Aramis's two wrists, who struggled in vain to release himself from this formidable grasp.

"D'Art----" exclaimed Athos, whilst the Gascon covered his mouth with his hand.

"I am your prisoner," said Aramis, giving up his sword to Porthos.

"Fire, fire!" cried Mordaunt, returning to the group surrounding the two friends.

"And wherefore fire?" said the colonel; "every one has yielded."

"It is the son of Milady," said Athos to D'Artagnan.

"I recognize him."

"It is the monk," whispered Porthos to Aramis.

"I know it."

And now the ranks began to open. D'Artagnan held the bridle of Athos's horse and Porthos that of Aramis. Both of them attempted to lead his prisoner off the battle-field.

This movement revealed the spot where Winter's body had fallen. Mordaunt had found it out and was gazing on his dead relative with an expression of malignant hatred.

Athos, though now cool and collected, put his hand to his belt, where his loaded pistols yet remained.

"What are you about?" said D'Artagnan.

"Let me kill him."

"We are all four lost, if by the least gesture you discover that you recognize him."

Then turning to the young man he exclaimed:

"A fine prize! a fine prize, friend Mordaunt; we have both myself and Monsieur du Vallon, taken two Knights of the Garter, nothing less."

"But," said Mordaunt, looking at Athos and Aramis with bloodshot eyes, "these are Frenchmen, I imagine."

"I faith, I don't know. Are you French, sir?" said he to Athos.

"I am," replied the latter, gravely.

"Very well, my dear sir, you are the prisoner of a fellow countryman."

"But the king--where is the king?" exclaimed Athos, anxiously.

D'Artagnan vigorously seized his prisoner's hand, saying:

"Eh! the king? We have secured him."

"Yes," said Aramis, "through an infamous act of treason."

Porthos pressed his friend's hand and said to him:

"Yes, sir, all is fair in war, stratagem as well as force; look yonder!"

At this instant the squadron, that ought to have protected Charles's retreat, was advancing to meet the English regiments. The king, who was entirely surrounded, walked alone in a great empty space. He appeared calm, but it was evidently not without a mighty effort. Drops of perspiration trickled down his face, and from time to time he put a handkerchief to his mouth to wipe away the blood that rilled from it.

"Behold Nebuchadnezzar!" exclaimed an old Puritan soldier, whose eyes flashed at the sight of the man they called the tyrant.

"Do you call him Nebuchadnezzar?" said Mordaunt, with a terrible smile; "no, it is Charles the First, the king, the good King Charles, who despoils his subjects to enrich himself."

Charles glanced a moment at the insolent creature who uttered this, but did not recognize him. Nevertheless, the calm religious dignity of his countenance abashed Mordaunt.

"Bon jour, messieurs!" said the king to the two gentlemen who were held

by D'Artagnan and Porthos. "The day has been unfortunate, but it is not your fault, thank God! But where is my old friend Winter?"

The two gentlemen turned away their heads in silence.

"In Strafford's company," said Mordaunt, tauntingly.

Charles shuddered. The demon had known how to wound him. The remembrance of Strafford was a source of lasting remorse to him, the shadow that haunted him by day and night. The king looked around him. He saw a corpse at his feet. It was Winter's. He uttered not a word, nor shed a tear, but a deadly pallor spread over his face; he knelt down on the ground, raised Winter's head, and unfastening the Order of the Saint Esprit, placed it on his own breast.

"Lord Winter is killed, then?" inquired D'Artagnan, fixing his eyes on the corpse.

"Yes," said Athos, "by his own nephew."

"Come, he was the first of us to go; peace be to him! he was an honest man," said D'Artagnan.

"Charles Stuart," said the colonel of the English regiment, approaching the king, who had just put on the insignia of royalty, "do you yield yourself a prisoner?"

"Colonel Tomlison," said Charles, "kings cannot yield; the man alone

submits to force."

"Your sword."

The king drew his sword and broke it on his knee.

At this moment a horse without a rider, covered with foam, his nostrils extended and eyes all fire, galloped up, and recognizing his master, stopped and neighed with pleasure; it was Arthur.

The king smiled, patted it with his hand and jumped lightly into the saddle.

"Now, gentlemen," said he, "conduct me where you will."

Turning back again, he said, "I thought I saw Winter move; if he still lives, by all you hold most sacred, do not abandon him."

"Never fear, King Charles," said Mordaunt, "the bullet pierced his heart."

"Do not breathe a word nor make the least sign to me or Porthos," said D'Artagnan to Athos and Aramis, "that you recognize this man, for Milady is not dead; her soul lives in the body of this demon."

The detachment now moved toward the town with the royal captive; but on the road an aide-de-camp, from Cromwell, sent orders that Colonel Tomlison should conduct him to Holdenby Castle.

At the same time couriers started in every direction over England and Europe to announce that Charles Stuart was the prisoner of Oliver Cromwell.