

Chapter 70. The Skiff "Lightning."

D'Artagnan had judged correctly; Mordaunt felt that he had no time to lose, and he lost none. He knew the rapidity of decision and action that characterized his enemies and resolved to act with reference to that. This time the musketeers had an adversary who was worthy of them.

After closing the door carefully behind him Mordaunt glided into the subterranean passage, sheathing on the way his now useless sword, and thus reached the neighboring house, where he paused to examine himself and to take breath.

"Good!" he said, "nothing, almost nothing--scratches, nothing more; two in the arm and one in the breast. The wounds that I make are better than that--witness the executioner of Bethune, my uncle and King Charles. Now, not a second to lose, for a second lost will perhaps save them. They must die--die all together--killed at one stroke by the thunder of men in default of God's. They must disappear, broken, scattered, annihilated. I will run, then, till my legs no longer serve, till my heart bursts in my bosom but I will arrive before they do."

Mordaunt proceeded at a rapid pace to the nearest cavalry barracks, about a quarter of a league distant. He made that quarter of a league in four or five minutes. Arrived at the barracks he made himself known, took the best horse in the stables, mounted and gained the high road. A

quarter of an hour later he was at Greenwich.

"There is the port," he murmured. "That dark point yonder is the Isle of Dogs. Good! I am half an hour in advance of them, an hour, perhaps. Fool that I was! I have almost killed myself by my needless haste. Now," he added, rising in the stirrups and looking about him, "which, I wonder, is the Lightning?"

At this moment, as if in reply to his words, a man lying on a coil of cables rose and advanced a few steps toward him. Mordaunt drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and tying a knot at each corner--the signal agreed upon--waved it in the air and the man came up to him. He was wrapped in a large rough cape, which concealed his form and partly his face.

"Do you wish to go on the water, sir?" said the sailor.

"Yes, just so. Along the Isle of Dogs."

"And perhaps you have a preference for one boat more than another. You would like one that sails as rapidly as----"

"Lightning," interrupted Mordaunt.

"Then mine is the boat you want, sir. I'm your man."

"I begin to think so, particularly if you have not forgotten a certain signal."

"Here it is, sir," and the sailor took from his coat a handkerchief, tied at each corner.

"Good, quite right!" cried Mordaunt, springing off his horse. "There's not a moment to lose; now take my horse to the nearest inn and conduct me to your vessel."

"But," asked the sailor, "where are your companions? I thought there were four of you."

"Listen to me, sir. I'm not the man you take me for; you are in Captain Rogers's post, are you not? under orders from General Cromwell. Mine, also, are from him!"

"Indeed, sir, I recognize you; you are Captain Mordaunt."

Mordaunt was startled.

"Oh, fear nothing," said the skipper, showing his face. "I am a friend."

"Captain Groslow!" cried Mordaunt.

"Himself. The general remembered that I had formerly been a naval officer and he gave me the command of this expedition. Is there anything new in the wind?"

"Nothing."

"I thought, perhaps, that the king's death----"

"Has only hastened their flight; in ten minutes they will perhaps be here."

"What have you come for, then?"

"To embark with you."

"Ah! ah! the general doubted my fidelity?"

"No, but I wish to have a share in my revenge. Haven't you some one who will relieve me of my horse?"

Groslow whistled and a sailor appeared.

"Patrick," said Groslow, "take this horse to the stables of the nearest inn. If any one asks you whose it is you can say that it belongs to an Irish gentleman."

The sailor departed without reply.

"Now," said Mordaunt, "are you not afraid that they will recognize you?"

"There is no danger, dressed as I am in this pilot coat, on a night as dark as this. Besides even you didn't recognize me; they will be much less likely to."

"That is true," said Mordaunt, "and they will be far from thinking of you. Everything is ready, is it not?"

"Yes."

"The cargo on board?"

"Yes."

"Five full casks?"

"And fifty empty ones."

"Good."

"We are carrying port wine to Anvers."

"Excellent. Now take me aboard and return to your post, for they will soon be here."

"I am ready."

"It is important that none of your crew should see me."

"I have but one man on board, and I am as sure of him as I am of myself. Besides, he doesn't know you; like his mates he is ready to obey our orders knowing nothing of our plan."

"Very well; let us go."

They then went down to the Thames. A boat was fastened to the shore by a chain fixed to a stake. Groslow jumped in, followed by Mordaunt, and in five minutes they were quite away from that world of houses which then crowded the outskirts of London; and Mordaunt could discern the little vessel riding at anchor near the Isle of Dogs. When they reached the side of this felucca, Mordaunt, dexterous in his eagerness for vengeance, seized a rope and climbed up the side of the vessel with a coolness and agility very rare among landsmen. He went with Groslow to the captain's berth, a sort of temporary cabin of planks, for the chief apartment had been given up by Captain Rogers to the passengers, who were to be accommodated at the other end of the boat.

"They will have nothing to do, then at this end?" said Mordaunt.

"Nothing at all."

"That's a capital arrangement. Return to Greenwich and bring them here. I shall hide myself in your cabin. You have a longboat?"

"That in which we came."

"It appeared light and well constructed."

"Quite a canoe."

"Fasten it to the poop with a rope; put the oars into it, so that it may follow in the track and there will be nothing to do except to cut the cord. Put a good supply of rum and biscuit in it for the seamen; should the night happen to be stormy they will not be sorry to find something to console themselves with."

"Consider all this done. Do you wish to see the powder-room?"

"No. When you return I will set the fuse myself, but be careful to conceal your face, so that you cannot be recognized by them."

"Never fear."

"There's ten o'clock striking at Greenwich."

Groslow, then, having given the sailor on duty an order to be on the watch with more than usual vigilance, went down into the longboat and soon reached Greenwich. The wind was chilly and the jetty was deserted, as he approached it; but he had no sooner landed than he heard a noise of horses galloping upon the paved road.

These horsemen were our friends, or rather, an avant garde, composed of D'Artagnan and Athos. As soon as they arrived at the spot where Groslow stood they stopped, as if guessing that he was the man they wanted. Athos alighted and calmly opened the handkerchief tied at each corner, whilst D'Artagnan, ever cautious, remained on horseback, one hand upon his pistol, leaning forward watchfully.

On seeing the appointed signal, Groslow, who had at first crept behind one of the cannon planted on that spot, walked straight up to the gentlemen. He was so well wrapped up in his cloak that it would have been impossible to see his face even if the night had not been so dark as to render precaution superfluous; nevertheless, the keen glance of Athos perceived at once it was not Rogers who stood before them.

"What do you want with us?" he asked of Groslow.

"I wish to inform you, my lord," replied Groslow, with an Irish accent, feigned of course, "that if you are looking for Captain Rogers you will not find him. He fell down this morning and broke his leg. But I'm his cousin; he told me everything and desired me to watch instead of him, and in his place to conduct, wherever they wished to go, the gentlemen who should bring me a handkerchief tied at each corner, like that one which you hold and one which I have in my pocket."

And he drew out the handkerchief.

"Was that all he said?" inquired Athos.

"No, my lord; he said you had engaged to pay seventy pounds if I landed you safe and sound at Boulogne or any other port you choose in France."

"What do you think of all this?" said Athos, in a low tone to D'Artagnan, after explaining to him in French what the sailor had said in English.

"It seems a likely story to me."

"And to me, too."

"Besides, we can but blow out his brains if he proves false," said the Gascon; "and you, Athos, you know something of everything and can be our captain. I dare say you know how to navigate, should he fail us."

"My dear friend, you guess well. My father meant me for the navy and I have some vague notions about navigation."

"You see!" cried D'Artagnan.

They then summoned their friends, who, with Blaisois, Mousqueton and Grimaud, promptly joined them, leaving Parry behind them, who was to take back to London the horses of the gentlemen and of their lackeys, which had been sold to the host in settlement of their account with him. Thanks to this stroke of business the four friends were able to take away with them a sum of money which, if not large, was sufficient as a provision against delays and accidents.

Parry parted from his friends regretfully; they had proposed his going with them to France, but he had straightway declined.

"It is very simple," Mousqueton had said; "he is thinking of Groslow."

It was Captain Groslow, the reader will remember, who had broken Parry's head.

D'Artagnan resumed immediately the attitude of distrust that was habitual with him. He found the wharf too completely deserted, the night too dark, the captain too accommodating. He had reported to Aramis what had taken place, and Aramis, not less distrustful than he, had increased his suspicions. A slight click of the tongue against his teeth informed Athos of the Gascon's uneasiness.

"We have no time now for suspicions," said Athos. "The boat is waiting for us; come."

"Besides," said Aramis, "what prevents our being distrustful and going aboard at the same time? We can watch the skipper."

"And if he doesn't go straight I will crush him, that's all."

"Well said, Porthos," replied D'Artagnan. "Let us go, then. You first, Mousqueton," and he stopped his friends, directing the valets to go first, in order to test the plank leading from the pier to the boat.

The three valets passed without accident. Athos followed them, then Porthos, then Aramis. D'Artagnan went last, still shaking his head.

"What in the devil is the matter with you, my friend?" said Porthos.

"Upon my word you would make Caesar afraid."

"The matter is," replied D'Artagnan, "that I can see upon this pier neither inspector nor sentinel nor exciseman."

"And you complain of that!" said Porthos. "Everything goes as if in flowery paths."

"Everything goes too well, Porthos. But no matter; we must trust in God."

As soon as the plank was withdrawn the captain took his place at the tiller and made a sign to one of the sailors, who, boat-hook in hand, began to push out from the labyrinth of boats in which they were involved. The other sailor had already seated himself on the port side and was ready to row. As soon as there was room for rowing, his companion rejoined him and the boat began to move more rapidly.

"At last we are off!" exclaimed Porthos.

"Alas," said Athos, "we depart alone."

"Yes; but all four together and without a scratch; which is a consolation."

"We are not yet at our destination," observed the prudent D'Artagnan; "beware of misadventure."

"Ah, my friend!" cried Porthos, "like the crows, you always bring bad omens. Who could intercept us on such a night as this, pitch dark, when one does not see more than twenty yards before one?"

"Yes, but to-morrow morning----"

"To-morrow we shall be at Boulogne."

"I hope so, with all my heart," said the Gascon, "and I confess my weakness. Yes, Athos, you may laugh, but as long as we were within gunshot of the pier or of the vessels lying by it I was looking for a frightful discharge of musketry which would crush us."

"But," said Porthos, with great wisdom, "that was impossible, for they would have killed the captain and the sailors."

"Bah! much Monsieur Mordaunt would care. You don't imagine he would consider a little thing like that?"

"At any rate," said Porthos, "I am glad to hear D'Artagnan admit that he is afraid."

"I not only confess it, but am proud of it," returned the Gascon; "I'm not such a rhinoceros as you are. Oho! what's that?"

"The Lightning," answered the captain, "our felucca."

"So far, so good," laughed Athos.

They went on board and the captain instantly conducted them to the berth prepared for them--a cabin which was to serve for all purposes and for the whole party; he then tried to slip away under pretext of giving

orders to some one.

"Stop a moment," cried D'Artagnan; "pray how many men have you on board, captain?"

"I don't understand," was the reply.

"Explain it, Athos."

Groslow, on the question being interpreted, answered, "Three, without counting myself."

D'Artagnan understood, for while replying the captain had raised three fingers. "Oh!" he exclaimed, "I begin to be more at my ease, however, whilst you settle yourselves, I shall make the round of the boat."

"As for me," said Porthos, "I will see to the supper."

"A very good idea, Porthos," said the Gascon. "Athos lend me Grimaud, who in the society of his friend Parry has perhaps picked up a little English, and can act as my interpreter."

"Go, Grimaud," said Athos.

D'Artagnan, finding a lantern on the deck, took it up and with a pistol in his hand he said to the captain, in English, "Come," (being, with the classic English oath, the only English words he knew), and so saying he descended to the lower deck.

This was divided into three compartments--one which was covered by the floor of that room in which Athos, Porthos and Aramis were to pass the night; the second was to serve as the sleeping-room for the servants, the third, under the prow of the ship, was under the temporary cabin in which Mordaunt was concealed.

"Oho!" cried D'Artagnan, as he went down the steps of the hatchway, preceded by the lantern, "what a number of barrels! one would think one was in the cave of Ali Baba. What is there in them?" he added, putting his lantern on one of the casks.

The captain seemed inclined to go upon deck again, but controlling himself he answered:

"Port wine."

"Ah! port wine! 'tis a comfort," said the Gascon, "since we shall not die of thirst. Are they all full?"

Grimaud translated the question, and Groslow, who was wiping the perspiration from off his forehead, answered:

"Some full, others empty."

D'Artagnan struck the barrels with his hand, and having ascertained that he spoke the truth, pushed his lantern, greatly to the captain's alarm, into the interstices between the barrels, and finding that there was

nothing concealed in them:

"Come along," he said; and he went toward the door of the second compartment.

"Stop!" said the Englishman, "I have the key of that door;" and he opened the door, with a trembling hand, into the second compartment, where Mousqueton and Blaisois were preparing supper.

Here there was evidently nothing to seek or to apprehend and they passed rapidly to examine the third compartment.

This was the room appropriated to the sailors. Two or three hammocks hung upon the ceiling, a table and two benches composed the entire furniture. D'Artagnan picked up two or three old sails hung on the walls, and meeting nothing to suspect, regained by the hatchway the deck of the vessel.

"And this room?" he asked, pointing to the captain's cabin.

"That's my room," replied Groslow.

"Open the door."

The captain obeyed. D'Artagnan stretched out his arm in which he held the lantern, put his head in at the half opened door, and seeing that the cabin was nothing better than a shed:

"Good," he said. "If there is an army on board it is not here that it is hidden. Let us see what Porthos has found for supper." And thanking the captain, he regained the state cabin, where his friends were.

Porthos had found nothing, and with him fatigue had prevailed over hunger. He had fallen asleep and was in a profound slumber when D'Artagnan returned. Athos and Aramis were beginning to close their eyes, which they half opened when their companion came in again.

"Well!" said Aramis.

"All is well; we may sleep tranquilly."

On this assurance the two friends fell asleep; and D'Artagnan, who was very weary, bade good-night to Grimaud and laid himself down in his cloak, with naked sword at his side, in such a manner that his body barricaded the passage, and it should be impossible to enter the room without upsetting him.