

Chapter 73. Fatality.

Scarcely had D'Artagnan uttered these words when a ringing and sudden noise was heard resounding through the felucca, which had now become dim in the obscurity of the night.

"That, you may be sure," said the Gascon, "means something."

They then at the same instant perceived a large lantern carried on a pole appear on the deck, defining the forms of shadows behind it.

Suddenly a terrible cry, a cry of despair, was wafted through space; and as if the shrieks of anguish had driven away the clouds, the veil which hid the moon was cleated away and the gray sails and dark shrouds of the felucca were plainly visible beneath the silvery light.

Shadows ran, as if bewildered, to and fro on the vessel, and mournful cries accompanied these delirious walkers. In the midst of these screams they saw Mordaunt upon the poop with a torch in hand.

The agitated figures, apparently wild with terror, consisted of Groslow, who at the hour fixed by Mordaunt had collected his men and the sailors. Mordaunt, after having listened at the door of the cabin to hear if the musketeers were still asleep, had gone down into the cellar, convinced by their silence that they were all in a deep slumber. Then he had run

to the train, impetuous as a man who is excited by revenge, and full of confidence, as are those whom God blinds, he had set fire to the wick of nitre.

All this while Groslow and his men were assembled on deck.

"Haul up the cable and draw the boat to us," said Groslow.

One of the sailors got down the side of the ship, seized the cable, and drew it; it came without the least resistance.

"The cable is cut!" he cried, "no boat!"

"How! no boat!" exclaimed Groslow; "it is impossible."

"'Tis true, however," answered the sailor; "there's nothing in the wake of the ship; besides, here's the end of the cable."

"What's the matter?" cried Mordaunt, who, coming up out of the hatchway, rushed to the stern, waving his torch.

"Only that our enemies have escaped; they have cut the cord and gone off with the boat."

Mordaunt bounded with one step to the cabin and kicked open the door.

"Empty!" he exclaimed; "the infernal demons!"

"We must pursue them," said Groslow, "they can't be gone far, and we will sink them, passing over them."

"Yes, but the fire," ejaculated Mordaunt; "I have lighted it."

"Ten thousand devils!" cried Groslow, rushing to the hatchway; "perhaps there is still time to save us."

Mordaunt answered only by a terrible laugh, threw his torch into the sea and plunged in after it. The instant Groslow put his foot upon the hatchway steps the ship opened like the crater of a volcano. A burst of flame rose toward the skies with an explosion like that of a hundred cannon; the air burned, ignited by flaming embers, then the frightful lightning disappeared, the brands sank, one after another, into the abyss, where they were extinguished, and save for a slight vibration in the air, after a few minutes had elapsed one would have thought that nothing had happened.

Only--the felucca had disappeared from the surface of the sea and Groslow and his three sailors were consumed.

The four friends saw all this--not a single detail of this fearful scene escaped them. At one moment, bathed as they were in a flood of brilliant light, which illumined the sea for the space of a league, they might each be seen, each by his own peculiar attitude and manner expressing the awe which, even in their hearts of bronze, they could not help experiencing. Soon a torrent of vivid sparks fell around them--then, at last, the volcano was extinguished--then all was dark and still--the

floating bark and heaving ocean.

They sat silent and dejected.

"By Heaven!" at last said Athos, the first to speak, "by this time, I think, all must be over."

"Here, my lords! save me! help!" cried a voice, whose mournful accents, reaching the four friends, seemed to proceed from some phantom of the ocean.

All looked around; Athos himself stared.

"'Tis he! it is his voice!"

All still remained silent, the eyes of all were turned in the direction where the vessel had disappeared, endeavoring in vain to penetrate the darkness. After a minute or two they were able to distinguish a man, who approached them, swimming vigorously.

Athos extended his arm toward him, pointing him out to his companions.

"Yes, yes, I see him well enough," said D'Artagnan.

"He--again!" cried Porthos, who was breathing like a blacksmith's bellows; "why, he is made of iron."

"Oh, my God!" muttered Athos.

Aramis and D'Artagnan whispered to each other.

Mordaunt made several strokes more, and raising his arm in sign of distress above the waves: "Pity, pity on me, gentlemen, in Heaven's name! my strength is failing me; I am dying."

The voice that implored aid was so piteous that it awakened pity in the heart of Athos.

"Poor fellow!" he exclaimed.

"Indeed!" said D'Artagnan, "monsters have only to complain to gain your sympathy. I believe he's swimming toward us. Does he think we are going to take him in? Row, Porthos, row." And setting the example he plowed his oar into the sea; two strokes took the bark on twenty fathoms further.

"Oh! you will not abandon me! You will not leave me to perish! You will not be pitiless!" cried Mordaunt.

"Ah! ah!" said Porthos to Mordaunt, "I think we have you now, my hero! and there are no doors by which you can escape this time but those of hell."

"Oh! Porthos!" murmured the Comte de la Fere.

"Oh, pray, for mercy's sake, don't fly from me. For pity's sake!" cried

the young man, whose agony-drawn breath at times, when his head went under water, under the wave, exhaled and made the icy waters bubble.

D'Artagnan, however, who had consulted with Aramis, spoke to the poor wretch. "Go away," he said; "your repentance is too recent to inspire confidence. See! the vessel in which you wished to fry us is still smoking; and the situation in which you are is a bed of roses compared to that in which you wished to place us and in which you have placed Monsieur Groslow and his companions."

"Sir!" replied Mordaunt, in a tone of deep despair, "my penitence is sincere. Gentlemen, I am young, scarcely twenty-three years old. I was drawn on by a very natural resentment to avenge my mother. You would have done what I did."

Mordaunt wanted now only two or three fathoms to reach the boat, for the approach of death seemed to give him supernatural strength.

"Alas!" he said, "I am then to die? You are going to kill the son, as you killed the mother! Surely, if I am culpable and if I ask for pardon, I ought to be forgiven."

Then, as if his strength failed him, he seemed unable to sustain himself above the water and a wave passed over his head, which drowned his voice.

"Oh! this is torture to me," cried Athos.

Mordaunt reappeared.

"For my part," said D'Artagnan, "I say this must come to an end; murderer, as you were, of your uncle! executioner, as you were, of King Charles! incendiary! I recommend you to sink forthwith to the bottom of the sea; and if you come another fathom nearer, I'll stave your wicked head in with this oar."

"D'Artagnan! D'Artagnan!" cried Athos, "my son, I entreat you; the wretch is dying, and it is horrible to let a man die without extending a hand to save him. I cannot resist doing so; he must live."

"Zounds!" replied D'Artagnan, "why don't you give yourself up directly, feet and hands bound, to that wretch? Ah! Comte de la Fere, you wish to perish by his hands! I, your son, as you call me--I will not let you!"

'Twas the first time D'Artagnan had ever refused a request from Athos.

Aramis calmly drew his sword, which he had carried between his teeth as he swam.

"If he lays his hand on the boat's edge I will cut it off, regicide that he is."

"And I," said Porthos. "Wait."

"What are you going to do?" asked Aramis.

"Throw myself in the water and strangle him."

"Oh, gentlemen!" cried Athos, "be men! be Christians! See! death is depicted on his face! Ah! do not bring on me the horrors of remorse! Grant me this poor wretch's life. I will bless you--I----"

"I am dying!" cried Mordaunt, "come to me! come to me!"

D'Artagnan began to be touched. The boat at this moment turned around, and the dying man was by that turn brought nearer Athos.

"Monsieur the Comte de la Fere," he cried, "I supplicate you! pity me! I call on you--where are you? I see you no longer--I am dying--help me! help me!"

"Here I am, sir!" said Athos, leaning and stretching out his arm to Mordaunt with that air of dignity and nobility of soul habitual to him; "here I am, take my hand and jump into our boat."

Mordaunt made a last effort--rose--seized the hand thus extended to him and grasped it with the vehemence of despair.

"That's right," said Athos; "put your other hand here." And he offered him his shoulder as another stay and support, so that his head almost touched that of Mordaunt; and these two mortal enemies were in as close an embrace as if they had been brothers.

"Now, sir," said the count, "you are safe--calm yourself."

"Ah! my mother," cried Mordaunt, with eyes on fire with a look of hate impossible to paint, "I can only offer thee one victim, but it shall at any rate be the one thou wouldst thyself have chosen!"

And whilst D'Artagnan uttered a cry, Porthos raised the oar, and Aramis sought a place to strike, a frightful shake given to the boat precipitated Athos into the sea; whilst Mordaunt, with a shout of triumph, grasped the neck of his victim, and in order to paralyze his movements, twined arms and legs around the musketeer. For an instant, without an exclamation, without a cry for help, Athos tried to sustain himself on the surface of the waters, but the weight dragged him down; he disappeared by degrees; soon nothing was to be seen except his long, floating hair; then both men disappeared and the bubbling of the water, which, in its turn, was soon effaced, alone indicated the spot where these two had sunk.

Mute with horror, the three friends had remained open-mouthed, their eyes dilated, their arms extended like statues, and, motionless as they were, the beating of their hearts was audible. Porthos was the first who came to himself. He tore his hair.

"Oh!" he cried, "Athos! Athos! thou man of noble heart; woe is me! I have let thee perish!"

At this instant, in the midst of the silver circle illumined by the light of the moon the same whirlpool which had been made by the sinking men was again obvious, and first were seen, rising above the waves, a

wisp of hair, then a pale face with open eyes, yet, nevertheless, the eyes of death; then a body, which, after rising of itself even to the waist above the sea, turned gently on its back, according to the caprice of the waves, and floated.

In the bosom of this corpse was plunged a poniard, the gold hilt of which shone in the moonbeams.

"Mordaunt! Mordaunt!" cried the three friends; "'tis Mordaunt!"

"But Athos!" exclaimed D'Artagnan.

Suddenly the boat leaned on one side beneath a new and unexpected weight and Grimaud uttered a shout of joy; every one turned around and beheld Athos, livid, his eyes dim and his hands trembling, supporting himself on the edge of the boat. Eight vigorous arms lifted him up immediately and laid him in the boat, where directly Athos was warmed and reanimated, reviving with the caresses and cares of his friends, who were intoxicated with joy.

"You are not hurt?" asked D'Artagnan.

"No," replied Athos; "and he----"

"Oh, he! now we may say at last, thank Heaven! he is really dead. Look!" and D'Artagnan, obliging Athos to look in the direction he pointed, showed him the body of Mordaunt floating on its back, which, sometimes submerged, sometimes rising, seemed still to pursue the four friends

with looks of insult and mortal hatred.

At last he sank. Athos had followed him with a glance in which the deepest melancholy and pity were expressed.

"Bravo! Athos!" cried Aramis, with an emotion very rare in him.

"A capital blow you gave!" cried Porthos.

"I have a son. I wished to live," said Athos.

"In short," said D'Artagnan, "this has been the will of God."

"It was not I who killed him," said Athos in a soft, low tone, "'twas destiny."