

Chapter 65

FRENCH AND FLEMINGS.

At the moment when the members of the council left the Hotel de Ville, the officers went to put themselves at the head of their troops, and execute the orders they had received. At the same time the artillery sounded. This artillery surprised the French in their nocturnal march, by which they had hoped to surprise the town; but instead of stopping their advance, it only hastened it. If they could not take the city by surprise, they might, as we have seen the king of Navarre do at Cahors, fill up the moats with fascines and burst open the gates with petards.

The cannon from the ramparts continued to fire, but in the darkness took scarcely any effect, and after having replied to the cries of their adversaries, the French advanced silently toward the ramparts with that fiery intrepidity which they always show in attack.

But all at once, doors and posterns opened, and from all sides poured out armed men, if not with the fierce impetuosity of the French, with a firmness which rendered them massive as a rolling wall.

It was the Flemings, who advanced in close ranks, and compact masses, above which the cannon continued to thunder, although with more noise than effect. Then the combat began hand to hand, foot to foot, sword to sword, and the flash of pistols lighted up faces red with blood.

But not a cry--not a murmur--not a complaint was heard, and the Flemings and French fought with equal rage. The Flemings were furious at having to fight, for fighting was neither their profession nor their pleasure; and the French were furious at being attacked when they meant to have taken the initiative.

While the combat was raging furiously, explosions were heard near St. Marie, and a light rose over the city, like a crest of flames. It was Joyeuse attacking and trying to force the barrier across the Scheldt, and who would soon penetrate into the city, at least, so the French hoped.

But it was not so; Joyeuse had weighed anchor and sailed, and was making rapid progress, favored by the west wind. All was ready for action; the sailors, armed with their boarding cutlasses, were eager for the combat; the gunners stood ready with lighted matches; while some picked men, hatchet in hand, stood ready to jump on the hostile ships and destroy the chains and cords.

The seven ships advanced in silence, disposed in the form of a wedge, of which the admiral's galley formed the point. Joyeuse himself had taken his first lieutenant's place, and was leaning over the bowsprit, trying to pierce the fogs of the river and the darkness of the night. Soon, through this double obscurity, he saw the pier extending itself darkly across the stream; it appeared deserted, but, in that land of ambushes, there seemed something terrifying in this desertion.

However, they continued to advance, and soon were within sight of the barrier, scarcely ten cable lengths off; they approached nearer and nearer, and yet not a single "qui vive!" struck on their ears.

The sailors only saw in this silence a carelessness which rejoiced them; but their young admiral, more far-seeing, feared some ruse. At last the prow of the admiral's ship touched the two ships which formed the center of the barrier, and made the whole line, which was fastened together by chains, tremble.

Suddenly, as the bearers of the hatchets received the order to board and cut the chains, a crowd of grappling irons, thrown by invisible hands, seized hold of the French vessels. The Flemings had forestalled the intended movement of the French. Joyeuse believed that his enemies were offering him a mortal combat, and he accepted it with alacrity. He also threw grappling irons, and the two lines of ships were firmly bound together. Then, seizing a hatchet, he was the first to jump on a ship, crying, "Board them! board them!" All his crew followed him, officers and men, uttering the same cry; but no cry replied to them, no force opposed their advance.

Only they saw three boats full of men gliding silently over the water, like three sea-birds.

The assailants rested motionless on the ships which they had conquered without a struggle.

All at once Joyeuse heard under his feet a crackling sound, and a smell of sulphur filled the air. A thought crossed his mind, and he ran and opened a hatchway; the vessel was burning. A cry of, "To our ships!" sounded through all the line. Each climbed back again more quickly than he had come in; but Joyeuse, this time, was the last. Just as he reached his galley, the flames burst out over the whole bridge of boats, like twenty volcanoes, of which each ship or boat was the crater; the order was instantly given to cut the ropes and break the chains and grappling-irons, and the sailors worked with the rapidity of men who knew that their safety depended on their exertions. But the work was immense; perhaps they might have detached those thrown by the enemy on their ships, but they had also to detach those which they themselves had thrown.

All at once twenty explosions were heard, and each of the French ships trembled to its center. It was the cannons that defended the port, and which, fully charged and then abandoned by the Antwerpians, exploded as the fire gained on them, breaking everything within their reach.

The flames mounted like gigantic serpents along the masts, rolled themselves round the yards, then, with their forked tongues, came to lick the sides of the French vessels.

Joyeuse, with his magnificent armor covered with gold, giving calmly, and in an imperious voice, his orders in the midst of the flames, looked like a fabulous salamander covered with scales, and at every movement

threw off a shower of sparks. But the explosions became louder than ever; the gun-room had taken fire, and the vessels were flying in pieces.

Joyeuse had done his best to free himself, but in vain; the flames had reached the French ships, and showers of fire fell about him. The Flemish barrier was broken, and the French burning ships drifted to the shore. Joyeuse saw that he could not save his ships, and he gave orders to lower the boats, and land on the left bank. This was quickly done, and all the sailors were embarked to a man before Joyeuse quitted his galley. His sang-froid kept every one in order, and each man landed with a sword or an ax in his hand. Before he had reached the shore, the fire reached the magazine of his ship, which blew up, lighting the whole horizon.

Meanwhile, the artillery from the ramparts had ceased, not that the combat had abated, but that it was so close it was impossible to fire on enemies without firing on friends also.

The Calvinist cavalry had charged, and done wonders. Before the swords of its cavaliers a pathway opened, but the wounded Flemings pierced the horses with their large cutlasses, and in spite of this brilliant charge, a little confusion showed itself in the French columns, and they only kept their ground instead of advancing, while from the gates of the city new troops continually poured out. All at once, almost under the walls of the city, a cry of "Anjou! France!" was heard behind the mass of the Antwerpians. This was Joyeuse and his 1,500 sailors, armed with

hatchets and cutlasses. They had to revenge their fleet in flames and two hundred of their companions burned or drowned.

No one could manage his long sword better than Joyeuse: every blow cut open a head, every thrust took effect. The group of Flemings on which he fell were destroyed like a field of corn by a legion of locusts.

Delighted with their first success, they continued to push on; but the Calvinist cavalry, surrounded by troops, began to lose ground. M. de St. Aignan's infantry, however, kept their place.

The prince had seen the burning of the fleet, and heard the reports of the cannon and the explosions, without suspecting anything but a fierce combat, which must terminate in victory for Joyeuse; for how could a few Flemish ships fight against the French fleet? He expected, then, every minute a diversion on the part of Joyeuse, when the news was brought to him that the fleet was destroyed, and Joyeuse and his men fighting in the midst of the Flemings. He now began to feel very anxious, the fleet being the means of retreat, and consequently the safety of the army. He sent orders to the Calvinist cavalry to try a fresh charge, and men and horses, almost exhausted, rallied to attack the Antwerpians afresh. The voice of Joyeuse was heard in the midst of the *melée* crying, "Hold firm, M. de St. Aignan. France! France!" and, like a reaper cutting a field of corn, his sword flew round, and cut down its harvest of men; the delicate favorite--the Sybarite--seemed to have put on with his cuirass the strength of a Hercules; and the infantry, hearing his voice above all the noise, and seeing his sword flashing, took fresh courage, and, like the cavalry, made a new effort, and returned to the combat.

But now the person that had been called monseigneur came out of the city on a beautiful black horse. He wore black armor, and was followed by three hundred well-mounted cavaliers, whom the Prince of Orange had placed at his disposal.

By a parallel gate came out William himself, with a picked body of infantry who had not yet appeared.

Monseigneur hastened where he was most wanted, that is to say, where Joyeuse was fighting with his sailors.

The Flemings recognized him, and opened their ranks, crying, joyfully, "Monseigneur! monseigneur!" Joyeuse and his men saw the movement, heard the cries, and all at once found themselves opposed to a new troop. Joyeuse pushed his horse toward the black knight, and their swords met. Joyeuse was confident in his armor and his science, but all his thrusts were skillfully parried, and one of those of his adversary touched him, and in spite of his armor, drew some drops of blood from his shoulder.

"Ah!" cried the young admiral, "this man is a Frenchman, and what is more, he has studied fencing under the same master as I have."

At these words the unknown turned away, and tried to find a new antagonist.

"If you are French," cried Joyeuse, "you are a traitor, for you fight against your king, your country, and your flag."

The unknown only replied by attacking Joyeuse with fresh fury; but now Joyeuse was on his guard, and knew with what a skillful swordsman he had to deal. He parried two or three thrusts with as much skill as fury, and it was now the stranger who made a step back.

"See!" cried Joyeuse, "what one can do fighting for one's country! A pure heart and a loyal arm suffice to defend a head without a helmet, a face without a vizor;" and he threw his helmet far from him, displaying his noble and beautiful head, with eyes sparkling with pride, youth and anger.

His antagonist forebore answer, uttered a cry, and struck at his bare head.

"Ah!" cried Joyeuse, parrying the blow, "I said you were a traitor, and as a traitor you shall die. I will kill you, and carry off this helmet which hides and defends you, and hang you to the first tree that I see."

[Illustration: "I SAID YOU WERE A TRAITOR, AND AS A TRAITOR YOU SHALL

DIE."]

But at this moment a cavalier cried:

"Monseigneur, no more skirmishing; your presence is wanted over there."

Glancing toward the point indicated, the unknown saw the Flemings giving way before the Calvinist cavalry.

"Yes," cried he, "those are the men I wanted."

At this moment so many cavaliers pressed on the sailors, that they made their first step in retreat.

The black cavalier profited by this movement to disappear in the *melée*.

A quarter of an hour after the French began to give way. M. de St. Aignan tried to retreat in good order, but a last troop of 2,000 infantry and 500 horse came out fresh from the city, and fell on this harassed and already retreating army. It was the old band of the Prince of Orange, which had fought in turns against the Duc d'Alva, Don John, Requesens, and Alexander Farnese. In spite of the coolness of the chiefs and the bravery of many, a frightful rout commenced.

At this moment the unknown fell again on the fugitives, and once more met Joyeuse with his now diminished band. The young admiral was mounted on his third horse, two having been killed under him; his sword was broken, and he had taken from a sailor one of their heavy hatchets, which he whirled round his head with the greatest apparent ease. From time to time he turned and faced his enemy, like the wild boar who

cannot make up his mind to fly, and turns desperately on his hunter. The Flemings, who by monseigneur's advice had fought without cuirasses, were active in the pursuit, and gave no rest to the Angevin army. Something like remorse seized the unknown at the sight of this disaster.

"Enough, gentlemen," cried he, in French, "to-night they are driven from Antwerp, and in a week will be driven from Flanders; ask no more of the God of battles."

"Ah! he is French," cried Joyeuse; "I guessed it, traitor. Ah! be cursed, and may you die the death of a traitor."

This furious imprecation seemed to disconcert the unknown more than a thousand swords raised against him; he turned, and conqueror as he was, fled as rapidly as the conquered. But this retreat of a single man changed nothing in the state of affairs. Fear is contagious, it seized the entire army, and the soldiers began to fly like madmen. The horses went fast, in spite of fatigue, for they also felt the influence of fear; the men dispersed to seek a shelter, and in some hours the army, as an army, existed no longer. This was the time when the dykes were to be opened. From Lier to Termonde, from Haesdouk to Malines--each little river, swollen by its tributaries--each canal overflowed, and spread over the flat country its contingent of furious water.

Thus, when the fugitive French began to stop, having tired out the Antwerpians, whom they had seen return to the town, followed by the soldiers of the Prince of Orange--when those who had escaped from the

carnage of the night believed themselves saved, and stopped to breathe for an instant, some with a prayer, and others with a curse, then a new enemy, blind and pitiless, was preparing for them. Joyeuse had commanded his sailors, now reduced to eight hundred, to make a halt; they were the only persons who had preserved some order, the Comte de St. Aignan having vainly tried to rally his foot soldiers.

The Duc d'Anjou, at the head of the fugitives, mounted on an excellent horse, and accompanied by a single servant, pushed forward without appearing to think of anything.

"He has no heart," cried some.

"His sang-froid is magnificent," said others.

Some hours of repose, from two to six in the morning, restored to the infantry the strength to continue their retreat; but provisions were wanting.

As for the horses, they seemed more fatigued than the men, and could scarcely move, for they had eaten nothing since the day before.

The fugitives hoped to gain Brussels, where the duke had many partisans, although they were not free from anxiety as to their reception. At Brussels, which was about eight leagues off, they would find food for the famishing troops, and a place of security from whence to recommence the campaign at a more favorable time. M. d'Anjou breakfasted in a

peasant's hut, between Heboken and Heckhout. It was empty, but a fire still burned in the grate.

The soldiers and officers wished to imitate their chief, and spread themselves about the village, but found with a surprise mingled with terror that every house was deserted and empty.

M. de St. Aignan, who had aided them in their search, now called to the officers:

"March on, gentlemen."

"But we are tired and dying with hunger, colonel."

"Yes, but you are alive; and if you remain here another hour you will be dead. Perhaps it is already too late."

M. de St. Aignan knew nothing; but he suspected some great danger. They went on; but two or three thousand men straggled from the main body, or, worn out with fatigue, lay down on the grass, or at the foot of a tree, wearied, desolate, and despairing. Scarcely three thousand able men remained to the Duc d'Anjou.