

Chapter 1

A TABLE D'HÔTE

The 9th of October, 1799, on a beautiful day of that meridional autumn which ripens the oranges of Hyères and the grapes of Saint-Peray, at the two extremities of Provence, a travelling chaise, drawn by three post horses, galloped at full speed over the bridge that crosses the Durance, between Cavailhon and Château-Renard, on its way to Avignon, the ancient papal city which a decree, issued the 25th of May, 1791, eight years earlier, had reunited to France--a reunion confirmed by the treaty signed in 1797, at Tolentino, between General Bonaparte and Pope Pius VI.

The carriage entered by the gate of Aix and, without slackening speed, traversed the entire length of the town, with its narrow, winding streets, built to ward off both wind and sun, and halted at fifty paces from the Porte d'Oulle, at the Hotel du Palais-Egalité, which they were again beginning to quietly rename the Hotel du Palais-Royal, a name which it bore formerly and still bears to-day.

These few insignificant words about the name of the inn, before which halted the post-chaise which we had in view, indicate sufficiently well the state of France under the government of the Thermidorian reaction, called the Directory.

After the revolutionary struggle which had occurred between the 14th of July, 1789, and the 9th Thermidor, 1794; after the days of the 5th and 6th of October, of the 21st of June, of the 10th of August, of the 2d and 3d of September, of the 21st of May, of the 29th Thermidor and the 1st Prairial; after seeing fall the heads of the King and his judges, and the Queen and her accusers, of the Girondins and the Cordeliers, the Moderates and the Jacobins, France experienced that most frightful and most nauseous of all lassitudes, the lassitude of blood!

She had therefore returned, if not to a need of monarchy, at least to a desire for a stable government, in which she might place her confidence, upon which she might lean, which would act for her, and which would permit her some repose while it acted.

In the stead of this vaguely desired government, the country obtained the feeble and irresolute Directory, composed for the moment of the voluptuous Barrès, the intriguing Sièyes, the brave Moulins, the insignificant Roger Ducos, and the honest but somewhat too ingenuous Gohier. The result was a mediocre dignity before the world at large and a very questionable tranquillity at home.

It is true that at the moment of which we write our armies, so glorious during those epic campaigns of 1796 and 1797, thrown back for a time upon France by the incapacity of Scherer at Verona and Cassano, and by the defeat and death of Joubert at Novi, were beginning to resume the offensive. Moreau had defeated Souvarow at Bassignano; Brune had defeated the Duke of York and General Hermann at Bergen; Masséna had annihilated the Austro-Russians at Zurich; Korsakof had escaped only with the greatest difficulty; the Austrian, Hotz, with three other generals, were killed, and five made prisoners. Masséna saved France at Zurich, as Villars, ninety years earlier, had saved it at Denain.

But in the interior, matters were not in so promising a state, and the government of the Directory was, it must be confessed, much embarrassed between the war in the Vendée and the brigandages of the Midi, to which, according to custom, the population of Avignon were far from remaining strangers.

Beyond doubt the two travellers who descended from the carriage at the door of the Hotel du Palais-Royal had reason to fear the state of mind in which the always excitable papal town might be at that time; for just before reaching Orgon, at a spot where three crossroads stretched out before the traveller--one leading to Nimes, the second to Carpentras, the third to Avignon--the postilion had stopped his horses, and, turning round, asked:

"Will the citizens go by way of Avignon or Carpentras?"

"Which of the two roads is the shorter?" asked the elder of the two travellers in a harsh, strident voice. Though visibly the elder, he was scarcely thirty years of age.

"Oh, the road to Avignon, citizen, by a good four miles at least."

"Then," he had replied, "go by way of Avignon."

And the carriage had started again at a gallop, which proclaimed that the citizen travellers, as the postilion called them, although the title of Monsieur was beginning to reappear in conversation, paid a fee of at least thirty sous.

The same desire to lose no time manifested itself at the hotel entrance. There, as on the road, it was the elder of the two travellers who spoke. He asked if they could dine at once, and the way this demand was made indicated that he was ready to overlook many gastronomical exigencies provided that the repast in question be promptly served.

"Citizens," replied the landlord, who, at the sound of carriage wheels hastened, napkin in hand, to greet the travellers, "you will be promptly and comfortably served in your room; but if you will permit me to advise--" He hesitated.

"Oh, go on! go on!" said the younger of the travellers, speaking for the first time.

"Well, it would be that you dine at the table d'hôte, like the traveller for whom this coach, already harnessed, is waiting. The dinner is excellent and all served."

The host at the same time indicated a comfortably appointed carriage, to which were harnessed two horses who were pawing the ground, while the postilion sought patience in the bottle of Cahors wine he was emptying near the window-ledge. The first movement of him to whom this proposal was made was negative; nevertheless, after a second's reflection, the elder of the two travellers, as if he had reconsidered his first decision, made an interrogative sign to his companion, who replied with a look which signified, "You know that I am at your orders."

"Very well, so be it," said the other, "we will dine at the table d'hôte." Then, turning to the postilion, who, hat in hand, awaited his order, he added, "Let the horses be ready in a half hour, at the latest."

And the landlord pointing out the way, they both entered the dining-room, the elder of the two walking first, the other following him.

Everyone knows the impression generally produced at a table d'hôte by newcomers. All eyes were bent upon them and the conversation, which seemed to be quite animated, stopped.

The guests consisted of the frequenters of the hotel, the traveller whose carriage was waiting harnessed at the door, a wine merchant from Bordeaux, sojourning temporarily at Avignon for reasons we shall shortly relate, and a certain number of travellers going from Marseilles to Lyons by diligence.

The new arrivals greeted the company with a slight inclination of the head, and sat down at the extreme end of the table, thereby isolating themselves from the other guests by three or four empty places. This seemingly aristocratic reserve redoubled the curiosity of which they were the object; moreover, they were obviously people of unquestionable distinction, although their garments were simple in the extreme. Both wore hightop boots and breeches, long-tailed coats, travelling overcoats and broad-brimmed hats, the usual costume of the young men of that day. But that

which distinguished them from the fashionables of Paris, and even of the provinces, was their long straight hair, and their black stocks buckled round the neck, military fashion. The Muscadins--that was the name then given to young dandies--the Muscadins wore dogs' ears puffing at the temples, the rest of the hair combed up tightly in a bag at the back, and an immense cravat with long floating ends, in which the chin was completely buried. Some had even extended this reaction to powder.

As to the personality of the two young men, they presented two diametrically opposite types.

The elder of the two, he who, as we have already remarked, had taken the initiative several times, and whose voice, even in its most familiar intonations, denoted the habit of command, was about thirty years of age. His black hair was parted in the middle, falling straight from his temples to his shoulders. He had the swarthy skin of a man who has travelled long in southern climes, thin lips, a straight nose, white teeth, and those hawk-like eyes which Dante gives to Cæsar. He was short rather than tall, his hand was delicate, his foot slender and elegant. His manner betrayed a certain awkwardness, suggesting that he was at the moment wearing a costume to which he was not accustomed, and when he spoke, his hearers, had they been beside the Loire instead of the Rhone, would have detected a certain Italian accent in his pronunciation.

His companion seemed to be some three or four years younger than he. He was a handsome young man with a rosy complexion, blond hair and light blue eyes, a straight, firm nose and prominent but almost beardless chin. He was perhaps a couple of inches taller than his companion, and though his figure was somewhat above medium height, he was so well proportioned, so admirably free in his movements, that he was evidently if not extraordinarily strong, at least uncommonly agile and dexterous. Although attired in the same manner and apparently on a footing of equality, he evinced remarkable deference to the dark young man, which, as it could not result from age, was doubtless caused by some inferiority of position. Moreover, he called his companion citizen, while the other addressed him as Roland.

These remarks which we make to initiate the reader more profoundly into our story, were probably not made as extensively by the guests at the table d'hôte; for after bestowing a few seconds of attention upon the new-comers, they turned their eyes away, and the conversation, interrupted for an instant, was resumed. It must be confessed that it concerned a matter most interesting to the travellers--that of the stoppage of a diligence bearing a sum of sixty thousand francs belonging to the government. The affair had occurred the day before on the road from Marseilles to Avignon between Lambesc and Pont-Royal.

At the first words referring to this event, the two young men listened with unmistakable interest. It had taken place on the same road which they had just followed, and the narrator, the wine merchant of Bordeaux, had been one of the principal actors in the scene on the highroad. Those who seemed the most curious to hear the details were the travellers in the diligence which had just arrived and was soon to depart. The other guests, who belonged to the locality, seemed sufficiently conversant with such catastrophes to furnish the details themselves instead of listening to them.

"So, citizen," said a stout gentleman against whom a tall woman, very thin and haggard, was crowding in her terror. "You say that the robbery took place on the very road by which we have just come?"

"Yes, citizen, between Lambesc and Pont-Royal. Did you notice the spot where the road ascends between two high banks? There are a great many rocks there."

"Yes, yes, my friend," said the wife, pressing her husband's arm, "I noticed it; I even said, as you must remember, 'Here is a bad place; I would rather pass here by day than at night.'"

"Oh! madame," said a young man whose voice affected to slur his r's after the fashion of the day, and who probably assumed to lead the conversation at the table d'hôte, on ordinary occasions, "you know the Companions of Jehu know no day or night."

"What! citizen," asked the lady still more alarmed, "were you attacked in broad daylight?"

"In broad daylight, citizenship, at ten o'clock in the morning."

"And how many were there?" asked the stout gentleman.

"Four, citizen."

"Ambushed beside the road?"

"No; they were on horseback, armed to the teeth and masked."

"That's their custom," said the young frequenter of the table d'hôte, "and they said, did they not: 'Do not defend yourself, we will not harm you. We only want the government money.'"

"Word for word, citizen."

"Then," continued this well-informed young man, "two dismounted from their horses, flinging their bridles to their comrades, and commanded the conductor to deliver up the money."

"Citizen," said the stout man astonished, "you describe the thing as if you had seen it."

"Monsieur was there, perhaps," said one of the travellers, half in jest, half in earnest.

"I do not know, citizen, whether in saying that you intend a rudeness," carelessly observed the young man who had so pertinently and obligingly come to the narrator's assistance, "but my political opinions are such that I do not consider your suspicion an insult. Had I had the misfortune to be among those attacked, or the honor to be one of those who made the attack, I should admit it as frankly in the one case as in the other. But yesterday at ten o'clock, at precisely the moment when the diligence was stopped, twelve miles from here, I was breakfasting quietly in this very seat. And, by-the-by, with the two citizens who now do me the honor to sit beside me."

"And," asked the younger of the two travellers who had lately joined the table, whom his companion called Roland, "how many men were you in the diligence?"

"Let me think; we were--yes, that's it--we were seven men and three women."

"Seven men, not including the conductor?" repeated Roland.

"Yes."

"And you seven men allowed yourselves to be plundered by four brigands? I congratulate you, gentlemen."

"We knew with whom we had to deal," replied the wine merchant, "and we took good care not to defend ourselves."

"What! with whom you had to deal?" retorted the young man. "Why, it seems to me, with thieves and bandits."

"Not at all. They gave their names."

"They gave their names?"

"They said, 'Gentlemen, it is useless to defend yourselves; ladies, do not be alarmed, we are not bandits, we are Companions of Jehu.'"

"Yes," said the young man of the table d'hôte, "they warned you that there might be no misunderstanding. That's their way."

"Ah, indeed!" exclaimed Roland; "and who is this Jehu who has such polite companions? Is he their captain?"

"Sir," said a man whose dress betrayed somewhat the secularized priest, and who seemed also to be, not only an habitual guest at the table d'hôte, but also an initiate into the mysteries of the honorable company whose merits were then under discussion, "if you were better versed than you seem to be in the Holy Scriptures, you would know that this Jehu died something like two thousand six hundred years ago, and that consequently he cannot at the present time stop coaches on the highways."

"Monsieur l'Abbé," replied Roland, who had recognized an ecclesiastic, "as, in spite of the sharp tone in which you speak, you seem a man of learning, permit a poor ignoramus to ask you a few details about this Jehu, dead these two thousand six hundred years, who, nevertheless, is honored by followers bearing his name."

"Jehu!" replied the churchman, in the same sour tone, "was a King of Israel anointed by Elisha, on condition that he punish the crimes of the house of Ahab and Jezbel, and put to death the priests of Baal."

"Monsieur l'Abbé," replied the young man laughing, "I thank you for the explanation. I don't doubt it is correct, and, above all, very learned. But I must admit it doesn't tell me much."

"What, citizen!" exclaimed the abbé, "don't you understand that Jehu is his Majesty Louis XVIII., anointed on condition that he punish the crimes of the Revolution and put to death all the priests of Baal; that is to say, all those who had taken any part whatsoever in the abominable state of things which, for these last seven years, has been called the republic?"

"Yes, indeed!" exclaimed the young man; "of course I understand. But among those whom the Companions of Jehu are appointed to fight, do you reckon the brave soldiers who have repulsed the enemy along the frontiers of France, and the illustrious generals who have commanded the armies of the Tyrol, the Sambre-and-Meuse, and of Italy?"

"Why, beyond doubt, those foremost and before all."

The young man's eyes flashed lightning; his nostrils quivered and his lips tightened. He rose from his chair, but his comrade touched his coat and forced him to sit down again, while with a single glance he silenced him. Then he who had thus given proof of his power, speaking for the first time, addressed the young man of the table d'hôte.

"Citizen, excuse two travellers who are just arrived from the end of the earth, from America, or India as it were. Absent from France these last two years; we are completely ignorant of all that has occurred here, and most desirous to obtain information."

"Why, as to that," replied the young man, to whom these words were addressed, "that is but fair, citizen. Question us and we will answer you."

"Well," continued the dark young man with the eagle eye, the straight black hair, and the granite complexion, "now that I know who Jehu is, and to what end his company was instituted, I should like to know what his

companions do with the money they take."

"Oh I that is very simple, citizen. You know there is much talk of the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy?"

"No, I did not know it," replied the dark young man, in a tone which he vainly strove to render artless; "I am but just arrived, as I told you, from the end of the earth."

"What! you did not know that? Well, six months hence it will be an accomplished fact."

"Really!"

"I have the honor to tell you so, citizen."

The two soldier-like young men exchanged a glance and a smile, though the young blond one was apparently chafing under the weight of his extreme impatience.

Their informant continued: "Lyons is the headquarters of the conspiracy, if one can call conspiracy a plot which was organized openly. 'The provisional government' would be a more suitable word."

"Well, then, citizen," said the dark young man with a politeness not wholly exempt from satire, "let us call it 'provisional government.'"

"This provisional government has its staff and its armies."

"Bah! its staff perhaps--but its armies--"

"Its armies, I repeat."

"Where are they?"

"One is being organized in the mountains of Auvergne, under the orders of M. de Chardon; another in the Jura Mountains, under M. Teyssonnet; and, finally, a third is operating most successfully at this time, in the Vendée, under the orders of Escarboville, Achille Leblond and Cadoudal."

"Truly, citizen, you render me a real service in telling me this. I thought the Bourbons completely resigned to their exile. I supposed the police so organized as to suppress both provisional royalist committees in the large towns and bandits on the highways. In fact, I believed the Vendée had been completely pacificated by Hoche."

The young man to whom this reply was addressed burst out laughing.

"Why, where do you come from?" he exclaimed.

"I told you, citizen, from the end of the earth."

"So it seems." Then he continued: "You understand, the Bourbons are not rich, the émigrés whose property was confiscated are ruined. It is impossible to organize two armies and maintain a third without money. The royalists faced an embarrassing problem; the republic alone could pay for its enemies' troops and, it being improbable that she would do so of her own volition, the shady negotiation was abandoned, and it was adjudged quicker to take the money without permission than to ask her for it."

"Ah! I understand at last."

"That's very fortunate."

"Companions of Jehu then are the intermediaries between the Republic and the Counter-Revolution, the tax-collectors of the royalist generals?"

"Yes. It is not robbery, but a military operation, rather a feat of arms like any other. So there you are, citizen, and now you are as well informed on this point as ourselves."

"But," timidly hazarded the wine merchant of Bordeaux, "if the Companions of Jehu--observe that I say nothing against them--want the government money--"

"The government money, no other. Individual plunder on their part is unheard of."

"How does it happen, then, that yesterday, in addition to the government money, they carried off two hundred louis of mine?"

"My dear sir," replied the young man of the table d'hôte, "I have already told you that there is some mistake. As surely as my name is Alfred de Barjols, this money will be returned to you some day."

The wine merchant heaved a sigh and shook his head, as if, in spite of that assurance, he still retained some doubts. But at this moment, as if the promise given by the young noble, who had just revealed his social position by telling his name, had stirred the delicacy of those whom he thus guaranteed, a horse stopped at the entrance, steps were heard in the corridor, the dining-room door opened, and a masked man, armed to the teeth, appeared on the threshold.

"Gentlemen," said he, in the profound silence occasioned by his apparition, "is there a traveller here named Jean Picot, who was in the diligence that was held up yesterday between Lambesc and Pont-Royal?"

"Yes," said the wine merchant, amazed.

"Are you he?" asked the masked man.

"I am."

"Was anything taken from you?"

"Oh, yes, two hundred louis, which I had intrusted to the conductor."

"And I may add," said the young noble, "that the gentleman was speaking of it at this very moment. He looked upon it as lost."

"The gentleman was wrong," said the masked unknown, "we war upon the government and not against individuals. We are partisans and not robbers. Here are your two hundred Louis, sir, and if a similar mistake should occur in the future, claim your loss, mentioning the name of Morgan."

So saying, the masked individual deposited a bag of gold beside the wine merchant, bowed courteously to the other guests, and went out, leaving some terrified and others bewildered by such daring.