Chapter 2

AN ITALIAN PROVERB

Although the two sentiments which we have just indicated were the dominant ones, they did not manifest themselves to an equal degree in all present. The shades were graduated according to the sex, age, character, we may almost say, the social positions of the hearers. The wine merchant, Jean Picot, the principal personage in the late event, recognizing at first sight by his dress, weapons, mask, one of the men who had stopped the coach on the preceding day, was at first sight stupefied, then little by little, as he grasped the purport of this mysterious brigand's visit to him, he had passed from stupefaction to joy, through the intermediate phases separating these two emotions. His bag of gold was beside him, yet he seemingly dared not touch it; perhaps he feared that the instant his hand went forth toward it, it would melt like the dream-gold which vanishes during that period of progressive lucidity which separates profound slumber from thorough awakening.

The stout gentleman of the diligence and his wife had displayed, like their travelling companions, the most absolute and complete terror. Seated to the left of Jean Picot, when the bandit approached the wine merchant, the husband, in the vain hope of maintaining a respectable distance between himself and the Companion of Jehu, pushed his chair back against that of his wife, who, yielding to the pressure, in turn endeavored to push back hers. But as the next chair was occupied by citizen Alfred de Barjols, who had no reason to fear these men whom he had just praised so highly, the chair of the stout man's wife encountered an obstacle in the immovability of the young noble; so, as at Marengo, eight or nine months later, when the general in command judged it time to resume the offensive, the retrograde movement was arrested.

As for him--we are speaking of the citizen Alfred de Barjols--his attitude, like that of the abbé who had given the Biblical explanation about Jehu, King of Israel, and his mission from Elisha, his attitude, we say, was that of a man who not only experiences no fear, but who even expects the event in question, however unexpected it may be. His lips wore a smile as he

watched the masked man, and had the guests not been so preoccupied with the two principal actors in this scene, they might have remarked the almost imperceptible sign exchanged between the eyes of the bandit and the young noble, and transmitted instantly by the latter to the abbé.

The two travellers whom we introduced to the table d'hôte, and who as we have said sat apart at the end of the table, preserved an attitude conformable to their respective characters. The younger of the two had instinctively put his hand to his side, as if to seek an absent weapon, and had risen with a spring, as if to rush at the masked man's throat, in which purpose he had certainly not failed had he been alone; but the elder, who seemed to possess not only the habit but the right of command, contented himself by regrasping his coat, and saying, in an imperious, almost harsh tone: "Sit down, Roland!" And the young man had resumed his seat.

But one of the guests had remained, in appearance at least, the most impassible during this scene. He was a man between thirty-three and thirty-four years of age, with blond hair, red beard, a calm, handsome face, with large blue eyes, a fair skin, refined and intelligent lips, and very tall, whose foreign accent betrayed one born in that island of which the government was at that time waging bitter war against France. As far as could be judged by the few words which had escaped him, he spoke the French language with rare purity, despite the accent we have just mentioned. At the first word he uttered, in which that English accent revealed itself, the elder of the two travellers started. Turning to his companion, he asked with a glance, to which the other seemed accustomed, how it was that an Englishman should be in France when the uncompromising war between the two nations had naturally exiled all Englishmen from France, as it had all Frenchmen from England. No doubt the explanation seemed impossible to Roland, for he had replied with his eyes, and a shrug of the shoulders: "I find it quite as extraordinary as you; but if you, mathematician as you are, can't solve the problem, don't ask me!"

It was evident to the two young men that the fair man with the Anglo-Saxon accent was the traveller whose comfortable carriage awaited him harnessed in the courtyard, and that this traveller hailed from London, or, at least, from some part of Great Britain.

As to his remarks, they, as we have stated, were infrequent, so laconic, in reality, that they were mere exclamations rather than speech. But each time an explanation had been asked concerning the state of France, the Englishman openly drew out a note-book and requested those about him, the wine merchant, the abbé, or the young noble to repeat their remarks; to which each had complied with an amiability equal to the courteous tone of the request. He had noted down the most important, extraordinary and, picturesque features of the robbery of the diligence, the state of Vendée, and the details about the Companions of Jehu, thanking each informant by voice and gesture with the stiffness peculiar to our insular cousins, replacing his note-book enriched each time by a new item in a side pocket of his overcoat.

Finally, like a spectator enjoying an unexpected scene, he had given a cry of satisfaction at sight of the masked man, had listened with all his ears, gazed with all his eyes, not losing him from sight until the door closed behind him. Then drawing his note-book hastily from his pocket--

"Ah, sir," he said to his neighbor, who was no other than the abbé, "will you be so kind, should my memory fail me, as to repeat what that gentleman who has just gone out said?"

He began to write immediately, and the abbé's memory agreeing with his, he had the satisfaction of transcribing literally and verbatim the speech made by the Companion of Jehu to citizen Jean Picot. Then, this conversation written down, he exclaimed with an accent that lent a singular stamp of originality to his words:

"Of a truth! it is only in France that such things can happen; France is the most curious country in the world. I am delighted, gentlemen, to travel in France and become acquainted with Frenchmen."

The last sentence was said with such courtesy that nothing remained save to thank the speaker from whose serious mouth it issued, though he was a descendant of the conquerors of Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt. It was the younger of the two travellers who acknowledged this politeness in that heedless and rather caustic manner which seemed habitual to him.

"'Pon my word! I am exactly like you, my lord--I say my lord, because I presume you are English."

"Yes, sir," replied the gentleman, "I have that honor."

"Well! as I was saying," continued the young man, "I am delighted to travel in France and see what I am seeing. One must live under the government of citizens Gohier, Moulins, Roger Ducos, Sièyes and Barras to witness such roguery. I dare wager than when the tale is told, fifty years hence, of the highwayman who rode into a city of thirty thousand inhabitants in broad day, masked and armed with two pistols and a sword at his belt, to return the two hundred louis which he had stolen the day previous to the honest merchant who was then deploring their loss, and when it is added that this occurred at a table d'hôte where twenty or twenty-five people were seated, and that this model bandit was allowed to depart without one of those twenty or twenty-five people daring to molest him; I dare wager, I repeat, that whoever has the audacity to tell the story will be branded as an infamous liar."

And the young man, throwing himself back in his chair, burst into laughter, so aggressive, so nervous, that every one gazed at him in wonderment, while his companion's eyes expressed an almost paternal anxiety.

"Sir," said citizen Alfred de Barjols, who, moved like the others by this singular outburst, more sad, or rather dolorous, than gay, had waited for its last echo to subside. "Sir, permit me to point out to you that the man whom you have just seen is not a highwayman."

"Bah! Frankly, what is he then?"

"He is in all probability a young man of as good a family as yours or mine."

"Count Horn, whom the Regent ordered broken on the wheel at the Place de Grève, was also a man of good family, and the proof is that all the nobility of Paris sent their carriages to his execution."

"Count Horn, if I remember rightly, murdered a Jew to steal a note of hand which he was unable to meet. No one would dare assert that a Companion of Jehu had ever so much as harmed the hair of an infant."

"Well, be it so. We will admit that the Company was founded upon a philanthropic basis, to re-establish the balance of fortunes, redress the whims of chance and reform the abuses of society. Though he may be a robber, after the fashion of Karl Moor, your friend Morgan--was it not Morgan that this honest citizen called himself?"

"Yes," said the Englishman.

"Well, your friend Morgan is none the less a thief."

Citizen Alfred de Barjols turned very pale.

"Citizen Morgan is not my friend," replied the young aristocrat; "but if he were I should feel honored by his friendship."

"No doubt," replied Roland, laughing. "As Voltaire says: 'The friendship of a great man is a blessing from the gods.'"

"Roland, Roland!" observed his comrade in a low tone.

"Oh! general," replied the latter, letting his companion's rank escape him, perhaps intentionally, "I implore you, let me continue this discussion, which interests me in the highest degree."

His friend shrugged his shoulders.

"But, citizen," continued the young man with strange persistence, "I stand in need of correction. I left France two years ago, and during my absence so many things have changed, such as dress, morals, and accents, that even the language may have changed also. In the language of the day in France what do you call stopping coaches and taking the money which they contain?"

"Sir," said the young noble, in the tone of a man determined to sustain his argument to its end, "I call that war. Here is your companion whom you have just called general; he as a military man will tell you that, apart from the pleasure of killing and being killed, the generals of all ages have never done anything else than what the citizen Morgan is doing?"

"What!" exclaimed the young man, whose eyes flashed fire. "You dare to compare--"

"Permit the gentleman to develop his theory, Roland," said the dark traveller, whose eyes, unlike those of his companion, which dilated as they flamed, were veiled by long black lashes, thus concealing all that was passing in his mind.

"Ah!" said the young man in his curt tone, "you see that you, yourself, are becoming interested in the discussion." Then, turning to the young noble, whom he seemed to have selected for his antagonist, he said: "Continue, sir, continue; the general permits it."

The young noble flushed as visibly as he had paled a moment before. Between clinched teeth, his elbow on the table, his chin on his clinched hand, as if to draw as close to his adversary as possible, he said with a Provençal accent, which grew more pronounced as the discussion waxed hotter: "Since _the general_ permits"--emphasizing the two words--"I shall

have the honor to tell him and you, too, citizen, that I believe I have read in Plutarch that Alexander the Great, when he started for India, took with him but eighteen or twenty talents in gold, something like one hundred or one hundred and twenty thousand francs. Now, do you suppose that with these eighteen or twenty talents alone he fed his army, won the battle of Granicus, subdued Asia Minor, conquered Tyre, Gaza, Syria and Egypt, built Alexandria, penetrated to Lybia, had himself declared Son of Jupiter by the oracle of Ammon, penetrated as far as the Hyphases, and, when his soldiers refused to follow him further, returned to Babylon, where he surpassed in luxury, debauchery and self-indulgence the most debauched and voluptuous of the kings of Asia? Did Macedonia furnish his supplies? Do you believe that King Philip, most indigent of the kings of poverty-stricken Greece, honored the drafts his son drew upon him? Not so. Alexander did as citizen Morgan is doing; only, instead of stopping the coaches on the highroads, he pillaged cities, held kings for ransom, levied contributions from the conquered countries. Let us turn to Hannibal. You know how he left Carthage, don't you? He did not have even the eighteen or twenty talents of his predecessor; and as he needed money, he seized and sacked the city of Saguntum in the midst of peace, in defiance of the fealty of treaties. After that he was rich and could begin his campaign. Forgive me if this time I no longer quote Plutarch, but Cornelius Nepos. I will spare you the details of his descent from the Pyrenees, how he crossed the Alps and the three battles which he won, seizing each time the treasures of the vanquished, and turn to the five or six years he spent in Campania. Do you believe that he and his army paid the Capuans for their subsistence, and that the bankers of Carthage, with whom he had quarrelled, supplied him with funds? No; war fed war--the Morgan system, citizen. Let us pass on to Cæsar. Ah, Cæsar! That's another story. He left for Spain with some thirty millions of debt, and returned with practically the same. He started for Gaul, where he spent ten years with our ancestors. During these ten years he sent over one hundred millions to Rome, repassed the Alps, crossed the Rubicon, marched straight to the Capitol, forced the gates of the Temple of Saturn, where the treasury was, seized sufficient for his private needs--and not for those of the Republic--three thousand pounds of gold in ingots; and died (he whom creditors twenty years earlier refused to allow to leave his little house in the Suburra) leaving two or three thousand sesterces per head to the citizens, ten or twelve millions to Calpurnia, and thirty or forty millions to Octavius; always the Morgan system, save that Morgan, I am sure, would die sooner than subvert to his personal needs either the silver of the Gauls or the gold of the capital. Now let us spring over eighteen centuries and come to the General Buonaparté." And the young aristocrat, after the fashion of the enemies of the Conqueror of Italy, affected to emphasize the

_u_, which Bonaparte had eliminated from his name, and the _e_, from which he had removed the accent.

This affectation seemed to irritate Roland intensely. He made a movement as if to spring forward, but his companion stopped him.

"Let be," said he, "let be, Roland. I am quite sure that citizen Barjols will not say the General Buonaparté, as he calls him, is a thief."

"No, I will not say it; but there is an Italian proverb which says it for me."

"What is the proverb?" demanded the general in his companion's stead, fixing his calm, limpid eye upon the young noble.

"I give it in all its simplicity: 'Francesi non sono tutti ladroni, ma buona parte'; which means: 'All Frenchmen are not thieves, but--"

"A good part are?" concluded Roland.

"Yes, 'Buonaparté,'" replied Alfred de Barjols.

Scarcely had these insolent words left the young aristocrat's lips than the plate with which Roland was playing flew from his hands and struck De Barjols full in the face. The women screamed, the men rose to their feet. Roland burst into that nervous laugh which was habitual with him, and threw himself back in his chair. The young aristocrat remained calm, although the blood was trickling from his brow to his cheek.

At this moment the conductor entered with the usual formula:

"Come! citizen travellers, take your places."

The travellers, anxious to leave the scene of the quarrel, rushed to the door.

"Pardon me, sir," said Alfred de Barjols to Roland, "you do not go by diligence, I hope?"

"No, sir, I travel by post; but you need have no fear; I shall not depart."

"Nor I," said the Englishman. "Have them unharness my horses; I shall remain."

"I must go," sighed the dark young man whom Roland had addressed as general. "You know it is necessary, my friend; my presence yonder is absolutely imperative. But I swear that I would not leave you if I could possibly avoid it."

In saying these words his voice betrayed an emotion of which, judging from its usual harsh, metallic ring, it had seemed incapable. Roland, on the contrary, seemed overjoyed. His belligerent nature seemed to expand at the approach of a danger to which he had perhaps not given rise, but which he at least had not endeavored to avoid.

"Good! general," he said. "We were to part at Lyons, since you have had the kindness to grant me a month's furlough to visit my family at Bourg. It is merely some hundred and sixty miles or so less than we intended, that is all. I shall rejoin you in Paris. But you know if you need a devoted arm, and a man who never sulks, think of me!"

"You may rest easy on that score, Roland," exclaimed the general. Then, looking attentively at the two adversaries, he added with an indescribable note of tenderness: "Above all, Roland, do not let yourself be killed; but if it

is a possible thing don't kill your adversary. Everything considered, he is a gallant man, and the day will come when I shall need such men at my side."

"I shall do my best, general; don't be alarmed." At this moment the landlord appeared upon the thresh-hold of the door.

"The post-chaise is ready," said he.

The general took his hat and his cane, which he had laid upon the chair. Roland, on the contrary, followed him bareheaded, that all might see plainly he did not intend to leave with his friend. Alfred de Barjols, therefore, offered no opposition to his leaving the room. Besides, it was easy to see that his adversary was of those who seek rather than avoid quarrels.

"Just the same," said the general, seating himself in the carriage to which Roland had escorted him, "my heart is heavy at leaving you thus, Roland, without a friend to act as your second."

"Good! Don't worry about that, general; seconds are never lacking. There are and always will be enough men who are curious to see how one man can kill another."

"Au revoir, Roland. Observe, I do not say farewell, but au revoir!"

"Yes, my dear general," replied the young man, in a voice that revealed some emotion, "I understand, and I thank you."

"Promise that you will send me word as soon as the affair is over, or that you will get some one to write if you are disabled."

"Oh, don't worry, general. You will have a letter from me personally in less than four days," replied Roland, adding, in a tone of profound bitterness: "Have you not perceived that I am protected by a fatality which prevents me from dying?"

"Roland!" exclaimed the general in a severe tone, "Again!"

"Nothing, nothing," said the young man, shaking his head and assuming an expression of careless gayety which must have been habitual with him before the occurrence of that unknown misfortune which oppressed his youth with this longing for death.

"Very well. By the way, try to find out one thing."

"What is that, general?"

"How it happens that at a time when we are at war with England an Englishman stalks about France as freely and as easily as if he were at home."

"Good; I will find out."

"How?"

"I do not know; but when I promise you to find out I shall do so, though I have to ask it of himself."

"Reckless fellow! Don't get yourself involved in another affair in that direction."

"In any case, it would not be a duel. It would be a battle, as he is a national enemy."

"Well, once more--till I see you again. Embrace me."

Roland flung himself with passionate gratitude upon the neck of the personage who had just given him this permission.

"Oh, general!" he exclaimed, "how happy I should be--if I were not so unhappy!"

The general looked at him with profound affection, then asked: "One day you will tell me what this sorrow is, will you not, Roland?"

Roland laughed that sorrowful laugh which had already escaped his lips once or twice.

"Oh! my word, no," said he, "you would ridicule me too much."

The general stared at him as one would contemplate a madman.

"After all," he murmured, "one must accept men as they come."

"Especially when they are not what they seem to be."

"You must mistake me for OEdipe since you pose me with these enigmas, Roland."

"Ah! If you guess this one, general, I will herald you king of Thebes! But, with all my follies, I forgot that your time is precious and that I am detaining you needlessly with my nonsense."

"That is so! Have you any commissions for Paris?"

"Yes, three; my regards to Bourrienne, my respects to your brother Lucien, and my most tender homage to Madame Bonaparte."

"I will deliver them."

"Where shall I find you in Paris?"

"At my house in the Rue de la Victoire, perhaps."

"Perhaps--"

"Who knows? Perhaps at Luxembourg!" Then throwing himself back as if he regretted having said so much, even to a man he regarded as his best friend, he shouted to the postilion, "Road to Orange! As fast as possible."

The postilion, who was only waiting for the order, whipped up his horses; the carriage departed rapidly, rumbling like a roll of thunder, and disappeared through the Porte d'Oulle.