

Chapter 3

THE ENGLISHMAN

Roland remained motionless, not only as long as he could see the carriage, but long after it had disappeared. Then, shaking his head as if to dispel the cloud which darkened his brow, he re-entered the inn and asked for a room.

"Show the gentleman to number three," said the landlord to a chambermaid.

The chambermaid took a key hanging from a large black wooden tablet on which were arranged the numbers in white in two rows, and signed to the young traveller to follow her.

"Send up some paper, and a pen and ink," Roland said to the landlord, "and if M. de Barjols should ask where I am tell him the number of my room."

The landlord promised to obey Roland's injunctions and the latter followed the girl upstairs whistling the Marseillaise. Five minutes later he was seated at a table with the desired paper, pen and ink before him preparing to write. But just as he was beginning the first line some one knocked, three times at the door.

"Come in," said he, twirling his chair on one of its hind legs so as to face his visitor, whom he supposed to be either, M. de Barjols or one of his friends.

The door opened with a steady mechanical motion and the Englishman appeared upon the threshold.

"Ah!" exclaimed Roland, enchanted with this visit, in view of his general's recommendation; "is it you?"

"Yes," said the Englishman, "it is I."

"You are welcome."

"Oh! if I am welcome, so much the better! I was not sure that I ought to come."

"Why not?"

"On account of Aboukir."

Roland began to laugh.

"There are two battles of Aboukir," said he; "one which we lost; the other we won."

"I referred to the one you lost."

"Good!" said Roland, "we fight, kill, and exterminate each other on the battlefield, but that does not prevent us from clasping hands on neutral ground. So I repeat, you are most welcome, especially if you will tell me why you have come."

"Thank you; but, in the first place, read that." And the Englishman drew a paper from his pocket.

"What is that?" asked Roland.

"My passport."

"What have I to do with your passport?" asked Roland, "I am not a gendarme."

"No, but I have come to offer you my services. Perhaps you will not accept them if you do not know who I am."

"Your services, sir?"

"Yes; but read that first."

Roland read:

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In the name of the French Republic--The Executive Directory hereby orders that Sir John Tanlay, Esq., be permitted to travel freely throughout the territory of the Republic, and that both assistance and protection be accorded him in case of need.

(Signed) FOUCHÉ.-

And below:

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To whom it may concern--I recommend Sir John Tanlay particularly as a philanthropist and a friend of liberty.

(Signed) BARRAS.-

"Have you read it?"

"Yes; what of it?"

"What of it? Well, my father, Lord Tanlay, rendered M. Barras some services; that is why M. Barras permits me to roam about France. And I am very glad to roam about; it amuses me very much."

"Oh, I remember, Sir John; you did us the honor to say so at dinner."

"I did say so, it is true; I also said that I liked the French people heartily."

Roland bowed.

"And above all General Bonaparte," continued Sir John.

"You like General Bonaparte very much?"

"I admire him; he is a great, a very great, man."

"By Heavens! Sir John, I am sorry he is not here to hear an Englishman say that of him."

"Oh! if he were here I should not say it."

"Why not?"

"I should not want him to think I was trying to please him. I say so because it is my opinion."

"I don't doubt it, my lord," said Roland, who did not see what the Englishman was aiming at, and who, having learned all that he wished to know through the passport, held himself upon his guard.

"And when I heard," continued the Englishman with the same phlegm, "you defend General Bonaparte, I was much pleased."

"Really?"

"Much pleased," repeated the Englishman, nodding his head affirmatively.

"So much the better!"

"But when I saw you throw a plate at M. Alfred de Barjols' head, I was much grieved."

"You were grieved, my lord, and why?"

"Because in England no gentleman would throw a plate at the head of another gentleman."

"My lord," said Roland, rising with a frown, "have you perchance come here to read me a lecture?"

"Oh, no; I came to suggest that you are perhaps perplexed about finding a second?"

"My faith, Sir John! I admit that the moment when you knocked at the door I was wondering of whom I could ask this service."

"Of me, if you wish," said the Englishman. "I will be your second."

"On my honor!" exclaimed Roland, "I accept with all my heart."

"That is the service I wished to render you!"

Roland held out his hand, saying: "Thank you!"

The Englishman bowed.

"Now," continued Roland, "as you have had the good taste, my lord, to tell me who you were before offering your services, it is but fair that, since I accept them, I should tell you who I am."

"Oh! as you please."

"My name is Louis de Montrevel; I am aide-de-camp to General Bonaparte."

"Aide-de-camp to General Bonaparte. I am very glad."

"That will explain why I undertook, rather too warmly perhaps, my general's defence."

"No, not too warmly; only, the plate--"

"Oh, I know well that the provocation did not entail that plate. But what would you have me do! I held it in my hand, and, not knowing what to do with it, I threw it at M. de Barjols' head; it went of itself without any will of mine."

"You will not say that to him?"

"Reassure yourself; I tell you to salve your conscience."

"Very well; then you will fight?"

"That is why I have remained here, at any rate."

"What weapons?"

"That is not our affair, my lord."

"What! not our affair?"

"No; M. de Barjols is the one insulted; the choice is his."

"Then you will accept whatever he proposes?"

"Not I, Sir John, but you in my name, since you do me the honor to act as my second."

"And if he selects pistols, what is the distance to be and how will you fight?"

"That is your affair, my lord, and not mine. I don't know how you do in England, but in France the principals take no part in the arrangements. That duty devolves upon the seconds; what they decide is well decided!"

"Then my arrangements will be satisfactory?"

"Perfectly so, my lord."

The Englishman bowed.

"What hour and what day?"

"Oh! as soon as possible; I have not seen my family for two years, and I confess that I am in a hurry to greet them."

The Englishman looked at Roland with a certain wonder; he spoke with such assurance, as if he were certain that he would not be killed. Just then some one knocked at the door, and the voice of the innkeeper asked: "May I come in?"

The young man replied affirmatively. The door opened and the landlord entered, holding a card in his hand which he handed his guest. The young man took the card and read: "Charles du Valensolle."

"From M. Alfred de Barjols," said the host.

"Very well!" exclaimed Roland. Then handing the card to the Englishman, he said: "Here, this concerns you; it is unnecessary for me to see this monsieur--since we are no longer citizens--M. de Valensolle is M. de Barjols' second; you are mine. Arrange this affair between you. Only," added the young man, pressing the Englishman's hand and looking fixedly at him, "see that it holds a chance of certain death for one of us. Otherwise I shall complain that it has been bungled."

"Don't worry," said the Englishman, "I will act for you as for myself."

"Excellent! Go now, and when everything is arranged come back. I shall not stir from here."

Sir John followed the innkeeper. Roland reseated himself, twirled his chair back to its former position facing the table, took up his pen and began to write.

When Sir John returned, Roland had written and sealed two letters and was addressing a third. He signed to the Englishman to wait until he had finished, that he might give him his full attention. Then, the address finished, he sealed the letter, and turned around.

"Well," he asked, "is everything arranged?"

"Yes," said the Englishman, "it was an easy matter. You are dealing with a true gentleman."

"So much the better!" exclaimed Roland, waiting.

"You will fight two hours hence by the fountain of Vaucluse--a charming spot--with pistols, advancing to each other, each to fire as he pleases and continuing to advance after his adversary's fire."

"By my faith! you are right, Sir John. That is, indeed, excellent. Did you arrange that?"

"I and M. de Barjols' second, your adversary having renounced his rights of the insulted party."

"Have you decided upon the weapons?"

"I offered my pistols. They were accepted on my word of honor that you were as unfamiliar with them as was M. de Barjols. They are excellent weapons. I can cut a bullet on a knife blade at twenty paces."

"Peste! You are a good shot, it would seem, my lord."

"Yes, I am said to be the best shot in England."

"That is a good thing to know. When I wish to be killed, Sir John, I'll pick a quarrel with you."

"Oh! don't pick a quarrel with me," said the Englishman, "it would grieve me too much to have to fight you."

"We will try, my lord, not to cause you such grief. So it is settled then, in two hours."

"Yes, you told me you were in a hurry."

"Precisely. How far is it to this charming spot?"

"From here to Vaucluse?"

"Yes."

"Twelve miles."

"A matter of an hour and a half. We have no time to lose, so let us rid ourselves of troublesome things in order to have nothing but pleasure before us."

The Englishman looked at the young man in astonishment. Roland did not seem to pay any attention to this look.

"Here are three letters," said he; "one for Madame de Montrevel, my mother; one for Mlle. de Montrevel, my sister; one for the citizen, Bonaparte, my general. If I am killed you will simply put them in the post. Will that be too much trouble?"

"Should that misfortune occur, I will deliver your letters myself," said the Englishman. "Where do your mother and sister live?"

"At Bourg, the capital of the Department of Ain."

"That is near here," observed the Englishman. "As for General Bonaparte, I will go to Egypt if necessary. I should be extremely pleased to meet General Bonaparte."

"If you take the trouble, as you say, my lord, of delivering my letters yourself, you will not have to travel such a distance. Within three days General Bonaparte will be in Paris."

"Oh!" said the Englishman, without betraying the least surprise, "do you think so?"

"I am sure of it," replied Roland.

"Truly, he is a very extraordinary man, your General Bonaparte. Now, have you any other recommendations to make to me, M. de Montrevel?"

"One only, my lord."

"Oh! as many as you please."

"No, thank you, one only, but that is very important."

"What is it?"

"If I am killed--but I doubt if I be so fortunate."

Sir John looked at Roland with that expression of wonder which he had already awakened three or four times.

"If I am killed," resumed Roland; "for after all one must be prepared for everything--"

"Yes, if you are killed, I understand."

"Listen well, my lord, for I place much stress on my directions being carried out exactly in this matter."

"Every detail shall be observed," replied Sir John, "I am very punctilious."

"Well, then, if I am killed," insisted Roland, laying his hand upon his second's shoulder, to impress his directions more firmly on his memory, "you must not permit any one to touch my body, which is to be placed in a leaden coffin without removing the garments I am wearing; the coffin you will have soldered in your presence, then inclosed in an oaken bier, which must also be nailed up in your presence. Then you will send it to my mother, unless you should prefer to throw it into the Rhone, which I leave absolutely to your discretion, provided only that it be disposed of in some way."

"It will be no more difficult," replied the Englishman, "to take the coffin, since I am to deliver your letter."

"Decidedly, my lord," said Roland, laughing in his strange way. "You are a capital fellow. Providence in person brought us together. Let us start, my lord, let us start!"

They left Roland's room; Sir John's chamber was on the same floor. Roland waited while the Englishman went in for his weapons. He returned a few seconds later, carrying the box in his hand.

"Now, my lord," asked Roland, "how shall we reach Vaucluse? On horseback or by carriage?"

"By carriage, if you are willing. It is much more convenient in case one is wounded. Mine is waiting below."

"I thought you had given the order to have it unharnessed?"

"I did, but I sent for the postilion afterward and countermanded it."

They went downstairs.

"Tom! Tom!" called Sir John at the door, where a servant, in the severe livery of an English groom, was waiting, "take care of this box."

"Am I going with you, my lord?" asked the servant.

"Yes!" replied Sir John.

Then showing Roland the steps of his carriage, which the servant lowered, he said:

"Come, M. de Montrevel."

Roland entered the carriage and stretched himself out luxuriously.

"Upon my word!" said he. "It takes you English to understand travelling. This carriage is as comfortable as a bed. I warrant you pad your coffins before you are put in them!"

"Yes, that is a fact," said Sir John, "the English people understand comfort, but the French people are much more curious and amusing--postilion, to Vaocluse!"