

Chapter 4

THE DUEL

The road was passable only from Avignon to l'Isle. They covered the nine miles between the two places in an hour. During this hour Roland, as he resolved to shorten the time for his travelling companion, was witty and animated, and their approach to the duelling ground only served to redouble his gayety. To one unacquainted with the object of this drive, the menace of dire peril impending over this young man, with his continuous flow of conversation and incessant laughter, would have seemed incredible.

At the village of l'Isle they were obliged to leave the carriage. Finding on inquiry that they were the first to arrive, they entered the path which led to the fountain.

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Roland, "there ought to be a fine echo here." And he gave one or two cries to which Echo replied with perfect amiability.

"By my faith!" said the young man, "this is a marvellous echo. I know none save that of the Seinonnetta, at Milan, which can compare with it. Listen, my lord."

And he began, with modulations which revealed an admirable voice and an excellent method, to sing a Tyrolean song which seemed to bid defiance to the human throat with its rebellious music. Sir John watched Roland, and listened to him with an astonishment which he no longer took the trouble to conceal. When the last note had died away among the cavities of the mountain, he exclaimed:

"God bless me! but I think your liver is out of order."

Roland started and looked at him interrogatively. But seeing that Sir John did not intend to say more, he asked:

"Good! What makes you think so?"

"You are too noisily gay not to be profoundly melancholy."

"And that anomaly astonishes you?"

"Nothing astonishes me, because I know that it has always its reason for existing."

"True, and it's all in knowing the secret. Well, I'm going to enlighten you."

"Oh! I don't want to force you."

"You're too polite to do that; still, you must admit you would be glad to have your mind set at rest about me."

"Because I'm interested in you."

"Well, Sir John, I am going to tell you the secret of the enigma, something I have never done with any one before. For all my seeming good health, I am suffering from a horrible aneurism that causes me spasms of weakness and faintness so frequent as to shame even a woman. I spend my life taking the most ridiculous precautions, and yet Larrey warns me that I am liable to die any moment, as the diseased artery in my breast may burst at the least exertion. Judge for yourself how pleasant for a soldier! You can understand that, once I understood my condition, I determined incontinently to die with all the glory possible. Another more fortunate than I would have succeeded a hundred times already. But I'm bewitched; I am impervious alike to bullets

and balls; even the swords seem to fear to shatter themselves upon my skin. Yet I never miss an opportunity; that you must see, after what occurred at dinner. Well, we are going to fight. I'll expose myself like a maniac, giving my adversary all the advantages, but it will avail me nothing. Though he shoot at fifteen paces, or even ten or five, at his very pistol's point, he will miss me, or his pistol will miss fire. And all this wonderful luck that some fine day when I least expect it, I may die pulling on my boots! But hush I here comes my adversary."

As he spoke the upper half of three people could be seen ascending the same rough and rocky path that Roland and Sir John had followed, growing larger as they approached. Roland counted them.

"Three!" he exclaimed. "Why three, when we are only two?"

"Ah! I had forgotten," replied the Englishman. "M. de Barjols, as much in your interest as in his own, asked permission to bring a surgeon, one of his friends."

"What for?" harshly demanded Roland, frowning.

"Why, in case either one of you was wounded. A man's life can often be saved by bleeding him promptly."

"Sir John," exclaimed Roland, ferociously, "I don't understand these delicacies in the matter of a duel. When men fight they fight to kill. That they exchange all sorts of courtesies beforehand, as your ancestors did at Fontenoy, is all right; but, once the swords are unsheathed or the pistols loaded, one life must pay for the trouble they have taken and the heart beats they have lost. I ask you, on your word of honor, Sir John, to promise that, wounded or dying, M. de Barjols' surgeon shall not be allowed to touch me."

"But suppose, M. Roland--"

"Take it or leave it. Your word of honor, my lord, or devil take me if I fight at all."

The Englishman again looked curiously at the young man. His face was livid, and his limbs quivered as though in extreme terror. Sir John, without understanding this strange dread, passed his word.

"Good!" exclaimed Roland. "This, you see, is one of the effects of my charming malady. The mere thought of surgical instruments, a bistoury or a lance, makes me dizzy. Didn't I grow very pale?"

"I did think for an instant you were going to faint."

"What a stunning climax!" exclaimed Roland with a laugh. "Our adversaries arrive and you are dosing me with smelling salts like a hysterical woman. Do you know what they, and you, first of all, would have said? That I was afraid."

Meantime, the three new-comers having approached within earshot, Sir John was unable to answer Roland. They bowed, and Roland, with a smile that revealed his beautiful teeth, returned their greeting. Sir John whispered in his ear:

"You are still a trifle pale. Go on toward the fountain; I will fetch you when we are ready."

"Ah! that's the idea," said Roland. "I have always wanted to see that famous fountain of Vaucluse, the Hippocrene of Petrarch. You know his sonnet?"

"Chiari, fresche e dolci acque

Ove le belle membra

Pose colei, che sola a me perdona.'

This opportunity lost, I may never have another. Where is your fountain?"

"Not a hundred feet off. Follow the path; you'll find it at the turn of the road, at the foot of that enormous boulder you see."

"My lord," said Roland, "you are the best guide I know; thanks!"

And, with a friendly wave of the hand, he went off in the direction of the fountain, humming the charming pastoral of Philippe Desportes beneath his breath:

"Rosette, a little absence
Has turned thine heart from me;
I, knowing that inconstance,
Have turned my heart from thee.
No wayward beauty o'er me
Such power shall obtain;
We'll see, my fickle lassie,
Who first will turn again."

Sir John turned as he heard the modulations of that fresh sweet voice, whose higher notes had something at a feminine quality. His cold methodical mind understood nothing of that nervous impulsive nature, save that he had under his eyes one of the most amazing organisms one could possibly meet.

The other two young men were waiting for him; the surgeon stood a little apart. Sir John carried his box of pistols in his hands. Laying it upon a

table-shaped rock, he drew a little key from his pocket, apparently fashioned by a goldsmith rather than a locksmith, and opened the box. The weapons were magnificent, although of great simplicity. They came from Manton's workshop, the grandfather of the man who is still considered one of the best gunsmiths in London. He handed them to M. de Barjols' second to examine. The latter tried the triggers and played with the lock, examining to see if they were double-barrelled. They were single-barrelled. M. de Barjols cast a glance at them but did not even touch them.

"Our opponent does not know these weapons?" queried M. Valensolle.

"He has not even seen them," replied Sir John, "I give you my word of honor."

"Oh!" exclaimed M. de Valensolle, "a simple denial suffices."

The conditions of the duel were gone over a second time to avoid possible misunderstanding. Then, these conditions determined, the pistols were loaded. They were then placed, loaded, in the box, the box left in the surgeon's charge, and Sir John, with the key in his pocket, went after Roland.

He found him chatting with a little shepherd boy who was herding three goats on the steep rocky slope of the mountain, and throwing pebbles into the fountain. Sir John opened his lips to tell Roland that all was ready; but the latter, without giving the Englishman time to speak, exclaimed:

"You don't know what this child has been telling me, my lord! A perfect legend of the Rhine. He says that this pool, whose depth is unknown, extends six or eight miles under the mountain, and a fairy, half woman half serpent, dwells here. Calm summer nights she glides over the surface of water calling to the shepherds of the mountains, showing them, of course, nothing more than her head with its long locks and her beautiful bare shoulders and arms. The fools, caught by this semblance of a woman, draw

nearer, beckoning to her to come to them, while she on her side signs to them to go to her. The unwary spirits advance unwittingly, giving no heed to their steps. Suddenly the earth fails them, the fairy reaches out her arms, and plunges down into her dripping palaces, to reappear the next day alone. Where the devil did these idiots of shepherds get the tale that Virgil related in such noble verse to Augustus and Mecænas?"

He remained pensive an instant, his eyes bent upon the azure depths, then turning to Sir John:

"They say that, no matter how vigorous the swimmer, none has ever returned from this abyss. Perhaps were I to try it, my lord, it might be surer than M. de Barjols' bullet. However, it always remains as a last resort; in the meantime let us try the bullet. Come, my lord, come."

Then turning to the Englishman, who listened, amazed by this mobility of mind, he led him back to the others who awaited them. They in the meantime had found a suitable place.

It was a little plateau, perched as it were on a rocky proclivity, jutting from the mountain side, exposed to the setting sun, on which stood a ruined castle where the shepherds were wont to seek shelter when the mistral overtook them. A flat space, some hundred and fifty feet long, and sixty wide, which might once have been the castle platform, was now to be the scene of the drama which was fast approaching its close.

"Here we are, gentlemen," said Sir John.

"We are ready, gentlemen," replied M. de Valensolle.

"Will the principals kindly listen to the conditions of the duel?" said Sir John. Then addressing M. de Valensolle, he added: "Repeat them, monsieur;

you are French and I am a foreigner, you will explain them more clearly than I."

"You belong to those foreigners, my lord, who teach us poor Provençals the purity of our language; but since you so courteously make me spokesman, I obey you." Then exchanging bows with Sir John, he continued: "Gentlemen, it is agreed that you stand at forty paces, that you advance toward each other, that each will fire at will, and wounded or not will have the right to advance after your adversary's fire."

The two combatants bowed in sign of assent, and with one voice, and almost at the same moment, they said:

"The pistols!"

Sir John drew the little key from his pocket and opened the box. Then approaching M. de Barjols he offered it to him open. The latter wished to yield the choice of weapons to his opponent; but with a wave of his hand Roland refused, saying in a tone almost feminine in its sweetness:

"After you, M. de Barjols. Although you are the insulted party, you have, I am told, renounced your advantages. The least I can do is to yield you this one, if for that matter it is an advantage."

M. de Barjols no longer insisted. He took one of the two pistols at random. Sir John offered the other to Roland, who took it, and, without even examining its mechanism, cocked the trigger, then let it fall at arm's-length at his side.

During this time M. de Valensolle had measured forty paces, staking a cane as a point of departure.

"Will you measure after me?" he asked Sir John.

"Needless, sir," replied the latter: "M. de Montrevel and myself rely entirely upon you."

M. de Valensolle staked a second cane at the fortieth pace.

"Gentlemen," said he, "when you are ready."

Roland's adversary was already at his post, hat and cloak removed. The surgeon and the two seconds stood aside. The spot had been so well chosen that neither had any advantage of sun or ground. Roland tossed off hat and coat, stationed himself forty paces from M. de Barjols, facing him. Both, one to right the other to the left, cast a glance at the same horizon. The aspect harmonized with the terrible solemnity of the scene about to take place.

Nothing was visible to Roland's right and to M. de Barjols' left, except the mountain's swift incline and gigantic peak. But on the other side, that is to say, to M. de Barjols' right and Roland's left, it was a far different thing.

The horizon stretched illimitable. In the foreground, the plain, its ruddy soil pierced on all sides by rocks, like a Titan graveyard with its bones protruding through the earth. Then, sharply outlined in the setting sun, was Avignon with its girdle of walls and its vast palace, like a crouching lion, seeming to hold the panting city in its claws. Beyond Avignon, a luminous sweep, like a river of molten gold, defined the Rhone. Beyond the Rhone, a deep-hued azure vista, stretched the chain of hills which separate Avignon from Nimes and d'Uzes. And far off, the sun, at which one of these two men was probably looking for the last time, sank slowly and majestically in an ocean of gold and purple.

For the rest these two men presented a singular contrast. One, with his black hair, swarthy skin, slender limbs and sombre eyes, was the type of the

Southern race which counts among its ancestors Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Spaniards. The other, with his rosy skin, large blue eyes, and hands dimpled like a woman's, was the type of that race of temperate zones which reckons Gauls, Germans and Normans among its forebears.

Had one wished to magnify the situation it were easy to believe this something greater than single combat between two men. One might have thought it was a duel of a people against another people, race against race, the South against the North.

Was it these thoughts which we have just expressed that filled Roland's mind and plunged him into that melancholy revery.

Probably not; the fact is, for an instant he seemed to have forgotten seconds, duel, adversary, lost as he was in contemplation of this magnificent spectacle. M. de Barjols' voice aroused him from this poetical stupor.

"When you are ready, sir," said he, "I am."

Roland started.

"Pardon my keeping you waiting, sir," said he. "You should not have considered me, I am so absent-minded. I am ready now."

Then, a smile on his lips, his hair lifted by the evening breeze, unconcerned as if this were an ordinary promenade, while his opponent, on the contrary, took all the precaution usual in such a case, Roland advanced straight toward M. de Barjols.

Sir John's face, despite his ordinary impassibility, betrayed a profound anxiety. The distance between the opponents lessened rapidly. M. de Barjols halted first, took aim, and fired when Roland was but ten paces from him.

The ball clipped one of Roland's curls, but did not touch him. The young man turned toward his second:

"Well," said he, "what did I tell you?"

"Fire, monsieur, fire!" said the seconds.

M. de Barjols stood silent and motionless on the spot where he had fired.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," replied Roland; "but you will, I hope, permit me to be the judge of the time and manner of retaliating. Since I have felt M. de Barjols' shot, I have a few words to say to him which I could not say before." Then, turning to the young aristocrat, who was pale and calm, he said: "Sir, perhaps I was somewhat too hasty in our discussion this morning."

And he waited.

"It is for you to fire, sir," replied M. de Barjols.

"But," continued Roland, as if he had not heard, "you will understand my impetuosity, and perhaps excuse it, when you hear that I am a soldier and General Bonaparte's aide-de-camp."

"Fire, sir," replied the young nobleman.

"Say but one word of retraction, sir," resumed the young officer. "Say that General Bonaparte's reputation for honor and delicacy is such that a miserable Italian proverb, inspired by ill-natured losers, cannot reflect

discredit on him. Say that, and I throw this weapon away to grasp your hand; for I recognize in you, sir, a brave man."

"I cannot accord that homage to his honor and delicacy until your general has devoted the influence which his genius gives him over France as Monk did--that is to say, to reinstate his legitimate sovereign upon the throne."

"Ah!" cried Roland, with a smile, "that is asking too much of a republican general."

"Then I maintain what I said," replied the young noble. "Fire! monsieur, fire!" Then as Roland made no haste to obey this injunction, he shouted, stamping his foot: "Heavens and earth! will you fire?"

At these words Roland made a movement as if he intended to fire in the air.

"Ah!" exclaimed M. de Barjols. Then with a rapidity of gesture and speech that prevented this, "Do not fire in the air, I beg, or I shall insist that we begin again and that you fire first."

"On my honor!" cried Roland, turning as pale as if the blood had left his body, "this is the first time I have done so much for any man. Go to the devil! and if you don't want to live, then die!"

At the same time he lowered his arm and fired, without troubling to take aim.

Alfred de Barjols put his hand to his breast, swayed back and forth, turned around and fell face down upon the ground. Roland's bullet had gone through his heart.

Sir John, seeing M. de Barjols fall, went straight to Roland and drew him to the spot where he had thrown his hat and coat.

"That is the third," murmured Roland with a sigh; "but you are my witness that this one would have it."

Then giving his smoking pistol to Sir John, he resumed his hat and coat. During this time M. de Valensolle picked up the pistol which had escaped from his friend's hand, and brought it, together with the box, to Sir John.

"Well?" asked the Englishman, motioning toward Alfred de Barjols with his eyes.

"He is dead," replied the second.

"Have I acted as a man of honor, sir?" asked Roland, wiping away the sweat which suddenly inundated his brow at the announcement of his opponent's death.

"Yes, monsieur," replied M. de Valensolle; "only, permit me to say this: you possess the fatal hand."

Then bowing to Roland and his second with exquisite politeness, he returned to his friend's body.

"And you, my lord," resumed Roland, "what do you say?"

"I say," replied Sir John, with a sort of forced admiration, "you are one of those men who are made by the divine Shakespeare to say of themselves:

"Danger and I--
We were two lions littered in one day,
But I the elder."