

Chapter 6

MORGAN

Our readers must permit us for an instant to abandon Roland and Sir John, who, thanks to the physical and moral conditions in which we left them, need inspire no anxiety, while we direct our attention seriously to a personage who has so far made but a brief appearance in this history, though he is destined to play an important part in it.

We are speaking of the man who, armed and masked, entered the room of the table d'hôte at Avignon to return Jean Picot the two hundred louis which had been stolen from him by mistake, stored as it had been with the government money.

We speak of the highwayman, who called himself Morgan. He had ridden into Avignon, masked, in broad daylight, entered the hotel of the Palais-Egalité leaving his horse at the door. This horse had enjoyed the same immunity in the pontifical and royalist town as his master; he found it again at the horse post, unfastened its bridle, sprang into the saddle, rode through the Porte d'Oulle, skirting the walls, and disappeared at a gallop along the road to Lyons. Only about three-quarters of a mile from Avignon, he drew his mantle closer about him, to conceal his weapons from the passers, and removing his mask he slipped it into one of the holsters of his saddle.

The persons whom he had left at Avignon who were curious to know if this could be the terrible Morgan, the terror of the Midi, might have convinced themselves with their own eyes, had they met him on the road between Avignon and Bédarides, whether the bandit's appearance was as terrifying as his renown. We do not hesitate to assert that the features now revealed would have harmonized so little with the picture their prejudiced imagination had conjured up that their amazement would have been extreme.

The removal of the mask, by a hand of perfect whiteness and delicacy, revealed the face of a young man of twenty-four or five years of age, a face

that, by its regularity of feature and gentle expression, had something of the character of a woman's. One detail alone gave it or rather would give it at certain moments a touch of singular firmness. Beneath the beautiful fair hair waving on his brow and temples, as was the fashion at that period, eyebrows, eyes and lashes were black as ebony. The rest of the face was, as we have said, almost feminine. There were two little ears of which only the tips could be seen beneath the tufts of hair to which the Incroyables of the day had given the name of "dog's-ears"; a straight, perfectly proportioned nose, a rather large mouth, rosy and always smiling, and which, when smiling, revealed a double row of brilliant teeth; a delicate refined chin faintly tinged with blue, showing that, if the beard had not been carefully and recently shaved, it would, protesting against the golden hair, have followed the same color as the brows, lashes and eyes, that is to say, a decided black. As for the unknown's figure, it was seen, when he entered the dining-room, to be tall, well-formed and flexible, denoting, if not great muscular strength, at least much suppleness and agility.

The manner he sat his horse showed him to be a practiced rider. With his cloak thrown back over his shoulders, his mask hidden in the holster, his hat pulled low over his eyes, the rider resumed his rapid pace, checked for an instant, passed through Bédarides at a gallop, and reaching the first houses in Orange, entered the gate of one which closed immediately behind him. A servant in waiting sprang to the bit. The rider dismounted quickly.

"Is your master here?" he asked the domestic.

"No, Monsieur the Baron," replied the man; "he was obliged to go away last night, but he left word that if Monsieur should ask for him, to say that he had gone in the interests of the Company."

"Very good, Baptiste. I have brought back his horse in good condition, though somewhat tired. Rub him down with wine, and give him for two or three days barley instead of oats. He has covered something like one hundred miles since yesterday morning."

"Monsieur the Baron was satisfied with him?"

"Perfectly satisfied. Is the carriage ready?"

"Yes, Monsieur the Baron, all harnessed in the coach-house; the postilion is drinking with Julien. Monsieur recommended that he should be kept outside the house that he might not see him arrive."

"He thinks he is to take your master?"

"Yes, Monsieur the Baron. Here is my master's passport, which we used to get the post-horses, and as my master has gone in the direction of Bordeaux with Monsieur the Baron's passport, and as Monsieur the Baron goes toward Geneva with my master's passport, the skein will probably be so tangled that the police, clever as their fingers are, can't easily unravel it."

"Unfasten the valise that is on the croup of my saddle, Baptiste, and give it to me."

Baptiste obeyed dutifully, but the valise almost slipped from his hands. "Ah!" said he laughing, "Monsieur the Baron did not warn me! The devil! Monsieur the Baron has not wasted his time it seems."

"Just where you're mistaken, Baptiste! if I didn't waste all my time, I at least lost a good deal, so I should like to be off again as soon as possible."

"But Monsieur the Baron will breakfast?"

"I'll eat a bite, but quickly."

"Monsieur will not be delayed. It is now two, and breakfast has been ready since ten this morning. Luckily it's a cold breakfast."

And Baptiste, in the absence of his master, did the honors of the house to the visitor by showing him the way to the dining-room.

"Not necessary," said the visitor, "I know the way. Do you see to the carriage; let it be close to the house with the door wide open when I come out, so that the postilion can't see me. Here's the money to pay him for the first relay."

And the stranger whom Baptiste had addressed as Baron handed him a handful of notes.

"Why, Monsieur," said the servant, "you have given me enough to pay all the way to Lyons!"

"Pay him as far as Valence, under pretext that I want to sleep, and keep the rest for your trouble in settling the accounts."

"Shall I put the valise in the carriage-box?"

"I will do so myself."

And taking the valise from the servant's hands, without letting it be seen that it weighed heavily, he turned toward the dining-room, while Baptiste made his way toward the nearest inn, sorting his notes as he went.

As the stranger had said, the way was familiar to him, for he passed down a corridor, opened a first door without hesitation, then a second, and found himself before a table elegantly served. A cold fowl, two partridges, a ham, several kinds of cheese, a dessert of magnificent fruit, and two decanters,

the one containing a ruby-colored wine, and the other a yellow-topaz, made a breakfast which, though evidently intended for but one person, as only one place was set, might in case of need have sufficed for three or four.

The young man's first act on entering the dining-room was to go straight to a mirror, remove his hat, arrange his hair with a little comb which he took from his pocket; after which he went to a porcelain basin with a reservoir above it, took a towel which was there for the purpose, and bathed his face and hands. Not until these ablutions were completed--characteristic of a man of elegant habits--not until these ablutions had been minutely performed did the stranger sit down to the table.

A few minutes sufficed to satisfy his appetite, to which youth and fatigue had, however, given magnificent proportions; and when Baptiste came in to inform the solitary guest that the carriage was ready he found him already afoot and waiting.

The stranger drew his hat low over his eyes, wrapped his coat about him, took the valise under his arm, and, as Baptiste had taken pains to lower the carriage-steps as close as possible to the door, he sprang into the post-chaise without being seen by the postilion. Baptiste slammed the door after him; then, addressing the man in the top-boots:

"Everything is paid to Valence, isn't it, relays and fees?" he asked.

"Everything; do you want a receipt?" replied the postilion, jokingly.

"No; but my master, the Marquise de Ribier, don't want to be disturbed until he gets to Valence."

"All right," replied the postilion, in the same bantering tone, "the citizen Marquis shan't be disturbed. Forward, hoop-la!" And he started his horses, and cracked his whip with that noisy eloquence which says to neighbors

and passers-by: "'Ware here, 'ware there! I am driving a man who pays well and who has the right to run over others."

Once in the carriage the pretended Marquis of Ribier opened the window, lowered the blinds, raised the seat, put his valise in the hollow, sat down on it, wrapped himself in his cloak, and, certain of not being disturbed till he reached Valence, slept as he had breakfasted, that is to say, with all the appetite of youth.

They went from Orange to Valence in eight hours. Our traveller awakened shortly before entering the city. Raising one of the blinds cautiously, he recognized the little suburb of Paillasse. It was dark, so he struck his repeater and found it was eleven at night. Thinking it useless to go to sleep again, he added up the cost of the relays to Lyons and counted out the money. As the postilion at Valence passed the comrade who replaced him, the traveller heard him say:

"It seems he's a ci-devant; but he was recommended from Orange, and, as he pays twenty sous fees, you must treat him as you would a patriot."

"Very well," replied the other; "he shall be driven accordingly."

The traveller thought the time had come to intervene. He raised the blind and said:

"And you'll only be doing me justice. A patriot? Deuce take it! I pride myself upon being one, and of the first calibre, too! And the proof is--Drink this to the health of the Republic." And he handed a hundred-franc assignat to the postilion who had recommended him to his comrade. Seeing the other looking eagerly at this strip of paper, he continued: "And the same to you if you will repeat the recommendation you've just received to the others."

"Oh! don't worry, citizen," said the postilion; "there'll be but one order to Lyons--full speed!"

"And here is the money for the sixteen posts, including the double post of entrance in advance. I pay twenty sous fees. Settle it among yourselves."

The postilion dug his spurs into his horse and they were off at a gallop. The carriage relayed at Lyons about four in the afternoon. While the horses were being changed, a man clad like a porter, sitting with his stretcher beside him on a stone post, rose, came to the carriage and said something in a low tone to the young Companion of Jehu which seemed to astonish the latter greatly.

"Are you quite sure?" he asked the porter.

"I tell you that I saw him with my own eyes!" replied the latter.

"Then I can give the news to our friends as a positive fact?"

"You can. Only hurry."

"Have they been notified at Servas?"

"Yes; you will find a horse ready between Servas and Sue."

The postilion came up; the young man exchanged a last glance with the porter, who walked away as if charged with a letter of the utmost importance.

"What road, citizen?" asked the postilion.

"To Bourg. I must reach Servas by nine this evening; I pay thirty sous fees."

"Forty-two miles in five hours! That's tough. Well, after all, it can be done."

"Will you do it."

"We can try."

And the postilion started at full gallop. Nine o'clock was striking as they entered Servas.

"A crown of six livres if you'll drive me half-way to Sue without stopping here to change horses!" cried the young man through the window to the postilion.

"Done!" replied the latter.

And the carriage dashed past the post house without stopping.

Morgan stopped the carriage at a half mile beyond Servas, put his head out of the window, made a trumpet of his hands, and gave the hoot of a screech-owl. The imitation was so perfect that another owl answered from a neighboring woods.

"Here we are," cried Morgan.

The postilion pulled up, saying: "If we're there, we needn't go further."

The young man took his valise, opened the door, jumped out and stepped up to the postilion.

"Here's the promised ecu."

The postilion took the coin and stuck it in his eye, as a fop of our day holds his eye-glasses. Morgan divined that this pantomime had a significance.

"Well," he asked, "what does that mean?"

"That means," said the postilion, "that, do what I will, I can't help seeing with the other eye."

"I understand," said the young man, laughing; "and if I close the other eye--"

"Damn it! I shan't see anything."

"Hey! you're a rogue who'd rather be blind than see with one eye! Well, there's no disputing tastes. Here!"

And he gave him a second crown. The postilion stuck it up to his other eye, wheeled the carriage round and took the road back to Servas.

The Companion of Jehu waited till he vanished in the darkness. Then putting the hollow of a key to his lips, he drew a long trembling sound from it like a boatswain's whistle.

A similar call answered him, and immediately a horseman came out of the woods at full gallop. As he caught sight of him Morgan put on his mask.

"In whose name have you come?" asked the rider, whose face, hidden as it was beneath the brim of an immense hat, could not be seen.

"In the name of the prophet Elisha," replied the young man with the mask.

"Then you are he whom I am waiting for." And he dismounted.

"Are you prophet or disciple?" asked Morgan.

"Disciple," replied the new-comer.

"Where is your master?"

"You will find him at the Chartreuse of Seillon."

"Do you know how many Companions are there this evening?"

"Twelve."

"Very good; if you meet any others send them there."

He who had called himself a disciple bowed in sign of obedience, assisted Morgan to fasten the valise to the croup of the saddle, and respectfully held the bit while the young man mounted. Without even waiting to thrust his

other foot into the stirrup, Morgan spurred his horse, which tore the bit from the groom's hand and started off at a gallop.

On the right of the road stretched the forest of Seillon, like a shadowy sea, its sombre billows undulating and moaning in the night wind. Half a mile beyond Sue the rider turned his horse across country toward the forest, which, as he rode on, seemed to advance toward him. The horse, guided by an experienced hand, plunged fearlessly into the woods. Ten minutes later he emerged on the other side.

A gloomy mass, isolated in the middle of a plain, rose about a hundred feet from the forest. It was a building of massive architecture, shaded by five or six venerable trees. The horseman paused before the portal, over which were placed three statues in a triangle of the Virgin, our Lord, and St. John the Baptist. The statue of the Virgin was at the apex of the triangle.

The mysterious traveller had reached his goal, for this was the Chartreuse of Seillon. This monastery, the twenty-second of its order, was founded in 1178. In 1672 a modern edifice had been substituted for the old building; vestiges of its ruins can be seen to this day. These ruins consist externally of the above-mentioned portal with the three statues, before which our mysterious traveller halted; internally, a small chapel, entered from the right through the portal. A peasant, his wife and two children are now living there, and the ancient monastery has become a farm.

The monks were expelled from their convent in 1791; in 1792 the Chartreuse and its dependencies were offered for sale as ecclesiastical property. The dependencies consisted first of the park, adjoining the buildings, and the noble forest which still bears the name of Seillon. But at Bourg, a royalist and, above all, religious town, no one dared risk his soul by purchasing property belonging to the worthy monks whom all revered. The result was that the convent, the park and the forest had become, under the title of state property, the property of the republic; that is to say, they belonged to nobody, or were at the best neglected. The republic having, for the last seven years, other things to think of than pointing walls, cultivating an orchard and cutting timber.

For seven years, therefore, the Chartreuse had been completely abandoned, and if by chance curious eyes peered through the keyhole, they caught glimpses of grass-grown courtyards, brambles in the orchard, and brush in the forest, which, except for one road and two or three paths that crossed it, had become almost impenetrable. The Correrie, a species of pavilion belonging to the monastery and distant from it about three-quarters of a mile, was mossgrown too in the tangle of the forest, which, profiting by its liberty, grew at its own sweet will, and had long since encircled it in a mantle of foliage which hid it from sight.

For the rest, the strangest rumors were current about these two buildings. They were said to be haunted by guests invisible by day, terrifying at night. The woodsmen and the belated peasants, who went to the forest to exercise against the Republic the rights which the town of Bourg had enjoyed in the days of the monks, pretended that, through the cracks of the closed blinds, they had seen flames of fire dancing along the corridors and stairways, and had distinctly heard the noise of chains clanking over the cloister tilings and the pavement of the courtyards. The strong-minded denied these things; but two very opposite classes opposed the unbelievers, confirming the rumors, attributing these terrifying noises and nocturnal lights to two different causes according to their beliefs. The patriots declared that they were the ghosts of the poor monks buried alive by cloister tyranny in the In-pace, who were now returned to earth, dragging after them their fetters to call down the vengeance of Heaven upon their persecutors. The royalists said that they were the imps of the devil, who, finding an empty convent, and fearing no further danger from holy water, were boldly holding their revels where once they had not dared show a claw. One fact, however, left everything uncertain. Not one of the believers or unbelievers--whether he elected for the souls of the martyred monks or for the Witches' Sabbath of Beelzebub--had ever had the courage to venture among the shadows, and to seek during the solemn hours of night confirmation of the truth, in order to tell on the morrow whether the Chartreuse were haunted, and if haunted by whom.

But doubtless these tales, whether well founded or not, had no influence over our mysterious horseman; for although, as we have said, nine o'clock had chimed from the steeples of Bourg, and night had fallen, he reined in his horse in front of the great portal of the deserted monastery, and, without

dismounting, drew a pistol from his holster, striking three measured blows with the butt on the gate, after the manner of the Freemasons. Then he listened. For an instant he doubted if the meeting were really there; for though he looked closely and listened attentively, he could perceive no light, nor could he hear a sound. Still he fancied he heard a cautious step approaching the portal from within. He knocked a second time with the same weapon and in the same manner.

"Who knocks?" demanded a voice.

"He who comes from Elisha," replied the traveller.

"What king do the sons of Isaac obey?"

"Jehu."

"What house are they to exterminate?"

"That of Ahab."

"Are you prophet or disciple?"

"Prophet."

"Welcome then to the House of the Lord!" said the voice.

Instantly the iron bars which secured the massive portal swung back, the bolts grated in their sockets, half of the gate opened silently, and the horse

and his rider passed beneath the sombre vault, which immediately closed behind them.

The person who had opened the gate, so slow to open, so quick to close, was attired in the long white robe of a Chartreuse monk, of which the hood, falling over his face, completely concealed his features.