

Chapter 7

THE CHARTREUSE OF SEILLON

Beyond doubt, like the first affiliated member met on the road to Sue by the man who styled himself prophet, the monk who opened the gate was of secondary rank in the fraternity; for, grasping the horse's bridle, he held it while the rider dismounted, rendering the young man the service of a groom.

Morgan got off, unfastened the valise, pulled the pistols from the holsters, and placed them in his belt, next to those already there. Addressing the monk in a tone of command, he said: "I thought I should find the brothers assembled in council."

"They are assembled," replied the monk.

"Where?"

"At La Correrie. Suspicious persons have been seen prowling around the Chartreuse these last few days, and orders have been issued to take the greatest precautions."

The young man shrugged his shoulders as if he considered such precautions useless, and, always in the same tone of command, said: "Have some one take my horse to the stable and conduct me to the council."

The monk summoned another brother, to whom he flung the bridle. He lighted a torch at a lamp, in the little chapel which can still be seen to the right of the great portal, and walked before the new-comer. Crossing the cloister, he took a few steps in the garden, opened a door leading into a sort of cistern, invited Morgan to enter, closed it as carefully as he had the outer door, touched with his foot a stone which seemed to be accidentally lying there, disclosed a ring and raised a slab, which concealed a flight of steps

leading down to a subterranean passage. This passage had a rounded roof and was wide enough to admit two men walking abreast.

The two men proceeded thus for five or six minutes, when they reached a grated door. The monk, drawing a key from his frock, opened it. Then, when both had passed through and the door was locked again, he asked: "By what name shall I announce you?"

"As Brother Morgan."

"Wait here; I will return in five minutes."

The young man made a sign with his head which showed that he was familiar with these precautions and this distrust. Then he sat down upon a tomb--they were in the mortuary vaults of the convent--and waited. Five minutes had scarcely elapsed before the monk reappeared.

"Follow me," said he; "the brothers are glad you have come. They feared you had met with some mishap."

A few seconds later Morgan was admitted into the council chamber.

Twelve monks awaited him, their hoods drawn low over their eyes. But, once the door had closed and the serving brother had disappeared, while Morgan was removing his mask, the hoods were thrown back and each monk exposed his face.

No brotherhood had ever been graced by a more brilliant assemblage of handsome and joyous young men. Two or three only of these strange monks had reached the age of forty. All hands were held out to Morgan and several warm kisses were imprinted upon the new-comer's cheek.

"Pon my word," said one who had welcomed him most tenderly, "you have drawn a mighty thorn from my foot; we thought you dead, or, at any rate, a prisoner."

"Dead, I grant you, Amiet; but prisoner, never! citizen--as they still say sometimes, and I hope they'll not say it much longer. It must be admitted that the whole affair was conducted on both sides with touching amenity. As soon as the conductor saw us he shouted to the postilion to stop; I even believe he added: 'I know what it is.' 'Then,' said I, 'if you know what it is, my dear friend, our explanations needn't be long.' 'The government money?' he asked. 'Exactly,' I replied. Then as there was a great commotion inside the carriage, I added: 'Wait! first come down and assure these gentlemen, and especially the ladies, that we are well-behaved folk and will not harm them--the ladies; you understand--and nobody will even look at them unless they put their heads out of the window.' One did risk it; my faith! but she was charming. I threw her a kiss, and she gave a little cry and retired into the carriage, for all the world like Galatea, and as there were no willows about, I didn't pursue her. In the meantime the guard was rummaging in his strong-box in all expedition, and to such good purpose, indeed, that with the government money, in his hurry, he passed over two hundred louis belonging to a poor wine merchant of Bordeaux."

"Ah, the devil!" exclaimed the brother called Amiet--an assumed name, probably, like that of Morgan--"that is annoying! You know the Directory, which is most imaginative, has organized some bands of chauffeurs, who operate in our name, to make people believe that we rob private individuals. In other words, that we are mere thieves."

"Wait an instant," resumed Morgan; "that is just what makes me late. I heard something similar at Lyons. I was half-way to Valence when I discovered this breach of etiquette. It was not difficult, for, as if the good man had foreseen what happened, he had marked his bag 'Jean Picot, Wine Merchant at Fronsac, Bordeaux.'"

"And you sent his money back to him?"

"I did better; I returned it to him."

"At Fronsac?"

"Ah! no, but at Avignon. I suspected that so careful a man would stop at the first large town to inquire what chance he had to recover his two hundred louis. I was not mistaken. I inquired at the inn if they knew citizen Jean Picot. They replied that not only did they know him, but in fact he was then dining at the table d'hôte. I went in. You can imagine what they were talking about--the stoppage of the diligence. Conceive the sensation my apparition caused. The god of antiquity descending from the machine produced a no more unexpected finale than I. I asked which one of the guests was called Jean Picot. The owner of this distinguished and melodious name stood forth. I placed the two hundred louis before him, with many apologies, in the name of the Company, for the inconvenience its followers had occasioned him. I exchanged a friendly glance with Barjols and a polite nod with the Abbé de Rians who were present, and, with a profound bow to the assembled company, withdrew. It was only a little thing, but it took me fifteen hours; hence the delay. I thought it preferable to leaving a false conception of us in our wake. Have I done well, my masters?"

The gathering burst into bravos.

"Only," said one of the participants, "I think you were somewhat imprudent to return the money yourself to citizen Jean Picot."

"My dear colonel," replied the young man, "there's an Italian proverb which says: 'Who wills, goes; who does not will, sends.' I willed--I went."

"And there's a jolly buck who, if you ever have the misfortune to fall into the hands of the Directory, will reward you by recognizing you; a recognition which means cutting off your head!"

"Oh! I defy him to recognize me."

"What can prevent it?"

"Oh! You seem to think that I play such pranks with my face uncovered? Truly, my dear colonel, you mistake me for some one else. It is well enough to lay aside my mask among friends; but among strangers--no, no! Are not these carnival times? I don't see why I shouldn't disguise myself as Abellino or Karl Moor, when Messieurs Gohier, Sieyès, Roger Ducos, Moulin and Barras are masquerading as kings of France."

"And you entered the city masked?"

"The city, the hotel, the dining-room. It is true that if my face was covered, my belt was not, and, as you see, it is well garnished."

The young man tossed aside his coat, displaying his belt, which was furnished with four pistols and a short hunting-knife. Then, with a gayety which seemed characteristic of his careless nature, he added: "I ought to look ferocious, oughtn't I? They may have taken me for the late Mandrin, descending from the mountains of Savoy. By the bye, here are the sixty thousand francs of Her Highness, the Directory." And the young man disdainfully kicked the valise which he had placed on the ground, which emitted a metallic sound indicating the presence of gold. Then he mingled with the group of friends from whom he had been separated by the natural distance between a narrator and his listeners.

One of the monks stooped and lifted the valise.

"Despise gold as much as you please, my dear Morgan, since that doesn't prevent you from capturing it. But I know of some brave fellows who are awaiting these sixty thousand francs, you so disdainfully kick aside, with as

much impatience and anxiety as a caravan, lost in the desert, awaits the drop of water which is to save it from dying of thirst."

"Our friends of the Vendée, I suppose?" replied Morgan. "Much good may it do them! Egotists, they are fighting. These gentlemen have chosen the roses and left us the thorns. Come! don't they receive anything from England?"

"Oh, yes," said one of the monks, gayly; "at Quiberon they got bullets and grapeshot."

"I did not say from the English," retorted Morgan; "I said from England."

"Not a penny."

"It seems to me, however," said one of those present, who apparently possessed a more reflective head than his comrades, "it seems to me that our princes might send a little gold to those who are shedding their blood for the monarchy. Are they not afraid the Vendée may weary some day or other of a devotion which up to this time has not, to my knowledge, won her a word of thanks."

"The Vendée, dear friend," replied Morgan, "is a generous land which will not weary, you may be sure. Besides, where is the merit of fidelity unless it has to deal with ingratitude? From the instant devotion meets recognition, it is no longer devotion. It becomes an exchange which reaps its reward. Let us be always faithful, and always devoted, gentlemen, praying Heaven that those whom we serve may remain ungrateful, and then, believe me, we shall bear the better part in the history of our civil wars."

Morgan had scarcely formulated this chivalric axiom, expressive of a desire which had every chance of accomplishment, than three Masonic blows resounded upon the door through which he had entered.

"Gentlemen," said the monk who seemed to fill the rôle of president, "quick, your hoods and masks. We do not know who may be coming to us."