

Chapter 9

ROMEO AND JULIET

Under the possibility of immediate departure, Morgan's horse, after being washed, rubbed down and dried, had been fed a double ration of oats and been resaddled and bridled. The young man had only to ask for it and spring upon its back. He was no sooner in the saddle than the gate opened as if by magic; the horse neighed and darted out swiftly, having forgotten its first trip, and ready for another.

At the gate of the Chartreuse, Morgan paused an instant, undecided whether to turn to the right or left. He finally turned to the right, followed the road which leads from Bourg to Seillon for a few moments, wheeled rapidly a second time to the right, cut across country, plunged into an angle of the forest which was on his way, reappeared before long on the other side, reached the main road to Pont-d'Ain, followed it for about a mile and a half, and halted near a group of houses now called the Maison des Gardes. One of these houses bore for sign a cluster of holly, which indicated one of those wayside halting places where the pedestrians quench their thirst, and rest for an instant to recover strength before continuing the long fatiguing voyage of life. Morgan stopped at the door, drew a pistol from its holster and rapped with the butt end as he had done at the Chartreuse. Only as, in all probability, the good folks at the humble tavern were far from being conspirators, the traveller was kept waiting longer than he had been at the monastery. At last he heard the echo of the stable boy's clumsy sabots. The gate creaked, but the worthy man who opened it no sooner perceived the horseman with his drawn pistol than he instinctively tried to, close it again.

"It is I, Patout," said the young man; "don't be afraid."

"Ah! sure enough," said the peasant, "it is really you, Monsieur Charles. I'm not afraid now; but you know, as the curé used to tell us, in the days when there was a good God, 'Caution is the mother of safety.'"

"Yes, Patout, yes," said the young man, slipping a piece of silver into the stable boy's hand, "but be easy; the good God will return, and M. le Curé also."

"Oh, as for that," said the good man, "it is easy to see that there is no one left on high by the way things go. Will this last much longer, M. Charles?"

"Patout, I promise, in my honor, to do my best to be rid of all that annoys you. I am no less impatient than you; so I'll ask you not to go to bed, my good Patout."

"Ah! You know well, monsieur, that when you come I don't often go to bed. As for the horse--Goodness! You change them every day? The time before last it was a chestnut, the last time a dapple-gray, now a black one."

"Yes, I'm somewhat capricious by nature. As to the horse, as you say, my dear Patout, he wants nothing. You need only remove his bridle; leave him saddled. Oh, wait; put this pistol back in the holsters and take care of these other two for me." And the young man removed the two from his belt and handed them to the hostler.

"Well," exclaimed the latter, laughing, "any more barkers?"

"You know, Patout, they say the roads are unsafe."

"Ah! I should think they weren't safe! We're up to our necks in regular highway robberies, M. Charles. Why, no later than last week they stopped and robbed the diligence between Geneva and Bourg!"

"Indeed!" exclaimed Morgan; "and whom do they accuse of the robbery?"

"Oh, it's such a farce! Just fancy; they say it was the Companions of Jesus. I don't believe a word of it, of course. Who are the Companions of Jesus if not the twelve apostles?"

"Of course," said Morgan, with his eternally joyous smile, "I don't know of any others."

"Well!" continued Patout, "to accuse the twelve apostles of robbing a diligence, that's the limit. Oh! I tell you, M. Charles, we're living in times when nobody respects anything."

And shaking his head like a misanthrope, disgusted, if not with life, at least with men, Patout led the horse to the stable.

As for Morgan, he watched Patout till he saw him disappear down the courtyard and enter the dark stable; then, skirting the hedge which bordered the garden, he went toward a large clump of trees whose lofty tops were silhouetted against the darkness of the night, with the majesty of things immovable, the while their shadows fell upon a charming little country house known in the neighborhood as the Château des Noires-Fontaines. As Morgan reached the château wall, the hour chimed from the belfry of the village of Montagnac. The young man counted the strokes vibrating in the calm silent atmosphere of the autumn night. It was eleven o'clock. Many things, as we have seen, had happened during the last two hours.

Morgan advanced a few steps farther, examined the wall, apparently in search of a familiar spot, then, having found it, inserted the tip of his boot in a cleft between two stones. He sprang up like a man mounting a horse, seized the top of the wall with the left hand, and with a second spring seated himself astride the wall, from which, with the rapidity of lightning, he lowered himself on the other side. All this was done with such rapidity, such dexterity and agility, that any one chancing to pass at that instant would have thought himself the puppet of a vision. Morgan stopped, as on the other side of the wall, to listen, while his eyes tried to pierce the darkness made deeper by the foliage of poplars and aspens, and the heavy shadows of

the little wood. All was silent and solitary. Morgan ventured on his path. We say ventured, because the young man, since nearing the Château des Noires-Fontaines, revealed in all his movement a timidity and hesitation so foreign to his character that it was evident that if he feared it was not for himself alone.

He gained the edge of the wood, still moving cautiously. Coming to a lawn, at the end of which was the little château, he paused. Then he examined the front of the house. Only one of the twelve windows which dotted the three floors was lighted. This was on the second floor at the corner of the house. A little balcony, covered with virgin vines which climbed the walls, twining themselves around the iron railing and falling thence in festoons from the window, overhung the garden. On both sides of the windows, close to the balcony, large-leafed trees met and formed above the cornice a bower of verdure. A Venetian blind, which was raised and lowered by cords, separated the balcony from the window, a separation which disappeared at will. It was through the interstices of this blind that Morgan had seen the light.

The young man's first impulse was to cross the lawn in a straight line; but again, the fears of which we spoke restrained him. A path shaded by lindens skirted the wall and led to the house. He turned aside and entered its dark leafy covert. When he had reached the end of the path, he crossed, like a frightened doe, the open space which led to the house wall, and stood for a moment in the deep shadow of the house. Then, when he had reached the spot he had calculated upon, he clapped his hands three times.

At this call a shadow darted from the end of the apartment and clung, lithe, graceful, almost transparent, to the window.

Morgan repeated the signal. The window was opened immediately, the blind was raised, and a ravishing young girl, in a night dress, her fair hair rippling over her shoulders, appeared in the frame of verdure.

The young man stretched out his arms to her, whose arms were stretched out to him, and two names, or rather two cries from the heart, crossed from one to the other.

"Charles!"

"Amélie!"

Then the young man sprang against the wall, caught at the vine shoots, the jagged edges of the rock, the jutting cornice, and in an instant was on the balcony.

What these two beautiful young beings said to each other was only a murmur of love lost in an endless kiss. Then, by gentle effort, the young man drew the girl with one hand to her chamber, while with the other he loosened the cords of the blind, which fell noisily behind them. The window closed behind the blind. Then the lamp was extinguished, and the front of the Château des Noires-Fontaines was again in darkness.

This darkness had lasted for about a quarter of an hour, when the rolling of a carriage was heard along the road leading from the highway of Pont-d'Ain to the entrance of the château. There the sound ceased; it was evident that the carriage had stopped before the gates.