Chapter 10

THE FAMILY OF ROLAND

The carriage which had stopped before the gate was that which brought Roland back to his family, accompanied by Sir John.

The family was so far from expecting him that, as we have said, all the lights in the house were extinguished, all the windows in darkness, even Amélie's. The postilion had cracked his whip smartly for the last five hundred yards, but the noise was insufficient to rouse these country people from their first sleep. When the carriage had stopped, Roland opened the door, sprang out without touching the steps, and tugged at the bell-handle. Five minutes elapsed, and, after each peal, Roland turned to the carriage, saying: "Don't be impatient, Sir John."

At last a window opened and a childish but firm voice cried out: "Who is ringing that way?"

"Ah, is that you, little Edouard?" said Roland. "Make haste and let us in."

The child leaped back with a shout of delight and disappeared. But at the same time his voice was heard in the corridors, crying: "Mother! wake up; it is Roland! Sister! wake up; it is the big brother!"

Then, clad only in his night robe and his little slippers, he ran down the steps, crying: "Don't be impatient, Roland; here I am."

An instant later the key grated in the lock, and the bolts slipped back in their sockets. A white figure appeared in the portico, and flew rather than ran to the gate, which an instant later turned on its hinges and swung open. The child sprang upon Roland's neck and hung there.

"Ah, brother! Brother!" he exclaimed, embracing the young man, laughing and crying at the same time. "Ah, big brother Roland! How happy mother will be; and Amélie, too! Every body is well. I am the sickest--ah! except Michel, the gardener, you know, who has sprained his leg. But why aren't you in uniform? Oh! how ugly you are in citizen's clothes! Have you just come from Egypt? Did you bring me the silver-mounted pistols and the beautiful curved sword? No? Then you are not nice, and I won't kiss you any more. Oh, no, no! Don't be afraid! I love you just the same!"

And the boy smothered the big brother with kisses while he showered questions upon him. The Englishman, still seated in the carriage, looked smilingly through the window at the scene.

In the midst of these fraternal embraces came the voice of a woman; the voice of the mother.

"Where is he, my Roland, my darling son?" asked Madame de Montrevel, in a voice fraught with such violent, joyous emotion that it was almost painful. "Where is he? Can it be true that he has returned; really true that he is not a prisoner, not dead? Is he really living?"

The child, at her voice, slipped from his brother's arms like an eel, dropped upon his feet on the grass, and, as if moved by a spring, bounded toward his mother.

"This way, mother; this way!" said he, dragging his mother, half dressed as she was, toward Roland. When he saw his mother Roland could no longer contain himself. He felt the sort of icicle that had petrified his breast melt, and his heart beat like that of his fellowmen.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "I was indeed ungrateful to God when life still holds such joys for me."

And he fell sobbing upon Madame de Montrevel's neck without thinking of Sir John, who felt his English phlegm disperse as he silently wiped away the tears that flowed down his cheeks and moistened his lips. The child, the mother, and Roland formed an adorable group of tenderness and emotion.

Suddenly little Edouard, like a leaf tossed about by the wind, flew from the group, exclaiming: "Sister Amélie! Why, where is she?" and he rushed toward the house, repeating: "Sister Amélie, wake up! Get up! Hurry up!"

And then the child could be heard kicking and rapping against a door. Silence followed. Then little Edouard shouted: "Help, mother! Help, brother Roland! Sister Amélie is ill!"

Madame de Montrevel and her son flew toward the house. Sir John, consummate tourist that he was, always carried a lancet and a smelling bottle in his pocket. He jumped from the carriage and, obeying his first impulse, hurried up the portico. There he paused, reflecting that he had not been introduced, an all-important formality for an Englishman.

However, the fainting girl whom he sought came toward him at that moment. The noise her brother had made at the door brought Amélie to the landing; but, without doubt, the excitement which Roland's return had occasioned was too much for her, for after descending a few steps in an almost automatic manner, controlling herself by a violent effort, she gave a sigh, and, like a flower that bends, a branch that droops, like a scarf that floats, she fell, or rather lay, upon the stairs. It was at that moment that the child cried out.

But at his exclamation Amélie recovered, if not her strength, at least her will. She rose, and, stammering, "Be quiet, Edouard! Be quite, in Heaven's name! I'm all right," she clung to the balustrade with one hand, and leaning with the other on the child, she had continued to descend. On the last step she met her mother and her brother. Then with a violent, almost despairing movement, she threw both arms around Roland's neck, exclaiming: "My brother! My brother!"

Roland, feeling the young girl's weight press heavily upon his shoulder, exclaimed: "Air! Air! She is fainting!" and carried her out upon the portico. It was this new group, so different from the first, which met Sir John's eyes.

As soon as she felt the fresh air, Amélie revived and raised her head. Just then the moon, in all her splendor, shook off a cloud which had veiled her, and lighted Amélie's face, as pale as her own. Sir John gave a cry of admiration. Never had he seen a marble statue so perfect as this living marble before his eyes.

We must say that Amélie, seen thus, was marvelously beautiful. Clad in a long cambric robe, which defined the outlines of her body, molded on that of the Polyhymnia of antiquity, her pale face gently inclined upon her brother's shoulder, her long golden hair floating around her snowy shoulders, her arm thrown around her mother's neck, its rose-tinted alabaster hand drooping upon the red shawl in which Madame de Montrevel had wrapped herself; such was Roland's sister as she appeared to Sir John.

At the Englishman's cry of admiration, Roland remembered that he was there, and Madame de Montrevel perceived his presence. As for the child, surprised to see this stranger in his mother's home, he ran hastily down the steps of the portico, stopping on the third one, not that he feared to go further, but in order to be on a level with the person he proceeded to question.

"Who are you, sir!" he asked Sir John; "and what are you doing here?"

"My little Edouard," said Sir John, "I am your brother's friend, and I have brought you the silver-mounted pistols and the Damascus blade which he promised you."

"Where are they?" asked the child.

"Ah!" said Sir John, "they are in England, and it will take some time to send for them. But your big brother will answer for me that I am a man of my word."

"Yes, Edouard, yes," said Roland. "If Sir John promises them to you, you will get them." Then turning to Madame de Montrevel and his sister, "Excuse me, my mother; excuse me, Amélie; or rather, excuse yourselves as best you can to Sir John, for you have made me abominably ungrateful." Then grasping Sir John's hand, he continued: "Mother, Sir John took occasion the first time he saw me to render me an inestimable service. I know that you never forget such things. I trust, therefore, that you will always remember that Sir John is one of our best friends; and he will give you the proof of it by saying with me that he has consented to be bored for a couple of weeks with us."

"Madame," said Sir John, "permit me, on the contrary, not to repeat my friend Roland's words. I could wish to spend, not a fortnight, nor three weeks, but a whole lifetime with you."

Madame de Montrevel came down the steps of the portico and offered her hand to Sir John, who kissed it with a gallantry altogether French.

"My lord," said she, "this house is yours. The day you entered it has been one of joy, the day you leave will be one of regret and sadness."

Sir John turned toward Amélie, who, confused by the disorder of her dress before this stranger, was gathering the folds of her wrapper about her neck.

"I speak to you in my name and in my daughter's, who is still too much overcome by her brother's unexpected return to greet you herself as she will do in a moment," continued Madame de Montrevel, coming to Amélie's relief.

"My sister," said Roland, "will permit my friend Sir John to kiss her hand, and he will, I am sure, accept that form of welcome."

Amélie stammered a few words, slowly lifted her arm, and held out her hand to Sir John with a smile that was almost painful.

The Englishman took it, but, feeling how icy and trembling it was, instead of carrying it to his lips he said: "Roland, your sister is seriously indisposed. Let us think only of her health this evening. I am something of a doctor, and if she will deign to permit me the favor of feeling her pulse I shall be grateful."

But Amélie, as if she feared that the cause of her weakness might be surmised, withdrew her hand hastily, exclaiming: "Oh, no! Sir John is mistaken. Joy never causes illness. It is only joy at seeing my brother again which caused this slight indisposition, and it has already passed over." Then turning to Madame de Montrevel, she added with almost feverish haste: "Mother, we are forgetting that these gentlemen have made a long voyage, and have probably eaten nothing since Lyons. If Roland has his usual good appetite he will not object to my leaving you to do the honors of the house, while I attend to the unpoetical but much appreciated details of the housekeeping."

Leaving her mother, as she said, to do the honors of the house, Amélie went to waken the maids and the manservant, leaving on the mind of Sir John that sort of fairy-like impression which the tourist on the Rhine brings with him of the Lorelei on her rock, a lyre in her hand, the liquid gold of her hair floating in the evening breezes.

In the meantime, Morgan had remounted his horse, returning at full gallop to the Chartreuse. He drew rein before the portal, pulled out a note-book, and pencilling a few lines on one of the leaves, rolled it up and slipped it through the keyhole without taking time to dismount.

Then pressing in both his spurs, and bending low over the mane of the noble animal, he disappeared in the forest, rapid and mysterious as Faust on his way to the mountain of the witches' sabbath. The three lines he had written were as follows:

"Louis de Montrevel, General Bonaparte's aide-de-camp, arrived

this evening at the Château des Noires-Fontaines. Be careful,

Companions of Jehu!"

But, while warning his comrades to be cautious about Louis de Montrevel, Morgan had drawn a cross above his name, which signified that no matter what happened the body of the young officer must be considered as sacred by them.

The Companions of Jehu had the right to protect a friend in that way without being obliged to explain the motives which actuated them. Morgan used that privilege to protect the brother of his love.