Chapter 12

PROVINCIAL PLEASURES

That same day Roland put into execution part of his plans for his guest's amusement. He took Sir John to see the church of Brou.

Those who have seen the charming little chapel of Brou know that it is known as one of the hundred marvels of the Renaissance; those who have not seen it must have often heard it said. Roland, who had counted on doing the honors of this historic gem to Sir John, and who had not seen it for the last seven or eight years, was much disappointed when, on arriving in front of the building, he found the niches of the saints empty and the carved figures of the portal decapitated.

He asked for the sexton; people laughed in his face. There was no longer a sexton. He inquired to whom he should go for the keys. They replied that the captain of the gendarmerie had them. The captain was not far off, for the cloister adjoining the church had been converted into a barrack.

Roland went up to the captain's room and made himself known as Bonaparte's aide-de-camp. The captain, with the placid obedience of a subaltern to his superior officer, gave him the keys and followed behind him. Sir John was waiting before the porch, admiring, in spite of the mutilation to which they had been subjected, the admirable details of the frontal.

Roland opened the door and started back in astonishment. The church was literally stuffed with hay like a cannon charged to the muzzle.

"What does this mean?" he asked the captain of the gendarmerie.

"A precaution taken by the municipality."

"A precaution taken by the municipality?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"To save the church. They were going to demolish it; but the mayor issued a decree declaring that, in expiation of the false worship for which it had served, it should be used to store fodder."

Roland burst out laughing, and, turning to Sir John, he said: "My dear Sir John, the church was well worth seeing, but I think what this gentleman has just told us is no less curious. You can always find--at Strasburg, Cologne, or Milan--churches or cathedrals to equal the chapel of Brou; but where will you find an administration idiotic enough to destroy such a masterpiece, and a mayor clever enough to turn it into a barn? A thousand thanks, captain. Here are your keys."

"As I was saying at Avignon, the first time I had the pleasure of seeing you, my dear Roland," replied Sir John, "the French are a most amusing people."

"This time, my lord, you are too polite," replied Roland. "Idiotic is the word. Listen. I can understand the political cataclysms which have convulsed society for the last thousand years; I can understand the communes, the pastorals, the Jacquerie, the maillotins, the Saint Bartholomew, the League, the Fronde, the dragonnades, the Revolution; I can understand the 14th of July, the 5th and 6th of October, the 20th of June, the 10th of August, the 2d and 3d of September, the 21st of January, the 31st of May, the 30th of October, and the 9th Thermidor; I can understand the egregious torch of civil wars, which inflames instead of soothing the blood; I can understand the tidal wave of revolution, sweeping on with its flux, that nothing can arrest, and its reflux, which carries with it the ruins of the institution which it has itself shattered. I can understand all that, but lance against lance, sword against sword, men against men, a people against a people! I can

understand the deadly rage of the victors, the sanguinary reaction of the vanquished, the political volcanoes which rumble in the bowels of the globe, shake the earth, topple over thrones, upset monarchies, and roll heads and crowns on the scaffold. But what I cannot understand is this mutilation of the granite, this placing of monuments beyond the pale of the law, the destruction of inanimate things, which belong neither to those who destroy them nor to the epoch in which they are destroyed; this pillage of the gigantic library where the antiquarian can read the archeological history of a country. Oh! the vandals, the barbarians! Worse than that, the idiots! who revenge the Borgia crimes and the debauches of Louis XV. on stone. How well those Pharaohs, Menæs, and Cheops knew man as the most perversive, destructive and evil of animals! They who built their pyramids, not with carved traceries, nor lacy spires, but with solid blocks of granite fifty feet square! How they must have laughed in the depths of those sepulchres as they watched Time dull its scythe and pashas wear out their nails in vain against them. Let us build pyramids, my dear Sir John. They are not difficult as architecture, nor beautiful as art, but they are solid; and that enables a general to say four thousand years later: 'Soldiers, from the apex of these monuments forty centuries are watching you!' On my honor, my lord, I long to meet a windmill this moment that I might tilt against it."

And Roland, bursting into his accustomed laugh, dragged Sir John in the direction of the château. But Sir John stopped him and asked: "Is there nothing else to see in the city except the church?"

"Formerly, my lord," replied Roland, "before they made a hay-loft of it, I should have asked you to come down with me into the vaults of the Dukes of Savoy. We could have hunted for that subterranean passage, nearly three miles long, which is said to exist there, and which, according to these rumors, communicates with the grotto of Ceyzeriat. Please observe, I should never offer such a pleasure trip except to an Englishman; it would have been like a scene from your celebrated Anne Radcliffe in the 'Mysteries of Udolpho.' But, as you see, that is impossible, so we will have to be satisfied with our regrets. Come."

"Where are we going?"

"Faith, I don't know. Ten years ago I should have taken you to the farms where they fatten pullets. The pullets of Bresse, you must know, have a European reputation. Bourg was an annex to the great coop of Strasburg. But during the Terror, as you can readily imagine, these fatteners of poultry shut up shop. You earned the reputation of being an aristocrat if you ate a pullet, and you know the fraternal refrain: 'Ah, ça ira, ça ira--the aristocrats to the lantern!' After Robespierre's downfall they opened up again; but since the 18th of Fructidor, France has been commanded to fast, from fowls and all. Never mind; come on, anyway. In default of pullets, I can show you one thing, the square where they executed those who ate them. But since I was last in the town the streets have changed their names. I know the way, but I don't know the names."

"Look here!" demanded Sir John; "aren't you a Republican?"

"I not a Republican? Come, come! Quite to the contrary. I consider myself an excellent Republican. I am quite capable of burning off my hand, like Mucius Scævola, or jumping into the gulf like Curtius to save the Republic; but I have, unluckily, a keen sense of the ridiculous. In spite of myself, the absurdity of things catches me in the side and tickles me till I nearly die of laughing. I am willing to accept the Constitution of 1791; but when poor Hérault de Séchelles wrote to the superintendent of the National Library to send him a copy of the laws of Minos, so that he could model his constitution on that of the Isle of Crete, I thought it was going rather far, and that we might very well have been content with those of Lycurgus. I find January, February, and March, mythological as they were, quite as good as Nivose, Pluviose, and Ventose. I can't understand why, when one was called Antoine or Chrystomome in 1789, he should be called Brutus or Cassius in 1793. Here, for example, my lord, is an honest street, which was called the Rue des Halles (Market Street). There was nothing indecent or aristocratic about that, was there? Well, now it is called--Just wait (Roland read the inscription). Well, now it is called the Rue de la Révolution. Here's another, which used to be called Notre Dame; it is now the Rue du Temple. Why Rue du Temple? Probably to perpetuate the memory of that place where the infamous Simon tried to teach cobbling to the heir of sixty-three kings. Don't quarrel with me if I am mistaken by one or two! Now here's a third; it was named Crèvecoeur, a name famous throughout Bresse, Burgundy and Flanders. It is now the Rue de la Federation. Federation is a fine thing, but Crèvecoeur was a fine name. And then you see to-day it leads straight to the

Place de la Guillotine, which is, in my opinion, all wrong. I don't want any streets that lead to such places. This one has its advantages; it is only about a hundred feet from the prison, which economized and still economizes the tumbrel and the horse of M. de Bourg. By the way, have you noticed that the executioner remains noble and keeps his title? For the rest, the square is excellently arranged for spectators, and my ancestor, Montrevel, whose name it bears, doubtless, foreseeing its ultimate destiny, solved the great problem, still unsolved by the theatres, of being able to see well from every nook and corner. If ever they cut off my head, which, considering the times in which we are living, would in no wise be surprising, I shall have but one regret: that of being less well-placed and seeing less than the others. Now let us go up these steps. Here we are in the Place des Lices. Our Revolutionists left it its name, because in all probability they don't know what it means. I don't know much better than they, but I think I remember that a certain Sieur d'Estavayer challenged some Flemish count--I don't know who--and that the combat took place in this square. Now, my dear fellow, here is the prison, which ought to give you some idea of human vicissitudes. Gil Blas didn't change his condition more often than this monument its purposes. Before Cæsar it was a Gaelic temple; Cæsar converted it into a Roman fortress; an unknown architect transformed it into a military work during the Middle Ages; the Knights of Baye, following Cæsar's example, re-made it into a fortress; the princes of Savoy used it for a residence; the aunt of Charles V. lived here when she came to visit her church at Brou, which she never had the satisfaction of seeing finished. Finally, after the treaty of Lyons, when Bresse was returned to France, it was utilized both as a prison and a court-house. Wait for me a moment, my lord, if you dislike the squeaking of hinges and the grating of bolts. I have a visit to pay to a certain cell."

"The grating of bolts and the squeaking of hinges is not a very enlivening sound, but no matter. Since you were kind enough to undertake my education, show me your dungeon."

"Very well, then. Come in quickly. I see a crowd of persons who look as if they want to speak to me."

In fact, little by little, a sort of rumor seemed to spread throughout the town. People emerged from the houses, forming groups in the streets, and they all

watched Roland with curiosity. He rang the bell of the gate, situated then where it is now, but opening into the prison yard. A jailer opened it for them.

"Ah, ah! so you are still here, Father Courtois?" asked the young man. Then, turning to Sir John, he added: "A fine name for a jailer, isn't it, my lord?"

The jailer looked at the young man in amazement.

"How is it," he asked through the grating, "that you know my name, when I don't know yours?"

"Good! I not only know your name, but also your opinions. You are an old royalist, Père Courtois."

"Monsieur," said the jailer, terrified, "don't make bad jokes if you please, and say what you want."

"Well, my good Father Courtois, I would like to visit the cell where they put my mother and sister, Madame and Mademoiselle Montrevel."

"Ah!" exclaimed the gatekeeper, "so it's you, M. Louis? You may well say that I know you. What a fine, handsome young man you've grown to be!"

"Do you think so, Father Courtois? Well, I can return the compliment. Your daughter Charlotte is, on my word, a beautiful girl. Charlotte is my sister's maid, Sir John."

"And she is very happy over it. She is better off there than here, M. Roland. Is it true that you are General Bonaparte's aide-de-camp?"

"Alas! I have that honor, Courtois. You would prefer me to be Comte d'Artois's aide-de-camp, or that of M. le Duc of Angoulême?"

"Oh, do be quiet, M. Louis!" Then putting his lips to the young man's ear, "Tell me, is it true?"

"What, Father Courtois?"

"That General Bonaparte passed through Lyons yesterday?"

"There must be some truth in the rumor, for this is the second time that I have heard it. Ah! I understand now. These good people who were watching me so curiously apparently wanted to question me. They were like you, Father Courtois: they want to know what to make of General Bonaparte's arrival."

"Do you know what they say, M. Louis?"

"Still another rumor, Father Courtois?"

"I should think so, but they only whisper it."

"What is it?"

"They say that he has come to demand the throne of his Majesty Louis XVIII. from the Directory and the king's return to it; and that if Citizen Gohier as president doesn't give it up of his own accord he will take it by force."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the young officer with an incredulous air bordering on irony. But Father Courtois insisted on his news with an affirmative nod.

"Possibly," said the young man; "but as for that, it's news for me. And now that you know me, will you open the gate?"

"Of course I will. I should think so. What the devil am I about?" and the jailer opened the gate with an eagerness equalling his former reluctance. The young man entered, and Sir John followed him. The jailer locked the gate carefully, then he turned, followed by Roland and the Englishman in turn. The latter was beginning to get accustomed to his young friend's erratic character. The spleen he saw in Roland was misanthropy, without the sulkiness of Timon or the wit of Alceste.

The jailer crossed the yard, which was separated from the law courts by a wall fifteen feet high, with an opening let into the middle of the receding wall, closed by a massive oaken door, to admit prisoners without taking them round by the street. The jailer, we say, crossed the yard to a winding stairway in the left angle of the courtyard which led to the interior of the prison.

If we insist upon these details, it is because we shall be obliged to return to this spot later, and we do not wish it to be wholly unfamiliar to our readers when that time comes.

These steps led first to the ante-chamber of the prison, that is to say to the porter's hall of the lower court-room. From that hall ten steps led down into an inner court, separated from a third, which was that of the prisoners, by a wall similar to the one we have described, only this one had three doors. At the further end of the courtyard a passage led to the jailer's own room, which gave into a second passage, on which were the cells which were picturesquely styled cages. The jailer paused before the first of these cages and said, striking the door:

"This is where I put madame, your mother, and your sister, so that if the dear ladies wanted either Charlotte or myself, they need but knock."

"Is there any one in the cell?"

"No one"

"Then please open the door. My friend, Lord Tanlay, is a philanthropic Englishman who is travelling about to see if the French prisons are more comfortable than the English ones. Enter, Sir John."

Père Courtois having opened the door, Roland pushed Sir John into a perfectly square cell measuring ten or twelve feet each way.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed Sir John, "this is lugubrious."

"Do you think so? Well, my dear friend, this is where my mother, the noblest woman in the world, and my sister, whom you know, spent six weeks with a prospect of leaving it only to make the trip to the Place de Bastion. Just think, that was five years ago, so my sister was scarcely twelve."

"But what crime had they committed?"

"Oh! a monstrous crime. At the anniversary festival with which the town of Bourg considered proper to commemorate the death of the 'Friend of the People,' my mother refused to permit my sister to represent one of the virgins who bore the tears of France in vases. What will you! Poor woman, she thought she had done enough for her country in giving it the blood of her son and her husband, which was flowing in Italy and Germany. She was mistaken. Her country, as it seems, claimed further the tears of her daughter. She thought that too much, especially as those tears were to flow for the citizen Marat. The result was that on the very evening of the

celebration, during the enthusiastic exaltation, my mother was declared accused. Fortunately Bourg had not attained the celerity of Paris. A friend of ours, an official in the record-office, kept the affair dragging, until one fine day the fall and death of Robespierre were made known. That interrupted a good many things, among others the guillotinades. Our friend convinced the authorities that the wind blowing from Paris had veered toward clemency; they waited fifteen days, and on the sixteenth they told my mother and sister that they were free. So you understand, my friend--and this involves the most profound philosophical reflection--so that if Mademoiselle Teresa Cabarrus had not come from Spain, if she had not married M. Fontenay, parliamentary counsellor; had she not been arrested and brought before the pro-consul Tallien, son of the Marquis de Bercy's butler, ex-notary's clerk, ex-foreman of a printing-shop, ex-porter, ex-secretary to the Commune of Paris temporarily at Bordeaux; and had the ex-pro-consul not become enamored of her, and had she not been imprisoned, and if on the ninth of Thermidor she had not found means to send a dagger with these words: 'Unless the tyrant dies to-day, I die to-morrow'; had not Saint-Just been arrested in the midst of his discourse; had not Robespierre, on that day, had a frog in his throat; had not Garnier de l'Aube exclaimed: 'It is the blood of Danton choking you!' had not Louchet shouted for his arrest; had he not been arrested, released by the Commune, recaptured in spite of this, had his jaw broken by a pistol shot, and been executed next day--my mother would, in all probability, have had her head cut off for refusing to allow her daughter to weep for citizen Marat in one of the twelve lachrymal urns which Bourg was desirous of filling with its tears. Good-by, Courtois. You are a worthy man. You gave my mother and sister a little water to put with their wine, a little meat to eat with their bread, a little hope to fill their hearts; you lent them your daughter that they might not have to sweep their cell themselves. That deserves a fortune. Unfortunately I am not rich; but here are fifty louis I happen to have with me. Come, my lord."

And the young man carried off Sir John before the jailer, recovered from his surprise and found time either to thank Roland or refuse the fifty louis; which, it must be said, would have been a remarkable proof of disinterestedness in a jailer, especially when that jailer's opinions were opposed to those of the government he served.

Leaving the prison, Roland and Sir John found the Place des Lices crowded with people who had heard of General Bonaparte's return to France, and

were shouting "Vive Bonaparte!" at the top of their lungs--some because they really admired the victor of Arcola, Rivoli, and the Pyramids, others because they had been told, like Père Courtois, that this same victor had vanquished only that Louis XVIII. might profit by his victories.

Roland and Sir John, having now visited all that the town of Bourg offered of interest, returned to the Château des Noires-Fontaines, which they reached before long. Madame de Montrevel and Amélie had gone out. Roland installed Sir John in an easy chair, asking him to wait a few minutes for him. At the end of five minutes he returned with a sort of pamphlet of gray paper, very badly printed, in his hand.

"My dear fellow," said he, "you seemed to have some doubts about the authenticity of that festival which I just mentioned, and which nearly cost my mother and sister their lives, so I bring you the programme. Read it, and while you are doing so I will go and see what they have been doing with my dogs; for I presume that you would rather hold me quit of our fishing expedition in favor of a hunt."

He went out, leaving in Sir John's hands a copy of the decree of the municipality of the town of Bourg, instituting the funeral rites in honor of Marat, on the anniversary of his death.