

Chapter 18

THE TRIAL

The next day Roland, who had been unable to sleep till about two in the morning, woke about seven. Collecting his scattered wits, he recalled what had passed between Sir John and himself the night before, and was astonished that the Englishman had not wakened him. He dressed hastily and went to Sir John's room at the risk of rousing him from his first sleep.

He knocked at the door. Sir John made no answer. Roland knocked again, louder this time. The same silence. This time some uneasiness mingled with Roland's curiosity. The key was on the outside; the young officer opened the door, and cast a rapid glance around the room. Sir John was not there; he had not returned. The bed was undisturbed. What had happened?

There was not an instant to lose, and we may be sure that, with that rapidity of decision we know in Roland, he lost not an instant. He rushed to his room, finished dressing, put his hunting knife into his belt, slung his rifle over his shoulder and went out. No one was yet awake except the chambermaid. Roland met her on the stairs.

"Tell Madame de Montrevel," said he, "that I have gone into the forest of Seillon with my gun. She must not worry if Sir John and I are not on time for breakfast."

Then he darted rapidly away. Ten minutes later he reached the window where he had left Sir John the night before. He listened, not a sound came from within; the huntsman's ear could detect the morning woodland sounds, but no others. Roland climbed through the window with his customary agility, and rushed through the choir into the sacristy.

One look sufficed to show him that not only the choir but the entire chapel was empty. Had the spectres led the Englishman along the reverse of the way he had come himself? Possibly. Roland passed rapidly behind the altar,

into the vaults, where he found the gate open. He entered the subterranean cemetery. Darkness hid its depths. He called Sir John three times. No one answered.

He reached the second gate; it was open like the first. He entered the vaulted passage; only, as it would be impossible to use his gun in such darkness, he slung it over his shoulder and drew out his hunting-knife. Feeling his way, he continued to advance without meeting anybody, but the further he went the deeper became the darkness, which indicated that the stone in the cistern was closed. He reached the steps, and mounted them until his head touched the revolving stone; then he made an effort, and the block turned. Roland saw daylight and leaped into the cistern. The door into the orchard stood open. Roland passed through it, crossed that portion of the orchard which lay between the cistern and the corridor at the other end of which he had fired upon the phantom. He passed along the corridor and entered the refectory. The refectory was empty.

Again, as in the funereal passageway, Roland called three times. The wondering echo, which seemed to have forgotten the tones of the human voice, answered stammering. It was improbable that Sir John had come this way; it was necessary to go back. Roland retraced his steps, and found himself in the choir again. That was where Sir John had intended to spend the night, and there some trace of him must be found.

Roland advanced only a short distance, and then a cry escaped him. A large spot of blood lay at his feet, staining the pavement. On the other side of the choir, a dozen feet from the blood, was another stain, not less large, nor less red, nor less recent. It seemed to make a pendant for the first.

One of these stains was to the right, the other to the left of that sort of pedestal intended, as we have said, to support the eagle lectern--the pedestal which Sir John had selected for his place of waiting. Roland went up to it. It was drenched with blood! Evidently the drama had taken place on that spot; a drama which, if all the signs were true, must have been terrible.

Roland, in his double capacity of huntsman and soldier, was keen at a quest. He could calculate the amount of blood lost by a man who was dead, or by one who was only wounded. That night three men had fallen, either dead or wounded. What were the probabilities?

The two stains in the choir to the right and left of the pedestal were probably the blood of Sir John's two antagonists. That on the pedestal was probably his own. Attacked on both sides, right and left, he had fired with both hands, killing or wounding a man with each shot. Hence these two bloodstains which reddened the pavement. He himself must have been struck down beside the pedestal, on which his blood had spurted.

After a few seconds of examination, Roland was as sure of this as if he had witnessed the struggle with his own eyes. Now, what had been done with the bodies? He cared little enough about two of them; but he was determined to know what had become of that of Sir John.

A track of blood started from the pedestal and led straight to the door. Sir John's body had been carried outside. Roland shook the massive door. It was only latched, and opened at the first pressure. Outside the sill the tracks of blood still continued. Roland could see through the underbrush the path by which the body had been carried. The broken branches, the trampled grass, led Roland to the edge of the wood on the road leading from Pont d'Ain to Bourg. There the body, living or dead, seemed to have been laid on the bank of the ditch. Beyond that no traces whatever.

A man passed just then, coming from the direction of the Château des Noires-Fontaines. Roland went up to him.

"Have you seen anything on the road? Did you meet any one?" he inquired.

"Yes," replied the man, "I saw two peasants carrying a body on a litter."

"Ah!" cried Roland, "was it that of a living man?"

"The man was pale and motionless; he looked as if he were dead."

"Was the blood flowing?"

"I saw some drops on the road."

"In that case, he is living."

Then taking a louis from his pocket he said: "There's a louis for you. Run for Dr. Milliet at Bourg; tell him to get a horse and come at full speed to the Château des Noires-Fontaines. You can add that there is a man there in danger of dying."

While the peasant, stimulated by the reward, made all haste to Bourg, Roland, leaping along on his vigorous legs, was hurrying to the château.

And now, as our readers are, in all probability, as curious as Roland to know what had happened to Sir John, we shall give an account of the events of the night.

A few minutes before eleven, Sir John, as we have seen, entered what was usually known as La Corriere, or the pavilion of the Chartreuse, which was nothing more than a chapel erected in the woods. From the sacristy he entered the choir. It was empty and seemed solitary. A rather brilliant moon, veiled from time to time by a cloud, sent its bluish rays through the stained glass, cracked and broken, of the pointed windows. Sir John advanced to the middle of the choir, where he paused and remained standing beside the pedestal.

The minutes slipped away. But this time it was not the convent clock which marked the time, it was the church at Péronnaz; that is to say, the nearest village to the chapel where Sir John was watching.

Everything happened up to midnight just as it had to Roland. Sir John heard only the vague rustling and passing noises of the night.

Midnight sounded; it was the moment he awaited with impatience, for it was then that something would happen, if anything was to happen. As the last stroke died away he thought he heard footsteps underground, and saw a light appear behind the iron gate leading to the mortuary vault. His whole attention was fixed on that spot.

A monk emerged from the passage, his hood brought low over his eyes, and carrying a torch in his hand. He wore the dress of a Chartreux. A second one followed, then a third. Sir John counted twelve. They separated before the altar. There were twelve stalls in the choir; six to the right of Sir John, six to his left. The twelve monks silently took their places in the twelve stalls. Each one placed his torch in a hole made for that purpose in the oaken desk, and waited.

A thirteenth monk appeared and took his stand before the altar.

None of the monks affected the fantastic behavior of ghosts or shades; they all belonged undoubtedly to the earth, and were living men.

Sir John, a pistol in each hand, stood leaning against the pedestal in the middle of the choir, and watched with the utmost coolness this manoeuvre which tended to surround him. The monks were standing, like him, erect and silent.

The monk at the altar broke the silence.

"Brothers," he asked, "why are the Avengers assembled?"

"To judge a blasphemer!" replied the monks.

"What crime has this blasphemer committed?" continued the interlocutor.

"He has tried to discover the secrets of the Companions of Jehu."

"What penalty has he incurred?"

"Death."

The monk at the altar waited, apparently, to give time for the sentence which had just been pronounced to reach the heart of him whom it concerned. Then turning to the Englishman, who continued as calm as if he were at a comedy, he said: "Sir John Tanlay, you are a foreigner and an Englishman--a double reason why you should leave the Companions of Jehu to fight their own battles with the government, whose downfall they have sworn. You failed in wisdom, you yielded to idle curiosity; instead of keeping away, you have entered the lion's den, and the lion will rend you."

Then after an instant's silence, during which he seemed to await the Englishman's reply, he resumed, seeing that he remained silent: "Sir John Tanlay, you are condemned to death. Prepare to die!"

"Ah! I see that I have fallen into the hands of a band of thieves. If so, I can buy myself off with a ransom." Then turning to the monk at the altar he asked, "How much do you demand, captain?"

A threatening murmur greeted these insolent words. The monk at the altar stretched out his hand.

"You are mistaken, Sir John. We are not a band of thieves," said he in a tone as calm and composed as Sir John's, "and the proof is, that if you have money or jewels upon you, you need only give me your instructions, and they will be remitted either to your family or the person whom you designate."

"And what guarantee shall I have that my last wishes will be carried out?"

"My word."

"The word of the leader of assassins! I don't trust it."

"This time, as before, you are mistaken, Sir John. I am no more the leader of assassins than I am a captain of thieves."

"Who are you, then?"

"The elect of celestial vengeance. I am the envoy of Jehu, King of Israel, who was anointed by the prophet Elisha to destroy the house of Ahab."

"If you are what you say, why do you veil your faces? Why do you wear armor under your robes? The elect strike openly; they risk death in giving death. Throw back your hoods, show me your naked breasts, and I will admit that you are what you pretend to be."

"Brothers, you have heard him," said the monk at the altar.

Then, stripping off his gown, he opened his coat, waistcoat and even his shirt. Each monk did the same, and stood with face exposed and bared

breast. They were all handsome young men, of whom the eldest was apparently not more than thirty-five. Their dress was elegant, but, strange fact, none was armed. They were judges and nothing more.

"Be satisfied, Sir John Tanlay," said the monk at the altar. "You will die, but in dying, you can, as you wished just now, recognize and kill your judges. Sir John, you have five minutes to prepare your soul for death!"

Sir John, instead of profiting by this permission to think of his eternal salvation, coolly cocked his pistols to see that the triggers were all right, and passed a ramrod down the barrels to make sure that the balls were there. Then, without waiting for the five minutes to expire, he said: "Gentlemen, I am ready. Are you?"

The young men looked at each other; then, on a sign from their chief, they walked straight to Sir John, and surrounded him on all sides. The monk at the altar stood immovable, commanding with his eye the scene that was about to take place.

Sir John had only two pistols, consequently he could only kill two men. He selected his victims and fired. Two Companions of Jehu rolled upon the pavement, which they reddened with their blood. The others, as if nothing had happened, still advanced with outstretched hands upon Sir John. Sir John seized his pistols by the muzzle, using them like hammers. He was vigorous and the struggle was long. For ten minutes, a confused group tussled in the centre of the choir; then this violent commotion ceased, and the Companions of Jehu drew away to right and left, and regained their stalls, leaving Sir John bound with their girdles and lying upon the pedestal in the choir.

"Have you commended your soul to God?" asked the monk at the altar.

"Yes, assassin," answered Sir John; "you may strike."

The monk took a dagger from the altar, advanced with uplifted arm, and, standing over Sir John, levelled the dagger at his breast: "Sir John Tanlay," he said, "you are a brave man, and doubtless a man of honor. Swear that you will never breathe a syllable of what you have seen; swear that under no circumstances, whatever they may be, you will recognize us, and we will spare your life."

"As soon as I leave here," replied Sir John, "I shall denounce you. The moment I am free I will trail you down."

"Swear," repeated the monk a second time.

"No," said Sir John.

"Swear," said the monk for the third time.

"Never," replied Sir John.

"Then die, since you will it!"

And he drove his dagger up to the hilt in Sir John's breast; who, whether by force of will, or because the blow killed him at once, did not even sigh. Then the monk in a loud sonorous voice, like a man conscious of having done his duty, exclaimed: "Justice is done!"

Then he returned to the altar, leaving the dagger in the wound and said: "Brothers, you are invited to the ball of the Victims, which takes place in Paris on the 21st of January next, at No. 35 Rue du Bac, in memory of the death of King Louis XVI."

So saying, he re-entered the subterranean passage, followed by the remaining ten monks, each bearing his torch in his hand. Two torches remained to light the three bodies.

A moment later four serving brothers entered, and raised first the bodies of the two monks, which they carried into the vault. Then they returned, lifted that of Sir John, placed it on a stretcher, and carried it out of the chapel by the entrance door, which they closed after them. Two of the monks walked in front of the stretcher, carrying the two torches left in the chapel.

And now, if our readers ask why there was this difference between the treatment received by Roland and that administered to Sir John, why this mansuetude toward one and this rigor toward the other, we reply: Remember that Morgan enjoined on his brethren the safety of Amélie's brother, and thus safeguarded, under no circumstances could Roland die by the hand of a Companion of Jehu.