

Chapter 19

THE LITTLE HOUSE IN THE RUE DE LA VICTOIRE

While they are bearing Sir John Tanlay's body to the Château des Noires-Fontaines; while Roland is hurrying in the same direction; while the peasant, despatched by him, is hastening to Bourg to notify Dr. Milliet of the catastrophe which necessitated his immediate presence at Madame de Montrevel's home, let us jump over the distance which separates Bourg from Paris, and the time which elapsed between the 16th of October and the 7th of November; that is to say, between the 24th of Vendemiaire and the 16th Brumaire, and repair to that little house in the Rue de la Victoire rendered historically famous by the conspiracy of the 18th Brumaire, which issued from it fully armed.

It is the same house which stands there to-day on the right of the street at No. 60, apparently astonished to present to the eye, after so many successive changes of government, the consular fasces which may still be seen on the panels of its double oaken doors.

Let us follow the long, narrow alley of lindens that leads from the gate on the street to the door of the house; let us enter the antechamber, take the hall to the right, ascend the twenty steps that lead to a study hung with green paper, and furnished with curtains, easy chairs and couches of the same color. The walls are covered with geographical charts and plans of cities. Bookcases of maple are ranged on either side of the fireplace, which they inclose. The chairs, sofas, tables and desks are piled with books; there is scarcely any room on the chairs to sit down, or on the desks and tables to write.

In the midst of this encumbering mass of reports, letters, pamphlets and books, a man had cleared a space for himself where he was now seated, clutching his hair impatiently from time to time, as he endeavored to decipher a page of notes, compared to which the hieroglyphics on the obelisk of Luxor, would have been transparently intelligible. Just as the secretary's impatience was approaching desperation, the door opened and a young officer wearing an aide's uniform entered.

The secretary raised his head, and a lively expression of satisfaction crossed his face.

"Oh! my dear Roland," said he; "you here at last! I am delighted to see you, for three reasons. First, because I am wearying for you; second, because the general is impatient for your return, and keeps up a hullabaloo about it; and third, because you can help me to read this, with which I have been struggling for the last ten minutes. But first of all, kiss me."

And the secretary and the aide-de-camp embraced each other.

"Well," said the latter, "let us see this word that is troubling you so, my dear Bourrienne!"

"Ah! my dear fellow, what writing! I get a white hair for every page I decipher, and this is my third to-day! Here, read it if you can."

Roland took the sheet from the secretary, and fixing his eyes on the spot indicated, read quite fluently: "Paragraph XI. The Nile, from Assouan to a distance of twelve miles north of Cairo, flows in a single stream"--"Well," said he, interrupting himself, "that's all plain sailing. What did you mean? The general, on the contrary, took pains when he wrote that."

"Go on, go on," said Bourrienne.

The young man resumed: "'From that point, which is called'--ah! Ah!"

"There you are! Now what do you say to that?"

Roland repeated: "'Which is called'--The devil! 'Which is called--'"

"Yes, 'Which is called'--after that?"

"What will you give me, Bourrienne," cried Roland, "if I guess it?"

"The first colonel's commission I find signed in blank."

"By my faith, no! I don't want to leave the general; I'd rather have a good father than five hundred naughty children. I'll give you the three words for nothing."

"What! are there three words there?"

"They don't look as if they were quite three, I admit. Now listen, and make obeisance to me: 'From the point called Ventre della Vacca.'"

"Ha! Ventre de la Vache! Confound it! He's illegible enough in French, but if he takes it into his head to go off in Italian, and that Corsican patois to boot! I thought I only ran the risk of going crazy, but then I should become stupid, too. Well, you've got it," and he read the whole sentence consecutively: "'The Nile, from Assouan to a distance of twelve miles north of Cairo, flows in a single stream; from that point, which is called Ventre de la Vache, it forms the branches of the Rosetta and the Damietta.' Thank you, Roland," and he began to write the end of the paragraph, of which the first lines were already committed to paper.

"Tell me," said Roland; "is he still got his hobby, the dear general, of colonizing Egypt?"

"Yes; and then, as a sort of offset, a little governing in France; we will colonize from a distance."

"Well, my dear Bourrienne, suppose you post me a little on matters in this country, so that I won't seem to have just arrived from Timbuctoo."

"In the first place, did you come back of your own accord, or were you recalled?"

"Recalled? I should think so!"

"By whom?"

"The general himself."

"Special despatch?"

"Written by himself; see!"

The young man drew a paper from his pocket containing two lines, not signed, in the same handwriting as that which Bourrienne had before him. These two lines said: "'Start. Be in Paris 16th Brumaire. I need you."

"Yes," said Bourrienne, "I think it will be on the eighteenth."

"What will be on the eighteenth?"

"On my word, Roland, you ask more than I know. That man, as you are aware, is not communicative. What will take place on the 18th Brumaire? I don't know as yet; but I'll answer for it that something will happen."

"Oh! you must have a suspicion!"

"I think he means to make himself Director in place of Sièyes, or perhaps president in Gohier's stead."

"Good! How about the Constitution of the year III.?"

"The Constitution of the year III. What about that?"

"Why, yes, a man must be forty years old to be a Director; and the general lacks just ten of them."

"The deuce! so much the worse for the Constitution. They must violate it."

"It is rather young yet, Bourrienne; they don't, as a rule, violate children of seven."

"My dear fellow, in Barras' hands everything grows old rapidly. The little girl of seven is already an old prostitute."

Roland shook his head.

"Well, what is it?" asked Bourrienne.

"Why, I don't believe the general will make himself a simple Director with four colleagues. Just imagine it--five kings of France! It wouldn't be a Directory any longer, but a four-in-hand."

"Anyway, up to the present, that is all he has allowed any one to perceive; but you know, my dear friend, if we want to know the general's secrets we must guess them."

"Faith! I'm too lazy to take the trouble, Bourrienne. Besides, I'm a regular Janissary--what is to be, will be. Why the devil should I bother to form an opinion and battle for it. It's quite wearisome enough to have to live." And the young man enforced his favorite aphorism with a long yawn; then he added: "Do you think there will be any sword play?"

"Probably."

"Then there will be a chance of getting killed; that's all I want. Where is the general?"

"With Madame Bonaparte. He went to her about fifteen minutes ago. Have you let him know you are here?"

"No, I wanted to see you first. But I hear his step now."

Just then the door was opened abruptly, and the same historical personage whom we saw playing a silent part incognito at Avignon appeared on the threshold, in the picturesque uniform of the general-in-chief of the army of Egypt, except that, being in his own house, he was bare-headed. Roland thought his eyes were more hollow and his skin more leaden than usual. But the moment he saw the young man, Bonaparte's gloomy, or rather meditative, eye emitted a flash of joy.

"Ah, here you are, Roland!" he said. "True as steel! Called, you come. Welcome, my dear fellow." And he offered Roland his hand. Then he asked, with an imperceptible smile, "What were you doing with Bourrienne?"

"Waiting for you, general."

"And in the meantime gossiping like two old women."

"I admit it, general. I was showing him my order to be here on the 16th Brumaire."

"Did I write the 16th or the 17th?"

"Oh! the 16th, general. The 17th would have been too late."

"Why too late?"

"Why, hang it, Bourrienne says there are to be great doings here on the 18th."

"Capital," muttered Bourrienne; "the scatter-brain will earn me a wiggling."

"Ah! So he told you I had planned great doings for the 18th?" Then, approaching Bourrienne, Bonaparte pinched his ear, and said, "Tell-tale!" Then to Roland he added: "Well, it is so, my dear fellow, we have made great plans for the 18th. My wife and I dine with President Gohier; an excellent man, who was very polite to Josephine during my absence. You are to dine with us, Roland."

Roland looked at Bonaparte. "Was it for that you brought me here, general?" he asked, laughing.

"For that, and something else, too, perhaps. Bourrienne, write--"

Bourrienne hastily seized his pen.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, general."

"My dear President, I write to let you know that my wife and I, with one of my aides-de-camp, will dine with you the day after to-morrow. This is merely to say that we shall be quite satisfied with a family dinner."

"What next?"

"How do you mean?"

"Shall I put, 'Liberty, equality, fraternity'?"

"Or death," added Roland.

"No," said Bonaparte; "give me the pen."

He took the pen from Bourrienne's hands and wrote, "Ever yours, Bonaparte." Then, pushing away the paper, he added: "Address it, Bourrienne, and send an orderly with it."

Bourrienne wrote the address, sealed it, and rang the bell. An officer on duty entered.

"Send an orderly with that," said Bourrienne.

"There is an answer," added Bonaparte.

The officer closed the door.

"Bourrienne," said Bonaparte, pointing to Roland, "look at your friend."

"Well, general, I am looking at him."

"Do you know what he did at Avignon?"

"I hope he didn't make a pope."

"No, he threw a plate at a man's head."

"Oh, that was hasty!"

"That's not all."

"That I can well imagine."

"He fought a duel with that man."

"And, most naturally, he killed him."

"Exactly. Do you know why he did it?"

"No."

The general shrugged his shoulders, and said: "Because the man said that I was a thief." Then looking at Roland with an indefinable expression of raillery and affection, he added: "Ninny!" Then suddenly he burst out: "Oh! by the way, and the Englishman?"

"Exactly, the Englishman, general. I was just going to speak to you about him."

"Is he still in France?"

"Yes, and for awhile even I thought he would remain here till the last trumpet blew its blast through the valley of Jehosaphat."

"Did you miss killing him?"

"Oh! no, not I. We are the best friends in the world. General, he is a capital fellow, and so original to boot that I'm going to ask a bit of a favor for him."

"The devil! For an Englishman?" said Bonaparte, shaking his head. "I don't like the English."

"Good! As a people, but individually--"

"Well, what happened to your friend?"

"He was tried, condemned, and executed."

"What the devil are you telling us?"

"God's truth, general."

"What do you mean when you say, 'He was tried, condemned, and guillotined'?"

"Oh! not exactly that. Tried and condemned, but not guillotined. If he had been guillotined he would be more dangerously ill than he is now."

"Now, what are you gabbling about? What court tried and condemned him?"

"That of the Companions of Jehu!"

"And who are the Companions of Jehu?"

"Goodness! Have you forgotten our friend Morgan already, the masked man who brought back the wine-merchant's two hundred louis?"

"No," replied Bonaparte, "I have not forgotten him. I told you about the scamp's audacity, didn't I, Bourrienne?"

"Yes, general," said Bourrienne, "and I answered that, had I been in your place, I should have tried to find out who he was."

"And the general would know, had he left me alone. I was just going to spring at his throat and tear off his mask, when the general said, in that tone you know so well: 'Friend Roland!'"

"Come back to your Englishman, chatterbox!" cried the general. "Did Morgan murder him?"

"No, not he himself, but his Companions."

"But you were speaking of a court and a trial just now."

"General, you are always the same," said Roland, with their old school familiarity; "you want to know, and you don't give me time to tell you."

"Get elected to the Five Hundred, and you can talk as much as you like."

"Good! In the Five Hundred I should have four hundred and ninety-nine colleagues who would want to talk as much as I, and who would take the words out of my mouth. I'd rather be interrupted by you than by a lawyer."

"Will you go on?"

"I ask nothing better. Now imagine, general, there is a Chartreuse near Bourg--"

"The Chartreuse of Seillon; I know it."

"What! You know the Chartreuse of Seillon?" demanded Roland.

"Doesn't the general know everything?" cried Bourrienne.

"Well, about the Chartreuse; are there any monks there now?"

"No; only ghosts--"

"Are you, perchance, going to tell me a ghost-story?"

"And a famous one at that!"

"The devil! Bourrienne knows I love them. Go on."

"Well, we were told at home that the Chartreuse was haunted by ghosts. Of course, you understand that Sir John and I, or rather I and Sir John, wanted to clear our minds about it. So we each spent a night there."

"Where?"

"Why, at the Chartreuse."

Bonaparte made an imperceptible sign of the cross with his thumb, a Corsican habit which he never lost.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "did you see any ghosts?"

"One."

"And what did you do to it?"

"Shot at it."

"And then?"

"It walked away."

"And you allowed yourself to be baffled?"

"Good! How well you know me! I followed it, and fired again. But as he knew his way among the ruins better than I, he escaped me."

"The devil!"

"The next day it was Sir John's turn; I mean our Englishman."

"Did he see your ghost?"

"He saw something better. He saw twelve monks enter the church, who tried him for trying to find out their secrets, condemned him to death, and who, on my word of honor, stabbed him."

"Didn't he defend himself?"

"Like a lion. He killed two."

"Is he dead?"

"Almost, but I hope he will recover. Just imagine, general; he was found by the road, and brought home with a dagger in his breast, like a prop in a vineyard."

"Why, it's like a scene of the Sainte-Vehme, neither more nor less."

"And on the blade of the dagger, that there might be no doubt as to who did the deed, were graven the words: 'Companions of Jehu.'"

"Why, it isn't possible that such things can happen in France, in the last year of the eighteenth century. It might do for Germany in the Middle Ages, in the days of the Henrys and the Ottos."

"Not possible, general? But here is the dagger. What do you say to that? Attractive, isn't it?"

And the young man drew from under his coat a dagger made entirely of steel, blade and handle. The handle was shaped like a cross, and on the blade, sure enough, were engraved the words, "Companions of Jehu."

Bonaparte examined the weapon carefully.

"And you say they planted that plaything in your Englishman's breast?"

"Up to the hilt."

"And he's not dead?"

"Not yet, at any rate."

"Have you been listening, Bourrienne?"

"With the greatest interest."

"You must remind me of this, Roland."

"When, general?"

"When?--when I am master. Come and say good-day to Josephine. Come, Bourrienne, you will dine with us, and be careful what you say, you two, for Moreau is coming to dinner. Ah! I will keep the dagger as a curiosity."

He went out first, followed by Roland, who was, soon after, followed by Bourrienne. On the stairs they met the orderly who had taken the note to Gohier.

"Well?" asked the general.

"Here is the President's answer."

"Give it to me."

Bonaparte broke the seal, and read:

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The President Gohier is enchanted the good fortune promised him by General Bonaparte. He will expect him to dinner the day after to-morrow, the 18th Brumaire, with his charming wife, and the aide-de-camp, whoever he may be. Dinner will be served at five o'clock. If the hour does not suit General Bonaparte, will he kindly make known the one he would prefer. The President, GOHIER.

16th Brumaire, year VII.-

With an indescribable smile, Bonaparte put the letter in his pocket. Then turning to Roland, he asked: "Do you know President Gohier?"

"No, general."

"Ah! you'll see; he's an excellent man."

These words were pronounced in a tone no less indescribable than the smile.