Chapter 20

THE GUESTS OF GENERAL BONAPARTE

Josephine, in spite of her thirty-four years, or possibly because of them (that enchanting age when woman hovers between her passing youth and her corning age), Josephine, always beautiful, more graceful than ever, was still the charming woman we all know. An imprudent remark of Junot's, at the time of her husband's return, had produced a slight coolness between them. But three days had sufficed to restore to the enchantress her full power over the victor of Rivoli and the Pyramids.

She was doing the honors of her salon, when Roland entered the room. Always incapable, like the true Creole she was, of controlling her emotions, she gave a cry of joy, and held out her hand to him. She knew that Roland was devoted to her husband; she knew his reckless bravery, knew that if the young man had twenty lives he would willingly have given them all for Bonaparte. Roland eagerly took the hand she offered him, and kissed it respectfully. Josephine had known Roland's mother in Martinique; and she never failed, whenever she saw Roland, to speak to him of his maternal grandfather, M. de la Clémencière, in whose magnificent garden as a child she was wont to gather those wonderful fruits which are unknown in our colder climates.

A subject of conversation was therefore ready at hand. She inquired tenderly after Madame de Montrevel's health, and that of her daughter and little Edouard. Then, the information given, she said: "My dear Roland, I must now pay attention to my other guests; but try to remain after the other guests, or else let me see you alone to-morrow. I want to talk to you about _him_" (she glanced at Bonaparte) "and have a thousand things to tell you." Then, pressing the young man's hand with a sigh, she added, "No matter what happens, you will never leave him, will you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Roland, amazed.

"I know what I mean," said Josephine, "and when you have talked ten minutes with Bonaparte you will, I am sure, understand me. In the meantime watch, and listen, and keep silence."

Roland bowed and drew aside, resolved, as Josephine had advised, to play the part of observer.

But what was there to observe? Three principal groups occupied the salon. The first, gathered around Madame Bonaparte, the only woman present, was more a flux and reflux than a group. The second, surrounding Talma, was composed of Arnault, Parseval-Grandmaison, Monge, Berthollet, and two or three other members of the Institute. The third, which Bonaparte had just joined, counted in its circle Talleyrand, Barras, Lucien, Admiral Bruix, [Footnote: AUTHOR'S NOTE.--Not to be confounded with Rear-Admiral de Brueys, who was killed at Aboukir, August 1, 1798. Admiral Bruix, the negotiator with Talleyrand of the 18th Brumaire, did not die until 1805.] Roederer, Regnaud de Saint-Jean-d'Angely, Fouché, Réal, and two or three generals, among whom was Lefebvre.

In the first group they talked of fashions, music, the theatre; in the second, literature, science, dramatic art; in the third, they talked of everything except that which was uppermost in their minds. Doubtless this reserve was not in keeping with Bonaparte's own feeling at the moment; for after sharing in this commonplace conversation for a short time, he took the former bishop of Autun by the arm and led him into the embrasure of the window.

"Well?" he asked.

Talleyrand looked at Bonaparte with that air which belonged to no one but him.

"What did I tell you of Sièyes, general?"

"You told me to secure the support of those who regarded the friends of the Republic as Jacobins, and to rely, upon it that Sièyes was at their head."

"I was not mistaken."

"Then he will yield?"

"Better, he has yielded."

"The man who wanted to shoot me at Fréjus for having landed without being quarantined!"

"Oh, no; not for that."

"But what then?"

"For not having looked at him or spoken to him at Gohier's dinner."

"I must confess that I did it on purpose. I cannot endure that unfrocked monk."

Bonaparte perceived, too late, that the speech he had just made was like the sword of the archangel, double-edged; if Sièyes was unfrocked, Talleyrand was unmitred. He cast a rapid glance at his companion's face; the ex-bishop of Autun was smiling his sweetest smile.

"Then I can count upon him?"

"I will answer for him."

"And Cambacérès and Lebrun, have you seen them?"

"I took Sièyes in hand as the most recalcitrant. Bruix saw the other two."

The admiral, from the midst of the group, had never taken his eyes off of the general and the diplomatist. He suspected that their conversation had a special importance. Bonaparte made him a sign to join them. A less able man would have done so at once, but Bruix avoided such a mistake. He walked about the room with affected indifference, and then, as if he had just perceived Talleyrand and Bonaparte talking together, he went up to them.

"Bruix is a very able man!" said Bonaparte, who judged men as much by little as by great things.

"And above all very cautious, general!" said Talleyrand.

"Yes. We will need a corkscrew to pull anything out of him."

"Oh, no; on the contrary, now that he has joined us, he, will broach the question frankly."

And, indeed, no sooner had Bruix joined them than he began in words as clear as they were concise: "I have seen them; they waver!"

"They waver! Cambacérès and Lebrun waver? Lebrun I can understand--a sort of man of letters, a moderate, a Puritan; but Cambacérès--"

"But it is so."

"But didn't you tell them that I intended to make them each a consul?"

"I didn't get as far as that," replied Bruix, laughing.

"And why not?" inquired Bonaparte.

"Because this is the first word you have told me about your intentions, Citizen General."

"True," said Bonaparte, biting his lips.

"Am I to repair the omission?" asked Bruix.

"No, no," exclaimed Bonaparte hastily; "they might think I needed them. I won't have any quibbling. They must decide to-day without any other conditions than those you have offered them; to-morrow it will be too late. I feel strong enough to stand alone; and I now have Sièyes and Barras."

"Barras?" repeated the two negotiators astonished.

"Yes, Barras, who treated me like a little corporal, and wouldn't send me back to Italy, because, he said, I had made my fortune there, and it was useless to return. Well, Barras--"

"Barras?"

"Nothing." Then, changing his mind, "Faith! I may as well tell you. Do you know what Barras said at dinner yesterday before me? That it was impossible to go on any longer with the Constitution of the year III. He admitted the necessity of a dictatorship; said he had decided to abandon the reins of government, and retire; adding that he himself was looked upon as worn-out, and that the Republic needed new men. Now, guess to whom he thinks of transferring his power. I give it you, as Madame de Sévigné says, in a hundred, thousand, ten thousand. No other than General Hedouville, a worthy man, but I have only to look him in the face to make him lower his eyes. My glance must have been blasting! As the result, Barras came to my bedside at eight o'clock, to excuse himself as best he could for the nonsense he talked the night before, and admitted that I alone could save the Republic, and placed himself at my disposal, to do what I wished, assume any rôle I might assign him, begging me to promise that if I had any plan in my head I would count on him--yes, on him; and he would be true to the crack of doom."

"And yet," said Talleyrand, unable to resist a play upon words, "doom is not a word with which to conjure liberty."

Bonaparte glanced at the ex-bishop.

"Yes, I know that Barras is your friend, the friend of Fouché and Réal; but he is not mine, and I shall prove it to him. Go back to Lebrun and Cambacérès, Bruix, and let them make their own bargain." Then, looking at his watch and frowning, he added: "It seems to me that Moreau keeps us waiting."

So saying, he turned to the group which surrounded Talma. The two diplomatists watched him. Then Admiral Bruix asked in a low voice: "What do you say, my dear Maurice, to such sentiments toward the man who picked him out, a mere lieutenant, at the siege of Toulon, who trusted him to defend the Convention on the 13th Vendémiaire, and who named him, when only twenty-six, General-in-Chief of the Army in Italy?"

"I say, my dear admiral," replied M. de Talleyrand, with his pallid mocking smile, "that some services are so great that ingratitude alone can repay them."

At that moment the door opened and General Moreau was announced. At this announcement, which was more than a piece of news--it was a surprise to most of those present--every eye was turned toward the door. Moreau appeared.

At this period three men were in the eyes of France. Moreau was one of these three men. The two others were Bonaparte and Pichegru. Each had become a sort of symbol. Since the 18th Fructidor, Pichegru had become the symbol of monarchy; Moreau, since he had been christened Fabius, was the symbol of the Republic; Bonaparte, symbol of war, dominated them both by the adventurous aspect of his genius.

Moreau was at that time in the full strength of his age; we would say the full strength of his genius, if decision were not one of the characteristics of genius. But no one was ever more undecided than the famous cunctator. He was thirty-six years old, tall, with a sweet, calm, firm countenance, and must have resembled Xenophon.

Bonaparte had never seen him, nor had he, on his side, ever seen Bonaparte. While the one was battling on the Adige and the Mincio, the other fought beside the Danube and the Rhine. Bonaparte came forward to greet him, saying: "You are welcome, general!"

"General," replied Moreau, smiling courteously, while all present made a circle around them to see how this new Cæsar would meet the new Pompey, "you come from Egypt, victorious, while I come, defeated, from Italy."

"A defeat which was not yours, and for which you are not responsible, general. It was Joubert's fault. If he had rejoined the Army of Italy as soon as he had been made commander-in-chief, it is more than probable that the

Russians and Austrians, with the troops they then had, could not have resisted him. But he remained in Paris for his honeymoon! Poor Joubert paid with his life for that fatal month which gave the enemy time to gather its reinforcements. The surrender of Mantua gave them fifteen thousand men on the eve of the battle. It was impossible that our poor army should not have been overwhelmed by such united forces."

"Alas! yes," said Moreau; "it is always the greater number which defeats the smaller."

"A great truth, general," exclaimed Bonaparte; "an indisputable truth."

"And yet," said Arnault, joining in the conversation, "you yourself, general, have defeated large armies with little ones."

"If you were Marius, instead of the author of 'Marius,' you would not say that, my dear poet. Even when I beat great armies with little ones--listen to this, you young men who obey to-day, and will command to-morrow--it was always the larger number which defeated the lesser."

"I don't understand," said Arnault and Lefebvre together.

But Moreau made a sign with his head to show that he understood. Bonaparte continued: "Follow my theory, for it contains the whole art of war. When with lesser forces I faced a large army, I gathered mine together, with great rapidity, fell like a thunderbolt on a wing of the great army, and overthrew it; then I profited by the disorder into which this manoeuvre never failed to throw the enemy to attack again, always with my whole army, on the other side. I beat them, in this way, in detail; and the victory which resulted was always, as you see, the triumph of the many over the few."

As the able general concluded his definition of his own genius, the door opened and the servant announced that dinner was served.

"General," said Bonaparte, leading Moreau to Josephine, "take in my wife. Gentlemen, follow them."

On this invitation all present moved from the salon to the dining-room.

After dinner, on pretence of showing him a magnificent sabre he had brought from Egypt, Bonaparte took Moreau into his study. There the two rivals remained closeted more than an hour. What passed between them? What compact was signed? What promises were made? No one has ever known. Only, when Bonaparte returned to the salon alone, and Lucien asked him: "Well, what of Moreau?" he answered: "Just as I foresaw; he prefers military power to political power. I have promised him the command of an army." Bonaparte smiled as he pronounced these words; then added, "In the meantime--"

"In the meantime?" questioned Lucien.

"He will have that of the Luxembourg. I am not sorry to make him the jailer of the Directors, before I make him the conqueror of the Austrians."

The next day the following appeared in the "Moniteur":

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PARIS, 17th Brumaire. Bonaparte has presented Moreau with a magnificent Damascus sword set with precious stones which he brought from Egypt, the value of which is estimated at twelve thousand francs.