

Chapter 23

ALEA JACTA EST

At seven in the morning, Fouché, minister of police, entered the bedroom of Gohier, president of the Directory.

"Oh, ho!" said Gohier, when he saw him. "What has happened now, monsieur le ministre, to give me the pleasure of seeing you so early?"

"Don't you know about the decree?" asked Fouché.

"What decree?" asked honest Gohier.

"The decree of the Council of the Ancients."

"When was it issued?"

"Last night."

"So the Council of the Ancients assembles at night now?"

"When matters are urgent, yes."

"And what does the decree say."

"It transfers the legislative sessions to Saint-Cloud."

Gohier felt the blow. He realized the advantage which Bonaparte's daring genius might obtain by this isolation.

"And since when," he asked Fouché, "is the minister of police transformed into a messenger of the Council of the Ancients?"

"That's where you are mistaken, citizen president," replied the ex-Conventional. "I am more than ever minister of police this morning, for I have come to inform you of an act which may have the most serious consequences."

Not being as yet sure of how the conspiracy of the Rue de la Victoire would turn out, Fouché was not averse to keeping open a door for retreat at the Luxembourg. But Gohier, honest as he was, knew the man too well to be his dupe.

"You should have informed me of this decree yesterday, and not this morning; for in making the communication now you are scarcely in advance of the official communication I shall probably receive in a few moments."

As he spoke, an usher opened the door and informed the president that a messenger from the Inspectors of the Council of the Ancients was there, and asked to make him a communication.

"Let him come in," said Gohier.

The messenger entered and handed the president a letter. He broke the seal hastily and read:

CITIZEN PRESIDENT--The Inspecting Commission hasten to inform you of a decree removing the residence of the legislative body

to Saint-Cloud. The decree will be forwarded to you; but measures for public

safety are at present occupying our attention. We invite you to meet the Commission of the Ancients. You will

find Sièyes and Ducos already there. Fraternal greetings

BARILLON,

FARGUES,

CORNET,

"Very good," said Gohier, dismissing the messenger with a wave of his hand.

The messenger went out. Gohier turned to Fouché.

"Ah!" said he, "the plot is well laid; they inform me of the decree, but they do not send it to me. Happily you are here to tell me the terms of it."

"But," said Fouché, "I don't know them."

"What! do you the minister of police, mean to tell me that you know nothing about this extraordinary session of the Council of the Ancients, when it has been put on record by a decree?"

"Of course I knew it took place, but I was unable to be present."

"And you had no secretary, no amanuensis to send, who could give you an account, word for word, of this session, when in all probability this session will dispose of the fate of France! Ah, citizen Fouché, you are either a very deep, or a very shallow minister of police!"

"Have you any orders to give me, citizen president?" asked Fouché.

"None, citizen minister," replied the president. "If the Directory judges it advisable to issue any orders, it will be to men whom it esteems worthy of its confidence. You may return to those who sent you," he added, turning his back upon the minister.

Fouché went, and Gohier immediately rang his bell. An usher entered.

"Go to Barras, Sièyes, Ducos, and Moulins, and request them to come to me at once. Ah! And at the same time ask Madame Gohier to come into my study, and to bring with her Madame Bonaparte's letter inviting us to breakfast with her."

Five minutes later Madame Gohier entered, fully dressed, with the note in her hand. The invitation was for eight o'clock. It was then half-past seven, and it would take at least twenty minutes to drive from the Luxembourg to the Rue de la Victoire.

"Here it is, my dear," said Madame Gohier, handing the letter to her husband. "It says eight o'clock."

"Yes," replied Gohier, "I was not in doubt about the hour, but about the day."

Taking the note from his wife's hand, he read it over:

Come, my dear Gohier, with your wife, and breakfast with me to-morrow at eight o'clock. Don't fail, for I have some very interesting things to tell you.

"Ah," said Gohier, "there can be no mistake."

"Well, my dear, are we going?" asked Madame Gohier.

"You are, but not I. An event has just happened about which the citizen Bonaparte is probably well-informed, which will detain my colleagues and myself at the Luxembourg."

"A serious event?"

"Possibly."

"Then I shall stay with you."

"No, indeed; you would not be of any service here. Go to Madame Bonaparte's. I may be mistaken, but, should anything extraordinary happen, which appears to you alarming, send me word some way or other. Anything will do; I shall understand half a word."

"Very good, my dear; I will go. The hope of being useful to you is sufficient."

"Do go!"

Just then the usher entered, and said:

"General Moulins is at my heels; citizen Barras is in his bath, and will soon be here; citizens Sièyes and Ducos went out at five o'clock this morning, and have not yet returned."

"They are the two traitors!" said Gohier; "Barras is only their dupe." Then kissing his wife, he added: "Now, go."

As she turned round, Madame Gohier came face to face with General Moulins. He, for his character was naturally impetuous, seemed furious.

"Pardon me, citizeness," he said. Then, rushing into Gohier's study, he cried: "Do you know what has happened, president?"

"No, but I have my suspicions."

"The legislative body has been transferred to Saint-Cloud; the execution of the decree has been intrusted to General Bonaparte, and the troops are placed under his orders."

"Ha! The cat's out of the bag!" exclaimed Gohier.

"Well, we must combine, and fight them."

"Have you heard that Sièyes and Ducos are not in the palace?"

"By Heavens! they are at the Tuileries! But Barras is in his bath; let us go to Barras. The Directory can issue decrees if there is a majority. We are three, and, I repeat it, we must make a struggle!"

"Then let us send word to Barras to come to us as soon as he is out of his bath."

"No; let us go to him before he leaves it."

The two Directors left the room, and hurried toward Barras' apartment. They found him actually in his bath, but they insisted on entering.

"Well?" asked Barras as soon as he saw them.

"Have you heard?"

"Absolutely nothing."

They told him what they themselves knew.

"Ah!" cried Barras, "that explains everything."

"What do you mean?"

"Yes, that is why he didn't come last night."

"Who?"

"Why, Bonaparte."

"Did you expect him last evening?"

"He sent me word by one of his aides-de-camp that he would call on me at eleven o'clock last evening."

"And he didn't come?"

"No. He sent Bourrienne in his carriage to tell me that a violent headache had obliged him to go to bed; but that he would be here early this morning."

The Directors looked at each other.

"The whole thing is plain," said they.

"I have sent Bollot, my secretary, a very intelligent fellow, to find out what he can," continued Barras.

He rang and a servant entered.

"As soon as citizen Bollot returns," said Barras, "ask him to come here."

"He is just getting out of his carriage."

"Send him up! Send him up!"

But Bollot was already at the door.

"Well?" cried the three Directors.

"Well, General Bonaparte, in full uniform, accompanied by Generals Beurnonville, Macdonald and Moreau, are on their way to the Tuileries, where ten thousand troops are awaiting them."

"Moreau! Moreau with him!" exclaimed Gohier.

"On his right!"

"I always told you that Moreau was a sneak, and nothing else!" cried Moulins, with military roughness.

"Are you still determined to resist, Barras?" asked Gohier.

"Yes," replied Barras.

"Then dress yourself and join us in the council-room."

"Go," said Barras, "I follow you."

The two Directors hastened to the council-room. After waiting ten minutes Moulins said: "We should have waited for Barras; if Moreau is a sneak, Barras is a knave."

Two hours later they were still waiting for Barras.

Talleyrand and Bruix had been admitted to Barras' bathroom just after Gohier and Moulins had left it, and in talking with them Barras forgot his appointment.

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We will now see what was happening in the Rue de la Victoire.

At seven o'clock, contrary to his usual custom, Bonaparte was up and waiting in full uniform in his bedroom. Roland entered. Bonaparte was perfectly calm; they were on the eve of a battle.

"Has no one come yet, Roland?" he asked.

"No, general," replied the young man, "but I heard the roll of a carriage just now."

"So did I," replied Bonaparte.

At that minute a servant announced: "The citizen Joseph Bonaparte, and the citizen General Bernadotte."

Roland questioned Bonaparte with a glance; was he to go or stay? He was to stay. Roland took his stand at the corner of a bookcase like a sentinel at his post.

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed Bonaparte, seeing that Bernadotte was still attired in civilian's clothes, "you seem to have a positive horror of the uniform, general!"

"Why the devil should I be in uniform at seven in the morning," asked Bernadotte, "when I am not in active service?"

"You will be soon."

"But I am retired."

"Yes, but I recall you to active service."

"You?"

"Yes, I."

"In the name of the Directory?"

"Is there still a Directory?"

"Still a Directory? What do you mean?"

"Didn't you see the troops drawn up in the streets leading to the Tuileries as you came here?"

"I saw them, and I was surprised."

"Those soldiers are mine."

"Excuse me," said Bernadotte; "I thought they belonged to France."

"Oh, to France or to me; is it not all one?"

"I was not aware of that," replied Bernadotte, coldly.

"Though you doubt it now, you will be certain of it tonight. Come, Bernadotte, this is the vital moment; decide!"

"General," replied Bernadotte, "I am fortunate enough to be at this moment a simple citizen; let me remain a simple citizen."

"Bernadotte, take care! He that is not for me is against me."

"General, pay attention to your words! You said just now, 'Take care.' If that is a threat, you know very well that I do not fear them."

Bonaparte came up to him, and took him by both hands.

"Oh, yes, I know that; that is why I must have you with me. I not only esteem you, Bernadotte, but I love you. I leave you with Joseph; he is your brother-in-law. Between brothers, devil take it, there should be no quarrelling."

"Where are you going?"

"In your character of Spartan you are a rigid observer of the laws, are you not? Well, here is a decree issued by the Council of Five Hundred last night, which confers upon me the immediate command of the troops in Paris. So I was right," he added, "when I told you that the soldiers you met were mine, inasmuch as they are under my orders."

And he placed in Bernadotte's hands the copy of the decree which had been sent to him at six o'clock that morning. Bernadotte read it through from the first line to the last.

"To this," said he, "I have nothing to object. Secure the safety of the National Legislature, and all good citizens will be with you."

"Then be with me now."

"Permit me, general, to wait twenty-four hours to see how you fulfil that mandate."

"Devil of a man!" cried Bonaparte. "Have your own way." Then, taking him by the arm, he dragged him a few steps apart from Joseph, and continued, "Bernadotte, I want to play above-board with you."

"Why so," retorted the latter, "since I am not on your side?"

"Never mind. You are watching the game, and I want the lookers-on to see that I am not cheating."

"Do you bind me to secrecy?"

"No."

"That is well, for in that case I should have refused to listen to your confidences."

"Oh! my confidences are not long! Your Directory is detested, your Constitution is worn-out; you must make a clean sweep of both, and turn the government in another direction. You don't answer me."

"I am waiting to hear what you have to say."

"All I have to say is, Go put on your uniform. I can't wait any longer for you. Join me at the Tuileries among our comrades."

Bernadotte shook his head.

"You think you can count on Moreau, Beurnonville, and Lefebvre," resumed Bonaparte. "Just look out of that window. Who do you see there, and there? Moreau and Beurnonville. As for Lefebvre, I do not see him, but I am certain I shall not go a hundred steps before meeting him. Now will you decide?"

"General," replied Bernadotte, "I am not a man to be swayed by example, least of all when that example is bad. Moreau, Beurnonville, and Lefebvre may do as they wish. I shall do as I ought!"

"So you definitively refuse to accompany me to the Tuileries?"

"I do not wish to take part in a rebellion."

"A rebellion! A rebellion! Against whom? Against a parcel of imbeciles who are pettifogging from morning till night in their hovels."

"These imbeciles, general, are for the moment the representatives of the law. The Constitution protects them; they are sacred to me."

"At least promise me one thing, iron rod that you are."

"What is it?"

"To keep quiet."

"I will keep quiet as a citizen, but--"

"But what? Come, I made a clean breast of it to you; do you do likewise."

"But if the Directory orders me to act, I shall march against the agitators, whoever they may be."

"Ah! So you think I am ambitious?" asked Bonaparte.

"I suspect as much," retorted Bernadotte, smiling.

"Faith," said Bonaparte, "you don't know me. I have had enough of politics, and what I want is peace. Ah, my dear fellow! Malmaison and fifty thousand a year, and I'd willingly resign all the rest. You don't believe me. Well, I invite you to come and see me there, three months hence, and if you like pastorals, we'll do one together. Now, au revoir! I leave you with Joseph, and, in spite of your refusal, I shall expect you at the Tuileries. Hark! Our friends are becoming impatient."

They were shouting: "Vive Bonaparte!"

Bernadotte paled slightly. Bonaparte noticed this pallor.

"Ah, ha," he muttered. "Jealous! I was mistaken; he is not a Spartan, he is an Athenian!"

As Bonaparte had said, his friends were growing impatient. During the hour that had elapsed since the decree had been posted, the salon, the anterooms, and the courtyard had been crowded. The first person Bonaparte met at the head of the staircase was his compatriot, Colonel Sebastiani, then commanding the 9th Dragoons.

"Ah! is that you, Sebastiani?" said Bonaparte. "Where are your men?"

"In line along the Rue de la Victoire, general."

"Well disposed?"

"Enthusiastic! I distributed among them ten thousand cartridges which I had in store."

"Yes; but you had no right to draw those cartridges out without an order from the commandant of Paris. Do you know that you have burned your vessels, Sebastiani?"

"Then take me into yours, general. I have faith in your fortunes."

"You mistake me for Cæsar, Sebastiani!"

"Faith! I might make worse mistakes. Besides, down below in the courtyard there are forty officers or more, of all classes, without pay, whom the Directory has left in the most complete destitution for the last year. You are their only hope, general; they are ready to die for you."

"That's right. Go to your regiment, and take leave of it."

"Take leave of it? What do you mean, general?"

"I exchange it for a brigade. Go, go!"

Sebastiani did not wait to be told twice. Bonaparte continued his way. At the foot of the stairs he met Lefebvre.

"Here I am, general!" said Lefebvre.

"You? And where is the 17th military division?"

"I am waiting for my appointment to bring it into action."

"Haven't you received your appointment?"

"From the Directory, yes. But as I am not a traitor, I have just sent in my resignation, so that they may know I am not to be counted on."

"And you have come for me to appoint you, so that I may count on you, is that it?"

"Exactly."

"Quick, Roland, a blank commission; fill in the general's name, so that I shall only have to put my name to it. I'll sign it on the pommel of my saddle."

"That's the true sort," said Lefebvre.

"Roland."

The young man, who had already started obediently, came back to the general.

"Fetch me that pair of double-barrelled pistols on my mantel-piece at the same time," said Bonaparte, in a low tone. "One never knows what may happen."

"Yes, general," said Roland; "besides, I shan't leave you."

"Unless I send you to be killed elsewhere."

"True," replied the young man, hastening away to fulfil his double errand.

Bonaparte was continuing on his way when he noticed a shadow in the corridor. He recognized Josephine, and ran to her.

"Good God!" cried she, "is there so much danger?"

"What makes you think that?"

"I overheard the order you gave Roland."

"Serves you right for listening at doors. How about Gohier?"

"He hasn't come."

"Nor his wife?"

"She is here."

Bonaparte pushed Josephine aside with his hand and entered the salon. He found Madame Gohier alone and very pale.

"What!" said he, without any preamble, "isn't the President coming?"

"He was unable to do so, general," replied Madame Gohier.

Bonaparte repressed a movement of impatience. "He absolutely must come," said he. "Write him that I await him, and I will have the note sent."

"Thank you, general," replied Madame Gohier; "my servants are here, and they can attend to that."

"Write, my dear friend, write," said Josephine, offering her paper and pen and ink.

Bonaparte stood so that he could see over her shoulder what she wrote. Madame Gohier looked fixedly at him, and he drew back with a bow. She wrote the note, folded it, and looked about her for the sealing-wax; but, whether by accident or intention, there was none. Sealing the note with a wafer, she rang the bell. A servant came.

"Give this note to Comtois," said Madame Gohier, "and bid him take it to the Luxembourg at once."

Bonaparte followed the servant, or rather the letter, with his eyes until the door closed. Then, turning to Madame Gohier, he said: "I regret that I am unable to breakfast with you. But if the President has business to attend to, so have I. You must breakfast with my wife. Good appetite to you both."

And he went out. At the door he met Roland.

"Here is the commission, general," said the young man, "and a pen."

Bonaparte took the pen, and using the back of his aide-de-camp's hat, he signed the commission. Roland gave him the pistols.

"Did you look; to them?" asked Bonaparte.

Roland smiled. "Don't be uneasy," said he; "I'll answer for them."

Bonaparte slipped the pistols in his belt, murmuring as he did so: "I wish I knew what she wrote her husband."

"I can tell you, word for word, what she wrote, general," said a voice close by.

"You, Bourrienne?"

"Yes. She wrote: 'You did right not to come, my dear; all that is happening here convinces me that the invitation was only a snare. I will rejoin you shortly.'"

"You unsealed the letter?"

"General, Sextus Pompey gave a dinner on his galley to Antony and Lepidus. His freedman said to him: 'Shall I make you emperor of the world?' 'How can you do it?' 'Easily. I will cut the cable of your galley, and Antony and Lepidus are prisoners.' 'You should have done so without telling me,' replied Sextus. 'Now I charge you on your life not to do it.' I remembered those words, general: '_You should have done so without telling me_'."

Bonaparte thought an instant; then he said: "You are mistaken; it was Octavius and not Antony who was on Sextus' galley with Lepidus." And he went on his way to the courtyard, confining his blame to the historical blunder.

Hardly had the general appeared on the portico than cries of "Vive Bonaparte!" echoed through the courtyard into the street, where they were taken up by the dragoons drawn up in line before the gate.

"That's a good omen, general," said Roland.

"Yes. Give Lefebvre his commission at once; and if he has no horse, let him take one of mine. Tell him to meet me in the court of the Tuileries."

"His division is already there."

"All the more reason."

Glancing about him, Bonaparte saw Moreau and Beurnonville, who were waiting for him, their horses held by orderlies. He saluted them with a wave of his hand, already that of a master rather than that of a comrade. Then, perceiving General Debel out of uniform, he went down the steps and approached him.

"Why are you in civilian's dress?" he asked.

"General, I was not notified. I chanced to be passing along the street, and, seeing the crowd before your house, I came in, fearing you might be in danger."

"Go and put on your uniform quickly."

"But I live the other side of Paris; it would take too long." But, nevertheless, he made as if to retire.

"What are you going to do?"

"Don't be alarmed, general."

Debel had noticed an artilleryman on horseback who was about his size.

"Friend," said he, "I am General Debel. By order of General Bonaparte lend me your uniform and your horse, and I'll give you furlough for the day. Here's a louis to drink the health of the commander-in-chief. To-morrow, come to my house for your horse and uniform. I live in the Rue Cherche-Midi, No. 11."

"Will nothing be done to me?"

"Yes, you shall be made a corporal."

"Good!" said the artilleryman; and he quickly handed over his uniform and horse to General Debel.

In the meantime, Bonaparte heard talking above him. He raised his head and saw Joseph and Bernadotte at a window.

"Once more, general," he said to Bernadotte, "will you come with me?"

"No," said the latter, firmly. Then, lowering his tone, he continued: "You told me just now to take care."

Yes."

"Well, I say to you, take care."

"Of what?"

"You are going to the Tuileries?"

"Of course."

"The Tuileries are very near the Place de la Révolution."

"Pooh!" retorted Bonaparte, "the guillotine has been moved to the Barrière du Trône."

"Never mind. The brewer Santerre still controls the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and Santerre is Moulins' friend."

"Santerre has been warned that at the first inimical movement he attempts I will have him shot. Will you come?"

"No."

"As you please. You are separating your fortunes from mine; I do not separate mine from yours." Then, calling to his orderly, he said: "My horse!"

They brought his horse. Seeing an artillery private near him, he said: "What are you doing among the epaulets?"

The artilleryman began to laugh.

"Don't you recognize me, general?" he asked.

"Faith, it's Debel! Where did you get that horse and the uniform?"

"From that artilleryman you see standing there in his shirt. It will cost you a corporal's commission."

"You are wrong, Debel," said Bonaparte; "it will cost me two commissions, one for the corporal, and one for the general of division. Forward, march, gentlemen! We are going to the Tuileries."

And, bending forward on his horse, as he usually did, his left hand holding a slack rein, his right resting on his hip, with bent head and dreamy eyes, he made his first steps along that incline, at once glorious and fatal, which was to lead him to a throne--and to St. Helena.