Chapter 25

AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION

Some time after this military revolution, which created a great stir in Europe, convulsing the Continent for a time, as a tempest convulses the ocean--some time after, we say, on the morning of the 30th Nivoise, better and more clearly known to our readers as the 20th of January, 1800, Roland, in looking over the voluminous correspondence which his new office entailed upon him, found, among fifty other letters asking for an audience, the following:

MONSIEUR THE GOVERNOR-I know your loyalty to your word, and you will see that I rely on it. I wish to speak to you for five minutes, during which I must remain masked. I have a request to make to you. This request you will grant or deny. In either case, as I shall have entered the Palace of the Luxembourg in the interest o£ the First Consul, Bonaparte, and the royalist party to which I belong, I shall ask for your word of honor that I be allowed to leave it as freely as you allow me to enter. If to-morrow, at seven in the evening, I see a solitary light in the window over the clock, I shall know that Colonel Roland de Montrevel has pledged me his word of honor, and I shall boldly present myself at the little door of the left wing of the palace, opening on the garden. I shall strike three blows at intervals, after the manner of the free-masons. In order that you may know to whom you engage or refuse your word, I sign a name which is known to you, that name having been, under circumstances you have probably not forgotten, pronounced before you. MORGAN,

Chief of the Companions of Jehu.

Roland read the letter twice, thought it over for a few moments, then rose suddenly, and, entering the First Consul's study, handed it to him silently. The latter read it without betraying the slightest emotion, or even surprise; then, with a laconism that was wholly Lacedæmonian, he said: "Place the light."

Then he gave the letter back to Roland.

The next evening, at seven o'clock, the light shone in the window, and at five minutes past the hour, Roland in person was waiting at the little door of the garden. He had scarcely been there a moment when three blows were struck on the door after the manner of the free-masons; first two strokes and then one.

The door was opened immediately. A man wrapped in a cloak was sharply defined against the grayish atmosphere of the wintry night. As for Roland, he was completely hidden in shadow. Seeing no one, the man in the cloak remained motionless for a second.

"Come in," said Roland.

"Ah! it is you, colonel!"

"How do you know it is I?" asked Roland.

"I recognize your voice."

"My voice! But during those few moments we were together in the dining-room at Avignon I did not say a word."

"Then I must have heard it elsewhere."

Roland wondered where the Chief of the Companions of Jehu could have heard his voice, but the other said gayly: "Is the fact that I know your voice any reason why we should stand at the door?"

"No, indeed," replied Roland; "take the lapel of my coat and follow me. I purposely forbade any lights being placed in the stairs and hall which lead to my room."

"I am much obliged for the intention. But on your word I would cross the palace from one end to the other, though it were lighted _à giorno_, as the Italians say."

"You have my word," replied Roland, "so follow me without fear."

Morgan needed no encouragement; he followed his guide fearlessly. At the head of the stairs Roland turned down a corridor equally dark, went twenty steps, opened a door, and entered his own room. Morgan followed him. The room was lighted by two wax candles only. Once there, Morgan took off his cloak and laid his pistols on the table.

"What are you doing?" asked Roland.

"Faith! with your permission," replied Morgan, gayly, "I am making myself comfortable."

"But those pistols you have just laid aside--"

"Ah! did you think I brought them for you?"

"For whom then?"

"Why, that damned police! You can readily imagine that I am not disposed to let citizen Fouché lay bold of me, without burning the mustache of the first of his minions who lays hands on me."

"But once here you feel you have nothing to fear?"

"The deuce!" exclaimed the young man; "I have your word."

"Then why don't you unmask?"

"Because my face only half belongs to me; the other half belongs to my companions. Who knows if one of us being recognized might not drag the others to the guillotine? For of course you know, colonel, we don't hide from ourselves that that is the price of our game!"

"Then why risk it?"

"Ah! what a question. Why do you venture on the field of battle, where a bullet may plow through your breast or a cannon-ball lop off your head?"

"Permit me to say that that is different. On the battlefield I risk an honorable death."

"Ah! do you suppose that on the day I get my head cut off by the revolutionary triangle I shall think myself dishonored? Not the least in the world. I am a soldier like you, only we can't all serve our cause in the same

way. Every religion has its heroes and its martyrs; happy the heroes in this world, and happy the martyrs in the next."

The young man uttered these words with a conviction which moved, or rather astonished, Roland.

"But," continued Morgan, abandoning his enthusiasm to revert to the gayety which seemed the distinctive trait of his character, "I did not come here to talk political philosophy. I came to ask you to let me speak to the First Consul."

"What! speak to the First Consul?" exclaimed Roland.

"Of course. Read my letter over; did I not tell you that I had a request to make?"

"Yes."

"Well, that request is to let me speak to General Bonaparte."

"But permit me to say that as I did not expect that request--"

"It surprises you; makes you uneasy even. My dear colonel, if you don't believe my word, you can search me from head to foot, and you will find that those pistols are my only weapons. And I haven't even got them, since there they are on your table. Better still, take one in each hand, post yourself between the First Consul and me, and blowout my brains at the first suspicious move I make. Will that suit you?"

"But will you assure me, if I disturb the First Consul and ask him to see you, that your communication is worth the trouble?"

"Oh! I'll answer for that," said Morgan. Then, in his joyous tones, he added: "I am for the moment the ambassador of a crowned, or rather discrowned, head, which makes it no less reverenced by noble hearts. Moreover, Monsieur Roland, I shall take up very little of your general's time; the moment the conversation seems too long, he can dismiss me. And I assure you he will not have to say the word twice."

Roland was silent and thoughtful for a moment.

"And it is to the First Consul only that you can make this communication?"

"To the First Consul only, as he alone can answer me."

"Very well. Wait until I take his orders."

Roland made a step toward the general's room; then he paused and cast an uneasy look at a mass of papers piled on his table. Morgan intercepted this look.

"What!" he said, "you are afraid I shall read those papers in your absence? If you only knew how I detest reading! If my death-warrant lay on that table, I wouldn't take the trouble to read it. I should consider that the clerk's business. And every one to his own task. Monsieur Roland, my feet are cold, and I will sit here in your easy-chair and warm them. I shall not stir till you return."

"Very good, monsieur," said Roland, and he went to the First Consul.

Bonaparte was talking with General Hedouville, commanding the troops of the Vendée. Hearing the door open, he turned impatiently.

"I told Bourrienne I would not see any one."

"So he told me as I came in, but I told him that I was not any one."

"True. What do you want? Be quick."

"He is in my room."

"Who?"

"The man of Avignon."

"Ah, ha! And what does he want?"

"To see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes, you, general. Does that surprise you?"

"No. But what can he want to say to me?"

"He refused obstinately to tell me. But I dare answer for it that he is neither importunate nor a fool."

"No, but he may be an assassin."

Roland shook his head.

"Of course, since you introduce him--"

"Moreover, he is willing that I should be present at the conference and stand between you and him."

Bonaparte reflected an instant.

"Bring him in," he said.

"You know, general, that except me--"

"Yes, General Hedouville will be so kind as to wait a second. Our conversation is of a nature that is not exhausted in one interview. Go, Roland."

Roland left the room, crossed Bourrienne's office, reentered his own room, and found Morgan, as he had said, warming his feet.

"Come, the First Consul is waiting for you," said the young man.

Morgan rose and followed Roland. When they entered Bonaparte's study the latter was alone. He cast a rapid glance on the chief of the Companions of Jehu, and felt no doubt that he was the same man he had seen at Avignon.

Morgan had paused a few steps from the door, and was looking curiously at Bonaparte, convincing himself that he was the man he had seen at the table d'hôte the day he attempted the perilous restoration of the two hundred louis stolen by an oversight from Jean Picot.

"Come nearer," said the First Consul.

Morgan bowed and made three steps forward. Bonaparte partly returned the bow with a slight motion of the head.

"You told my aide-de-camp, Colonel Roland, that you had a communication to make me."

"Yes, citizen First Consul."

"Does that communication require a private interview?"

"No, citizen First Consul, although it is of such importance--"

"You would prefer to be alone."

"Beyond doubt. But prudence--"

"The most prudent thing in France, citizen Morgan, is courage."

"My presence here, general, proves that I agree with you perfectly."

Bonaparte turned to the young colonel.

"Leave us alone, Roland," said he.

"But, general--" objected Roland.

Bonaparte went up to him and said in a low voice: "I see what it is. You are curious to know what this mysterious cavalier of the highroad has to say to me. Don't worry; you shall know."

"That's not it. But suppose, as you said just now, he is an assassin."

"Didn't you declare he was not. Come, don't be a baby; leave us."

Roland went out.

"Now that we are alone, sir," said the First Consul, "speak!"

Morgan, without answering, drew a letter from his pocket and gave it to the general. Bonaparte examined it. It was addressed to him, and the seal bore the three fleurs-de-lis of France.

"Oh!" he said, "what is this, sir?"

"Read it, citizen First Consul."

Bonaparte opened the letter and looked at the signature: "Louis," he said.

"Louis," repeated Morgan.

"What Louis?"

"Louis de Bourbon, I presume."

"Monsieur le Comte de Provençe, brother of Louis XVI."

"Consequently Louis XVIII., since his nephew, the Dauphin, is dead."

Bonaparte looked at the stranger again. It was evident that Morgan was a pseudonym, assumed to hide his real name. Then, turning his eyes on the letter, he read:

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January 3, 1800. Whatever may be their apparent conduct, monsieur, men like you never inspire distrust. You have accepted an exalted post, and I thank you for so doing. You know, better than others, that force and power are needed to make the happiness of a great nation. Save France from her own madness, and you will fulfil the desire of my heart; restore her king, and future generations will bless your memory. If you doubt my gratitude, choose your own place, determine the future of your friends. As for my principles, I am a Frenchman, clement by nature, still more so by judgment. No! the conqueror of Lodi, Castiglione and Arcola, the conqueror of Italy and Egypt, cannot prefer an empty

celebrity to fame. Lose no more precious time. We can secure the glory of France. I say we, because I have need of Bonaparte for that which he cannot achieve without me. General, the eyes of Europe are upon you, glory awaits you, and I am eager to restore my people to happiness. LOUIS.-

Bonaparte turned to the young man, who stood erect, motionless and silent as a statue.

"Do you know the contents of this letter?" he asked.

The young man bowed. "Yes, citizen First Consul."

"It was sealed, however."

"It was sent unsealed under cover to the person who intrusted it to me. And before doing so he made me read it, that I might know its full importance."

"Can I know the name of the person who intrusted it to you?"

"Georges Cadoudal."

Bonaparte started slightly.

"Do you know Georges Cadoudal?" he asked.

"He is my friend."

"Why did he intrust it to you rather than to another?"

"Because he knew that in telling me to deliver the letter to you with my own hand it would be done."

"You have certainly kept your promise, sir."

"Not altogether yet, citizen First Consul."

"How do you mean? Haven't you delivered it to me?"

"Yes, but I promised to bring back an answer."

"But if I tell you I will not give one."

"You will have answered; not precisely as I could have wished, but it will be an answer."

Bonaparte reflected for a few moments. Then shaking his shoulders to rid himself of his thoughts, he said: "They are fools."

"Who, citizen?" asked Morgan.

"Those who write me such letters--fools, arch fools. Do they take me for a man who patterns his conduct by the past? Play Monk! What good would it do? Bring back another Charles II.? No, faith, it is not worth while. When a man has Toulon, the 13th Vendemiaire, Lodi, Castiglione, Arcola, Rivoli and the Pyramids behind him, he's no Monk. He has the right to aspire to more

than a duchy of Albemarle, and the command by land and sea of the forces of his Majesty King Louis XVIII."

"For that reason you are asked to make your own conditions, citizen First Consul."

Bonaparte started at the sound of that voice as if he had forgotten that any one was present.

"Not counting," he went on, "that it is a ruined family, a dead branch of a rotten trunk. The Bourbons have so intermarried with one another that the race is depraved; Louis XIV. exhausted all its sap, all its vigor.--You know history, sir?" asked Bonaparte, turning to the young man.

"Yes, general," he replied; "at least as well as a _ci-devant_ can know it."

"Well, you must have observed in history, especially in that of France, that each race has its point of departure, its culmination, and its decadence. Look at the direct line of the Capets; starting from Hugues Capet, they attained their highest grandeur in Philippe Auguste and Louis XI., and fell with Philippe V. and Charles IV. Take the Valois; starting with Philippe VI., they culminated in François I. and fell with Charles IX. and Henry III. See the Bourbons; starting with Henry IV., they have their culminating point in Louis XIV. and fall with Louis XV. and Louis XVI.--only they fall lower than the others; lower in debauchery with Louis XV., lower in misfortune with Louis XVI. You talk to me of the Stuarts, and show me the example of Monk. Will you tell me who succeeded Charles II.? James II. And who to James II.? William of Orange, a usurper. Would it not have been better, I ask you, if Monk had put the crown on his own head? Well, if I was fool enough to restore Louis XVIII. to the throne, like Charles II. he would have no children, and, like James II., his brother Charles X. would succeed him, and like him would be driven out by some William of Orange. No, no! God has not put the destiny of this great and glorious country we call France into my hands that I should cast it back to those who have gambled with it and lost it."

"Permit me, general, to remark that I did not ask you for all this."

"But I, I ask you--"

"I think you are doing me the honor to take me for posterity."

Bonaparte started, turned round, saw to whom he was speaking, and was silent.

"I only want," said Morgan, with a dignity which surprised the man whom he addressed, "a yes or a no."

"And why do you want that?"

"To know whether we must continue to war against you as an enemy, or fall at your feet as a savior."

"War," said Bonaparte, "war! Madmen, they who war with me! Do they not see that I am the elect of God?"

"Attila said the same thing."

"Yes; but he was the elect of destruction; I, of the new era. The grass withered where he stepped; the harvest will ripen where I pass the plow. War? Tell me what has become of those who have made it against me? They lie upon the plains of Piedmont, of Lombardy and Cairo!"

"You forget the Vendée; the Vendée is still afoot."

"Afoot, yes! but her leaders? Cathelineau, Lescure, La Rochejaquelin, d'Elbée, Bonchamps, Stoffiet, Charette?"

"You are speaking of men only; the men have been mown down, it is true; but the principle is still afoot, and for it are fighting Autichamp, Suzannet, Grignon, Frotté, Châtillon, Cadoudal. The younger may not be worth the elder, but if they die as their elders died, what more can you ask?"

"Let them beware! If I determine upon a campaign against the Vendée I shall send neither Santerre nor Rossignol!"

"The Convention sent Kléber, and the Directory, Hoche!"

"I shall not send; I shall go myself."

"Nothing worse can happen to them than to be killed like Lescure, or shot like Charette."

"It may happen that I pardon them."

"Cato taught us how to escape the pardon of Cæsar."

"Take care; you are quoting a Republican!"

"Cato was one of those men whose example can be followed, no matter to what party they belong."

"And suppose I were to tell you that I hold the Vendée in the hollow of my hand?"

"You!"

"And that within three months, she will lay down her arms if I choose?"

The young man shook his head.

"You don't believe me?"

"I hesitate to believe you."

"If I affirm to you that what I say is true; if I prove it by telling you the means, or rather the men, by whom I shall bring this about?"

"If a man like General Bonaparte affirms a thing, I shall believe it; and if that thing is the pacification of the Vendée, I shall say in my turn: 'Beware! Better the Vendée fighting than the Vendée conspiring. The Vendée fighting means the sword, the Vendée conspiring means the dagger.'"

"Oh! I know your dagger," said Bonaparte. "Here it is."

And he drew from a drawer the dagger he had taken from Roland and laid it on the table within reach of Morgan's hand.

"But," he added, "there is some distance between Bonaparte's breast and an assassin's dagger. Try."

And he advanced to the young man with a flaming eye.

"I did not come here to assassinate you," said the young man, coldly. "Later, if I consider your death indispensable to the cause, I shall do all in my power, and if I fail it will not be because you are Marius and I the Cimbrian. Have you anything else to say to me, citizen First Consul?" concluded the young man, bowing.

"Yes. Tell Cadoudal that when he is ready to fight the enemy, instead of Frenchmen, I have a colonel's commission ready signed in my desk for him."

"Cadoudal commands, not a regiment, but an army. You were unwilling to retrograde from Bonaparte to Monk; why should you expect him to descend from general to colonel? Have you nothing else to say to me, citizen First Consul?"

"Yes. Have you any way of transmitting my reply to the Comte de Provençe?"

"You mean King Louis XVIII.?"

"Don't let us quibble over words. To him who wrote to me."

"His envoy is now at the camp at Aubiers."

"Well, I have changed my mind; I shall send him an answer. These Bourbons are so blind that this one would misinterpret my silence."

And Bonaparte, sitting down at his desk, wrote the following letter with a care that showed he wished to make it legible:

I have received your letter, monsieur. I thank you for the good

opinion you express in it of me. You must not wish for your return to France; it could only be over a hundred thousand dead bodies. Sacrifice your own interests to the repose and welfare of France. History will applaud you. I am not insensible to the misfortunes of your family, and I shall hear with pleasure that you are surrounded with all that could contribute to the tranquillity of your retreat. BONAPARTE.

Then, folding and sealing the letter, he directed it to "Monsieur le Comte de Provençe," and handed it to Morgan. Then he called Roland, as if he knew the latter were not far off.

"General?" said the young officer, appearing instantly.

"Conduct this gentleman to the street," said Bonaparte. "Until then you are responsible for him."

Roland bowed in sign of obedience, let the young man, who said not a word, pass before him, and then followed. But before leaving, Morgan cast a last glance at Bonaparte.

The latter was still standing, motionless and silent, with folded arms, his eyes fixed upon the dagger, which occupied his thoughts far more than he was willing to admit even to himself.

As they crossed Roland's room, the Chief of the Companions of Jehu gathered up his cloak and pistols. While he was putting them in his belt, Roland remarked: "The citizen First Consul seems to have shown you a dagger which I gave him."

"Yes, monsieur," replied Morgan.

"Did you recognize it?"

"Not that one in particular; all our daggers are alike."

"Well," said Roland, "I will tell you whence it came."

"Ah! where was that?"

"From the breast of a friend of mine, where your Companions, possibly you yourself, thrust it."

"Possibly," replied the young man carelessly. "But your friend must have exposed himself to punishment."

"My friend wished to see what was happening at night in the Chartreuse."

"He did wrong."

"But I did the same wrong the night before, and nothing happened to me."

"Probably because some talisman protects you."

"Monsieur, let me tell you something. I am a straight-forward man who walks by daylight. I have a horror of all that is mysterious."

"Happy those who can walk the highroads by daylight, Monsieur de Montrevel!"

"That is why I am going to tell you the oath I made, Monsieur Morgan. As I drew the dagger you saw from my friend's breast, as carefully as possible, that I might not draw his soul with it, I swore that henceforward it should be war to the death between his assassins and myself. It was largely to tell you that that I gave you a pledge of safety."

"That is an oath I hope to see you forget, Monsieur de Montrevel."

"It is an oath I shall keep under all circumstances, Monsieur Morgan; and you would be most kind if you would furnish me with an opportunity as soon as possible."

"In what way, sir?"

"Well, for example, by accepting a meeting with me, either in the Bois de Boulogne or at Vincennes. We don't need to say that we are fighting because you or one of your friends stabbed Lord Tanlay. No; we can say anything you please." (Roland reflected a moment.) "We can say the duel is on account of the eclipse that takes place on the 12th of next month. Does the pretext suit you?"

"The pretext would suit me," replied Morgan, in a tone of sadness of which he seemed incapable, "if the duel itself could take place. You have taken an oath, and you mean to keep it, you say. Well, every initiate who enters the Company of Jehu swears that he will not expose in any personal quarrel a life that belongs to the cause and not to himself."

"Oh! So that you assassinate, but will not fight."

"You are mistaken. We sometimes fight."

"Have the goodness to point out an occasion when I may study that phenomenon."

"Easily enough. If you and five or six men, as resolute as yourself, will take your places in some diligence carrying government money, and will defend it against our attack, the occasion you seek will come. But, believe me, do better than that; do not come in our way."

"Is that a threat, sir?" asked the young man, raising his head.

"No," replied Morgan, in a gentle, almost supplicating voice, "it is an entreaty."

"Is it addressed to me in particular, or would you include others?"

"I make it to you in particular;" and the chief of the Companions of Jehu dwelt upon the last word.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man, "then I am so fortunate as to interest you?"

"As a brother," replied Morgan, in the same soft, caressing tone.

"Well, well," said Roland, "this is decidedly a wager,"

Bourrienne entered at that moment.

"Roland," he said, "the First Consul wants you."

"Give me time to conduct this gentleman to the street, and I'll be with him."

"Hurry up; you know he doesn't like to wait."

"Will you follow me, sir?" Roland said to his mysterious companion.

"I am at your orders, sir."

"Come, then," And Roland, taking the same path by which he had brought Morgan, took him back, not to the door opening on the garden (the garden was closed), but to that on the street. Once there, he stopped and said: "Sir, I gave you my word, and I have kept it faithfully, But that there may be no misunderstanding between us, have the goodness to tell me that you understand it to have been for this one time and for to-day only."

"That was how I understood it, sir,"

"You give me back my word then?"

"I should like to keep it, sir; but I recognize that you are free to take it back."

"That is all I wish to know. Au revoir! Monsieur Morgan."

"Permit me not to offer you the same wish, Monsieur de Montrevel."

The two young men bowed with perfect courtesy, Roland re-entered the Luxembourg, and Morgan, following the line of shadow projected by the walls, took one of the little streets to the Place Saint-Sulpice.

It is he whom we are now to follow.