Chapter 26

THE BALL OF THE VICTIMS

After taking about a hundred steps Morgan removed his mask. He ran more risk of being noticed in the streets of Paris as a masked man than with uncovered face.

When he reached the Rue Taranne he knocked at the door of a small furnished lodging-house at the corner of that street and the Rue du Dragon, took a candlestick from a table, a key numbered 12 from a nail, and climbed the stairs without exciting other attention than a well-known lodger would returning home. The clock was striking ten as he closed the door of his room. He listened attentively to the strokes, the light of his candle not reaching as far as the chimney-piece. He counted ten.

"Good!" he said to himself; "I shall not be too late."

In spite of this probability, Morgan seemed determined to lose no time. He passed a bit of tinder-paper under the heater on the hearth, which caught fire instantly. He lighted four wax-candles, all there were in the room, placed two on the mantel-shelf and two on a bureau opposite, and spread upon the bed a complete dress of the Incroyable of the very latest fashion. It consisted of a short coat, cut square across the front and long behind, of a soft shade between a pale-green and a pearl-gray; a waistcoat of buff plush, with eighteen mother-of-pearl buttons; an immense white cravat of the finest cambric; light trousers of white cashmere, decorated with a knot of ribbon where they buttoned above the calves, and pearl-gray silk stockings, striped transversely with the same green as the coat, and delicate pumps with diamond buckles. The inevitable eye-glass was not forgotten. As for the hat, it was precisely the same in which Carle Vernet painted his dandy of the Directory.

When these things were ready, Morgan waited with seeming impatience. At the end of five minutes he rang the bell. A waiter appeared.

"Hasn't the wig-maker come?" asked Morgan.

In those days wig-makers were not yet called hair-dressers.

"Yes, citizen," replied the waiter, "he came, but you had not yet returned, so he left word that he'd come back. Some one knocked just as you rang; it's probably--"

"Here, here," cried a voice on the stairs.

"Ah! bravo," exclaimed Morgan. "Come in, Master Cadenette; you must make a sort of Adonis of me."

"That won't be difficult, Monsieur le Baron," replied the wig-maker.

"Look here, look here; do you mean to compromise me, citizen Cadenette?"

"Monsieur le Baron, I entreat you, call me Cadenette; you'll honor me by that proof of familiarity; but don't call me citizen. Fie; that's a revolutionary denomination! Even in the worst of the Terror I always called my wife Madame Cadenette. Now, excuse me for not waiting for you; but there's a great ball in the Rue du Bac this evening, the ball of the Victims (the wig-maker emphasized this word). I should have thought that M. le Baron would be there."

"Why," cried Morgan, laughing; "so you are still a royalist, Cadenette?"

The wig-maker laid his hand tragically on his heart.

"Monsieur le Baron," said he, "it is not only a matter of conscience, but a matter of state."

"Conscience, I can understand that, Master Cadenette, but state! What the devil has the honorable guild of wigmakers to do with politics?"

"What, Monsieur le Baron?" said Cadenette, all the while getting ready to dress his client's hair; "you ask me that? You, an aristocrat!"

"Hush, Cadenette!"

"Monsieur le Baron, we _ci-devants_ can say that to each other."

"So you are a _ci-devant_?"

"To the core! In what style shall I dress M. le Baron's hair?"

"Dog's ears, and tied up behind."

"With a dash of powder?"

"Two, if you like, Cadenette."

"Ah! monsieur, when one thinks that for five years I was the only man who had an atom of powder '_à la maréchale_.' Why, Monsieur le Baron, a man was guillotined for owning a box of powder!"

"I've known people who were guillotined for less than that, Cadenette. But explain how you happen to be a _ci-devant_. I like to understand everything."

"It's very simple, Monsieur le Baron. You admit, don't you, that among the guilds there were some that were more or less aristocratic."

"Beyond doubt; accordingly as they were nearer to the higher classes of society."

"That's it, Monsieur le Baron. Well, we had the higher classes by the hair of their head. I, such as you see me, I have dressed Madame de Polignac's hair; my father dressed Madame du Barry's; my grandfather, Madame de Pompadour's. We had our privileges, Monsieur; we carried swords. It is true, to avoid the accidents that were liable to crop up among hotheads like ourselves, our swords were usually of wood; but at any rate, if they were not the actual thing, they were very good imitations. Yes, Monsieur le Baron," continued Cadenette with a sigh, "those days were the good days, not only for the wig-makers, but for all France. We were in all the secrets, all the intrigues; nothing was hidden from us. And there is no known instance, Monsieur le Baron, of a wig-maker betraying a secret. Just look at our poor queen; to whom did she trust her diamonds? To the great, the illustrious Leonard, the prince of wig-makers. Well, Monsieur le Baron, two men alone overthrew the scaffolding of a power that rested on the wigs of Louis XIV., the puffs of the Regency, the frizettes of Louis-XV., and the cushions of Marie Antoinette."

"And those two men, those levellers, those two revolutionaries, who were they, Cadenette? that I may doom them, so far as it lies in my power, to public execration."

"M. Rousseau and citizen Talma: Monsieur Rousseau who said that absurdity, 'We must return to Nature,' and citizen Talma, who invented the Titus head-dress."

"That's true, Cadenette; that's true."

"When the Directory came in there was a moment's hope. M. Barras never gave up powder, and citizen Moulins stuck to his queue. But, you see, the 18th Brumaire has knocked it all down; how could any one friz Bonaparte's hair! Ah! there," continued Cadenette, puffing out the dog's ears of his client--"there's aristocratic hair for you, soft and fine as silk, and takes the tongs so well one would think you wore a wig. See, Monsieur le Baron, you wanted to be as handsome as Adonis! Ah! if Venus had seen you, it's not of Adonis that Mars would have been jealous!"

And Cadenette, now at the end of his labors and satisfied with the result, presented a hand-mirror to Morgan, who examined himself complacently.

"Come, come!" he said to the wig-maker, "you are certainly an artist, my dear fellow! Remember this style, for if ever they cut off my head I shall choose to have it dressed like that, for there will probably be women at my execution."

"And M. le Baron wants them to regret him," said the wig-maker gravely.

"Yes, and in the meantime, my dear Cadenette, here is a crown to reward your labors. Have the goodness to tell them below to call a carriage for me."

Cadenette sighed.

"Monsieur le Baron," said he, "time was when I should have answered: 'Show yourself at court with your hair dressed like that, and I shall be paid.' But there is no court now, Monsieur le Baron, and one must live. You shall have your carriage."

With which Cadenette sighed again, slipped Morgan's crown in his pocket, made the reverential bow of wig-makers and dancing-masters, and left the young man to complete his toilet.

The head being now dressed, the rest was soon done; the cravat alone took time, owing to the many failures that occurred; but Morgan concluded the difficult task with an experienced hand, and as eleven o'clock was striking he was ready to start. Cadenette had not forgotten his errand; a hackney-coach was at the door. Morgan jumped into it, calling out: "Rue du Bac, No. 60."

The coach turned into the Rue de Grenelle, went up the Rue du Bac, and stopped at No. 60.

"Here's a double fare, friend," said Morgan, "on condition that you don't stand before the door."

The driver took the three francs and disappeared around the corner of the Rue de Varennes. Morgan glanced up the front of the house; it seemed as though he must be mistaken, so dark and silent was it. But he did not hesitate; he rapped in a peculiar fashion.

The door opened. At the further end of the courtyard was a building, brilliantly lighted. The young man went toward it, and, as he approached, the sound of instruments met his ear. He ascended a flight of stairs and entered the dressing-room. There he gave his cloak to the usher whose business it was to attend to the wraps.

"Here is your number," said the usher. "As for your weapons, you are to place them in the gallery where you can find them easily."

Morgan put the number in his trousers pocket, and entered the great gallery transformed into an arsenal. It contained a complete collection of arms of all

kinds, pistols, muskets, carbines, swords, and daggers. As the ball might at any moment be invaded by the police, it was necessary that every dancer be prepared to turn defender at an instant's notice. Laying his weapons aside, Morgan entered the ballroom.

We doubt if any pen could give the reader an adequate idea of the scene of that ball. Generally, as the name "Ball of the Victims" indicated, no one was admitted except by the strange right of having relatives who had either been sent to the scaffold by the Convention or the Commune of Paris, blown to pieces by Collot d'Herbois, or drowned by Carrier. As, however, the victims guillotined during the three years of the Terror far outnumbered the others, the dresses of the majority of those who were present were the clothes of the victims of the scaffold. Thus, most of the young girls, whose mothers and older sisters had fallen by the hands of the executioner, wore the same costume their mothers and sisters had worn for that last lugubrious ceremony; that is to say, a white gown and red shawl, with their hair cut short at the nape of the neck. Some added to this costume, already so characteristic, a detail that was even more significant; they knotted around their necks a thread of scarlet silk, fine as the blade of a razor, which, as in Faust's Marguerite, at the Witches' Sabbath, indicated the cut of the knife between the throat and the collar bone.

As for the men who were in the same case, they wore the collars of their coats turned down behind, those of their shirt wide open, their necks bare, and their hair, cut short.

But many had other rights of entrance to this ball besides that of having Victims in their families; some had made victims themselves. These latter were increasing. There were present men of forty or forty-five years of age, who had been trained in the boudoirs of the beautiful courtesans of the seventeenth century--who had known Madame du Barry in the attics of Versailles, Sophie Arnoult with M. de Lauraguais, La Duthé with the Comte d'Artois--who had borrowed from the courtesies of vice the polish with which they covered their ferocity. They were still young and handsome; they entered a salon, tossing their perfumed locks and their scented handkerchiefs; nor was it a useless precaution, for if the odor of musk or verbena had not masked it they would have smelled of blood.

There were men there twenty-five or thirty years old, dressed with extreme elegance, members of the association of Avengers, who seemed possessed with the mania of assassination, the lust of slaughter, the frenzy of blood, which no blood could quench--men who, when the order came to kill, killed all, friends or enemies; men who carried their business methods into the business of murder, giving their bloody checks for the heads of such or such Jacobins, and paying on sight.

There were younger men, eighteen and twenty, almost children, but children fed, like Achilles, on the marrow of wild beasts, like Pyrrhus, on the flesh of bears; here were the pupil-bandits of Schiller, the apprentice-judges of the Sainte-Vehme--that strange generation that follows great political convulsions, like the Titans after chaos, the hydras after the Deluge; as the vultures and crows follow the carnage.

Here was the spectre of iron impassible, implacable, inflexible, which men call Retaliation; and this spectre mingled with the guests. It entered the gilded salons; it signalled with a look, a gesture, a nod, and men followed where it led. It was, as says the author from whom we have borrowed these hitherto unknown but authentic details, "a merry lust for extermination."

The Terror had affected great cynicism in clothes, a Spartan austerity in its food, the profound contempt of a barbarous people for arts and enjoyments. The Thermidorian reaction was, on the contrary, elegant, opulent, adorned; it exhausted all luxuries, all voluptuous pleasures, as in the days of Louis XV.; with one addition, the luxury of vengeance, the lust of blood.

Fréron's name was given to the youth of the day, which was called the jeunesse Fréron, or the _jéunesse dorée_ (gilded youth). Why Fréron? Why should he rather than others receive that strange and fatal honor?

I cannot tell you--my researches (those who know me will do me the justice to admit that when I have an end in view, I do not count them)--my researches have not discovered an answer. It was a whim of Fashion, and Fashion is the one goddess more capricious than Fortune.

Our readers will hardly know to-day who Fréron was. The Fréron who was Voltaire's assailant was better known than he who was the patron of these elegant assassins; one was the son of the other. Louis Stanislas was son of Elie-Catherine. The father died of rage when Miromesnil, Keeper of the Seals, suppressed his journal. The other, irritated by the injustices of which his father had been the victim, had at first ardently embraced the revolutionary doctrines. Instead of the "Année Littéraire," strangled to death in 1775, he created the "Orateur du Peuple," in 1789. He was sent to the Midi on a special mission, and Marseilles and Toulon retain to this day the memory of his cruelty. But all was forgotten when, on the 9th Thermidor, he proclaimed himself against Robespierre, and assisted in casting from the altar the Supreme Being, the colossus who, being an apostle, had made himself a god. Fréron, repudiated by the Mountain, which abandoned him to the heavy jaws of Moise Bayle; Fréron, disdainfully repulsed by the Girondins, who delivered him over to the imprecations of Isnard; Fréron, as the terrible and picturesque orator of the Var said, "Fréron naked and covered with the leprosy of crime," was accepted, caressed and petted by the Thermidorians. From them he passed into the camp of the royalists, and without any reason whatever for obtaining that fatal honor, found himself suddenly at the head of a powerful party of youth, energy and vengeance, standing between the passions of the day, which led to all, and the impotence of the law, which permitted all.

It was to the midst of this _jeunesse_ Fréron, mouthing its words, slurring its r's, giving its "word of honor" about everything, that Morgan now made his way.

It must be admitted that this _jeunesse_, in spite of the clothes it wore, in spite of the memories these clothes evoked, was wildly gay. This seems incomprehensible, but it is true. Explain if you can that Dance of Death at the beginning of the fifteenth century, which, with all the fury of a modern galop, led by Musard, whirled its chain through the very Cemetery of the Innocents, and left amid its tombs fifty thousand of its votaries.

Morgan was evidently seeking some one.

A young dandy, who was dipping into the silver-gilt comfit-box of a charming victim, with an ensanguined finger, the only part of his delicate hand that had escaped the almond paste, tried to stop him, to relate the particulars of the expedition from which he had brought back this bloody trophy. But Morgan smiled, pressed his other hand which was gloved, and contented himself with replying: "I am looking for some one."

"Important?"

"Company of Jehu."

The young man with the bloody finger let him pass. An adorable Fury, as Corneille would have called her, whose hair was held up by a dagger with a blade as sharp as a needle, barred his way, saying: "Morgan, you are the handsomest, the bravest, the most deserving of love of all the men present. What have you to say to the woman who tells you that?"

"I answer that I love," replied Morgan, "and that my heart is too narrow to hold one hatred and two loves." And he continued on his search.

Two young men who were arguing, one saying, "He was English," the other, "He was German," stopped him.

"The deuce," cried one; "here is the man who can settle it for us."

"No," replied Morgan, trying to push past them; "I'm in a hurry."

"There's only a word to say," said the other. "We have made a bet, Saint-Amand and I, that the man who was tried and executed at the Chartreuse du Seillon, was, according to him, a German, and, according to me, an Englishman."

"I don't know," replied Morgan; "I wasn't there. Ask Hector; he presided that night."

"Tell us where Hector is?"

"Tell me rather where Tiffauges is; I am looking for him."

"Over there, at the end of the room," said the young man, pointing to a part of the room where the dance was more than usually gay and animated. "You will recognize him by his waistcoat; and his trousers are not to be despised. I shall have a pair like them made with the skin of the very first hound I meet."

Morgan did not take time to ask in what way Tiffauges' waistcoat was remarkable, or by what queer cut or precious material his trousers had won the approbation of a man as expert in such matters as he who had spoken to him. He went straight to the point indicated by the young man, saw the person he was seeking dancing an été, which seemed, by the intricacy of its weaving, if I may be pardoned for this technical term, to have issued from the salons of Vestris himself.

Morgan made a sign to the dancer. Tiffauges stopped instantly, bowed to his partner, led her to her seat, excused himself on the plea of the urgency of the matter which called him away, and returned to take Morgan's arm.

"Did you see him," Tiffauges asked Morgan.

"I have just left him," replied the latter.

"Did you deliver the King's letter?"

"To himself."

"Did he read it?"

"At once."

"Has he sent an answer?"

"Two; one verbal, one written; the second dispenses with the first."

"You have it?"

"Here it is."

"Do you know the contents?"

"A refusal."

"Positive?"

"Nothing could be more positive."

"Does he know that from the moment he takes all hope away from us we shall treat him as an enemy?"

"I told him so."

"What did he answer?"

"He didn't answer; he shrugged his shoulders."

"What do you think his intentions are?"

"It's not difficult to guess."

"Does he mean to keep the power himself?"

"It looks like it."

"The power, but not the throne?"

"Why not the throne?"

"He would never dare to make himself king."

"Oh! I can't say he means to be absolutely king, but I'll answer for it that he means to be something."

"But he is nothing but a soldier of fortune!"

"My dear fellow, better in these days to be the son of his deeds, than the grandson of a king."

The young man thought a moment.

"I shall report it all to Cadoudal," he said.

"And add that the First Consul said these very words: 'I hold the Vendée in the hollow of my hand, and if I choose in three months not another shot will be fired.'"

"It's a good thing to know."

"You know it; let Cadoudal know it, and take measures."

Just then the music ceased; the hum of the dancers died away; complete silence prevailed; and, in the midst of this silence, four names were pronounced in a sonorous and emphatic voice.

These four names were Morgan, Montbar, Adler and d'Assas.

"Pardon me," Morgan said to Tiffauges, "they are probably arranging some expedition in which I am to take part. I am forced, therefore, to my great regret, to bid you farewell. Only before I leave you let me look closer at your waistcoat and trousers, of which I have heard--curiosity of an amateur; I trust you will excuse it."

"Surely!" exclaimed the young Vendéan, "most willingly."