

Chapter 27

THE BEAR'S SKIN

With a rapidity and good nature that did honor to his courtesy, he went close to the candelabra, which were burning on the chimney-piece. The waistcoat and trousers seemed to be of the same stuff; but what was that stuff? The most experienced connoisseur would have been puzzled.

The trousers were tight-fitting as usual, of a light tint between buff and flesh color; the only remarkable thing about them was the absence of the seam, and the closeness with which they clung to the leg. The waistcoat, on the other hand, had two characteristic signs which attracted attention; it had been pierced by three balls, which had the holes gaping, and these were stained a carmine, so like blood, that it might easily have been mistaken for it. On the left side was painted a bloody heart, the distinguishing sign of the Vendéans. Morgan examined the two articles with the closest attention, but without result.

"If I were not in such a hurry," said he, "I should like to look into the matter for myself. But you heard for yourself; in all probability, some news has reached the committee; government money probably. You can announce it to Cadoudal; only we shall have to take it first. Ordinarily, I command these expeditions; if I delay, some one may take my place. So tell me what your waistcoat and trousers are made of."

"My dear Morgan," replied the Vendéan, "perhaps you have heard that my brother was captured near Bressure, and shot by the Blues?"

"Yes, I know that."

"The Blues were retreating; they left the body at the corner of the hedge. We were pursuing them so closely that we arrived just after them. I found the body of my brother still warm. In one of his wounds a sprig was stuck with these words: 'Shot as a brigand by me, Claude Flageolet, corporal of the

Third Battalion of Paris.' I took my brother's body, and had the skin removed from his breast. I vowed that this skin, pierced with three holes, should eternally cry vengeance before my eyes. I made it my battle waistcoat."

"Ah!" exclaimed Morgan, with a certain astonishment, in which, for the first time, was mingled something akin to terror--"Ah! then that waistcoat is made of your brother's skin? And the trousers?"

"Oh!" replied the Vendéan, "the trousers, that's another matter. They are made of the skin of Claude Flageolet, corporal of the Third Battalion of Paris."

At that moment the voice again called out, in the same order, the names of Morgan, Montbar, Adler and d'Assas.

Morgan rushed out of the study, crossed the dancing-hall from end to end, and made his way to a little salon on the other side of the dressing-room. His three companions, Montbar, Adler and d'Assas, were there already. With them was a young man in the government livery of a bearer of despatches, namely a green and gold coat. His boots were dusty, and he wore a visored cap and carried the despatch-box, the essential accoutrements of a cabinet courier.

One of Cassini's maps, on which could be followed the whole lay of the land, was spread on the table.

Before saying why this courier was there, and with what object the map was unfolded, let us cast a glance at the three new personages whose names had echoed through the ballroom, and who are destined to play an important part in the rest of this history.

The reader already knows Morgan, the Achilles and the Paris of this strange association; Morgan, with his blue eyes, his black hair, his tall, well-built figure, graceful, easy, active bearing; his eye, which was never without animation; his mouth, with its fresh lips and white teeth, that was never without a smile; his remarkable countenance, composed of mingling elements that seemed so foreign to each other--strength and tenderness, gentleness and energy; and, through it all, that bewildering expression of gayety that was at times alarming when one remembered that this man was perpetually rubbing shoulders with death, and the most terrifying of all deaths--that of the scaffold.

As for d'Assas, he was a man from thirty-five to thirty-eight years of age, with bushy hair that was turning gray, and mustaches as black as ebony. His eyes were of that wonderful shade of Indian eyes, verging on maroon. He was formerly a captain of dragoons, admirably built for struggle, whether physical or moral, his muscles indicating strength, and his face, obstinacy. For the rest, a noble bearing, great elegance of manners, scented like a dandy, carrying, either from caprice or luxury, a bottle of English smelling-salts, or a silver-gilt vinaigrette containing the most subtle perfumes.

Montbar and Adler, whose real names were unknown, like those of d'Assas and Morgan, were commonly called by the Company "the inseparables." Imagine Damon and Pythias, Euryalus and Nisus, Orestes and Pylades at twenty-two--one joyous, loquacious, noisy, the other melancholy, silent, dreamy; sharing all things, dangers, money, mistresses; one the complement of the other; each rushing to all extremes, but forgetting self when in peril to watch over the other, like the Spartan youths on the sacred legions--and you will form an idea of Montbar and Adler.

It is needless to say that all three were Companions of Jehu. They had been convoked, as Morgan suspected, on business of the Company.

On entering the room, Morgan went straight to the pretended bearer of despatches and shook hands with him.

"Ah! the dear friend," said the latter, with a stiff movement, showing that the best rider cannot do a hundred and fifty miles on post-hacks with impunity. "You are taking it easy, you Parisians. Hannibal at Capua slept on rushes and thorns compared to you. I only glanced at the ballroom in passing, as becomes a poor cabinet courier bearing despatches from General Masséna to the citizen First Consul; but it seemed to me you were a fine lot of victims! Only, my poor friends, you will have to bid farewell to all that for the present; disagreeable, unlucky, exasperating, no doubt, but the House of Jehu before all."

"My dear Hastier--" began Morgan.

"Stop!" cried Hastier. "No proper names, if you please, gentlemen. The Hastiers are an honest family in Lyons, doing business, it is said, on the Place des Terreaux, from father to son, and would be much humiliated to learn that their heir had become a cabinet courier, and rode the highways with the national pack on his back. Lecoq as much as you please, but not Hastier. I don't know Hastier; and you, gentlemen," continued the young man, addressing Montbar, Adler and d'Assas, "do you know him?"

"No," replied the three young men, "and we ask pardon for Morgan, who did wrong."

"My dear Lecoq," exclaimed Morgan.

"That's right," interrupted Hastier. "I answer to that name! Well, what did you want to tell me?"

"I wanted to say that if you are not the antipodes of the god Harpocrates, whom the Egyptians represent with a finger on his lips, you will, instead of indulging in a lot of declamations, more or less flowery, tell us why this costume, and why that map?"

"The deuce!" retorted the young man. "If you don't know already, it's your fault and not mine. If I hadn't been obliged to call you twice, caught as you doubtless were in the toils of some beautiful Eumenides imploring vengeance of a fine young man for the death of her old parents, you'd know as much as these gentlemen, and I wouldn't have to sing an encore. Well, here's what it is: simply of the remaining treasure of the Berne bears, which General Lecourbe is sending to the citizen First Consul by order of General Masséna. A trifle, only a hundred thousand francs, that they don't dare send over the Jura on account of M. Teyssonnet's partisans, who, they pretend, are likely to seize it; so it will be sent by Geneva, Bourg, Mâcon, Dijon, and Troyes; a much safer way, as they will find when they try it."

"Very good!"

"We were informed of this by Renard, who started from Gex at full speed, and transmitted the news to l'Hirondelle, who is at present stationed at Châlon-sur-Saône. He transmitted it to me, Lecoq, at Auxerre, and I have done a hundred and fifty miles to transmit it in turn to you. As for the secondary details, here they are. The treasure left Berne last octodi, 28th Nivôse, year VIII. of the Republic triple and indivisible. It should reach Genoa to-day, duodi, and leave to-morrow, tridi, by the diligence from Geneva to Bourg; so that, by leaving this very night, by the day after to-morrow, quintide, you can, my dear sons of Israel, meet the treasure of messires the bears between Dijon and Troyes, near Bar-sur-Seine or Châtillon. What say you?"

"By heavens!" cried Morgan, "we say that there seems to be no room for argument left; we say we should never have permitted ourselves to touch the money of their Highnesses the bears of Berne so long as it remained in their coffers; but as it has changed hands once, I see no objection to its doing so a second time. Only how are we to start?"

"Haven't you a post-chaise?"

"Yes, it's here in the coach-house."

"Haven't you horses to get you to the next stage?"

"They are in the stable."

"Haven't you each your passports."

"We have each four."

"Well, then?"

"Well, we can't stop the diligence in a post-chaise. We don't put ourselves to too much inconvenience, but we don't take our ease in that way."

"Well, and why not?" asked Montbar; "it would be original. I can't see why, if sailors board from one vessel to another, we couldn't board a diligence from a post-chaise. We want novelty; shall we try it, Adler?"

"I ask nothing better," replied the latter, "but what will we do with the postilion?"

"That's true," replied Montbar.

"The difficulty is foreseen, my children," said the courier; "a messenger has been sent to Troyes. You will leave your post-chaise at Delbauce; there you will find four horses all saddled and stuffed with oats. You will then calculate your time, and the day after to-morrow, or rather to-morrow, for it is past midnight, between seven and eight in the morning, the money of Messires Bruin will pass an anxious quarter of an hour."

"Shall we change our clothes?" inquired d'Assas.

"What for?" replied Morgan. "I think we are very presentable as we are. No diligence could be relieved of unnecessary weight by better dressed fellows. Let us take a last glance at the map, transfer a pâté, a cold chicken, and a dozen of champagne from the supper-room to the pockets of the coach, arm to the teeth in the arsenal, wrap ourselves in warm cloaks, and--clack! postilion!"

"Yes!" cried Montbar, "that's the idea."

"I should think so," added Morgan. "We'll kill the horses if necessary, and be back at seven in the evening, in time to show ourselves at the opera."

"That will establish an alibi," observed d'Assas.

"Precisely," said Morgan, with his imperturbable gayety. "How could men who applaud Mademoiselle Clotilde and M. Vestris at eight o'clock in the evening have been at Bar and Chatillon in the morning settling accounts with the conductor of a diligence? Come, my sons, a last look at the map to choose our spot."

The four young men bent over Cassini's map.

"If I may give you a bit of topographical advice," said the courier, "it would be to put yourselves in ambush just beyond Massu; there's a ford opposite to the Riceys--see, there!"

And the young man pointed out the exact spot on the map.

"I should return to Chacource, there; from Chacource you have a department road, straight as an arrow, which will take you to Troyes; at Troyes you take carriage again, and follow the road to Sens instead of that to Coulommiers. The donkeys--there are plenty in the provinces--who saw you in the morning won't wonder at seeing you again in the evening; you'll get to the opera at ten instead of eight--a more fashionable hour--neither seen nor recognized, I'll warrant you."

"Adopted, so far as I am concerned," said Morgan.

"Adopted!" cried the other three in chorus.

Morgan pulled out one of the two watches whose chains were dangling from his belt; it was a masterpiece of Petitot's enamel, and on the outer case which protected the painting was a diamond monogram. The pedigree of this beautiful trinket was as well established as that of an Arab horse; it had been made for Marie-Antoinette, who had given it to the Duchesse de Polastron, who had given it to Morgan's mother.

"One o'clock," said Morgan; "come, gentlemen, we must relay at Lagny at three."

From that moment the expedition had begun, and Morgan became its leader; he no longer consulted, he commanded.

D'Assas, who in Morgan's absence commanded, was the first to obey on his return.

Half an hour later a closed carriage containing four young men wrapped in their cloaks was stopped at the Fontainebleau barrier by the post-guard, who demanded their passports.

"Oh, what a joke!" exclaimed one of them, putting his head out of the window and affecting the pronunciation of the day. "Passpawts to dwive to Gwobois to call on citizen _Ba-as_? 'Word of fluted honor!' you're cwazy, fwend! Go on, dwiver!"

The coachman whipped up his horses and the carriage passed without further opposition.