Chapter 29

THE GENEVA DILIGENCE

About the hour when Roland was entering Nantes, a diligence, heavily loaded, stopped at the inn of the Croix-d'Or, in the middle of the main street of Châtillon-sur-Seine.

In those days the diligences had but two compartments, the coupé and the interior; the rotunda is an adjunct of modern times.

The diligence had hardly stopped before the postilion jumped down and opened the doors. The travellers dismounted. There were seven in all, of both sexes. In the interior, three men, two women, and a child at the breast; in the coupé, a mother and her son.

The three men in the interior were, one a doctor from Troyes, the second a watchmaker from Geneva, the third an architect from Bourg. The two women were a lady's maid travelling to Paris to rejoin her mistress, and the other a wet-nurse; the child was the latter's nursling, which she was taking back to its parents.

The mother and son in the coupé were people of position; the former, about forty years of age, still preserving traces of great beauty, the latter a boy between eleven and twelve. The third place in the coupe was occupied by the conductor.

Breakfast was waiting, as usual, in the dining-room; one of those breakfasts which conductors, no doubt in collusion with the landlords, never give travellers the time to eat. The woman and the nurse got out of the coach and went to a baker's shop nearby, where each bought a hot roll and a sausage, with which they went back to the coach, settling themselves quietly to breakfast, thus saving the cost, probably too great for their means, of a meal at the hotel.

The doctor, the watchmaker, the architect and the mother and son entered the inn, and, after warming themselves hastily at the large kitchen-fire, entered the dining-room and took seats at the table.

The mother contented herself with a cup of coffee with cream, and some fruit. The boy, delighted to prove himself a man by his appetite at least, boldly attacked the viands. The first few moments were, as usual, employed in satisfying hunger. The watchmaker from Geneva was the first to speak.

"Faith, citizen," said he (the word citizen was still used in public places), "I tell you frankly I was not at all sorry to see daylight this morning."

"Cannot monsieur sleep in a coach?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, yes, sir," replied the compatriot of Jean-Jacques; "on the contrary, I usually sleep straight through the night. But anxiety was stronger than fatigue this time."

"Were you afraid of upsetting?" asked the architect.

"No. I'm very lucky in that respect; it seems enough for me to be in a coach to make it unupsettable. No, that wasn't it."

"What was it, then?" questioned the doctor.

"They say in Geneva that the roads in France are not safe."

"That's according to circumstances," said the architect.

"Ah! how's that?" inquired the watchmaker.

"Oh!" replied the architect; "if, for example, we were carrying government money, we would surely be stopped, or rather we would have been already."

"Do you think so?" queried the watchmaker.

"That has never failed. I don't know how those devils of Companions of Jehu manage to keep so well posted; but they never miss an opportunity."

The doctor nodded affirmatively.

"Ah!" exclaimed the watchmaker, addressing the doctor; "do you think so, too?"

"I do."

"And if you knew there was government money in the coach, would you be so imprudent as to take passage in it?"

"I must admit," replied the doctor, "that I should think twice about it."

"And you, sir?" said the questioner to the architect.

"Oh, I," replied the latter--"as I am on important business, I should have started anyway."

"I am tempted," said the watchmaker "to take off my valise and my oases, and wait for to-morrow's diligence, because my boxes are filled with watches worth something like twenty thousand francs. We've been lucky so far, but there's no use tempting Providence."

"Did you not hear these gentlemen say," remarked the lady, joining in the conversation for the first time, "that we run the risk of being stopped only when the coach carries government money?"

"That's exactly it," replied the watchmaker, looking anxiously around. "We are carrying it."

The mother blanched visibly and looked at her son. Before fearing for herself every mother fears for her child.

"What! we are carrying it?" asked the doctor and the architect in varying tones of excitement. "Are you sure of what you are saying?"

"Perfectly sure, gentlemen."

"Then you should either have told us before, or have told us in a whisper now."

"But perhaps," said the doctor, "the gentleman is not quite sure of what he says."

"Or perhaps he is joking," added the architect.

"Heaven forbid!"

"The Genevese are very fond of a laugh," persisted the doctor.

"Sir," replied the Genevese, much hurt that any one should think he liked to laugh, "I saw it put on the coach myself."

"What?"

"The money."

"Was there much?"

"A good many bags."

"But where does the money come from?"

"The treasury of the bears of Berne. You know, of course, that the bears of Berne received an income of fifty or even sixty thousand francs."

The doctor burst out laughing.

"Decidedly, sir, you are trying to frighten us," said he.

"Gentlemen," said the watchmaker, "I give you my word of honor--"

"Take your places gentlemen," shouted the conductor, opening the door. "Take your places! We are three-quarters of an hour late."

"One moment, conductor, one moment," Said the architect; "we are consulting."

"About what?"

"Close the door, conductor, and come over here."

"Drink a glass of wine with us, conductor."

"With pleasure, gentlemen; a glass of wine is never to be refused."

The conductor held out his glass, and the three travellers touched it; but just as he was lifting it to his lips the doctor stopped his arm.

"Come, conductor, frankly, is it true?"

"What?"

"What this gentleman says?" And he pointed to the Genevese.

"Monsieur Féraud?"

"I don't know if that is his name."

"Yes, sir, that is my name--Féraud & Company, No. 6 Rue du Rempart, Geneva, at your service," replied the watchmaker, bowing.

"Gentlemen," repeated the conductor, "take your places!"

"But you haven't answered."

"What the devil shall I answer? You haven't asked me anything."

"Yes, we asked you if it is true that you are carrying a large sum of money belonging to the French Government?"

"Blabber!" said the conductor to watchmaker, "did you tell that?"

"Confound it, my worthy fellow--"

"Come, gentlemen, your places."

"But before getting in we want to know--"

"What? Whether I have government money? Yes I have. Now, if we are stopped, say nothing and all will be well."

"Are you sure?"

"Leave me to arrange matters with these gentry."

"What will you do if we are stopped?" the doctor asked the architect.

"Faith! I shall follow the conductor's advice."

"That's the best thing to do," observed the latter.

"Well, I shall keep quiet," repeated the architect.

"And so shall I," added the watchmaker.

"Come, gentlemen, take your seats, and let us make haste."

The boy had listened to this conversation with frowning brow and clinched teeth.

"Well," he said to his mother, "if we are stopped, I know what I'll do."

"What will you do?" she asked.

"You'll see."

"What does this little boy say?" asked the watchmaker.

"I say you are all cowards," replied the child unhesitatingly.

"Edouard!" exclaimed his mother, "what do you mean?"

"I wish they'd stop the diligence, that I do!" cried the boy, his eye sparkling with determination.

"Come, come, gentlemen, in Heaven's name, take your places," called the conductor once more.

"Conductor," said the doctor, "I presume you have no weapons!"

"Yes, I have my pistols."

"Unfortunate!"

The conductor stooped to the doctor's ear and whispered: "Don't be alarmed, doctor; they're only loaded with powder."

"Good!"

"Forward, postilion, forward!" shouted the conductor, closing the door of the interior. Then, while the postilion snapped his whip and started the heavy vehicle, he also closed that of the coupé.

"Are you not coming with us, conductor?" asked the lady.

"Thank you, no, Madame de Montrevel," replied the conductor; "I have something to do on the imperial." Then, looking into the window, he added: "Take care the Monsieur Edouard does not touch the pistols in the pocket of the carriage; he might hurt himself."

"Pooh!" retorted the boy, "as if I didn't know how to handle a pistol. I have handsomer ones than yours, that my friend Sir John had sent me from England; haven't I, mamma?"

"Never mind, Edouard," replied Madame de Montrevel, "I entreat you not to touch them."

"Don't worry, little mother." Then he added softly, "All the same, if the Companions of Jehu stop us, I know what I shall do."

The diligence was again rolling heavily on its way to Paris.

It was one of those fine winter days which makes those who think that nature is dead at that season admit that nature never dies but only sleeps. The man who lives to be seventy or eighty years of age has his nights of ten or twelve hours, and often complains that the length of his nights adds to the shortness of his days. Nature, which has an everlasting existence; trees, which live a thousand years; have sleeping periods of four or five months, which are winters for us but only nights for them. The poets, in their envious verse, sing the immortality of nature, which dies each autumn and revives each spring. The poets are mistaken; nature does not die each autumn, she only falls asleep; she is not resuscitated, she awakens. The day when our globe really dies, it will be dead indeed. Then it will roll into space or fall into the abysses of chaos, inert, mute, solitary, without trees, without flowers, without verdure, without poets.

But on this beautiful day of the 23d of February, 1800, sleeping nature dreamed of spring; a brilliant, almost joyous sun made the grass in the ditches on either side of the road sparkle with those deceptive pearls of the hoarfrost which vanish at a touch, and rejoice the heart of a tiller of the earth when he sees them glittering at the points of his wheat as it pushes bravely up through the soil. All the windows of the diligence were lowered, to give entrance to this earliest smile of the Divine, as though all hearts were saying: "Welcome back, traveller long lost in the clouds of the West, or beneath the heaving billows of Ocean!"

Suddenly, about an hour after leaving Châtillon, the diligence stopped at a bend of the river without any apparent cause. Four horsemen quietly approached, walking their horses, and one of them, a little in advance of the

others, made a sign with his hand to the postilion, ordering him to draw up. The postilion obeyed.

"Oh, mamma!" cried Edouard, standing up and leaning out of the window in spite of Madame de Montrevel's protestations; "oh, mamma, what fine horses! But why do these gentlemen wear masks? This isn't carnival."

Madame de Montrevel was dreaming. A woman always dreams a little; young, of the future; old, of the past. She started from her revery, put her head out of the window, and gave a little cry.

Edouard turned around hastily.

"What ails you, mother?" he asked.

Madame de Montrevel turned pale and took him in her arms without a word. Cries of terror were heard in the interior.

"But what is the matter?" demanded little Edouard, struggling to escape from his mother's encircling arms.

"Nothing, my little man," said one of the masked men in a gentle voice, putting his head through the window of the coupé; "nothing but an account we have to settle with the conductor, which does not in the least concern you travellers. Tell your mother to accept our respectful homage, and to pay no more heed to us than if we were not here." Then passing to the door of the interior, he added: "Gentlemen, your servant. Fear nothing for your money or jewels, and reassure that nurse--we have not come here to turn her milk." Then to the conductor: "Now, then, Père Jérôme, we have a hundred thousand francs on the imperial and in the boxes, haven't we?"

"Gentlemen, I assure you--"

"That the money belongs to the government. It did belong to the bears of Berne; seventy thousand francs in gold, the rest in silver. The silver is on the top of the coach, the gold in the bottom of the coupé. Isn't that so? You see how well informed we are."

At the words "bottom of the coupe" Madame de Montrevel gave another cry of terror; she was about to come in contact with men who, in spite of their politeness, inspired her with the most profound terror.

"But what is the matter, mother, what is the matter?" demanded the boy impatiently.

"Be quiet, Edouard; be quiet!"

"Why must I be quiet?"

"Don't you understand?"

"No."

"The coach has been stopped."

"Why? Tell me why? Ah, mother, I understand."

"No, no," said Madame de Montrevel, "you don't understand."

"Those gentlemen are robbers."

"Take care you don't say so."

"What, you mean they are not robbers? Why, see they are taking the conductor's money."

Sure enough, one of the four was fastening to the saddle of his horse the bags of silver which the conductor threw down from the imperial.

"No," repeated Madame de Montrevel, "no, they are not robbers." Then lowering her voice, she added: "They are Companions of Jehu."

"Ah!" cried the boy, "they are the ones who assassinated my friend, Sir John."

And the child turned very pale, and his breath came hissing through his clinched teeth.

At that moment one of the masked men opened the door of the coupé, and said with exquisite politeness: "Madame la Comtesse, to our great regret we are obliged to disturb you; but we want, or rather the conductor wants, a package from the bottom of the coupé. Will you be so kind as to get out for a moment? Jérôme will get what he wants as quickly as possible." Then, with that note of gayety which was never entirely absent from that laughing voice, he added, "Won't you, Jérôme?"

Jérôme replied from the top of the diligence, confirming these words.

With an instinctive movement to put herself between the danger and her son, Madame de Montrevel, while complying with that request, pushed

Edouard behind her. That instant sufficed for the boy to seize the conductor's pistols.

The young man with the laughing voice assisted Madame de Montrevel from the coach with the greatest care, then signed to one of his companions to give her an arm, and returned to the coach.

But at that instant a double report was heard. Edouard had fired a pistol with each hand at the Companion of Jehu, who disappeared in the smoke.

Madame de Montrevel screamed, and fainted away. Various cries, expressive of diverse sentiments, echoed that of the mother.

From the interior came one of terror; they had all agreed to offer no resistance, and now some one had resisted. From the three young men came a cry of surprise--it was the first time such a thing had happened.

They rushed to their companion, expecting to find him reduced to pulp; but they found him safe and sound, laughing heartily, while the conductor, with clasped hands, was exclaiming: "Monsieur, I swear there were no balls; monsieur, I protest, they were only charged with powder."

"The deuce," said the young man, "don't I see that? But the intention was good, wasn't it, my little Edouard?" Then, turning to his companions, he added: "Confess, gentlemen, that he is a fine boy--a true son of his father, and brother of his brother. Bravo, Edouard! you'll make a man some day!"

Taking the boy in his arms, he kissed him, in spite of his struggles, on both cheeks.

Edouard fought like a demon, thinking no doubt that it was very humiliating to be embraced by a man at whom he had just fired two pistols.

In the meantime one of the Companions had carried Edouard's mother to the bank by the roadside a little distance from the diligence. The man who had kissed Edouard with so much affection and persistence now looked around for her.

"Ah!" cried he, on perceiving her, "Madame de Montrevel still unconscious? We can't leave a woman in that condition, gentlemen. Conductor, take Master Edouard." Placing the boy in Jérôme's arms, he turned to one of his companions: "Man of precautions," said he, "haven't you smelling salts or a bottle of essence with you?"

"Here!" said the young man he had addressed, pulling a flask of toilet vinegar from his pocket.

"Good," said the other, who seemed to be the leader of the band. "Do you finish up the matter with Master Jérôme; I'll take charge of Madame de Montrevel."

It was indeed time. The fainting fit was giving place to a violent nervous attack; spasmodic movements shook her whole body and strangled cries came from her throat. The young man leaned over her and made her inhale the salts.

Madame de Montrevel presently opened her frightened eyes, and called out: "Edouard! Edouard!" With an involuntary movement she knocked aside the mask of the man who was supporting her, exposing his face.

The courteous, laughing young man--our readers have already recognized him--was Morgan.

Madame de Montrevel paused in amazement at sight of those beautiful blue eyes, the lofty brow, and the gracious lips smiling at her. She realized that

she ran no danger from such a man, and that no harm could have befallen Edouard. Treating Morgan as a gentleman who had succored her, and not as a bandit who had caused her fainting-fit, she exclaimed: "Ah, sir! how kind you are."

In the words, in the tones in which she uttered them, there lay a world of thanks, not only for herself, but for her child.

With singular delicacy, entirely in keeping with his chivalric nature, Morgan, instead of picking up his fallen mask and covering his face immediately, so that Madame de Montrevel could only have retained a fleeting and confused impression of it--Morgan replied to her compliment by a low bow, leaving his features uncovered long enough to produce their impression; then, placing d'Assas' flask in Madame de Montrevel's hand--and then only--he replaced his mask. Madame de Montrevel understood the young man's delicacy.

"Ah! sir," said she, "be sure that, in whatever place or situation I see you again, I shall not recognize you."

"Then, madame," replied Morgan, "it is for me to thank you and repeat, 'How kind you are.'"

"Come, gentlemen, take your seats!" said the conductor, in his customary tone, as if nothing unusual had happened.

"Are you quite restored, madame, or should you like a few minutes more to rest?" asked Morgan. "The diligence shall wait."

"No, that is quite unnecessary; I feel quite well, and am much indebted to you."

Morgan offered Madame de Montrevel his arm, and she leaned upon it to reach the diligence. The conductor had already placed little Edouard inside. When Madame de Montrevel had resumed her seat, Morgan, who had already made his peace with the mother, wished to do so with the son.

"Without a grudge, my young hero," he said, offering his hand.

But the boy drew back.

"I don't give my hand to a highway robber," he replied. Madame de Montrevel gave a start of terror.

"You have a charming boy, madame," said Morgan; "only he has his prejudices." Then, bowing with the utmost courtesy, he added, "A prosperous voyage, madame," and closed the door.

"Forward!" cried the conductor.

The carriage gave a lurch.

"Oh! pardon me, sir!" exclaimed Madame de Montrevel; "your flask!"

"Keep it, madame," said Morgan; "although I trust you are sufficiently recovered not to need it."

But Edouard, snatching the flask from his mother's hands, flung it out of the window, crying: "Mamma doesn't receive presents from robbers."

"The devil!" murmured Morgan, with the first sigh his Companions had ever heard him give. "I think I am right not to ask for my poor Amélie in marriage." Then, turning to his Companions, he said: "Well, gentlemen, is it finished?"

"Yes," they answered with one voice.

"Then let us mount and be off. Don't forget we have to be at the Opera at nine o'clock this evening."

Springing into his saddle, he was the first to jump the ditch, reach the river, and there unhesitatingly took the ford which the pretended courier had pointed out on Cassini's map.

When he reached the opposite bank, followed by the other young men, d'Assas said to him: "Say, didn't your mask falloff?"

"Yes; but no one saw my face but Madame de Montrevel."

"Hum!" muttered d'Assas. "Better no one had seen it."

Putting their horses to a gallop, all four disappeared across the fields in the direction of Chacource.