

Chapter 30

CITIZEN FOUCHÉ'S REPORT

On arriving the next day, toward eleven in the morning, at the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs, Madame de Montrevel was astonished to find, instead of Roland, a stranger awaiting her. The stranger approached her.

"Are you the widow of General de Montrevel, madame?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur," replied Madame de Montrevel, not a little astonished.

"And you are looking for your son?"

"Yes; and I do not understand, after the letter he wrote me--"

"Man proposes, the First Consul disposes," replied the stranger, laughing. "The First Consul has disposed of your son for a few days, and has sent me to receive you in his stead."

Madame de Montrevel bowed.

"To whom have I the honor of speaking?" she asked.

"To citizen Fauvelet de Bourrienne, his first secretary," replied the stranger.

"Will you thank the First Consul for me," replied Madame de Montrevel, "and have the kindness to express to him the profound regret I feel at not being able to do so myself?"

"But nothing can be more easy, madame."

"How so?"

"The First Consul has ordered me to bring you to the Luxembourg."

"Me?"

"You and your son."

"Oh! I am going to see General Bonaparte; I am going to see General Bonaparte!" cried the child, jumping for joy and clapping his hands. "What happiness!"

"Edouard, Edouard!" exclaimed Madame de Montrevel. Then, turning to Bourrienne, "You must excuse him, sir; he is a little savage from the Jura Mountains."

Bourrienne held out his hand to the boy.

"I am a friend of your brother's," said he. "Will you kiss me?"

"Oh! willingly, sir," replied Edouard. "You are not a thief, I know."

"Why, no; I trust not," replied the secretary, laughing.

"You must excuse him once again, sir. Our diligence was stopped on the way."

"Stopped?"

"Yes."

"By robbers?"

"Not exactly."

"Monsieur," asked Edouard, "when people take other people's money, are they not thieves?"

"That is what they are generally called, my dear child."

"There, you see, mamma."

"Come, Edouard, be quiet, I beg of you."

Bourrienne glanced at Madame de Montrevel, and saw clearly from the expression of her face that the subject was disagreeable to her; he therefore dropped it.

"Madame," said he, "may I remind you that I have I orders to take you to the Luxembourg, and to add that Madame Bonaparte is expecting you?"

"Pray give me time to change my gown and to dress Edouard, sir."

"How long will that take, madame?"

"Is half an hour too much to ask?"

"No, indeed; if half an hour really suffices I shall think you most reasonable."

"Be easy, sir; it will be sufficient."

"Well, madame," said the secretary, bowing, "I will attend to an errand, and return in half an hour to place myself at your orders."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't be annoyed if I should be punctual."

"I shall not keep you waiting."

Bourrienne left. Madame de Montrevel dressed Edouard first, then herself, and was ready five minutes before Bourrienne reappeared.

"Take care, madame," said Bourrienne laughing, "lest I tell the First Consul of your extreme punctuality."

"What should I have to fear if you did?"

"He would keep you near him to give lessons in punctuality to Madame Bonaparte."

"Oh!" exclaimed Madame de Montrevel, "you must forgive unpunctuality in a Creole."

"But I believe you are a Creole also, madame."

"Madame Bonaparte sees her husband every day," said Madame de Montrevel, laughing, "whereas I am to see the First Consul for the first time."

"Come, mother, let us go!" said Edouard.

The secretary drew aside to allow Madame de Montrevel to pass out. Fifteen minutes later they had reached the Luxembourg.

Bonaparte occupied the suite of rooms on the ground floor to the right. Josephine's chamber and boudoir were on the first floor; a stairway led from the First Consul's study to her room.

She was expecting Madame de Montrevel, for as soon as she saw her she opened her arms as to a friend. Madame de Montrevel had stopped respectfully at the door.

"Oh! come in, come in, madame!" said Josephine. "To-day is not the first that I know you; I have long known you through your excellent son, Roland. Shall I tell you what comforts me when Bonaparte leaves me? It is that Roland goes with him; for I fancy that, so long as Roland is with him, no harm will befall him. Well, won't you kiss me?"

Madame de Montrevel was confused by so much kindness.

"We are compatriots, you know," continued Josephine. "Oh! how well I remember M. de la Clémencière, and his beautiful gardens with the splendid fruit. I remember having seen a young girl who seemed its queen. You must have married very young, madame?"

"At fourteen."

"Yes, you could not have been older to have a son of Roland's age. But pray sit down."

She led the way, making a sign to Madame de Montrevel to sit beside her.

"And that charming boy," she said, pointing to Edouard, "is he also your son?" And she gave a sigh. "God has been prodigal to you, madame, and as He has given you all you can desire, will you not implore Him to send me a son."

She pressed her lips enviously to Edouard's forehead.

"My husband will be delighted to see you, he is so fond of your son, madame! You would not have been brought to me in the first instance, if he were not engaged with the minister of police. For that matter," she added, laughing, "you have arrived at an unfortunate moment; he is furious!"

"Oh!" cried Madame de Montrevel, frightened; "if that is so, I would rather wait."

"No, no! On the contrary, the sight of you will calm him. I don't know just what is the matter; but it seems a diligence was stopped on the outskirts of

the Black Forest in broad daylight. Fouché will find his credit in danger if the thing goes on."

Madame de Montrevel was about to answer when the door opened and an usher appeared.

"The First Consul awaits Madame de Montrevel," he said.

"Go," said Josephine; "Bonaparte's time is so precious that he is almost as impatient as Louis XV., who had nothing to do. He does not like to wait."

Madame de Montrevel rose hastily and turned to take Edouard with her.

"No," said Josephine; "leave this beautiful boy with me. You will stay and dine with us, and Bonaparte can see him then. Besides, if my husband takes a fancy to see him, he can send for him. For the time, I am his second mamma. Come, what shall we do to amuse ourselves?"

"The First Consul must have a fine lot of weapons, madame," replied the boy.

"Yes, very fine ones. Well, I will show you the First Consul's arms."

Josephine, leading the child, went out of one door, and Madame de Montrevel followed the usher through the other.

On the way the countess met a fair man, with a pale face and haggard eye, who looked at her with an uneasiness that seemed habitual to him. She drew hastily aside to let him pass. The usher noticed her movement.

"That is the minister of police," he said in a low voice. Madame de Montrevel watched him as he disappeared, with a certain curiosity. Fouché was already at that time fatally celebrated. Just then the door of Bonaparte's study opened and his head was seen through the aperture. He caught sight of Madame de Montrevel.

"Come in, madame," he said; "come in."

Madame de Montrevel hastened her steps and entered the study.

"Come in," said Bonaparte, closing the door himself. "I have kept you waiting much against my will; but I had to give Fouché a scolding. You know I am very well satisfied with Roland, and that I intend to make a general of him at the first opportunity. When did you arrive?"

"This very moment, general."

"Where from? Roland told me, but I have forgotten."

"From Bourg."

"What road?"

"Through Champagne."

"Champagne! Then when did you reach Châtillon?"

"Yesterday morning at nine o'clock."

"In that case, you must have heard of the stoppage of the diligence."

"General--"

"Yes, a diligence was stopped at ten in the morning, between Châtillon and Bar-sur-Seine."

"General, it was ours."

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"You were in the diligence that was stopped?"

"I was."

"Ah! now I shall get the exact details! Excuse me, but you understand my desire for correct information, don't you? In a civilized country which has General Bonaparte for its chief magistrate, diligences can't be stopped in broad daylight on the highroads with impunity, or--"

"General, I can tell you nothing, except that those who stopped it were on horseback and masked."

"How many were there?"

"Four."

"How many men were there in the diligence?"

"Four, including the conductor."

"And they didn't defend themselves?"

"No, general."

"The police report says, however, that two shots were fired."

"Yes, general, but those two shots--"

"Well?"

"Were fired by my son."

"Your son? Why, he is in Vendée!"

"Roland, yes; but Edouard was with me."

"Edouard! Who is Edouard?"

"Roland's brother."

"True, he spoke of him; but he is only a child."

"He is not yet twelve, general."

"And it was he who fired the two shots?"

"Yes, general."

"Why didn't you bring him with you?"

"I did."

"Where is he?"

"I left him with Madame Bonaparte."

Bonaparte rang, and an usher appeared.

"Tell Josephine to bring the boy to me." Then, walking up and down his study, he muttered, "Four men! And a child taught them courage! Were any of the robbers wounded?"

"There were no balls in the pistols."

"What I no balls?"

"No; they belonged to the conductor, and he had taken the precaution to load them with powder only."

"Very good; his name shall be known."

Just then the door opened, and Madame Bonaparte entered, leading the boy by the hand.

"Come here," Bonaparte said to him.

Edouard went up to him without hesitation and made a military salute.

"So you fired at the robbers twice, did you?"

"There, you see, mamma, they were robbers!" interrupted the child.

"Of course they were robbers; I should like to hear any one declare they were not! Was it you who fired at them, when the men were afraid?"

"Yes, it was I, general. But unfortunately that coward of a conductor had loaded his pistols only with powder; otherwise I should have killed their leader."

"Then you were not afraid?"

"I?" replied the boy. "No, I am never afraid."

"You ought to be named Cornelia, madame," exclaimed Bonaparte, turning to Madame de Montrevel, who was leaning on Josephine's arm. Then he said to the child, kissing him: "Very good; we will take care of you. What would you like to be?"

"Soldier first."

"What do you mean by first?"

"Why, first a soldier, then later a colonel like my brother, and then a general like my father."

"It won't be my fault if you are not," answered the First Consul.

"Nor mine," retorted the boy.

"Edouard!" exclaimed Madame de Montrevel, timidly.

"Now don't scold him for answering properly;" and Bonaparte, lifting the child to the level of his face, kissed him.

"You must dine with us," said he, "and to-night Bourrienne, who met you at the hotel, will install you in the Rue de la Victoire. You must stay there till Roland gets back; he will then find you suitable lodgings. Edouard shall go to the Prytanée, and I will marry off your daughter."

"General!"

"That's all settled with Roland." Then, turning to Josephine, he said: "Take Madame de Montrevel with you, and try not to let her be bored.--And, Madame de Montrevel, if your friend (he emphasized the words) wishes to go to a milliner, prevent it; she can't want bonnets, for she bought thirty-eight last month."

Then, giving Edouard a friendly tap, he dismissed the two women with a wave of the hand.