

Chapter 33

THE LAW OF RETALIATION

"Now, general," said Roland, when supper was over and the two young men, with their elbows on the table and their legs stretched out before the blazing fire, began to feel that comfortable sensation that comes of a meal which youth and appetite have seasoned. "Now for your promise to show me things which I can report to the First Consul."

"You promised, remember, not to object to them."

"Yes, but I reserve the right, in case you wound my conscience too severely, to withdraw."

"Only give time to throw a saddle on the back of your horse, or of mine, if yours is too tired, colonel, and you are free."

"Very good."

"As it happens," said Cadoudal, "events will serve you. I am here, not only as general, but as judge, though it is long since I have had a case to try. You told me, colonel, that General Brune was at Nantes; I knew it. You told me his advanced guard was only twelve miles away, at La Roche-Bernard; I knew that also. But a thing you may not know is that this advanced guard is not commanded by a soldier like you and me, but by citizen Thomas Millière, Commissioner of the Executive authorities. Another thing of which you may perhaps be ignorant is that citizen Thomas Millière does not fight like us with cannon, guns, bayonets, pistols and swords, but with an instrument invented by your Republican philanthropists, called the guillotine."

"It is impossible, sir," cried Roland, "that under the First Consul any one can make that kind of war,"

"Ah! let us understand each other, colonel. I don't say that the First Consul makes it; I say it is made in his name."

"And who is the scoundrel that abuses the authority given him, to make war with a staff of executioners?"

"I have told you his name; he is called Thomas Millièrre. Question whom you please, colonel, and throughout all Vendée and Brittany you'll hear but one voice on that man. From the day of the rising in Vendée and Brittany, now six years ago, Millièrre has been, always and everywhere, the most active agent of the Terror. For him the Terror did not end with Robespierre. He denounced to his superiors, or caused to be denounced to himself, the Breton and Vendéan soldiers, their parents, friends, brothers, sisters, wives, even the wounded and dying; he shot or guillotined them all without a trial. At Daumeray, for instance, he left a trail of blood behind him which is not yet, can never be, effaced. More than eighty of the inhabitants were slaughtered before his eyes. Sons were killed in the arms of their mothers, who vainly stretched those bloody arms to Heaven imploring vengeance. The successive pacifications of Brittany and Vendée have never slaked the thirst for murder which burns his entrails. He is the same in 1800 that he was in 1793. Well, this man--"

Roland looked at the general.

"This man," continued the general, with the utmost calmness, "is to die. Seeing that society did not condemn him, I have condemned him."

"What! Die at La Roche-Bernard, in the midst of the Republicans; in spite of his bodyguard of assassins and executioners?"

"His hour has struck; he is to die."

Cadoudal pronounced these words with such solemnity that no doubt remained in Roland's mind, not only as to the sentence, but also the execution of it. He was thoughtful for an instant.

"And you believe that you have, the right to judge and condemn that man, guilty as he is?"

"Yes; for that man has judged and condemned, not the guilty but the innocent."

"If I said to you: 'On my return to Paris I will demand the arrest and trial of that man,' would you not trust my word?"

"I would trust your word; but I should say to you: 'A maddened wild beast escapes from its cage, a murderer from his prison; men are men, subject to error. They have sometimes condemned the innocent, they might spare the guilty.' My justice is more certain than yours, colonel, for it is the justice of God. The man will die."

"And by what right do you claim that your justice, the justice of a man liable to error like other men, is the justice of God?"

"Because I have made God a sharer in that justice. Oh! my condemnation of that man is not of yesterday."

"How do you mean?"

"In the midst of a storm when thunder roared without cessation, and the lightning flashed from minute to minute, I raised my arms to heaven, and I said to God: 'O God! whose look is that lightning, whose voice is that thunder, if this man ought to die, extinguish that lightning, still the thunder for ten minutes. The silence of the skies, the darkness of the heavens shall

be thy answer!' Watch in hand, I counted eleven minutes without a flash or a sound. I saw at the point of a promontory a boat, tossed by a terrible tempest, a boat with but one man in it, in danger every minute of sinking; a wave lifted it as the breath of an infant lifts a plume, and cast it on the rocks. The boat flew to pieces; the man clung to the rock, and all the people cried out: 'He is lost!' His father was there, his two brothers were there, but none dared to succor him. I raised my arms to the Lord and said: 'If Millière is condemned by Thee as by me, O God, let me save that man; with no help but thine let me save him!' I stripped, I knotted a rope around my arm, and I swam to the rock. The water seemed to subside before my breast. I reached the man. His father and brothers held the rope. He gained the land. I could have returned as he did, fastening the rope to the rocks. I flung it away from me; I trusted to God and cast myself into the waves. They floated me gently and surely to the shore, even as the waters of the Nile bore Moses' basket to Pharaoh's daughter. The enemy's outposts were stationed around the village of Saint-Nolf; I was hidden in the woods of Grandchamp with fifty men. Recommending my soul to God, I left the woods alone. 'Lord God,' I said, 'if it be Thy will that Millière die, let that sentry fire upon me and miss me; then I will return to my men and leave that sentry unharmed, for Thou wilt have been with him for an instant.' I walked to the Republican; at twenty paces he fired and missed me. Here is the hole in my hat, an inch from my head; the hand of God had aimed that weapon. That happened yesterday. I thought that Millière was at Nantes. To-night they came and told me that Millière and his guillotine were at La Roche-Bernard. Then I said: 'God has brought him to me; he shall die.'"

Roland listened with a certain respect to the superstitious narrative of the Breton leader. He was not surprised to find such beliefs and such poetry in a man born in face of a savage sea, among the Druid monuments of Karnac. He realized that Millière was indeed condemned, and that God, who had thrice seemed to approve his judgment, alone could save him. But one last question occurred to him.

"How will you strike him?" he asked.

"Oh!" said Georges, "I do not trouble myself about that; he will be executed."

One of the two men who had brought in the supper table now entered the room.

"Brise-Bleu," said Cadoudal, "tell Coeur-de-Roi that I wish to speak to him."

Two minutes later the Breton presented himself.

"Coeur-de-Roi," said Cadoudal, "did you not tell me that the murderer Thomas Millièrè was at Roche-Bernard?"

"I saw him enter the town side by side with the Republican colonel, who did not seem particularly flattered by such companionship."

"Did you not add that he was followed by his guillotine?"

"I told you his guillotine followed between two cannon, and I believe if the cannon could have got away the guillotine would have been left to go its way alone."

"What precautions does Millièrè take in the towns he visits?"

"He has a special guard about him, and the streets around his house are barricaded. He carries pistols always at hand."

"In spite of that guard, in spite of that barricade and the pistols, will you undertake to reach him?"

"I will, general."

"Because of his crimes, I have condemned that man; he must die."

"Ah!" exclaimed Coeur-de-Roi, "the day of justice has come at last!"

"Will you undertake to execute my sentence, Coeur-de-Roi?"

"I will, general."

"Go then, Coeur-de-Roi. Take the number of men you need; devise what stratagem you please, but reach the man, and strike."

"If I die, general--"

"Fear not; the curate of Leguerno shall say enough masses in your behalf to keep your poor soul out of purgatory. But you will not die, Coeur-de-Roi."

"That's all right, general. Now that I am sure of the masses, I ask nothing more. I have my plan."

"When will you start?"

"To-night."

"When will he die?"

"To-morrow."

"Go. See that three hundred men are ready to follow me in half an hour."

Coeur-de-Roi went out as simply as he had entered.

"You see," said Cadoudal, "the sort of men I command. Is your First Consul as well served as I, Monsieur de Montrevel?"

"By some, yes."

"Well, with me it is not some, but all."

Bénédicté entered and questioned Georges with a look.

"Yes," replied Georges, with voice and nod.

Bénédicté went out.

"Did you see any one on your way here?" asked Cadoudal.

"Not one."

"I asked for three hundred men in half an hour, and they will be here in that time. I might have asked for five hundred, a thousand, two thousand, and they would have responded as promptly."

"But," said Roland, "you have, in number at least, a limit you cannot exceed."

"Do you want to know my effective? It is easily told, I won't tell you myself, for you wouldn't believe me. Wait. I will have some one tell you."

He opened the door and called out: "Branche-d'Or!"

Two seconds later Branche-d'Or appeared.

"This is my major-general," said Cadoudal, laughing. "He fulfils the same functions for me that General Berthier does for the First Consul. Branche-d'Or--"

"General."

"How many men are stationed along the road from here to La Roche-Bernard, which the gentleman followed in coming to see me?"

"Six hundred on the Arzal moor, six hundred among the Marzan gorse, three hundred at Péaule, three hundred at Billiers."

"Total, eighteen hundred. How many between Noyal and Muzillac?"

"Four hundred."

"Two thousand two hundred. How many between here and Vannes?"

"Fifty at Theix, three hundred at the Trinité, six hundred between the Trinité and Muzillac."

"Three thousand two hundred. And from Ambon to Leguerno?"

"Twelve hundred."

"Four thousand four hundred. And in the village around me, in the houses, the gardens, the cellars?"

"Five to six hundred, general."

"Thank you, Bénédicité."

He made a sign with his head and Bénédicité went out.

"You see," said Cadoudal, simply, "about five thousand. Well, with those five thousand men, all belonging to this country, who know every tree, every stone, every bush, I can make war against the hundred thousand men the First Consul threatens to send against me."

Roland smiled.

"You think that is saying too much, don't you?"

"I think you are boasting a little, general; boasting of your men, rather."

"No; for my auxiliaries are the whole population. None of your generals can make a move unknown to me; send a despatch without my intercepting it; find a retreat where I shall not pursue him. The very soil is royalist and Christian! In default of the inhabitants, it speaks and tells me: 'The Blues

passed here; the slaughterers are hidden there!' For the rest, you can judge for yourself."

"How?"

"We are going on an expedition about twenty-four miles from here. What time is it?"

Both young men looked at their watches.

"Quarter to twelve," they said together.

"Good!" said Georges, "our watches agree; that is a good sign. Perhaps some day our hearts will do the same."

"You were saying, general?"

"I was saying that it was a quarter to twelve, colonel; and that at six o'clock, before day, we must be twenty miles from here. Do you want to rest?"

"I!"

"Yes; you can sleep an hour."

"Thanks; it's unnecessary."

"Then we will start whenever you are ready."

"But your men?"

"Oh! my men are ready."

"Where?"

"Everywhere."

"I should like to see them."

"You shall."

"When?"

"Whenever agreeable to you. My men are very discreet, and never show themselves till I make the signal."

"So that whenever I want to see them--"

"You will tell me; I shall give the signal and they'll appear."

"Let us start, general."

"Yes, let us start."

The two young men wrapped themselves in their cloaks and went out. At the door Roland collided against a small group of five men. These five men wore Republican uniforms; one of them had sergeant stripes on his sleeve.

"What is all this?" asked Roland.

"Nothing," replied Cadoudal, laughing.

"But who are these men?"

"Coeur-de-Roi and his party; they are starting on that expedition you know of."

"Then they expect by means of this uniform--"

"Oh! you shall know all, colonel; I have no secrets from you." Then, turning to the little group, Cadoudal called: "Coeur-de-Roi!"

The man with the stripes on his sleeves left the group, and came to Cadoudal.

"Did you call me, general?" asked the pretended sergeant.

"Yes, I want to know your plan."

"Oh! general, it is very simple."

"Let me judge of that."

"I put this paper in the muzzle of my gun." Coeur-de-Roi showed a large envelope with an official red seal, which had once, no doubt, contained some Republican despatch intercepted by the Chouans. "I present myself to the sentries, saying: 'Despatch from the general of division.' I enter the first guardhouse and ask to be shown the house of the citizen-commissioner; they show me, I thank them; always best to be polite. I reach the house, meet a second sentry to whom I tell the same tale as to the first; I go up or down to citizen Millièrre accordingly as he lives in the cellar or the garret. I enter without difficulty, you understand--'Despatch from the general of division'. I find him in his study or elsewhere, present my paper, and while he opens it, I kill him with this dagger, here in my sleeve."

"Yes, but you and your men?"

"Ah, faith! In God's care; we are defending his cause, it is for him to take care of us."

"Well, you see, colonel," said Cadoudal, "how easy it all is. Let us mount, colonel! Good luck, Coeur-de-Roi!"

"Which of these two horses am I to take?" asked Roland.

"Either; one is as good as the other; each has an excellent pair of English pistols in its holsters."

"Loaded?"

"And well-loaded, colonel; that's a job I never trust to any one."

"Then we'll mount."

The two young men were soon in their saddles, and on the road to Vannes; Cadoudal guiding Roland, and Branche-d'Or, the major-general of the army, as Georges called him, following about twenty paces in the rear.

When they reached the end of the village, Roland darted his eyes along the road, which stretches in a straight line from Muzillac to the Trinité. The road, fully exposed to view, seemed absolutely solitary.

They rode on for about a mile and a half, then Roland said: "But where the devil are your men?"

"To right and left, before and behind us."

"Ha, what a joke!"

"It's not a joke, colonel; do you think I should be so rash as to risk myself thus without scouts?"

"You told me, I think, that if I wished to see your men I had only to say so."

"I did say so."

"Well, I wish to see them."

"Wholly, or in part?"

"How many did you say were with you?"

"Three hundred."

"Well, I want to see one hundred and fifty."

"Halt!" cried Cadoudal.

Putting his hands to his mouth he gave the hoot of the screech-owl, followed by the cry of an owl; but he threw the hoot to the right and the cry to the left.

Almost instantly, on both sides of the road, human forms could be seen in motion, bounding over the ditch which separated the bushes from the road, and then ranging themselves beside the horses.

"Who commands on the right?" asked Cadoudal.

"I, Moustache," replied a peasant, coming near.

"Who commands on the left?" repeated the general.

"I, Chante-en-hiver," replied another peasant, also approaching him.

"How many men are with you, Moustache?"

"One hundred."

"How many men are with you, Chante-en-hiver?"

"Fifty."

"One hundred and fifty in all, then?" asked Georges.

"Yes," replied the two Breton leaders.

"Is that your number, colonel?" asked Cadoudal laughing.

"You are a magician, general."

"No; I am a poor peasant like them; only I command a troop in which each brain knows what it does, each heart beats singly for the two great principles of this world, religion and monarchy." Then, turning to his men, Cadoudal asked: "Who commands the advanced guard?"

"Fend-l'air," replied the two Chouans.

"And the rear-guard?"

"La Giberne."

The second reply was made with the same unanimity as the first.

"Then we can safely continue our way?"

"Yes, general; as if you were going to mass in your own village."

"Let us ride on then, colonel," said Cadoudal to Roland. Then turning to his men he cried: "Be lively, my lads."

Instantly every man jumped the ditch and disappeared. For a few seconds the crackling of twigs on the bushes, and the sound of steps among the underbrush, was heard. Then all was silent.

"Well," asked Cadoudal, "do you think that with such men I have anything to fear from the Blues, brave as they may be?"

Roland heaved a sigh; he was of Cadoudal's opinion.

They rode on. About three miles from Trinité they caught sight of a black spot approaching along the road with great rapidity. As it became more distinct this spot stopped suddenly.

"What is that?" asked Roland.

"As you see, a man," replied Cadoudal.

"Of course; but who is this man?"

"You might have guessed from the rapidity of his coming; he is a messenger."

"Why does he stop?"

"Because he has seen us, and does not know whether to advance or retreat."

"What will he do?"

"Wait before deciding."

"For what?"

"A signal."

"Will he answer the signal?"

"He will not only answer but obey it. Will you have him advance or retreat; or will you have him step aside."

"I wish him to advance; by that means we shall know the news he brings."

Cadoudal gave the call of the cuckoo with such perfection that Roland looked about him for the bird.

"It was I," said Cadoudal, "you need not look for it."

"Is the messenger going to come?"

"Not-going to, he is coming."

The messenger had already started, and was rapidly approaching; in a few seconds he was beside his general.

"Ah!" said the latter, "is that you, Monte-à-l'assaut?"

The general stooped, and Monte-à-l'assaut said a few words in his ear.

"Bénédicté has already warned me," said Georges. Then turning to Roland, he said, "Something of importance is to happen in the village of the Trinité in a quarter of an hour, which you ought to see. Come, hurry up."

And, setting the example, he put his horse to a gallop. Roland did the same.

When they reached the village they could see from a distance, by the light of some pine torches, a tumultuous mob in the market square. The cries and movements of this mob bespoke some grave occurrence.

"Fast, fast!" cried Cadoudal.

Roland asked no better; he dug his spurs in his horse's belly.

At the clatter of horses' hoofs the peasants scattered. There were five or six hundred of them at least, all armed.

Cadoudal and Roland found themselves in a circle of light in the midst of cries and agitation.

The crowd was pressing more particularly toward the opening of a street which led to the village of Tridon. A diligence was coming down that street escorted by a dozen Chouans; two on either side of the postilion, ten others guarding the doors. The carriage stopped in the middle of the market-

square. All were so intent upon the diligence that they paid but scant attention to Cadoudal.

"Hola," shouted Georges. "What is all this?"

At this well known voice, everyone turned round, and heads were uncovered.

"The Big Round Head!" they murmured.

"Yes," said Cadoudal.

A man went up to Georges.

"Didn't Bénédicité and Monte-à-l'assaut notify you?" he inquired.

"Yes. Is that the diligence from Ploermel to Vannes that you are bringing back?"

"Yes, general. It was stopped between Tréfléon and Saint-Nolf."

"Is he in it?"

"We think so."

"Act according to your consciences; if it is a crime toward God, take it on yourselves; I take only the responsibility toward men. I will be present at what takes place; but I will not share in it--either to hinder or help."

"Well," demanded a hundred voices, "what does he say, Sabre-tout?"

"He says we must act according to our consciences, and that he washes his hands of it."

"Long live the Big Round Head!" cried all the people, rushing toward the diligence.

Cadoudal remained motionless in the midst of this crowd. Roland stood near him, also motionless, but full of curiosity; for he was completely ignorant of who, or what, was in question.

The man who had just spoken to Cadoudal, and whom his companions called Sabre-tout, opened the door. The travellers were huddled together and trembling in the darkness within.

"If you have nothing to reproach yourselves with against God or the king," said Sabre-tout in a full sonorous voice, "descend without fear. We are not brigands, we are Christians and royalists."

This declaration no doubt reassured the travellers, for a man got out, then two women, then a mother pressing her child in her arms, and finally another man. The Chouans examined them attentively as they came down the carriage steps; not finding the man they wanted, they said to each traveller, "Pass on."

One man alone remained in the coach. A Chouan thrust a torch in the vehicle, and by its light they could see he was a priest.

"Minister of the Lord," said Sabre-tout, "why did you not descend with the others? Did you not hear me say we were Christians and royalists?"

The priest did not move; but his teeth chattered.

"Why this terror?" continued Sabre-tout. "Does not your cloth plead for you? The man who wears a cassock can have done nothing against royalty or religion."

The priest crouched back, murmuring: "Mercy! mercy!"

"Why mercy?" demanded Sabre-tout, "do you feel that you are guilty, wretch?"

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Roland, "is that how you royalists and Christians speak to a man of God!"

"That man," said Cadoudal, "is not a man of God, but a man of the devil."

"Who is he, then?"

"Both an atheist and a regicide; he denied his God and voted for the death of the king. That is the Conventional Audrein."

Roland shuddered. "What will they do?" he asked.

"He gave death, he will receive death," answered Cadoudal.

During this time the Chouans had pulled Audrein out of the diligence.

"Ha! is it you, bishop of Vannes?" cried Sabre-tout.

"Mercy!" begged the bishop.

"We were informed of your arrival, and were waiting for you."

"Mercy!" repeated the bishop for the third time.

"Have you your pontifical robes with you?"

"Yes, my friends, I have."

"Then dress yourself as a prelate; it is long since we have seen one."

A trunk marked with the prelate's name was taken from the diligence and opened. They took the bishop's robes from it, and handed them to Audrein, who put them on. Then, when every vestment was in its place, the peasants ranged themselves in a circle, each with his musket in his hand. The glare of the torches was reflected on the barrels, casting evil gleams.

Two men took the priest and led him into the circle, supporting him beneath his arms. He was pale as death. There was a moment of lugubrious silence.

A voice broke it. It was that of Sabre-tout.

"We are about to judge you," said the Chouan. "Priest of God, you have betrayed the Church; child of France, you have condemned your king to death."

"Alas! alas!" stammered the priest.

"Is it true?"

"I do not deny it."

"Because it is impossible to deny. What have you to say in justification?"

"Citizens--"

"We are not citizens," cried Sabre-tout, in a voice thunder, "we are royalists."

"Gentlemen--"

"We are not gentlemen; we are Chouans."

"My friends--"

"We are not your friends; we are your judges. You judges are questioning you; answer."

"I repent of what I did, and I ask pardon of God and men."

"Men cannot pardon you," replied the same implacable voice; "for, pardoned to-day, you would sin to-morrow. You may change your skin, but never your heart. You have nothing to expect from men but death; as for God, implore his mercy."

The regicide bowed his head; the renegade bent his knee. But suddenly drawing himself up, he cried: "I voted the king's death, it is true, but with a reservation--"

"What reservation?"

"The time of the execution."

"Sooner or later, it was still the king's death which you voted, and the king was innocent."

"True, true," said the priest, "but I was afraid."

"Then you are not only a regicide, and an apostate, but also a coward. We are not priests, but we are more just than you. You voted the death of the innocent; we vote the death of the guilty. You have ten minutes in which to prepare to meet your God."

The bishop gave a cry of terror and fell upon both knees; the church bells rang, as if of their own impulse, and two of the men present, accustomed to the offices of the church, intoned the prayers for the dying. It was some time before the bishop found words with which to respond. He turned affrighted glances in supplication to his judges one after the other, but, not one face met his with even the consolation of mere pity. The torches, flickering in the wind, lent them, on the contrary, a savage and terrible expression. Then at last he mingled his voice with the voices that were praying for him.

The judges allowed him time to follow the funeral prayer to its close. In the meantime others were preparing a pile of wood.

"Oh!" cried the priest, beholding these preparations with growing terror; "would you have the cruelty to kill me thus?"

"No," replied his inflexible accuser, "flames are the death of martyrs; you are not worthy of such a death. Apostate, the hour has come!"

"Oh, my God! my God!" cried the priest, raising his arms to heaven.

"Stand up!" said the Chouan.

The priest tried to obey, but his strength failed him, and he fell again to his knees.

"Will you let that murder be done before your eyes?" Roland asked Cadoudal.

"I said that I washed my hands of it," replied the latter.

"Pilate said that, and Pilate's hands are to this day red with the blood of Jesus Christ."

"Because Jesus Christ was a righteous man; this man is a Barabbas."

"Kiss your cross! kiss your cross!" cried Sabre-tout.

The prelate looked at him with a terrified air, but without obeying. It was evident that he no longer saw, no longer heard.

"Oh!" cried Roland, making an effort to dismount, "it shall never be said that I let a man be murdered before me, and did not try to, save him."

A threatening murmur rose around him; his words had been overheard. That was all that was needed to excite the young man.

"Ah! is that the way of it?" he cried, carrying his hand to one of his holsters.

But with a movement rapid as thought, Cadoudal seized his hand, and, while Roland struggled vainly to free himself from this grip of iron, he shouted: "Fire!"

Twenty shots resounded instantly, and the bishop fell, an inert mass.

"Ah!" cried Roland. "What have you done?"

"Forced you to keep your promise," replied Cadoudal; "you swore to see all and hear all without offering any opposition."

"So perish all enemies of God and the king," said Sabre-tout, in a solemn voice.

"Amen!" responded the spectators with one voice of sinister unanimity.

Then they stripped the body of its sacerdotal ornaments, which they flung upon the pile of wood, invited the other travellers to take their places in the diligence, replaced the postilion in his saddle, and, opening their ranks to give passage to the coach, cried: "Go with God!"

The diligence rolled rapidly away.

"Come, let us go," cried Cadoudal, "we have still twelve miles to do, and we have lost an hour here." Then, addressing the executioners, he said: "That man was guilty; that man is punished. Human justice and divine justice are satisfied. Let prayers for the dead be said over his body, and give him Christian burial; do you hear?" And sure of being obeyed, Cadoudal put his horse to a gallop.

Roland seemed to hesitate for a moment whether to follow him or not; then, as if resolving to accomplish a duty, he said: "I will go to the end."

Spurring his horse in the direction taken by Cadoudal he reached the Chouan leader in a few strides. Both disappeared in the darkness, which grew thicker and thicker as the men left the place where the torches were illuminating the dead priest's face and the fire was consuming his vestments.