

Chapter 35

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

Roland's first visit on arriving in Paris was to the First Consul. He brought him the twofold news of the pacification of the Vendée, and the increasingly bitter insurrection in Brittany.

Bonaparte knew Roland; consequently the triple narrative of Thomas Millièrre's murder, the execution of Bishop Audrein, and the fight at Grandchamp, produced a deep impression upon him. There was, moreover, in the young man's manner a sombre despair in which he could not be mistaken.

Roland was miserable over this lost opportunity to get himself killed. An unknown power seemed to watch over him, carrying him safe and sound through dangers which resulted fatally to others. Sir John had found twelve judges and a death-warrant, where he had seen but a phantom, invulnerable, it is true, but inoffensive.

He blamed himself bitterly for singling out Cadoudal in the fight, thus exposing himself to a pre-arranged plan of capture, instead of flinging himself into the fray and killing or being killed.

The First Consul watched him anxiously as he talked; the longing for death still lingered in his mind, a longing he hoped to cure by this return to his native land and the endearments of his family.

He praised and defended General Hatry, but, just and impartial as a soldier should be, he gave full credit to Cadoudal for the courage and generosity the royalist general had displayed.

Bonaparte listened gravely, almost sadly; ardent as he was for foreign war with its glorious halo, his soul revolted at the internecine strife which

drained the life-blood of the nation and rent its bowels. It was a case in which, to his thinking, negotiation should be substituted for war. But how negotiate with a man like Cadoudal?

Bonaparte was not unaware of his own personal seductions when he chose to exercise them. He resolved to see Cadoudal, and without saying anything on the subject to Roland, he intended to make use of him for the interview when the time came. In the meantime he wanted to see if Brune, in whose talent he had great confidence, would be more successful than his predecessors.

He dismissed Roland, after telling him of his mother's arrival and her installation in the little house in the Rue de la Victoire.

Roland sprang into a coach and was driven there at once. He found Madame de Montrevel as happy and as proud as a woman and a mother could be. Edouard had gone, the day before, to the Prytanée Français, and she herself was preparing to return to Amélie, whose health continued to give her much anxiety.

As for Sir John, he was not only out of danger, but almost well again. He was in Paris, had called upon Madame de Montrevel, and, finding that she had gone with Edouard to the Prytanée, he had left his card. It bore his address, Hôtel Mirabeau, Rue de Richelieu.

It was eleven o'clock, Sir John's breakfast hour, and Roland had every chance of finding him at that hour. He got back into his carriage, and ordered the coachman to stop at the Hôtel Mirabeau.

He found Sir John sitting before an English breakfast, a thing rarely seen in those days, drinking large cups of tea and eating bloody chops.

As soon as the Englishman saw Roland he gave a cry of joy and ran to meet him. Roland himself had acquired a deep affection for that exceptional nature, where the noblest qualities of the heart seemed striving to hide themselves beneath national eccentricities.

Sir John was pale and thin, but in other respects he was well. His wound had completely healed, and except for a slight oppression, which was diminishing daily and would soon disappear altogether, he had almost recovered his former health. He now welcomed Roland with a tenderness scarcely to be expected from that reserved nature, declaring that the joy he felt in seeing him again was all he wanted for his complete recovery.

He begged Roland to share the meal, telling him to order his own breakfast, *a la Française*. Roland accepted. Like all soldiers who had fought the hard wars of the Revolution, when bread was often lacking, Roland cared little for what he ate; he had acquired the habit of eating whatever was put before him as a precaution against the days when there might be nothing at all. Sir John's attention in asking him to make a French breakfast was scarcely noticed by him at all.

But what Roland did notice was Sir John's preoccupation of mind. It was evident that Sir John had something on his lips which he hesitated to utter. Roland thought he had better help him.

So, when breakfast was nearly over, Roland, with his usual frankness, which almost bordered upon brutality at times, leaned his elbows on the table, settled his chin in his hands, and said: "Well, my dear Sir John, you have something to say to your friend Roland that you don't dare put into words."

Sir John started, and, from pale as he was, turned crimson.

"Confound it!" continued Roland, "it must be hard to get out; but, Sir John, if you have many things to ask me, I know but few that I have the right to refuse you. So, go on; I am listening."

And Roland closed his eyes as if to concentrate all his attention on what Sir John was about to say. But the matter was evidently, from Sir John's point of view, so extremely difficult to make known, that at the end of a dozen seconds, finding that Sir John was still silent, Roland opened his eyes.

The Englishman was pale again; but this time he was paler than before. Roland held out his hand to him.

"Why," he said, "I see you want to make some compliment about the way you were treated at the Château des Noires-Fontaines."

"Precisely, my friend; for the happiness or misery of my life will date from my sojourn at the château."

Roland looked fixedly at Sir John. "The deuce!" he exclaimed, "can I be so fortunate--" Then he stopped, remembering that what he was about to say was most unconventional from the social point of view.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sir John, "my dear Roland, finish what you were saying."

"You wish it?"

"I implore you."

"But if I am mistaken; if I should say something nonsensical."

"My friend, my friend, go on."

"Well, as I was saying, my lord, can I be so fortunate as to find your lordship in love with my sister?"

Sir John gave a cry of joy, and with a rapid movement, of which so phlegmatic a man might have been thought incapable, he threw himself in Roland's arms.

"Your sister is an angel, my dear Roland," he exclaimed, "and I love her with all my heart."

"Are you entirely free to do so, my lord?"

"Entirely. For the last twelve years, as I told you, I have had my fortune under my own control; it amounts to twenty-five thousand pounds sterling a year."

"Too much, my dear fellow, for a woman who can only bring you fifty thousand francs."

"Oh!" said the Englishman, with that national accent that returned to him occasionally in moments of strong excitement, "if I must get rid of a part of it, I can do so."

"No," replied Roland, laughing, "that's not necessary. You're rich; it's unfortunate, but what's to be done?--No, that's not the question. Do you love my sister?"

"I adore her."

"And she," resumed Roland, "does she love you?"

"Of course you understand," returned Sir John, "that I have not asked her. I was bound, my dear Roland, to speak to you first, and if the matter were agreeable, to beg you to plead my cause with your mother. After I have obtained the consent of both, I shall make my offer. Or rather, you will make it for me, for I should never dare."

"Then I am the first to receive your confidence?"

"You are my best friend, and it ought to be so."

"Well, my dear friend, as far as I am concerned, your suit is won--naturally."

"Your mother and sister remain."

"They will be one. You understand that my mother will leave Amélie free to make her own choice; and I need not tell you that if it falls upon you she will be delighted. But there is a person whom you have forgotten."

"Who is that?" said Sir John, in the tone of a man who, having weighed all chances for and against, believes he knows them all, and is met by an obstacle he has never thought of.

"The First Consul," said Roland.

"God--" ejaculated the Englishman, swallowing the last words of the national oath.

"He spoke to me just before I left for the Vendée of my sister's marriage," continued Roland; "saying that it no longer concerned my mother and myself, for he would take charge of it."

"Then," said Sir John, "I am lost."

"Why so?"

"The First Consul does not like the English."

"Say rather that the English do not like the First Consul."

"But who will present my wishes to the First Consul?"

"I will."

"And will you speak of them as agreeable to yourself?"

"I'll turn you into a dove of peace between the two nations," said Roland, rising.

"Oh! thank you," cried Sir John, seizing the young man's hand. Then he added, regretfully, "Must you leave me?"

"My friend, I have only a few hours' leave. I have given one to my mother, two to you, and I owe one to your friend Edouard. I want to kiss him and ask his masters to let him scuffle as he likes with his comrades. Then I must get back to the Luxembourg."

"Well, take him my compliments, and tell him I have ordered another pair of pistols for him, so that the next time he is attacked by bandits he needn't use the conductor's."

Roland looked at Sir John.

"Now, what is it?" he asked.

"What! Don't you know?"

"No. What is it I don't know?"

"Something that nearly killed our poor Amélie?"

"What thing?"

"The attack on the diligence."

"But what diligence?"

"The one which your mother was in."

"The diligence my mother was in?"

"Yes."

"The diligence my mother was in was attacked?"

"You have seen Madame de Montrevel, and she didn't tell you?"

"Not a word about that, anyway."

"Well, my dear Edouard proved a hero; as no one else defended the coach, he did. He took the conductor's pistols and fired."

"Brave boy!" exclaimed Roland.

"Yes, but, unluckily or luckily the conductor had taken the precaution to remove the bullets. Edouard was praised and petted by the Companions of Jehu as the bravest of the brave; but he neither killed nor wounded them."

"Are you sure of what you are telling me?"

"I tell you your sister almost died of fright."

"Very good," said Roland.

"How very good?" exclaimed Sir John.

"I mean, all the more reason why I should see Edouard."

"What makes you say that."

"A plan."

"Tell me what it is."

"Faith! no. My plans don't turn out well for you."

"But you know, my dear Roland, that if there are any reprisals to make--"

"I shall make them for both. You are in love, my dear fellow; live in your love."

"You promise me your support?"

"That's understood! I am most anxious to call you brother."

"Are you tired of calling me friend?"

"Faith, yes; it is too little."

"Thanks."

They pressed each other's hands and parted.

A quarter of an hour later Roland reached the Prytanée Français, which stood then on the present site of the Lyceum of Louis-le-Grand--that is to say, at the head of the Rue Saint-Jacques, behind the Sorbonne. At the first words of the director, Roland saw that his young brother had been especially recommended to the authorities. The boy was sent for. Edouard flung

himself into the arms of his "big brother" with that passionate adoration he had for him.

After the first embraces were over, Roland inquired about the stoppage of the diligence. Madame de Montrevel had been chary of mentioning it; Sir John had been sober in statement, but not so Edouard. It was his Iliad, his very own. He related it with every detail--Jérôme's connivance with the bandits, the pistols loaded with powder only, his mother's fainting-fit, the attention paid to her by those who had caused it, his own name known to the bandits, the fall of the mask from the face of the one who was restoring his mother, his certainty that she must have seen the man's face.

Roland was above all struck with this last particular. Then the boy related their audience with the First Consul, and told how the latter had kissed and petted him, and finally recommended him to the director of the Prytanée Français.

Roland learned from the child all that he wished to know, and as it took but five minutes to go from the Rue Saint Jacques to the Luxembourg, he was at the palace in that time.