Chapter 37

THE AMBASSADOR

We have seen that Roland, on returning to the Luxembourg, asked for the First Consul and was told that he was engaged with Fouché, the minister of police.

Roland was a privileged person; no matter what functionary was with Bonaparte, he was in the habit, on his return from a journey, or merely from an errand, of half opening the door and putting in his head. The First Consul was often so busy that he paid no attention to this head. When that was the case, Roland would say "General!" which meant, in the close intimacy which still existed between the two schoolmates: "General, I am here; do you need me? I'm at your orders." If the First Consul did not need him, he replied: "Very good." If on the contrary he did need him, he said, simply: "Come in." Then Roland would enter, and wait in the recess of a window until the general told him what he wanted.

On this occasion, Roland put his head in as usual, saying: "General!"

"Come in," replied the First Consul, with visible satisfaction; "come in, come in!"

Roland entered. Bonaparte was, as he had been told, busy with the minister of police. The affair on which the First Consul was engaged, and which seemed to absorb him a great deal, had also its interest for Roland.

It concerned the recent stoppages of diligences by the Companions of Jehu.

On the table lay three _procès-verbaux_ relating the stoppage of one diligence and two mail-coaches. Tribier, the paymaster of the Army of Italy, was in one of the latter. The stoppages had occurred, one on the highroad between Meximieux and Montluel, on that part of the road which crosses the

commune of Bellignieux; the second, at the extremity of the lake of Silans, in the direction of Nantua; the third, on the highroad between Saint-Etienne and Bourg, at a spot called Les Carronnières.

A curious fact was connected with these stoppages. A sum of four thousand francs and a case of jewelry had been mixed up by mistake with the money-bags belonging to the government. The owners of the money had thought them lost, when the justice of the peace at Nantua received an unsigned letter telling him the place where these objects had been buried, and requesting him to return them to their rightful owners, as the Companions of Jehu made war upon the government and not against private individuals.

In another case; that of the Carronnières--where the robbers, in order to stop the mail-coach, which had continued on its way with increased speed in spite of the order to stop, were forced to fire at a horse--the Companions of Jehu had felt themselves obliged to make good this loss to the postmaster, who had received five hundred francs for the dead horse. That was exactly what the animal had cost eight days before; and this valuation proved that they were dealing with men who understood horses.

The _procès-verbaux_ sent by the local authorities were accompanied by the affidavits of the travellers.

Bonaparte was singing that mysterious tune of which we have spoken; which showed that he was furious. So, as Roland might be expected to bring him fresh information, he had called him three times to come in.

"Well," said he, "your part of the country is certainly in revolt against me; just look at that."

Roland glanced at the papers and understood at once.

"Exactly what I came to speak to you about, general," said he.

"Then begin at once; but first go ask Bourrienne for my department atlas."

Roland fetched the atlas, and, guessing what Bonaparte desired to look at, opened it at the department of the Ain.

"That's it," said Bonaparte; "show me where these affairs happened."

Roland laid his finger on the edge of the map, in the neighborhood of Lyons.

"There, general, that's the exact place of the first attack, near the village of Bellignieux."

"And the second?"

"Here," said Roland, pointing to the other side of the department, toward Geneva; "there's the lake of Nantua, and here's that of Silans."

"Now the third?"

Roland laid his finger on the centre of the map.

"General, there's the exact spot. Les Carronnières are not marked on the map because of their slight importance."

"What are Les Carronnières?" asked the First Consul.

"General, in our part of the country the manufactories of tiles are called _carronnières_; they belong to citizen Terrier. That's the place they ought to be on the map."

And Roland made a pencil mark on the paper to show the exact spot where the stoppage occurred.

"What!" exclaimed Bonaparte; "why, it happened less than a mile and a half from Bourg!"

"Scarcely that, general; that explains why the wounded horse was taken back to Bourg and died in the stables of the Belle-Alliance."

"Do you hear all these details, sir!" said Bonaparte, addressing the minister of police.

"Yes, citizen First Consul," answered the latter.

"You know I want this brigandage to stop?"

"I shall use every effort--"

"It's not a question of your efforts, but of its being done."

The minister bowed.

"It is only on that condition," said Bonaparte, "that I shall admit you are the able man you claim to be."

"I'll help you, citizen," said Roland.

"I did not venture to ask for your assistance," said the minister.

"Yes, but I offer it; don't do anything that we have not planned together."

The minister looked at Bonaparte.

"Quite right," said Bonaparte; "you can go. Roland will follow you to the ministry."

Fouché bowed and left the room.

"Now," continued the First Consul, "your honor depends upon your exterminating these bandits, Roland. In the first place, the thing is being carried on in your department; and next, they seem to have some particular grudge against you and your family."

"On the contrary," said Roland, "that's what makes me so furious; they spare me and my family."

"Let's go over it again, Roland. Every detail is of importance; it's a war of Bedouins over again."

"Just notice this, general. I spend a night in the Chartreuse of Seillon, because I have been told that it was haunted by ghosts. Sure enough, a ghost appears, but a perfectly inoffensive one. I fire at it twice, and it doesn't even turn around. My mother is in a diligence that is stopped, and faints away. One of the robbers pays her the most delicate attentions, bathes her temples with vinegar, and gives her smelling-salts. My brother Edouard fights them as best he can; they take him in their arms, kiss him, and make

him all sorts of compliments on his courage; a little more and they would have given him sugar-plums as a reward for his gallant conduct. Now, just the reverse; my friend Sir John follows my example, goes where I have been; he is treated as a spy and stabbed, as they thought, to death."

"But he didn't die."

"No. On the contrary, he is so well that he wants to marry my sister."

"Ah ha! Has he asked for her?"

"Officially."

"And you answered?"

"I answered that the matter depended on two persons."

"Your mother and you; that's true."

"No; my sister herself--and you."

"Your sister I understand; but I?"

"Didn't you tell me general, that you would take charge of marrying her?"

Bonaparte walked up and down the room with his arms crossed; then, suddenly stopping before Roland, he said: "What is your Englishman like?"

"You have seen him, general."

"I don't mean physically; all Englishmen are alike--blue eyes, red hair, white skin, long jaws."

"That's their _th_," said Roland, gravely.

"Their _th_?"

"Yes. Did yon ever learn English, general?"

"Faith! I tried to learn it."

"Your teacher must have told you that the _th_ was sounded by pressing the tongue against the teeth. Well, by dint of punching their teeth with their tongues the English have ended by getting those elongated jaws, which, as you said just now, is one of the distinctive characteristics of their physiognomy."

Bonaparte looked at Roland to see if that incorrigible jester were laughing or speaking seriously. Roland was imperturbable.

"Is that your opinion?" said Bonaparte.

"Yes, general, and I think that physiologically it is as good as any other. I have a lot of opinions like it, which I bring to light as the occasion offers."

"Come back to your Englishman."

"Certainly, general."

"I asked you what he was like."

"Well, he is a gentleman; very brave, very calm, very impassible, very noble, very rich, and, moreover--which may not be a recommendation to you--a nephew of Lord Grenville, prime minister to his Britannic Majesty."

"What's that?"

"I said, prime minister to his Britannic Majesty."

Bonaparte resumed his walk; then, presently returning to Roland, he said: "Can I see your Englishman?"

"You know, general, that you can do anything."

"Where is he?"

"In Paris."

"Go find him and bring him here."

Roland was in the habit of obeying without reply; he took his hat and went toward the door.

"Send Bourrienne to me," said the First Consul, just as Roland passed into the secretary's room.

Five minutes later Bourrienne appeared.

"Sit down there, Bourrienne," said the First Consul, "and write."

Bourrienne sat down, arranged his paper, dipped his pen in the ink, and waited.

"Ready?" asked the First Consul, sitting down upon the writing table, which was another of his habits; a habit that reduced his secretary to despair, for Bonaparte never ceased swinging himself back and forth all the time he dictated--a motion that shook the table as much as if it had been in the middle of the ocean with a heaving sea.

"I'm ready," replied Bourrienne, who had ended by forcing himself to endure, with more or less patience, all Bonaparte's eccentricities.

"Then write." And he dictated:

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Bonaparte, First Consul of the Republic, to his Majesty the King

of Great Britain and Ireland. Called by the will of the French nation to the chief magistracy

of the Republic, I think it proper to inform your Majesty

personally of this fact. Must the war, which for two years has ravaged the four quarters

of the globe, be perpetuated? Is there no means of staying it? How is it that two nations, the most enlightened of Europe,

more powerful and strong than their own safety and

independence require; how is it that they sacrifice to their

ideas of empty grandeur or bigoted antipathies the welfare

of commerce, eternal prosperity, the happiness of families?

How is it that they do not recognize that peace is the first

of needs and the first of a nation's glories? These sentiments cannot be foreign to the heart of a king who

governs a free nation with the sole object of rendering it happy. Your Majesty will see in this overture my sincere desire to

contribute efficaciously, for the second time, to a general

pacification, by an advance frankly made and free of those

formalities which, necessary perhaps to disguise the dependence

of feeble states, only disclose in powerful nations a mutual

desire to deceive. France and England can, for a long time yet, by the abuse of

their powers, and to the misery of their people, carry on the

struggle without exhaustion; but, and I dare say it, the fate

of all the civilized nations depends on the conclusion of a

war which involves the universe.-

Bonaparte paused. "I think that will do," said he. "Read it over, Bourrienne."

Bourrienne read the letter he had just written. After each paragraph the First Consul nodded approvingly; and said: "Go on."

Before the last words were fairly uttered, he took the letter from Bourrienne's hands and signed it with a new pen. It was a habit of his never to use the same pen twice. Nothing could be more disagreeable to him than a spot of ink on his fingers.

"That's good," said he. "Seal it and put on the address: 'To Lord Grenville.'"

Bourrienne did as he was told. At the same moment the noise of a carriage was heard entering the courtyard of the Luxembourg. A moment later the door opened and Roland appeared.

"Well?" asked Bonaparte.

"Didn't I tell you you could have anything you wanted, general?"

"Have you brought your Englishman?"

"I met him in the Place de Buci; and, knowing that you don't like to wait, I caught him just as he was, and made him get into the carriage. Faith! I thought I should have to drive round to the Rue Mazarine, and get a guard to bring him. He's in boots and a frock-coat."

"Let him come in," said Bonaparte.

"Come in, Sir John," cried Roland, turning round.

Lord Tanlay appeared on the threshold. Bonaparte had only to glance at him to recognize a perfect gentleman. A trifling emaciation, a slight pallor, gave Sir John the characteristics of great distinction. He bowed, awaiting the formal introduction, like the true Englishman he was.

"General," said Roland, "I have the honor to present to you Sir John Tanlay, who proposed to go to the third cataract for the purpose of seeing you, but who has, to-day, obliged me to drag him by the ear to the Luxembourg."

"Come in, my lord; come in," said Bonaparte. "This is not the first time we have seen each other, nor the first that I have expressed the wish to know you; there was therefore positive ingratitude in trying to evade my desire."

"If I hesitated," said Sir John, in excellent French, as usual, "it was because I could scarcely believe in the honor you do me."

"And besides, very naturally, from national feeling, you detest me, don't you, like the rest of your countrymen?"

"I must confess, general," answered Sir John, smiling, "that they have not got beyond admiration."

"And do you share the absurd prejudice that claims that national honor requires you to hate to-day the enemy who may be a friend to-morrow?"

"France has been almost a second mother country to me, and my friend Roland will tell you that I long for the moment when, of my two countries, the one to which I shall owe the most will be France."

"Then you ought to see France and England shaking hands for the good of the world, without repugnance."

"The day when I see that will be a happy day for me."

"If you could contribute to bring it about would you do so?"

"I would risk my life to do it."

"Roland tells me you are a relative of Lord Grenville."

"His nephew."

"Are you on good terms with him?"

"He was very fond of my mother, his eldest sister."

"Have you inherited the fondness he bore your mother?"

"Yes; only I think he holds it in reserve till I return to England."

"Will you deliver a letter for me?"

"To whom?"

"King George III."

"I shall be greatly honored."

"Will you undertake to say to your uncle that which cannot be written in a letter?"

"Without changing a syllable; the words of General Bonaparte are history."

"Well, tell him--" but, interrupting himself, he turned to Bourrienne, saying: "Bourrienne, find me the last letter from the Emperor of Russia."

Bourrienne opened a box, and, without searching, laid his hand on a letter that he handed to Bonaparte.

The First Consul cast his eye over the paper and then gave it to Lord Tanlay.

"Tell him," said he, "first and before all, that you have read this letter."

Sir John bowed and read as follows:

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CITIZEN FIRST CONSUL--I have received, each armed and newly

clothed in the uniform of his regiment, the nine thousand

Russians, made prisoners in Holland, whom you have returned

to me without ransom, exchange, or condition of any kind. This is pure chivalry, and I boast of being chivalrous. I think that which I can best offer you in exchange for this

magnificent present, citizen First Consul, is my friendship.

Will you accept it? As an earnest of that friendship, I am sending his passports

to Lord Whitworth, the British Ambassador to Saint Petersburg. Furthermore, if you will be, I do not say my second, but my

witness, I will challenge personally every king who will not

take part against England and close his ports to her. I begin with my neighbor the King of Denmark, and you will

find in the "Gazette de la Cour" the ultimatum I have sent him. What more can I say to you? Nothing, unless it be that you and

I together can give laws to the world. I am your admirer and sincere friend, PAUL.-

Lord Tanlay turned to the First Consul. "Of course you know," said he, "that the Emperor of Russia is mad."

"Is it that letter that makes you think so, my lord?" asked Bonaparte.

"No; but it confirms my opinion."

"It was a madman who gave Henry VI. of Lancaster the crown of Saint-Louis, and the blazon of England still bears--until I scratch them out with my sword--the fleur-de-lis of France."

Sir John smiled; his national pride revolted at this assumption in the conqueror of the Pyramids.

"But," said Bonaparte, "that is not the question to-day; everything in its own time."

"Yes," murmured Sir John, "we are too near Aboukir."

"Oh, I shall never defeat you at sea," said Bonaparte; "it would take fifty years to make France a maritime nation; but over there," and he motioned with his hand to the East, "at the present moment, I repeat, that the question is not war but peace. I must have peace to accomplish my dream, and, above all, peace with England. You see, I play aboveboard; I am strong enough to speak frankly. If the day ever comes when a diplomatist tells the truth, he will be the first diplomatist in the world; for no one will believe him, and he will attain, unopposed, his ends."

"Then I am to tell my uncle that you desire peace."

"At the same time letting him know that I do not fear war. If I can't ally myself with King George, I can, as you see, do so with the Emperor Paul; but Russia has not reached that point of civilization that I desire in an ally."

"A tool is sometimes more useful than an ally."

"Yes; but, as you said, the Emperor is mad, and it is better to disarm than to arm a madman. I tell you that two nations like France and England ought to be inseparable friends or relentless enemies; friends, they are the poles of the world, balancing its movements with perfect equilibrium; enemies, one must destroy the other and become the world's sole axis."

"But suppose Lord Grenville, not doubting your genius, still doubts your power; if he holds the opinion of our poet Coleridge, that our island needs no rampart, no bulwark, other than the raucous murmur of the ocean, what shall I tell him?"

"Unroll the map of the world, Bourrienne," said Bonaparte.

Bourrienne unrolled a map; Bonaparte stepped over to it.

"Do you see those two rivers?" said he, pointing to the Volga and the Danube. "That's the road to India," he added.

"I thought Egypt was, general," said Sir John.

"So did I for a time; or, rather, I took it because I had no other. But the Czar opens this one; your government can force me to take it. Do you follow me?"

"Yes; citizen; go on."

"Well, if England forces me to fight her, if I am obliged to accept this alliance with Catherine's successor, this is what I shall do: I shall embark forty thousand Russians on the Volga; I shall send them down the river to Astrakhan; they will cross the Caspian and await me at Asterabad."

Sir John bowed in sign of deep attention. Bonaparte continued: "I shall embark forty thousand Frenchmen on the Danube."

"Excuse me, citizen First Consul, but the Danube is an Austrian river."

"I shall have taken Vienna."

Sir John stared at Bonaparte.

"I shall have taken Vienna," continued the latter. "I shall then embark forty thousand Frenchmen on the Danube; I find Russian vessels at its mouth ready to transport them to Taganrog; I march them by land along the course of the Don to Pratisbianskaïa, whence they move to Tzaritsin; there they descend the Volga in the same vessels that have transported the forty thousand Russians to Asterabad; fifteen days later I have eighty thousand men in western Persia. From Asterabad, these united corps will march to the Indus; Persia, the enemy of England, is our natural ally."

"Yes; but once in the Punjab, the Persian alliance will do you no good; and an army of eighty thousand men cannot drag its provisions along with it."

"You forget one thing," said Bonaparte, as if the expedition were already under way, "I have left bankers at Teheran and Caboul. Now, remember what happened nine years ago in Lord Cornwallis' war with Tippo Saïb. The

commander-in-chief fell short of provisions, and a simple captain--I forget his name."

"Captain Malcolm," said Lord Tanlay.

"That's it!" cried Bonaparte. "You know the story! Captain Malcolm had recourse to the Brinjaries, those Bohemians of India, who cover the whole Hindostan peninsula with their encampments, and control the grain supplies. Well, those Bohemians are faithful to the last penny to those who pay them; they will feed me."

"You must cross the Indus."

"What of that!" exclaimed Bonaparte, "I have a hundred and eighty miles of bank between Déra-Ismaël-Khan and Attok to choose from. I know the Indus as well as I do the Seine. It is a slow current flowing about three miles an hour; its medium depth is, I should say, at the point I mentioned, from twelve to fifteen feet, and there are ten or more fords on the line of my operations."

"Then your line is already traced out?" asked Sir John smiling.

"Yes, in so far as it follows a broad uninterrupted stretch of fertile, well-watered provinces; that I avoid the sandy deserts which separate the lower valley of the Indus from Rajputana; and also that I follow the general bases of all invasions of India that have had any success, from Mahmoud of Ghazni, in the year 1000, to Nadir Shah, in 1739. And how many have taken the route I mean to take between the two epochs! Let us count them. After Mahmoud of Ghazni came Mohammed Ghori, in 1184, with one hundred and twenty thousand men; after him, Timur Tang, or Timur the Lame, whom we call Tamerlane, with sixty thousand men; after Tamerlane, Babar; after Babar, Humajan, and how many more I can't remember. Why, India is there for whoever will go and take it!"

"You forget, citizen First Consul, that all the conquerors you have named had only the aboriginal populations to deal with, whereas you have the English. We hold India--"

"With from twenty to twenty-two thousand men."

"And a hundred thousand Sepoys."

"I have counted them all, and I regard England and India, the one with the respect, the other with the contempt, they merit. Wherever I meet European infantry, I prepare a second, a third, and if necessary, a fourth line of reserves, believing that the first three might give way before the British bayonets; but wherever I find the Sepoys, I need only the postilion's whip to scatter the rabble. Have you any other questions to put to me, my lord?"

"One, citizen First Consul: are you sincerely desirous of peace?"

"Here is the letter in which I ask it of your king, my lord, and it is to be quite sure that it reaches his Britannic Majesty that I ask Lord Grenville's nephew to be my messenger."

"It shall be done as you desire, citizen; and were I the uncle, instead of the nephew, I should promise more."

"When can you start?"

"In an hour I shall be gone."

"You have no wish to express to me before leaving?"

"None. In any case, if I have any, I leave my affairs to my friend, Roland."

"Shake hands with me, my lord; it will be a good omen, as you represent England and I France."

Sir John accepted the honor done him by Bonaparte, with the exact measure of cordiality that indicated both his sympathy for France, and his mental reserves for the honor of his own nation.

Then, having pressed Roland's hand with fraternal effusion, he bowed again to the First Consul and went out. Bonaparte followed him reflectively with his eyes; then he said suddenly: "Roland, I not only consent to your sister's marriage with Lord Tanlay, but I wish it. Do you understand? _I wish it_."

He laid such emphasis upon those three words, that to any one who knew him they signified plainly, not "I wish," but "I will."

The tyranny was sweet to Roland, and he accepted it with grateful thanks.