

Chapter 38

THE TWO SIGNALS

Let us now relate what happened at the Château des Noires-Fontaines three days after the events we have just described took place in Paris.

Since the successive departures of Roland, then Madame de Montrevel and her son, and finally Sir John--Roland to rejoin his general, Madame de Montrevel to place Edouard in school, and Sir John to acquaint Roland with his matrimonial plans--Amélie had remained alone with Charlotte at the Château des Noires-Fontaines. We say *_alone_*, because Michel and his son Jacques did not live in the house, but in the little lodge at the gate where he added the duties of porter to those of gardener.

It therefore happened that at night all the windows, excepting those of Amélie, which, as we have said, were on the first floor overlooking the garden, and that of Charlotte in the attic, were left in darkness.

Madame de Montrevel had taken the second chambermaid with her. The two young girls were perhaps rather isolated in their part of the house, which consisted of a dozen bedrooms on three floors, especially at a time when so many rumors of robberies on the highroads reached them. Michel, therefore, proposed to his young mistress that he sleep in the main building, so as to be near her in case of need. But she, in a firm voice, assured him that she felt no fear, and desired no change in the customary routine of the château.

Michel did not insist, and retired, saying that Mademoiselle might, in any case, sleep in peace, for he and Jacques would make the rounds of the house during the night.

Amélie at first seemed anxious about those rounds; but she soon noticed that Michel and Jacques contented themselves with watching on the edge of the forest of Seillon, and the frequent appearance of a jugged hare, or a

haunch of venison on the table, proved to her that Michel kept his word regarding the promised rounds.

She therefore ceased to trouble about Michel's rounds, which were always on the side of the house opposite to that where she feared them.

Now, as we have said, three days after the events we have just related, or, to speak more correctly, during the night following the third day, those who were accustomed to see no light save in Amélie's windows on the first floor and Charlotte's on the third, might have observed with surprise that, from eleven o'clock until midnight, the four windows on the first floor were illuminated. It is true that each was lighted by a single wax-candle. They might also have seen the figure of a young girl through the shades, staring in the direction of the village of Ceyzeriat.

This young girl was Amélie, pale, breathing with difficulty, and seeming to watch anxiously for a signal.

At the end of a few minutes she wiped her forehead and drew a joyous breath. A fire was lighted in the direction she had been watching. Then she passed from room to room, putting out the three candles one after the other, leaving only the one which was burning in her own room. As if the fire awaited this return signal, it was now extinguished.

Amélie sat down by her window and remained motionless, her eyes fixed on the garden. The night was dark, without moon or stars, and yet at the end of a quarter of an hour she saw, or rather divined, a shadow crossing the lawn and approaching the window. She placed her single candle in the furthest corner of her room, and returned to open her window.

He whom she was awaiting was already on the balcony.

As on the first night when we saw him climb it, the young man put his arm around the girl's waist and drew her into the room. She made but slight resistance; her hand sought the cord of the Venetian blind, unfastened it from the hook that held it, and let it fall with more noise than prudence would have counselled.

Behind the blind, she closed the window; then she fetched the candle from the corner where she had hidden it. The light illuminated her face, and the young man gave a cry of alarm, for it was covered with tears.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"A great misfortune!" replied the young girl.

"Oh, I feared it when I saw the signal by which you recalled me after receiving me last night. But is it irreparable?"

"Almost," answered Amélie.

"I hope, at least, that it threatens only me."

"It threatens us both."

The young man passed his hand over his brow to wipe away the sweat that covered it.

"Tell me," said he; "you know I am strong."

"If you have the strength to hear it," said she, "I have none to tell it." Then, taking a letter from the chimney-piece, she added: "Read that; that is what I received by the post to-night."

The young man took the letter, opened it, and glanced hastily at the signature.

"From Madame de Montrevel," said he.

"Yes, with a postscript from Roland."

The young man read:

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MY DEAREST DAUGHTER--I hope that the news I announce will give you as much joy as it has already given our dear Roland and me. Sir John, whose heart you doubted, claiming that it was only a mechanical contrivance, manufactured in the workshops at Vaucanson, admits that such an opinion was a just one until the day he saw you; but he maintains that since that day he has a heart, and that that heart adores you. Did you suspect it, my dear Amélie, from his aristocratic and polished manners, when your mother's eyes failed to discern this tenderness. This morning, while breakfasting with your brother, he formally asked your hand. Your brother received the offer with joy, but he made no promises at first. The First Consul, before Roland's

departure for the Vendée, had already spoken of making himself responsible for your establishment. But since then he has asked to see Lord Tanlay, and Sir John, though he maintained his national reserve, was taken into the first Consul's good graces at once, to such a degree that he received from him, at their first interview, a mission to his uncle, Lord Grenville. Sir John started for England immediately. I do not know how many days Sir John will be absent, but on his

return he is certain to present himself to you as your betrothed. Lord Tanlay is still young, pleasing in appearance, and immensely rich; he is highly connected in England, and Roland's friend. I do not know a man who has more right, I will not say to your love, but to your profound esteem. The rest of my news I can tell you in two words. The First Consul

is still most kind to me and to your two brothers, and Madame Bonaparte has let me know that she only awaits your marriage to place you near her. There is talk of leaving the Luxembourg, and removing to the

Tuileries. Do you understand the full meaning of this change of domicile? Your mother, who loves you,

CLOTILDE DE MONTREVEL.-

Without pausing, the young man turned to Roland's postscript. It was as follows:

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You have read, my dear little sister, what our good mother has written. This marriage is a suitable one under all aspects. It

is not a thing to be childish about; the First Consul _wishes_ you to become Lady Tanlay; that is to say, he _wills_ it. I am leaving Paris for a few days. Though you may not see me, you will hear of me. I kiss you, ROLAND.-

"Well, Charles," asked Amélie, when the young man had finished reading, "what do you think of that?"

"That it is something we had to expect from day to day, my poor angel, but it is none the less terrible."

"What is to be done?"

"There are three things we can do."

"Tell me."

"In the first place, resist if you have the strength; it is the shortest and surest way."

Amélie dropped her head.

"You will never dare, will you?"

"Never."

"And yet you are my wife, Amélie; a priest has blessed our union."

"But they say that marriage before a priest is null before the law."

"Is it not enough for you, the wife of a proscribed man?" asked Morgan, his voice trembling as he spoke.

Amélie flung herself into his arms.

"But my mother," said she; "our marriage did not have her presence and blessing."

"Because there were too many risks to run, and we wished to run them alone."

"But that man--Did you notice that my brother says he wills it?"

"Oh, if you loved me, Amélie, that man would see that he may change the face of the State, carry war from one end of the world to the other, make laws, build a throne, but that he cannot force lips to say yes when the heart says no."

"If I loved you!" said Amélie, in a tone of soft reproach. "It is midnight, you are here in my room, I weep in your arms--I, the daughter of General de Montrevel and the sister of Roland--and you say, 'If you loved me.'"

"I was wrong, I was wrong, my darling Amélie. Yes, I know that you were brought up in adoration of that man; you cannot understand that any one should resist him, and whoever does resist him is a rebel in your eyes."

"Charles, you said there were three things that we could do. What is the second?"

"Accept apparently the marriage they propose to you, and gain time, by delaying under various pretexts. The man is not immortal."

"No; but is too young for us to count on his death. The third way, dear friend?"

"Fly--but that is a last resource, Amélie; there are two objections: first, your repugnance."

"I am yours, Charles; I will surmount my repugnance."

"And," added the young man, "my engagements."

"Your engagements?"

"My companions are bound to me, Amélie; but I, too, am bound to them. We also have a man to whom we have sworn obedience. That man is the future king of France. If you accept your brother's devotion to Bonaparte, accept ours to Louis XVIII."

Amélie let her face drop into her hands with a sigh.

"Then," said she, "we are lost."

"Why so? On various pretexts, your health above all, you can gain a year. Before the year is out Bonaparte will probably be forced to begin another war in Italy. A single defeat will destroy his prestige; in short, a great many things can happen in a year."

"Did you read Roland's postscript, Charles?"

"Yes; but I didn't see anything in it that was not in your mother's letter."

"Read the last sentence again." And Amélie placed the letter before him. He read:

I am leaving Paris for a few days; though you may not see me,
you will hear of me. "Well?"

"Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"It means that Roland is in pursuit of you."

"What does that matter? He cannot die by the hand of any of us."

"But you, unhappy man, you can die by his!"

"Do you think I should care so very much if he killed me, Amélie?"

"Oh! even in my gloomiest moments I never thought of that."

"So you think your brother is on the hunt for us?"

"I am sure of it."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Because he swore over Sir John's body, when he thought him dead, to avenge him."

"If he had died," exclaimed the young man, bitterly, "we should not be where we are, Amélie."

"God saved him, Charles; it was therefore good that he did not die."

"For us?"

"I cannot fathom the ways of the Lord. I tell you, my beloved Charles, beware of Roland; Roland is close by."

Charles smiled incredulously.

"I tell you that he is not only near here, but he has been seen."

"He has been seen! Where? Who saw him?"

"Who saw him?"

"Yes."

"Charlotte, my maid, the jailer's daughter. She asked permission to visit her parents yesterday, Sunday; you were coming, so I told her she could stay till this morning."

"Well?"

"She therefore spent the night with her parents. At eleven o'clock the captain of the gendarmerie brought in some prisoners. While they were locking them up, a man, wrapped in a cloak, came in and asked for the captain. Charlotte thought she recognized the new-comer's voice. She looked at him attentively; his cloak slipped from his face, and she saw that it was my brother,"

The young man made a movement.

"Now do you understand, Charles? My brother comes to Bourg, mysteriously, without letting me know; he asks for the captain of the gendarmerie, follows him into the prison, speaks only to him, and disappears. Is that not a threatening outlook for our love? Tell me, Charles!"

As Amélie spoke, a dark cloud spread slowly over her lover's face.

"Amélie," said he, "when my companions and I bound ourselves together, we did not deceive ourselves as to the risks we ran."

"But, at least," said Amélie, "you have changed your place of refuge; you have abandoned the Chartreuse of Seillon?"

"None but our dead are there now."

"Is the grotto of Ceyzeriat perfectly safe?"

"As safe as any refuge can be that has two exit."

"The Chartreuse of Seillon had two exits; yet, as you say, you left your dead there."

"The dead are safer than the living; they are sure not to die on the scaffold."

Amélie felt a shudder go through her.

"Charles!" she murmured.

"Listen," said the young man. "God is my witness, and you too, that I have always put laughter and gayety between your presentiments and my fears; but to-day the aspect of things has changed; we are coming face to face with the crisis. Whatever the end brings us, it is approaching. I do not ask of you, my Amélie, those selfish, unreasonable things that lovers in danger of death exact from their mistresses; I do not ask you to bind your heart to the dead, your love to a corpse--"

"Friend," said the young girl, laying her hand on his arm, "take care; you are doubting me."

"No; I do you the highest honor in leaving you free to accomplish the sacrifice to its full extent; but I do not want you to be bound by an oath; no tie shall fetter you."

"So be it," said Amélie.

"What I ask of you," continued the young man, "and I ask you to swear it on our love, which has been, alas! so fatal to you, is this: if I am arrested and disarmed, if I am imprisoned and condemned to death, I implore you, Amélie, I exact of you, that in some way you will send me arms, not only for myself, but for my companions also, so that we may still be masters of our lives."

"But in such a case, Charles, may I not tell all to my brother? May I not appeal to his tenderness; to the generosity of the First Consul?"

Before the young girl had finished, her lover seized her violently by the wrist.

"Amélie," said he, "it is no longer one promise I ask of you, there are two. Swear to me, in the first place, and above all else, that you will not solicit my pardon. Swear it, Amélie; swear it!"

"Do I need to swear, dear?" asked the young girl, bursting into tears. "I promise it."

"Promise it on the hour when I first said I loved you, on the hour when you answered that I was loved!"

"On your life, on mine, on the past, on the future, on our smiles, on our tears."

"I should die in any case, you see, Amélie, even though I had to beat my brains out against the wall; but I should die dishonored."

"I promise you, Charles."

"Then for my second request, Amélie: if we are taken and condemned, send me arms--arms or poison, the means of dying, any means. Coming from you, death would be another joy."

"Far or near, free or a prisoner, living or dead, you are my master, I am your slave; order and I obey."

"That is all, Amélie; it is simple and clear, you see, no pardon, and the means of death."

"Simple and clear, but terrible."

"You will do it, will you not?"

"You wish me to?"

"I implore you."

"Order or entreaty, Charles, your will shall be done."

The young man held the girl, who seemed on the verge of fainting, in his left arm, and approached his mouth to hers. But, just as their lips were about to touch, an owl's cry was heard, so close to the window that Amélie started and Charles raised his head. The cry was repeated a second time, and then a third.

"Ah!" murmured Amélie, "do you hear that bird of ill-omen? We are doomed, my friend."

But Charles shook his head.

"That is not an owl, Amélie," he said; "it is the call of our companions. Put out the light."

Amélie blew it out while her lover opened the window.

"Even here," she murmured; "they seek you even here!"

"It is our friend and confidant, the Comte de Jayat; no one else knows where I am." Then, leaning from the balcony, he asked: "Is it you, Montbar?"

"Yes; is that you, Morgan?"

"Yes."

A man came from behind a clump of trees.

"News from Paris; not an instant to lose; a matter of life and death to us all."

"Do you hear, Amélie?"

Taking the young girl in his arms, he pressed her convulsively to his heart.

"Go," she said, in a faint voice, "go. Did you not hear him say it was a matter of life and death for all of you?"

"Farewell, my Amélie, my beloved, farewell!"

"Oh! don't say farewell."

"No, no; au revoir!"

"Morgan, Morgan!" cried the voice of the man waiting below in the garden.

The young man pressed his lips once more to Amélie's; then, rushing to the window, he sprang over the balcony at a bound and joined his friend.

Amélie gave a cry, and ran to the balustrade; but all she saw was two moving shadows entering the deepening shadows of the fine old trees that adorned the park.