Chapter 39

THE GROTTO OF CEYZERIAT

The two young men plunged into the shadow of the trees. Morgan guided his companion, less familiar than he with the windings of the park, until they reached the exact spot where he was in the habit of scaling the wall. It took but an instant for both of them to accomplish that feat. The next moment they were on the banks of the Reissouse.

A boat was fastened to the foot of a willow; they jumped into it, and three strokes of the oar brought them to the other side. There a path led along the bank of the river to a little wood which extends from Ceyzeriat to Etrez, a distance of about nine miles, and thus forms, on the other side of the river, a pendant to the forest of Seillon.

On reaching the edge of the wood they stopped. Until then they had been walking as rapidly as it was possible to do without running, and neither of them had uttered a word. The whole way was deserted; it was probable, in fact certain, that no one had seen them. They could breathe freely.

"Where are the Companions?" asked Morgan.

"In the grotto," replied Montbar.

"Why don't we go there at once?"

"Because we shall find one of them at the foot of that beech, who will tell us if we can go further without danger."

"Which one?"

"D'Assas."

A shadow came from behind the tree.

"Here I am," it said.

"Ah! there you are," exclaimed the two young men.

"Anything new?" inquired Montbar.

"Nothing; they are waiting for you to come to a decision."

"In that case, let us hurry."

The three young men continued on their way. After going about three hundred yards, Montbar stopped again, and said softly: "Armand!"

The dry leaves rustled at the call, and a fourth shadow stepped from behind a clump of trees, and approached his companions.

"Anything new?" asked Montbar.

"Yes; a messenger from Cadoudal."

"The same one who came before?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"With the brothers, in the grotto."

"Come."

Montbar rushed on ahead; the path had grown so narrow that the four young men could only walk in single file. It rose for about five hundred paces with an easy but winding slope. Coming to an opening, Montbar stopped and gave, three times, the same owl's cry with which he had called Morgan. A single hoot answered him; then a man slid down from the branches of a bushy oak. It was the sentinel who guarded the entrance to the grotto, which was not more than thirty feet from the oak. The position of the trees surrounding it made it almost impossible of detection.

The sentinel exchanged a few whispered words with Montbar, who seemed, by fulfilling the duties of leader, desirous of leaving Morgan entirely to his thoughts. Then, as his watch was probably not over, the bandit climbed the oak again, and was soon so completely blended with the body of the tree that those he had left might have looked for him in vain in that aerial bastion.

The glade became narrower as they neared the entrance to the grotto. Montbar reached it first, and from a hiding-place known to him he took a flint, a steel, some tinder, matches, and a torch. The sparks flew, the tinder caught fire, the match cast a quivering bluish flame, to which succeeded the crackling, resinous flames of the torch.

Three or four paths were then visible. Montbar took one without hesitation. The path sank, winding into the earth, and turned back upon itself, as if the young men were retracing their steps underground, along the path that had brought them. It was evident that they were following the windings of an ancient quarry, probably the one from which were built, nineteen hundred

years earlier, the three Roman towns which are now mere villages, and Cæsar's camp which overlooked them.

At intervals this subterraneous path was cut entirely across by a deep ditch, impassable except with the aid of a plank, that could, with a kick, be precipitated into the hollow beneath. Also, from place to place, breastworks could still be seen, behind which men could intrench themselves and fire without exposing their persons to the sight or fire of the enemy. Finally, at five hundred yards from the entrance, a barricade of the height of a man presented a final obstacle to those who sought to enter a circular space in which ten or a dozen men were now seated or lying around, some reading, others playing cards.

Neither the readers nor the players moved at the noise made by the new-comers, or at the gleam of their light playing upon the walls of the quarry, so certain were they that none but friends could reach this spot, guarded as it was.

For the rest, the scene of this encampment was extremely picturesque; wax candles were burning in profusion (the Companions of Jehu were too aristocratic to make use of any other light) and cast their reflection upon stands of arms of all kinds, among which double-barrelled muskets and pistols held first place. Foils and masks were hanging here and there upon the walls; several musical instruments were lying about, and a few mirrors in gilt frames proclaimed the fact that dress was a pastime by no means unappreciated by the strange inhabitants of that subterranean dwelling.

They all seemed as tranquil as though the news which had drawn Morgan from Amélie's arms was unknown to them, or considered of no importance.

Nevertheless, when the little group from outside approached, and the words: "The captain! the captain!" were heard, all rose, not with the servility of soldiers toward their approaching chief, but with the affectionate deference of strong and intelligent men for one stronger and more intelligent than they.

Then Morgan shook his head, raised his eyes, and, passing before Montbar, advanced to the centre of the circle which had formed at his appearance, and said:

"Well, friends, it seems you have had some news."

"Yes, captain," answered a voice; "the police of the First Consul does us the honor to be interested in us."

"Where is the messenger?" asked Morgan.

"Here," replied a young man, wearing the livery of a cabinet courier, who was still covered with mud and dust.

"Have you any despatches?"

"Written, no, verbal, yes."

"Where do they come from?"

"The private office of the minister of police."

"Can they be trusted?"

"I'll answer for them; they are positively official,"

("It's a good thing to have friends everywhere," observed Montbar, parenthetically.)

"Especially near M. Fouché," resumed Morgan; "let us hear the news."

"Am I to tell it aloud, or to you privately?"

"I presume we are all interested, so tell it aloud."

"Well, the First Consul sent for citizen Fouché at the Louvre, and lectured him on our account."

"Capital! what next?"

"Citizen Fouché replied that we were clever scamps, very difficult to find, and still more difficult to capture when we had been found, in short, he praised us highly."

"Very amiable of him. What next?"

"Next, the First Consul replied that that did not concern him, that we were brigands, and that it was our brigandage which maintained the war in Vendée, and that the day we ceased sending money to Brittany there would be no more Brittany."

"Excellent reasoning, it seems to me."

"He said the West must be fought in the East and the Midi."

"Like England in India."

"Consequently he gave citizen Fouché full powers, and, even if it cost a million and he had to kill five hundred men, he must have our heads."

"Well, he knows his man when he makes his demand; remains to be seen if we let him have them."

"So citizen Fouché went home furious, and vowed that before eight days passed there should not be a single Companion of Jehu left in France."

"The time is short."

"That same day couriers started for Lyons, Mâcon, Sons-le-Saulnier, Besançon and Geneva, with orders to the garrison commanders to do personally all they could for our destruction; but above all to obey unquestioningly M. Roland de Montrevel, aide-de-camp to the First Consul, and to put at his disposal as many troops as he thought needful."

"And I can add," said Morgan, "that M. Roland de Montrevel is already in the field. He had a conference with the captain of the gendarmerie, in the prison at Bourg, yesterday."

"Does any one know why?" asked a voice.

"The deuce!" said another, "to engage our cells."

"Do you still mean to protect him?" asked d'Assas.

"More than ever."

"Ah! that's too much!" muttered a voice.

"Why so," retorted Morgan imperiously, "isn't it my right as a Companion?"

"Certainly," said two other voices.

"Then I use it; both as a Companion and as your leader."

"But suppose in the middle of the fray a stray ball should take him?" said a voice.

"Then, it is not a right I claim, nor an order that I give, but an entreaty I make. My friends, promise me, on your honor, that the life of Roland de Montrevel will be sacred to you."

With unanimous voice, all stretching out their hands, they replied: "We swear on our honor!"

"Now," resumed Morgan, "let us look at our position under its true aspect, without deluding ourselves in any way. Once an intelligent police force starts out to pursue us, and makes actual war against us, it will be impossible for us to resist. We may trick them like a fox, or double like a boar, but our resistance will be merely a matter of time, that's all. At least that is my opinion."

Morgan questioned his companions with his eyes, and their acquiescence was unanimous, though it was with a smile on their lips that they recognized their doom. But that was the way in those strange days. Men went to their death without fear, and they dealt it to others without emotion.

"And now," asked Montbar, "have you anything further to say?"

"Yes," replied Morgan, "I have to add that nothing is easier than to procure horses, or even to escape on foot; we are all hunters and more or less mountaineers. It will take us six hours on horse back to get out of France, or twelve on foot. Once in Switzerland we can snap our fingers at citizen Fouché and his police. That's all I have to say."

"It would be very amusing to laugh at citizen Fouché," said Montbar, "but very dull to leave France."

"For that reason, I shall not put this extreme measure to a vote until after we have talked with Cadoudal's messenger."

"Ah, true," exclaimed two or three voices; "the Breton! where is the Breton?"

"He was asleep when I left," said Montbar.

"And he is still sleeping," said Adler, pointing to a man lying on a heap of straw in a recess of the grotto.

They wakened the Breton, who rose to his knees, rubbing his eyes with one hand and feeling for his carbine with the other.

"You are with friends," said a voice; "don't be afraid."

"Afraid!" said the Breton; "who are you, over there, who thinks I am afraid?"

"Some one who probably does not know what fear is, my dear Branche-d'Or," said Morgan, who recognized in Cadoudal's messenger the same man whom they had received at the Chartreuse the night he himself arrived from Avignon. "I ask pardon on his behalf."

Branche-d'Or looked at the young men before him with an air that left no doubt of his repugnance for a certain sort of pleasantry; but as the group had evidently no offensive intention, their gayety having no insolence about it, he said, with a tolerably gracious air: "Which of you gentlemen is captain? I have a letter for him from my captain."

Morgan advanced a step and said: "I am."

"Your name?"

"I have two."

"Your fighting name?"

"Morgan."

"Yes, that's the one the general told me; besides, I recognize you. You gave me a bag containing sixty thousand francs the night I saw the monks. The letter is for you then."

"Give it to me."

The peasant took off his hat, pulled out the lining, and from between it and the felt he took a piece of paper which resembled another lining, and seemed at first sight to be blank. Then, with a military salute, he offered the paper

to Morgan, who turned it over and over and could see no writing; at least none was apparent.

"A candle," he said.

They brought a wax light; Morgan held the paper to the flame. Little by little, as the paper warmed, the writing appeared. The experience appeared familiar to the young men; the Breton alone seemed surprised. To his naive mind the operation probably seemed like witchcraft; but so long as the devil was aiding the royalist cause the Chouan was willing to deal with him.

"Gentlemen," said Morgan, "do you want to know what the master says?"

All bowed and listened, while the young man read:

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MY DEAR MORGAN--If you hear that I have abandoned the cause, and am in treaty with the government of the First Consul and the Vendéan leaders, do not believe it. I am a Breton of Brittany, and consequently as stubborn as a true Breton. The First Consul sent one of his aides-de-camp to offer me an amnesty for all my men, and the rank of colonel for myself. I have not even consulted my men, I refused for them and for me. Now, all depends on us; as we receive from the princes neither money nor encouragement, you are our only treasurer; close your coffers, or rather cease to open those of the government for us, and the royalist opposition, the heart of which beats only in

Brittany, will subside little by little, and end before long. I need not tell you that my life will have ended first. Our mission is dangerous; probably it will cost us our heads; but

what can be more glorious than to hear posterity say of us, if

one can hear beyond the grave: "All others despaired; but they,

never!" One of us will survive the other, but only to succumb later. Let

that survivor say as he dies: _Etiamsi omnes, ego non._ Count on me as I count on you. CADOUDAL. P.S.--You know that you can safely give Branche-d'Or all the money

you have for the Cause. He has promised me not to let himself be

taken, and I trust his word.-

A murmur of enthusiasm ran through the group, as Morgan finished the last words of the letter.

"You have heard it, gentlemen?" he said.

"Yes, yes, yes," repeated every voice.

"In the first place, how much money have we to give to Branche-d'Or?"

"Thirteen thousand francs from the Lake of Silans, twenty-two thousand from Les Carronnières, fourteen thousand from Meximieux, forty-nine thousand in all," said one of the group.

"You hear, Branche-d'Or?" said Morgan; "it is not much--only half what we gave you last time, but you know the proverb: 'The handsomest girl in the world can only give what she has.'"

"The general knows what you risk to obtain this money, and he says that, no matter how little you send, he will receive it gratefully."

"All the more, that the next will be better," said a young man who had just joined the group, unperceived, so absorbed were all present in Cadoudal's letter. "More especially if we say two words to the mail-coach from Chambéry next Saturday."

"Ah! is that you, Valensolle?" said Morgan.

"No real names, if you please, baron; let us be shot, guillotined, drawn and quartered, but save our family honor. My name is Adler; I answer to no other."

"Pardon me, I did wrong--you were saying?"

"That the mail-coach from Paris to Chambéry will pass through Chapelle-de-Guinchay and Belleville next Saturday, carrying fifty thousand francs of government money to the monks of Saint-Bernard; to which I may add that there is between those two places a spot called the Maison-Blanche, which seems to me admirably adapted for an ambuscade."

"What do you say, gentlemen?" asked Morgan, "Shall we do citizen Fouché the honor to worry about his police? Shall we leave France? Or shall we still remain faithful Companions of Jehu?"

There was but one reply--"We stay."

"Right!" said Morgan. "Brothers, I recognize you there. Cadoudal points out our duty in that admirable letter we have just received. Let us adopt his heroic motto: _Etiamsi omnes, ego non._" Then addressing the peasant, he said, "Branche-d'Or, the forty-nine thousand francs are at your disposal; you can start when you like. Promise something better next time, in our name, and tell the general for me that, wherever he goes, even though it be to the scaffold, I shall deem it an honor to follow, or to precede him. Au

revoir, Branche-d'Or." Then, turning to the young man who seemed so anxious to preserve his incognito, "My dear Adler," he said, like a man who has recovered his gayety, lost for an instant, "I undertake to feed and lodge you this night, if you will deign to accept me as a host."

"Gratefully, friend Morgan," replied the new-comer. "Only let me tell you that I could do without a bed, for I am dropping with fatigue, but not without supper, for I am dying of hunger."

"You shall have a good bed and an excellent supper."

"Where must I go for them."

"Follow me."

"I'm ready."

"Then come on. Good-night, gentlemen! Are you on watch, Montbar?"

"Yes."

"Then we can sleep in peace."

So saying, Morgan passed his arm through that of his friend, took a torch in his other hand, and passed into the depths of the grotto, where we will follow him if our readers are not too weary of this long session.

It was the first time that Valensolle, who came, as we have said, from the neighborhood of Aix, had had occasion to visit the grotto of Ceyzeriat,

recently adopted as the meeting-place of the Companions of Jehu. At the preceding meetings he had occasion to explore only the windings and intricacies of the Chartreuse of Seillon, which he now knew so well that in the farce played before Roland the part of ghost was intrusted to him. Everything was, therefore, curious and unknown to him in this new domicile, where he now expected to take his first sleep, and which seemed likely to be, for some days at least, Morgan's headquarters.

As is always the case in abandoned quarries--which, at the first glance, partake somewhat of the character of subterranean cities--the different galleries excavated by the removal of the stone end in a cul de sac; that is to say, at a point in the mine where the work stops. One of these streets seemed to prolong itself indefinitely. Nevertheless, there came a point where the mine would naturally have ended, but there, in the angle of the tunnelled way, was cut (For what purpose? The thing remains a mystery to this day among the people of the neigbborhood) an opening two-thirds the width of the gallery, wide enough, or nearly so, to give passage to two men abreast.

The two friends passed through this opening. The air there became so rarefied that their torch threatened to go out at every step. Vallensolle felt drops of ice-cold water falling on his hands and face.

"Bless me," said he, "does it rain down here?"

"No," replied Morgan, laughing; "only we are passing under the Reissouse."

"Then we are going to Bourg?"

"That's about it."

"All right; you are leading me; you have promised me supper and a bed, so I have nothing to worry about--unless that light goes out," added the young man, looking at the paling flame of the torch.

"That wouldn't matter; we can always find ourselves here."

"In the end!" said Valensolle. "And when one reflects that we are wandering through a grotto under rivers at three o'clock in the morning, sleeping the Lord knows where, with the prospect of being taken, tried, and guillotined some fine morning, and all for princes who don't even know our names, and who if they did know them one day would forget them the next--I tell you, Morgan, it's stupid!"

"My dear fellow," said Morgan, "what we call stupid, what ordinary minds never do understand in such a case, has many a chance to become sublime."

"Well, well," said Valensolle, "I see that you will lose more than I do in this business; I put devotion into it, but you put enthusiasm."

Morgan sighed.

"Here we are," said he, letting the conversation drop, like a burden too heavy to be carried longer. In fact, his foot had just struck against the first step of a stairway.

Preceding Valensolle, for whom he lighted the way, Morgan went up ten steps and reached the gate. Taking a key from his pocket, he opened it. They found themselves in the burial vault. On each side of the vault stood coffins on iron tripods: ducal crowns and escutcheons, blazoned azure, with the cross argent, indicated that these coffins belonged to the family of Savoy before it came to bear the royal crown. A flight of stairs at the further end of the cavern led to an upper floor.

Valensolle cast a curious glance around him, and by the vacillating light of the torch, he recognized the funereal place he was in.

"The devil!" said he, "we are just the reverse of the Spartans, it seems."

"Inasmuch as they were Republicans and we are royalists?" asked Morgan.

"No; because they had skeletons at the end of their suppers, and we have ours at the beginning."

"Are you sure it was the Spartans who proved their philosophy in that way?" asked Morgan, closing the door.

"They or others--what matter?" said Vallensolle. "Faith! My citation is made, and like the Abbé Vertot, who wouldn't rewrite his siege, I'll not change it."

"Well, another time you had better say the Egyptians."

"Well," said Valensolle, with an indifference that was not without a certain sadness, "I'll probably be a skeleton myself before I have another chance to display my erudition. But what the devil are you doing? Why did you put out the torch? You're not going to make me eat and sleep here I hope?"

Morgan had in fact extinguished the torch at the foot of the steps leading to the upper floor.

"Give me your hand," said the young man.

Valensolle seized his friend's band with an eagerness that showed how very slight a desire he had to make a longer stay in the gloomy vaults of the dukes of Savoy, no matter what honor there might be in such illustrious companionship.

Morgan went up the steps. Then, by the tightening of his hand, Valensolle knew he was making an effort. Presently a stone was raised, and through the opening a trembling gleam of twilight met the eyes of the young men, and a fragrant aromatic odor came to comfort their sense of smell after the mephitic atmosphere of the vaults.

"Ah!" cried Valensolle, "we are in a barn; I prefer that."

Morgan did not answer; he helped his companion to climb out of the vault, and then let the stone drop back in its place.

Valensolle looked about him. He was in the midst of a vast building filled with hay, into which the light filtered through windows of such exquisite form that they certainly could not be those of a barn.

"Why!" said Valensolle, "we are not in a barn!"

"Climb up the hay and sit down near that window," replied Morgan.

Valensolle obeyed and scrambled up the hay like a schoolboy in his holidays; then he sat down, as Morgan had told him, before a window. The next moment Morgan placed between his friend's legs a napkin containing a paté, bread, a bottle of wine, two glasses, two knives and two forks.

"The deuce!" cried Valensolle, "'Lucullus sups with Lucullus.'"

Then gazing through the panes at a building with numberless windows, which seemed to be a wing of the one they were in, and before which a sentry was pacing, he exclaimed: "Positively, I can't eat my supper till I know where we are. What is this building? And why that sentry at the door?"

"Well," said Morgan, "since you absolutely must know, I will tell you. We are in the church of Brou, which was converted into a fodder storehouse by a decree of the Municipal Council. That adjoining building is now the barracks of the gendarmerie, and that sentry is posted to prevent any one from disturbing our supper or surprising us while we sleep."

"Brave fellows," said Valensolle, filling his glass; "their health, Morgan!"

"And ours!" said the young man, laughing; "the devil take me if any one could dream of finding us here."

Morgan had hardly drained his glass, when, as if the devil had accepted the challenge, the sentinel's harsh, strident voice cried: "_Qui vive!_"

"Hey!" exclaimed the two young men, "what does this mean?"

A body of thirty men came from the direction of Pont d'Ain, and, after giving the countersign to the sentry, at once dispersed; the larger number, led by two men, who seemed to be officers, entered the barracks; the others continued on their way.

"Attention!" said Morgan.

And both young men, on their knees, their ears alert, their eyes at the window, waited.

Let us now explain to the reader the cause of this interruption of a repast which, though taken at three o'clock in the morning, was not, as we have seen, over-tranquil.