

Chapter 40

A FALSE SCENT

The jailer's daughter had not been mistaken; it was indeed Roland whom she had seen in the jail speaking to the captain of the gendarmerie. Neither was Amélie wrong in her terror. Roland was really in pursuit of Morgan.

Although he avoided going to the Château des Noires-Fontaines, it was not that he had the slightest suspicion of the interest his sister had in the leader of the Companions of Jehu; but he feared the indiscretion of one of his servants. He had recognized Charlotte at the jail, but as the girl showed no astonishment, he believed she had not recognized him, all the more because, after exchanging a few words with the captain, he went out to wait for the latter on the Place du Bastion, which was always deserted at that hour.

His duties over, the captain of gendarmerie joined him. He found Roland impatiently walking back and forth. Roland had merely made himself known at the jail, but here he proceeded to explain the matter, and to initiate the captain into the object of his visit.

Roland had solicited the First Consul, as a favor to himself, that the pursuit of the Companions of Jehu be intrusted to him personally, a favor he had obtained without difficulty. An order from the minister of war placed at his disposal not only the garrison of Bourg, but also those of the neighboring towns. An order from the minister of police enjoined all the officers of the gendarmerie to render him every assistance.

He naturally applied in the first instance to the captain of the gendarmerie at Bourg, whom he had long known personally as a man of great courage and executive ability. He found what he wanted in him. The captain was furious against the Companions of Jehu, who had stopped diligences within a mile of his town, and on whom he was unable to lay his hand. He knew of the reports relating to the last three stoppages that had been sent to the minister of police, and he understood the latter's anger. But Roland brought

his amazement to a climax when he told him of the night he had spent at the Chartreuse of Seillon, and of what had happened to Sir John at that same Chartreuse during the succeeding night.

The captain had heard by common rumor that Madame de Montrevel's guest had been stabbed; but as no one had lodged a complaint, he did not think he had the right to investigate circumstances which it seemed to him Roland wished to keep in the dark. In those troublous days more indulgence was shown to officers of the army than they might have received at other times.

As for Roland, he had said nothing because he wished to reserve for himself the satisfaction of pursuing the assassins and sham ghosts of the Chartreuse when the time came. He now arrived with full power to put that design into execution, firmly resolved not to return to the First Consul until it was accomplished. Besides, it was one of those adventures he was always seeking, at once dangerous and picturesque, an opportunity of pitting his life against men who cared little for their own, and probably less for his. Roland had no conception of Morgan's safe-guard which had twice protected him from danger--once on the night he had watched at the Chartreuse, and again when he had fought against Cadoudal. How could he know that a simple cross was drawn above his name, and that this symbol of redemption guaranteed his safety from one end of France to the other?

For the rest, the first thing to be done was to surround the Chartreuse of Seillon, and to search thoroughly into its most secret places--a thing Roland believed himself perfectly competent to do.

The night was now too far advanced to undertake the expedition, and it was postponed until the one following. In the meantime Roland remained quietly in hiding in the captain's room at the barracks that no one might suspect his presence at Bourg nor its cause. The following night he was to guide the expedition. In the course of the morrow, one of the gendarmes, who was a tailor, agreed to make him a sergeant's uniform. He was to pass as a member of the brigade at Sons-le-Saulnier, and, thanks to the uniform, could direct the search at the Chartreuse without being recognized.

Everything happened as planned. Roland entered the barracks with the captain about one o'clock, ascended to the latter's room, where he slept on a bed on the floor like a man who has just passed two days and two nights in a post-chaise. The next day he restrained his impatience by drawing a plan of the Chartreuse of Seillon for the captain's instruction, with which, even without Roland's help, that worthy officer could have directed the expedition without going an inch astray.

As the captain had but eighteen men under him, and it was not possible to surround the monastery completely with that number, or rather, to guard the two exits and make a thorough search through the interior, and, as it would have taken three or four days to bring in all the men of the brigade scattered throughout the neighborhood, the officer, by Roland's order, went to the colonel of dragoons, garrisoned at Bourg, told him of the matter in hand, and asked for twelve men, who, with his own, made thirty in all.

The colonel not only granted the twelve men, but, learning that the expedition was to be commanded by Colonel Roland de Montrevel, aide-de-camp to the First Consul, he proposed that he himself should join the party at the head of his twelve men.

Roland accepted his co-operation, and it was agreed that the colonel (we employ the words colonel and chief of brigade indifferently, both being interchangeable terms indicating the same rank) and his twelve dragoons should pick up Roland, the captain, and his eighteen men, the barracks being directly on their road to the Chartreuse. The time was set for eleven that night.

At eleven precisely, with military punctuality, the colonel of dragoons and his twelve men joined the gendarmes, and the two companies, now united in one, began their march. Roland, in his sergeant's uniform, made himself known to his brother colonel; but to the dragoons and gendarmes he remained, as agreed upon, a sergeant detached from the brigade at Sons-le-Saulnier. Only, as it might otherwise have seemed extraordinary that a sergeant, wholly unfamiliar with these localities, should be their guide, the men were told that Roland had been in his youth a novice at Seillon, and

was therefore better acquainted than most persons with the mysterious nooks of the Chartreuse.

The first feeling of these brave soldiers had been a slight humiliation at being guided by an ex-monk; but, on the other hand, as that ex-monk wore the three-cornered hat jauntily, and as his whole manner and appearance was that of a man who has completely forgotten that he formerly wore a cowl, they ended by accepting the humiliation, and reserved their final judgment on the sergeant until they could see how he handled the musket he carried on his arm, the pistols he wore in his belt, and the sword that hung at his side.

The party was supplied with torches, and started in perfect silence. They were divided into three squads; one of eight men, led by the captain of gendarmerie, another of ten, commanded by the colonel, and the third of twelve men, with Roland at its head. On leaving the town they separated.

The captain of the gendarmerie, who knew the localities better than the colonel of dragoons, took upon himself to guard the window of La Corriere, giving upon the forest of Seillon, with his eight men. The colonel of dragoons was commissioned by Roland to watch the main entrance of the Chartreuse; with him were five gendarmes and five dragoons. Roland was to search the interior, taking with him five gendarmes and seven dragoons.

Half an hour was allowed each squad to reach its post; it was more than was needed. Roland and his men were to scale the orchard wall when half-past eleven was ringing from the belfry at Péronnaz. The captain of gendarmerie followed the main road from Pont d'Ain to the edge of the woods, which he skirted until he reached his appointed station. The colonel of dragoons took the crossroad which branches from the highway of Pont d'Ain and leads to the great portal of the Chartreuse. Roland crossed the fields to the orchard wall which, as the reader will remember, he had already climbed on two occasions.

Punctually at half-past eleven he gave the signal to his men to scale the wall. By the time they reached the other side the men, if they did not yet know that Roland was brave, were at least sure that he was active.

Roland pointed in the dusk to a door--the one that led from the orchard into the cloister. Then he sprang ahead through the rank grasses; first, he opened the door; first, he entered the cloister.

All was dark, silent and solitary. Roland, still guiding his men, reached the refectory. Absolute solitude; utter silence.

They crossed the hall obliquely, and returned to the garden without alarming a living creature except the owls and the bats. There still remained the cistern, the mortuary vault, and the pavilion, or rather, the chapel in the forest, to be searched. Roland crossed the open space between the cistern and the monastery. After descending the steps, he lighted three torches, kept one, and handed the other two, one to a dragoon, the other to a gendarme; then he raised the stone that concealed the stairway.

The gendarmes who followed Roland began to think him as brave as he was active.

They followed the subterranean passage to the first gate; it was closed but not locked. They entered the funereal vault. Here was more than solitude, more than silence; here was death. The bravest felt a shiver in the roots of their hair.

Roland went from tomb to tomb, sounding each with the butt of the pistol he held in his hand. Silence everywhere. They crossed the vault, reached the second gate, and entered the chapel. The same silence, the same solitude; all was deserted, as it seemed, for years. Roland went straight to the choir; there lay the blood on the stones; no one had taken the trouble to efface it. Here was the end of his search, which had proved futile. Roland could not bring himself to retreat. He fancied he was not attacked because of his

numerous escort; he therefore left ten men and a torch in the chapel, told them to put themselves in communication, through the ruined window, with the captain of the gendarmerie, who was ambushed in the forest within a few feet of the window, while he himself, with two men, retraced his steps.

This time the two men who followed Roland thought him more than brave, they considered him foolhardy. But Roland, caring little whether they followed or not, retraced his own steps in default of those of the bandits. The two men, ashamed, followed him.

Undoubtedly the Chartreuse was deserted. When Roland reached the great portal, he called to the colonel of dragoons; he and his men were at their post. Roland opened the door and joined them. They had seen nothing, heard nothing. The whole party entered the monastery, closing and barricading the door behind them to cut off the bandits' retreat, if they were fortunate enough to meet any. Then they hastened to rejoin their comrades, who, on their side, had united with the captain and his eight men, and were waiting for them in the choir.

There was nothing for it but to retire. Two o'clock had just struck; nearly three hours had been spent in fruitless search. Roland, rehabilitated in the estimation of the gendarmes and the dragoons, who saw that the ex-novice did not shirk danger, regretfully gave the signal for retreat by opening the door of the chapel which looked toward the forest.

This time Roland merely closed the door behind him, there being no longer any hope of encountering the brigands. Then the little troop returned to Bourg at a quick step. The captain of gendarmerie, with his eighteen men and Roland, re-entered the barracks, while the colonel and his twelve men continued on their way toward the town.

It was the sentinel's call, as he challenged the captain and his party, which had attracted the attention of Morgan and Valensolle; and it was the noise of their return to the barracks which interrupted the supper, and caused Morgan to cry out at this unforeseen circumstance: "Attention!"

In fact, in the present situation of these young men, every circumstance merited attention. So the meal was interrupted. Their jaws ceased to work to give the eyes and ears full scope. It soon became evident that the services of their eyes were alone needed.

Each gendarme regained his room without light. The numerous barrack windows remained dark, so that the watchers were able to concentrate their attention on a single point.

Among those dark windows, two were lighted. They stood relatively back from the rest of the building, and directly opposite to the one where the young men were supping. These windows were on the first floor, but in the position the watchers occupied at the top of bales of hay, Morgan and Valensolle were not only on a level, but could even look down into them. These windows were those of the room of the captain of gendarmes.

Whether from indifference on the worthy captain's part, or by reason of State penury, the windows were bare of curtains, so that, thanks to the two candles which the captain had lighted in his guest's honor, Morgan and Valensolle could see everything that took place in this room.

Suddenly Morgan grasped Valensolle's arm, and pressed it with all his might.

"Hey" said Valensolle "what now?"

Roland had just thrown his three-cornered hat on a chair and Morgan had recognized him.

"Roland de Montrevel!" he exclaimed, "Roland in a sergeant's uniform! This time we are on his track while he is still seeking ours. It behooves us not to lose it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Valensolle, observing that his friend was preparing to leave him.

"Inform our companions. You stay here and do not lose sight of him. He has taken off his sword, and laid his pistols aside, therefore it is probable he intends to spend the night in the captain's room. To-morrow I defy him to take any road, no matter which, without one of us at his heels."

And Morgan sliding down the declivity of the hay, disappeared from sight, leaving his companion crouched like a sphinx, with his eyes fixed on Roland de Montrevel.

A quarter of an hour later Morgan returned. By this time the officer's windows were dark like all the others of the barracks.

"Well?" asked Morgan.

"Well," replied Valensolle, "it ended most prosaically. They undressed themselves, blew out the candles, and lay down, the captain on his bed, Roland on a mattress. They are probably trying to outsnore each other at the present moment."

"In that case," said Morgan, "good-night to them, and to us also."

Ten minutes later the wish was granted, and the two young men were sleeping, as if they did not have danger for a bed-fellow.