

Chapter 41

THE HÔTEL DE LA POSTE

That same morning, about six o'clock, at the cold gray breaking of a February day, a rider, spurring a post-hack and preceded by a postilion who was to lead back the horse, left Bourg by the road to Mâcon or Saint-Julien.

We say Mâcon _or_ Saint-Julien, because about three miles from the capital of Bresse the road forks; the one to the right keeping straight on to Saint-Julien, the other, which deviates to the left, leading to Mâcon.

When the rider reached this bifurcation, he was about to take the road leading to Mâcon, when a voice, apparently coming from beneath an upset cart, implored his pity. The rider called to the postilion to see what the matter was.

A poor market-man was pinned down under a load of vegetables. He had evidently attempted to hold up the cart just as the wheel, sinking into the ditch, overbalanced the vehicle. The cart had fallen on him, but fortunately, he said, he thought no limbs were broken, and all he wanted was to get the cart righted, and then he could recover his legs.

The rider was compassionate to his fellow being, for he not only allowed the postilion to stop and help the market-man, but he himself dismounted, and with a vigor one would hardly have expected from so slight a man, he assisted the postilion not only to right the cart, but to replace it on the roadbed. After which he offered to help the man to rise; but the latter had said truly; he really was safe and sound, and if there were a slight shaking of the legs, it only served to prove the truth of the proverb that God takes care of drunkards. The man was profuse in his thanks, and took his horse by the bridle, as much, it was evident, to hold himself steady as to lead the animal.

The riders remounted their horses, put them to a gallop, and soon disappeared round a bend which the road makes a short distance before it reaches the woods of Monnet.

They had scarcely disappeared when a notable change took place in the demeanor of our market-man. He stopped his horse, straightened up, put the mouthpiece of a tiny trumpet to his lips, and blew three times. A species of groom emerged from the woods which line the road, leading a gentleman's horse by the bridle. The market-man rapidly removed his blouse, discarded his linen trousers, and appeared in vest and breeches of buckskin, and top boots. He searched in his cart, drew forth a package which he opened, shook out a green hunting coat with gold braidings, put it on, and over it a dark-brown overcoat; took from the servant's hands a hat which the latter presented him, and which harmonized with his elegant costume, made the man screw his spurs to his boots, and sprang upon his horse with the lightness and skill of an experienced horseman.

"To-night at seven," he said to the groom, "be on the road between Saint-Just and Ceyzeriat. You will meet Morgan. Tell him that he _whom he knows of_ has gone to Mâcon, but that I shall be there before him."

Then, without troubling himself about his cart and vegetables, which he left in his servant's charge, the ex-marketman, who was none other than our old acquaintance Montbar, turned his horse's head toward the Monnet woods, and set out at a gallop. His mount was not a miserable post hack, like that on which Roland was riding. On the contrary, it was a blooded horse, so that Montbar easily overtook the two riders, and passed them on the road between the woods of Monnet and Polliat. The horse, except for a short stop at Saint-Cyr-sur-Menthon, did the twenty-eight or thirty miles between Bourg and Mâcon, without resting, in three hours.

Arrived at Mâcon, Montbar dismounted at the Hôtel de la Poste, the only one which at that time was fitted to receive guests of distinction. For the rest, from the manner in which Montbar was received it was evident that the host was dealing with an old acquaintance.

"Ah! is it you, Monsieur de Jayat?" said the host. "We were wondering yesterday what had become of you. It's more than a month since we've seen you in these parts."

"Do you think it's as long as that, friend?" said the young man, affecting to drop his r's after the fashion of the day. "Yes, on my honor, that's so! I've been with friends, the Trefforts and the Hautcourts. You know those gentlemen by name, don't you?"

"By name, and in person."

"We hunted to hounds. They're finely equipped, word of honor! Can I breakfast here this morning?"

"Why not?"

"Then serve me a chicken, a bottle of Bordeaux, two cutlets, fruit--any trifle will go."

"At once. Shall it be served in your room, or in the common room?"

"In the common room, it's more amusing; only give me a table to myself. Don't forget my horse. He is a fine beast, and I love him better than I do certain Christians, word of honor!"

The landlord gave his orders. Montbar stood before the fire, his coat-tails drawn aside, warming his calves.

"So you still keep to the posting business?" he said to the landlord, as if desirous of keeping up the conversation.

"I should think so!"

"Then you relay the diligences?"

"Not the diligences, but the mail-coaches."

"Ah! tell me--I want to go to Chambéry some of these days--how many places are there in the mail-coach?"

"Three; two inside, and one out with the courier."

"Do I stand any chance of finding a vacant seat?"

"It may happen; but the safest way is to hire your own conveyance."

"Can't I engage a place beforehand?"

"No; for don't you see, Monsieur de Jayat, that if travellers take places from Paris to Lyons, they have the first right."

"See, the aristocrats!" said Montbar, laughing. "Apropos of aristocrats, there is one behind me posting here. I passed him about a mile the other side of Polliat. I thought his hack a little wind-broken."

"Oh!" exclaimed the landlord, "that's not astonishing; my brothers in the business have a poor lot of horses."

"Why, there's our man!" continued Montbar; "I thought I had more of a lead of him."

Roland was, in fact, just passing the windows at a gallop.

"Do you still want chamber No. 1, Monsieur de Jayat?" asked the landlord.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because it is the best one, and if you don't take it, I shall give it to that man, provided he wants to make any stay."

"Oh! don't bother about me; I shan't know till later in the day whether I go or stay. If the new-comer means to remain give him No. 1. I will content myself with No. 2."

"The gentleman is served," said the waiter, looking through the door which led from the kitchen to the common room.

Montbar nodded and accepted the invitation. He entered the common room just as Roland came into the kitchen. The dinner was on the table. Montbar changed his plate and sat down with his back to the door. The precaution was useless. Roland did not enter the common room, and Montbar breakfasted without interruption. When dessert was over, however, the host himself brought in his coffee. Montbar understood that the good man was in talkative humor; a fortunate circumstance, for there were certain things he was anxious to hear about.

"Well," said Montbar, "what became of our man? Did he only change horses?"

"No, no, no," said the landlord; "as you said, he's an aristocrat. He ordered breakfast in his own room."

"His room or my room?" asked Montbar; "for I'm certain you put him in that famous No. 1."

"Confound it! Monsieur de Jayat, it's your own fault. You told me I could do as I liked."

"And you took me at my word; that was right. I shall be satisfied with No. 2."

"You'll be very uncomfortable. It's only separated from No. 1 by a partition, and you can hear everything that happens from one room to the other."

"Nonsense, my dear man, do you think I've come here to do improper things, or sing seditious songs, that you are afraid the stranger should hear or see what I do?"

"Oh! that's not it."

"What is it then?"

"I'm not afraid you'll disturb others. I'm afraid they'll disturb you."

"So your new guest is a roisterer?"

"No; he looks to me like an officer."

"What makes you think so?"

"His manner, in the first place. Then he inquired what regiment was in garrison at Mâcon; and when I told him it was the 7th mounted Chasseurs, he said: 'Good! the colonel is a friend of mine. Can a waiter take him my card and ask him to breakfast with me?'"

"Ah, ha!"

"So you see how it is. When officers get together they make so much racket and noise. Perhaps they'll not only breakfast, but dine and sup together."

"I've told you already, my good man, that I am not sure of passing the night here. I am expecting letters from Paris, *_paste restante_*, which will decide me. In the meantime, light a fire in No. 2, and make as little noise as possible, to avoid annoying my neighbors. And, at the same time, send me up pen and ink, and some paper. I have letters to write."

Montbar's orders were promptly executed, and he himself followed the waiter to see that Roland was not disturbed by his proximity.

The chamber was just what the landlord had said. Not a movement could be made, not a word uttered in the next room, that was not heard. Consequently Montbar distinctly heard the waiter announce Colonel Saint-Maurice, then the resounding steps of the latter in the corridor, and the exclamations of the two friends, delighted to meet again.

On the other hand, Roland, who had been for a moment disturbed by the noise in the adjoining room, forgot it as soon as it had ceased, and there was no danger of its being renewed. Montbar, left alone, seated himself at the table, on which were paper, pen and ink, and remained perfectly motionless.

The two officers had known each other in Italy, where Roland was under the command of Saint-Maurice, the latter being then a captain and Roland a lieutenant. At present their rank was equal, but Roland had beside a double commission from the First Consul and the minister of police, which placed all officers of his own rank under his command, and even, within the limits of his mission, those of a higher rank.

Morgan had not been mistaken in supposing that Amélie's brother was in pursuit of the Companions of Jehu. If Roland's nocturnal search at the Chartreuse of Seillon was not convincing, the conversation between the young officer and his colleague was proof positive. In it, it developed that the First Consul was really sending fifty thousand francs as a gift to the monks of Saint-Bernard, by post; but that this money was in reality a trap devised for the capture of the Companions of Jehu, if all means failed to surprise them in the Chartreuse of Seillon or some other refuge.

It now-remained to be seen how these bandits should be captured. The case was eagerly debated between the two officers while they had breakfast. By the time dessert was served they were both agreed upon a plan.

That same evening, Morgan received the following letter:

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Just as Adler told us, next Friday at five o'clock the mail-coach will leave Paris with fifty thousand francs for the fathers of Saint-Bernard. The three places, the one in the coupé and the two in the interior, are already engaged by three travellers who will join the coach, one at Sens, the other two at Tonnerre. The travellers are, in the coupé, one of citizen Fouché's best men: in the interior M. Roland de Montrevel and the colonel of the 7th Chasseurs, garrisoned at

Mâcon. They will be in civilians' clothes not to excite suspicion,
but armed to the teeth. Twelve mounted Chasseurs, with muskets, pistols,
and sabres, will
escort the coach, but at some distance behind it, so as to arrive
during the fray. The first pistol fired will be the signal for
putting their horses to a gallop and falling upon us. Now my advice is that,
in spite of these precautions, in fact
because of these precautions, the attack should be made at the
place agreed upon, namely the Maison-Blanche. If that is also the
opinion of the comrades, let me know it. I will myself take the
coach, as postilion, from Mâcon to Belleville. I will undertake
to settle the colonel, and one of you must be responsible for
Fouché's agent. As for M. Roland de Montrevel, no harm will befall him,
for I
have a means, known to me alone and by me invented, by which he
can be prevented from leaving the coach. The precise day and hour at
which the mail to Chambéry will pass
the Maison-Blanche is Saturday at six in the evening. Answer in
these words, "Saturday, six of the evening," and all will go on
rollers. MONTBAR.-

At midnight Montbar, who had complained of the noise his neighbor made,
and had removed to a room at the opposite end of the inn, was awakened by
a courier, who was none other than the groom who had brought him his
horse ready bridled and saddled in the morning. The letter contained only
these words, followed by a postscript:

Saturday, six of the evening. MORGAN. P.S.--Do not forget, even when
fighting, above all when fighting,

that Roland de Montrevel's life is safeguarded.

The young man read this reply with visible satisfaction. The matter was no
longer a mere stoppage of a diligence, but a species of affair of honor among

men of differing opinions, with clashes of courage and bravery. It was no longer a matter of gold spilled upon the highroad, but of blood to be shed--not of pistols loaded with powder, and wielded by a child's hands, but of deadly weapons handled by soldiers accustomed to their use.

For the rest, as Montbar had all the day that was dawning and the morrow before him in which to mature his plans, he contented himself with asking his groom to inquire which postilion would take the coach at Mâcon at five o'clock for the two stages between Mâcon and Belleville. He also sent him to buy four screw-rings and two padlocks fastening with keys.

He already knew that the mail was due at Mâcon at half past four, waited for the travellers to dine, and started again punctually at five. No doubt all his plans were previously laid, for, after giving these directions, Montbar dismissed his servant and went to sleep like a man who has long arrears of slumber to make up.

The next morning he did not wake, or rather did not come downstairs until nine o'clock. He asked casually what had become of his noisy neighbor, and was told that he had started in the Lyons mail at six in the morning, with his friend the colonel of the Chasseurs; but the landlord thought they had only engaged places as far as Tonnerre.

If Monsieur de Jayat had interested himself in the young officer, the latter, in turn, had made inquiries about him, asking who he was, whether he came habitually to the hotel, and whether he would be willing to sell his horse. The landlord had replied that he knew Monsieur de Jayat well, for he was in the habit of coming to the hotel whenever business brought him to Mâcon, and that, as for the horse, he did not believe, considering the affection the young gentleman showed for the animal, that he would consent to part with him for any price. On which the traveller had departed without saying any more.

After breakfast M. de Jayat, who seemed to find time hanging heavily on his hands, ordered his horse, mounted it, and rode out from Mâcon by the Lyons road. As long as he was in the town he allowed his horse to take the

pace his fancy dictated, but once beyond it, he gathered up the reins and pressed the animal with his knees. The hint sufficed, and the animal broke into a gallop.

Montbar passed through the villages of Varennes, La Crèche, and Chapelle-de-Guinchay, and did not stop until he reached the Maison-Blanche. The spot was exactly as Valensolle had described it, and was admirably adapted for an ambushade.

The Maison-Blanche stood in a tiny valley between a sharp declivity and a rise in the ground. A little rivulet without a name flowed past the corner of the garden and made its way to the Saône just above Challe. Tall bushy trees followed the course of the little stream, and described a half-circle, inclosing the house on three sides. The house itself was formerly an inn which proved unproductive to the innkeeper. It had been closed for seven or eight years, and was beginning to fall into decay. Before reaching it, the main road coming from Mâcon made a sharp turn.

Montbar examined the locality with the care of an engineer choosing his ground for a battlefield. He drew a pencil and a note-book from his pocket and made an accurate plan of the position. Then he returned to Mâcon.

Two hours later his groom departed, carrying the plan to Morgan, having informed his master that Antoine was the name of the postilion who was to take the coach from Mâcon to Belleville. The groom also gave him the four screw-rings and the two padlocks he had purchased.

Montbar ordered up a bottle of old Burgundy, and sent for Antoine.

Ten minutes later Antoine appeared. He was a fine, handsome fellow, twenty-five or six years of age, about Montbar's height; a fact which the latter, in looking him over from head to foot, remarked with satisfaction. The postilion paused at the threshold, and, carrying his hand to his hat in a military salute, he said: "Did the citizen send for me?"

"Are you the man they call Antoine?" asked Montbar.

"At your service, and that of your company."

"Well, you can serve me, friend. But close the door and come here."

Antoine closed the door, came within two steps of Montbar, saluted again, and said: "Ready, master."

"In the first place," said Montbar, "if you have no objections, we'll drink a glass of wine to the health of your mistress."

"Oh! oh! My mistress!" cried Antoine. "Can fellows like me afford mistresses? They're all very well for gentlemen such as you."

"Come, you scamp!" said Montbar. "You can't make me believe that, with your make-up, you've made a vow of chastity."

"Oh! I don't say I'm a monk in that particular. I may have a bit of a love-affair here and there along the high-road."

"Yes, at every tavern; and that's why we stop so often with our return horses to drink a drop or fill a pipe."

"Confound it!" said Antoine, with an indescribable twist of the shoulders. "A fellow must have his fun."

"Well, taste the wine, my lad. I'll warrant it won't make you weep." And filling a glass, Montbar signed to the postilion to fill the other.

"A fine honor for me! To your health and that of your company!"

This was an habitual phrase of the worthy postilion, a sort of extension of politeness which did not need the presence of others to justify it in his eyes.

"Ha!" said he, after drinking and smacking his lips, "there's vintage for you-- and I have gulped it down at a swallow as if it were heel-taps!"

"That was a mistake, Antoine."

"Yes, it was a mistake."

"Luckily," said Montbar, refilling his glass, "you can repair it."

"No higher than my thumb, citizen," said the facetious postilion, taking care that his thumb touched the rim of the glass.

"One minute," said Montbar, just as Antoine was putting his glass to his lips.

"Just in time," said the postilion; "it was on its way. What is it?"

"You wouldn't let me drink to the health of your mistress, but I hope you won't refuse to drink to mine."

"Oh! that's never refused, especially with such wine. To the health of your mistress and her company."

Thereupon citizen Antoine swallowed the crimson liquor, tasting and relishing it this time.

"Hey!" exclaimed Montbar, "you're in too much of a hurry, my friend."

"Pooh!" retorted the postilion.

"Yes. Suppose I have several mistresses. If I don't name the one we drink to what good will it do her?"

"Why, that's true!"

"Sad; but you'll have to try again, my friend."

"Ha! Try again, of course! Can't do things half-way with a man like you. The sin's committed; we'll drink again." And Antoine held out his glass. Montbar filled it to the brim.

"Now," said Antoine, eyeing the bottle, and making sure it was empty, "there must be no mistake. Her name?"

"To the beautiful Josephine!" said Montbar.

"To the beautiful Josephine!" repeated Antoine.

And he swallowed the Burgundy with increasing satisfaction. Then, after drinking, and wiping his lips on his sleeve, he said, as he set the glass on the table: "Hey! one moment, citizen."

"What now?" exclaimed Montbar. "Anything wrong this time?"

"I should say so. We've made a great blunder but it's too late now."

"Why so?"

"The bottle is empty."

"That one, yes; but not this one."

So saying, Montbar took from the chimney corner another bottle, already uncorked.

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed Antoine, a radiant smile lighting his face.

"Is there any remedy for it?" asked Montbar.

"There is," replied Antoine, holding out his glass.

Montbar filled it as scrupulously full as he had the first three.

"Well," said the postilion, holding the ruby liquid to the light and admiring its sparkle, "as I was saying, we drank to the health of the beautiful Josephine--"

"Yes," said Montbar.

"But," said Antoine, "there are a devilish lot of Josephines in France."

"True. How many do you suppose there are, Antoine?"

"Perhaps a hundred thousand."

"Granted. What then?"

"Well, out of that hundred thousand a tenth of them must be beautiful."

"That's a good many."

"Say a twentieth."

"All right."

"That makes five thousand."

"The devil! You're strong in arithmetic!"

"I'm the son of a schoolmaster."

"Well?"

"Well, to which of those five thousand did we drink, hey?"

"You're right, Antoine. The family name must follow. To the beautiful Josephine--"

"Stop. This glass was begun; it won't do. If the health is to do her any good, we'll have to empty it and fill it again."

He put the glass to his lips.

"There, it's empty," he said.

"And full," added Montbar, putting the bottle to the glass.

"I'm ready. To the beautiful Josephine--"

"To the beautiful Josephine--Lollier!"

And Montbar emptied his glass.

"By the Lord!" exclaimed Antoine. "Wait a moment. Josephine Lollier! Why, I know her."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"Josephine Lollier! Why, she's the daughter of the man who keeps the post-horses at Belleville."

"Exactly."

"Damn it!" exclaimed the postilion, "you're not to be pitied--a pretty slip of a girl! To the health of beautiful Josephine Lollier."

And he swallowed his fifth glass of Burgundy.

"Now," asked Montbar, "do you understand why I had you sent up here, my lad?"

"No; but I don't bear you any grudge for it, all the same."

"That's very kind of you."

"Oh! I'm a pretty good devil."

"Well, I'll tell you why I sent for you."

"I'm all ears."

"Wait. You'll hear better if your glass is full than if it's empty."

"Are you a doctor for deaf folk?" asked the postilion, banteringly.

"No; but I've lived a good deal among drunkards," replied Montbar, filling Antoine's glass again.

"A man is not a drunkard because he likes wine," said Antoine.

"I agree with you, my good fellow," replied Montbar. "A man is only a drunkard when he can't carry his liquor."

"Well said," cried Antoine, who seemed to carry his pretty well. "I'm listening."

"You told me that you didn't understand why I had sent for you."

"That's what I said."

"Still, you must have suspected that I had an object?"

"Every man has an object, good or bad, according to our priest," observed Antoine, sententiously.

"Well, my friend," resumed Montbar, "mine is to make my way by night, without being recognized, into the courtyard of Master Nicolas-Denis Lollier, postmaster at Belleville."

"At Belleville," repeated Antoine, who had followed Montbar's words with all the attention he was capable of. "You wish to make your way by night, without being recognized, into the courtyard of Master Nicolas-Denis Lollier, postmaster at Belleville, in order to see the beautiful Josephine? Ah, ha! my sly dog!"

"You have it, my dear Antoine; and I wish to get in without being recognized, because Father Lollier has discovered everything, and has forbidden his daughter to see me."

"You don't say so. Well, what can I do about it?"

"Your wits are still muddled, Antoine. Drink another glass of wine to brighten them up."

"Right you are," exclaimed Antoine.

And he swallowed his sixth glass of wine.

"You ask what you can do, Antoine?"

"Yes, what can I do? That's what I ask."

"Everything, my friend."

"I?"

"You."

"Ha! I'm curious to know what. Clear it up, clear it up!" And he held out his glass.

"You drive the mail to Chambéry to-morrow, don't you?"

"Yes; at six o'clock."

"Well, suppose that Antoine is a good fellow?"

"No supposing about it; he is!"

"Well, this is what Antoine does--"

"Go on; what does he do?"

"In the first place, he empties his glass."

"Done! that's not difficult."

"Then he takes these ten louis."

Montbar spread ten louis on the table.

"Ah, ha!" exclaimed Antoine, "yellow boys, real ones. I thought those little devils had all emigrated."

"You see there are some left."

"And what is Antoine to do to put them in his pocket?"

"Antoine must lend me his best postilion's suit."

"To you?"

"And let me take his place to-morrow night."

"Ah, yes; so that you can see the beautiful Josephine to-morrow night."

"Of course. I reach Belleville at eight, drive into the courtyard, and say the horses are tired and must rest from eight till ten, and from eight to ten--"

"You can fool Père Lollier."

"Well, there you are, Antoine!"

"There I am! When a fellow's young he goes with the young 'uns; when he's a bachelor he's in with the bachelors; when he's old and a papa, he can go with the papas, and cry, 'Long live the papas.'"

"Then, my good Antoine, you'll lend me your best jacket and breeches?"

"I've just got a new jacket and breeches that I've never worn."

"And you'll let me take your place?"

"With pleasure."

"Then I'll give you five louis for earnest money."

"And the rest?"

"Tomorrow, when I pull on the boots; only--there's one precaution you must take."

"What is it?"

"There's talk of brigands robbing diligences; you'll be careful to put the holsters on the saddle."

"What for?"

"For pistols."

"No, no! Don't you go and shoot those fine young fellows."

"What! do you call robbers who pillage diligences fine young men?"

"A man's not a robber because he takes government money."

"Is that your opinion?"

"I should say so; besides, it's the opinion of a good many other people, too. As for me, if I were a judge, I'd never in the world condemn them."

"Perhaps you would drink to their health?"

"Of course, if the wine was good."

"I dare you to do it," said Montbar, emptying the last of the second bottle into Antoine's glass.

"You know the proverb?" said the postilion.

"What is it?"

"Never defy a fool to commit his folly. To the health of the Companions of Jehu."

"Amen!" responded Montbar.

"And the five louis?" asked Antoine, putting his glass on the table.

"There they are."

"Thank you; you shall have the holsters on your saddle; but take my advice and don't put pistols in 'em; or if you do, follow Père Jérôme's example--he's the conductor of the Geneva diligence--and put powder and no balls in 'em."

And with that philanthropic advice, the postilion took his leave, and went down the stairway singing a postilion's song in a vinous voice.

Montbar followed the song conscientiously through two verses, then, as the voice died away in the distance, he was obliged to forego the rest of the song, however interesting he may have found it.