

Chapter 42

THE CHAMBÉRY MAIL-COACH

The next day, at five in the afternoon, Antoine, anxious, no doubt, not to be late, was in the courtyard of the Hôtel de la Poste, harnessing the three horses which were to relay the mail-coach.

Shortly after, the coach rumbled into the courtyard at a gallop, and was pulled up under the windows of a room close to the servants' stairway, which had seemed greatly to occupy Antoine's attention. If any one had paid attention to so slight a detail it might have been observed that the window-curtain was somewhat imprudently drawn aside to permit the occupant of the room to see the persons who got out of the coach. There were three men, who, with the haste of famished travellers, made their way toward the brilliantly lighted windows of the common room.

They had scarcely entered, when a smart postilion came down the kitchen staircase, shod simply with thin pumps over which he intended to pull his heavy riding-boots, These he received from Antoine, slipping five louis into his hand at the same time, and turned for the man to throw his riding cape over his shoulders, a protection rendered necessary by the severity of the weather.

This completed, Antoine returned hastily to the stables and hid in the darkest corner. As for the man who had taken his place, reassured no doubt by the high collar of the cape that concealed half of his face, he went straight to the horses which stood ready harnessed, slipped his pistols into the holsters, and, profiting by the moment when the other horses were being led into the stable by their postilion, he took a gimlet, which might in case of need serve as a dagger, from his pocket, and screwed the four rings into the woodwork of the coach, one into each door, and the other two into the body of the coach. After which he put the horses to with a rapidity and skill which bespoke in him a man familiar from childhood with all the details of an art pushed to extremes in our day by that honorable class of society which we call "gentlemen riders."

That done, he waited, quieting his restless horses by voice and whip, judiciously combined, or used in turn.

Everyone knows the rapidity with which the meals of the unhappy beings condemned to travel by mail are hurried through. The half-hour was not up, when the voice of the conductor was heard, calling:

"Come, citizen travellers, take your places."

Montbar placed himself close to the carriage door and recognized Roland and the colonel of the 7th Chasseurs, perfectly, in spite of their disguise, as they jumped into the coach, paying no attention whatever to the postilion.

The latter closed the door upon them, slipped the padlock through the two rings and turned the key. Then, walking around the coach, he pretended to drop his whip before the other door, and, in stooping for it, slipped the second padlock through the rings, deftly turned the key as he straightened up, and, assured that the two officers were securely locked in, he sprang upon his horse, grumbling at the conductor who had left him to do his work. In fact the conductor was still squabbling with the landlord over his bill when the third traveller got into his place in the coupé.

"Are you coming this evening, to-night, or to-morrow morning, Père François?" cried the pretended postilion, imitating Antoine as best he could.

"All right, all right, I'm coming," answered the conductor; then, looking around him: "Why, where are the travellers?" he asked.

"Here," replied the two officers from the interior and the agent from the coupé.

"Is the door properly closed?" persisted Père François.

"I'll answer for that," said Montbar.

"Then off you go, baggage!" cried the conductor, as he climbed into the coupé and closed the door behind him.

The postilion did not wait to be told twice; he started his horses, digging his spurs into the belly of the one he rode and lashing the others vigorously. The mail-coach dashed forward at a gallop.

Montbar drove as if he had never done anything else in his life; as he crossed the town the windows rattled and the houses shook; never did real postilion crack his whip with greater science.

As he left Mâcon he saw a little troop of horse; they were the twelve chasseurs told off to follow the coach without seeming to escort it. The colonel passed his head through the window and made a sign to the sergeant who commanded them.

Montbar did not seem to notice anything; but after going some four or five hundred yards, he turned his head, while executing a symphony with his whip, and saw that the escort had started.

"Wait, my babes!" said Montbar, "I'll make you see the country." And he dug in his spurs and brought down his whip. The horses seemed to have wings, and the coach flew over the cobblestones like the chariot of thunder rumbling past. The conductor became alarmed.

"Hey, Master Antoine," cried he, "are you drunk?"

"Drunk? fine drinking!" replied Montbar; "I dined on a beetroot salad."

"Damn him! If he goes like that," cried Roland, thrusting his head through the window, "the escort can't keep up."

"You hear what he says!" shrieked the conductor.

"No," replied Montbar, "I don't."

"Well, he says that if you keep this up the escort can't follow."

"Is there an escort?" asked Montbar.

"Of course; we're carrying government money."

"That's different; you ought to have said so at first."

But instead of slacking his pace the coach was whirled along as before; if there was any change, it was for greater velocity than before.

"Antoine, if there's an accident, I'll shoot you through the head," shouted the conductor.

"Run along!" exclaimed Montbar; "everybody knows those pistols haven't any balls in them."

"Possibly not; but mine have!" cried the police agent.

"That remains to be seen," replied Montbar, keeping on his way at the same pace without heed to these remonstrances.

On they went with the speed of lightning through the village of Varennes, then through that of La Crèche and the little town of Chapelle-de-Guinchay; only half a mile further and they would reach the Maison-Blanche. The horses were dripping, and tossed the foam from their mouths as they neighed with excitement.

Montbar glanced behind him; more than a mile back the sparks were flying from the escort's horses. Before him was the mountainous declivity. Down it he dashed, gathering the reins to master his horses when the time came.

The conductor had ceased expostulating, for he saw that the hand which guided the horses was firm and capable. But from time to time the colonel thrust his head through the window to look for his men.

Half-way down the slope Montbar had his horses under control, without, however, seeming to check their course. Then he began to sing, at the top of his voice, the "Réveil du Peuple," the song of the royalists, just as the "Marseillaise" was the song of the Jacobins.

"What's that rogue about?" cried Roland, putting his head through the window. "Tell him to hold his tongue, conductor, or I'll put a ball through his loins."

Perhaps the conductor might have repeated Roland's threat to Montbar, but he suddenly saw a black line blocking the road. "Halt, conductor!" thundered a voice the next moment.

"Postilion, drive over the bellies of those bandits!" shouted the police agent.

"Drive on yourself!" said Montbar. "Do you suppose I'm going over the stomachs of friends? Who-o-ah!"

The mail coach stopped as if by magic.

"Go on! go on!" cried Roland and the colonel, aware that the escort was too far behind to help them.

"Ha! You villain of a postilion," cried the police agent, springing out of the coupé, and pointing his pistol at Montbar, "you shall pay for this."

The words were scarcely uttered when Montbar, forestalling him, fired, and the agent rolled, mortally wounded, under the wheels of the coach. His fingers, convulsed by death, touched the trigger and the pistol went off, but the ball touched no one.

"Conductor," shouted the two officers, "by all the powers of heaven, open, open, open quickly!"

"Gentlemen," said Morgan, advancing, "we are not attacking your persons, we merely want the government money. Conductor! that fifty thousand francs, and quickly too!"

Two shots from the interior made answer for the officers, who, after vainly shaking the doors, were still more fruitlessly attempting to force themselves through the windows. No doubt one of their shots took effect, for a cry of rage was heard and a flash illuminated the road. The colonel gave a sigh, and fell back against Roland. He was killed outright.

Roland fired again, but no one replied to him. His pistols were both discharged; locked in as he was he could not use his sabre, and he howled with rage.

Meantime the conductor was forced, with a pistol at his throat, to give up the money. Two men took the bags containing the fifty thousand francs, and fastened them on Montbar's horse, which his groom had brought ready saddled and bridled, as if to a meet. Montbar kicked off his heavy boots and sprang into the saddle.

"My compliments to the First Consul, Monsieur de Montrevell!" cried Morgan. Then, turning to his companions, he cried: "Scatter which way you will, you know the rendezvous for to-morrow night."

"Yes, yes," replied ten or a dozen voices.

And the band dispersed like a flock of birds, disappearing down the valley into the shadow of the trees that lined the banks of the little river and surrounded the Maison-Blanche.

At that moment the gallop of horses was heard, and the escort, alarmed by the pistol shots, appeared on the crest of the hill and came down the slope like an avalanche. But it came too late; it found only the conductor sitting dazed by the roadside, the bodies of the colonel and of Fouché's agent, and Roland a prisoner, roaring like a lion gnawing at the bars of its cage.