

## Chapter 45

### THE FOLLOWER OF TRAILS

The reader will not have forgotten the situation in which the escort of chasseurs found the Chambéry mail-coach.

The first thing they did was to look for the obstacle which prevented Roland from getting out. They found the padlock and wrenched off the door.

Roland bounded from the coach like a tiger from its cage. We have said that the ground was covered with snow. Roland, hunter and soldier, had but one idea--to follow the trail of the Companions of Jehu. He had seen them disappear in the direction of Thoissy; but he believed they were not likely to continue in that direction because, between them and the little town ran the Saône, and there were no bridges across the river between Belleville and Mâcon. He ordered the escort and the conductor to wait for him on the highroad, and alone and on foot, without even waiting to reload his pistols, he started on the tracks of Morgan and his companions.

He was not mistaken. A mile from the highroad the fugitives had come to the river; there they had halted, probably deliberating, for the trampling of their horses' hoofs was plainly visible; then they had separated into two troops, one going up the river to Mâcon, and the other descending it in the direction of Belleville.

This separation was doubtless intended to puzzle their pursuers, if they were pursued. Roland had heard the parting call of the leader: "To-morrow night, you know where!" He had no doubt, therefore, that whichever trail he followed, whether up or down--if the snow did not melt too fast--would lead him to the rendezvous, where, either together or singly, the Companions of Jehu were certain to assemble.

He returned upon his own tracks, ordered the conductor to put on the boots thrown aside by the pretended postilion, mount the horse and take the

coach to the next relay, namely Belleville. The sergeant of chasseurs and four of his men, who knew how to write, were to accompany the conductor and sign his report of what had occurred. Roland forbade all mention of himself and where he had gone, lest the brigands should get word of his future plans. The rest of the escort were to carry back their colonel's body, and make deposition on their own account, along the same lines as the conductor, to the authorities, and equally without mention of Roland.

These orders given, the young man dismounted a chasseur and took his horse, selecting the one he thought most serviceable. Then he reloaded his pistols, and put them in the holsters in place of the regulation weapons of the dismounted chasseur. Having done this, and promised the conductor and the chasseurs a speedy vengeance, conditioned, however, on their keeping his present proceedings secret, he mounted the horse and rode off in the direction he had already investigated.

When he reached the spot where the two troops had separated, he had to decide between the different trails. He chose that which descended the Saône toward Belleville. He had excellent reason for making this choice, although it might possibly take him out of his way for six or eight miles. In the first place he was nearer Belleville than Mâcon; then he had spent twenty-four hours at Mâcon, and might be recognized there, whereas he had never stopped at Belleville longer than the time required to change horses when accident brought him there by post.

The events we have just recorded had taken barely an hour to happen. Eight o'clock was striking from the church clock at Thoissy when Roland started in pursuit of the fugitives. The way was plain; five or six horses had left their imprint on the snow; one of these horses had paced.

Roland jumped the two or three brooks which watered the space he had to cross to reach Belleville. A hundred yards from the town he paused, for here the trail separated again; two of the six travellers had turned to the right, that is to say, they had struck away from the river, the four others to the left, continuing on their way to Belleville. At the outskirts of the town, another secession had taken place; three of the riders had gone round the town, one had entered it.

Roland followed the latter, sure that he could recover the traces of the others. The one who had entered the town and followed the main street had stopped at a pretty house between court and garden, numbered 67. He had rung and some one had let him in; for through the iron grating could be seen traces of footsteps, and beside them the tracks of a horse being led to the stable.

It was quite evident that one, at least, of the Companions of Jehu had stopped there. By going to the mayor of the town, exhibiting his authority, and asking for gendarmes, Roland could have arrested him at once. But that was not his object; he did not wish to arrest a solitary individual; he wanted to catch the whole company in a trap.

He made a note in his mind of No. 67, and continued on his way. He crossed the entire town and rode a few hundred paces beyond it without meeting any fresh traces. He was about to return, when it occurred to him that, if the tracks of the three riders reappeared anywhere, it would be at the head of the bridge. And there, sure enough, he found the hoof-prints of three horses, which were undoubtedly those he sought, for one of them paced.

Roland galloped in pursuit. On reaching Monceaux--same precaution, the riders had skirted the village; but Roland was too good a scout to trouble himself about that. He kept on his way, and at the other end of Monceaux he recovered the fugitives' tracks. Not far from Châtillon one of the three horses had left the highroad, turning to the right toward a little château, standing on a hill a short distance from the road between Châtillon and Trévoux. This time the three remaining riders, evidently believing they had done enough to mislead any one who might be following, had kept straight on through Châtillon and taken the road to Neuville.

The direction taken by the fugitives was eminently satisfactory to Roland; they were undoubtedly on their way to Bourg; if they had not intended to go there they would have taken the road to Marlieux. Now, Bourg was the headquarters Roland had himself chosen for the centre of his own

operations; it was his own town, and he knew, with the minuteness of boyish knowledge, every bush, every ruin, every cavern in the neighborhood.

At Neuville the riders had skirted the village. Roland did not trouble himself about a ruse, already known and thwarted; but on the other side he found but one trail. He could not be mistaken in that horse, however; it was the pacer. Certain of recovering the trail again, Roland retraced his steps. The two riders had separated at a road leading off to Vannes; one had taken that road, the other had skirted the village, which, as we have said, was on the road to Bourg. This was the one to follow; besides, the gait of the horse made it easier, as it could not be confused with any other. Moreover, he was on his way to Bourg, and between Neuville and Bourg there was but one other village, that of Saint-Denis. For the rest, it was not probable that the solitary rider intended to go further than Bourg.

Roland continued on his way with more eagerness than ever, convinced that he was nearing the end. In fact the rider had not skirted Bourg, but had boldly entered the town. There, it seemed to Roland that the man had hesitated, unless this hesitation were a last ruse to hide his tracks. But after ten minutes spent in following his devious tracks Roland was sure of his facts; it was not trickery but hesitation.

The print of a man's steps came from a side street; the traveller and the pedestrian had conferred together for a moment, and then the former had evidently employed the latter as a guide. From that point on, the footsteps of a man went side by side with those of the horse. Both came to an end at the hôtel de la Belle-Alliance. Roland remembered that the horse wounded in the attack at Les Carronnières had been brought to this inn. In all probability there was some connivance between the inn-keeper and the Companion of Jehu. For the rest, in all probability the rider would stay there until the next evening. Roland felt by his own fatigue that the man he was following must need rest. And Roland, in order not to force his horse and the better to reconnoitre the tracks he was following, had taken six hours to do thirty miles.

Three o'clock was striking from the truncated bell-tower of Nôtre-Dame. Roland debated what to do. Should he stop at some inn in the town?

Impossible, he was too well known in Bourg; besides, his horse with its cavalry saddle-cloth would excite suspicion. It was one of the conditions of success that his presence at Bourg should remain unknown.

He could hide at the Château des Noires-Fontaines and keep on the watch, but could he trust the servants? Michel and Jacques would hold their tongues, Roland was sure of them; but Charlotte, the jailer's daughter, she might gossip. However, it was three o'clock in the morning, every one was asleep, and the safest plan was certainly to put himself in communication with Michel. Michel would find some way of concealing his presence.

To the deep regret of his horse, who had no doubt scented a stable, Roland wheeled about and rode off in the direction of Pont-d'Ain. As he passed the church of Brou he glanced at the barrack of the gendarmes, where, in all probability, they and their captain were sleeping the sleep of the righteous.

Roland cut through the little strip of forest which jutted into the road. The snow deadened the sound of his horse's hoofs. Branching into the road from the other side, he saw two men slinking along in the ditch, carrying a deer slung by its forelegs to a sapling. He thought he recognized the cut of the two men, and he spurred his horse to overtake them. The men were on the watch; they turned, saw the rider, who was evidently making for them, flung the animal into the ditch, and made for the shelter of the forest of Seillon.

"Hey, Michel!" cried Roland, more and more convinced that he had to do with his own gardener.

Michel stopped short; the other man kept on his way across the fields.

"Hey, Jacques!" shouted Roland.

The other man stopped. If they were recognized, it was useless to fly; besides, there was nothing hostile in the call; the voice was friendly, rather than threatening.

"Bless me!" said Jacques, "it sounds like M. Roland."

"I do believe it is he," said Michel.

And the two men, instead of continuing their flight, returned to the highroad.

Roland had not heard what the two poachers had said, but he had guessed.

"Hey, the deuce! of course it is I," he shouted.

A minute more and Michel and Jacques were beside him. The questions of father and son were a crossfire, and it must be owned they had good reason for amazement. Roland, in civilian's dress, on a cavalry horse, at three in the morning, on the road from Bourg to the château! The young officer cut short all questions.

"Silence, poachers!" said he, "put that deer behind me and be off at trot to the château. No one must know of my presence there, not even my sister."

Roland spoke with military precision, and both men knew that when he gave an order there was no replying. They picked up the deer, put it behind his saddle, and followed the gentle trot of the horse at a run. There was less than a mile to do, and it took but ten minutes. At a short distance from the château, Roland pulled up. The two men went forward as scouts to see if all were quiet. Satisfied on that point, they made a sign to Roland to advance.

Roland came, dismounted, found the door of the lodge open, and entered. Michel took the horse to the stable and carried the deer to the kitchen; for Michel belonged to that honorable class of poachers, who kill game for the pleasure of killing, and not for the selfish interest of sale. There was no need for precaution, either for horse or deer; for Amélie took no more notice of what went on in the stable than of what they served her to eat.

During this time Jacques lighted the fire. When Michel returned he brought the remains of a leg of mutton and some eggs for an omelet. Jacques made up a bed in the office.

Roland warmed himself and ate his supper without saying a word. The two men looked at each other with an astonishment that was not devoid of a certain degree of anxiety. A rumor of the expedition to Seillon had got about, and it was whispered that Roland had led it. Apparently, he had returned for another similar expedition.

When Roland had finished his supper he looked up and saw Michel.

"Ah! so there you are?" he exclaimed.

"I am waiting for Monsieur's orders."

"Here they are; listen carefully."

"I'm all ears."

"It's a question of life or death; of more than that, of my honor."

"Speak, Monsieur Roland."

Roland pulled out his watch.

"It is now five o'clock. When the inn of the Belle-Alliance opens, be there, as if you were just sauntering by; then stop a minute to chat with whoever opens it."

"That will probably be Pierre."

"Pierre or another; find out from him who the traveller is who arrived last night on a pacing horse. You know what pacing is, don't you?"

"The deuce! You mean a horse that goes like a bear, both feet forward at the same time."

"Bravo! You can also find out whether the traveller is leaving this morning, or whether he proposes to spend the day at the hotel, can't you?"

"Of course I can find that out."

"Well, when you have found out all that, come and tell me; but remember, not a word about my being here. If any one asks about me, say that they had a letter from me yesterday, and that I was in Paris with the First Consul."

"That's understood."

Michel departed. Roland went to bed and to sleep, leaving Jacques to guard the building.



When Roland awoke Michel had returned. He had found out all that his master desired to know. The horseman who had arrived in the night was to leave the next morning, and on the travellers' register, which every innkeeper was obliged by law to keep in those days, was entered: "Saturday, 30th Pluviose, \_ten at night\_; the citizen Valensolle, from Lyons going to Geneva." Thus the alibi was prepared; for the register would prove that the citizen Valensolle had arrived at ten o'clock, and it was impossible that he could have assisted in robbing the mail-coach near the Maison-Blanche at half-past eight and yet have reached the Hotel de la Belle-Alliance at ten.

But what impressed Roland the most was that the man he had followed through the night, and whose name and retreat he had just discovered, was none other than the second of Alfred de Barjols, whom he himself had killed in a duel near the fountain of Vaucluse; and that that second was, in all probability, the man who had played the part of ghost at the Chartreuse of Seillon.

So, then, the Companions of Jehu were not mere thieves, but, on the contrary, as rumor said, gentlemen of good family, who, while the noble Bretons were laying down their lives for the royalist cause in the West, were, here in the East, braving the scaffold to send to the combatants the money they took from the government.