

Chapter 46

AN INSPIRATION

We have seen that during the pursuit of the preceding night Roland could have arrested one or two of the men he was pursuing. He could now do the same with M. de Valensolle, who was probably, like Roland himself, taking a day's rest after a night of great fatigue.

To do it he had only to write a line to the captain of gendarmes, or to the colonel of dragoons, who had assisted him during that ineffectual search at Seillon. Their honor was concerned in the affair. They could instantly surprise M. de Valensolle in bed, and at the cost of two pistol shots--two men killed or wounded--he would be taken.

But M. de Valensolle's arrest would give warning to the rest of the band, who would instantly put themselves in safety beyond the frontier. It was better, therefore, to keep to his first idea; to go slowly, to follow the different trails which must converge to one centre, and, at the risk of a general engagement, throw a net over the whole company.

To do that, M. de Valensolle must not be arrested. It was better to follow him on his pretended journey to Geneva, which was probably but a blind to foil investigation. It was therefore agreed that Roland, whose disguise, however good, was liable to be penetrated, should remain at the lodge, and Michel and Jacques should head off the game. In all probabilities, M. de Valensolle would not set out from the inn before nightfall.

Roland made inquiries of Michel about the life his sister had led since her mother's departure. He learned that she had never once left the grounds during that time. Her habits were still the same, except for the walks and visits she had made with Madame de Montrevel.

She rose at seven or eight in the morning, sketched or practiced her music till breakfast, and afterward read or employed herself at some kind of

embroidery, or took advantage of the sunshine to go out with Charlotte to the river. Sometimes she bade Michel unfasten the little boat, and then, well wrapped in furs, would row up the Reissouse as far as Montagnac or down to Saint-Just. During these trips she spoke to no one. Then she dined. After dinner, she retired to her bedroom and did not appear again.

By half-past six, therefore, Michel and Jacques could decamp without arousing any suspicion as to their where-about; and, accordingly, at that hour they took their blouses, game-bags and guns, and started. Roland had given them their instructions. They were to follow the pacing horse until they had ascertained his destination, or until they had lost all trace of him. Michel was to lie in wait opposite the inn of the Belle-Alliance; Jacques was to station himself outside of Bourg, just where the main road divides into three branches, one going to Saint-Amour, another to Saint-Claude, and the third to Nantua. This last was at the same time the highroad to Geneva. It was evident that unless M. de Valensolle returned upon his steps, which was not probable, he would take one or another of these three roads.

The father started in one direction, the son in another. Michel went toward the town by the road to Pont-d'Ain, passing the church of Brou. Jacques crossed the Reissouse, followed the right bank of the little river, and found himself, after walking a few hundred yards beyond the town, at the sharp angle made by the parting of the three roads. Father and son reached their separate posts at about the same time.

At this particular moment, that is to say, about seven o'clock, the stillness and solitude surrounding the Château des Noires-Fontaines was broken by the arrival of a post-chaise, which stopped before the iron gate. A servant in livery got off the box and pulled the chain of the bell.

It was Michel's business to open the gate, but Michel was away, as we know. Amélie and Charlotte probably counted on him, for the bell was rung three times before any one answered it. At last the maid appeared at the head of the stairs calling Michel. Michel made no reply. Finally, protected by the locked gates, Charlotte ventured to approach them. In spite of the obscurity she recognized the servant.

"Ah, is it you, Monsieur James?" she cried, somewhat reassured. James was Sir John's confidential valet.

"Yes, mademoiselle, it is I, or rather it is Sir John."

The carriage door opened at this moment, and his master's voice was heard saying: "Mademoiselle Charlotte, will you tell your mistress that I have just arrived from Paris, that I have called to leave my card, and to ask permission, not to be received this evening, but to be allowed to call tomorrow, if she will grant me that favor. Ask her at what hour I shall least inconvenience her."

Mademoiselle Charlotte had a high opinion of Sir John, consequently she acquitted herself of the commission with the utmost alacrity. Five minutes later she returned to announce that Sir John would be received the next day between twelve and one o'clock.

Roland knew what the Englishman had come for. In his mind the marriage was an accomplished fact, and he regarded Sir John already as his brother-in-law. He hesitated a moment as to whether he should or should not make himself known to Sir John, and tell his friend about his projects; but he reflected that Sir John was not a man to let him work them out alone. He, too, had a revenge to take on the Companions of Jehu; he would certainly insist on taking part in the expedition, whatever it was. And that expedition, however it might result, was certain to be dangerous, and another disaster might befall him. Roland's luck, as Roland well knew, did not extend to his friends. Sir John, grievously wounded, had barely escaped with his life, and the colonel of dragoons had been killed outright. He therefore allowed Sir John to drive away without giving any sign of his own proximity.

As for Charlotte, she did not seem in the least surprised that Michel was not there to open the gate. Evidently they were accustomed to his absences, and they did not disturb either the mistress or the maid. For the rest, Roland knew his sister well enough to understand this indifference. Amélie, feeble

under a moral suffering wholly unsuspected by Roland, who attributed to simple nervous crises the fluctuations of his sister's character, Amélie was strong and brave before real danger. That was no doubt why she felt no fear about remaining with Charlotte alone in the lonely house, without other protection than that afforded by the two gardeners, who spent their nights in poaching.

As for ourselves, we know that Michel and his son did really serve their mistress' desire more in absenting themselves thus frequently from the château than in staying [near] it. Their absence left the coast clear for Morgan, [and that] was all Amélie really cared about.

That evening and part of the night went by without bringing Roland any news. He tried to sleep, but succeeded ill. He fancied every minute that he heard some one at the door. The day was just beginning to glimmer through the shutters when the door did actually open. Michel and Jacques were returning, and this is what had happened to them:

They had each gone to his post, Michel at the inn door, Jacques to the junction of the roads. Twenty paces from the door Michel had met Pierre, and three words sufficed to show him that M. de Valensolle was still at the inn. The latter had announced that, as he had a long journey before him, he would let his horse rest and would not start until nightfall. Pierre did not doubt that he was going to Geneva, as he said.

Michel proposed a glass of wine to Pierre. Pierre accepted. After that, Michel was sure of being warned of any change. Pierre was the hostler, and nothing could be done in the stable without his knowledge. A lad attached to the inn promised to convey the news to Michel, in return for which Michel gave him three charges of powder with which to make firecrackers.

At midnight the traveller had not yet started; they had drunk four bottles of wine, but Michel had partaken sparingly of them. He had found means to pour three of the four bottles into Pierre's glass, where they did not long remain. At midnight the wine-shop closed, and Michel having nowhere to go for the four hours that still remained until daybreak, Pierre offered him a

bed of straw in the stable. Michel accepted. The two friends went back arm-in-arm; Pierre staggering, Michel pretending to stagger.

At three o'clock in the morning the servant of the hotel awakened Michel. The traveller wanted his horse. Michel, pretending that he must be off to see to his game, also rose. His toilet was not long in making; he had only to shake the straw from his hair, game-bag, and blouse, after which he took leave of his friend Pierre and hid himself at the corner of the street.

Fifteen minutes later the gate opened and a man rode out on a pacing horse. It was M. de Valensolle. He took the street that led to the Geneva road. Michel followed without concealment, whistling a hunting air. Only, as Michel could not run for fear of attracting the rider's notice, he lost sight of him before long. But Jacques was there, thought he, waiting at the fork of the roads. Yes, Jacques had been there, but he had been there for over six hours of a winter's night, in five degrees of cold. Had he the courage to stand six hours in the snow and kick his soles against a tree?

Thinking thus, Michel took a short cut through the streets and lanes, running at full speed; but horse and rider, in spite of his haste, had gone faster than he. He reached the fork of the roads. All was silent and solitary. The snow, trampled the day before, a Sunday, no longer showed distinct tracks. The steps of the horse were lost in the mud of the road. Nor did he waste further time in vain searching. He wondered what had become of Jacques; but his poacher's eye soon told him.

Jacques had stood on watch at the foot of a tree. For how long? It was difficult to say, but long enough to become very cold. The snow was well beaten down by his heavy hunting-boots. He had evidently tried to keep warm by walking up and down. Then suddenly he must have remembered a little mud hut on the other side of the road, such as the road-menders build as a shelter against the rain. He had gone down the ditch and crossed the road. His trail, lost for a moment in the centre of the road, was visible on the snow at either side. This trail formed a diagonal line, making straight for the hut. It was evidently in the hut that Jacques had passed the night. But when had he left it? And why had he left it? The first question was unanswerable. But to the most inexperienced scout the second was plain

enough. He had left it to follow M. de Valensolle. The same footsteps that had approached the hut were to be seen going, as they left it, in the direction of Ceyzeriat.

The traveller had really taken the road to Geneva. Jacques' footsteps showed it plainly. The stride was long, like that of a man running, and he had followed the road behind the trees, evidently to conceal himself from the rider. At a wretched tavern, one of those with the legend inscribed over its door: "Here we give food and drink, equestrian and pedestrian lodgings," the trail stopped. It was clear that the rider had stopped before this inn, for Jacques had also paused behind a tree some twenty feet distant, where the snow was trampled. Then, probably after the gate had closed on horse and rider, Jacques had left his tree, crossed the road, this time with hesitation, his short steps leading, not to the door, but to the window.

Michel put his own feet in his son's footprints and reached the window. Through the chinks in the shutter the interior, when lighted, could be seen; but now all was dark, and Michel could see nothing. But Jacques had certainly looked through the window; no doubt it was then lighted, and he had been able to see something.

Where had he gone on leaving the window? Round the house, close to the wall. This excursion was easy to follow. The snow was virgin. As for his purpose in going round the house that was not difficult to make out. Jacques, like a lad of sense, had concluded that the traveller had not left a good hotel, saying that he was going to Geneva, to put up at a miserable tavern a mile from the town.

He must have ridden through the yard and gone out by some other exit. Jacques had, therefore, skirted the house in the hope of recovering the trail, if not of the horse, at least of the rider on the other side.

Sure enough, from a small gate in the rear, opening toward the forest that extends from Coterz to Ceyzeriat, footsteps could be seen advancing in a straight line to the edge of the woods. They were those of a man elegantly

shod, wearing spurs on his heels, for the spurs had left their marks upon the snow.

Jacques had not hesitated to follow these marks. The track of his heavy shoes could be seen near the prints of the delicate boot--the large foot of the peasant near the slender foot of the city man.

It was now five o'clock. Day was breaking, and Michel resolved to go no further. Jacques was on the trail, and the young poacher was worth as much as the old one. Michel circled the open as if he were returning from Ceyzeriat, resolving to enter the inn and wait for Jacques' return; certain that his son would know he had followed him and had stopped short at this isolated house.

Michel knocked on the window-shutter and was soon admitted. He knew the landlord, who was well accustomed to his nocturnal habits, asked for a bottle, complaining bitterly of his poor luck, and asked permission to wait for his son, who was in the woods on the other side, and who, he hoped, had been more successful in tracking the game. It goes without saying that this permission was readily accorded. Michel opened the window-shutters, in order to look out on the road.

It was not long before some one knocked on the glass. It was Jacques. His father called him.

Jacques had been as unfortunate as his father. No game; and he was frozen. An armful of wood was thrown on the fire and a second bottle of wine was brought. Jacques warmed himself and drank.

Then, as it was necessary that the two poachers should be back at the château before daylight, that their absence might not be noticed, Michel paid for the wine and the wood, and the pair departed.

Neither had said one word before the landlord of the subject that filled their minds. He was not to suspect that they were on other trail than that of game. But no sooner were they outside of the house than Michel drew close to his son. Jacques recounted how he had followed the tracks until they had reached a crossroad in the forest. There a man, armed with a gun, had suddenly appeared and asked him what he was doing in the forest at that hour. Jacques replied that he was watching for game. "Then go further," said the man; "don't you see that this place is taken?"

Jacques admitted the justice of this claim, and went on about a hundred rods further, but, just as he was slanting to the left to return to the crossroad, another man, armed like the first, had suddenly started up with the same inopportune question. Jacques gave him the same answer: "Watching for game." The man had then pointed to the edge of the woods, saying in a threatening manner: "If I have any advice to give you, my young friend, it is to go over there. It will be safer for you than here."

Jacques had taken this advice, or at least had pretended to take it, for as soon as he had reached the edge of the woods he had crept along in the ditch, until, convinced that it would be impossible to recover M. de Valensolle's track, he had struck into the open, and returned by fields and the highroad to the tavern, where he hoped to, and in fact did, find his father.

They reached the Château des Noires-Fontaines, as we have seen, just as day was breaking.

All that we have related was repeated to Roland with a multiplicity of detail which we must omit, and convinced the young officer that the two armed men, who had warned off Jacques, were not poachers as they seemed, but Companions of Jehu. But where was their haunt located?

There was no deserted convent, no ruin, in that direction.

Suddenly Roland clapped his hand to his head. "Idiot that I am!" he cried, "why did I never think of that?"

A smile of triumph crossed his lips, and addressing the two men, who were mortified at having brought him no more definite news, he cried: "My lads, I know all I want to know. Go to bed and sleep sound; my word, you deserve to!" He himself, setting the example, slept like a man whose brain has solved a problem of the utmost importance which has long harassed it.

The thought had just flashed through his mind that the Companions of Jehu had abandoned the Chartreuse of Seillon for the grottoes of Ceyzeriat; and at the same time he recalled the subterranean passage leading from these grottoes to the church of Brou.