

Chapter 47

A RECONNOISSANCE

That same day, Sir John, making use of the permission accorded him the night before, presented himself at the Château des Noires-Fontaines between twelve and one o'clock.

Everything occurred as Morgan had advised. Sir John was received as the friend of the family, Lord Tanlay as a suitor whose attentions were most flattering. Amélie made no opposition to the wishes of her mother and brother, and to the commands of the First Consul, further than to dwell on the state of her health and to ask for delay on that account. Sir John bowed and submitted; he had obtained more than he had hoped to obtain. He was accepted.

He felt that his presence in Bourg, if prolonged, would be an impropriety, Amélie being (still on the plea of ill-health) parted from her mother and brother. He therefore announced that he would pay her a second visit on the morrow, and leave Bourg that same evening. He would delay further visits until Amélie came to Paris, or until Madame de Montrevel returned to Bourg. The latter arrangement was the more probable of the two, for Amélie assured him she needed the country air and the spring-like weather to assist her in recovering her health.

Thanks to Sir John's considerate delicacy, the plan arranged between Amélie and Morgan was thus carried out, and the two lovers had before them a period of solitude and a respite in which to form their plans.

Michel learned these details from Charlotte and imparted them in turn to Roland. The latter determined to await Sir John's departure before he took any decisive steps against the Companions of Jehu. But this did not prevent him from endeavoring to set at rest any remaining doubts.

When night came he put on a hunting-suit, and over it Michel's blouse, concealed his face beneath a broad-brimmed hat, slipped a pair of pistols in his knife-belt, hidden by the blouse, and boldly took the road from Noires-Fontaines to Bourg. He stopped at the barracks of the gendarmerie and asked to see the captain.

The captain was in his room. Roland went up and made himself known. Then, as it was only eight o'clock, and some one passing might recognize him, he blew out the light, and the two men talked in the dark. The captain knew already what had happened on the Lyons road three days earlier, and, certain that Roland was not killed, was expecting him. To his great astonishment, Roland asked him for only one, or rather for two things: the key of the church of Brou and a crowbar.

The captain gave him the required articles, and offered to accompany him, but Roland refused. It was evident to his mind that he had been betrayed by some one connected with the affair of the Maison-Blanche, and he would not expose himself to a second defeat. He therefore begged the captain to tell no one of his presence in Bourg, and to await his return, even if it were delayed some hours. The captain agreed.

Roland, the key in his right hand, the crowbar in his left, reached the side door of the church without making any noise. This he unlocked, entered, relocked it behind him, and found himself facing a wall of hay. He listened. The most profound silence reigned.

He remembered his boyish habits, took his bearings, put the key in his pocket, and scrambled up the wall of hay, which was about fifteen feet high and formed a sort of platform. When he reached the top he slid down on the other side, as though he were descending the scarp of a fortification, and reached the flooring of the church, which was almost wholly composed of mortuary stones.

The choir was empty, thanks to a rood-screen which protected it on one side, and also to the walls which inclosed it to right and left. The door of the screen was open and Roland entered the choir without difficulty. He came

face to face with the monument of Philippe le Beau. At the head of the tomb was a large square flagstone. It covered the steps which led to the burial vaults.

Roland must have known the way, for as soon as he reached the stone he knelt down and felt with his hand for the edge of it. When he found it he stood up, inserted his lever and raised the slab. With one hand he held it up while he went down the steps. Then he lowered it slowly. It seemed as though this nocturnal visitor were voluntarily separating himself from the land of the living, and descending into the world of the dead. And strange indeed to him, who sees by night as by day, on the earth and beneath it, must the impassibility of this young man have seemed, who passed among the dead in search of the living, and who, in spite of darkness and solitude, did not shudder at the touch of the mortuary marbles.

He walked on, feeling his way among the tombs, until he came to the iron gate leading to the subterranean passage. He looked for the lock. It was only bolted. He inserted the end of his lever between the bolt and the staple, and pushed it gently. The gate opened. He drew it close after him, but did not lock it, so as to avoid delay on his return. The crowbar he left at the corner of the gate.

Then, with straining ears, dilated pupils, every sense tense with this effort to hear, the need to breathe, the impossibility of seeing, he advanced slowly, a pistol in one hand, touching the wall with the other to guide himself. He walked thus for fifteen minutes. A few drops of ice-cold water fell through the roof on his hands and shoulders, and told him he was passing under the river.

At the end of this time he found the door which opened from the passage into the quarry. There he halted a moment. He could now breathe more freely, and, moreover, he fancied that he heard distant sounds, and could see flickering lights, like will-o'-the-wisps, on the pillars that supported the roof. An observer might have thought, not distinguishing the face of the silent listener, that he showed hesitation; but the moment his countenance was seen, no one could have mistaken its expression of hope.

He then resumed his way, heading toward the light he thought he had seen. As he advanced, the lights and the noises grew more distinct. It was evident that the quarry was inhabited. By whom? He did not yet know, but he would know.

He was already within ten feet of that open clearing in the midst of the granite walls which we described on our first visit to the grotto of Ceyzeriat. Roland clung closely to the wall, and moved forward almost imperceptibly. In the dim half-light he looked like a gliding bass-relief.

At last his head passed beyond an angle of the wall, and his glance rested upon what we may call the camp of the Companions of Jehu.

A dozen or more of the members sat there at supper. Roland was seized with a wild desire to precipitate himself into their midst, attacking them singly, and fighting until he died. But he repressed the insensate thought, withdrew his head as slowly as he had advanced it, and, with beaming eyes and heart full of joy, returned, unseen and unsuspected, along the way he had come. Everything was now explained; the deserted Chartreuse, M. de Valensolle's disappearance, and the counterfeit poachers near the entrance to the grotto of Ceyzeriat.

This time he was sure of his vengeance, his deadly, terrible vengeance-- deadly, because, in like manner as he had been spared (he suspected intentionally), he meant to spare others; with this difference that, whereas he had been spared for life, he would order these men spared for death, death on the scaffold.

Half-way back he thought he heard a noise behind him. He turned and was certain he saw a gleam of light. He quickened his steps. The gate once passed, there was no danger of losing his way. It was no longer a quarry with a thousand windings; it was a straight and narrow vaulted passage leading to the mortuary grating. At the end of ten minutes he again passed

under the river; a couple of minutes later, his outstretched hand touched the iron gate.

He took the crowbar from the place where he had left it, entered the vault, pulled the gate to, closed it gently and noiselessly, and, guiding himself by the tombs, he regained the staircase, pushed up the flagstone with his head, and stood once more in the land of the living.

There it was comparative daylight. He left the choir, closed the door of the screen as he had found it, scaled the hay, crossed the platform, and slid down the other side. The key was still in his pocket. He unlocked the door and stepped out into the street.

The captain of gendarmerie was anxiously awaiting him. They conferred together for a few moments, and then they returned to Bourg by the outer road to avoid being seen. Here they entered the town through the market-gate, and followed the Rue de la Révolution, the Rue de la Liberté, and the Rue d'Espagne, since called the Rue Simonneau. There Roland ensconced himself in a corner of the Rue du Greffe and waited. The captain continued on his way alone. He went down the Rue des Ursules (for the last seven years called the Rue des Casernes). This was where the colonel of dragoons lived. He had just gone to bed when the captain of the gendarmerie entered his room; in two words the latter told all, and he rose at once and dressed in haste.

When the colonel of dragoons and the captain of gendarmerie appeared in the square, a shadow detached itself from the opposite wall and came up to them. That shadow was Roland. The three men stood talking for about ten minutes, Roland giving his orders, the other two listening and approving.

Then they separated. The colonel returned home. Roland and the captain followed the Rue de l'Etoile, climbed the steps of the Jacobins, passed down the Rue du Bourgneuf, and reached the outer road once more. Then they struck diagonally across to the highroad of Pont-d'Ain. The captain stopped at the barracks, which were on the way, and Roland continued alone to the château.

Twenty minutes later--in order not to awaken Amélie--instead of ringing the bell he knocked on Michel's window-blind. Michel opened, and with one bound Roland, devoured by that fever which took possession of him whenever he incurred, or merely dreamed of some danger, sprang into the room.

He would not have awakened Amélie had he rung, for Amélie was not asleep. Charlotte had been into town ostensibly to see her father, but really to take a letter from her mistress to Morgan. She had seen Morgan and brought back his answer.

Amélie was reading that answer, which was as follows:

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DEAR LOVE OF MINE--Yes, all goes well on your side, for you are an angel; but I greatly fear that all may go ill on mine, for I am the demon. I must see you, I must hold you in my arms and press you to my Heart. I know not what presentiment hangs over me; but I am sad, sad as death. Send Charlotte to-morrow to make sure that Sir John is gone, and then, if you are certain, make the accustomed signal. Do not be alarmed; do not talk to me of the snow, or tell me that my footsteps will be seen. This time it is not I who will go to you, but you who must come to me. Do you understand? You can safely walk in the park, and no one will notice your footsteps. Put on your warmest shawl and your thickest furs. Then we will spend an hour in the boat under the willows together, and change

our roles for once. Usually I tell you of my hopes and you tell me of your fears; but to-morrow, you will tell me of your hopes and I will tell you of my fears, my darling Amélie. Only, be sure to come out as soon as you have made the signal. I will await it at Montagnac, and from Montagnac to the Reissouse it will not take a love like mine five minutes to reach you. Au revoir, my poor Amélie; had you never met me you would have been the happiest of the happy. Fatality placed me in your path, and I have made a martyr of you. Your CHARLES. P.S.--To-morrow without fail, unless some insurmountable obstacle prevents.