

Chapter 48

IN WHICH MORGAN'S PRESENTIMENTS ARE VERIFIED

It often happens that the skies are never so calm or so serene as before a storm. The day was beautiful and still; one of those glorious days of February when, in spite of the tingling cold of the atmosphere, in spite of a winding-sheet of snow covering the earth, the sun smiles down upon mankind with a promise of spring.

Sir John came at noon to make his farewell visit to Amélie. He had, or thought he had, her promise, and that satisfied him. His impatience was altogether personal; but Amélie, in accepting his suit, even though she relegated the period of her marriage to the vaguest possible future, had crowned his hopes. He trusted to the First Consul and to Roland's friendship for the rest. He therefore returned to Paris to do much of his courting with Madame de Montrevel, not being able to remain at Bourg and carry it on with Amélie.

A quarter of an hour after he had left the Château des Noires-Fontaines, Charlotte was also on her way to Bourg. At four o'clock she returned, bringing word that she had seen Sir John with her own eyes getting into his travelling carriage, and that he had taken the road to Mâcon.

Amélie could therefore feel perfectly at ease on that score. She breathed freer. She had tried to inspire Morgan with a peace of mind which she herself did not share. Since the day that Charlotte had brought back the news of Roland's presence at Bourg, she had had a presentiment, like that of Morgan himself, that they were approaching some terrible crisis. She knew all that had happened at the Chartreuse of Seillon. She foresaw the struggle between her brother and her lover, and, with her mind at rest about her brother, thanks to Morgan's protection, she, knowing Roland's character, trembled for her lover's life.

Moreover, she had heard of the stoppage of the Chambéry mail-coach and the death of the colonel of Chasseurs. She also knew that her brother had

escaped, but that he had disappeared since that time. She had received no letter from him herself. This disappearance and silence, to her who knew her brother so well, was even worse than open and declared war.

As for Morgan, she had not seen him since the scene we have narrated, when she promised to send him arms wherever he might be, in case he were condemned to death. Amélie therefore awaited this interview, for which Morgan had asked, with as much impatience as he who had asked it. As soon as she thought Michel and his son were in bed, she lighted the four windows with the candles which were to summon Morgan to her.

Then, following her lover's injunctions, she wrapped herself in a cashmere shawl, which Roland had brought her from the battlefield of the Pyramids, and which he had unwound from the head of a chieftain whom he had killed. Over this she flung a fur mantle, left Charlotte behind to keep her informed in case of eventualities, which she trusted would not be forthcoming, opened the park gate, and hastened toward the river.

During the day she had gone to the Reissouse and back several times to trace a line of footsteps, among which the nocturnal ones would not be noticed. She now descended, if not tranquilly at least boldly, the slope leading to the river. Once there, she looked about her for the boat beneath the willows. A man was waiting in it--Morgan. With two strokes of the oar he reached a spot where Amélie could come to him. The young girl sprang down and he caught her in his arms.

The first thing the young girl noticed was the joyous radiance which illuminated, if we may say so, the face of her lover.

"Oh!" she cried, "you have something nice to tell me." "What makes you think so, dearest?" asked Morgan with his tenderest smile.

"There is something in your face, my darling Charles, something more than the mere happiness of seeing me."

"You are right," said Morgan, throwing the boat-chain around a willow and letting the oars float idly beside the boat. Then, taking Amélie in his arms, he said, "You were right, my Amélie. Oh! blind weak beings! It is at the very moment that happiness knocks at our door that we despair and doubt."

"Oh, speak, speak!" said Amélie, "tell me what has happened."

"Do you remember, my Amélie, how you answered me the last time we met, when I asked you to fly and spoke to you of your probable repugnance to the step?"

"Yes, I remember, Charles. I said that I was yours, and that, though I felt that repugnance, I would conquer it for your sake."

"And I replied that I had engagements which would prevent my leaving the country; that I was bound to others, and they to me; that our duty was to one man to whom we owed absolute obedience--the future King of France, Louis XVIII."

"Yes, you told me that."

"Well, we are now released from our pledges, Amélie, not only by the King, but by our general, Georges Cadoudal."

"Oh! my friend, then you will be as other men, only above all others."

"I shall become a simple exile, Amélie. There is no hope of our being included in the Breton or Vendéan amnesty."

"Why not?"

"We are not soldiers, my darling child. We are not even rebels. We are Companions of Jehu."

Amélie sighed.

"We are bandits, brigands, highwaymen," said Morgan, dwelling on the words with evident intention.

"Hush!" said Amélie, laying her hand on her lover's lips. "Hush! don't let us speak of that. Tell me how it is that your king has released you, and your general also."

"The First Consul wished to see Cadoudal. In the first place, he sent your brother to him with certain proposals. Cadoudal refused to come to terms; but, like ourselves, he received orders from Louis XVIII. to cease hostilities. Coincident with that order came another message from the First Consul to Cadoudal. It was a safeguard for the Vendéan general, and an invitation to come to Paris; an overture from one power to another power. Cadoudal accepted, and is now on his way to Paris. If it is not peace, it is at least a truce."

"Oh, what joy, my Charles!"

"Don't rejoice too much, my love."

"Why not?"

"Do you know why they have issued this order to suspend hostilities?"

"No."

"Because M. Fouché is a long-headed man. He realized that, since he could not defeat us, he must dishonor us. He has organized false companies of Jehu, which he has set loose in Maine and Anjou, who don't stop at the government money, but pillage and rob travellers, and invade the châteaux and farms by night, and roast the feet of the owners to make them tell where their treasure is hidden. Well, these men, these bandits, these _roasters_, have taken our name, and claim to be fighting for the same principles, so that M. Fouché and his police declare that we are not only beyond the pale of the law, but beyond that of honor."

"Oh!"

"That is what I wished to tell you before I ask you to fly with me, my Amélie. In the eyes of France, in the eyes of foreigners, even in the eyes of the prince we have served, and for whom we have risked the scaffold, we shall be hereafter, and probably are now, dishonored men worthy of the scaffold."

"Yes; but to me you are my Charles, the man of devoted convictions, the firm royalist, continuing to struggle for a cause when other men have abandoned it. To me you are the loyal Baron de Sainte-Hermine, or, if you like it better, you are to me the noble, courageous, invincible Morgan."

"Ah! that is what I longed to hear, my darling. If you feel thus, you will not hesitate, in spite of the cloud of infamy that hangs over our honor, you will not hesitate--I will not say to give yourself to me, for that you have already done--but to become my wife."

"Hesitate! No, not for an instant, not for a second! To do it is the joy of my soul, the happiness of my life! Your wife? I am your wife in the sight of God, and God will have granted my every prayer on the day that he enables me to be your wife before men."

Morgan fell on his knees.

"Then," he said, "here at your feet, with clasped hands and my whole heart supplicating, I say to you, Amélie, will you fly with me? Will you leave France with me? Will you be my wife in other lands?"

Amélie sprang erect and clasped her head in her hands, as though her brain were bursting with the force of the blood that rushed to it. Morgan caught both her hands and looked at her anxiously.

"Do you hesitate?" he asked in a broken, trembling voice.

"No, not an instant!" she cried resolutely. "I am yours in the past, in the present, in the future, here, everywhere. Only the thought convulses me. It is so unexpected."

"Reflect well, Amélie. What I ask of you is to abandon country and family, all that is dear to you, all that is sacred. If you follow me, you leave the home where you were born, the mother who nurtured you, the brother who loves you, and who, perhaps, when he hears that you are the wife of a brigand, will hate you. He will certainly despise you."

As he spoke, Morgan's eyes were anxiously questioning Amélie's face. Over that face a tender smile stole gradually, and then it turned from heaven to earth, and bent upon Morgan, who was still on his knees before her.

"Oh, Charles!" she murmured, in a voice as soft as the clear limpid river flowing at her feet, "the love that comes direct from the Divine is very powerful indeed, since, in spite of those dreadful words you have just uttered, I say to you without hesitation, almost without regret: Charles, I am here; Charles, I am yours. Where shall we go?"

"Amélie, our fate is not one to discuss. If we go, if you follow me, it must be at once. To-morrow we must be beyond the frontier."

"How do we go?"

"I have two horses, ready saddled at Montagnac, one for you, Amélie, and one for me. I have letters of credit for two hundred thousand francs on London and Vienna. We will go wherever you prefer."

"Wherever you are, Charles. What difference does it make so long as you are there?"

"Then come."

"Can I have five minutes, Charles; is that too much?"

"Where are you going?"

"To say good-by to many things, to fetch your precious letters and the ivory chaplet used at my first communion. Oh! there are many sacred cherished souvenirs of my childhood which will remind me over there of my mother, of France. I will fetch them and return."

"Amélie!"

"What is it?"

"I cannot leave you. If I part with you an instant now I feel that I shall lose you forever. Amélie, let me go with you."

"Yes, come. What matter if they see your footsteps now? We shall be far enough away to-morrow. Come!" The young man sprang from the boat and gave his hand to Amélie to help her out. Then he folded his arm about her and they walked to the house.

On the portico Charles stopped.

"Go on alone," said he; "memory is a chaste thing. I know that, and I will not embarrass you by my presence. I will wait here and watch for you. So long as I know you are close by me I do not fear to lose you. Go, dear, and come back quickly."

Amélie answered with a kiss. Then she ran hastily up to her room, took the little coffer of carved oak clamped with iron, her treasury, which contained her lover's letters from first to last, unfastened from the mirror above her bed the white and virginal chaplet that hung there; put into her belt a watch her father had given her, and passed into her mother's bedchamber. There she stooped and kissed the pillow where her mother's head had lain, knelt before the Christ at the foot of the bed, began a thanksgiving she dared not finish, changed it to a prayer, and then suddenly stopped--she fancied she heard Charles calling her.

She listened and heard her name a second time, uttered in a tone of agony she could not understand. She quivered, sprang to her feet, and ran rapidly down the stairs.

"What is it?" cried Amélie, seizing the young man's hand.

"Listen, listen!" said he.

Amélie strained her ears to catch the sound which seemed to her like musketry. It came from the direction of Ceyzeriat.

"Oh!" cried Morgan, "I was right in doubting my happiness to the last. My friends are attacked. Adieu, Amélie, adieu!"

"Adieu!" cried Amélie, turning pale. "What, will you leave me?"

The sound of the firing grew more distinct.

"Don't you hear them? They are fighting, and I am not there to fight with them."

Daughter and sister of a soldier, Amélie understood him and she made no resistance.

"Go!" she said, letting her hands drop beside her. "You were right, we are lost."

The young man uttered a cry of rage, caught her to his breast, and pressed her to him as though he would smother her. Then, bounding from the portico, he rushed in the direction of the firing with the speed of a deer pursued by hunters.

"I come! I come, my friends!" he cried. And he disappeared like a shadow beneath the tall trees of the park.

Amélie fell upon her knees, her hands stretched toward him without the strength to recall him, or, if she did so, it was in so faint a voice that Morgan did not stop or even check his speed to answer her.