

Chapter 53

IN WHICH AMÉLIE KEEPS HER WORD

The verdict rendered by the jury of the town of Bourg had a terrible effect, not only in the courtroom, but throughout the entire town. The four prisoners had shown such chivalric brotherhood, such noble bearing, such deep conviction in the faith they professed, that their enemies themselves admired the devotion which had made robbers and highwaymen of men of rank and family.

Madame de Montrevel, overwhelmed by the part she had been made to play at the crucial point of this drama, saw but one means of repairing the evil she had done, and that was to start at once for Paris and fling herself at the feet of the First Consul, imploring him to pardon the four condemned men. She did not even take time to go to the Château des Noires-Fontaines to see Amélie. She knew that Bonaparte's departure was fixed for the first week in May, and this was already the 6th. When she last left Paris everything had been prepared for that departure.

She wrote a line to Amélie explaining by what fatal deception she had been instrumental in destroying the lives of four men, when she intended to save the life of one. Then, as if ashamed of having broken the pledge she had made to Amélie, and above all to herself, she ordered fresh post-horses and returned to Paris.

She arrived there on the morning of the 8th of May. Bonaparte had started on the evening of the 6th. He said on leaving that he was only going to Dijon, possibly as far as Geneva, but in any case he should not be absent more than three weeks. The prisoners' appeal, even if rejected, would not receive final consideration for five or six weeks. All hope need not therefore be abandoned.

But, alas! it became evident that the review at Dijon was only a pretext, that the journey to Geneva had never been seriously thought of, and that Bonaparte, instead of going to Switzerland, was really on his way to Italy.

Then Madame de Montrevel, unwilling to appeal to her son, for she had heard his oath when Lord Tanlay had been left for dead, and knew the part he had played in the capture of the Companions of Jehu--then Madame de Montrevel appealed to Josephine, and Josephine promised to write to the First Consul. That same evening she kept her promise.

But the trial had made a great stir. It was not with these prisoners as with ordinary men. Justice made haste, and thirty-five days after the verdict had been rendered the, appeal was rejected. This decision was immediately sent to Bourg with an order to execute the prisoners within twenty-four hours. But notwithstanding the haste of the minister of police in forwarding this decision, the first intimation of the fatal news was not received by the judicial authorities at Bourg. While the prisoners were taking their daily walk in the courtyard a stone was thrown over the outer wall and fell at their feet. Morgan, who still retained in relation to his comrades the position of leader, picked it up, opened the letter which inclosed the stone, and read it. Then, turning to his friends, he said: "Gentlemen, the appeal has been rejected, as we might have expected, and the ceremony will take place in all probability to-morrow."

Valensolle and Ribier, who were playing a species of quoits with crown-pieces and louis, left off their game to hear the news. Having heard it they returned to their game without remark.

Jayat, who was reading "La Nouvelle Héloïse," resumed his book, saying: "Then, I shall not have time to finish M. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's masterpiece, and upon my word I don't regret it, for it is the most utterly false and wearisome book I ever read in my life!"

Sainte-Hermine passed his hand over his forehead, murmuring: "Poor Amélie!" Then observing Charlotte, who was at the window of the jailer's room overlooking the courtyard, he went to her. "Tell Amélie that she must keep the promise she made me, to-night."

The jailer's daughter closed the window, kissed her father, and told him that in all probability he would see her there again that evening. Then she returned to Noires-Fontaines, a road she had taken twice every day for the last two months, once at noon on her way to the prison, once in the evening on returning to the château.

Every night she found Amélie in the same place, sitting at the window which, in happier days, had given admittance to her beloved Charles. Since the day she had fainted in the courtroom she had shed no tears, and, we may almost add, had uttered no word. Unlike the marble of antiquity awakening into life, she might have been compared to a living woman petrifying into stone. Every day she grew paler.

Charlotte watched her with astonishment. Common minds, always impressed by noisy demonstrations, that is to say, by cries and tears, are unable to understand a mute sorrow. Dumbness to them means indifference. She was therefore astonished at the calmness with which Amélie received the message she was charged to deliver. She did not see in the dimness of the twilight that Amélie's face from being pale grew livid. She did not feel the deadly clutch which, like an iron wrench, had seized her heart. She did not know that as her mistress walked to the door an automatic stiffness was in her limbs. Nevertheless she followed her anxiously. But at the door Amélie stretched out her hand.

"Wait for me there," she said.

Charlotte obeyed. Amélie closed the door behind her, and went up to Roland's room.

Roland's room was veritably that of a soldier and a huntsman, and its chief adornments were trophies and weapons. Arms of all kinds were here, French and foreign, from the blue-barrelled pistol of Versailles to the silver-handled pistol of Cairo, from the tempered blade of Catalonia to the Turkish cimeter.

Amélie took down from this arsenal four daggers, sharp-edged and pointed, and eight pistols of different shapes. She put balls in a bag and powder in a horn. Thus supplied she returned to her own room. There Charlotte assisted her in putting on the peasant gown. Then she waited for the night.

Night comes late in June. Amélie stood motionless, mute, leaning against the chimney-piece, and looking through the open window at the village of Ceyzeriat, which was slowly disappearing in the gathering shades of night. When she could no longer distinguish anything but the lights which were being lighted one by one, she said:

"Come, it is time to go."

The two young girls went out. Michel paid no attention to Amélie, supposing her to be some friend of Charlotte's, who had called to see her and whom the jailer's daughter was now escorting home.

Ten o'clock was striking as they passed the church of Brou. It was quarter past when Charlotte knocked at the prison door. Old Courtois opened it.

We have already shown the political opinions of the worthy jailer. He was a royalist. He therefore felt the deepest sympathy for the four condemned men, and had hoped, like nearly every one in Bourg--like Madame de Montrevel, whose despair at what she had done was known to him--that the First Consul would pardon them. He had therefore mitigated their captivity as much as possible, without failing in his duty, by relieving them of all needless restrictions. On the other hand, it is true that he had refused a gift of sixty thousand francs (a sum which in those days was worth nearly treble what it is now) to allow them to escape.

We have seen how, being taken into confidence by his daughter, he had allowed Amélie, disguised as a Bressan peasant, to be present at the trial. The reader will also remember the kindness the worthy man had shown to Amélie and her mother when they themselves were prisoners. This time, as

he was still ignorant of the rejection of the appeal, he allowed his feelings to be worked upon. Charlotte had told him that her young mistress was to start that night for Paris to endeavor to hasten the pardon, and that she desired before leaving to see the Baron de Sainte-Hermine and obtain his last instructions.

There were five doors to break through to reach the street, a squad of guards in the courtyard, and sentinels within and without the prison. Consequently Père Courtois felt no anxiety lest his prisoners escape. He therefore consented that Amélie should see Morgan.

We trust our readers will excuse us if we use the names Morgan, Charles, and the Baron de Sainte-Hermine, interchangeably, since they are aware that by that triple appellation we intend to designate the same man.

Courtois took a light and walked before Amélie. The young girl, as though prepared to start by the mail-coach at once on leaving the prison, carried a travelling bag in her hand. Charlotte followed her mistress.

"You will recognize the cell, Mademoiselle de Montrevel," said Courtois. "It is the one in which you were confined with your mother. The leader of these unfortunate young men, the Baron Charles de Sainte-Hermine, asked me as a favor to put them in cage No. 1. You know that's the name we give our cells. I did not think I ought to refuse him that consolation, knowing how the poor fellow loved you. Oh, don't be uneasy, Mademoiselle Amélie, I will never breathe your secret. Then he questioned me, asking which had been your mother's bed, and which yours. I told him, and then he wanted his to stand just where yours did. That wasn't hard, for the bed was not only in the same place, but it was the very one you had used. So, since the poor fellow entered your cell, he has spent nearly all his time lying on your bed."

Amélie gave a sigh that resembled a groan. She felt--and it was long since she had done so--a tear moisten her eyelids. Yes! she was loved as she loved, and the lips of a disinterested stranger gave her the proof of it. At this moment of eternal separation this conviction shone like a diamond of light in its setting of sorrow.

The doors opened one by one before Père Courtois. When they reached the last one, Amélie laid her hand on the jailer's shoulder. She thought she heard a chant. Listening attentively, she became aware that it was a voice repeating verses.

But the voice was not Morgan's; it was unknown to her. Here is what it said:

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I have bared all my heart to the God of the just,

He has witnessed my penitent tears;

He has stilled my remorse, He has armed me with trust,

He has pitied and calmed all my fears. My enemies, scoffing, have said in their rage:

"Let him die, be his mem'ry accursed!"

Saith the merciful Father, my grief to assuage,

"Their hatred hath now done its worst. "I have heard thy complaints, and I know that the ban

Of remorse hath e'en brought thee so low;

I can pity the soul of the penitent man

That was weak in this valley of woe; "I will crown thy lost name with the just acclaim

Of the slow-judging righteous years;

Their pity and justice in time shall proclaim

Thine honor; then layoff thy fears!" I bless thee, O God! who hast deigned to restore

Mine honor that Thou hast made whole

From shame and remorse; as I enter Death's door

To Thee I commend my poor soul! To the banquet of life, an unfortunate guest,

I came for a day, and I go--

I die in my vigor; I sought not to rest

In the grave where the weary lie low. Farewell to thee, earth! farewell, tender verdure

Of woodland! Farewell, sunny shore!

Green fields that I love, azure skies, smiling Nature,

Farewell! I shall see thee no more. May thy beauty still gladden the friends that I love,

Whom I long for--but stern fate denies;

May they pass full of years, though I wait them above;

May a last loving hand close their eyes.-

The voice was silent; no doubt the last verse was finished. Amélie, who would not interrupt the last meditations of the doomed men, and who had recognized Gilbert's beautiful ode written on a hospital bed the night before his death, now signed to the jailer to open the door. Père Courtois, jailer as he was, seemed to share the young girl's emotion, for he put the key in the lock and turned it as softly as he could. The door opened.

Amélie saw at a glance the whole interior of the cell, and the persons in it.

Valensolle was standing, leaning against the wall, and still holding the book from which he had just read the lines that Amélie had overheard. Jayat was seated near a table with his head resting on his hands. Ribier was sitting on the table itself. Near him, but further back, Sainte-Hermine, his eyes closed as if in sleep, was lying on the bed. At sight of the young girl, whom they knew to be Amélie, Ribier and Jayat rose. Morgan did not move; he had heard nothing.

Amélie went directly to him, and, as if the love she felt for him were sanctified by the nearness of death, she gave no heed to the presence of his friends, but pressed her lips to his, murmuring: "Awake, my Charles, it is I, Amélie. I have come to keep my promise."

Morgan gave a cry of joy and clasped her in his arms.

"Monsieur Courtois," said Montbar, "you are a worthy man. Leave those poor young people alone. It would be sacrilege to trouble their last moments together on earth by our presence."

Père Courtois, without a word, opened the door of the adjoining cell. Valensolle, Jayat and Ribier entered it, and the door was closed upon them. Then, making a sign to Charlotte, Courtois himself went away. The lovers were alone.

There are scenes that should not be described, words that must not be repeated. God, who sees and hears them from his immortal throne, alone knows what sombre joys, what bitter pleasures they contain.

At the end of an hour the two young people heard the key turn once more in the lock. They were sad but calm. The conviction that their separation would not be for long gave them a sweet serenity. The worthy jailer seemed more grieved and distressed at his second appearance than at his first; but Morgan and Amélie thanked him with a smile.

He went to the cell where the others were locked up and opened it, murmuring to himself: "Faith! It would have been hard if they couldn't have been alone together on their last night."

Valensolle, Jayat and Ribier returned. Amélie, with her left arm wound around Morgan, held out her right hand to them. All three, one after the other, kissed that cold, damp hand. Then Morgan led her to the door.

"Au revoir!" he said.

"Soon!" she answered.

And then this parting at the gates of death was sealed by a long kiss, followed by a groan so terrible that it seemed to rend their hearts in twain.

The door closed again, the bolts and bars shot into their places.

"Well?" cried Valensolle, Jayat and Ribier with one accord.

"Here!" replied Morgan, emptying the travelling bag upon the table.

The three young men gave a cry of joy as they saw the shining pistols and gleaming blades. It was all that they desired next to liberty--the joy, the dolorous precious joy of knowing themselves masters of their own lives, and, if need be, that of others.

During this time the jailer led Amélie to the street. When they reached it he hesitated a moment, then he touched Amélie's arm, saying as he did so: "Mademoiselle de Montrevel, forgive me for causing you so much pain, but it is useless for you to go to Paris."

"Because the appeal has been rejected and the execution takes place tomorrow, I suppose you mean," said Amélie.

The jailer in his astonishment stepped back a pace.

"I knew it, my friend," said Amélie. Then turning to Charlotte, she said:
"Take me to the nearest church and come for me to-morrow after all is over."

The nearest church was not far off. It was that of Sainte-Claire. For the last three months it had been opened for public worship under the decree of the First Consul. As it was now nearly midnight, the doors were closed; but Charlotte knew where the sexton lived and she went to wake him. Amélie waited, leaning against the walls as motionless as the marble figures that adorned its frontal.

The sexton arrived at the end of half an hour. During that time the girl had seen a dreadful sight. Three men had passed her, dragging a cart, which she saw by the light of the moon was painted red. Within this cart she perceived shapeless objects, long planks and singular ladders, all painted the same color. They were dragging it toward the bastion Montrevel, the place used for the executions. Amélie divined what it was, and, with a cry, she fell upon her knees.

At that cry the men in black turned round. They fancied for a moment that one of the sculptured figures of the porch had descended from its niche and was kneeling there. The one who seemed to be the leader stepped close to the young girl.

"Don't come near me!" she cried. "Don't come near me!"

The man returned humbly to his place and continued on his way. The cart disappeared round the corner of the Rue des Prisons; but the noise of its wheels still sounded on the stones and echoed in the girl's heart.

When the sacristan and Charlotte returned they found the young girl on her knees. The man raised some objections against opening the church at that hour of the night; but a piece of gold and Mademoiselle de Montrevel's name dispelled his scruples. A second gold piece decided him to light a little

chapel. It was the one in which Amélie had made her first communion. There, kneeling before the altar, she implored them to leave her alone.

Toward three in the morning she saw the colored window above the altar of the Virgin begin to lighten. It looked to the east, so that the first ray of light came direct to her eyes as a messenger from God.

Little by little the town awoke. To Amélie the noise seemed louder than ever before. Soon the vaulted ceiling of the church shook with the tramp of a troop of horsemen. This troop was on its way to the prison.

A little before nine the young girl heard a great noise, and it seemed to her that the whole town must be rushing in the same direction. She strove to lose herself in prayer, that she might not hear these different sounds that spoke to her in an unknown language of which her anguish told her she understood every word.

In truth, a terrible thing was happening at the prison. It was no wonder that the whole town had rushed thither.

At nine o'clock Père Courtois entered the jail to tell the prisoners at one and the same time that their appeal had been rejected and that they must prepare for immediate death. He found the four prisoners armed to the teeth.

The jailer, taken unawares, was pulled into the cell and the door locked behind him. Then the young men, without any defence on his part, so astonished was he, seized his keys, and passing through the door opposite to the one by which he had entered they locked it on him. Leaving him in their cell, they found themselves in the adjoining one, in which he had placed three of them during Amélie's interview with Morgan.

One of the keys on the jailer's bunch opened the other door of this cell, and that door led to the inner courtyard of the prison. This courtyard was closed by three massive doors, all of which led to a sort of lobby, opening upon the porter's lodge, which in turn adjoined the law-courts. From this lodge fifteen steps led down into a vast courtyard closed by an iron gate and railing. Usually this gate was only locked at night. If it should happen to be open on this occasion it would offer a possibility of escape.

Morgan found the key of the prisoners' court, opened the door, and rushed with his companions to the porter's lodge and to the portico, from which the fifteen steps led down into the courtyard. From there the three young men could see that all hope was lost.

The iron gate was closed, and eighty men, dragoons and gendarmes, were drawn up in front of it.

When the four prisoners, free and armed to the teeth, sprang from the porter's lodge to the portico, a great cry, a cry of astonishment and terror, burst from the crowd in the street beyond the railing.

Their aspect was formidable, indeed; for to preserve the freedom of their movements, perhaps to hide the shedding of blood, which would have shown so quickly on their white linen, they were naked to the waist. A handkerchief knotted around their middle bristled with weapons.

A glance sufficed to show them that they were indeed masters of their own lives, but not of their liberty. Amid the clamoring of the crowd and the clanking of the sabres, as they were drawn from their scabbards, the young men paused an instant and conferred together. Then Montbar, after shaking hands with his companions, walked down the fifteen steps and advanced to the gate.

When he was within four yards of the gate he turned, with a last glance at his comrades, bowed graciously to the now silent mob, and said to the soldiers: "Very well, gentlemen of the gendarmerie! Very well, dragoons!"

Then, placing the muzzle of his pistol to his mouth, he blew out his brains.

Confused and frantic cries followed the explosion, but ceased almost immediately as Valensolle came down the steps, holding in his hand a dagger with a straight and pointed blade. His pistols, which he did not seem inclined to use, were still in his belt.

He advanced to a sort of shed supported on three pillars, stopped at the first pillar, rested the hilt of his dagger upon it, and, with a last salutation to his friends, clasped the column with one arm till the blade had disappeared in his breast. For an instant he remained standing, then a mortal pallor overspread his face, his arm loosened its hold, and he fell to the ground, stone-dead.

The crowd was mute, paralyzed with horror.

It was now Ribier's turn. He advanced to the gate, and, once there, aimed the two pistols he held at the gendarmes. He did not fire, but the gendarmes did. Three or four shots were heard, and Ribier fell, pierced by two balls.

Admiration seized upon the spectators at sight of these successive catastrophes. They saw that the young men were willing to die, but to die with honor, and as they willed, and also with the grace of the gladiators of antiquity. Silence therefore reigned when Morgan, now left alone, came smiling down the steps of the portico and held up his hand in sign that he wished to speak. Besides, what more could it want--this eager mob; watching for blood?

A greater sight had been given to it than it came to see. Four dead men had been promised to it; four heads were to be cut off; but here was variety in death, unexpected, picturesque. It was natural, therefore, that the crowd should keep silence when Morgan was seen to advance.

He held neither pistols nor daggers in his hands; they were in his belt. He passed the body of Valensolle, and placed himself between those of Jayat and Ribier.

"Gentlemen," said he, "let us negotiate."

The hush that followed was so great that those present seemed scarcely to breathe. Morgan said: "There lies a man who has blown out his brains [he pointed to Jayat]; here lies one who stabbed himself [he designated Valensolle]; a third who has been shot [he indicated Ribier]; you want to see the fourth guillotined. I understand that."

A dreadful shudder passed through the crowd.

"Well," continued Morgan, "I am willing to give you that satisfaction. I am ready, but I desire to go to the scaffold in my own way. No one shall touch me; if any one does come near me I shall blow out his brains--except that gentleman," continued Morgan, pointing to the executioner. "This is his affair and mine only."

The crowd apparently thought this request reasonable, for from all sides came the cry, "Yes, yes, yes."

The officer saw that the quickest way to end the matter was to yield to Morgan's demand.

"Will you promise me," he asked, "that if your hands and feet are not bound you will not try to escape?"

"I give my word of honor," replied Morgan.

"Then," said the officer; "stand aside, and let us take up the bodies of your comrades."

"That is but right," said Morgan, and he turned aside to a wall about ten paces distant and leaned against it.

The gate opened. Three men dressed in black entered the courtyard and picked up the bodies one after the other. Ribier was not quite dead; he opened his eyes and seemed to look for Morgan.

"Here I am," said the latter. "Rest easy, dear friend, I follow."

Ribier closed his eyes without uttering a word.

When the three bodies had been removed, the officer of the gendarmerie addressed Morgan.

"Are you ready, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Morgan, bowing with exquisite politeness.

"Then come."

"I come."

And he took his place between a platoon of gendarmerie and a detachment of dragoons.

"Will you mount the cart, sir, or go on foot?" asked the captain.

"On foot, on foot, sir. I am anxious that all shall see it is my pleasure to be guillotined, and that I am not afraid."

The sinister procession crossed the Place des Lisses and skirted the walls of the Hôtel Montbazou. The cart bearing the three bodies came first, then the dragoons, then Morgan walking alone in a clear space of some ten feet before and behind him, then the gendarmes. At the end of the wall they turned to the left.

Suddenly, through an opening that existed at that time between the wall and the market-place, Morgan saw the scaffold raising its two posts to heaven like two bloody arms.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, "I have never seen a guillotine, and I had no idea it was so ugly."

Then, without further remark, he drew his dagger and plunged it into his breast up to the hilt.

The captain of the gendarmerie saw the movement without being in time to prevent it. He spurred his horse toward Morgan, who, to his own amazement and that of every one else, remained standing. But Morgan, drawing a pistol from his belt and cocking it, exclaimed: "Stop! It was agreed that no one should touch me. I shall die alone, or three of us will die together."

The captain reined back his horse.

"Forward!" said Morgan.

They reached the foot of the guillotine. Morgan drew out his dagger and struck again as deeply as before. A cry of rage rather than pain escaped him.

"My soul must be riveted to my body," he said.

Then, as the assistants wished to help him mount the scaffold on which the executioner was awaiting him, he cried out: "No, I say again, let no one touch me."

Then he mounted the three steps without staggering.

When he reached the platform, he drew out the dagger again and struck himself a third time. Then a frightful laugh burst from his lips; flinging the dagger, which he had wrenched from the third ineffectual wound, at the feet of the executioner, he exclaimed: "By my faith! I have done enough. It is your turn; do it if you can."

A minute later the head of the intrepid young man fell upon the scaffold, and by a phenomenon of that unconquerable vitality which he possessed it rebounded and rolled forward beyond the timbers of the guillotine.

Go to Bourg, as I did, and they will tell you that, as the head rolled forward, it was heard to utter the name of Amélie.

The dead bodies were guillotined after the living one; so that the spectators, instead of losing anything by the events we have just related, enjoyed a double spectacle.