

Chapter 55

INVULNERABLE

Amélie died during the night of Monday and Tuesday, that is to say, the 2d and 3d of June. On the evening of Thursday, the 5th of June, the Grand Opera at Paris was crowded for the second presentation of "Ossian, or the Bards."

The great admiration which the First Consul professed for the poems of Macpherson was universally known; consequently the National Academy, as much in flattery as from literary choice, had brought out an opera, which, in spite of all exertions, did not appear until a month after General Bonaparte had left Paris to join the Army of the Reserves.

In the balcony to the left sat a lover of music who was noticeable for the deep attention he paid to the performance. During the interval between the acts, the door-keeper came to him and said in a low voice:

"Pardon me, sir, are you Sir John Tanlay?"

"I am."

"In that case, my lord, a gentleman has a message to give you; he says it is of the utmost importance, and asks if you will speak to him in the corridor."

"Oh!" said Sir John, "is he an officer?"

"He is in civilian's dress, but he looks like an officer."

"Very good," replied Sir John; "I know who he is."

He rose and followed the woman. Roland was waiting in the corridor. Lord Tanlay showed no surprise on seeing him, but the stern look on the young man's face repressed the first impulse of his deep affection, which was to fling himself upon his friend's breast.

"Here I am, sir," said Sir John.

Roland bowed.

"I have just come from your hotel," he said. "You have, it seems, taken the precaution to inform the porter of your whereabouts every time you have gone out, so that persons who have business with you should know where to find you."

"That is true, sir."

"The precaution is a good one, especially for those who, like myself, come from a long distance and are hurried and have no time to spare."

"Then," said Sir John, "was it to see me that you left the army and came to Paris?"

"Solely for that honor, sir; and I trust that you will guess my motives, and spare me the necessity of explaining them."

"From this moment I am at your service, sir," replied Sir John.

"At what hour to-morrow can two of my friends wait upon you?"

"From seven in the morning until midnight; unless you prefer that it should be now."

"No, my lord; I have but just arrived, and I must have time to find my friends and give them my instructions. If it will not inconvenience you, they will probably call upon you to-morrow between ten and eleven. I shall be very much obliged to you if the affair we have to settle could be arranged for the same day."

"I believe that will be possible, sir; as I understand it to be your wish, the delay will not be from my side."

"That is all I wished to know, my lord; pray do not let me detain you longer."

Roland bowed, and Sir John returned the salutation. Then the young man left the theatre and Sir John returned to his seat in the balcony. The words had been exchanged in such perfectly well modulated voices, and with such an impassible expression of countenance on both sides, that no one would have supposed that a quarrel had arisen between the two men who had just greeted each other so courteously.

It happened to be the reception day of the minister of war. Roland returned to his hotel, removed the traces of his journey, jumped into a carriage, and a little before ten he was announced in the salon of the citizen Carnot.

Two purposes took him there: in the first place, he had a verbal communication to make to the minister of war from the First Consul; in the second place, he hoped to find there the two witnesses he was in need of to arrange his meeting with Sir John.

Everything happened as Roland had hoped. He gave the minister of war all the details of the crossing of the Mont Saint-Bernard and the situation of the

army; and he himself found the two friends of whom he was in search. A few words sufficed to let them know what he wished; soldiers are particularly open to such confidences.

Roland spoke of a grave insult, the nature of which must remain a secret even to his seconds. He declared that he was the offended party, and claimed the choice of weapons and mode of fighting-- advantages which belong to the challenger.

The young fellows agreed to present themselves to Sir John the following morning at the Hôtel Mirabeau, Rue de Richelieu, at nine o'clock, and make the necessary arrangements with Sir John's seconds. After that they would join Roland at the Hôtel de Paris in the same street.

Roland returned to his room at eleven that evening, wrote for about an hour, then went to bed and to sleep.

At half-past nine the next morning his friends came to him. They had just left Sir John. He admitted all Roland's contentions; declared that he would not discuss any of the arrangements; adding that if Roland regarded himself as the injured party, it was for him to dictate the conditions. To their remark that they had hoped to discuss such matters with two of his friends and not with himself, he replied that he knew no one in Paris intimately enough to ask their assistance in such a matter, and that he hoped, once on the ground, that one of Roland's seconds would consent to act in his behalf. The two officers were agreed that Lord Tanlay had conducted himself with the utmost punctiliousness in every respect.

Roland declared that Sir John's request for the services of one of his two seconds was not only just but suitable, and he authorized either one of them to act for Sir John and to take charge of his interests. All that remained for Roland to do was to dictate his conditions. They were as follows!

Pistols were chosen. When loaded the adversaries were to stand at five paces. At the third clap of the seconds' hands they were to fire. It was, as we see, a duel to the death, in which, if either survived, he would be at the mercy of his opponent. Consequently the young officers made many objections; but Roland insisted, declaring that he alone could judge of the gravity of the insult offered him, and that no other reparation than this would satisfy him. They were obliged to yield to such obstinacy. But the friend who was to act as Sir John's second refused to bind himself for his principal, declaring that unless Sir John ordered it he would refuse to be a party to such a murder.

"Don't excite yourself, dear friend," said Roland, "I know Sir John, and I think he will be more accommodating than you."

The seconds returned to Sir John; they found him at his English breakfast of beefsteak, potatoes and tea. On seeing them he rose, invited them to share his repast, and, on their refusing, placed himself at their disposal. They began by assuring him that he could count upon one of them to act as his second. The one acting for Roland announced the conditions. At each stipulation Sir John bowed his head in token of assent and merely replied: "Very good!"

The one who had taken charge of his interests attempted to make some objections to a form of combat that, unless something impossible to foresee occurred, must end in the death of both parties; but Lord Tanlay begged him to make no objections.

"M. de Montrevel is a gallant man," he said; "I do not wish to thwart him in anything; whatever he does is right."

It only remained to settle the hour and the place of meeting. On these points Sir John again placed himself at Roland's disposal. The two seconds left even more delighted with him after this interview than they had been after the first. Roland was waiting for them and listened to what had taken place.

"What did I tell you?" he asked.

They requested him to name the time and place. He selected seven o'clock in the evening in the Allée de la Muette. At that hour the Bois was almost deserted, but the light was still good enough (it will be remembered that this was in the month of June) for the two adversaries to fight with any weapon.

No one had spoken of the pistols. The young men proposed to get them at an armorer's.

"No," said Roland, "Sir John has an excellent pair of duelling pistols which I have already used. If he is not unwilling to fight with those pistols I should prefer them to all others."

The young man who was now acting as Sir John's second went to him with the three following questions: Whether the time and place suited him, and whether he would allow his pistols to be used.

Lord Tanlay replied by regulating his watch by that of his second and by handing him the box of pistols.

"Shall I call for you, my lord?" asked the young man.

Sir John smiled sadly.

"Needless," he replied; "you are M. de Montrevel's friend, and you will find the drive pleasanter with him than with me. I will go on horseback with my servant. You will find me on the ground."

The young officer carried this reply to Roland.

"What did I tell you?" observed Roland again.

It was then mid-day, there were still seven hours before them, and Roland dismissed his friends to their various pleasures and occupations. At half-past six precisely they were to be at his door with three horses and two servants. It was necessary, in order to avoid interference, that the trip should appear to be nothing more than an ordinary promenade.

At half-past six precisely the waiter informed Roland that his friends were in the courtyard. Roland greeted them cordially and sprang into his saddle. The party followed the boulevards as far as the Place Louis XV. and then turned up the Champs Elysées. On the way the strange phenomenon that had so much astonished Sir John at the time of Roland's duel with M. de Barjols recurred. Roland's gayety might have been thought an affectation had it not been so evidently genuine. The two young men acting as seconds were of undoubted courage, but even they were bewildered by such utter indifference. They might have understood it had this affair been an ordinary duel, for coolness and dexterity insure their possessor a great advantage over his adversary; but in a combat like this to which they were going neither coolness nor dexterity would avail to save the combatants, if not from death at least from some terrible wound.

Furthermore, Roland urged on his horse like a man in haste, so that they reached the end of the Allée de la Muette five minutes before the appointed time.

A man was walking in the allée. Roland recognized Sir John. The seconds watched the young man's face as he caught sight of his adversary. To their great astonishment it expressed only tender good-will.

A few more steps and the four principal actors in the scene that was about to take place met.

Sir John was perfectly calm, but his face wore a look of profound sadness. It was evident that this meeting grieved him as deeply as it seemed to rejoice Roland.

The party dismounted. One of the seconds took the box of pistols from the servants and ordered them to lead away the horses, and not to return until they heard pistol-shots. The principals then entered the part of the woods that seemed the thickest, and looked about them for a suitable spot. For the rest, as Roland had foreseen, the Bois was deserted; the approach of the dinner hour had called every one home.

They found a small open spot exactly suited to their needs. The seconds looked at Roland and Sir John. They both nodded their heads in approval.

"Is there to be any change?" one of the seconds asked Sir John.

"Ask M. de Montrevel," replied Lord Tanlay; "I am entirely at his disposal."

"Nothing," said Roland.

The seconds took the pistols from the box and loaded them. Sir John stood apart, switching the heads of the tall grasses with his riding-whip.

Roland watched him hesitatingly for a moment, then taking his resolve, he walked resolutely toward him. Sir John raised his head and looked at him with apparent hope.

"My lord," said Roland, "I may have certain grievances against you, but I know you to be, none the less, a man of your word."

"You are right," replied Sir John.

"If you survive me will you keep the promise that you made me at Avignon?"

"There is no possibility that I shall survive you, but so long as I have any breath left in my body, you can count upon me."

"I refer to the final disposition to be made of my body."

"The same, I presume, as at Avignon?"

"The same, my lord."

"Very well, you may set your mind at rest."

Roland bowed to Sir John and returned to his friends.

"Have you any wishes in case the affair terminates fatally?" asked one of them.

"One only."

"What is it?"

"That you permit Sir John to take entire charge of the funeral arrangements. For the rest, I have a note in my left hand for him. In case I have not time to speak after the affair is over, you are to open my hand and give him the note."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"The pistols are loaded, then."

"Very well, inform Sir John."

One of the seconds approached Sir John. The other measured off five paces. Roland saw that the distance was greater than he had supposed.

"Excuse me," he said, "I said three paces."

"Five," replied the officer who was measuring the distance.

"Not at all, dear friend, you are wrong."

He turned to Sir John and to the other second questioningly.

"Three paces will do very well," replied Sir John, bowing.

There was nothing to be said if the two adversaries were agreed. The five paces were reduced to three. Then two sabres were laid on the ground to mark the limit. Sir John and Roland took their places, standing so that their toes touched the sabres. A pistol was then handed to each of them.

They bowed to say that they were ready. The two seconds stepped aside. They were to give the signal by clapping their hands three times. At the first

clap the principals were to cock their pistols; at the second to take aim; at the third to fire.

The three claps were given at regular intervals amid the most profound silence; the wind itself seemed to pause and the rustle of the trees was hushed. The principals were calm, but the seconds were visibly distressed.

At the third clap two shots rang out so simultaneously that they seemed but one. But to the utter astonishment of the seconds the combatants remained standing. At the signal Roland had lowered his pistol and fired into the ground. Sir John had raised his and cut the branch of a tree three feet behind Roland. Each was clearly amazed--amazed that he himself was still living, after having spared his antagonist.

Roland was the first to speak.

"Ah!" he cried, "my sister was right in saying that you were the most generous man on earth."

And throwing his pistol aside he opened his arms to Sir John, who rushed into them.

"Ah! I understand," he said. "You wanted to die; but, God be thanked, I am not your murderer."

The two seconds came up.

"What is the matter?" they asked together.

"Nothing," said Roland, "except that I could not die by the hand of the man I love best on earth. You saw for yourselves that he preferred to die rather than kill me."

Then throwing himself once more into Sir John's arms, and grasping the hands of his two friends, he said: "I see that I must leave that to the Austrians. And now, gentlemen, you must excuse me. The First Consul is on the eve of a great battle in Italy, and I have not a moment to lose if I am to be there."

Leaving Sir John to make what explanations he thought suitable to the seconds, Roland rushed to the road, sprang upon his horse, and returned to Paris at a gallop.