

# **The Companions of Jehu**

**by**

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# The Companions of Jehu

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## An Introductory Word To The Reader

Just about a year ago my old friend, Jules Simon, author of "Devoir," came to me with a request that I write a novel for the "Journal pour Tous." I gave him the outline of a novel which I had in mind. The subject pleased him, and the contract was signed on the spot.

The action occurred between 1791 and 1793, and the first chapter opened at Varennes the evening of the king's arrest.

Only, impatient as was the "Journal pour Tous," I demanded a fortnight of Jules Simon before beginning my novel. I wished to go to Varennes; I was not acquainted with the locality, and I confess there is one thing I cannot do; I am unable to write a novel or a drama about localities with which I am not familiar.

In order to write "Christine" I went to Fontainebleau; in writing "Henri III." I went to Blois; for "Les Trois Mousquetaires" I went to Boulogne and Béthune; for "Monte-Cristo" I returned to the Catalans and the Château d'If; for "Isaac Laquedem" I revisited Rome; and I certainly spent more time studying Jerusalem and Corinth from a distance than if I had gone there.

This gives such a character of veracity to all that I write, that the personages whom I create become eventually such integral parts of the places in which I planted them that, as a consequence, many end by believing in their actual existence. There are even some people who claim to have known them.

In this connection, dear readers, I am going to tell you something in confidence--only do not repeat it. I do not wish to injure honest fathers of families who live by this little industry, but if you go to Marseilles you will be shown there the house of Morel on the Cours, the house of Mercédès at the Catalans, and the dungeons of Dantès and Faria at the Château d'If.

When I staged "Monte-Cristo" at the Théâtre-Historique, I wrote to Marseilles for a plan of the Château d'If, which was sent to me. This drawing was for the use of the scene painter. The artist to whom I had recourse forwarded me the desired plan. He even did better than I would have dared ask of him; he wrote beneath it: "View of the Château d'If, from the side where Dantès was thrown into the sea."

I have learned since that a worthy man, a guide attached to the Château d'If, sells pens made of fish-bone by the Abbé Faria himself.

There is but one unfortunate circumstance concerning this; the fact is, Dantès and the Abbé Faria have never existed save in my imagination; consequently, Dantès could not have been precipitated from the top to the bottom of the Château d'If, nor could the Abbé Faria have made pens. But that is what comes from visiting these localities in person.

Therefore, I wished to visit Varennes before commencing my novel, because the first chapter was to open in that city. Besides, historically, Varennes worried me considerably; the more I perused the historical accounts of Varennes, the less I was able to understand, topographically, the king's arrest.

I therefore proposed to my young friend, Paul Bocage, that he accompany me to Varennes. I was sure in advance that he would accept. To merely propose such a trip to his picturesque and charming mind was to make him bound from his chair to the tram. We took the railroad to Châlons. There we bargained with a

livery-stable keeper, who agreed, for a consideration of ten francs a day, to furnish us with a horse and carriage. We were seven days on the trip, three days to go from Châlons to Varennes, one day to make the requisite local researches in the city, and three days to return from Varennes to Châlons.

I recognized with a degree of satisfaction which you will easily comprehend, that not a single historian had been historical, and with still greater satisfaction that M. Thiers had been the least accurate of all these historians. I had already suspected this, but was not certain. The only one who had been accurate, with absolute accuracy, was Victor Hugo in his book called "The Rhine." It is true that Victor Hugo is a poet and not a historian. What historians these poets would make, if they would but consent to become historians!

One day Lamartine asked me to what I attributed the immense success of his "Histoire des Girondins."

"To this, because in it you rose to the level of a novel," I answered him. He reflected for a while and ended, I believe, by agreeing with me.

I spent a day, therefore, at Varennes and visited all the localities necessary for my novel, which was to be called "René d'Argonne." Then I returned. My son was staying in the country at Sainte-Assise, near Melun; my room awaited me, and I resolved to go there to write my novel.

I am acquainted with no two characters more dissimilar than Alexandre's and mine, which nevertheless harmonize so well. It is true we pass many enjoyable hours during our separations; but none I think pleasanter than those we spend together.

I had been installed there for three or four days endeavoring to begin my "René d'Argonne," taking up my pen, then laying it aside almost immediately. The thing would not go. I consoled myself by telling stories. Chance willed that I should relate one which Nodier had told me of four young men affiliated with the Company of Jehu, who had been executed at Bourg in Bresse amid the most dramatic circumstances. One of these four young men, he who had found the greatest difficulty in dying, or rather he whom they had the greatest difficulty in killing, was but nineteen and a half years old.

Alexandre listened to my story with much interest. When I had finished: "Do you know," said he, "what I should do in your place?"

"What?"

"I should lay aside 'René d'Argonne,' which refuses to materialize, and in its stead I should write 'The Companions of Jehu.'"

"But just think, I have had that other novel in mind for a year or two, and it is almost finished."

"It never will be since it is not finished now."

"Perhaps you are right, but I shall lose six months regaining my present vantage-ground."

"Good! In three days you will have written half a volume."

"Then you will help me."

"Yes, for I shall give you two characters."

"Is that all?"

"You are too exacting! The rest is your affair; I am busy with my 'Question d'Argent.'"

"Well, who are your two characters, then?"

"An English gentleman and a French captain."

"Introduce the Englishman first."

"Very well." And Alexandre drew Lord Tanlay's portrait for me.

"Your English gentleman pleases me," said I; "now let us see your French captain."

"My French captain is a mysterious character, who courts death with all his might, without being able to accomplish his desire; so that each time he rushes into mortal danger he performs some brilliant feat which secures him promotion."

"But why does he wish to get himself killed?"

"Because he is disgusted with life."

"Why is he disgusted with life?"

"Ah! That will be the secret of the book."

"It must be told in the end."

"On the contrary, I, in your place, would not tell it."

"The readers will demand it."

"You will reply that they have only to search for it; you must leave them something to do, these readers of yours."

"Dear friend, I shall be overwhelmed with letters."

"You need not answer them."

"Yes, but for my personal gratification I, at least, must know why my hero longs to die."

"Oh, I do not refuse to tell you."

"Let me hear, then."

"Well, suppose, instead of being professor of dialectics, Abelard had been a soldier."

"Well?"

"Well, let us suppose that a bullet--"

"Excellent!"

"You understand? Instead of withdrawing to Paraclet, he would have courted death at every possible opportunity."

"Hum! That will be difficult."

"Difficult! In what way?"

"To make the public swallow that."

"But since you are not going to tell the public."

"That is true. By my faith, I believe you are right. Wait."

"I am waiting."

"Have you Nodier's 'Souvenirs de la Révolution'? I believe he wrote one or two pages about Guyon, Leprêtre, Amiet and Hyvert."

"They will say, then, that you have plagiarized from Nodier."

"Oh! He loved me well enough during his life not to refuse me whatever I shall take from him after his death. Go fetch me the 'Souvenirs de la Révolution.'"

Alexandre brought me the book. I opened it, turned over two or three pages, and at last discovered what I was looking for. A little of Nodier, dear readers, you will lose nothing by it. It is he who is speaking:

The highwaymen who attacked the diligences, as mentioned in the article on Amiet, which I quoted just now, were called Leprêtre, Hyvert, Guyon and Amiet. Leprêtre was forty-eight years old. He was formerly a captain of dragoons, a knight of St. Louis, of a noble countenance, prepossessing carriage and much elegance of manner. Guyon and Amiet have never been known by their real names. They owe that to the accommodating spirit prevailing among the vendors of passports of those days. Let the reader picture to himself two dare-devils between twenty and thirty years of age, allied by some common responsibility, the sequence, perhaps of some misdeed, or, by a more delicate and generous interest, the fear of compromising their family name. Then you will know of Guyon and Amiet all that I can recall. The latter had a sinister countenance, to which, perhaps, he owes the bad reputation with which all his biographers have credited him. Hyvert was the son of a rich merchant of Lyons, who had offered the sub-officer charged with his deportation sixty thousand francs to permit his escape. He was at once the Achilles and the Paris of the band. He was of medium height but well formed, lithe, and of graceful and pleasing address. His eyes were never without animation nor his lips without a smile. His was one of those countenances which are never forgotten, and which present an inexpressible blending of sweetness and strength, tenderness and energy. When he yielded to the eloquent petulance of his inspirations he soared to enthusiasm. His conversation revealed the rudiments of an excellent early education and much natural intelligence. That which was so terrifying in him was his tone of heedless gaiety, which contrasted so horribly with his position. For the rest, he was unanimously conceded to be kind, generous, humane, lenient toward the weak, while with the strong he loved to display a vigor truly athletic which his somewhat effeminate features were far from indicating. He boasted that he had never been without money, and had no enemies. That was his sole reply to the charges of theft and assassination. He was twenty-two years old.

To these four men was intrusted the attack upon a diligence conveying forty thousand francs of government money. This deed was transacted in broad daylight, with an exchange of mutual courtesy almost; and the travellers, who were not disturbed by the attack, gave little heed to it. But a child of only ten years of age, with reckless bravado, seized the pistol of the conductor and fired it into the midst of the assailants. As this peaceful weapon, according to the custom, was only charged with powder, no one was injured; but the occupants of the coach quite naturally experienced a lively fear of reprisals. The little boy's mother fell into violent hysterics. This new disturbance created a general diversion which dominated all the preceding events and particularly attracted the attention of the robbers. One of them flew to the woman's side, reassuring her in the most affectionate manner, while complimenting her upon her son's precocious courage, and courteously pressed upon her the salts and perfumes with which these gentlemen were ordinarily provided for their own use. She regained consciousness. In the excitement of the moment her travelling

companions noticed that the highwayman's mask had fallen off, but they did not see his face.

The police of those days, restricted to mere impotent supervision, were unable to cope with the depredations of these banditti, although they did not lack the means to follow them up. Appointments were made at the cafés, and narratives relating to deeds carrying with them the penalty of death circulated freely through all the billiard-halls in the land. Such was the importance which the culprits and the public attached to the police.

These men of blood and terror assembled in society in the evening, and discussed their nocturnal expeditions as if they had been mere pleasure-parties. Leprêtre, Hyvert, Amiet and Guyon were arraigned before the tribunal of a neighboring department. No one save the Treasury had suffered from their attack, and there was no one to identify them save the lady who took very good care not to do so. They were therefore acquitted unanimously.

Nevertheless, the evidence against them so obviously called for conviction, that the Ministry was forced to appeal from this decision. The verdict was set aside; but such was the government's vacillation, that it hesitated to punish excesses that might on the morrow be regarded as virtues. The accused were cited before the tribunal of Ain, in the city of Bourg, where dwelt a majority of their friends, relatives, abettors and accomplices. The Ministry sought to propitiate the one party by the return of its victims, and the other by the almost inviolate safeguards with which it surrounded the prisoners. The return to prison indeed resembled nothing less than a triumph.

The trial recommenced. It was at first attended by the same results as the preceding one. The four accused were protected by an alibi, patently false, but attested by a hundred signatures, and for which they could easily have obtained ten thousand. All moral convictions must fail in the presence of such authoritative testimony. An acquittal seemed certain, when a question, perhaps involuntarily insidious, from the president, changed the aspect of the trial.

"Madam," said he to the lady who had been so kindly assisted by one of the highwaymen, "which of these men was it who tendered you such thoughtful attention?"

This unexpected form of interrogation confused her ideas. It is probable that she believed the facts to be known, and saw in this a means of modifying the fate of the man who interested her.

"It was that gentleman," said she, pointing to Leprêtre. The four accused, who were included in a common alibi, fell by this one admission under the executioner's axe. They rose and bowed to her with a smile.

"Faith!" said Hyvert, falling back upon his bench with a burst of laughter, "that, Captain, will teach you to play the gallant."

I have heard it said that the unhappy lady died shortly after of chagrin.

The customary appeal followed; but, this time, there was little hope. The Republican party, which Napoleon annihilated a month later, was in the ascendency. That of the Counter-Revolution was compromised by its odious excesses. The people demanded examples, and matters were arranged accordingly, as is ordinarily the custom in strenuous times; for it is with

governments as with men, the weakest are always the most cruel. Nor had the Companies of Jehu longer an organized existence. The heroes of these ferocious bands, Debeauce, Hastier, Bary, Le Coq, Dabri, Delbourbe and Storkenfeld, had either fallen on the scaffold or elsewhere. The condemned could look for no further assistance from the daring courage of these exhausted devotees, who, no longer capable of protecting their own lives, coolly sacrificed them, as did Piard, after a merry supper. Our brigands were doomed to die.

Their appeal was rejected, but the municipal authorities were not the first to learn of this. The condemned men were warned by three shots fired beneath the walls of their dungeon. The Commissioner of the Executive Directory, who had assumed the rôle of Public Prosecutor at the trial, alarmed at this obvious sign of connivance, requisitioned a squad of armed men of whom my uncle was then commander. At six o'clock in the morning sixty horsemen were drawn up before the iron gratings of the prison yard.

Although the jailers had observed all possible precautions in entering the dungeon where these four unfortunate men were confined, and whom they had left the preceding day tightly pinioned and heavily loaded with chains, they were unable to offer them a prolonged resistance. The prisoners were free and armed to the teeth. They came forth without difficulty, leaving their guardians under bolts and bars, and, supplied with the keys, they quickly traversed the space that separated them from the prison yard. Their appearance must have been terrifying to the populace awaiting them before the iron gates.

To assure perfect freedom of action, or perhaps to affect an appearance of security more menacing even than the renown for strength and intrepidity with which their names were associated, or possibly even to conceal the flow of blood which reveals itself so readily beneath white linen, and betrays the last agonies of a mortally wounded man, their breasts were bared. Their braces crossed upon the chest--their wide red belts bristling with arms--their cry of attack and rage, all that must have given a decidedly fantastic touch to the scene. Arrived in the square, they perceived the gendarmerie drawn up in motionless ranks, through which it would have been impossible to force a passage. They halted an instant and seemed to consult together. Leprêtre, who was, as I have said, their senior and their chief, saluted the guard with his hand, saying with that noble grace of manner peculiar to him:

"Very well, gentlemen of the gendarmerie!"

Then after a brief, energetic farewell to his comrades, he stepped in front of them and blew out his brains. Guyon, Amiet and Hyvert assumed a defensive position, their double-barrelled pistols levelled upon their armed opponents. They did not fire; but the latter, considering this demonstration as a sign of open hostility, fired upon them. Guyon fell dead upon Leprêtre's body, which had not moved. Amiet's hip was broken near the groin. The "Biographie des Contemporains" says that he was executed. I have often heard it said that he died at the foot of the scaffold. Hyvert was left alone, his determined brow, his terrible eye, the pistol in each practiced and vigorous hand threatening death to the spectators. Perhaps it was involuntary admiration, in his desperate plight, for this handsome young man with his waving locks, who was known never to have shed blood, and from whom the

law now demanded the expiation of blood; or perhaps it was the sight of those three corpses over which he sprang like a wolf overtaken by his hunters, and the frightful novelty of the spectacle, which for an instant restrained the fury of the troop. He perceived this and temporized with them for a compromise.

"Gentlemen," said he, "I go to my death! I die with all my heart! But let no one approach me or I shall shoot him--except this gentleman," he continued, pointing to the executioner. "This is an affair that concerns us alone and merely needs a certain understanding between us."

This concession was readily accorded, for there was no one present who was not suffering from the prolongation of this horrible tragedy, and anxious to see it finished. Perceiving their assent, he placed one of his pistols between his teeth, and drawing a dagger from his belt, plunged it in his breast up to the hilt. He still remained standing and seemed greatly surprised. There was a movement toward him.

"Very well, gentlemen!" cried he, covering the men who sought to surround him with his pistols, which he had seized again, while the blood spurted freely from the wound in which he had left his poniard. "You know our agreement; either I die alone or three of us will die together. Forward, march!" He walked straight to the guillotine, turning the knife in his breast as he did so.

"Faith," said he, "my soul must be centred in my belly! I cannot die. See if you can fetch it out."

This last was addressed to his executioner. An instant later his head fell. Be it accident or some peculiar phenomenon of the vitality, it rebounded and rolled beyond the circle of the scaffolding, and they will still tell you at Bourg, that Hyvert's head spoke.

Before I had finished reading I had decided to abandon René d'Argonne for the Companions of Jehu. On the morrow I came down with my travelling bag under my arm.

"You are leaving?" said Alexandre to me.

"Yes."

"Where are you going?"

"To Bourg, in Bresse."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Study the neighborhood and consult with the inhabitants who saw Leprêtre, Amiet, Guyon and Hyvert executed."

\* \* \* \* \*

There are two roads to Bourg--from Paris, of course; one may leave the train at Mâcon, and take stage from Mâcon to Bourg, or, continuing as far as Lyons, take train again from Lyons to Bourg.

I was hesitating between these two roads when one of the travellers who was temporarily occupying my compartment decided me. He was going to Bourg, where he frequently had business. He was going by way of Lyons; therefore, Lyons was the better way.

I resolved to travel by the same route. I slept at Lyons, and on the morrow by ten in the morning I was at Bourg.

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