

Arthur

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ARTHUR, Vol. I.

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CHAPTER I

THE POST-ROAD

A strange chance put me in possession of this journal. I had established myself for several months in a central city in one of our southern departments, whose shore is bathed by the Mediterranean, and I was desirous of purchasing a country place in that marvellously picturesque land. I had already looked at several pieces of property when, one day, the notary, who had been giving me some necessary directions for one of my explorations, said to me: "I have just received notice that at about eight leagues from here, in one of the most beautiful situations in the world, neither too far nor too near to the sea, there is a country house for sale. I know nothing of it whatever; but if you would like to see it, monsieur, here are the precise directions how to find it. You will have to arrange the affair with the curé of the village of ——."

"What!" said I, "with the curé? You don't suppose that it is the presbytery that is for sale?"

"I know nothing about it," answered the lawyer; "but, judging from the high price that they ask, I hardly think it can be a parsonage. Besides," added he, with a sly and convincing look, "it seems as though there would be a thousand ways of arranging an advantageous and private sale, because it is sold in consequence of sudden departure or a sudden death, I don't know exactly which; the fact is, there have been told so many absurd and stupid stories on the subject, that I should make myself ridiculous in repeating them all to you. What is certain, however, monsieur, is that such an

opportunity is always a good one, and my correspondent assures me that there has been no end of money spent on the property."

"A swift departure! A sudden death! Who, then, lived on the place?" I asked.

"I know nothing, absolutely nothing. My correspondent tells me nothing more, and 'tis by the greatest accident that he has even heard of this good opportunity; because out of a hundred people in this department, you will scarcely find ten who could tell you anything about the village of ——."

I know not why, but for some reason this information, vague as it was, excited my curiosity; I decided to set forth immediately, and consequently ordered horses to be put to the carriage.

"Oh," said the notary, "I advise you not to think of venturing to travel in a carriage over those dreadful roads. 'Tis a post-road, to be sure, but the nearest relay to —— is still five leagues off, and to get there they say one has to go through regular sand-pits, where one sinks so deep that 'tis a thousand chances to one if you ever get out again. If you take my advice you will go on horseback."

I took his word for it, and had a portemanteau fastened behind my saddle, and thus, preceded by a postilion, I started for the village of ——, which was eight leagues from the city where I was staying.

I got over the first three leagues in about an hour, changed horses at the relay, and then struck into the open country.

It was towards the middle of the month of May, a delicious morning, cooled by a gentle northerly breeze. The roads, deep with a sand as yellow as ochre, though detestable for carriages, which would sink in to the hubs of the wheels, were not at all bad for

horseback riding. The farther I advanced towards the interior of the uncultivated and wild country, the more nature became grand and majestic, though perhaps at the same time somewhat monotonous. Before me stretched out great plains of rose-coloured heather towards a horizon of bluish mountains; to the left were numerous wooded hills, while to the right was a continuous curtain of verdure, formed by the willows and poplars which bordered a shallow but very clear stream, always fordable but very swift, which we were continually crossing; for it wandered with many turnings across the road, which sometimes descended between high banks, covered with hawthorn, mulberry, and wild rose bushes, sometimes, emerging from these hollows, ascended to the plain that could be seen straight before us as smooth as a tennis-court.

"Have you ever been to ——?" I asked my guide, whose strongly marked face, extreme neatness, and easy seat denoted a soldier whose term of service was over. I had heard his companions at the post call him "the hussar," and everything about the man was such a contrast to the negligent appearance and noisy familiarity of the rest of these Southerners! "Have you ever been to ——?"

"Yes, monsieur, twice in my life," he replied, stopping his horse and placing himself a little behind me; "I went there once two years ago, and then I went there three months ago, but *dame!* the two goings were not much alike!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, the first time," said he, in an excited way, still animated by the remembrance of such a glorious journey, "that was the fine ride! *Cent sous* for the guide! A courier! Six horses to the berlin!"

And by way of illustration my guide began cracking his whip in a way that almost deafened me.

Not being content with this manner of describing the rank of the travellers, I asked him:

"But who was in that carriage? Who paid the courier?"

"I don't know, monsieur, the blinds of the berlin were pulled down. On the seat behind sat a man and a woman, both elderly folks who looked as though they might be confidential servants."

"And the courier, had he nothing to say?"

"The courier? Not he, a ferocious looking fellow with never a word to say! The only time I heard him speak was when he ordered the horses, and that didn't take long, *allez, monsieur!* He jumped from his horse, put two louis d'or in the hand of the *maître de poste*, and said: 'Six horses for the carriage and one riding-horse, *cent sous* for the guide, forty sous paid in advance.' And then off he went at a gallop."

"And he never gave his master's name?"

"*Non, monsieur.*"

"What sort of livery did the courier wear?"

"Stop a bit, monsieur, and I'll try to remember. Yes—a green jacket, with gold braid on all the seams, a cap just like the jacket, red silk sash, coat-of-arms on his buttons, a hunting-knife—moustaches—oh, the whole business—grand style—but too fierce to suit me, *parole d'honneur!*"

"And since then have you never found out who you led to ——?"

"*Non*, monsieur."

"And the carriage, when did it come back?"

"But, monsieur, it never did come back."

"What!" said I, much surprised, "but there must be a good many country houses at ——?"

"*Non*, monsieur, there is only one in the place; all the rest are only little huts for the peasants."

"Then there is another road besides this one?"

"Oh, *non*, monsieur; this is the only possible way of getting back."

"And nobody ever came back this way?"

"*Non*, monsieur."

"It is most extraordinary! And how long ago did all this happen?"

"Very nearly two years, monsieur."

"Now tell me about your other journey," said I to my guide, hoping to get at some explanation of the mystery.

"Oh, that is a journey never to forget! I'll remember that one for many a day! Ah, the old scoundrel! The old brigand! The sly old fox!"

"*Voyons*, come, tell me about it, *mon garçon*; the thought of it seems to put you in an ill temper."

"Ill temper! You better believe it does, and a good reason. It is not so much for the trick he played on me as for the mean way he did

it,—and then to think of his having called me his good friend, the old monster! *Son bon ami!*

"You shall hear the whole story, monsieur.

"That ride was about three months ago. It was my turn next to ride. I was warming myself in the stable between my horses, for it was very cold. About eleven o'clock in the morning I heard click-clack, click-clack, a cracking of the whip for all the world as if for another hundred sous for the guide, and the voice of Jean Pierre all out of breath calling out, 'Two carriage horses!'

"*Bon,*' said I, 'here is a good thing and it is my turn to go; 'so I went out to get a look at the traveller.

"Well, there stood a sort of an old gig with a leather apron, a thing we used to call a berlingot; the whole affair so covered and spattered with mud that you couldn't tell its colour.

"I said to myself: 'Good! 'Tis a doctor who is hurrying to see some one at the point of death.' But, *saprejeu!* What do I hear but the voice of the dying man himself calling out from the depths of the berlingot, calling as loud as it could call—half a cough—half a snuffle:

"Ah, beggar of a postilion! Ah, miserable wretch! Do you mean to kill me tearing over the roads like this?'

"The fact is Jean Pierre had dragged the old thing along at such a pace that the hubs were smoking.

"Hope you've got the worth of your money, *not'-bourgeois,*' said Jean Pierre, in a furious voice to the old berlingot.

"There'll be four francs for the guide, won't there?' said I to Jean Pierre, who was unhitching his horses and swearing like a pagan.

"Four francs! Not much! Ah, no, not much; the old beast only pays twenty-five sous.'

"Twenty-five cents? The tariff? And you galloping him along as though he were a prince?"

"Yes; and the only thing I'm sorry for is that I couldn't jounce him any faster.'

"You are a great stupid,' said I to Jean Pierre.

"You'll do just as I did.'

"Not much,' said I to Jean Pierre.

"Well, they finally brought me my mount. I had named him Devastator because he was continually committing injuries to others. It was a way he had, that beast; man or horse, 'twas all the same to him, so that he could get in a bite or a kick, in front or behind, anywhere in fact. Poor Devastator!" added my guide, with a sad sigh.

Then he continued: "They brought me my horse, and before mounting him I saw a great, dried-up, bony hand as dark as walnut-wood stretched out of the leather apron of the berlingot to pay Jean Pierre his twenty-five sous.

"Seeing Jean Pierre get only his twenty-five sous, I shuddered—and I said to myself:

"All right, old consumptive, you're going to get a famous promenade for your twenty-five sous. We're going to take it at a walk.'

"Where are we going, monsieur?' I asked the berlingot, for I saw no one, even the big, dried-up, yellow fist had disappeared.

"We are going to ——,' answered a voice, but so feebly, so faintly, that it was as the voice of a dying man; and then the voice added, always half coughing, half sniffing, 'But I must tell you one thing, my good friend—'

"His good friend!" repeated my guide, in a rage.

"I must warn you that the slightest jolt gives me frightful pain; I am almost dead from the horrible bumpings that your miserable comrade has inflicted on me. I wish to travel gently, very gently, at the least little trot, slowly, do you understand? because!—and he coughed as though he were breathing his last—'because the least little shock might kill me—and I mean to pay only the tariff that the law allows, twenty-five sous for the guide, my good friend.' And thereupon he began a fit of coughing as though he were about to expire, the old wreck!

"Ah, you only pay twenty-five sous! And you call me your *bon ami*! Aha! So it hurts you to go too fast, does it? Wait a bit! Wait a bit, old miser!' said I, as I jumped a-straddle Devastator's back. 'I'll give you your gentle trot, yes, a nice gentle little trot!' And crack! off I go full blast, and I joggle the old gig as though I meant to shake it to pieces, but fast, ah, but so fast, that if the old fox had been paying a thousand francs to the guide (as they say the great Napoleon used to do), he could not have gone any faster. And let me tell you that I took in all the ruts and gullies on the way.

"Pretty soon I got the horse into a real gallop,—oh, something like a gallop! *V'lan!* You should have seen the jumps that the old berlingot took in flying over the ground; but to do justice to every one, I will say that the old berlingot must have been solidly built not to have gone all to pieces a thousand times."

"Unhappy man," said I to my guide, "you might have killed that poor sick man!"

"Kill him! Ah, well, yes! Kill him indeed, the old brigand! I had no such good luck as that; but we went at such a pace, monsieur, that in spite of these sandy roads, and with only one extra horse, I got him to —— (and that is two posts and three-quarters) in an hour and a half."

"The devil you did!" said I. "Well, that was a ride!"

"But hold on, monsieur. Wait till you hear the end. The voice in the berlingot told me not to go into the village; so when we got to a hill about two hundred yards from —— we came to a halt, and I unhitched poor Devastator for the last time, for he was foundered and died afterwards, died from that race; so dead that my master put me on the retired list for fifteen days, and that same scamper cost me more than a hundred crowns; yes, me, poor devil as I am!

"But you must admit, monsieur, that it is hard lines to be made to take twenty-five cents, and then to be called '*mon bon ami*' by such a scoundrel as that. One is apt to forget himself."

"Continue," said I.

"Well, monsieur, I unfasten my horse and open the door, expecting to see my old invalid lying fainting in the bottom of the old wagon, for I hadn't heard a sound for the last hour. Thousand thunders!

what do I see? A great strong fellow who was clacking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and corking up a bottle of rum; and who says to me, in a great deep voice fit for a cathedral singer:

"Hey, stupid, now you have learned how one can travel like a prince at the lowest figure. Ever since leaving Paris I have made three leagues and a half every hour, without a courier, and never have paid more than twenty-five sous.' And so saying, he jumps out of the carriage as lightly as a stag, the monster!"

I could not prevent myself from laughing at this strange way of getting over the ground swiftly and cheaply, and my guide continued:

"You understand, monsieur, how furious one was only to be paid twenty-five sous, and to be called *mon bon ami*? The more the sly old fox begged to be taken gently, the more one wished to get even with him by jolting him over the road at the devil's own gait; while all the time the faster one went the better he was pleased, old miserable! Hey, monsieur, did you ever hear of such an old bandit? One must be without a heart to pretend to be ill when one is vigorous and solid as an old post-horse! But that is not all yet; I asked him where he was going. He replied:

"Wait for me here, and if I am not back in an hour you can go about your business.'

"And how about the carriage?" said I.

"If I don't return, you can take it back to the post-house, and some one will come to get it.'

"And your baggage?"

"I take it with me.'

"And he showed me a long box, flat, square, and quite heavy, which he carried under his arm, and then he disappeared in the undergrowth, which is very thick in that place.

"In this cursed village there is no inn, so I fed my horses and waited; but poor Devastator was so blown that he couldn't eat. I was hungry enough, however, and so I took a bite, and at the end of an hour my old deceiver had not got back. Well, I wait two hours and no one comes yet, so I start for the village which is in the distance, for say I to myself, he must be in the country house of the folks of the six horses and the courier. So I ring at the little door, and then at the big door,—nobody. I knock and pound as though I meant to break the door down,—nobody.

"Finally I got tired, and came back and waited another half-hour; still nobody came. My faith! So then I went back to the post-house. We put the old berlingot under a shed, and from that time until now no one has been to claim it. So probably the old brigand finds himself well off where he is, and where you are going, monsieur; but all the same it is a curious kind of a town,—folks go there, but nobody ever comes back."

Like my guide, I was much struck by this strange story, and became more and more curious.

"But that man," said I, "the last one that you took to ——, was he very old?"

"Pretty well on, about fifty years I should say, dry as a chip, hair perfectly white, but eyes and eyebrows black as charcoal. And now I think of it, when I asked him about his baggage, and he showed

me the big box, he laughed,—ah, but such a laugh, he almost foamed at the mouth; and I noticed that his teeth were very pointed and wide apart, which they do say is a sign of wickedness; but that doesn't surprise me when a man is infamous enough to offer the guide twenty-five sous, and then to call him his *bon ami!*"

"And what did he wear?" I asked, in spite of myself, more and more interested in the recital.

"Oh, he was well clothed: a great dark-coloured redingote, a black cravat, and the cross of honour. With all this a face the colour of copper and a large bony frame, quite in the style of my old commandant Calebasse, chief of squadron in the Ninth Hussars,—a great old tough, all muscles and bones."

"And have you never heard him spoken of since?"

"*Non*, monsieur. Ah, I forgot to tell you that while I was waiting there I heard something like two or three shots. That is all; perhaps some one was shooting thrushes in the vineyards."

The heavy square box had made such an impression on my mind that I shivered, thinking that here, perhaps, had taken place in this lonely spot some bloody and unwitnessed duel, had not the ruse resorted to by this personage, in order to be driven rapidly and at little expense, seemed to contradict all idea of a combat. Such a foolish idea seemed unnatural in such a solemn time. What struck me as extremely singular was that no one had returned from this strange village, where, as my guide said, "folks go, but never come back."

However, the notary had assured me that the only important habitation was the one that was offered for sale. What, then, had

become of the travellers in the first carriage? And where was he who went in the berlingot?

I puzzled about it all until my head felt dizzy, and I longed to be at —— so as to clear up this strange mystery.

When my guide had told me about the carriage with the blinds pulled down, I had thought of a runaway match, but the courier and the servants seemed ill suited to the secrecy desired in an elopement.

However, this old man who arrived two years afterwards, his strange manners, the pistol-shots, and then the sudden disappearance of every one,—certainly these were extraordinary circumstances and my curiosity was at the highest pitch.

"Here we are at last at ——, monsieur," said the guide. "You will admit that there is a fine view. And, see, monsieur, it is right here near this dead plantain-tree that I set down the old fellow of the berlingot."

We had, in fact, arrived on the heights which overlook the village of ——.

CHAPTER II

THE COTTAGE

Seen from the hilltop, the little village was beautiful to behold. Its few houses, all half-way up the hill, were built of a yellowish stone, over which grape-vines were climbing. Some of the houses were roofed with red tiles; others had thatched roofs, on which were growing every sort of beautiful green and velvety moss, mingled with tufts of wall-flowers in bloom; while all this rustic picture was framed in great groups of plantains, live-oaks, and Lombardy poplars, from the midst of which rose the modest church tower of gray stone.

I descended by a steep, winding path, and very soon arrived in the little village square. On the left, I saw the gate of the cemetery; on the right was the church porch, and noticing very near the latter a house rather larger than the rest, and which only differed from them by its remarkable cleanliness, I decided that it must be the presbytery. I got off my horse and knocked. I had not been mistaken.

A woman, clothed in black, still young, but horribly misshapen, and very ugly, whose face, however, appeared to have an expression of extreme goodness, came to open the door for me. She asked, in a very pronounced Southern accent, what I wished.

"I have come, madame," said I, "to see the country place that is for sale in the village. M. V——, the notary, sent me to see M. le curé, who, he tells me, has the property for sale."

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