The Man In Grey

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THE MAN IN GREY

PROEM

It has been a difficult task to piece together the fragmentary documents which alone throw a light—dim and flickering at the best—upon that mysterious personality known to the historians of the Napoleonic era as the Man in Grey. So very little is known about him. Age, appearance, domestic circumstances, everything pertaining to him has remained a matter of conjecture—even his name! In the reports sent by the all-powerful Minister to the Emperor he is invariably spoken of as "The Man in Grey." Once only does Fouché refer to him as "Fernand."

Strange and mysterious creature! Nevertheless, he played an important part—*the* most important, perhaps—in bringing to justice some of those reckless criminals who, under the cloak of Royalist convictions and religious and political aims, spent their time in pillage, murder and arson.

Strange and mysterious creatures, too, these men so aptly named Chouans—that is, "chats-huants"; screech-owls—since they were a terror by night and disappeared within their burrows by day. A world of romance lies buried within the ruins of the châteaux which gave them shelter—Tournebut, Bouvesse, Donnai, Plélan. A world of mystery encompasses the names of their leaders and, above all, those of the women—ladies of high degree and humble peasants alike—often heroic, more often misguided, who supplied the intrigue, the persistence, the fanatical hatred which kept the fire of rebellion smouldering and spluttering even while it could not

burst into actual flame. D'Aché, Cadoudal, Frotté, Armand le Chevallier, Marquise de Combray, Mme. Aquet de Férolles—the romance attaching to these names pales beside that which clings to the weird anonymity of their henchmen—"Dare-Death," "Hare-Lip," "Fear-Nought," "Silver-Leg," and so on. Theirs were the hands that struck whilst their leaders planned—they were the screech-owls who for more than twenty years terrorised the western provinces of France and, in the name of God and their King, committed every crime that could besmirch the Cause which they professed to uphold.

Whether they really aimed at the restoration of the Bourbon kings and at bolstering up the fortunes of an effete and dispossessed monarchy with money wrung from peaceable citizens, or whether they were a mere pack of lawless brigands made up of deserters from the army and fugitives from conscription, of felons and bankrupt aristocrats, will for ever remain a bone of contention between the apologists of the old régime and those of the new.

With partisanship in those strangely obscure though comparatively recent episodes of history we have nothing to do. Facts alone—undeniable and undenied—must be left to speak for themselves. It was but meet that these men—amongst whom were to be found the bearers of some of the noblest names in France—should be tracked down and brought to justice by one whose personality has continued to be as complete an enigma as their own.

CHAPTER I
SILVER-LEG

I

"Forward now! And at foot-pace, mind, to the edge of the wood—or——"

The ominous click of a pistol completed the peremptory command.

Old Gontran, the driver, shook his wide shoulders beneath his heavy caped coat and gathered the reins once more in his quivering hands; the door of the coach was closed with a bang; the postilion scrambled into the saddle; only the passenger who had so peremptorily been ordered down from the box-seat beside the driver had not yet climbed back into his place. Well! old Gontran was not in a mood to fash about the passengers. His horses, worried by the noise, the shouting, the click of firearms and the rough handling meted out to them by strange hands in the darkness, were very restive. They would have liked to start off at once at a brisk pace so as to leave these disturbers of their peace as far behind them as possible, but Gontran was holding them in with a firm hand and they had to walk—walk!—along this level bit of road, with the noisy enemy still present in their rear.

The rickety old coach gave a lurch and started on its way; the clanking of loose chains, the grinding of the wheels in the muddy roads, the snorting and travail of the horses as they finally settled again into their collars, drowned the coachman's muttered imprecations.

"A fine state of things, forsooth!" he growled to himself more dejectedly than savagely. "What the Emperor's police are up to no one knows. That such things can happen is past belief. Not yet six o'clock in the afternoon, and Alençon less than five kilomètres in front of us."

But the passenger who, on the box-seat beside him, had so patiently and silently listened to old Gontran's florid loquacity during the early part of the journey, was no longer there to hear these well-justified lamentations. No doubt he had taken refuge with his fellow-sufferers down below.

There came no sound from the interior of the coach. In the darkness, the passengers—huddled up against one another, dumb with fright and wearied with excitement—had not yet found vent for their outraged feelings in whispered words or smothered oaths. The coach lumbered on at foot-pace. In the affray the head-light had been broken; the two lanterns that remained lit up fitfully the tall pine trees on either side of the road and gave momentary glimpses of a mysterious, fairy-like world beyond, through the curtain of dead branches and the veil of tiny bare twigs.

Through the fast gathering gloom the circle of light toyed with the haze of damp and steam which rose from the cruppers of the horses, and issued from their snorting nostrils. From far away came the cry of a screech-owl and the call of some night beasts on the prowl.

Instinctively, as the road widened out towards the edge of the wood, Gontran gave a click with his tongue and the horses broke into a leisurely trot. Immediately from behind, not forty paces to the rear, there came the sharp detonation of a pistol shot. The

horses, still quivering from past terrors, were ready to plunge once more, the wheelers stumbled, the leaders reared, and the team would again have been thrown into confusion but for the presence of mind of the driver and the coolness of the postilion.

"Oh! those accursed brigands!" muttered Gontran through his set teeth as soon as order was restored. "That's just to remind us that they are on the watch. Keep the leaders well in hand, Hector," he shouted to the postilion: "don't let them trot till we are well out of the wood."

Though he had sworn copiously and plentifully at first, when one of those outlaws held a pistol to his head whilst the others ransacked the coach of its contents and terrorised the passengers, he seemed inclined to take the matter philosophically now. After all, he himself had lost nothing; he was too wise a man was old Gontran to carry his wages in his breeches pocket these days, when those accursed Chouans robbed, pillaged and plundered rich and poor alike. No! Gontran flattered himself that the rogues had got nothing out of him: he had lost nothing—not even prestige, for it had been a case of twenty to one at the least, and the brigands had been armed to the teeth. Who could blame him that in such circumstances the sixty-two hundred francs, all in small silver and paper money—which the collector of taxes of the Falaise district was sending up to his chief at Alençon—had passed from the boot of the coach into the hands of that clever band of rascals?

Who could blame him? I say. Surely, not the Impérial Government up in Paris who did not know how to protect its citizens from the depredations of such villains, and had not even succeeded in making the high road between Caen and Alençon safe for peaceable travellers.

Inside the coach the passengers were at last giving tongue to their indignation. Highway robbery at six o'clock in the afternoon, and the evening not a very dark one at that! It were monstrous, outrageous, almost incredible, did not the empty pockets and ransacked valises testify to the scandalous fact. M. Fouché, Duc d'Otrante, was drawing a princely salary as Minister of Police, and yet allowed a mail-coach to be held up and pillaged—almost by daylight and within five kilomètres of the county town!

The last half-hour of the eventful journey flew by like magic: there was so much to say that it became impossible to keep count of time. Alençon was reached before everyone had had a chance of saying just what he or she thought of the whole affair, or of consigning M. le Duc d'Otrante and all his myrmidons to that particular chamber in Hades which was most suitable for their crimes.

Outside the "Adam et Ève," where Gontran finally drew rein, there was a gigantic clatter and din as the passengers tumbled out of the coach, and by the dim light of the nearest street lantern tried to disentangle their own belongings from the pile of ransacked valises which the ostlers had unceremoniously tumbled out in a heap upon the cobble stones. Everyone was talking—no one in especial seemed inclined to listen—anecdotes of former outrages committed by the Chouans were bandied to and fro.

Gontran, leaning against the entrance of the inn, a large mug of steaming wine in his hand, watched with philosophic eye his former passengers, struggling with their luggage. One or two of them were going to spend the night at the "Adam et Ève": they had already filed past him into the narrow passage beyond, where they were now deep in an altercation with Gilles Blaise, the proprietor,

on the subject of the price and the situation of their rooms; others had homes or friends in the city, and with their broken valises and bundles in their hands could be seen making their way up the narrow main street, still gesticulating excitedly.

"It's a shocking business, friend Gontran," quoth Gilles Blaise as soon as he had settled with the last of his customers. His gruff voice held a distinct note of sarcasm, for he was a powerful fellow and feared neither footpads nor midnight robbers, nor any other species of those *satané* Chouans. "I wonder you did not make a better fight for it. You had three or four male passengers aboard——"

"What could I do?" retorted Gontran irritably. "I had my horses to attend to, and did it, let me tell you, with the muzzle of a pistol pressing against my temple."

"You didn't see anything of those miscreants?"

"Nothing. That is——"

"What?"

"Just when I was free once more to gather the reins in my hands and the order 'Forward' was given by those impudent rascals, he who had spoken the order stood for a moment below one of my lanterns."

"And you saw him?"

"As plainly as I see you—except his face, for that was hidden by the wide brim of his hat and by a shaggy beard. But there is one thing I should know him by, if the police ever succeeded in laying hands on the rogue."

"What is that?"

"He had only one leg, the other was a wooden one."

Gilles Blaise gave a loud guffaw. He had never heard of a highwayman with a wooden leg before. "The rascal cannot run far if the police ever do get after him," was his final comment on the situation.

Thereupon Gontran suddenly bethought himself of the passenger who had sat on the box-seat beside him until those abominable footpads had ordered the poor man to get out of their way.

"Have you seen anything of him, Hector?" he queried of the postilion.

"Well, now you mention him," replied the young man slowly, "I don't remember that I have."

"He was not among the lot that came out of the coach."

"He certainly was not."

"I thought when he did not get back to his seat beside me, he had lost his nerve and gone inside."

"So did I."

"Well, then?" concluded Gontran.

But the puzzle thus propounded was beyond Hector's powers of solution. He scratched the back of his head by way of trying to extract thence a key to the enigma.

"We must have left him behind," he suggested.

"He would have shouted after us if we had," commented Gontran. "Unless——" he added with graphic significance.

Hector shook himself like a dog who has come out of the water. The terror of those footpads and of those pistols clicking in the dark, unpleasantly close to his head, was still upon him.

"You don't think——" he murmured through chattering teeth.

Gontran shrugged his shoulders.

"It won't be the first time," he said sententiously, "that those miscreants have added murder to their other crimes."

"Lost one of your passengers, Gontran?" queried Gilles Blaise blandly.

"If those rogues have murdered him——" quoth Gontran with an oath.

"Then you'd have to make a special declaration before the chief commissary of police, and that within an hour. Who was your passenger, Gontran?"

"I don't know. A quiet, well-mannered fellow. Good company he was, too, during the first part of the way."

"What was his name?"

"I can't tell. I picked him up at Argentan. The box-seat was empty. No one wanted it, for it was raining then. He paid me his fare and scrambled up beside me. That's all I know about him."

"What was he like? Young or old?"

"I didn't see him very well. It was already getting dark," rejoined Gontran impatiently. "I couldn't look him under the nose, could I?"

"But *sacrebleu*! Monsieur le Commissaire de Police will want to know something more than that. Did you at least see how he was dressed?"

"Yes," replied Gontran, "as far as I can recollect he was dressed in grey."

"Well, then, friend Gontran," concluded Gilles Blaise with a jovial laugh, "you can go at once to Monsieur le Commissaire de Police, and you can tell him that an industrious Chouan, who has a wooden leg and a shaggy beard but whose face you did not see, has to the best of your belief murdered an unknown passenger whose name, age and appearance you know nothing about, but who, as far as you can recollect, was dressed in grey—— And we'll see," he added with a touch of grim humour, "what Monsieur le Commissaire will make out of this valuable information."

II

The men were cowering together in a burrow constructed of dead branches and caked mud, with a covering of heath and dried twigs. Their heads were close to one another and the dim light of a dark lanthorn placed upon the floor threw weird, sharp shadows across their eager faces, making them appear grotesque and almost ghoulish—the only bright spots in the surrounding gloom.

One man on hands and knees was crouching by the narrow entrance, his keen eyes trying to pierce the density of the forest beyond.

The booty was all there, spread out upon the damp earth—small coins and bundles of notes all smeared with grease and mud; there were some trinkets, too, but of obviously little value: a pair of showy gold ear-rings, one or two signets, a heavy watch in a chased silver case. But these had been contemptuously swept aside—it was the money that mattered.

The man with the wooden leg had counted it all out and was now putting coins and notes back into a large leather wallet.

"Six thousand two hundred and forty-seven francs," he said quietly, as he drew the thongs of the wallet closely together and tied them securely into a knot. "One of the best hauls we've ever had. 'Tis Madame who will be pleased."

"Our share will have to be paid out of that first," commented one of his companions.

"Yes, yes!" quoth the other lightly. "Madame will see to it. She always does. How many of you are there?" he added carelessly.

"Seven of us all told. They were a pack of cowards in that coach."

"Well!" concluded the man with the wooden leg, "we must leave Madame to settle accounts. I'd best place the money in safety now."

He struggled up into a standing position—which was no easy matter for him with his stump and in the restricted space—and was about to hoist the heavy wallet on to his powerful shoulders, when one of his mates seized him by the wrist.

"Hold on, Silver-Leg!" he said roughly, "we'll pay ourselves for our trouble first. Eh, friends?" he added, turning to the others.

But before any of them could reply there came a peremptory command from the man whom they had called "Silver-Leg."

"Silence!" he whispered hoarsely. "There's someone moving out there among the trees."

At once the others obeyed, every other thought lulled to rest by the sense of sudden danger. For a minute or so every sound was hushed in the narrow confines of the lair save the stertorous breathing which came from panting throats. Then the look-out man at the entrance whispered under his breath:

"I heard nothing."

"Something moved, I tell you," rejoined Silver-Leg curtly. "It may only have been a beast on the prowl."

But the brief incident had given him the opportunity which he required; he had shaken off his companion's hold upon his wrist and had slung the wallet over his shoulder. Now he stumped out of the burrow.

"Friend Hare-Lip," he said before he went, in the same commanding tone wherewith he had imposed silence awhile ago on his turbulent mates, "tell Monseigneur that it will be 'Corinne' this time, and you, Mole-Skin, ask Madame to send Red-Poll over on Friday night for the key."

The others growled in assent and followed him out of their hiding-place. One of the men had extinguished the lanthorn, and

another was hastily collecting the trinkets which had so contemptuously been swept aside.

"Hold on, Silver-Leg!" shouted the man who had been called Hare-Lip; "short reckonings make long friends. I'll have a couple of hundred francs now," he continued roughly. "It may be days and weeks ere I see Madame again, and by that time God knows where the money will be."

But Silver-Leg stumped on in the gloom, paying no heed to the peremptory calls of his mates. It was marvellous how fast he contrived to hobble along, winding his way in and out in the darkness, among the trees, on the slippery carpet of pine needles and carrying that heavy wallet—six thousand two hundred francs, most of it in small coin—upon his back. The others, however, were swift and determined, too. Within the next minute or two they had overtaken him, and he could no longer evade them; they held him tightly, surrounding him on every side and clamouring for their share of the spoils.

"We'll settle here and now, friend Silver-Leg," said Hare-Lip, who appeared to be the acknowledged spokesman of the malcontents. "Two hundred francs for me out of that wallet, if you please, ere you move another step, and two hundred for each one of us here, or——"

The man with the wooden leg had come to a halt, but somehow it seemed that he had not done so because the others held and compelled him, but because he himself had a desire to stand still. Now when Hare-Lip paused, a world of menace in every line of his gaunt, quivering body, Silver-Leg laughed with gentle irony, as a man would laugh at the impotent vapourings of a child.

"Or what, my good Hare-Lip?" he queried slowly.

Then as the other instinctively lowered his gaze and mumbled something between his teeth, Silver-Leg shrugged his shoulders and said with kind indulgence, still as if he were speaking to a child:

"Madame will settle, my friend. Do not worry. It is bad to worry. You remember Fear-Nought: he took to worrying—just as you are doing now—wanted to be paid out of his turn, or more than his share, I forget which. But you remember him?"

"I do," muttered Hare-Lip with a savage oath. "Fear-Nought was tracked down by the police and dragged to Vincennes, or Force, or Bicêtre—we never knew."

To the guillotine, my good Hare-Lip," rejoined Silver-Leg blandly, "along with some other very brave Chouans like yourselves, who also had given their leaders some considerable trouble."

"Betrayed by you," growled Hare-Lip menacingly.

"Punished—that's all," concluded Silver-Leg as he once more turned to go.

"Treachery is a game at which more than one can play."

"The stakes are high. And only one man can win," remarked Silver-Leg dryly.

"And one man must lose," shouted Hare-Lip, now beside himself with rage, "and that one shall be you this time, my fine Silver-Leg. À moi, my mates!" he called to his companions.

And in a moment the men fell on Silver-Leg with the vigour born of terror and greed, and for the first moment or two of their desperate tussle it seemed as if the man with the wooden leg must succumb to the fury of his assailants. Darkness encompassed them all round, and the deep silence which dwells in the heart of the woods. And in the darkness and the silence these men fought—and fought desperately—for the possession of a few hundred francs just filched at the muzzle of a pistol from a few peaceable travellers.

Pistols of course could not be used; the police patrols might not be far away, and so they fought on in silence, grim and determined, one man against half a dozen, and that one halt, and weighted with the spoils. But he had the strength of a giant, and with his back against a stately fir tree he used the heavy wallet as a flail, keeping his assailants at arm's length with the menace of death-dealing blows.

Then, suddenly, from far away, even through the dull thuds of this weird and grim struggle, there came the sound of men approaching—the click of sabres, the tramp and snorting of horses, the sense of men moving rapidly even if cautiously through the gloom. Silver-Leg was the first to hear it.

"Hush!" he cried suddenly, and as loudly as he dared, "the police!"

Again, with that blind instinct born of terror and ever-present danger, the others obeyed. The common peril had as swiftly extinguished the quarrel as greed of gain had fanned it into flame.

The cavalcade was manifestly drawing nearer.