

第三章

Chapter 3



亨利在码头见到了弟弟马克，弟弟向亨利介绍了其内兄——穿着步兵军服的哈拉朗·罗德里克上尉。

上尉代表全家对他的到来表示欢迎，亨利看到上尉操着一口流利的法语，感到以后交流更加方便了，并约定第二天去罗德里克家拜访。

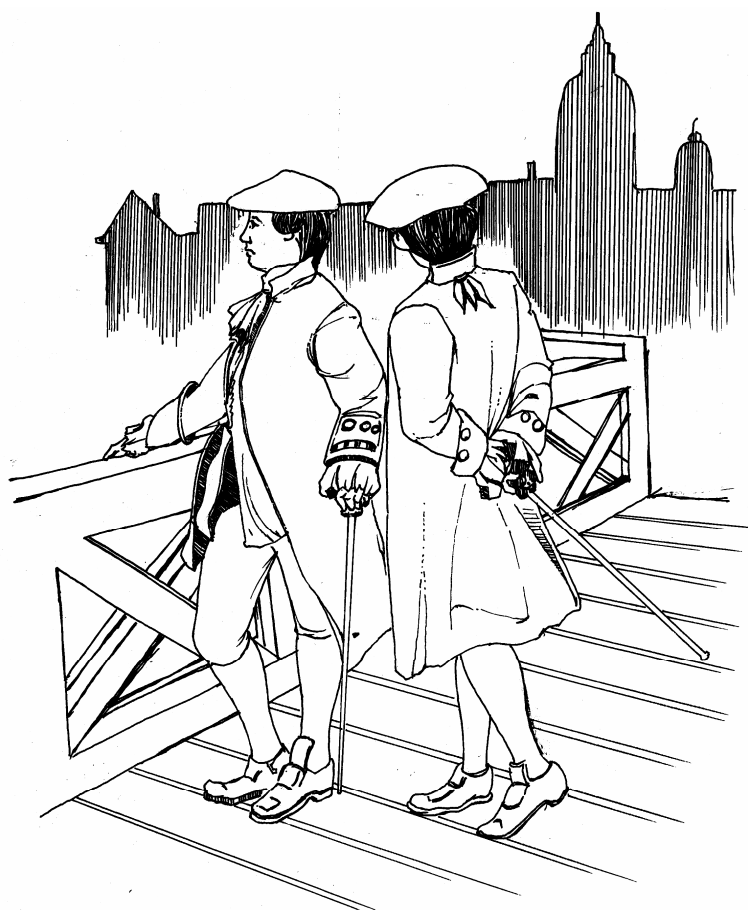
随后他们坐车到了马克住的旅馆，亨利被安排在马克的隔壁。已经分别一年的兄弟俩一直聊到吃晚饭。弟弟表示：对于自己的婚礼，要像征求父母的意见一样征得哥哥的同意，并说麦娜是他送给哥哥的一个妹妹；亨利表示接受这个妹妹。

亨利迫不及待地想去拜访罗德里克家。弟弟告诉他，大家以为船晚上才会到，麦娜和她母亲另有安排。今天下午去码头也是为了谨慎，没想居然接到了他。

马克讲述了他离开巴黎后的经历以及人们对他的画作的高度评价，并说最近为麦娜小姐画了一张像，画得逼真极了。

马克又告诉他自己初来拉兹时，几个画室都热情地邀请他。在聚会中，他遇到了在布达佩斯就认识的哈拉朗上尉，他们成了朋友。哈拉朗上尉把他介绍给了自己的家人，于是马克见到了麦娜。此后的几个月，每晚他都去罗德里克家。罗德里克医生医术高明，还是一位称职的父亲，罗德里克夫人是一位优秀的女士，她仁慈，热心公益事业。

马克向哈拉朗上尉诉说自己爱上了麦娜，上尉将此事告诉了父母，于是，父母又征求了女儿的意见，最后马克上门求婚得到允许。



兄弟俩饭后散步

弟弟表示，因为哥哥的工程师工作太忙，所以请哥哥确定结婚日期，亨利表示，自己可以在这里停留一个月。

弟弟感到非常高兴，他们一直谈到吃晚饭。饭后他俩沿多瑙河左岸散步，亨利向弟弟提起了威廉·斯托里茨。马克表示，听哈拉朗上尉说过：那是在他求婚三四个月之前，威廉曾求婚但被拒绝，这事可能连麦娜小姐都不知道。不过威廉是个行动诡秘的人，在一次艺术展览会上，哈拉朗曾指给他看过威廉，最近两三个星期已经没见到这个人了。

亨利感到后面有人跟踪，走到桥上时，他们停了几分钟，亨利朝后看去，看到了一个中等个头、上了年纪的男子在后面。

亨利告诉弟弟，他信中所要的文件都备齐了。十点半时他们走回旅馆，路上空无一人。他们很快就上床睡着了。突然亨利被惊醒了：那些威胁的话在他睡着时，又在耳边响起了。

Marc was waiting for me, as I had expected, and we exchanged a hearty handshake.

‘Henri!... My dear Henri!’ he repeated in tones of emotion and with his eyes moist, although his whole face radiated happiness.

‘My dear Marc,’ I replied, ‘let me shake your hand again,’ then after these first greetings, ‘Come on! let’s be off!’ I exclaimed, ‘You’re taking me with you, I suppose?’

‘Yes, to the hotel; it’s only ten minutes away, but not before I first introduce you to my future brother-in-law.’

I had not noticed an officer who was standing a little behind Marc. He was a captain, wearing the uniform of the infantry. Twenty-eight years at most, somewhat above middle height and with a chestnut moustache and beard, he had the proud aristocratic air of the Magyar, the air of one accustomed to command. Yet there was a look of welcome in his eyes and a smile upon his lips.

‘Captain Haralan Roderich,’ Marc explained.

I took the hand which the captain was holding out to me.

‘Monsieur Vidal,’ he said, ‘we’re very happy to see you, and you cannot imagine what delight your arrival, which we’ve been so impatiently waiting for,

is going to give my whole family.'

'Including Mademoiselle Myra?' I asked.

'Yes indeed!' exclaimed my brother, 'and it isn't her fault, my dear Henri, if the Dorothy hasn't made ten leagues an hour since you left Vienna!'

I soon realised that Captain Haralan spoke French fluently, as did his family, for they had visited France. What was more, as Marc and I had a perfect knowledge of German and a smattering of Hungarian, we could talk in any of these languages, which in fact mingled in our mouths.

A vehicle took my luggage and ourselves to the hotel.

Having arranged my first visit to the Roderich family for the next day, I stayed alone with my brother in a fairly comfortable room, next to the one he had occupied since he had settled down in Ragz.

Our conversation continued until dinner-time.

'My dear Marc,' I said, 'so here we are together and both of us in good health, I think? If I'm not mistaken we've been separated for a good year.'

'Yes, Henri, and the time seemed very long, although the presence of my dear Myra has very pleasantly shortened the last few months ... Still, here you are, and absence has not made me forget that you're my big brother.'

'And your best friend, Marc.'

'Well, Henri, you'll quite understand that my wedding couldn't take place without your being there beside me! ... And haven't I got to ask for your consent?'

'My consent?'

'Yes, as I should have asked it from father if he'd been here. But you won't refuse it any more than he would, and when you know her!...'

'I know her already from your letters, and I know how happy you are.'

'More than I can tell you. But you'll see her, you'll judge for yourself, and you'll love her, I'm quite sure of that! It's the best of sisters whom I'm giving you.'

'And whom I accept, my dear Marc, knowing in advance that you couldn't do anything but make asplendid choice. But why shouldn't we pay our visit to Doctor Roderich this evening?'

'No, tomorrow ... We didn't think that the boat would arrive so early, and

we didn't expect you until this evening. It was only by excess of prudence that we came on to the quay, Haralan and myself, and it was as well that we did, so that we could be there when you landed. Oh, if my dear Myra had known! ... How she will regret not being here! ... But, as I say, you weren't expected until tomorrow. Madame Roderich and her daughter have another engagement for this evening, and tomorrow they'll give you their apologies.'

'That's understood, Marc,' I replied, 'and as we can belong to one another for a few hours today, let's spend them in chatting and discussing the past and the future, in exchanging all the memories that two brothers can have after a year's separation.'

Marc then described his travels since he had left Paris, all the towns where he had won success, his stay at Vienna and Presburg, where the doors of the artistic world had been thrown wide open before him. But this told me nothing new. A portrait signed by Marc Vidal could not but be much sought after and quarrelled for, and with the same enthusiasm by the rich Austrians as by the rich Magyars.

'I couldn't satisfy them, my dear Henri. Inquiries and even orders from everywhere! What do you expect, the word had gone round from a good bourgeois of Presburg: "Marc Vidal makes a better likeness than nature itself!" So,' my brother added jokingly, 'it doesn't seem impossible that one of these days they'll carry me off to take the portraits of the whole Viennese Court!'

'Take care, Marc, take care. It would embarrass you greatly if you had to leave Ragz just now to attend Court!'

'I should decline the most important invitation in the world, my friend. At the present moment there's no question of portraits. Or rather I've just finished the last.'

'Hers, of course?'

'Hers, and there's no doubt about it that it's the one I've done worst.'

'Who knows?' I exclaimed. 'When an artist thinks more of the model than the portrait...'

'Well, Henri, you'll see! ... I tell you again; a better likeness than nature! ... That's my gift, it seems ... Yes, all the time that my dear Myra was posing I

couldn't take my eyes away from her. But to her it was not a joke, it was not to the fiancé, it was to the artist that she meant to devote those two short hours ... And my brush flew over the canvas ... With what passion! ... At times it seemed that the portrait was going to come alive like Galatea's statue.'

'Steady, Pygmalion, steady. Tell me how you first got into touch with the Roderich family.'

'It was written.'

'I don't doubt it, but still'

Several drawing-rooms in Ragz had done me the honour of admitting me almost as soon as I arrived. Nothing could have been more agreeable, were it only as a way of spending the long evenings in a foreign town. I went to those homes where I was welcomed, and it was in one of them that I renewed my acquaintance with Captain Haralan.'

'Renewed it?' I asked.

'Yes, Henri, for I'd met him several times before in Budapest. An officer of the greatest merit, destined for a splendid future and at the same time the most amiable of men. In short, we met every day, and from being somewhat casual our relations gradually changed into a deep friendship. He wanted to introduce me to his family, and I accepted all the more willingly because I'd already met Myra, and ...'

'And,' I broke in, 'the sister being no less charming than the brother, you began your visits to Dr. Roderich's?'

'Yes, Henri, and for three months I haven't let an evening go without visiting it. But after all, when I speak of my dear Myra you may think that I'm exaggerating ...'

'But no, my friend, but no! You aren't exaggerating. I'm quite certain that it wouldn't be possible to exaggerate when you talk about her. What's more, if you want to know my sincere opinion. I declare that I find you moderate.'

'Oh, my dear Henri, how I love her!'

'That goes without saying. Anyhow, I'm quite satisfied to believe that you're going to enter the most honourable of families ...'

'And the most honoured,' Marc replied, 'Dr. Roderich is a physician of high repute and at the same time he's the best of men and well worthy of being

the father...'

'Of his daughter,' I said, 'just as Madam Roderich is no less worthy, no doubt, of being her mother.'

'She! a splendid woman!' Marc exclaimed, 'adored by all her friends, pious, charitable, full of good works ...'

'Perfection itself, and she'll be the sort of mother-in-law you don't find in France! Isn't that so, Marc?'

'Joke away, Henri! Joke away! But remember we're not in France, we're in Hungary, in this Magyar country where customs have kept something of their old time severity, where the family is still patriarchal ...'

'Go along, you future patriarch, for that's what you're going to be.'

'That's a status which is as good as any other!'

'Well, your story, it seems, isn't out of the ordinary. Thanks to Captain Haralan you've been introduced into his family and they've given you a welcome, which doesn't surprise me at all, seeing that I know you. You couldn't see Mademoiselle Myra without being attracted by her charm ...'

'Just as you say, brother!'

'Well, to finish up, just as Marc Vidal couldn't see Mademoiselle Myra Roderich without being attracted by her charm, Mademoiselle Myra Roderich couldn't see Marc Vidal without being attracted by ...'

'I didn't say that, Henri!'

'But I say so, if only out of respect for the truth. And Doctor, and Madame Roderich, when they realised what was happening, weren't offended. So Marc opened his heart to Captain Haralan. And Captain Haralan didn't take the disclosure too badly. He mentioned it to his parents, and they mentioned it to their daughter. Then Marc Vidal formally made his proposal, it was accepted, and this romance is going to finish like so many others of the same kind ...'

'What you call the finish, my dear Henri,' broke in Marc, 'to my mind it's only the beginning.'

'You're quite right, Marc, and I ought to have realised the value of words ... And when is the wedding to take place?'

'We were waiting for your arrival to fix the date.'

'Well, when you like, in six weeks ... in six months ... in six years...'

‘My dear Henri,’ Marc replied, ‘I know that the time of an engineer is valuable and if you stay as long as that in Ragz, the whole solar system, not having your calculations to help it, will be deranged.’

‘So I should be responsible for earthquakes, floods, tidal waves and other disasters?’

‘Yes, so we can’t put off the ceremony any longer ...’

‘Then the day after tomorrow or even this evening, perhaps? ... Rest assured, my dear Marc, I’ll say everything that’s needed even though my work isn’t as necessary as you suggest to the whole order of the Universe. So before a month is over I hope to visit your wife and yourself.’

‘That would be perfect!’

‘But, my dear Marc, what are your plans? Do you mean to leave Ragz immediately after your marriage?’

‘That’s not yet decided,’ Marc replied, ‘and we shall have time to think about it. All I’m thinking of is the present. As to the future, for me it’s limited by my wedding. Nothing exists beyond that.’

‘The past is no longer with us,’ I quoted, ‘the future hasn’t yet come, the present is everything!’

The conversation continued on these lines until dinnertime. Afterwards Marc and I, lighting our cigars, went to take a walk along the left bank of the Danube.

It goes without saying that the subject of our conversation had not changed and that Myra Roderich was still its object.

Some word, I don’t know which, recalled what I’d heard from the Police-Lieutenant before I left Paris. Nothing that my brother said suggested that his romance had been disturbed, not even for a day. And yet, if Marc do not know this, at least this rival must have existed, for Myra Roderich had been sought after by the son of Otto Storitz. Certainly there was nothing surprising that anyone should ask for the hand of so accomplished a young lady and one so well off.

Naturally, the words I thought I heard just as I was getting off the boat recurred to my mind, though I still insisted that I’d been the sport of some illusion. Anyhow, if those words had really been uttered, what conclusion

could I draw from them? I did not know who could have said them! I should have felt inclined to blame that unpleasant German who had come aboard at Budapest. But that was an idea I had to renounce, that coarse fellow having left the boat at Vukovar. So the only thing that was left was the idea of some practical joker.

Without relating that incident to my brother, I thought I might mention that I'd learned regarding Wilhelm Storitz.

Marc replied by a characteristic gesture of disdain. Then he said, 'Yes, Haralan did mention that individual. He seems to be the only son of that savant Otto Storitz, who has the reputation in Germany of being a magician—an unjust reputation, for he really held a high place in natural science and he had made important discoveries in chemistry and physics. But his son's advances were rejected.'

'Well before yours were accepted, wasn't it?'

'Four or five months previously, if I'm not mistaken,' my brother replied.

'So the two facts have no relation at all?'

'None at all.'

'Does Mademoiselle Myra know that Wilhelm Storitz had aspired to the honour of becoming her husband?'

'I don't think so.'

'And since then nothing has happened?'

'Nothing at all. He must have realised that he hadn't got a chance.'

'Why was that? Was it his reputation?'

'No. Wilhelm Storitz is a queer sort of fellow whose very existence is fairly mysterious and who lives in strict retirement.'

'In Ragz?'

'Yes, in Ragz, in a detached house on the Boulevard Tékéli, where nobody ever goes. He's thought to be a queer fellow, that's all. But he's a German and that would be enough to make Dr. Roderich repulse him, for the Hungarians do not much like the representatives of the Teutonic race.'

'Have you met him?'

'Occasionally, and one day, in the Art Gallery. Captain Haralan pointed him out to me without his noticing us.'

‘Is he in Ragz just now?’

‘I can’t tell you for certain, Henri, but I think he’s not been seen for two or three weeks.’

‘It would be better if he’d left the town.’

‘Well!’ exclaimed Marc. ‘let’s leave that man wherever he may be, and if there’s ever a Dame Wilhelm Storitz, you can be certain that it won’t be Myra Roderich, because ...’

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘because she’ll be Madame Marc Vidal!’

Our walk continued along the quay, and I had a purpose in prolonging it. For some time I’d thought that we were being followed by someone who was walking behind us as if he wanted to hear our conversation, and I wanted to make certain of this.

We stopped for a few minutes on the bridge, and I took advantage of the halt to look back the way we had come. Some distance away I could see a man of medium height and, to judge by the slowness of his movements, of a certain age.

Anyhow, I soon stopped thinking about it. I assured Marc that I had brought all the papers he had asked for in his last letter. He could rest assured that he would lack none of the documents essential for the great matrimonial voyage.

On the whole the conversation kept going back to that star of the first magnitude, the dazzling Myra, just as the magnetic needle turns towards the Pole Star.

We went back towards the hotel. As we reached it I cast a last glance behind me. The road was deserted. Even if he had existed otherwise than in my imagination, the man who had followed us had vanished.

At half past ten, Marc and I were back in our rooms in the hotel. I went to bed and at once began to fall asleep.

Suddenly I woke up with a start. A dream? ... A nightmare?... An obsession?... Those words I thought I heard on board the Dorothy, I fancied I’d heard them again in my drowsiness, those words which threatened Marc and Myra Roderich!