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VENETIAN MASQUE

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CHAPTER I

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THE WHITE CROSS INN

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The traveller in the grey riding-coat, who called himself Mr. Melville was contemplating the malice of which the gods are capable. They had conducted him unscathed through a hundred perils merely, it seemed, so that they might in their irony confront him with destruction in the very hour in which at last he accounted himself secure.

It was this delusive sense of security, the reasonable conviction that having reached Turin the frontiers of danger were behind him, which had urged him to take his ease.

And so in the dusk of a May evening he had got down from his travelling-chaise, and walked into the trap which it afterwards seemed to him that the gods had wantonly baited.

In the dimly lighted passage the landlord bustled to inquire his needs. The inn's best room, its best supper, and the best wine that it could yield. He issued his commands in fairly fluent Italian. His voice was level and pleasantly modulated, yet vibrant in its undertones with the energy and force of his nature.

In stature he was above the middle height and neatly built. His face, dimly seen by the landlord under the shadow of the grey sugar-loaf hat and between the wings of black hair that hung to the collar on either side of it, was square

and lean, with a straight nose and a jutting chin. His age cannot have been more than thirty.

Accommodated in the best room above-stairs, he sat in the candlelight contentedly awaiting supper when the catastrophe occurred. It was heralded by a voice on the stairs; a man's voice, loud and vehement and delivering itself harshly in French. The door of Mr. Melville's room had been left ajar, and the words carried clearly to him where he sat. It was not merely what was said that brought a frown to his brow, but the voice itself. It was a voice that set memories dimly astir in him; a voice that he was certainly not hearing for the first time in his life.

'You are a postmaster and you have no horses! Name of God! It is only in Italy that such things are permitted to happen. But we shall change that before all is over. Anyway, I take what I find. I am in haste. The fate of nations hangs upon my speed.'

Of the landlord's answer from below a mumble was all that reached him. That harsh, peremptory voice rejoined.

'You will have horses by morning, you say? Very well, then. This traveller shall yield me his horses, and in the morning take those you can supply. It is idle to argue with me. I will inform him myself. I must be at General Bonaparte's headquarters not later than tomorrow.'

Brisk steps came up the stairs and crossed the short landing. The door of Mr. Melville's room was pushed open, and that voice, which was still exercising him, was speaking before its owner fully appeared.

'Sir, let my necessity excuse the intrusion. I travel on business of the utmost urgency.' And again that pompous

phrase: 'The fate of nations hangs upon my speed. This post-house has no horses until morning. But your horses are still fit to travel, and you are here for the night. Therefore . . .'

And there abruptly the voice broke off. Its owner had turned to close the door, whilst speaking. Turning again, and confronting the stranger, who had risen, the Frenchman's utterance was abruptly checked; the last vestige of colour was driven from his coarsely featured face; his dark eyes dilated in an astonishment that gradually changed to fear.

He stood so for perhaps a dozen quickened heart-beats, a man of about Mr. Melville's own height and build, with the same black hair about his sallow, shaven face. Like Mr. Melville he wore a long grey riding-coat, a garment common enough with travellers; but in addition he was girt by a tricolour sash, whilst the conspicuous feature of his apparel was the wide black hat that covered him. It was cocked in front, á la Henri IV, and flaunted a tricolour panache and a tricolour cockade.

Slowly in the silence he recovered from the shock he had sustained. His first wild fear that he was confronted by a ghost yielded to the more reasonable conclusion that he was in the presence of one of those jests of nature by which occasionally a startling duplication of features is produced.

In this persuasion he might well have remained if Mr. Melville had not completed the betrayal of himself which Fate had so maliciously conducted to this point.

'An odd chance, Lebel,' he said, his tone sardonic, his grey eyes cold as ice. 'A very odd chance.'

The Citizen-Representative Lebel blinked and gasped, and at once recovered. There were no more illusions either about supernatural manifestations or chance likenesses.

'So it is you, Monsieur le Vicomte!' The thick lips tightened. 'And in the flesh. Faith, this is very interesting.' He set his dispatch-case on a marble-topped console beside Mr. Melville's conical grey hat. He uncovered himself and placed his own hat on the dispatch-case. There were beads of perspiration glistening on his brow just below the straight fringe of black hair. 'Very interesting,' he repeated. 'It is not every day that we meet a man who has been guillotined. For you were guillotined—were you not?—at Tours, in ninety-three.'

'According to the records.'

'Oh, I am aware of the records.'

'Naturally. Having been at such pains to sentence me, you would not be likely to neglect to make sure that the sentence had been executed. Only that, Lebel, could give you security of tenure in my lands. Only that could ensure that when France returns to sanity, you will not be kicked back to the dunghill where you belong.'

Lebel displayed no emotion. His coarse, crafty face remained set in impassivity.

'It seems that I did not make sure enough. The matter calls for inquiry. It may bring some heads to the basket besides your own. It will be interesting to discover how you come to be a ci-devant in two senses.'

Mr. Melville was ironical. 'Who has better cause than yourself to know what bribery can do among the masters of your cankered republic, your kingdom of blackguards? You,

who have corrupted and bribed so freely, and who have so freely been bribed and corrupted, should find no mystery in my survival.'

Lebel set his arms akimbo, scowling. 'I find a mystery in that a man in your condition should take that tone with me.'

'No mystery, Lebel. We are no longer in France. The warrant of the French Republic doesn't run in the dominions of the King of Sardinia.'

'Does it not?' Lebel chuckled maliciously. 'Is that your fool's paradise? My dear ci-devant, the arm of the French Republic reaches farther than you suppose. We may no longer be in France, but the Republic is master here as elsewhere. We have a sufficient garrison in Turin to see that Victor Amadeus observes the terms of the Peace of Cherasco and to do what else we please. You will find the commandant very much at my orders. You'll realize how a French warrant runs here when you are on your way back to Tours, so that the little omission of three years ago may be repaired.'

It was at this point, in the sudden annihilation of his confidence, that Mr. Melville was brought to contemplate the cruel ironies of which the gods are capable. This man, who once had been his father's steward, was perhaps the only member of the government personally acquainted with him, and certainly the only one whose interests would be served by his death. And of all the millions of Frenchmen in the world, it must be just this Lebel who was chosen by Fate to walk in upon him at the White Cross Inn.

For a moment a wave of anguish swept over him. It was not only that his own personal ruin confronted him, but the

ruin at the same time of the momentous mission to Venice with which Mr. Pitt had entrusted him, a mission concerned with the very fortunes of civilization, imperilled by Jacobin activities beyond the frontiers of France.

'A moment, Lebel!'

His cry checked the Frenchman as he was turning to depart. He turned again; not indeed to the request, but to the quick step behind him. His right hand slid into the pocket of his riding-coat.

'What now?' he growled. 'There is no more to be said.'

'There is a great deal more to be said.' Mr. Melville's voice miraculously preserved its level tone. In his manner there was no betrayal of the anxiety consuming him. He side-stepped swiftly, putting himself between Lebel and the door. 'You do not leave this room, Lebel. I thank you for warning me of your intentions.'

Lebel was contemptuously amused.

'Perhaps because I am a lawyer I prefer things to be done for me by the law and in proper form. But if that is denied me by violence, I must act for myself in kind. Now, will you stand away from that door and let me pass?'

His hand emerged from his pocket grasping the butt of a pistol. He proceeded without haste. Perhaps it amused him to be deliberate; to observe the futile struggles of a victim, trapped and helpless at pistol-point.

Mr. Melville was without weapons other than his bare hands. But there was more of the Englishman in him than the name. Before the muzzle of that slowly drawn pistol had cleared the lip of Lebel's pocket a bunch of knuckles crashed into the point of his jaw. The blow sent him reeling

backwards across the room. Then, his balance lost, he toppled over and went down at full length with a clatter of fire-irons which his fall disturbed.

He lay quite still.

Mr. Melville stepped forward, swiftly and delicately. He stooped to pick up the pistol which had fallen from the Citizen-Representative Lebel's hand.

'Now I don't think you will send for the commandant,' he murmured. 'At least, not until I am well away from Turin.' He touched the fallen man with his toe contemptuously. 'Get up, canaille.' But even as he issued the command, his attention was caught by the queer, limp inertness of the body. The eyes, he perceived, were half-open. Looking more closely, he saw a spreading flow of blood upon the floor. And then the spike of an overturned andiron caught his eye. It was tipped with crimson. He realized at once that Lebel's head had struck it in his fall, and that it had pierced his skull.

With a catch in his breath, Mr. Melville went down on one knee beside the body, thrust his hand inside the breast of the coat, and felt for the heart. The man was dead.

He came to his feet again, shuddering, nauseated. For a moment, the shock of finding himself an unintentional murderer turned him numb. When presently he recovered the use of his wits, physical nausea was supplanted by panic. At any moment the landlord or another might walk into that room and find him with the body; and the body that of a man in high authority among the French, who, as Lebel had informed him, were virtually, if not officially, the masters here in Turin. He would have to face the French

commandant, after all, and in no whit better case than if Lebel had summoned him. There were no explanations that would save or serve him. Investigation of his identity, if they troubled about that, would merely provide confirmation of the deliberate murderous intent with which it would be assumed that he had acted.

Only instant flight remained, and even of this the chances were dismayingly slender. He could announce that he had changed his mind, that he would pursue his journey that very night, at once, and demand his chaise. But whilst the horses were being harnessed and the postilion was making ready, it was unthinkable that no one should enter his room, that there should be no inquiry for the French representative who had gone to interview him. His very action in calling for his chaise must excite suspicion and inquiry. Yet he must take this monstrous chance. There was no alternative.

He stepped briskly to the door, and pulled it open. From the threshold, whilst putting out his hand to take his hat from the console, his eyes, those grey eyes that were normally so calm and steady, wandered in a last glance of horror to the supine form with its head by the hearth and its toes pointing to the ceiling.

He went out, mechanically pulling the door after him until it latched. He clattered down the stairs calling for the landlord, in a voice the harshness of which almost surprised him; and because of the confusion in his mind, French was the language that he used.

As he reached the foot of the stairs, the landlord emerged from a door on the left.

'Here, citizen-representative.' He advanced a step or two, and bowed with great deference. 'I hope the English gentleman has been persuaded to accommodate you.'

Mr. Melville was taken aback. 'To . . . to accommodate me?'

'To yield you his horses, I mean.'

The landlord was staring at him. Instinctively, not knowing yet what capital might be made of this unaccountable mistake, Mr. Melville averted his countenance a little. In doing so he found himself looking into a mirror on the wall, and the landlord's mistake became less unaccountable. He was wearing Lebel's wide-brimmed hat cocked á la Henri IV with its tricolour panache and tricolour cockade.

He braced himself, and answered vaguely: 'Oh, yes. Yes.'

CHAPTER II

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DEAD MAN'S SHOES

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In a flash Mr. Melville perceived all that he had contributed to the confusion of identities. His height and build were much the same as Lebel's. Like Lebel, he wore a grey riding-coat, and the landlord evidently overlooked the lack of the representative's tricolour sash. Both he and Lebel had arrived at nightfall, and had been seen only briefly in the dimly lighted passage. The most distinguishing feature between them so viewed was the panached hat of the representative; and this Mr. Melville was now wearing. Also, whereas on arrival Mr. Melville had spoken Italian, now, in summoning the landlord, he had used the language in which he had lately been speaking to Lebel. Therefore, even before seeing him, the landlord had persuaded himself that it was the Frenchman who called him.

All this he perceived in a flash, between saying 'Oh, yes,' and adding the second 'Yes.' From that perception Mr. Melville passed instantly to consider how best he could turn the landlord's error to account. The most imminent danger was that of an invasion of the room above-stairs whilst he was waiting for the chaise.

He must begin by averting this, and hope that in the leisure gained he would discover the next step. To this end he spoke promptly.

'You may order the horses to be harnessed and the postilion to be ready. I shall be departing presently. But first this English traveller and I have business together. A very fortunate meeting. We are not on any account to be disturbed.' He turned on the stairs as he spoke. 'You understand?'

'Oh, but perfectly.'

'Good.' Mr. Melville began to ascend again.

A waiter appeared, to inform the landlord that he was ready to serve the supper ordered by the gentleman above. Mr. Melville, overhearing him, paused.

'Let that wait,' he said, with the peremptory curtness that Lebel had used. 'Let it wait . . . until we call for it.'

Back in the room above-stairs, with the door now locked, Mr. Melville took his square jutting chin in his hand, and those cold, thoughtful, wide-set eyes of his considered the body at his feet without emotion. What was to do he by now perceived. Precisely how to do it might be suggested, he hoped, by the papers in the representative's dispatch-case.

He made a beginning by transferring the sash of office from Lebel's waist to his own. In adjusting it, he surveyed himself in the long gilt-framed mirror above the console. He took off the big cocked hat, and pulled his long black hair a little more about his face, so as to deepen the shadows in it. Beyond this he attempted no change in his appearance, and when it was done he went to work swiftly, and, all things considered, with a surprising calm. There was not a tremor in the hands with which he searched Lebel's pockets. He found some money: a bundle of freshly printed assignats, and a small handful of Sardinian silver; a pocket knife; a

handkerchief; and some other trivial odds and ends; a bunch of four keys on a little silken cord; and a passport on a sheet of linen-backed paper.

Proceeding with method, he next emptied his own pockets, and from their contents made a selection of passport, notebook, soiled assignats and other loose money, a handkerchief, and a silver snuffbox engraved with a monogram of the letters M.A.V.M. which agreed nearly enough with the name on the passport. These objects he bestowed suitably in the pockets of Lebel.

To his own pockets he transferred all that he had taken from Lebel's, with the exception of the little bunch of keys, which he placed on the table, and the linen-backed passport, which he now unfolded. His eyes brightened at the terms of it.

It bore the signature of Barras and was countersigned by Carnot. It announced that the Citizen Camille Lebel, a member of the Council of the Cinque-Cents, travelled as the fully accredited representative of the Directory of the French Republic, One and Indivisible, on a mission of state; it commanded all subjects of the French Republic to render him assistance when called upon to do so; it warned any who hindered him that he did so at the peril of his life; and it desired all officers of whatsoever rank or degree, civil or military, to place at his disposal all the resources within their control.

It was not merely a passport. It was a mandate, and probably as formidable as any that had ever been issued by the Directory. It showed Mr. Melville the heights to which the

dead rogue had climbed. A man to whom such powers were entrusted must himself be ripe for election as a director.

A description of the bearer was appended: Height 1.75 metres (which was within a couple of centimetres of Mr. Melville's own height), build slim, carriage erect, face lean, features regular, complexion pale, mouth wide, teeth strong and white, eyebrows black, hair black and thick, eyes black, distinctive signs none.

In all details save only that of the colour of the eyes, the description fitted Mr. Melville. But the eyes offered an awkward obstacle, and he did not see how the word 'noirs' was to be changed into 'gris' without leaving obvious and dangerous signs of tampering penmanship. Inspiration came, however. Writing materials were on the table. He sat down and made experiments. The ink was stale and deep in colour, a shade deeper than that on the document, he thinned it with water from a carafe, adding drop by drop until he was satisfied. Then he chose a quill, tested it, cut it, tested it again, and rehearsed with it on a separate sheet of paper. Finally satisfied, he addressed himself with confidence to the passport. It was a simple matter to lengthen the first limb of the *n*, so that it became a *p*; he appended a stroke to the *o*, so that it became an *a*, and added a circumflex above; he passed on to join the dot with the body of the next letter, so that the *i* was transformed into an *l*. Then a little curl above the *r* made it look like an *e*, and the final *s* remained intact. He let it dry, and then examined it. A magnifying-glass might reveal what had been done, but to the naked eye 'noirs' had been

impeccably transformed into 'pâles'; a neat compromise, thought Mr. Melville.

He had proceeded without haste, and therefore a little time had been consumed. To make up for it he went now to work more briskly. He unlocked Lebel's dispatch-case. A swift survey of its contents was all that the moment permitted. But here he was fortunate. Almost the first document he scanned disclosed that Lebel was the creature of Barras, dispatched by Barras to exercise surveillance over Bonaparte—that other creature of Barras'—to check the young general's inclination to go beyond the authority of his position, and to remind him constantly that there was a government in Paris from which he must take his orders and to which he would ultimately be answerable.

For the moment this was all that he required to know. He thrust back the papers and locked the case.

His eyes moved slowly round the room in a last survey. Satisfied, he drew a sheet of paper towards him, took up a pen, dipped it, and wrote swiftly:

> Citizen—I require that you wait upon me here at the White Cross Inn without an instant's delay on a matter of national importance.

He signed it shortly with the name Lebel, and added below the words: 'Reprèsentant en mission.'

He folded it, and scrawled the superscription: 'To the Commandant de Place of the French Garrison in Turin.'

Out on the landing, in the harsh, peremptory tones the Frenchman had used, Mr. Melville bawled for the landlord. When he had curtly ordered him to have the note conveyed

at once, he went back and shut himself into the room again; but this time he did not trouble to lock the door.

It was a full half-hour before voices, a heavy tread on the stairs, and the clatter of a sabre against the balusters proclaimed the arrival of the commandant.

The officer, a tall, gaunt, sinewy man of forty, his natural arrogance and self-sufficiency inflamed by the curt terms of the note he had received, flung the door wide, and walked in unannounced. He checked at what he beheld upon the floor. Then his questioning glance travelled to the man who, pencil in hand at the table, sat as unconcernedly busy with some documents as if corpses were his daily companions.

The truculent eyes of the soldier met a sterner truculence in the eyes of the gentleman with the pencil. He heard himself greeted in a rasping tone of reproof.

'You make yourself awaited.'

The officer bridled. 'I am not at everybody's beck and call.' With a soldier's ready sneer for the politician, he added: 'Not even a citizen-representative's.'

'Ah!' Mr. Melville poised his pencil. 'Your name, if you please?'

The question crackled so sharply that the commandant, who was himself full of questions by now, answered it almost unawares.

'Colonel Lescure, Commandant de Place in Turin.'

Mr. Melville made a note. Then he looked up as if waiting for something more. As it did not immediately come, he added it himself.

'Entirely at my orders, I hope.'

'At your orders? See here. Supposing you begin by telling me what this means. Is that man dead?'

'You have eyes, haven't you? Take a look at him. As to what it means, it means that there has been an accident.'

'Oh! An accident! That's simple, isn't it? Just an accident.' He was full of obvious malice. Behind him the landlord showed a round white face of fear.

'Well, perhaps not quite an accident,' Mr. Melville amended.

The colonel had gone forward, and was stooping over the body. In that stooping attitude he looked round to jeer again: 'Oh, not quite an accident?' He stood up, and turned. 'Seems to me that this is a police affair; that a man has been murdered. Supposing you tell me the truth about the matter.'

'Why else do you suppose I sent for you? But don't raise your voice to me. I don't like it. I met this man here tonight by chance. I distrusted his looks and his manner. For one thing, he was English; and God knows no Frenchman today has cause to think well of any member of that perfidious race. An Englishman in Turin, or anywhere in Italy, may be an object of suspicion to any but a fool. Foolishly I announced the intention of sending for you that he might render a proper account of himself before you. At that he drew a pistol on me. It is there on the floor. I struck him. He fell, and by the mercy of Providence broke his head on that fire-iron, on which, if you look, you will find blood. That is all that I can tell you. And now you know precisely what occurred.'

'Oh, I do, do I? Oh, I do?' The commandant was laboriously ironical. 'And who is to confirm this pretty little tale of yours?'

'If you were not a fool you would see the evidence for yourself. The blood on the fire-iron; the nature of the wound; the position in which he is lying. He had not been moved since he fell. He will have papers that should speak to his identity as an Englishman, named Marcus Melville. I know that he has, because he showed them to me under my insistence. You will find them in his pocket. You had better have a look at them. And at the same time, it may save words if you have a look at mine.' And he proffered the linen-backed sheet.

It checked an outburst from the empurpling colonel. He snatched the passport, and then his manner changed as he read those formidable terms, which might be said to place the entire resources of the State at the bearer's service. His eyes grew round. The high colour receded from his cheeks.

'Bu . . . but, citizen-representative, why . . . why did you not tell me sooner?'

'You did not ask. You take so much for granted. You seem so ignorant of the proper forms. Do you know, Colonel Lescure, that you do not impress me very favourably? I shall have occasion to mention it to General Bonaparte.'

The colonel stood dismayed.

'But name of a name! Not knowing who you were . . . In dealing with a stranger . . . naturally . . . I . . .'

'Silence! You deafen me.' Mr. Melville recovered the passport from the soldier's nerveless fingers. He stood up. 'You have wasted enough of my time already. I have not

forgotten that I was kept waiting half-an-hour for your arrival.'

'I did not realize the urgency.' The colonel was perspiring.

'It was stated in my note to you. I even said that the matter was one of national importance. That to a zealous officer should have been enough. More than enough.' He began to replace his documents in the dispatch-case. His cold, hard, inflexible voice went on: 'You are now in possession of the facts of what happened here. The urgency of my business does not permit me to be detained for the convenience of the local authorities and their inquiries into this man's death. I am already overdue at General Headquarters in Milan. I leave this matter in your hands.'

'Of course. Of course, citizen-representative. Why, indeed, should you be troubled further in the affair?'

'Why, indeed?' Ever stern and uncompromising he locked the dispatch-case and turned to the awed landlord. 'Is the chaise ready?'

'It has been waiting this half-hour, sir.'

'Lead the way then, if you please. Good-night, citizen-colonel.'

But on the threshold the commandant stayed him. 'Citizen-representative! You—you will not be too harsh with an honest soldier, who was seeking to do his duty in the dark. If now . . . General Bonaparte . . .'

Eyes light and hard as agates flashed upon him sternly. Then a chill, tolerant smile broke faintly on the features of the citizen-representative. He shrugged.

'So that I hear no more of this affair, you shall hear no more of it,' he said, and with a nod went out.

CHAPTER III

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THE DISPATCH-CASE

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The real name of this escaping gentleman who rolled out of Turin that night, in a jolting chaise, was Marc-Antoine Villiers de Melleville.

In manner and air he was as French as his real name when he spoke French, but as English as that name's present Anglicized form when he spoke English. And he was not merely bi-lingual. He was bi-national, lord of considerable estates both in England and in France.

He derived his English possessions of Avonford, from his grandmother, the Lady Constantia Villiers, who had been so bright an ornament of the court of Queen Anne. She had married the brilliant Grègoire de Melleville, Vicomte de Saulx, who at the time was French Ambassador at the Court of Saint James's. Their eldest son, Gaston de Melleville, had further diluted the French blood of his house by an English marriage. Himself as much English as French, he had divided his time between the paternal estates at Saulx and the maternal inheritance at Avonford, and it was actually at Avonford that Marc-Antoine had been born, one degree more English than his half-English father before him. When the troubles grew menacing in France, Gaston de Melleville's definite departure for England can hardly be regarded in the light of an emigration.

He placed his affairs in the hands of his steward, Camille Lebel, a young lawyer educated at the Vicomte's own charges, and putting his trust in this man whom he had raised from the soil to the robe, he confidently left him to steer the fortunes of the estates of Saulx through the dangerous political waters of the time.

Upon his father's death, unintimidated by the condition of things in France, and actually encouraged by his English mother, a woman who placed duty above every consideration, Marc-Antoine crossed the Channel to go and set affairs in order at Saulx.

His estates, like those of all emigrated noblemen, had been confiscated by the State, and had been sold for the benefit of the nation. They had, however, been purchased for a bagatelle by Camille Lebel with Melleville money which had come into his hands as the intendant of the estate. No doubt crossed Marc-Antoine's mind even when he found Lebel of such republican consequence in Touraine that he was actually president of the Revolutionary Tribunal of Tours. He assumed that this was a mask donned by that loyal steward the better to discharge his stewardship. Disillusion did not come until, denounced and arrested, it was actually by Lebel that he was sentenced to death. Then he understood.

One great advantage Marc-Antoine possessed over other unfortunate nobles in his desperate case. Wealth was still his, and wealth that was safe in England and could there be drawn upon. This weapon he was shrewd enough to wield. He had perceived how corruptible were these starvelings of the new règime, and to what lengths corruption could go. He

sent for the advocate he had employed, but whom Lebel had silenced, and what he said to him induced the lawyer to bring the public prosecutor into the business. Lebel, his work done, had left Tours for Saulx, and this rendered possible the thing that Marc-Antoine proposed. Against his solemn pledge and his note of hand for some thousands of pounds in gold redeemable in London, his name was inserted in a list of persons executed, and he was spirited out of prison and supplied with a passport that bore him safely back across the Channel.

Until their chance meeting that night at the White Cross Inn in Turin, Lebel had remained in the persuasion that no hereditary proprietor of the Saulx estates survived ever to rise up and claim them even should the monarchy be restored. How far that meeting, instead of the catastrophe he had accounted it, was actually destined to further Marc-Antoine's present aims, he was not to realize until he came to a closer scrutiny of Lebel's papers.

This happened at Crescentino. He reached it towards midnight, and since, according to the postilion, his horses had also reached the limit of endurance, he was constrained to put up at the indifferent house that was kept by the postmaster. There, late though the hour and weary though he was, he sat down to investigate, by the light of a couple of tallow candles, the contents of Lebel's dispatch-case. It was then discovered to him that Lebel had not been crossing merely the path of his travels when they met, but also the very purpose of his mission to Venice.

On his escape from France in '93, Marc-Antoine bore with him the fruits of shrewd observations, as a result of which

he was able to convey to King George's watchful government a deal of first-hand information. The authority which he derived from his social position, the lucidity of the expositions which he was in a position to make, and the shrewdness of his inferences from the facts, caught the attention of Mr. Pitt. The minister sent for him, not only then, but on subsequent occasions when news more than ordinarily startling from across the Channel rendered desirable the opinions of one as well-informed upon French matters as Marc-Antoine.

From all this it had resulted that when, in the spring of this year 1796, the Vicomte had announced that his own affairs were taking him to Venice, Mr. Pitt displayed his trust in him by inviting him to assume a mission of considerable gravity on behalf of the British Government.

The successes of Bonaparte's Italian campaign had appeared all the more dismaying to Mr. Pitt because so utterly unexpected. Who with the facts before him could have imagined that a mere boy without experience of leadership, followed by a ragged, starveling horde, inadequate in numbers and without proper equipment, could successfully have opposed the coalition of the Piedmontese with the seasoned army of the Empire under the command of veterans in generalship? It was as alarming as it seemed fantastic. If the young Corsican were to continue as he had begun, the result might well be the rescue of the French Republic from the bankruptcy on the brink of which Mr. Pitt perceived it with satisfaction to be reeling. Not only was the exhausted French treasury being replenished by these victories, but the ebbing confidence of

the nation in its rulers was being renewed, and the fainting will to maintain the struggle was being revived.

A republican movement which was almost in the nature of a religion was being given a new lease of life, and it was a movement that constituted a deadly peril to all Europe and to all those institutions which European civilization accounted sacred and essential to its welfare.

From the outset William Pitt had laboured to form a coalition of European states which should present a solid, impregnable front to the assaults of the anarch. The withdrawal of Spain from this alliance had been his first grave setback. But the rapid victories of the Army of Italy under Bonaparte, resulting in the armistice of Cherasco, had changed mere disappointment into liveliest alarm. It was idle to continue to suppose that the successes of the young Corsican, who, as a result of a piece of jobbery on the part of Barras, had been placed in command of the Army of Italy, were due only to the favour of fortune. A formidable military genius had arisen, and if Europe were to be saved from the deadly pestilence of Jacobinism, it became necessary to throw every ounce of available strength into the scales against him.

The unarmed neutrality declared by the Republic of Venice could be tolerated no longer. It was not enough that Austria might be prepared to raise and launch fresh armies more formidable than that which Bonaparte had defeated. Venice, however fallen from her erstwhile power and glory, was still capable of putting an army of sixty thousand men into the field; and Venice must be persuaded to rouse herself from her neutrality. Hitherto the Most Serene

Republic had met all representations that she should definitely take her stand against the invaders of Italy with the assumption that the forces already ranged against the French were more than sufficient to repel them. Now that the facts proved the error of this assumption, she must be brought to perceive the danger to herself in further temporizing, and out of a spirit of self-preservation, if from no loftier motive, unite with those who stood in arms against the common peril.

This was to be the Vicomte de Saulx's mission. The very laws of Venice, which forbade all private intercourse between an accredited ambassador and the Doge or any member of the Senate, called for something of the kind.

Virtually, then, the Vicomte de Saulx travelled as a secret envoy-extraordinary, charged with a method of advocacy paradoxically impossible to the avowed British Ambassador by virtue of his very office. And since he had set out, the need for this advocacy had been rendered increasingly urgent by Bonaparte's crushing defeat of the Imperial forces at Lodi.

Now Lebel, it appeared from the papers which Marc-Antoine perused with ever-increasing interest and attention, had the same ultimate destination, and went in much the same capacity to represent the French interest.

The elaborate, intimate notes of instruction in Barras' hand confirmed that complete confidence in Lebel which the powers bestowed upon him already announced.

Lebel's first errand was to Bonaparte, from whom he was enjoined to stand no nonsense. He might find—and there were already signs of it—that the general's successes had

gone to his head. Should Bonaparte display any troublesome arrogance, let Lebel remind him that the hand that had raised him starving from the gutter could as easily restore him to it.

There were minute instructions for the future conduct of the Italian campaign, but in no particular were they so minute as in what concerned Venice. Venice, Barras pointed out, was dangerously poised, not merely between armed and unarmed neutrality, but between neutrality and hostility. Pressure was being brought to bear upon her. There were signs that Pitt, that monster of perfidy and hypocrisy, was active in the matter. A blunder now might fling Venice into the arms of Austria with sorry consequences for the Army of Italy.

What exactly this would mean was made clear by a minute schedule of the forces by land and sea within Venetian control.

It must be Lebel's task to insist with Bonaparte, and to see that he complied with the insistence, that Venice should be lulled by protestations of friendship until the time to deal with her should arrive, which would be when the Austrian strength was so shattered that alliance with Venice could no longer avail either of them.

The instructions continued. From Bonaparte's headquarters at Milan, Lebel was to proceed to Venice, and there his first task should be thoroughly to organize the revolutionary propaganda.

'In short,' Barras concluded this voluminous note, 'you will so dispose that Venice may be strangled in her sleep. It is your mission first to see that she is lulled into slumber,