

## IX. *The Sword-Swallower's Song*

Monsieur le Marquis de Rosenthal, having pronounced these remarkable words, picked up a chair and came to place himself facing the divan on which Comayrol and good old Jaffret were sitting.

"Messieurs," he continued, in a polite tone full of modesty, "you are an illustrious association, and I am merely a simple bumpkin; that is why it's perfectly natural that I should dress up in order to have the honor of introducing myself to you: tidy body, tidy mind, tidy situation. I don't dress like this every day; I've prepared, like a candidate who is about to take his examination, and I've chosen the prettiest of my names for the occasion. You will, I hope, have some indulgence in favor of a neophyte who has the greatest respect for you, but cannot push courtesy as far as telling you, hypocritically, that, in his opinion, his youth is not worth as much as your decrepitude."

"Damn it!" exclaimed Comayrol. "We're not averse to joking, Monsieur Saladin, but we have other things to do here than watch you swallow sabers!"

The Prince and Dr. Samuel had drawn closer together. Vicomte Gioja stood to one side, striking a superb pose.

"I'm flattered," Saladin said, biting the beak of his stick, "that you've taken the trouble to gather a little information about me. I'm worth the trouble, let it be said without false modesty, and I hope to offer you abundant proof of that shortly. You've been vegetating for many years now, by dear Messieurs; you have no leader. I think that you've found one."

"He has talent as an orator," whispered the son of Louis XVII.

"Where does this fellow come from?" demanded Gioja, from the other side of the room.

"I believe," said Saladin, turning toward him politely, "that I have the honor of speaking to Monsieur le Duc de Chaves' *valet de coeur*?"

"Well, well!" murmured Comayrol, pricking up his ears.

"My dear Monsieur...!" Gioja began, haughtily.

"Shhh!" said Saladin, softly. "We'll get back in due course to the honorable role you're playing with regard to Monsieur le Duc, which might eventually get in the way of the association's business affairs. You're the one who has the Scapular?"

Gioja did not reply. The other members of the club looked at one another in frank astonishment.

"I have frequented the offices of the Prefecture," said the Marquis de Rosenthal, parenthetically, "in an amateur capacity and to perfect my education. I have a little learning in all faculties, and am well acquainted with your petty histories."

"You haven't come here to threaten us, I assume?" pronounced Comayrol, whose sanguine cheeks took on a deeper red hue.

Jaffret touched his arm and murmured: "He interests me."

"My dear Monsieur," said Saladin, addressing Comayrol, "I'm independent by nature and I desire to make my own way, outside the administration. Except that it pleases me to let you know right away that I'm on my guard. You see me alone; you are five—it's as well that liberty of discussion between us should be fully assured."

"Well then," said Comayrol, with contained rudeness, "let's get on with the discussion, please, without delay."

"With all my heart," said Saladin. "Except that no one has yet answered my question. Is it Vicomte Annibal Gioja who is Master of the Scapular?"

"That's a secret of our fraternity," observed Dr. Samuel, who had not yet spoken.

Saladin bowed to him.

"Messieurs," he went on, "the Scapular is your scepter, I know that—and many other things. Although I do not see here any of the great physiognomies that made the ancient history of your order illustrious, I would have some reluctance to advance my candidature in opposition to individuals such as Messieurs Jaffret, Comayrol and Samuel, who are at least very capable and very experienced."

"That's very good of you," growled the former notary's clerk.

"I speak my mind...but if it's only a matter of dethroning this rogue, things change, and I tell you frankly that a society like yours ought not to have a man of straw for a managing director."

Annibal Gioja threw away the newspaper that he had in his hand and took a step toward Saladin. Good old Jaffret stopped him with a gesture, saying: "Let the orator speak, my dear boy."

"Given that," Saladin went on, turning to Gioja, "the orator will talk to you in private whenever you wish."

Good old Jaffret took the floor again. "My dear Monsieur," he said. "I make the observation you that our meetings here are always peaceful."

"It's necessary, my dear Monsieur," Saladin interjected, "that our meetings become fruitful again, as they once were. I'm counting on importing, I ought to tell you, a little of the young and active blood that is in my veins. My intention—why should I hide it from you?—is to restore the great family of the *Habits Noirs*."

There was a stir, as they say in accounts of parliamentary proceedings, and the son of Louis XVII exclaimed, involuntarily: "Listen, damn it! Listen!"

"I've been listening," growled Comayrol. "The son of that scoundrel Similor is as loquacious as his father. He's talked a great deal, but so far as I can see, he hasn't yet said anything."

"The substance is very vague," murmured good old Jaffret. "Very vague indeed..."

"I'll make it precise," said Saladin. "Don't worry. But before entering into the matter, it's necessary to clear the terrain. Are you bound to Gioja, yes or no?"

"No," replied all the members present, in unison, except for Gioja himself.

"Would you give the Scapular," Saladin continued, "to a young man of courage and ambition, who could bring you, as a premium for that joyous event, a ready-made affair of 1.5 million francs in cash, without discounts or deductions?"

There was a moment of hesitation; then Comayrol replied: "That depends."

"That depends," good old Jaffret repeated, paternally. "It depends, depends..."

"You understand," Comayrol, went on, "that there must be proofs...guarantees..."

"It's not sufficient here," Vicomte Annibal added, with bitter scorn, "to know how to swallow swords."

Saladin pounced on that interjection as if on a prey. "Messieurs!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet and putting his hand inside his jacket, "in our social order, from the lowest rung of the ladder to the most elevated, permit me to tell you, I see only sword-swallowers everywhere. The Prussian monarch draws Austria into a war against Denmark..."

"Listen!" said the Prince, keenly interested.

By contrast, Comayrol exclaimed: "We don't talk about politics here, my good man."

And Jaffret added, in a plaintive tone: "Look out—the brave young man has prepared a tirade!"

"An electoral candidate making his profession of faith," Saladin tried to continue, "a minister balancing his budget, needy kings who scatter taxes like pearls around their debts..."

"And philanthropists who force you to take out life insurance," Comayrol declaimed, imitating his accent. "The same! Too bad! And the apostles that extract teeth with a pistol..."

"And the good souls, deprived of capital, who protest against usury..." good old Jaffret insinuated.

"And the ancients of Clichy<sup>ii</sup> who have raised their lances against bodily restraint..." Dr. Samuel slipped in.

"Sword-swallowers!" cried the Prince, delightedly. "Sword-swallowers!"

Everyone looked at Saladin and repeated, triumphantly: "Sword-swallowers!"

Monsieur le Marquis de Rosenthal was slightly disconcerted at first, but by the end of the manifestation he had regained his victorious smile. He clapped his ox-blood gloves together, and said: "Bravo, my dear lords! You're not as old as I thought, I owe you that justice, and you have cut through my song with great intelligence. Bravo, again—and so much the better! Between men of intelligence, there is less difficulty in understanding one another. Let's get to the point. Tomorrow, Monsieur le Duc de Chaves, already mentioned, will have, in his house in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré, a round sum of 1.5 million francs..."

"You're mistaken, my little Monsieur," Annibal Gioja hastened to say. "The round sum is two million."

Saladin turned toward him solely. "Ah!" he said. Then he turned back to the group facing him, as if to ask: "Is that true?"

Comayrol addressed a mocking nod of the head to him, which good old Jaffret translated thus: "My dear young man, you have all my personal sympathy, but you've arrived a little too late."

Saladin remained pensive momentarily, then asked himself, aloud: "Will there be 3.5 million francs in the Hôtel de Chaves tomorrow, then?"

"That's 100,000 piastres that you want to slip into your own pocket, then?" said Annibal Gioja, who had not heard his final observation.

"What!" Comayrol cried, by contrast. "Three and a half million francs? Where do you get that calculation?"

"I'm sure of the figure of 1.5 million," Saladin replied. "You appear to be sure of the figure of two million. Evidently, the two sums must be distinct."

Jaffret pricked up his ears, like a good warhorse hearing the sound of the trumpet. "He has talent!" he repeated. "Let's get this clear. Where is your 1.5 million francs coming from, young man?"

"From Brazil," Saladin replied, without hesitation. "Now that I think about it, your two millions must be coming from Paris." Interpreting as a response the play of physiognomies that surrounded him, he added: "I've got it! Have you the means of getting hold of the two million?"

Comayrol made a noble gesture. "We're not entirely clumsy, Monsieur le Marquis," he replied.

"I'll be precise," Saladin persisted. "Let's not joke any more, Masters. Can you regard the two million as yours already? You're hesitating! So you're still seeking...seek no longer! When I say I'm bringing you a project, it's because I'm bring you a project."

He emphasized the final word and his round eyes made a tour of the audience, pricking each member with a cold and piercing gaze.

Jaffret, Comayrol and the doctor wore astonished expressions. Gioja lowered his eyes. The Prince rubbed his hands and exclaimed, on his own: "Very good! That suits me!"

"Whether it's 1.5 million francs, as I believed, or 3.5 million, as it now appears," Saladin continued, "I say that the deal is done, since from tomorrow on, I can get as many men as you wish into the Hôtel de Chaves, at any hour of the day or night you might choose."

"Damn!" said good old Jaffret. "That's very kind of you, my dear boy."

"What are your means?" asked Comayrol.

"I ask permission," Saladin replied, "to keep that to myself, until we've concluded our arrangement."

"To conclude an arrangement, it's necessary to know, damn it!"

"Let's not fall into a vicious circle," said Saladin, whose voice took on a veritable authority again. "Besides, we haven't finished with the preliminaries. In the capacity of Master—*Père*, since that's your term—I claim the lion's share, and I'll only work if I'm the Master."

"That's plain enough," said Comayrol.

"As honest as gold," agreed good old Jaffret.

"What do you mean by the lion's share?" demanded Dr. Samuel.

"If it were only a matter of my 1.5 million francs," Saladin replied, "I'd have to demand half."

"Half!" cried the audience, in chorus. "Don't make us laugh!"

"But," said Saladin, "since there's another two million besides, each of us will keep his own part; you get the two millions and I'll have the 1.5 million."

Good old Jaffret blew into his cheeks.

"Damn!" said the Prince.

"You're mad, old chap," Comayrol decided.

Gioja laughed into his tinted beard.

"That's the way it is," Saladin said, tranquilly. "Take it or leave it."

"With 1.5 million francs," Samuel observed, "one could buy all the locksmiths in Paris."

"You don't get it!" Comayrol riposted, laughing. "Our new Master wants to make us pay for the young and lively blood that he's going to infuse into our old veins."

"Exactly!" said Saladin. "I don't forbid you to find it dear, but that's my price."

"And what if it's not ours?" said Comayrol, staring at him fixedly. His cheeks were scarlet, all the way to his ears.

Saladin met his gaze and replied, coldly: "That would be annoying, Monsieur Comayrol. What I have in mind is that you'll indulge my caprice this evening, or I'll abandon you."

The members of the club tried to laugh, but Saladin repeated, emphasizing his words: “I’ll abandon you...to begin with. Then I’ll make a career in the administration by revealing your pot of roses.”

He was sitting, as we have said, facing a group formed by the doctor, Jaffret, Comayrol and the Prince. Opposite him, above the divan that served to seat those gentlemen, there was a large mirror. Behind him, touching the back of his chair, was a table supporting a lamp. Behind that table, Annibal Gioja was standing, sometimes immobile, sometimes pacing back and forth.

As he pronounced the final word, Saladin saw the eyes of his four interlocutors fix themselves simultaneously on Gioja. He knew where Gioja was. The mirror, though smoke-stained, sent back the image of the Italian, of whom he had not lost sight for an instant. Something glittered in the latter’s right hand as he took a step toward the table. The eyes of the four members of the Black Silk Bonnet Club were lowered at the same time, and good old Jaffret shivered slightly.

“Well,” said Saladin, “Victomte Annibal hasn’t lost his Neapolitan habits.” He turned his head negligently.

The Italian moving toward him stopped abruptly—but when Saladin had resumed his position relative to his four interlocutors, the scene had changed completely. Each of them—even good old Jaffret—had a knife in his hand.

“What will Monsieur Massenet say?” asked Saladin, laughing.

“Massenet won’t say anything,” Comayrol replied, getting to his feet. He *eats in*. You’re fried, my lad!”

Without turning round, Saladin picked up the lantern from the table, which was within arm’s reach, and raised it above his head.

At the same moment, there were three sharp raps on the panes of the window overlooking the alleyway.

The knives disappeared as if by magic, and everything fell silent—even the sound of breathing.

“The shutters aren’t closed today!” whispered Comayrol, after a few seconds, punctuating the sentence with a Southern curse.

“Why aren’t they closed?” added good old Jaffret.

“They were closed,” Saladin replied. “Firmly closed—but I made my tour before I came in, with Papa. One has a few good friends nearby.”

“*Bonjour*, old folk!” shouted a voice from the alleyway outside. “How are you, today?”

Comayrol ran to the window and opened it. “Who’s there?” he demanded.

There was no reply. His gaze interrogated the dark alleyway, which seemed to be deserted.

In the meantime, good old Jaffret took hold of Saladin’s fingers with the hand that had formerly held the knife, and squeezed them affectionately, whispering: “This whole little scheme is remarkably intelligent, and I give you my vote with all my heart, Biribi.”

The Prince, who had moved around the table, touched Dr. Samuel’s shoulder. “You wanted a man,” he said. “Here’s one.”

“I don’t know about that,” the doctor said. “We’ll see.”

Saladin replied to good old Jaffret: “It wasn’t hard to do. You’re aging bandits, ripened by retirement. I’d have acted otherwise if you’d been 20 years younger.” He added: “Shut the window, Papa Comayrol. You’re still the greenest of the gang, and by searching hard, one might still find muscle under your skin. Word of honor, though, you’re in need of renewal. Your five daggers were so funny! I thought I was in a wax museum.”

Comayrol stayed by the window, not concealing his bad temper. “You’re right, little one,” he pronounced, through gritted teeth. “Fifteen years ago, you wouldn’t have had time to lift the candle!”

Saladin blew him a kiss. “We’ll be good friends, old chap, the two of us,” he said, “when you’ve sworn obedience to me. Come on! Let’s not go to sleep. Put on a semblance of deliberating a little, my venerable friends, while I pretend not to be listening, and then you can give me your official response.”

He moved away from the divan and went to pick up *Le Journal des Villes et Campagnes* on the far side of the room.

The members of the Black Silk Bonnet Club formed a group, and good old Jaffret said in his softest voice: “Annibal Gioja, respected Master, I request the floor. You’ll give it to me? Thank you. You’re sacked, my lad, and that’s no bad thing.”

Gioja said something in a low voice by way of reply, which Saladin did not catch.

The deliberation lasted exactly two minutes, after which the eloquent Comayrol, having recovered all his good humor, advanced toward Saladin at the head of the club, and said to him: “Master, the Scapular is yours.”

Gioja made as if to open his coat.

“No need, my lad,” Saladin said to him. “That’s an obsolete formality. We won’t scrap any of the old customs, designed to strike the crude imagination of the populace, but between ourselves, we’re above all that. Is it understood that you name me *Père-à-tous* and chief *Habit Noir*, unanimously? Raise your hands!”

All the hands were raised, even Gioja’s.

“Good!” said Saladin, standing up and enveloping them with a hard stare. “You don’t like speeches, so I’ll do without the saber I was counting on swallowing for my greeting. That’s an end to laughter. Sit down—we’ll have a chat.”

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<sup>i</sup> I have left this phrase untranslated because English has no similarly polite say of signifying “procurer” (“pimp” or “pander” would be too nakedly insulting).

<sup>ii</sup> Clichy was one of the French sites at which flint tools had been discovered, whose apparent antiquity called Biblical chronology into question and formed the focal point of fierce debates about “pre-Adamite” humankind. *Les anciens de Clichy* were, therefore, Stone Age humans, and the phrase was used metaphorically much as we would nowadays use “dinosaurs”. Dr. Samuel, the proprietor of at least one “sanatorium,” is misusing the phrase in complaining about legally-backed reforms in the treatment of the insane, which were intended to reduce the levels of brutality in the overstocked asylums of Paris and the provinces. In this instance, he is the conservative.