



CHAPTER

1

The Period

It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness. It was the season of Light; it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair. Some people had everything to look forward to, while others had nothing to look forward to—much like today.

In France, in 1775, things were beginning to go swiftly downhill. The government was spending money without limits, gradually bankrupting the country. Church leaders entertained themselves with such “humane” actions as sentencing a youth to have his hands cut off, his tongue torn out with pincers, and his body burned alive—because he had not knelt down, in the rain, to honor a procession of monks some fifty or sixty yards away.

There were already trees growing in France in 1775 that would soon be sawed into boards, to make a terrible instrument of death. This was the

guillotine, which would slice off the heads of thousands of French nobility. And in the small farmlands outside of Paris sat many creaky carts in need of new paint. These time-worn vehicles were spattered with mud, snuffed about by pigs, and roosted in by poultry. But one day, they would carry lords and ladies to the guillotine, whose razor-sharp knife so swiftly separated an aristocrat's head from his body.

But in 1775, no one suspected that these trees and carts would one day be transformed into agents of death. No one dared suggest that France reshape itself, so that the small farmer, the tradesman, the ordinary citizen could have a decent life. This would have been considered unpatriotic by the aristocracy that ruled the land and the cardinals that ruled the church.

While France enjoyed a period of calm, England was the scene of wide disorder. Every night armed robbers plundered residents of the cities and the countryside. Families were publicly cautioned not to go out of town without putting their furniture in warehouses for security. Even the mayor of London was robbed of his possessions while strolling about the city. Jailed prisoners regularly fought battles with their guards. In a fruitless effort to preserve law and order, the hangman strung up countless villains. Some of these were ruthless murderers, while others had stolen only a few pennies—but they all received the same punishment.



CHAPTER

2

The Mail

On a Friday night in late November, 1775, the road to Dover lay shrouded in mist. As the Dover mail carriage lumbered up Shooter's Hill, the weary passengers walked uphill in the mud by the side of the coach. They trudged along not for exercise, but because the weight of the carriage had three times already brought the horses to a stop.

However, the coachman managed to persuade the beasts to continue on. So, with drooping heads and swishing tails, they mashed their way through the thick mud, floundering and stumbling along. As often as the driver rested them and brought them to a stand, the near horse violently shook his head, as if insisting that the coach could never get up the hill.

A steaming mist had crawled up the hill like an evil spirit. A clammy, intensely cold dampness filled the air, like the waves of an unwholesome sea. The mist was so dense that the coach driver could see only a few yards ahead.

The three passengers in the carriage were wrapped up to the cheekbones and over the ears, and wore heavy boots. Each traveler was so protected against the penetrating cold, that none could tell what the others looked like. No one spoke. In those days, travelers hesitated to break into conversation with strangers. They could never tell who might be ready to draw a pistol and rob them right on the spot.

The guard of the Dover mail stood on his own particular perch, beating his feet to keep warm, as the coach lumbered up Shooter's Hill. He kept an eye and a hand on the arms-chest before him, where several loaded guns lay on top of a layer of sharp swords.

"Wo-ho!" said the coachman, addressing the horses. "One more pull and you're at the top and be damned to you, for I have had trouble enough to get you to it—Joe!"

"Hallo," the guard replied.

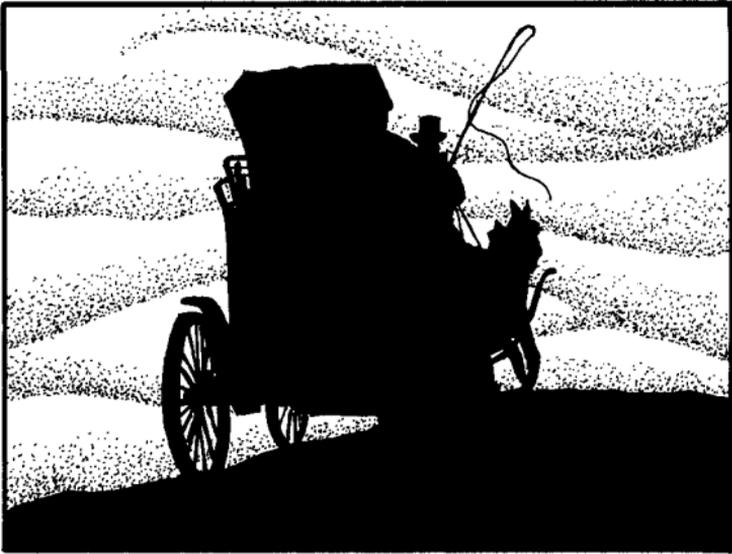
"What time do you make it, Joe?"

"Ten minutes past eleven."

"And not atop of Shooter's yet! Tst! Yah! Get on with you!"

The lead horse, spurred by the whip, made a decided scramble for it, and the three other horses followed suit. This last burst carried the mail to the summit of the hill. The horses stopped to breathe again, and the guard got down to prepare the wheel for the descent.

"Tst, Joe!" cried the coachman in a warning



voice, looking down from his box.

“What is it, Tom?”

They both listened.

“I hear a horse cantering, Joe.”

“I think the horse is galloping, Tom,” replied the guard. “Gentlemen! In the king’s name, all of you!” With this warning, he cocked his blunderbuss and made ready to defend the coach.

The stillness that accompanied the halting of the coach, added to the stillness of the night, made it very quiet indeed. The hearts of the passengers beat loud enough perhaps to be heard, for they too heard the distant hoofbeats.

The sound of a galloping horse came fast and furiously up the hill.

“So-ho!” the guard sang out, as loud as he could roar. “Yo there! Stop! I shall fire!”

The pace was suddenly halted and, with much splashing and slipping, a man's voice called from the mist, "Is that the Dover mail?"

"Never you mind what it is!" the guard retorted. "Who are you?"

"Is that the Dover mail?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want a passenger, if it is."

"What passenger?"

"Mr. Jarvis Lorry."

One of the passengers indicated that it was his name. The guard, the coachman, and the two other passengers eyed him distrustfully.

"Stay where you are," the guard called to the voice in the mist. "Passenger by the name of Lorry answer straight."

"What is the matter?" asked the passenger with a worried tone. "Who wants me? Is it Jerry?"

"Yes, Mr. Lorry."

"What is the matter?"

"A message sent after you from over yonder. T. and Co."

"I know this messenger, guard," said Mr. Lorry. "He may come close; there's nothing wrong."

"I hope there ain't, but I can't be so sure of that," said the guard gruffly. "Listen well, you! Come forward slowly, d'yuh hear? And if you've got holsters on your saddle, don't let me see your hand go near 'em. For I might make a mistake, and when I make one, it takes the form of lead. So now let's look at you."

The figures of a horse and rider came slowly through the swirling mist to the side of the mail, where the passenger stood. The rider stooped and handed the passenger a small folded paper. The rider's horse was tired, and both horse and rider were covered with mud, from the hoofs of the horse to the hat of the man.

"Guard!" said the passenger, in a tone of quiet confidence.

The watchful guard, with his right hand at the stock of his raised blunderbuss, his left around the barrel, and his eye on the horseman, answered curtly, "Sir."

"There is nothing to worry about. I belong to Tellson's Bank. You must know Tellson's Bank in London. I am going to Paris on business. May I read this?"

"If you be quick, sir."

In the light of the coach-lamp he read, first to himself and then aloud, "'Wait at Dover for Mam'selle.' It's not long, you see, guard. Jerry, say that my answer was RECALLED TO LIFE."

"That's a very strange answer," said Jerry.

"Take that answer back, and they will know that I received their message. Have a safe journey. Good night."

The coach lumbered on again, with heavier wreaths of mist closing round it as it began the descent. The guard soon replaced his gun in his arms-chest, but only after checking on the condition of the pistols that he wore in his belt.

“Tom!” the guard called softly over the coach-roof.

“Hallo, Joe.”

“Did you hear the message?”

“I did, Joe.”

“What did you make of it, Tom?”

“Nothing at all, Joe.”

“That’s a coincidence,” the guard replied, “for I made the same of it myself.”

Jerry, left alone in the mist and darkness, dismounted. As the exhausted mare rested, he wiped the mud from his face and shook the water out of his hat brim. He waited until the wheels of the mail coach were no longer within hearing and the night was quite still again. Then he turned to walk down the hill.

“After that there gallop from Temple Bar in London, old lady, I won’t trust your fore-legs till I get you on the level,” said this hoarse messenger, glancing at his mare. ‘Recalled to life.’ That’s a Blazing strange message. If everyone were recalled to life, Jerry, you’d be in a Blazing bad way, Jerry!”