

The Story of Monsieur Drouet – Capture of a King

I am the postmaster* at Sainte Menehould but I used to be a soldier.

On Tuesday 22 May around 7.30pm I saw two carriages at my door, a berline* with six people in it and a cabriolet* with two people inside. There were also three outriders (men on horseback) and eleven other relief horses.

In the berline there was a woman who looked like the queen. [*Monsieur Drouet has seen her once when he was in the army*]. On her left was a man, whose face looked like the face on the five-pound note which I had in my pocket.

A detachment of 50 hussars* had been hanging round the inn all morning: their commander went over and spoke to the outriders, who were clearly in a hurry to leave. My suspicions were aroused but I didn't want to cause a false alarm. But when I saw that the soldiers were also getting ready to leave and to follow the carriages, (as if to escort them) I told the local National Guard* what I thought. We all got together and found out that the carriages had taken the road to Varenne. We arrived in Varenne around the same time as the carriages, around 11pm. It was a very dark night.

We took off anything which might have suggested that we were a fighting unit and walked with our horses slowly past the carriages, trying to look as if we were merchants who'd come for the local market. At the far end of the main street, there was an inn. I went in and asked the innkeeper if he was a patriot. He said that he was. I told him that the king was in Varenne and was trying to escape and that he should get all the people together to stop him.

We wanted to sound the alarm but we were worried that if we did so, the king would hear it and would gallop off on horseback before we could stop him, so we went to the bridge over the river which was the only way out of the town. We blocked this with a big heavy coach full of furniture and with some other vehicles.

We also noticed that there were some hussars and their horses near the bridge, about eight or ten people, all armed. We approached the carriages which were moving down the street and made them stop.

The mayor of Varenne asked where they were going. The woman in the carriage said that she was the Baroness of Korf and a foreigner, that they were going to Frankfurt, that she was in a hurry and that she should be given priority to travel. She was asked if she had a passport. She said that she did but she didn't see why she should show it. The mayor insisted and the passport was produced. Several people there thought that it was valid but I said that it wasn't as it hadn't been countersigned by the president of Parliament. I said that I didn't believe that she was a foreigner as no foreigner would be given an escort of hussars, and that I thought that it was

the king and the queen. This was enough for the townspeople to detain them until the next morning. They got out of the carriage and went with the mayor to his house where they admitted that they were the king and the queen.

This was told to me later as I had stayed outside to talk to the hussars, who had arrived with swords in their hands. There were about 150 of them. There were also about 100 ordinary people milling around in the street and lots of women and children. The hussars' commander, Monsieur Douglas said that he wanted to talk to the king and to guard him. He was told that he couldn't, and that if he tried to seize the king, he would only get a dead body.

I ran into the road and told the women to pick up stones and to throw them at the hussars if they started anything. The commander of the local National Guard got two small canons and put them at the top of the road and two more small canons which he put at the bottom of the road, so that the hussars found themselves caught between two sources of fire. The hussars were told to dismount but they tried to get round the cannon to escape.

I seized the bridle of the horse ridden by Monsieur Douglas and cried out "Cannoneers, to your posts! Fire if anyone moves!" The hussars retreated and talked among themselves for a bit and then threw in their lot with the local people. Their commander escaped. They were wrong to have given in so easily as the cannons weren't loaded.

The next day, the king and queen were taken back to Paris under guard. 18 months later, the king was accused of treason and guillotined in January 1791

Some information to help you with your detecting

* The post master was an important position, as he usually not only ran an inn but kept lots of spare horses to take the place of the tired horses of travellers' carriages. The tired horses would be rested and then they would be used as replacements in turn.

* A berline was a large, heavy and slow carriage.

* A cabriolet was a small, light and fast carriage.

* A hussar was a lightly-armed cavalryman, in a regiment usually organised either by the king or by one of the aristocrats. They were often used to escort important people around the countryside.

* The National Guard was a sort of local police force, made up of volunteers who lived in the locality.