

## The Flight to Varennes (21–23 June 1791)

After a late start, the royal family followed a circuitous route through a series of small towns in the countryside. However, things started to go awry near the city of Châlons, where the loyal soldiers due to escort the royal family were not to be found. The carriage continued unaccompanied to the town of Varennes, where it stopped to get fresh horses. There, a royal postmaster Drouet, who had recognized the King at an earlier stop, caught up to the carriage and had the local prosecutor, Sauce, search it. Drouet would later describe the tense scene that followed.

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Gentlemen, my name is Jean-Baptiste Drouet, and I am the Posting-Master at Sainte-Menehould. . . . On Tuesday the 2nd at half-past seven, after dinner, I saw two carriages in front of my door, namely a coach with six passengers and a cabriolet with two. . . . In the coach there was a woman, whom I thought I recognized as the Queen, and on the seat in front of her to the left was a man. I was struck by the resemblance of his face to the likeness of the King printed on an assignat which I had with me at the time. Since the morning a detachment of about fifty dragoons had been stationed at the Inn nearby. The officer in charge went up to the carriages and spoke in a low voice to the couriers accompanying them. . . . They looked quite confused and kept repeating what they had said. My suspicions increased, but, being unwilling to cause a false alarm and having no one by me to consult, I let the carriages go. This I did most unwillingly. I was furious and ran about the place telling everyone that I believed the King was going away. I thought I had noticed that his face was pimply, but one of my uncles said I must have made a mistake. Perhaps I should have believed him if I had not seen the dragoons preparing to mount their horses. I then gave the alarm and made the drummer beat the call to arms. . . .

I met my postilions who had accompanied the King and who were coming out of Clermont at the moment that we were going in. They told me that instead of following the road to Metz, as the couriers had proposed at my posting-station, the carriages had driven towards Varennes after leaving Clermont. We went by a side-road through the woods and reached Varennes at the same time as the carriages which were drawn up alongside the houses at the top of the town. It was then about half-past eleven and the night was very dark. However, in order not to be recognized or suspected, we took off our cross-belts and only kept our swords and then, as we passed by the carriages at a walk, we said in a loud voice. "Good Lord! we'll be very late getting to Grandpre: perhaps we shan't get there with our horses dead-beat": thus trying to pass ourselves as merchants bound for the fair at Grandpre. The carriages had stopped because there is no posting-stage at Varennes, and the postilions would not go through without resting the horses. Further down the street we found an inn, where the people were still up. I took the landlord aside and said to him, "Are you a good patriot?" He replied. "You may be sure I am." "Very well, then," I went on, "the King is at the top of the hill. He'll be passing through soon. Go quickly and collect all the good citizens you know to prevent him getting away." He went off without a word. My comrade and I wanted at first to sound the alarm, but we thought that if we did so, the King might turn round and go off at a gallop before anyone could get there to prevent him and in that way would elude us. We went to the bridge, the only place where he could get through and fortunately found there a van full of old furniture.

We used it and other vehicles we found in the neighbourhood to block the bridge. We did all this in less time than it takes to tell you about it. On this side of the bridge we saw some dismounted hussars whose horses were on the other side. Then we ran to the Mayor and the Commandant of the National Guards. In less than five minutes we had collected eight or ten armed men . . . and then we marched in front of the coach which was coming down the street. We stopped it. The district attorney questioned the travellers who were they and where were they going? A lady replied that she was the Baroness de Korff (the name appeared to be German). She said she was a

foreigner and that she was on her way to Frankfort. She was in a hurry and hoped that she would be allowed to pass. Asked if she had a passport, she said yes, but that she did not think it necessary to have it examined. We insisted. . . . While the passport was being examined, I said to the two ladies that I could not believe that the "baroness" was a foreigner, because if that were so she would not have the privilege in France of being escorted by detachments of dragoons and hussars. I presumed that it was the King and the Queen who were in the berline. My remarks caused the others to discuss the advantage of keeping the travelers until the next morning. The Mayor and the Attorney asked them to leave the coach, which they did without resistance. They then went to the house of the district attorney where they confessed who they were. The King said, "Here is my wife, here are my children, we adjure you to show to us the consideration which Frenchmen have always shown to their King." They were assured that they were under the protection of the law and that they had nothing to fear. This was related to me because during the conversation I was down below talking to the hussars, who were coming up with drawn swords and occupying the street. They numbered perhaps 150. Besides them the street contained about 100 men most of them armed and a great many women and children. The officer in command of the hussars, M. de Douglas or Jouglas, said that he wished to speak to the King and to guard him. He was told that he would neither guard him nor even see him. I added that if he thought he was going to snatch the King away from us, all he would get was death at our hands. I ran into the street and exhorted the women to go back to their houses, but to take with them stones to throw at the hussars, if they started any trouble. All this lasted for less than half an hour. Meantime the Commander of the National Guard had two small pieces of artillery placed at the top of the street and two others at the bottom, . . . so that the hussars would be between two fires. He ordered the officer commanding the detachment to make his men dismount and withdraw from the town. Instead of that they showed signs of slipping behind the cannons and seizing them. I seized the bridle of M. de Jouglas's horse and pushing my pistol into his chest, I cried: "Gunners, stand to. Fire if anyone moves." They took up their positions and held up the fuses, on which the hussars retreated. Then after conferring together they came and threw themselves into the arms of the National Guards. Since then they have behaved very well. Their commanding officer escaped. They made a great mistake in giving in so easily, for the guns were not loaded.

Source: Georges Pernoud and Sabine Flaissier, *The French Revolution*, translated by Richard Graves (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), 87–90.