THE YELLOW POPPY

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Yellow Poppy
Date of first publication: 1920
Author: Dorothy Kathleen Broster
Date first posted: May 16, 2015
Date last updated: May 16, 2015
Faded Page eBook #20150538

This ebook was produced by: Marcia Brooks, Al Haines, Paulina Chin & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

THE YELLOW POPPY

BY

D. K. BROSTER

AUTHOR OF MR. ROWL, ETC.

DUCKWORTH
3, HENRIETTA STREET, LONDON, W:C:

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Published — 1920
Second Impression — 1925
Third Impression — 1926

TO

GERTRUDE SCHLICH

MOST GENEROUS AND INSPIRING OF CRITICS
THIS BOOK
WHICH IS SO MUCH HERS ALREADY

“I love you, loved you . . . loved you first and last,
And love you on for ever . . .
. . . I had known the same
Except that I was prouder than I knew,
And not so honest. Aye, and as I live
I should have died so, crushing in my hand
This rose of love, the wasp inside and all,—
Ignoring ever to my soul and you
Both rose and pain,—except for this great loss,
This great despair . . .”

Aurora Leigh.

CONTENTS

BOOK I

THE WEDDING GIFT

I.	"WHAT IS MIRABEL?"	11
II.	THE GIFT IS OFFERED	19
III.	THE GIFT IS RECEIVED	29
IV.	A VERY YOUNG MAN	41
V.	*TU MARCELLUS ERIS*	49

BOOK II

MIRABEL

I.	M. THIBAULT IN CONVERSATION	63
II.	LE PALAIS DE FAIENCE	71
III.	NINE YEARS—AND BEYOND	78
IV.	JADIS	88
V.	THE JASPER CUP	99
VI.	THE ROMAUNT OF ROLAND	111
VII.	CHILDE ROLAND COMES TO THE DARK TOWER	119
VIII.	HIS SOJOURN THERE	126
IX.	HIS DEPARTURE THENCE	135
X.	THE KNIGHT'S MOVE	141
XI.	CHECK TO THE KNIGHT	155
XII.	THE ROOK'S MOVE: CHECK TO THE ROOK	165
XIII.	THE BISHOP'S MOVE	177
XIV.	PLOTTER AND PRIEST	184
XV.	UNDER THE SEAL	191
XVI.	THE QUEEN'S MOVE	198

BOOK III

LE CLOS-AUX-GRIVES

I.	THE COURT OF CHARLEMAGNE	209
II.	M. DE KERSAINT ANSWERS FOR A KINSMAN	215
III.	M. DE KERSAINT ANSWERS FOR HIMSELF	225
IV.	A MOONLIGHT WALK IN THE FOREST	236
V.	WHAT THE ABBÉ THOUGHT OF IT	246
VI.	*MEMINI ET PERMANEO*	253
VII.	THE CHURCH MILITANT	260
VIII.	THE PAWN RETURNS TO THE BOARD	267
IX.	THE CHOICE	278
X.	"AFTERWARDS"	286
XI.	AMONG THE WATCHERS	295
XII.	THE CENTRE OF THE LABYRINTH	304

BOOK IV

THE YELLOW POPPY

I.	FULFILMENT	315
II.	THE YELLOW POPPY	324

III.	THE COST OF ANSWERED PRAYER	331
IV.	WAR . . . AND TREATIES	340
V.	ALONE IN ARMS	353
VI.	“SWORD, THY NOBLER USE IS DONE!”	362
VII.	HOW AT THE LAST THE WINE WAS NOT DRUNK	371
VIII.	WHAT WAS LEARNT AT VANNES	381
IX.	THE RUBIES OF MIRABEL	387
X.	THE LAST CONFLICT	398
XI.	GASTON GIVES UP THE YELLOW POPPY	411
XII.	FOR SOME THE WORLD IS EMPTY	421
XIII.	TO THE UTTERMOST	432

BOOK I

THE WEDDING GIFT

“And so, self-girded with torn strips of hope,
Took up his life, as if it were for death
(Just capable of one heroic aim),
And threw it in the thickest of the world.”

Aurora Leigh.

NOTE

Any reader familiar with the figure of the gallant and unfortunate Louis de Frotté will realise why neither he nor the Normandy which he led so well play any part in these pages—not indeed that he has served as prototype for any character in them, but because to have introduced him also would have been to overblacken the reputation of Bonaparte. Yet that which is here laid to the First Consul's charge is no libel, for the deeds done at Alençon and Verneuil in mid-February, 1800, are written in history.

CHAPTER I

"WHAT IS MIRABEL?"

"I wish I had been taught how to make a bed!" complained Roland de Céligny, as he wrestled with his blanket in the half-darkness of the attic.

"You may think yourself lucky to have a bed to make!" retorted a comrade who sat cross-legged on a neighbouring pile of sacking. "Mine cannot be 'made,' though a careless movement will reduce it to its component elements."

"The devil! If I tuck in the blanket this side, it won't reach to the other!" pursued the young grumbler, fiercely demonstrating the truth of his accusation, where he knelt by a mattress placed directly on the floor.

"From this, my paladin, learn that the gifts of Fate are evenly distributed," returned he of the pile of sacking. Since one of his arms was in a sling, it is possible that he would not have been capable even of the Vicomte de Céligny's unfruitful exertions, but he did not say so. On the contrary, he looked at his friend's performance with the air of one who in a moment will say, "Let me do it!"

"If you would only take less——" he began.

"For Heaven's sake be quiet, you two!" entreated a third voice. "One cannot count, much less think, in your chatter . . . Two tierce-majors. . . ."

The owner of this voice, a man of about forty-five or fifty, sat at a table in a corner playing piquet by candlelight with another. There is no reason why you should not play piquet, even if you are a Chouan officer in the late April of the year of grace 1799—or, if you prefer it, which in that case is unlikely, Floréal of the year VII of the Republic—and are concealed at the top of an old house at Hennebont in Brittany with a bandage on your head, and an ache within it which may well justify a little impatience to noise. When, in addition, your partner refuses to play for money, the game becomes so harmless as almost to be meritorious.

To the appeal of the piquet-player—his superior officer into the bargain—the wounded critic on the sacking made no reply save a grimace. The time selected for bedmaking by the very good-looking young man who was engaged in it was not, as might be guessed, a morning hour; it was, on the contrary, nine o'clock in the evening. Two candles stuck in the necks of bottles gave the card-players their requisite illumination; another, standing on a dilapidated chest of drawers, shone on the book which a third young man, sitting astride a chair, had propped on its back and in which he appeared to be immersed.

The attic thus meagrely lit was spacious, and full of odd corners, but crowded with tables and chairs and cupboards, for it was the top floor of a furniture dealer, where he stored his old or unfashionable goods, many of which had been piled up on the top of each other to make more room, and where two or three huge old wardrobes, jutting out like dark shadowy rocks from the walls, still further reduced the space available for occupation. Yet though it was, patently, a refuge, it was also a rendezvous.

In this spring of 1799 the Directory, the cruel and incapable, was still prolonging its dishonoured existence, and after ten years of torment the French people were still enslaved—to an oligarchy instead of to a monarchy. The liberty dangled so long before their eyes, the liberty in whose name so many terrible crimes had been committed, seemed further away than ever. Inert and exhausted, pining under a leprosy of political corruption, her credit and trade almost ruined, the mere ghost of what she had been, France was sighing for the master that she was impotent to give herself, the man who should overturn her new tyrants and raise her up once more to her full stature. And to most minds in the West, that home of loyalty, only one master was conceivable, and that was Louis XVIII., the King who had never reigned.

In the West, moreover, at this moment, the Chouannerie, that sporadic guerrilla warfare of profoundly Royalist and Catholic stamp, indigenous to Brittany, Anjou, and Maine since the overthrow of the great Vendean effort in 1793, was showing signs of reviving—under persecution. It had indeed been temporarily stamped out at the pacification of three years ago, but that pacification had left the Royalists of Brittany and the neighbouring departments in a position which gradually proved to be intolerable. They were not at war, yet they lived in continual peril, not one of them sure of his liberty or even of his life. After the scandalous *coup d'état* of Fructidor, '97, the promised religious freedom was not even a name, and political freedom, especially in the western departments whose elections had been so cynically annulled, was a mere farce. It came, in fact, at last to this, that the Minister of Police could recommend that the Royalists of those regions should be "caused to disappear" if necessary; tyranny unashamed had replaced oppression.

Naturally enough, in 1798 the Chouan began to make his appearance once more. At first he merely robbed couriers and diligences of public money. But this not very creditable activity was on the surface; underneath, in the hands usually of gentlemen, the work went secretly forward of organising that indomitable and tenacious peasantry, at once pious and cruel, and of transforming brigandage into real war; and so, throughout the West, might be found wandering Royalist leaders with their little staffs, striving to keep effective the Chouans who had once fought, and to enrol and arm fresh volunteers. To such a band, commanded by the Marquis de Kersaint, an *émigré* distinguished in Austrian service who had not long come over from England, belonged these five men in the furniture-dealer's attic.

They were not, at this moment, in very enviable case, for besides that two of them were wounded, they and their handful of peasants—since scattered—had yesterday come off second best in an unexpected collision with Government troops in the neighbouring department of Finistère, and they were now beginning, moreover, to be anxious about the safety of their leader, who, with a guide, had taken a more circuitous route to Hennebont in order to gather certain information. And his presence here was urgent because it had long been arranged that he and his two elder subordinates should meet and confer in Hennebont with Georges Cadoudal, the famous peasant leader of the Morbihan, concerning the better organisation of the wilder and more westerly region of Finistère, which, it was whispered, M. de Kersaint was eventually to command in its entirety. Yesterday's misfortune had made such a meeting more, not less, necessary; and so here, half-fugitive, M. de Kersaint's officers were, having had the luck to slip unobserved into the little town in the dusk. But now there were rumours of a *colonne mobile* on the road which their leader would probably take; and in any case there was always danger—danger which the three young men who formed a sort of bodyguard of aides-de-camp to him considered would have been lessened for him had they shared his odyssey. But M. de Kersaint had apparently thought otherwise.

The game of cards in the corner came at last to an end, and the opponents added up their scores.

"You have won, Comte," said the bandaged player's adversary, leaning back in his chair. The candle-light which threw up his companion's somewhat harsh features shone in his case on a nondescript round face with no salient characteristics. By this and by his peasant's attire he might well have been a small farmer; but on the other, him addressed as "Comte," the gaily embroidered Breton vest and short coat sat less naturally.

"Yes, I suppose I have," returned the latter. He drew out his watch and frowned. "They ought really to be here by now," he observed.

"I doubt if it is quite dark enough outside," replied his late adversary. "Le Blé-aux-Champs would hardly risk bringing M. de Kersaint into Hennebont while light remained."

"I wish he had not gone to Scaër," muttered the other.

"You do not think that anything has happened to M. le Marquis, do you, sir?" asked Roland de Céligny.

"No," replied M. de Kersaint's second-in-command. "I will not believe in misfortune; it is the way to bring it about."

"Perhaps this is they," suggested Artamène de la Vergne, the youth with his arm in a sling, as a step was heard on the echoing stairs. And even the silent reader lifted his head from his book to listen.

But the moment of suspense which followed was not lightened when the door opened and old M. Charlot, the furniture-dealer, himself appeared on the threshold, candle in hand, tinted spectacles on nose. In a silence of expectancy he came in and shut the door carefully behind him, while five pairs of eyes stared at him uneasily.

"Gentlemen," he began in a cautious voice, looking round on the forms ensconced among his shadowy furniture, "is not one of you a priest?"

The second piquet-player bent forward. "Yes, I am," he surprisingly admitted. "Do you want me?"

"There is an old lady very ill next door, Monsieur l'Abbé, an old Mlle Magny, who has been a respected inhabitant of this town for many years. It is not that she wants a confessor or the Last Sacraments, because she had them two or three days ago; it is that to-night she is wandering so much that her niece, who looks after her, came in to me about it just now in great distress. The old lady seems to have something on her mind, and Mme Leclerc thought that if she could get a priest, an *insermenté*, of course——"

The Abbé who looked so little of an Abbé interrupted. "I am quite ready to go to her, Monsieur Charlot, if it is necessary, but I should have thought that, rather than summon a stranger, the poor lady's relatives would have had recourse to the priest who confessed her the other day."

"Yes, mon père," replied the old man, "but you see he lives very retired outside the town since Fructidor, and there is always a certain risk for him in coming, and seeing that you were on the spot, and not known here for a priest . . ."

The word "risk" appeared to have decided the question, for at it the Abbé in the peasant's dress had risen.

"I will come at once," he said without more ado, and walked round an intervening barrier of upturned chairs.

"That is very good of your reverence," said M. Charlot in a tone of relief, moving towards the door. "She has been an excellent Christian in her time, that poor lady, and shrewd enough too, but now she lies there, so her niece says, talking continually of some place—or person, maybe—called Mirabel, and of a wedding. And nothing——"

"*Mirabel!*" ejaculated the Abbé, stopping short.

"O, Monsieur l'Abbé!" exclaimed M. Charlot, struck by his tone, "if you know something about this Mirabel, then surely the good God has sent you to the poor soul! I will take you there at once."

He opened the door for the priest, who went through it without another word. None of the three young men, all watching these two protagonists, noticed that the wounded piquet-player also had risen abruptly from his seat at the mention of the name which had so affected his companion, had stared after them a second or two, and that he now let himself fall into his chair again with a despondent gesture, and took his bandaged head between his hands.

"Now the Abbé's got a job to occupy him," said Artamène de la Vergne in a sleepy voice. "I wish I had; or that M.

de Kersaint and Le Blé-aux-Champs would arrive quickly, so that I could go to sleep without the prospect of being waked up again immediately.”

“The true campaigner can sleep at any time, and for any length of time,” remarked Roland complacently. “It is early yet, at least I think so. My watch has stopped.”

“And mine is lost,” responded the Chevalier de la Vergne. “Lucien is sure to have his, and it is sure to be correct. Ask him the time.”

“Lucien!” said Roland. No answer from the reader.

“Lucien, deaf adder!” supplemented Artamène.

“I believe he is asleep,” muttered the Vicomte de Céligny, and by a snake-like elongation of body and arm he contrived to reach a leg of the student’s chair and to shake the same.

“I wish *you* were asleep!” exclaimed his victim, lifting a mildly exasperated face. “What in Heaven’s name do you want?”

“The time, dear friend.”

Lucien du Boisfossé pulled the watch from his fob. “A quarter—no, seventeen minutes past nine.”

“What are you reading?” demanded Artamène.

“The *Æneid* of Virgil,” replied Lucien, his eyes on the page again.

The questioner gave an exclamation, almost of horror. “Ye gods! He is reading Latin—for amusement!”

“A quarter past nine,” remarked Roland reflectively. “This time yesterday I was——”

“Don’t chatter so, Roland le preux! You disturb our Latinist . . . and also,” added Artamène in a lower tone, “run the risk of breaking into M. de Brencourt’s meditations. Look at him!”

The bandaged piquet-player, who still sat by the table, seemed indeed sunk in a profound abstraction, letting the idle cards fall one by one from his fingers. It was plain that he did not know what he was doing.

“I wager he is thinking of a woman,” whispered Artamène, bringing himself nearer to his friend. “It seems a quieting occupation; suppose we think of one too! But on whom shall I fix my thoughts . . . and you, Roland?”

A slight flush, invisible in the poor light, dyed young de Céligny’s cheek as he answered, with a suspicion of embarrassment, “I will think of that poor old lady next door. Will the Abbé exorcise her, do you think, from the spell of . . . what was it—Mirabel? And, by the way, what is Mirabel?”

“The name of a kind of plum, ignoramus,” replied Lucien du Boisfossé unexpectedly. He yawned as he spoke.

“Plainly our Lucien has been studying the Georgics also,” commented Artamène.

“An encyclopaedia would be more to the point!” retorted Roland. And raising his voice, he said, “Comte, what is Mirabel?”

The older man heard, even with a little start. He laid down the cards and came out of his reverie.

“Mirabel, gentlemen, is the name of a property and château near Paris, the château that was begun for François I. You may have heard of it. It belongs, or belonged, to the Duc de Trélan.”

“Trélan,” observed the young Chevalier de la Vergne reflectively. “I seem to remember the name in connection with the prison massacres in September, ’92. He was killed in them, I think?”

“No,” replied the Comte de Brencourt sombrely. “He was never in prison. He had emigrated. It was his wife who was butchered—with Mme de Lamballe.”

“Morbleu!” exclaimed Artamène. “And the Duc is still alive, then?”

“I believe so,” replied M. de Brencourt, even more sombrely.

“Where is he now?” asked Roland.

“Somewhere abroad—in England or Germany.”

“Worse than being dead!” observed Artamène, lying down and pulling the covering over him.

CHAPTER II

THE GIFT IS OFFERED

And next door, in a tidy but overcrowded bedroom, the Abbé Chassin, without any of the marks of his office, sat and listened to the babbling of an old spinster lady who was to terminate an uneventful and singularly respectable life as the messenger of destiny to not a few people.

The heavy curtains were pulled back from the side of the small fourposter by which the priest sat, and the candlelight fell soft and steady on the old, old blanched face within the neat capfrill, itself scarcely whiter than the visage it surrounded. On the waxlike countenance, amid all the signs of nearing death, was the imprint of that masterfulness which sometimes descends with age upon a certain type of old lady. And Mlle Magny was talking, talking continuously and pitifully, her eyes fixed, her shrivelled fingers pleating and plucking the edge of the sheet in the last fatal restlessness. Those hands were the only things that moved.

"I ought to have had it ready . . . but I did not know in time, I did not know! All these years to have had it in the family, and not to have known that it was there! But perhaps I shall be in time after all—they cannot have come back from the chapel yet, surely. But I must be quick, I must be quick! . . . and when the bride gives round the sword-knots and the fans to all the fine company I shall offer my gift to the young Duc. But I must be quick . . ."

And the withered hands, abandoning the sheet, began to fumble over the bed as if searching for something.

The Abbé bent forward and laid one of his own gently on the nearer.

"Cannot I help you, my daughter—cannot I do something for you?"

The eyes turned a moment; the brain, deeply absorbed in the past though it was, seemed to grasp this intrusion from the present, even to the pastoral mode of address.

"You are a priest, Monsieur? That is good—that is good! Yes, you can open this casket for me," and she made as if she held it. "And inside you will find the wedding gift for the young Duc de Trélan—but you must be quick, quick! They will be back from the chapel! . . . Ah, I cannot find the key—I cannot turn the lock! My God, if I should be too late after all! Mon père, mon père, help me! . . . But, mon père, you are doing nothing!"

The Abbé looked round in desperation. He could see nothing that at all resembled a locked casket among the little treasures of the old lady's room, the pincushions, the images of devotion, all the prim collection of a blameless lifetime. But in a moment the struggle with the imaginary lock came to an end, and as the tired hands relaxed a smile crept about Mlle Magny's indrawn mouth.

"How handsome he is, Monseigneur Gaston!" she said in a tone of admiration. "My dear lady will be proud of him to-day! They will dance to-night after the wedding, and I shall see it all, as my lady wishes. But none of the fine ladies there will have given the bride such a gift as I shall give the bridegroom, though I am only his dear mother's maid. . . . But why does the Abbé not bring it to me? When the bride gives round the swordknots and the fans——"

"Madame," gently interrupted the priest, "if you will tell me where your gift is, I will bring it to you instantly."

A look of cunning swept over the dying old woman's face, and a faint sound that was like a chuckle came from her lips.

"Ah, no, I have hidden it well!" she replied unexpectedly, "hidden it nearly as securely as the treasure of Mirabel itself. You will not find it in a hurry, Clotilde!"

Who was Clotilde, wondered the priest? The niece with whom she lived, probably. But what was this about a 'treasure' in Mirabel?

"To think," went on the old voice musingly, "that the precious paper was all these years in Cousin François' dining-room, and all those scores of years before that, since the time it was stolen. And all the dead and gone Duchesses might have had the rubies to wear. I might have clasped the necklace round my sainted lady's own neck. Now the new Duchesse will be the first to put it round her pretty throat."

The priest gave a little shiver. Still that wedding eight-and-twenty years ago! . . . Since then the pretty throat of which she spoke had known a very different necklace . . . but of the same colour . . .

"But if you have hidden the rubies, Madame," he hazarded, bewildered between the 'treasure' and the 'paper,' the 'gift' and what was concealed, "you will not be able to give them to the bride."

"It was not I who hid them!" responded Mlle Magny impatiently. "It was the first Duc, in the days of Mazarin, who hid a great store of money and jewels at Mirabel. And no one was ever able to find them again. Stolen . . . hidden . . . hidden . . . stolen . . . they make a beautiful couple, and when Monseigneur de Paris has married them and the nuptial mass is finished. . . ."

A long pause. Then the old lady whispering, "Sainte Vierge, how tired I am!" clasped her hands on her breast. The Abbé got up and bent over her. Her eyes were closed, and he heard her murmur indistinctly, "*Mater amabilis, virgo prudentissima*, grant me soon to see my sainted lady!"

To be on the brink of so important, so long-lost a secret—too late for it to be of use . . . yet, after all, perhaps, not too late—and to be baffled at the very moment of discovery! When such an extraordinary coincidence had brought

him, of all men in the world, to this bedside, for its possessor to take the secret unrevealed out of life with her! It was hard!

Yet, as M. Chassin was a priest, he put away regret, and tried to think only of the needs of this soul about to pass through the great door. Mlle Magny had had the last rites, that he knew. Was the moment come for the commendatory prayer? He slipped his fingers round her wrist. But the pulse, though feeble and irregular, was not at the last flutter. And slowly, as if his touch had roused her, the old lady opened her eyes again. The look in them was different; meeting it, the priest knew that she was no longer wandering in the mists of nearly thirty years ago. She was back in the present; so much so, indeed, that she was capable of astonishment at seeing this unknown man in peasant's dress bending over her—more, of resenting it.

"Who are you, Monsieur, and . . . what . . . what are you doing here?" she demanded, in a tone which, if scarcely more than the frailest of whispers, yet conveyed some of that masterfulness which was written on her face.

"I am a priest, Madame, an *insermenté*, and M. Charlot, your neighbour, brought me here, at your niece's desire."

"Clotilde always . . . takes too much upon herself," said the thread of a voice in a tone of displeasure. "I have already had . . . the Last Sacraments."

"Yes, Madame," assented M. Chassin, realising that Mlle Magny's recovery of her senses was not advancing him much. "It was not for the purpose of administering you that I came."

Her look asked him what his purpose was.

"Because, my daughter, you were speaking of—Mirabel."

"Nonsense!" retorted Mlle Magny quite sharply. "I am not in . . . in the habit of . . . discussing my past life with strangers!"

"You have been ill, Madame," said the priest gently. "And has not Mirabel something to do with your present life too?" Then, being a man who knew how to wait, he took his seat beside her again, and exercised this power.

"Have I been wandering?" asked the dying woman, suddenly turning her eyes upon him.

"A little, yes."

"I have been very ill . . . and they tell me I shall not get better. . . . Is that so, Father?"

"It is what I have been given to understand, my daughter. But you have made your peace with God."

"Yes," said she. "But there is something else that I desire to do . . . before I die . . . yet God knows how I am to do it."

The priest bent forward. "God does indeed know, my daughter, and it was doubtless He Who sent me here to-day. You wish, do you not, to give into the hands of the Duc de Trélan a paper now in your possession concerning a treasure which has been for many years hidden in his château of Mirabel."

A flush rose in the ivory face. "I talked of that?"

"Of that—and of a wedding at Mirabel."

Mlle Magny put a trembling hand over her eyes. "Indeed, you must forgive me! . . . All these years I cannot forget it—the lights, the jewels, the beauty of that couple, my lady's happiness. For I was tirewoman, mon père, during many years, to the Duchesse Eléonore, the Dowager Duchess, a saint on earth. God rest her soul! She only lived for a short time after her son's marriage."

The priest nodded, as one who knows already. "I, too, have cause to say 'God rest her!'—And the paper you spoke of?"

"What paper?" demanded the old voice, suddenly suspicious again.

"The paper containing the secret of the hoard hidden at Mirabel in Mazarin's time, which has come into your hands, Madame, and which you were wishing that you could have given to the Duc de Trélan on his wedding day so many years ago."

There was silence from the bed. "Well," said the old lady at last, with more animation, "if I told you . . . all that . . . I may as well tell you the rest."

And slowly, with pauses for breath, she told him how the Duc de Trélan of Mazarin's day, implicated in the rebellion of the Fronde, and not knowing which party would finally triumph in that kaleidoscope of civil conflict, buried gold and jewels in his once-royal château of Mirabel and made a memorandum of the hiding-place for his son, then away fighting with Condé. The Duc himself had to flee before Mazarin's vengeance and died in exile; Mirabel was for a space confiscated, and when the next Duc was reinstated the treasure could not be found. The memorandum of its hiding-place had been stolen by the late Duc's steward, who offered to sell it for a large sum to the successor to the title. Suspecting a hoax the latter refused; yet, as was not difficult for a great noble in those days, he procured a *lettre de cachet* against the offender, who dragged out the rest of his life in prison. Before his arrest, however, he had placed the memorandum in the hands of a friend; but the friend never took any steps to utilise it, and merely preserved it in such a manner that it was to all intents and purposes lost—for he pasted the parchment, face downwards, against the back of his wife's portrait. Probably, said the old lady, he was waiting till the man who had confided it to him came out of prison; but this the steward never did, and a short time before his death in captivity his friend, Mlle Magny's great-great-

grandfather, died too. And there, gummed against the picture of the flourishing bourgeoise dame of Louis XIII.'s day, the parchment had remained for nearly a hundred and fifty years, till, some two years ago, on Cousin François' death, the portrait had come into Mlle Magny's possession, and the old lady herself, in examining it, had lighted on the parchment, and realised of what irony Fate was capable.

"Ah, if only I had had it earlier!" she concluded wistfully. "What a gift to have made my sainted lady, who was sometimes pressed for money for her charities, since, like all the Saint-Chamans, both her husband and her son spent their means royally. And now these two years that I have had it it is useless! Where is the Duc de Trélan now? Alas, we know where his wife, the Duchesse Valentine, went! . . . And what is Mirabel to-day?"

"No, Madame," said the priest, as the voice ceased exhausted, "two years ago you could have done nothing. But to-day, as Heaven has so ordered it, you can give that paper to the Duc de Trélan, if you wish."

She turned her sunken eyes on him again. The lustre was already fading.

"And how is that, if you please?"

"Because I am . . . in close touch with the Duc. If you commit the paper to me he shall have it before—before I am many days older."

"But—if he is still alive—he is an émigré . . . has been an émigré for many years!" objected Mlle Magny incredulously.

"Nevertheless I am in close touch with him."

The failing eyes of the sick woman searched his face—that commonplace visage out of which looked neither good nor evil. It was difficult to read.

"I have nothing but your word for that," she said, while suspicion and a wistful desire to trust him strove together in look and tone.

The priest put his hand into a pocket of his embroidered vest and pulled out an ornate rosary of ebony and silver. Taking one of the silver paternoster beads between his finger and thumb; he bent over Mlle Magny and held it near her eyes. "Can you see what is engraved on that bead, Madame? It is not a sacred emblem."

The old lady put up her feeble hand and tried to push his a little further off. "You are holding it too near, mon père," she said irritably. "I am not so blind as that. . . . It looks like . . . it is very worn . . . yet it looks like a bird of some kind, with wings outspread. What is that doing on a chaplet? Is it on the rest of the beads?"

He showed her. "Victor, Cardinal de Trélan, in the early days of the century, seems to have had a strange fancy for his family crest on his rosary. There is his monogram on one bead. That bird, Madame, is the Trélan phoenix, and the present Duc gave me this old rosary at my ordination."

Instantly she seized his hand. "The Trélan phoenix! Let me look again! Yes, it is, it is! Ah, to see it once more after all these years!" And as the priest relinquished the chaplet, the Duchesse Eléonore's tirewoman, almost sobbing, put it to her lips.

The Abbé waited, and after a moment she turned on him moist eyes and said, puzzled, "But . . . but . . . I seem to remember . . . ordination . . . the Cardinal's rosary . . . it was surely to the young Duc's foster-brother, a Breton peasant, whom I never saw . . . that it was given . . . when he took orders?"

"You remember quite rightly, Madame. And I am that foster-brother, that Breton peasant, Pierre Chassin."

Had he suddenly revealed himself as Louis XVIII. or the Comte d'Artois the devoted old spinster could scarcely have shown more emotion.

"God be praised! God be praised for this mercy!" she quavered. "His foster-brother! Yes, I remember hearing from my lady all about your mother. Six years before I entered her service it was . . ."

"—Remembering then, Madame, what I too owe to your lady of blessed memory, and to the Duc, who, as you probably know, had me educated and gave me a cure on his estates in the south, you may trust me, may you not, with the document?"

"Yes, indeed!" returned the old lady, and there was no shadow of doubt in her tone now. But the shock of joy, her devotion to the great family with whom her life had been bound up, and the advent of this man who, if he were not himself the rose, was almost a graft from the tree—all these seemed to have benumbed her faculties, for she lay quiet, tears of weakness and happiness stealing from under the closed lids. Presently she said,

"He is in France again then, the Duc?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell you that, my daughter. But, on the faith of a Christian and a priest he shall have the secret in his hands very shortly."

"He will not be able to make use of it now."

"Who knows? And if not now, when happier days come, perhaps. If he can make use of it, it will be of immeasurably greater service to him to-day than it would ever have been a quarter of a century ago. For this much I can tell you, Madame, that, wherever he is, he is fighting for the King."

"As a Trélan should!" she murmured with a smile. But the smile had gone when she added, "And the terrible fate of his wife, the Duchesse Valentine?"

“It broke his heart,” said the priest briefly.

“My lady was spared much,” murmured Mlle Magny. She passed a shaking hand over her eyes. “So much blood . . . and Mirabel deserted. . . . Are the candles going out, mon père, or is it my eyes? N’importe—you can still find the parchment . . . that little closed frame by the mirror yonder. If you open it you will know the face.”

He did. It was a little pastel drawing of the Duchesse Eléonore, his patroness, wearing the widow’s weeds in which he best recalled her. He came back to the bed holding it.

“It was to have been buried with me, that little picture . . . it still shall be. Clotilde knew how fond I was of it—but she would never have guessed anything else, poor fool . . . I took a lesson from my forbear . . . Tear off the paper at the back, mon père.”

M. Chassin obeyed, and as he peeled off the pinkish, speckly paper recently pasted there, a piece of yellow parchment doubled up against the real back of the picture was disclosed. It was folded in four, and on it was written in brownish ink the single word, “Mirabel.”

“Open it!” said the voice from the bed, grown very weak now.

The priest obeyed. As he unfolded the parchment with no very steady hands, his eyes were greeted with a sort of rough sketch-map of some complexity, underneath which was written, in a crabbed seventeenth century hand:

“Plan de l’endroit dans mon chasteau de Mirabel où j’ay fait enterrer plusieurs milliers de pistoles et divers parements de pierreries de feu ma femme, à cause des troubles sévissant en ce royaume.” And he caught sight of “Item, 10 sacs contenant chascun 2,500 pistoles . . . Item, un collier de rubis des Indes fort bien travaillé . . . Item, une coupe en or giselé dite de la reyne Margueritte” . . .

The whole was inscribed “Pour mon fils hault et puissant seigneur Gui de Saint-Chamans, Marquis de la Ganache, Vicomte de Saint-Chamans,” and signed, “Fait par moy a mon dit chasteau de Mirabel ce six avril de l’an mil six cent cinquante-deux, Antoine-Louis de Saint-Chamans, Duc de Treslan.”

“This is indeed——” began the priest as soon as he could find voice, when, glancing off the parchment, he saw the change which, in the brief space of his study of the document, had come over the face on the pillow. Mlle Magny had used her last reserve of strength over this matter; it was gone now, and she was going too.

“Promise me, Father!” she gasped out as he bent over her.

“I promise you, my daughter, as I hope myself for salvation!”

The drawn lips smiled. “I can say my *Nunc Dimittis* . . . Bless me, Pierre Chassin!”

He raised his hand. “*Benedicat te* . . .” and passed straight on to the “Go forth, O Christian soul . . .”

By the end she was unconscious, and a quarter of an hour later, the weeping Clotilde on one side of the bed and the proscribed priest praying on the other, Mlle Magny, her last thoughts on earth occupied with the house of Trélan, went through the great door to meet her sainted lady, leaving on its hither side the secret of Mirabel to bring about results undreamt of.

CHAPTER III

THE GIFT IS RECEIVED

All this while the occupants of M. Charlot's attic, which the Abbé had so abruptly quitted, were taken up with their own anxieties, and though they had at last fallen silent, the chiaroscuro of their abode was fairly throbbing with uneasiness. What made their leader, with a guide above suspicion, so late in finding his way from Scaër?

At last, just about the moment that M. Chassin, next door, had finished the *Proficiscere* and was calling for "Clotilde," the Vicomte de Céligny exclaimed, not for the first time, "This must be they!" The four men strained their ears, for a noise could certainly be heard on the staircase.

"Dame! it sounds as though Le Blé-aux-Champs were drunk!" observed Artamène.

"Or hurt!" added the Comte de Brencourt, listening uneasily.

The heavy, shuffling footsteps which they had heard ascending the stairs paused outside the door. Roland sprang up and opened it, drawing back instantly with a little cry. Two men, both in Breton costume, stood on the threshold, the elder and taller supporting the other, a young saturnine-looking peasant, whose face was sulky with pain, and whose unshod left foot was enveloped in a stained and muddy handkerchief.

"Monsieur le Marquis!" cried Roland and Artamène together, "What has happened?"

"Nothing very serious," replied the elder newcomer cheerfully. "We startled a *colonne mobile* in the dusk, that is all, and our poor Blé-aux-Champs has a ball through his foot."

"But you yourself are unhurt, de Kersaint, I hope?" asked the Comte de Brencourt, not without anxiety, as he came forward from his corner. "We were getting very uneasy about you."

"I am untouched, thank you. But this lad of mine——"

"Let him lie down on my mattress, sir," suggested the Vicomte de Céligny, and, as it happened to be the nearest to the door, the young Chouan, after vain protests, hobbled towards it, his arm still round his leader's neck.

"Yes, lie down, mon gars," said M. de Kersaint, lowering him to the pallet, "and we will see what can be done for this foot." He looked round. "Where is our surgeon-in-chief, the Abbé?"

"Confessing or otherwise ministering to a dying woman next door," replied M. de Brencourt. "M. Charlot came in for him."

The Marquis de Kersaint raised his eyebrows a trifle, but made no comment. "I am afraid that we are somewhat of an infirmary here altogether," he remarked. "What of your injuries, Comte—and yours, La Vergne?"

"I do not deny that I have a headache," returned M. de Brencourt. "But, as for the cause, the Abbé dressed the scratch this afternoon, and reported that it was doing excellently. My wrist" he showed a bandage "will, he says, take a little longer to heal."

"And your safe arrival, Monsieur le Marquis, has done even more for my arm than the Abbé's ministrations," said Artamène.

M. de Kersaint smiled at him and shook his head, as he knelt down by the prostrate guide and began to take the handkerchief off his foot. He would have been more or less than human if he had not known that he was idolised, as well as feared, by these well-born young followers of his.

"Let me do that, Monsieur le Marquis!" now begged Roland, while the thoughtful Lucien produced from the recesses of the attic a bowl of water and some torn linen.

But the Marquis de Kersaint, asking Roland when he had ever dressed a gunshot wound, went through the process with a deftness which suggested that he himself had dressed not a few. The young peasant, who had lain with his face hidden in the pillow, caught his hand as he finished and carried it dumbly to his lips.

"There, mon gars," said his leader kindly, as he withdrew it. "Lie there and be as comfortable as you can under the circumstances. The ball has gone clean through, which is a great mercy. Roland, put a covering of some kind over him.—Thank you, Lucien; yes, I should like some fresh water. You can put it on that convenient chest of drawers yonder."

As he stood there, washing the blood off his hands, it was not difficult to understand the attraction that the Marquis de Kersaint might possess for either sex or any age. As a young man he must have been superlatively handsome, and now the grey at his temples only served to emphasize his appearance of extreme distinction. Just as his dark, slightly rippling hair gained by contrast with that touch of Time's powder, so the peasant's dress which he wore merely set off the natural air of command that hung about him—an air of which it was plainly impossible for him to divest himself, even for purposes of disguise. It was innate in the whole poise of his tall figure, in the aquiline nose with its delicate nostrils, in the imperious glance of the fine grey eyes. Yet there was a measure of geniality about the mouth—of the kind that it is not wise to presume upon. Everybody in the attic knew that.

"Well, my children, and what have you been doing since you arrived?" he asked, looking round as he dried his hands. "Lucien, I see, has got hold of a book as usual. What have you been reading, Lucien?"

"This is what he has been reading, Monsieur le Marquis!" cried the young Chevalier de la Vergne, snatching up du Boisfossé's Virgil whence he had laid it, face downwards, on his chair. And holding the book with the hand which

rested in the sling, of which he still had the use, he flourished his other arm at Roland, who was standing near, and began to declaim at him the famous lament out of the sixth book for the untimely dead Marcellus—

"Heu miserande puer! si qua fata aspera rumpas,
Tu Marcellus eris. Manibus date lilia plenis
Purpureos——"

He had got no further when, to his enormous surprise, the book was gently but firmly taken out of his hand.

"Do not repeat those lines, boy, over anyone young, as you are doing at this moment," said M. de Kersaint quietly looking, not at him, but at Roland. "I always think they are unlucky. . . ."

And before the two young men had time to recover from their astonishment he had walked over to the other side of the attic, and joined his second in command at the little table to which the latter had returned.

"I have some papers here, de Brencourt," he said, sitting down, "which we could look at till the Abbé returns. Undoubtedly our attempt was premature . . . but unless we can get money it always will be premature. I have seen 'Sincère'; he could join us with at least two hundred and fifty men if we could only provide arms for them."

"Always the same cry—insufficient arms and ammunition," remarked his lieutenant rather bitterly. "How is anything considerable going to be done in Finistère if there is always this lack? And we could get both in plenty from England if we only had the money to buy them with."

"Exactly," said the Marquis. "But where the money is to come from I do not know—beyond the not very generous subsidy which the British Government has promised me for the summer.—Well, we must take counsel with Georges when he comes. Now, look at these figures."

And he and the Comte de Brencourt were still bending over the papers which he had spread out on the table when the three young men, who had withdrawn themselves as far as possible from the conclave of their superiors, became aware that the priest was once more in their midst. He had entered among the shadows very quietly.

"A la bonne heure, Monsieur l'Abbé!" said Roland de Céligny. "Monsieur le Marquis has arrived." And he indicated the other side of the attic.

"And have you been to the wedding at Mirabel?" enquired Artamène mischievously.

The Abbé Chassin quickly turned on him with a frown, putting his finger to his lips. But he was too late; the words were out, and, though the culprit had moderated his voice, they had been heard. And Artamène, roused at once to interest and alertness by the priest's gesture, was somehow aware of a sudden stiffening of M. de Kersaint's whole figure, ere he said, turning round from the table, "What is this about . . . Mirabel?"

The Abbé seeming in no great haste to answer, it was M. de Brencourt who replied, "The old lady whom the Abbé has been visiting next door is, apparently, suffering from delusions about Mirabel—that château of the Duc de Trélan's near Paris. That is what M. de la Vergne means."

"This is interesting," observed the Marquis de Kersaint, turning further round to look at the little priest, who had not advanced a step since Artamène's jest. "And did you learn anything fresh about Mirabel, Abbé?"

"Yes, I did, Monsieur le Marquis," answered the priest rather shortly.

"May we hear it?"

M. Chassin was silent, and seemed to be considering this request. Artamène saw his face, and it was oddly perturbed.

"We are not, I hope, inviting you to reveal the secrets of the confessional?"

"No."

"Why may we not hear it, then?"

"Because," said the Abbé gravely, "it is more suited for your private ear, Monsieur le Marquis."

"Why?" asked M. de Brencourt, instantly, looking from one to the other, "why for M. de Kersaint's private ear?"

This question the Abbé seemed totally unable to answer, and after a second or two the Marquis de Kersaint said carelessly to his subordinate, "Because M. Chassin knows that I am a kinsman of the Duc de Trélan's, I suppose."

"A kinsman of the Duc de Trélan's—you!" exclaimed the Comte de Brencourt in obvious surprise. "A near kinsman?"

"No, no, very distant," replied his leader quickly. "And that is why I cannot conceive how a disclosure affecting his property can possibly be destined for my ear alone. So let us all hear it, if you please, Monsieur l'Abbé."

M. de Brencourt, still under the empire of surprise or some other emotion, continued to look at this kinsman of M. de Trélan's very fixedly; so, from where he still stood near the door, did the priest. A better light would have revealed entreaty in his eyes.

"Well, Monsieur l'Abbé, I am waiting!" said the Marquis de Kersaint rather haughtily, and in the fashion of a man who has never been used to that discipline.

The Abbé set his lips obstinately. "It will keep well enough till to-morrow, Monsieur le Marquis."

"What, a communication from the dying? And who knows whether we shall all see to-morrow? Come, Abbé, I command you!—Roland, a chair here for M. Chassin."

Whether the priest could have stood out, had he willed, against that masterful voice and gesture, at any rate he did not.

"Very well, Marquis," said he, and Artamène, thrilled to the core, thought, " 'Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin!' That's what he would really like to say, our Abbé!" And since their leader had intimated that the matter was not private after all, he applied himself to listen with all his ears. Roland, looking rather troubled, set a chair at the table for the priest and stood back.

"You must know then, Monsieur le Marquis," began the Abbé in a low voice, "that the old lady whom I have been visiting had been present at the festivities in 1771, when the . . . the young Duc de Trélan married his bride."

"That beautiful and most unfortunate lady!" commented M. de Brencourt under his breath.

The Marquis glanced at him for the fraction of a second, and the priest went on, nervously rubbing his hands together, and rather pale:

"It seems that there is a legend of a treasure hidden in Mirabel since the days of the Fronde, a treasure whose whereabouts no one has ever been able to discover. Since you are a kinsman of M. de Trélan's, Monsieur le Marquis, it is possible that you have heard of the legend?"

M. de Kersaint nodded thoughtfully. "I believe I have heard of it. Yes?"

"The story appears to be true. The document describing the hiding-place of the treasure was stolen at the time—nearly a hundred and fifty years ago—and came into the possession of this old lady's family, but in such a way that it was only recently rediscovered by the old lady herself."

"What an extraordinary tale! Well?"

"Since then she had desired to give it to the Duc, but could not, as he was not in France. And in her delirium just now, fancying herself back at the wedding, she was talking so persistently of offering to the . . . the young couple, as a wedding gift, this paper, which would help them to what was after all their own, that M. Charlot——"

"A wedding gift for de Trélan and his wife!" interposed the Comte de Brencourt with a laugh. "Bon Dieu, what irony, considering how their wedded life ended!"

"Surely that need not concern us now, Monsieur de Brencourt!" said his leader coldly. "Go on please, Abbé."

"By the most curious coincidence," pursued M. Chassin, his eyes fixed on the Marquis, "M. Charlot asked me, as a priest, to see if I could not set the old lady's mind at rest by some means. She did at last regain control of her senses, and I was able in the end to assure her that I could and would despatch the document, if she entrusted me with it, to the proper quarter."

"And she gave it you?" asked the Marquis, bending forward with some eagerness.

"I have it here now," answered the priest, touching his breast.

M. de Kersaint drew back again, and Artamène was struck with his resemblance to a chess player who is meditating the next move. But only the Marquis de Kersaint himself and the man whom he had forced into playing out this gambit with him, fully realised the awkward position into which his insistence had got them.

"So I must make it my business to despatch it, somehow, to M. le Duc," finished the Abbé. "It was of course my knowledge that you were kin to him, Monsieur le Marquis, which made me accept the trust, as I knew I could rely on your assistance."

But the Marquis was looking down at the table and said nothing.

"The document will hardly be of much use to M. de Trélan when he does get it," remarked the Comte de Brencourt. "Mirabel, I have heard, is now a museum or something of the sort; at any rate it is in government hands. And M. de Trélan—where is M. de Trélan? In England still? No, hardly. One never hears of him. Perhaps he is dead."

"No, he is alive," replied his kinsman briefly, lifting his eyes for a second.

"Ah! But how is he going to profit by this treasure, even if it is still there?"

"Nevertheless, I must fulfil my trust," observed M. Chassin, looking across the table at M. de Kersaint's lowered head.

"Oh, undoubtedly, Abbé, though I do not know how you are going to do it even with M. de Kersaint's cousinly . . . is it cousinly? . . . assistance. What do you yourself think of the problem, Marquis?"

The Marquis de Kersaint raised his head. "I think," he said slowly, looking hard at M. Chassin, "that the Abbé is right. M. de Trélan must be informed, somehow. But at the same time, since it is practically out of the question for him, in exile, to take any steps in the matter—and would be difficult and dangerous even were he in France—and since our need for money is so pressing at this moment, I would propose——"

"What?" asked the Comte.

"To ask, as his kinsman, for his authorisation to use the treasure, if we can come at it, for the needs of Finistère—that is to say, for the King's service."

"O sir, do you think we could!" cried Roland eagerly, starting forward.

"O, Monsieur le Marquis, send us to Mirabel!" cried Artamène.

"You are going too fast, gentlemen. We must first get the Duc's leave to pillage his property, even though it be

confiscated."

"Do you think you will have difficulty in getting it?" asked the Comte de Brencourt, narrowing his eyes.

"No, I do not think so. As you have yourself pointed out, Comte, how is M. de Trélan going to profit, in any case, by this suddenly revealed hoard?"

"Well, when the King comes into his own again, it would be of no small service to the Duc, a fund in his own château! I expect his financial resources, great as they once were, are much embarrassed. He could hardly have been accused of husbanding them!"

"You seem to know a great deal about the private affairs of M. de Trélan, Comte!" observed M. de Kersaint drily, turning and looking at him. "I might observe that no honest man has gained by the Revolution, and that those with much to lose have lost proportionately. However, if my kinsman takes the view that you suggest—which I do not think he will—he must be induced to look upon our present proposed use of the money as a loan to His Majesty. After all, it was never of any advantage to him as long as he was unaware of its existence or of its whereabouts, and of these, apparently, he never would have known but for the extraordinary coincidence of which the Abbé has just told us."

"But," suggested M. de Brencourt, "before approaching him on the subject—through you—might it not be as well to get a sight of this precious document, so that we may form some idea as to whether the amount will repay the risking a man's neck to find, and whether it will prove easy to come at?"

The priest and M. de Kersaint looked at one another. "Yes. I think we might do that without indiscretion," said the latter, after a moment's hesitation. "Do not you, Abbé?"

M. Chassin made no reply in words, but drew out from his coat the parchment received from the dying woman and gave it into the hands of his leader. The Marquis de Kersaint spread out the ancient memorandum on the table, moved the candles in their bottles nearer, and the three men studied in silence the rough diagram and its legend. Nor were Roland and Artamène, in the background, innocent of craning their necks to see likewise.

"Ten bags—two thousand five hundred pistoles in each," murmured the Comte reflectively. "How much is that, I wonder, in modern money? And there are jewels too, apparently."

The Marquis de Kersaint's lips were compressed, his face an enigma. "It certainly appears to be worth taking risks for," he said at last. "Money is what we most need in the world now for Finistère. We can get the men; the last few months have shown me that clearly, but of what use are unarmed men?"

"Less than none," observed his second in command. "This document, therefore, seems singularly like a gift from heaven."

"I shall certainly communicate with M. de Trélan without delay," said the Marquis. "May I keep this parchment, Abbé?"

"I had hoped that you would charge yourself with its despatch, Monsieur le Marquis," replied the priest, and M. de Kersaint without more ado folded it up and put it in his breast.

"It seems to me, de Kersaint," said the Comte de Brencourt reflectively, playing with the cards which still strewed the table, "that, considering all things, the exceptional circumstances, our pressing needs, the possibility that you may never succeed in communicating with the Duc—wherever he may be—that we could hardly be blamed if we took the law into our own hands, and did not wait for his authorisation. After all, the risk would be ours."

"That solution had already occurred to me, I admit," said the Marquis, with the ghost of a smile, while mute applause from MM. de Céligny and de la Vergne greeted the Comte's suggestion. "But the affair is in a sense the Abbé's, and entrusted to him."

"I am quite content to abide by your decision, Monsieur le Marquis," replied the priest sedately.

"But, de Kersaint," objected the Comte, evidently struck by a sudden idea, "have you not some reversionary interest in the treasure yourself, if you are kin to M. de Trélan? Should we not ultimately be robbing you, perhaps?"

"No, I am not sufficiently nearly related to the Duc for that," returned the Marquis quickly. "I am connected with him by marriage only—a distant kinsman."

"Perhaps you will allow me to congratulate you on that, then," said M. de Brencourt in a sombre tone. "For myself, I should not care to think that I had near ties of blood with a man who, in safety himself, left his wife to perish as he did!"

An electric shock seemed at these words to communicate itself to the other two men. M. de Kersaint's right hand, which rested on the table in the ring of candlelight, was seen instantly to clench itself. The next instant the Abbé, by a sudden clumsy movement, sent the candle nearest to him to the floor where, with a crash of the bottle, it was immediately extinguished.

"Pardon me, Monsieur le Comte!" he interposed quickly, bending forward. "—Dear me, how awkward I am!—Pardon me, but you do the Duc de Trélan a great injustice, surely! How could he, an émigré to whom France was closed, possibly rescue a woman immured in a Paris prison? The thing is preposterous. Besides, he probably knew nothing about her being there till all was over. I have heard that Mirabel was not sacked till August the thirtieth, and the prison massacres, you will remember, began on the second of September."

"You seem very much the champion of M. de Trélan, Abbé!" remarked the Comte, looking at him hard. "You have

wasted a candle over him."

"One should try, surely, to be just to those who cannot answer for themselves," retorted the priest. "Moreover, I am certain M. de Kersaint would bear me out in what I say."

"He does not seem to be in any great haste to do so," observed the other, half to himself, and his eyes suddenly moved to the clenched hand.

"I am too much amazed at your attack on my kinsman," retorted the Marquis, in a voice unlike his own. "It is incredible that such a thing should be said in France of M. de Trélan—that he could have saved his wife and did not!"

The Comte shrugged his shoulders. "I do not know that it is what others say, for I imagine that few people trouble their heads about de Trélan now-a-days. But it is what I think—though as a matter of fact you are putting more into my words than I actually uttered. Perhaps I am prejudiced. I knew that lady many years ago," he went on, with lowered eyes, fidgeting with the cards again, "the most gracious of God's creatures, and to remember that she went, abandoned by everybody, through *that* door, saw, as her last glimpse of life, those obscene faces, that gutter running with blood, that mound of——"

The priest jumped up and seized him by the arm. "For God's sake, stop, Monsieur de Brencourt!" he whispered. "Do you not know that most of M. de Kersaint's family perished in the massacres!"

And at that the Comte did stop. After a moment M. de Kersaint removed the hand with which he had covered his eyes.

"I should indeed be glad if you would spare me that subject," he said, in a scarcely audible voice, not looking at either of them. Even the one remaining candle showed him to be frightfully pale. "I . . . I cannot . . . perhaps we should finish this discussion . . . in the morning. It is already very late."

"Yes, it is very late," agreed the Comte, plainly rather horrified. He leant over the table. "Can you forgive me, Marquis? Of course I was not aware, and I regret——"

"I knew that," said M. de Kersaint with a palpable effort, and touched the hand which the other held out. And so ended the reception of Mlle Magny's wedding gift.

CHAPTER IV

A VERY YOUNG MAN

Roland de Celigny, waking with a start, wondered for a moment where he was. Then he raised himself on his elbow and looked about him.

The dawn was slipping a slim, cool hand into the strangely populated attic, and the grey light invested furniture and sleepers alike with quite a different appearance from last night's. Roland himself had insisted on giving up his pallet permanently to Le Blé-aux-Champs, because of his hurt, and had ensconced himself at the other side of the attic. Over in his old place Chouan and noble, alike young and alike wounded, lay side by side, the only difference in their condition being that the peasant, for all his protests, had the better couch. But, like M. de Brencourt, huddled on the little sofa of worn, gilt-striped rose brocade, and the Abbé, of whom he could see only the feet projecting round a wardrobe, they both appeared to be asleep, despite their injuries; and Roland knew that Artamène's gave him no slight pain at times.

But he could not be altogether sorry for his friend's wound. For, since it was M. de la Vergne's right arm that had suffered, it had fallen to the Vicomte de Céligny to write at his dictation a line of reassurance to his mother and sister in Finistère. And thus Roland's own fingers had formed, if his brain had not originated, the words which would undoubtedly have the happiness of penetrating into the little ears of Mlle Marthe de la Vergne, even, probably, that of being read by her brilliant dark eyes. And she would know, too, from the contents of the letter who had penned it. The question whether she would care was one which he did not like to press overmuch, for he had very little to go upon, poor Roland, since Marthe had grown up—one meeting under the eyes of Mme de la Vergne in the wide, cool salon of the château with its shining floor, and Mlle Marthe rising from tambour work at its farther end; and one brief message of good wishes with which his friend Artamène, her fortunate brother, was found to be charged when Roland met him a few weeks ago at the rallying-place.

Roland could have wished that his friend's flesh wound were his own, that he also had something with a tinge of suffering and heroism about it, of which Mlle Marthe could have been informed, to which she might even have given a moment's regret. Or, better still, if it could have been, that the injury had happened so near the Château de la Vergne as to leave no alternative but to take the sufferer in and tend him there. Alas, Roland neither possessed the requisite damage, nor had the Château de la Vergne the desired proximity to the scene of the little defeat at la Croix-Fendue.

Besides, if anything untoward happened to him, he was under promise to return, if possible, to his grandfather, with whom he lived.

Roland did not remember his mother, and of his father, though he had died only about a year and a half ago, he had seen extremely little. Three years after Mme de Céligny's death he had been committed, a child of five years old, to the care of his maternal grandfather, the Baron de Carné, and by him he had been brought up at Kerlidec, in Brittany, separated by the breadth of France from his patrimony near Avignon. He had seldom visited this, or his morose parent, though when he did, M. de Céligny had always made a point of initiating him, young as he was, into the management of the estate which would one day be his—for the Vicomte, unlike so many landowners in those troubled years, had never been dispossessed. But Roland was much fonder of the stern and passionate old man who had brought him up, and who had for him such exquisite tendernesses; and he had become too much accustomed to living with a grandfather rather than with a father to find the arrangement surprising. He had, moreover, few friends of his own age to comment on its unusual character, since his education had been entirely conducted at Kerlidec by his grandfather and a tutor or two. Artamène de la Vergne, who lived at no very great distance, was, in fact, his only intimate.

Yet in the end, through no fault of the Vicomte de Céligny's other than an unfortunate choice of the moment of his death, his estates did not come to Roland at all. He died very suddenly of heart disease just after the coup d'état of '97, and the Directory at once seized the property on the specious pretext that the heir was an émigré. Because the events of Fructidor had revived the legislation against that unfortunate class, it had taken a year and a half and very cautious moves indeed on the part of the Baron de Carné even to get his grandson's name removed from that inauspicious list on which, like many another, it wrongly figured, and Roland was not yet in possession of his inheritance. His present proceedings, if the Government became aware of them, were still less likely to hasten that event.

And these proceedings had been entered into against M. de Carné's wishes; another had overborne that strong will of his. To this day Roland could not quite understand how it had been done. For a moment he lived again through the episode of his quasi-abduction from Kerlidec last February;—that strained interview (at part of which he had been present) between his grandfather and the tall, commanding visitor who, turning out, to Roland's surprise and delight, to be the Marquis de Kersaint, the hero of the lost day of Rivoli, enlisting likely young men to fight for the King later on in Finistère, had asked M. de Carné if Roland might come with him——provided Roland himself were willing. Of Roland's willingness—rather, rapture—there could be no question, but M. de Kersaint had insisted on the Baron's formal consent; and this, on the understanding that Roland was to be regarded strictly as a loan, and returned, had been given . . . but given with such palpable, almost venomous hostility that the youth could not imagine why it should have been

vouchsafed at all.

The end of the episode, too, just because it puzzled him, was bitten into his memory. Grandfather and grandson were on the perron watching the unbidden guest ride away down the dripping avenue—for Roland was to join him, with Artamène, a few days later—and Roland, boylike, had exclaimed at his admirable seat on a horse.

"As you say, Roland, a damnably good seat!" M. de Carné had returned harshly. "A damnable air of assurance altogether! Quite enough to turn a young man's head, or for that matter a——" He checked himself, and said with bitterness that they must begin to think of Roland's preparations. And when the young man remorsefully replied, "Not yet, grandpère! It is growing dark; let us think of our game of chess!" his grandfather retorted, looking at him in a way that he could not fathom, "Chess! Poor little pawn, you have been taken!"

But if it were so, the pawn certainly had no objection.

And now, indeed, feeling a sense of elation, almost of importance, at being apparently the only one awake in this company, Roland looked past the intervening furniture towards the two large chairs in which M. de Kersaint had elected to spend the night. Well, he was still stretched in them, long and rather shadowy in outline, but Roland doubted if he were asleep, for as he gazed at him he heard the Marquis move and sigh.

The adoration tempered with awe which Roland felt for him had received, if it needed it, a fresh impetus through last night's happenings. An eager and interested witness of the scene's beginning, an unwilling and indignant one of its close, Roland had felt, and still felt, that he hated M. de Brencourt for the torture to which, even unwittingly, he had put him, as anyone could see. And why, as Artamène had whispered to him afterwards, had M. de Brencourt displayed such an aversion to the Duc de Trélan?

What was M. de Kersaint going to do, he wondered, about this business of Mirabel? The name seemed to have a faintly familiar sound, though he could have sworn that he had never heard it before. As he strove to recover the connection a glorious thought shot suddenly into his mind. If only M. de Kersaint would let *him* go to Paris in search of this treasure! There—if his search were successful, as of course it would be—shone in truth a deed worthy to lay at the feet of Mlle Marthe de la Vergne!

Wrapped in the warm and rosy imaginings which this idea brought to him Roland dropped off to sleep again—a light slumber in which he had a distinct impression that M. de Kersaint came and stood for some time looking down on him, and from which he woke to find the attic grown considerably lighter, and M. de Kersaint's sleeping-place, to which he instantly glanced, empty. Everybody else seemed to be slumbering as before.

It was a moment or two before Roland's eyes found his leader, in the farthest corner of the attic, seated sideways at a little table, writing—at least, with a pen between his fingers. His chin was propped on his fist, and the young daylight as it entered silhouetted his fine profile with sufficient clearness for the observer to be sure that his thoughts were not pleasant ones.

"All his family massacred!" sprang into Roland's mind. "He is thinking of that—or of how to retrieve la Croix-Fendue, or perhaps how to get the treasure from Mirabel . . . How handsome he is!" And on Roland, himself as unconscious of his own good looks as it is possible for a young man to be, came the resolve to use this Heaven-sent opportunity for the furtherance of his own desires.

Rising very quietly from the floor, he picked his way, half dressed as he was, among furniture and sleepers till he came to the window.

"Monsieur le Marquis!"

M. de Kersaint started and looked round. "Roland, what are you doing?" he asked in a whisper.

"I have been awake before," said Roland, as if that were a reply.

"Well?"

"I want to ask you something, sir."

"If," said M. de Kersaint, studying him as he stood there in his shirt and breeches, "if it is to repeat La Vergne's request of last night about Mirabel, I may as well tell you at once, my boy, that it is of no use."

The youth's visage so manifestly fell that his leader could not help smiling.

"I see that I guessed right. No, my dear boy, this business, if ever it gets itself done at all, is work for a much older head than yours."

"I am not so young, Monsieur le Marquis," pleaded the aspirant, in the same discreet tone. "I shall be twenty this year."

"Yes, but not until the very end of it," retorted M. de Kersaint with promptitude.

The child of December was first taken aback, then flattered, that the date of his obscure birthday should be known to his hero, who was now looking at him half-teasingly, a mood in which Roland especially adored him. Then the petitioner recovered himself.

"But even if you think me young, sir," he went on with fervour, "nobody here, however much older he is——"

"Has any experience of house-breaking," he was going on to say, when the words were cut short by a grasp on his arm. He turned, and M. de Kersaint, who had momentarily lowered his gaze, lifted it at the same instant so that they

both beheld the Chevalier de la Vergne, sling and all.

“What, another!” exclaimed M. de Kersaint. “Morbleu!”

“I felt sure that he was trying to steal a march on me, Monsieur le Marquis,” explained Artamène. “If anyone is to go to Mirabel——”

“It would certainly not be you, La Vergne, with that arm,” interposed his leader. “However, there is no question of Mirabel for either of you.”

“But——” began both the candidates.

“If you want to know my plans, gentlemen,” said M. de Kersaint then, with a touch of impatience, real or assumed, “they are, as far as regards yourselves, these—a return, for the present, to your own firesides.”

“We are to go back home!” ejaculated the horror-struck Artamène.

Amusement shot again into M. de Kersaint’s eyes at the tone, but because of its pitch he laid his finger on his lips. “It is not designed as a punishment, believe me, my children. But our drawing of the sword was premature; I always feared it, and I have resolved, for the present, to disband. It will only be for a month or two, probably.”

“But—but you will send for us again, sir?” stammered Roland. All the brightness seemed suddenly to have departed from life.

“Most certainly. I could not get on without my aides-de-camp. Now go back to your beds and leave me to finish what I am doing.”

It was two exceedingly dispirited young men who returned to their couches. “To be sent home like schoolboys!” whispered Roland, who had left his with such hopes. But they were too dejected to discuss the catastrophe. Happy Lucien, who had slept through its announcement! They sat side by side on Artamène’s blanket, and looked at each other, while close by the young Chouan, who was awake, moved restlessly. What, if they were going to separate, was to become of him? Perhaps this unspoken query gave Artamène his great idea.

“I am not fit to take the journey to La Vergne alone,” he whispered suddenly in Roland’s ear. “Will you escort me?”

“Will I not?” responded his friend, his eyes sparkling again.

With the full advent of morning came the good M. Charlot and a servant, bringing coffee and rolls to the unaccustomed guestchamber. To this welcome refreshment he joined the more than welcome news that the troops who had nearly intercepted the Marquis and his guide last night had marched out at dawn, and in an hour or so it would be quite safe to depart. Also, the wounded man could now be moved downstairs to a bed and cared for until his foot was healed.

“Excellent, my dear Monsieur Chariot,” said the Marquis de Kersaint. “And—the other matter?”

“I have already sent to the place, Monsieur, and a message has come back that the person your honours are expecting has not yet arrived.”

Artamène and Roland looked at each other over their coffee-bowls. They cherished a faint hope, now rapidly withering, that they might catch a glimpse of this famous person ere departing.

But very shortly afterwards, as it seemed, the three of them had put together their small belongings, had received their last instructions, and had learnt how, when the summons came to them again, it would probably be to a more lasting campaign. The Marquis de Kersaint hoped by the summer to have a regular headquarters at least—to keep always on foot an army of Chouans was impossible—in short, to be in a larger way of business. But even these bright predictions did not cheer ‘les jeunes,’ as the Abbé called them, very much.

“All I can do, mes enfants,” said their leader to them in conclusion, “is to wish you a safe return and a better meeting. Remember my recommendations as to prudence in your journeys.—I am not sure that I ought to let you travel in that condition, Artamène.”

And when the youth hastened to inform him that he would have the advantage of Roland’s care and company M. de Kersaint smiled and said, “Very well. But, Roland, remember that your real destination is not La Vergne, but Kerlidec. My honour is engaged, as you know, in sending you back to your grandfather. Good-bye, Lucien; you will now have leisure to proceed with your study of the Mantuan.”

The Abbé had already given them his blessing; the Comte had gone to the place appointed to await Cadoudal. Even Le Blé-aux-Champs had been carried downstairs. So when the Marquis had shaken hands with them there was nothing for the three young men to do but to go. And they went.

But they had not got beyond the next turn on the dusky staircase before they heard M. de Kersaint’s voice on the landing above them.

“Roland,” it called down, “come back a moment, will you? I have a message for M. de Carné.”

Wondering, the young Vicomte went up again, nearly to the top, where the tall figure was standing.

“I only wish you to point out to him,” said the Marquis, “that I am fulfilling my promise. That is all.”

Then he added, in a different tone, “May God keep you, my boy!” and stooping, kissed him on the forehead.

CHAPTER V

TU MARCELLUS ERIS

"And so, *exeunt* 'les jeunes,' " said the Marquis de Kersaint, coming back into the attic and shutting the door after him.

Its only remaining occupant, the Abbé Chassin, looked up from his breviary where he sat on the old brocade sofa.

"I could wish," he observed, "that they had departed earlier—or at least that young La Vergne had done so, before he brought about what happened last night, by his mention of the word 'Mirabel.' But what, Gaston, in the name of all the saints, possessed you to force me to give you the memorandum like that, before everybody? Of course I only meant to put it into your hands when we were alone!"

The Marquis de Kersaint, seeming to find it perfectly natural to be addressed thus familiarly by his inferior, shrugged his shoulders. "Why then, my dear Pierre, did you, in your turn, say before everybody that your information was for my private ear? A slip of that kind is unlike you. How could I possibly accept for my private ear any news about the place?"

"No, perhaps not, but your persistence, if you will forgive my saying so, rather drove me into a corner. However, I dare say we were both equally to blame, I for not being readier-witted, and you for—well, for taking the bull a little too much by the horns."

M. de Kersaint, evidently not at all resenting these criticisms, looked down at the priest. "Above all things I did not want to create a mystery," he said.

"And instead of that you created a kinsman," observed the Abbé with a half smile, and then became grave again. "It was very unfortunate, the whole thing, but naturally we had neither of us any idea of what it was going to lead to."

The Marquis de Kersaint's face darkened. He turned away, and began to walk up and down. "You made a fine holocaust of my imaginary family," he said after a moment.

"I had to stop him somehow," replied the Abbé briefly. He had closed his book, and was watching the pacing figure.

"So that," said M. de Kersaint after another silence, "that is how a Frenchman, an émigré himself, judges the conduct of the Duc de Trélan! I thought it was only in England that they did not understand."

The priest had risen. "Gaston," he said firmly, "as I said to the Comte last night, and as I would repeat it at my last hour, in the matter of Mme de Trélan's death I hold that no one was to blame—save her murderers. She could not have been saved. Did his Highness the Duc de Penthièvre save his daughter? We know that he tried. Not an archangel could have saved Mme de Lamballe. So with Mme de Trélan that day. You know that as well as I, and M. de Brencourt, if he were not ridden by some demon of spite, knows it too."

"She went through that door, as he said," continued M. de Kersaint. He had come to a standstill; his face was ashen. "She saw . . . all that . . . before——And she might have taken the road to England and safety two years earlier."

"It is true," answered the priest. "She had the chance."

"Yes," said his foster-brother, looking at him as if he did not see him, "she had the chance . . . and refused it. I cannot tell de Brencourt that. But, O my God, what a tragedy of mistakes!"

He was backed now against a huge old wardrobe, motionless, almost as if he were nailed to it, voice and eyes alike full of that seven years' old horror and anguish.

"It was but a mistake, a misunderstanding, then, Gaston," said the priest quickly. "You acknowledge that, you see!"

The man against the wardrobe gave a laugh. "But what is worse than a mistake, Pierre? Not a crime, certainly. Mistakes appear, at least, to be more heavily visited in this world. It seems to me that I am about to begin a fresh series of payments for mine. . . . As for her, if she made any, she paid—how much more than paid!—in that moment of martyrdom that does not bear thinking of, that I still dream about, it seems to me, almost every night. . . . Now, if it is to be dragged out as de Brencourt dragged it yesterday, I shall wish you had not turned me from my purpose seven years ago."

Dear saints, thought the priest, looking at him compassionately, are we, after all he has suffered, to go once more through the inferno of those dreadful days in England? For a moment he saw again that lofty, richly-furnished room in London where the proudest man whom Pierre Chassin had ever met or read of sat with his whole existence fallen in a day to ruins about him—his honour tarnished and his self-respect in the dust. For he had that day received the appalling news of his wife's butchery in prison—not having known, even, that she was a prisoner—and he had heard also that he was in consequence being talked about in no flattering terms throughout those same London drawing-rooms where he had been so courted. Indeed—not then knowing why—he had that very morning been cut in St. James's Street by two of his most intimate English acquaintances. . . . The candlelight on his escritoire, running over the darkly shining mahogany before him, had showed the weapon ready to his hand when the shabby little émigré priest, who had come hotfoot at the news, succeeded in forcing his way past the terrified servants into that forbidden room . . . only to be ordered, in a voice that made him quail, to depart instantly. He had sometimes wondered himself what had given him the courage to disobey, and to stand, as he had done, for a whole night between the Duc de Trélan and suicide. Even to-day he could scarcely bear to think of the naked agony and conflict of that vigil, and it was very rarely

referred to by either of them.

He went up to him and put his hand on his shoulder. “O my brother, if you would only cease to torment yourself! You have not, you never have had, a shadow of real responsibility for your wife’s death.”

“Easy to believe, is it not?” remarked the other with a ghastly smile, “when men speak still as de Brencourt spoke last night!”

The Abbé made an almost impatient movement. “It is quite impossible that the Comte really thinks what he says! Why, thousands of men emigrated without their wives,—just as some wives without their husbands—and no one thought it anything but natural and right in those days . . . a duty even! All the noblesse were equally blinded as to what was coming. And can you seriously maintain that any blame attaches to you for what happened two years later, because you were no clearer-sighted than the rest—the rest who, like you, were in exile?”

“But the rest,” said the Marquis de Kersaint, staring down before him at his locked hands, “were not, in 1792, merely amusing themselves in exile, whatever they may have been doing in 1790. . . . Even though I had not been by her side, if I had been where I ought to have been long before, in the army of the Princes or with Condé, do you think that de Brencourt would say . . . those things? Or that they would be like death to me, if he did? . . . You see you cannot answer that, Pierre!”

“Mon frère,” said M. Chassin quietly, “that delay has been expiated. The question for the moment is, whether M. le Comte suspects your identity.”

M. de Kersaint moved a little. “Do you think he possibly can? I never remember seeing him before in my life, until he was assigned to me last December in Jersey as my lieutenant.”

“And if he had ever chanced to see you before the Revolution,” went on the priest musingly, “this bitter resentment he seems to have would have shown itself ere now. No, he could have had no grounds for suspicion of any kind before last night and the business of Mirabel. It was evidently only the mention of that name that roused him. If he begins to have . . . ideas . . . my advice to you, Gaston, is to tell him who you are. He knows, as most people do, about the part you played at Rivoli, not to speak of what you are doing now, so he would not continue——”

“Never!” broke in the Marquis, making a violent gesture of negation. “I desire never to hear that old name of mine again in this life! And I forbid you once more to tell anyone in the world—*anyone*—whatever you might think would be gained by it! Is it a promise?”

“You have had my promise once for all, Gaston.”

“I will never see you again if you break it!” said his foster-brother with vehemence.

“Have I kept it so ill these seven years, then, that you think a threat is necessary?” asked the priest gently.

“Oh, my dear Pierre, forgive me!” cried the other instantly, and he held out his hand. “When a man starts threatening the best friend he ever had, to whom he owes not only his life but his sanity, it looks rather as if that sanity was leaving him!”

“I do not see much signs of that,” said the priest, with a smile, as he took the proffered hand. “And last night’s business was horrible. I have always thought,” he went on reflectively, “that M. le Comte was an embittered man.”

“If I had known,” said his foster-brother in a low voice, “that he had ever met her, I would never have consented to work with him. . . . But I never should have known save for this strange business of Mirabel.”

“And that is a business which must be attended to, I suppose,” the priest reminded him.

“Yes, I suppose so, too,” said M. de Kersaint rather wearily. He went to the nearest table, and sitting down pulled out the parchment and flattened it out on it. The Abbé came and studied it over his shoulder for a while in silence.

“Well, what do you think of it, Gaston?”

“I have very little doubt that it is genuine. As a child, I once heard my grandfather speak of the legend, but he dismissed it as being only a legend. In those days I thought the idea romantic and fascinating. Did I never mention it to you when I came to Rosmadel?”

“Never,” said the priest, suddenly seeing himself as he was in those days, a little barefooted boy going birdsnesting with a young prince in velvet whom he had the right to call brother. “Had you done so I should not have forgotten it.”

“I do not believe that I ever gave it a thought after I came to man’s estate,” went on the Marquis musingly. “It must have gone back to the region of fairy stories. And this old lady—what was her name?—you did not mention it, I think.”

“Purposely so,” replied the Abbé, dropping into a chair beside him. “Her name was Magny, Mlle Magny. She was for years, she said, tiring-woman to Mme la Duchesse Douairière.”

His hearer clasped his hands over his eyes. “I remember the name,” he said after a moment. “I recall her too, I think. She must be well advanced in years now.”

“She was yesterday,” agreed the priest. “To-day—who knows?”

The Marquis looked up. “She is dead then? I did not gather that.”

“She died while I was with her.” They both fell silent, M. de Kersaint fingering the parchment—gone back also, thought the priest, to a distant wedding-day.

"Gaston, give me your hand!" he said suddenly, stretching out his own. "No, not that one, the other." And when the Marquis in surprise had complied, the Abbé, holding the so dissimilar fingers in his own, tapped with a forefinger on the signet ring that one of them bore, and said, "Are you wise to wear *that*?"

M. de Kersaint looked down at the crest cut in the emerald. "I have always worn it—without reflecting, I suppose—when I gave up everything else. One is inconsistent, no doubt. I never use it, of course."

"But anybody—anybody interested—can make out what the device is, though oddly enough it never struck me till last night when your hand was on the table and the candlelight fell on it."

"It means nothing to *him* probably."

"I am not so sure of that," said the priest, releasing the hand.

The Marquis slipped off the ring. "Very well. I will give up wearing it then.—Though, indeed, I might use it to support my claim of being akin . . . not that I am likely to wish to do that again!"

"Your kinship is by marriage, remember. You would never use the same arms. And, Gaston, having once declared yourself a kinsman of the Duc de Trélan's you will have to keep it up, in order to get at the money."

The Marquis, putting the ring in his pocket, frowned at this obvious truth.

"I suppose I shall. Let us think about this business then, before de Brencourt comes back, as he may do any moment. Now, am I to take on myself to give permission for the further rifling of my 'kinsman's' property, or shall I go through the farce of writing him a letter?"

"If you do that, a certain time must be allowed to elapse before you could . . . receive a reply."

"Precisely," said the Marquis de Kersaint. In spite of everything a gleam of rather grim amusement flitted over his face. "And I need not point out to you that the money would be like manna from heaven at this moment. So large a sum, absolutely at one's own disposal—why, one might organise and arm Finistère almost as well as Cadoudal is arming the Morbihan. There is no time to lose, for, as it is, when we get possession of the treasure—if we ever do—it will be useless in its present state—coin of the time of Louis XIII. and Henri IV. It would have to go to England. Bertin would see to that, of course."

The Abbé nodded. "But Bertin is not the man to get it out of Mirabel. What staff, if any, do you suppose the Directory maintains in the place?"

Mirabel's owner shook his head. "I have no idea. I only know that it is a museum, which implies a guardian of some sort. I had rather for our purposes that it was empty and falling into ruins. Make a note, Pierre, to write to Bertin or someone to find out the dispositions there."

The Abbé nodded again. "I imagine, then, that you will not write the letter to M. de Trélan—you will take the responsibility on your own shoulders, as you hinted at doing last night."

"Yes," said M. de Kersaint, leaning back in his chair. "And I shall probably go to Mirabel myself."

The priest jumped. "Gaston, that would be madness!"

"Why?"

"Why? You know that as well as I. It is a great risk for anyone to run, and for a general himself to incur a hazard which he should assign to a subordinate is not only folly, but culpable folly. What would happen to all the plans for Finistère if you got laid by the heels? And think of the self-betrayal! Could you wonder if those quick-witted young men of yours, if M. de Brencourt, if all who got to know of it asked themselves why you did such an extraordinary thing as to go on this quest in person?"

M. de Kersaint looked at him musingly. "You have a terrible habit of being in the right, mon frère. I believe you want to go yourself!"

"Well, I think I should not do amiss, though I do not know Mirabel."

"I wonder if you know what a good opinion of yourself you have!" said the Marquis, smiling. "No—though I dislike sending him there—I think that de Brencourt is the man to go."

"Has he ever been there, do you think?" asked the priest, hesitating a little.

The Marquis looked away. "No, I should doubt it," he said after a moment. "I shall have to ask him, I suppose. But here is my ancestor's plan, and naturally I can give him all necessary details."

"You must be careful how you do that—remember that you are only a distant kinsman."

"I am not likely to forget it," retorted the Marquis. "I would far rather not, but I think I must send the Comte. He is the man I should naturally have sent."

"Roland de Céligny was dying to go, was he not?"

"Harebrained boy, yes! But I told him and La Vergne that I would have none of it. It is no work for children. He will be safely out of the way with his grandfather till I send for him again—though to be sure I should have preferred to keep him with me."

"I hope his grandfather will be grateful to you for your self-denial."

"Highly improbable, I should think," observed the Marquis sardonically. "I can do no good thing in that quarter."

"I can understand that it is not work for Roland," pursued the priest meditatively, "but, as far as risk goes, he ran

enough of that with us at la Croix-Fendue the day before yesterday.”

“Of a soldier’s death, perhaps, but not of any other. Not *that* again, please God!” A look of bitter regret passed over his face. “O Pierre,” he said in a low voice, “if only that boy had been born . . . at Mirabel!”

“Yes, yes!” assented the priest sadly. Things might indeed have been otherwise if Mirabel had not in its last days been a childless house.

“When I see his grandfather again——” the Marquis was beginning—and was cut short by the sound of steps on the stairs. In an instant he was the man who had entered the attic yesterday evening, not the man who for the last three-quarters of an hour had been talking without reserve to his only intimate.

“De Brencourt—and Georges,” he said, and rising, stood waiting to receive the most notable of all the Royalist leaders, and that a peasant. In another moment the latter stood on the threshold, a massive Breton of about thirty, bull-necked, wide-shouldered, with short and very closely curling reddish hair.

The Marquis went forward and held out his hand. “Monsieur Cadoudal, I am honoured to meet the bravest of the brave.”

The Chouan’s great grip engulfed the strong, slender fingers. “And I in my turn,” he said, with a natural dignity, “salute the hero of Rivoli. You bear a Breton name, Monsieur le Marquis.”

“I have—or had—property in Brittany,” replied M. de Kersaint, hesitating for a moment, “but I am not a Breton.”

Georges Cadoudal *was* Breton—to the backbone—and in the discussion which followed Pierre Chassin had leisure to realise the force and unswervingness of his countryman’s personality, his warlike and (on a small scale) his administrative genius, and his justness of political outlook. For he knew perfectly well that as long ago as last summer, when Cadoudal had come back from his refuge in England to reorganise the Morbihan, he had urged the Bourbons to immediate action, pointing out that Hoche was no more, Bonaparte shut up (as he still was) with his best troops in Egypt, and the Republican armies being drawn off to the frontiers to face other foes. It was the hour to seize. But the advisers of the King and of his brother the Comte d’Artois, who was more particularly concerned with the affairs of the west, were, as usual, swayed by the evil genius which always seemed to haunt their counsels, and did nothing. Against that ineptitude Cadoudal, like all the Royalist leaders, past and present, had continually to struggle—as if there were not enough difficulties and more than enough dangers, without instructions from overseas that were always either futile or too late. If only, thought the Abbé, they do not trip Gaston’s feet in the future . . . He watched him now, listening to Cadoudal’s explanation of his system of “legions” in the Morbihan and in Loire-Inférieure, and how he had brought it about.

“But Finistère, Monsieur le Marquis,” finished the Breton, looking at the keen patrician face opposite him, “will be a much more difficult matter, because it is almost fresh ground. And you will find there many fewer arms stored away than is the case in my command, where we have been fighting on and off for six years.”

“I know it,” returned Finistère’s destined leader gravely. “I know I have a very hard task before me. But I have just received good news, Monsieur Cadoudal. I may be able to supply a good proportion of the necessary arms myself. There is something equivalent to 12,000 louis awaiting me in a kinsman’s château if I can secure it. As to organisation, here is my scheme, if you will be good enough to glance at it. Though I can never look to have a force like yours, I should hope in the event of hostilities to be able to support your rear—though indeed that would by no means counterbalance the immense benefit to me of having you as a bulwark in front of me. Against the tide of attack we of Finistère should at best be only a few pebbles—behind a rock.”

“At any rate, Monsieur le Marquis,” said ‘Georges,’ gazing at him hard out of his deepset eyes, “I can tell, without even looking at your scheme, that I should not have *sand* behind me!”

An hour later Cadoudal, escorted by M. de Brencourt, having departed as secretly as he had come, M. de Kersaint stood collecting the papers strewn on the table. “I should have been happy to serve under that man, instead of being his colleague,” he said musingly. Then he went and looked out through the attic window at the remains of the mediaeval fortifications of Hennebont, with their memories of the indomitable spirit which had once defended them, housing in the breast of the Comtesse Jeanne de Montfort.

“Pierre,” he said suddenly, “before we leave I have a fancy that I should like to see the giver of this strange and belated wedding gift of mine. Would it be possible, think you?”

“I do not suppose the niece would object, if you give me leave to concoct some reason for the request,” replied the Abbé.

The Marquis gave a sort of smile. “You can say what you like. I am afraid you must be getting inured to deception on my behalf. At any rate I cannot betray myself to Mlle Magny now.”

No, one cannot betray oneself to the dead. And yet, who knows? . . . Perhaps the old lady’s spirit, still hovering round the habitation it had so recently quitted, could realise and be glad that her offering had thus quickly found its goal. But candles burnt now at the head and feet of that empty dwelling, and the face looked austere, and remote from those old desires and admirations. M. de Kersaint took the holy-water sprinkler which the priest handed to him, and

shook a few drops on the dead servitress of his house.

"Yes, I remember her," he said in a low voice. "My mother always thought so highly of her . . . I wish now that I had seen her alive, for I should like to have thanked her for this great gift of hers, with its possibilities for France. Could she have chosen a better time to make it?"

He stooped over the bed, and, reverently lifting one of the old hands folded over the crucifix, put a kiss on its icy, shrivelled surface, while the priest gazed at him, full of sorrowful thoughts. Eight-and-twenty years ago, when those closed eyes had looked on him in his springtime, what might he not have become? Lucien, who had been struck by it, had told him how M. de Kersaint had objected to last night's use of the *Tu Marcellus eris*, and the sad and lovely lines rushed into the priest's mind anew. Yes, more poignant than the lament for youth cut off and blighted promise, was that for youth spent to no end and promise wasted. *Tu Marcellus eris!* At twenty-three he might have been . . . at fifty-one? . . .

For what the man who stood there with him by the dead had since done to redeem the light and sterile past he could not claim in his own name, and she—the bride of Mlle Magny's memories—to whom this late justification of her faith in him would have been life's supremest happiness, was no longer on earth to see it.

Truly, as the great Latin knew, there was a bitter sense of tears in human things.

BOOK II

MIRABEL

“And so, cold, courteous, a mere gentleman,
He bowed, we parted.

Parted. Face no more,
Voice no more, love no more! wiped wholly out
Like some ill scholar’s scrawl from heart and slate,—
Aye, spit on and so wiped out utterly
By some coarse scholar! I have been too coarse,
Too human. Have we business, in our rank,
With blood i’ the veins? I will have henceforth none;
Not even to keep the colour at my lip.”

Aurora Leigh.

CHAPTER I

M. THIBAULT IN CONVERSATION

In spite of the bare six miles which separated it from Paris in spite of its position only a little off the high-road there-from to Saint-Germain-en-Laye, a great peace reigned this afternoon over the hamlet of Mirabel-le-Château, those few dwellings which had grown up, for its convenience or by its favour, round the vast oblong mass of the Renaissance palace from which they took their name. It was the light, warm peace of early April sunshine, of occasionally rising April dust, and of trees all brightly and freshly arrayed, but, whatever its ingredients, it was a tranquillity entirely unappreciated by the one human being in sight of Mirabel, the sentry in his box outside that deserted palace. He was so bored with being sentry there!

Years ago, in the bad old days, as he was accustomed to regard them, if he had been in Mirabel-le-Château at all—which was improbable, for he was a Parisian—the village would not have been so deathly quiet, for, vassal though it were of the great house which it was now his untoward lot to guard, it beat at least with the life radiating to it from that centre and reason of its being. But if all the remaining inhabitants of Mirabel-le-Château could boast, in theory, of a glorious liberty, of bowing the knee no more to M. le Duc de Trélan, nor even to the King of France—but only to France's five kinglets, the Directors, to the military authorities who bled them by incessant conscription, and, in a measure, to that member of the *Conseil des Anciens* who had charge of the château, Georges Camain—they certainly could not congratulate themselves on the possession of overmuch gaiety or even of bread. In those same bad old days the tyrannical owners of Mirabel had given them work, or bread, or both; no one to-day gave them either, for there was none to give. Besides, there were not now many inhabitants left in the hamlet to receive. The village boys who, as boys will, had cheered on the Paris mob which sacked Mirabel in the summer of 1792 lay, many of them, as quiet as the bodies round which they had unthinkingly danced—corpses themselves in the blood-stained soil of Flanders or Switzerland or Italy or Syria. Those who lived were far away. In Mirabel-le-Château now only the old and the women remained.

Certainly, in the bad old days, Mirabel-le-Château had been a more cheerful and a more populous village; but then it had not been free. Certainly, in that time of oppression, such of its inhabitants as were so minded could flock on Sundays at the sound of the bell to the little church and hear the white-haired curé say Mass and admonish them—two proceedings which some of them found, strangely enough, to be of assistance in their daily lives. Now that old man was slowly dying, a deportee in the swamps of Cayenne, there was no one to say Mass, and even the bell, the symbol of a cult, might on no account be rung. Yet every tenth day these freed citizens were all but hounded into the bare and desecrated church to hear a discourse on patriotism or the social virtues. But were they not delivered from "the imbecile liturgy of the priesthood" and all the superstitions of Catholicism? Was not Sunday replaced by the more enlightened if penetratingly dull Décadi? And whereas, in the bad old days, the master of Mirabel had all but owned them, now, on the contrary they, or at least the French nation, claimed to own Mirabel. It was true that singularly little benefit had accrued to them from the change.

And thus the village of Mirabel-le-Château was less than half animate, and the sentry from the guard-house opposite the Temple of Reason (formerly the church) had to bear his dreadful affliction of ennui unsolaced. Only a wooden barrier and some acres of gravel separated him from the château behind him, for the great wrought iron gates, of the finest Italian workmanship, had been destroyed when the present proprietors entered so tempestuously on their new acquisition seven years ago. These gates had been very economically replaced, all the time that the deceased Convention was in power, by a cord bearing a knot of tricolour ribbon and the legend, "Défense d'entrer," written on a card in violet ink that had run and paled with the rain. But now, under the Directory, a neat wooden barrier spanned the wide space between the stone gateposts with their mutilated shields and lions, a barrier bearing a painted notice which, headed "Ci-devant château de Mirabel, Bien National," went on to state that since the Government intended eventually to turn the château into a museum of art treasures, citizens were already at liberty to visit it twice in the "décade," on payment of a fee. Practically nothing, as yet, had really been done towards the formation of the proposed museum, and if the Directory, always pressed for money, depended for this consummation on the payments of visitors it could have amassed very little towards that object. Meanwhile it had locked up such of the rooms as had not been entirely stripped of pictures and furniture, installed a female concierge with power to summon relays of *femmes de journée* to her aid, and kept what seemed to be a rather unnecessary sentry till nightfall at the entrance.

And this sentry, fixed bayonet and all, lounged to-day in his box as though he had never known the meaning of drill, as though he were not a National Guard from what had been one of the most turbulent sections of Paris. He sighed as he sat there, his musket between his knees, he fidgeted with his white cross-belts, he drummed with his heels; a member of a free people felt himself very much in bondage this afternoon. He would not be relieved till another hour and a quarter had dragged by. For a few minutes' conversation with some human being of whatever station, sex, or age, he would have given almost anything that he could think of. But the village, round the corner to his right, seemed uninhabited as well as invisible; even the cabaret on his other hand, between him and the high-road at right angles

some half-mile away, might as well have been shut, for all the company it was receiving or emitting. Though he could not betake himself thither, sheer boredom was making the Citizen Grégoire Thibault altruistic. To see anybody go in, even. . . . And it was in looking dejectedly along the poplar-bordered road to the Café du Musée that he became aware of a cloud of dust settling down in the distance.

A little interest sprang into his veiled eye; he leant forward out of his box and spat upon the ground with a return of vigour. That dust must betoken the passing of the diligence from Paris to Saint-Germain. Now, had it set down any one for Mirabel-le-Château? Very improbable; but if it had the traveller would be obliged to pass him to get to the hamlet. . . . There was nobody, of course, and, as to talk, only the conversation of the poplars with the breeze. "Oh, sacré métier!" groaned the Citizen Grégoire, and took out his pipe as a last resource. There was no one to report him to the sergeant.

He pushed down the coarse tobacco by means of a handsome gold and bloodstone seal with a coat of arms, loot from the great pillage, which he had bought last year for ten sous on the Quai de la Mégisserie, began to feel for his tinderbox, and stopped. The diligence *had* set down a passenger after all!

Down the sunlit road under the poplars was advancing the figure of a woman, carrying a little covered basket in her hand. By her gait she was young. So much the better. Thibault rose to his feet; it seemed too good to be true.

It must be conceded that, as the godsend came nearer, he suffered a measure of disappointment. The woman was not young—but neither was she old. She was walking rather slowly, with her eyes on the ground, but when she was quite near she lifted them and looked at him, and M. Thibault perceived that she was about to stop of her own accord.

"Good-day, la femme!"

"Good-day, citizen sentry," she returned. "This is the only entrance to the château, is it not?"

Her voice was very sweet—though indeed any voice would have fallen like music on the ears of Grégoire just then. The eyes which she raised to him were noticeably well-set; under her decent black bonnet he saw fair hair turning grey. She was tall and generously made; he took her to be about forty-five. Then her little covered basket and her air of having business there suddenly recalled to him a fact he had totally forgotten.

"Name of a pipe!" exclaimed he, slapping his musket. "Is it possible, citoyenne, that you are the new concierge?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, citizen sentry. I was instructed to come this afternoon. My baggage, a small trunk, should have arrived already."

"I don't believe it has," said M. Grégoire Thibault musingly, and he rubbed a rather bristly chin. "If I had seen anything of it, I shouldn't have forgotten that you were coming. But perhaps it arrived this morning before I was on duty." He appeared to be ruminating on this possibility, but in reality he was thinking to himself, "She has been a fine woman, that, once!" Aloud, he said, "I knew, of course, that Mère Prévost was giving up her job, but I had forgotten that she was to leave to-day. Her man has come back from the wars, I believe, short of an arm. And so you are the new caretaker, citoyenne?"

He took another look at her. "Le diable m'emporte," he thought this time, "if she is not a fine woman still!"

Resting his musket against the sentry-box he went slowly, fishing out a key, to the movable portion of the barrier. But having got there, instead of unfastening the padlock he turned round again, leaning against the bar.

"I'm sure I hope you'll like this business, citoyenne," he began conversationally. "Pretty dreary, I take it, living alone in that great house there, full of nothing but memories of the time of the Tyrant, and of the bloodshed the day the people took it. If one believed in ghosts, now——"

"You don't believe in them, evidently, Citizen?"

"I hope I am a better patriot," responded the National Guard with dignity. "Ghosts, the so-called saints, prayers for the dead, the Republic has done away with all that nonsense."

"Yes, there has been a good deal done away with these last ten years." The tone of this remark a little puzzled Grégoire, but he continued nevertheless, "Still, I must confess that Décadi doesn't often see me at the Temple, unless there's a wedding. It's just a little wearisome. . . . But my wife in Paris goes to the Temple of Genius regularly—the late *edifice Roch*, as you know—and says she likes it, especially since they have instituted recitations by the children, and our youngest took a prize. But what were we speaking of?—ah, the château. Well, if I were not a good patriot, and disbelieved in saints and angels and all that rubbish, I might be tempted to think that the ci-devant Duchesse walked there o' nights without her head, or maybe with it, looking in her silks and satins as she did before they stuck it on a pike, for I have heard that she was a famous beauty."

"Yes, I have heard that," said the newcomer with a shade of impatience. "But I have also heard that it is incorrect," she added.

"Well, beauty or not, it was all the same to her, poor wretch, when she came out of La Force that day," observed Grégoire, comfortably leaning back on his elbows on the barrier. And having thus dismissed the subject he went on, "The ci-devant Duc now,—supposed to be alive, he is. So you won't meet him walking there. Instead of Monseigneur we have M. le Député Camain; he often comes, and sometimes the Citoyenne Dufour, who used to be at the Opera, with him. She acts at the Ambigu-Comique now. They say he's going to marry her. Curious world, isn't it, Citoyenne? Think, if the Duc and Duchesse could see Mirabel now!" He laughed.

The new caretaker drew her shawl round her as if the April breeze caught her. “I think I had better——” she began, making a fresh move towards the barrier. And then she said abruptly, “You spoke just now of the Duc. Has anything been heard—here in Mirabel-le-Château, I mean—about him?”

M. Grégoire shook a waggish finger at her. “No, no, nothing more is known about him. And take care, citoyenne concierge!” he added grinning. “It doesn’t do, since Fructidor, to be too much interested in aristocrats as high up as that, especially when they are still émigrés. But I believe from what I have heard, that Monseigneur le Duc could turn any woman’s head. I don’t suppose, however, that you ever saw him, did you?”

“I am from the provinces,” was the new concierge’s reply. “I only came to Paris after the tenth of August.”

“Ah, you missed something!” said the National Guard regretfully. “I wasn’t at the storming of the Tuileries, but I saw the place afterwards. And this nest of ci-devants, as I daresay you’ve heard, was rushed two days later, by patriots from Paris. Not so much fighting, of course, as in the Place du Carrousel, since there were no troops here, but they barricaded the place as well as they could, and the Duchesse’s maître d’hôtel was killed outside her boudoir, and two or three servants on the stairs and so on. Then the house was pretty well looted; I’ve heard the citizen Camain regret that.”

The concierge looked away from him at the great façade. “And how was it that the Duc escaped?” she asked.

“How did he escape! He did not need to escape!” retorted the sentry. “He wasn’t there. He had emigrated long before that. That’s what saved him.”

“But he could not know, long before, what was going to happen in 1792,” said the woman, almost as if she were defending M. de Trélan.

“Maybe not,” returned the National Guard indifferently. “All I know is that he wasn’t here. But she was—the ci-devant Duchesse—and that was the end of her, after a few days of La Force. Myself, I don’t approve of murdering prisoners, especially those of the sex, though the woman Lamballe, being such a friend of the female Capet—as we used to call her before Thermidor—doubtless deserved what she got. But as for this Duchesse, I have heard that she was always kind to the poor, here and elsewhere. But what would you have? Mistakes happen.”

“Yes,” agreed the concierge, looking at him. “But, no doubt, she is well out of this world. It is not too merry a one, Citizen, even, perhaps, for a Duchesse.”

M. Thibault, who was in reality a sympathetic soul, and by no means the blood-boltered patriot he liked to paint himself at times, said to this, “You have known trouble, Citoyenne?”

“I have known what it is to lose my husband, my home, and every penny I had. But I am not faint-hearted; do not think that! One goes on to the end, does one not, citizen sentry—till the relief?”

“Sacré tonnerre, yes!” asseverated the citizen sentry, struck. “I see you are a good-plucked one, Madame. Well, I shall like to think of you behind me in the château there, and if ever there’s anything you want doing for you, I’m your man. Grégoire Thibault is my name.”

The new concierge thanked him with a smile which caused a sensible warmth to flow over the Citizen Grégoire, and made him regret still more that he could not decently keep her waiting any longer. He fitted the key slowly into the lock, saying, “You’ve got your warrant with you, I suppose, Madame?”

The woman held it out at once—an official document duly stamped and sealed, appointing the widow Vidal, sempstress, of the Rue de Seine, concierge of the ci-devant château of Mirabel, in room of the woman Prévost, resigning that charge. The document was signed by the Deputy Camain, the administrator of Mirabel, and countersigned by one of the five Directors, Larevellière-Lépeaux.

“ ‘Vidal,’ ” murmured the sentry, studying it. “Parfaitement.” He returned the paper and at last unfastened the barrier. “Do you see those two bits of balustrading, Madame Vidal, on either hand of the great steps? When you get there you will find that there is a stairway the other side of them, going down to the basement storey. The left-hand one has ‘Concierge’ on it. You go down there. Mme Prévost will probably be on the look-out for you. Good-luck to you, Citoyenne!”

She bent her head again with that smile which had charmed him.

“Thank you, Citizen. I think I shall find my way. . . . Ah, there is one thing I forgot. I have lived in Paris for some years with my niece Mme Tessier, and it is probable that she may come to see me soon—that she will come regularly, in fact. She will have a pass from M. Camain himself. I suppose therefore that there will be no difficulty?”

“No, that will be all right. No need to bother about that,” replied M. Thibault heartily.

And Mme Vidal passed through the barrier. As she did so she not unnaturally glanced up at the broken stone lion on one of the gateposts which still held between its paws the defaced shield of the Ducs de Trélan. The man, who saw the movement, made a gesture of half-tolerant contempt.

“Those watchdogs won’t bark at you now—nor at any one!” he remarked. But Mme Vidal seemed not to have heard him; nor did he, on his side, observe that she had caught her underlip between her teeth like one in sudden pain. Then she began to walk steadily towards the great house.

CHAPTER II

LE PALAIS DE FAIENCE

A trifle of agitation might easily have been excused in any prospective caretaker confronted for the first time by the château of Mirabel. Since there was, on this side of it, no half-concealing avenue, nor, indeed, trees of any kind whatever, but only the prone skeletons of what had been a series of formal gardens, the whole towering extent of the façade broke in one oppressive moment upon eye and brain. And that, no doubt, was why Mme Vidal, walking at first with fair speed towards it over the wide gravel approach, suddenly came to a standstill, and, gripping tightly the handle of her basket, stood like a statue, gazing, across its forlorn parterres, at the overpowering bulk of her new home.

Forty-two years had gone to the making of Mirabel. Begun in 1528 for François I., at the same time as that other palace of Fontainebleau, it had risen under the eyes of successive Royal architects, de l'Orme and Primaticcio, till it became the great château reckoned, in that day of the French Renaissance, so wonderful a novelty—a residence not built round courtyards one or many, but constructed in a solid mass, a parallelogram of great length and height, whereof the north side exactly reproduced the south and the east the west. And Girolamo della Robbia, brought from Italy, had ornamented it in every part with details of many-coloured majolica.

So it stood, this great pile, before the eyes of Mme Vidal—its five-storeyed façade cut, as it were, into three portions by the two square-faced towers which ran up it, and which were repeated, something larger and more aspiring, at the corners. Along both of the two lower storeys, making a sort of colonnade or loggia in front of the tall windows, went richly decorated arcading, fifteen bays of it, lofty and round-arched. Interrupted by similar towers at intervals the colonnading ran, in fact, round the entire building. But the five bays of the central portion were more deeply recessed than the others, for at their pillar bases stretched, from tower to tower, twelve immensely long, wide and shallow steps. Save for the absence of these steps and of the great entrance door to which they led—and for a difference, also, in the frieze over the arches—the second storey exactly reproduced the first. But the third and fourth gained a measure of variety from the absence of the colonnading; though on the third there was still an uncovered terrace or balcony. Here too the windows, no longer so lofty, showed differing schemes of ornamentation, the frames of the lower row being supported by a sort of winged design, the upper accompanied by flat columns.

Yet, despite these devices to break monotony, it was with relief that the eye, travelling upwards over this regular assemblage of colonnades and windows, came at last to the high-pitched roofs, with their agreeably different levels, their dormer windows, and their tall, ornate chimney-stacks. The roof of the midmost portion of the château, between the two central towers, was the lowest; yet even this, after putting forth two great decorated chimneys, suddenly soared up at each end into a peak higher even than those of the towers. And on either hand of it sprang the great pointed pavilion-roofs of the side wings, much higher again, and blossoming, they also, into the most intricately ornamented chimneys and dormer windows.

And everywhere there was this astounding many-hued, glazed and highly-modelled decoration, lavished in frieze and medallion from the richly diapered soffits of the arcading on the ground floor to the very crests of the roofs themselves. It was true that it did not glitter so brightly in the sun of 1799 as in that of 1570, that more than two centuries of exposure to northern weather had dimmed—not perhaps to its disadvantage—something of the Italian's lustre and colouring, and that the far more destructive human agencies of the last seven years had obliterated some of his ornaments altogether, yet Mirabel still was a "palais de faïence," still supported the enthusiastic testimony of a Renaissance contemporary that its mass was "fort éclattante à la veue." And even if the decoration were too exuberant, even if the whole building were imposing rather from sheer size than from any other architectural virtue, it was undeniably a great house, with a majesty and a history of its own, a house that bore out the proud motto of its vanished owners, *Memini et permaneo*—'I remember and I remain.'

Such was the château of Mirabel, built for the first King of the Valois-Angouléme branch, whose salamander still in places adorned it, and given by the last to his favourite, César de Saint-Chamans, Marquis de Trélan. Up and down those great steps, in the last two hundred years, had gone many a prince and warrior and statesman and courtier, many a great lady and fair. Mirabel with its colonnades and majolica had known much revelry, much wit, much evil; some good deeds, no little patronage of art and letters, now and then a liberal charity; once or twice, in brides of the line, some approach to saintliness. And it had sheltered always a brilliant courage, a brilliant egoism, an astoundingly tenacious self-will, and a pride as great as the Rohans'. For these last qualities it had been no unfit setting.

Now it was . . . as it was; and a poor semptress from Paris, whom the warrant of that little hunchbacked, cross-grained Angevin attorney, the Director Larevellière-Lépeaux, had appointed its only tenant, stood in front of the blind, shuttered mass and gazed at it. The sun might strike on the majolica, but how eyeless looked those great lofty windows of the lower storeys, through that empty colonnading where no one ever now walked or talked! The glass was gone from some of them. Everything was dead, ruined, deserted—a pulseless body. Only, over the level central roof, against the clear sky of afternoon, voyaged with light heart a feather of an April cloud, and the April breeze shook cheerfully the few self-sown flowers that flaunted haphazard in what was the mere chart of the formal gardens. But Mme Vidal's

eyes were on the house, and the house only.

Presently a lively discussion of sparrows took place near her on the gravel. The angry cheeping appeared to rouse her, and she began to go on again towards the château, while the victor of the affray, hopping to the basin of a sunken fountain, drank delicately of that water with which the spring rains, and they alone, had filled it.

Very soon the new concierge was close enough to the house to distinguish plainly the winged beasts, like dragon-headed horses, that went in couples, face to face, all along the frieze running above the colonnading of the ground floor, and the medallions of classical heads that filled the spandrils below the frieze, and the Doric entablature of the next storey. Walking now like an automaton, she came nearer and nearer, and stood at last at the foot of the great steps, and, looking up, saw, over the blotched and discoloured marble, through which the grass was pushing triumphant fingers, how the great door, visible now through the richly diapered archway, was roughly mended and yet more roughly boarded up. It still wore the scars of that August day seven years ago when, for the first time in all its proud history, it had been opened to a will that was neither its master's nor the King's. At it, too, the concierge stood a moment or two gazing, then, as she had been directed, she turned to her left hand, and began to descend the steps which led from the ground level at the foot of the tower towards the basement offices. These steps, at the base of either tower, were invisible till one was close to the house, since they were screened by a line of stone balustrading, but, as the sentry had said, a board with a legend and a downward-pointing hand directed the feet of the visitor to this subterranean entrance. Mirabel had been greatly admired once for the possession of this very thing.

Just as Mme Vidal got to the bottom of the steps the door at right angles to them opened, and revealed the outgoing caretaker, a dry, thin-lipped woman dressed in rusty black, with a fairhaired child of three or four clinging to her skirts.

"I hope, Madame," said her successor apologetically, "that I have not inconvenienced you? I fear I am a little late; the diligence was not punctual."

"You're not later than I expected," replied Mme Prévost unemotionally. "I saw Thibault chattering to you at the gate; I know what he is, so I don't blame you. From the way his tongue goes, it's a pity he's not a woman."

Without more ado she led the way in, the child's hand in hers, and Mme Vidal followed her along a short passage into a smallish living-room, clean, bare, and distinctly stuffy with an accumulated rather than a recent smell of cooking. Facing the door, high up, were two tall windows, which came just down to the level of the ground outside, itself, naturally, higher than that of the floor. They gave sufficient light, but it was not very easy to see out of them, for they were heavily barred. In the middle of the room, covered with a nightmare of a cloth, stood a round table. On the left hand was the stove, with a few shelves and appurtenances; on the right a press, two chairs and another door.

"Here is the bedroom," said Mme Prévost, opening this door, and affording a hasty glimpse of a still smaller room, where the chief object to be seen was a short, wide, wooden bed, covered with a patchwork quilt of various shades, and situated in a recess.

"You'll find these rooms quite comfortable," said the woman. "The Government provides all necessaries, down to pots and pans, as I expect you've been told, so you'll have what you want for cooking. And I will come again in the morning to show you round the château; I can tell you your duties then. I have left you enough provisions for your supper and breakfast, in case you did not think to bring anything with you. There is a small trunk of yours arrived, however; I put it in the bedroom. I suppose you know that people come to see the place occasionally, though a good portion of it is shut up? There's keys—a mort of keys. Look, Madame!" She unfastened a small door in the wall, and showed them reposing in a sort of cupboard.

"It will take me time to learn all those," said Mme Vidal, resting her hand on the table. She had a look, suddenly come upon her, of great fatigue.

"Oh, they are all labelled," returned Mme Prévost complacently. "Well, I'll come and show you in the morning, about nine. Yes, ma petite"—for the child was tugging at her skirts—"we are going to see Papa. She hardly knows what the word means; born in Germinal of the year IV, she was, and he away in Germany with General Moreau. . . . I hope you will find everything you want, Madame. I can assure you it's all clean and as it should be."

"I am sure it is," answered Mme Vidal. "But may I not pay you this evening for the provisions you have been kind enough to leave me?"

"Very well, Madame, if you wish," replied the other, who was gathering together some small possessions. "There's the bread and the coffee, and a couple of eggs—not so easy to come by in these hard days. The milk-woman comes at half-past six in the morning." Reflecting a moment she named a sum, and Mme Vidal, pulling out a shabby purse, paid it with reiterated thanks.

"But I see that you have left me some wood too," she added. "Do I not owe you for that also?"

"No, no," said Mme Prévost, waving away the proposal. "There's never any lack of wood here, and the Government lets the concierge have it free. It would be hard indeed if they were stingy with it, considering that it costs them nothing, as it is all off the estate. This lot is particularly good, you'll find; it comes from the pine avenue, I fancy."

Mme Vidal took a step backwards. "They are not cutting down the pine avenue, surely?" she exclaimed in a sharp,

sudden voice.

A great astonishment dawned in the meagre visage before her. “Why, do you know Mirabel already!” she asked. “I thought—the Citizen Deputy said you came from the provinces.”

“So I did—so I do,” stammered the new concierge. “But even in the provinces . . . one had heard of the pine avenue at Mirabel. My late husband had seen it in his youth.”

“I see,” said Mme Prévost slowly. “Well, I will leave you to settle in, Madame, for you look tired. I’ll come in the morning about nine then. The stairway up to the ground floor is a little to the left out there; not that you will need to go up before I come. The key of the door I let you in at is in the lock; everybody, visitors and all, comes by that door, and you are not responsible for any other; in fact the rest are nearly all barred up. You had better lock that door behind me now. Come along, Mariette.”

Almost in silence Mme Vidal went with her into the passage, and when Mme Prévost and the child had passed through, and she had responded with a pale smile to the outgoing concierge’s “A demain, Madame!” she turned the key and pushed the bolt. Then she went back to the living-room, and locked that door behind her also.

Back in Mirabel! back in Mirabel! Was it possible? Back in Mirabel—though, to be sure, in a region of it that she had never even seen before. Some of the swarm of servants had lived here in old times. Had she betrayed herself about the avenue? How foolish, after all these years of self-repression! She looked slowly round. Yes, this odd couple of rooms was no doubt some lesser steward’s in the past. But, if unfamiliar, it was at least situated within the shell of what had been, what still was, Mirabel—Mirabel the loved, Mirabel the hated, Mirabel the enchanted palace, Mirabel the purgatory. . . .

She went suddenly to the cupboard in the wall, and putting in her hand drew out the keys. Yes, she was once more, in a sense—but in what a sense—the châtelaine of Mirabel.

And, flinging them back clashing into their seclusion, she sat down at the table, buried her face in her hands and began to laugh. There was never a laugh more mirthless, yet the situation had its humours. At her, indeed, the “watchdogs” on the disfigured gateposts, as the sentry had termed them, would never even have growled. The new concierge of Mirabel’s fallen estate had once been the mistress of Mirabel’s magnificence, for Mme Vidal the caretaker was Valentine de Saint-Chamans, was the Duchesse de Trélan in person.

CHAPTER III

NINE YEARS—AND BEYOND

(1)

The general belief that the Duchesse de Trélan, thrown into prison when Mirabel was sacked, had shared the terrible fate of the Princesse de Lamballe, though it was unfounded, had a large amount of probability to justify it. Valentine de Saint-Chamans had come very near to being cut down by the weapons of the killers in that shambles of a street outside La Force on the 3rd of September, 1792—so near it indeed that her entire disappearance from that hour was assigned to that cause and to no other.

But she had been saved on the very brink by a man almost unknown to her, acting under a stimulus not commonly as powerful in this world as it might be—gratitude.

Years and years before the Duchesse de Trélan had discovered in Paris, precariously situated, a former steward of Mirabel, had pensioned him from her own purse, and had continued the pension after his death to his granddaughter, Suzon. Suzon in due time wedded one Alcibiade Tessier, a young watchmaker with ideas—the Duchesse, who was fond of her for her own sake, contributing her dowry. After that Valentine lost sight of her protégée, and for some years before 1792 she had seen nothing of Mme Tessier, so that no one had less idea than she in what good stead her own past generosity was to stand her.

The first intimation of it was the sudden appearance, at one o'clock in the afternoon of that third of September, in the little courtyard of the prison of La Petite Force—where only an hour and a half earlier Mme de Trélan had seen and spoken to the Princesse de Lamballe, now gone to her doom—of a man whom she seemed to have seen before. This man approached her, looked her in the face, said with meaning, "Do not be afraid! I shall be there!" and walked rapidly away again. It was Alcibiade Tessier, now an important member of his "section," and, as such, decorated with a badge of authority commanding respect, though meaningless to the Duchesse de Trélan.

Sure enough, when a little before three o'clock several men came to take her before that mock tribunal in the adjoining prison of La Force, he was at their head. Still Mme de Trélan had not recognised him, and thought his remark merely ferocious irony. But a measure of enlightenment as to his aim, at any rate, came when she found him confidently taking the words out of her mouth, and answering for her to those questions that she only half understood. It was he who at the end of that rapid interrogatory caught her arm and, raising it, said, "See, she cries 'Vive la nation' "; it was he who, on the pronouncement of acquittal, went out in front of her through the door of death into the swimming Rue des Balais, he who, with some more under his orders, hurried her up the length of that swirling red gutter into the worse carnage of the Rue St. Antoine, and finally he who, when one of the male furies there, with dripping sabre, tried to get her to kneel on the hillock of corpses and shreds of corpses to swear fealty to the nation, pushed her by, covering her face with his hat, asseverating that she was not a friend of the Lamballe, and that she had already sworn.

But it was only when she sank down, half dead, in Alcibiade's little shop in the Rue de Seine that the Duchesse de Trélan began fully to realise the harvest which she was reaping. In the Tessiers' attic, where, more or less indisposed, she was hidden for a month, she knew it better still. For Suzon had quite decided that her benefactress was to instal herself there for the present, until she could safely get away, and she and Alcibiade so wrought upon Mme de Trélan that in mid-October she openly appeared as Suzon's aunt from the provinces, arriving one evening, for the benefit of the neighbours, with a trunk—Suzon's.

She was then able to attempt to communicate with her émigré husband, and wrote a very guarded letter addressed to his last direction in London. Suzon, who was anxious for her to join him, contrived to get it conveyed somehow across the Channel. Cautiously as (for the Tessiers' sake) the letter was worded, it showed that Mme de Trélan was waiting for a lead to join the Duc in England. No answer came. The obvious explanation of the silence was that her letter had never reached him. That was quite to be expected. After Christmas she wrote again; fresh difficulties of conveyance, fresh uncertainties as to its arrival. And again no reply.

"The reason is," Suzon would say, "that M. le Duc is coming himself to take you away. One of these days he will turn up in the Rue de Seine, you will see!"

But Valentine knew—indeed, hoped—that that was out of the question. In that early spring of 1793, after the King's execution, how could a proscribed noble possibly get into Paris without incurring the most terrible risks? She was haunted sometimes by the thought that he had come, and had paid the penalty. That thought made her hesitate too about fleeing on her own account to England—always supposing such a course were possible without compromising the Tessiers—for her husband might meanwhile be searching for her in Paris, since she had not dared (again for their sakes) to give her address plainly. She would wait a little longer.

And then, in that April, the bloody thundercloud of the Terror broke over France. Ere the first spattering red drops had swelled to the stream which was to run so full Valentine found herself once more in prison—this time in a much obscurer place of detention than La Force. A piece of her underclothing, incautiously sent to be washed out of the

house, was found to bear a compromising mark; the washerwoman denounced this widow from the provinces who had a coronet on her shift. The marvel was that the Tessiers themselves were not included in this catastrophe, but they put up such a good defence, Alcibiade's character for patriotism stood so high, and Suzon affirmed so stoutly that the garment in question belonged to a ci-devant in the country whom her aunt had once served as maid, that in the end Valentine was imprisoned as a suspect merely. And as a suspect she remained in her mean captivity for more than a year, unrecognised—for there were none of her acquaintance there—and forgotten.

The Gironde fell, Marat was murdered, the Queen executed, Vendée defeated. The year 1793 closed; the next began; Hébert's, then Danton's head went the way of the rest, and at last the long suspense was ended, when on a May morning of 1794 the widow Vidal stood before Dumas and his assessors in their plumed hats, in that hall of so many anguishes in the Palais de Justice, to find acquittal on an unforeseen ground. There was no evidence against her; the zealous washerwoman was dead, and even Fouquier-Tinville himself, demanding his quota of heads a day, was intent on nobler quarry than this country widow. Her trial only lasted ten minutes. One was quickly lost or saved just then.

The fishwives on the other side of the barrier acclaimed the acquittal, little guessing whom they were applauding. Some of them insisted on accompanying the Duchesse home—to all the home she had. Henceforward she was more or less sacred. But never, now, while that orgy of blood and denunciation lasted, could her real identity be suffered to reveal itself, or the Tessiers would be lost indeed. Moreover, Mme de Trélan was herself beginning to be uncertain of it. And, though her position was improved by her official acquittal, the months of prison and privation had left their mark on her character in a kind of inertia and indifference very foreign to her nature. In common with many others in those days of superhuman strain, the love of life was running low in her. Existence was almost a burden. She was ill, indeed, for months. Then at last, in that stiflingly hot and cloudless Thermidor, the spell of terror was snapped, and the guillotine came back from its ceaseless work in the east of Paris to the centre for Maximilien Robespierre himself.

In the reaction Valentine roused herself to write again to her husband, more because she felt she owed it to him than because of any great wish to do so, or of any hope that he would receive the letter. She did seriously contemplate leaving France, or at least leaving Paris, but the days went on, and she took no steps. . . . It was better to think that Gaston was dead. She did think it at last. If he were not, she was too proud to make an appearance in the world of emigration as a deserted wife. And the few family ties she, an only child and early orphaned, had possessed were all broken now, by nature or violence. She was happy, too, in a sense, with the Tessiers, who had risked so much for her, and to whom, since Thermidor, her presence was no longer a menace—though she was still very careful not to betray herself. She began to earn money by embroidery, which she had always done exquisitely; she began, too, to enjoy the new sensation of earning. And when in '97 Alcibiade died very suddenly, and his widow, keeping a journeyman to attend to the clocks and watches, turned half the shop into a lingerie, Mme de Trélan's skill helped to support the new venture.

So—unbelievably when she looked back at their added months—five years, almost, had passed since her release, and she was still in the Rue de Seine, having reached an indifference to outward circumstances which might, on the surface, have earned the commendation accorded by spiritual direction to "detachment." Yet this state of mind was not in the main the fruit of the astonishing change in her fortunes, of captivity and indignities or suspense—not even the fruit of her husband's strange silence. It sprang from a tree of older growth than these, though no doubt these conditions, and especially the last, had ripened it; it was the lees of a cup more deadening, even, than that which the Revolution had set to her lips—the cup which she had begun to drink years before, when her heart had been slowly starved amid the luxury and state of Mirabel.

(2)

The marriage of Geneviève-Armande-Marie-Valentine de Fondragon with Gaston-Henri-Hippolyte-Gabriel-Eléonor de Saint-Chamans, Duc de Trélan, had been arranged, as often happened, when the bride was a child in the convent. But Mlle de Fondragon had seen her betrothed before the ceremony rather oftener than fell to the lot of most highborn young girls in her day, and no match, in the end, had been more one of love than hers with the singularly attractive young man who came sometimes, as was permitted, to the parlour of the great aristocratic nunnery of the Panthémont where she was being educated. She was seventeen, beautiful and accomplished, when she was wedded with all imaginable pomp in the chapel of Mirabel to a bridegroom of twenty-three, and began with him an existence out of which custom and the demands of fashion, rather than anything more menacing, were so quickly to suck not only the early enchantment, but the more lasting affection that might have replaced it. For the splendid and handsome young patrician whom she had married went his own way in life—and it was not hers.

It was indeed expected of a man of rank in those days that he should either keep a mistress or be assigned as lover to some married lady of his own world, and that he should see only as much of the society of his own wife as a certain standard of good usage demanded. After a few years of marriage the young Duc de Trélan was conforming most faithfully to both these requirements. And Valentine, formed in that corrupt and polished society which grew up so early, was even at twenty-one too much of her rank and epoch ever to utter reproaches, or even to feel very keenly that

her husband's far from unusual conduct was reprehensible in itself. Practically the whole of the highest society was an amazing *chassé-croisé* of such arrangements. But she did feel it in another way, and that sharply enough; for there was a factor not always present in like situations—she loved her husband passionately. And so, just as an ordinary woman, she suffered.

Not that Gaston de Trélan was by any means a profligate. He was difficult in his preferences, and she knew well how violently—and for the most part unsuccessfully—he was run after in society. "Saint-Charmant" was the current play on his name in the salons of the Faubourg St. Germain and of the Marais. Nor did he ever fail in attentions to her; nay, as the years went on, she knew that she had his respect always; intermittently, perhaps, almost his love. Of the freedom, not to say licence, which a lady in her high position could claim, she herself had not taken the shadow of an advantage. And yet, though she was herself so unsullied, and though she was also a very proud woman, she would have passed over in her husband what her world, so far from censuring, almost demanded. As youth fell away from both of them she certainly felt it less, and the Duc's love affairs, never scandalously frequent, became almost negligible. It was not that trait in him which had cut the deepest; it was the gradual conviction that the high promise of his character and gifts would never be fulfilled. Her love for him, which had survived unfaithfulness, was ambitious, and not without reason. More than most of his line Gaston de Trélan had capacity, but unluckily there ran in his blood far more than his share of the indolent pride of the Saint-Chamans. If he could not do a thing supremely well, he would not do it at all. Indeed, he appeared to see no reason why he should trouble to do anything, in a world where all was at his feet, but be uniformly charming, gay, keenwitted—and supremely wilful. Like most young nobles he had had a military training, and had been given a colonelcy at the age of twenty; but not one second more than the obligatory four months of the twelve would he ever spend with his regiment. Indeed he resigned the burden of this command a few years after marriage. In later life the coveted position of First Gentleman of the Bedchamber had been almost forced upon him; fortunately that only entailed a year of service. Valentine, a Dame du Palais herself at the time, had no love for the long and tiring ceremonial of Court attendance, and if only he had accepted the post of ambassador to Sweden which was offered him about the same period, or that of governor of Provence for which he was proposed, she would have forgiven him had he refused the honour at Versailles. But there existed no influence strong enough to make him shoulder responsibility against his will.

Yet the slow disillusionment had not killed her love. After all, when the crash came in 1790 they were neither of them old. And she herself, as she felt bitterly at times, had failed to do the one thing which was really demanded of her. She had not given her husband an heir—and Gaston de Trélan was the last of his line.

It was a shattering blow to a house which dated from the eleventh century. The name would be extinguished altogether, and the property broken up. Mirabel would go to a cousin, the Duc de Savary-Lancosme, who would also inherit the great estates in Berry. Saint-Chamans, that cradle of the race in the South—which for some reason Valentine had never liked and rarely visited—would fall to another branch. So the Duc de Trélan was pitied, as she knew, for what, to a man of his rank, possessions and ancient lineage, was indeed a profound misfortune. Things might indeed have been very different if Mirabel had not been a childless house—not in the accepted sense that the birth of a son would have drawn husband and wife together, for this was doubtful—but because the Duchesse de Trélan would not have felt always, as the hope of one died, the sense of an irremediable shortcoming, and because a certain fatal retort could never have been made.

For her husband's entire abstention from reproach on that score Valentine had always borne him gratitude. And indeed no one in the world ever counted up more greedily than she his good qualities—his generosity, his courage, his strict regard for honour, his contempt of anything petty or mean. It was nothing but that undying wish of hers to see him openly what he really was which led, after the years of partial estrangement, to their final rupture, when, in July, 1790, the Duc announced his intention of emigrating.

He assumed as a matter of course that his wife would accompany him from a France grown, as he said, insupportable. Most people of their rank had already gone, for with them it had become practically a principle; M. de Trélan was inclined to blame himself for having remained so long. But Valentine did not approve of the principle, and said so; for a man of any weight and authority to leave France at this juncture seemed to her like deserting one's country in her hour of need—though the opinion was not fashionable. Her husband listened to her, as he always did, with courtesy, but replied that by remaining he regarded himself as tacitly countenancing the growth of theories and practices, both in politics and religion, which he most cordially detested. And the Duchesse on that had frankly told him that, having for so many years refused to take any part in politics, or diplomacy, or military affairs or indeed anything, he had hardly the right now to complain of present developments. Never before had she been within even measurable distance of such plain speech.

And M. de Trélan, who could never brook criticism, was plainly more than annoyed, but he had controlled himself, and recurred more insistently still to the question of his wife's accompanying him into exile. Once more the Duchesse had refused, saying finally, when pressed for a reason, that she "did not like running away."

It was true that she had hastily added "from responsibility"—since she knew, none better, that the last weakness on

earth of which her husband could be accused was physical cowardice—but it was too late. The Duc was on his feet, quite white. “Madame,” he said, “God made you a woman; you may thank Him for it. Do you stay here then, with your responsibilities. They are doubtless great; and if I do not return”—he took no notice of her as she tried to break in—“if I do not return, you can superintend the bestowal of my property on its legal heirs. Savary-Lancosme and the rest will have cause, *as ever,* to be grateful to you. I have the honour to wish you good-day.” And he walked out of her boudoir.

She never saw him again. Within an hour he had quitted Mirabel for ever, leaving her to reflect, wounded to the soul as she was, on those two little words “as ever” and what, after all, they revealed.

But in a few days there came a letter from him begging her, not without a certain stiffness, to forgive him for what, in the heat of the moment, had passed his lips, and offering her, if she had reconsidered her decision, his escort to Coblentz, or, if she preferred it, to England. Otherwise, for the short absence which he proposed to make, she would find that his affairs were sufficiently in order not to incommode her, and he prayed her to remain at Mirabel or wherever seemed good to her.

Except for an absence of feeling the letter was perfect, but Mme de Trélan knew that it was the letter of a man who wishes to set himself right in his own eyes for what he considers a lapse from good taste. She thought emigration foolish and unpatriotic—the day had not yet come when it was the only chance of safety for the wellborn—and she could not bring herself to accept an amende prompted less by affection for her than by a desire for rehabilitation. And if it was to be a short absence, why leave France at all? Down at her country house in Touraine she was, besides, interesting herself in a certain philanthropic scheme of her own. So she answered the Duc’s letter in much the same spirit, asked his pardon also for her hasty words—and refused.

The Duc de Trélan never came back. From Coblentz he went to England, and though he and his wife at first kept up a desultory correspondence on matters of business, for five or six months before the sack of Mirabel she had not had a line from him. Intercourse with England was by that time becoming uncertain, but she had news of him through less direct channels. By all accounts Gaston de Trélan was much too popular in English society to find time for writing to the wife who so deeply disapproved of his having taken refuge there.

CHAPTER IV

JADIS

(1)

But the strange twist of Fortune's wheel which, nine years after her husband's departure, had brought the Duchesse de Trélan as concierge to her own palace, was first set in motion when M. Georges Camain, originally a builder at Angers, was returned at the elections of 1795 as Deputy for Maine-et-Loire, and, coming up to Paris to take his seat, received, after a time, from the Director Larevellière-Lépeaux—like him an Angevin and the quasi-pontiff of that new and arid creed which M. Camain also professed, Theophilanthropism—the charge of Mirabel. For M. Camain was a cousin of Suzon Tessier's, though they had not met since Suzon was a child.

Nor indeed did the Deputy discover Suzon's existence till the year that Alcibiade Tessier died; but after that he was pretty assiduous in his visits. Valentine sometimes wondered if he had a vision of consoling the little widow. She herself met him occasionally at meals—a person of forty-five or so, large, high-coloured, good-humoured, inclined to a florid style in dress and a slightly vulgar gallantry. Report said that down at Angers in '94 he had been a Terrorist, but Suzon discreetly refrained from making enquiries on that point. Now he seemed so moderate in his politics that it was hard to understand how he had escaped being *fructidorisé* with the other moderate and Royalist deputies in the *coup d'état* of 1797.

M. Camain found, of course, that Suzon's "aunt" had already lived with her for years, and he was not sufficiently conversant with his cousin's relations by marriage to contest any statements which Mme Tessier chose to make about her kinswoman's past history. Even her neighbours in the Rue de Seine scarcely remembered now, so fast did events move, that Mme Vidal had begun her residence with the Tessiers at a very significant date in 1792, and had passed more than a year in prison since. Besides, M. Camain did not frequent any house in the street but Suzon's.

One afternoon, therefore, in March, 1799, the Deputy, dropping in, in his genial way, to his cousin's little shop, said, after some casual conversation, "By the way, ma cousine, how would you like to live in a château?" and when Mme Tessier, who was sewing behind the counter, replied that she had no such ambition, her kinsman admitted that she might find Mirabel lacking in cosiness.

Mme Tessier's work left her fingers. "*Mirabel!*" she exclaimed, in a tone not to be described.

Camain cocked his eyebrow at her. "Yes, Mir-a-bel! The present concierge is leaving, her husband having come home discharged from the army, and I always refuse to have a married couple there. Do you fancy the job?"

"God forbid!" said his cousin fervently.

"Of course, I was forgetting your grandfather. His ghost would certainly walk to see you installed there as the employee of the present régime."

"Mirabel is full of ghosts," said Mme Tessier, half unconsciously, her eyes suddenly fixed. Yes, had the Deputy but known, the ghost of ghosts was not even so far away as Mirabel.

As if, startlingly, her cousin had read her thoughts, he said, looking from one counter with its array of clocks to the other with its piles of linen garments, "No, I suppose you would not want to leave this singular union of science and . . . er . . . art which you have created. But what about that aunt of yours? She is very badly off, isn't she,—and a charge to you, I suspect? How would it suit her? She would have assistance, you know, for the cleaning—she need never touch a brush herself—but she would have to live in the place, and be responsible for its condition. She has always struck me as a notable woman. What do you think of that, Cousin Suzon? You see that I am determined to do you a good turn, whether you will or no!"

And not all Suzon's hastily found arguments about Mme Vidal's unwillingness and unsuitability could turn him from his purpose of at least offering her the post. Moreover, during the discussion the Deputy unwittingly gave vent to a number of *doubles entendres*, such as "Nothing like keeping Mirabel in the family!" and, "It only wants a woman with a head on her shoulders," so that by the time his threat to go and interview Mme Vidal in person had driven her perforce to undertake the office Suzon Tessier was almost hysterical, and went up the staircase wringing her hands. Never for one wild second did she imagine that the offer would be accepted.

At first, indeed, Mme de Trélan had seemed to see in it an insult thrown at her by Fate—but by Fate's hand only, for Suzon was certain that the Deputy had no suspicion of her identity. "Caretaker of my own house!" the Duchesse had exclaimed. And then she had begun to laugh, saying that it was so preposterous as to be amusing. Yet the next moment, to Mme Tessier's horror, she had exclaimed, "Dear God! why should I say it is preposterous, *now*! Tell me, Suzon, what I should have to do as concierge of Mirabel?"

And when Suzon, brokenly, had told her, hoping against hope that she was only playing with the idea to feed the little vein of ironic humour which she had sometimes observed in her, Valentine said gravely, "Since this strange thing has come to me, Suzon, perhaps it is meant, for some reason, that I should do it."

"Madame, think what you are saying!" cried the poor Tessier, all her fears back again. "You a concierge!"

“But what am I now, Suzon—a sempstress, almost your pensioner.” She said it without bitterness.

“But at *Mirabel*—and you its Duchess!”

To that the Duchesse only said calmly, “I could resign, I suppose, when I wished. And you would come to see me sometimes, would you not? I should still have leisure, perhaps, to sew for you. . . . Yes, Suzon, if your good Deputy wants an immediate answer you can give it to him. Tell him that—I accept.”

And as Suzon’s horrified protests against this—to her—monstrous and sacrilegious compliance were broken into by the none too patient benefactor himself tapping on the door, Mme de Trélan was able to tell him in person that, if he really thought her suitable for the post, she should be pleased to take it.

“There!” said Georges Camain triumphantly to the overwhelmed Suzon. And to her “aunt” he announced with a bow, “Madame, one has only to look at you to know that Mirabel is fortunate!”

It was in this manner that the Duchesse de Trélan came to accept her own, and to pass, some three weeks later, into a sort of possession of it.

(2)

Now, at eight o’clock the morning after her entry, she was already going up the stairway to the ground floor, the keys of Mirabel in her hand, for during her night under the patchwork quilt she had discovered that there was one thing about which she had miscalculated her strength. She could not endure to make re-acquaintance with her violated home in the company of Mme Prévost. True, she would probably be obliged to retrace her steps with the ex-concierge when the latter came to instruct her in her new duties, but it would be less desecration of her pride and of her memories if she revisited Mirabel for the first time alone.

But at the top of the stairs she hesitated. What was she going to find? She knew only too well what desolation might greet her. Paris had long been a vast pawnshop for the sale of the plundered goods of noble owners exiled or murdered. She had but to go into the once aristocratic Faubourg St. Germain to see a whole street of empty palaces, stripped, many of them, not only of furniture, mirrors and balustrades, but even of the very lead from the roofs.

And outside Paris it was the same. Where were the galleries and *faïence* pavements of the château of Ecouen, Mirabel’s contemporary? And Anet, that palace of love, fruit of the same brain as Mirabel, where every door and window bore the interlaced monograms of Henri II. and Diane de Poitiers? Of that jewel of stone, set in its woods in the valley of the Eure, nothing but its walls remained. Its costly canals were rotting mud and rotting water, its parks cut down, the kneeling statue of Diane in pieces, her mausoleum a horse trough. Chantilly, stripped of its marble columns, of its *jaspe fleuri*, of its panels of agate, had become a manufactory. Bellevue, that haunt of the Pompadour, was a barracks; Marly, a field and four walls.

And Versailles itself? Versailles was the museum of the department. The avenue under whose fourfold ranks of elms had passed Turenne and Colbert and Corneille existed no longer. In the chapel the very marble itself had been split and hacked to get rid of the encrusted Lilies, and the Virgin over the altar still held a pike in her hand. The beds in the park were covered with brambles and weeds, the borders of the Grand Canal were a grazing ground for goats and donkeys, the Pièce des Suisses was muddy, the Naiads were covered with dust. Trianon was for sale. The rooms, said Suzon, who had been there, smelt damp, like a cellar, and the dining-room was full of a strange lumber which Valentine recognised from her description as the remains of those sledges on which the young, laughing Court of 1788 had sped over the ice. . . .

How should she find her house of Mirabel?

The morning sun, at least, knew nothing of change of ownership nor of desecration. It came stooping in through the outer arcading just as it used to do. In room after room, as she went onwards from one to the other, it accompanied her, the only habitual thing left in that desolation. But, though these rooms were stripped, they were not damaged—only, in their aching bareness, very strange.

She came at last to the midmost point of the ground floor, the great banqueting hall, or Salle Verte, a vast apartment so closely resembling in decoration the Salle d’Hercule at Versailles as almost to suggest that it was a copy of it. There was the same effect of green relieved with gold on a white background, the same green marble pillars and heavily gilded cornice. Triumphal deities swam across the ceiling, and, just as at Versailles, two great pictures, set in elaborately carved frames, formed part of the integral scheme of decoration. As Valentine entered and looked down the vista of pillars she was confronted by the same huge canvas, saw that Æneas was still toilfully bearing Father Anchises on his shoulders from the burning town—the huge canvas which had witnessed the dancing on her wedding night and much beside. She turned almost unthinkingly to look at the companion picture which used to face it at the other end of the great room, over the hearth, and was met by a large blank space. Dido surveying the Trojan ships, with Carthage’s proud towers behind her, was gone. Why? A rude scrawl of *Les reines à la lanterne* on the blank space answered her. Dido was a queen; Æneas probably considered to be the very model of a virtuous and filial Republican. The Duchesse smiled; not a smile of amusement.

One thing the removal of the enormous canvas had brought into prominence, and that was the coat of arms in relief

on the stone hood of the chimney. It was blazoned in colour, and gilt to boot; and though it had been partially defaced, among so many quarterings there were still decipherable enough roses and besants and castles and ermine to show the great alliances of the house. And at the top the phoenix of the Saint-Chamans still soared undefeated from the flames, while below was yet clearly to be read their arrogant motto, doubly defiant in this pillaged and ownerless dwelling, charged, too, with a double irony: *Memini et permaneo*—'I remember and I remain.' She, who had lived with it for one-and-twenty years and knew that it proclaimed even more than that—'I hold out, I stay to the end,' shivered now as she looked at it.

She turned away at last, and walked half the echoing length of that deserted splendour with a steady step. Small risk of losing foothold now on that once slippery parquet!

The room which next she entered had much more of the Renaissance about it, designed as it had been as a withdrawing-room for Mirabel's first royal owner. The great feature of this apartment—known always as the "sallette"—was the vast chimneypiece, behind which ran a staircase mounting to a kind of tribune or gallery, as in a chapel. The tapestry representing the history of St. Louis of France, which had clothed the walls of this room since the reign of Louis XIII. at least, had never been removed till the Revolution, nor the furniture of the same epoch, for the "sallette" had always been something of a curiosity, and here the phoenix of the house of Trélan had never replaced the crowned salamander of the Roi Chevalier. But now the place was despoiled alike of the furniture and of the woven story of the royal saint—all but one strip a few feet long, whose scorched edges testified to the passage of fire upon it. It was part of King Louis' embarkation at Aigues Mortes for the Holy Land, and over his armour, as Valentine remembered, he had worn a mantle sown with fleur-de-lys—indeed, some were still visible. . . .

Mme de Trélan did not spend much longer on the ground floor. On the next, whither she now mounted, were rooms she had preferred, the little Galerie de Diane, for instance (large enough in any smaller house) where most of the older tapestry used to hang. She supposed it would not be there now. But it was: Brussels and Gobelin and Mortlake and some old Arras. Yes, there was the piece of Arras she had loved as a bride—a little world of leaves with its small merry woodland creatures interminably roaming and leaping about in it. And there was the piece of English tapestry, Soho or Mortlake, of which the Duchesse Eléonore had been so fond. Here, too, in a sixteenth century piece from the looms of Paris, was the deathless bird of the Trélans rising from a perfect sea of flames, and surrounded very oddly by a quantity of angels and martyrs, the device floating in a wind-borne scroll from its beak. Oh, what crowds of memories!

Valentine de Trélan passed on. She went through the ante-chamber, where the crimson velvet curtains were embroidered in twisted columns of silver, and came to the jewel of the house, the Galerie de Psyché, for which Mirabel was famous. It was indeed a place of stately beauty, and she, once its possessor, found herself marvelling at it anew, seeing for the first time with a gaze not that of ownership the perfect harmony between its delicate ornament and its splendid proportions, and the charm of Natoire's beautiful paintings of the story which gave the place its name.

And the Galerie de Psyché seemed to have been purposely preserved as a show-room, for here were gathered together some of the best specimens of furniture from other parts of the house. The Duchesse recognised, for instance, the magnificent Boule escritoire from her husband's private apartments, with its wonderful marquetry of tortoiseshell and copper, and a little green vernis-Martin cabinet of her own, acquired when vernis-Martin of that shade was the rage, and other things. This assemblage of objects seemed to her more insulting than spoliation, and she stayed for a little by that cabinet of hers. Had she been betrayed into an undertaking which, after all, she had not strength to carry through?

But, having come so far, she would at least go on to her own apartments. She did not think of them with any special affection; she had loved more her less magnificent rooms in her country house near the Loire.

She came first to her bedroom. Much earlier in the century chamber music must have sounded in this room, for all its decorations were trophies of musical instruments, lutes and pipes and tambourines knotted together by fluttering ribbons. All these were carved; there was no painting here, save the delicate ivory paint which covered these and the panelled walls alike. The elaborate bed of gilt and inlaid tulipwood was still there, projecting from the wall, but stripped of its green silk coverlet fringed with gold. This bed stood on three raised steps, outside which, as usually in the bed-chambers of the great, ran a gilt balustrade. Half of it was still there. So was a large armchair of green satin and gilt—but nothing else.

The Duchesse de Trélan stood outside the broken fence and looked at the bed where she had often lain. But it seemed certain to her that it was another woman who had rested under that canopy—a woman, on the whole, unhappier than herself.

She passed into her cabinet de toilette. This room was somewhat famous, for it had been decorated by Huret in the second quarter of the century, when "chinoiseries" and "singeries" were all the fashion, and on the jonquil-coloured paint of its walls, patterned with gold arabesques, queer little apes frolicked in a thousand antics, while sedate Chinamen walked under umbrellas or fished unendingly in bamboo-foliaged streams. Save for these, its fifty years old occupants, the room was empty. Gone was the great toilet table with all its appurtenances where the Duchesse de Trélan had been obliged to spend so much of her time, had sat so often watching her hair being piled up into some

elaborate erection *à la candeur* or *à la victoire*, and listening, half against her will, to the compliments and small talk of some male visitor. All that was left was the great full-length swinging mirror, mounted by Caffieri, with its couple of doves playfully pecking each other at the bottom, and its coronet at the top—the mirror which had so often reflected the Duchesse de Trélan, majestic in the spreading, festooned hoop and close-fitting square-cut bodice of traditional Court costume, the *grande robe parée*, pearls lying in a rope on her white breast and pearls across her towering headdress of powder and curls and feathers . . . and which now showed Mme Vidal, the concierge of Mirabel, in a plain black dress with a rather old-fashioned fichu about the shoulders, and above it a courageous, sensitive face with a beautifully modelled brow, surmounted by masses of fair hair going grey—the concierge of Mirabel with the keys in her hand.

Valentine de Trélan looked at her image a moment and then walked to the door. The room opening out of this was her boudoir, where she had been sitting on the day which had put an end to all this life. Two years before that, something else had come to an end there too. Here, for the first time, she knew a real hesitation; but after a second or two she fitted the key into the lock and entered.

When, as a bride, Mme de Trélan had made the acquaintance of this room, she had fallen in love with its decorations, of the purest style of the Regency, and she had ever afterwards refused to have it redecorated—had refused to exchange Pineau's shells and arabesques and fantastic birds and cornucopias either for the prettinesses of Van Spaendonck's doves and rose-wreaths and forget-me-nots, or for the thin Pompeian style of a later fashion. And thus the room was very much as it had appeared to her at her first sight of it—and at her last.

For her boudoir with its furniture was quite untouched; its complete preservation seemed almost to argue some cynical purpose. The door giving on to the corridor, which had been broken down by the torrent of bodies that had poured through it, had been carefully put back in place. Perhaps the same care had obliterated the stains on its other side, where her maître d'hôtel had died for her in vain. Here were all the chairs and footstools of rose-coloured taffeta and silver, and the Boule secrétaire that her husband had given her, and the commode made for her on her marriage by Riesener. She had never thought to gaze again on those familiar half-blown roses of its beautiful inlay, all amaranth and laburnum and tulipwood.

Her breath seemed to stop; it all became so real again. Just here, where the mirror with its framework of garlanded palm-stems still hung on the walls between the windows, here she had faced that river of violence and had thought, half hoped, to die. She could see now the door crashing inwards, the evil and stupid faces, the menacing gestures, the bare arms, the eyes alight with the lust of plunder and carnage . . . but the cries, the oaths, that spume on the tide of invasion, she could hear no longer—not even the scream of her murdered servant, which once she had fancied would ring in her ears for ever. No; though she could see the catastrophe, it was like a painting, fixed, and lacking the vitality of sound and motion—more frozen, a good deal, than the tapestry in the Galerie de Diane. In this room only one voice sounded, where it had sounded in her hearing for the last time, and it said only one thing. The room was full of it. . . . Very pale, Valentine turned from looking at the doorway by which Destiny had entered to look at that other, through which all her heart had gone out, with Gaston. The scene to which that exit had been the close had none of the quality of canvas or tapestry; it was alive, burning, as vivid as of yesterday. How had they ever come to it? But that she had asked herself a thousand times in the years between. And regret was so vain and so weak, and tore so terribly. She would not often visit this room again. . . .

As Mme de Trélan locked the door by which she had entered, she noticed that even her work-table was still here—an oval thing of marquetry and ormulu, poised on slender curving legs. Without thinking she opened it, to see inside on the gathered brocade of the lining a few odd skeins of embroidery silks, a tiny pair of scissors and a golden thimble, and wondered whether, since it did not seem to have been examined, any one had discovered the little false bottom that it had. There was nothing in it, she knew; yet her fingers sought it out. And she was mistaken! There in the recess were a couple of brooches and an old locket on a chain—things outworn, ornaments of no value which she did not recollect having placed there. The locket bore her maiden monogram in pearls and garnets, but it was empty, and she could not even remember what it used to hold. She slipped it into her pocket.

A moment later she was hurrying down the great staircase. A glance at her watch had shown her that Mme Prévost was almost due. She did not wish to be found up here. Then she remembered that the ex-concierge could not get in unless she admitted her. Truly she was the châtelaine of Mirabel!

CHAPTER V

THE JASPER CUP

The morning that the Duchesse de Trélan was led through the show portions of her own mansion by the former caretaker, to be initiated into what she was to point out to others, was naturally an initiation into a strange kind of discipline as well. Valentine had anticipated this. But that first morning's experience was the most painful; afterwards she was to find that to accompany visitors herself was not nearly so trying. To that, she thought, she would become almost accustomed in time.

It was certainly one drop less in the cup of desecration that the family portraits were not displayed to the public view. Their absence, which had puzzled Mme de Trélan at first, had been explained by Mme Prévost. They were all hung in a small locked gallery on the second floor, together with what was left of the collection of china and other objects of rarity, and the Deputy Camain kept the key himself. "And he won't so much as let you put your nose inside," had concluded the ex-concierge sourly. "Often have I offered to dust them cups and saucers, and he won't have it. Afraid of their being broken, I suppose—much more likely to break them himself with that feather brush he keeps in there."

"And the family pictures are there too, you say?" asked Valentine.

"Every one," returned Mme Prévost, "except the last Duchess's, that had a pike stuck through it, and was spoilt."

But for that pike's activities, of which she was aware, Mme de Trélan would scarcely have ventured to ratify the assent which she had so precipitately given to Camain's proposal. There was no other portrait of her at Mirabel, though she had often been painted.

In a week Mme de Trélan had settled down to the strange, lonely, monotonous life in a manner that amazed herself. The days began to follow each other in a regular routine, so many in the *décade* for cleaning, two for visitors. She contrived to secure her provisions without ever entering the tiny village, lest some of the older inhabitants might recognise her, in spite of her altered appearance. Suzon Tessier, resigned, yet always anticipatory of ill, had been twice to see her. M. Georges Camain had not yet made his appearance, but that he would soon do so Suzon had warned her. Valentine only trusted that he would not bring with him that Mlle Dufour mentioned by the sentry, of whose intimacy with the Deputy she had then heard for the first time, for there were memories connected with the actress which she did not wish revived.

When the bell jangled, therefore, about three o'clock one fine afternoon on a day devoted neither to cleaning nor to visitors the Duchesse felt convinced that it announced her employer. Sure enough, when she opened the door there stood M. Georges Camain, deputy of Maine-et-Loire, debonair even in the bottle-green habit with mother-of-pearl buttons, cut by Heyl and therefore the *ne plus ultra* of that strange mania which afflicted the fashionables of the Directory for wearing purposely ill-fitting coats. Muffled in approved style to his very underlip in the voluminous folds of his neckcloth, he swept off his hat with a rather exaggerated politeness.

"Ah, our new guardian of the Hesperides! Not that I should wish, Madame, to compare you to a dragon! Have I your permission to enter?"

"You are master here, Monsieur le Député," replied Mme de Trélan, standing back. She disliked his exuberant politeness.

"Not I, Madame Vidal," retorted he, coming in, however, with an air of possession somewhat at variance with his words. "I am but the servant of our five kings. Well, I hope that Suzon considers you sufficiently comfortable here? She is always so solicitous about her relations—except about me!"

The Duchesse, still standing in the passage, assured him that she had nothing to complain of. He asked her a few more questions: whether her scrubbers were willing and obedient, whether she found the responsibility too much, and finally revealed what he had more particularly come for—to look over the collection of porcelain before putting it into her charge. And on that he preceded her up to the second floor, talking as he went.

"You observe, Madame Vidal," he said, when at last he stopped before a door and fitted the key into the lock, "that I preferred the china in here to get dusty rather than to give the breaking of it to your predecessor's fingers. But needlework keeps the hands fine, does it not?"—he gave as he spoke a glance at hers—"and I feel sure that those of yours could be trusted about the most fragile porcelain. I shall make over this key to you without uneasiness."

Mme de Trélan followed him into the room with the tiny thrill of distaste which any personal remark from him always raised in her . . . and was instantly confronted, over the glass cases, by the eyes of her husband, looking down at her with a smile from his frame on the grey panelling of the wall.

Drouais, the King's painter, had depicted him at three-quarter length in the twenty-third year of his age and in a primrose satin coat. His left hand rested lightly on his hip, just above the silver swordhilt which showed below the silk. A signet ring of emerald gleamed on the middle finger, and through the guard of the sword was stuck a yellow rose. And in the pastel the very assurance of the highborn, smiling face beneath the rime of its powdered hair was as seductive as the beauty of its lines. If this young prince with the rose in his swordhilt possessed so obviously everything that life had to offer, who could grudge him those gifts? He would always use them with ease and exquisite

taste.

The blood rushed to Mme de Trélan's heart. She had forgotten that the pictures were here. For a moment she did not hear what the Deputy was saying . . . Gaston de Trélan was not without company on the walls. His father was there, and the Cardinal of Louis XV.'s days, a mixture of sensuality and inscrutability in his lace and scarlet, and Antoine de Trélan, the marshal of France under the Roi Soleil, greatly bewigged and cuirassed, and François de Trélan, the mousquetaire, his hand on his sword, and the first owner of Mirabel, César de Trélan, by Clouet, in his tilted cap and earrings and little pointed beard. That imprisonment was shared by the ladies of the house also, and Diane de Trélan in her great ruff hung side by side with the kind and saintly-visaged Duchesse Eléonore. Only Valentine's own picture seemed missing.

She hoped that Camain would make no reference to the personages by whom they were surrounded, of whose eyes she felt herself so conscious. And he did not, for his thoughts were set on the porcelain he had come to see, and he went the round with her, taking up with his careful plebeian fingers a fragile little two-handled cup out of which a queen might have drunk, touching a green Sèvres dish affectionately, calling her attention to a biscuit group, tendering her morsels of elementary ceramic information. And she began to see that this self-made, self-educated son of a small Angers builder had really learnt something about the least durable of all the arts, and seemed to appreciate the ephemeral loveliness of its productions.

And thus she went round half the room with him, listening to his commendations, and felt her husband's eyes watching her.

"This has a crack, I'm afraid," said the Deputy ruefully, taking up a teapot of yellow Sèvres covered with gold spots. "Hardly wonderful, when one thinks of the risks they have run. Some was smashed that night, I know. The People when inflamed with zeal is not remarkable for discrimination. Now, isn't that Meissen candlestick delicious, Mme Vidal?"

He went on. As was perhaps natural, the ancient and prized but much less sophisticated Henri Deux ware did not appeal to him. Some of the old Rouen he approved, for it was gay, and some of the Chinese porcelain, but not all.

"I can't think what the ci-devants could see in some of this foreign stuff!" he declared, stopping before a large bowl of dark blue Chinese pottery, over which crawled sinuous dragons of lighter blue and cream faintly tinged with pink. "I call that coarse!" Valentine, who knew that her father-in-law had prized the bowl because it was early Ming, did not venture to dispute this dictum.

"I like a thing with some work in it," went on M. Georges Camain. "Now I feel I could have done those beasts myself; look at the rough, raised outline they have. It may be old—I believe it is. Give me something more modern and delicate, like the setting of that jasper cup over there—Gouthière, I fancy. You have a good look at it afterwards, Mme Vidal."

The jasper cup was still here then! Yes, she would have a good look at it—afterwards, not now.

From the cup, under its glass shade, M. Camain's eyes strayed up to the portraits.

"It would be strange, would it not, if all these painted gentry round us could really see us in this sanctum of theirs," he said suddenly, giving voice to Valentine's own thoughts. "That old lady yonder—she looks a terror!—rather reminds me of my aunt Fourrier, who used to keep the bric-à-brac shop in the Rue St. Julien at Angers."

And he indicated the portrait of the Duchesse Charlotte-Elisabeth, a voluminous dame who had flourished in the Regency.

"The last Duchesse of all isn't here," went on M. Camain, raising his spy-glass again as if, after all, he were not sure. "They destroyed her portrait the night the château was taken—again that undiscriminating zeal of the Sovereign People, more undiscriminating than usual in this case, for I understand that the Duchesse was known for her charities. And I have often regretted the destruction on other grounds, because since Mirabel has been under my charge I wanted to see what she was like, and why the Duc deserted her."

"Deserted her!" exclaimed Valentine, in a voice that made the Deputy drop his glass and turn and look at her. Then she added faintly, "I never heard. . . . Did he desert her, then?"

"Perhaps that's putting it rather strongly," said Camain smiling. "We all know that the aristocrats who hopped so gaily across the frontiers in '90 and '91 thought they were coming back again in a few weeks. I daresay the Duc de Trélan had the same delusion. But I have heard it said that he never even gave his wife the chance of going with him—hooked it without her knowing . . . I believe they hardly ever saw one another. So she stayed behind—more fool she!—and lost her life in consequence."

Fire swept over Valentine's pale visage. "Ah no, no, but he did——" she broke out, and then, finding a difficulty in speaking, pulled herself together. "I mean, surely he must have given the Duchesse the chance of accompanying him!" She looked down at the floor as she spoke; she was aware how deeply she was discomposed, and how hot an indignation possessed her at this false accusation which she had not the right to deny. And she went on, feverishly, "In any case did not a great many . . . ci-devants . . . emigrate without their wives?"

"Yes—sometimes with other people's!" retorted the Deputy with a wink. "However, I never heard that the Duc de

Trélan did that. Mademoiselle . . . the . . . er . . . lady to whom he was assigned as admirer at the time—untruly as I believe—would certainly never have gone with him; she was too good a patriot for that! That's Monseigneur himself yonder, over the green console. What do you think of him? He must have been much younger when that was painted, of course."

Valentine was forced to turn and look with him at the young man in primrose satin. "I . . . I think he must have been very handsome." Surely that remark was both safe and natural!

"Oh, you women!" exclaimed the Deputy, showing signs of a return to his jocular manner. "That always takes you—never fails! They say the Duchesse herself was not insensible to it. Well, if it is any consolation to you, Madame Vidal, no doubt he is handsome still, for that matter . . . more than can be said for that old boy next him. Who is it?" He put up his glass again to make out the name of Gaston de Trélan's neighbour, a very early dark portrait of a Knight of Malta.

"And I cannot believe," went on Valentine with a thrill in her voice, "that he never invited his wife to go with him."

" 'Raoul de Saint-Chamans, Vice-Commander of the Order,' " read out Camain. "What Order, I wonder?—I beg your pardon, Madame Vidal; you were saying? . . ."

Mme de Trélan ran a finger nervously along the edge of one of the cases. "I was wondering, Monsieur le Député, from what you said, whether you knew anything of the Duc's present whereabouts."

"I? Dame, no, nothing at all! Why should I?"

Valentine tried to perpetrate a jest. "He might appear at Mirabel some day."

"I shouldn't advise him to," returned the Deputy rather grimly. "Not, at all events, till he has made his peace with the Government. . . . If he should turn up I shall expect you to tell me," he added lightly. "It is part of your duties as concierge. But of course he will never come. Why should he, after all these years? Much too comfortable where he is, I expect—probably married again to some rich English lady. . . . Look here, Madame Vidal, I must be going. No, leave the shutters open, please, because I should like you to go round and have a good dust here when I am gone. I keep a feather duster in the drawer of that console, under Monseigneur the ex-Duc. After you, if you please!"

He held open the door for her.

"Do you know, Madame," he said abruptly as they went down the great staircase together, "what I should like to do with Mirabel? It is mere extravagant nonsense trying to turn it into a museum. There's the château of Versailles already for that, and at the Louvre those cart-loads of pictures and statues that General Bonaparte sent from Italy the year before last. No, I should like to see Mirabel made into something like an orphanage,—run by the State, of course, not by nuns—for the children of dead soldiers. If our wars go on much longer, they will need it—poor little devils!"

He spoke with genuine feeling. Valentine was astonished, and listened with a sort of unwilling respect while he developed the theme a little. By this time they were outside her own modest quarters in the lower regions, and here the Deputy, asking if he might come in, entered practically without permission. Once inside, he pulled from his pocket a leather case.

"Permit me, Madame, since I am here," he said, "to discharge the office of paymaster. The concierge of Mirabel is usually paid on the first of every month, but you have no doubt had to disburse something, and will be glad not to wait till the beginning of Prairial." And he counted out assignats on to the cloth.

Valentine de Trélan flushed. Although she knew that there was a salary attached to the post she occupied, it was a different thing to receive it in concrete form from the hand of an authority whom she did not recognise. She instantly renewed her resolve of giving it in charity through Suzon Tessier.

"Now I will leave you the key of the china gallery," said Camain, bringing out the object in question. "None of the cases are locked, as you saw, so do not admit any visitors there at present. Keep everything carefully dusted, Madame Vidal, if you please, the pictures as well. I daresay you will like to give an extra flick now and then to the last Duc's portrait, as you have evidently constituted yourself his champion against detractors such as myself—No, I like the sentiment; I wish the concierge of Mirabel to identify herself with Mirabel, and I am fortunate in having found one who is capable of it. Madame Prévost, good woman, was not. . . . I fear I must trouble you to accompany me to the door, in order to fasten it after me. . . . Au plaisir de vous revoir, Madame!" He made a sweeping bow and went up the steps.

So Valentine de Saint-Chamans, Duchesse de Trélan, went back to her room, found the assignats, the price of her services, lying on the table, and, with an expression of distaste, locked them away. Then she began to search for a cloth to supplement the feather duster.

No one in the world—that just-foundered world to which she belonged—had had unquestioned right to her services save the Queen of France, but to serve her (as she had done) was the crown of honour. Perhaps for that reason Mme de Trélan found a savour in the situation—commanded to dust her own china! There was even a faint smile on her lips as she entered the gallery again—but she kept her eyes averted from her husband's portrait.

The Sèvres now was in hands such as it had been made for. She went over it slowly and carefully. Was it hers, or was it Camain's, or the property of those who had ravished Mirabel? Not for the first time since '92 the thought of the problem of property came over her. How could anything material be really owned? She, who had had so much of the

world's goods, was now stripped of everything, and all but constrained to accept a pittance from the plunderers. Were the only things that remained to one then, the mind, the heart, what one had learnt and suffered? She had begun to think so. And still the problem remained: were the rights of property inalienable, as it was in her blood to believe them, or was this little Dresden figure in her hand not hers by right any longer because she had no means now to enforce that right?

"Really, I am becoming a Jacobin, or a philosopher," she said to the little shepherdess. "In any case, my dear, the roses round your hat are very dusty."

After the Sèvres and Meissen and Vienna she dusted and wiped the Oriental ware; the great Chinese vase that Camain had pronounced "coarse," and that frail and marvellous eggshell porcelain which must be held to the light before one can see that dragons and clouds and waves live within its walls of moonbeam. Then she came, among the other treasures of ivory and crystal and enamel, on the jasper cup to which the Deputy had directed her attention. As if she did not know it!

The low sun, pleased to find for once an entry at the rarely opened shutters, danced in shafts and motes of brightness over the dull golden mounting that had made of it so costly a thing. Round the curve of the red-brown, half translucent jasper ran a wreath of tiny golden laurel leaves gemmed with pearls; delicate little vine branches laden with grapes were woven together at the bottom to form a framework for the cup, and the whole rested on three faun-headed supports. Underneath, a golden serpent with eyes of topaz wriggled its way towards the vine clusters.

That jasper cup was the last thing which her husband had given her, not long before his emigration. But money could not buy what Valentine de Trélan wanted then. Gouthière, when he designed and mounted the goblet, had not done ill in placing the little snake underneath. Valentine had thought so at the time, and had almost disliked the precious thing—symbol, so it sometimes seemed to her, of her life and Gaston's, that might have been so different if they had not been born to such idle greatness, a cup too richly set to drink out of.

She gazed at it now with compressed lips, aware that vine and laurel leaves were becoming blurred by the slow, hot tears that were rising to her eyes. Suddenly she turned away from it, and walking at last to the young man over the console looked up at him.

Yes, he had been like that! Yes, he had had that expression—once! "How could I have kept your heart, Gaston?" she asked, gazing at the smiling eyes. For he had a heart as undoubtedly as he had charm and distinction and courage and wit . . . as well as riches and a great name and Mirabel. Yet one thing was lacking always—and after all these years it was hard to be sure what it was.

Or—as she had often and often thought—was it not rather she who lacked? Yet what could she have given him that she had not? That other men in those days of universal gallantry had been so ready to call her cold and heartless, was that a reason for reproach? If she could have the past again, what would she have done differently?—till that last fatal taunt. She did not know. Had it all been inevitable tragedy then, fixed for them before ever they met, from the moment they had been born?

It was double tragedy too. Gaston's indifference to her love was his wife's private sorrow, and not his fault, for how could love come at bidding? But his lifelong indifference to the claims of ambition—of duty even—how was that to be condoned or explained? No, he was like some tall ship, gallantly furnished and manned, that had never made the great voyage for which it had been built, but had drifted always with light airs, till drifting was no longer possible . . . at least on a summer sea. Where was it now?

She could not take her eyes from the picture, though the glance the canvas gave her back was like a blade in a wound. But Gaston could not be like that now—nor like the Gaston who had left her presence so mortally insulted. Yet if he knew exile and material loss he had not known the hard discipline of prison and contumely. He, she was sure, had never been reduced to earning his bread. What was he doing—if he lived? Married again, perhaps, to some rich lady, as the Deputy had suggested, for if he had taken the trouble to make enquiries about his wife's fate he must indubitably, like all her world, believe her dead.

Taken the trouble! Unjust, unjust! She knew that he must have done all he could; she never doubted that. And back leapt the memory of that plebeian's unworthy accusation—that he had deserted her, had not given her the chance of accompanying him. Had he not! twice over, once repulsed by that utterance of hers which had wounded him so deeply as to betray him into an unforgettable retort, and then, generously, by his letter. And the Deputy had said. . . . Perhaps others had said too—for even Suzon, if she had not told her the truth. . . .

And so, for the first time in all these years, it occurred to Valentine de Trélan that her refusal to accompany her husband into voluntary exile had done him wrong. It was on his head, in this slander, that it had recoiled. It was not that she still did not think his judgment mistaken. But, of the two obstinacies set in the lists against each other that day was not hers, after all, the more culpable? As she could not turn him, ought she not to have stayed by his side? Even though he were wrong it was hardly a crime that he was committing. . . . Deserted her? Was it not rather she, who, remaining against his will, had deserted him?

And again it struck at her, Camain's accusation. How dared he, an upstart, a man of the people, how dared he throw

mud at the Duc de Trélan, as far above him in character as he was removed in rank! But whose action was it that had given him the opportunity of throwing mud? Ah, if they had not separated . . . if she had done what he wished. . . .

The sun had left the window. A blackbird in the overgrown park outside was proclaiming rapturous things. Inside, among the Sèvres and the portraits, the Duchesse de Trélan, her arms outstretched on the cold malachite of the console beneath her husband's picture was weeping bitterly. She had not known that it would be like this! The life of long ago, sunk for ever beneath those whirlpools of fury and carnage—regret for that was past. She was strong enough to face its cold relics without faltering. But Mirabel held, after all, not only the phantom of a dead existence, but of a love slowly slain . . . and not dead. Oh, if only Gaston were back in Mirabel again!

But there was no living creature in the great house save herself. The young man on the wall, with his indefinable air of charming assurance and good society, looked out into the room over the faded head of his wife, and the blackbird in the garden continued to assert that spring was come. Yet for his only hearer spring would never come again.

CHAPTER VI

THE ROMAUNT OF ROLAND

It may be doubted whether, after all, Roland de Céligny really regretted exchanging Ares for Aphrodite. He hardly knew himself, as he journeyed with his injured friend by discreet routes back to Finistère and that friend's home near the sea. His heart was certainly sore at leaving the clash of arms, and he still resented the summary separation from his leader. Yet, to balance the sword half drawn and all too quickly sheathed, were the curls of Mlle de la Vergne, enshrined in the château whose tourelles rose, on the third day, from a screen of chestnuts to greet the travellers.

What, in that blest abode, would Marthe be doing when they came on her? Involuntarily Roland pictured their meeting as a replica, and saw her again at embroidery in the salon with its Indian hangings. But one always paints these things wrong. The reality was even better. For there was no duenna of a mother with her, merely a rustic groom, when, mounted on a beautiful black thoroughbred, she suddenly trotted round a bend of the road. . . .

"If that is not my little sister!" exclaimed Artamène spurring forward; and Roland, uncovering, pulled up his horse.

In the dappled sunlight, under the chestnuts, brother greeted sister, bending from the saddle. Roland thought he had never seen anything more beautiful. He was near enough to hear the joy and the anxiety in Mlle de la Vergne's voice, her stream of enquiries. Then Artamène looked back and beckoned.

"Let me present M. le Vicomte de Céligny, whom you have already met, ma sœur, in a new rôle—that of the trusty garde-malade. Since I cannot dispense with his services he comes to stay with us for a few days."

The little hand which Marthe, pulling off her gauntlet, surrendered with a smile to his salute, was it not even more shapely, more satin-soft to the lips than when it had dropped the embroidery needle to submit to the same reverential greeting? And she herself, in her long blue habit, her man's high-crowned buckled hat, seemed even more desirable than in high-waisted white, yellow-sprigged muslin of that afternoon in the salon!

"Tell Séraphin to gallop back and tell Maman," suggested Artamène.

And so they rode slowly along, Marthe in the middle, and talked of their adventures. The wind blew a fold of the long habit against Roland's foot. Except on the day when he had joined the Marquis de Kersaint, M. de Céligny had never been so happy in his life—for his rapture on the occasion of the Marquis's appearance at Kerlidec had been clouded by his grandfather's hostility. Now there was nothing to stain this perfect joy, and Roland was too deeply enthralled even to envy the solicitous glances which Marthe threw at her brother's be-slinged left arm.

Sad that out of happiness may spring trouble! If the seeds of Roland's escapade were not exactly sown during that short ride the ground was at any rate prepared for their reception.

Mme de la Vergne, warned by the herald, was on the perron to greet them. Artamène flung himself off his horse and ran up the steps, and, while the good lady embraced her son, Roland had the bliss of dismounting Mlle de la Vergne—of receiving her for one brief second in his arms as she slipped like a feather from the saddle. Then followed his own reception by Mme de la Vergne, small and fair and so unlike her daughter; and he found himself being thanked—*thanked!*—for accompanying her son hither.

"*Maman*," sang Marthe to the harpsichord that evening, "*Maman, dîtes-moi ce qu'on sent quand on aime, Est-ce plaisir, est-ce tourment? Je suis tout le jour dans une peine extrême, Et la nuit je ne sais comment!*"

Was she? No! But Roland, that night, could not sleep for exaltation.

Artamène, by his mother's desire, remained in bed next morning. A surgeon had been summoned to view his arm.

"Come and feed the poultry, Monsieur de Céligny—or are you too proud?" suggested Mlle de la Vergne after breakfast. "We are very rustic here, you must know, for we are short of farm servants."

Roland, who would have swept a pigsty at her bidding, followed her as to some high festival. The hens who drove clucking round his feet might have been the doves of Venus. And the pigeons did indeed sweep in a cloud over Marthe, and ate out of her hand. Roland feared they pecked too hard.

When Artamène appeared he found them sitting in the lime arbour.

"Is our paladin telling you of his adventures?" he enquired, sitting down beside them.

"I have none to tell," answered Roland. "It is you, mon cher, with your wound and your sling and your surgeon, who have the beau rôle."

"And all wasted on a sister!" observed the hero with a grin.

"M. de Céligny has been telling me," said Marthe, "the strange story about the old lady and the treasure of Mirabel. Do you believe it?"

"I believed it sufficiently to try to get sent after the treasure," replied her brother. "So, taking a mean advantage of my slumbers, did Roland."

Marthe turned her brilliant dark eyes from one to the other. Artamène shook his head.

"Our request was not favourably received."

"O, what a pity!" sighed Mlle de la Vergne.

Flecks of sunlight came through the linden-leaves on to her dark hair, bringing out unsuspected warmth in its ebony, and on to a red stone on her finger.

"There is a ruby necklace there," said Roland suddenly, his eyes moving from her ringlets to her hand. "And hundreds of louis in pistoles of the time of Louis XIII. So the plan said. Oh, if we could only have gone!"

"And is all that hoard to lie there, then, unused, while the Cause goes short of money?"

"Oh, no!" said both the young men together. "Presently, when M. de Kersaint has got the authority of the Duc de Trélan, wherever he may be, he will send some one after it."

"Some one—whom?"

"I should think very probably M. de Brencourt," replied Roland.

"And he must wait—perhaps for weeks and weeks—before he can start?"

"Yes," said her brother, "unless the Marquis, who, as M. de Céligny will have told you, is a kinsman of M. de Trélan's, decides to act without his authorisation, which, from what he said, it is quite likely he may do."

"So that M. de Trélan's authorisation is not indispensable?"

"No. Only a matter of form, I think. Being an émigré and Mirabel confiscated—he can neither prevent nor forward such an attempt."

Mlle de la Vergne was silent, pushing at the gravel with a little shoe and looking down at it. "Where is Mirabel, did you say?"

"Quite near Paris, I gather," replied Artamène.

"I wish," said Marthe pensively, "that I were in Paris—quite near Mirabel!"

"My dear little sister, what would be the good of that?" asked Artamène, amused.

"I have relatives in Paris," announced Roland, with sudden and apparent irrelevance, "two old cousins of my father's—quiet, unsuspected, unsuspicious old gentlemen."

The little silence which followed this statement was broken by a whirr of wings as one of Marthe's pigeons alighted on the gravel outside the arbour, and, looking hard and hopefully at them out of one round, red-circled, unemotional eye, began to walk slowly up and down, jerking its burnished neck.

"O, if I were only a man!" exclaimed Mlle de la Vergne, abruptly, springing to her feet with kindling eyes.

"If I only had two arms!" said her brother, following her example, but more slowly.

"But I *am* a man, and both my arms are sound!" cried Roland, almost brandishing those members.

"And you have relatives in Paris who could help you!" said Marthe, turning her eyes on him.

"Well, no, hardly *help*," said Roland slowly, thinking of his ancient and peaceful kinsmen. "But they could give me a roof. . . ."

"And I could give you money to bribe anyone who needed bribing," declared Marthe. "At least, I have my pearls."

"Oh, curse this arm!" muttered the wounded hero. "Yet, after all, I do not see why I also——"

"No! no!" exclaimed both the others. "No, we know what the surgeon said. That would be the sheerest folly"—as if what they had in their own inflammable heads were cold wisdom.

Artamène leant dejectedly against the side of the arbour. "I don't see how you could do anything, Roland. You have not the plan of the late lamented of the time of Mazarin. You could not go and dig all over a place of that size on chance, even if the Directory gave you permission, which it certainly would not!"

"But I saw the plan!" retorted the Vicomte de Céligny. "I saw it perfectly clearly over the Abbé's shoulder that night. Why, I could draw it now, if I had a pencil. Nobody has one? Well, look here!"

He broke off a twig from the lime-tree and began a series of scratches on the gravel, just as a bell clanged from the house to summon them to the midday meal—scratches which Séraphin diligently raked out during that repast.

By sunlight and by twilight and by lamplight, under the arbour, on the lawn, in the salon, the rough plan made from that fleeting glimpse of the original was constructed and reconstructed and discussed. So much were their young heads bent over it the next evening that Mme de la Vergne said they looked like conspirators.

"Ma mère, you are perspicacious," replied her son. "We *are* conspirators." But, not really believing him, she did not pursue the question, and indeed, before she could revert to it, Artamène looked very hard at his sister and asked her if she were not going to sing to them.

Roland added his entreaties, and attended Mlle de la Vergne to the harpsichord.

"What shall I sing?" asked she. "No, I do not need any music, thank you. You must join in the chorus, then, Monsieur, you and Artamène." And with a mischievous smile she broke into the old children's ronde of *La Double Violette*:

"J'ai un long voyage à faire,
Je ne sais qui le fera;
Si je l'dis à l'alouette
Tout le monde le saura!
La violette double double,
La violette doublera!

"Si je l'dis à l'alouette,
Tout le monde le saura:
Rossignol du vert bocage
Faîtes-moi ce plaisir-là!"

and when she got to

"Rossignol prend sa volée,
Au château d'amour s'en va,"

she looked at Roland.

Afterwards they sang other songs.

Next day the conspirators met again in the arbour for a final council of war. They could not improve upon the map which the two young men had made—indeed, the question rather was whether they had not already improved it out of all resemblance to the original. Roland's immediate movements were now under discussion. Though it must shorten his visit, they all, even Roland himself, felt that no time was to be lost. M. de Céligny was supposed, of course, to be on his way to Kerlidec and his grandfather.

"But it will be wiser," said he, "not to go there now. When I return. . . . You see, he might make difficulties about my visiting Paris at all. So I will write to him. . . ."

He would not accept Mlle de la Vergne's pearls, though he thought it sublime of her to offer them. He had plenty of money, he said. And he settled to start next day. Artamène tried to salve his own fierce dejection by resolving to accompany him part of the way.

But, perhaps from the excitement of these deliberations, the Chevalier de la Vergne's arm became unexpectedly painful during the night. It was out of the question for him even to leave his bed next morning, and, for once in his life, he did not seem wishful to do so. Roland's offer to delay his departure was, however, declined by him. Mme de la Vergne, supposing their young guest to be setting off for Kerlidec—a point on which he did not undeceive her—hoped that he would visit them again, and when he asked if he might pay his parting respects to Mlle de la Vergne (having already taken a bedside farewell of her brother), replied rather absently that she was probably in the poultry-yard, and that if M. de Céligny would give himself the trouble. . . . For her thoughts were not at the moment with an unchaperoned daughter and what a susceptible young man might say to her ere he rode away, but with her son in pain upstairs, and whether the surgeon really understood his case, and if the constant poulticing he had ordered were right. Besides—though this even the inquiring mind of Artamène had never come near guessing—there existed a certain understanding between her and M. de Carné on the subject of Roland and Marthe.

Roland was off before the permission could be revoked. But Mlle de la Vergne was not in the poultry yard, though matters connected with her pensioners had drawn her to the spot where he found her, the miniature bridge which spanned the little stream winding through the grounds. From this she was watching with some anxiety the first voyage of a brood of ducklings down that St. Lawrence. Roland was stabbed to the heart. He was going to danger, to prison perhaps, for her—and her mind was set on ducklings!

Erect and noble (so he hoped—at any rate booted and spurred) the young man walked towards the bridge. Directly she turned, the surprise and concern on her face healed him.

"What! you are going already, Monsieur de Céligny! I thought it was not to be for another hour, and that you were closeted with Artamène . . . and I might have missed wishing you Godspeed because of these wretched little adventurers!"

"Ah no, Mademoiselle!" said Roland. "Do you think I should have gone like that? I have need of all the benedictions you can give me."

And what she gave him satisfied him fully—only a look, but a look so charged with meaning—and both her hands. There on the tiny bridge he raised them with reverence and joy to his lips. Her silence, her faint flush, her movement of surrender, whether it were ultimate or no, dubbed him indeed her knight, going to the ogre's castle with her colours on his helm—invincible indeed, and supremely blest to serve at once his lady and his King.

And unregarded, in that high moment, went the indignant comments of the little yellow navigator under their very feet, who was finding the stream on which his inexperience had embarked of an unlooked-for strength and volume.

CHAPTER VII

CHILDE ROLAND COMES TO THE DARK TOWER

Valentine de Trélan was kneeling before her crucifix ere retiring to bed when she heard the first shot. The report broke so sharply across her prayers that, like a noise heard in sleep, its first demand on the senses was the question whether it were real. The second shot brought her to her feet in some concern. Who could be firing so late, and at what? The sentry, at some marauder? But, as far as she could judge, the sound came from the great garden at the back, where no sentry was. Her first impulse was to go out in that direction to investigate, but she supposed she must not leave her post, in case she were summoned for any reason. She dressed again, and went out to the passage and listened.

Sure enough, some ten minutes later, there came a knocking on one of the more distant doors that gave on to the garden front. She fetched her keys, and hastening along the lengthy corridor, opened it. Outside were two National Guards, her friend Grégoire Thibault and another. Grégoire had a musket over his shoulder.

“Sorry to disturb you, citoyenne,” said he, half apologetically. “You have not seen anything of a man prowling round here, I suppose?”

“Nothing,” answered Mme de Trélan with perfect truth. “Was that what you were firing at?”

“Jacques here,” said Grégoire, “was going along the road when he saw—or thought he saw—in the distance a man climbing over the wall that goes round the park. He was off duty, so he had not his musket, and instead of going after him he came to tell me, as I was nearer than the guard house.”

“Not being quite the figure for climbing walls either, citoyenne,” put in Grégoire’s companion with reason.

“So we separated, and each went round a different side of the château. The light was getting bad, and the first time I fired at something moving it was comrade Jacques here. Luckily I didn’t hit him. Then a few minutes later I saw my gentleman for a second by a big bush of something, but, parbleu, he slipped round one of those heathen goddesses or whatever they are. I sent a remembrancer after him from this”—Grégoire slapped his musket—“and I am almost sure I hit him; but do you think I could find him anywhere in the garden? No!”

Valentine, who knew the extent of the garden—park, rather—so much better than he, was convinced that the time which had elapsed between the second shot and his appearance at the château was not a quarter long enough for a thorough search, especially in the rapidly failing light, so that the odds were the intruder, if wounded, was still there. She said as much.

“Well, he can stay there till daylight,” announced the Citizen Grégoire composedly, “and reflect on his crimes. If he isn’t there he has made off, and won’t be likely to return in a hurry. You are not nervous, are you, Madame Vidal?”

“Not the least in the world,” the Duchesse assured him. “Did you see what this man was like, or have you any idea why he should come into the garden?”

“From the way in which he slipped over that wall,” remarked Jacques, “I should say he was young.”

“I daresay,” put in Grégoire consolingly, “that it was only some inquisitive lad wanting to see inside the garden. You will be all right, Madame Vidal; he can’t possibly get into the house. If I wasn’t sure of it, parbleu, I would stay the night here.”

If Grégoire Thibault, in the days of the Terror, had been a hunter of suspects, as he gave himself out to be, his zeal had sadly suffered eclipse since that time. It was clear that he wished to minimise the seriousness of the inroad in order to get home to his bed, and for the same reason, had no intention of turning out the rest of the guard. Valentine was not in the least anxious to keep him from that haven, and so after a few reassuring words the twain departed, and Mme de Trélan was free to resume her interrupted orisons, with a conviction that some man, with purpose unknown, was lurking in the precincts of Mirabel.

The affair indeed was a strange interruption to the almost cloistral quiet of the last few weeks, into which news of the outer world came only through Suzon Tessier or Toinon the *laitière*, or by the unencouraged gossip of the scrubbers. For, since she never went into the hamlet, Valentine might almost have been a recluse living the contemplative life with brief intervals of the active. Sometimes, already, it seemed to her that she had never known Mirabel under conditions any different.

She did go to bed, and after a time went to sleep, but woke about midnight, and remained awake, for she found that she could not well bear the idea of a fellow-creature lying out all night in the dark and lonely park, perhaps in agony to boot, even though he were a thief or something of the kind. But it was useless looking for him before daylight. The thought that he might try to effect an entry she dismissed. At dawn she rose, dressed, and slipped out behind Mirabel.

It was three o’clock, and the first thrush was singing in that vast desert of a garden. Along the weed-infested paths went the Duchesse, and through bosquet after bosquet, tended groves no longer, but thickets so overgrown that some were almost impassable. Nettles, burdocks, thistles, briars, those raiding colonists were everywhere, waging war against the smothering advances of the unclipped ivy. But the little lake in the distance mirrored no tall pines now on its tarnished surface. Of that aisle of scent and murmurs the nearer pillars were but stumps; the farther stood lonely and condemned against the sky. Valentine did not look this morning at those distant martyrs; she kept her gaze on the

ground as she made her way between the bushes or skirted the long, dripping grass of some once-shaven little lawn. Such terms and sylvan deities as still had heads looked at their former lady with cold and curious, in some cases with leering eyes. Had she been wandering there without an object she might have had leisure to taste the infinite sadness of that place, made only for pleasure and good company, or to remember, perhaps, certain passages of its light past. But she was searching for an unfortunate; and that the unfortunate, when found, might prove to be a very undesirable person indeed, that, in fact, she was disposed to picture him as such, did not greatly trouble her. The last few incredible years had given her a sympathy with the hunted.

Full though her mind was of her quest, the first indication that it was on the way to prove successful gave her something of a shock. She had come to the head of the flight of shallow marble steps that led from one little terrace to the next, when she suddenly perceived on each a small, reddish, star-shaped splash. She bent down; yes, it was blood—the trail of the pursued. On the grassgrown gravel at the foot of the steps it was more difficult to follow, but the track began again, clearer and larger than before, on a short flight that led once more upwards. On one step there was even a smear, that looked like the print of a hand, as though the wounded man had stumbled and recovered himself.

And thus, finally, in what had been known as the Bosquet de Mercure, she found the invader, fallen sideways at the foot of the bronze statue of Mercury—a young man, pale as marble and as beautiful as the god himself, and so unlike what she had expected that she stood a moment as still as he. That he was a gentleman was plain without the evidence of his clothes; and he wore, as further and indeed defiant proof, the black coat-collar which marked the aristocrat and reactionary, the *collet noir* which had caused so many pitched battles in the streets of Paris. One arm lay out on the gravel, crushing a little company of that innocent and joyous flower, the speedwell, which had rooted there, intruding in the garden like him, and, like him, shut-eyed. The other hand held a red ball of a handkerchief which had probably, during consciousness, been pressed against the dark patch on the left side of his grey coat.

And Valentine, her heart alight with compassion, began to stoop over her quarry . . . stopped, raised herself again, and put out a hand to the base of the statue for support. In the unconscious face at her feet she suddenly saw. . . . Whence came that resemblance? She was carried back a hundred years, to a morning in her young wifehood here at Mirabel, to an early wakening, to the thrush, just heard, like this, in the summer dawn . . . while by her side lay the husband who still summed up all her dreams, on whom she had looked down with the yet untroubled eyes of love, and whose sleeping visage had been the very counterpart of this.

But in a moment the illusion was fled, and she did not know how it had ever come. Leaving the statue she knelt down by the fallen youth and felt for his heart. It was beating. She began to unfasten his neckcloth. But how was she to convey him into the château? She could not carry him. Besides, how badly was he hurt? Could she possibly get him into that damp little pseudo-classical temple of Ceres on the other side of the grove? But the first thing was to try to revive him. When she had been a fine lady she would have had a vinaigrette or something of the sort about her; now there was nothing for it but to scoop up in her hollowed palms a little stagnant water from the basin at the foot of the statue, and to dash it, greenish as it was, over the white face. Three times she did this without any result but temporary disfigurement, and then set to work to rub the intruder's hands, long patrician hands like her own, like . . . But that was folly.

"Grandpère!" said the young man suddenly, "Monsieur le Marquis! . . . Artamène . . . Where am I, then?" He opened his eyes, tried rashly to raise himself, and relapsed with a groan, his hand to his wounded side. "What has happened to me? . . . Is this a garden?"

Valentine slipped her arm under his head. "Do not try to move yet, Monsieur," she said in her beautiful voice. "You are in the park of Mirabel—with a friend."

He stared up at her, utterly perplexed. (But his eyes were brown, quite unlike that dark grey.) "I am so thirsty," he said, like a child.

"You cannot drink this stagnant water," replied Mme de Trélan compassionately, and then, looking closer and seeing how dry and cracked his lips were, bethought her of a spring that flowed, or that used to flow, through a lion's mouth in the grotto of Latona, a few seconds away. "Wait," she said, gently withdrawing her arm, "I think I can get you some fresh water."

She rose and hastened off. Yes, the spring was still flowing, and even the stone goblet that served it, though very green, was still there. The Duchesse brought back that water from the past; and, aided by her, the boy drank long and eagerly, and thanked her.

All this while the dawn was growing brighter, and the solitary thrush now become one of a choir, and, though Mercury was battered and green, he held out the *caduceus* over the two figures beneath him with an air at once sprightly and benedictory. And the one bright buttercup at his feet, moved by the morning breeze, bent towards them too.

"My child," said Valentine gently, as she set down the goblet, "I do not know what you were doing here last night, but I suppose you do. At any rate you were shot at by the sentry, and I see that you are hurt in the side, but not, I hope, seriously. The question is, how to move you so that I can do something for your wound."

The invader was perfectly sensible now. “But, Madame, who are you?” he asked.

“The concierge of Mirabel—of the château,” said she.

“I shall never find it now,” murmured the young man dejectedly. “Instead, I suppose I shall have to go to prison.”

“Yes, in the château,” said Mme de Trélan encouragingly. “And I will be your gaoler.”

He understood. A look of alarm came over his face. “Oh no, Madame, that would never do! The Directory——”

“I am afraid that I care very little for the Directory,” broke in the Duchesse calmly, beginning to unfasten the fichu from her neck. “Now first, Monsieur, I am going to tie this muslin of mine very tightly about you, for I think there has been no bleeding for some time, and then we must see whether you can get to your feet, and whether, with my help, you can walk as far as the château.”

And five minutes or so later, with infinite precautions, the youth trying to put as little weight on a woman as he need, and to stifle the expressions of pain that came to his lips, they were actually progressing very slowly from the Bosquet de Mercure into that of Ceres. And in the pillared shrine of the goddess Mme de Trélan had a moment’s impulse to instal her protégé, seeing his extreme pallor and the possibility of his being unable to reach the house. But the little temple was eminently unsuitable for a hospital, she would find it very awkward to get away to tend him there, and he would be liable to discovery. So, since he assured her rather breathlessly that he was all right, they went forward.

On the edge of the great fountain, however, exposed though it was in its open parterre, he was obliged to sit down and rest a moment or two. The Duchesse sat beside him with her arm round him, lest he should fall backwards off the stone rim into the dark and viscous water behind him. And he, his eyes on the great house, seemed to be realising the extent of his prospective refuge. “I could not see it properly last night,” he murmured.

But Valentine told him not to talk. He did not altogether obey her, and his intermittent remarks as they went onwards in the growing light amid the increasing vociferations of the thrushes were now and then unintelligible. Once he called her “Marthe,” and then apologised.

Certainly there were no eyes to watch them at that early hour save those of the birds, no place for them to watch from but the overgrown thickets. And so Mme de Trélan got Roland de Céligny unobserved into Mirabel by the basement stairway at the back, and along the dark passages to her room. By the time they reached her parlour he was mute and unresisting, and when she had steered him to the bed (left just as she had slipped out of it) and had somehow assisted him on to it, her youthful visitor, as she fully expected, quietly fainted away again.

CHAPTER VIII

HIS SOJOURN THERE

(1)

When the *laitière* came at half-past six that morning she was sorry to hear that Mme Vidal was indisposed, but not ill-pleased to sell her, in consequence, a double portion of milk. So indisposed indeed was the concierge that she requested Toinon, when she returned to the village, to get conveyed to Paris a note to her niece Mme Tessier, asking the latter to make a few purchases and to visit her.

The sympathetic Toinon gone, Mme de Trélan went back to her patient. Long before this he had come to himself for the second time, and she had fed him with the milk she had reserved for her morning coffee, in a spoon. He took it drowsily, like a child, and dropped off to sleep again.

She thought him asleep now when she came in, and went about noiselessly putting the dark little bedroom to rights, preoccupied all the time with one thought, this boy's safety. The thought divided itself into two parts; how to secure proper attention for his wound, and how to get the boy himself away without discovery. Her unpractised investigation of his hurt had already led her to suppose that it was a glancing flesh wound off the ribs, probably not dangerous, save from the amount of blood he seemed to have lost. Why he had risked coming by it she had not even a guess.

But though she thought him asleep she saw, after a minute or two, as she passed by the bed, that his eyes were open and that he was looking at her. He was very flushed.

"Is there anything you want, mon enfant?" she asked, stopping.

He continued to look at her mutely, then made these brief statements:

"My name is Roland de Céligny. I ought not to have come. Now I shall be endangering you. Madame, I implore you to let me go!"

"Chut!" retorted Valentine, laying her hand for a second on his forehead. "How could you go, even if I would let you? There is no need, I assure you, to trouble about me. Besides, why should I not care for a wounded man whom I find in the garden. You are not a malefactor, Monsieur de Céligny!"

"Mais si, Madame," replied Roland earnestly. "In intention, at least . . . that is just what I am. . . . You ought to give me up."

"If we all did what we ought to do!" exclaimed Valentine lightly, and stood looking down at him, convinced now that that momentary likeness was a trick of the dawn, some enchantment of the garden, anything but fact.

She felt that to ensure silence she ought to leave him; unused as she was to caring for an injured man she was certain that he ought not to talk. In romances the wounded hero was always adjured not to do so, and the boy looked feverish. But not to know a little more about him were to waste the chance of arranging some plan which the faithful Suzon's arrival would bring her. So, contrary to all romantic tradition, Valentine sat down by the bed and said in a business-like way,

"Tell me, Monsieur de Céligny, as shortly as possible, what you came into the garden to do, and if you know anyone in Paris with whom it would be safe to communicate. I ask you this because I have a trusted friend coming to see me to-day, and through her something might be arranged. Your personal safety is the first thing to consider, your wound—which I believe is not serious—the second."

"I have cousins in Paris," said Roland. He gave their address. "I was at their house for three or four days before I came here."

"Do they know where you are?"

"No, Madame."

"They will be very anxious about you, then?"

"Yes," murmured he rather shamefacedly, and sighed.

"Are they likely to track you here?"

"I don't think so," said the adventurer. "No, I do not believe it possible."

"But the sentry saw you; fortunately it was too dark to distinguish your face. They are sure to search again. I think the moment has come, Monsieur de Céligny, if I am to help you further, for you to tell me a little more. You see that I am your friend, and that I am not . . . in fear of the Directory. You need not name anyone unless you wish, but I think you had better tell me for what reason you were in the park of Mirabel last night."

"Madame," replied Roland with emotion, "after what you have done for me I should indeed be foolish and ungrateful if I kept back anything from you. I came to Mirabel to find the hidden treasure."

The Duchesse de Trélan stared at him. "But, my child, there is no such thing!"

From the pillow the young man's look said as politely as possible, "How can you be sure of that, Madame la concierge?"

"I have known the château for many years," said Valentine, "and I assure you. . . ." She broke off, puzzled.

"But I have seen a plan of its hiding-place," said Roland eagerly.

"Where did you see such a thing?"

"When I was in Brittany with M. de——" some remnant of caution checked him, "—with a Chouan leader."

"A Chouan leader had a plan of a treasure hidden in Mirabel!" exclaimed Mirabel's mistress, strongest amazement in her tone. "What was his name—no, I will not ask you that. Did he send you here, then?"

"No, Madame," admitted Roland, with a return of shamefacedness. "He will be very angry with me—if ever I see him again." He gave a second or two to inward contemplation, presumably, of this anger, and went on, "The money was hidden here during the Fronde by the Duc of those days, but the paper describing its whereabouts was stolen, and came into the hands of an old lady who was dying in the next house to . . . to where we were. Our aumônier went to see her, and she gave him the paper to convey to the Duc de Trélan, who, I believe, is in England, or somewhere of the sort. At any rate he is an émigré—as I suppose you know, Madame."

Valentine forced herself to remain quietly sitting there. "Well?" she said, and her voice, from sheer self-restraint, sounded quite stony.

"And the aumônier brought it in to give to M. de Kersaint, because he knew that the Marquis was a kinsman of the Duc de Trélan."

"What name did you say?" asked Valentine, more and more amazed.

"The Marquis de Kersaint," replied Roland. Then he stopped. "I did not mean to mention the name."

"De Kersaint—a kinsman!" exclaimed Valentine, from whom all thoughts of encouraging prudence in the fugitive were now miles away. "I never heard the name in my life! A kinsman of——"

And now Roland was staring at her.

"Well, never mind," said she. "We must keep to the point, which is, how to get you away, Monsieur de Céligny. You saw this . . . this extraordinary plan, then, and—since you say that you were not sent—I assume that you thought that you would like to come on your own account to hunt for the treasure. Had you any accomplices?"

"Not in Paris," replied Roland, reddening faintly.

"And your cousins know nothing?"

"No, I merely said that I was leaving Paris for the day and might be back late. You see, Madame, I meant to have got here earlier, but it was light so long. I only had a sight of that plan for a moment," confessed the treasure-hunter with engaging candour, "yet I remember that it looked as though there were an entrance from the garden to a passage leading under the house to the banqueting hall, I think. But I did not realise that the garden was so large."

Again Valentine stared at him. It was making her dizzy to learn these facts—if they were facts—about her own house after all her years of acquaintance with it.

"You must be crazy, my child," she said conclusively, "or the plan was a hoax. But to return to these cousins of yours, and how to get you restored to them. The point is whether it would be better to try to smuggle a surgeon in to you, or to smuggle you out. And what to say to them? It is not over safe to tell the exact truth in a letter. It might endanger the bearer also. Let me think."

She put her shapely, slightly roughened hand over her eyes, and Roland gazed at it.

"Monsieur de Céligny," she said after a moment, uncovering her eyes, "have you ever fought a duel?"

"No, Madame."

"Should you object to having come to the park of Mirabel for that purpose last night?"

Roland took her meaning, with a little smile. "There is nothing I should like better."

"It is the best I can devise for the moment. As I say, it would not do for you to tell the truth in writing. If, to-morrow night, you could walk with my assistance as far as a little door in the park wall that I know of, and if your cousins could procure, with all secrecy, for a carriage to be there. . . . You see, it will be impossible for you to get out of the place you have so rashly entered save in some such clandestine fashion, and even then any mischance——"

"Mischance to me matters not, Madame!" cried the young man. "But if it were to you!"

The Duchesse de Trélan smiled. "Reassure yourself, Monsieur de Céligny. No mischance is likely to come to me. If you feel able I must urge you now to write a line to your cousins about your duel. It might be thought a trap of some kind if I wrote. They must see your hand."

She fetched him pencil and paper, and together they concocted a letter to his elderly kinsmen, she holding the paper. At the end she fed him again, for the conversation and the effort of writing had exhausted him rather alarmingly. It was no more than was to be expected. But at that price Valentine had the main threads of the affair in her hands now.

(2)

In the early afternoon arrived, as she had been desired, the faithful Tessier, with a basket containing medicaments and comforts.

"I knew the place would not suit you, Madame," she said, almost as soon as she set foot inside the little parlour. "Ah, I see that you are indeed indisposed!" For Mme de Trélan, to give colour to her statement to Toinon, had wrapped

herself in a shawl.

"Suzon, I was never better in my life," said she, and looked it. "But there is someone ill here. That was really why I sent for you."

"Someone—in there?" ejaculated Mme Tessier, pointing to the bedroom door.

"Yes, a young man, suffering from a gunshot wound in the side," responded the Duchesse calmly. "You can give me help and advice."

For the moment Suzon looked little capable of either. Her eyes turned wildly from Mme de Trélan to the bedroom door.

"But—did he fall from heaven, or through the chimney?" she managed to get out.

"Neither. I found him in the garden at three o'clock this morning. He was shot by the guard last night."

Suzon sat down heavily on a chair. "Mercy on us! What is his name, Madame, his business?"

"His name—no, I will not tell you his name. And as for his business, suffice it to say that it has not succeeded. I want to keep him here no longer than is necessary for his wound, lest he should be discovered and taken."

"But you yourself, Madame?"

"My reputation, do you mean?" asked the Duchesse, laughing. She seemed in a mood of unusual exhilaration. "I think, at my age, that will take care of itself."

"Your safety is what I mean, Madame," said Suzon reproachfully. "You ought to give him up, whatever he was doing."

"That is just what I am going to do—to his relations if they will come and fetch him." And Valentine explained her plan. When she had heard it, poor Suzon, breathing a sigh of relief at the prospect of getting rid of the refugee, almost clamoured to take the compromising letter to its destination.

"And I think I had better see these gentlemen and bring back the answer to-morrow," she volunteered.

"I hardly like to ask you to do that," said Valentine, hesitating.

"Then how are you going to know, Madame, whether the carriage will be there or not," objected Mme Tessier. "It will be difficult enough as it is to bring it all off without a hitch. And I am only too anxious for him to be gone. Cleaning day or visiting day, what might happen—Heaven preserve us!"

"My bedroom is not on show to the general public," observed Valentine lightly. "And I can always lock Louise out." (Louise commanded the brigade of cleaners.) "However, I am not anxious to keep the boy, for his own sake. Now, what have you brought me for him, Suzette?"

Mme Tessier watched her as, alert and interested, she unpacked the basket. Now and again there would peep out, in this tragically fated lady, whom she worshipped and protected with equal fervour—this lady who for all her lifetime of authority was so wonderfully humble and contented—some trait of those older days when her lightest wish had been a command. Despite her extraordinary consideration for others, and those her inferiors, she did sometimes demand services without counting the cost, and accept devotion as a right. And Suzon loved her for it.

"This is excellent, ma fille," said the Duchesse in a moment, setting out Suzon's purchases on the table. "I think that as a reward I must tell you, after all, about this young man's errand—a wild-goose chase if ever there was one. Did you ever hear, Suzon, from your grandfather, of a treasure hidden in Mirabel from the time of the Fronde?"

"Why, bless you, yes, Madame," replied Suzon. "Grandpère used often to talk of it. There were supposed to be jewels too. But I never believed it myself."

Valentine was taken aback at this unexpected reply. "You did know of it! It is extraordinary that I should be the last to hear of it, then."

And in both their minds, as each guessed, was the unuttered question, Had the Duc known of it too? But for years now Mme Tessier had never mentioned M. de Trélan unless the Duchesse did so first.

"It is very strange," went on Mirabel's mistress reflectively. "And stranger still that the man who possesses a plan of the spot where this treasure is supposed to be hidden should be a Chouan leader calling himself—with what truth I cannot tell—a kinsman of . . . of the Duc's." A swift, tiny flush ran over her face. "I have never heard his name. I think it must be a false assertion."

"And that is why the young man is here, then?" interrupted Suzon despite herself. "—sent by this Chouan to secure the treasure! He is a Royalist, therefore!—O, Madame——"

"Not *sent*, I gather," corrected the Duchesse. "Yes, a Royalist, a *collet noir*."

"A *collet noir*—one of those hotheads! And the guard—you say they shot him! Did they not search for him? Will they not search again? Really, Madame, I must say it, your imprudence . . ."

"The search, if you can call it so, is over," said Mme de Trélan with composure, opening a pot of jelly. "It was very perfunctory last night, and little better this morning, when the sergeant and three men came. I of course knew nothing—may Heaven pardon me!"

"Heaven needs to watch over you!" murmured Suzon.

"They think he got away—the obvious conclusion. So now we have nothing to do but to make that surmise a fact."

Suddenly she turned her head. “What, in heaven’s name, is the poor boy doing in there now?”

He was singing; and as the two women went hastily in, it was apparent that his choice was that gay little air, *La Double Violette*.

“Suzon,” said the Duchesse in alarm, after a moment, “he is light-headed. Is he worse? What ought I to do?”

“I expect,” replied Mme Tessier, “that a surgeon would say he should be bled.”

“Bled! when he has lost so much blood already!”

“Rossignol prend sa volée,
Au château d’amour s’en va,”

chanted Roland, more and more out of tune.

“Oh, poor nightingale!” exclaimed Valentine, half laughing. “ ‘Château d’amour,’ indeed!”

“Trouva la porte fermée,
Par la fenêtre il entra,”

was the songster’s next equally appropriate announcement.

“I will go at once to the village and get a febrifuge of some kind,” said Suzon, making for the door. “I will not be long.”

And Mme de Trélan was left, to be greeted with the nightingale’s message:

“Bonjour l’une, bonjour l’autre,
Bonjour la belle que voilà!
Votre amant m’envoie vous dire
Que vous ne l’oubliez pas!”

“Child,” she said, sitting down and laying her hand on the hot forehead, “you could put your strength to so much better use!”

And at her voice or touch the minstrel suddenly ceased his strain, while his fingers, moving over the bed, found and closed on her other hand. Thereafter he was at least quiet.

CHAPTER IX

HIS DEPARTURE THENCE

Thus it was that Roland de Céligny's exit from Mirabel was not so speedily effected as his hostess had planned. And without Suzon Tessier it is doubtful whether it would have been effected at all. For if Mme de Trélan was cast for the romantic part in this drama of deliverance, it was Suzon who played the indispensable go-between with MM. de Céligny *aînés*, she who brought in the additional and choicer provisions required for the invalid, she who supported, on cleaning-day, the fiction of Mme Vidal's not being able to leave her room, and personally enforced, in consequence, a surprising quiet among the myrmidons of Louise. But Roland hardly realised his debt to Mme Tessier; the ardour of his gratitude glowed at the feet of Mme de Vidal—as he persisted in calling her.

But on the fourth evening he was well enough to go, the two women thought; and, for his part, well enough to be sorry to go.

It had been arranged that at ten o'clock a carriage should be in waiting outside a certain little door in the park wall at the end of the lime-tree avenue known as the Allée des Soupirs—a door which the Duchesse had already investigated, and from which, when she oiled the rusty bolts, she had torn away in readiness the plastered ivy. This door was some distance down the park, and, therefore, to accustom him to the use of his legs, Valentine had caused her patient to walk several times round the room with the assistance of Suzon and herself. It was already getting dark; Suzon had gone back to Paris, and, since Mme de Trélan dared not have her patient in her living-room in case of a surprise, she had taken her armchair into her bedroom and ensconced him in it, to eat his supper before he faced the journey to the door, and herself sat down to bear him company.

And while he ate Roland talked; or, to be more accurate, when he was not talking, he ate. Propped up with pillows in his chair, bright-eyed, with a varying colour, he appeared, as he was, excited, and not the less attractive for his condition. His wound was not, Suzon said, doing very well, but he seemed free from fever, and it was too dangerous for him to stay longer. Both Valentine and he knew that. So he utilised the last remaining half-hour in converse, and not being of a suspicious nature, never considered that this woman who was saving him could quite easily betray him afterwards when she had gained from him all the information she wanted, nor even that it might be worth her while letting him slip for the sake of that information. The concierge's extraordinary kindness and generosity had earned, besides his undying gratitude, his whole-hearted confidence. Moreover, as he told himself, however she came to her present position, it was not a position natural to her. Apart from her voice, her bearing, what concierge ever had filbert nails like that? Yes, Roland wished he were not going out of Mirabel with the prospect of never seeing its guardian again.

So he chatted unrestrainedly about the little band in Brittany. Chiefly he dwelt upon M. de Kersaint, and manifested astonishment when he learnt that his hostess did not know of the heroic part that gentleman had played in the great Austrian defeat at Rivoli two and a half years ago.

"You forget, Monsieur Roland," observed Valentine, smiling, "that I do not live in Royalist circles. But I think I do remember hearing at the time that one of the Austrian columns was commanded by a French émigré, but I never learnt his name."

"It was M. de Kersaint. He has the cross of Maria Theresa for it."

"Indeed! I am afraid the Directory would give him a very different decoration if they had him in their hands."

"They are not likely to have him there," asserted Roland confidently. "But I remember hearing M. de Brencourt say that Masséna in particular—not to speak of General Bonaparte——"

"Whom did you say?" asked Valentine, struck.

"General Masséna. He came up during the night, you know, to Joubert's assistance, Bonaparte being of course in supreme command——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Duchesse again, less interested in the battle of Rivoli (on which this young man seemed to be an expert) than in something else. "I mean—what name—whom did you say you overheard? . . . M. de Brencourt?"

Roland nodded. "The Comte de Brencourt is M. de Kersaint's second-in-command. He said that Masséna was furious——"

"Tell me, what is he like, this M. de Brencourt?"

Roland, surprised, described him. "Why, do you know him, Madame?"

"It cannot be the same," said Valentine hastily. "I did not mean to interrupt you, Monsieur de Céligny. Go on, pray, with what you were telling me about M. de Kersaint and Rivoli."

But she did not listen. Pictures were floating in her head of her stay at Spa in 1787, of her first meeting at that fashionable resort with the Comte de Brencourt, whose admiration had almost amounted to persecution, who had threatened once to shoot himself because of her coldness, and who had followed her against her bidding to her country house.

It was the same man, of course. Dimly she heard about Lucien and Artamène and the "Abbé," of the disbanding, of greater plans for the future, and it was not for some moments that she came back entirely to her room and her attractive refugee, and found that the young man, leaning slightly forward in the big chair, was asking her a question.

"Do you not think, Madame de Vidal, that you might add to your never-to-be-forgotten kindness by telling me in your turn, something about yourself? You—pardon me—you are no concierge! You are as gently born as I!"

"You think so? Well, the world has been upside down these ten years, has it not? Ten years ago—if you were old enough then to give a thought to the future—you would not have expected to grow up a house-breaker, Monsieur Roland!"

But from the way he looked at her then she could almost see his young and romantic mind working, and probably making up wild stories about her. She decided to present him with one ready-made, and not so far from the truth.

"Yes," she said quietly, "it is useless to deny that I am gently born, but I trust that my employer, the Deputy who has charge of the château, is not aware of the fact. For him I am the aunt of his cousin, Mme Tessier. My late husband, an émigré, died abroad, and I was obliged to earn my living, like many a better woman. I used to earn it by needlework; now I do so by looking after Mirabel. There you have my history in the proverbial nutshell. And now"—she glanced at the little clock on the shelf, "it is nearly time to start for the Allée des Soupirs."

The colour leapt into Roland's face. "You have been so divinely kind, Madame, that I dare ask one more kindness. Something—the merest trifle—as a memento of what indeed I shall need no memento to keep in lifelong memory!"

It was a long time since young men had asked Valentine de Trélan for souvenirs. That they had asked in vain was neither here nor there.

"But, my child," she responded with a maternal air, "I have nothing to give you . . . unless you would like a thimble or a pair of scissors!"

"I should like anything," said the petitioner humbly.

"I suppose," said she, rising, "that what you would like best would be some of this semi-mythical treasure.—Roland!" she said, struck by a sudden thought, "promise me that you will not come back after it when you are better! Promise me!"

The boy had flushed with pleasure at the sound of his unprefixed name. "Alas, the treasure will probably be gone before I am well enough for that, Madame. The Marquis de Kersaint will send somebody—but not one of us. He said it was work for an older and wiser head, and I suppose he was right. I suspect he will send M. de Brencourt, if he can spare him."

"Oh!" said Valentine, and was silent all at once.

"But," went on the youth, unregarding, "if I am to promise not to return, Madame de Vidal, you must give me a remembrance of you to take away with me. Otherwise——"

"I think you are threatening me," observed Valentine, recovering herself. "For my part I can ill spare my thimble, but if it will prevent your climbing that wall again—Stay, I believe I have something after all."

And going into the outer room she came back with the locket she had found in the work table in her boudoir.

"If you care for this, Monsieur de Céligny," she said, "you are welcome to it. It has no value. It was mine as a girl, before my marriage."

But she need not have said that, for the V, which alone stood out clearly among the twisted pearls and garnets of the monogram, he could easily take for "Vidal." Getting with some difficulty to his feet the young man reverently received the trinket, looked at it, and having kissed it slipped the worn chain about his neck. Mme de Trélan brought some garments from the bed.

"It is really time to go, mon enfant. You will need all your courage for the journey. Here is your hat; I brought it in afterwards from the guardianship of the statue; and you must put on this cloak, for it is raining hard. All the better, for rain drowns noises—though I hope there is no one to hear in any case. Now, you must lean on me hard, for I am very strong."

It was indeed raining from a light spring sky which somehow concealed a moon. On the limes of the Allée des Soupirs, when they got there, the drops pattered heavily. The journey had been slow and trying, but at last they reached the door. Roland, panting, leant against the wall while Valentine opened it.

It was lucky that she had oiled bolts and hinges, for even then it protested as she pulled at it. The last ivy tendril gave. Mme de Trélan went through and heard an unseen horse blow out its nostrils and a bit jingle, and then saw two dim forms waiting in the lane. One of them touched her on the shoulder.

"He is there?" asked an educated man's voice.

"Just inside," she answered. "Be quick, for he can scarcely stand."

The two men went through the door, and in a moment Roland came out between them, stumbling a little but not so spent that he did not try to stop as he passed her. His supporters very properly would have none of this, but she heard the boy's low, broken words of gratitude and farewell before the three had vanished in the shadows.

She turned to go in. And then the same man's form loomed through the darkness again.

“This is for your inestimable services, and your discretion, my good woman,” he whispered. “You can guess whence it comes.” And, seizing one of her hands in the obscurity, he thrust something into it and closed her fingers round the gift.

Very shortly afterwards the Duchesse de Trélan stood alone in the rain under the wet limes of the Allée des Soupirs in her park of Mirabel. Her arm was lightened of the burden she had supported down the avenue, but her heart, although it knew a great relief, beat to an odd little ache that was almost regret. And she stood there between tears and laughter, because of what she held in her hand as an exchange for Roland de Céligny—a considerable bundle of assignats.

CHAPTER X

THE KNIGHT'S MOVE

(1)

May had given place to June before Valentine de Trélan had quite got accustomed to the departure of the handsome boy whose presence had been such an anxiety and yet such a pleasure to her. The five thousand francs which she had in his place—not nearly so large a sum as it appeared owing to the enormous depreciation of paper money under the incapable rule of the Five Kings—she had at first thought of returning to his relatives by Suzon Tessier. But Suzon, by pretending to wish for her own sake to avoid further intercourse with that house, had persuaded the Duchesse to keep their bounty, at least for the present.

Since the evening when she had wept under her husband's portrait Valentine had never again felt any disposition to tears. Reaction had come after that outburst. If Gaston were alive—and she could not rid herself of the conviction that he was—it was difficult not to draw the conclusion that he was indifferent to her fate. Seven years, and no sign! Then she told herself again, as she had so often done, that her letters had never reached him, that he had not the slightest reason for supposing her to be still in life, since everybody of her world who had survived the tempest believed her murdered, that she had no evidence of his not having made enquiries after her, or unsuccessful efforts to find her. Only of a successful effort would she have heard. But none of these reasoned considerations could remove the sting of that long silence.

Yet, if Gaston were suddenly to appear before her, would she be able to greet him with that unconcern which she had almost persuaded herself that she felt—and that she ought to feel? She knew she would not. Down in the depths of her soul all the time was the emotion which had pierced her in the picture-gallery—the intense longing to see him again. It was Mirabel which had first made her conscious of this longing, and it was Mirabel which had insensibly fed it. And there were times when she cursed the impulse which had brought her here, for under the crust of indifference which she had hoped was forming over her heart she could feel the stirring of that desire, growing daily not less strong, but stronger.

And then one day it occurred to her that if this Chouan chief of Roland de Céligny's spoke of writing to the Duc de Trélan about the treasure he must know, or think he knew, Gaston's whereabouts. More, if he were to send someone to Mirabel after the hoard, as Roland had appeared to think certain, she might communicate at least with this self-styled kinsman of her husband's by his emissary, whoever he were. Yes, even if he were the Comte de Brencourt; for although that mad passion of his must be many times dead after all these years—and, perhaps, just because of its death—he would surely bear a letter for her back to Brittany . . . even as Roland might have done, had she thought of it in time.

This idea grew in her to an impatience for the coming of the next treasure-seeker. But June went on, and he did not come. Paris celebrated (with insufficient enthusiasm to please the Government) the obsequies of the envoys murdered at Rastadt; commerce continued to decline, discontent and lethargy to become more marked, and Republican feelings suffered outrage at the first performances of the opera of *Adrien*, wherein the stage emperor made his entry with undue pomp. On the eighteenth came a minor revolution, the *coup d'état* of the 30th Prairial, with a consequent change of ministry. Valentine heard of it with calm, and June slid presently into July.

(2)

Among the few sightseers who passed the sentry on the 20th of Messidor, a visiting day, was one who, though M. Thibault was too much engrossed in conversation to observe it, never entered the château at all, but strolled round to the garden front. There was nothing to prevent this, though it was hardly ever done. The really remarkable fact about this enterprising visitor was that he did not reappear again at leaving time; but this also passed without remark. Yet he had not vanished into space; he was seated, when twilight came, in that very grotto of Latona whose spring had refreshed Roland, waiting with some impatience for completer darkness. He had already seen as much of the garden front of Mirabel as he wished—a window on the ground-floor with a badly-broken shutter.

Problems connected with the recruiting and organisation of Finistère had kept the Comte de Brencourt longer in Brittany than the Marquis de Kersaint had bargained for, but he was here at last on his mission. Since a detail of the ancient plan had proved susceptible of two interpretations, he hoped to-night to make a preliminary search; after which he would arrange his plan of campaign with the Royalist agents in Paris with whom he was in touch.

More than the question of his difficult enterprise, however, was occupying M. de Brencourt's mind as he sat in that fantastic relic of the dead and gone world of which he also was a survival. It was impossible to be at Mirabel, even for the first time in his life, without thinking of Mme de Trélan, and, as his refuge darkened, he found himself thinking of little else, and of the extraordinary chance which had thrown her tragic and sacred shadow across his path again. On the windings of that chance Artus de Brencourt, while he waited, had time to meditate profoundly, and sitting there in the July twilight, his chin on his hand, staring at the arbutus which almost blocked the entrance to the grotto, he was

asking himself two questions. Why had the Marquis de Kersaint, that kinsman of the Duc de Trélan's, ceased, after that night at Hennebont, to wear his emerald signet ring; and why had that ring borne, as he then distinctly saw for the first time, the phoenix of the Saint-Chamans? For M. de Kersaint had stated that he was a connection of that house by marriage only. That he was a connection seemed obvious from the minute instructions he had been able to give M. de Brencourt on the topography of Mirabel. This business of the ring intrigued the Comte not a little. He was quite conversant with the device of the great house of Trélan, and over the troop of strange surmises born of the presence of that device on M. de Kersaint's finger and its abrupt disappearance he was still frowning when the time came for him to make his stealthy entrance into Mirabel.

For all that she had half looked for his arrival, it was chance, of a kind, that directed the Duchesse de Trélan's steps that evening towards the invader; chance that caused her to have left the special key in the door of the portrait gallery; chance that made her set out, somewhat unnecessarily, to fetch it before she retired for the night—and chance that led her returning footsteps through the great dark spaces of the Salle Verte . . . to hear, as she passed along between the pillars and the wall, a slight muffled noise of tapping—coming whence?

Valentine stopped dead, lamp in hand. The gentle and recurrent sound did not come from the banqueting hall itself, that was plain. From the "sallette," then?

No more than when she had searched the garden for a possible malefactor and found Roland did she dream of danger to herself, though had she paused to think of it she might have guessed that the intruder would be armed, and, if surprised, might use his weapon. She walked back and softly opened the door of the sallette; her surmise was right.

Her own lamp cast in its beams, but there was light there already—a lantern standing on the floor, making a pool of radiance by the feet of a man who stood in front of the great hearth with his back to her. In this pool, pinned down by the lantern, was an outspread sheet of paper, a plan of some sort. Her eyes were able to take in these details before the man, turning quickly, saw her standing there with her lamp. His one hand went to his breast, doubtless in search of a weapon, but he never produced it, and the tool which he held in the other fell clattering to the floor.

"*God in Heaven!*" he exclaimed sharply, and recoiled a step or two.

"Who is it?" asked Valentine a little uncertainly. "Is it—is it Monsieur de Brencourt?"

The intruder did not answer—did not even seem to hear her question. He remained literally as if turned to stone, his eyes burning cavernously in his pale face, on which the upcast light of the lantern at his feet, crossing with that of Valentine's lamp, cast odd shadows. After a moment, moving like a man half stunned from a fall, he came a little towards her. Then he stopped again, and passed his hand over his eyes.

"That light dazzles me . . . you are not real!" he muttered. Stooping, he picked up his own lantern, and held it high in a hand that shook.

"Is it really Madame de Trélan?" he asked huskily. "Was it untrue then . . . September . . . La Force?—Speak, Duchesse, for God's sake!"

In the matter of astonishment Valentine had the advantage of him, since she had been led to think his coming possible. But she too was shaken by the encounter, the first with anyone of her own world who had known her, for seven long years. And she found herself unable to do more than give a sort of pale acquiescence to his agitated questions by bending her head and saying, "Yes, it was untrue."

"It is she!" said de Brencourt to himself, his harsh features showing his profound emotion. Suddenly he lowered his lantern. "Give me your lamp, Duchesse, and sit down and tell me—tell me, unless I am to take leave of my senses, how it comes about . . . where you have been all these years . . . what you are doing now? My God, to think—Permit me!"

He deposited his own lantern on the floor and took the lamp from her unresisting grasp, looking round the plundered sallette in vain for something to put it on.

"Give me back the lamp, Monsieur le Comte," said Valentine, finding speech. "We cannot talk here. Let us go to my room. It is safer also."

"You have a room here?" he exclaimed. "You are . . ." For the first time he seemed to become aware of her attire, so different from anything which he had ever seen her wear.

She held out her hand for the lamp. "Come," she said, "unless your business here——" She indicated the tool and the map.

"Oh, that can wait now!" said the treasure-hunter with an accent of scorn. He picked up the chisel and the plan and followed her.

So, beneath the cavernous half-seen gilding of the great Salle Verte, down the basement stairs and along the bare prison-like corridor below, carrying the lamp, went the Duchesse de Trélan in her respectable black dress and fichu, and behind her walked, still half stupefied, the man who had once made such persistent and unavailing love to her. And it was in this guise, very exactly that of a thief in the night, that the Comte de Brencourt came for the first time to her house of Mirabel.

The thought penetrated his stupor with some force during the transit. For, once arrived at Valentine's little parlour,

as she put down the lamp on the table he said abruptly:

"I have never been in Mirabel in my life. And I find you here to greet me!" He gave a sudden laugh.

Valentine did not answer. She was much more moved than she wished to betray. She sat down in a chair near the table and motioned to him to do the same. But he put his hands on the table and remained leaning over it, staring at her with a half-wild eagerness.

"*Are* you alive, Duchesse? Or am I dead, too?"

"The Duchesse is not alive," responded Valentine with a faint smile. "You are speaking to Madame Vidal, the concierge of Mirabel."

"Good God!" exclaimed the Comte de Brencourt, springing upright.

"How else do you suppose I could be here?"

"You are jesting!" cried he, still incredulous. "You . . . you . . . a concierge! Does no one know you? Then you are poor—in want! Madame, Madame! . . ."

Valentine lifted a hand. "Please, Monsieur de Brencourt, do not agitate yourself! I am not in want. There is no one left at Mirabel to recognise me—my portrait had a pike put through it. I came of my own free will, and I am not unhappy here."

At this, as if it were the most stunning news of all, he did, perhaps unconsciously, subside into a chair, and, leaning his elbows on the table, took his head between his hands.

"Tell me what happened?" he said after a moment. And Mme de Trélan told him, shortly, the history of those seven years.

"Everybody thinks that I was killed," she finished.

"I thought so," said he without moving. "I thought so. . . . God pity me, I have carried that picture of your death about with me all these years. Oh, why did you not let me into the secret?"

She looked at him with a sort of maternal regret, a kinder look indeed, had he but met it, than he had ever won from her during all the period of his fruitless passion. "In the beginning I could tell no one, lest I should endanger the Tessiers. I disappeared, Comte, without exactly intending it. In the end I was glad to disappear. No one but Mme Tessier knows to this hour of my identity; I do not mean anyone to know. Believe me, I have not been unhappy with these good friends of mine. After being twice so near death, to see the sky and the green leaves in the spring, to know affection, as I have known it, and faithfulness. . . . But I am sorry if I have caused you so long a pain. . . . I had no news of you—for all I knew you had gone the same road."

"I nearly did—in another way," said the Comte briefly, raising his head. He drew a deep breath and gazed at her anew. "Do you know, Duchesse, that this is like—No, I cannot yet grasp that this is you, Valentine de Trélan, not only alive, but in this mean room, this bourgeois dress——"

She interrupted him with a warning. "Comte, this mean room of mine is not too safe a shelter for you! And how did you get into Mirabel?"

Plainly this subject had ceased to interest him for the moment, yet he answered that it were better for her not to know, adding, "But you do not ask me why you found me where you did?"

"No," said Valentine composedly. "I know why you broke in. You are come, are you not, on behalf of the Marquis de Kersaint, to secure the treasure supposed to have been hidden in the château during the time of the Fronde?"

Again M. de Brencourt stared at her. "Are you a witch, Madame, or has some Royalist agent——"

"Neither," said she smiling. "It is no mystery how I know. You have been preceded in your quest here, Monsieur de Brencourt. Let me tell you of the doings of a very rash young man."

And astonished, annoyed, but half envious in the end (for had she not nursed the boy for four days) the Comte de Brencourt listened. But Valentine had to hear some very trenchant comments on her protégé's insane proceedings—so her hearer characterised them.

"And where is the treasure really supposed to be?" she asked.

"As far as can be made out," said her guest, "behind the great hearth, under that curious sort of gallery, in the room where you found me.—Duchesse, I should perhaps ask your permission for my work there; indeed, should I find anything, what right have I to take it?"

"The right of conquest," answered Valentine. "But, as for my permission, if I thought that withholding it would keep you from going on with your search, I believe I would withhold it. You risk your life, Monsieur de Brencourt—or at least your liberty. Is it worth it?"

His look said as plainly as speech, "So you do care a little for my life—even for my liberty," but what he replied was, "The King's cause in Finistère is in desperate need of money."

"And your leader is determined to secure it," finished Valentine. She went on, "Who is this Marquis de Kersaint who . . . who sent you?" It was not the way in which she had meant to end the sentence.

Her question had rung in the Comte de Brencourt's own head pretty often of late. If he could have answered it . . .

"M. de Kersaint, Madame, as his ardent admirer, young de Céligny, will probably have told you, is the émigré who

commanded that forlorn hope of an Austrian column at Rivoli. He had been in Imperial service, I believe, for some years, but left it at Campoformio. Monseigneur le Comte d'Artois and his council offered him the post of organising Finistère, where he will, if all goes well, be the general commanding for the King this summer. I was assigned to him as his second-in-command and came over to Brittany with him in January. I know no more of his personal history than that—except that all his family, so I understand, perished in the massacres."

There was a little pause, and Valentine, with an effort, said, "I hear that in addition he calls himself a kinsman of . . . my husband's."

The Comte made her a little bow. "He does claim that honour."

The blood mounted to Mme de Trélan's cheek, but she took no notice of his tone, somewhat at variance with the phrase he used.

"I do not remember ever having heard his name."

M. de Brencourt was silent.

"But," she went on, "as his kinship is . . . quite possible . . . I shall ask you, Monsieur de Brencourt, to do me a favour."

"A favour! You have only to ask, Duchesse." But he bit his lip; for he feared what the request might be.

"There is," said Valentine, looking down, "a certain family matter on which I should be glad of information. It is possible that M. de Kersaint can supply this. I will, therefore, write him a letter, and ask you to be good enough to convey it to him when you return, Comte. Will you do this for me?"

"Any least service that I can render you, Madame——" said the Comte, but rather formally this time. His brain was still dazed with shock, but it was beginning to wake to other activities, and he suddenly saw with immense distaste a picture of himself delivering a letter from this woman, loved and mourned and now given back to life, into the hand of the man who wore the crest of the house of Trélan, who knew Mirabel so well, who had been so agitated at the mention of her death. . . .

"But do not, Duchesse," he continued hastily, "do not give me the letter till I have finished or all but finished my quest, for, should I have the mischance to be taken with it on me, you will involve yourself—involve us all," he added, guessing that any threat of danger to herself alone would probably go unregarded.

Valentine bent her head. "Yes, I understand. And I thank you, Comte. How long will your investigations take you, do you think?"

"It is the getting the gold away that will be the difficulty," replied the adventurer. "When I have satisfactorily located it I shall concert measures with an agent in Paris. See, Madame, here is a copy of the original plan. But I fear it will not mean much to you, for steps have been taken to render it unintelligible to anybody else."

He spoke truth, for of the scrawl now under her eyes Valentine could make nothing. Yet she kept her gaze long on it, making up her mind to do a thing she shrank from, with this man of all others, and that was, to bring her husband's name into the conversation once more. For the Comte had been with this "kinsman"; he might even conceivably have heard something himself.

"Did I understand," she began, her head still bent over the plan, "that M. de Kersaint communicated with my . . . with the Duc de Trélan before undertaking this search? M. de Céligny said something about such a project."

"No," replied M. de Brencourt sharply. "No, there is nothing of M. de Trélan in this. M. de Kersaint soon abandoned that idea. He had to dispense with his kinsman's authorisation."

"He could not, perhaps, get into touch with the Duc?" suggested Valentine faintly. Oh, how she hated this! Yet he might hold some clue.

"No," said the Comte again. "He judged it to be impracticable, after all."

"The Duc is no longer in England, perhaps?" pursued Valentine, in torture at having to show him that she herself did not know.

"No, Madame, not in England, nor——"

He stopped abruptly. As a man who is fording a river may come unexpectedly on a deep and eddying current that threatens his balance, so did Artus de Brencourt find himself losing foothold in the wholly unlooked for temptation which suddenly assailed him. Could it be blamed, the lie which should rid this beloved lady of the ghost of that worthless husband who had left her to this, the husband who in effect had been dead to her for years—and who probably really was dead by this time? For those suspicions as to de Kersaint's identity were absurd. . . .

And though it was unpremeditated, nothing could have served him better than his hesitation. The Duchesse's eyes were on him.

"Do not be afraid to speak, Monsieur de Brencourt," she said, slowly turning ashy pale. "If you mean that the Duc is dead—tell me so!"

How could he resist the statement, put into his very mouth like that? Once again those arguments flashed past him: nothing had been heard of de Trélan for years, the Marquis had *not* communicated with him—and as for those surmises about de Kersaint himself, which till this moment he had done nothing but encourage, he mentally stamped on them.

Then, taking a long breath, he let himself be sucked down, dizzy but open-eyed, into the torrent.

"Madame . . . I regret to be so fatal a messenger," was all he said, and bent his head.

At least he would not look at her to see how his arrow had sped. He heard her catch her breath, heard her rise from her place opposite him at the table and go away. Glancing up, after a moment, he saw her on the edge of the circle of lamplight, leaning against the high shuttered window, her hands over her face.

Now, after the stroke he had dealt her, it were the part of a gentleman to leave her. Even though her husband were nothing to her now, there was shock in the news. De Brencourt was very conscious of it, but the circumstances were exceptional, for he stood in peril of never seeing her again. And now, perhaps, after these wasted, unhappy years she would listen to him.

He got up and went towards her, but something in her attitude or in his own soul restrained him from speaking to her just then. He paused, stood looking desperately at her stricken figure for a moment, then, going back to his former place at the table, buried his face in his arms.

After a little he heard her voice say, falteringly, from where she was:

"Do you know any details, Monsieur le Comte—any place . . . when it was?"

He raised his head but did not look at her. "No," he said slowly, gripping his hands together before him on the table. "M. de Kersaint said no more than this, that it was useless to write to the Duc de Trélan, because he had just heard that he was dead—had been dead . . . some time."

When, at the repetition of that word "dead" he heard her catch her breath again, he felt as though he were bludgeoning her. But no—it was only a surgical operation . . . and better so for her. The man he was murdering was dead already. And it was too late to go back now.

"I do not know how M. de Kersaint was aware of this," he went on. "He keeps his own counsel always. But that is what he said, Madame. I . . . I . . . ." He tried to add some formal words of sympathy, but that falsehood would not come, and he remained staring before him.

"But I must know more!" said the Duchesse to herself in a quick, breathless voice. "He will know, this M. de Kersaint, this kinsman. Oh, I must write to him at once—before you go, even, Comte!" She put her hand to her head. "Where—how shall I address the letter?"

He saw that he must give a direction that would never find its destination. How unexpectedly dark and tortuous it was beginning to be, this path! Suddenly realising that he was seated while she was standing he got up, and for the first time since the utterance of his lie, looked her in the face for a second. But he could not bear the sight, and it was with downcast gaze that he responded,

"It will be better for me to take the letter myself, Madame."

"But I cannot wait . . ." she answered faintly, so faintly that he saw she was on the point of swooning. He sprang round the table to her, and catching her in his arms held her a second or two. The scarf had fallen from her hair, and her head, grey and golden, rested against his shoulder. Her eyes were shut, but he did not think she had quite lost consciousness, or the kiss, reverent as it was, which he put on that pathetic hair might have found another goal, for his heart was beating furiously. Then he lowered her into a chair, looked round for water, and, seeing a pitcher and a cup, poured some out with shaking hands and held it to her lips.

He was right; the Duchesse had not lost consciousness entirely. She drank some water, contrived to thank him, and put her head back against the chair.

"Are you better? Are you better?" he got out. ("Brute, brute, brute!" he said to himself. But he was not repentant.)

"You were right to tell me . . . I asked you," said she almost inaudibly. A little colour was creeping back to her face.

He waited a moment, gave her the cup again, gently took one hand when she had finished, and gently rubbed it. "And now that I have told you—Valentine, my only love, I have been faithful to your memory all these years—now that I have told you, you will let me take you away from this dreadful place, this intolerable existence, for ever. Valentine . . . Valentine . . ."

He was at her feet now, clutching at the hand he had been chafing, breathless, almost sobbing in the extremity of his pleading:

"Valentine, I implore you! It breaks my heart to see you here! Come with me; be my wife! let us take what remains to us in this sorry world! And if I speak so soon, when my hand has just dealt you this blow, it is because the time is so short, as you know. Indeed, I would not press you for an answer now, even after all these years, but that we are in the midst of perils. Say you forgive my importunity—and say you will come with me!"

She gently withdrew her hand.

"Comte," she said with an effort, "I . . . I thank you, but it could not be. I am an old woman now . . . I thank you, I thank you indeed for your faithfulness, but I could not."

"At least then, let me take you away as a brother might! You cannot remain here—it is impossible to leave you to this!"

“You will have enough to do,” said she, with a tremor of the lips, “to get your gold away without encumbering yourself . . . with a sister.”

“Curse the gold!” answered the Comte de Brencourt. “No, after all, it brought me here.”

He had got to his feet and stood looking down at her, his eyes kindling. Then he made a great effort over himself, and, stooping, took her hand and kissed it as he might have done amid the gaieties where first he met her.

“To-morrow night I will come again for an answer, Duchesse. I will leave you now; I have given you, I know, a very great shock. And I regret . . .” Again the words stuck. “You must forgive me . . . And, lest you should be anxious, I will not return to the sallette to-night. Indeed, I think it must be getting near dawn.”

“I have given you my answer, Monsieur de Brencourt,” repeated Valentine. There were black rings under her eyes. “Believe me, I do appreciate your devotion. If I could accept, I would.”

“I cannot take that answer,” said Artus de Brencourt gravely. “But I will take an assurance that when you have duly mourned the man to whom you have been so nobly faithful . . . that then, even if I have to wait a year, two years——”

“I can give you no hope,” she said once more.

“You do not love me, Madame, that I have always known. But all I ask is the right to be spent in your service.”

“I had rather, Comte, that you were spent in a worthier.”

He made a gesture. “There exists no worthier,” he said with quiet conviction, and bowing, went towards the door.

But at the door he paused. “One thing more, Duchesse. Since I would sooner die a thousand deaths than implicate you in this attempt of M. de Kersaint’s, I wish to say that should any mischance happen to me within these walls, you may be well assured that I shall give no sign of ever having seen you before. And you, Duchesse—for your own sake, not for mine—will do the same by me, will you not? Promise me that!”

Half by gesture, for speech was getting beyond her, she promised.

“I have the honour to take leave of you,” said the Comte de Brencourt, and he went out.

There was night in Mirabel—cold night and loneliness.

CHAPTER XI

CHECK TO THE KNIGHT

It is doubtful if the Comte de Brencourt realised how his false tidings about her husband would sweep out of Mme de Trélan's head almost all thought of himself, his proximity and his enterprise; and quite certain that he would not have been pleased had he known where she spent the greater part of the following morning. For she had deliberately gone up to a part of the château which she had not yet entered, a part shut to visitors—the Duc's private apartments.

Stripped, dusty, neglected, they were yet the rooms which Gaston had inhabited, and she wandered there too miserable, too self-reproachful even for weeping. *Mort!* the word with its hollow vowel seemed to go echoing through the emptiness that had once been so different. No chance now of reconciliation; no chance of that ultimate meeting somewhere, somehow, to the hope of which, in spite of herself, she knew at last that she had been desperately clinging—which had even, perhaps unknown to her, been the determining factor in her acceptance of the post at Mirabel. Whatever unsubstantial edifice she had been rearing was all in ruins now, and neither in pride and resentment, nor in the love that forgives everything, could they meet again on earth.

Now she knew the truth: she had always loved him, she always would. And since, in its own surroundings, there was not a single possession of his remaining, she went to the Galerie de Psyché, and, under the paintings of that wife of fable who also lost her mate, she knelt down by Gaston's beautiful escritoire, and bowing her head upon it, kissed the place on the tortoiseshell where his hand had used to rest. He was dead—so what did it matter that he had long ceased to love her? He was dead; he was hers now; she could love for both.

It was neither a cleaning nor a visiting day, and Valentine could not be too thankful that, with these tidings fresh upon her heart, she would not be obliged to act just yet the intolerable part she had so lightly taken up. But, to her utter dismay, she heard, about two o'clock in the afternoon, voices on the steps leading down to her room, and then the sound of the entrance door opening, which showed that the arrivals must include her master Camain, who now used the key he had had, it appeared, all the time. And when Valentine went out unwillingly into the passage she found him in the midst of a whole cortège of visitors, mostly feminine. Hanging on to his arm was a pretty, plump woman of about thirty-five, whom she recognised at once from the frequent prints of her in Paris. It was Rose Dufour, the actress of the Ambigu-Comique.

A violent gust of repulsion went through the Duchesse de Trélan. True, she had never been able to believe that her husband had really admired Mlle Dufour, but nine or ten years ago rumour had certainly linked their names for a space, and to see her in person to-day, of all days . . .

"Ha, here is our good friend, Mme Vidal!" said Camain, advancing. "Rose, if you wish to leave your wrap in her care——" And without waiting for permission he removed from the nymph's very scantily attired shoulders a handsome pelisse of violet satin edged with ermine.

"Good God, Camain, do you want me to die of cold in your old tomb of a château!" exclaimed she, snatching at it.

"Well, it is true that you will not be suffocated without it. You might almost as well have nothing on," observed her admirer frankly, looking at her transparent white muslin gown of classic cut, worn slightly damp, according to the insane fashion of the day, to make it cling. Even Mlle Dufour's arms were bare to the shoulder, for the actress was not of those who had to endure the accusation launched at the wearers of sleeves, that they feared to show those members. And her mythological garb, slit for a considerable distance up the side, revealed the golden fastenings of the buskin clambering half-way up her leg, where a gilded acorn clasped them. For that reason, presumably, she was not wearing, like one of her companions, a jewelled thong around her ankle. But upon her fair coiffure—probably a wig, for which the rage was extreme—rose a confection of lilac crêpe, adorned with two rows of pearls and surmounted by a rose and a pansy.

Valentine had turned her back, pretending to be busy. For nothing on earth would she touch any of that creature's belongings! However, the dispute about the pelisse resolved itself into the lady's decreeing that her swain should carry it over his arm, lest she should wish to resume it, and presently the whole party, laughing and talking, swept up the stairway to the ground floor. Mme de Trélan, conscious of jangled nerves, would fain have stayed behind, but Camain insisted on her accompanying them, as was indeed her duty. He did not present her to his mistress, but his affability stopped short only of that mark of distinction.

In the great Salle Verte, for which they presently made, he acted showman, while many remarks were passed on its size and decorations, and surmises made as to what scenes ("orgies," one of the male members of the party termed them) had occurred in it.

"And there is an inner room, somewhat curious," said the Deputy. "It was designed, I believe, to be a sort of retreat for the prince—since the château, as I daresay you know, was originally built for King François I. It is worth looking at, Mesdames." So the company obediently followed him along the Salle Verte.

Valentine was conscious of a violent wish that they should not enter the sallette. Till this moment she had been too much absorbed in the thought of her dead husband to give much consideration to the Comte de Brencourt and his

doings. Now, although she knew that he had not attacked the masonry, and although he would surely not be so rash as to attempt anything in daylight, she had a premonition of disaster. But Camain waved his hand towards the door, and there was nothing for it but to open it.

However, to Mme de Trélan's great relief—for she had somehow, against her better sense, expected to see de Brencourt standing where she had found him last night—the sallette was empty. And the company were called on by the Deputy to admire the *cheminée royale*, with its carving of Apollo and Daphne, and its nymph and pipe-playing satyr on either side, but some of the ladies, unversed in mythological lore, despite their present attire, were intrigued by the main subject, and among these was the Citoyenne Dufour.

"What on earth is happening to that woman, Camain?" she demanded. "Her arms are sprouting at the ends. And who is the man?"

"That, ma belle," responded her admirer, "is the nymph Daphne, turning into a laurel to escape the attentions of the god Apollo—a pretty prudery not likely, I fancy, to find many imitators in these days, eh, ladies?"

Violent protests from the ladies of the party.

"Oh, oh, Citizen Deputy, you have left some fleur-de-lys on the wall!" observed one of them. "Is that to be on the safe side—in case a Bourbon should return?"

"Fleur-de-lys? Nonsense!" returned M. Camain, putting up his spy-glass to look at the poor scorched remnant of tapestry hanging there. "Those things you see round that bit of border are . . . humming-birds, heraldic humming-birds!"

Much laughter greeted this sally. "And what is this queer long beast over the hearth?" demanded another voice.

"With a crown on its head, too! Oh fie!"

"It is not, at any rate," said one of the two youngish men of the party, in the extraordinary lisp cultivated by the would-be fashionable, "the strange fowl to whose nest some one has set fire just as she was going to lay, which we saw in the Salle Verte!"

So it went on, the flow of humour; and after visiting most of the apartments on the first floor, where M. Camain tripped badly as an expositor of the story of Psyche, and where Valentine's own apartments, though arousing much interest, were voted horribly old-fashioned in decoration, they came to the second, to the door of the locked gallery with the china and portraits. Mme de Trélan had hoped that she might have been spared that—for how should she look upon that portrait in primrose satin to-day?—and sick at heart as never before, she had contrived to trail behind. She heard Camain's voice explaining what was in the room while he waited for her to unlock the door. Then she realised that the key, being a special one, was not on the concierge's bunch, and that she had in consequence forgotten to bring it with her. She came forward and said so. "But I will go and fetch it instantly, Monsieur le Député."

"Do, pray,—though I regret to put you to the trouble," said her employer. "Meanwhile, ladies, come out on to this balcony, and you will see——"

Valentine hastened down the nearest stairs. Better to get it over as soon as possible, the visit to that room, for it had to be gone through with, and she had no one but herself to thank for that fact.

She had come down a minor staircase which deposited her at some distance from her own quarters, and having arrived on the basement floor she began to run, for she was still as light-footed as a girl, and she had a constitutional dislike, for all her upbringing, to keeping people waiting. And thus, round a corner, she almost collided with a man hastening in the opposite direction. A second of stupefaction, and she saw that it was the Comte de Brencourt.

"What!" she stammered out. "M. le Comte—what madness! Camain is here himself!"

"I know!" returned he rather breathlessly. "They are after me—never mind what happened—a folly of my own. I am trying to get as far away from your rooms as possible."

"But for God's sake go back there!" said the Duchesse, seizing hold of his arm, and all but pushing him. "Go to my room—you will be safe there. They will not go in!"

"Never!" he exclaimed. "The last thing I should do—compromise you in this affair!" And breaking away from her he disappeared without another word, and was out of sight or hearing before she could even think of some spot in which he could hide. And since her quick wit told her that any delay in returning with the key might lead to Camain himself descending to investigate, she ran on to her little parlour, snatched it up and set off again with all haste. Terrible though it was to leave the Comte to his fate, or at least to his own devices—for she heard no sounds of pursuit yet—it was out of her power to help him now.

From what she caught, as she returned to the little group of persons on the second floor, it seemed that Camain had been singing her praises in her absence.

"I am afraid that you have hurried, Madame Vidal," he said in a tone of concern as he took the key from her. She was indeed very obviously out of breath. "You should not have done so. These ladies seized the opportunity of taking a breath of air on the balcony, and having a peep from there at the park, which they tell me I ought to keep in better order."

"Indeed, Monsieur le Député," put in one of the critics in an affected voice, "you ought to be scolded! It seems, as

far as one can judge from up here, to be in the state of the tangled wood which surrounded the castle of the Sleeping Beauty." She pulled her gauze scarf about her with a still more affected air, acquired with a good deal of pains above her husband's shop, and the five blue feathers in her turban quivered.

"Now that remark, Madame Constant," said the Deputy, stooping and fitting the key into the lock, "gives me an opening, does it not, for a pretty speech about the Sleeping Beauty herself? However, Mme Vidal doesn't like pretty speeches, so I won't make it." He opened the door, invited the ladies to enter, and after casting upon Valentine a glance which could only be described as ogling, followed the bevy, who had already fluttered in with exclamations—two of them also casting glances of another nature upon the concierge as they passed.

Mme de Trélan, every sense on the alert, remained outside. Dared she run down the stairs again, and could she do any good if she did? She had not long to hesitate, for in an instant Camain's voice was heard summoning her within, and she obeyed, anxiety as to what was going forward downstairs swallowing for the moment every other feeling.

"You might show these gentlemen the pictures, Madame Vidal," said her master, looking up from his favourite Sèvres. And as the three men of the party attached themselves to her, the Duchesse began to move slowly along the line of Trélans, starting as far as possible from her husband's portrait. She heard, before beginning her own unwilling exposition, Camain saying, "You see this plate, ladies; I believe it was one of a service painted for the late Duchesse on her marriage." And she guessed to what he was directing the attention of those fair and envious vulgarians, to the plate of green Sèvres with the alternate medallions of cherubs on clouds, baskets of flowers, and green wreaths, round the rim whose extreme edge was of dark blue hatched with gold.

"That must be the poor woman's monogram in the middle, then," said one of them, and Valentine knew that she was looking at the gold T in the centre, intertwined with a V of roses and forget-me-nots, and surmounted by a coronet. "T for Trélan, of course—I wonder what the V stood for?"

"I don't know," said Camain. "Victoire or Victorine, I expect. Do you know, Mademoiselle Dufour?"

"Why on earth should I?" asked Rose Dufour indifferently. "Let me look at it, Georges—I'll take it in my own hands, thanks . . . Great God, how clumsy you are!" For the sound of a smash told that the late Duchesse de Trélan's plate now existed only in fragments.

Through the ensuing recriminations between the Deputy and his *innamorata*, and the expressions of concern from everybody else in the room, including her own three prospective picture-gazers, Valentine's ears were strained to catch other sounds. And as she still did not hear them she began to entertain a faint hope. The château was so large that a man might lead his pursuers a good dance and elude them in the end. Unfortunately M. de Brencourt was not familiar with its topography.

"If you say you dropped it because you were carrying my pelisse I'll take the pelisse myself!" Mlle Dufour's voice emerged again, sounding less good-humoured than usual. "No, I'm not going to carry it on my arm—Heaven forbid. You can put it on my shoulders, only don't drop it also—Bon Dieu, what's that?"

For a loud knock had come at the door, which stood ajar—a knock that sounded to Valentine like the summons of Fate. Moving a trifle, she was able to see the soldier outside, whose approaching footfalls the recent scene had drowned. A sensitive lady gave a little scream.

"Who's there?" asked Camain, the violet satin held above Mlle Dufour's bare shoulders. "Excuse me, ma mie!" He dropped the cloak upon its destination without much ceremony, and strode to the door, where the National Guard was seen to salute and to say something in a low voice.

"Tut, tut!" said the Deputy. "Well, I suppose I had better come down and ask him a few questions."

"What is it, Georges?" asked the Dufour, who had glided to the door after him, the ermine slipping half off her shoulders.

"The guard have captured a man who has just made an entrance into the building, and they would like me to have a look at him before marching him off."

"How interesting!" cried the actress. "What a coup de théâtre! Do not go down to him, Georges! Let them bring him up here! This might have been arranged for us. What was he doing?"

Nobody could answer that question but Valentine, and she only in part. Camain hesitated a moment, but only a moment. "Very well," he said. "Tell them to bring him up here," he added to the National Guard.

A hot flame of indignation ran over the Duchesse. The Comte de Brencourt, a gentleman, was then to be made a show for the passing curiosity of a courtesan and her friends! But what had he been about, in daylight too? The same question no doubt was exercising the Deputy, for he turned round, his look seeking her out; and, being half a head taller than any one else in the room, he easily found her.

"Here is a pretty find to be made on your domain, Madame Vidal!" he said. The voice sounded jocular, but she was not sure of the genuineness of that jocularity. She was saved the necessity of a reply by a remark from one of the ladies, winged by a malicious side-glance at her, the shabby, middle-aged caretaker; "Perhaps it is the Prince come after the Sleeping Beauty!"

Half ashamed, the men sniggered too. Valentine's anger, lit in spite of her contempt, served usefully to steady her.

“It is more likely, Monsieur le Député,” she said coldly, “that he has come after something in this room—there are valuables here, are there not?”

“At the moment, most certainly!” cut in one of the youngish men, bowing with a fatuous air in the direction of Rose and the others.

“But in the daytime!” said Camain musingly. His eyes strayed to the jasper cup. “I’ll have the room made surer.”

“And I shall beg leave to give up the key,” said Valentine, her head high. Anything to foster the idea of ordinary theft.

“I shall not ask you——” Camain was beginning, when the tramp of feet in the corridor interrupted him. “Ah, here is our adventurer. Yes, bring him in, men.”

If the Comte de Brencourt felt the indignity of his position, he did not show it. His chief preoccupation, Valentine could not but feel, was to avoid looking at her. He had not been secured without a struggle, that was evident, for there was a cut on his forehead, and his neckcloth was wrenched half off. His arms were bound to his sides by a pipe-clayed cross-belt. Valentine could not keep her eyes off him, but the Comte himself looked nowhere but at Camain. And Camain, advancing a little, studied him for a moment, his hands behind his back, his rather prominent blue eyes suddenly grown searching.

“Your report, corporal?” he said abruptly, still running his gaze over the captive.

The National Guard related a story to which no one in the room listened more fixedly than the concierge of Mirabel: how the sentry—apparently neither Grégoire nor Jacques—happening to look round at the château not very long after the entry of the Deputy and his party, had seen a man getting in at one of the ground-floor windows, how he had summoned the guard and they, selecting the same window, as the quickest mode of entrance, had at last run the intruder to earth on the basement floor and, after a lively resistance, captured him.

“Very smart work, corporal,” said the Deputy. “But that window—what window was it?”

“We found ourselves when we got in, Citizen Deputy, in that room they call the ‘sallette.’ ”

“The sallette!” echoed Camain in surprise, and Valentine suppressed an exclamation. How nearly right her presentiments had been, then! But to enter by the window, in broad daylight, in view of the sentry; it sounded crazy!

“And what had he in his pockets?” went on the Deputy.

“These small tools, Citizen Deputy, a handkerchief, and a case with assignats; we have not counted them yet.”

(He must have had time to get rid of the plan, then.)

“Well, my fine fellow, and what have you to say for yourself?” The words were careless, but the tone was so different from anything which Mme de Trélan had yet heard him use, that, for the first time, she realised how Georges Camain might have been a Terrorist.

To this the prisoner was understood to mutter, in a strong patois, that he hoped the citizen would not be too severe on a poor man, that the times were bitter hard—no work, no food—and he had thought he might light on something or other in Mirabel that nobody would miss . . .

His dishevelled appearance, the blood trickling down one cheek, and a certain amount of dirt that M. de Brencourt had somehow accumulated, went really a good way to obliterate the marks of race. Perhaps he would succeed in carrying it off that he was a common thief. The Deputy seemed inclined to believe it.

“I rather think, my man,” he said, with a smile which had in it nothing of amiable, “that you have known the inside of a gaol already, from the look of you. However, we shall hear all about that later. You had better take him to the guard-house for the present,” he remarked to the corporal, “and make arrangements for having him conveyed to Paris.”

By the end of this little speech Valentine had realised where the captive’s eyes, which had already removed themselves from his inquisitor’s, were now fixed—on the portrait of her husband as a young man which faced him all the while.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROOK'S MOVE: CHECK TO THE ROOK

(1)

If, owing to the slackness of the once fire-eating Grégoire and his superior, Roland's apparition in the gardens of Mirabel had produced but little stir in official quarters, it was not so with the actual capture of a delinquent made within the château, and practically under the eyes of the Deputy himself. For two days Mirabel was turned inside out, and Camain, the outwardly easy-going, piqued by this daring intrusion, superintended much of the search in person. What the soldiers and police agents expected to find appeared doubtful; and indeed there was actually little for them to discover, since, already aware of the strangely open method of ingress selected by the invader, they paid no attention to the broken shutter at the back of Mirabel which had originally admitted him. The one genuine discovery which they made intrigued them a good deal—the lantern lying in the colonnade not far from the windows of the sallette—for why should a man want a lantern in the daytime?

It puzzled Valentine also when she came to hear of it; but, after thought, she came to the conclusion that the lantern was, for her at least, the key to the whole mystery of the Comte's arrest—as indeed it was. She recalled that he had had a lantern when she found him in the sallette that evening; on searching her memory was fairly sure that he had not brought it with him to her room, and supposed that next morning, suddenly remembering having left it where its presence, if discovered, might prove very awkward for him—or for her—he had gone, at a most unfortunate moment, to retrieve it, had nearly been trapped in the sallette by the advent of Camain and his party, and in desperation had climbed with it through the window, trusting to the colonnading outside to hide him. But on returning, after an interval, by the same way, he had had the ill-luck to be seen. For all she knew, that had been the road by which he had originally entered Mirabel.

It was not until a day or two had elapsed that Valentine realised how fortunate for her was the fact that M. de Brencourt had been found breaking in, apparently for the first time, during the presence of visitors. It occurred to no one that it was not his first invasion, and had there been complicity on the part of the concierge it was plain that he would never have chosen such a time. That M. Camain himself entertained no suspicions of her was proved by the frankness with which, coming daily during this period of turmoil, he kept his subordinate posted up in the course of events.

"The authorities can make nothing of the man," he admitted in her little room, on the third morning. "They cannot even discover his name. But, chiefly because he turned out to have too large a sum of money on him for a common malefactor, he has been clapped into the Temple, on the chance of his being a political offender."

"Political!" ejaculated Valentine. "What political object could be served by breaking in here!"

"I confess I cannot imagine," responded the administrator. "But the Royalists are up to all sorts of games. If he had been better-looking, now, one might have put forward a theory that he was the Duc de Trélan himself, come back to have a peep at the place . . . as you once suggested to me that he might, Madame Vidal!" He laughed, as at something equally preposterous and amusing, but all the colour went from Valentine's face. That surmise, made in utter and desperate jest as it had been, could never know fulfilment now!

"But," went on the Deputy, unobservant, "I am relieved to find that there is no question of the Minister of Police wanting to confront you with this man, as I was afraid, at one point, that there might be. It is possible, however, that he may require some sworn statement of conditions here, a deposition, in short, such as one makes before a notary. And I also should be glad of it for the sake of my reputation, for though this man was fortunately seen and captured at once, you will imagine, Madame, that I am not pleased to learn about that other marauder who escaped from the garden a while ago, though that has been kept very quiet—too quiet, in fact. Will you believe, Madame Vidal, that I was only a few days ago informed of that episode?"

Valentine stared at him, disconcerted. "But I thought you knew of that, Monsieur le Député!"

"Naturally. I ought to have known of it. Well, there is a more zealous sergeant at the poste de garde now, and there will henceforth be a sentry on duty here all night. So I hope that your peace will not be molested again. Now, Madame, if you will kindly give me writing materials. . . . Thank you. Be seated, pray. I shall ask you to give me an account of the early part of that day?"

"But there is nothing to give an account of," said the Duchesse. If he had asked for the preceding evening!

"So much the better," returned Camain, trying the nib of the quill on his finger-nail. "Still, you can tell me how the day was passed, from your rising in the morning; and what, if anything, you observed of unusual. I take it, of course, that you had not seen this man lurking about the place before?"

"No, of course not," lied Valentine gallantly. After all, it was not for herself. But she was glad she had not to meet his eye, as he glanced up for a second.

"I was sure of that," said he, beginning to write. "Now, although I am not a notary, we will observe the forms. . . . 'Je

soussignée. . . .' What is your baptismal name, Madame Vidal?"

Hastily Mme de Trélan put forward the least aristocratic sounding of her names. "Marie," she answered.

" 'Marie,' " repeated the scribe, in somewhat lingering tones. " 'Marie.' 'I, the undersigned, Marie Vidal.' Widow, of course?"

"Yes," said Valentine rather faintly, for the question stabbed her. The Deputy looked up, and she had an impression that he was going to ask her how long she had been a widow, and that she would be mesmerised into answering that she did not know, that it was just what she was seeking to know. . . . But he did not; he settled to business instead—and was very business-like too. Valentine had to account for every hour of that morning, and as she really had no right in the Duc's apartments she did not find it too easy. When it was finished, and she had signed, he thanked her, and looking at his watch left somewhat precipitately.

Valentine came back rather thoughtful from accompanying him to the door, which she always conceived it her duty to do. He was kind; she did not like deceiving him—though indeed she had no hand in this enterprise of the Comte de Brencourt's any more than in Roland de Céligny's. All she was doing was to hold her tongue about the Comte's identity, and to wish him well out of the Temple. His sudden capture, however, had profoundly affected her own affairs, for he could not now be the bearer of her intended letter to the Marquis de Kersaint, nor—since he had left her that night without giving her his leader's address—could she send it by any other means.

Unless, indeed, she thought, standing by the high barred window and looking out, she were to discover M. de Kersaint's whereabouts by communication with Roland de Céligny, if he were still with his cousins. No, to approach Roland might be very inauspicious for him just at this juncture; moreover, she must hope, for his own sake, that he had left Paris by now. She must wait a little; and, after all, the initial shock was over. Gaston was dead, and details of the how and when of his death could not help him to life again. She hoped he had not died in poverty. She could not bear that thought. . . .

Nor could she bear, just now, the consciousness that M. Georges Camain was beginning to look upon her with an eye more beaming than that of an employer. Even his consideration, for which she had been grateful, was coming to displease her, for surely it exceeded what was due to a concierge. Not being born to that estate she could not feel certain about this, but she did know that a demeanour in the Deputy which even as Mme Vidal she disliked, as the Duc de Trélan's widow she abhorred.

And she was troubled next day, when M. Camain appeared again, in a shirt of fine batiste fastened with a golden butterfly, bearing a bunch of roses in his hand. He laid them down on the table.

"I am happy to tell you, Madame Vidal, that the deposition was quite sufficient. You will not be molested in any way."

"Really, Citizen Deputy, I am most grateful to you," said the Duchesse—and meant it.

"You are more than welcome," returned her benefactor with a bow. "It is a pleasure to serve you in anything. Besides, I look upon you as a colleague in the preservation of Mirabel."

It was well said, if, again, an unusual sentiment. However, the look which followed its enunciation gave Valentine a sudden presentiment that his next words were going to be less well chosen, and she became acutely conscious of the red roses on the table. But at that very moment the door burst abruptly open, and Louise, with a bucket of water and a mop tied up in a cloth, clanged into the little room.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Madame Vidal, I thought you were upstairs, and I was going to wash the. . . . Oh, Monsieur le Député!" She was struck speechless.

"I will go," said Georges Camain at once. "No, remain, my good woman, and do your work." Her he did not address as colleague.

"Pray, Monsieur le Député——" began the Duchesse, for form's sake, though in reality she could have embraced that bucket-bearing form.

"No, no," said he quite good-humouredly. "I would not for the world interfere with your wise dispositions. Do not come to the door, I beg."

He disappeared, only just avoiding a second bucket which Louise had left outside in the passage, and Valentine turned away to hide a smile, but not because of the bucket, for that anyone should fall over such an object was not a form of humorous incident that appealed to her. Her mirth, however, was of a very fleeting nature, since the situation had elements which did not amuse her at all.

"Look what beautiful flowers M. le Député has brought, Madame!" said Louise, suddenly seeing them. "He doubtless brought them for you. A very affable gentleman, M. Camain!"

Mme de Trélan glanced at the roses, still lying on the table. Impossible to tell, since the bearer had been so hastily routed, whether they were intended for her or no. On the whole she feared they were. Then the idea of another destination occurred to her. The affable gentleman was probably on his way to Mlle Dufour.

"You can take them away with you when you go, Louise," she said, indifferently. "M. le Député must have

forgotten them. But it is a pity that they should be wasted."

"But surely Madame will keep them?"

"I dislike the scent of roses," was Madame's quite curt reply.

But Rose—*the* Rose—she had made up her mind about that ornament of the theatre. There could never have been anything between her and Gaston, fastidious as he had been to his finger-tips. Mlle Dufour had not enough mind even to have amused him. But there was such a thing as claiming for lover a man who had on one occasion, or perhaps two, paid a woman some slight, half careless attention, especially when that man's admiration was in itself a distinction. The Duchesse de Trélan had known it done in far higher circles than those in which Mlle Dufour moved. Something told her that in 1790 the actress had employed that useful method of self-advertisement, and who was there then—or ever—to gainsay its truth? To-day that man's wife, having seen the claimant, felt with every instinct that the claim was false. But she did not detest Rose much the less.

(2)

Camain did not come again for several days. The little sprite which dwelt in Mme de Trélan's brain, even in the cloud of sorrow and remorse, suggested that he was trying to find out and avoid a day when minor "colleagues" might come charging into her room. And luck served him, for he arrived one beautiful afternoon when she was quite alone. But he seemed in a very business-like mood, and while he apologised for interrupting her sewing, he told her the reason for his visit; he was thinking of having the garden put in better order, though, as he said, the ridiculous sum which the Directory placed at his disposal would not admit of much being done.

"But I know very little about gardens," he concluded. "Now, a woman's taste . . . Will you come out with me and give me the benefit of your advice, Madame Vidal?"

"But, Monsieur le Député," objected Valentine, "I am not a Lenôtre. It is gardening on a grand scale here—landscape gardening. I suppose, however, that you could begin by putting the Italian garden in the front a little in order. Shall I come out there with you?"

M. Camain shook his head. "I should prefer to do something to the wilderness at the back—for a wilderness it is fast becoming. You would be doing Mirabel a real service if you would come out there with me now."

Valentine had to acknowledge to herself that, assuming his sudden anxiety about the garden to be genuine, this was certainly true. And the state of the park had long afflicted her. Nevertheless she went unwillingly.

But the Deputy's business-like mood continued, and from the great terrace at the top the two took a general survey of the rioting vegetation. Nodding spires of foxgloves pierced it now, and the stately candles of the mulleins were lit, while round the rose-trees, turned once more to briars, the bindweed stretched her strangling arms, and trumpeted her victories from a thousand mouths. And arbour after arbour was nothing but a mantle of the white stars of the wild clematis.

Into this jungle the administrator and the concierge of Mirabel descended after a little, and pushed their way along the paths, discussing the pruning and lopping of laurel and arbor vitæ, and the possibility of re-shaping the yews that once had been ships or peacocks. But it seemed very hopeless.

"Indeed, I can hardly wonder that that marauder escaped the other day," commented M. Camain, standing at the top of a flight of steps not very far from the scene of the invader's mishap. "It would need an army to make any impression on this. I almost think that you are right, Madame Vidal, and that, with the meagre means at my disposal; I shall have at present to content myself with the front garden."

"There is only one saving clause," he remarked suddenly over his shoulder as he led the way back, "and that is, that to put order into this tangle would destroy its character of the Sleeping Beauty's enchanted forest, on which Mme Constant remarked so aptly the other day."

Valentine, annoyed, bit her lip and, answering nothing, followed him at a slackening pace. But M. Georges Camain, having arrived at a seat in the bosquet through which they were passing, turned round and waited for her.

"Shall we sit down a moment after our walk?" he suggested.

It was a curved stone seat which the honeysuckle had so invaded as to leave little room. But one end was still clear. On this the Duchesse unwillingly sat down, and her employer did the same.

"It only occurred to me the other day," he began in a conversational tone, looking at her profile, "that I might in some sort claim relationship with you, Madame Vidal."

"Indeed, Citizen Deputy! How is that?"

"Well, as I have the happiness to call Mme Tessier cousin, it appears to me that, since you are akin to her, I might have the even greater happiness of thinking of you as——"

"As your aunt, were you going to say, Citizen?" interrupted Mme de Trélan with, a gleam. "But I am afraid that I cannot aspire to that honour. It is only by marriage that I am related to Suzon."

"I fear you are mocking me, Madame," said Camain in a tone of relish. "You must be well aware that I do not conceive of you as my aunt." His hand was creeping towards her along the back of the seat, over the tangled

honeysuckle.

"I am nearly forty-five years old, Monsieur le Député," said Valentine in a very repressive voice. "Old enough to be a grandmother." She rose. "Now, if you will excuse me, I must be getting back to my work."

"But that is just what I do not wish you to do, Madame Vidal," interposed Camain, getting to his feet with even greater alacrity. "Oblige me by sitting down a moment, and by listening to what I have to say."

As his not inconsiderable bulk blocked the only egress from the seat there was nothing for it but to comply, and this, after a momentary hesitation, Mme de Trélan did.

"You must by this time," began Camain, clearing his throat, "have become aware, Madame, of my profound admiration for you."

"I know that you have shown me great consideration, Citizen," responded Valentine, "and I assure you that it has been appreciated."

"It would be impossible for me to do too much to show my regard for you," said the Deputy earnestly. "Your talents, Madame, your character, your gifts of heart and brain—you must forgive me if I point out (what you must surely know) that they are thrown away upon your present situation."

"Is that a kind way of intimating, Monsieur le Député, that you wish me to resign it?" enquired Valentine, immensely relieved at the goal towards which, after all, the conversation appeared to be making.

"You have hit the nail on the head," replied M. Camain with a peculiar smile. "I do wish you to resign this post, so unworthy of your sensibilities and your education. I wish to remove you, with your consent, to another, which I dare to flatter myself will be less unworthy of you."

Mme de Trélan looked at him mutely.

"All this, Madame," pursued the Deputy, waving his hand to include not only the garden but the château itself, "all this, over which you exercise so wise a regency, is but a dead kingdom. You are but the guardian of a cenotaph. But imagine yourself," he went on, warming to his trope, "imagine yourself ruling with a real authority where all is, on the contrary, alive, where every subject is your—I should say, every wish is your subject, every project laid at your feet for approval, every——"

But Valentine broke in rather ruthlessly by saying, "I cannot imagine to what kingdom you refer, Monsieur Camain."

"You do not divine?" said he, and the smile became more marked. "You must guess—'tis your adorable woman's modesty which dictates that reluctance! Madame . . . *Marie* . . . the kingdom which I invite you to enter—ah no, not to enter, for you are already enthroned there, but to sway absolutely—is at your feet this moment, is, in short, this heart!" finished M. Camain, transferring himself very neatly from the bench beside her to one bended knee, and clasping both hands to the neighbourhood of the organ he had named.

Valentine surveyed him there on the gravel with stupefaction and a spice of malicious amusement.

"Am I to understand, Monsieur le Député, that you are good enough to offer me the post recently occupied by Mlle Dufour?"

Her suitor reddened. "Good God, no, Madame! I must have expressed myself but ill if I gave you to suppose that! No, Mlle Dufour and I have parted. It is my hand, in all respect and honesty, of which I have the honour to ask your acceptance."

"In short," said the Duchesse, unable to resist, "vous allez vous ranger. Please get up, Citizen. I am very much honoured by your offer, but it is impossible for me to accept it."

Her wooer kept his countenance very well. Possibly he had expected this refusal, as a further manifestation of the modesty to which he had alluded. He did get up, and, dusting the traces of the greenish gravel off the knees of his small-clothes, stood before her, rather a fine figure of a man, who probably carried off better than most the ridiculous red toga *à l'antique* which the members of the Conseil des Anciens had to wear at their assemblies.

"I am too sudden, perhaps, Madame?" he enquired, his head on one side. "I recognise and bow to your superior delicacy. A flower should never be plucked in a hurry. And yet, the encouragement I have received——"

"Encouragement, Monsieur?" exclaimed the Duchesse. "Whence did you derive that?"

The Deputy made her a bow. "You have been—unintentionally, no doubt—kinder than you knew."

"Do you mean to say that I—*I*—gave you encouragement, Monsieur?" All the Duchesse de Trélan was in the astonishment of that emphasized pronoun.

"Not openly, Madame, I admit—but in a way you were unconscious of."

"Most certainly I was unconscious of it!" said Valentine, in a tone of the strongest indignation. "Your imagination, Monsieur le Député, runs away with you!"

"Madame, I only used my eyes," pleaded Camain, undeterred by her displeasure—seeming, indeed, rather to enjoy it. And he sat down again on the seat. "You would not, naturally, be aware of it, chère Madame. But cast your mind back a week—to the day of the arrest. It was on that day that I first received hope. . . . I see you do not believe me. Must I convince you then?"

"You cannot, Monsieur."

Camain bent nearer. “Do you challenge me? Ah, Madame Marie, but you will be angry with me! It was, then—you remember that day, Mlle Dufour was with me—it was the way you looked . . . in which I saw you looking . . . the hostile way, in short, in which you looked at poor Rose.”

“*Rose* . . . the way I looked . . . you think—is it possible that you imagine, Monsieur Camain, that I was jealous of your mistress?” A white and royal anger possessed the Duchesse, and she got up from the stone bench more like a queen than a concierge.

“I knew you would be angry,” said Camain plaintively, gazing up at her. “But as I live, I saw you looking at her once or twice in a manner which seemed to me to admit of only one explanation.”

Mme de Trélan gasped. She had no words before a supposition so monstrous. What had begun by resembling farce had turned to something else. Here, in her own garden, to be subjected to the insolent fatuity of this man of no breeding! And Rose Dufour, of all women. . . .

“It is impossible for me to remain at Mirabel to be insulted, Monsieur Camain,” she said very haughtily. “Will you kindly relieve me of my charge here, and replace me as soon as you can? I should prefer to leave to-morrow.”

M. Camain stooped and picked up his cameo-headed cane. With this, rising, he poked the ground for a few seconds.

“I am obliged by the terms of my appointment, Madame Vidal,” he said at the end of them, “to receive notice of resignation in writing.”

“Then you shall have it in writing at once,” returned she. “If you will kindly let me pass——”

He stood aside. “Send it by post, Madame, to-morrow, if you are still of the same mind. Though why my most respectful admiration should be construed——”

“That is enough, Monsieur,” said Mme de Trélan as she might have spoken to a disobedient servant, and walked straight past him out of the grove.

M. Camain, deputy for Maine-et-Loire, did not follow her. After a moment he reseated himself on the stone bench, and, crossing one blue and white striped leg over the other, rubbed his ankle thoughtfully. Then a sort of smile passed over his well-shaven face, he put a finger and thumb into a waistcoat pocket, and drew forth a little almanac, which he consulted. This done, he rose and sauntered towards the lower end of the park, to a certain little door in the outer wall which, to his knowledge, had not been used for years. It had, as he knew, bolts only on the inside, so the absence of a key need not deter him from leaving Mirabel by that way . . . unless indeed long disuse should have rusted those bolts in their sockets, or the ivy have bolted it in another fashion.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BISHOP'S MOVE

(1)

It was not until Valentine's letter of resignation had gone that she realised what, in the heat of her anger, she had done. She had shut herself out of Mirabel for ever. To-morrow would probably be the last day she should ever spend there. Was it really only a week ago that, fresh from the shock of the Comte's news, she had wondered how she could possibly have put herself into such a position? Well, she had still more indignant reason for wonder at herself to-day, yet—she had suddenly discovered that she did not want to quit Mirabel. But it was too late now.

Next afternoon a messenger brought her a letter addressed in Camain's large, sprawling hand. Out of it fell a spray of young ivy. Mme de Trélan looked at it distastefully—some sentimental afterthought, no doubt, of her bourgeois wooer's—and letting it lie on the table read his regrets at her decision to resign, his surprise at the resentment aroused by his "deeply respectful addresses"—and his reminder that by the terms of her appointment she had agreed to give thirty days' notice of resignation, and that she was not therefore legally free to leave Mirabel till the 27th of Thermidor next. But the rejected suitor pledged his word that, unless obliged, he would not enter the château again during her stay, so that she might feel at liberty from the menace of a devotion which was evidently distasteful. "And perhaps," the letter concluded, "in that period the rest of this torn ivy, which you will no doubt recognise, may have time to grow again over the little door near the Allée des Soupirs."

The letter dropped from Valentine's hand. Was it a threat—this about the door? Could he know anything about Roland, from some unsuspected source, or did he perceive no more than that the door had recently been used? But, as Roland must surely have quitted Paris by now, the sprig of ivy moved her not, and the most potent emotion roused by her employer's letter was probably the last he intended—relief. Through that forgotten thirty days' warning she had a respite; she need not leave Mirabel yet. She had never dreamed that she could be so deeply thankful.

For she would have fuller leisure now to think of Gaston, whose widow she was—whose widow she had been, perhaps, for long enough already, even though this Chouan leader had only recently learnt the fact of his death. Yes, she had known that all along. That was why Gaston had never answered her letters, never sought for her. It was not indifference, but a gaoler far more implacable who had held him captive; and the reflection that he had possibly been dead for years held a terrible kind of comfort in it.

She was Gaston de Trélan's widow, in Gaston's violated home. And it seemed to her that these twenty-nine days had been given her to go over their life together, and to pray for him. Afterwards, when she, too, had left that home for ever, she would take steps to communicate with the Marquis de Kersaint in the hopes of hearing more. So, before the empty tabernacle in the cold, half-pillaged chapel, where in the presence of such a brilliant company the Archbishop of Paris had made them one, she prayed for him every night and morning, at hours when no one was likely to summon her. Suzon was indisposed and could not come to see her. Camain had sworn not to come. And more than half the allotted respite slid by—too quickly.

Mme de Trélan had not mentioned her approaching departure to Louise and the rest of her minions. A faint hope began to stir in her, as time went on, that the Deputy would ask her to reconsider her decision. Her anger against him had measurably died down; it seemed to her now rather absurd that she had been so hot. The man knew no better; and, had not Rose been involved in his amazing "proof" she might even have seen the ludicrous side of it. But despite her conviction about her, nothing connected with Mlle Dufour could be to her amusing—only hateful. Yet, if M. Camain did ask her to stay on as concierge, how was she to regulate their intercourse in future?

So July went on, with reverses abroad and discontent at home, and Valentine saw now the use to which she would put the money, the price of Roland's safety, for when she was free she would find some priest who would say Masses for Gaston's soul, and she would herself go to her duties, as she had done now, regularly but surreptitiously, for years. For she felt on her own soul a deadly sin of pride; and if Gaston had contracted a sacrilegious marriage before he died, the fault was partly hers. What were those few letters which she had sent compared to the more active steps which she ought to have taken to find him—steps which, now that it was too late, she could not conceive why she had not taken?

And she longed so intensely for the comfort of the Mass that she thought she would have asked Suzon, had she not been indisposed, to take her place at Mirabel for a night, to allow her to attend in Paris one of the churches where, in a half clandestine fashion, it was celebrated. Then she would remember that in a couple of weeks she would be free to do this, since—Camain having given no further sign—Mirabel would shortly know her no more. Her desire changed its goal a little then, and became a longing that the chapel of Mirabel itself which had witnessed their union might know once more the offering of the holy mysteries, for Gaston's soul and for her grave shortcomings too. Alas, there appeared small chance of that.

(2)

“I see you have got a gardener, Madame Vidal,” observed Louise one morning as she came in. “He seems very busy out in the front there. An oldish man for all that work, though.”

She was right. Later on, when Valentine looked out, she did indeed descry an elderly man busy with what had been the flower beds in the Italian garden. Then she remembered that Camain, on that memorable day, had spoken of his intention of having the beds attended to. Still, one man could not accomplish very much in so absolute a desolation.

The gardener did not come near the château, nor did she take any notice of him till two days later. It happened to turn extremely cold for the beginning of August, and at midday, as she saw this industrious elderly person sitting eating on a barrow, she thought he might like to conclude his meal under the shelter of the colonnades, with the addition, perhaps, of a cup of coffee. She went up the steps, crossed to the bed by which he was sitting, and suggested it.

Without his hat, which the gardener removed as he rose on her approach, his face was seen to be round and comfortable. He seemed about fifty, hale and vigorous, with a twinkling eye. He thanked Mme de Trélan warmly, very warmly, for her kind thought, left his barrow, and betook himself up the great steps to the shelter of the colonnade, while she returned to her own quarters to make him some coffee.

By the time she brought it out to him he had finished his meal, and was standing in front of the boarded-up door looking at it. He turned round, took the cup from her with a little bow, and said,

“Madame, you do more in offering me this cup of coffee than you know. I am thirsty, it is true, but I am even more thirsty for talk with you.”

The Duchesse stared at him. He spoke with a slight accent, but his speech was educated.

“I have dug,” went on the gardener, sipping the coffee, “for three days in the garden, and I desire presently, with your permission, to dig in the château itself.”

“What, are you another of them?” cried Valentine involuntarily.

He smiled. “Even so, Madame. And since the arrest of M. de Brencourt has——”

“You know M. de Brencourt?”

“We are under the same orders.”

“Those of this Marquis de Kersaint?”

“Precisely,” said the gardener, and he now gulped down the coffee.

“But,” objected the Duchesse, puzzled, “how is it that you confide in me so readily? With M. de Brencourt”—“it was different,” she was going on to say, but stopped, realising that she was on the verge of an indiscretion.

“Because in the first place,” said the new treasure-seeker, “I went, on the receipt of certain information, to those old MM. de Céligny to whom you so cleverly restored their interesting young relative; and from them—since the boy has returned to his grandfather—I learnt all that Roland had told them of your devotion.”

“Roland has gone, then?” said she, relieved. “He was well again?”

“Very nearly. The wound was not serious.”

“And the second gentleman—he who was arrested, M. de Brencourt?”

“He is still imprisoned in the Temple, but soon to leave it, I hope. He has found a venial guard, and . . . one has agents in Paris, you know, Madame. It is from them that I have learnt the facts about him.”

“I hope that you may not follow him to the Temple, Monsieur,” said Valentine, rather troubled.

“I hope so too,” said the newcomer composedly. “But since I hold a certain position here, having—no matter how—procured the post of an accredited gardener, I shall set about matters quietly. I propose, therefore, to go on attending to my horticultural duties for a space before beginning my investigation.”

Mme de Trélan studied the little man a moment. He seemed an extremely unhurried plotter—either a very cool hand, or one who was inclined to take things too easily. It was impossible for her to judge. It suddenly came to her, however, that the means of communication with M. de Kersaint were restored. When she knew rather more about him she could ask this emissary to bear her letter.

“You want me to help you, Monsieur, I suppose?” she suggested. “But what if I have scruples—I am not sure that I have not? I did not help either of the others, you know.”

“I shall respect your scruples, Madame. Unless you carry them so far as to denounce me, I can do what is necessary without claiming your active assistance. All I shall ask is that you remark on it to no one if I transfer the scene of my labours, in a day or two, from the front garden to the park behind. And now, if you will excuse me,” he concluded, “I will return to my wheelbarrow.”

“Before you go, Monsieur, may I know your name?” asked Valentine. Then she caught herself up. “No, I think I know too many names. I would rather not hear it. It is better for your sake that I should know you only as the gardener of Mirabel.”

Now this abstention of the concierge’s suited M. Chassin admirably. Although he had never been at Mirabel (just as he had never seen its Duchess) it was as well that his name, undistinguished though it were, should not be whispered there. So he bowed a little and said, “As you please, Madame. But possibly you know it already from one of

the other gentlemen—from M. de Céligny, perhaps, if he talked to you much about M. de Kersaint, whose aumônier I have the honour to be.”

“You are a priest, then?” exclaimed Mme de Trélan, surprised.

“*Presbyter valde indignus*,” replied M. Chassin.

“I had not guessed it,” said Valentine. “Though indeed why should I?—Yes, M. de Céligny did refer to the aumônier, now I come to think of it, in connection with the plan of the treasure, but he did not mention the name.”

“Then I will remain the aumônier, or the gardener, according as you please, Madame,” said M. Chassin briskly. “What shall I do with this cup—besides thanking you a thousand times for its contents?”

The Duchesse took it from him. “If you care for another to-morrow at the same hour, Monsieur l’Aumônier, it will be at your disposal.”

“You are too good, Madame,” replied the priest. “You are sure my presence—our conversation—will not bore you?” There was a little twinkle in his eye.

“On the contrary,” responded Mme de Trélan. “I find all this passionately interesting. I feel that I am assisting at a romance. Is it not in the old fairy-tales that three sons of a king come after a treasure, or to slay a dragon, or free a princess?—and it is always the third and last who succeeds.”

“Alas, Madame,” said the third and last adventurer, “I am no king’s son. That description may serve for MM. de Céligny and de Brencourt, but my father was a shoemaker. I should not be worthy to free a princess. Besides, as I have told you, I am a priest.”

“Moreover there are no princesses here,” added Valentine hastily, annoyed with herself for having chosen just that illustration.

“Nor a dragon?” enquired the treasure-seeker.

“No, unless it be the Deputy or the sentry.”

“The latter, indeed, may be wondering at our conversation now, if he can see us in here,” observed the gardener, and he began to move towards the steps. “By the way, Madame, is it true that the Deputy Camain does not come here much now? I heard from . . . a source of information . . . that his visits, at one time very frequent, have practically ceased of late. Is that so? It is somewhat important for me to know.”

“Yes, that is quite correct,” answered the Duchesse, and was again annoyed with herself because she felt the colour rising to her face.

CHAPTER XIV

PLOTTER AND PRIEST

(1)

Not until that evening did Roland's exact words about the aumônier recur to Mme de Trélan's memory. Who could she have been, the dying old lady who possessed this mysterious document? It was all but clear now that some treasure really did exist in Mirabel; but its existence, as a matter of fact, interested Mirabel's mistress less than the means by which it had come to light after all these years. She had no intention of claiming the hoard.

And more amazing than all was the fact that this third treasure-seeker was a priest. It seemed almost as if her fervent wish of the last days were on its way to be granted. Could she ask him to say Mass in Mirabel—would it be safe? She knew nothing about him personally, but he could not be a man to shrink from risks, or he would not be employed on his present mission. He must equally be an *insermenté*, one who had not sworn allegiance to the State, or he would never be aumônier to a Royalist division.

The desire to feel her way towards this great question of a Mass at Mirabel, as well as to satisfy her curiosity about the plan, was the reason why next day, at the same time, as the Abbé-gardener was making with a handkerchief of provisions towards the colonnades, she went up the great steps and intercepted him.

"Your coffee is awaiting you in my room, Monsieur l'Aumônier," she suggested, "if you will give yourself the trouble to descend thither."

He thanked her and followed her down, unrolled his comestibles, took the plate she put before him, and with little ado set heartily to work. Valentine placed the coffee pot at his elbow and herself sat down opposite him.

"I hope you will pardon my rustic manners, Madame," he observed after a moment or two, "but this digging gives a man a fine appetite."

"I trust they feed you well where you lodge in the village, Monsieur l'Abbé," said she in reply. "Where do you lodge, by the way?"

"At the little house next the church—I beg its pardon, the Temple of . . . what is it the Temple of, Madame, Age, or Genius, or Fame, or what?"

"I have never enquired," returned the Duchesse, with a shade of contempt. "The Temple of Lunacy, I should think. —Who lives in that little house now? It used to be . . . let me see—Nicole, the locksmith, and his family."

"Nicole the locksmith?" repeated the priest, ceasing to masticate. "He has not lived there for seven years, I understand, since Mirabel was sacked."

"Is that so?" asked Valentine. "What happened to him?"

"I do not know," answered the Abbé. "I only know the bare fact from the old man who lives there now.—Did you then know Mirabel-le-Château as long ago as that, Madame Vidal?"

"Yes, I have known Mirabel a long time," said Valentine, after a slight hesitation. If she were going eventually to ask him to say a Mass here for the Duc de Trélan, she must give him some sort of ground for making the request.

"You have lived here before, perhaps?"

"Yes," admitted Mme de Trélan. "How I have come to live here again, under such different auspices, is the result of circumstances with which I need not trouble you. But, since I knew the château before it changed owners, perhaps you will not think it strange that I should show curiosity as to how you came into possession of the plan of which M. de Céligny spoke, and of which I saw a copy in M. de Brencourt's possession. M. de Céligny said something about an old lady who was dying, whom you visited. But how did she come to have this paper, and why did she desire to give it to . . . to M. de Trélan?"

M. Chassin wiped his mouth. "It is a long story how it came into her possession, Madame, but a much shorter one why she desired it to go to its rightful owner. She had been tiring-woman to M. de Trélan's mother, the Duchesse Eléonore."

"What was her name?" demanded Valentine, a little breathlessly.

"Magny, Mlle Magny," said M. Chassin.

Valentine got up from the table and went over toward the stove. The past seemed suddenly to crowd upon her almost suffocatingly. Behind the other ghosts in Mirabel she often felt the gentle spirit of the mother-in-law who had welcomed her with such affection, and now here was another shadowy inmate. Then she was aware that the priest was watching her out of his placid, shrewd little eyes with a good deal of interest, and that she must walk warily.

"You knew Mlle Magny, I see?" he remarked.

"Yes," said the Duchesse de Trélan. She remembered now her first sight of that prim, devoted attendant as it were yesterday. The best thing for him to suppose would be that they had been fellow-servants years ago. So she added, "I was here for the last two years of Mlle Magny's service, when, as you say, she was maid to Mme la Duchesse Douairière."

“Were you here, then, Madame, under the Duchesse Valentine?” was the priest’s not unnatural question.

Mme de Trélan much disliked lying, although her whole life recently might have been called a lie. She clung to the literal truth underlying her statement when she said, “No, I never served the Duchesse Valentine.” And then, to turn him away from a dangerous topic, she said, “I need not ask you, Monsieur l’Abbé, if you are an insermenté priest. You must be, to hold the position which you do, and to have received any trust from so good a Catholic as Mlle Magny.”

“No, Madame, naturally I have never taken the oath,” responded M. Chassin. He looked at her with fresh interest, and added, “You too, then, my daughter, are a good Catholic in these times of persecution?”

“I was never a Catholic worth speaking of, I am afraid,” said Valentine rather sadly, “until these times.”

“And are you able to go to your duties here, my child?” It was remarkable how the cloak of the plotter and half humorous observer slipped at once aside, and revealed the priest.

“Not here,” responded Mme de Trélan. “I always did in Paris; it is possible there. But there is no Mass here, no priest . . . O mon père!”

“What is it?”

“Lately—for a special reason—I have longed for little else, night and day, but that there might be Mass said once in the chapel here, for . . . for one who was much connected with Mirabel.”

Her deep earnestness and hardly contained emotion affected M. Chassin. He was a little puzzled, too. Did she mean Mlle Magny? If so, why did she not say so? More likely, perhaps, that she was thinking of some relative of her own. Perhaps she was the widow of a steward or something of the kind, for she was far too superior to have been an ordinary servant. However, practical as usual, he saw that the point was not for whose soul—if she meant that—the Mass was to be said, but whether it could be said at all.

“Have you the necessaries still in the chapel?” he asked thoughtfully.

“I believe so,” answered the Duchesse. “I could look . . . I know where they would be hidden. A priest coming like this seems . . .” She broke off wistfully. “But there would be a certain amount of risk to you, Father, and so I hardly like suggesting it. Nothing but my very real need would make me. I . . . I have heard news that would make it just now the greatest comfort I could look for in this world.”

“My daughter,” said the Abbé, rising, “as a priest, nothing could give me greater joy, in these times, than to hear that you desire such a thing. But, as a plotter, I think that I must get on a little further with my task before I undertake the additional risk—not much, perhaps, but still to be considered when I am charged with a mission not my own. An argument, no doubt,” he added with a sort of twinkle, “against the union of the secular and the sacred characters in one individual. However, I will think over the best way to fulfil your edifying desire, if I can. I should begin at once, I think, by starting work earlier than I have hitherto done, that no suspicion might be excited on the morning itself, for it would have, would it not, to be a very early Mass? And you wish, I gather, a Mass of requiem?”

Valentine bowed her head. She was almost too much stirred to thank him, and looked up with eyes full of tears.

M. Chassin was moved to give her his blessing, and on that departed once more to his wheelbarrow and his hoe.

(2)

Valentine thought of little else but the priest’s half promise all the rest of the day. Very early next morning she went and searched in the chapel for the gem-studded chalice and ciborium, hidden away with all the more valuable vestments early in 1792, and hidden so securely that if they had been looked for in the August pillage they had never been found. That day being a cleaning day she thought it better not to invite the remarks of her *femmes de journée* by having the gardener into her room at all. Moreover at first she thought he had not arrived; till it occurred to her to look out from an upper window at the back of the château. The result of her observations was that she took out a bowl of coffee at noon to the grotto of Latona, and, going in, told him the reason.

“Much wiser, Madame,” said the priest, wiping a hot brow with his sleeve. “And did you say that to-morrow was a visiting day? Then I shall be back in the front, very active, for all eyes to see. I have no business to be here at the back at all.”

“But you have a good reason for it?” suggested Mme de Trélan.

The aumônier dropped his voice. “There is a sort of underground passage leading from this grotto—which is of course of later construction—to the place under the cheminée royale in the sallette where Louis-Antoine de Trélan hid his money. Once I have unblocked the end of it, now hidden by those rocks, I hope to find the rest easy.”

“M. de Céligny did not know of that!”

“The misguided youth never got more than a moment’s sight of the plan.”

“And M. de Brencourt?”

“He preferred to attack the other end, in the château, as likely to prove shorter. The result you know.”

“And when you have got the money?”

“I have to convey it by degrees—or rather, cause it to be conveyed—to an agent in Paris, and he to England to be melted down. It is of course useless in its present state. When I reach it I calculate that it will take me three or four days

to get it away, a portion at a time. It will be too heavy to take all at once, for so much weight in so little bulk would excite suspicion.”

“I see that you are coming earlier,” said Valentine. “Does that mean that you will be able to say Mass? I have found all that is requisite.”

“I think I may promise it,” replied the gardener.

Next day, as he had predicted, he was working in the front of the château, and a Deputy whom Valentine showed round said that he was glad something was being done to the flower beds, but that he considered M. Camain rather parsimonious in the matter of labour.

During the next three days, although the priest had returned to his work in the park, something invariably happened to prevent Mme de Trélan from getting speech with him. But on the fourth afternoon she had the curiosity to go and stand by the great fireplace in the sallette. She most distinctly heard gnome-like activities at work below. Evidently the miner was advancing in his task.

Next morning she sought him out soon after he arrived, while he was still in the front of the château.

“Will you come to my room to-day for your coffee, Monsieur l’Aumônier?” she asked.

“Certainly, Madame,” responded the gardener, and he walked beside her wheeling his wheelbarrow. “I wanted to speak with you about a certain arrangement. I shall not be here much longer, I think,” he added significantly.

“You are—advancing?”

“To-morrow or the next day will see the end, I hope. I will certainly come at noon.”

And he came, punctually. He was hot and rather dirty. Valentine let him eat his meal in peace.

“And so it really was true, the tale of the treasure,” she said meditatively, as he drew to a close.

“Every word, Madame,” replied the priest.

“And you have actually secured the whole of it?”

“Except the jewels—and unless I am prevented from going on to-morrow.”

“Why should you be?”

“One never knows,” said he, and finished his coffee with appreciation. “And now,” he added briskly, “about to-morrow morning?”

“You will really do it for me? God reward you, Father!”

“I will come at half-past four to-morrow to your entrance here. I suppose there is a private door to the chapel from the château? You will have everything ready? Perhaps you have made ready for Mass before?”

“Yes, I have,” said the Duchesse.

“Then that is settled,” observed M. Chassin, brushing the crumbs off his person. “The sentry is used by now to my industrious early entrances, and there is no one about to ask why, having entered, I am not to be seen working. Nor will anybody, I presume, ring your bell at that early hour. I see no extra hazard at all; and most of my treasure trove is already in Paris, in good hands.”

At the door he stopped. “There is only one thing more. For whose soul do you wish this Mass said, Madame Vidal?”

Valentine did not reply at once. She suddenly saw what questions it would lead to if she said “For the Duc de Trélan’s.” Perhaps he would even refuse to say a requiem for Gaston at all unless she told him by what right she demanded it. A desire, very unlike her, to put off the difficult moment seized her. If she only told him the name to-morrow, at the eleventh hour, when the candles were lit, and everything ready, surely he would ask no questions then. Or if it came to it, she might even tell him who she was. But not now.

“May I tell you to-morrow morning, Father?” she asked.

M. Chassin raised his clumsy eyebrows a trifle, but since he could not very well pretend that it was of paramount importance to know the name overnight, he said, “Very well, my daughter,” and departed.

CHAPTER XV

UNDER THE SEAL

The chapel at Mirabel, of later date than the château itself, was one of those lofty, pompous, rococo edifices abounding in heavy wood-carving, and puffy-cheeked cherubs, and tribunes with bulged and gilded fronts almost suggestive of a theatre. But hostile hands, in stripping it of some of its exuberance, had bestowed the crown of martyrdom on its floridity, and the light of this early summer morning, streaming in through the red and purple clad saints of the apsidal eastern window, seemed a little to dispel its chill—the chill of a building long disused—though it could not replace the warm memory of incense and the winking light before the tabernacle.

The candles on the unvested marble altar, and those in the great carved candlesticks where the bier or catafalque should have stood, were of brown wax as usage demanded. Valentine had found them, and in another place the black and gold vestments for the priest, stored away with the rest, and she had brought out from the sacristy and spread between the candlesticks on the floor itself—since there was no bier—the black pall with the arms of the house of Trélan. Everything was ready, and now she herself, the solitary worshipper, knelt with bowed head on a chair in the nave, though it wanted yet an hour to the priest's coming. She was making her preparation for confession, for she was going to ask for communion at this Mass. The resolve to do so had come to her during the night.

Nearly half-past four already. Valentine hurried back to her room. He was very punctual, the gardener priest, and prudent to boot, for he did not even wake any echoes by ringing, but tapped upon the outer door.

"Everything is ready, mon père. I will take you straight to the chapel," said Mme de Trélan.

M. Chassin paused a moment when he got inside the building. This, then, was where his foster-brother had married the "beautiful and unfortunate lady" as M. de Brencourt had justly called her. Little as Mme Vidal had been able to do, the place had something the air of requiem; he saw the candles, the pall—and then the arms on the pall. Surely she, a former domestic, would not have brought that out save for a member of the house! Then he thought, wondering at his own slow-wittedness, that of course she wanted a Mass said for the Duchesse Valentine. He was more than glad to say one here for the repose of that soul.

As he moved forward again Mme Vidal pointed out the sacristy. "I will light the candles while you vest, Father," she added. "But, before you begin Mass, I should like to make my confession, for I wish to communicate. And then I will tell you for whose soul I am asking for this Mass."

M. Chassin, feeling that he hardly needed now to be told, disappeared into the sacristy. Valentine lit the candles on the altar and those round the pall. Before she had finished the priest emerged in alb and stole, tying the girdle of the former round him as he came, for there was need of haste in all this business. He entered the confessional, whose elaborate carving bore scars from axe or hammer, and drew the curtain after him. She went and knelt down at the right-hand grille.

There was absolute silence when Valentine had finished. All through the priest had hardly said a word or asked her a question, and from the beginning she had resolved to make no mysteries, but here, under the seal, to be perfectly frank about her identity. It would have meant, perhaps, evasions else.

But the silence was so prolonged that at last she raised her eyes, and could just see through the grille enough to gather that the Abbé had covered his own eyes with his hand. It was not till then that Valentine fully recognised how even to this man, unconnected, save as a political plotter, with the house of Trélan, it must come as a shock to learn, in the very chapel of Mirabel itself, her identity with its supposedly murdered mistress. She had not been thinking enough of herself to realise that; rather of her relations to Gaston. She waited; and after a moment or two more her confessor seemed to collect himself, and in a shaken voice named her penance and gave her absolution.

Bent under the weight of freedom Valentine bowed her head, and so remained—till she suddenly heard the rungs of the curtain in front of the confessional rattle on their little pole, and it came to her that the priest, still so strangely silent, was preparing to leave the box. But there was still something for her to say.

"Father, now you can guess for whose soul I wish this Mass said—for that of my husband, Gaston, Duc de Trélan."

Still silence. M. Chassin had, in fact, only drawn aside the curtain because in the tumult of his emotions he felt that he was suffocating. He was not thinking of moving at that moment; he was incapable of it. What was he to do! what, in God's name, was he to do! And there was no time to think, that was the terrible part of it. He could not knowingly enact a sacrilege. . . . And this, this was the murdered Duchesse! It was incredible—yet obviously true, though his brain could hardly grasp it yet. . . . But the other side of the business! Of course Gaston's repeated injunction to respect his secret to the uttermost, an injunction laid on him afresh not long ago at Hennebont, did not apply to this case, which the Duc could not have foreseen . . . no man could have imagined a resurrection like this! Yet what was it, "nobody in the world," "whatever you think might be gained by it." He must have a little time to consider. . . . And he must say something now. . . .

“My child,” he managed to get out, “I cannot well say a requiem Mass unless I have reason to . . . to know the person dead.”

“But I know it, Father,” came the sad voice. “Is not that enough?”

She had heard some rumour, of course. How to convey to her its falsity without betraying what he knew as fact—and without undue shock to her?

“I suppose, my daughter,” he said gently, “that you have had some private information. Is it—forgive me—is it reliable?”

Valentine caught her breath. “Only too much so, I fear.” And then a light broke upon her. “Surely, Father, as you were sent from the Marquis de Kersaint about this business, and he knew of the Duc’s death, you know it, too? Or did he keep you in ignorance before he sent you to Mirabel?”

“What!” exclaimed M. Chassin, thinking he had not heard aright through the grille. “What did you say, my child? M. de Kersaint knew that the Duc was dead? Who told you that?”

His astonishment set a mad hope tearing at Valentine’s heart. “M. de Brencourt,” she answered. “Was he wrong, then?”

But M. Chassin had flung himself out of the confessional, his stole in his hand. “M. de Brencourt!” he exclaimed. Once out he seemed on the verge of some expression better befitting his late employment as gardener or plotter than his present as priest. “M. de Brencourt told you—my child, do not stay kneeling there . . . M. de Brencourt . . . here, sit on this chair and let me hear more of this extraordinary . . . misunderstanding!—May I know this great matter—your identity—so long as to speak of it a little now?”

His face was mottled with emotions. Valentine, her eyes fixed on him, had already risen from her knees and did sink down on the chair he indicated. In front of her the candles burnt round the pall and on the altar, ready for the funeral Mass.

“Yes, Father—but—*misunderstanding*!” she caught at the word. “Is it untrue, then, Father, is it untrue?”

“I do not say that, but . . . tell me what M. de Brencourt said to you!”

“But is it untrue—is it untrue?” she repeated piteously. “O God, is he alive after all?”

The secret knocked so hard at the door of the priest’s lips that it seemed to him it must force its way out. It was cruelty to keep her in this tension—and almost absurd, too. But he must have a little time to reflect if he were justified in breaking so solemn a promise.

“Calm yourself, Madame la Duchesse,” he said, and, sufficiently agitated himself, sat down beside her. How extraordinary, how dizzying a sensation to be in the actual living presence of her whose loss had turned the whole current of his foster-brother’s being. “Tell me first just what M. de Brencourt said.”

Valentine put her hands to her head in the effort to remember exactly.

“He said that M. de Kersaint had told him it was useless to write to the Duc de Trélan for permission to search here because he had just heard that the Duc was dead—had been dead some time.”

“And M. de Brencourt told you that!”

Valentine’s heart seemed to stand still. “It was false then?”

“I cannot say, Madame, whether it was false or true,” responded M. Chassin, “this only, that M. de Brencourt must have strangely misunderstood M. de Kersaint, for the Marquis has certainly no grounds for asserting that the Duc is dead. I do not say that it is not so, but he has no authority for asserting it . . . and I do not believe that he ever did.”

What was the mystery? The chapel, the lights, were beginning to dance round Valentine. The priest guessed it.

“Madame, this is too much for you. And for me, too. . . . To learn that you are alive—Let us both try to be calm. I will do what I came here to do, and though cannot say a funeral Mass for the Duc de Trélan because . . . because I am convinced that he is still alive, I will say one for his intention and for yours, and for your reunion . . . and for wisdom to know how to act,” he added almost to himself. “But you will give me leave to retain my knowledge of who you are, will you not? As you are aware, I must not, having learnt it as I did, unless you sanction it?”

“But not to use it, Father, not to impart to any third person.”

“Not even to——” He checked himself.

“Not to anyone,” said Valentine firmly. “I am no longer the Duchesse de Trélan. It was necessary, I thought, that you should know I once was. Now I am Mme Vidal again.”

“Then,” said the priest very solemnly, “I implore you, as your confessor, either to write without loss of time to M. de Kersaint, telling him who you are, and asking for details about your husband which only he can give you, or, better still,” his voice shook with earnestness, “to go in person to Brittany to see him. Believe me, you will be more than thankful all your life if you do. I will give you directions afterwards. And now I will finish vesting.”

Valentine slipped to her knees, and remained sunk on the kneeling-chair while M. Chassin hastily rolled aside the pall, put out the great candles, and went into the sacristy.

Yet in a moment or two he was hurrying out and bending over the kneeling figure. “Madame, Madame, I think it must be your bell which is ringing so furiously!”

He had to repeat it again; but, when once she had understood, Mme de Trélan was in full possession of her wits.

“I will go at once, Father. It must be something unusual at this hour. But take off those vestments—leave the chapel! You must not be found here at any cost!”

Fears only for him hurried her out of the chapel and along the corridor. It was true; her bell was ringing violently, and it could not be much later than five o’clock.

She expected to find outside the door soldiers, or at least the sentry. The only being there was a rather indignant small boy, who said reproachfully that he had been ringing for five minutes, and asked if the gardener were anywhere about. The child seemed so little the herald of danger that Valentine said she thought that she could find him, and asked why he was wanted.

“Tell him, please,” said the small messenger, sniffing, “that his mother in Paris is very ill—dying—and that he must go at once if he wants to see her alive.” And as Valentine gave an exclamation he added, “A man has come from Paris to say this. The gardener must hurry. That’s all.” And he scampered up the steps again.

Valentine hastened out into the passage, relieved to see in the distance the form of the Abbé, once more a gardener, coming towards her.

“There is bad news for you, Monsieur l’Abbé, I am sorry to say,” she exclaimed when he came within hearing. “Your mother in Paris——”

“Is dying, I suppose,” finished the priest with a strange mixture of concern and irritation. “Do not be distressed, Madame, for I have no mother. It means something quite different. I will come into your room for a moment—but I must leave Mirabel at once. . . . It means, in fact,” he went on, once inside, “that the agent in Paris who has the bulk of the treasure in his possession by now, and who has the task of transferring it to England, is in peril of some kind—has probably fallen under suspicion. There is not a moment to lose if I am to save the money. Fortunately I had not begun Mass . . . Before I go, however . . .” He fumbled hastily in a pocket, and bringing out something wrapped in a scrap of faded silk, slid the contents out on to the table—a glittering, snake-like heap of blood and fire and tarnished gold.

“This is yours, Madame, by every right. I cannot take it!”

Valentine stared at it a moment. “But I do not need it, Monsieur l’Abbé. Take it with the rest!”

“No. It would provide for the journey, Madame, which I implore you to make,” returned M. Chassin, looking at her hard. “And the directions I promised you—have you pencil and paper? M. de Kersaint’s headquarters are now at an old *manoir* called le Clos-aux-Grives, near Lanvennec in Finistère. If you journey in person to Lanvennec you should go by the route which I am writing down. In the end you will be directed to a little farm called the Ferme des Vieilles, not very far from his headquarters, and on saying there these words in Bas-Breton all will be made easy for you.” Standing, he wrote for a moment or two, blessed her, and remained looking at her, for all his haste, with an expression Valentine could not decipher—the expression of a man torn by perplexity. Then he caught her hand, kissed it, and in a very little had been let out of the door and was hurrying up the steps.

And Mme de Trélan, who had meant to watch him safely past the sentry, stood oblivious with closed eyes. . . .

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUEEN'S MOVE

Three days later, about sunset, the Duchesse de Trélan, her long dead predecessor's rubies heavy, warm, and invisible about her neck, stood in the great Salle Verte, probably for the last time. Only one more day remained of her strange tenancy of Mirabel—for Camain had made no sign—and moreover nothing would have kept her longer now. She was on fire to get to Finistère . . . if it were possible.

Of the Abbé she had heard nothing—but she could expect to hear nothing, unless it were news of his arrest. No one had seemed perturbed at the non-appearance of the gardener; possibly no one knew of it. She could only hope that he had got the treasure away from Paris, for his coming had so profoundly affected her that she could not but wish him well. They would meet again, she supposed, in Brittany, if she ever got there—for, money apart (and that she had, the reward for Roland) how was she going to find a means to take her unmolested from Paris into the furthest fastnesses of the Royalist West?

A mellowed light between afternoon and evening was pouring in, softening the vista of green marble pillars and the gilt. Would she ever see the Salle Verte again after to-morrow? Much had happened there. The great apartment peopled itself for a space with that throng on her wedding night, one young and splendid figure outshining every other man there; it held again the later assemblies it had seen, the men of note that the Duchesse de Trélan had known, the soldiers, the diplomats, the courtiers, the *grandes dames* . . . all that scarlet-heeled, powdered, witty, gallant, vicious world, exquisite, debauched and courteous, everyone of whom, however reluctant or defiant, had come to the brink of the red torrent which flowed between that life and this, the torrent in which most of them had been swept away, with so many of the old landmarks, good or bad, as well. And for a moment Valentine found herself wondering what this historic room, still unhurt, unpillaged, might be destined to witness in the future. No de Trélan, at least, would ever tread its floor again.

Unless Gaston came back . . . some day. He might—he might! Stranger things had happened. Only it was certain that he would never come back under any conditions that involved a pact with the spoilers. No exile, no hardships, nothing that she could imagine would have changed that trait in him. . . .

A step, a heavy, hasty step, broke into her reverie—a step that had not been her way of late. It could only be one person's. She turned, and saw M. Georges Camain advancing along the line of pillars towards her, wearing a face of thunder.

Valentine's heart sank. She went a few paces to meet him, and he stayed his advance, and, beckoning to her in a manner quite devoid of his usual objectionable gallantry, walked back to the great hearth and took up by his stand by it. Evidently he felt the middle of so vast an apartment no place for a scene, and that there was going to be a scene was written on his whole demeanour.

"Well, Madame Vidal?" He threw the words at her like a challenge.

She met his look with composure, and answered, "Yes, Citizen Deputy."

"Yes, Citizen Deputy," he mimicked her angrily. "The Citizen Deputy wants to know what you have done with the gardener who was working here a few days ago?"

"I have done nothing with him, Citizen. He has not been here for the last three days."

"Indeed? And do you know why he left?"

"A messenger came to say that his mother in Paris was dying."

"*Mother!*" said Camain, exploding. "Mother dying! You have the impudence . . . Shall I tell you, since you are so persistently innocent, why he left? His plans in Paris were threatened, and you know what those plans were, and his work here, too, as well as I—no, by God, better, since I have not yet had time to investigate his operations at Mirabel."

"Plans? Work?" repeated Valentine. "Do you refer to the Italian——"

"Pshaw!" broke in the ex-Jacobin savagely, "don't trifle with me like that, woman! I say you know what he came to do, and you helped him to do it, and to get away with his booty."

Then he had got away . . . or did Camain only mean from Mirabel? Valentine made no reply.

"Why don't you answer me?" barked her late admirer.

"You are so positive, Citizen Deputy, what is the use? It is of little avail for me to protest—though you must know it quite well—that I had no hand in the appointment of this gardener who seems to have displeased you, nor in the carrying out of his 'work,' whatever it may have been, except that I used to give him a cup of coffee with his meal at mid-day."

"Yes, just as out of the same pure kindness you opened the door in the park wall to let one or the other of the rest out or in—just as you fooled me into saving you from being confronted with the man who broke into the sallette, your accomplice, whom you invited here, I expect——"

"Never!" interrupted Valentine firmly. "I had nothing to do with his coming, any more than with that of the gardener."

Camain would not listen. "Then, like a fool, I gave you thirty days in which you were assured of my absence—incredible idiot that I was! And this is the use you have made of them!" His towering rage seemed almost as much with himself as with her; but his scowl was not pleasant to sustain.

"Did I appoint the gardener, Citizen?"

"That is not the question. He got his appointment by chicanery, used it to search Mirabel for hidden treasure in the interests of the Royalists, and you furthered his researches—you who asked me so guilelessly a little time ago for what reason that other man could have broken in."

"I absolutely deny that I furthered his researches in any way," retorted Valentine with spirit.

"If you did not actually go and help him dig," retorted Camain, scowling worse than ever, "you knew of his purpose, and it was your duty to tell me."

"I wonder if it was," said Valentine reflectively, almost more to herself than to him.

The irate Georges stared at her a second in amazement. "You are a cool hand!" he exclaimed. "You wonder if it was . . . when I am paying you to look after the place"—a flush rose in Valentine's cheek—"and when now, in consequence of your silence, if not of your complicity, I am myself in a most unenviable position!"

"I am sorry to hear that, Monsieur le Député," said Valentine gravely.

"Deuced good of you! It never occurred to you, I suppose, that I was responsible to the Government for Mirabel—even when I was taking down that worthless deposition of yours? Still, you have shown me pretty clearly once that my concerns are less than nothing to you. But let me tell you that, if there is an enquiry, someone else—to whom I begin to think you are under a very heavy debt indeed—will probably come off badly, and that is Suzon Tessier."

She turned an alarmed face on him. "Not Suzon! What had she to do with it?"

"This, that she has had you under her roof for nearly seven years as her 'aunt,' and that it was from her house that you were taken off to prison as a suspected aristocrat. Yes, you see I know that now—not from Suzon, of course."

"We are not in the Terror now," said Valentine uneasily. Could Suzon really be in danger?

"No, but we may go back to it before long if these crazy young Royalist reactionaries become more troublesome. There were quantities of *collets noirs* in that fracas with the Jacobins of the Société du Manège last month. *You* may approve of those antics, but they will lead to—repression."

"But what am I to do?" asked Valentine. "I deny complicity with the persons who came here, but truth or falsehood, as I know, has little to do with the verdict of a revolutionary jury, and for nothing in the world would I have Suzon suffer on my account."

Camain took a turn up and down, his arms folded. "Yes, what can you do?" he asked sarcastically. "Rather late to think of that now! Well, I think the best thing you can do, Madame Vidal, is to vanish. If there is an enquiry, which I shall do my best to prevent for my own sake, Suzon had better not be able to produce you."

Valentine's heart gave a leap. Was it possible that he, of all people, might be interested in her going to Finistère? A few moments ago her chances of an interview with the Marquis de Kersaint had seemed very remote indeed.

"But how can I vanish in a moment?" she asked.

Camain came nearer, and looked down at her with searching, half mocking eyes. "Have you no friends, no aristocratic kin who would shelter you? Cannot you go back to that 'provincial town' from which you came to be Suzon's aunt? Difficult to find again, I fancy! . . . It must be a complete, a good disappearance—you must not be caught."

"To fulfil that requirement, Monsieur le Député, there is no place but the grave. I do not propose to kill myself, nor, I suppose, are you asking that of me."

An unwilling smile came over the heavy, angry visage.

"Corbleu, I was right in admiring you! Yes, there is no place but the grave for that. I am not asking you to journey so far. But you understand that, if you vanish, you will, in a sense, assume some of the guilt of these happenings at Mirabel?"

"Yes, I understand. And that is what you want, Citizen, in order to take it off your shoulders—and Suzon's?"

"But you can scarcely regard yourself, in that case, as an innocent scapegoat, can you, Madame Vidal?" he suggested.

She did not answer this, but said, with a beating heart and outward calm, "There is a place to which I could go—a place far enough away, where I should not, probably, be found. But how, without a passport or papers of any kind, am I to get there?"

"Papers!" he said half sneeringly. "Plenty of Royalist agents in Paris would forge you those."

"I do not know any Royalist agents in Paris, Citizen."

"Again so innocent! Do you expect *me* to provide you with papers?"

"I doubt if you could," answered Valentine. "I expect nothing—but I do wish to preserve Suzon from ill."

"And me?" suggested Camain. "No, I am not much above a bricklayer by origin—no stewards to the aristocracy in *my* family! Well, Madame Vidal, since I am fond of Suzon, and since I was misguided enough to admire you, and since I

am not indifferent to the safety of my own skin, I can give you a paper . . . at a price. I have here," he brought out a pocket-case, "a blank laissez-passer that I once got out of Barras when he was particularly in need of cash. That would carry you anywhere as long as the Directory stands, but it cost me a deal of money. The question is, how much is it worth to you?"

The Duchesse's hand went involuntarily to the neck of her dress. Was it for this that the Abbé had left her the necklace?

"I do not mean in money," said Camain, watching her. "If you really want this paper—and you ought to want it, for it would be beyond price to a person in your situation—you will be willing to give me in exchange for it what I conceive you value most."

Valentine changed colour a little. "And what is that?" she asked.

"Your secret," said the Deputy.

She stared at him, bereft of speech.

"By that I mean—your real name," explained M. Camain. "You cannot flatter yourself that, by this time, I do not almost know it. Did you not realise when you refused my suit, when you were for once your real self, how you betrayed your origin? That scorn——"

"It was not scorn of you, Monsieur Camain," she broke in quickly. "You mistook me. I did not resent your offer, but the . . . the grounds on which you based it. However, it is no good going back to that."

"No," said the Deputy, looking at her as she stood there by the blazoned and defaced hearth, so plainly dressed, yet clothed with the grace and dignity that never left her. "No, it is no use going back to that. But, to be frank with you, even after your treatment of me the other day in the garden, I meant to renew my suit. I told myself that a man," involuntarily he drew himself up, "is a man after all, and we are every one equal in these days. But now, I think you are too clever for the wife of a bourgeois, and too innately ci-devant after all, in spite of the life you have lived of late, and your conciergeship and the rest. There is, as the Scripture says, a great gulf fixed between us. I was aiming too high, was I not, Madame la . . . what was the title you used to bear?"

Valentine did not answer, but said very gravely indeed, turning her gaze full on him. "There is indeed a great gulf fixed, Monsieur le Député, between such as you are and such as I. It is filled with blood—and mostly with innocent blood—the blood of my class . . . shed by yours."

Georges Camain shifted uneasily. "There may have been mistakes," he muttered, and Valentine wondered for a second over what private and accusing memories of his own his mind went glancing as he looked at the floor. "But come," he said, recovering himself, "we must keep to business. I can replace you to-morrow, and you can start to-morrow. You observe I do not ask your destination. To get there, wherever it be, you have only to show this paper. It will open any gate to you, for that dissolute scoundrel's signature is still all-powerful. You have only to tell me, Madame Vidal, what you called yourself in the days before you became Suzon Tessier's aunt, and it is yours."

"And," said Valentine slowly, "if my name should chance not to please you, you would have me arrested at once, before I had an opportunity of using your paper."

"That's the worst of you ci-devants," said the Deputy, in something resembling his former jocular tones. "So suspicious. You won't trust the People . . . I do not know what oath I can swear to you. And why should an oath be needed; it is to my interest and my cousin's to get you away. Moreover I am a Theophilanthropist and you, I expect, a Catholic."

"Then we both believe in a God at least," said Mme de Trélan. "Swear to me, Monsieur Camain, by the God we both believe in, that you will make no use of my name if I tell it to you, that you will betray it to no one else, that you will give me the paper and not hinder my departure, and I will tell you my secret."

Camain raised his hand. "I swear all this, by the God in Whom we both believe, and by the white head of my old mother down in Angers, who still prays, I think, to your Catholic Virgin for her son."

Valentine looked away from him.

"I am the woman who best has a right to be in Mirabel," she said, with her eyes on the phoenix over the escutcheon where her own arms of Fondragon were quartered with all the rest. "This house—this hearth—knows no name but the name I bear."

"What the . . . why . . . what in the wide universe do you mean?" ejaculated Camain, open-mouthed and recoiling.

His protégée turned and faced him. "I mean that I am the Duchesse de Trélan," she said simply.

Barras' signature, turning upon itself in its descent, fluttered from the Deputy's paralysed hand to the floor between them.

BOOK III

LE CLOS-AUX-GRIVES

"Why care by what meanders we are here
In the centre of the labyrinth? Men have died
Trying to find this place, which we have found."

In a Balcony.

CHAPTER I

THE COURT OF CHARLEMAGNE

Because it was both midday and high summer, the thrushes that gave its pretty name to the old farmhouse of Le Clos-aux-Grives, near Lanvennec in Finistère, were not singing; and though the same hour of noon which silenced them called insistently for some voice from the large iron cooking-pot that hung over the fire in the living-room, the pot also was mute. Yet Lucien du Boisfossé, wearing as serious a face as that which he had bent over the *Æneid* at Hennebont, was seated on a stool near it, almost under the deep recessed hearth, and from time to time he would rise, take off the lid, and peer into its contents.

The youthful cook was not alone in the big, low room—far from it. On one of the aged black oak settles that ran out at right angles from the hearth was seated Artamène de la Vergne, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and a riding-switch between his hands. He was regarding his friend's occupation with much the same amused criticism which he had bestowed on Roland's bedmaking in M. Charlot's attic four months ago. And at least a dozen other gentlemen, some quite young, some in the thirties or forties, were also in the room, talking and laughing. For though the three treasure-seekers who had formed part of the smaller gathering at Hennebont were still missing, their places, as far as numbers went, were amply filled.

The projects which had been discussed with Georges Cadoudal on that occasion were in a fair way of realisation to-day. Finistère *was* in process of organisation—at the cost of weeks of unremitting toil and danger, in which M. de Kersaint had personally traversed all the wildest districts of the department. As far as the promise of men went, the harvest was good, but, as usual, the pinch came over arming them—and Mirabel had not yet yielded up its treasure. The chief source of encouragement, however, lay in the aspect of the political situation: the effect produced by the numerous Austrian and Russian victories of the spring and summer—not yet indeed come to an end, for it was the eve of Novi; the weariness of the country, still groaning under a detested but tottering government; the hopes based on the important Royalist movement centred in Bordeaux, which embraced Toulouse and Languedoc, and not a little, too, on the revulsion caused by the cruel operation of the Law of Hostages of July 12, which actually forced recruits into the Chouan camp.

Of the other Royalist leaders many were still in England. And the Marquis de Kersaint was not advertising himself; with the means at his disposal—for in no one place could he hope to get together a really formidable force—his aim, when the time came, was to surprise rather than to defy. Weeks, however, would probably elapse before concerted action was taken, and meanwhile he had still to find most of the arms and ammunition required. And, though he had his staff round him here, his men, his *gars*, were, with certain exceptions, going about their usual avocations, cultivating their farms or preparing for harvest. Only, one day, when the whisper went round, the hoe and sickle would lie idle in the fields, and he who had been a small farmer would turn up in the likeness of a brigand at the rallying-place—Galoppe-la-Frime or Frappe d'Abord the Chouan.

In one thing alone was M. de Kersaint singular, in that he already had a regular headquarters and was able to occupy it unmolested. Even Cadoudal and his subordinates in the Morbihan judged it prudent to leave theirs by night, and sleep dispersed in the forest. That M. de Kersaint and his officers could remain with impunity at the Clos-aux-Grives, that despatches found their way there and that it was the discreet centre of a continual going and coming of emissaries, as the work of organisation advanced towards completion, was owing to the fact that it stood in furthest Finistère, the most remote and untouched part of the intractable West. It was too difficult for the Blues, as they were termed, to get at it.

And so, in this large farm-house, once a *manoir*, all but the superior officers of M. de Kersaint's staff were awaiting their noontide meal this August day. The old greenish glass in the tiny panes admitted a tempered light, but the room was large enough to have windows on both sides, and it was a pleasant apartment. At night it was used as a dormitory by the younger officers, who slept on pallets on the floor, for which reason, and also because it was mainly 'les jeunes' who inhabited it at any time, M. du Ménars, acting second-in-command till the Comte de Brencourt's return, had christened it 'the nursery'—earning thereby small gratitude from Lucien and Artamène and their peers. On the long table, dark with the polish of ages, were set platters, horn spoons and forks, bowls of the cheerful Quimper ware, and jugs of cider, but the meal, whatever its nature, seemed to be dependent on the boiling of Lucien's pot, to which process, indeed, other eyes than Artamène's were directed.

M. de la Vergne himself was moved at last to expostulate, though as a matter of fact he had only come into the 'nursery' five minutes before. Stretching out an arm, he tapped the pot with his switch, and said gently, "What is in this receptacle, my good Lucien? Stones?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied M. du Boisfossé in a rather exasperated voice. "They brought it in here from the kitchen, and said it would finish cooking nicely, if I would just see that the fire was kept up. And I've put sticks and sticks on the wretched thing——"

"And blacked your face into the bargain," finished his friend brutally. "I expect it is the mortal part of that

superannuated cow I have seen about. . . . Never mind, time conquers all things, even cows. Put on yet more sticks, and while the old lady simmers I will tell you a piece of news. M. le Marquis is going to recall—you can guess whom!"

"Not our long-lost Roland?" exclaimed Lucien, starting up.

Artamène nodded. "If you agitate yourself, mon ami, you will knock your head against the hearth next. Yes, it appears that the convalescent adventurer has written him so penitent and piteous a letter from Kerlidec that our leader's heart is softened, and he is writing to tell Roland that he may rejoin us. You have heard, of course, gentlemen," he went on, addressing a little group of newly-joined young officers who had strolled over to the hearth, "how our paladin was unhorsed at Roncesvalles—that is to say, winged by the guard of the enchanted castle of Mirabel. But he did not fall into the hands of the Saracens, like M. de Brencourt, his successor, for the princess who inhabits the same, in other words, the concierge, taking pity on him, nursed and smuggled him out of Mirabel again to his relatives in Paris. Thence, when he was sufficiently recovered, the poor Roland returned home to, I am afraid, a very irate grandparent.—Keep the dowager going, Lucien!"

"And now you say that Charlemagne has relented, and is going to summon him here?" said Lucien, taking up his friend's metaphor. "What a mercy!"

"I suppose M. le Marquis has been anxious about M. de Céligny?" suggested one of the newcomers.

"Yes, very anxious—and more than anxious, exceedingly angry," replied M. du Boisfossé. "Isn't that so, Artamène."

"Parbleu!" remarked M. de la Vergne, making a face.

"Do you mean angry with you, Chevalier?" pursued the enquirer. "Why?"

"Because I had a hand in M. de Céligny's enterprise," explained Artamène, sighing gently. "I would fain have shared it altogether, but I was winged myself then. We planned it together in our retirement last spring—if what we had to leave so largely to chance can be said to have had a plan. And then, when Roland had set out, his grandfather wrote to the Marquis to know what had become of him, and M. le Marquis sent to me, and out it all came . . . at least, most of it. I said that Roland had gone to visit his cousins in Paris, which was true, but not, I must confess, the whole truth. If I may venture a counsel, gentlemen, to such of you as are newcomers, always tell the whole truth when you are dealing with M. le Marquis."

"And when did *you* tell the whole truth, then, La Vergne?"

"When I came here," replied Artamène. He beat a little tattoo on one boot with his riding-switch, and added in a feeling voice, but with a laugh in the corner of his eye, "—a memorable day."

"*Dies nefas*," commented Lucien.

"And M. de Kersaint was displeased with you?"

"*Displeased!*" exclaimed the culprit. "Had I possessed the gift of metamorphosis the shape of a mouse, a spider—of a gnat, even—had speedily been mine."

A laugh went round his audience.

"But," objected someone, "I do not see in your case, Chevalier, the reason for this excessive wrath at which you hint."

"Well, for one thing," returned Artamène pensively, "M. le Marquis had definitely forbidden either of us to go to Mirabel, whereas I . . . and my family . . . had certainly encouraged Roland's expedition. Then the Marquis seemed to consider also that I had deceived him about Roland by merely telling him of his visit to those confounded cousins (which of course I did solely to shield Roland). In fact he characterised my conduct by a very unpleasant term which I am not going to repeat. (However, we have since made it up, Charlemagne and I.) And thirdly, to such of us as have seen them together, it is undeniable that between M. le Marquis and the Vicomte de Céligny there subsists——"

"Chut!" said the prudent Lucien, holding up a finger.

"Mais, au nom de Dieu, pourquoi *chut*?" demanded Artamène in a voice of injured innocence. "I was merely going to say that there subsisted between them a special affection, of which I, for one, am not in the least jealous. What is the harm in that remark?"

Nobody present either condemned or absolved him, but one or two who in the spring had seen the couple together turned away to hide a smile.

"I still cannot quite understand," remarked Lucien judicially, "how this good fairy of a concierge came to be inhabiting Mirabel. I thought that the place was in the hands of the Directory, and surely their nominee——"

"We shall have to wait until the Abbé or M. de Brencourt returns to discover that," said Artamène. "I gathered that M. le Marquis expects the latter any day now; it seems, from what the Abbé wrote, a foregone conclusion that he would succeed in escaping from the Temple."

"How?" asked Lucien, his head almost in the procrastinating pot.

"Mainly by the use of the root of all evil, mon cher—in plainer language, by bribery. I thought you knew that."

"And M. le Comte did not get the treasure from Mirabel?" asked a newcomer.

"No, the booty is left to the Church to secure. And, do you know, I shall stake my money on the Church's success."

“I wish Roland could have got it,” murmured Lucien.

“So do I,” said Artamène. “So does . . . my family.” He got up and stretched himself. “But, dear me, we were very young last spring! I am older now, and wiser—much wiser. And as for poor Roland, he must have attained to such a pitch of sagacity that——” He suddenly stopped and remained fixed, his arms extended, and, staring at an open casement said, “Morbleu, talk of the devil!”

“What is it?” exclaimed several voices, their owners following his gaze, while Lucien sprang up and had exactly that encounter with the overhanging hearth which his friend had predicted.

“May I be shot if that is not the Comte de Brencourt in person, just ridden into the courtyard!” And Artamène dashed to the window, followed by almost everybody else.

But in a moment he had turned away again, shaking his head. “Too late!” he said disappointedly. “He will go straight to M. le Marquis now. Besides, he did not look as if he would be communicative; he had his mouth shut like a strongbox.” And he regretfully strolled back to the fire, which the sedulous Lucien had not deserted. “Good Heavens, philosopher, isn’t that soufflé of yours cooked yet?”

“I think,” said M. du Boisfossé, prodding about with a fork, one hand pressed to his head, “that I shall assume the process.”

CHAPTER II

M. DE KERSAINT ANSWERS FOR A KINSMAN

(1)

About the time that the contents of Lucien's pot were becoming only a tough memory, the Marquis de Kersaint was standing, with his hands behind his back, looking out through the casement of the small room on the upper floor of the Clos-aux-Grives which was set apart for his sole use, and out of which led a still smaller bedroom. Under his gaze was the farmyard, still stocked with chickens and pigs, and then, almost at once, came the outposts of the great forest which stretched for many miles to the south-west, and whose friendly presence had been one of his reasons for his choice of headquarters. From the window of the inner room could be seen also the low bare contours of the lande, studded with menhirs.

M. de Kersaint, however, was not occupied with the view. He was thinking about the singularly unsatisfactory interview which he had just had with his returned chief of staff. For M. de Brencourt would hardly answer any questions about his doings, seemed to know almost nothing of the unusual concierge at Mirabel (of whom, and of whose services to Roland M. de Kersaint had heard from the Abbé) and, when taxed with having written from the Temple, as he had, a letter dissuading his leader from sending another emissary after the treasure, could only reply that he supposed, at his age, captivity was extinguishing to the sense of adventure. And, when closer pressed as to why he had stated in so many words that the gold was impossible to get at and the place closely guarded, whereas the Abbé had just written exactly the opposite, he had made no answer at all. Decidedly, in view of the effect which Mirabel had had on him, it would have been better not to have sent him at all.

The Marquis turned at last from the window. He had discarded the peasant's dress now-a-days, and wore a dark-green uniform with black facings, with the little red and white ribbon of the Order of Maria Theresa on the breast, and a white scarf round the waist. Out of a small travelling safe near the window he took some letters, and re-read Roland de Céligny's ashamed appeal with something between a smile and a frown. After that, obeying the instinct which so often pushes a man to do what hurts him, he re-read also the three biting epistles from M. de Carné which Roland's action had brought upon him. The first was thus conceived:

> "*Monsieur le 'Marquis,'*
> *I am most reluctant to enter into a correspondence with you, but as I am confined to my bed with an attack of gout, I cannot carry out my first intention of coming in person to see you. Six days have now passed since you disbanded your cohort of young men, yet Roland has not been sent back to me according to the promise on which I was weak enough to rely. Where is the boy?*"

This was the first intimation which the Marquis had received that Roland was missing. Alarmed and angry, he wrote to the old man in that sense, but his disclaimer did not prevent his meanwhile receiving a second missive, now in his hand. "*I find by a letter which has just reached me from my grandson, that instead of sending him back to me, you have despatched him on a secret and doubtless dangerous mission to Paris, for that he can really have gone of his own initiative, as he says, I refuse to believe. I regret that my present infirmity, by making it impossible for me to offer you satisfaction, renders it impossible also for me to tell you what I think of your conduct—though, to be frank, that conduct does not surprise me.*"

M. de Kersaint, greatly roused, had answered that for his part he regretted his respect for the Baron's grey hairs should prevent his replying in the strain to which he was tempted, stating, however, that he did not send Roland to Paris, that on the contrary he had forbidden him to go, that he had only that day heard of his disobedience, and that he was at once instituting enquiries after him in the capital. His anxiety and his displeasure, he added, were not less than M. de Carné's own.

To which the old man had replied with brevity and effect:

"*I have only to say that, to my bitter grief, I see at last in Roland the dawn of those qualities whose appearance I have always so much dreaded. He is indeed his father's son.*"

Even now the reader flushed as his eyes met this thrust, and he had been far angrier when he first received it—angry with himself too for having protected his own honour by revealing the boy's disobedience. He might as well have taken the blame on his own shoulders, since the old man had contrived after all to put the responsibility there—on the score of that paternity which, during that visit to Kerlidec last February, M. de Carné had at length been obliged to acknowledge. . . .

Had it not been for the existence of Roland himself that brief amour with Laure de Céligny, more than twenty years ago, would have seemed now as unreal as a dream. It had come to pass so suddenly, been over so soon. Down there at Saint-Chamans, in the south of olives and nightingales and orange blossom (the south to which, for some reason, his

wife so unwillingly and so seldom accompanied him) passion flared up quickly. Yet of the Vicomtesse Laure alone, among the many women who had loved him and the few he had loved, Gaston de Trélan had a particularly gentle memory. She had seemed to him like a dove in a cypress-tree.

The episode ended. That it had ever been was not discovered till Laure's sudden death, coming to light then only through the single letter her lover had written her, which (of course) she had kept. M. de Céligny wrote to him. The Duc de Trélan posted down from Paris to the olives and the nightingales and offered him satisfaction. Very greatly to his surprise it was refused. The Vicomte de Céligny—the cypress-tree—intimated that, though he had proof enough that M. de Trélan had been his wife's lover, he had none that Roland (now two years old) was not his own son. He should consider him his own, and a duel, whatever its result, could only bring disrepute on the name of his dead wife. Roland should succeed to his estates, and the Duc had no claim on him whatever. A strange interview.

So it was, and for three years the Duc heard nothing more, and never visited his possessions in the south. Then he learnt, incidentally, that the child had been sent to his grandfather in Brittany to be brought up. The move, after de Céligny's declaration, puzzled him extremely, and in the end he went to Kerlidec to investigate the matter. The fiery temper of the Baron de Carné, who had worshipped his dead daughter, led to the meeting which his son-in-law had declined, and the fact that Gaston de Trélan, a singularly fine swordsman, and a much younger man than himself (being then about six-and-thirty) disarmed him with ease, only increased M. de Carné's bitter resentment against him as the seducer—so he termed him—of his Laure. No more than his son-in-law would he acknowledge the Duc's claim on the child, and forbade him, if he had any regard for Laure's memory, to see the boy again.

But M. de Trélan had seen the five-year-old Roland at that very visit, and the sight was enough to explain why M. de Céligny had sent him away. At that age more than later, his resemblance to his real father was unmistakable; apparently M. de Céligny had not been able to bear this speaking witness to his wife's frailty, though it seemed that he had not moved from his intention of acknowledging him as his heir. To M. de Carné the beautiful boy was merely the child of his beloved Laure. . . . The Duc said that he would undertake not to see him again during his supposed father's lifetime; further than that he would not go. He had kept his word.

But now he could claim, had claimed, if not the full rights of a father—for he had promised not to reveal his relationship till Roland was of age—at least some control over his movements. It was doubly unfortunate then, that Roland had acted as he had about Mirabel. Was it true that he had handed down to the boy his own bad qualities—left conveniently unnamed in that stinging remark of M. de Carné's? At any rate, he thought now with a bitter smile, "I have not yet seen traces in the sweet-tempered Roland of being his grandfather's grandson." And, lighting a candle, he burnt the Baron's three letters to ashes.

But there was a fourth—that which had come with Roland's—and it was couched in a milder vein. Roland had evidently succeeded in convincing his grandfather that the Marquis de Kersaint was far indeed from having had a hand in his escapade, and the Baron had consequently penned a rather stiff apology for his former insinuations, and, in addition, an obviously reluctant request for Roland's recall to the Royalist colours, since he was, he confessed, eating his heart out at Kerlidec. M. de Kersaint had thereupon recalled the culprit.

So, in a week now, he might expect Roland in person. He must do his best to show him just the amount of severity that he would have done to Lucien or Artamène, no less and no more. It would not be easy. The boy's misdemeanour sprang after all from no worse fault than want of thought, and its very foolhardiness went far to redeem it. Suppose he had paid for it with his life!

And as he locked the safe, the Marquis said to himself, "How am I ever going to repay that woman for saving the child?"

(2)

M. le Général Marquis de Kersaint and M. le Comte de Brencourt supped together that evening. The latter was no longer a treasure-hunter; he was M. de Kersaint's second-in-command, and he had been out of touch with his leader and the organisation of Finistère for some weeks. He had to be initiated into the present state of Royalist affairs in the department, and there were also a quantity of other matters to discuss: the proposed Anglo-Russian landing at the Texel, and how it would affect the West, how much weight Pichegru's name would carry when he appeared as a Royalist, and as ever, the difficulties created by the vacillating conduct of the Comte d'Artois' advisers.

And over their meal they did discuss these, but, as they were neither of them men to waste words on a situation, they got through pretty quickly, and towards the end of the repast the Comte was able to gratify the curious desire he now seemed to have to talk about Mirabel.

"A monstrous fine place, you know, Marquis," he observed for the second time, refilling his glass.

"Is it?" said M. de Kersaint with indifference.

"Well, you must realise that it is!" retorted the Comte. "You speak as if you had never seen it."

"I have seen it very seldom."

"If that is so, then, parbleu, you have an astounding memory for topographical details! The accuracy of the plan of

the interior you made for me was astounding, considering that you had only been there once."

"I never said, surely, that I had only been there once."

"Your pardon, then. You gave me to understand as much, I thought, when you drew me the plan."

"Did I? I have no recollection of having said so, for as a matter of fact I must have been there quite three times in my life."

The Comte smiled curiously. "Your plan becomes less miraculous then. But even so, the owner or someone must have conducted you into every hole and corner on the ground floor."

To this deduction M. de Kersaint made no response. The Comte drank off a glass of wine, and then, just perceptibly taking a breath as one addressing himself to a plunge, said, "Did you ever see the Duchesse during any of your—three visits?"

"No," replied the Marquis, his eyes on the stem of his wineglass. "She was not there. She was often elsewhere. They had several other properties."

"A great pity," observed M. de Brencourt meaningly, "that she was not elsewhere in August, '92. Why in God's name did she not emigrate?"

"My dear Comte, how can I say?" retorted M. de Kersaint, twisting the wineglass round and round. (Had he turned paler?)

"I wonder," said his companion reflectively, "if her husband ever gave her the chance of going with him?"

How can a man in mental agony, however proud and determined, suppress every sign of what he is suffering? Yet only a very close observer could have seen the throbbing of the vein at the Marquis de Kersaint's temple. And this observer, though watching as the proverbial cat the mouse, missed it.

"You seem to forget," returned M. de Kersaint rather haughtily, "that my kinsman is a gentleman. And, for the matter of that, the Duchesse could have gone at any time between '90 and '92."

"Quite true. And might be alive now had she done so."

"So might many other people, if it comes to that."

"It was a wise precaution, certainly, leaving France. I suppose one may say you owe *your* life to it, de Kersaint?"

"Possibly," said his leader shortly. "More probably I owe it to Josef Schnitterl. Pass me the wine if you have done with it, please."

The Comte's glance lit for an instant on the scrap of ribbon on the speaker's breast. It was Schnitterl, the Marquis's Austrian body-servant—not long ago serving their meal—who, as he was never tired of relating, had found his master half-dead on the battlefield of Rivoli.

"If Mme de Trélan had emigrated," the tormentor pursued, "the Duc would be spared the burden of remorse which he carries—or does not carry, as the case may be." With that he pushed the bottle of wine towards his companion and looked him full in the face.

But M. de Kersaint, though rather white about the mouth, met the look quite steadily. "Thank you," he said, taking the bottle. But he offered no remark on the subject of the Duc de Trélan's problematical burden.

"Do you know, de Kersaint," shot out the Comte suddenly, watching him as he filled his glass, "that there is a portrait at Mirabel which reminded me very strongly of you—of what you must have been when you were younger."

"Well, you know I am kin to the family." He had not spilled a drop of wine.

"But by marriage only!" riposted the Comte like lightning. "You laid some stress on that once."

The Marquis shrugged his shoulders. "You forgot that, I expect, when you thought you saw a likeness. Some people," he pursued with commendable sangfroid, "are always seeing resemblances of that sort in relations by marriage."

"Indeed! Well, you might have sat for this picture! I saw it when I was arrested, for I was taken up into the room where all your—I mean your kinsman's—family portraits now hang. Camain, the Deputy of whom I have told you, happened to be there with a party of friends, including his bonne amie, Mlle Dufour—the actress, Rose Dufour."

"Yes?"

"It was piquant to see her there, with her great bourgeois admirer, going round the Duc's china under the eyes of all his ancestors—*and under someone else's, too*," he added mentally, "and must have been even more piquant for her—the Duc's former mistress."

"His mistress!" exclaimed M. de Kersaint sharply. "That she never was!"

The Comte looked a rather mocking surprise. He had not expected to draw de Kersaint thus, for he believed what he said. "What, you can answer for your kinsman's private life to that extent, Marquis! You must have known him pretty well, then, after all!"

"I knew him well enough to be sure that that story has no foundation," retorted his companion with a frown.

"Ah! Was he then such a puritan, the Duc de Trélan?"

"Certainly not. But every man draws the line somewhere."

"I see," observed M. de Brencourt, looking down with a smile at the tablecloth. "Your noble relative thought too

highly of himself to lay his purse at the feet of an opera singer, yet he did not scruple to leave his wife to years of penury. The world, as you must recognise, would have thought nothing of the first—a mere peccadillo—the second——" He shrugged his shoulders.

Obsessed with the ineffaceable picture of the Duchesse in her shabby dress, he looked up to see how it was faring with his victim after this venomous thrust. The latter was gazing at him, sufficiently ghastly indeed, but with so much astonishment that the Comte realised his slip.

"Years of penury!" said the Marquis harshly. "What are you talking of, de Brencourt? Mme de Trélan was amply provided for during the two years of the Duc's emigration, and at her . . . death" (it was evident that he could scarcely bring out the word) "she certainly was not poor!"

And at that M. de Brencourt himself went white. Good Heavens, supposing that in the delight of torturing him he let out something vital, as he had almost done now. He must curb his tongue. "No, no, that is true, I suppose," he stammered. "I ought to beg M. de Trélan's pardon for saying that. . . ."

"I think you ought to beg his pardon for a good deal else that you have said about him," remarked M. de Trélan's kinsman stiffly.

"Why, so I would, perhaps,—if he were here," replied M. de Brencourt, shutting his eyes.

His leader looked at him contemptuously for a moment, then he said, "It is perhaps fortunate that he is not.—Well, did you collect any more *chroniques scandaleuses* at Mirabel?"

The colour returned to the Comte's face under the tone.

"No. One item, however, may interest you—as a kinsman by marriage. Her portrait is no longer at Mirabel."

"Whose portrait?"

"The late Duchesse's." His secret felt safer now behind that adjective.

A moment's pause. "What had happened to it then?"

"When the mob broke in that day, the mob which she had to face alone—picture it, de Kersaint!—some ruffian with a pike dashed his weapon through it. No doubt he would have liked——"

"Who told you that—about the portrait?" interrupted the Marquis, setting down his glass. He had not drunk; and this time there was a stain on the cloth.

"Who told me?—The concierge," replied M. de Brencourt after a second's hesitation.

"Ah, this concierge about whom you are so unwilling to tell me anything, although the Abbé's success or failure may possibly depend upon her."

"Unwilling—I!" exclaimed the Comte harshly. "There is nothing to tell. She did not save me, like Roland." A sneer crept into his voice. "And probably in Roland's case it was merely that he is a taking youth, and she felt compassion for him, or——" An idea seemed suddenly to come into his mind that struck him silent for a moment; then with half a laugh he muttered, "No, morbleu, it could hardly have been that! On the contrary!"

"You are mysterious," observed his leader coldly. "And I repeat that, since you knew this friendly woman to be in charge at Mirabel, I cannot understand your trying to dissuade me from a further attempt on the treasure."

M. de Brencourt looked at the ceiling. "Possibly you cannot," he returned very slowly. "But I remembered that one woman had already gone to prison—and worse—from Mirabel, and I did not——"

The Marquis leant forward. "Do you mean to insinuate," he said hotly, "that I wish to make use of a woman and leave her to pay? Because if so, Monsieur de Brencourt——"

He checked himself abruptly. "Come in!"

The knock at the door had heralded Lucien du Boisfossé, who stood there saluting and signifying that the *chef de canton* called 'Sincèree' had sent a messenger who would like to speak to the General at once.

"Show him up," said M. de Kersaint. "No—wait! I'll see him downstairs. Excuse me, Comte." And he was gone.

M. de Brencourt looked after him with an unpleasant smile; then he poured himself out another glass of wine and drank it down.

Next evening M. du Ménars and another officer were also at supper.

CHAPTER III

M. DE KERSAINT ANSWERS FOR HIMSELF

(1)

Lucien du Boisfossé and Artamène de la Vergne would not have been themselves—particularly Artamène—if they had not remarked, during the next few days, that a state of curious restraint had come into existence between their leader and his chief of staff, the Comte de Brencourt. Indeed, apart from any intercourse that he held with M. de Kersaint, no one could fail to see that the Comte had returned from his mission another and a much less agreeable person. As Artamène remarked, he had never been genial in his manners, but at least he had some manners; now he seemed to have left them with the abandoned treasure at Mirabel. His moodiness and irritability vented themselves on all his subordinates, and he would harry gentleman and peasant alike for not saluting with sufficient precision, or not mounting guard properly. Indeed, the Chevalier de la Vergne opined that there might be a mutiny among the Chouans, caused for no other reason than that M. de Brencourt had something on his mind—was *rongé* with something or other, as he put it.

To what it could be that was thus gnawing at him the two young men then applied their wits, and, suddenly remembering that night at Hennebont, arrived without much trouble at a theory not very far removed from the truth. With the facile, half-contemptuous pity of youth, they threw a hasty crumb of sympathy to the elder man, obliged to return to the house where had lived the murdered lady for whom he had then confessed his admiration. Still, they wished it had not made him so unpleasant.

But Artus de Brencourt was to be pitied—and condemned—for reasons more acute than 'les jeunes' had divined.

He had come back to the Clos-aux-Grives after his escape from prison not only because, in the position he held, it was his plain duty to do so, but also because even a momentary return to Mirabel, where all his desire was set, would most certainly have involved Mme de Trélan in suspicion, or so he considered. Madly as he craved to see her again, his love was sufficiently unselfish to shrink from that. But he had by no means abandoned his intention of breaking down her opposition to his suit. When he got back to Finistère, and found that the Abbé had been despatched to Mirabel in spite of his letter of dissuasion (which had been prompted in reality less by fear for her safety than by anxiety about the preservation of her incognito) he decided that he must wait at the Clos-aux-Grives till the latter's return, for, successful or unsuccessful, the priest would certainly bring some information about the concierge and the state of affairs at the château. Then he could make up his mind to his next move.

But there were tormenting elements in this course. If the Abbé proved unsuccessful in his quest, it was quite likely —having regard to the issues for Finistère hanging on the securing of the gold—that the Marquis himself would resolve to go after it, and then. . . . Or again, suppose that M. Chassin were successful, and that his very success brought "Mme Vidal" into suspicion? Prison at least would face her again—possibly deportation. Or, almost worst of all, suppose the self-contained little priest, anything but a fool, and deep, as he always suspected, in de Kersaint's confidence, should discover who she was. What was there, indeed, to prevent her telling him? It was hardly surprising that during these days of suspense M. de Brencourt developed into a martinet.

For he had besides to endure the close daily companionship of the man he hated, envied, pretended to despise, admired, the man who—so he chose to put it—had deserted Valentine, the man who nevertheless had had for nineteen years the rights of a husband and to whom perhaps she was, in spite of everything, not indifferent. Had she not all but swooned at the news of his death, though he had so completely cast her off? That she might conceivably care for Gaston de Trélan still, that was the horrible doubt which gnawed at the Comte's heart—almost more than a doubt in the hours when he allowed himself to realise how little foundation he had for the charges which he had made against the Duc. But he fed himself on those accusations till he had come almost to believe in their truth. They *must* be true—else why had he found Mme de Trélan under a false name, in an inconceivable situation, and ignorant whether her husband were alive or dead? He must have treated her abominably, or she would long ago have taken steps to join him! And now that, since his visit to Mirabel, suspicion as to de Kersaint's identity existed no longer, for he *knew*, the perpetual craving to wound, to avenge himself—and her—together with the intoxicating consciousness of the secret which he held, and which he meant to keep for ever from the one man on earth who had a right to know it, and to whom it would mean, as he guessed, at the lowest estimation release from hell, and perhaps much more—all these were driving him insensibly to a precipice which now he could see gaping in front of him and that other man almost with joy, for even if both of them fell over it he cared little, provided they fell together.

The last day or two had lent a more sinister purpose to his gibes. It began to be clear to him that he could not even wait for the Abbé's return, which might take place any day now. For what if he brought the news of the presence at Mirabel of something far more wonderful and precious than what he had gone to search for? All would be over then; *he* would certainly go to her. . . . The prospect was intolerable; the only way to render it impossible of realisation was to

provoke de Kersaint—if he could—before the priest's return. And despite the astonishing armour of self-control which the Marquis had succeeded in buckling on, the latter was beginning to lose patience at last.

The Comte saw it, and hugged the knowledge. Everything that he could say, short of direct personal insult, he had said to him whenever he had the chance, during the last four days. And he knew that his victim, unless he revealed his identity, was helpless to do more than resent his insinuations, since they were all directed against that presumably absent person, the Duc de Trélan. But the veil was wearing very thin now. The hour would soon come when the man who had woven it would be forced to tear it asunder with his own hands.

(2)

It had been a trying day, sultry, and overshadowed by the threat of thunder without its relief. A despatch had come too from a subordinate to say that the zeal of the recruits in his region was sensibly diminishing because only one in four could be armed. As usual for the last three nights, there had been one or two other officers to supper. M. de Brencourt could smile, now, at that effort at self-protection on the Marquis's part. Hatred, like love, will find out the way. Yet he had not hoped that he could bring about the explosion that very evening.

After the other officers had withdrawn and the supper dishes were removed, M. de Kersaint was obliged to consult his chief of staff about the news which had just arrived. Nor, to do him justice, did the Comte de Brencourt give to the matter in hand much less attention than he would have done had their relations been perfectly normal.

At the end M. de Kersaint remarked that unless the gold from Mirabel was in their hands soon it would come too late to be of use.

"You have not heard further from the Abbé then?" asked his second-in-command, though he was aware that he had not.

"Not a word."

"He may be arrested—the whole attempt a failure then, for all we know?"

"Yes," said de Kersaint with a little sigh. "And with it the best of our hopes for Finistère."

De Brencourt shook his head in an affectation of sympathy.

"I wonder you can sleep at night, Marquis, with so much on your mind!"

The proud grey eyes met his. "I do not find it difficult, thanks," returned his leader drily, and he got up and went to the window, where he pulled aside the rough curtain and looked out. Moonlight came in when he did so.

The Comte made a movement as though to go, but he still lingered, his eyes fixed on the back turned to him.

"It begins to look as if Mirabel had proved as fatal to the Abbé as to Roland and myself and . . . its late mistress," he observed.

"We must hope not," replied the Marquis after a moment, drumming lightly on the window pane.

"I feel sure," went on the Comte, "that, from what I have heard of him, de Trélan's remorse over that business—assuming that he felt any—would be due rather to the damage suffered by his own reputation than to any affection for his wife. Don't you think that is probable, de Kersaint?"

The man at the window suddenly flung open the casement as though he needed air. And indeed there was sweat on his forehead.

"By the way," pursued his tormentor, as though struck by a sudden idea, "I don't believe I ever asked you, Marquis, who was de Trélan's heir? He had no *legitimate* children, I fancy?"

There was a momentary pause.

"No," said M. de Kersaint, without moving. "The Duc de Savary-Lancosme, his cousin-german, would have come into most of his property." And he shut the window again.

"Is Savary-Lancosme alive?"

"He was guillotined in '94."

"Humph. He must sleep more soundly, then, than his cousin."

The Marquis de Kersaint dropped the curtain over the moonlit casement and half turned round. "I really do not know why he should," he said shortly, yet speaking, as was evident, with the most careful self-restraint. "Shall we say good-night now, Comte?"

A very little more and he might do it, if he could only hit on the right thing. So, instead of taking this broad hint, the Comte de Brencourt sat down carelessly on the table.

"I wonder," he observed slowly, and with a sort of casual reflectiveness, "if *that* was the reason of de Trélan's . . . poltroonery."

He waited, after that last substantive, either for an explosion, or for a question as to what he meant. Neither came. But, glancing across the zone of lamplight to the window, he saw the smitten rigidity of his victim, and was filled with hope.

"I mean," he explained, "the fact of the late Duchesse's childlessness . . . Poor lady!"

Luck had served him far better than he could ever know. He had stabbed at the rawest wound of all, the most

torturing memory. The Marquis swung round with clenched hands.

“And who gave you the right to make suppositions about the private affairs of the Duc and Duchesse de Trélan, Monsieur?” he demanded in a voice of hardly suppressed fury.

The Comte got off the table and looked at him.

“The same Fates, I imagine,” he answered coolly, “which caused the Duchesse to stand, in her lifetime, so sadly in need of some champion, by making her husband what he was—what he is!”

And at that the string snapped entirely. M. de Kersaint strode round the table. “Mort de ma vie! this is insufferable! Monsieur de Brencourt, I have borne insolence and innuendo from you long enough! I have been far too patient——”

“The innuendo, Monsieur,” broke in de Brencourt with a grim exultation, “the innuendo, since you term it so, shall be dropped. God knows I desire nothing better! Anything that I have said of the Duc de Trélan I will repeat to the Duc de Trélan’s face. You cannot retort that that is an idle boast! Have I not recently seen a certain portrait in primrose satin at Mirabel?”

The original of that portrait put his hand for a second over his eyes. But it was only for a second; then he faced his enemy, his head high, and said, with blazing scorn,

“It is an idle boast, and a cowardly! You have insulted me past endurance—have gone on doing it—and yet you know I cannot demand satisfaction. Is that chivalry?”

“Cannot demand satisfaction?” cried the Comte de Brencourt with a sneer. “And why not, pray? Are you still intent on keeping up the farce of the Duc de Trélan’s being somewhere far away—somewhere *safe*—somewhere where you have to write letters to him . . . the farce of his not being in this very room, standing on the identical spot you are standing on now?”

“You know I do not mean that!” retorted M. de Kersaint, white with fury. “I mean that you have gone on in your underhand and venomous persecution, knowing that, placed in such a position as mine, I could not call you to account for it. You have done a despicable thing knowing that you were safe from consequences, but some day—some day, by God,—you shall give me full reparation for your conduct!”

The Comte, darkly flushed, was gripping the hilt of his sword with his left hand. “I will give it you to-night—with all my heart!” he said between his teeth.

“Do not be absurd, Monsieur!” said his leader sharply. “You are beside yourself to suggest such a thing. How *could* we go out, you and I, the general and the second-in-command of the army of Finistère! The whole of the West would ring with the scandal. We must part, that is plain, but we cannot fight . . . unfortunately.”

The Comte saw the precipice receding. He gathered himself together for a final effort.

“Then, Monsieur le Duc de Trélan,” he said, “give me leave to tell you that, my opinion of your past behaviour being unchanged, I must now add to it what I think of your present. You have not redeemed yourself by these last years—by that business of Rivoli and the rest. You are, as you always were . . . *un lâche*!”

He had reached his goal. That intolerable word, delivered moreover like the sting of a whip, was too much for the determination of the proud nature at which it was flung.

“Will you fight me now?” asked de Brencourt, watching him.

“Yes!” said Gaston de Trélan with a gasp, and, as though to seal his reversed decision and make it impossible to withdraw from it, he struck the Comte with the back of his hand, but quite lightly, across the mouth.

“Thank you!” said the latter, apparently accepting the formal blow in the same spirit. “I thought you would see reason in the end.” He passed his handkerchief across his lips and became business-like. “We cannot fight here, that is plain. And we must dispense with seconds.”

“There is a full moon,” said the Duc de Trélan curtly. “We must go to the forest. By that dolmen they call the Moulin-aux-Fées would serve. There is a level clearing there.”

“Yes, that would serve admirably. We must provide some excuse—say we are anxious to make a reconnaissance or something of the kind—since I suppose it is impossible to get out without being seen. Nobody should suspect . . . unless one of us does not come back. Then it will be—the work of some lurking Republican.”

M. de Kersaint nodded. “And the weapons? Swords, I presume.”

“I should prefer swords,” said his adversary. “Unfortunately”—he looked doubtfully at his right hand—“I am afraid that since the affair of la Croix-Fendue my wrist is still too stiff for anything so delicate as sword-play.”

“I had forgotten that. It must be pistols then. We shall have to go further off, that is all. Who is officer of the guard to-night?”

“Young La Vergne, I am afraid,” said the Comte.

The Marquis consulted his watch. “Shall we say in half an hour, then?” he suggested. “I have one or two matters that I must set in order, in case I fall; you doubtless the same. And if I fall, Comte, the command devolves naturally on you—at least till you hear from Edinburgh. Possibly you would be confirmed in the command of Finistère.” He spoke quite dispassionately, as if he were one of the seconds in whose hands, had not the circumstances been unusual, the conduct of the affair would have rested, and going to the little travelling safe began to unlock it. De Brencourt picked

up some papers he had brought with him and went to the door.

"You have only to mark anything you wish 'Private,' and I give you my word it shall be burnt unread," he observed. "I for my part shall rely on a similar consideration." On him, too, rested the same forced composure.

"You may do so, Monsieur," said the Marquis, without looking round. "There will be nothing private here, however, but a couple of letters that I am going to write now. You will find, on the other hand, a number of papers that will be essential to you if you have to take over the command. I will just see that they are in order.—Will you come back for me in half an hour, then?"

"Yes," said the Comte, and, something impelling him to salute, perhaps for the last time, the leader he hoped to kill, he did so and went out.

The moment that the door closed behind his enemy Gaston de Trélan drew a long, almost a sobbing breath, and bending his head stood gripping the edge of the safe with both hands. He had had such a hard fight of it . . . and he was beaten after all. But the consuming rage that shook him left no room now for consciousness of defeat; and that rage, so overpowering for a moment or two as to make him feel physically faint, gave way in its turn to a savage gladness. For duty's sake, and at almost unbearable cost to himself, he had tried to avoid this thing—but now that it had come, and he was going to settle the score, what place was there for anything but a measureless relief? Good God, because he commanded Finistère, was he to submit to a series of insults without parallel?

After a few minutes he loosed his hold of the safe, sat down at the table, pulled writing-materials towards him, and began to write rapidly. Thrusting his hand inside his shirt when he had finished, he brought out and slipped over his head something which hung round his neck on a ribbon. It was a white, gold-edged cross with a red medallion in the centre surrounded by a border of white and gold—the cross of the Order of Maria Theresa, never given save for personal valour in the field. Around the medallion ran the single word, "*Fortitudini*." He placed the decoration in the letter, which he sealed and addressed to "Monsieur le Vicomte de Céligny," writing underneath, "Not to be opened except in the event of my death." This done, he wrote another which he addressed to the Abbé Chassin, and took them both to put in the safe. Standing by that receptacle he then sorted through some papers and locked it up again. Then he took his pistols from their case, oiled them very carefully, loaded them, and laid them on the table.

There were still five minutes or so before he went out to use them. He stood looking down at them a little. Then he went slowly to the fireplace and laid his head on his folded arms on the mantel. It was bitter to be driven to this, just when he was on the eve of making his work in Finistère a success. To-morrow, if he lived, he might hear that the money from Mirabel was truly his—for the Cause—but to-night he must expose himself to the chance of being killed by this man who had been trying for days to provoke him. Well, God knew he had done his utmost that he should not succeed—but there was a limit to what could be borne by flesh and blood. Would not even *she* have said so, for whose memory's sake he had tried to do something worthy of a man? . . . But if he fell, what a way to fall—in a quarrel with his own chief of staff?

Then it came back upon him like a flood that his enemy had dared to use her sacred name as a cover for his own unspeakable insolence, and regret and reluctance were gone as though they had never been. He would kill de Brencourt for that! He went back to the table and took up his pistols.

It was time indeed, for as he pushed the first into his belt there came a tap at the door, and the Comte reappeared.

"Are you ready?" he asked in a low voice.

The Marquis, with a face like flint, nodded and took up the second pistol. But M. de Brencourt closed the door behind him.

"Before we go," he said, "would it not be as well to settle the distance and the order of firing? We might do that as conveniently here as in the forest."

"Certainly," agreed his adversary. "The less time we spend there the better."

"Ten paces, then?" suggested the other. "Moonlight is not daylight." (But, even in the moonlight, it would surely be impossible to miss at ten paces.)

"Very well," agreed M. de Kersaint indifferently. "Across a handkerchief, if you like—only there are no seconds to hold it for us."

"No, and that is the other point," said the Comte de Brencourt with some eagerness. "Since there is no one to count for us, or to make any signal, we cannot with the best will in the world be sure of firing at exactly the same moment. I suggest, therefore, that we draw lots to determine who is to fire first."

There was a second's pause. The Marquis had not faced this difficulty. But of course some such reliance on a hazard was inevitable. "That would certainly be best," he replied, looking steadily at its proposer. "There might, too, in that case, be only one shot to attract attention."

"Quite so. How shall we settle it then?" asked the Comte, looking round the room.

"I have it," said his opponent rather grimly, plunging a hand into a pocket. "A very simple way, if somewhat childish. You see this coin?" And he held out on his open palm a florin of the last issue of Louis XVI. "I will put my hands behind my back, and when I bring them closed into sight again you shall guess which of them contains the

florin. If you guess rightly the first shot shall be yours—if you guess wrongly, mine. Are you content? Or would you prefer to hold the coin and I will guess? But I think the odds are just the same either way."

"No, I am perfectly content that you should hold it," replied his foe. So, standing there in the lamplight, the Marquis de Kersaint, commanding in chief for the King in Finistère, and in past days, when he bore another name, a very great gentleman indeed, put his hands behind him in the way that children have done for centuries, with not the fate of a game but his own, perhaps, hanging on the choice. In another moment he brought his closed fists in front of him again and looked at M. de Brencourt.

"I choose the left hand," said the Comte.

M. de Kersaint opened his fingers. The silver effigy lay in his palm. His life was M. de Brencourt's for the taking.

"Let us go, then," he said, and turned down the lamp.

CHAPTER IV

A MOONLIGHT WALK IN THE FOREST

(1)

Thousands of years before, the ancient and forgotten race, drowned now in the mists of time, which had set up in those parts the long ranks of menhirs on the lande, had raised in the forest, over the remains of some dead chieftain, a great dolmen of granite. The death-chamber had long ago been rifled of bones and treasure, but it still stood, no different from what it had been for the last few hundred years, with ferns growing out of the cracks, and one of its supports prone, and an aged oak, immeasurably younger than itself, watching over it. And to this spot the two men, with passions no less primitive in their hearts, made their way; for on one side of the Moulin-aux-Fées, as the peasants called it, there was a little clearing.

It was true that M. de Kersaint had said, when pistols were named, that they must go further than this. But when they beheld the clearing, so inviting in the cold light that flooded it from a moon well over the tree tops, its suitability to the work they had in hand struck both of them so strongly that they agreed it was not necessary to go on. They had already put a considerable distance between them and the Clos-aux-Grives, and the little wind that walked the forest to-night had its light feet set in the opposite direction. They would risk the sound of a shot carrying back to the farm.

So, under the impassive gaze of the moon, which alone made their culpable proceedings possible at this hour, they measured out ten paces, first one of them, then the other, and set each a bit of dead branch to mark their respective positions. When this was done to their satisfaction they found themselves standing at the Comte's mark examining their pistols for the last time.

"I shall not cock mine until you have fired, Monsieur," announced the Marquis. "If there were to be an accident—such things have happened—you might think I had broken our compact."

"I have no fear, Monsieur, of an accident of that kind," returned de Brencourt, buttoning his coat up to the throat as he spoke. "However, as you please—But you are surely going to take off that white scarf of yours?" And as the Marquis looked down a little doubtfully at the white scarf of leadership round his waist, his opponent added hotly, "Good God, man, do you think I am going to stand up and fire at you unless you do? It would be murder! And your sword—the hilt catches the moonlight." His own lay already at his feet.

"Very well," agreed the Marquis, and began, almost, it seemed reluctantly, to detach the scarf. Having unwound it he paused with it in his hand.

"I have a request to make of you, Comte, before I go to my place," he said, not altogether in the tone of one making a request. "The disagreement between us being a purely personal matter, I should be glad to have your word that you intend to respect my secret, whatever the result of our encounter?"

De Brencourt looked at him. It was some satisfaction to have him begging for terms—no, begging was certainly not the word for one who spoke like that.

"Yes, I promise you that," he answered. "Whatever the result of our encounter, I will keep your secret as far as in me lies."

"Thank you," returned his adversary. And, throwing the white scarf from him, he turned and walked to his place.

Artus de Brencourt waited a second or two, his pistol by his side. This was the moment he had hoped and schemed for, and it was sweet. Yet now that it had come, it suddenly seemed incredible that they two should be facing each other like this. A few months ago, who would have predicted it? . . . No use to think of that now, nor, since he was a gentleman, with his enemy's life in his hands, did he desire to keep that enemy in mortal suspense longer than was needful. Best be as quick about the business as possible. He was a notoriously good shot. . . .

"Are you ready?" he called out.

And the Marquis de Kersaint, standing like a dark statue in the moonlight, his face merely a pale blur, his arms folded on his breast, silently nodded.

The Comte de Brencourt drew a deep breath, raised his pistol, and took a long and steady aim for the statue's heart.

Yet when he had got the barrel on the mark his hand began to shake. He bit his lip. If only de Kersaint had his own weapon cocked, were not standing there defenceless to be shot at by the man who had insulted him. It took some courage to do that! And he had called him a coward. . . . Had it not been an affair of honour it had felt a little too much like murder for his taste after all. Yet he intended to kill Valentine's husband. And the iron sanction of the code which kept the other there as a mere target for his bullet kept him there too, determined to complete his work.

. . . But—could he complete it? The Comte had no idea how deceptive even the most brilliant moonlight can be, for now, at a short ten paces' distance, he found to his mortification that he could not really distinguish the outline of de Kersaint's body, though he could see it as a mass. That scarf would have been useful, yet it did not occur to him to regret it. Bending all his will anew to the task he succeeded in steadying his hand, and his forefinger began to close round the trigger. In another second or two. . . . Would the Marquis spin round, as a man sometimes did when shot

through the heart, or would he fall forward on his face? . . . Odd that he should think, at such a moment, of the execution of Charette three years ago at Nantes, when, as the tale went, the indomitable spirit that dwelt in the riddled body of the Royalist chief had held him upright for a moment in death, with six balls in him. De Kersaint would have but one—sent there by a comrade. He, Artus de Brencourt, was doing the Directory's work for them! . . . No, he was doing Valentine's! One vision of her as he had seen her in her homely dress at Mirabel, one fleeting thought of those years of neglect before the storm, of the life she had led since, and those half regrets were swept aside like gnats before a gale. The baffling moonlight paralysed him no longer. He corrected his aim for the second time, set his teeth, and pressed the trigger.

The shot went echoing with startling effect in the silver silence; it seemed to reverberate even from the empty dolmen. A scuttling of some frightened creature took place in the undergrowth, and, as the light smoke cleared away, rising ghostlike towards the moon, the Comte saw that M. de Kersaint was staggering a little. He took a step backwards, threw out his left arm and regained his balance somewhat abruptly, while the uncocked pistol slid with a rustle and a thud into the bracken at his feet. Either to recover it, or because he could not help himself, he sank to one knee and appeared to be groping for it with his left hand; then, abandoning the attempt, he got rather unsteadily to his feet again, and stood a moment with his head bent, and his right arm still across his breast, where he had kept it all the time.

"You are hit, Monsieur? Can you not return my fire?" called out de Brencourt, still standing ready to receive it.

M. de Kersaint shook his head, then, turning his back on him, walked to the nearest tree and stood leaning against it, always holding his right arm to his breast, but now supporting it with the other. A doubtless annoyed owl sailed out of the branches above him with a hoot.

And, after all, his adversary never even paused to ask himself whether he were sorry he had not succeeded. . . . In a moment he was at his side.

"Where are you hit, Monsieur le Marquis?"

"In my right arm," said his opponent briefly. "You have disabled me. I cannot return your fire."

"I am sorry for that," said the Comte rather stiffly. "Are you sure you cannot—with your left hand?"

"I am sorry too," said the Marquis de Kersaint, lifting his head. "Believe me, I should not have done you the poor compliment of firing in the air! But it would be a farce—my left hand. I am extremely right-handed; so of what use to risk the noise of another shot. I fancy my arm is broken. Let us get back." He did not seem to know that, even as he spoke, the blood, very dark in the moonlight, was running through the fingers of the hand which held his wounded arm pressed up to his body.

"But first," interposed the Comte quickly, "we must stop this bleeding, however roughly. It is not from the artery, I trust?—no, I think not. Can you take your coat off . . . I'd better slit up the sleeve, in any case. Sit down on this stone, de Kersaint; that will be easier for both of us."

And, supporting him under his left arm, he guided his wounded enemy to the fallen block of the dolmen.

The Marquis sat down obediently, and lent his head for a moment on his left hand. It was evident, though not a sound passed his lips, that he was in a good deal of pain.

"No, don't do that, Comte!" he said suddenly, as de Brencourt, kneeling by him in the fern, began to take out a knife. "One doesn't want to make more . . . parade . . . about this business than one can avoid. Help me out of the coat instead." And he began to unbutton it.

"Much better let me slit the sleeve," objected de Brencourt with reason. However, seeing that the Marquis was determined, he unfastened his swordbelt, and as carefully as he could, stripped off the long uniform coat.

"I suppose you don't wish to preserve *this*?" he remarked, and, ripping up the drenched shirt-sleeve, examined the injury. In the outer side of the Marquis de Kersaint's forearm, midway between wrist and elbow, was a small round aperture, from which the blood was welling in a stream so steady as to suggest that it would never cease.

"The ball is still there, of course," observed its sender, absorbed in his examination. "Otherwise——" He came to an abrupt pause, suddenly realising by how very little his messenger of death had fallen short of its goal.

"Otherwise it would be in my heart, you were going to say," finished the Marquis with composure.

"Perhaps it was stopped by one of the bones," muttered de Brencourt, avoiding his eye. "I expect there is a breakage, as you say. . . . However, I had best tie it up as quickly as possible. I shall need your handkerchief as well as mine—perhaps your scarf too. It is bleeding like a fountain."

Carefully as a surgeon, and with something of a surgeon's dispassionate interest, he staunched and bandaged the injury which he himself had made—no bad exemplar, at that moment, of what there was gallant and chivalrous in a practice which had little enough to commend it.

"So there was only one shot after all," observed M. de Kersaint presently. "Did you mean to kill me, Comte?"

M. de Brencourt, tightening the last knot, looked at him with an odd expression. "Yes," he replied.

"I thought so," returned the Marquis coolly. "I am afraid, then, that this must have been somewhat of a

disappointment. You take it very well. It was the moonlight, I suppose? In many ways I should have been glad of your success."

A dark flush ran over his opponent's face. He made no reply, and laying down the bandaged arm gently on its possessor's knee, began to scrub at his own bloody hands with a frond of bracken. When he had got them comparatively clean he threw it away, got up from his knees, took a turn or two and came back.

"Marquis," he said, rather stiffly, "I aimed as well as I could. Evidently it was not to be. . . . And now, if you will allow me, I should like to take back the term I applied to you this evening. It is not applicable—and I do not think that I ever believed it was. But I meant you to fight me. You can guess why . . . and we need not go into what is done with. . . . And now that we have met, and blood has flowed—and I sincerely regret, as I said, that it should be yours alone——" He stopped.

The Marquis de Kersaint, still without his coat, got up from the fallen stone. To him also a duel was sacramental, and bloodshed, at the risk of life, did serve, between gentlemen, to wash out enmity. To what degree, however, that stain was ineffaceable, they could hardly know then, for they were both moved, little as they showed it, by the near passage of the dark angel.

"Thank you, M. de Brencourt," he said quietly. "Allow me to apologise, in my turn, for the blow I struck you—though I think you understand why I struck. I am quite willing to take your hand if you are willing to take mine; indeed, I was going to propose that, as neither of us after all is to remain permanently beside the Moulin-aux-Fées, we had better try, for the King's sake, to forget, if we can, what has passed between us. I at least am content to try. I do not wish to change my second-in-command."

"Nor I to change my leader!" cried the Comte, really shaken by the generosity which could forget his deliberate campaign of insults. He too held out his left hand, and they sealed the compact. Perhaps at the moment he almost forgot how much less complete the covenant was than the other imagined—forgot what he was holding back and meant to go on holding back. . . .

"And now," he said, recovering himself, "if you insist on getting into that sleeve again." He picked up the redingote. "It is a long way back—at least I fear you will find it so, de Kersaint."

"I only wish it were longer," said the Marquis, with a little frown. "They have such sharp ears, those young men of mine—I do not think the bone is broken after all. Help me into my coat, and lend me your arm, and I shall do very well."

(2)

The Clos-aux-Grives at last, white in the moonlight, between the sparser trees of the forest's verge. It was high time. But before the duellists were quite near enough to give the countersign to the sentry, whose challenge had just rung out, a figure from within the courtyard, shouting something to him, vaulted the low wall by the Chouan and raced towards them. So vehement was its haste that the two gentlemen stopped. It was then seen that the athlete was the Chevalier de la Vergne, in such a hurry that he had hardly time to pull himself up and to salute.

"I saw you coming, Monsieur le Marquis," he exclaimed breathlessly. "There is great news—M. l'Abbé has come back! . . . *What, are you hurt, sir!*"

("Damnation!" said the Comte de Brencourt under his breath.)

"Yes, a trifle," returned the Marquis carelessly. "A stray Blue in the forest; nothing to worry about. Come, Comte, let us go and welcome the Abbé. This is indeed good news—if it means his success." And, loosing the Comte's arm, as much, perhaps, to show his ability to do so as because the Comte displayed a tendency to be rooted to the spot, he began to walk towards the entrance.

"O, Monsieur le Marquis," exclaimed the young officer, accompanying him, "are you sure that it is not much? Why, I can see the blood on your sleeve . . . and on your breast too! Take my arm, de grâce,—and you will let me turn out the guard at once, will you not?"

"That is unnecessary, my dear boy," replied his leader; "so is your support. M. de Brencourt settled the Blue for me.—Good-night, Sans-Souci," he said, as the sentry presented arms.

"But you will not find the Blue, La Vergne—he got away after all," added the Comte quickly from behind. To him the duel was a secondary matter now—and, in itself, the Abbé's success or failure also. What other information had the priest brought from Mirabel . . . and how soon would he divulge it? Would it be possible to see him before de Trélan did? Hardly . . .

"And where is M. Chassin?" enquired M. de Kersaint directly they got inside, when the light from the sconce on the wall instantly betrayed to Artamène's distressed but ever observant eyes how pale he was—and with a smear of blood on his cheek too. "In my room?—then I will see him at once."

"Let me light you up the staircase, Messieurs!" cried the zealous Artamène, taking down the sconce.

"Are not the stairs lighted as usual?" asked the Comte irritably. "Yes, of course they are. No, go to your bed, La Vergne, and don't harass M. de Kersaint any more!"

"You forget, La Vergne is officer of the guard to-night," said the Marquis with a little smile. "Goodnight, my boy.

Don’t bother about that Blue. As for my arm, the Abbé will do anything further that is necessary.”

And he went off, followed by the Comte. Artamène looked after them, uttering wicked words below his breath; then he replaced the sconce, tiptoed into the “nursery,” and picked his way among the dozen or so slumbering forms there till he came to Lucien du Boisfossé’s pallet in a corner.

“Lucien, wake up!” he whispered, stooping over him and gently shaking him. “I want to tell you something!”

Astoundingly, Lucien opened his eyes at once. “Don’t blow into my ear like that, officer of the guard!” he returned. “And there’s no need to poke me so. I was awake. I have not been to sleep.”

“Great Heavens!” ejaculated Artamène. This was indeed an evening of surprises.

“I was,” said Lucien, complacently, “composing a proclamation in rhyme to the *patauds* of this canton. It was to begin——”

“Never mind that,” cut in Artamène ruthlessly. “Two much more interesting things have happened while you have been asl——I mean awake. The first is, that M. l’Abbé has returned from Mirabel——”

Lucien sat up in bed. “*Laus Deo!*” he exclaimed. “And has he got—*it*?”

“He wouldn’t tell me,” said the enquirer, “but I think from his manner that he has not been unsuccessful. However, the second thing is even more momentous. M. le Marquis and M. le Comte have just come back from a moonlight stroll in the direction of the forest, M. le Marquis as white as a sheet, with blood all over the sleeve of his coat and his right arm tucked into his breast.”

“Good God!” ejaculated Lucien, bounding upon his couch.

“Chut! don’t wake the others! (It will be impossible to keep it quiet, though.) It appears that they met a Blue in the forest—or at any rate a Blue was in the forest, dropped, perhaps like an acorn from a tree, for I know not how otherwise he could have been there—and he shot at and wounded M. le Marquis—one doesn’t yet know how seriously—and then, apparently, M. de Brencourt settled the hash of the Blue. At least, he fired and hit him; though he thinks the fellow got away. Now, what do you think of that for a Breton night’s entertainment? Don’t sit on your bed looking like an owl, Monsieur du Boisfossé!”

“An owl,” replied the young man unperturbed, “is the emblem of wisdom, also of us Chouans. I am thinking this, my Artamène, that while lying here engaged in the labours of composition, I heard, far away—so far away that I did not think it worth while disturbing the slumbers of the officer of the guard——”

“Well, what did you hear?” asked his friend, kicking him gently in return for this thrust.

“A shot—one shot,” replied Lucien.

Artamène’s mobile face changed, “Of course you will repeat that I was asleep, which is a lie. But I never heard it—nor the sentries, I presume, since none of them reported it.”

“But, my dear friend,” enquired Lucien earnestly, “if I was able to hear one shot, why didn’t I hear two?”

They stared at each other in the dim light, these two young investigators, the one sitting up in his shirt on his pallet, the other, booted and sword-girt, kneeling beside him.

“You mean,” said the latter after a moment, “that if you heard the shot which this solitary Blue fired at M. le Marquis, why did you not hear the shot which M. de Brencourt fired at the Blue?”

“That is my meaning,” responded Lucien weightily.

“So that—provided you were not dreaming—there was only one shot fired . . . and that was fired at the Marquis.”

Lucien nodded. “Obviously, since he has been hit.”

“And that shot could not have fired itself.”

“It is usual to infer a finger on the trigger.”

“The question is, Whose finger?—No, Lucien, we had better not go any further! As we have already said, there has been storm in the atmosphere lately. And this desire for exercise in the moonlight! . . . Yet it must have been all en règle, even though there were no witnesses, since they came back together on good terms—arm in arm, in fact. But for the Marquis to proceed to such an extremity!—I never did like M. de Brencourt!”

“I think you are going too fast, mon ami,” remarked the soberer Lucien. “They would never have chosen pistols, and risked being heard at headquarters.”

“They seem to have chosen *a* pistol, however,” retorted Artamène. “Whatever has happened, I am convinced that there has been the devil of a lot of lying done to-night . . . and that there will be even more to-morrow!”

“And who——”

“Charlemagne, I regret to say,” responded his friend, shaking his head, “—Charlemagne, who recently read me such a homily on truthfulness!”

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE ABBÉ THOUGHT OF IT

Up in the Marquis de Kersaint's room M. Pierre Chassin, priest and plotter, tired as he was, had been for some time pacing uneasily up and down. He had just returned from the mouth of the Seine and the successful despatch to England of the gold of Mirabel, which (as the agent in Paris at whose house it had been accumulating had indeed come under suspicion) the Abbé had had to pack up with exceeding haste, and take to the coast himself. But though he had just passed some agitated days and nights between Paris and Harfleur, the memory of them was as nothing to that of the shock and emotion he had experienced in the chapel at Mirabel. So that he was thinking at the moment scarcely at all of what he had so dexterously got out of the château, but of what he had left in it. And he was fairly distracted.

For the twentieth time he cursed the contre-temps which had hurried him away from Mirabel in so untimely a fashion, before he had had opportunity to decide whether he ought or ought not to break his solemn promise to Gaston—that promise renewed at Hennebont. Now he saw clearly that it would have been right to break it, and that if he had only been granted a little longer there he would have done so. And had not such grave issues depended on his getting the money into safety he would willingly have risked his own personal liberty by remaining a few hours longer near the Duchesse; he would even have returned to Mirabel when his errand was accomplished, but for the practical certainty of being arrested and thereby, probably, compromising her. Even now the idea had visited him of writing to her and revealing the Marquis de Kersaint's identity. But that would indeed be confiding his foster-brother's jealously-guarded secret to the birds of the air, for he could not use a cipher to Mme de Trélan, and the letter might be intercepted by the Government . . . and it might some day mean Gaston's life if the Directory knew who he really was. Still, she herself might write to the "Marquis de Kersaint" to make enquiries. God grant it! Or she might come in person, as he had so earnestly pressed.

Yet, if only he had learnt her secret otherwise than under the seal of the confessional, when the knowledge might not be communicated, might not be used. If only he had had the wit to guess it! But we only see what we have some grounds for believing that we shall see. . . . Here he was again, possessed of information he could not impart to the person vitally interested—only in this case time would never show him that he ought to disclose it. His lips were shut, absolutely, till eternity. Some other person must make the revelation—and the only other person who had the necessary knowledge was the Comte de Brencourt.

And M. de Brencourt had escaped, was already back. Perhaps he had told Gaston by this time—for what more natural than that the "kinsman" of the Duc de Trélan should be immediately informed of a fact of such paramount importance to his relative? Something, however, made the priest quite sure that M. de Brencourt had not taken this course—the remembrance of what he knew to be his deliberate lie to the Duchesse de Trélan. After viewing that lie from every side M. Chassin had come to a pretty correct estimate of the motive that had prompted it, and it did not raise his hopes of forcing the Comte to a revelation. Indeed, he almost wondered why M. de Brencourt had returned to the Clos-aux-Grives at all.

He wondered, too, with a growing uneasiness, on what conceivable errand the two gentlemen could have gone out to-night, as, on his own arrival, the exhilarated Artamène had told him they had done. Why should they both go, at such an hour, and without the shadow of an escort?

Then he heard steps and voices in the passage, and stopped his pacing. They were back. His forebodings suddenly seemed ridiculous. The door was opened a little way.

"Thank you, de Brencourt. Good-night," said Gaston's voice, with a ring of fatigue in it. "No, thanks; the Abbé will do anything that is necessary." And he came in.

The light in the room, emanating from a somewhat smoky lamp, did not instantly reveal his state, and he said, in a quite natural manner, "My dear Pierre! This is indeed good! And I am to congratulate you, I think?"

M. Chassin had advanced round the table to take his outstretched left hand. Nearer, he saw; and he no longer took the hand in question—he caught at it.

"Gaston! What in God's name has happened to you? Here—sit down, for pity's sake!"

He pulled out the nearest chair from the table, and, far from unwillingly, the wounded man sat down in it, saying as he did so, "But, my dear Pierre, why all this emotion at the sight of a little blood?"

The Abbé suddenly made use of a very unecclesiastical expression. "What has happened to you?" he repeated, standing over him.

"If you must know," said his foster-brother, leaning back with a little smile in the chair, "I have had the bad luck to be winged by a Blue who must have been lurking in the forest, and the wound, slight in itself, has bled a good deal, that is all.—Sit down, Pierre, and tell me your news. You have succeeded—I can see it!"

How he could see it on the perturbed countenance gazing down at him was not easy to guess.

"Yes, I have succeeded," returned the priest shortly. "But there is plenty of time to talk about that later. I will see this wound first, if you please. What in the name of fortune were you doing in the forest at this time of night? And who

bandaged this up—who was the imbecile who took your coat off you and put it on again instead of slitting up the sleeve?"

For the Marquis, submitting to the inevitable, had stiffly and painfully drawn his arm out of the breast of his coat and laid it on the table.

"One question at a time, mon cher," he said. "M. de Brencourt was with me, and it was he who was kind enough to do what he could for me. I myself was the imbecile who insisted on getting into my coat again."

"And why, may I ask?" enquired the Abbé, rapidly unbandaging. "Do you enjoy putting yourself to pain?"

"Does anybody?" retorted his patient. "I did not want to cause more alarm on my return than I needed; that was why."

"Humph; very thoughtful of you!" commented M. Chassin, glancing at him. "Tch! tch! a nice business! The ball is still there!"

"I believe it is," admitted M. de Kersaint almost apologetically.

"Can you move your fingers?"

"I can, but I don't want to."

"I wonder where it has got to," murmured the Abbé, still examining. "Does that hurt?"

"Yes, infernally," responded the victim, wincing.

"Very well, I will not do it again. Wherever it is the bullet will have to come out."

"Naturally," said the Marquis resignedly. "But at least tie my arm up for to-night—and tell me about the treasure."

"Tell me first about this, Gaston. Was the man near—this looks to me as if it had been fired from a few yards off only? Did you see him?"

"N . . . no; he was in the shadow under the trees."

"Whereabouts?"

His foster-brother hesitated. "Not far from the Moulin-aux-Fées."

"Holy Virgin, what were you doing there?"

"Perhaps foolishly, taking a walk." And then he went on quickly, "But are you not going to tie this thing up, or am I to spend the night like this?"

For his bared arm, streaked with blood and much swollen round the little bluish orifice, rested before him on the table, and the Abbé had retired into the bedroom.

"I am going to wash it first," came his voice from within. The Marquis put his head back against the chair. He suddenly looked exhausted.

The sound of pouring water was heard. "This solitary Republican had a musket, I imagine—or was it a pistol? The wound looks to me rather like a pistol-wound."

"No, it was a musket . . . at least I suppose so," replied the duellist almost inaudibly. The priest came to the door of the bedroom and looked at him for a second; then he vanished again and reappeared with a glass in his hand.

"Drink this, if you please, Gaston!" he said authoritatively. His brother opened his eyes.

"I detest brandy," he said, almost petulantly. "And you surely do not think that I am going to faint?"

"That is as it may be," returned the Abbé, watching the speaker narrowly as he took and drained the glass. And he washed and bandaged very speedily, asking not a single further question during the operation. Perhaps he had come to the conclusion that he were better advised not to do so, for other reasons than that his patient was not in the most fitting condition to answer them. After which, refusing in his own turn to satisfy any enquiries about the treasure that evening, he announced his intention of acting as the Marquis's body-servant for the nonce; and did so.

"You'll do best with this pillow under your arm," he observed when the wounded man was in bed. "We will have the surgeon from Lanvennec as early as we can get him to-morrow morning."

"Damnable nuisance, that!" muttered the sufferer impatiently. "Are you sure that you could not manage to extract the ball yourself, Pierre?"

"Having some small idea of the intricate structure even of the human arm," responded M. Chassin, arranging the pillow under the arm in question, "I am quite sure that I could not, without possibly maiming you for life. And why should you object to having a surgeon?—Is that comfortable?"

"Since you succeeded in extracting the gold from Mirabel," observed Mirabel's owner, looking up at him with a rather feverish brilliance in his eyes, "I should have thought that a trifle like this would be nothing to you. My God, Pierre, have you really got it all—twenty-five thousand pistoles? It is almost too good to believe! Why, with half that amount——"

The priest held up his finger, smiling. "Yes, I got it nearly all away. And now you must——"

"A moment, Pierre! no, I insist on asking this! That woman at Mirabel—the concierge; I hope she has not been compromised in any way? I should be most deeply concerned if it were so."

"Ah, the concierge," repeated M. Chassin, and he paused. "—No, as far as I know, she has not fallen under suspicion at all. But I had to leave extremely hurriedly, so that I should be very glad if I—if you, rather, could make

enquiries on the point."

"I shall do so," said his foster-brother. "Think of what I owe her—the boy's safety, perhaps his life. . . . Why are you looking at me like that, Pierre?"

The priest pulled himself together. "You have asked enough questions for to-night, Gaston. Just answer me one in return.—Since we parted, has not M. de Brencourt . . . guessed your secret?"

The Marquis flushed, and his mouth tightened. "I think he guessed it long ago."

"But he knows it now, beyond guessing—you know that he knows?"

A pause. "Yes," said the Duc de Trélan at last, frowning and reluctant. "I know . . . that he knows."

He turned his head away on the pillow.

"Thank you," responded M. Chassin rather grimly. And then, he added, in a tone astonishingly light-hearted, "I daresay it is as well."

The Duc bit his lip. "I am glad you think so," he replied in an exceedingly cold voice. And from the reply and its manner the priest learnt what he wanted to learn. M. de Brencourt had made no pleasant use of his knowledge.

"If you need anything in the night, or cannot sleep, Gaston, call for me. I shall spend it in your room out there.—Yes, it is necessary. Try not to make calculations about what Mirabel has given you, but get some rest if you can."

"And if I cannot, what pleasanter subject could I have to think about?" enquired his patient, looking up at him again. The frown was gone. "And for that, as for so much else, I have to thank you, my brother." He held out his left hand.

"And suppose," said the Abbé in a low voice, as he took it in both his own, "suppose that I had come back with my news to find you with a bullet in your heart! Gaston, you might have remembered . . . me!"

The hand in his own returned his grip, but the voice said, with fair composure, "Yes, it was foolhardy, that walk. But surely, Pierre, you know that one day or the other you are certain to find me as you say; and you know, too, that if I have finished my task it is what I should desire."

"Yes," said Pierre Chassin very gravely. "I do not wish you any better death, when the time comes. But the death you faced to-night was not worthy of you. Perhaps the prayers of . . . of one who lived at Mirabel averted it. And I know you must have been tried beyond endurance. . . . See, I have shaded the candle so; and remember to call me. Good-night, mon frère."

CHAPTER VI

MEMINI ET PERMANEO

It was soon plain to Gaston de Trélan that, between bodily pain and mental turmoil, sleep was not likely to visit him much that night. He would, at least, keep that fact from Pierre if he could. . . . Poor Pierre! it seemed to be his fate to cause him anxiety! And he owed him so much, more than a man could ever repay: his life—that was little—but what measure of self-respect he had also.

That life he had nearly cast away this evening, and, because of his present position and circumstances, he fully shared the priest's reprobation of the hazard, but no other course had been possible, for not Pierre himself, who had so quickly penetrated the tale of the "Blue," could guess the lengths to which he had suffered de Brencourt to go before he consented to fight him. Even to Pierre he was not going to repeat the things the Comte had said. . . .

Seven years ago, in London, only the little priest's affection and determination had prevented society from saying next day, "You remember that French émigré, the Duc de Trélan, whom we used to meet everywhere? Well, he has just shot himself—and small wonder!" And it was not as if Gaston and his protégé were then on terms of intimacy, for they had seen little of each other for the previous ten years or so, since his own visits to St. Chamans had become so much rarer—above all since the priest had come under his displeasure for something he had ventured to say to him down there not unconnected with Mme de Céligny. Few people, even of his own rank, under M. de Trélan's displeasure cared to have dealings with him in that condition, and yet this peasant-priest, who had never approached his patron in his own need (for the Duc afterwards discovered that he had been living in London for weeks on the verge of starvation) had the disinterested courage to oppose him in the blackest hour of his life. And Pierre Chassin had done more than stay his finger on the trigger, for when, during that dreadful vigil, Gaston himself had said, out of his agony, that no other path remained open to him, since neither in England nor in France could he ever look an acquaintance in the face again, it was the Abbé who replied, "Then change your name. Do not go to serve with Condé, as you were intending; go where no one knows you." And so, as the Marquis de Kersaint, the Duc de Trélan—a soldier by education and the descendant of soldiers—entered Austrian service against the French Republic, thinking, mistakenly, that he could soon throw away his life on the battlefield; as the Marquis de Kersaint he rose to command, found a certain anodyne in hard work and fighting, and was in touch by letter during those years with the only man he could really call friend—his only confidant at least—the humbly-born foster-brother who had stood by him in his extremity; and had earned the right to address him more freely than a brother by blood would ever have dared to do.

But of the two things he sought—forgetfulness or death—M. de Trélan had found neither. For him the arrogant motto of his race was only too true—*'Memini et permaneo*, I remember and I remain.' It soon became clear to him that when a man desired extinction he could not have it. What of the hazards of that Italian campaign, of the fights for Mantua, of Castiglione, Caldiero, Arcola, through which he had always come untouched till the day of Rivoli? Even then death had tossed him aside in the end.

Indeed, that disastrous fourteenth of January, 1797, when the young, haggard-eyed general from Corsica had beaten the Austrian marshal on that plateau among the mountains, had brought Gaston de Trélan not death but honour. At Vienna, when he had recovered from his all but fatal wound, the Emperor's hand had bestowed on him the coveted Cross he wore. So, when the peace of Campoformio had ended Austria's wars for a time, and the Abbé Chassin, now an accredited agent of the Royalists of the West, had deterred him from entering Russian service and persuaded him, despite his hatred of the place, to come to London, he came, in his borrowed name—and found himself, to his surprise, no little of a hero there also. For there had been attached to Alvintzy's staff at Rivoli an English officer of discernment, who, greatly struck by the part played in the battle by "Colonel de Kersaint" and his practically forlorn hope of a column, while much criticising the higher command for devoting it to destruction, had not spared in his despatches eulogies of its leader nor regrets for his supposed fate. And after a little while spent in London, in very different circles from those in which he moved before, the "Marquis de Kersaint" was offered by the Comte d'Artois and his council the post of organising and leading Finistère. He accepted; but nothing would induce him to go to Edinburgh for the personal interview which the Prince desired. They had met too often at Versailles for that.

So he had now in his hands the chance to do something that she whom he had lost would have approved. In those years of self-imposed expiation he had learnt what he had thrown away, not so much in failing her at the moment of peril, which he had done in ignorance, but through his insane blindness in having so little prized, through all the best of life, a love and a nobility which many a man would have given his soul to possess. In the great and terrible awakening through which he had passed in London he had seen himself as he must have appeared to other men, and that hell was too sharp at first for any consolation to visit him, and any least thought or memory of Valentine could only be more exquisite torture. Yet there came a day when, instead of averting his mind from what he could not bear to contemplate, he found himself gazing at it as the one hope in the blackness, as a trembling pagan might see the image of the martyr smile upon him, the martyr his own hands had done to death. Valentine had loved him; what if she loved him still?

It grew in him to conviction, that first dim fancy; it saved him, probably, from madness. Lost, sometimes, like a star

which the clouds have blotted out, it always reappeared, and shone at last with almost the light of an inspiration, a proof of the strong and steady influence which the dead can wield. So it came about in the end that, for all the suffering and hopeless regret involved, Gaston, Duc de Trélan, was fast in love with his wife's memory—so fast that he who had once been "Saint-Charmart" in Paris salons had in Vienna the character of a woman-hater—so fast that he felt, if Valentine knew the depth of his repentance and his pain, she, with her wide charity, would forgive him everything . . . as he doubted not that, in the supreme hour, she had.

But to forgive oneself, that was a different matter. His own stark pride, so interwoven with the fabric of his whole nature, seemed to put that possibility ever further and further from him as the years went by. Yet, if he could not himself forget, it seemed at least that others had done so—till that night at Hennebont when the calumny which he had believed dead had reared its head for an instant. Afterwards it had slept again, apparently, through all the directions he had been obliged to give de Brencourt about Mirabel before despatching him thither, in which he knew quite well that he was risking having the veil torn from the wound. His sacrifice, made to get the gold for the cause to which he had vowed himself, had recoiled on his own head. For days now he had been at the mercy of the Comte, with his knowledge of that slander which was half true; and de Brencourt had behaved like a Red Indian with an enemy at the stake, subjecting him to a deliberate mental torture to which this night's hazard and bloodshed had been nothing but a relief. It was small consolation to know that he, for his part,—till the coming of the breaking-point—had endured reiterated agony without giving a sign . . . agony not only to his pride but to his love. For it was true—by what diabolical instinct had de Brencourt known it?—that his chief thought when he received the terrible news had been for his own honour . . . though it had long ceased to be true. But that final remark about the want of an heir, the very taunt he had thrown at her himself! Even now, alone and in half darkness though he was, the Duc de Trélan threw his arm over his eyes and groaned aloud. Ah, that look of mortal pain on her face when he had spoken those cruel words—the last he was ever to say to her, the last look he was to carry away. *Memini et permaneo!* And had *she* remembered, when in the same room she had faced that scene of violence which was but the prelude to the other, the final, the unspeakable, outside the prison door?

It was more than clear to him now what had reawakened de Brencourt's enmity; it was that visit to Mirabel where she had lived. That he himself in the past had known nothing of his wife's acquaintance with the Comte was but natural, seeing how their lives, even before their final separation, had drifted asunder, and it was the fact that de Brencourt should have constituted himself her defender against him, her husband, which had proved so intolerable. His wife's memory championed against him by a casual admirer! For the vulgar question as to what Valentine's relations with the Comte de Brencourt might possibly have been had no power over him. It needed not the enshrinement of death to set her reputation above any suspicion of unfaithfulness. It had stood there in life, something of a marvel among so many which were otherwise. He had not that, at least, to rack him.

Now, judging de Brencourt by the standard common to gentlemen, since they had been out together and blood had flowed, he expected a surcease of this bitter hostility. Absurd as it might be, the fact that he, the injured party, had a bullet in his arm signified, by the code, that his honour was satisfied. Since Gaston de Trélan had been reared in that code, it did not seem absurd to him—though damnably inconvenient and painful. Yet, though de Brencourt had shared with him that sacrament of expiation, and had taken his hand after it, his superior was beginning to see that he, at least, had undertaken by the dolmen more than he could carry out. De Brencourt's conduct had been too deliberate. They would not be able to work together to any profit. He would be obliged, after all, to ask him to resign. For a few days, however, in order to disarm suspicions on the part of his staff, they would have to go on as before. Then he would appoint du Ménars in the Comte's place. It would be best; for now he must concentrate all his energies on distributing the arms which the treasure would shortly procure from England, where, as already arranged, the Government would buy the gold as it stood, by weight.

Yes, at last he had the means in his power to make his difficult task a success. He would, moreover, have had the satisfaction of having provided these himself. It meant a great deal to him—more than he had once thought anything in life could mean. And lying there, more than a little feverish, he began to be busy with plans and schemes. Undoubtedly, when the time was fully ripe, as it nearly was, this great uprising of the West would be no petty insurrection. It might change the destinies of France. And he would have no small part in that consummation—he who had wasted all his opportunities, as Valentine had told him at the last, and only too truly. Yet he could not lay any achievement, past or future, any expiation, before her now. She was gone where she could hear neither of Italy nor Finistère.

Gaston de Trélan turned restlessly in the bed. His arm was on fire; he was already between sleep and fever, and, as sometimes happened still, the desperate wound he had taken in his side two and a half years ago, though fully healed, awoke to pain once more. And perhaps because of the ache of the one and the fever of the other, he suddenly saw, as a detached spectator might see in a great picture, the heights and vineyards of Rivoli, the lofty plateau which the French had so victoriously retained, the snowy slopes of Monte Baldo above it, below, the zigzag path from the valley choked with a horrible débris of the slain men and horses and the cannon of Reuss's pounded column—and under Monte Baldo, himself, among the dead and dying of his own corps, sacrificed in an impossible enterprise, lying as he had

fallen in beating off the charge of Junot's cavalry, the whole side of his white Austrian uniform one great stain of blood. He saw the picture in this curious way for a moment, with the sun going down red behind the mountains of Garda—the next, physical memory caught him up, and he was back in that still conscious body of his, lying there hour after hour in the cold, defeated and forgotten. The stars came out in the January night; down below in the gorge roared the Adige, swollen with the winter rains; he could hear from the smirched and trampled snow a few groans, a prayer or two; he was not sure that he was not groaning himself. . . . And he remembered the three days of that toilsome march round Monte Baldo on which he had been despatched in order to take Joubert in the rear—a project ill-conceived and ill-timed, as he was well aware—his breaking in consequence with his five battalions on the doubly-reinforced foe when the battle was already lost, the hopeless conflict against the whole weight of the French army, with its inevitable close—surrender. But *he* had not surrendered. . . . The cold grew numbing; was this sleep, or death . . .

Finistère's leader came out of this half coma of reminiscence with a start, and realised where he was, how far removed in time and space from the great Austrian disaster. He supposed that he was a trifle light-headed, for he had really felt that the next thing would be the arrival of those dim, frosty-breathed forms with lanterns, and Schnitterl's voice, and he would be lifted to a stretcher and to a resumption of that life he thought he had done with at last. Josef had often told him how he had begged to be left there. But no . . . *Et permaneo*.

After all, he thought now, staring at the moving reflection of the candle on the ceiling, perhaps it was as well that he had not died there in the snow. There was a chance to-day of something better than mere personal heroism. Although nothing, nothing could undo the past nor give him back the dead, yet, if ever they met beyond the grave, he might have some guerdon to lay there at her feet—some tiny sprig of laurel that he could point to and say, "Valentine, I was not wholly what you thought me. . . ."

And for a moment he fancied that he saw her, shadowy and bejewelled, by the bed.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHURCH MILITANT

It was Lucien who rode to Lanvennec next morning for the surgeon. M. de Brencourt considered him discreet, and chose him rather than Artamène (who had besides been up all night) or any other of the younger men. But had he known that Lucien, though outwardly respectful and certainly of a fundamental prudence, was finishing in his head as he rode a short but very venomous epistle in verse, beginning, "*Artus, le Judas de nos jours!*" in which, somewhere near the end, "*maître*" rhymed with "*traître*," he might have selected another messenger.

However, the surgeon came, concerned but unsuspicious, and, assisted by M. Chassin, did his unpleasant work with reasonable speed and deftness, producing at the end of it what he vaguely termed a "projectile" from a region of M. de Kersaint's forearm which, on the contrary, he described with much exactitude. And while he was binding up the arm in question the Abbé quietly annexed the bullet—"as a souvenir," he said.

But someone else seemed to be souvenir-hunting that morning. Not long after the Abbé had left his patient to repose and had established himself again in the outer room with his reflections and his breviary, the Comte de Brencourt appeared there.

"Is it out satisfactorily?" he enquired.

"Quite," replied the priest. "A painful business; but nothing, mercifully, appears to be permanently injured. Yet the surgeon tells me that our leader"—he stressed the words a little—"came very near never having the use of his sword-arm again."

The Comte looked grave. To do him justice, he had desired last night to kill, not to maim.

"The curious thing," went on the priest, "is that the bullet is a pistol bullet, though last night M. de Kersaint distinctly said that his assailant shot him with a musket."

"No, no! The man had a pistol," said M. de Brencourt. "The Marquis was mistaken."

"Obviously the man had a pistol," agreed M. Chassin with serenity. "And not an army pistol either."

The Comte met his look. "I should rather like to see that bullet," he observed.

"No doubt," thought the Abbé, twiddling it in his pocket. "But you are not going to." And as he made no audible reply to this suggestion the enquirer had to let the subject drop.

"To turn to another question, Abbé," he said, sitting down, "one has not yet had opportunity to congratulate you on your wonderful success. Allow me to do so now—most heartily."

"You are generous, Monsieur le Comte," said the priest, reaching round to place his breviary on the table, and not seeming to notice the proffered hand. "I thank you all the more. Another person ought by rights, however, to be included in your congratulations."

"Who—not Roland de Céligny, surely?"

"No. His friend the concierge—your friend the concierge."

"Why do you call her my friend?" asked the Comte with a frown. "She was certainly de Céligny's, but in no sense mine."

"No? Well, my friend the concierge, then," said the priest with a little smile.

De Brencourt's heart was beating to suffocation as he looked at him. Now, surely, he should learn whether to M. Chassin she were more than a concierge—the main purpose with which he had sought this interview.

"Yes, she was of the greatest service to me," resumed the priest, "although, indeed, she gave me no active assistance. Poor woman, she had had a sad history."

"Did she tell it to you?" demanded the Comte quickly.

"Oh, one did not need to be *told* it," replied the Abbé.

But the look of relief which at that most palpably appeared on the Comte's features had the briefest stay there conceivable, for the aumônier went on to say meditatively, "I am glad to think that I was able to make her some recompense. You remember the ruby necklace mentioned in the plan, Monsieur le Comte?"

"You are not going to say that you gave her that!" exclaimed his companion, starting up in his chair.

"Ah, I see you think it an excessive reward?" commented the Abbé, looking at him enquiringly. "So did M. le Marquis, I fancy, when I told him. But come now, Monsieur le Comte, do you not think that it really was no more than her due, that if ever woman had a right to it, she had . . . and that if M. de Kersaint knew all he would say the same?"

But the Comte was quite speechless. The piercing little eyes held his, and he could feel them boring into his very soul. "If ever woman had a right to it" . . . "if M. de Kersaint knew all." The Abbé knew—he knew! He would never have given her the necklace else. Had he told the Duc yet?

"Of course," went on the priest in a lowered tone, lowering that uncomfortable gaze also till it rested on his blunt fingers outspread on his knees, "had there been a Duchess of the house living I should not have felt justified in giving so valuable an heirloom to a concierge. But, under the sad circumstances, I hold that I was absolved, do not you, Monsieur le Comte?"

Oh, curse his maddening and mysterious persistence! Was he playing with him, or was he ignorant after all?

“That is not for me to say,” muttered the Comte thickly. “The matter concerns M. de Kersaint.”

“Very true. Everything about Mme Vidal more nearly concerns M. de Kersaint than anybody else.” He seemed to wait for the Comte to agree or else to ask why, but the Comte could bring out neither assent nor query.

“Since he is most interested in the treasure,” finished the Abbé with an amicable air of explaining his statement. “And, speaking of that treasure, Monsieur le Comte, I feel sure that by now you have penetrated the disguise. The cloak was bound to sit rather awkwardly after—you know what I mean.” He looked at him again.

M. de Brencourt changed colour. “Disguise? Whose disguise? No, I do *not* know what you mean!” There was sharp alarm in his tone; whither was this tending?

“Whose disguise?” repeated the priest. “Why, surely, there is only one disguise in question?” He waited a second and then went on, “The Marquis has perhaps told you himself who he is?”

“No, he has not!” returned M. de Brencourt angrily. “And I do not wish to learn any secrets, if you please, Abbé!” For if he could carry it off with the Abbé and the outside world in general that he had never known who de Kersaint really was, how could he be blamed for not having told him that his wife was alive?

“Very well said, Monsieur le Comte,” remarked M. Chassin in a tone of commendation. “And if I were not sure that, like myself, you know already, I would not speak to you of the identity of M. de Kersaint and the Duc de Trélan.”

“But for Heaven’s sake do *not* speak to me of their identity!” cried the Comte, his head reeling as he saw this knowledge being openly thrust upon him. “How do I know—or care—who he is!”

“I am afraid I have done it now,” said the priest placidly “but only because I was sure you had guessed it.”

“How could you be sure?” growled the other. “Did—surely he did not tell you? Only last night he asked me to respect his confidence!”

“Ah!” said the priest. “After you . . . saved his life, no doubt! Well, Monsieur de Brencourt, you can still respect it. And since you do know it—*I thought you did*—I am sure that as a gentleman you must regret the expressions you used, in ignorance, of M. de Trélan, that night at Hennebont. But you have no doubt made that all right with him.”

“That,” said M. de Brencourt, with hostility, “is a matter which concerns M. de Trélan and myself, not you, Monsieur Chassin.—And as regards confidences, it seems to me that you were going very near betraying one yourself just now. If I had *not* known . . . are you usually in the habit of doing that?” For now there was a fresh track of alarm; had the priest betrayed this particular confidence to one at Mirabel—told the concierge, even without knowing who she was, that he really came from Mirabel’s master? It was not impossible. He waited in acute tension.

“No,” said the Abbé composedly, “without wishing to belaud myself, it is a point I am rather particular upon. But I assured the Marquis—the Duc—some time ago that he would have to tell you sooner or later. I wonder he did not do so before you went to Mirabel. Did you not guess it then, from the knowledge he displayed of the place?”

“Monsieur l’Abbé,” replied the Comte, with more than irritation, “it does not seem to me to matter much what I guessed or what I did not guess. Enough that I did not impart my speculations to any living soul.”

“No, I am sure you were very careful not to do that!” said the Abbé warmly, and he looked at him harder than ever.

M. de Brencourt got up and went to the window. He must know, this man. And yet . . . did he? He would have told de Trélan at once, if he did; a bullet in the arm would not have prevented the reception of that news. The Comte would almost have given his soul to make sure, but it was so difficult to plumb the extent of the priest’s knowledge without exposing his own. A sort of fascination caused him to recur to the subject of Mirabel, but he approached it this time from a safer side.

“When am I to have an account of your securing of the treasure, Abbé?” he asked, throwing himself down on the window-seat. “It *was* under the hearth in the sallette, I suppose?”

And presumably his fellow-adventurer felt he owed him this, for he gave him, on this invitation, a fairly circumstantial account of his success at Mirabel and his peregrinations afterwards. The Comte listened from the window with the closest attention. After all, *she* did not seem to have played so much part in the business as he had feared. Perhaps——

“But I was glad to leave Mirabel in any case,” finished the narrator with a sigh. “It has a tragic atmosphere—a haunted feeling. Were you not conscious of that, Monsieur le Comte?” And as the Comte, for fear of giving an opening, did not reply, the priest went on, “If it were M. de Trélan’s once more and he were free to go there, I am sure he never would.”

M. de Brencourt could not resist the bait. “No, I should think not!” he broke out in spite of himself. “He would think always of that night—of his wife, alone——”

The priest looked up. “Ah yes, I have heard you in that vein before, Monsieur le Comte,” he interrupted coolly. “Now tell me candidly, for I want to know, since I am not gently born, and can’t understand the refinements of you nobles—is it not a fact that all the aristocrats who emigrated early, as M. de Trélan did, emigrated on a point of honour . . . mistaken, it may be, but still a principle? Why, if it comes to that, Monsieur de Brencourt, you are, I think, an émigré yourself, and I don’t suppose you considered that you were running away?”

“No, that is true,” conceded the Comte somewhat reluctantly. “It was—before it became a matter of safety—a matter of principle.”

“When the Duc emigrated in 1790 it would have taken a very far-sighted person to prophesy the extremities to which the Revolution would go later on. I happen to know, too, that he made a great effort to induce the Duchesse to accompany him. She refused, as it were on a point of honour also. She disapproved of the emigration.”

“And dearly enough she paid for that disapproval,” muttered the Comte.

“Quite true. And don’t you think that M. de Trélan has paid dearly for it too?”

A pause. “He deserved to,” said his companion.

The Abbé made a gesture. “One must make allowances for you, Monsieur. I know that you had the honour of the acquaintance of that noble and unfortunate lady—you told us so—and it has biased you against a man who has been equally unfortunate, and who, for seven years, in the midst of hardships and dangers of his own seeking, has never ceased to suffer the pangs of a remorse which, as I hope for salvation, I consider excessive.”

“You are an eloquent defender, Abbé,” said the Comte de Brencourt, shrugging his shoulders. “You should be at the bar . . . I happen to differ from you. I consider, to put it bluntly, that M. le Duc de Trélan deserves every sting of remorse he has suffered and may still suffer henceforward. I am not for letting a man off so cheaply.”

M. Chassin leant forward. “That was a figure of speech, I presume?” he put in like lightning.

“What do you mean?” asked the Comte, startled.

“You spoke of letting him off—as if you had the power to do it.”

The Comte recovered himself. “Do not be absurd, Abbé!” he said scornfully. “Am I the Judge of all the earth? Of course it was a figure of speech! How could *I* absolve him for what is done and can never be undone? Put his behaviour down, at the best, to mistaken judgment, we have to suffer for our mistakes just as much as for our crimes.”

The Abbé sat back in his chair again. “Since you know that so well, Monsieur de Brencourt,” he said gravely, “it might occur to you that it is a mistake—a dangerous mistake—to play with other people’s remorse. You might conceivably know that torment yourself one day!”

“I’ll take the risk of that,” said the Comte drily, and got up. “Especially as I have no idea what you mean about ‘playing’ with other people’s,” he added, not at all certain what that phrase did mean in the mouth that had uttered it. It was time, at any rate, to end this dangerous interview, which had not told him what he wanted to know. One thing was clear, that if the priest knew Mme Vidal’s secret he would eventually tell the “Marquis de Kersaint,” and after that, no doubt, would come the deluge, and either he, Artus de Brencourt, or his late adversary would really be swept away in it, this time. But if there came no deluge, then M. Chassin did not know.

“If you will excuse me, mon père,” he said, looking down at him, “I must quit this interesting conversation for my duties. Ask M. de . . . Kersaint when you go in to him again, to send for me if he wants me.” And he left the room.

So the Abbé Chassin knew that he did not mean ever to tell Gaston de Trélan that his wife was alive, that he meant to go on withholding the knowledge for his own purpose. And his heart was hardened against M. de Brencourt.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PAWN RETURNS TO THE BOARD

(1)

Roland had come. He stood in the 'nursery' with an overjoyed friend holding him firmly by either arm.

"But why," he was now demanding feverishly, "why cannot I see M. le Marquis at once, and get it over?"

For if his sincere penitence had caused his grandfather to dismiss him in the end with a sort of blessing—a remark that he was, if crazy and disobedient, at least no milksop—the youth knew that there was a still more merited penance to be gone through before he could expect a blessing *here*. Part indeed of that penance, and perhaps the worst part, he had already been undergoing at Kerlidec—the ashamed realisation of the damage his own wilfulness had caused to his hero's reputation, in the eyes, too, of one who was always so inexplicably hostile to M. de Kersaint.

"Why?" echoed Artamène. "Because, four nights ago, our revered leader met with an accident in the forest. (Roland gave an exclamation.) The accident took the form of a Blue, who shot him in the arm."

"But he's all right," interpolated the kindhearted Lucien. "They took out the bullet next morning. The Abbé is very strict, however."

"—And M. de Brencourt shot the Blue," continued Artamène, "shot him so dead that he was, apparently, blown completely off this planet."

"You forget," Lucien reminded him, "that the Comte distinctly stated that he got away."

"What, after he was dead?" asked Roland.

They looked at him; they drew closer, very close.

"Bend your head, my paladin," commanded Artamène. And, almost glueing his lips to the attentive ear, he whispered into it, "The question is, whether he ever lived, that Blue!"

"Oh!" exclaimed the Vicomte de Céligny, drawing back.

"Oh, and likewise Ah, and many other vocables!" agreed M. de la Vergne, his eyes bright.

"But that means. . ."

Lucien put a finger on his lip. "We don't discuss it, Roland. We don't—ahem—allow our minds to dwell on it. But ——"

" 'Au clair de la lune,' " hummed the Chevalier de la Vergne under his breath. "Two gentlemen, seized with a sudden desire for a walk at half past ten at night. I was on duty that evening, and let them out. Also, I met them returning—in perfect amity, I must confess; most correct. You see, M. le Comte had been so obliging as to bandage the wound which he——"

"Don't go on, Artamène!" cried Lucien warningly. "Remember that we are here in the region of hypothesis only."

"Listen to our student. 'The wound which he so signally avenged,' was what I was going to say, mon cher. Now, is that statement in the region of hypothesis or of fact? If we knew that, we should know all!"

"But, merciful Heavens, why should they——" began Roland, in tones of horrified amazement.

"My good Roland," replied Artamène, "though most things are in time revealed to enquiring intelligences, such as M. du Boisfossé's and mine, the reason for that promenade under the goddess of the night has not yet been disclosed. The infernally bad temper in which M. de Bren—— Chut! here's the Abbé, come to summon you to the scaffold."

But that was not exactly M. Chassin's errand. He had come to say that M. de Kersaint desired Roland to sup with them and to relate his adventures. And if the prodigal should have a little private interview with him afterwards he, the priest, did not fancy that it would be very terrible.

"I expect you have been informed of his mishap," concluded M. Chassin, glancing at the other young men, neither of whom, by a singular coincidence, met his eye. "Thank God it was not worse.—Now mind you tell him, my child, all about Mirabel—especially about the concierge there."

(2)

So Roland supped with the gods, as Artamène and Lucien had put it. The invitation, with its suggestion of pardon for the past, had pleased and flattered him; the banquet itself he found at first a little embarrassing. To begin with, he had uneasy anticipations of the interview afterwards; and then he found the sight of the Marquis with his arm in a sling oddly shocking, after the revelations made to him downstairs. That support was as inconspicuous as possible, being of black silk; still, there was the leader of Finistère, at the head of the table, unable to use his right hand; and at the other end sat the man who was . . . perhaps . . . responsible for his condition. The priest was placed opposite Roland, and Josef Schnitterl, M. de Kersaint's bodyservant, waited upon them all; but he was little in the room.

Now if Roland, who possessed only conjectures, felt embarrassed, the little aumônier, dowered though he was with an appearance of placidity and a good appetite, had arrived at the point where he could scarcely bear to see M. de Brencourt in the same room with his foster-brother—much less because of what had passed at the Moulin-aux-Fées

than because of the deadly wrong the Comte was doing him now. And, as a matter of fact the Marquis and his chief of staff did not seem to be seeking each other's society these last few days, though when they were together their relations were of such a successful correctness that speculation downstairs—except with MM. du Boisfossé and de la Vergne—was beginning to languish. No one could have guessed that the priest was thinking, as he looked at the handsome and engaging young face opposite him, "If only Roland knew of her identity!" and that he was preoccupied every hour of the day with the question, "Will she come?" or was on tenterhooks at every communication the Marquis received—for it might be from *her*.

When Roland's first constraint was over, and the meal had proceeded a little way, the Marquis enjoined the young man to give a most particular account of all his doings. Roland assumed the air of obeying to the full, though as a matter of fact he contrived to make his narrative begin with his arrival in Paris. But this the Marquis would not have.

"You can only earn my full pardon, Roland," he said, looking at him quizzically, "by an equally full confession of your sins—and by revealing the names of all your accomplices!"

The Comte and the Abbé both exclaimed at this. "No gentleman could consent to receive his pardon on such terms," declared the former.

"It is true," admitted the inquisitor, "that I know Roland's partners in guilt already. The one I have already dealt with; the other, I am afraid, lies outside my jurisdiction."

"Ah, there was another, was there?" asked the Abbé, looking amusedly across at poor Roland, who, blushing, was alternately studying the tablecloth and sending appealing glances at his leader. "I know of one. Who was the other? Not our staid Lucien, surely?"

"No," replied M. de Kersaint, smiling, "not Lucien. I have strong reasons to suspect another member of Artamène's family, no less daring than himself, and, presumably, even more inspiring.—But enough that I know the name of this . . . person.—Go on, Roland; after all we will dispense with the meetings of the conspirators at La Vergne. Continue from your leaving that nest of plotters."

He was in better spirits than he had been for days; and how should Roland guess with what pleasure he was looking forward to an interview after supper where, after all, he should let the penitent off rather easily? Thankfully escaping from the dangerous neighbourhood of Mlle de la Vergne the young man carried on his narrative up to his falling unconscious at the foot of the statue of Mercury in the park of Mirabel.

M. de Kersaint leant back in his chair. "We now come, I think, to the really romantic part of the story, do we not? Enter Mme Vidal, I believe."

As Roland embarked on the entry of Mme Vidal into his recital the Abbé and M. de Brencourt became very silent. (But Roland noticed nothing; *his* audience was M. de Kersaint.)

Almost immediately, however, the latter interrupted him. "What was she like to look at, this good angel?" he enquired, laying down his fork. "She was not young, that I have gathered."

Roland was rather at a loss. "I am afraid I am not very good at description, sir. But M. le Comte or M. l'Abbé"—he turned towards them—"surely you have heard all about her appearance from them."

"No, indeed I have not," replied the Marquis. "Rather remarkably, they neither of them seem able to describe her."

"Let us have your attempt, then, Roland," said the Abbé. A vista of blest possibilities was opening out before him. The same thing was happening to the Comte de Brencourt . . . only the possibilities were not blest.

Roland tried, but possibly through the hostile influence of the gentleman at the bottom of the table he failed to achieve anything recognisable.

" 'Tall, fair hair going grey, blue-grey eyes'—that does not advance us much," observed M. de Kersaint with truth. "It is like the passport descriptions, 'bouche moyenne,' and the rest. Never mind Mme Vidal's appearance, then, Roland. But since you of the three had the most intimate acquaintance with her, tell us, at least, what impression her personality made on you. For though M. le Comte does not seem to find the presence at Mirabel of a concierge with Royalist sympathies extraordinary, I must say that I do."

"I said, Marquis, if I remember," interposed M. de Brencourt rather hoarsely, "that I thought her sympathies need not have been so entirely Royalist as you assume. She was a woman, M. de Céligny an interesting young man, helpless and wounded . . . que sais-je? It was enough to appeal to any woman's heart."

Roland, embarrassed at hearing himself described in these terms, and in such an unpleasant voice, broke in,

"Oh but, indeed, Monsieur le Comte, she had Royalist sympathies. At least she was the widow of a poor Royalist gentleman . . . for of course, Messieurs, you saw at once that she was a lady. Indeed, I could not quite understand why she accepted the post, for she certainly seemed out of place in it. Didn't you think so, Messieurs?"

"I did, certainly," said the Abbé quietly. The vista was opening out into a regular Heaven. The Comte was understood to say that he had hardly seen her.

"It certainly does seem extraordinary," mused the Marquis, leaning his head on his hand, his eyes fixed on Roland.

"If you had seen her, sir, you would have thought so still more," said Roland with eagerness. "She had a carriage, always, and a way of speaking when she forgot herself—what I mean to say is, that if it hadn't been so patently absurd

to think so, one might even have taken her for a grande dame.”

“And why,” asked the Abbé softly, “would it be so patently absurd to have taken her for one? Stranger things have happened in the topsy-turveydom of to-day. I have heard of Chevaliers of St. Louis working as stevedores at a German port, and we all know how many émigrés in London earned——”

M. de Brencourt broke in upon him rudely. “Pshaw, Abbé, you are too romantic, and so is M. de Céligny. You forget, I have seen the woman too, and though undoubtedly superior, she was nothing out of the way, and as unlike the paragon of our young friend’s poetic fancy as——”

“As falsehood is unlike truth,” finished M. Chassin, looking straight at him. “Well, we differ, Comte, in our estimate of what is ‘out of the way,’ that is all. I am with M. de Céligny’s.—Go on, my son. You think one might even have taken her for a grande dame?”

“Stuff and nonsense,” muttered M. de Brencourt angrily, pushing away his plate.

“Really,” said the Marquis, as this little passage of arms ended, “your Mme Vidal begins to intrigue me so much that I almost wish I had gone to Mirabel myself!”

“Ah, if only you had!” was drawn in a whisper from the Abbé.

M. de Kersaint heard, though he was not meant to, and raised his eyebrows. “Why, it was your representations which prevented me from going!” he exclaimed. “What is the matter, Monsieur de Brencourt?”

“Nothing,” replied the Comte, who had half risen from his seat. “For the moment I thought—it was nothing.”

“You hear that testimony, Monsieur le Comte?” said the Abbé, turning to him with a sudden air of combat. “You should be pleased with me—M. le Marquis acknowledges that it was my wise counsels which prevailed on him not to go in person to Mirabel!”

“And why the deuce do you suppose I should be pleased at that?” demanded the goaded gentleman. “M. de Kersaint was welcome to go to Mirabel if he wished, for all it mattered to me!”

(“How very rude he is!” thought Roland, displeased.)

“You would not, surely, have had our leader run into such danger?”

“Well, *I* had to run into it!” retorted the Comte.

“Yes—*and succumbed*!” returned the priest with such a world of meaning in his voice that the Comte changed colour.

“Come, Abbé,” interposed the Marquis, “are you not being ungenerous to a less fortunate rival? You are surely not casting it up at M. de Brencourt that he endured a brief captivity for the King’s cause?”

The Abbé shook his head. “M. le Comte knows that I am not,” he replied. “But I am afraid that we are checking Roland’s interesting recital by our divergences on the subject of Mme Vidal. If he will forgive our bad manners . . .”

“Yes, go on, Roland,” said the Marquis. “But you must eat too. You were telling us about your actual entry into the château.”

“I got as far as Mme Vidal’s room,” resumed Roland obediently, “and then I suppose I fainted again, for the next thing I remember is finding myself in bed there, and Mme Vidal bending over me again.—Ah, by the way,” he cried, suddenly remembering something which might serve as a contribution to portraiture, “there was one curious little fact about her which I forgot to mention. It was then that I first noticed it. One of her eyes, though they were almost blue, had some brown specks in it. Did you remark it, Monsieur l’Abbé? It was the right eye. You could only see it when she was quite near you.”

“No . . . I . . . did not observe it,” said the Abbé. He spoke as if a strong wind of sudden origin had somehow taken away his breath. From the lower end of the table came the sound of a man drawing his sharply.

“I remember I used to look at it when she nursed me,” went on Roland, happy at producing some effect in the end. “And I——”

He was interrupted by a voice he scarcely knew. “She had eyes, you say, almost blue, with brown specks in one?” gasped the Marquis, jerking forward in his chair. “Did I hear rightly? Blue eyes . . . which one had the . . . say it again!”

In a dead silence, and much embarrassed thereby, Roland repeated his observation. The Marquis de Kersaint, leaning forward in his chair, his left hand clutching the table, looked at him with eyes which seemed as if they would drive through him, and as the young man, fascinated by that extraordinary gaze, returned it, he saw his leader slowly turn so pale that it looked as if every vestige of blood had been drained away from his face. Even his lips were the colour of paper. Next moment, without a word, without even a gesture of apology, he had pushed back his chair, risen from his place, and disappeared into his bedroom.

Roland fell back, smitten dumb with astonishment and, staring at the door which had just closed, he did not see the black and thunderous look which the Comte de Brencourt darted first at him and then at the Abbé. But in a moment the priest, too, was on his feet.

“It must be that wound of his,” he said quickly. “If you will excuse me a minute, Messieurs?” And he, too, went through the bedroom door. Roland saw his face as he went; it was not inexpressive now. It wore a most singular look of mingled gravity and exultation.

The Comte de Brencourt and the unconscious author of this scene were now alone. And just because the Comte was looking as he did Roland felt that he must say something.

"I am afraid that M. le Marquis' wound——" he began timidly.

M. de Brencourt gave a short laugh that was more like a snarl. "His wound!" he exclaimed. "Well, yes, a wound if you like—a sore, a festering sore! Mort de ma vie, boy, what made you so observant!"

"Observant!" repeated the puzzled Roland. "I don't understand you, Monsieur le Comte. Ought one not to have noticed that M. le Marquis was—in pain. But the Abbé——"

"Go on with your supper, in Heaven's name!" broke in the Comte roughly. He really looked like murder at that moment. "You have done a pretty evening's work, on my soul—and I don't suppose you are through with it yet, either!" And, laughing again, he poured out and drank off a glass of wine.

But Roland, almost convinced that he was sitting at table with a madman, was in no mood to obey him. He merely stared at the second in command. Fortunately it was only for a moment, for the bedroom door opened again and the Abbé stood there.

"M. de Kersaint wishes to speak to you, Roland," he said. Amazing thing—*he* looked pleased. Roland got up, utterly bewildered. His interview—now? He knew not what he had said or done to precipitate it, and apprehension was so written on his face that M. Chassin put his hand kindly for a moment on his arm as he passed him, and gave it a little pressure.

The Comte de Brencourt now addressed the aumônier. "Since your services, Monsieur l'Abbé, don't seem after all to be needed for this surprising seizure of M. de Kersaint's," he observed, "perhaps you will be good enough to sit down and finish your supper. These constant exits hardly tend to good appetite!"

A flame of anger suddenly ran over the little priest's face. "It is *your* services that have been required these many days, Monsieur de Brencourt," he rapped out, "and you know it! I have no wish to sit down to table with you!" And turning on his heel he marched out of the sitting-room and slammed the door.

Stupefaction seized M. de Brencourt in his turn. He *did* know then, that wily old devil—he had known all the time! Why, in the name of all his saints had he not told de Trélan? But anyhow de Trélan was in process of enlightenment at this moment behind that door, for of course he had had the boy in to question him further. In a few minutes he would doubtless come out, and then—well, there would probably be murder. For a little bloodshed would hardly wash away this time what their encounter the other evening had not availed to bring to light. . . .

For five minutes, perhaps, the Comte de Brencourt sat there with a set face waiting for this to happen; then, as no one emerged from the inner room, his fretted nerves drew him to his feet and sent him out in search of the Abbé.

He found him standing motionless under the moon and stars just outside the farmyard—not far, to be exact, from the pigsties, as would have been obvious to anyone less absorbed. The Comte strode over to the cassocked figure.

"May I ask what you meant by that remark you made just now?" he demanded without preliminary.

The Abbé drew himself up. "It is no good talking to me in that tone, Monsieur de Brencourt," he returned with spirit. "I am neither a gentleman nor a layman, so *I* can't go out with you to the Moulin-aux-Fées."

"Certainly no one would ever take you for a gentleman," responded the Comte, his voice shaking with passion, "and it takes a priest indeed to play the part you have played—a spying hedge-priest——"

"Which is worse, Monsieur le Comte, spying or lying?"

"*Lying!*" ejaculated the Comte with vehemence. "Don't your books of moral theology tell you that keeping quiet about a thing is as bad as lying about it? Why was it more my business to tell the Duc de Trélan that his wife is alive than yours, as you evidently knew it?"

"Dear me," said M. Chassin, and he smiled. "I was referring to something quite different—to the occasion on which, in so many words, you told Mme Vidal that her husband was dead—no tacit lie that! I think you are rather betraying yourself, are you not, by referring to yet another?"

"Oh, go to the devil!" burst out M. de Brencourt.

"I wish I knew where you were to go, Monsieur le Comte," was the priest's answer. "No, seriously, I do not wish to quarrel with you—even after the part you have played. The situation that you have brought about is much too grave for that. You must know that you have done a thing which God may forgive but which man will find it hard to. Listen to me, Monsieur de Brencourt, I beg of you, before it is too late, and remove yourself from the Clos-aux-Grives, from M. de Kersaint's command even——"

M. de Brencourt, thus adjured, exploded in an oath and struck the door of the pigsty so violent a blow that he brought out an enquiring inmate.

"By the God above us, Abbé, you go too far! Do you suppose that I am going to run away from de Kersaint's—from de Trélan's—from any man's anger!—Forgiveness—I have not asked for it! And when the Duc de Trélan wants me he will know where to find me!" He swung off in the direction of the forest.

"I only wish I could hope he did *not* know where to find you," muttered the Abbé, gazing after his receding figure, "for, short of a miracle, there will be a terrible day of reckoning for this silence of yours!"

But the flood of joy and gratitude in his heart was too potent; it swept away alike his disgust and his apprehension, and by the pigsty wall itself M. Chassin fell on his knees and covered his face, while the moon, but little declined from her fatal plenitude of four nights ago, looked down benignantly upon him.

CHAPTER IX

THE CHOICE

(1)

The brief but acrimonious interview of M. de Brencourt and M. Chassin had scarcely terminated when Roland de Céligny emerged from his leader's bedroom to the outer room. He shut the door behind him quickly, and stood there a moment with his back to it, curiously combining the air of a sentinel and that of a fugitive. And indeed, breathing rather fast, he was saying to himself, "No one shall go in—not even the Abbé!"

He had just been witnessing something which, though he did not fully understand it, he felt no eyes ought to have witnessed; he was hot and shaken with the thought that his own unwilling but necessary presence had been an outrage. . . . But since he was there, as he knew, to answer what he was asked, and since the Marquis de Kersaint could ask anything of him, even to his life, he had stayed, and averted his eyes through the storm of questioning, behind which could be divined a man's very soul on the rack—till that final bowing of the proud, unhappy head over the battered trinket that Roland had withdrawn from his own neck and held out as proof irrefragable . . . yet a proof of what he still did not know.

He was so agitated that it was only after a few seconds of this self-imposed vigil that he realised he was facing an empty room. The Abbé was not there, the Comte was not there. And in a minute or two more, still hearing no movement from within he thought, "I must not stay here; he would not like it . . . I must tell the Abbé something. But I must also contrive that no one else goes in." And, casting a glance on the wasted victuals of that supper-table which he had been so instrumental in breaking up, he went out.

A little later he was knocking at the aumônier's door. M. Chassin, barely entered himself, opened it. His face lit up when he saw who stood there.

"My dear boy, I am glad to see you! Come in!"

Roland still hesitated. "Are you alone, mon père?"

"Absolutely, my child. Come in!" He almost steered him in. "Now sit down, and we will have a talk. I was hoping that you would come."

But Roland would not sit down. In his young mind he was afraid, if he did that, of being led into saying more than he wanted to say. He did not know how much he ought to reveal. As a matter of fact he hated saying anything at all about what he had seen, but, bewildered as he was, he felt that the Abbé had better be told something.

Standing there by the bed, he began at the end. "I . . . I ventured to tell the officer of the guard that no one was to approach M. le Marquis to-night except through you—because of his wound," he said.

"Excellent! Very good indeed!" said the priest, and he clapped him on the shoulder. Roland wondered a little why he seemed so elated; to him, fresh from that scene with his leader, it did not seem quite decent.

"You are perhaps going to see him now, mon père?" he hazarded.

"God forbid, my son! If ever a man's privacy should be respected, his should be at this moment . . . if you have done what I prayed you might be doing!"

"But, Monsieur l'Abbé," besought the perplexed and almost unhappy Roland, "what is it that I have done? What is it all?"

"Tell me first what you did do?" said the priest. "No,"—for the boy had instantly turned away and was showing a disposition to go—"I do not want to hear anything about M. de Kersaint. I can see from your face how you feel about it. I only want to know this—how did you convince him . . . if you did . . . that Mme Vidal, who has some brown specks in one of her eyes, was . . . someone he had known before?"

"I showed him," said Roland, looking at the floor, "a little old locket she gave me when I left. And when he saw that ——" He stopped dead.

"Yes, yes," said the priest, putting a hand on his arm. "When he saw that he was convinced, was he not? That's all it is necessary for me to know, my child. Please God the rest will come right now."

"O, Monsieur l'Abbé, couldn't you tell me *what* is to come right?"

"Not just yet," said M. Chassin, smiling. "But you shall know soon. Anyhow, my son, you can go to bed, as I hope you are about to do, with the reflection that you have this evening done the best day's work you ever did in your young life. . . . I think you have not yet had your scolding for going to Mirabel? No! Well, you will never get it now—— from M. de Kersaint." And adding, "Go to bed! God bless you!" he, to Roland's astonishment, bestowed upon him a hearty embrace.

And the author of so much disturbance, somewhat comforted, lay down a little later by the side of Artamène and Lucien, whose scrupulous abstention, on his request, from all enquiries about his supper-party seemed a thing phenomenal, an almost chilly lack. So, also, did the absence of the little locket and its chain from Roland's own neck.

How well inspired M. l'Abbé Chassin, for his part, had been to lie down to sleep that night almost fully dressed, was proved at about a quarter to five next morning, when he woke to find M. du Ménars, rather scantily clothed, standing beside his bed. He blinked up at him a moment, for if he had expected to be roused by anyone, it was by Gaston himself.

"Do you know where de Brencourt is, Abbé?" asked the Comte's next in rank. "He is nowhere to be found, and I must see either him or the Marquis at once, the Marquis by preference. But for that I want your permission, as I understand he was not to be disturbed without it."

"What has happened?" asked the Abbé, getting off the bed.

"Cadoudal has just sent an express to say that the English convoy with muskets and ammunition for the Morbihan which he was expecting has arrived—arrived two days ago," he added, glancing at the open letter in his hand, "but that, knowing M. de Kersaint to be in need of both, and that he would probably be in a position to repay him in kind later on, he detached one ship for us before it unloaded, and directed it to put in at Sainte-Brigitte, and as the wind is favourable it ought to be there this evening. Splendid news—provided we can reach the coast quickly. And of course we shall want every man we can get together to cover the disembarkation, for the Blues are certain to get wind of it."

"I will rouse the Marquis instantly," said M. Chassin. "Only do me the favour, Monsieur du Ménars, of allowing me to see him first. He was much indisposed last night. . . ."

And a few seconds later, with Cadoudal's despatch in his hand, he was knocking gently on his foster-brother's door. Receiving no answer he tried the handle. To his surprise it gave, so he went in, shutting the door quickly.

It was light, of course; had been light for long enough, added to which the sun would soon be up. All the eastern sky already expected him. But in the room there still survived the pale, forgotten ghost of a candle flame, and the open window was curtained over. And by the window, fully dressed, his sound arm stretched out along the wide ledge, his head sunk forward on that arm, sat Gaston de Trélan asleep. At least he did not move until the priest touched him on the shoulder.

"Who is it?" he asked without moving. "I thought the door was locked."

"It is I, Pierre," answered the Abbé, his voice very stirred. "Gaston, my brother . . ."

And his brother sighed, lifted his head, and pulled himself up from the sill, stiffly, as if he had been there a long time. In his one available hand he held something tightly. He looked like a man who has had as much as he can bear in this world, from whom shock has shorn away everything, even the power to feel joy.

"I fell asleep, I think," he said uncertainly. "I suppose you have come to tell me, Pierre, that it is all a dream?"

"No, thank the ever-merciful God, it is true. Look in your hand!"

The Duc de Trélan obeyed him, opening his fingers with difficulty, as if they too were stiff. And he gazed at the little locket, at the worn, dangling chain, as a man sleepwalking or entranced might gaze. Then he said, in one and the same breath, "*It can't, it can't be true! . . . I must start for Mirabel instantly!*" and rose to his feet.

The Abbé faced him. "Something is asked of you, Gaston, before you meet her. As a soldier . . . You did not hear a horseman gallop into the yard a short time ago?"

The sleepwalker shook his head mutely. "Who was it?" he asked with indifference.

"A messenger in haste from Georges—with great news. He brought this. M. du Ménars opened it, and is outside now, waiting to consult you." And he held out the open despatch.

The wounded man transferred the locket to the keeping of his hampered right hand, and took it. A quick touch of colour shot into his face as he read, and he bit his lip hard. Then, even paler than before, he held out the letter again. "Tell du Ménars and de Brencourt to see to it then, Pierre. I must start for Mirabel at once."

The priest said nothing, and made no motion to take the despatch, but looked at him with some of his own steady colour fading, a most unusual phenomenon. Ah, was that inherent wilfulness going to ruin this also!

"You do not approve?" said Gaston de Trélan sharply. "But how could you understand! I would go to her over a world in flames!"

"And over your own honour, too?—Gaston, Gaston, reflect a moment, I implore you! Do not spoil this almost incredible miracle that God has wrought for you by snatching at it before the hour! See how she has been preserved for you all these years, how wonderfully the knowledge of it has come to light, and have patience a few days longer! For this unexpected coming of arms—why, it is the fulfilment of your greatest desire!"

"I have a greater now," said Gaston de Trélan, looking far beyond him. "Are you human, Pierre, that you do not realise it?" Cadoudal's despatch was almost crumpled to nothing in his clenched hand; he became aware of it. "Take this, before I—But, my God, that it should have come to-day!"

This time the priest accepted the letter, and retained the hand that gave it him as well. "Mon frère, consider!" he said pleadingly. "It only means the shortest of delays. You can hasten to Mirabel afterwards."

"Yes," said his brother with an indescribable intonation, "If you will guarantee that I shall still be alive

—*afterwards*!" And he withdrew his hand.

There indeed lay the hazard, and they both knew it. Disabled, too, as he was, he might well be killed before that meeting could take place, for there would be fighting over this business of the convoy. And death, the long desired, had terrors for him now.

Nevertheless the little priest did not budge. Gaston would thank him for it, he knew, when his brain was clear of this tremendous shock.

"No, my first duty is to her," went on the Duc de Trélan with all his old stubbornness. "I can never offer her sufficient reparation; at least what I can offer her shall be instant. And—she may be in danger there! I have plenty of competent officers; de Brencourt, du Ménars can handle the men as well as I for this affair. It will not amount to more than a skirmish at most—perhaps there will be no collision with the Republicans at all."

"Then why," said the Abbé very low, looking at the floor, "did you speak just now of the possibility of your falling yourself before you and she could meet?"

His shot went home. The tired eyes flashed like steel. "Pierre!" said the Duc de Trélan in a warning voice.

The priest raised his head. There were tears in his own eyes. "The men are untried, Gaston, most of them. They will follow *you*, but who really knows whether they will follow du Ménars? And the Comte de Brencourt—no one knows where he is. There may be no big engagement with the Republicans over this business, but it will be no easy task to cover the disembarkation and get the arms away from Sainte-Brigitte. You are a soldier; I do not need to tell you that. With these peasants it will need the most skilful leadership. And . . . to throw away, after all our prayers, the chance of arming Finistère! My brother, my brother . . ."

But his brother had already turned away and was at the window, his back to him, and the priest heard him say in a stifled voice, "Finistère, Finistère . . . O my God, what a refinement of cruelty!"

The sun was up now; the curtain could not withhold it. In the silence could be heard the tread of M. du Ménars as he walked up and down in the room outside—waiting. Pierre Chassin looked at the crumpled despatch that he held, and its characters seemed to him like the writing on the wall. Yet how natural was the impulse to disregard it—how brutal to stand in the way of disregarding it . . . . But because he loved the man by the window so much he struck again at him, and harder.

"You said just now, Gaston, that your first duty was to your wife. Yes, I think it is, but only because your duty to your King and your position coincide with it—risen though she be from the dead. Think for a moment of her—what she would choose—not of your own most natural desires! Which would she have, that you should be false to your trust in order to hasten to her, or that you fulfil it first, setting her second . . . even" his voice shook a little, "even if need be, that you should die in fulfilling it. O—forgive me, my brother—you know which she would have . . ."

But Gaston gave no sign.

"Forgive me, too," resumed Pierre rather brokenly, "for saying things so harsh *now*! But this is the testing-moment; you will never meet another more crucial. You could not lay before your noble wife a nobler reparation than this—to put your fidelity to a trust before the instincts of your own heart. . . ."

The words died away as his own heart sank. And had he gone too far? He knew that no other man would have ventured to say a tithe as much to that haughty and wounded spirit. But he knew, too, with conviction, that Gaston's better self must echo every cruel word. And as the tall figure still stood motionless, the forehead leaning on the bent left arm against the frame of the curtained window, Pierre Chassin prayed as he had not prayed even for their reunion, that the man faced with so tense a choice should not fail.

"Of course, you have seen her," said the Duc at last, breaking the vibrating silence, but in a voice that told how slowly mental circulation was coming back to him. "You have seen her . . . spoken with her! Pierre, you knew all this then—knew and never told me!—Concierge at Mirabel! It is like a nightmare!"

Indeed there was much to explain—but not now. "I only knew at the eleventh hour," said the priest quickly. "And under the seal, Gaston; so I could not tell you. My promise to you prevented my telling her before I had time to consider whether I were justified in breaking it. That time was never given me; but had I not had to leave in such haste I should have told her. But—listen, Gaston, for God's sake—all may yet come right of itself, for I pressed her so strongly to come to Brittany in person to see the 'Marquis de Kersaint,' giving her full directions, that I fully believe she will come. And if the sword lies between you and that meeting she would urge you——"

"To take it up," said the leader of Finistère. "Yes, yes. You are right. I don't see things clearly this morning." He drew a long breath, jerked back the little curtain from before the casement, and the risen sun entered gloriously. Then he turned round, his figure dark against it, and said, in his voice of everyday,

"Tell du Ménars to come in, Pierre."

The Abbé went quickly up to him and kissed him.

CHAPTER X

"AFTERWARDS"

(1)

Not Artamène de la Vergne himself had received the command to boot and saddle, which set the Clos-aux-Grives in such a pleasurable commotion at sunrise that morning, more jubilantly than Lucien du Boisfossé. None of the three had been more thrilled than he with the joyful news about the English frigate and its cargo, and the prospect of a brush with the Blues before that cargo could be secured.

But alas for those bright anticipations! The youthful philosopher was destined to have no hand in disembarking barrels of powder on the beach of Sainte-Brigitte. Because M. de Kersaint considered him the youngest officer with a head on his shoulders—how gladly would poor Lucien have foregone that flattering opinion!—he had been left behind with thirty men or so to guard the deserted headquarters. And there, late the next afternoon, he still was, trying to read Rabelais in the empty 'nursery,' in spite of a headache. For on top of his head, bandaged up like a mummy's, there was a fairly extensive sabre cut—though there had been no fighting at the Clos-aux-Grives. But Lucien had seen some rather murderous fighting, for all that.

It was M. de Brencourt who was the *fons et origo* of that headache—M. de Brencourt who had so mysteriously disappeared, who could not be found for any searching before the column started on its march to the sea . . . but who had just as mysteriously reappeared, about four hours after its departure, to fall into such a paroxysm of rage and despair when he learnt what had happened as Lucien hoped never to witness again. It was plain that the Comte feared Lucien and everyone else would attribute his strange defection (of which he offered no explanation) to cowardice, an idea which had never entered the youth's head, and which he endeavoured tactfully to convey to his superior would enter the head of no living man who knew him. In the end the Comte did what du Boisfossé had seen from the first he would do—rode off like a madman along the road to the sea.

In a couple of hours he was back again, his roan horse a lather. It seemed that when he had got a certain distance he had heard a piece of news which had sent him back as hard as he could gallop. The Blues had got wind of the convoy, and it seemed likely that they would attack the Chouans in force from the far side of Sainte-Brigitte. That could not concern M. de Brencourt now, but what had sent him back was the news that a smaller body—of cavalry, it was said—were probably setting out to fall upon their rear from the north-east. This contingent would pass within some six or seven miles of Lanvennec. And, since every available Chouan in the district who possessed arms had gone with the Marquis de Kersaint, M. de Brencourt proposed to take the headquarters guard, all but a man or two, and ambush this column at a certain ford which it must cross—if he could get there in time.

It was not for Lucien to protest; M. de Brencourt was not merely his superior officer, but the second-in-command. And the youth was only too pleased at the prospect of seeing some fighting after all, and perhaps doing a great service to his departed comrades. For this was how its originator seemed to regard the enterprise. So they set out, and they did get there in time, and yesterday, almost at this hour, Lucien had found himself, musket in hand, kneeling with the rest behind a fringe of willows on the bank of a broadish stream. And as they waited, and the willow leaves tickled his nose, M. du Boisfossé, who had only just learnt from the Comte the numerical strength of the enemy, began to realise that thirty men, even posted as they were, with all the advantage of a surprise, could hardly hope to stop or account for two hundred and fifty horsemen, and that M. de Brencourt was doing something that was a great deal more than rash. Could it be that he wanted to get himself killed? If so, he possibly had a right to indulge this fancy, but hardly to include him, du Boisfossé, and the major part of the headquarters guard in his desire. However . . .

Now, looking back on yesterday's mêlée, the young philosopher, though he had no reason to modify this view of the Comte's motives when he remembered how recklessly that gentleman had exposed himself throughout, knew at least that the second-in-command could congratulate himself on having caused the foe, after all, something worse than confusion and delay. For the Republicans, counting presumably on annexing the English muskets to their own use, had with them, and in the front of the column too, some empty ammunition waggons, and these were their bane. At the very first volley, poured into their unsuspecting ranks just as they were about to ford the stream, the now riderless horses of one of these waggons had dashed down into the river, and being there instantly shot, and the waggon overturned by their dying struggles, the narrow passage was for some time entirely blocked, while a hail of bullets came from the invisible marksmen on the opposite bank. Undoubtedly the Blues lost their heads in the surprise of it, or they would have rushed the ford and discovered how lightly it was held, but in the turmoil many saddles were emptied before the passage was clear. When at last they splashed over they were in too much haste to investigate the willows, but their infuriated rear ranks, without drawing rein, did use the sabre on anyone they could see—and Lucien happened to be one of these.

He woke up to find himself lying on the trampled, muddy bank, amid a strong smell of bruised peppermint. M. de Brencourt himself was bathing his head, and told him that he had had a nasty knock, but that, luckily, the blade had

turned. Two of their men had been less fortunate.

But the ford! Lucien dreamed of it that night; yet what he still saw with most particularity was none of the slain cavalrymen, but one dead rawboned chestnut horse, which lay pathetically with outstretched neck in the stream which was not deep enough to float it, the cut traces bobbing on the current.

And now the youth, relieved of his command, since the Comte was at the farmhouse, sat in the nursery and longed for its other occupants. M. de Brencourt had been unwontedly genial to him, and really solicitous about his hurt, but his manner was sometimes very strange, he was restless to an extraordinary degree, and looked as if he had not slept for nights. And though rumours were beginning to come in of the complete success of the expedition, rumours indeed that it had beaten off the enemy and was on its way back with what it had gone to fetch, M. de Kersaint's chief of staff seemed in no way uplifted by them. Lucien could not make him out.

He was in fact thinking about him now when the door of the nursery opened a little way and a small barefooted boy looked timidly in.

"Hallo!" said the young man. "What do you want, mon gars? Come in!"

"Yes, go in, child, and tell us what you want," commanded de Brencourt, appearing at that moment behind him. "Why, you are from the Ferme des Vieilles, are you not—Le Blé-aux-Champs' brother?"

The boy, half frightened, half alert, looked up with dark eyes at the gentleman who had him by the shoulder. "Yes, Monsieur le Comte."

"You came to see if he was back, I suppose?"

"No, Monsieur le Comte. I came on a message," said the boy, rubbing one bare and dirty foot against the ankle of the other. "I knew they were not back. But soon they will be. There is dust hanging over the road from the sea."

"Ah, a good scout already," observed M. de Brencourt, releasing him. "How is that head, du Boisfossé?"

"Better, thank you, sir," responded Lucien politely. "How soon do you think they will be here?"

The Comte gave an odd little movement of the shoulders, as if to say that the matter did not interest him. He was certainly very strange.

"Well, and what did you come here for, child?" he asked carelessly.

"Only to say that there is a lady from Paris at our farm," responded the small messenger, "and that she wishes to wait on M. le Marquis when he returns. That is all, Monsieur."

It seemed, however, to be more than enough for the Comte de Brencourt. He grabbed hold of the small shoulder again, almost throwing the child off his balance.

"What did you say! A lady from Paris asking for the Marquis?"

"Yes," said the boy, wriggling; and his face turned sulky, just like his elder brother's.

"Well, go on!" said the Comte, shaking him.

"There is nothing else," muttered Mercury. "She came yesterday. She is waiting. And when M. le Marquis returns . . . Let me go, Monsieur le Comte—I have to drive the cow home."

Without another word M. de Brencourt dragged the boy out of the room. The expression on his face was startling. So was the amazement on Lucien's.

And about two minutes later the young man was craning his swathed head recklessly out of the window. There had been a sudden clatter of hoofs on the cobbles of the yard, but the rider was already gone.

"Well," thought M. du Boisfossé, "the mysterious lady may have intended to interview M. le Marquis, but I think it is M. le Comte whom she will see first. Here, perhaps, is some explanation of—everything! Oh, why are Roland and Artamène not back!"

(2)

They were not far away. That dust above the road from the sea hung over a column winding triumphantly along, with a string of country carts in its midst piled high with the cases and barrels which, since dawn, they had been receiving from the English sailors on the beach at Sainte-Brigitte. The Chouans were intoxicated with their success; had they not yesterday, before ever arriving at the little bay, routed what seemed to them a huge body of Blues; had not hostile cavalry, too, broken harmlessly during the night on the covering force which M. le Marquis had so wisely stationed on the road to protect his operations? Vaguely they themselves realised that they had been brilliantly handled, and assented without hesitation to the opinion of hardbitten veterans of former wars like Sans-Souci and Fleur d'Epine when they said, "We have a great general—another Charette, perhaps."

At the head of his victorious array, rather weary from strain and want of sleep, his right arm still in a sling, but erect and easy as ever, rode Gaston de Trélan on the beautiful black horse which had once been Marthe de la Vergne's. By his side was M. du Ménars, and the two were already discussing the best method of distributing the muskets and ammunition through the department, and how far they would meet their needs till the gold of Mirabel could procure more.

"Still, this is an excellent beginning," observed M. du Ménars contentedly. "We shall be in soon now. . . . I wonder

if we shall find any news of de Brencourt when we get back? His disappearance at this juncture is the most inexplicable thing I ever heard of. Has it occurred to you, Marquis, that it might conceivably be the result of foul play?"

His leader looked round at him, evidently startled. Du Ménars knew that he had had very little time for any speculation about his missing subordinate.

"Foul play?" he ejaculated. "No, I had not thought of that. I know no more than you why . . . *My God*!"

And his horse suddenly bounded forward as if he had unconsciously driven in the spurs. Checking him, he turned his head sharply aside, then addressed his aide-de-camp over his shoulder.

"Monsieur de Céligny, have the goodness to ride back till you come to the Abbé, and tell him that I must speak to him at once. I will wait for him here, by the side of the road. Don't halt the column, du Ménars; go on and I will catch you up."

And as Roland turned to obey he rode across to the side of the road, and sat there waiting while the ranks trudged past. In these, sooner or later, would come the Abbé, who always marched with the men. At last the priest came abreast, and stepping aside, stood by the black horse and its rider, while the loaded carts and their escort passed. When the embroidered jacket, baggy breeches and wide-brimmed hat of the last Chouan had gone by, his foster-brother swung off his steed. His face was fearfully stern.

"Pierre," he said in a voice unlike his own, "a terrible thought has just come to me. I cannot understand why I have not had it earlier. As de Brencourt knew my wife in the old days," he paused; the priest guessed only too well what was coming, "—as he knew her personally, he must have been aware that she was alive—was at Mirabel—and . . . *deliberately kept the knowledge from me!*"

The priest looked down at the dusty road. "I am afraid that he did, Gaston."

"*God!*" said Gaston de Trélan, and smote his fist upon his saddle. The thoroughbred reared a little, and the Abbé caught the reins.

"I tried to force him to tell you. But my own position was so difficult," he began.

"To keep silent after I had consented to meet him," exclaimed the Duc, his eyes blazing, "after he had taken my hand . . . it revolts me! I can hardly believe it—be quiet, Zéphyr!"

"He was mad, I suppose, at seeing her again," said the priest, shaking his head. "It has revolted me, too. Perhaps his disappearance—Where are you going, Gaston?"

For M. de Trélan, already back in the saddle, was turning his horse's head in the opposite direction.

"I must get away for a little," he said, very grim. "This is a thunderbolt—horrible. I must have time to get accustomed to it before I can face anybody. Go on after the men, Pierre; do not get left behind."

He set spurs to his horse in earnest; Zéphyr went half across to the opposite bank, tried vainly to get his head down, and next moment was going down the road like an arrow, and, annoyed at his cavalier treatment, pulling so hard that for a moment or two his rider thought that he would prove too much for his bridle hand, and regretted his disabled right arm. The struggle for mastery, however, gave him some physical relief in the black whirlwind of repulsion and horror that had broken on him. Between the demands of leadership and the overwhelming news about his wife, he had had no time or inclination these two days to think out the part de Brencourt had played—scarcely time, indeed, till this homeward march, to think of him at all, in spite of his singular disappearance. And now the realisation of the Comte's cold-blooded treachery and deceit, coming on top of his provocations, on top of the duel, on top of his own sparing of him, despite his resolve to the contrary—for Gaston de Trélan was no more exclusively right-handed than another—and, most repulsive of all, on top of their reconciliation . . . it was surely enough to put any decent man beside himself, and how much more the man who had been his victim! He turned Zéphyr on to a track that made for the lande, and for a space, in which time hardly seemed to exist, galloped him madly over the heather.

Gradually he began to regain control over himself, too. The man had probably taken himself off for good; though he could never forgive him, nor forget what he had done, he would not be called upon to meet him again. And he had not succeeded in his devil's work. So he himself would rather think of this tremendous news of Valentine's survival—if indeed it were not after all some mistake, some cruel imposture, which he would discover for such when he got to Mirabel.

—No, the evidence was too strong! She *was* there—no impostress, but the real Valentine; not the dead Valentine whom he had grown to love and look to, but the living. And so their meeting was to be in this world after all—though he himself in the last few days had so nearly gone to another. And how would the living Valentine receive him? Perhaps she would altogether turn from him. Could he blame her if she did?

He rode off the lande by way of the Ferme des Vieilles, Zéphyr by this time quieted, indeed exhausted. "Poor Zéphyr!" said his master remorsefully. "Because I have been treated like a brute, I have treated you like one!"

As he drew near the farm he saw the old mother of the family outside, violently agitating her arms and crying, "Monsieur le Marquis! Monsieur le Marquis!"

He drew rein. "What is it, mother? Your sons are safe; Le Blé-aux-Champs has done very well."

The old woman's wrinkled face lighted up. "Ste. Anne be praised! But it is not that, Monsieur le Marquis. I thought

I had better make sure if you had met the lady out there on the lande—among the Stones, I think she is."

"Lady! what lady?"

"You have not come from the Clos-aux-Grives, then? You have not had the message I sent by Yvot?"

"What message?—No, I have not been there yet. Out with it, in Heaven's name!"

"A lady has come from Paris to see you, Monsieur le Marquis; she arrived yesterday. So we gave her a bed here—poor lying, but the best we could do till you——"

"Here! Now! With you?" And in a second he was on the road by her side.

"Ma Doué, Monsieur le Marquis, how you startled me, getting off so quickly! No, she is not here now—she went out on the lande a little while ago, and I thought I saw her walking in the Allée. Being from Paris she does not understand how evil they are, the Old Ones, about sundown, though I warned her . . . Bless us, Monsieur le Marquis, you look as if someone had put a spell on you!"

For, stricken with an odd silence, and very pale, the leader of Finistère had taken a step or two backwards, till he was brought up by his horse's quarter, and there he was staring at her, his hand to his head.

"No, it is the breaking of a spell, please God!" said he, recovering himself. "I will go and find this lady on the lande. It may be that . . . that she will not return to you, Mère Salaun."

He took Zéphyr by the bridle, and went back on to the heather. But, once out of sight, he drew a long shuddering breath, and throwing his arm over Zéphyr's crest, pressed his forehead against the warm satin of his neck, and so remained for a while.

And Zéphyr, convinced by now that the master he knew had returned to him, put his head round and lipped at his shoulder. Then he cocked his little ears and listened. Far away, the beat of another horse's hoofs was audible on the highroad. His rider gave no sign of having heard it, but in a moment or two took the bridle again and went forward towards the Allée des Vieilles.

CHAPTER XI

AMONG THE WATCHERS

(1)

Versailles, Dreux, Alençon, Rennes, Pontivy—like beads on a chaplet they had slid past Valentine de Trélan, like locks on a smooth river or canal, opened for her by that bit of paper in Barras' handwriting. She was herself amazed by the ease of her journey, that journey which was really a flight, hardly realising how much things were changed from the days, for instance, of the Terror, and how many people travelled comfortably now-a-days and contrived to elude showing their passports if they were out of date. And she had in her possession something much more potent than a mere passport. Whether she were taken for a political power, or for one of the many ladies in whom the raffish Director was interested—or for a combination of both, like Mme Tallien—Valentine neither knew nor cared; at any rate whenever she produced the laissez passer she was shown deference—till she got into the country districts of that land of the leal, farther Brittany. Here the municipalities indeed were Republican, but at one or two small places where she had to halt Barras' signature commanded anything but reverence, though it had to be obeyed. Twice she distinctly heard the word "spy" whispered of her.

But once she had passed Scaër and was in full Finistère it was better, for here she could use the private directions which the Abbé had given her. And it was by the employment of these that she finally arrived, without mishap, at the Ferme des Vieilles, to which the Abbé had directed her.

The little old farmhouse by the roadside looked at her cunningly and rather inhospitably, she thought, from its tiny peering windows. Beyond it was a wide stretch of moorland with heather, and, in one place, long strange rows of upright stones. She descended from the farmer's hooded cart by which she had replaced the diligence at her last stopping-place and knocked at the open half-door. Inside, a beautiful, grave and dirty little girl of six or so, dressed in all respects like a grown woman of the sixteenth century, stuck a finger in her mouth and stared at her.

"Mignonne," said Valentine, stooping over the half-door "*Ema ar bleun er balan*—the broom is in flower."

"*Tremenet er ar goanv*—the winter is past," responded an old woman, coming into view. "Enter, Madame!"

Half an hour later Valentine was being served with a rough meal, the children standing round, awed, and she had learnt all there was to know; how the Marquis de Kersaint and practically all the officers from the headquarters, even the aumônier, were gone to the sea to fetch a convoy of arms, and that to interview the man whom she had come so far to meet she must wait, probably, till the day after to-morrow. Meanwhile Mère Salaun offered her hospitality, premising (and justly) that it was not fit for a lady from Paris.

And indeed Mme de Trélan slept but ill that night in the *lit clos* put at her disposal, though she had known in prison much less comfortable sleeping-places. But it was not only the unwonted experience of passing the night in a sort of hutch which kept her wakeful, it was partly the dread lest M. de Kersaint should never return from this expedition—for she had been told there would be fighting.

No news next morning, but a rumour that there had been a fierce encounter between the Chouans and the Blues. Valentine was restless. She would have liked to go to the Clos-aux-Grives, but thought it would be unfitting; and it was besides unnecessary, since Mère Salaun had instituted the ten-year-old Yvot as a courier.

So she walked on the lande, where the wind blew over the wide spaces, and tried to be patient.

"What are those great avenues of stones that I saw in the distance this morning?" she asked at the mid-day meal. "There seem to be miles of them."

"Those, Madame," said her hostess, pouring out the milk for the children, "are Les Vieilles, the Old Ones, the Old Women. Some call them Les Veilleuses, the Watchers."

"Your farm is, then, named after them?" commented Mme de Trélan.

"Unfortunately," replied Mère Salaun, compressing her wrinkled lips. And seeing Valentine's look of enquiry, she went on, "They are not . . . not benevolent, Les Vieilles. Do not go among them much, Madame, especially after sundown, if you want to keep the wish of your heart. For if they can they will take it from you."

What a strange idea! "Who set them up?" asked the Duchesse.

Mère Salaun shook her head. "We do not know. Fetch Madame's crêpe from the hearth, Corentine."

Little Yvot fidgeted. "But, Madame," he broke in, in his shrill voice, "nobody set them up. A long while ago they were a queen's ladies, and a magician turned them into stones. And on one night in the year, on Midsummer Eve, they leave their places one by one and go to the pool to drink—because you see, Madame, they were alive once, and they are still thirsty. Some people think they eat, too, and put food for them. And as they go in turn to drink you can see the gold underneath, and the rich ornaments, in the place they have left!"

"And do people go on that night to take it?" asked Mme de Trélan as he paused for breath.

Yvot's eyes grew bigger and his tanned little face paled, while his grimy hand made a rapid sign of the cross over

himself. “God forbid! There was a man once—he went to get the gold—folks begged him not to. He never came back!”

“Well, what happened to him?” asked Valentine, interested less in the tale than in the narrator—and somewhat appalled at the gigantic pancake, nearly a quarter of an inch in thickness, which had appeared before her.

“The menhir came back from the pond and caught him! He is underneath it to-day—the one they call La Bossue, the Hunchback. You can hear him groaning and praying to be let out sometimes. He has been there for seventy years!”

At this climax one of the smaller children burst into tears, and Yvot was angrily commanded by his mother to get on with his dinner. But she, too, signed herself.

Nevertheless Valentine found herself among the stone avenues that evening. No news had come yet, but the Allée was at such a short distance from the farm that if it came she could easily be informed.

So she walked among the menhirs, Les Vieilles, Les Veilleuses, and the menhirs watched her as she went, and she knew it. They were yellow with lichen, rust-red with it, grey with it; the heather was about their deep roots, older than the oldest trees. Ancient, terrible, venerable, four ranks of them, they marched for ever up the rise and over it towards some invisible goal. Valentine de Trélan with her forty-five years felt very young, very ignorant beside them.

They had been here—planted by whom, and why?—long, long before the overturned order of yesterday; long before its pillars had been laid, long before Clovis and Charlemagne; they would still be here when the name of the last King of France was forgotten. As she stood among them she knew that she was in the oldest place of this old land of Armorica. They were the more living in semblance, the more individual, these grey shapes, because their slope was not alike, any more than their forms. Some leant this way, some that; some were grotesque, some more than grotesque; yet whatever were the purpose that possessed them, it possessed them even terribly. Valentine wondered which was the “hunchback” of the evil legend . . . She was afraid of them; and yet they fascinated her.

And as she walked between their ranks she wondered how much longer she would have to wait before she saw the Marquis de Kersaint. How calmly, at the Ferme des Vieilles, they took this fighting—all the men away with M. le Marquis as a matter of course. Was it true, she had asked, that Cadoudal in the Morbihan had ordered all his young men not to marry for the present? Quite true. And they were not marrying? No. What a people to lead, and what a leader!

What should she do after she had talked with the Marquis? It depended on what he told her. In any case she was come to the beginning of a new chapter in what was left to her of the book of her life. Would Gaston’s name be on those pages—and in what characters would it be written?

It had been a grey day, austere, not unbeautiful. Now, at the approach of sunset, it was warming into a certain splendour. The shadows of the watchers began to slant across the avenue like scores of pointing fingers, and at the other end the pine trees on the rise grew darker against what would soon be a battlemented glory of cloud. And after sundown it was sinister here, they said; Valentine could believe it, but the watchers had some spell to make one linger. . . .

It was as she turned from looking at the distant pines and the sunset that she became aware she was not alone in the Allée des Vieilles. Some way off a man was standing by one of the tallest menhirs; indeed, she almost thought that he was leaning against it. It gave her a start at first to find that, when she had thought she was alone, she was being observed. He must have ridden up unheard on the heather, for outside the double avenue a black horse was bending its head towards that arid nourishment. All she could see of its rider at this distance was that he was tall, that he wore a long close-fitting dark redingote, that he had a white sash round his middle, and a sword.

All at once she thought, “How stupid of me; it is a Royalist, one of M. de Kersaint’s officers, probably, back from the fighting. Perhaps it is even M. de Kersaint himself, ridden over from his headquarters, on hearing that I am here, to wait on me. That is very courteous of him. But why, since he must see me, does he not move, or come to meet me? . . . Perhaps, if he is from the fighting, he is hurt.” And then indeed she saw that he carried his right arm in a sling.

She began in her turn to go towards him. Still she could not see his face; he had his hat rammed low over his eyes. In the hat, as she now noticed for the first time, was a white plume. That feather showed her that it must be M. de Kersaint himself, and her heart beat a little faster. Yet how strange of him to remain covered when, plainly, he must see her advancing, and not to move a step to meet her. But she went on nevertheless, till only ten yards or so separated them.

And the Royalist still stood motionless, the sunset glow falling on him, watching her so intently that he gave the effect of holding his breath. Valentine began to be a little frightened; his behaviour was so unaccountable. And suddenly the old Breton woman’s warning came back to her. Was the wish of her heart, then, going to be reft from her here among Les Vieilles; was she to learn from this man, among the covetous old stones, that Gaston was dead—to learn it this time without possibility of doubt? Was that why he was so still—because he knew her errand? She stopped.

Her stopping seemed to galvanise the watcher into life. He moved a little forward from the menhir which had been supporting him, and put up his left hand to his hat as though to remove it. But still he did not take it off.

“Madame de Trélan!”

That voice! . . .

She quivered as though she had been shot and put her hands to her breast. “Dear God!” she said. “Who is it? Who is it?”

“*Valentine!*” said the voice again.

And in a single movement the Royalist officer uncovered, flung his hat from him, and was at her feet. But even with the previous warning of the voice, even with his tardy uncovering, the shock was too much for a woman who was no longer young. It was as one sees something a long way off that she saw him kneeling there with bent head; but when he raised it, and his face was visible, the blood drummed in her ears. The grey watchers bowed suddenly towards her, the heather began to give way beneath her feet. “Gaston!” she sighed, putting out her hands helplessly like a frightened child, “Gaston—I’m falling! . . .” The heather gave way altogether. . . .

(2)

The cold grey sea on which Valentine had been floating hither and thither began a little to cease its swaying motion. . . . But how curious to be on a sea at all! Yet she could hear it . . . no, it was the wind in the pine avenue at Mirabel. But the pine avenue was nearly all cut down now . . . It was neither, neither. She was lying in strong arms that held her close, against a heart whose pulsations she could hear. It began to come back. That figure by the menhir. O, Christ in Heaven!—but that was a dream!

Yet kisses, not the kisses of a dream, were being laid on her closed eyes, her hair, her brow—though none upon her lips—and with them went passionate words of supplication for forgiveness, and words of a meaning far transcending that . . . words of love, heartbroken words. But he who thus addressed her must have thought her still unconscious when he dared to speak them, for when she opened her eyes and stirred she was very gently laid down out of his grasp upon the heather, and this Royalist officer who was her husband knelt silently there beside her, with his face buried in his hands.

At that relaxing hold Valentine might have thought—a thousand things—but, dizzy and confused though she still was, she had heard, and felt. There was no room for surmises or mistakes.

“Gaston,” she said faintly, lingering on the name. “O Gaston . . . if you are real . . . your arms!”

His hands came down, and she saw his face, ravaged, older, infinitely changed.

“Dare I hold you in my arms, Valentine?” He was shaking as he said it.

From where she lay she gave him one look, and held out her hands the second time.

“O my wife, my saint!” said Gaston de Trélan, choking. He stooped and gathered her once more to his breast.

And, after all, so unbelievable was it, that the long embrace did seem to belong to another world than this—a far world, but the only real. . . .

That passed. The heather became heather again, the air the air of earth. Somehow he was helping the living Valentine whom he held to her feet, and was leading her towards the nearest menhir—that indeed against which he had himself been leaning. Directly he saw that she could stand alone, and could take some support, if she wished it, from the great granite finger, he threw himself on his knees before her.

“Valentine, this is where I should be!” he broke out uncontrollably, “here, at your feet, not holding you in my arms. I am not worthy of that, Valentine—Valentine, how can I even ask for forgiveness? But I do ask for it—I do ask! For seven years I have sought it, and I have sometimes felt that you . . . where I thought you had gone, had given it to me.” His voice broke, and, stooping that proud head of his, he did literally kiss her feet.

“Gaston, if you love me!” she cried out, trying to stay him. “No, no . . . and what talk is this of forgiveness? O my darling, I was wrong too—stubborn and proud. I should have gone with you—and afterwards . . . you never got my letters, I know it, but I should have written again, made more efforts. O Gaston, if you love me, don’t do that!”

He lifted his head. “Letters!” he said in a dazed way. “You wrote . . . you had no answer? I never had them!—Valentine,” and there was anguish in his voice, “you did not think I received them . . . and left them unanswered!”

“No, no!” she said. “No, my heart! We will talk of that presently; there is so much to say. Only now, Gaston—I cannot bear to see you kneel to me, my husband.”

“But there is more than that,” he said, not without difficulty. “More than my having left you to face . . . horrors. The years before——”

“I do not remember the years before,” answered Valentine.

“At least,” said he, very low, “the years since have been yours alone.” And still kneeling there, but with his arms about her, as she stooped to him he kissed her on the lips.

Afterwards she sat propped against the menhir, and her husband half sat, half knelt beside her, holding her hands and gazing at her as at what indeed she was, one returned from the dead. Very briefly, and only under the pressure of his questions, for she, too, desired chiefly to contemplate him, she had given him the outline of that past nine years, sliding as quickly as possible over the massacres and her subsequent year in prison, because he turned so pale that

she feared he would faint next. And he had been wounded . . . but he said that it was an old injury—nothing . . .

“And now, Gaston,” she said breathlessly, “you—what are you doing here with this M. de Kersaint? Is he really a kinsman—is that why you are here? At first—before I recognised you—I thought you must be he.”

His grasp tightened on her hands, and before he answered he put them to his lips. “You were not mistaken, Valentine. That has been my name for seven years, since you . . . died. O, my wife” he almost crushed her hand, “*are* you alive—is it not some phantasy, some illusion of this place——”

“What!” she broke in, the colour rushing over her face and fleeing again, “*you* are M. de Kersaint—it was *you* at Rivoli—it is *you* who command Finistère for the King . . . that scarf means——”

Quite suddenly she drew away her hands and putting them over her face burst into tears.

CHAPTER XII

THE CENTRE OF THE LABYRINTH

(1)

From the clump of pines on the rise the view down the Allée des Vieilles, with the sunset light on it, was extensive, and figures half a mile away were tolerably clear. The Comte de Brencourt had learnt at the farm that he was too late, but he had come on nevertheless. He had not reached his vantage point in time to witness the actual moment of meeting, but, though faces were of course indistinguishable at that distance, he had seen enough. And, grinding his teeth, with strange red spasmodic waves passing across his eyesight, so that from time to time he could see nothing at all, he still waited in the shadow of the clump. He had not known why—till a few minutes ago, when they had started to walk this way.

Yes, he knew now why he had come, and why he had endured that hell. But they walked so slowly—and he did not want to kill her too. Her husband's arm was about her, and her head rested against him. Zéphyr followed, with his incomparable grace of movement, trying now and then to twitch a mouthful of something edible from among the heather. They were only a couple of hundred yards away now. What was this in his own hand—yes, of course, his pistol. And it was not moonlight this time, but strong level sunlight, falling in the right direction. A hundred and fifty yards. His hand must not shake now. But he must be very careful. If only de Trélan would take his arm away, curse him! A hundred and twenty yards, a hundred yards. . . .

If Valentine de Trélan had not worn that look, who knows what might not have happened, whether the menhirs would not have had their wish, and taken her heart's desire from her. But what, when she was near enough, he who loved her in his own fashion could read on her face was both shield and sword. Crazed though he was at the moment, it smote the pistol from his hand, the very impulse to use it from his heart. The glory that she wore was not forgiveness, or reconciliation, or the transient joy of a great wonder, but absolute, perfect, rounded happiness, tranquillised ecstasy. Then all those years of desertion were nothing; all those years when Gaston de Trélan had followed strange fires were nothing; all the time in Mirabel, then, she had been thinking of him, had perhaps gone there for the sake of his memory—all her life, perhaps, she had been a ship beating against contrary winds to a haven he had not thought existed. And now she was in harbour—no doubt of that!

"She has the face of a saint in Paradise!" he said to himself, trembling. At her husband's he cast no look; he mattered less than nothing to him.

Vain, then, his own faithfulness to her, that had led him into such crooked and faithless paths, vain his endeavours, stained with his own dishonour, to keep them apart. She had loved *him* all the time, and now . . .

There was no more to say or do. *Ite, missa est.* Artus de Brencourt stumbled down the slope, blinded less by the sunset's exultation as he turned than by that sight, mounted and rode off, more cold and grey than the immemorial watchers, with eyes from which not even hate looked out any more.

No, one thing remained to do, and that quickly. He would have wished to return to the Clos-aux-Grives for a few moments first, but that was impossible, for he would risk meeting them—if *he* brought her there. Nor did he want to do it too near headquarters. If he could light on a place with sufficient cover there was a chance that his body would never be found at all. He would prefer that—not to give de Trélan the satisfaction of knowing how thoroughly he had worsted him.

And, surely, this oak thicket a little off the road would serve, for the road was lonely enough. He could not wait to find a better spot, for a thirst was on him to be gone. He had done a thing for which there was no forgiveness this side death—a thing for which he had no intention of asking forgiveness—and, what was far more terrible to him had done it in vain.

He dismounted at the entry to the copse. What should he do with his horse, whose presence might betray his own? A moment's reflection, and he turned the animal's head away from the direction of the Clos-aux-Grives, and, drawing his sword, smote it hard on the flank with the flat. The beast reared, capered, and bolted down the road. Then, dropping the sword, M. de Brencourt plunged into the thicket.

It was not as dense as he had thought, but at the foot of this oak tree he would be quite invisible from the road. He had no last message to leave other than those he had written on the night of the duel and, as it happened, left undestroyed afterwards. He had no last thoughts, for he was incapable of any thought but one, and as for prayer, a man had no right to it who was doing what he was doing. Nevertheless once familiar words drifted through his brain and out again as he knelt down by the oak-tree's strong old roots, ". . . pray for us sinners now and in the hour of our death" . . . but they scarcely had meaning, and his mind seemed only a blank of wreathing fog as he put the pistol to his ear.

The weapon remained there for perhaps eight seconds, then sank.

For there comes a point when the machinery that the brain controls will not revolve any longer. Artus de Brencourt had come to that point now. Ridden as he had recently been with the most devastating emotions, torn with hatred and more than half mad with jealousy, having twice tried and failed to kill the man he hated, having lived by day on the edge of a volcano and having scarcely slept by night, he had now to face the most shattering experience of all—itself the direct outcome of the others. He lacked the nerve to kill himself.

Only the tiniest muscular action was needed, the pressure of a finger, and he had not the will power left for it. Kneeling there, the sweat pouring off his face, he tried . . . and could not. His hand would not even hold the weapon in position. He who but a little while ago had tried to steal another man's life from him had not courage left to take his own.

The discovery, stark and sickening, broke the violent, passion-tossed man to pieces, broke him utterly. Never in his life had he known the taste of physical cowardice till now. A horrible nausea came over him, and he fell forward on his face at the foot of the oak tree and lay there, beaten at last—lay there while an oak leaf settled on his hair and his horse, returning, trotted past again in the direction of headquarters. But he did not hear it.

(2)

Complicated emotions of some violence had assailed M. Chassin when he reached the Clos-aux-Grives and heard from Lucien the story of the ford, and how M. de Brencourt had recently ridden off in haste—and especially when he learnt why he had thus ridden off. And at that piece of news—since the "lady from Paris" awaiting the Marquis could be no other than Mme de Trélan herself—M. Chassin also, abandoning his duties towards the wounded, rushed out of the farmhouse, a prey at the same time to he knew not what dire premonitions, and to a joy and thankfulness beyond words.

Yet where was he to go, and what was he to do? He found himself setting out as fast as he could go for the Ferme des Vieilles, become now a species of rendezvous. But he had hardly gone a mile, his soutane well tucked up, when between heat, fatigue and apprehension he was asking himself why in the name of all the saints he had not borrowed a horse. And instantly the saints sent him one. It came trotting leisurely down the road towards him, its bridle dangling, a riderless horse—more, a horse that he recognised. It was the Comte de Brencourt's roan.

The Abbé stood in the dust and smote his brow. What did this portend? At any rate he would utilise the steed. He caught it as it passed, girt his soutane still higher, mounted and pursued his road. And as he went he looked from side to side, but he would not have thought of entering the oak copse when he came to it, had not his eye been attracted by something that glinted at the side of the road—the sword that lay there.

The Abbé dismounted, without grace, and picked it up. He seemed to have seen it before, though, after all, one sword was very much like another. Perhaps the thicket would yield some explanation of the mystery. He tied up the roan and went in.

But, in a sense, the thicket only yielded him another mystery. For, on the root of an oaktree, with a pistol lying on the ground beside him, was quietly seated M. de Brencourt, writing something on his knee. M. Chassin, having expected anything in the world but this sight, stood speechless, his cassock tucked about his waist and the drawn sword in his hand. After a moment the Comte lifted his head, looked at him, and seemed, with an effort—or that was the effect he gave—to recognise him.

"I was writing to you, Abbé," he said. "You are the person I want."

The voice, very flat and monotonous, was unlike his own. So was his face. His eyes were someone else's. The Abbé did not like them.

"I have your horse, Monsieur le Comte, and your sword, I think," he said, for want of anything better.

"Thank you," said the stranger under the tree in his dull, slow tones. "As I am leaving the district at once it will be convenient to have them. Perhaps I had better give you this."

And, still seated there, he handed up the piece of paper on which he had been writing. M. Chassin, advancing, took it, and read, in a nerveless handwriting, these words addressed to himself:

"*You wanted me to go, and I am going—probably to join M. de Bourmont in Maine, if he will have me. He is the furthest away. I have tried to go further still, which would no doubt have pleased you better, but——*" some words were scratched out here. "*Since I am fulfilling your wishes, perhaps you will do me the service to report my decision in the proper quarter, and later despatch my personal effects to me, for I shall not enter the Clos-aux-Grives again.*"

The Abbé, dumbfounded, looked at the writer. Something abnormal had happened: what was it? And Gaston?

"You mean this?" he stammered.

"Certainly," responded M. de Brencourt, without moving a muscle of that expressionless face. "I have tried to shoot the Duc de Trélan"—the priest gave an exclamation—"and failed . . . he does not know it—you can tell him if you like . . . and I have tried to shoot myself and failed. I do not wish to live, but if I cannot kill myself, what other choice is there for the moment?" He brushed some bits of dead leaf off his knees, put his pistol back into his belt, and rising, held out his hand for his sword. "Did I leave it in the road?" he enquired, in the same emotionless way. "Thank you. I will try to

have you informed, Monsieur l'Abbé, if I am killed when the campaign opens, as I trust I shall be; I expect you would like to know. But you need not fear that I shall ever seek to see either of them again."

He slipped his sword carefully back into the scabbard, made the petrified priest a sort of salute, and went quietly past him to the gap in the hedge where his horse was tied.

And M. Chassin, who had come out prepared to fight dragons, turned and stared after him dumbly, knowing not whether to give thanks or no. For this time M. de Brencourt had frightened him. But, just as the Comte got into the saddle, he felt a sudden violent impulse to say something that would pierce that terrifying calm. He could not let him go like that. Calling to him, he hurried to the gap and came out into the road beside him and his horse. The Comte looked down at him with his mask of a face.

"Monsieur le Comte," said the little priest earnestly, "I have a feeling that some day, in spite of everything, you will be given an opportunity of serving that lady you have loved and wronged . . . May God forgive you and go with you!"

"Thank you; you are most kind," said the mask politely, and the roan horse moved forward.

And his whilom adversary, so unexpectedly routed, stood in the road thinking, "It is not in Maine, but in a madhouse that he will find himself before he is much older! God pity him! . . . But where can Gaston be—and she?"

(3)

Could Pierre Chassin but have seen them they were sitting under the pine-stems, unconscious of the lurking death so recently withdrawn—sitting there very much as they had walked thither, his left arm about her, her head on his breast; only now she held, with her own two hands, that one hand of his fast against her, as if she feared it would slip away again. Here was grass, a little distance from the pines, and Zéphyr cropped it, and for a long while the brisk, tearing noise of his browsing, the jingle of his bridle, and the sough of the wind above them was all that they could hear . . . since the hour was too solemn, too wonderful, for further speech.

For they both knew now, if not all, at least the most vital facts about each other. Now, for Valentine, the seven years' silence was explained—and could scarcely have had a more honourable justification. Now the idea that Gaston had not cared whether she were dead or alive seemed blasphemy. How false, too, had been all those past conceptions of what their meeting would be like, if ever they met again! Nothing remained now of old wrongs, however deep, nothing of old unhappinesses, however real, nothing of old mistakes. All these were not, before the miracle of his personal presence, the marvel of being in his arms. It was as if hoar frost should change, under a stronger sun than winter's, into the spring's diamonds of unimaginable joy.

Here, as she rested on his heart, came on her, after the wonder, the peace of Paradise. For this the watchers seemed to have been planted; to this goal under the pine-trees they ran up. Take her heart's desire from her! why, they had given it! She would never know how nearly it had been snatched away as soon as given. . . .

As for the man against whose breast she leant, nothing but what he held had reality for him . . . and even she was not yet quite real. The few hours during which he had known the nightmare picture in his mind to be but a lying canvas were not sufficient to erase its effect. The singe of his seven years' purgatory (worse than hers, because it had been purely mental) would not pass lightly from him, though it would pass. And this of it burnt hot in his mind now, even in these transcendent moments—the subtle change in her, the hair tarnished from its glory, the lines on the delicate skin, not to be accounted for merely by the passing of time, but his doing, his fault! If she had not fallen, there in the Allée, he would scarcely have ventured to touch her; had she not been (as he thought) unconscious he would never have kissed her as he had. She was too sacred, and too profoundly wronged. Yet here she was in his arms, willingly, generously—too great in mind to exact what a lesser woman would have exacted. And before the depth of the love which had survived all that hers had had to survive he was still, in spirit, on his knees.

The sunset had burnt out before they stirred, yet the wonderful hour had to end. Gaston de Trélan got up at last and helped his wife to her feet, and then remained gazing at her, almost tranced. And she looked at him, standing there above that strange battle-array of stones, tall and resolute, with the stains of march and fight still on him, with almost everything of the young prince of the Mirabel portrait gone. There was no rose in his swordhilt now. . . . She drew a long breath, and held out her hand to him, and at the touch he woke, and led her down the slope towards the black horse, who was to carry her to the Clos-aux-Grives. But as they went she remembered something.

"Gaston," she said softly, "I have not come to you empty-handed. I, too, can give you something for the cause, mon Général!" Withdrawing her hand from his she brought out from its hiding-place and held out to him the ruby necklace. "Like the gold, it comes from Mirabel; it was given—I daresay you have heard by whom—to the concierge of Mirabel."

Yet her husband, with the jewels in his hand, did not seem pleased. "But it is the Duchesse de Trélan who will wear it," he answered, drawing himself up. "Permit me!" And, a little awkwardly by reason of his injured arm, he contrived to clasp the heirloom round her neck—then, catching her to him with a sudden gasp, said vehemently, "Never speak to me again of Mirabel—of your being there like that! I cannot bear it!"

“But, Gaston,” she said, looking up at him, “when I was there I thought of you nearly all the time. . . . O my dear, when you ride in triumph into Paris with the Royalists of Finistère behind you, we two must make a pilgrimage to Mirabel together. If it had not been for Mirabel—for the treasure . . .”

She did not finish, for she was strained too closely. And, stooping his head, her husband kissed her—but not as he had done on his knees in the heather, like a worshipper. He kissed her like a lover. He was hers at last.

BOOK IV

THE YELLOW POPPY

“But oh, the night! oh! bitter-sweet, oh, sweet!
O dark, O moon and stars, O ecstasy
Of darkness! O great mystery of love,—
In which absorbed, loss, anguish, treason’s self
Enlarges rapture—as a pebble dropt
In some full winecup over-brims the wine!”

Aurora Leigh.

CHAPTER I

FULFILMENT

“When Love comes tapping
On the pane,
Let not his summons
Be in vain;
—‘Enter, Sweet, bring thou
Sun or rain!’ ”

sang Marthe de la Vergne to the harpsichord in her light sweet voice. The strains floated through the open salon window to Valentine de Trélan as she sat outside in the September sunshine. The music changed:

“Should the King honour
My poor door;
—‘Take, Sire, my sword-arm
And my store!’
So spake my fathers
Long before.”

There was a thrill in the young voice. Yes, thought Mme de Trélan, Marthe, if she had been a man, would certainly have given her sword-arm and her store to-day; in fact she had given them, in her brother, and—another.

The chords ceased; somebody had come into the room, and Valentine recognised her hostess’s voice, though she could not hear what she said. She resumed the embroidery which she had put down to listen to Mlle de la Vergne’s singing, but in a moment or two that had slipped to her lap, and her thoughts were miles away—back at the Allée des Vieilles, at the Clos-aux-Grives. Once more she rode into the courtyard of Gaston’s headquarters on Gaston’s horse, once more she renewed her acquaintance with Roland and the Abbé Chassin; once more she lay in the little room which her husband had given up to her—a soldier’s wife, in a soldier’s bare environment. And once more she was arranging Gaston’s sling for him—that sling for which she could not learn the reason, since he evaded her questions about his wound—and he suddenly caught sight of her hands, not quite the white and exquisite hands he remembered, and she perceived that the slight transformation brought home to him almost intolerably the years of which he could not bear her to speak. He had broken down at the sight, and before she could quiet him the palms of those hands, kissed over and over again, were wet with his tears. Yes, the lover she had never known she had now, and in those short five days together at the Clos-aux-Grives, interrupted though their companionship necessarily was, she had lived the only part of all her years that was worth the living.

Yet, lover though he were, Gaston de Trélan had almost instantly to sacrifice his happiness and hers. Even with a woman to wait on her he would not have it said that the chief of Finistère had his wife with him at his headquarters; would not at any rate permit himself a privilege he would not have accorded to any of his officers. He sent Artamène to ask Mme de la Vergne if she would receive his wife for a while—and so the brief idyll came to an end. For nearly a fortnight now the Duchesse de Trélan—her identity was no secret here—had been living, for the first time in seven years, with women of her own class, of whom the younger was already her slave. And she was happy here, where she was made so gladly welcome; but her thoughts had an incorrigible habit, as now, of flying away.

For besides those hours with Gaston there had been conversations with the Abbé Chassin, in which she learnt what had at first puzzled her, why her husband had changed his name; and to her Pierre Chassin revealed, saying he thought he owed it to her as well as to his foster-brother, something of the utter despair and grief of seven years ago, and its sequel. He told her indeed, in so many words, that the profound change in Gaston was due to her—to her memory; but Valentine had both combated this and said that there was no change—it was but the fruition of what had been there all the time. . . .

Fruition, yes—fruition of character, fruition of prayer. She had prayed and longed, and lo, after years, here was the answer! Its symbol lay across her very knees—the white silk of which she was making a scarf for the general commanding for the King in Finistère. And that general was her husband—her husband who loved her.

Could a heart, not very young, break with excess of happiness and gratitude? Spring’s joy was not like this—not so secure, not so blest. Surely this, the joy of autumn, was better!

Her eyes were full of tears as she looked at the golden tranquillity before her, the still trees whence floated the murmur of Marthe’s pigeons, the late flowers, the windless blue sky behind the poplars. But they did not fall; and after sitting a moment longer gazing before her she rose, and going to the window, looked in. Marthe, alone once more, was still seated at the harpsichord.

“What a charming little song, my child,” said Valentine, “and what a fresh voice you have!”

Mlle de la Vergne rose and, smiling, made her a curtsey. “Chère Madame, it is a little song that Artamène unearthed

somewhere; we used to sing it when he was here in the spring recovering of his wound, M. de Céligny and he and I. There is another verse."

"Will you not sing it then? Sing it all again, if you will, to please me?"

She sat down in the room this time, and once more Marthe sang the words, to the light tripping measure of the first stanza, and the martial rhythm of the second. For the third, the music changed yet again to more solemn harmonies:

"Then, when Death batters
At my gate,
One boon, I pray thee,
Grant me, Fate—
Instant to open
Ere he wait!"

The chords ended in the minor.

Looking up, Marthe saw that Mme de Trélan had leant her head on one hand. She rose, stood a moment irresolute, and then darted to her, and flinging herself on her knees beside her seized her other hand.

"Madame! Madame! I should not have sung the last verse! You are thinking—forgive me, but I can guess—that, when the fighting begins——"

Valentine put her arm round her. "My child, you shame me! You have more courage than I! Have you not given your brother to the same danger, and more than your brother?"

Marthe hid her face on the elder woman's shoulder, and thus, the dark head and the golden-grey together, they were when the door at the end of the great salon opened. Mlle de la Vergne drew away at the sound, and both ladies looked up. On the threshold stood the tall figure of the Duc de Trélan, with two aides-de-camp behind him; and the aides-de-camp were Roland and Artamène.

A moment the three invaders stood there, smiling, all three of them; then the sun-barred parquet rang under a spurred tread as Gaston came forward to kiss his wife's hand, and afterwards her cheek. His arm was no longer in a sling; he was wearing the Cross of Maria Theresa. As he lifted Marthe's fingers to his lips she thought—though she had never been to a court which had ceased to exist by the time she was of an age to be presented—"One sees, just by his manner of doing this, what a great gentleman he is. And I wonder if, in all those brilliant ceremonies at Versailles, in the days when he was first gentleman of the bedchamber to the King, whether Mme de Trélan ever saw him to such advantage as here in our drawing-room, in that plain, dark uniform, with his sword and that air of purpose."

And the young girl's reflection was near enough to Valentine's inmost thought as, clinging to her husband's arm, she went with him through the long window into the sunshine outside, which was so filled with her thoughts of him. Out there, his arms round her, her hands on his breast, her eyes closed, she took and gave on the lips a kiss at once grave and passionate, a kiss like the first kiss of lovers—a salute which had no special affinity with courts.

"O Gaston, how I have dreamed of this!"

"Not more, my heart of hearts, than I! But I could not well have come, had I not been leaving my headquarters for a few days in any case."

"To fight? Not yet, surely?"

"No—to talk!" said he with a little rueful look. "But it will end in fighting, I trust. I am bound for the château of La Jonchère, near Pouancé—just over the border in Anjou—where all the chiefs are to meet on the fifteenth, to take a final decision."

"And you think it will be war?"

"I hope so. Circumstances have never been so favourable. But you are standing all this while; let us go and sit down in the arbour."

They were seated under the linden arch, as yet untouched by autumn, when she said, "A rumour came yesterday, Gaston, that Vendée had already risen. But we are so out-of-the-way here; is it true?"

Her husband's face darkened. "Valentine, it is true. Risen, and risen unsuccessfully, alas. Forestier—you may remember hearing of him in the grande guerre—came back from Spain to lead the rising. He was defeated and, it is feared, mortally wounded, at Civière, on the thirtieth of August."

Valentine gave a little shiver. Defeat . . . wounds. . . . "Gaston, why was it? Surely in Vendée if anywhere——"

"My darling, Vendée is more a name than a power now. That heroic earth is a desert; half her grown men have perished. Three years have not nearly sufficed to raise her from ruins. And yet"——He stopped, and dropped his voice a little. "Yet one thing might have done it. One thing might even have raised the bones of the slain to life and made soldiers of them—the coming of a Prince. It is the old cry—Charette's cry, the cry of Quiberon."

She detected bitterness in his tone. "Does so much, then, depend for us now, in Brittany, on the Comte d'Artois' coming in person?"

The Duc bent his head. "It is hard to say how much."

"Perhaps I should not ask this, Gaston," she suggested, uneasy, "but does he mean to come?"

"He says so," replied M. de Trélan gravely. "I have no doubt he means it. It is that nest of intriguers round him who can never be made to see the necessity. They put it on the British Government."

Valentine was silent, thinking of the irresponsible Prince Charming whom they had both known personally in the vanished days of Versailles; then she sighed, and changed the topic. But after a little her husband said that it was his duty to pay his respects to Mme de la Vergne, whom he had not yet seen. And as he rose, reluctantly, he said, "Could we not ride together somewhere this afternoon, Valentine—alone?"

It was what she had been hoping for. "To the sea, then?" she suggested. "I have not been there yet, though you can see it from the upper windows, and hear it too, when there is wind. Let us go there together."

"Soit!" said he, and went off in search of the lady of the house.

In the salon, meanwhile, Marthe entertained the aides-de-camp.

"No, you must kiss my left hand to-day, Monsieur de Céligny," she said, laughing, and put her right behind her back. "I keep the other exclusively now for our General."

She had a flame-coloured ribbon in her hair, and her eyes danced as always. Yes, she was worth all that Mirabel unpleasantness! But Roland had already seen her since his return.

"Mademoiselle," he said with some audacity, "if I am to follow M. le Duc's example in salutation to Mme de Trélan, after the hand comes . . . the cheek. But there, too, I would be content with the left!"

"That also," said Marthe with dignity, "is reserved for someone else!" And she provokingly held it up to her brother, who kissed her on both.

"Did I hear you singing *Sur le Seuil* just now, ma petite?" he enquired. "That was why you never heard us riding up. You were making such a to-do among those low notes, for Death battering on the gate, that he really might have been battering for all you heard."

But, presently, with a little wise smile, Artamène drifted out of the salon. He went into the garden and climbed up into an apple tree which he knew of, where he could lie at his ease in a fork and try some of the small green apples. "Maman and I," he thought, "are de trop in this establishment. M. le Marquis—his pardon, M. le Duc—and his resuscitated spouse (who is worthy of him) in the arbour, Roland and Marthe in the salon . . . Je me fais hermite."

But his departure had not greatly facilitated matters, for presently Mme de la Vergne came in and carried off Marthe on some business concerned with the nourishment of the gentlemen who had descended on her, and a moment or two later, when Roland stood irresolute and alone by the window, he perceived his leader coming in search of his hostess.

"Go and talk to Mme de Trélan, my boy," said the Duc. "She is in the arbour. I imagine you still have memories of Mirabel to discuss."

So Roland went to the arbour, where Valentine was, and having at her request fetched her embroidery, sat himself down precariously at her feet on an overturned wateringpot.

"Madame, I have a grievance against M. le Duc," he began. "I must lay it before you, for you are the only person who can do anything for me in the matter."

Valentine looked up. "What is it, my child?"

"My locket!" said Roland. "The locket you gave me. He has never returned it since that night!"

"Have you ever asked him?"

Roland shook his head, and his eyes said plainly who he proposed should perform that office. Valentine met them—and her needle slipped. The memory of another garden came back to her. He *was* like Gaston in just that light, when he wore just that expression. . . .

"Blood!" cried the young man. "Madame, you are quite pale! If you would allow me——" And out came his handkerchief.

She shook her head, and twisted her own round the scratch, which had already flecked the silk of the scarf. Suppose her first impression had been correct after all? Well, it was part of the pain of the past, stretching onwards, which she must face. And did it hurt so much in this wonderful present? But her look was grave when she said lightly, "Is there not some other person's locket you would prefer to the concierge's, Roland?"

He flushed a little. "Even if she would have me, if Mme de la Vergne and her brother—and my grandfather—would give their consents, I am more or less penniless, Madame. My estates were sequestrated when my father died two years ago."

His father! Her heart leapt up again. And yet . . . Was it possible that she *wished* he were Gaston's son?

"Sequestrated by the Government, I suppose? You never told me that. Where are they, Roland—in Brittany also?"

"No, Madame; right down in the south, near Avignon."

Quite abruptly the Duchesse de Trélan stood up, dropping the scarf; and the youth, trying to follow her example with the alacrity which politeness demanded, all but rolled off the wateringcan. And Valentine apologised. "I suddenly felt it too hot here. I will go under the trees, I think."

Near Avignon! So was Saint-Chamans. She really felt faint, and yet it was not exactly with distaste. But she must know. And since nothing, not even *that*, had power to come between them now she would ask Gaston himself at the

first opportunity. She did not even feel that she must have time to reflect on this.

But perhaps Gaston meant to tell her of his own free will . . .

Then she saw him and Marthe coming that way through the sunshine, under the apple trees, and she went towards him, followed by Roland. And in his hermitage the Chevalier de la Vergne, making a wry face over a sour apple, roused himself to peer down at the sound of voices.

“Everything that there is of a family party!” he observed softly. And with that, judging it time to discover himself, he dropped down from his tree and joined the quartet.

“Oh, there you are, young gentleman,” remarked M. de Trélan. “Mademoiselle and I have been looking for you. How far did you say it was to the sea, Mademoiselle?”

“About five miles, Monsieur le Duc.”

“Then you shall lend me your horse after déjeuner, Artamène, and Mme de Trélan shall ride Zéphyr. He prefers to carry a lady, does he not, Mademoiselle?”

“I could not vouch for that, Monsieur le Duc. He has been more honoured since he ceased to do so.”

“You perhaps have not had time to realise, Valentine,” said Gaston, addressing his wife with a smile creeping round his mouth, “that, as in Eastern countries—and not only there, I fancy—where an accused, fearing an adverse judgment, is prompt to send a substantial present to the judge beforehand, so Zéphyr (himself of Eastern origin) came to me as a . . . bribe . . . and my hands, I fear, are somewhat stained by corruption.”

“How is that?” asked the Duchesse, glancing from her husband to the laughing girl.

“But my lips, by the same token, are sealed,” finished M. de Trélan.

“Mesdames, Messieurs, le déjeuner est servi,” announced the recently promoted Séraphin, approaching with the gait of a rustic and the livery of a major-domo.

CHAPTER II

THE YELLOW POPPY

So Gaston and Valentine rode alone to the sea.

They went at first through deep lanes, scarcely wide enough to ride abreast, where they lost sight of their goal, then, mounting a rise of sandy turf, came on it spread gloriously before them. A fresh breeze was blowing off the land, and the water was of a hundred vivid, changing hues—the clearest green, purple that was almost rose, and blue that was more than the blue of heaven. It was flecked with myriad little tips of foam that looked like sea-birds, for ever vanishing and reappearing, and the offshore wind ran over it in sudden violent caresses. Far out, it was the colour of a distant wood of hyacinths.

They checked their horses. Valentine drew a long breath before the pulsating wonder of it, the freedom and the joy. She stretched out her hand in silence to her husband, and he took it as simply; so they sat on their horses hand in hand like two children at their first sight of the ocean.

Then he suggested their going down to the shore, and they went down among the shelving dunes, their horses' hoofs sinking deep in the loose blown sand. At the verge were the stem and ribs of an abandoned boat, conveniently embedded there, to which they could tether their horses, and Gaston, dismounting, did so and held out his arms to her. But Zéphyr whinnied after them; sand and rotting timbers pleased him not.

Down here, on the shore itself, the sandhills gave some shelter, and they could walk in comfort, especially when they went nearer to the water where the sand was firm and ribbed. Despite the offshore wind, the curling waves shook off from their edges a breeze of their own, the essence of the sea. Clinging to her husband's arm, Valentine leant her head against his shoulder and half closed her eyes.

"Here," he said softly, looking down at her, "here one forgets wars and anxieties, the past and the future—everything but the present. We were right to come."

The breeze of the sea's own seemed to freshen. Down here one could not see in the same way as from the verge above the whole extent of that moving field of rapture, all the rainbow thoughts that ran over its surface, but one was nearer to its incommunicable magic.

"You will be cold, my darling. Let us walk along by the waves."

The little seas, tumbling in foam at their feet, bending in mock homage before them, racing slily to entrap them, laughed their undying laugh whose meaning the heart of man is not deep enough to seize. Starfish, fluted shells, trails of seaweed, all their careless treasures were displayed there. . . . They would laugh with just the same fresh joy to-morrow . . . when Gaston would be here no longer . . . O, terrible, that eternal youth and indifference!

"Gaston," she said, gripping his arm more closely, "you are not going alone to La Jonchère, surely? You spoke of sending the young men back."

"No, my heart," said he, putting his hand over hers. "I am not going alone. M. du Ménars and another officer will meet me to-morrow on the road, with an escort as well. When we meet I shall send my aides-de-camp back to the Clos-aux-Grives. That was all I meant."

A few paces more, and he added, "Unless I take one of them with me to La Jonchère in order to use him as a messenger to you. Which of them, in that case, would you rather have as Mercury?"

Why did he ask her that? She forgot the sea and glanced at him, but he was looking at the waves.

She answered as she would have answered in any case. "I would rather have Roland. He is a charming boy . . . I was already fond of him at Mirabel." If Gaston meant to tell her without being asked, which was her great hope, she would make it as easy as possible for him. She paused, and went on lightly, "Mme de la Vergne, however, might prefer her own son. As for Marthe . . . well, I know Roland's mind at least on that matter."

Her husband stopped in his walk. "Valentine," he said, turning his head towards her, "I have something to tell you about Roland."

She stopped too, and loosed his arm. For a moment her heart seemed to pause also. He had paled a little, his voice was very grave and not free from difficulty, but he did not try to escape her gaze. On the contrary he looked straight at her.

("*I have something to tell you about Roland!*" echoed the waves, laughing.)

And then Valentine de Trélan knew that she wanted to spare him the explicit avowal, because she saw how much it would cost him to utter to her face what was, by implication, an insult to her—though an insult twenty years old.

"I guessed it, Gaston," she said, very quietly. "But I hoped that you would tell me. It is right that I should know . . . but I want to learn nothing further . . . I only wished it not to lie, unspoken, between us. . . . Now we need never speak of it again, save as it affects the boy himself."

"I hate that you should know it," he said with emotion. "And yet I hated even more to keep you in ignorance. I thought, too, that you might guess, and that was worse . . . Valentine, Valentine, I cannot wish it undone, because I love him . . . but if only I need not have given you this pain!"

Yet he was suffering more than she; she knew that. Once again, as in the arbour this morning, it came to her as strange that she should feel it so little. And, only eager for the moment to allay the deep distress in his eyes and voice, she put her hands on his arm. “It does not pain me now, Gaston. No, no, believe me! I am speaking the truth! It is so long ago, in that other life which we have forgotten. Why remember it now, in this?”

He caught her hands and raised them to his lips. “Generous! generous!” he murmured. “Why must I choose to-day to wound you so?”

“But you have chosen the right day, the right place!” she cried. The vanishing of the dread that he might not tell her had almost irradiated her. “The . . . the past—see, it can be forgotten, as a pebble would be, cast into those great waters . . . and that there is no pain now—*I* love him, too. Will not that convince you, my husband?”

Perhaps it did. He bowed his forehead silently upon her hands as he held them.

“But as for guessing,” she went on, “—O Gaston, my very dear, it is over now—as for guessing, the first moment that I saw him, lying in the garden at Mirabel, I was startled . . . but I thought it was imagination. And I grew so fond of him in those few days, innocent and gallant as he was. Yet I put the idea away at once because . . . because he had not your eyes . . . and now, after all . . .” She stopped; speech was suddenly failing her. “O Gaston,” she said in a breaking whisper, “Gaston, if only he had *mine*!”

And pulling her hands away she put them before her own face, weeping.

“My darling, my darling!” he cried, and strained her in his arms, saying no more than that, beyond speech indeed himself, pierced once more by the memory of his own words at their parting, which came back even now to stab him. But as, with her face covered, she wept upon his heart, he knew that it was not of his unworthy reproach that she was thinking. Hers was a deeper and more mysterious pain. It seemed so to throb through her as he held her, there on the sandy shore, that the very waves were full of it; and he could do nothing save hold her more tenderly still, and kiss the yet beautiful hair.

After a little she ceased to sob, and dried her eyes.

“Only one thing more,” she said unsteadily. “Does Roland know?”

“I gave my word to his grandfather that I would not tell him before he was one-and-twenty. I have tried to keep it in the spirit as well as in the letter. I do not think he guesses. What others may guess I do not know.”

“It is plain,” said Valentine, “that he worships you. But they all do that, those young men—and with reason.”

They were still standing at the edge of the waves when she put the seal on her forgiveness. For she said, looking at him with her clear eyes, “Gaston, when I see him and speak with him I am glad that he is your son!”

Later on they sat at the base of the sandhills, and spoke of many things—even of M. de Brencourt, so sore a subject to her husband that, till now, Valentine had scarcely dared to mention the Comte’s name. Particularly had this been the case since he had learnt, at the Clos-aux-Grives, of the lie told at Mirabel about his own death. Most of the tale of treachery Valentine had gleaned, not from Gaston at all, but from the Abbé Chassin. Yet it seemed to her a better thing that Gaston should say openly now, as with cold passion he did, “*He took my hand after I had gone out with him, and yet went on with the worst treason of all! It is impossible for a man to forgive an act so absolutely base!*” than that he should nurse his just resentment in secret and never speak of it. But though through the Comte de Brencourt she had so nearly lost him before ever he was found, though now, realising it afresh, she caught to her breast the arm which the false comrade had pierced, this day and place seemed to spread healing hands even over that madness and treachery. And when she looked at him, holding him thus, the frown went from Gaston’s brow, and adding, “At least, then, I will try to forget,” he gave her a long kiss.

But soon, too soon, it was time to return. The wind was dropping; the gulls which had been soaring high on its strength were now beginning to ride on the little waves, or to stalk along by the edge of the tide. The brief hour was over, the hour that seemed more particularly set between the old life and the new, in this place of wild air and rapture, where the years of pain and surmise were forgotten, and the hazard of the sword and what the future might bring yet unweighed. It was time to go.

And as, very close together, the two went slowly along the dry sand at the bottom of the dunes, they saw at a little distance a small patch of colour there—a pool of faint green, touched with blots of pale, swaying yellow that caught and held the sunlight. They came to it.

“Flowers even here!” exclaimed Valentine.

It was the bride of the waves, the beautiful yellow sea-poppy, that blossoms so late, and is so soon scattered. They both stood and looked down at it, not without wonder, as those who come on a jewel in a dusty place—at the strong, abundant, deeply-cut foliage, silvery green in the sunset, fashioned to defy wind and wave, that had yet given birth to such an ethereal marvel of a flower, whose every petal was a miracle of delicacy, a flower so frail that a breath could put out its cup of light. Already the plant at their feet bore the tokens of the passing of many of its blossoms, in the long curving horns, treasures of next year’s promise, which had succeeded the fallen petals.

Valentine, who had never seen the horned poppy before, knelt down by it. “How wonderful to bloom so late, and in

so inclement a place!” she said. “Look how the wind beats on these flowers!”

“And yet they do not fall,” said her husband. “You shall give me one, my dearest heart, for this our second betrothal.”

So she plucked a poppy and held it up to him. It seemed almost to have light in itself, like a fragile golden lamp half enclosed between the open, guarding hands of its leaves. He took it, and bending, kissed the hand that gave it him. Next moment, either because it was caught by a puff of wind, or because its brief life was already over, he held nothing in his hand but the stem with its sturdy foliage, and the pistil set within its fringe of orange-yellow stamens. The four lovely shining petals were blown away. One only rested over his heart, caught there on the cross of white and gold.

Valentine turned pale. What had suggested to her that this wonder was like their love, so late in blossoming, so little favoured in its surroundings, so exquisite . . . and, perhaps, so short-lived?

“Wait, and I will give you another,” she said with a rather forced gaiety. “I will choose a younger flower this time.”

“No, no,” cried Gaston de Trélan. “I want no other.” And, gently taking off the bright, clinging thing from his breast and closing it in his hand, he stooped and recovered the other three—two from the sand, the fourth from Valentine’s habit, and lifted them to his lips. At the base of each pale golden petal was the faintest stain. Then he put them carefully, almost reverently away in a little leather case, and replaced it inside his uniform.

“You look quite white, my darling!” he exclaimed, catching sight of her face as she rose. “What is the matter?”

But she would not tell him; she only came for the last time in that place into the strong circle of his arms. Her cheek rested where the poppy petal had lain, on the guerdon of valour; against her side she felt the hilt of his sword—a sweet discomfort.

“O Gaston, my heart, my only love! It was worth those years—this hour! Only, with so much happiness upon me, I think I would rather die to-day.”

“Are you afraid?” he asked in a low voice, holding her as if he meant to hold her for ever. “Are you afraid, my saint, my strong saint? I am not. This place that we have come to, after such bitter wanderings, shall hold us always now—be sure of it—in life or death!”

And though the yellow poppy shone and shivered at their feet—the sea-poppy that flowers so late and is so soon scattered—she knew that it was true.

CHAPTER III

THE COST OF ANSWERED PRAYER

So it was Roland, now openly betrothed to Marthe, who came to La Vergne a week later, bringing Gaston's letter announcing that the die was cast, and it was Roland who told Valentine more fully of the great gathering of Royalist chiefs at La Jonchère, surrounded by almost inaccessible forest, and guarded by more than a thousand peasants. The young man, though not himself admitted to the conferences, had seen some of the leaders, Châtillon and Bourmont and La Prévalaye and Sol de Grisolles, and d'Autichamp the Vendean, and Georges Cadoudal whom he had missed at Hennebont. Their three days of deliberation had resulted in a decision for a general levy of arms in the West. The date fixed was the fifteenth of October. "Not very long to wait, Madame!" said Hermes enthusiastically.

No, for Gaston's wife the time was all too short till the clash of arms,—but all too long till his promised visit. For in his letter he had said that before the hour of action broke he should, please God, come and show her all that was in his heart for her. And Valentine looked at the words every day, as September, full of rumours, ripened towards October.

In the first week in October came the news that fighting had already begun in Northern Brittany, and with success, for the Chevalier de la Nougarède, "Achille le brun," had hardly got back from La Jonchère than he raised the standard, and beat, at Argentré, the Republican general Schildt who had come out of Rennes to attack him. And even before that d'Andigné, the Comte de Châtillon's very competent chief of staff, had inflicted a severe little defeat at Noyant on eight hundred of the old, tried soldiers who had formed part of the garrison of Milan.

On the other hand there was bad news from Holland, where Brune had defeated the allied Anglo-Russian forces of the Texel expedition on September 19; and worse from Switzerland, where, six days later, Masséna inflicted such a severe defeat on Korsakoff at Zurich that Suwaroff, coming from Italy to join his countryman, had difficulty in saving his own army. Valentine was uneasy at these tidings of the Republic's triumph on a large scale, but neither she nor the other two women fully comprehended how they isolated the Royalists of the West. And though she wondered why the forty-five thousand English and Russians could not have been landed directly on the soil of France, in Brittany or Vendée, instead of in Holland, she could not foresee that a little later Brune's whole army, set free by the capitulation of Alkmaar, would be employed against the Chouans. She worked at the last golden fleur-de-lys on Gaston's scarf, and helped Mme de la Vergne and Marthe in their household employments and in the orchard, for there were fewer men than ever, Séraphin and two of the farm boys having gone to join the Lilies.

And once or twice, in that St. Luke's summer come before its time, she found her steps turning towards the sea. She went there twice with Marthe. She would have liked to go there again with Gaston, but she knew that desire unlikely of fulfilment. And the sea was so changed—calm with an unearthly calm; shining with a pure, still radiance, and warded by great slow-moving fleets of cloud galleons like mother-of-pearl, that were reflected, far-gleaming, in the water over which they sailed. Yes, this October sea was as far removed from a tranquil blue sea of summer as from that beautiful September sea, where there had been wind and rainbow shadows—and the yellow poppy, which bloomed no longer. There shone instead the golden leaves of the poplars at La Vergne, incredibly yellow against the distant sea, on the one or two days that the sea had colour. But mostly it was of that indescribable hue of nacre.

And when would Gaston come?

When he did come Valentine would have given everything in the world that he had not.

Old Colette, the cook, who had gone to the tiny village for her marketing, came back on one of these still mornings rather flustered, reporting that there were soldiers there. It was a most startling as well as a most unpleasant novelty. In none of the previous risings had Blues ever been seen at La Vergne. The ancient woman at first reported the invaders to be about a hundred; later she came down to a dozen.

But half that number could terrorise the place. And why were they there? The three ladies at the château had nothing to hide—as yet, nothing, for themselves, to fear; nevertheless they were in a fever. If word could only be sent to the "Marquis de Kersaint" in case he were on his road! But word could not be sent. Valentine comforted herself and them by the assurance that he would not come without an escort, and would therefore have nothing to fear from a handful of Blues. He would never come alone.

But that was precisely what her husband did, riding in quietly to the stable-yard at dusk of that October day, and, finding no one there, putting up his horse with his own hands. And Marthe, hearing unwonted sounds, ran out from the kitchen and found him in the act, with Zéphyr very much at home, and pulling down hay from his old rack.

"O, Monsieur le Duc! Monsieur le Duc!" she cried.

"Mademoiselle," said Gaston, laughing, "I do indeed apologise for making free of your provender without permission. May I plead that it is for your own horse?"

She darted at him while Zéphyr whinnied for recognition. "Why did you choose to-day to come, Monsieur de Trélan? We have been so praying that you would not. Do not say that you are alone, unescorted! For . . . did you not know it? . . . there are soldiers in the village!"

There was a moment's silence. "No, I did not know it," said the Duc quietly. "Had I known, I should not have come

alone. But I did not enter the village, so they will not have seen me." He paused, passing his hand once or twice over Zéphyr's neck, and said in a voice which, despite himself, revealed how intensely he disliked the idea, "I do not wish to involve you in unpleasantness. Perhaps the simplest thing would be to ride away again at once."

Marthe shook her head. Now that he was here, risk or no risk, he must see his wife. Perhaps indeed there was greater risk in going back.

"You must stay," she said. "And we have taken certain precautions. Come to the house, Monsieur le Duc, and I will show you, even before you see Mme de Trélan."

"And Zéphyr—if they should search? He becomes your horse once more, I suppose? But my saddle, Mademoiselle, what of that? Unless you can persuade them that you always use a man's!"

"Here is mine quite near," she said, pointing to it, "and it fits him, of course. Yours—it has holsters, too!—we must hide in the loft." They hid it, and in a few minutes she was showing M. de Trélan the old hiding-place in the dining-room. "It is very ingenious, the way one gets there," she added.

It *was* very ingenious. Against the painted panels stood a massive sideboard which four men could scarcely have stirred from its place. But when Marthe touched a spring a section of it turned upon itself and gave access to a tiny room behind, whose door formed part of the panelling.

"A very charming little retreat," observed the Duc, smiling. "But I hope that you do not expect me to deprive myself of your society, Mademoiselle, by spending all my time in there?"

"We should be the last to wish to banish you, Monsieur. But there it is ready, if you—get tired of us! Yet I think you have run all the risk you are likely to run . . . unless they *know*."

"That, I think, is impossible," said Gaston. And then Valentine, attracted by voices, entered. Marthe slipped out with the speed of a swallow.

"O my darling, my darling, why have you come?" was her first word.

"Ma foi," returned her husband gaily, as he kissed her, "apparently to be put aside, like the bread, in that sort of garde-manger there—at least that is the fate Mlle Marthe designs for me. It is not my intention, however."

"Gaston, you should not have come!" she repeated.

"Chère amie, what a greeting. Shall I go again?"

"No, no!" She clung to his arm. "You did not know, of course!"

"No," he said more gravely, "I did not know. It would not have been right for me to come if I had known." Then he looked at her and said with deliberation, "I am only thankful that I did not know!"

They had all of them that in the blood which responds to the stimulus of danger, and supper, in the room whence the hiding-place was so easily accessible, was a cheerful meal. During its course news arrived that the soldiers had left the village altogether. So they went with light hearts into the salon, and there the leader of Finistère told the three ladies what in a few days they would divine for themselves, the outline of the main plan of campaign, and why what seemed the hazardous plan of attacking large towns instead of small was the better. For in the small towns, violently anti-royalist as they were, the whole population was armed, and the walls and palisades loopholed, so that the losses involved in the capture of such positions, without artillery, would be too heavy to be worth incurring. On the other hand the large towns were often insufficiently garrisoned for their size, opinion therein was more moderate, sometimes secretly favourable, and even an unsuccessful attack would benefit the Royalists, since it would draw off the Republican troops from the country districts.

"It is a good thing that we are going to begin fighting in earnest," he concluded, "for soon I shall not be able to hold in my followers. Do you know what Lucien and Roland did the other day for a wager—strolled, in full uniform, through the streets of Lanvennec in broad daylight! The Republicans were just changing guard, and were, I fancy, too much petrified by their audacity to take in what was happening. Anyhow my young sparks had completed their promenade before the chase began. It was *I* who had them arrested."

He had barely finished the story when steps came flying down the passage, the door was unceremoniously opened, and Marthe's maid, shutting it behind her, stood there panting. "Soldiers!" she gasped, "they are in the house . . . some in the garden . . . they are coming here now." Indeed, through the closed door could clearly be heard approaching feet and the clank of spurs—feet that cut off the possibility of swift retreat to the cachette in the dining-room. In another moment their owners would be in the salon.

Valentine, turning quite white, went to her husband's side, and Gaston, who had jumped up, looked quickly round the room. "The window," he suggested; but at the same moment came a blow on the shutters outside.

"No, no!" exclaimed Marthe, as pale as Mme de Trélan. "Behind you—the hangings!" And she all but pushed him to the wall, parted the hangings of woven Indian stuff, and with her little hands drew them hastily over him again. Then she ran to the long window, on which repeated blows were raining. Mme de la Vergne, nervous but collected, went to the door. And Valentine was left by the hearth to see that Marthe's work was not completed. For under the thin gay riot of branches, birds and flowers that concealed him, were only too plainly visible Gaston's boots—the hangings did not quite reach the floor. It seemed to her that in that second she knew the concentrated anguish of a lifetime—for Marthe's

quick wit had been right; it was the only possible place in the room. Yet she had seized a brocaded cushion from the sofa, had cast it down against the hangings on her husband's feet as though it had fallen there, and, placing a low chair in front of it, had herself sat down as a living screen, all before the door actually opened and the Republican officer and his men came in.

If the search had been anything but perfunctory, Gaston de Trélan must have been discovered. But the officer, it was obvious, had no idea whom the Château de la Vergne was harbouring, nor indeed, that it was specifically harbouring anybody, and he was almost apologetic at disturbing the ladies. But—orders were orders. Round the salon, therefore, he merely took a long glance, and when they had searched the rest of the house with about the same particularity, the Blues went away, and the inmates of the château could sleep in perfect security.

But not Valentine. For all her courage and resource she came near breaking down when she was at last alone with her husband.

"I feel as if I should never sleep again!" she said, pressing the palms of her hands over her eyes. "I see nothing but those men's faces and the way they looked round the room. Gaston, Gaston, I am not fit to be your wife!"

"Never would I have come," said he remorsefully, holding her in his arms as they stood by the hearth in her room, "never would I have come had I known it would be to put you to such strain!"

"Gaston, is it true that the Royalists have no artillery?"

"Yes," he replied unwillingly.

"And these Republican victories in Holland and Switzerland—are they not very unfortunate?"

"They are not fortunate, certainly. But the greater the odds, the greater the glory."

"Gaston, I . . . I do not think I can let you go!"

To this he said nothing, but very tenderly kissed her hair, as he held her. And now she began to see the price that every woman pays who stands where she did.

"You know," she said, after a pause, "I think I must be, ordinarily, without imagination. I think of you and danger always, every moment that I breathe, but they never seem together, and only to-night, when danger was in the room with you and I sat there pretending to sew—thank God it was not your scarf that I had—thinking every moment that one of them would pick up that cushion and you would be dragged out—it was only then that I realised what danger is. . . ."

But all night she realised it, and all night, whether she woke, or slept in snatches, she saw the price that she must pay, although he was safe for the moment at her side. Gaston, too, lay long awake, and they talked; but he must rise and ride away before sunrise, and, campaigning having given him the gift of sleep at will, after a while he slept.

He could sleep, yes; for though reluctant to leave her he was going to what he desired, to what she—strange irony—had prayed, years ago, that he might desire—a man's work, a man's hazards, a man's endurances. Long unanswered, that slow prayer of hers had found ample fulfilment now . . . and she was beginning to learn the cost of its realisation. His hand held at last the hilt of a blade that was worthy of him—but its point was in her heart.

Once in her torment she slipped out of bed and wandered distractedly round the dark room. She went, without conscious purpose, towards the deep recessed window, and, feeling her way to the curtains, met on the window-seat something long and hard and cold. Her fingers told her that it was Gaston's sword, which he had laid there. And, hating it and loving it at once, she knelt down and laid her forehead against the scabbard. "Bring him back to me! bring him back!" But what could a sword do against a bullet?

Valentine looked out. The night had been dull and cloudy, but it was now getting towards dawn. She had a desire to see Gaston more clearly, and, leaving the curtain half drawn, she went back towards the bed. Then she wished she had left the window veiled. In that grey light how pale he looked, lying there motionless in the ancient bed, whose twisted posts recalled the great candlesticks she had set out at Mirabel for the requiem mass that was never said. Ah, what horrible presentiments seized one in this wan, uncourageous hour! She had a yearning to wake him, to hear him speak; she even pressed her hand over her mouth as she stood there by him lest she should do it, but all the time she knew that an impulse such as that had no chance against the deep, protective instinct which immediately overrode it. He must sleep, because he would have need of strength to-day whither he went.

Cold and heartsick, she crept back at last into bed and lay there, still wakeful, in agony. How often in the weeks of tension that were coming would she not lie and crave for the pain that she had now—the anticipated pain of parting. For a little time longer she could listen to his quiet breathing. To have done that to-morrow and the morrow after would be the whole of bliss, for she would have known that he was safe. But to-morrow night——

She did fall asleep in the end. A slight sound woke her. Gaston, fully dressed, was kneeling by her side.

"O, my heart, is it time already?"

"It wants five minutes, beloved."

In that black night Valentine had determined that, if it killed her, she would not fail him at the moment of parting. "I must get up, then, and give you your scarf," she said, raising herself.

"You must fasten it on for me," said he.

"No, Gaston, not over your uniform—and you without an escort! It is too conspicuous . . . I wish now that I had not worked the ends in gold. No; hide it in your breast, and put it on when you are back!" She had slipped out of bed, had found the symbol, and was holding it close to her.

"Very well, most dear," said he, smiling. "I wanted your fingers to knot it round me, but perhaps you are right. It is from your hands that I receive it, which is all that matters." He knelt and took it from her, kissed the folded silk, and opening the breast of his uniform, put it over his heart. She stooped over him suddenly.

"I am not worthy of you, my dearest, for last night . . . if I could have kept you back, I would. This morning I . . . I desire you to go. But I am weak, Gaston; only promise me that you will think of me as I wish to be in this, and not as I . . . as I am!"

Still kneeling, he caught her hands. "Have you then so little knowledge of what you are to me, Valentine—you, my star, my standard with the Lilies, my oriflamme itself!"

CHAPTER IV

WAR . . . AND TREATIES

(1)

And now at last the West was really ablaze, and in a few days, as department after department lit up with the carefully prepared flame, the Republicans began to suffer more serious reverses than they had known since the days of the *grande guerre*, the Vendée proper, six years before. For the Chouannerie which the dying Directory had to face was very different from what it had been in the days of Hoche and the Convention; it was no longer a swarm of small peasant uprisings led, sometimes, by nameless chiefs as uneducated as the men who followed them. The leaders of this war were gentlemen, returned émigrés, with enrolled levies at their disposal; with a system of requisition, a network of espionage and intelligence throughout the country districts; with, here and there, white-plumed staff officers wearing the cross of St. Louis, with uniforms, now and then with fifes and drums, and even, in one or two cases, with a little cavalry.

And their tactics were new and more formidable. No longer did they content themselves with overrunning the country districts, avoiding the neighbourhood of towns; on the contrary, as M. de Kersaint had told the ladies of La Vergne, they were in such force that they threatened—and did more than threaten—those centres of Republicanism.

At the voice of Cadoudal the country between Vannes and Auray had risen as one man. Not vainly had he boasted in the spring of his careful organisation. And while he himself successively took Landévant between Auray and Hennebont, Port Navalo at the outlet of the inland sea of the Morbihan, and other places between that and the mouth of the Vilaine, his lieutenant Sol de Grisolles raised the districts between the mouth of the Vilaine and that of the Loire. To him fell La Roche-Bernard on the river itself, Pontchâteau and Guérande with its mediæval walls and towers, a formidable triangle of possessions above St. Nazaire and the Loire mouth. And these were only some of the Republican losses in Brittany.

Maine fought under the young Comte de Bourmont, seconded by the veteran Chevalier de Tercier, and Chappedelaine, and the Chevalier de Châteauneuf—who was “Achille le blond.” Another of Bourmont’s lieutenants, La Fregeolière, pushed as far as Le Lude and La Flèche on the borders of the Angoumois and Touraine. Anjou obeyed the old Comte de Châtillon, and, after the brilliant initial success of his chief of staff, d’Andigné, at Noyant in September, the Angevins made rapid incursions into the districts of Segré, Candé and Châteauneuf. Ingrandes, Varades on the Loire, garrisoned towns, were threatened. From the Loire right up to the Côtes-du-Nord the Republican cantonments and posts were submerged under a flood of insurgents.

But far more resounding than all these widespread successes were the audacious *coups de main* carried out on large towns. St. Brieuc on its bay in the Côtes-du-Nord was not, it is true, a large town, but it was garrisoned; yet Mercier, Cadoudal’s young alter ego, and Saint-Régent took and held it for a night while General Casabianca barricaded himself in his hotel. The Chouans set free three hundred Royalists imprisoned there, and took muskets. But, ten days before this, a much more daring capture had been made—nothing less than the city of Le Mans which, at three o’clock on the morning of October 15, Bourmont’s forces entered at five points simultaneously. He held it for three days before he withdrew. Even more than Le Mans, Nantes, that great city, proud of its resistance to the Vendean army, might have seemed secure. But while Grigny, commanding there, went out in the wrong direction to encounter the Angevins, Châtillon and d’Andigné, under cover of a thick fog, slipped in at four o’clock in the morning of October 20 with no more than two thousand followers, of whom only half were accustomed to arms.

The taking of Nantes, though the place had to be evacuated before daylight, and though it did not give the captors any material advantage in the way of arms and powder, as did the seizure of Le Mans, had, equally with that exploit, exactly the effect on public opinion that the Royalists had hoped, creating such a terror in the large towns that they could not be left without adequate garrisons, and thus immobilising a number of Republican troops, and leaving the country districts freer for the operations of the Royalists. Before either of these feats, however, the example had been set in Finistère—and was not Valentine proud of it?—when her husband, with a smaller force than any, seized and held for two days and nights the pleasant cathedral city of Quimper, the *chef-lieu* of the department. Yet she could hardly have been prouder than ‘les jeunes,’ who played a most conspicuous part in the enterprise. To the Republicans of Quimper the sudden inroad of a hitherto unknown phenomenon, Chouan cavalry—not very wonderfully mounted, it is true, nor smartly equipped, but making a terrific noise on the cobbled streets—was little short of apocalyptic. The Chevalier de la Vergne, the commander of this small body, observed to his two intimates that they had a right to give themselves airs, since the capture of Quimper was undoubtedly due in the main to “Charlemagne’s Horse,” as he had christened his corps; but Roland reminded him that, if such were the case, it was really Mirabel which had taken the town, for Mirabel had mounted and armed those cavaliers, as it had armed the greater part of M. de Kersaint’s *gars*.

And, after leaving Quimper, before the troops sent in haste from the Morbihan could fall upon him, the Marquis de Kersaint was up threatening Châteaulin, while M. du Ménars with “Charlemagne’s Horse” marched rapidly towards

Carhaix. A force was then ordered out of Brest in the hopes of catching the Royalists between two fires, but, nobody knew how, M. de Kersaint and his men slipped through, and, effecting a junction with his subordinate, plunged into the wild, broken country round Huelgoat, where the Blues did not dare to follow them. Finally, in retiring unsatisfied to Brest, the Republicans were fallen upon in the rear by a perfectly unexpected body of Chouans from the north, which they had believed quiet. Their leader was one "Sincère." And the authorities, completely misinformed as they had been about the supposed quiescence of Finistère, were at their wits' end to know where the flame would next break out in the department.

But south of the Loire things did not go so well. There were no great generals left there; the majority even of the former officers were missing. Forestier, the most popular, was still recovering from his terrible wound of August, and his ill-success then made a new levy still more difficult. Yet d'Autichamp, Suzannet, and Grignon, who divided the three Vendean commands, did their best. The Republicans had few forces on the left bank of the Loire, and one brilliant success might have raised Vendée from ruins. The success did not come. Suzannet attacked Montaigu, was beaten off and severely wounded, a misfortune which led directly to the dispersal of his men. D'Autichamp, who had got together a rather larger force, fell in at Les Aubiers with two hundred and fifty Blues whose commander stationed some of them in the church tower, whence they killed and wounded some forty Royalists. It was proposed to burn them out, but this would have offended the religious scruples of the Vendeans, and they were besieged instead. After twenty-four hours without food or water they were still holding out. Meanwhile the Republican *chef de brigade* at Bressuire was on the march. D'Autichamp went to Nueil to defend the passage of the little river Argenton against him, left the command there to a peasant subordinate, and returned to Les Aubiers. He had better have stayed at Nueil. The Vendeans, according to their incorrigible habit, neglected to put sentries, the Blues from Bressuire surprised them, and they were put to flight.

The affair did not cost many men, but it had a most unfortunate moral effect. Five thousand Vendeans had allowed themselves to be surprised and routed by eight hundred Blues. "Where is Cathelineau?" was the universal cry. And in fact this miserable affray of Les Aubiers decided the fate of the whole campaign in Vendée, for after it d'Autichamp could only skirmish, and Grignon, in the centre, was never able to get together many men. Much, certainly, had hung on the valour of the Blues in the church tower and the religious scruples of their opponents.

But the failure of Vendée and the startling successes in Brittany alike paled before a much greater event. On the 9th of October, the very day that Gaston de Trélan had ridden away alone from La Vergne at sunrise, General Bonaparte, abandoning his army in Egypt, landed at Fréjus. On the 16th, the day after the taking of Le Mans, he was at Paris. In a month from the date of his landing, the 9th of November, the Directory lay in the dust, and he was acclaimed First Consul of the temporary Consulate, and the saviour of France. Across the path of the Bourbons there no longer sprawled a hydra-headed incompetence. One man of genius, with a vehement, implacable will stood there, armed.

The road to power had been made easy for him. France was only crying out for a deliverer to raise her from the state of mud and blood in which she lay. Attempts had already been made to find one in Joubert or Moreau. It was conceivable that even had a Bourbon appeared he might very well have been accepted. But it was too late now.

Yet this moment was the very apogee of the Royalist revival in the West. Never had they been better organised, better recognised as a military force. What they had taken or threatened in three weeks was amazing. In the Morbihan they were entirely masters of the countryside; in Ille-et-Vilaine they had strong detachments near Rennes, Fougères, and Vitré; Bourmont in Maine occupied the bourgs and even the little towns on the banks of the Sarthe and the Loire; and distant Finistère had become almost volcanic.

On account of these very successes, overtures of peace had already been made, from the side of the Directory, before the great change of Brumaire. With them was charged the Republican general-in-chief in the West, the Comte de Hédouville, a gentleman with the manners and predilections of his caste, and he, in his headquarters at Angers, was actually in conference with the chosen go-between—a Royalist lady, Mme Turpin de Crissé—on the day of the *coup d'état* itself, so that his success was announced to a Government already overthrown. For he naturally directed his powers of conciliation towards the least victorious wing of the Royalist forces. It was with aversion and amazement, therefore, that the leaders of Brittany, Maine and Anjou heard that an armistice had been signed on November 25 for the left bank of the Loire. And during the cessation of hostilities the Comte de Grignon was surprised and killed by the Republicans, so that since d'Autichamp, who had always opposed the taking up of arms, was more than willing, and Suzannet was *hors de combat*, there remained no obstacle to the pacification of Vendée. A conference for that object was imminent.

But a suspension of arms on the left bank of the Loire almost of necessity brought about one on the right also, whether the leaders were anxious for it or no. Châtillon indeed was of the former for he was old and ill. But Cadoudal and Mercier received it with great disfavour. Yet, whether it were to result in peace or no, the armistice for the purpose of treating of pacification was promulgated on December 9, and Pouancé in Anjou was appointed as the place of meeting.

The Marquis de Kersaint, away in unvanquished Finistère, was too bitterly disgusted to attend these conferences

in person. But, unless he wished to lose touch with the other leaders, he was obliged to be represented there, and he sent to Pouancé two delegates, his chief of staff, the Chevalier du Ménars, and the Abbé Chassin.

(2)

From the Abbé Chassin's Diary.

Pouancé, Christmas Eve, 1799.—A good occasion for reviewing, before I say my first Mass of the feast, these brief notes that I have been keeping since M. du Ménars and I came here a fortnight ago. Yet really all that I can say is that we are still here, discussing, discussing . . . The energy expended on these conferences might have launched a battle or a siege. Perhaps in its way it is as usefully spent.

The party for continuing the war is in a minority, that is clear. But it is a very strong minority—Cadoudal, our mainstay here, Mercier, the Comte de Bourmont, one or two minor chiefs, and, of course, through our voices, the "Marquis de Kersaint." That the Vendean leaders cry for peace one cannot wonder, for Vendée is exhausted. They say they have not even enough munitions for a headquarters guard. But the war minority would more than once have liked to break off the conferences, and it was only after stormy discussions that M. de Bourmont was named as delegate to Hédouville at Angers. He has others with him now. I have hardly dared inform Gaston how things were tending, though I was sent here for that purpose.

There is this to be said, that we began with a moral victory, since we obtained that the Government should send no more troops into the West during the armistice. And our military position—except in Vendée—is so good that we have every right to hope to gain our points. Moreover the acts of the new Government, particularly the abrogation of the abominable Law of Hostages, have disposed many minds towards conciliation. Some of the more warlike leaders, even, are not opposed to a respite, provided that they can remain in arms, as they are doing. And then there is this widespread idea among them that Bonaparte intends to play the part of a Monk, and use his power for a restoration of royalty. I must confess I do not share it, but M. du Ménars does. At any rate time to penetrate the First Consul's intentions is no loss—we sent the Chevalier d'Andigné to Paris on December 18 to sound him. Moreover we want to be certain of Monseigneur le Comte d'Artois' wishes.

So time is really what we are playing for in these negotiations with Hédouville. The worst of it is that Hédouville is so accommodating that he makes this difficult! All our just demands are on the way to being accepted—complete freedom for religion, no oath or formal submission, no disarmament, oblivion of the past, and no conscription. If this is really so then we should lay down—but not give up—our arms on an honourable peace. But would the terms be observed afterwards by the Government? Georges, I know, doubts it. . . .

It is time to prepare for my Mass. I shall say all three in a disused church, with the leaders who are here and our Breton guard for congregation. The proper season for thoughts of peace. . . .

December 29.—All those dreams of peace are scattered. Yesterday, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, without warning, without justification, appeared a most violent and provocative proclamation from the three Consuls to the inhabitants of the West, denouncing our chiefs—who at the very moment are in treaty with their representative—but professing a tenderness for those who had been "led astray" by them. The Government will pardon those who repent, but will strike down those who, after this warning, dare still to resist.

Everyone is burning with indignation. Most certainly the First Consul is not going to play Monk! One begins to see him, a menacing figure, behind the conciliatory form of General Hédouville, who wishes us well and has always acted as an honourable opponent—and who has written, evidently with regret, that if we cannot come to an agreement with him by the 15th (he means of their new-fangled Nivôse, of which to-day is the 8th) hostilities must begin again, as a result of orders he has received from Paris.

And, as if Fate had determined that they should, M. de Châtillon has this very day received a letter from Monseigneur le Comte d'Artois confirming the instructions he had already sent, not to make peace unless it were part of a plan for the general pacification of Europe, and saying that help is on the way, and that he himself will soon be here. Will he?

If he do come our forces will be doubled in the twinkling of an eye. Probably the First Consul knows that, and wishes to have done with us before he could arrive. Bonaparte must know, too, of our division of opinion, our want of arms and ammunition and artillery. I feel that he intends to have victory at any price, and that he would prefer to crush us rather than to placate—it would give him more advertisement.

So ends the conference of Pouancé. Georges has already left for the Morbihan; La Prévalaye and Bourmont have returned, or are returning, to their divisions. We hear that the victorious army of Holland, under the detestable Brune, is on the way to Brittany. M. du Ménars and I start back on our journey to Finistère in an hour's time.

Quimperlé, January 4.—We have taken longer than I expected to reach the soil of Finistère, but we have gone slowly on purpose, not wishing to get out of touch with possible developments, for we believe that the indefatigable Hédouville is trying to get together a new conference in spite of the shock which slew the first. Yet, if he does, M. du

Ménars and I should not return without an authorisation which we know well enough Gaston will never give.

And now that we have seen with our own eyes to-day a copy of the far more violent manifesto, signed by the First Consul, to the Army of the West, we think that the sooner we are back at the Clos-aux-Grives the better, for that does not sound like conferences. "The majority of good citizens," runs this proclamation, "have already laid down their arms; there remain only brigands, émigrés, men in the pay of England—Frenchmen in the pay of England! March against them; you will not be called upon to display much valour . . . Let me soon learn that the chiefs of the rebels have ceased to exist!"

Such are a few phrases culled from it. That "Frenchmen in the pay of England" is a clever and a galling touch. Indeed, it is the great misfortune of our party to be mixed up so inextricably with the foreigner. And yet it is not our fault; it is the fault of circumstances. England alone, with Austria, continues the struggle; she is rich; it is she who disposes of the persons of most of our princes, since they live under her protection. . . . Yet it pleases me to think that epithet does not apply to Gaston, at any rate. The promised English subsidy amounted to very little; it is his own gold, from his own house, which has made it possible for him to do the wonders he has done.

I do not like that "Let me learn that the chiefs of the rebels have ceased to exist"; it savours, somehow, of methods unworthy of a soldier.

January 6.—Back at Le Clos-aux-Grives. Gaston (as I thought I should find him) determined to continue the struggle, whatever the rest decide. He has the advantage of the remotest and wildest country, and Georges, his nearest neighbour, will certainly do as he is doing. But the forces of Finistère are pitifully small compared to the enemy's. If only he could get help by sea from England!

January 7.—We hear that there is to be a new conference opened on the 10th at Candé. Gaston refuses to have anything to do with it, and indeed it would be impossible to get there in time now.

January 10.—Decidedly we are returning to the worst days of the Directory. A decree has just come down declaring the departments of the West outlawed.

January 15.—Negotiations were reopened two days ago at Candé.

January 18.—Nothing settled yet at Candé, we hear, but the rupture of the truce is postponed till January 22. Gaston speaks of sending me to England.

January 20.—Most disastrous news. Two days ago, at Montfaucon-sur-Moine, the officers of Vendée signed a separate peace. Alas for the glorious shades of La Roche-jaquelein and Lescure!

January 22.—The truce expires to-day. Anjou is disbanding.

January 24.—Brune's army is getting nearer every day, and it is said that he is to replace Hédouville as general-in-chief. We hear that Bourmont was defeated two days ago by Chabot at Meslay; unless he can recover, that means that Maine, too, is gone. Brisk fighting is going on indeed in the Côtes-du-Nord, but our hopes rest on Cadoudal, the unbeaten and unyielding. Gaston has sent M. du Ménars with what men he can spare southwards.

January 25.—A report that yesterday or the day before Cadoudal fought an indecisive action with Harty, commanding the troops at Vannes, at Pont-du-Loc. Georges is not beaten, that is clear, but, if he is not victorious, it may menace his bold plan of pushing on, after crushing Harty, to the banks of the Vilaine, and joining hands with Sol de Grisolles, there to await Brune's onset—and after that, perhaps, of joining hands with Gaston.

January 26.—Only too true. Georges has sent a courier to warn Gaston. His plan is hopeless. He fears, too, that Sol de Grisolles is not in a state to defend the passage of the Vilaine. And Bourmont has given in.

Doubtless there *is* something in race, and ancient blood. The prospect before us, once so bright, is hourly more gloomy, and I know, none better, what failure means to Gaston. Yet he keeps his profound discouragement wonderfully to himself, and his little army is still as well disciplined as it is possible for a Chouan force to be. It is already unsafe for us to make the Clos-aux-Grives our permanent headquarters. We live dispersed in the forest, only meeting there occasionally by day, never by night. I write this, in fact, seated on a fallen stone of the dolmen where that memorable meeting—about which I have never been told—took place last August. I wonder what has become of that misguided madman, the Comte de Brencourt?

Gaston had a letter from the Duchesse to-day, sent by a stable-boy from La Vergne. I say to myself still, that whatever happens he can never be captured, in such proximity to the sea as he will be if we are forced to retire when Brune enters the Morbihan. He and she can always take ship for England at the eleventh hour.

January 27.—The garrison of Quimper has evidently been reinforced. A hot brush to-day on the Lanvennec road. We have lost forty-three killed and wounded, among them, alas, two of our few remaining officers. Roland has got a scratch of which he is rather proud. I have just been dressing it. Gaston, I could see, was on tenterhooks about it.

January 28.—Very bad news indeed. Cadoudal has had to disband his men, for fear of being crushed by Brune's advance. These disastrous tidings, getting through by unknown channels as things do here, have caused some desertions. Rumours that M. du Ménars is killed. It is very cold in the forest.

January 29.—Brune entered Vannes yesterday, and made a great requisition of money, overcoats and shoes for his

troops. I *am* to go to England. Would I were not!

January 30.—Last night a party of Blues from Lanvennec sacked and burnt the Clos-aux-Grives. There was no one there, and it was not worth throwing away lives in its defence, as it was of little use to us. 'Les jeunes' of course wanted to defend their nursery. The night was red with the flames of it. Farewell, old house!

It is true about M. du Ménars. He was a brave man and a good officer. R.I.P. His men no longer exist as a force.

I want Gaston to make for La Vergne. But he will not, principally, I think, because all his desire is there. But it would be an excellent headquarters—or more accurately, I fear, place of retreat—for a time.

February 4.—Cadoudal is reported to be actually treating with Brune, and the terms, alas, include disarmament. In a day or two Gaston will find himself literally alone, with his mere handful of men, against Brune's whole army. He still hopes for help from England, and for some outcome of those ambitious plans which—too late—the Prince's council have made, and says that so long as he can keep open a part of the coast of Finistère for that purpose, so long he is doing his duty and not sacrificing men uselessly; and that it will take Brune considerable time to advance across the Morbihan into Finistère. This is true. I start for England with his despatches to-morrow morning. My admiration for him knows no bounds; he *has* broken those "*aspera fata*."

But this evening I had a letter from Paris, from "Paul Berry," which has made me very uneasy. He says—and he should know, if anyone—that the First Consul is furious against the "Marquis de Kersaint,"—"that insolent without an army who still holds out"—and they say that he has sworn to make an example of one Chouan leader at least. A horrible fear possesses me that that example may be made of the last in arms, the highest in rank, and . . . his foe of Rivoli. Does Bonaparte remember that, I wonder?

Much troubled by this letter, which I received after seeing Gaston and getting my last instructions I went to him again. The Allée des Vieilles has such a bad reputation after dark in the district that we have been able to use it undisturbed as a bivouac. (It makes a detestable one, owing to the wind on the lande.) I found Gaston walking up and down in the darkness by the ghostly stones, muffled in his cloak. I told him what I had just heard from Paris. He laughed.

"Is the young man from Corsica a bugbear who has frightened even you, Pierre?" he asked. "I promise you he shall not have me to 'make an example of,' if that is his phrase, till the last possible moment. And when I have done all I can—what does it matter if he succeeds?"

Seeing him in that mood, and feeling that I was leaving him—with what a heavy heart!—to I know not what imminent perils, I said, "You need never fall into his hands, Gaston, whatever of defeat happens. Here the door is always open behind you. The sea——"

He interrupted me, in that suddenly freezing voice he has when he is displeased. "I am surprised at you, Pierre," he said, and turned his back on me.

I was a little hurt; of course I knew better than to insult him by suggesting that he should desert his men. I only meant to remind him that should it come to submission—and in my heart, I can see nothing else before him—once the formalities over, he can so easily take ship for England. I explained this, and, though I did not like using this weapon, I am so afraid of what I may be leaving him to—and most of all his own indomitable pride—that I added, "Gaston, remember that you would not sail alone!"

A little quiver went through him, almost as if I had struck him. He said never a word, but I saw his face for a second in the light of the camp fire. I presumed, I daresay, for there is perfect understanding between them on all things—yet, for all that, surely she should have some consideration shown her! In that thought lies my best hope.

But I wish to God I were not going to England. . . .

CHAPTER V

ALONE IN ARMS

(1)

About midnight on the 14th of February—her name-day, which the ladies of La Vergne had celebrated, though with heavy hearts, by a little feast—Mme de Trélan was awakened by a commotion in the hall below. Many people seemed to be there, and she heard the jingle of accoutrements. For a moment she thought the invaders might be Republicans; then, with a leap of the heart, that it might conceivably be . . . someone else. She opened her door and listened, and, since sounds floated very clearly up the great staircase, she did catch the sound she craved for. She flung on a cloak and went out into the gallery.

Down in the hall, in the midst of his remaining staff, her husband was apologising with great courtesy for taking possession of Mme de la Vergne's house without leave. Nothing, he declared, but necessity would have made him do so. As she must be aware, he had his back fairly to the wall now; there were only sixty men with him, but it was possible that by using La Vergne as a centre he might succeed in rallying the broken remnants of the late M. du Ménars' force. On the morrow he would lay before the three ladies the arrangements he proposed for their conveyance to a place of safety—though he had no intention, he assured her, of allowing himself to be attacked in the château.

But Valentine heard Mme de la Vergne, a perfectly dignified figure, despite her hastily donned *déshabillé*, in the little crowd of uniformed and booted and lantern-bearing men, reply quite calmly that there was no need to waste time over such a discussion. "My daughter and I shall have the honour to entertain you in our house, Monsieur le . . . Marquis, for as long as you require it. All we have is at your disposal. But we do not intend to leave it."

Valentine did not wait for Gaston's reply; she knew he would not argue the point then in front of his officers, including, as they did, his hostess's son. Returning to her room, she began to rekindle the dying fire there, to warm him when he came. She felt a little stunned. She had not known that things were going as ill as this.

Half an hour later she heard his knock at her door. As he entered she saw how his air was changed—for it was not only that his uniform was worn and stained, his boots covered with mud, the scarf she had embroidered soiled—and the change went like a knife through her heart. But all he did, the first greetings over, was to apologise for his state—the gentleman of the great world ashamed for appearing so in the presence of a woman.

"I am not fit to be in your room, Valentine," he said, looking down at himself with distaste. "I have not had my clothes off for the last week. You must forgive this unceremonious visit."

She was sitting in her chair again now, and he stood by her in the firelight. Pride and anguish strove together in her as she looked up at him.

"Gaston, I heard what you said in the hall. Tell me the worst, my darling! We have heard that Cadoudal is treating with the Republicans, but we cannot believe it. But if it should be true, if he should submit, would there be no one left in arms at all—no one in the Côtes-du-Nord even——no one but you . . . no one?"

She could only see his profile. He was fingering a little Chinese figure that stood on her mantelpiece.

"Where does this mandarin come from, I wonder? It reminds me of one we had at Mirabel. We had several, I think . . ." Then he looked down at her. "Yes, Valentine, it is the last act. Cadoudal *has* submitted. He signed near Vannes yesterday . . . I *am* alone in arms; there is no one else left. Unless help comes from England in the next few days——"

He broke off, turned back to the mandarin, and then, abruptly, his sword clanking against the floor as he did so, knelt down and buried his face on her knees. And, fighting back the sob that rose in her own throat, she folded her arms round his neck and kissed the wet, iron-grey hair.

"My darling, my darling, how tired you are!" She smoothed the bowed head as she would have smoothed a child's, terribly conscious all the time of the restraint he was putting on himself not to break down altogether. For his hands were gripping the arms of her chair on either side of her, and every now and again a shudder went through him.

"I will never consent to the disarmament of Finistère, never—never—never!" he said in a smothered voice. "I will die first!"

Her hand stopped. "Is that what you fear, Gaston? Is that it? O my knight without reproach, you shall do what you think best. If it is necessary—if you must in honour—you shall . . . die."

"I will not hold you back." But she had no need to add that, and she did not. Her husband lifted his head, almost frightened at the sublimity of her self-forgetfulness.

"Valentine," he exclaimed, "is it possible that you—a woman—*understand*?"

"I love you," she said simply.

He knelt there staring at her, the firelight showing, on his sad and weary features, an expression that was almost awe. Then he made a movement and caught her to him.

"I said you were my oriflamme. I shall fight to the last as long as I have the means, and with how much more courage if you give me leave to die! . . . But I shall not let them attack La Vergne, though you, I know, would not fear it."

“Nor would the others,” she answered. “Then will you not make it your headquarters?”

“I do not know yet. When Brune’s advance begins . . . But though I do not intend to stand a siege here, I fear I must send you and the other ladies away.”

Valentine said nothing, but a little shiver went through her in her turn.

“It is true,” said Gaston, feeling it, “that Mme de la Vergne has already refused to go. And you, my darling——”

“You must do as you think best,” she said again. She would not give open utterance to the wild prayer that was ringing through her.

He sighed, and loosing his hold of her hands, got to his feet, drawing her up with him.

“Gaston, you will sleep now?”

He shook his head. “I must go round the sentries again first. All my officers—all that are left, that is—are as weary as I. As for a bed, I have not seen one for weeks. Something harder will be more familiar. I shall sleep in the hall; there is a bearskin rug there that promises well.”

“Where did you sleep last night, Gaston?”

His voice changed. “In a very holy place, beloved—the place where you came back to me from the dead—the Allée des Vieilles.”

He kissed her on the brow and went out.

“I never thought,” said Artamène next day to Roland, with one of his old flashes of gaiety, not so frequent now as of yore. “I never thought that I should live to admire my own mother more than Cleopatra or la Grande Mademoiselle and other determined ladies! Imagine her standing up to M. le Duc like that—and routing him! It is for you to tremble, Roland, at these unsuspected qualities, since as your future mother-in-law . . .”

For before the unshakable determination of Mme de la Vergne not to be turned out of her own house, as evinced in a private interview with the friendly invader that morning, the determination—perhaps not quite so strong—of the Duc de Trélan to turn her out was baffled.

“I think,” said Lucien, “that there are disadvantages in being a gentleman. M. le Marquis is always grand seigneur; had he been one of these sans-culotte generals he would have bundled her out without ceremony—excuse the verb, mon cher.”

“There are compensations, too,” observed Roland. “Thanks to the admirable—or ominous—firmness of Mme de la Vergne, the Duchesse can remain also.”

“You pointedly omit the advantage to yourself, I notice,” said Marthe’s brother, “It will be my duty to call you out for that, Roland, to-morrow morning. There being no . . . no Moulin-aux-Fées handy, I suggest rakes, in the poultry-yard; but you shall be buried in the arbour of famous memory.”

“I wonder how long any of us will stay here,” observed Lucien thoughtfully. “And as to being buried—we may not have much choice in the matter of locality.”

The other two looked at him with equal thoughtfulness, for in this ebb of fortune the idea was not by now a new one.

“I make only one stipulation about my death,” announced the Chevalier de la Vergne with composure, “and that is, to fall at the same moment as M. le Duc. And you, Roland, have you chosen yours? You look as if you were selecting it.”

“No, I was thinking about Mme la Duchesse,” answered the young man rather unexpectedly.

(2)

It is a terrible hour when a man of superlative pride and self-will learns that Destiny—or another man—has a stronger will than he.

And this hour struck for Gaston de Trélan the very day after his arrival at La Vergne, when he received an ultimatum from General Brune giving him twenty-four hours in which to consent to an unconditional surrender, involving disarmament as well as disbandment. Otherwise the army of Holland, already on the march, would enter Finistère at several points—Finistère laid open to them not only by the capitulation of her more formidable neighbours, the Morbihan and the Côtes-du-Nord, but also by the dispersal of her own defenders. Never very numerous, they had quite forsaken the standard now, returning to their farms or going into hiding, and during the last few days it had become abundantly clear that all “M. de Kersaint’s” careful organisation was in ruins; despairing reports from subordinates, gentlemen or Chouans, in the outlying districts, each said that their little bands had melted away like snow. His own personal followers were, indeed, more than ever devoted, but the flame he had lit through Finistère was out, and he stood, a beaten man, among its ashes.

Yet though he might be overwhelmed by numbers and his men scattered, so long as the arms he had been at such pains to procure for them were not given up to the enemy but hidden (as was the case) he had not utterly failed, since Finistère would not be defenceless for the future. And to disarmament he had said that he would never consent—he

would rather die. Now it was required of him to give the order for it immediately. More, within less than ten days he was to surrender his own sword in person to the Republican commander-in-chief.

On this culminating humiliation Brune—or rather, that intense and vehement personality in Paris of whom Brune was but the mouthpiece—insisted absolutely. The Marquis de Kersaint, he wrote (following his instructions) must not only submit at once, and effectually disarm his men, but he must also be at Vannes on February 24 to give up his sword and ratify the whole transaction. If not, the preceding evidences of submission would go for nothing, and Finistère would be laid waste without the loss of a day: every man known to have fought under him would be shot, every fifth house burnt in the insurgent villages. Nothing would avail him unless he regularised the situation by giving up his own sword; and to that end Brune sent him, with the ultimatum, safe-conducts for himself and an escort of three or four persons.

There was no choice, no shadow of a possible alternative. It was not merely that Gaston de Trélan's military situation was hopeless—almost ludicrously so—alone with a few score men not merely against Brune, but, since the submission of the other leaders, against La Barolière and Chabot as well; it was that if he refused the terms he was condemning Finistère to the fate that had been Vendée's years ago under Turreau's *colonnes infernales*. If he had any heart in him, any humanity, he must drink this bitter cup. The chance of dying had not been granted him; to kill himself was tantamount to refusing. No help, no word of help, had come from England; he did not even know whether the Abbé had reached his destination. Besides, no help could possibly come in time now.

Nothing, nothing was left save the desperate honour of having been the last to uphold the splendid hopes with which, in the autumn, this business had begun—that, and a woman's love and admiration and succour. It was Valentine who saw the dark waters close above his head and went down with him to the depths; and, when the moment came that the words were wrenched from him, as from a man on the rack—"*There is no way out of it—no possible way out; I must do it!*" it was she who wrote at his dictation the letter to Brune saying that, for the sake of the lives of others, he agreed to the terms of surrender, would give the necessary orders, and afterwards, availing himself of the safe-conduct, would reach Vannes by the day appointed to give up his sword in person to the General-in-chief.

(3)

The same night that this letter arrived at its destination, a young Republican officer was lying in his bed at the Hôtel de l'Epée at Vannes, not unmindful of his good fortune in having it to himself. The town was crammed with Republican troops, and was likely to be even fuller in a few days, when the drafts *en route* for Finistère were recalled, as they presumably would be now that the Marquis de Kersaint had agreed to submit, which recent piece of news was known to the young officer—his name was Marcel Poulain—because he was on Brune's staff.

He was nearly asleep when the door was suddenly opened, and the landlord's apologetic voice informed him that an aide-de-camp of the First Consul's had just come in dead-beat, and, having delivered his urgent despatches to the General, must be given a bed at once. Unfortunately there was not a bed in the place which had not two occupants already except——

"Yes there is," interrupted the young man angrily, "Next door. Put him there!"

"I cannot, sir," retorted the landlord. "The gentleman next door is indisposed, and is also, I think, a Royalist. And the aide-de-camp has scarcely drawn rein since leaving Paris. . . ."

"Oh, very well," groaned Marcel resignedly, and almost immediately the heavy, stumbling steps of the exhausted courier could be heard along the corridor, and in another moment he staggered in and fell with a jangle of spurs and a groan on to a chair. Marcel, on his elbow, scrutinised him.

"Why," he exclaimed, "I'm damned if it's not Adolphe Bergeron!"

"I scarcely know who I am," returned the other hoarsely. "I only know that I am absolutely in pieces. I killed one horse . . . and all for——" He did not say for what.

And presently, his friend having made room for him, he stretched himself out beside him with more groans, and complaints of the hardness of the bed.

"Poor devil!" said Marcel sympathetically. "And so you knew what was in your despatches. I hope it was worth flaying yourself for?"

"I did not know when I left Paris," answered the rider, moving restlessly. "Nor when I got here. But Brune has just let it out."

"Well, was it worth it?"

There was no reply. "Adolphe, you need not be so deuced discreet! I'm on the staff, you know."

"Yes, the staff at least will know it to-morrow," muttered Adolphe. "—Don't let anyone guess that you have been told already, that's all . . . You know that man who organised Finistère, de Kersaint?"

"I should think I did!" responded Marcel with animation. "The General has been getting furious despatches about him almost every day of late from the First Consul, saying that he must be finished with at once, by whatever means. His being the only one of the Royalist leaders who would have nothing to do with the idea of pacification—even

Cadoudal came down to it in the end—has, I suppose, enraged Bonaparte. However, Brune has got him in a cleft stick at last, and he has agreed to all the terms, including the surrender of his sword. I saw the letter myself this afternoon—in a woman's hand it was. Have your despatches to do with him?"

"They have," said Adolphe. "Exclusively. He is coming under a safe-conduct, I take it?"

"Yes. The General sent it some days ago."

"Well, it . . . it is to be withdrawn. That's what I have flayed myself for."

"*What!* O, but that's a mistake; it can't be withdrawn now. De Kersaint has accepted it; he is going to use it."

"To be frank," said Adolphe, gazing at the still-burning candle, "I only said 'withdrawn' to make it sound better. It really comes to this, that it will not be observed."

The other bounded up in bed. "But, great God, man——"

"I know, I know! But I can't help it—it is the First Consul's orders. . . . The fact is, Bonaparte means to have this Marquis de Kersaint alive or dead—you have said as much yourself—and now, I suppose, he will get him."

"My God!" said his friend, and lay down again in silence.

"If I had known what I was carrying," said Adolphe after a little, "I might have had—an accident. But I had no idea, and it is done now. The order will be sent on to Auray and other places to-morrow."

"*Order!* But it's impossible—one can't send an order like that! Surely a safe-conduct, once given, is the most sacred thing a soldier knows. If he does not observe it—O, it's the dirtiest, most damnable treachery I ever heard of! Pah! is that the way they do things in Corsica?"

"Chut, mon ami, walls have ears," said the aide-de-camp wearily. "But you are right; it is infamous. They say in Paris that *he* has all along wanted someone of whom to make an example, for the sake of the impression. Yet all the other leaders submitted, as you say. But this man who has held out so, besides that he put Bonaparte to inconvenience at Rivoli—ah, I forgot, you were there—is also, it appears, a ci-devant of the ci-devants; no less than the Duc de Trélan, in fact. Brune let that out too; Fouché, it seems, discovered it. So he would be worth capturing, and Brune, not being troubled with scruples, will obey orders. . . . And *I* brought them!"

"I wish now you had not told me," said Brune's young staff-officer.

Another than he had been told also, for walls *have* ears, and that by the side of their bed happened to be merely a cracked wooden partition. The officer of Bourmont's disbanded army who lay ill in the next room had, therefore, heard every word of their conversation. He was Artus de Brencourt.

CHAPTER VI

"SWORD, THY NOBLER USE IS DONE!"

"*Le vin est versé; il faut le boire.*" The words of the old adage rang in Valentine's head to-night. Not long ago Gaston had quoted them. She had never before so felt their inexorable quality—for to-morrow he must set out to Vannes to drink it. . . . He had said farewell to his very few remaining officers, disbanded, of his handful of men, all but a few sentries, and wanted to ride alone to his surrender, but 'les jeunes' had made such an outcry at this, and begged so hard to be his escort, that, as the other safe-conducts were blank, he consented.

It was past midnight, and he was still writing, by the light of a couple of candles, at a table in the embrasure of the large window in their room at La Vergne. Despite the cold, Valentine was sitting on the seat in the space between her husband and the heavily curtained window—the seat where, that October night, she had found and kissed his sword. Now, that same sword. . . . She looked between the candle-flames at his downbent face. One hand supported his head as he wrote, the fingers running up into the thick, rippling hair. The last three months of strain had aged him a little; but she saw nothing there that she did not love and honour.

The château was very still. Now and again, even through the closed window, Valentine could hear the footfall of the sentry on the flags below. But, after the recent armed occupation, this was like the last moments before death. To-morrow there would be no sentry—nothing to guard. It would all be over.

She pulled aside the curtain and looked out. There was a royal moon; she had forgotten it. The terrace sparkled with thinly fallen snow, and she could see how it powdered the bare, pleached boughs of the arbour where, in the spring, Roland and the son and daughter of the house had planned the invasion of Mirabel. And she saw, too, in the distance—or was it fancy?—a silver streak, the sea.

Ah, if they were there, embarking—if Gaston could but be spared the purgatory that lay before him first. She glanced at him again. He had death in his soul; she knew that. *Le vin est versé* . . .

It was not merely that he shrank, as any soldier might, from the personal humiliation of surrendering his sword; it was also that he had given to this enterprise, so nearly successful, not only his arm, but his heart. Only lately had she come to see what the overthrow of the cause meant to him; indeed she had not fully learnt it yet. Was he writing to the Comte d'Artois, she wondered now—to the Prince who, once again, had never come? If *she* had held the pen there were words, burning words, that she would have written to that royal laggard! O, how could the man exist who knew that a whole population was sacrificing itself for him and his family, that for years they had been dying for him on the battlefield and the scaffold, that his appearance was the one thing they asked of life, and his presence would cause all that suffering and sacrifice to be forgotten—how could he know all this . . . and not come!

Valentine clenched her hands. He whom she loved was driven to this pass through Charles of Bourbon. He had fought to keep open a harbour for the sails that never came, and was now left, deserted and alone, to drink this bitter wine. . . . The tears began to creep down her face—tears of wrath. She did not want Gaston to see them, and turning away, her forehead against the cold glass, she swallowed them down, trying to fix her thoughts instead on that silver gleam of sea, which, when the surrender was consummated, would bear them both away from the land of the once more lost cause.

When she had regained her self-control she dropped the curtain and turned back into the room. Her husband had laid down his pen and was leaning back in his chair, his hands along the arms. His look was remote and very grave. She rose from the seat, knelt down beside him and took his right hand in both of hers. His gaze came from far off and rested on her—still very grave.

"Gaston, I believe I can see the sea—the moon is so bright."

"Yes?" said he, with a note of enquiry.

"I wish we were down there now," she went on rather unsteadily, "—where the yellow poppies bloomed last autumn. Do you remember?"

"Do I remember? Do I ever forget? I have them safe—what you gave me." He touched his breast with his other hand.

"My darling, if they could only bring you forgetfulness—forgetfulness of to-morrow!"

He shook his head. "They will not easily do that." From her his glance strayed to the sheathed sword lying on the table. She could not bear to see his face when he looked at it, and hid her own.

He seemed then to make an effort to turn his thoughts. "You were speaking of the sea, beloved. When this . . . this business is over, the sea shall take us away at last to happiness."

Valentine raised her head quickly. "At last! Gaston, no happiness over the sea, in tranquillity, can ever have the taste of this I have known, in warfare, since last summer! It can never be better, even as this, come what may, can never be less. If it ended to-morrow, you know that I have lived to see all that I dreamt of—more than I dreamt of! O, my knight, when the utmost has been wrought, what matters the broken sword! Please God there are many more happy days before us . . . but not better, not happier days!"

Their lips met in silence. Then, as she knelt there, he bowed his head till it rested on her shoulder. Grief and love were one.

The promise of the serene moon of the night was not fulfilled. Flurries of sleet were sweeping over the countryside next morning; the strip of sea was the colour of slate, and the wind howled in all the tall chimneys.

In this tumult Gaston bade farewell to Valentine upstairs. He and his escort calculated to reach Quimperlé that night, and Vannes the next, so that, unless the roads were in very bad condition, she might hope to see him back on the fourth day.

Downstairs in the wide hall with the young men were Mme de la Vergne and Marthe, the former as if she clung to the fiction of speeding a parting guest. But they were all very quiet, looking silently at the staircase when the Duc de Trélan, pale and upright, came down it pulling on his gauntlets.

"You have your safe-conducts on you, gentlemen, I hope?" he said as he descended.

"Have *you* your safe-conduct, Monsieur le Duc?" asked Marthe impulsively, coming to the foot of the stairs. Her little hands were clenched; she hated this business almost as much as he.

But Gaston reassured the impetuous girl, and saluted Mme de la Vergne while Artamène went down the steps to the horses, already there in charge of Lucien and a groom. Roland remained, the Duc's riding cloak over his arm.

"I hate this day more than any God ever made!" said his betrothed to him under her breath. Her eyes looked as if she had not slept. Roland took her hands and drew her to him, but he could not give her any verbal comfort.

And then, just as M. de Trélan was bending in farewell over Mme de la Vergne's fingers, there came with the cold wind through the open door the sound of a galloping horse stayed at the very perron, expostulatory voices at the bottom, and feet running up the steps. Next moment, breathing hard, a man burst into the hall with Artamène behind him.

"Thank God, I am in time!" he jerked out—pulled off his hat as he saw the ladies, and revealed the features of the Comte de Brencourt.

He was spattered with mud and half melted snow up to his very shoulders; his riding boots were one cake of it. But he went straight towards the Duc de Trélan, disregarding every one else.

"Don't go to Vannes, de Kersaint!" (the old name was evidently still the more natural). "Don't go, for God's sake—there is treachery!"

Marthe gave a cry that went unheeded.

"Treachery!" ejaculated Gaston. His eyes lit up. "You dare to come and use that word in front of me—*you!*—But, perhaps, as an expert, you feel privileged?"

The Comte at that terrible rebuff stood a moment rigid, then he reeled a step backwards exactly as if he had been struck. Encountering a high-backed chair he gripped it with one hand, steadied himself, and said, in a voice that the air seemed to dissipate, "Your safe-conduct is waste paper." His face was quite grey.

The Duc surveyed him pitilessly for a second or two; then he slightly shrugged his shoulders and turned away. "I am afraid that you have ridden very hard to no purpose, Monsieur," he observed. "Roland, my cloak, please!"

The Comte flung out his free hand. "You are going to your death!" he said wildly. "You are mad—I have warned you . . . Where is Mme de Trélan, she might——"

"Leave my wife's name out of your fabrications, if you please!" said Gaston like a rapier thrust, turning on his heel towards him for a brief instant. "Well, Roland?"

The thunderstruck young man approached with the cloak, and put it on his leader's shoulders in the midst of an extraordinary silence which even Artamène did not dare to break. It was the messenger of destiny himself who broke it, with something between a sob and a laugh.

"You are all mad here, I think . . . Madame—or you, Mademoiselle, perhaps you have some influence? As there is a God above us, it is a matter of this gentleman's life. Orders have come from the First Consul to Brune that his safe-conduct is not to be observed, and those orders have been transmitted at least as far as Auray, and probably further by this time. Can you not stop him?"

And at that Gaston flung his cloak back on to Roland's arm, went up to Mme de la Vergne, said something to her in a low tone which caused her and Marthe to withdraw to the other end of the hall, motioned Roland and Artamène also away, and, going up to the Comte, looked him in the eyes and said in a voice vibrating with anger, "No man or woman living keeps me from doing what I intend to do—have you not learnt that yet, Monsieur de Brencourt? And, as for your story, I certainly put more faith in Brune's honour than in yours!"

The Comte, livid, swallowed something in his throat. "Your safe-conduct is waste paper," he repeated. "I heard it with my own ears." Then he broke out with some of his old vehemence, "Good God, de Trélan, why won't you believe me?—If this were not true, why do you think I have ridden nearly eighty miles, ill as I am, in this mad haste?"

The man he had so treacherously used continued to look at him. He had not raised his own voice at all, and it was low now, unhurried, and colder than the wind from glaciers. "That is a question which only you can answer, Monsieur

le Comte. I cannot pretend to fathom the motives of a man so utterly false as you. I can only suppose that having failed in the past to deprive me of my life . . . and more than my life . . . you are now trying to take from me something more precious than either, my honour. But I am not to be frightened by talk of treachery into breaking my pledged word. You have failed this time also, Monsieur de Brencourt.—Come, gentlemen, it is time to start."

He had finally turned his back. The Comte, speechless, bowed his head against the high chair to which he was holding. What could he do against this attitude? He had anticipated contempt, hatred, but never disbelief. He lifted his head once more, tried to say, "For your wife's sake!" but the words stuck in his throat, and besides, the Duc was at the door now with the young men—was descending the steps. All that came to his dry lips was the old tag, "Your blood be on your own head!" Then his limbs gave way beneath him, and he collapsed into the chair, hiding his face in his hands. Outside there were sounds of mounting and of riding away; then silence.

Marthe and her mother, with rather pale faces, looked at each other, and then at the mudstained figure huddled in the chair, the elder woman uneasily, Marthe with distaste. Since the Duc so disbelieved his story, they disbelieved it too. Then Mme de la Vergne, mindful as ever of the claims of hospitality, addressed the stranger.

"May I not order some refreshment for you after your ride, Monsieur?"

At her voice de Brencourt roused himself, and rose stiffly. But he responded by a question.

"This is your house, Madame, I think—not the Duc de Trélan's?"

"Certainly it is my house," responded Mme de la Vergne. The gentleman looked ghastly ill, as she now saw.

"Then I should be very glad of a glass of wine . . . before I ride away again. My mission . . . has been fruitless, but I am . . . I have . . ." His voice tailed off into nothing.

"Monsieur, sit down again—you are unwell!" cried Mme de la Vergne sharply. Whatever the subject of disagreement between him and M. de Trélan—and it must have been very acute—she did not want to have him fainting in her hall. "Marthe, go and order something to be brought at once—and pray give yourself the trouble to come to the fire, Monsieur; you must be frozen."

M. de Brencourt obeyed, but with difficulty, and sank into a great chair that she pushed forward. "You do not object to my being in your house a little? The treachery—you heard that?—is not what you probably think. O, my God, my God, why did I come myself? He might have listened to someone else!"

But he found himself alone. He put his cold hand over his eyes and groaned aloud. Yes, the desperate fight he had had with himself to do this thing in person, after his failure to find a trustworthy messenger—and the result, the reward! Surely, in the few minutes that had passed, he had paid to the full. But he had paid in vain. . . .

His head was swimming; his body frozen. A tray appeared beside him, brought by that scornful girl herself. She vanished again. He seized and drained the glass of wine upon it, and a little warmth stole into him. He heard a footstep, the flow of a robe; the lady of the house back again, no doubt. But, when he looked round, there, gazing at him in astonishment, was the Duchesse de Trélan.

He got up and flung himself towards her.

"I did it for your sake," he cried, hardly knowing what he said, "—and he repulsed me like a dog. I was told I should live to do you a service . . . and I thought the day had come. But he . . . he affected to think it was . . . false . . . and he has gone, despite my warning."

"Warning!" stammered Valentine, blanching. "Warning of what? I was above—I did not know that you were here."

"I imagine so," he retorted bitterly. But she had no room in her mind for any emotion but one.

"You came to warn M. de Trélan?" she said, and he saw that she was twisting her fingers together. "That was . . . I thank you. But—what is the danger? . . . *because he is gone!*" The last four words came out with little less than terror behind them.

He could do her the immense, deliberate, though defeated wrong that he had done, but, face to face with her again, after all he had sinned and suffered, he shrank from dealing her the blow his undiluted knowledge must deal. And it was too late now for any benefit to come of it, for, as she had said, the Duc was gone.

He dropped his eyes. "I heard a rumour," he said, "that there was a regiment of the soldiers from Holland somewhere on the Vannes road, and that they might not be too particular in the observance of a safe-conduct. That was all; and no doubt it was false . . . and at any rate," he added, his bitterness getting the better of him again, "M. de Trélan saw fit not only to disregard my warning, but to insult me into the bargain."

"Not to observe the safe-conduct!" exclaimed the Duchesse sharply. "But that is unthinkable!"

(Yes, anything but *his* peril had passed her by; that was clear.)

"You are right, it is really unthinkable," he answered wearily. "I was a fool to come, and I will relieve you of my presence."

He meant, indeed, on that to walk straight out of the place. But he was not a young man; he had been ill; he had asked too much of his body. His head turned once more, and violently; he caught at the arm of the chair from which he had risen, and, not to fall altogether, slid back into it. And then the mud, the pallor, the deadly fatigue were all visible to

Valentine, and she realised with a shock the thing he had done—for her. He saw it in her face as she came to him.

"You do believe me then, Valentine? It may not be true, but I believed it!" he said confusedly, forgetting that he had not revealed the heart of the peril. "And I tried to stop him—against my will, yes, against my will! But you do believe me,—in spite of the past?"

The hoarse words were torn out of him, and when she let him have her hand as she bent over him, he put his head down on it and broke into a moment's strangled sobbing.

CHAPTER VII

HOW AT THE LAST THE WINE WAS NOT DRUNK

(1)

By very hard going the four riders got to Quimperlé that night, despite the state of the roads. They slept there entirely unmolested; a small detachment of troops indeed occupied the town, but the mere sight of Brune's signature was enough. And the anxiety of 'les jeunes' at least—the Duc would not discuss the matter—'les jeunes' who had only half heard, was much allayed. It did not strike them that they were still within the confines of Finistère, and that possibly the disgraceful orders had not yet crossed the Scorff. Yet, all unknown to their leader, they took that night in the hôtel a certain precaution which might have remained unknown to him, had he not, waking in the dark of the early morning, and perplexed by a sound outside his door for which he could not account, lit a candle and softly opened it; and so come on his own son stretched out there asleep across the threshold, his pistols within reach of his hand, and his drawn sword beneath his head.

Gaston looked down, not a little moved, at that embodiment of his own youth guarding him, and, shading the light, contemplated the sleeping boy as he had done last year in the attic at Hennebont. Laure's face, grown so shadowy now, came back for a moment to haunt him. "I wish I could tell him," he said to himself. But there was his promise; and with a sigh he went in and closed the door again.

The Duc made no reference next morning to his discovery, and thus never learnt that they had all taken their turns in devotion. When they reached Pont-Scorff they were already in the Morbihan, but through Pont-Scorff they rode without even having to show their safe-conducts. As Auray was rather too long a stage before the mid-day meal, and as the horses, with the exception of Zéphyr, were now going none too well, they decided to eat déjeuner at Hennebont, and about noon they drew rein before the chief inn in the little town which had seen them creep into it like thieves in the dusk, nearly a year ago. But though they came openly now they were incomparably heavier-hearted.

As they dismounted, Gaston desired two of them to look after the tired horses while he ordered the meal. Lucien and Artamène detached themselves for this duty, and disappeared down a dark entry with the four steeds. The Duc, followed by Roland, entered the inn.

Evidently Hennebont was full of soldiers; officers of all arms were lounging outside and inside the door of the hostelry, but, though they looked with extreme curiosity at the Royalists, no one seemed to find their presence unnatural, or made the faintest show of asking for some authorisation of it. Not even to Gaston did it occur that here, in the Morbihan, they were being taken for officers of Cadoudal's disbanded army who had presumably not yet divested themselves of their uniforms, but who were none the less amnestied. To Roland it was an extraordinary experience to pass through these throngs of Blues as if they possessed some charm; they did not even need to show those safe-conducts. But of course they were safe with an honourable foe; were their enemies not fellow-countrymen?

The inn parlour, with its small round tables, was crowded with guests, both civil and military. As M. de Trélan came in, followed by the young man, not a few looked up at the two handsome Chouan officers, of whom Gaston's high rank could only be guessed at by the air of distinction that never left him, for he was not openly wearing his scarf, and the little cross on his breast was too rare a decoration to be widely known. They sat down at the only unoccupied table, one in a corner opposite the door, and the Duc ordered four covers. The be-coiffed peasant girl who received his commands asked for indulgence if there were delay, for, as the gentlemen could see, they were very busy.

"Shall I go out then, and help the others with the horses, Sir?" suggested Roland. His leader nodded, and Roland got up, still thinking how odd it was to sit down placidly and eat in a room full of Blues. There were quite a dozen officers there—hussars, dragoons and infantry. The eyes of some of these officers followed him as he threaded his way between the tables. Possibly they also found it piquant to see a former foe moving about unmolested.

Feminine eyes followed him, too, appreciative of his youth and looks, eyes set in the face of a youngish, buxom woman wearing an extravagant bonnet and luxurious furs of marten who sat—strangely enough, with her back to most of the company—at a table in one of the other corners. With her was a big florid man over whose air of importance, every time he looked at his companion, there passed a milder and obscuring gleam, even as a light cloud drifts over the face of the moon. Any guests who had noticed them decided that they were probably bride and bridegroom, and all the more sentimental because they were neither of them in their first youth. And newly wed in fact they were—M. and Mme Georges Camain, on their way to Lorient, at which port M. Camain had to inspect some warehouses for the Government. By taking his Rose with him he hoped to combine pleasure with business.

Mme Camain's eyes, therefore, travelled after the young man, as he entered her sphere of vision just before going through the door. Her husband thereupon leant over the table and tapped her on the pretty, plump hand with the new wedding ring.

"Eyes right, please!" he said jocosely. "You are only allowed to look at me now."

"He reminds me of someone, that child," observed the lady reflectively. "A long time ago . . ."

“Eat your partridge, ma mie, and never mind about the days before the Flood,” commanded Camain, setting her the example. “Remember, too, that we have ordered the carriage to be at the door by one o’clock, and that time is getting on.”

Rose pouted. “I suppose you think you have a right to be jealous now, vieux monstre!”

“It is not only a right, but a duty!” returned the monster cheerfully, going on eating, however, with a very care-free appetite.

But Rose was intrigued by the passage of the young man. “I wonder if he was alone?” she murmured, and, between taking pecks at her partridge, continually turned her head and craned her neck towards that quarter of the room from which she divined that he had come. But it was in vain; for, short of getting up and turning round altogether, she could not see it.

And Gaston de Trélan, at that table in the corner, his head on his hand, his thoughts far away, sat waiting for the advent of the meal and the return of his aides-de-camp. The two nearest officers, dragoons, with their heads close together over their wine, alternately looked at him and whispered to one another. Meanwhile people ate steadily.

All at once Rose, whose curiosity, though almost motiveless, was proving too strong for her, saying to her astonished husband, “I think I must have dropped my handkerchief from my reticule as I came in,” got up from her place before he had time to protest, and walked, her eyes on the floor as though searching for something, till she came to a spot whence she could conveniently glance at that one table in the corner which she could not see when seated. Having arrived there, she sped a look at it—at the Royalist officer sitting there alone who, as she moved across the room, raised preoccupied eyes in her direction. . . .

Next moment the entire company was electrified to see the pretty little woman in the marten furs clasp her hands suddenly together, and give a tiny scream which penetrated through all the clatter of knives and the babel of conversation. And then, more or less of silence having descended, she broke out with a name—

“Monsieur de Trélan! Is it possible!”

And not to realise who was the object of this touching recognition was difficult, for the solitary Chouan officer in the corner, after staring a moment, rose slowly to his feet and bowed—as a man bows to an unknown lady. Yet Rose stood there, her face quite white under her preposterous bonnet, apparently oblivious that every eye was either on her, or on the man to whom she had drawn attention. Then the wave of mild universal surprise was broken into and flung aside by a billow of a much more menacing kind. For, with an exclamation, one of the neighbouring officers of dragoons leapt to his feet, his chair falling backwards behind him, and strode in front of the Royalist’s table.

“Monsieur de Trélan—or Monsieur de Kersaint, as you prefer—will you have the kindness to follow me?”

Gaston, coldly amused, surveyed him for a moment. “No, Monsieur, I must beg to decline,” he said. “Your zeal is admirable, but misplaced.” And he laid his hand on the back of his chair, with a view, evidently, to sitting down again.

“You deny then that you are de Kersaint, the general of Finistère?”

“Not for a moment!”

“Then,” said the officer with a gesture, “it is my unpleasant duty to arrest you. You will be wise, as you see, not to resist.”

The Duc de Trélan relinquished his hold of the chair and drew himself up. “You must be dreaming, Monsieur,” he retorted. “You have no power to arrest me. I am on my way to Vannes under General Brune’s safe-conduct. You must know that, since you know who I am.”

For all reply the officer turned and beckoned to the rest. But his companion was already there beside him, and from every quarter of the room the other Republicans were hurrying, between the tables, to that table in the corner behind which stood their quarry, alone.

“I have a safe-conduct,” repeated Gaston very haughtily. “Am I not speaking to Frenchmen?—I have this also!” He took a step or two backwards, and his sword sprang out.

“You had better come without resistance, Monsieur de Kersaint,” said the officer of dragoons menacingly. “I have a squadron of my men out there within hail, and these gentlemen, you can see, are in receipt of the same orders. As for your aide-de-camp——” He snapped his fingers.

But Camain, pushing his bulky form through the onlookers, here broke in. “Look here, gentlemen, this officer says he has a safe-conduct. Give him at least the chance of showing it!”

“Who are you?” asked the dragoon rudely over his shoulder. “A damned civilian! This is a matter for the military, thanks! The Chouan general de Kersaint is to be arrested, safe-conduct or no safe-conduct; those are the orders of the First Consul himself!”

Camain drew up his imposing figure. “I am deputy for the department of Maine-et-Loire,” he declared in his deepest voice. “(Be quiet, Rose!) What you are proposing to do is atrocious, and I protest!”

“Go back to your department then, and protest there!” retorted the officer insolently. “Now that Madame has so obligingly furnished the identification we wanted . . . Once more, Monsieur de Kersaint, will you come, or will you have a useless mêlée here?”

Gaston set his teeth. It was true after all, this incredible infamy! If he had listened to de Brencourt! . . . Valentine—should he ever see her again? The room, seething now with excitement, swam for a second. . . . No, they should not take him alive! This, the last, would be a good fight—one against how many . . . twelve, thirteen? He slipped a couple of feet further backwards still, till he was almost in the angle of the wall, the blade he had never thought to use again glittering in his hand. Then he smiled, not altogether scornfully. His intention was obvious.

In the ring now round him several other swords slid out. Most of the guests, vociferating, had already made a bolt for the door, but Rose was clinging to her husband in a frenzy. "Georges! Georges! don't let them do it! It is the Duc, it is indeed! Tell them you had charge of Mirabel—tell them . . ." But her words, vain in any case, could not penetrate the uproar. And, even as she spoke, the officer of dragoons drew and cocked a pistol. "Now, for the last time, Monsieur de Kersaint! See, we do not want to harm your escort, if you have one—our business is not with them—but if you drive us to use force, you will certainly get them killed as well as yourself!"

His escort! that escort for the moment, mercifully, out of hearing. In the imminent prospect of combat Gaston had forgotten them. Good God, that was only too true—they would certainly get themselves cut to pieces for him! Roland—*Roland*!—and those other boys slaughtered for his sake . . . and uselessly! The idea was too horrible. He must let them take him—quickly. His face grew sombre, and he lowered his point a little.

"So this is the First Consul's honour!" he said, but his voice cut like a sword, "—and yours, soldiers and Frenchmen! I was warned of this—but I would not believe such a thing possible!"

"It is orders!" a chorus answered him.

"Swear that you will let my escort go unharmed—no, how can I rely on your word?" he said, looking contemptuously round, and this time no one answered him. "At least I shall never give up my sword now, since there is no one left worthy to receive it." And before anyone had moved he had put his left hand to the naked blade, and, bending his knee, snapped the weapon across. Then he threw the two halves at his feet and folded his arms. "I am at your disposal . . . *gentlemen* . . . only be quick about it!"

They had no desire to be other than speedy. There was a travelling carriage just drawn up at the inn door; small matter that it belonged to the Deputy who had tried to interfere. Five minutes later, with fifty dragoons round it, that carriage had started for Auray and Vannes, while the remaining officers, having thrust aside the doubly infuriated Camain, were dealing in the passage with the distracted young men of their prisoner's escort, to whom news of the catastrophe had meanwhile penetrated. The short and furious mêlée was indeed none of the Republicans' seeking, but its end was just as inevitable as if it had been. . . . For Artamène, his head laid open by a sabre, having stumbled, blinded with blood, into the eating-room, and fallen his length among the tables, lay there without stirring; while Lucien, his arm fractured, leant with shut eyes against the doorpost, his uniform torn on one side from shoulder to waist. And in the now emptied setting of the drama which she had unwittingly brought about, Rose Camain, kneeling by the bleeding and unconscious boy on the floor, but not trying in any way to succour him, her hands to the sides of her head in approved theatrical fashion, was sending forth shriek after shriek. . . .

(2)

But Roland, uninjured though almost crazy, was in the yard, his hands shaking so much as he re-saddled Zéphyr that he could hardly pull the girths. Even so, he had enough wits left to realise that the large stout man, himself greatly discomposed, who had, as far as he remembered, dragged him bodily out of the affray, was right when he said that it was perfectly useless to follow the vanished carriage along the Auray road. The best thing that he could do was to hasten back to Finistère and spread the news. Roland was conscious that his adviser was helping him now, keeping up, as he put on Zéphyr's bridle, a running accompaniment of wrath—"Disgraceful . . . infamous . . . to purloin a carriage too. . . ."

"Look here, boy," he said suddenly, throwing the reins over the Arab's neck, "—by the way, I suppose you're his son, are you not?"

Roland, too dazed and wretched to be surprised at the idea, shook his head, and put his foot in the stirrup.

"You're devilish like him," said Camain explanatorily. "Wait a minute—I want to say something. The Duchesse de Trélan—if you see her, tell her she can command my services. Camain, my name is; she knew me at Mirabel . . . I expect you have heard about that. Hôtel du Lion d'Or at Lorient will find me."

Roland, in the saddle now, nodded. *O God, O God, they had let him be taken!*

"I'll see that your comrades are looked after," added the Deputy kindly, looking up at his young, desperate face. "I hope it is all a mistake—damn it all, it must be! and that they will release him when they get to Vannes. Yet it is best not to count on it. Good luck to you!"

Roland bent down and seized the hand of the ex-administrator of Mirabel, who so little divined in him the "marauder" of last April, and next moment was out of the courtyard.

But even as he passed under the tunnel leading to the street he heard this Camain calling after him, and impatiently reined up again.

“Look here, young man,” said the Deputy in a lowered tone, “as it was owing to my—as I feel a sort of interest in the Trélan family, I’m damned if I don’t follow those scoundrels to Vannes to-night, just to keep an eye on the business. Tell the Duchesse that—and should she come to Vannes in person, tell her to go to the Hôtel de l’Epée, and if I am not still there myself I will leave a message for her.”

“God bless you!” said Roland, with tears in his eyes. Then he was in the street, and a moment or two later, riding like mad back along the road to Finistère.

For some miles he galloped on almost without thought, he was so numb with misery and incredulity. Zéphyr, the incomparable, seemed quite fresh, despite the distance he had come since yesterday morning. That was why he had taken him. . . . A rescue—how was it to be brought about? It all seemed to rest on his shoulders. A terrible feeling of helplessness began to wrap him round as he pushed on through the cold rain which was now beating on him. Was he really acting for the best in returning like this, and what was to be done when he got back—the men all disbanded? If only the Abbé were there! And how should he ever tell the Duchesse? The clouds about him seemed thick with the shame and anguish in his heart. And Zéphyr was not so fresh after all.

What did they mean to do with the Duc? Hold him as a hostage? They dared do nothing worse, in the face of that full safe-conduct. Even the First Consul would not dare. It was a mistake; yes, a piece of bravado. Yet if only they had listened to M. de Brencourt!

He had covered many miles without drawing rein. The night was beginning, the early February night. And Zéphyr, the tireless and surefooted, had stumbled twice. “O Zéphyr, don’t you fail too, as we have failed!” cried his rider.

Over the border at last into Finistère, and through Quimperlé, where they had slept yesterday. It was dark now, and snowing a little. He meant to ride all night, but at Bannalec it was plain that it was an impossibility both for him and his gallant horse. He tried to get another; could not, and fell asleep from exhaustion even as he argued about it with the people of the inn. They carried him up and put him to bed. He had covered not quite half of the distance back.

It was afternoon of the next day when at last he got to La Vergne, and he could hardly get out of the saddle, hardly drag himself up the steps. No sentry now. He lifted the great knocker; the door swung open. Someone had heard the hoofs. It was Marthe. She caught at him as he stumbled into the hall. “Roland, what is it? O, what has happened?”

“Bad news,” said he, so weary he could scarcely frame the words. “The Duc——” A cold mist suddenly drove at him across the hall; when it cleared he saw Mme de la Vergne hurrying towards him, and that Marthe had her arms round him, half supporting him. And who was the man rising from a chair by the hearth? But he saw also the Duchesse de Trélan, who must have been coming down the great staircase, standing as if turned to marble in her descent, a few feet from the bottom. . . . And he broke away from Marthe, for he knew he must tell her at once.

“Madame, they have arrested the Duc at Hennebont—they have taken him to Vannes . . . it was true about the safe-conduct . . . the others are hurt—killed, perhaps . . .” And sobbing out, “How can we save him?” clutching at her dress, he sank forward exhausted on the stairs, his head against her very feet.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT WAS LEARNT AT VANNES

Two nights later, in the dark and the cold, they drove into Vannes—Valentine, Roland and the Comte de Brencourt—having left Mme de la Vergne at Hennebont as they passed through, to tend her son. All thought of raising in Finistère a force large enough for rescue had been abandoned. Indeed they could never have got together enough men to assault Vannes, held as it now was, and the mere attempt might be extremely prejudicial to M. de Trélan. Since Finistère had capitulated, it might indeed be the very consummation at which the First Consul was aiming, in order to have a good pretext for disposing of Finistère's leader, now that he had him in his hands. It was better to hurry to Vannes and trust to organising a rescue by means of some of Cadoudal's Chouans.

So M. de Brencourt had counselled when, the evening of Roland's arrival, he had offered Valentine such assistance as a man still sick could give. That she could accept it as she had done, and could show herself willing, in this terrible hour, to rely whole-heartedly upon him, was balm to his scarified pride. But indeed, in contemplating her despair, he forgot, at moments, his reception by her husband. If Artus de Brencourt had never arrived at seeing his own past conduct in quite the same light as a dispassionate observer would have done, there was one episode on which he could not reflect without tingling shame and horror—that frenzied vigil in which he had come near to slaying in Valentine's presence the man she loved. He had indeed recognised for months past that he had been practically out of his senses at the time—perhaps all the time since his return from Mirabel. . . . Not indeed that this knowledge had helped him much that night at Vannes, in the struggle he had had to bring himself to render a great service to the man he had so deeply injured—apprehensive as he was lest he should seem to be trying to make reparation, yet forced to do the service in person for lack of a trustworthy messenger. Well, it was certain that the Duc de Trélan had not suspected him of *that* motive, when he had flung back in his face the warning which the Comte had only been driven to bring by the instinctive feeling that, despite the past, he could not let his former leader go to his death in such a shocking fashion. But the Duc had gone . . . and just because of the past.

There was no difficulty in obtaining news of "M. de Kersaint" at Vannes. The place was ringing with it—and it was stunning. He had been summarily tried the day before by a military court, and sentenced to death. The pretext was that he was an émigré a rebel taken in arms who had never meant to surrender. He was to have been shot that same afternoon, but at twelve o'clock had come a courier with orders for a respite and for his immediate transference to Paris. And, in half an hour from the arrival of the despatch, he had been taken away in a travelling-carriage under a strong escort. That was yesterday.

So much the Comte de Brencourt, quitting the conveyance, easily gathered before they got to the Hotel de l'Epée. He had to tell Valentine that her husband was gone, but he suppressed the fact that, had he not been removed, she would not have seen him alive; and hoped she would not hear it. The lamp that lit the interior of the carriage showed him, when he had finished his brief recital, the tragic face of the woman he loved, on whom, as if she had not known enough sorrow, this, too, was come. But she did not weep nor blench; she said, "Then we must follow to Paris to-morrow morning," and he assented. It would take them between three and four days.

They rattled through the dark and tortuous streets and drew up at the hotel. Valentine put down her thick veil and Roland assisted her to alight. Just inside the door a large man was standing waiting—Georges Camain in person. He came forward with an air of profound deference.

"I have ventured to order a private room to be put at your disposal, Madame," he said, "and if you will allow me, I will attend you there. I have a message for you."

"You have seen him then?" she breathed. And Camain bent his head in assent.

"I will wait upon you afterwards," murmured the Comte in her ear. Since the Deputy had not recognised him there was no point in giving him a further opportunity. But Roland, obeying his gesture, followed Mme de Trélan; yet after all, when the room was reached, remained outside the door. So the ex-administrator of Mirabel and the ex-concierge were once more alone together.

The moment that she was inside Valentine threw back her veil and turned to him. There was no need to utter her question.

"I succeeded in seeing M. de Trélan for three minutes yesterday," said the Deputy gravely. "It was between noon and half-past, when he left for Paris. I had been trying in vain all morning to do so. And then, Madame, the interview took place on the stairs as they were conducting him to the carriage, so that it was not very satisfactory."

"But at least you saw him!" said Valentine, and the emotion she was holding in check showed itself hungrily for a moment. "O, if only I had been in your place!"

"Indeed, I only wish you had, Madame," returned Camain gently.

"And you found him——?"

"Quite well, Madame, and perfectly composed, though I think the respite was a great surprise to him. You know, I expect," he went on, looking away for a second, "that the iniquitous sentence was to have been carried out yesterday

afternoon?—Of course," he added hastily, for her face told him that she had not known, "this respite has changed all that. . . . As I say, we had only a moment or two, and the letter which I understand M. le Duc would have written to you, had this change not occurred, he had not yet begun, so in that moment on the stairs he scribbled a line on a page from my pocketbook, which he did me the honour to commit to me, and I was to explain why it was so short. I was also charged to ask you to convey to a certain person who had brought a warning his profound regret for the way he had received it, and to his aides-de-camp an assurance that they were not to blame themselves in any way for what happened at Hennebont; that since his arrest was inevitable he wished it to take place without their knowledge, and that he was only grieved to hear that in the end it had not done so. . . . Here is M. de Trélan's note, Madame."

He put a tiny piece of paper in her hand, and, clearing his throat, walked away to the fireplace.

Valentine opened the little torn-off twist. It contained only one word, and Gaston's initials. The word was "*Always*."

She pressed it to her lips. For a moment she seemed to feel his arms about her. Ah, never again, perhaps. . . . She murmured some words of thanks. The Deputy turned round.

"I wish to God I could have done more," he said, surreptitiously pocketing his handkerchief. "It is abominable—beyond words—this affair! And to think that it was brought about . . ." he checked himself and looked at her strangely, but she did not seem to notice anything, and he went on, "Now, alas, I can do nothing further. I have no influence with the present Government. I must pursue my journey to Lorient."

"If you had done nothing but bring me this," replied Valentine, rousing herself, "a world of thanks would be no payment. But you have shown me besides, Monsieur Camain, the treasure of a kind and generous heart."

"As long as you live, Duchesse," said the bricklayer's son, bending over the hand she gave him, "you will not lack that offering. It is your own heart that calls it out. . . ."

A little later the three travellers had made some pretence of eating the meal which had been brought up to them, and then, seeing that the two men were restless, Valentine begged them not to consider her but to leave her if they wished; and they, thinking on their side that she perhaps desired to be alone, obeyed.

Valentine did desire to be alone, but it was no solace. It seemed to her that she had touched the lowest depths of human despair. She had never dreamt that Gaston would be gone from Vannes. The word he had sent her was warm in her bosom, but that was not he. She felt that it was only the prospect of seeing him at the end of them, even though it must be as a captive, which had kept life in her these two dreadful days. And what had the Deputy said—that if the *sursis* had not come . . . O no, no, that was not possible! She would not look at it. . . . But it *was* true that he was far away, alone, in the hands of his enemies. It was an effort to keep herself from calling his name aloud.

She sat in a chair by the fire, the wind howling outside, the tears dripping through her fingers, and did not hear the door open. Roland stood on the threshold again, looking at her with a great compassion and understanding in his young eyes—for if his heart was broken what must hers be? And half impulsively, half timidly, he went across the little room and knelt down by her.

"Madame, dear Madame!"

Still weeping, she put out her hand to him blindly, and he kissed it, kissed her tears on it. And then she turned wholly to him, and as he, kneeling there, took her tenderly and reverently into his arms, she shook with sobbing on his shoulder. It was really the first time that she had broken down since the arrest. Except that he felt he must comfort her—though he knew not by what means, for what means were there?—the boy would have liked to sob too.

He said something, and through her misery she thought, "His voice is getting like Gaston's. There will be something of Gaston left in the world after all."

It was at that moment that the impulse to tell him came to her overwhelmingly. She was so lonely; it would comfort her—if she could keep from thinking of Mme de Céligny. He ought to know now, too.

She mastered her sobs after a while, lifted her head from the boy's shoulder, dried her eyes and leant back in her chair.

"Stay there, Roland, if you will," she said, and he sat on the floor beside her chair, silently looking into the fire. What he saw there was always the same—the inn parlour at Hennebont; sometimes with his leader sitting there, as he had last seen him when he went out to the others on that thrice accursed errand of his own making, sometimes disordered and sickeningly empty, as it had appeared at his return. . . .

Valentine contemplated his face, quite haggard in the firelight for all its youth, and the tragedy in his eyes.

"Roland," she said, putting her hand on his arm, "I want to tell you something. The Duc sent a message to you and the others through M. Camain. You were not, he said, to distress yourself about what happened at Hennebont, for as his arrest had to come he particularly wished it should take place as quickly as possible, before you could return. He knew quite well, you see, what you would all have done—what you did, alas—and he would not have you killed to no end."

Roland turned that tragic gaze upon her. "In other words, M. le Duc got himself taken to save us. . . . *I wish I were dead!*"

The tears were in his voice, not in his eyes, which were quite dry. He turned them on the fire again.

“Do you then love him so much?” asked Valentine softly.

Roland gave her one look; he did not answer in words.

“O my child, my child!” said Mme de Trélan. Her beautiful and expressive voice held a world of meanings, but Roland was back in the coals and the inn parlour. He remembered they had not laid the four covers when he went out of the room; there were only three—or was it two? . . . If he had stayed, he could have died there at his feet before they took him.

“Roland,” said the Duchesse’s voice again, “I want to tell you something else. I did not mean to do so yet . . . but I feel I must.” She made a little pause. “You do not remember your mother, I think?”

He shook his head.

“A long time ago, Roland . . . she and the Duc met . . . and he loved her——”

The boy turned, startled, from his contemplation of the fire.

“—Too well,” finished Valentine, with a long breath.

He went white, then scarlet; then white again. “Madame—what do you mean?—I don’t understand. . . . You cannot mean——”

Unconsciously she was pressing her wet handkerchief into a ball. “M. de Trélan is your father, Roland.”

CHAPTER IX

THE RUBIES OF MIRABEL

(1)

"You really wish to do this, Madame?" asked Suzon Tessier, looking at the piece of embroidery she had just laid before the Duchesse.

"I must do something, Suzon, to pass the time till I start for the Temple. I cannot go out; Paris hurts me. And, sewing once more in this room, I shall feel I am back in the old days."

"I only wish you were!" thought Suzon as she left the room—a wish Valentine would never have echoed. Though these days were nothing but linked hours of anguish and suspense, she would not have changed. Heaven lay between that time and this.

The day before yesterday she had arrived with her escort in this new, gay, animated Paris which hurt her so—the Paris which, exhilarated by a slight frost, under a cheerful winter sky, seemed to have drunk in a new lease of life with its revivifying change of government. It was a fresh world to Valentine—and a cruel. So when, after one night at a hotel, she had sought out Suzon to see how she fared, that faithful soul had refused to let her face again the curious looks of the hostelry. Since there was no danger to Mme Tessier in housing her now—and Valentine had learnt long since that the threatened Mirabel enquiry had never come to anything—she let herself be persuaded without much difficulty, and she and Roland were staying in the Rue de Seine. M. de Brencourt was lodging at an obscure little *hôtel garni* in the Rue du Vieux-Colombier. Mme de Trélan had hardly seen him since their arrival; he was too deeply occupied. For the whole weight of Royalist influence in Paris was at work to procure the release of "M. de Kersaint" from the prison of the Temple, where he was in close confinement awaiting the First Consul's pleasure. He was still under the sentence of death passed on him at Vannes, and all attempts, based on the disgraceful means taken for his capture, to get that sentence removed, or even commuted, had so far been vain, though Berthier, the Minister of War, was an officer of the ancien régime, and Lebrun, the Third Consul, actually in relations with the Royalist party. Protests and clamour having proved unavailing, there remained therefore nothing, if the prisoner was to be saved, but to carry him off.

And this was by no means a hopeless enterprise, for in Paris there existed a whole subterranean population of Chouans and émigrés, of conspirators and dubious characters. The heads of the secret Royalist agency, the Chevalier de Coigny and the Baron Hyde de Neuville, knew well where to put their hands on suitable instruments. Plans were in fact already well forward for a very promising scheme, to be put into force the following evening. There would arrive at the prison of the Temple a carefully forged order for M. de Trélan's transference to some other place of confinement; it would be brought by an officer, and there would be a carriage and a considerable escort—enough to impose on any jailor in the world. And, once they had the captive out, they would make for the coast, along the road to which relays would be in waiting.

All this Valentine knew, and it had, till an hour or so ago, been the one thing which filled her mind. But the arrival of the order to see her husband, which after reiterated attempts had been procured for her, absorbed it now. The order was for three o'clock that afternoon.

There was more colour on Mme de Trélan's face to-day than at Vannes—more colour and more signs of strain. And the sewing she had asked for was something of a pretence—as much a pretence, really, as was Roland's book, now upside down on his knee where he sat on the window-seat, his chin on his hand, gazing immovably out of the window. She put down her needle and gazed at him in her turn.

How like his profile was to Gaston's—and how unlike! Was she sorry that she had told him? It had changed him, between that news and the catastrophe of Hennebont he seemed a boy no longer. For a nature so open as his he had said extraordinarily little, but she had divined easily enough the tides of feeling that had met—were meeting still—in his young heart: the shock of knowing that he had no right to the name he bore (though since he had been so carefully recognised by the late M. de Céligny the world need never know that) the shock to his thoughts of the mother of whom, perhaps mercifully, he had no memory. On the other hand there was the fervour of his worship for M. de Trélan, which lent so much reality and poignancy to his frustrated desire to have died to save him. . . . She did not feel sure that she had not been selfish in the matter; she had even said so, later on, that dark evening at Vannes. But when he had cried bewildered, "How can you be so good to me, Madame? You ought to hate me!" she had answered that he must know she loved him and was leaning on him then, or she would never have told him. "But I think you ought to know," she had ended, "in case he . . ."

Before she got further Roland had come back from the mantelpiece, where his head lay buried in his arms, and was at her feet, kissing the hands which were gripping each other in the effort to finish that sentence. And he said, in a smothered voice, "If it is dishonour . . . I do not feel dishonoured.—But I cannot grasp it yet; it seems too blinding . . ."

Valentine remembered all this, looking at him now after six days.

"Roland, my child," she said suddenly, "I want to consult you about something. If to-morrow night's scheme

should fail——”

The young man turned his head at once. “Oh, it will not fail,” he asserted. “But I wish—O, how I wish—that I were in it!”

For, there being secret communication between the Royalist agency and the Temple, the prisoner had contrived to express a strong desire that the Vicomte de Céligny should take no active part in the plan of rescue.

“Poor boy, I know you do! But, Roland, I also have to be inactive. Yet I have a scheme of my own, in case the other fails . . . You know the Trélan rubies? We had designed them, M. de Trélan and I, for Marthe on your wedding day. Now I have the thought of giving—of offering—them to someone else . . . as a price.”

“To whom?” asked Roland, leaning forward as the Duchesse unclasped them from under her dress.

“To Mme Bonaparte.”

Roland, a little startled, considered. “Would it be of any use?”

“She is said to be rapacious for jewels—and of Royalist leanings.”

“But what could she do?”

“Use her influence with her husband. What do you think of it, Roland?”

The young man on the window seat reflected. “You should consult M. Hyde de Neuville, Madame, not me. I know nothing of Mme Bonaparte. But——” He stopped and coloured a little.

“What, Roland?”

“Forgive me, Madame, but would the Duc approve of such a step?”

Her own colour faded a little as she met his eyes. And then with courage, she answered, “No, Roland, I am afraid he might not. He is, as you know . . . very proud. But it is not as if he personally would have a hand in it. A wife’s mortal anxiety will excuse anything. I should go as one woman—as one wife—to another . . . an independent step.”

“Shall you tell M. de Trélan of it this afternoon?” asked Roland, with his eyes on the floor.

Valentine did not answer for a moment. “But in that case I could not say truthfully that he knew nothing of it—which I should wish to be able to say. Advise me, Roland!”

“O Madame, how can I presume to advise you in a matter that concerns only you and him. You know so much better what he would wish than I do!”

And Valentine sat silent, looking at him, her face drawn, the red rivulet of fire across her hands.

“Roland, what you really mean is that I know what he would not wish!”

“Yes, Madame,” answered the boy in a very low voice.

Valentine caught her underlip. “You have your father in you, there is no doubt,” she thought to herself, and as she bent over the stones a tear fell on to the possible price of blood. For the worst of it was that she knew Roland was right.

She lifted her head again. “Then I shall speak of it to him—ask his permission. . . . And I think, Roland, that I will go and prepare now. It is very early to start, but it is a long way to the Temple, and we could walk part of it. It is so hard to sit still.”

As she came downstairs again, dressed for the street, she was thinking of the man who had put the rubies into her hands that strange day at Mirabel. Ah, that the Abbé Chassin were here now! he who had always been at hand in difficulties, and who now, at the most critical time of all, was over the sea. But even he, as she knew, could do no more than was being done.

In the parlour she found M. de Brencourt—the first time she had seen him that day.

“You are setting out already, Madame?” he asked, bending over her hand. She told him why, thinking how worn and ill he looked, and how possessed (as indeed he was) by a spirit of restless energy.

“I would beg leave to escort you part of the way,” he said, “but having missed Hyde de Neuville at his lodging, and hearing he had something of importance to say to me and was coming here, I must await him. Roland, I suppose, accompanies you?”

“Yes—but he will not be able to see M. de Trélan, I am afraid. Is there any message you wish conveyed about to-morrow night?”

M. de Brencourt shook his head. “Communications of that kind, Madame, go by their own channel. Besides, there is nothing fresh to say. The Duc knows the attempt is to be made; his part is merely passive.”

She said nothing for a moment. Then, flooding up from the depths, came the thing she had not yet allowed to escape her. “O, Monsieur de Brencourt, if only he had listened to you!”

The Comte shook his head. “No, Madame, say rather, If only the warning had come from other lips! I was the one man in the world who should not have carried it. . . . Duchesse, we cannot put off our past so easily; it clings, like the shirt of fable, and poisons everything. . . . You may tell the Duc, if you will, that I accept his apology in the same spirit in which he sent it. I cannot blame him for disbelieving my veracity—however much, being only human, I resent it. But it was inevitable; and that he is where he is now is Nemesis—the Nemesis I have drawn down on both of us.”

She could find no words before the sadness of his tone. He opened the door for her.

When he had shut the door behind Mme de Trélan the Comte turned and threw himself down in a chair, his chin on his breast, staring into the fire. His brain was weary, for he had been up most of the night. He could not forget (even if Valentine did, as he sometimes suspected) that the Duc de Trélan was not only a prisoner but a condemned prisoner—not a man awaiting trial, but one already under sentence of death—and that his position was very precarious. Any hour might conceivably bring the tidings that the sentence had been carried out on him; for his own part he wished the rescue had been fixed for that evening, but it had not proved possible to have every thread in place so soon.

M. de Brencourt's whole soul was so set on getting Gaston de Trélan out of the mortal peril in which he stood, that he did not analyse his motives over closely. He had entered on the attempt for Valentine's sake—and a little, too, for the sake of his own self-respect. And the Duc had sent a message of regret; from him of all men that was no empty form of words. Yet Artus de Brencourt was under the impression that he cared very little about de Trélan's fate in itself. But it is hard to know one's own heart.

He went on staring into the coals. He wished he did not keep seeing that figure by the dolmen in the forest waiting with folded arms to receive his fire. It was so very possible . . . He shivered. "How much better it would be if I could take his place!"

A knock, and the expected visitor was shown in, and the Comte roused himself. Hyde de Neuville, the newcomer, was surprisingly young for the position he occupied—only three and twenty in fact—good-looking, alert, intelligent, well-dressed, a man of good family accustomed to the best society, and, in some of his activities, to the worst. He had some astonishingly audacious exploits to his name. When he wrote letters—as to M. Chassin—he signed himself "Paul Berry."

"I had gone to see Bertin," explained the young man, coming over to the fire. "I was fearing a hitch about the escort. But it is all right. The two dozen men he had laid his hand on are perfectly reliable, and I am now quite satisfied. Uniforms, indeed, are more difficult to procure than bodies to put them on. But we shall manage."

"You have no doubts about the forged order?"

"Not the slightest. And none of the Temple officials will be surprised, I think, if M. de Trélan is transferred, the circumstances of his capture having been so exceptional."

"So damnable!" interpolated the Comte.

"But I really wanted to speak to you about something quite different," went on the young conspirator. "Late last night I had a communication from my compatriot Bourgoing, who is in relations with Talleyrand. It appears Talleyrand thinks that, partly owing to the outcry which has been made about this abominable violation of M. de Trélan's safe-conduct, Bonaparte would, after all, be rather glad to get out of going to the extremity to which he most undoubtedly meant to go when he sent those infamous orders to Brune."

De Brencourt stared at him rather incredulously. "I can hardly believe that of the First Consul. He is entirely without scruples, and very unlikely to be frightened into turning back once he has started on a course, however black that course may be. He cannot be magnanimous now; it is too late. It would only look like weakness."

"I know that. But Bonaparte, besides getting rid of the odium this affair is raising in certain quarters in Paris, would demand some kind of *quid pro quo*—that the Duc should personally ask for his life, and, I suppose, give an undertaking never to conspire against him. Talleyrand is almost convinced that in such a case he would be merciful—in fact that he would secretly be relieved. He could make at any rate some pretence of magnanimity; it might affect wavering supporters. But he has gone too far to set the Duc de Trélan free of his own motion; it would look too much like weakness, as you say. On the other hand if it were publicly known that the Duc had asked for mercy——"

"I fear, in that case, that the First Consul will not obtain the relief which he desires," observed M. de Brencourt drily. "Who that had had any acquaintance with him could imagine that the Duc de Trélan would, for any consideration, stoop to sue from Bonaparte—and by so doing serve Bonaparte's purpose too! . . . I should scarcely like even to propose such an idea to him.—But of course it would be only proper to inform him—as I expect you have already done?"

Hyde de Neuville looked thoughtful. He nodded. "My note must have reached him, by the usual channel, three or four hours ago.—By the way, has the Duchesse started for the Temple? I think her interview was for three o'clock, was it not? I was wondering whether the ease with which, in the end, the order was obtained, was due to the idea that she might work on her husband if she knew."

"Then I am thankful that she does not know," replied the Comte rather hoarsely.

"You mean that it would be of no use? Well, we must then stake everything on to-morrow night's affair, which promises excellently." He brought out a paper. "Now, who of these do you think had best drive the carriage, and who play the officer commanding the escort? And I have not yet quite arranged about all the further relays."

(3)

At that very moment Valentine, on Roland's arm, had just emerged from the Rue du Roule into the Rue Saint-Honoré, whence they intended to take a fiacre to the Temple. In that animated and busy street Roland was looking

round for a carriage when he suddenly exclaimed,

"See, Madame, what is coming. Is it—it must be the First Consul himself!"

Valentine followed his eyes. From the direction of the Tuileries was approaching, at a fast trot, a carriage with an escort of mounted grenadiers. It came onwards in a clatter of hoofs, and on its passage a roar of cheers went up and hats were waved. Valentine felt a momentary dizziness, and held Roland's arm tightly. She was about to see the master of France, the great general, the great administrator, the genius with a marvellous brain, an indomitable will, and a petty soul—the man who had her husband's life in his hand, to keep or to throw away. But when the carriage was almost abreast she involuntarily dropped Roland's arm and drew herself up, the pride of a long line firing her blood.

And she saw, passing quickly, not, as she had expected, a young hero in uniform, but, in a grey civilian overcoat, the wide revers crossed closely over his chest, a little man whose hollow temples and cheeks, and pallid yellowish complexion, made him look at least ten years older than his thirty years. Sombre and preoccupied, his head sunk on his breast, he appeared almost indifferent to the plaudits of the crowd, but chance, or something in her attitude, drew his eyes in Valentine's direction, and for one brief second the Duchesse de Trélan sustained—and returned—the singular and burning gaze of Napoleon Bonaparte. Then he was gone.

Trembling a little, Mme de Trélan took the young man's arm again. She could not shake off the feeling that the First Consul knew who she was, and that it was the question of the Duc de Trélan's fate which was absorbing his thoughts just then. And he did not look as if he could be turned from his purpose by any woman. . . .

"Let us get a carriage and go quickly, Roland," she said in a faint voice.

The slow horse clanked dully along the interminable Rue du Temple, till at last Valentine and Roland found themselves standing before the columned entrance to the Palace of the Temple, once the habitation of the Comte d'Artois and, before him, of other princes of the blood, such as Conti of amorous memory. And soon, formalities over, they were walking, with a soldier as guide, across the great courtyard with its encircling row of leafless trees, towards the low façade. Except that this was day, and not night, they saw just what the Royal Family had seen when they were brought there captives on the 13th of August, 1792, for the palace itself had not changed its external aspect since, and the prison itself, the great Tower, stood at some distance behind. Following their guide they went through the building, emerging finally on the flight of steps which led down from what had been the great salon to the palace garden, and saw then, at the end of the deserted pleasances, the great wall built round the Tower to isolate the royal captives, and over its bleak masonry the upper storeys and the pointed roof of the massive donjon of the Temple which was their goal.

Valentine had heard of this wall of Palloy's at the time of its construction. It had served its purpose only too well then; it looked—God help her!—as if it would serve it well now. Yet M. de Brencourt had escaped—but that was by bribery, and he had not been in solitary confinement. . . . Now they were at the guardhouse in the wall, were passed civilly and quietly through, and found themselves facing the fortress itself, grey, massive, foursquare, with its small satellite round tower at each angle. Every window in the main building, except those at the very top, was blinded by a sloping board-work, a tabatière. And round it the encircling wall, supported on many buttresses, formed a complete square of desolation. In this were listlessly promenading a few prisoners.

"That is the entrance, Madame," said their guide, pointing to the left-hand of the two smaller towers on that side. "The stairway runs up that tourelle; they will take you up from the greffe there. I see old Bernard awaiting you, in fact."

And indeed, on the small semi-circular perron at the foot of the little tower was already standing an old gaoler with a bunch of keys.

"Madame de Trélan?" said this old man when they got there. "We were expecting you. If you will show me the pass there is no need to go into the greffe. Thank you, Monsieur . . . Madame will be obliged to mount a good many steps, since M. de Trélan, as she probably knows, is in solitary confinement, and therefore at the top of the Tower. I will go first; there are wickets to unfasten."

The winding stairway of the turret was too narrow for Roland to give the Duchesse his arm. Light and gloom alternated with each other as they passed the slit-like windows in the six-foot masonry. And every step they mounted seemed to drive the blood further from Valentine's heart. How could Gaston ever be rescued, even by guile, from a place like this? And she, who had been twice in prison herself, and thought she knew all its bitterness, now found that she was tasting a cup incomparably sharper.

She was so pale when they got to the top that Roland put his arm about her for a moment.

"Trying, the ascent, Madame," observed the melancholy gaoler. "One hundred and twenty-two steps."

A couple of sentries with fixed bayonets stood before the thick, nail-studded door. The "Marquis de Kersaint" was well guarded indeed.

"The young gentleman will stay outside," observed Bernard. "My orders, as you know, are only for the family. There is a bench yonder, Monsieur."

Roland, his heart beating furiously, bent his head in acquiescence, and when the gaoler had unlocked the door and the sentries had stood aside Valentine passed in alone.

CHAPTER X

THE LAST CONFLICT

She had no time for thought of her surroundings. Gaston, warned by the opening of the door, was waiting just inside, and she was in his arms, strained to him, clinging to him, before ever it had finished closing behind her.

O, haven where she had thought these last dreadful days never to rest again! But no, how could God take it from her again so soon? He was too good! Just to be there once more, to feel Gaston's lips on hers, to hold him—the agony of suspense drugged, if not dead—nothing else mattered, not even that he was a prisoner.

"Beloved, your cheek is cold," he murmured. "Is it so cold in here?—and if I hold you all the time will you be warm enough?"

"I am not cold," she answered in a whisper, "but hold me . . . hold me . . ." And consciousness of everything but that hold drifted away.

. . . Cold? Perhaps *he* was cold—neglected? What was this place like? To see it, in its relation to him, she lifted her head from his breast, and was conscious for the first time of the small, high room in which she stood, of the window ten feet up in the wall, so that no view was possible, and the light came down from it very cheerlessly. On the ancient walls, blackened in places by the smoke of many a bygone torch, names were scrawled. She saw a pallet, a table and chair—and a stove, which was burning.

Then she scrutinised him, with such eyes of anxiety for what she might discover in his appearance that Gaston smiled at it.

"Do you expect to find, my darling, that ten days of captivity can have changed me?" he asked. "I have everything I want—everything I can pay for, that is—except liberty for correspondence . . . and my personal liberty, bien entendu."

Indeed he looked younger, less worn, than at her last sight of him. And his tone, assumed or natural, was so calm. But somehow that very fact made her a little uneasy.

He took her hands again. "Sit down, my heart. No, not on my solitary chair; I cannot recommend it. The bed is better; I can sit there too."

She obeyed him. She did not like to think he slept on that!

"This place makes me shudder, Gaston."

"Dearest, after La Force and your other prison! It seems to me, now that you are here, like a palace! And you, what roof in Paris has the happiness of sheltering you?"

She told him. And then, holding his hand as he sat by her on the little bed, and turning round and round on his finger, for which it was now too loose, his emerald ring, she approached the subject so near her lips.

"Gaston, you spoke just now—not seriously, I know—of paying for your liberty. Suppose this plan for your rescue fails, which God forbid, but suppose it fails . . . could your liberty be bought?"

He looked at her so hard, so questioningly, that her hopes for the scheme sank lower still.

"I fear not," he said very gravely. And then, after another pause, "What did you imagine could buy it, my wife?"

And by his very intonation she knew that she would never, with his consent, kneel to Joséphine Bonaparte. Yet she would not give up.

"With the ruby necklace," she answered, and went on. But he soon stopped her.

"Valentine, you cannot really be proposing that I should stoop to beg my life of Bonaparte!"

She winced, for the tone was almost hard, and hurt. "No, no," she interposed hastily, "not that *you* should! But I, your wife, approaching Mme Bonaparte, a wife herself, that is a very different thing. For me to do so is a most natural step, and when I point out to her what surely her husband cannot realise, the infamy of the means by which he took you, the violation of your safe-conduct——"

He had been staring at the floor, his mouth set. But again he broke in. "The First Consul has had plenty of time to reflect on that, Valentine. Believe me, he knows what he is doing."

O, the place was cold, after all, deadly cold! And Gaston so inexorable——

"And you will not let me——" she began once more unsteadily.

"A thousand times no! I forbid it absolutely."

Very low, Valentine said, "And what of me? Am I too to be sacrificed to the pride of your race? Can I not plead for myself, Gaston,—not with Bonaparte indeed, but with you, with you!"

He turned, he caught her quickly in his arms. "My darling, my very dear, don't say that!" he exclaimed in a moved voice. "Don't say that! It is not I indeed, nor pride——"

But she retorted, half sobbing, "Gaston, I almost think that if you were to be told you could have your life for the asking, you would not ask for it!"

Mercifully she could not guess that the sudden closer tension of his arms about her told how her shot had gone home, nor that her head almost rested at that moment on Hyde de Neuville's letter. As for Gaston himself, who knew how truly, indeed, she had unwittingly spoken, he dared not take up her challenge. So he said, as calmly as he could,

"My dearest, you are overwrought. And, Valentine, can you think that I should allow you to put yourself to a useless humiliation, you whom I love more than my life? For I do not think Mme Bonaparte would have any influence in the matter, and if she had, I dislike the idea of bribing her to use it, as much as you do, I am sure, in your heart. No, we will trust to that clever and audacious young man, Hyde de Neuville, with all the means he has at his disposal. To come and demand a prisoner with a forged order and a fictitious escort will be child's play to him. And some day I will tell you the very good reason I have for not wishing my life to be begged by anyone. On the faith of a gentleman it is not merely pride. But for the present you must trust me."

The present. He could speak of it like that! Then he really thought that there might be a future in which he would be a free man? Did he, *did* he? She looked hard at him, and suddenly out of the past shot the remembrance of that very different struggle which had ended their life at Mirabel. Then she had pleaded with him to do something worthy of himself; now . . . was it possible that she was urging him to consent to something unworthy? If that were so, thank God that he was, as before, unmoved. And as she studied the fine, rather worn profile she realised, too, how much less stern were the lines of his mouth. He had asked a little while ago, in jest, if she thought his brief captivity had changed him. But it was true; there was a deep change in him. The profound depression of those last days at La Vergne was gone. Why?

"Gaston," she said on an impulse, "you are happier than when we parted."

He turned his head, looked down into her eyes, and smiled. "You can guess why, my soul—you who know what was spared me. God was kind to me. The wine was poured, but I did not drink it. I never had to give up my sword; I never did consent to disarmament. And Finistère is saved all the same. Have I not reason to be happier?"

"And yet—O Gaston, Gaston, I must say it—if only you had listened to M. de Brencourt's warning!"

He got up from the bed. "M. de Brencourt, I trust, has received the message I sent by M. Camain?"

"Yes," said Valentine. "He sent one back by me to-day; that he accepted your apology. But he said—and it distressed me, Gaston—that he ought never to have brought the message himself. Your disbelief, he seemed to think, was his Nemesis."

"That is true," said her husband a little coldly. "To this hour I do not see how I could have believed in his good faith. But—I have been wanting to say this to you, my dearest—nothing could have made any difference. You think that if I had listened to his warning I should not be here to-day, nor those poor boys lying at Hennebont. But as far as I am concerned it would have been just the same. I must have gone to Vannes to give up my sword, even were I sure that I was walking into a snare. For if, scenting a trap, I had not gone, what would have happened? Brune would have stoutly denied the intended treachery, I should have been branded as failing to redeem my pledge, and Finistère would have been invaded after all. Do you not see that even if I had believed de Brencourt I could have done no differently?"

She looked up at him a moment, standing there with a prison wall for background. No, *he* could have done no differently, whatever a man with less strict a sense of honour might have done.

"You are you!" she said proudly. "But I will point out that aspect to the Comte—for he has suffered, Gaston. . . . But, my darling, there is something else I want to ask you." She paused a moment. "If you will not let me beg your life, and I"—she faltered a little—"I accept your wishes . . . what is to happen if the plan for to-morrow fails? Will Bonaparte keep you in prison for years, perhaps?"

And the human spirit has such strange recesses that it really seemed to her that by throwing out this suggestion in words she could make it real, avoid a worse. For at Vannes they had told her——

Gaston de Trélan went suddenly over to the stove, and held out his hands for a moment to its warmth. His back was towards her. Then, sitting down beside her on the bed again, he said lightly, "He is not likely to have the chance of doing that—unless he captures me a second time."

She saw that he was evading her. "Yes," she broke in, seizing his arm, "I know; we have spoken about that. But the best plans sometimes fail. What then? Gaston, as you love me . . . Gaston, answer me!"

He looked down at the little hand gripping his arm, and after a moment put his other hand over it. "My wife, can you not see that the First Consul, a soldier himself, would not incur the odium of an almost unparalleled piece of military treachery unless it were worth his while? . . . My dear, there is no braver woman than you. I do you the honour, therefore, of telling you the truth. No, he will not keep me in prison. If I am not rescued I shall undoubtedly be shot . . . as an—example."

She was answered. Her hand relaxed upon his arm, and he hastily slipped the arm itself about her as she fell away from him. But Valentine pulled herself still further away.

"Then I am going to disregard your wishes, Gaston! You do not know what you are saying. I give you fair warning. I am going to Mme Bonaparte—to the First Consul himself! You expect me to stand by and see you murdered when I might save you! What is your pride—which you cannot deny—against your life . . . and Gaston, Gaston, against my love for you, which you treat so lightly!"

He slipped to his knees and caught her hands to his breast. "O, my more than dear, do not say that!" he implored. "Is not your love for me all the light I have in the world? But at this hour there is something that calls more insistently

even than love—something that, if it has to do with pride, is not linked with personal pride. I mean—honour. And you could not gain me my life if you asked—I am sure of it—yet if you were to make the attempt——"

But Valentine broke in with desperate logic. "You cannot know that I should fail! How could you? You cannot be sure till it has been tried. And I shall try! Then you can talk of failure!"

Gaston knelt there as pale as she. Surely, surely, he could find some way to stay her without revealing the cruel knowledge he had—that only he himself could ever be successful in an entreaty which even she could not move him to make.

"Valentine, sooner than think of you on your knees to that man I would go on my own—if that were conceivable. But it is not conceivable—not if he had a pardon ready sealed in his hand, not if he held it out to me! Think a moment, heart of my heart, and face it! When did any captured Breton or Vendean, even the humblest peasant, ever ask for mercy? Thousands of them have laid down their lives readily in the cause they fought for, and hundreds of gentlemen, too. And would you have me—through your mouth or my own it matters little—would you have me, a leader, be the first in either of those lists to play the recreant? Was it for that you wrought and gave me that scarf there—that when the crucial moment came I should deal the cause it represents such a stab in the back as my humiliation would be? Think of our enemies saying, 'At the last moment the Duc de Trélan's heart failed him, and he humbly besought the First Consul for his life.' How would that sound in the streets of Paris next week . . . and when the King comes back?"

Valentine flinched. Her lips were grey. Indeed she did not like the sound of it.

"But, Gaston," she said, those lips quivering, "for the cause you have done more than enough. You have done everything that mortal man could do, you, the last in arms—more than Cadoudal, who was so strong—more than all the rest!"

"And all in vain," he finished sadly.

"No devotion is in vain!"

He smiled suddenly, the smile, somehow, of a young man. "My darling, that is what I have been trying to say. There are two sides to being made an 'example' of."

But at that she gave a sharp exclamation and put her hands over her eyes.

Her husband's face became still more drawn. "Valentine," he said tenderly, but very gravely, "have you forgotten the night I came, when the tide of fortune was ebbing, to La Vergne. It was your name day; not three weeks have passed since then. That night, my very dear, my heart of hearts, my fleur-de-lys, you understood—wonderfully—and you gave me leave to die!"

"But not like this—not like this!" she cried distractedly. "O blessed saints, help me! Why did I ever say that! I meant—in the fighting . . . and I thought the need for it was past with the surrender. O Gaston, Gaston, you are killing me!"

Indeed it seemed like it. Her head went down to her very knees, and the wrenching sobs shook her from head to foot. The price was more than she could pay! He was now, through and through, what once she would almost have given her soul to see him. But the cost, the cost of it! . . . She saw, dimly, horribly, what he meant—the damage his death would do to Bonaparte's reputation. It broke her, strong as she was. And, no longer rebellious but purely suppliant, she threw herself on his neck as he knelt there beside the little prison bed, pleaded with him, besought him, implored him—and all in vain.

It almost broke Gaston too, since for him there was also the strain of keeping from her any suspicion of what he knew about Bonaparte's real desire, but his man's, his soldier's will held firm against the lover's. Extravagant perhaps, even fanatical, but none could say ignoble, his intention was fixed. If the attempt at rescue failed, if the First Consul meant to consummate his treachery, he must do it. There was no more to say.

In the end Valentine was, if not acquiescent, at least vanquished. No, she would not go to Mme Bonaparte; she gave him her word. No, she would not even lend the countenance of her name to any of the protests now being made in certain quarters. Yes, she would even acknowledge that, theoretically, he was right. . . . Beaten and shivering, she half lay in his arms, and composure, the composure of exhaustion, began to come back to them both after the combat, and for a little while they were able to talk of other things, far away and dear. . . .

A warning knock came at the door.

"Good God!" exclaimed Gaston, "is the time nearly up, then? And we have spent so much of it in . . . conflict!"

He looked at her with eyes full of love and a very white smile on his lips. And all Valentine's soul was in the gaze with which she met his in her answer:

"Forgive me for my foolishness! It is over now. I would not have you otherwise than victor—for now I see you at your full stature. And I . . . who once presumed to criticise you—I am at your feet . . . in worship."

Her voice died out of existence under his sudden passionate kisses. His own was shaking as he said between them, almost fiercely, "You must not say that, Valentine, you must not say that! O my dear, my dear, how *can* we part, how can I——"

The knock came once more. He stopped abruptly, set his teeth, loosed the tension of his hold, and after a second or

two stood up, quite steady and composed again, drawing her gently with him.

“Who brought you here, my darling?”

“Roland,” she answered. “He is waiting out there all this while, poor boy. And, Gaston, he is heartbroken. He thinks they ought all to have been killed before they let you be taken. Not even the message you sent him at Vannes seems to comfort him.”

Gaston sighed. “Poor Roland! And he is just outside? Cannot he come in for a moment? Surely, Valentine, I am absolved now from my promise to de Carné. I should like to tell him.”

“My heart, he knows, these seven days. I told him at Vannes. *I* had made no promise.”

“God bless you!” said her husband, raising her hand to his lips.

“Gaston, ask to see him,” she suggested. “The pass was for one or more members of the family. Tell the gaoler that he is your son.”

“You would allow that?”

“I should wish it. It is the only way to see him.”

“My saint!” He kissed her hand again. “Very well. Old Bernard is an excellent soul; he will not be particular to a minute or two. But do not go, my darling! I want yours to be the last presence in this room to-day.”

But Valentine shook her head with a little smile. “These are his moments. I will come back afterwards.”

One long embrace and they separated as the door swung open. Outside could be heard the click of steel as the sentries crossed their bayonets over the aperture. But, before Valentine going out, they uncrossed for a second.

“I should like to see the Vicomte de Céligny for a minute or two,” said Gaston to the gaoler.

“Only members of the family, Monseigneur,” returned the precise old man, shaking his head. “I have very strict orders.”

“But since he is my son!” retorted M. de Trélan, in the most natural tone possible. “Come,” he went on, as the old man looked incredulous, “you are sufficiently old-fashioned to call me Monseigneur, and yet you affect not to know that the son of a duke rarely bears the same title as his father. Besides, if you doubt me, go and look at him!”

“Well, well,” said old Bernard, “if he is your son the order covers him, though his name is not on it. You swear that he is your son, Monsieur le Duc?”

“Yes, I swear it,” answered Gaston.

What a strange person and place to receive the first public avowal of his relationship to Roland! He leant against the table and put his hand over his eyes, for indeed the victory he had won in the last hour was only less prostrating than a defeat. When he removed it, Roland was through the door, was on one knee before him, trying to seize his hand and kiss it, and half sobbing out the old appellation, “Monsieur le Marquis! Monsieur le Marquis!”

Gaston stooped and raised him. “Am I only that to you, Roland, my son, my son!”

And, actually in his father’s arms, the warring tides of emotion in the boy’s breast were stilled. He hid his face there, trembling a little. But Gaston said never a word till he took his son’s head between his hands and lifted it. “You are like your mother,” he said in a low voice, looking into his eyes. “You may think of me as you like, Roland, but of her you must think as you have always done. The blame was mine, and mine alone.” And he kissed him.

With his hero’s kiss on his forehead, Roland was in no state to apportion blame between that hero in his mortal peril, and the mother whom he did not remember. He drew a long breath and said, “If only I can be what your son ought to be, sir!”

Gaston smiled rather sadly. “Take a better example, my child. But there is one way in which you can—no, I think I have really no need to point it out to you. If I am shot, Mme de Trélan——”

Roland clutched his arm. “Don’t use that word, sir—I cannot bear it! For it is our fault, all this—we failed you! And we had hoped to die with you!”

“But, my dear boy, that was just what I did not want—and you must allow your general some say in the matter. That was why I hoped the business would be quickly over, and why I was so much distressed to hear from M. Camain what happened after I was gone. You have no further news of the others yet, I suppose?”

Roland shook his head. “But it was thought, when we passed through Hennebont, that Artamène would eventually recover, though he was too ill to know us. . . . Monsieur le Duc, I have never understood why it happened just at that moment—your arrest?”

“Because, directly after you left the room, Roland, I was recognised by a woman whom I had once known slightly. The comedy was that I failed to recognise her at the time—though I have realised since who she was—and that she had no idea, poor soul, of what she was bringing on me. But it made no difference; they would have taken me at Auray, if not at Hennebont; even if I *had* reached Vannes a free man I should not long have remained so. That came out very clearly at my—trial. So you see there is nothing to be distressed about.”

But Roland thought otherwise. Had the arrest been attempted on the highroad there would have been a chance which there never had been in that trap of a room. He had a vision of a great fight in the open, in which they three

should have laid down their lives indeed, and their leader spurred away, free. He sighed disconsolately.

"Mme de Trélan spoke of going to Mme Bonaparte," he remarked.

"I would not sanction it," said his father quietly. "Besides, it would be useless."

"You mean," said Roland, biting his lips to keep back certain unmanly evidences of emotion, "that you are sure the First Consul is absolutely determined to . . ."

Gaston did not answer for a moment. Then he took a letter out of his coat. "No," he said quietly, "as it happens that is just what I do not mean. On the contrary. For a person of his extreme decision he appears to be uncomfortable. Read that, Roland; but first give me your word that you will not tell the Duchesse."

"I give you my word, sir—as your son," said Roland, throwing back his head.

But as he read it some colour came back to his face.

"My God! Then, Mon——"

"Mon père, I hope you were going to say," interposed M. de Trélan smiling, as he took the letter from his suddenly shaking hand and tore it across. "No, my son, there are some things that one does not do, and one is, to play, in a situation such as mine, the enemy's game. You see from that letter what—as far as any mortal can penetrate into his heart—the First Consul would like to happen—and therefore, quite plainly, it is just what shall not happen. Either he must release me of his own act, unconditionally—a step which is extremely improbable—or he must go on to the end. That end he will regret . . . for his own sake." He opened the door of the stove, and threw in the paper. "I have shown you that letter, Roland," he went on, turning to him again, "because you are a man now, but I have particularly kept the knowledge of what it says from the Duchesse; still more must it be kept from her if I die. It would make it too hard for her . . . you understand? I fear I have made it hard enough as it is . . . You can tell her, if you like, some day—years hence. And I want you to warn the Comte de Brencourt and M. Hyde de Neuville not to let her know on any account—if I die, that is. If I escape, it is of no consequence."

"If you escape!" cried Roland feverishly, "but you shall escape! That plan—if only I might take part in it! But Mon—mon père, I have been thinking out there . . . I am not so tall as you, but since I am like you a little (though I never knew it), if you would but get into my clothes now and go away with Mme de Trélan while I——"

"My dearest boy," said Gaston, touched and laughing too, as he put his arm round his shoulders, "that thousand-year-old device! As if I could pass for a young man of twenty! Alas, never again! But I have every confidence in . . . the official scheme for to-morrow evening. Yet in case——" He slipped the emerald ring with the phoenix off his finger and put it on Roland's.

A quiver ran through the boy. He clasped the hand thus decorated to his breast as though it were wounded. "Then you have not every confidence . . . O mon père, take it back!"

"I will take it back when I am free," replied his father, smiling. "A loan, you see.—Here is my patient Bernard." He took him in his arms and kissed him on either cheek. "Be happy with Marthe—she shall wear the rubies after all. And try to get your grandfather, some day, to think less hardly of me."

Roland, shaking with the sobs he was striving so hard to suppress, said almost inaudibly, "But he does. I have had a letter. He is greatly distressed."

"Then I have gained something by being sentenced to death," thought Gaston to himself, with a rather grim amusement. "You must go, my boy," he said aloud. "And God go with you, always!"

He watched his son walk, blind with tears, to the door, and then made a sign to the gaoler. "Give us one last moment, Bernard, for pity's sake!" For, before the bayonets could cross themselves again, Valentine had slipped in, and come straight into his arms where he stood under that heartbreaking window. And Bernard compassionately went out again and closed the door.

"If the plan fails, Gaston, is this the last time?" (How could anyone who was so white speak so steadily?)

"No, no—they will certainly let me see you again." His own voice was not quite steady.

"You are sure? I—a woman does not know about these things."

"Yes, I am sure of it. If it comes to that, I shall have you in my arms once again, my dearest, dearest heart!" Yet he held her now as if that time had come. "Moreover, I do not believe the plan will fail. But, my darling, I have not been torturing you unnecessarily, in speaking of . . . the other alternative. It is only because, as God has given us at the end of summer to be one in life, I want you to understand that to die now would be to me no defeat or loss—to understand so that we might still be one . . . even if we had to part. . . ."

"Death could never take you from me," she answered.

CHAPTER XI

GASTON GIVES UP THE YELLOW POPPY

(1)

It was about six o'clock the next morning that old Bernard, who had just finished dressing himself, looked out of the window of the little ground-floor room in the Palace of the Temple where he slept—for most of the personnel of the prison were housed there, and he indeed, a former servant of the Prince de Conti, had slept there for more years than he could count. The pale, reluctant winter dawn was on the courtyard and its shivering trees. It would be a chilly transit to his duties in the Tower.

As he was turning away, blowing on his fingers, he heard unusual sounds in the courtyard, and, after another glance through the window, he went out on to the perron and stood there in some astonishment.

A closed carriage—a berline—had just drawn in under the entrance and was coming to a standstill in the middle of the court. Immediately behind, with a great jangle of bits and trappings, came riding two and two a score or so of hussars. What on earth could this portend, at so early an hour? It must be something official, however, since the guard at the entry had admitted the cortège.

Even as Bernard stood there he heard himself hailed, and saw the sergeant of the guard running towards him and trying to attract his attention. A little behind him rode an officer.

"Holà, Bernard!" called out the sergeant. "You are just the man I want. Take M. le Capitaine Guibert to the Tower at once; he brings orders for the immediate transference of a prisoner. Here, mon Capitaine, is the very gaoler who has the care of those au secret."

The officer dismounted without a word, threw the speaker the reins, and strode up the five steps to where the surprised old man awaited him. He was young, tall and handsome, suitable in every way to the bravery of his sky-blue pelisse heavily barred with silver, the fur-edged dolman of darker blue that hung from one shoulder, and the gaily embroidered sabretache that swung against his leg. But under the high, cord-wreathed shako his face looked impenetrably, almost unnaturally grave.

"If you will come this way, sir," said Bernard a little nervously, and thereafter trotted along in front of him through the palace and the length of its frosty garden, perturbed in spirit, while the officer stalked behind him equally silent. They passed the guardhouse in the wall without comment. At the *greffe* in the Tower itself the hussar, with the same economy of language, presented an order, and said he wished to see the prisoner in question immediately. The *guichetier*, having read it through, raised his eyebrows, pursed his lips and transcribed it carefully in a book. It was an order for the delivery of the person of Gaston de Saint-Chamans, ex-Duc de Trélan, known also as the Marquis de Kersaint.

"M. de Trélan is au secret—I expect you know that, captain," he remarked when he had finished. "I hope there has been no dissatisfaction at the Tuileries? I assure you that every precaution is taken for his safe custody."

The young officer made a gesture that might have meant anything, and prepared to follow his guide.

To mount that dark, winding staircase on a winter's morning required a light. Bernard produced a torch and preceded the officer, whose sabre clanked on the steps as he followed him. Half way up, at one of the wickets, the old man paused, and turned to him. "You are taking away our most distinguished prisoner, Monsieur le Capitaine."

"Yes," replied the hussar. His mouth shut as if he did not intend to say more, and the old man went on again.

One sentry—they were of a corps of veterans—was plainly asleep, on the bench by the door, when they got up. His companion, pacing to and fro, shoved him with his foot, and he stood sleepily to attention as the officer passed. In another moment the nail-studded door stood open, and the young hussar, taking the torch from Bernard and motioning him back, went in, pushing the door to behind him.

The torch he held, conflicting with the daylight from the high window, showed him the man he had come for fast asleep on the little bed in the furthest corner. He went over to him, stood looking down at him a second or two, and then, with what looked like hesitation, put out a hand to wake him. But at that moment, roused by the light, the prisoner stirred.

(2)

Gaston had dreamt much that night, dreams commingled of sweet and sinister. Nearly always the menhirs had been in them, the Allée des Vieilles where Valentine had been miraculously restored to him, but they were strangely mixed with visions of Mirabel, where he and she had parted. He stood once more among the old stones, but she was not there; he was to meet her, he knew, at Mirabel, and the idea was sweet. Yet somehow the dream was sinister. . . .

And now—he was fully awake on the instant, in the fashion of a soldier and a commander. His first thought was—Hyde de Neuville . . . they had put forward the time . . . here was the pseudo-Republican officer he was to expect. He looked up at the hussar for a second or two—and all that fell away from him for ever. A man in peril is swift of

apprehension. This officer was genuine.

"You are an early visitor, sir," he said, raising himself on his elbow. "I may guess, may I not, that you do not come at this hour on any very agreeable errand?"

"General," said the young man, speaking at length for the first time since he had entered the prison, "my errand is hateful. I . . . I am ashamed of the uniform I wear—but as long as I wear it I must obey. . . . Will you read that, Monsieur le Duc?" He held out, not the order he had shown to the *guichetier*, but another, and brought the torch a little nearer.

Gaston took the paper, and, still leaning on one elbow, studied it, and the vehement "Bonaparte" at the bottom, with the marks of the splutter of the pen. His eyebrows went up a trifle, but no other change came over his face.

"A little sudden," he observed. "But after all . . . What time do you wish me to be ready?"

"At seven o'clock, General. It is now ten minutes after six."

The Duc de Trélan returned the warrant. "The First Consul is somewhat given to sudden impulses," he remarked. "As he grows older he will find that they are generally to be regretted. But I think that, after all, I misjudge him; for this was intended from the first. I have about fifty minutes then. Would you be so good, Monsieur, as to see if they could find me a priest while I am dressing; there may be one in captivity in the Temple.—No, do not give yourself the trouble; if old Bernard is there I will ask him myself. And you, Monsieur le Capitaine—shall I see you again?"

"I command the escort," replied the young hussar, looking away.

"I will be ready for you then, in . . . forty-seven minutes," said the Duc, his eyes on the watch he had drawn from beneath his pillow. "Perhaps you will be good enough to leave me your torch for the moment. The oil was finished in my lamp last night, and the illumination here is not very good, as you can see."

The young officer looked round, saw a ring designed for that purpose on the wall, thrust the torch into it, drew himself up, made the captive a magnificent salute, and strode to the door.

Next moment the old gaoler looked in, mildly curious.

"Monsieur Bernard," said the Duc, who was now sitting on the edge of the bed, "I have a particular favour to ask you. Can you contrive to heat me some shaving water within a quarter of an hour or so? I wish to be presentable this morning."

"But certainly, only—Monsieur le Duc, what is it, so early? You are being transferred, I gathered?"

"Yes, Bernard—if you like to put it so. And besides the shaving water—and a better light to use it by—is there by chance a priest among the prisoners here, think you?"

"A priest!" exclaimed the old man, taken aback. "A priest . . . I don't know—I don't think so. But why do you want a . . . O Monseigneur!—it's not *that*!"

"It is indeed," said Gaston with a little smile. "Not altogether unexpected, my good Bernard.—Well, do your best to get me a priest. I have not much time; only about three-quarters of an hour."

No, he had not much time. And perhaps it was best. He could not possibly say good-bye to Valentine now. Yesterday had been their farewell after all. Did this hurried execution mean that the First Consul had got wind of to-night's rescue?

He dressed swiftly, but with attention to details, shaved with care when old Bernard, almost weeping, brought him the water and the tidings that no priest could so far be found; and, with only twenty-five minutes left, sat down to write his last letter to Valentine.

He had no little to say, but he wrote steadily and without difficulty, pausing only once or twice. When he had finished he took out from a pocket-case in his breast a little square of folded paper, somewhat worn, wrote on it three words and slipped it inside his letter. Then he folded, addressed and sealed the whole, kissed his wife's name upon the superscription, and put it in the case. There was already another letter there.

And now, since he had taken from its place over his heart the amulet he always wore there, to give it back to the hand whence he had it, for the short time that heart had to beat it should beat against the symbol that was rather of loyalty than of love—but which love had nevertheless fashioned and given him. He took from the back of the chair the scarf he had so treasured, and put the end with the golden fleur-de-lys to his lips. For a moment, at the touch of what her fingers had wrought, a wave of anguish engulfed him. He gripped his hands hard behind his head, as it fell forward on the folds of the scarf across the table. O, not to have to leave her . . . even to see her once more, only once!

It was short, that agony. Gaston de Trélan had faced it many times these last few days. He rose, fastening the scarf across his breast instead of as usual round his waist. Her arms would be about him thus, to the end. Only four minutes more. No priest had come. So he knelt down by the table, and tried to collect his thoughts.

The door opened slowly. Gaston stood up; the young hussar, much the paler of the two, came in.

"I am ready," said the Duc. "But before we go I have a favour to ask of you. This case, Monsieur, contains a letter to my wife, with another to the same address. Could it be given to her? She is to be found at Mme Tessier's in the Rue de Seine."

"I give you my word that she shall have it," said the officer. "I will take it myself—if I cannot find a better

messenger.”

“Thank you, Monsieur,” said Gaston, replacing the case inside his uniform. “If it will not inconvenience you, however, I will keep the letter on me till the last possible moment, and give it to you—later on. And I have a fancy not to be parted from my Cross of Maria Theresa before I need; therefore, if it would not be putting you to too much trouble, I would ask you to take it off when the business is over. This scarf I should wish to be buried with. I am still, you know, Monsieur le Capitaine,” he threw back his head a little, “the General commanding for His Majesty King Louis XVIII. in Finistère, a position that is not cancelled by my capture under a safe-conduct.—I beg your pardon, for you neither had part in, nor approve of that,” he added, seeing the young man wince. “The scarf, then, I should desire to remain on me, the order to go to the Duchesse if you would be so good.”

“She shall have it . . . if you think that a Republican’s word is ever to be trusted again.”

“I think that I can trust yours,” retorted Gaston, holding out his hand.

“Monsieur le Duc . . .” stammered the young hussar, hesitating.

The keen eyes smiled at him. “My boy, do you think I don’t understand? Come, we have a journey to make in company. And your hands are clean—as I hope mine are.”

So, with a flush, Captain Guibert gripped his prisoner’s fingers for a second. And then old Bernard’s voice broke in on them. “Monseigneur,” it said at Gaston’s elbow, “you are fasting, and it is so cold outside! Will you not?” And he held out on a little tray a cup of coffee. But his hands shook so that the cup was clattering on its saucer.

“Monsieur Bernard, you are my good angel,” said Gaston gaily, as he took it from him. “I hope M. le Capitaine was as fortunate before he set out—so much earlier, too, than I am to do.”

He drank down the hot coffee and set the empty cup on the table in significant proximity to his purse, which he had already placed there for the old gaoler. But Bernard, sniffing, shuffled out before he could take farewell of him.

“Poor Bernard is too tenderhearted for his post,” observed his prisoner. “The sooner he is quit of us the better.—I follow you, Monsieur.”

(3)

A guard of dismounted hussars was awaiting them at the foot of the Tower.

“I have a carriage for you, Monsieur le Duc,” explained Captain Guibert half apologetically, as, on a sign from him, his men fell in behind him and his prisoner, “but it is in the courtyard of the Palace, for as you know, it is impossible for a vehicle to be brought any nearer.”

“But why should I wish for better treatment than my King?” asked the Duc de Trélan. “He had to walk from the Tower.”

Once through the great wall of isolation—at last—they went side by side in silence, the armed guard behind, across the garden to the Palace. Gaston was thinking that if, on their way to the Plaine de Grenelle—the usual spot for such events—they crossed the river by the Pont Neuf, as was most likely, they could hardly avoid passing one end or other of the Rue de Seine, where Valentine lay asleep, or wakeful. He wondered whether she would somehow be aware . . . and whether he could entirely keep his composure as they went so near. . . .

When they came, through the building, in sight of the courtyard, the carriage was drawn up at the foot of the steps. Grouped round it, the remaining hussars sat their horses motionless, holding those of their dismounted comrades, but the frost in the air made the animals impatient, and one perpetual jingle shook from their tossing heads, while their breaths, and the men’s, too, went up like smoke.

Gaston looked back over his shoulder for an instant. Above the low façade of the Palace, to the left of the Tower behind, the sun was now visible, huge and red. It would be a fine day, probably—but one would not know. . . . The dismounted men were already resuming their saddles; a horse was pawing the ground as if eager to be off.

“Lieutenant Soyer,” said the captain, “take the head of the escort!” He turned to his prisoner. “Monsieur de Trélan, pardon me, but someone must drive in the carriage with you. I am very sorry . . . but if you will permit me, I will do so myself, instead of my lieutenant.”

He reminded Gaston of his own three ‘jeunes.’ In such circumstances he would not have wished Roland to carry himself otherwise.

“I should desire your company, Monsieur le Capitaine,” he replied courteously, and put his foot on the step of the high-slung berline. “We journey to the Plaine de Grenelle, I suppose?”

The young man dropped his eyes and reddened. “No,” he said, in a low, ashamed voice, “the orders are . . . *Mirabel*.”

For the first time since he had learnt that he was to die that morning, Gaston de Trélan showed emotion before a witness. He flushed too, but it was with anger.

“The First Consul’s idea of the dramatic, I suppose! One sees his origin.” He bit his lip and recovered himself. “I have the right, I think, to consider it somewhat misplaced. However, the setting of the last scene is really of small importance to me.”

He got into the carriage, and the captain of hussars silently followed him in, and sat down opposite him, his sabre across his knees. In a few seconds the carriage was rolling noisily over the cobblestones of the archway into the street. But they would not pass near Valentine now; they would soon be going further away every moment . . . for ever.

They had traversed Paris, and were in the Avenue de Neuilly, when the young officer said abruptly,

"Monsieur le Duc, if when we are past Neuilly, I were to get out, to halt the escort, make some diversion, and call off the men on either side if you could slip out . . ."

Gaston shook his head, smiling, despite himself, at the wild idea. "My dear boy—apart from a personal preference for not being shot in the back—do you suppose that I would accept your young life for mine?"

"My life! But my career was my life—and I am going to resign my commission before this day is over! I cannot serve any more a soldier who violates a safe-conduct. And I thought him . . . I was with him in Italy—at Acre—at Aboukir . . ." He put his forehead down on the hands that rested over each other on the hilt of his sabre, upright between his knees.

Gaston's face softened as he looked at him. It was as he thought. He would not have died in vain.

He leant back with folded arms. The rumble of the wheels, the trot of the horses on either hand, the figures of their riders as they rose and fell close to the carriage windows, held a rhythm that was almost soothing. And now that the shock of indignation and disgust was over, what better place at which to die than Mirabel, which had re-united him and Valentine? It was his dream come true; he was not going away from her; she was—was she not?—waiting for him there.

Only just this side of death had they plucked the flower of flowers; but they *had* plucked it. And the life whose uselessness had hurt her so, at the end he had contrived to do something with it after all. By refusing to ransom it, as he might conceivably have done, he was flinging it down, not as a forfeit, but as a challenge, against the walls that had been his and Valentine's. In having him shot in defiance of the strictest article of military honour, Bonaparte plainly designed to make of the Duc de Trélan's death a terrible example—in decreeing that the sentence should be carried out, against all the dictates of decent feeling, in front of his own confiscated house, to make that death a kind of show as well. But the more publicity given to so callous and unscrupulous an action, the longer it was likely to be remembered—against its author; and the impression might not be what Bonaparte designed. The hope of such a result was partly what Gaston de Trélan was laying down his life for. Already, as he knew, there was no small clamour and protest in Paris over his probable fate, so that the added affront of this morning did but make dying, after all, the more worth while.

The short miles had slipped past. Here already, by the slackening pace, was the turn off the Saint-Germain road. Nearly ten years. . . . The carriage, swaying a little, swung round at right angles into the way lined with gaunt poplars, where the frozen puddles crackled under hoofs and wheels—the last stage but one of the journey that was bearing him away from all he loved. No! "Death could never take you from me!" *Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam venturi saeculi*. Crossing himself, he began silently to recite his act of contrition.

And in a few moments more, the faint winter sun glinting on its majolica, came Mirabel—Mirabel with the barrier removed, and some hundreds of troops drawn up in front of it on the frostbound gravel.

The officer of hussars, raising his head, saw his companion holding out to him, with a little smile, the lettercase he had drawn from his breast.

"I am glad, after all," said the last Duc de Trélan quietly, "that it should be *here*."

CHAPTER XII

FOR SOME THE WORLD IS EMPTY

(1)

It was Hyde de Neuville, half beside himself with grief and fury, who brought the Comte de Brencourt the news, which at ten o'clock the young conspirator had only just heard, and which he could hardly believe. Yet there was no doubt about its truth. And someone must break it to the Duchesse.

But not, surely, the stunned and horrified man to whom this announcement had just been made. He stood frozen, in his room at the little *hôtel garni*, repeating with a stammering tongue, "Dead!—dead! shot this morning! . . . there is some mistake . . ."

"I wish there were!" cried Hyde de Neuville passionately. "I wish to God there were! I wish we had tried for last night—why were we such fools as to delay? I do not yet know whether this morning's work was prompted by design, or just by evil chance. And the Duchesse——"

"Don't suggest that I shall tell her!" cried the Comte wildly. "De Neuville, for pity's sake——"

"But I must not lose a moment in going to Bertin and the others," said the young man. "We may all find ourselves in prison before nightfall—and to no purpose. Besides, I am a stranger to her; you an old acquaintance—the Duc's late chief of staff. You are the man, Comte. Tell her the whole plan has failed—tell her her husband is suddenly taken ill—tell her anything to soften the blow!" And he was gone.

The Comte sank down and buried his head in his arms. "I told her that he was dead, once. Now it is true—now it is true!"

He could not do it. He must find someone else. Roland—he would break the news best, if he could get hold of him. O God, to think he had once wished this, had lied for it, had tried to bring it about with his own hand! And—shot at Mirabel! The idea was profoundly shocking to him even in the midst of the shock of the execution itself. He seemed to recall a hateful precedent for it, for he remembered the young Prince de Talmont, captured in the Vendean war and shot in front of the castle of Laval, which had belonged to his family for nine centuries.

What was the time? Suppose Mme de Trélan were to go to the Temple this morning! "The Duc is gone, Madame la Duchesse; he has driven out to his château of Mirabel. Will Madame follow?" Why did he see the Temple as it had once been, a princely residence, and why did he imagine that dialogue? He must be going mad. She would not go there to-day; the order was for yesterday. Yesterday she had seen him; and did not know she should see him no more in life.

Or stay, suppose Valentine had taken a fancy to visit Mirabel this morning with Roland. It was most unlikely that she would do such a thing; yet his distracted mind showed him the Duchesse and Roland arriving there and finding God knew what—soldiers, a crowd, and in front of the great façade——

M. de Brencourt sprang up. That wholly baseless picture decided him. He could not let her run that dreadful risk. Oblivious of the fact that, long before she got to Mirabel, if ever she went, she must meet the tidings of what had taken place there, he crammed on his hat, and without a redingote, despite the cold, rushed out in the direction of the Rue de Seine.

"No, M. de Céligny has gone out," replied Suzon's servant. "Mme de Trélan is within."

His last hope was vanished then. He never thought of Mme Tessier. There was no help for it. Far rather would he have been in the dead man's place at Mirabel.

He was only just in time, apparently, for the first thing that he saw on being ushered into Mme Tessier's parlour was Valentine's hat and gloves on the table. And she, standing by the hearth, had her cloak on already—a grey cloak with grey fur at the throat, in which he would always see her now to the end of the world. He contrived, he knew not how, to get across the room and to kiss her hand before she noticed anything unusual.

"I am glad I had not gone out, Monsieur de Brencourt," she said in an ordinary tone, such as she had managed to preserve nearly all the time in these days of strain. "I was only waiting for Roland to return."

And then she saw his face and said, quite quietly, "I am afraid you bring some bad news."

"It is not good." His voice—he heard it himself—was the voice of a stranger.

"The plan has miscarried somehow, Comte—you have come to tell me that?"

He bent his head. "Yes. Yes, Madame. I . . . came to tell you that."

A pause. Slowly, slowly the colour faded in the face over the grey fur collar that he would see to the end of the world.

"It will not be carried out to-night, then?"

("*Nor any other night.*") No, he lacked courage to say that yet.

"No, Madame. It . . . it . . . it has proved impossible."

"This cloak is too hot," said Valentine de Trélan suddenly. She unfastened the collar. "Perhaps I will not go out after

all.” She made as if she were going to throw it off, then sat down instead in the armchair by the fire. “But time is precious, Monsieur de Brencourt,” she said, looking at him fixedly—he could feel that, though he could not meet her eyes.

“No,” he said, trembling, and very low, “time is of no value now.”

But either she had not heard, or she did not understand. He could see that; so he tried again, and got out more. “Madame, I must tell you that the time for this plan is past for ever.”

He felt the impact of these words on her mind, yet he felt also that she was gathering herself up in spirit either to resist their meaning or to infuse fresh will into him. He saw her hands clench themselves a little as she said,

“If that has failed, then, you will make another, a better plan, will you not?”

O, why would she not understand! He raised his eyes at last in agony from her clenched hands to her face. “Valentine . . .” he said, and, had her life depended on it, could get out no other word. His throat had closed up. He turned away and hid his face.

The fire crackled like a burning house; outside in the street a boy was whistling like a fife . . . and yet it was so still.

At last her voice came, and it sounded sick with horror. “Monsieur de Brencourt, what—*what*, in God’s name, are you trying to tell me?”

“Not to go to the Temple to-day—not to go——”

“They have taken him away?” she interrupted sharply, her hands on the arms of the chair. “Transferred him to another prison?”

At last he turned and faced her, at last he got it out in its entirety. “Yes, he is gone—but not to another prison. He is gone where I wish I were gone too, before I had to tell you. It is all over, Valentine, all over . . .”

She fell back in her chair. If only he might kneel and kiss her feet, try—though he knew he could not—to comfort her. But the memory of this scene’s parody, played out falsely before, lay like a bitter flood between him and her. This time it was true, his news.

Steps outside, thank God! Roland, perhaps, or Mme Tessier, whom he had forgotten. He hurried to the door, caught at the passerby—Suzon.

“Go in to the Duchesse at once,” he said. “I have had to bring her terrible news—I can bear no more. The Duc was shot at Mirabel this morning. Go in, I say!” He pushed her in.

(2)

On the very threshold, as he opened the door into the street to escape, M. de Brencourt all but ran into an officer of hussars. The officer was young, handsome, rigid, set about the mouth.

“Does Mme de Trélan lodge here?” he asked with a foot on the doorstep.

“Yes,” replied the Comte. “Excuse me, Monsieur——”

The officer barred the way. “Pardon me a moment. I must see her.”

“You cannot,” retored de Brencourt, stopped despite himself. “She cannot see anyone.”

“She knows then!” said the young man, and there was relief in his tone.

And instantly, looking at the expression on his visage, the Comte understood.

“I have just told her,” he said.

“Thank God for that,” returned the hussar. “But I have a message to deliver—and I pray you, Monsieur, to give it to her, as you have . . . done the other thing. I come straight from Mirabel.”

“Monsieur,” replied the Comte hoarsely. “Once it was prophesied to me that I should do this lady a service. I did not know what it would be—now, I think I do . . . I have just rendered it, and not for the hope of heaven would I go through the like again. You must give the message yourself, if it was from . . . *him*.”

“There is no verbal message from . . . the late Duc de Trélan,” answered the young hussar, and as he paused at the name and its qualification he suddenly brought his heels together and saluted. And the Comte, for all his pre-occupation with his own feelings, saw that his mouth was twitching. “There is no verbal message,” he repeated, “but I have two letters, and the Duc’s decoration. I am charged, however, to say, that Mme de Trélan is at liberty to go to Mirabel when and how she will, that her privacy will be respected in every way, and that if she wishes the body to be buried in the chapel there——”

“Is this the First Consul’s magnanimity!” flared out the Comte. And, thinking he heard a sound behind him in the house, and suddenly becoming conscious, too, that all this was taking place on the doorstep, he seized hold of the young officer’s hanging dolman. “Bring that cursed uniform of yours inside!” he muttered, and, opening the door of a little room close by, pushed the glittering and jingling form inside.

Once sheltered by a closed door the young Republican turned on him almost savagely. “Do you think that you are the only man heartbroken over this horrible business?” he demanded. “Do you realise that I have had to help carry it out—that it was I, at least, who commanded the escort, that it was I who had to rouse M. de Trélan early this morning with the news, had to drive with him from Paris to Mirabel, had to sit my horse like a statue with my sword drawn, as

though I approved, while it was done—I who have been one of Bonaparte's aides-de-camp in Egypt and Syria, and have worshipped his very stirrup leather . . . and am going to throw up my commission the moment I leave this house!"

There was no doubt of his emotion now; two tears were running down his face. He could not have been more than five and twenty. He raised a gauntleted hand and brushed them away.

"Why, then, did you——" began M. de Brencourt in a suddenly weary voice.

"Because if I had not commanded the escort someone else would have done so. When I found I was detailed for that duty, I thought I could at least ensure that M. de Trélan had due respect shown him—and that I could, perhaps, let him know before he died that there was, at any rate, one soldier of the Republic who was ashamed of the deed. As I intended to resign my commission immediately afterwards there was nothing improper in that . . . and if I went farther than I should perhaps have done when, on the way to Mirabel, I offered to connive at his escape—well, the Duc refused." He paused, drew a long breath, and said, "Afterwards I had my men carry him into Mirabel, into the great hall there. We unbarred the big door for it. I had the candlesticks fetched from the chapel also; strangely enough, there were funeral candles already in them. If Mme de Trélan goes, therefore, there is nothing she cannot look upon; I have seen to that. His face is quite uninjured—I would not even have it covered."

The Comte held out his hand to him. "If I could bring myself really to believe that he is dead," he said painfully, "I would thank you in her name. But I cannot believe it—even after telling her so."

"Oh, God knows it's true enough," responded the young hussar, passing his hand for a moment over his eyes.

"Where was it carried out—this iniquity?" demanded M. de Brencourt abruptly.

"In front of one of the central towers, below which the concierge used to live. It was the Duc's own choice, when he was asked if he had any preference; I do not know the reason for it."

M. de Brencourt did. He turned away.

And, even as he turned, the door of the little room opened, and in came, not Roland, as he expected—but the Abbé Chassin.

"You!" exclaimed the Comte, staring at him in astonishment. They had not met since the memorable day in the thicket by the road; moreover he thought the Abbé still in England.

Travelstained, his eyes red-rimmed for lack of sleep, his round face drawn and shadowed, the little priest looked not only twenty years older, but as if the heart had gone out of him for ever.

"I have journeyed day and night since I heard he was taken," he said in a dulled voice. "I know now that I am too late. My God, my God!"

"How did you learn it? Have you seen Mme de Trélan?"

"Not yet. Mme Tessier is with her. I heard it in the streets."

The Comte looked at him and was moved with compassion. "I am sorry for that," he said, gently for him, and put his hand for a second on the dusty shoulder. Then he bent and added in a low voice, "We should have saved him this very evening if it had not been for this."

The young officer, who had been standing since the Abbé's entrance gazing at some objects which he had laid on the table, here raised his head and addressed the newcomer. "Then perhaps you, Monsieur, would give Mme la Duchesse the message I bear—and give her these, too. I was trying to persuade this gentleman to do it. It is not over fitting for me."

"You were . . .?" asked M. Chassin, his face working a little.

"Monsieur commanded the escort," replied the Comte for him, "and has done everything that he could do, then and since. He bears a message from the . . . the authorities that the Duchesse is free to go to Mirabel when she pleases, and to do what she wishes about burial. . . . You tell her, Abbé. We have both had as much as we can bear!"

"And you think I can bear anything?" asked M. Chassin in a half-choked voice, "I, who shall never see him alive now!"

The young hussar had noted the Comte's method of address. "You are a priest, sir?" he enquired. "Then perhaps this letter, directed to the Abbé Chassin, is for you?"

Pierre was beside him in a moment, and saw what was on the table. "O Gaston, my brother!" he exclaimed brokenly, and knelt down there, covering his face.

"*Brother!*" ejaculated the Comte under his breath. Then he understood. It explained many things.

"This order that he wore is not hurt," murmured the young hussar almost to himself, "although——" He did not finish, but lifted a fold of the handkerchief, and revealed the cross of white and gold with its red heart. "M. de Trélan particularly wished the Duchesse to have it." He relapsed into silence again, looking down at it, and M. de Brencourt stood looking at it too—save those two letters in the firm hand-writing which he knew so well, all that was left of the leader he had admired, and hated, and schemed against—and tried to save.

"*Absolve, O Lord, the soul of Thy servant*," prayed the Abbé in the silence, "*that though dead to the world he may live to Thee, and whatsoever he hath done amiss in his human conversation, through the weakness of the flesh, do Thou by the pardon of Thy most merciful loving-kindness wipe away*." He rose to his feet, took up the letter addressed

to him, kissed it, and put it in his pocket. “This, I understand,” he said to the hussar, touching the cross, “is for Mme de Trélan, as well as the letter?”

“You will do my commission then, Monsieur l’Abbé?” asked the young man, his face haggard with strain and entreaty. “I thank you from my heart! As for me, I have business of my own now.” And he picked up his shako.

“One moment,” said M. Chassin. “I fancy that when I came in you were telling this gentleman some details about—the end. The Duchesse may some day wish to hear them; and I wish to know now, both as M. le Duc’s foster-brother and a priest.—Did they let him have a priest this morning?”

The young captain sedulously fingered the cords that went round his headgear. “He asked for one, but none could be found in the time.” He hesitated, and then broke out—“If I might tell you the rest another day, Monsieur l’Abbé; I engage to do so. But just now the whole affair is so horrible to me—no, not the actual execution, for any one more nobly and simply composed than M. de Trélan it is impossible to imagine . . . the one man at Mirabel this morning who had no cause for shame. Moreover since there was, mercifully, no bungling, he could scarcely have suffered—shot, as he was, through the heart. I was not the only soldier there who envied him so fine an end before so many witnesses. (There were generals present; Lannes and Murat, and Marmont, too, I think.) But the treachery of it! . . . Gentlemen, your cause has sustained a great loss, but Bonaparte’s honour has sustained a greater!”

“Yes,” said the Comte, “and if M. de Trélan had cared less for that cause for which he died, he might very conceivably have kept his life—but that, I expect, is not generally known. I intend that it shall be.”

“What is that?” exclaimed the Abbé. “He refused a pardon?”

“He refused to ask for one,” returned the Comte, and explained.

“O, my brother, I recognise you there!” said Pierre softly.

“Yet it is not a thing that the Duchesse ought to know,” added M. de Brencourt.

“Not know it!” exclaimed the young hussar. “Why, to die like that is more than fine—it is glorious! It seems a pity that she should be ignorant of it. *I* shall remember . . . Farewell, gentlemen.”

He turned towards the door, and took one step in its direction, but no more. For it was open, and Mme de Trélan herself stood on the threshold. None of them, absorbed, had known it.

M. de Brencourt put his hand over his mouth. God grant she had not heard! She gave no sign of it. Her eyes were on the young Republican.

“You come from . . . Mirabel, I think, sir?”

“Yes, Madame. I have brought you . . . these.” He indicated the letter and the decoration on the table, but made no motion to give them to her, and she did not take them. Yet she looked at them as though she saw nothing else. And the Abbé was kissing her hand before she seemed to realise that he was there, nor did she show any surprise at his presence.

But in a moment or two she lifted her eyes to the young officer again, and from her look it seemed as if, with the strange, exalted sight that comes sometimes with the stroke of a grief that no words can fathom, she saw something now of the tragedy of his soul on his face.

“I thank you, sir, for these,” she said gently. “My husband has a higher honour now, I think.”

The young hussar bent his head till his looped-up tresses of plaited hair fell on his breast. “Yes, Madame.” He bowed profoundly, and went once more towards the door; then, inspired perhaps by that vision of measureless sorrow and courage before him, turned and said, “Madame, I have been present at the death of a hero. I wish mine might be like it!” And—only a young captain of hussars, but the material of which the conqueror’s marshals were made—he saluted and went out, to lay aside, with his broken belief, all his dreams of glory.

When he was gone, M. Chassin took the letter and the cross in its handkerchief, and put them into Valentine’s hands. M. de Brencourt looked out of the window. He did not hear what they said to each other, but he supposed that the priest was giving her the message about Mirabel . . .

It was thawing outside. People were going to and fro as usual. . . . Who would have thought the world would seem so empty?

Valentine’s voice startled him. “Monsieur de Brencourt, would you have the goodness to procure me a carriage? I am going at once to Mirabel.”

He turned round. “Not alone, Madame, surely!” For she stood there alone now.

“No, M. l’Abbé will go with me.—But first, tell me of what you were speaking when I came in. I heard the word *pardon*; was there ever talk of such a thing?”

Rent with compassion, he looked at her and did not answer.

“I heard what that young man said,” she went on with extraordinary steadiness, “that it was a pity I should not know. Tell me, I implore you!”

She knew too much already! Useless to try to keep it from her now, and dreadful to combat her wishes at this moment. And, not yet having seen Roland since yesterday afternoon, the Comte had received no direct prohibition; it was only his own consideration for her which recommended silence. So he told her the truth. She covered her face; and

once again he left her.

“Will you tell Roland, when he comes, to follow us to Mirabel?” said the Abbé to him some half-hour later, before entering the carriage after Mme de Trélan.

M. de Brencourt bowed his head. “And I?” he said in a low voice, “If I might—if I dared think——”

The Duchesse turned hers and answered without hesitation. “Come with Roland—*friend*!”

CHAPTER XIII

TO THE UTTERMOST

The Abbé Chassin, who lived to be a very old man, left among his papers a full record of most of the events connected with the death of the Duc de Trélan, but no word of that short drive with Mme de Trélan from Paris to Mirabel. Presumably he could not write of it.

Yet Valentine was quite calm. She leant back nearly all the way with her eyes closed, an image of marble in her grey cloak. Her hands were clasped in her lap; Pierre thought that she, like himself, was praying, but he was not sure. From him, at intervals, scraps of the *De Profundis* broke aloud, and he did not know it. . . . *Domine exaudi vocem meam . . . Quia apud te propitiatio est . . . speravit anima mea in Domino*. . . . Underneath it all was the thought that their carriage wheels, once Paris was behind them, were on the very track of Gaston's, and that they were passing over again, at so short an interval, his *via dolorosa*. But well he knew that his had been nothing to his wife's, now.

Was not that the final swordstroke, too—that bitter and glorious knowledge which was to have been kept from her? He was sure that Gaston had not meant her to learn it. And yet, after all, perhaps it fell at this hour on a heart already numbed by shock, and she could better bear it to-day than to-morrow. To have known it yesterday, when her husband was still on earth—that would have been intolerable. But she had said so little, seemed set on so high a pinnacle of loss, that he could only look at her, and conjecture, and pray. And in his own heart the sword turned also.

At last they left the road to Saint-Germain. The poplars passed one by one, those poplars under which Mme Vidal had walked last spring to take up her post. Mud splashed from the wheels; the puddles were melted since this morning. The carriage slackened, then, turning, drove through the empty space between the gateposts with their mutilated lions. But Mirabel bore little trace of what had taken place there four or five hours ago, save that the barrier was entirely removed, and the gravel scored by the passage of troops. And there were certain marks on the base of one of the towers; but these were invisible at a distance.

They drew up before the great steps. The priest got out and assisted Mme de Trélan to alight. The heavy door at the top, barred for so many years, stood wide open, and on either side of it was stationed a hussar with drawn sabre. At least then, ran his thought, the butchers have some proper feeling; they do not intend the curious to pass that door . . . unless, perhaps, it were that young captain's doing only. He offered his arm. But Valentine refused it. "I would rather go quite alone," she said gently. "If you would wait here till I summon you . . . or till the others come . . ."

He could not gainsay her. So once more he, too, stood in front of Mirabel, and suddenly realised with intensity the part that Mirabel's treasure—yielded moreover to *his* hands—had played in these two lives. It had made possible Gaston de Trélan's short-lived success in Finistère, and had thereby brought him fame—and death. It had lifted his burden from him, and joined him and Valentine in a union such as they had never known . . . but only to part them. The colonnades wavered for a moment as all this beat upon the priest's brain. Then he thought of nothing else but what was before his eyes—the figure of Mme de Trélan going up those wide, neglected steps.

He did not know, nor did Valentine till she came to them, that across their discoloured marble trailed, in places, another and a deeper discolouration. She had reached the sixth or seventh of the twelve before its meaning penetrated to her consciousness. She stopped, drawing a long breath; then went slowly on again, looking at it. But when she came to the tenth step Pierre Chassin, watching from below, saw her sink on her knees, and thought her strength was failing her. It was not so. Bending forward, as on the ascent of some great altar, the Duchesse de Trélan deliberately stooped and kissed, on the topmost step of all, one of the little splashes, dull now, and dry, which marked her husband's return to his house of Mirabel.

Then she rose, and went also, between the guards, through the open door, and into the Salle Verte.

But here, in the long, pillared room, there were no signs of anything like that ineffaceable witness upon the steps. Only, an island of light in its vastness, a pale island in the winter's day, the tall candlesticks from the chapel, with tapers burning in them, and, on the ground between, straight and still, the sovereign presence there—Gaston. Had there been rivers of blood, disfigurement, horrors, they would not have stopped her for a moment; and, come as she was to the end of the world where the great sea washes in, she saw nothing but beauty and an unimagined splendour.

For a second, indeed, those four spires tipped with flame seemed a strange distance off, and, measured even by steps, the way was long down the great, silent room of gilt and marble, under the gaze of the painted Olympus of the ceiling, which had looked on many scenes, but never on the counterpart of this. Yet, with no remembrance of having traversed it, she was there beside him.

He lay his full length, his head hardly raised on the rolled-up military cloak which pillowed it, and he had for a pall the strip of ancient tapestry from the sallette. The worn fabric covered his body from throat to feet, but over its faded imagery his hands were folded lightly on his breast, the fingertips just crossing each other. His head was turned a very little towards the door by which she had entered, as if expecting her; a faint gleam of gold at his side showed an inch or two of the fringe of his scarf—her scarf—escaping from beneath the shrouding tapestry. He did not now look more

than five-and-forty, and, except that he was mortally pale, he might have been asleep.

Valentine had no consciousness of death in presence of this incarnation of dignity and repose. He had never seemed more alive, or closer to her. Slowly she knelt down by him; slowly, and without a tremor, she kissed him on the mouth. For her there were no more fever-fits of suspense, nor ever would be again.

Then she contemplated him, lying there like a victor. This was his return to the house he had so lightly quitted—a triumphal return, she could feel it no otherwise. He had in death the same air of dominating his surroundings that had been his in life, but with a serenity added which it was hard to believe a violent end had given him. And whence had he that air of absorption in some grave happiness of his own? She knew. She had known this long while—was it an hour? . . . It was written too, perhaps, in this letter. For here, alone with Gaston in this narrow house of light, was the place to read his last message. When she broke the seal of the letter a tiny packet slipped out on to the hands which had put it there. Valentine let it lie; what need for haste?

> "*There is not time*," she read, "*there is not time to ask you to come to me, Valentine, beloved, and perhaps it is best. Indeed I did not intentionally deceive you yesterday when I said that I should be allowed to see you again. The plan has not failed; but it will never be put to the test now, and perhaps that is best too.*
>
> "*I think you know, my dearest, that I look upon the perfidy with which my life is taken from me as an opportunity which I would not forego—though I tried not to put it to you too directly yesterday when the issue was still in doubt. That life itself is little enough to give, God knows, but at least it is more than I should have been able to give had I been killed in Brittany, where all we tried to do by the sword has proved so vain. For to fall like this means immortal shame to the conqueror, and you will see, Valentine, that the blot of the violated safe-conduct and its sequel will not easily or soon be washed from Bonaparte's reputation, whatever lustre the future may add to it; and so I like to think that my death will do more for the cause than my life could ever have done. And if my sword is broken, it is not taken from me. It is not I who have regrets on the score of treachery. I have my chance thereby—and you would surely be the last to stay me. For once, Valentine, you gave me leave to die!*
>
> "*The regret I have . . . O my darling, is there need to name it? Yet you said, that last night at La Vergne, that we should never know any happiness over the sea greater than that which we have had, so briefly but so wonderfully, this autumn. It is true, dearest, true a thousand times. We shall not now grow old together, that is all.*
>
> "*I do not presume to dictate to you what you should do until we meet again. You will know best. The Abbé is aware of my dispositions for your future. They are safely in London; he will tell you of them when he returns. I wish I could have seen him again; I have written him a few lines—poor acknowledgment of what he has been to me. I commend Roland to him, but most of all to you, you being what you are. For him, too, Pierre knows my wishes. And I ask de Brencourt's pardon once more for what I said to him at La Vergne when he tried to warn me. He has taken the best revenge.*
>
> "*But, Valentine, I do not ask your pardon again for all the past, for that would be to doubt you—a thing impossible. To my last breath this morning I shall have you in my heart—and feel you in my arms, perhaps, as on the shore that day in Finistère, when it was you who wished to die because we were so happy. You see, therefore, beloved, how small a thing it is, if one can do it cheerfully—as I do.*
>
> "*I have not much more time. Old Bernard has gone to find a priest, but I do not somehow think he will be successful. If I must depart unshriven you will pray best for me, my heart of hearts, for you know all the worst of me. For I desire to die as I have not always lived, in the Catholic faith, the servant of the King of France, and your most unworthy lover.*"

It was dated that morning at a little before seven o'clock, and signed with his full name, Gaston-Henri-Hippolyte-Gabriel-Eléonor de Saint-Chamans, and with all his titles.

The letter fell from Valentine's hands. No mention here of the pardon he had spurned—no mention, for her sake. Ah, how much better she understood yesterday now. "You tried to keep it from me," she whispered, "but I know your secret, O my knight without stain! I know why you look like that! '*If one can do it cheerfully—as I do.*' If you could do it, surely I can bear the knowledge of it!" And she clasped her hands in acceptance above the piece of flotsam from other years that covered him like a banner, whereon still lingered fragments of warriors and guidons and waves and battlemented towers, and—unnoticed, perhaps, by the reverent and hostile hands that spread it there—a border of the flower which had sprung out of a soil of such past glories, the fleur-de-lys, the symbol for which he had died. For she had very clearly the conviction that she was speaking to him, that she would often speak to him like this, as she might have spoken yesterday, but with all the pain, the conflict of wills, gone from their intercourse—that they would many times talk together thus, and that she would tell him over and over again, "My heart, my hero! you did well . . . well!"

Then she saw the little packet lying where it had fallen, and took it up again. It was no more than a folded square of paper with three words on it; but out of it—pale, brittle, transparent as goldbeater's skin, the stain at their bases more deeply marked—floated the four pressed petals of the yellow poppy she had once given him by the verge of that full sea of joy. As before they fell—fell and scattered . . . but not this time on the sand. Valentine's hand shook suddenly. Her presentiment of that day of rapture had come true; they did typify that love of theirs, so late in blooming, so miraculous in its perfect flower, so soon cut short. Ghosts of their former loveliness, they lay unstirred now on the quiet breast. . . . And there, too, above her, as she knelt by Gaston treacherously slain, there they were once more, wavering in the cold air, pallid in the March daylight—four petals, each on a stem of wax, significant and alive! Was this what the yellow sea-poppy had foreshadowed—the petals of this encircling flower of death, between which he lay so ivory-pale and would not speak to her nor move? . . .

Then he *was* dead; she had not understood. He could not hear. Her head began to turn; a cold, slow terror rose over her soul like a marsh-mist. The air seemed full of flickering petals, flickering flames. As she had stretched out her hands to Gaston that day by the menhirs, so now she stretched them out again, but more blindly, in more desperate need—and met his for the last time. And, cold though they were and motionless, she clasped her own round them, and, stooping, covered them with kisses, for they were still his hands . . . the hands that yesterday, about this time, warm and strong, were holding hers. . . .

When that thought touched her, Valentine's composure shattered to fragments. She could not bear it. It was too much to ask of her, to approve this cruel heroism. After so short a time . . . so short a time! . . . O, if only she might follow Gaston now, if she might only lie here cold beside him, where she was bowed in weeping such as she had never known. . . . No, that was not for her; she saw instead a long road. . . . And even in her anguish she found herself praying almost unconsciously—but not for the accomplishment of that desire. In that difficult prayer she seemed to drift a long way from the Salle Verte . . . even to be, once, on the threshold of a strange region where grief and joy were in some mysterious fashion fused into one awful beauty. And Gaston was there with her. . . .

When she came back she found in her hand the little piece of paper that had enclosed the petals, on which she saw that Gaston had written, written recently, three words, no more. And they were the motto of his house; *Memini et permaneo*—'I remember and I remain . . . to the end.'

They wonderfully steadied her; they seemed the most direct message from those closed, serene and half-smiling lips. And in this border country between the four candle-flames, where her desire was accomplished and her heart broken with its accomplishment, she saw clearly—and would never quite lose the vision—the marvellous and splendid thing that had come to them after those barren years: to both a great love, to her a great sorrow, and to him that noble end which even the foe had envied him—the opportunity, in a shaken time, of proving his fidelity to the uttermost, the supreme honour of choosing death rather than belittle the cause he served.

Yes, all, all that she had longed for him to show himself lay here between the candles; and with it their love, safe for ever. And very gently Valentine de Trélan gathered up from their restingplace the almost bodiless petals of the yellow poppy which were thus given back to her, and held them a moment in the curve of her hand. They seemed to mean, now, even more than they had meant that day, since they had lain on the heart which, in making so great a sacrifice, asked of her a courage as great, a fortitude longer drawn. Yet it was a crown that she would carry—sharp, but royal. She looked at the composed and beautiful head on the soldier's cloak.

"I am *his* wife," she said to herself, "—*his* widow!"

THE END.

REPRODUCED AND PRINTED BY
LOWE & BRYDONE (PRINTERS) LIMITED,
101, PARK ST., CAMDEN TOWN, N.W.1.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES

A few obvious printing errors have been silently corrected. Otherwise, inconsistencies, variations and possible errors in spelling and grammar have been preserved. Please note the following changes:

"though" changed to "through" and
"time" changed to "times", both on p. 97.

[End of *The Yellow Poppy* by D. K. Broster.]