ANGELOT

A·STORY·OF THE·FIRST EMPIRE

PRICE

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ANGELOT

ELEANOR·C·PRICE

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ANGELOT

A Story of the First Empire

By

ELEANOR C. PRICE

Author of
"The Heiress of the Forest"

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"YOU FORGET YOURSELF—YOU ARE MAD," SHE SAID HAUGHTILY.
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ANGELOT

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CHAPTER I

IN THE DEPTHS OF OLD FRANCE

"Drink, Monsieur Angelot," said the farmer.

His wife had brought a bottle of the sparkling white wine of the country, and two tall old treasures of cut glass. The wine slipped out in a merry foam. Angelot lifted his glass with a smile and bow to the mistress.

"The best wine in the country," he said as he set it down.

The hard lines of her face, so dark, so worn with perpetual grief and toil, softened suddenly as she looked at him, and the farmer from his solemn height broke into a laugh.

"Martin's wine," he said. "That was before they took him, the last boy. But it is still rather new, Monsieur Angelot, though you are so amiable. Ah, but it is the last good wine I shall ever have here at La Joubardière. I am growing old—see my white hair—I cannot work or make other men work as the boys did. Our vintage used to be one of the sights of the country—I needn't tell you, for you know—but now the vines don't get half the care and labour they did ten years ago; and they feel it, like children, they feel it. Still, there they remain, and give us what fruit they can—but the real children, Monsieur Angelot, their life-blood runs to waste in far-away lands. It does not enrich France. Ah, the vines of Spain will grow the better for it, perhaps—"

"Hush, hush, master!" muttered the wife, for the old man was not laughing now; his last words were half a sob, and tears ran suddenly down. "I tell you always," she said, "Martin will come back. The good God cannot let our five boys die, one after the other. Madame your mother thinks so too," she said, nodding at Angelot. "I spoke to her very plainly. I said, '*They* cannot be unjust—and surely, to take all the five children of a poor little farmer, and to leave not one, not even the youngest, to do the work of the farm—come, what sort of justice is that!' And she said: 'Listen, maîtresse: the good God will bring your Martin back to you. He cannot be unjust, as you say. If my Angelot had to go to the war—and I always fear it—I should expect him back as surely as I expect my husband back from Lancilly at this moment.'"

Angelot smiled at her. "Yes, yes, Martin will come back," he said. But he shrugged his shoulders, for he could not himself see much comfort for these poor people in his mother's argument. If you have lost four, it is surely more logical to expect to lose a fifth. His father, a philosopher, would not have said so much as this to the Joubards, but would have gone on another tack altogether. He would have pointed out to them that the glory of France depended on their sons; that this conscription, which seemed to them so cruel, which now, in 1811, was becoming really oppressive, was the means of making France, under her brilliant leader, the most powerful and magnificent nation in the world. He would have waved the tricolour before those sad eyes, would have counted over lists of victories; and so catching was his enthusiasm that Joubard's back would have straightened under it, and he would have gone home—it happened more than once—feeling like a hero and the father of heroes. But the old fellow's sudden flame of faith in his landlord and Napoleon was not so lasting as his wife's faith in Madame and the justice of God.

Angelot wished the maîtresse good-day, left a brace of birds on the table, and stepped out from the grimy darkness of the farm kitchen into the dazzling sunshine of that September morning. The old white farm, with crumbling walls about it, remnants of attempts at fortification long ago, looked fairly prosperous in its untidiness. The fresh stacks of corn were golden still; poultry made a great clatter, a flock of geese on their way out charging at the two men as they left the house. An old peasant was hammering at barrels, in preparation for the vintage; a wild girl with a stick and a savage-looking brindled dog was starting off to fetch the cows in from their morning graze.

All the place was bathed in crystal air and golden light, fresh and life-giving. It stood high on the edge of the moors, the ground falling away to the south and east into a wild yet fertile valley; vineyards, cornfields not long reaped, small woods, deep and narrow lanes, then tall hedges studded with trees, green rich meadows by the streams far below. On the slope, a mile or two away, there was a church spire with a few grey roofs near it, and the larger roofs, half-hidden by trees, of the old manor of La Marinière, Angelot's home. On the opposite slope of the valley, rising from the stream, another spire, another and larger village; and above it, commanding the whole country side, with great towers and shining roofs, solid lengths of wall gleaming in newly restored whiteness, lines of windows still gold in the morning sun, stood the old château of Lancilly, backed by the dark screen of forest that came up close about it and in old days had surrounded it altogether. Twenty years of emptiness; twenty years, first of

revolution and emigration, then of efforts to restore an old family, which the powerful aid of a faithful cousin and friend had made successful; and now the Comte de Sainfoy and his family were at last able to live again at Lancilly in their old position, though there was much yet to be done by way of restoration and buying back lost bits of property. But all this could not be in better hands than those of Urbain de la Marinière, the cousin, the friend, somewhat despised among the old splendours of a former régime, and thought the less of because of the opinions which kept him safe and sound on French soil all through the Revolution, enabling him both to save Lancilly for its rightful owners, and to keep a place in the old and loved country for his own elder brother Joseph, a far more consistent Royalist than Hervé de Sainfoy with all his grand traditions. For the favour of the Emperor had been made one great step to the restoration of these noble emigrants. Therefore in this small square of Angevin earth there were great divisions of opinion: but Monsieur Urbain, the unprejudiced, the lover of both liberty and of glory, and of poetry and philosophy beyond either, who had passed on with France herself from the Committee of Public Safety to the Directory, and then into the arms of First Consul and Emperor—Monsieur Urbain, the cousin, the brother, whose wife was an ardent Royalist and devout Catholic, whose young son was the favourite companion of his uncle Joseph, a more than suspected Chouan—Monsieur Urbain, Angelot's father, was everybody's friend, everybody's protector, everybody's adviser, and the one peacemaker among them all. And naturally, in such a case, Monsieur Urbain's hardest task was the management of his own wife—but of this more hereafter.

"Your father's work, Monsieur Angelot," said old Joubard, pointing across the valley to Lancilly, there in the blaze of the sun.

Angelot lifted his sleepy eyelids, his long lashes like a girl's, and the glance that shot from beneath them was half careless, half uneasy.

"We have done without them pretty well for twenty years," the farmer went on, "but I suppose we must be glad to see them back. Is it true that they are coming to-day?"

"I believe so."

"Your uncle Joseph won't be glad to see them. The Emperor's people: they may disturb certain quiet little games at Les Chouettes."

"That is my uncle's affair, Maître Joubard."

"I know. Well, a still tongue is best for me. Monsieur Urbain is a good landlord—and I've paid for my place in the Empire, *dame*, yes, five times over. Yet, if I could choose my flag at this time of day, I should not care for a variety of colours. Mind you, your father is a wise man and knows best, I dare say. I am only a poor peasant. But taking men and their opinions all round, Monsieur Angelot, and though some who think themselves wise call him a fool,—with respect I say it,—your dear little uncle is the man for me. Yes—I would back Monsieur Joseph against all his brother's wisdom and his cousin's fine airs, and I am sorry these Sainfoy people are coming back to trouble him and to spoil his pretty little plots, which do no harm to any one."

Angelot laughed outright. "My uncle would not care to hear that," he said.

"Nevertheless, you may tell him old Joubard said it. And what's more, monsieur, your father thinks the same, or he would not let you live half your life at Les Chouettes."

"He has other things to think of."

"Ah, I know—and Madame your mother to reckon with."

"You are too clever," said Angelot, laughing again. "Well, I must go, for my uncle is expecting me to breakfast."

"Ah! and he has other guests. I saw them riding over from the south, half an hour ago."

"You have a watch-tower here. You command the country."

"And my sight is a hawk's sight," said the old man. "Good-day, dear boy. Give my duty to Monsieur Joseph."

Angelot started lightly on his way over the rough moorland road. The high ridge of tableland extended far to the north; the *landes*, purple and gold with the low heather and furze which covered them, unsheltered by any tree, except where crossed in even lines by pollard oaks of immense age, their great round heads so thick with leaves that a man might well hide in them. These *truisses*, cut every few years, were the peasants' store of firewood. Their long processions gave a curious look of human life to the lonely moor, only inhabited by game, of which Angelot saw plenty. But he did not shoot, his game-bag being already stuffed with birds, but marched along with gun on shoulder and dog at heel over the yellow sandy track, loudly whistling a country tune. There was not a lighter

heart than Angelot's in all his native province, nor a handsomer face. He only wanted height to be a splendid fellow. His daring mouth and chin seemed to contradict the lazy softness of his dark eyes. With a clear, brown skin and straight figure, and dressed in brown linen and heavy shooting boots, he was the picture of a healthy sportsman.

A walk of a mile or two across the *landes* brought him into a green lane with tall wild hedges, full of enormous blackberries, behind which were the vineyards, rather weedy as to soil, but loaded with the small black and white grapes which made the good pure wine of the country.

Angelot turned in and looked at the grapes and ate a few; this was one of his father's vineyards. The yellow grapes tasted of sunshine and the south. Angelot went on eating them all the way down the lane; he was thirsty, in spite of Joubard's sparkling wine, after tramping with dog and gun since six o'clock in the morning. The green lane led to another, very steep, rough, and stony. Corners of red and white rock stood out in it; such a surface would have jolted a strong cart to pieces, but Les Chouettes had no better approach on this side.

"I want no fine ladies to visit me," Monsieur Joseph would say, with his sweet smile. "My friends will travel over any road."

Down plunged the lane, with a thick low wood on one side and a sloping stubble field edged by woods on the other; here again stood a row of old pollard oaks, like giant guards of the solitude. Then the deep barking of many dogs, Monsieur Joseph's real protectors, and a group of Spanish chestnuts sending their branches over the road, announced the strange hermitage that its master called by the fanciful name of Les Chouettes. There had indeed been a time, not long before, when owls had been its chief inhabitants. Now, if report was to be believed, night-birds of a different species were apt to congregate there.

The lane opened suddenly on Monsieur Joseph's out-buildings, with no gates or barriers, things unknown in Anjou. Tall oaks and birches, delicate and grey, leaned across the cream-coloured walls and the high grey stone roofs where orange moss grew thickly. Low arched doorways with a sandy court between them led into the kitchen on one side, the stables on the other. Beyond these again, in the broad still sunshine, standing squarely alone in a broad space of yellow sand, was Monsieur Joseph's house, not very old, for the kitchens and stables had belonged to a little château long since pulled down. It also was built of cream-coloured stone, with a little tower to the west of it, with playful

ironwork and high mansard windows. An odd feature was that it had no actual door. All the lower windows opened down to the ground, with nothing but a stone step between them and the sandy soil, so that the house could be entered or left at any point, through any room.

Two rough roads or country tracks, continuing the lane, passed the house to the north and south, the northern road wandering away westward under a wild avenue of old oaks on the edge of a wood into high fields beyond, the southern crossing broad green slopes that descended gradually into the valley towards Lancilly, past low copses and brimming streams, leaving to the east the high moors and La Marinière with its small village and spire.

Thus Les Chouettes had a view of its own to the west and south, but could be seen far off from the south only; woods covering the upper slope against the sunset. Woods and high land sheltered it again from the north and east, and the only roads near it were little better than cart-tracks.

There were long hours at Les Chouettes when no sound was to be heard but the hooting of owls or screaming of curlews or the odd little squeak of the squirrels as they darted up and down and about the oak trees.

"He mews like a cat, the little *fouquet,*" Monsieur Joseph used to say; and passionate sportsman as he was, he would never shoot the squirrels or allow them to be shot by his man, who lamented loudly. Angelot had caught his uncle's liking for that swift red spirit of the woods, and so the squirrels had a fine time all over the lands of La Marinière.

Evidently there was a good deal going on at Les Chouettes, when Angelot came down from the moors that morning. He was not surprised, after old Joubard's report, to see his uncle's outdoor factotum, a bullet-headed creature with scarcely anything on but his shirt, leading the last of several horses into the shadowy depths of the stable. Opposite, the cook looked out smiling from the kitchen, where she lived with her solemn husband, the valet-de-chambre. He, in apron and sabots, was now in the act of carrying the first dishes across to the dining-room window.

"Just in time, Monsieur Angelot!" cried the cook.

Four large black dogs came barking and leaping to meet the young man and his dog, an intimate friend of theirs. Then a small slender figure, with a cropped head and a clinging dark blue frock, flashed across from the wood, ordered the

dogs back in a voice that they obeyed, and clinging to Angelot's arm, led him on towards the corner of the house.

"Ah, my Ange! I began to think you were not coming," she said. "There are four of them in the salon with papa, and I was afraid to go in till you came."

"What! Mademoiselle Riette afraid of anything on earth—and especially of four old gentlemen!"

"They are not very old, and they look so fierce and secret this morning. But come, come, you must put down your game-bag and wash your hands, and then we will go in together."

CHAPTER II

HOW THE OWLS HOOTED IN THE DAYTIME

The sun poured into the little salon, all polished wood and gay-coloured chintz, where Monsieur Joseph de la Marinière and his four friends were talking at the top of their voices.

The four guests sat in more or less tired attitudes round the room; the host stood poised on the hearth-rug, a dark, dandy little gentleman with a brilliant smile. He had a way of balancing himself on one foot and slightly extending both arms, as if he were going to fly off into space. This, and his gentle, attractive manner, sometimes touched with melancholy, gave him a sort of angelic, spiritual air. It was difficult to imagine him either a soldier or a conspirator, yet he had been one and was still the other. More than once, only a politic indulgence not often extended by Napoleon's administrators, and the distinguished merits of his younger brother, had saved Monsieur Joseph from sharing the fate of some of his friends at Joux, Ham, or Vincennes.

These fortress prisons held even now many men of good family whom only the Restoration was to set free. They, as well as plenty of inferior prisoners, owed their captivity in most cases to a secret meeting betrayed, a store of arms discovered, a discontented letter opened, or even to an expression of opinion, such as that France had been better off under the Bourbons. Napoleon kept France down with an iron hand, while the young men and lads in hundreds of thousands shed their blood for him, the women wept, and the old men sometimes raged: but yet France as a whole submitted. The memory of the Terror made this milder tyranny bearable. And genius commands, as long as it is victorious, and till this year of the Spanish war, there had been no check to Napoleon. He had not yet set out to extinguish the flame of his glory in Russian snows.

The police all over France obeyed his orders only too well—"*Surveillez tout le monde, excepté moi!*" To a great degree it was necessary, for French society, high and low, was honeycombed with Royalist plots, some of them hardly worthy of a cause which called itself religious as well as royal. Leaders like Cadoudal and Frotté were long dead; some of their successors in conspiracy were heroes rather of scandal than of loyalty, and many a tragic legend lingers in French society

concerning the men and women of those days.

To a great extent, the old families of La Vendée, the La Rochejacqueleins at their head, refrained from mixing themselves up in the smaller plots against the Empire in which hundreds of Chouans, noble and peasant, men and women, were constantly involved during these years with probable loss of life and liberty. It was not till later that the general feeling became intensified so that Napoleon had to weaken his army, in the Waterloo campaign, by sending some thousands of men against a new insurrection in the West, under Louis de la Rochejaquelein, a second La Vendée war, only stopped by the final return of the Bourbons.

Monsieur Joseph's gay little room looked like anything but a haunt of conspirators; but his friends were earnestly discussing with him the possibility of raising the country, arming the peasants, marching on the chief town of the department, capturing the Prefect, as well as the General in command of the division, and holding them as hostages while the insurrection went on spreading through Anjou and the neighbouring provinces.

The most eager, the most original of the plotters was the Baron d'Ombré, a dark, square young man with frowning brows. He turned quite fiercely on a milder-looking person, a Monsieur de Bourmont, a distant cousin of the well-known leader of that name, who doubted whether the peasants would rise as readily as César d'Ombré expected.

"I tell you," he said, "they hate, they detest the Empire. Look at their desolate homes, their deserted fields! I tell you, the women of France alone, if they had a leader, would drive the usurper out of the country."

"There is your mission, then, dear César," said the Vicomte des Barres, a delicate, sarcastic-looking man of middle age. "March on Paris with your phalanx of Amazons."

"César is right, nevertheless, gentlemen," growled the Comte d'Ombré, the young man's father, the oldest of the party. "It is energy, it is courage, that our cause wants. And I go farther than my son goes. Take the Prefect and the General by all means—excellent idea—"

"If you can catch them—" murmured Monsieur des Barres, and was frowned upon furiously by César d'Ombré.

The Comte was rather deaf. "What? What?" he asked sharply, being aware of the interruption.

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing!" cried their host, with one spring from the fireplace to the old man's chair—"and what would you do, monsieur, with the Prefect and the General? I am dying of curiosity."

Monsieur d'Ombré stared up into the sweet, birdlike face, which bent over him with flashing eyes and a delighted smile.

"Do? I should shoot them on the spot," he said. "They are traitors: I would treat all traitors the same. Yes, I know the Prefect is a friend of your brother's—of your own, possibly. I know my son and I are your guests, too. Never mind! Any other conduct would be cowardly and abominable. No member of my family would ever be guilty of opportunism, and remain in my family. Those two men have done more harm in this province than Napoleon Buonaparte and all his laws and police. They never tried to make his government popular. The Prefect, at least, has done this—I know nothing about the General."

"A wooden image of his master," said Monsieur des Barres.

Monsieur Joseph returned, rather sobered, to his hearth rug. "Shoot them, well, well!" he muttered. "A strong measure, but possibly politic. It is what one would *like* to do, of course, officially. Not personally—no—though Monsieur d'Ombré may be right. It is a crime, no doubt, to make the Empire popular. I am afraid my poor brother has tried to do the same, and succeeded—yes, succeeded a little."

"My father is quite wrong," César d'Ombré muttered in the ear of Monsieur de Bourmont, who listened with a superior smile. "Such mad violence would ruin the cause altogether. Now as hostages, those two men would be invaluable."

"Time enough to discuss that when you have got them," said Monsieur de Bourmont. "To me, I must confess, this plan of a rising sounds premature and unpractical. What we want first is money—money from England, and stronger support, too—as well as a healthier public opinion all through this part of the country."

"Ah! but none of your waiting games for me," cried the young Baron. "*'De l'audace'*—you know—that is the motto for Frenchmen."

"Boldness and rashness need not be the same thing," said Monsieur de Bourmont, drily. "And remember whom you are quoting, my dear César. A

dangerous person, to say the least."

A grim smile lightened d'Ombré's hard face. "It was the right thing to say, if the devil said it," he answered.

The Vicomte des Barres rose from his chair and lounged into the middle of the room.

"To be practical, friends," he said, "the feeling among the peasants is the question. In this country side, Monsieur de la Marinière ought to know pretty well what it is. And I fear he will tell us that a good deal of exertion will be necessary, before they will take up their guns and pikes, and march where they are led. It goes without saying that he, himself, is the one man to lead them. I believe, though he chooses to live like a hermit, he is the most popular man in Anjou."

"But no—no, dear Vicomte," said Monsieur Joseph, shaking his head violently. "It is true there are some of them who love me—but their interest, you see, is on the other side. My brother is more popular than I am, and he deserves it, in spite of his lamentable opinions."

"Ah, monsieur, forgive me, but do you understand your peasants?" cried César d'Ombré. "Are you doing them justice? Would they set a good farm against their king, their religion, the salvation of their country? Bleeding from the loss of their sons—will they think more of money and corn-stacks and vintages than of that true peace and freedom which can only be won by driving out tyranny? Nobody wants to put them back as they were before 1789. The feudal ages are gone—we have given up our rights, and there is an end of it—but we want our own kings again, and we want peace for France, and time to breathe and to let her wounds heal. We want to be rid of this accursed usurper who is draining her life blood. That, I say, is what the peasants feel, most of them, as strongly as we do. But they are of course uneducated. They need stirring up, drilling, leading. And I can hardly believe, monsieur, that the weight of one man in the other scale—even of your learned and distinguished brother—would outweigh all the claims of faith and affection and loyalty. No—delay and hesitation are useless. Trust the peasants, I say."

"You may be right—I hope you are—" said Monsieur Joseph, more gravely than usual. "But my brother will not now be alone in the left-hand scale. Lancilly, under his care, has given the people work and wages for years, remember. And now, with Hervé de Sainfoy's return—"

A howl from César d'Ombré, a groan from his father, a grimace of disgust from Monsieur de Bourmont, who had reason, for his own cousin, once a Chouan, was now an Imperial officer—a laugh from Monsieur des Barres; all this greeted the name of the owner of Lancilly.

"Although that renegade is your cousin, monsieur," old d'Ombré growled, "I hope the country side may soon be made too hot to hold him."

Monsieur Joseph shrugged his shoulders, smiled, looked on the floor. He did not take up the old man's words; he could not very well have done so. But there was something about him which reminded his guests that the slender little boyish man was a dead shot and a perfect swordsman, and that once, long ago, in old La Vendée days, he had challenged a man who had said something insulting of his brother Urbain, and after one or two swift passes had laid him dead at his feet.

There was a moment of rather awkward silence. Then Monsieur des Barres took up the word again.

"To be practical, my friends," he repeated, "the first step to action, it seems to me, is to sound and encourage the peasants. Each of us must be responsible for his own neighbourhood."

"We will answer for ours," said César d'Ombré.

Monsieur de Bourmont, the most cautious of the party, murmured something to the same effect, and Monsieur Joseph nodded gravely.

The Vicomte's eyes dwelt on him, a little anxiously. It seemed as if that word "renegade," applied to his cousin and neighbour, might have a tendency to stick in his throat. Des Barres, who admired and loved the little gentleman, was sorry. He wanted to remind him how the old Comte d'Ombré was universally known for bad manners, stupidity, and violence. He would have liked to reason with him, too, on the subject of that cousin, and to point out kindly, as a friend, how Monsieur de Sainfoy had had absolutely no real and good excuse for going over to the Emperor. Nothing but ambition and worldiness could have led him into the course he had taken. Urbain de la Marinière, known even before 1789 as a philosophical Republican, held a very different place in the estimation of honest men.

"That farmer on the *landes*"—said the Vicomte, looking at his host—"a good example of a superior peasant, is he not? We passed near his farm this morning.

What line does he take?"

"Joubard? He is a fine old fellow, that. His fifth son was taken by the conscription a year ago. Four are dead. I think his heart is in the right place. But he is my brother's best tenant. Yes—I don't know. Old Joubard is made of good stuff, and he loves me."

"And probably he loved his sons, and their mother loved them too," said César d'Ombré.

"Here are my children," said Monsieur Joseph, looking out of the window. "Breakfast will be ready immediately. With your leave we will finish our discussion afterwards."

All the faces lightened, except that of the Baron d'Ombré, whose soul was too much in earnest to be glad of a bodily interruption. But the ride had been long, over difficult roads and under a hot sun, and breakfast was later than usual. The three elder conspirators were not sorry to lay aside their plotting for an hour, and they knew by experience that Monsieur Joseph's cook was an artist. On an occasion such as this, dishes of the rarest distinction crossed the sandy court from that quaint high-roofed kitchen.

The children, as Monsieur Joseph called them, came to the glass door and opened it gently. They were Angelot and Henriette, first cousins, and alike enough to be brother and sister, in spite of the ten years between them.

The girl, with her fearless eyes, walked first; it seemed natural to her. All the men rose and bowed as she came in. She made a formal curtsey to each one separately, and smiled when Monsieur des Barres, the man of the world, bent gracefully to kiss her hand as if she had been a grown-up woman.

"Good morning, my dear uncle," said Angelot, and kissed Monsieur Joseph on both cheeks; then bowed deeply to the company.

They looked upon him with not altogether friendly eyes; the Comte d'Ombré even muttered something between his teeth, and hardly returned the young fellow's salutation. The son of Urbain de la Marinière, a notorious example of two odious things, republicanism and opportunism! the mutual affection of him and his uncle Joseph only made him more of a possible danger. To Monsieur d'Ombré Angelot seemed like a spy in the camp. His son, however, knew better, and so did the other two. Angelot's parentage was not in his favour, certainly, but

they tried to take him at his uncle's valuation, and that was a high one. And Monsieur Joseph's judgment, though romantic, was seldom wrong.

Gigot, the dark-faced valet, having kicked off the sabots which covered his felt shoes, but still wearing his large apron, set open the door into the long narrow hall which ran through the back of the house, widening in the middle where the tower and staircase branched from it.

"Monsieur est servi!"

The hungry guests marched willingly to the dining-room, their heavy boots creaking, the noise of tread and voices echoing through the bare boarded house.

"You do not join us, mademoiselle?" said Monsieur des Barres, seeing that Henriette lingered behind in the drawing-room.

"No, monsieur," the child answered. "My father thinks I am too young to listen. Besides, I am the *guetteuse*. It is our business to watch—the dogs and I."

"Indeed! Is that how you spend your life? A curious employment for a young lady!"

"When there is danger abroad, I am more to be trusted than any one else."

"I quite believe it. You know, then, that our visit to-day is not entirely one of pleasure? Monsieur your father has taken you so far into his confidence, though you are too young to listen?"

"I know everything, monsieur," said Henriette.

"Then we may eat in peace. We are safe in your care. That is charming, mademoiselle."

"Yes, monsieur. I will let you know at once, if Monsieur le Préfet and his gendarmes are riding down the lane."

"Good heavens, what an idea! I have not the smallest wish to meet Monsieur le Préfet. I believe that gentleman keeps a black book, in which I am quite sure my name is written. Yes indeed, mademoiselle, if he should happen to pass, send him a little farther. Tell him he will find a nest of Chouans at Vaujour, or anywhere else your fancy suggests."

Henriette laughed and nodded. "Trust me, monsieur," she said.

"Your little cousin is charming," said Monsieur des Barres to Angelot, who was politely waiting for him in the hall.

The six men were soon sitting at Monsieur Joseph's hospitable round table. As they dispatched their plates of steaming soup they saw the slim blue figure of Henriette, with two dogs at her heels, flit past the window in the direction of the steep lane down which Angelot had come not very long before. This lane led not only to the *landes*, but by other lanes to one of the rare high roads of the country, and on to the chief town of the department. It was partly for this reason that Monsieur Joseph, who valued privacy and independence, left it in its present break-neck condition, more like the dry course of a torrent than a civilised road.

A large dish of eggs followed the soup. But only half the guests had been helped, when all the dogs about the place began to bark savagely. And then, out of the shadow of the wood, darting down past the back of the kitchen, Henriette came flying to the dining-room window, almost upsetting Gigot and his dish as she sprang over the step.

"Papa, papa, there is a party riding down the lane. I believe it is Monsieur le Préfet and an officer with him, and three servants. I ran up the wood. They had only just turned into the lane, and they are coming down very slowly; their horses don't like it."

Monsieur Joseph rapped out a tremendous oath, and looked round at his guests, whose faces were a study.

"The Prefect and the General!" he said. "Now is your moment, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER III

"JE SUIS LE GÉNÉRAL BIM-BAM-BOUM!"

All the men rose to their feet, except the elder d'Ombré, who had taken a very long draught of his host's good wine, and now stared stupidly at the others. César d'Ombré's eyes flamed with excitement. He seized the arm of Angelot, who was next to him, in such a grip that the young fellow flinched and frowned.

"It is our moment!" he cried. "Six to two"—then savagely, and tightening his grasp—"unless we are betrayed—"

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Angelot, his uncle, and Monsieur de Bourmont, all in a breath.

Monsieur des Barres laughed as he looked at Henriette.

"The idea is absurd," he said—"and yet," in a lower tone—"mademoiselle has proved herself an amazingly true prophetess. However, it is absurd—"

There was a moment or two of uproar. Angelot, having impatiently shaken off the Baron's hand, was demanding that he should withdraw his words. He, having apparently at once forgotten them, was insisting that now indeed was the time to prove a man's loyalty, that they must stand all together and dare all things, that the Prefect and the General, once at Les Chouettes, must never leave it but as prisoners, that the Government would be instantly demoralised, and the insurrection would catch and flame like a fire in dry grass—

"And be put out as easily," shouted Monsieur de Bourmont. "Madness, madness! Mere midsummer foolery. Go and hide yourself, firebrand!"

"Shoot them on the spot! Where are my pistols?" stammered the old Comte, beginning to understand the situation.

Monsieur des Barres laughed till he held his sides. Henriette gave him one or two angry and scornful glances, while Gigot, under her orders, whisked glasses and plates and dishes into a cupboard, pushed back chairs against the wall, took away every sign of the good meal just begun. In the midst of all this clatter Monsieur Joseph said a few words with eager nods and signs to Monsieur de

Bourmont, and they two, taking the old man by each arm, led him forcibly out towards the west side of the house.

"Bring the others!" said Monsieur Joseph to his nephew, who was listening as if fascinated to César d'Ombré's ravings.

The little uncle was angry, Angelot perceived. He stamped his foot, as if he meant to be obeyed. Angelot had never seen him in such a state of anxiety and excitement, or heard such words as his sincerely pious mouth had let fall two minutes before—in Riette's presence, too! Old Joubard was wrong: these plots were not exactly to be laughed at. Angelot, realising that the Prefect and the General were really in danger of their lives from men like the Messieurs d'Ombré, thought rather seriously of his own father. At the same time, he longed to punish César for what he had dared to say about betrayal. Yes, he was his father's son; and so the sight of him was enough to make these wild Chouans suspect far better Royalists than themselves. There was an account to settle with Monsieur des Barres, too. His polite manners were all very well, but his words to Henriette just now were insulting. Angelot was angry with his uncle's guests, and not particularly inclined to help them out of their present predicament. He stood gloomily, without attempting to obey his uncle, till Henriette came up to him suddenly.

"Ange—the horses into the hiding-place! Do you hear—quick, quick!"

It might be possible to hesitate in obeying Uncle Joseph, but Cousin Henriette was a far more autocratic person. And then her good sense never failed, and was always convincing; she was never in doubt as to her own right course or other people's: and Angelot, who had no sisters, loved her like a little sister, and accepted her tyrannous ways joyfully.

She had hardly spoken when he was out of the window, and with a few strides across the sunshine had disappeared into the dark and cavernous archway of the stables.

Henriette turned to the two remaining guests, César d'Ombré still arguing in favour of instant action with Monsieur des Barres, who looked serious enough now, and stood shrugging his shoulders.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the child. "I know where my papa is waiting for you."

"Mademoiselle, we are in your hands," said the Vicomte, bowing. "We have never for an instant lost confidence in you."

She bent her head, with the air and smile of a woman who rather scornfully accepts an apology. She went out of the dining-room and along the hall, the two men following her. César d'Ombré lingered as far as he dared, and grumbled between his teeth.

At that very moment the Prefect of the department, with the newly appointed General in command of the troops stationed there, only escorted by three men in the dress of gendarmes, rode slowly and gently round the back of the kitchen into the sandy courtyard of Les Chouettes.

"Monsieur de la Marinière's hermitage," said the Prefect to his companion.

"It looks like one, sapristi!" said the General.

Nothing could seem stiller, more fast asleep, than Les Chouettes in the approaching noon of that hot September day. The dogs barked and growled, it was true, but only one of them, the youngest, troubled himself to get up from where he lay in the warm sand. No human creature was to be seen about the house or buildings; the silence of the woods lay all around; the dry air smelt delicately of wood smoke and fir trees; the shadows were very deep, cutting across the broad belts of glowing sunshine.

"Every one is asleep," said the Prefect. "I am afraid breakfast is over; we ought to have arrived an hour ago."

"Caught them napping!" chuckled the General.

The voices, and the clinking of bridles, as the little cavalcade passed towards the house at a walking pace, brought the cook to the kitchen door. She stared in consternation. She was a pretty woman, Gigot's wife, with a pale complexion and black hair; her provincial cap was very becoming. But she now turned as red as a turkey-cock and her jaw dropped, as she stared after the horsemen. No one had warned her: there had not been time or opportunity. She was just dishing up the roast meat for the hungry appetites of Messieurs les Chouans, when behold, the gendarmes! Who the gentlemen were, she did not know; but imperial gendarmes were never a welcome sight to Monsieur Joseph's household.

"The place is like a city of the dead," said the Prefect, drawing rein in front of the salon windows. "See if you can find any one, Simon, and ask for Monsieur

de la Marinière."

One of the gendarmes dismounted. Wearing the ordinary dress of these civil soldiers, he yet differed in some indefinable way from his two companions. He had the keen and wary look of a clever dog; his eyes were everywhere.

"City of the dead, eh! Plenty of footprints of the living!" he muttered, as he turned back towards the outbuildings and noticed the trampled sand.

Marie Gigot saw him coming, and dived back into her kitchen.

"Ah! it is that demon!" she said to herself. "Holy Virgin, defend us! I thought that wretch was gone. All of them in the dining-room—the stable full of their horses, and no one there but that ignorant Tobie! We are done for at last, that's sure. Eh! there's Monsieur Angelot talking to him. But of course it is hopeless. That must be the Prefect. To be sure they say he is better than the last—and it may be only a friendly visit—and why should not my master have his friends to breakfast? But then, again, what brings that Simon, that Chouan-catcher, as they call him! Why, Gigot told me of half-a-dozen fellows who had sworn to shoot him, and not a hundred miles from here."

She ran to the door again and looked out. Angelot, cool and quiet, had come out of the stable and met the gendarme face to face, returning his salutation with indifference.

"It is Monsieur le Préfet? Certainly, my uncle is at home," he said. "I am not sure that he is in the house," and he walked on towards the group of horsemen.

"Not in the house!" breathed the cook. "They are hiding, then! They must have heard or seen them coming—ah, how stupid I am! I saw mademoiselle run past the window."

Angelot came bareheaded, smiling, to represent his uncle in welcoming the Prefect to Les Chouettes. He would not have been his father's son if the droll side of the situation had not struck him. He thought it exquisite, though he was sorry for his uncle's annoyance. The Chouan guests had irritated him, and that they should lose their breakfast seemed a happy retribution, though he would have done all he could to save them from further penalties. Angelot looked up at the Prefect, his handsome sleepy eyes alight with laughter.

"Do my uncle the pleasure of coming in, monsieur," he said. "He will be here immediately; he has been out shooting. It is exactly breakfast time."

"We shall be very grateful for your uncle's hospitality; we have had a long ride in the heat," said the Prefect.

His eyes as they met Angelot's were very keen, as well as very kind and gentle. He was a singularly good-looking man, and sat his horse gracefully. His manners were those of the great world; he was one of the noblest and most popular of the men of old family who had rallied to the Empire, believing that Napoleon's genius and the glory of France were one.

"Monsieur le Général," he said, turning to his companion, "let me present Monsieur Ange de la Marinière, the son of Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière, one of my truest friends in the department."

The rough and mocking voice that answered—"Happy to make his acquaintance"—brought the colour into Angelot's face as he bowed.

The Prefect, who for reasons of his own watched the lad curiously, saw the change, the cloud that darkened those frank looks suddenly, and understood it pretty well. The new military commander, risen from the ranks in every sense, had nothing to justify his position except courage, a talent for commanding, and devotion to the Emperor. That he was not now fighting in Spain was due partly to quarrels with other generals, partly to wounds received in the last Austrian campaign, which unfitted him for the time for active service. In sending him to this Royalist province of the West, Napoleon might have aimed at providing the Prefect with an effective foil to his own character and connections. The great Emperor by no means despised the trick of setting his servants to watch one another.

One personal peculiarity this General possessed, which had both helped and hindered him in his career. As Monsieur des Barres said, he was exceedingly like his master. A taller, heavier man, his face and head were a coarse likeness of Napoleon's. There were the lines of beauty without the sweetness, the strength without the genius, the ingrained selfishness unveiled by any mask, even of policy. General Ratoneau was repulsive where Napoleon was attractive. He had fought under Napoleon from the beginning, and had risen by his own efforts, disliked by all his superiors, even by the Emperor, to whom the strange likeness did not recommend him. But it had a great effect on the men who fought under him. Though he was a brutal leader, they were ready to follow him anywhere, and had been known to call him *le gros caporal*, so strong and obvious was this likeness. He was a splendid soldier, though ill-tempered, cruel, and overbearing.

He was a man to be reckoned with, and so the amiable Prefect found. Having himself plenty of scruples, plenty of humanity, and a horror of civil war, he found a colleague with none of these difficult to manage. Nothing, for instance, was further from the Prefect's wish than to spy upon his Royalist neighbours and to drive them to desperation. The very word *Chouan* represented to General Ratoneau a wild beast to be trapped or hunted.

Angelot looked at this man, and from the first glance hated him. There was something insolent in the stare of those bold dark eyes, which were bloodshot, too, matching the redness and coarseness of the face; something mocking, threatening, as much as to say: "Very fine, young fellow, but I don't believe a word of it. I believe you, baby as you are, and your father, and your uncle, and the whole boiling of you, are a set of traitors to the Emperor and ought to be hanged in a row on those trees of yours. So take care how you behave, young man!"

The Prefect read Angelot's looks, and saw what kind of instant impression the General had made. No girl, at the moment, could have shown her feelings more plainly. Angelot might have said aloud, "What odious wretch is this!" such proud disgust was written on his face. But he recovered himself instantly, and again laughter was very near the surface as he begged these new guests to dismount. For the outwitting and disappointing of such a horrible official was even a richer piece of fun than the disturbance of the poor Chouans at their breakfast table.

Nothing could have been more agreeable than the manner in which Monsieur Joseph received his unexpected visitors. They were hardly in the salon when he came lightly along the hall, step and air those of a much younger man. All smiles, he shook hands affectionately with the Prefect and bowed ceremoniously to the General. They had done him the greatest honour, caused him the keenest delight, by this friendly visit of surprise. Only he must beg them to pardon the deficiencies of his household. He really could not say what sort of breakfast they were likely to find. Plenty, he hoped—for his nephew had come in from a long morning's sport, half-an-hour ago, and the cook knew how to a measure a young man's appetite. But as to quality—he could only throw himself on the kind indulgence of his friends.

"As for me," said the General, "I am as hungry as a wolf, and I could eat a lump of brown bread, and wash it down with a quart of sour wine."

"Ah, ah! a true soldier, monsieur!" said Monsieur Joseph, and clapped his hands

gently.

"My uncle's wine is not sour, as Monsieur le Général will find," said Angelot.

The General replied, with a scowl and a shrug, "I don't suppose you mean to compare your wine from this poor soil with the wine of the South, for instance."

"Ah, pardon, but I do!" cried the boy. "This very morning, our farmer on the *landes* gave me a glass of wine, white sparkling wine, which you would hardly match in France, except, of course, in the real champagne country. And even as to that, our wine is purer. It tastes of sunshine and of the white grapes of the vineyard. There is nothing better."

"Nothing better for children, I dare say," said General Ratoneau, with a laugh. "Men like something stronger than sunshine and grapes. So will you, one of these days."

Angelot looked hard at the man for a moment. He sat squarely, twisting his whip in his hands, on one of Monsieur Joseph's old Louis Quinze chairs, which seemed hardly fit to bear his weight. The delicate atmosphere of old France was all about him. Angelot and his uncle were incarnations of it, even in their plain shooting clothes; and the Prefect, the Baron de Mauves, was worthy in looks and manners of the old régime from which he sprang. The other man was a son of the Revolution and of a butcher at Marseilles. With his glittering uniform, his look of a coarse Roman, he was the very type of military tyranny at its worst, without even the good manners of past days to soften the frank insolence of a soldier.

"Voilà l'Empire! I wish my father could see him!" Angelot thought.

Monsieur Joseph looked at his nephew. His sweet smile had faded, a sudden shadow of anxiety taking its place. How would Angelot bear with this man? Would he remember that in spite of all provocation he must be treated civilly? The Prefect also glanced up a little nervously at Angelot as he stood. Had the handsome, attractive boy any share at all of his father's wisdom and faultless temper?

Angelot was conscious of both these warnings. He answered the little uncle's with a smile, and said easily—"It is possible—I cannot tell. As to the wine—I will ask your opinion after breakfast, monsieur."

The Prefect's face cleared up suddenly. Angelot was a worthy son of his father.

"It is quite unnecessary, my dear friend," he said to Monsieur Joseph, "for you to attempt to alarm us about our breakfast. Your cook can work miracles. This is not the first time, remember, that I have taken you by surprise."

"And you are always welcome, my dear Baron," Monsieur Joseph answered gently, but a little dreamily.

"I shall now have a fresh attraction in this country," the Prefect said. "With your cousin, De Sainfoy, at Lancilly, your neighbourhood will indeed leave nothing to be desired."

"Hervé is an agreeable man," said Monsieur Joseph. "I have not seen him for many years; I do not know his wife and family. My brother is charmed to welcome them all."

"Of course, and they must feel that they owe everything to him. Monsieur your brother is a benefactor to his country and species," said the Prefect, with a smile at Angelot. "Madame de Sainfoy is an exceedingly pretty woman. She made quite a sensation at Court in the spring, and I should think there will not be much difficulty in her getting the appointment I understand she wishes—lady in waiting to the Empress. Only they say that the Emperor does not quite trust De Sainfoy—finds him a little half-hearted."

"That is possible," said Monsieur Joseph, gently.

"Well, it is a pity," said the Prefect. "If you accept the new régime at all, you should do it loyally."

"My cousin has a son fighting in Spain. That ought to be placed to his credit."

"And no doubt it is. His daughter, too, may do something. There is only one grown up, and she has not been brought much into society—her father's fault, they say; he has ideas of his own about marrying her. But I am telling you what you know already?"

"Not at all, monsieur. I have heard nothing of it. When my cousins live at Lancilly, the family councils may include me; so far they have not done so. I did not even realise that Mademoiselle Hélène was old enough to be married. And what match is arranged for her?"

"None that I know of. Her father's action has been negative, not positive, I understand. He has simply refused to consider one or two suggested marriages,

either of which would have been good politically."

"Reasons of birth, I suppose," said Monsieur Joseph. "He has my cordial sympathy."

The Prefect coughed; the General scraped his chair; Angelot nearly laughed aloud.

"You will find it very agreeable to have your cousins at Lancilly," the Prefect said, looking at him kindly.

"I don't know, monsieur," Angelot answered. "Young girls are hardly companions for me."

"Indeed! As to that—" began the Prefect, still smiling as he looked at the lad; but his remark was cut short and his attention pleasantly distracted.

Gigot, with unshaken solemnity, set open the doors for the second time that morning.

"Monsieur est servi!"

CHAPTER IV

HOW THE BREAKFAST COOKED FOR THOSE WAS EATEN BY THESE

The Prefect and the General enjoyed their breakfast thoroughly. They sat over it long; so long that Angelot, his hunger satisfied, began to suffer in his young limbs from a terrible restlessness. It was as much as he could do to sit still, listening first to the Prefect's political and society talk, then to stories of the General's campaigns. Under the influence of the despised wine of Anjou, Monsieur de Mauves, whose temper needed no sweetening, became a little sleepy, prosy, and long-winded. General Ratoneau on his side was mightily cheered, and showed quite a new animation: long before the meal ended, he was talking more than the other three put together. It was he who had been the hero of Eylau, of Friedland, of Wagram; the Emperor and the Marshals were nowhere. All the great movements were in consequence of his advice. And then his personal courage! The men he had killed with his own hand! As to the adventures which had fallen to his lot in storming and plundering towns, burning villages, quartering his men on country houses, these often belonged so much to the very seamiest side of war that Monsieur Joseph, soldier as he was, listened with a frown, and the Prefect coughed and glanced more than once at Angelot. For some of these stories were hardly suited to young and innocent ears, and Angelot looked, and indeed was, younger than his age.

He was listening, not curiously, but with a kind of unwilling impatience. The man seemed to impress him in spite of himself, in spite of disgust at the stories and dislike of the teller. Once or twice he laughed, and then General Ratoneau gave him a stare, as if just reminded of his existence, and went on to some further piece of coarse bragging.

Monsieur Joseph became paler and graver, Angelot more restless, the Prefect sleepier, as the rough voice talked on. Angelot thought breakfast would never be over, and that this brute would never have done boasting of his fine deeds, such as hanging up six brothers in a row outside their own house, and threatening the mother and sisters with the same fate unless they showed him the way to the cellar, where he knew they had hidden plate and jewellery, as well as a quantity

of good wine.

"You would not have done it, monsieur?" said Angelot, quickly.

The General assured him with oaths that he certainly would.

"And they knew it, and did as they were told," he said. "We did not hurt them, as it happened. We stripped the house, and left them to bury their men, if they chose. What had they to expect? Fortune of war, my boy!"

Angelot shrugged his shoulders.

"You should send that nephew of yours to learn a few things in the army," the General said to Monsieur Joseph, when they at last rose and left the dining-room. "He will grow up nothing but an ignorant, womanish baby, if you keep him down here among your woods much longer."

"I am not his father," Monsieur Joseph answered with some dryness. "He is a friend of the Prefect's; you can easily remonstrate with him, Monsieur le Général. But you are mistaken about young Ange. He is neither a girl nor a baby, but a very gallant young fellow, still humane and innocent, of course—but your stories might pierce a thicker skin, I fancy."

The General laughed aloud, as they strolled out at the back of the house into the afternoon sunshine.

"Well, well, a soldier has the right to talk," he said. "I need not tell a man who knows the world, like you, that I should never have hanged those women—poor country rubbish though they were, and ugly too, I remember. But the men had tried to resist, and martial law must be obeyed."

Some reassurance of the same kind was given to Angelot by the Prefect, who lingered behind with him.

"And our conscripts go for this, monsieur!" Angelot said.

"My dear boy," said Monsieur de Mauves, lazily, "you must take these tales *cum grano*. For instance, if I know the Emperor, he would have shot the man who hanged those women. And our friend Ratoneau knew it."

Les Chouettes seemed stiller than ever, the sun hotter, the atmosphere more sleepy and peaceful. The dogs were lying in various directions at full length on the sand. The sleeping forms of the Prefect's gendarmes were also to be seen,

stretched on the grass under the southern belt of fir trees. One moving figure came slowly into sight on the edge of the opposite wood, and strolled into the sunshine, stooping as she came to pick the pale purple crocuses of which the grass was full—little Henriette, a basket on her arm, her face shaded by a broad straw bonnet.

The General shaded his eyes with his hand, and stared at her.

"Who is that young girl, monsieur?" he asked.

The question itself seemed impertinent enough, but the insolence of the tone and the manner sent a quiver through Monsieur Joseph's nerves. His face twitched and his eyes flashed dangerously. At that moment he would have forgiven any rashness on the part of his Chouan friends; he would have liked to see Monsieur d'Ombré's pistol within a few inches of the General's head, and if it had gone off, so much the better. He wondered why he had not encouraged César d'Ombré's idea of making these men prisoners. Perhaps he was right, after all; the boldest policy might have been the best. Perhaps it was a splendid opportunity lost. Anyhow, the imperial officials would have been none the worse for cooling their heels and starving a little, the fate of the Royalists now. As to the consequences, Monsieur Joseph in his present mood might have made short work of them, had it not been for that young girl in the meadow.

"It is my daughter, Monsieur le Général."

A person with finer instincts could not have failed to notice the angry shortness of the reply. But the General was in high good humour, for him, and he coolly went on adding to his offences.

"Your daughter, is it! I did not know you were married. I understood from Monsieur le Préfet that you were a lonely hermit. Is there a Madame de la Marinière hidden away somewhere? and possibly a few more children? This house is a kind of beehive, I dare say—" he walked on to the grass, and turned to stare at the windows. "Was madame afraid to entertain us? My stories would have been too strong for her, perhaps? but I assure you, monsieur, I know how to behave to women!" and he laughed.

"I hope so, monsieur, especially as you are not now in Germany," said Monsieur Joseph, thinking very earnestly of his own sword and pistols, ready for use in his own room.

He need only step in at that window, a few yards off. A fierce word, a blow, would be a suitable beginning—and then—if only Riette were out of sight, and the Prefect would not interfere—there could not be a better ground than the sand here by the house. Must one wait for all the formalities of a duel, with the Prefect and Angelot to see fair play? However, he tried hard to restrain himself, at least for the moment.

"My wife is dead, monsieur, and I have but that one child," he said, forcing the words out with difficulty: it was a triumph of the wise and gentle Joseph over the fiery and passionate Joseph.

He thought of Urbain, when he wanted to conquer that side of himself; Urbain, who by counsel and influence had made it safe for him to live under the Empire, and who now, hating vulgarity and insolence as much as he did himself, would have pointed out that General Ratoneau's military brutality was not worth resenting; that there were greater things at stake than a momentary annoyance; that the man's tongue had been loosened, his lumbering spirit quickened, by draughts of sparkling wine of Anjou, and that his horrible curiosity carried no intentional insult with it. Indeed, as Monsieur Joseph perceived immediately, with a kind of wonder, the man fancied that he was making himself agreeable to his host.

"Ah, sapristi, I am sorry for you, monsieur, and for the young lady too," he said. "I am not married myself—but the loss of wife and mother must be a dreadful thing. Excuse a soldier's tongue, monsieur."

Monsieur Joseph accepted the apology with a quick movement of head and hand, being as placable as he was passionate. The General continued to stare at Henriette, who moved slowly, seeming to think of nothing, to see nothing, but the wild flowers and the crowd of flitting butterflies in the meadow.

During this little interlude, one of the gendarmes, who had seemed asleep, got up and moved towards the Prefect, who turned to speak to him, and after the first word walked with him a few yards, so as to be out of hearing of the others. Angelot, who had been standing beside the Prefect, glanced after them with a touch of anxiety. He did not like the looks of that gendarme, though he had not, like Marie Gigot, recognised him as specially dangerous. He walked forward a few steps and stood beside his uncle. Suppose the meeting of that morning, risky if not unlawful, were to come to the Prefect's knowledge; suppose his uncle's dangerous friends were ferreted out of their hiding-place in the wood; what then

was he, his father's son, to do? His mother's son, though far enough from sharing her enthusiasms, had an answer ready: whatever it might cost, he must stand by the little uncle and Riette.

"Your daughter is still young,"—it was the General's hoarse voice—"too young yet to be reported to the Emperor. Monsieur le Préfet must wait three or four years. Then, when she is tall and pretty—"

Angelot's brow darkened. What was the creature saying?

"You were pleased to mean—" Monsieur Joseph was asking, with extreme civility.

"Ah, bah, have you heard nothing of the new order? Well, as I say, it will not affect you at present. But ask Monsieur le Préfet. He will explain. It is rather a sore subject with him, I believe, he has the prejudices of his class—of your class, I mean."

"You are talking in riddles, indeed, monsieur," said Monsieur Joseph.

They looked round at the Prefect. He had now finished his short talk with the gendarme, and as he turned towards the other group, Angelot's young eyes perceived a shadow on his kind face, a grave look of awakened interest. Angelot was also aware that he beckoned to him. As soon as he came up with him, the Prefect said, "That is mademoiselle your cousin, is it not, gathering flowers in the meadow? I should like to pay her my compliments, if she is coming this way."

"I will go and tell her so, Monsieur le Préfet," said Angelot.

"Do, my friend."

His eyes, anxious and thoughtful, followed the young man as he walked across towards the distant edge of the wood, whose dark shadows opened behind Riette and the crocuses. She looked up, startled, as her cousin came near, and for a moment seemed to think of disappearing into the wood; but a sign from him reassured her, and she came with a dancing step to meet him.

"I have been rousing curiosity, Monsieur le Préfet," said the General, smiling grimly, as the Prefect rejoined the other men. "I have been telling Monsieur de la Marinière that one of these days you will report his daughter to the Emperor."

The Prefect looked angry and annoyed. His handsome face flushed. With an involuntary movement he laid his hand on Monsieur Joseph's shoulder; their eyes met, and both men smiled.

"I sometimes think," said Monsieur de Mauves, "that His Majesty does not yet quite know France. His ideas have great spirit and originality, but they are not always very practical."

"They are generally put into practice," growled the General.

"Yes—but I do not think this one will go far. Certainly, it will have died out long before Mademoiselle de la Marinière is grown up."

"But explain, my dear friend!" cried Monsieur Joseph. "Is the Emperor going to raise a regiment of Amazons, to fight Russia? I am dying with curiosity."

"Some people would find your idea less disagreeable than the fact," said the Prefect, smiling, while the General shook with laughter.

"Amazons! ha! ha! capital! I should like to lead them."

It seemed that the Prefect, for once, was ashamed of his great master. He went on to explain, in a hurried fashion, how he and his brother Prefects had received this very singular command from the Emperor—that they were to send him, not a mere list, but a *catalogue raisonné*, of all the well-born girls in their several departments; their personal appearance, their disposition, their dowries, their prospects in the future; in short, every particular regarding them. And with what object? to arrange marriages between these young women of the best blood in France and his most favoured officers. It was one way, an original way, of making society loyal to the Empire; but the plan savoured too much of the treatment of a conquered country to please men like the Baron de Mauves. He might speak of it with a certain outward respect, as coming from the Emperor; and the presence of General Ratoneau was also a check upon his real sentiments; but he was not surprised at Monsieur Joseph's evident disgust, and not out of sympathy with it.

The reign of the soldier! They were heroes, perhaps, many of these men whom Napoleon delighted to honour. It was not unnatural that he should heap dukedoms and pensions and orders upon them. But it seemed a dangerous step forward, to force such men as this Ratoneau, for instance, into the best families of France. No doubt he, in spite of his Napoleonic looks, was a bad specimen;

but Monsieur Joseph might be excused if he looked at him as he said: "My dear Baron, it is tyranny. I speak frankly, gentlemen; it is a step on the road to ruin. Our old families will not bear it. What have you done?"

"Nothing," said Monsieur de Mauves. "I think most of the Prefects agree with me; it is an order which will have to be repeated."

On which the General turned round with a grin, and quoted to him his own words—"Monsieur le Préfet—if you accept the new régime, you should accept it loyally."

"Pardon—nothing of this before the children, I beg," exclaimed Monsieur Joseph in haste, for Angelot and Henriette were coming across the meadow.

The Prefect's delicate brows went up; he shrugged his shoulders, and moved off with a somewhat absent air to meet the young people.

The sunshine, the flowery meadow, the motionless woods all about in the still afternoon: no background could be more peaceful. Nor could any unwelcome visitor with official power be more gentle and courteous than the Prefect as he took off his hat and bowed low to the slim child in her old clinging frock, who curtseyed with her hands full of crocuses and a covered basket on her arm. But little Riette and her cousin Angelot watched the amiable Prefect with anxious, suspicious eyes, and she took his kind words and compliments with an ease of reply which was not quite natural. She was a responsible person in her father's house at all times; but the fates of men had never, perhaps, been hung round her neck before. Why, the very fact of their concealment would be enough to condemn the four in government eyes looking out for conspiracies. And Monsieur des Barres, always lively, had said to Riette ten minutes ago: "Now, mademoiselle, you have sheltered us, you have fed us; we depend on you to keep all inconvenient persons out of the wood."

"Stay where you are till they are gone, and have no fear," the child answered, and went back to meet the enemy.

And presently the Prefect said, "You have gathered some very pretty flowers, mademoiselle."

"Pray take some, monsieur," said Riette.

The Prefect took two crocuses in his fingers, and cleverly slipped them into a buttonhole, for which they were not very well suited. Then he went on talking

about flowers for a minute or two, but the subject was soon exhausted, for his knowledge lay among garden flowers, and Riette knew none but those that grew among her own woods and fields. Then suddenly and without warning, those pointed fingers of his had lifted the cover of the basket. It was done with a smile, as one might do it, a little mischievously, to a child trying to hide something, and with the words—"More flowers, mademoiselle?" At the bottom of the basket lay two corks and a small roll of bread. St. Elizabeth's miracle was not repeated for Henriette.

Angelot smiled and bit his lip; then looked at the faces of his two companions. In the Prefect's there was plainly a question. Riette flushed crimson; for a moment her dark eyes were cast down; then there was something both roguish and pathetic in them, as she looked up at the man on whom so much depended.

"Monsieur," said the sweet, childish voice, "I often eat my breakfast out-of-doors—I did to-day."

The Prefect smiled, but gravely. Angelot hardly thought that he was deceived.

"It is an agreeable thing to do, when one is young," the Prefect said. "Young, and with a clear conscience. But most people, if they had the choice, would prefer your father's hospitable dining-room."

He turned with a wave of his hand and walked towards the house.

"What have you done, child?" said Angelot, half laughing, half solemn.

"I did not tell a lie," said Riette. "Marie gave me something for myself too: she and papa both said I must not have breakfast with you. Oh, they were hungry, Angelot! They devoured what I took, especially the Baron d'Ombré. I am sorry there was a bit of bread left, and I don't know how the corks got there. But, my dear, he knows nothing!"

"Hush. I am not so sure. Now keep out of the way till they are gone."

This was a counsel of perfection, which Henriette did her best to follow; but it was difficult, for the time was long. All the household at Les Chouettes became very restless and impatient as the afternoon wore on, but none of them dared show it. Poor Monsieur Joseph summoned up all his powers of general conversation, which were a little rusty, to entertain the Prefect, who went on talking politics and society as if life, for him, had no more immediate and present interest. Angelot marched about with an uneasy sense of keeping guard;

knowing, too, that his father was expecting him to help to receive the distinguished cousins at Lancilly. He did not mind that much; the idea of the Sainfoy family was not very attractive to him: he thought they might interfere with the old freedom of the country-side; and even to please his father he could not desert his little uncle in a difficulty. He poured out some of his irritation on the Prefect's pet gendarme, whom he caught stealing round by the wood where, hidden behind a pile of logs in an old stone hovel, the four Royalist gentlemen were finding this official visit considerably more than a joke.

"What are you doing on my uncle's land?" Angelot said sharply to the man.

"Nothing, monsieur. Is it not allowed to take a little exercise?" said Simon, the Chouan-catcher.

There was such a keen look in the man's eyes, such a veiled insolence in his tone, that Angelot suddenly felt he must say no more. He muttered something about disturbing the game, and passed on. Simon grinned as he looked after him.

All this time the General was fast asleep, stretched on a sofa in the salon. Angelot looked in upon him as he lay snoring. With his eyes shut, he was more like the Emperor than ever; and as with Napoleon, there was a sort of fascination in the brow, the chin, the shape of the head, though here there was coarseness instead of refinement, the power of will without the genius.

"He is a handsome beast, but I hate him!" the young man thought as he looked through the window. "Now if our excellent Chouans were here, what would they do? Probably nothing. And what can anybody do? Nothing. Fate has brought the Empire, as my father says, and he does not agree with Uncle Joseph that it does much more harm than good. For my part, I would as soon live in peace—and it does not please me to be ruled by overbearing soldiers and police spies. However, as long as they leave me my dog and gun and the freedom of the woods, they may have their politics to themselves for me.—Here I am, dear uncle."

He turned from the window with a shrug. Monsieur Joseph and the Prefect had been strolling about the meadow, and the Prefect now expressed a wish to walk round the woods, and to see the view of Lancilly from the high ground beyond them.

Angelot went with the two men. They walked right through the wood. The Prefect stopped and talked within twenty yards of the hovel where the four

conspirators lay hidden. It was a grand opportunity for old Monsieur d'Ombré's pistol-shot; but not a movement, not a sound broke the stillness of the wood. There was only the rustling of the leaves, the squeak of the squirrels as they raced and scampered in the high branches of the oaks.

The two La Marinières stood on each side of Monsieur de Mauves: they were a guard to him, though he did not know it, as his eyes wandered curiously, searchingly, down the glade in which he chose to linger.

A rough whitewashed corner of the hovel, the mass of its dark roof, were actually visible beyond an undergrowth of briars.

"What have you there?" said the Prefect, so quietly that his companions did not even suspect him of a suspicion.

"A shelter—an old hovel where wood is stored for the winter," Monsieur Joseph answered truthfully; but his cheeks and eyes brightened a little, as if prepared for something more.

"Ah!" the Prefect only said, looking rather fixedly that way. "And where is this view of Lancilly?"

Both the uncle and nephew breathed more freely as they led him up the hill, through higher slopes of wood, then under some great branching oaks, here allowed to grow to their full size, and out into a rugged lane, winding on through wild hedges festooned with blackberries. Here, at the top, they looked straight across the valley to Lancilly, as it lay in the sunshine. Its high roofs flashing, it looked indeed the majestic centre of the country-side. Angelot gazed at it indifferently. Again the Prefect turned to him with his kind smile.

"It will be charming for you to have your cousins there. They will reconcile you to the powers that be."

Angelot answered: "I have no quarrel with the powers that be, monsieur, as long as you represent them. As to life, I want no change. Give me a gun and set me on a moor with my uncle. There we are!"

"If I thought your uncle was quite so easily satisfied!" the Prefect said, and his look, as he turned to Monsieur Joseph, was a little enigmatical.

CHAPTER V

HOW ANGELOT MADE AN ENEMY

The sun was near setting when the Prefect and his companions rode away from Les Chouettes, their visit having resulted, as it seemed, in nothing worse than annoyance and anxiety.

Joseph de la Marinière drew a long breath as he saw them go. The Prefect looked back once or twice and saw him standing near his house, a small black figure in the full blaze of the west. He seemed to be alone with his dogs, though in fact Riette and the three servants were peeping round the corner of the house beyond him, waiting for the final disappearance of the visitors. He had asked Angelot to guide them through the labyrinth of woods and lanes to a road leading to a town which the Prefect wished to reach before nightfall. As Angelot was on foot, their progress was slow; and it seemed an age to Monsieur Joseph till they had crossed his broad meadow to the south, and instead of going on towards Lancilly, had struck into a wood on the left through which a narrow path ran.

When the last gendarme had passed from bright sunshine into shadows, when the tramp of the last horse had died away, Monsieur Joseph made a little joyful spring into the air and called, "Riette, my child, where are you?"

"Here I am, papa!" cried the girl, darting forward. "Ah, what a day we have had!"

"And what an evening we will have now!" said Monsieur Joseph.

He seized her two hands, and they danced round together. In the shadow behind the house Gigot and Marie followed their example, while Tobie, having no partner, jumped up and down with his arms akimbo. Mademoiselle Riette, catching sight of him, laughed so exhaustingly that she could dance no longer. Then the whole family laughed till the tears ran down their faces, while the dogs sat round and wagged their tails.

"The good God has protected us," said Gigot, coming forward to his master. "Does monsieur know that one of those gendarmes was Simon, the police agent, the Chouan-catcher, they call him? When I saw him, my heart died within me.

But we were too clever for him. He went smelling about, but he found nothing."

"He smelt something, though," growled Tobie the groom. "He would have searched the stable and found the inner place if I had not stood in front of him: luckily I was the biggest man of the two. It is not so easy, do you see, to make a way past me."

"I gave them enough good food and wine to send them to sleep for the afternoon," said Marie the cook. "It was a sad waste, but the only way to keep such creatures quiet."

"What a terrible man, that General!" said Gigot. "How he slept and snored and kicked the sofa! you can see the marks of his boots now. And how he resembles the Emperor! I know, for I saw his Majesty once—"

"Stop your recollections, Gigot," said Monsieur Joseph; for Gigot, like many solemn and silent people, was difficult to check when once set talking. "We have something else to think of now. Make haste with dinner, Marie. We must console our poor friends for their captivity. Come, Riette, we will go and fetch them."

So that evening was a merry one at Les Chouettes, and the moon was high before the second batch of guests climbed slowly to the moor on their homeward way. The day's experience had not heightened their courage, somehow, or advanced their plans for a rising. Even the Comte d'Ombré agreed that the time was hardly ripe; that five or six men might throw away their own lives or liberties, but could not make a new revolution; that the peasants must be sounded, public opinion educated; and that the Prefect's courteous moderation was an odious quality which made everything more difficult.

And in the meanwhile, Monsieur de Mauves was justifying their conclusions in a way that would have startled them.

Beyond the wood, Angelot led the party across stubble-fields, where blue field flowers with grey dusty leaves clustered by the wayside, and distant poplars, pointing high into the evening air, showed where his home lay. Then they turned down into one of the hollow lanes of the country, its banks scooped out by winter rains and treading of cattle, so that it was almost like three sides of a cylinder, while the thick pollard oaks, leaning over it, made twilight even in the lingering sunshine.

The General was riding in front, the gendarmes some yards behind; Angelot,

with his dog and gun, kept close beside the Prefect, who talked to him with his usual friendliness. Presently he said, "I love your uncle, Angelot, much better than he loves me, and I am sorry that he should run such useless risks."

"What risks, monsieur?" the young man said, glancing up quickly; and somehow it was difficult to meet the Prefect's eyes.

"Ah, you know very well. Believe me, your father is right, and your uncle is wrong. The old régime cannot be reëstablished. The path of France is marked out for her; a star has arisen to guide her, and she is foolish, suicidal, not to follow where it leads. I do not defend or admire the Emperor in everything: but see what he has done for France. She lay ruined, distracted. She took the mountain path of liberty, made a few wrong turns, and was dashed over the precipice. See how the Emperor has built her up into a great nation again; look at the laws and the civilisation; look at the military glory which has cost much blood, it is true, but has raised her so high in Europe that the nations who were ready to devour her are mostly crouching at her feet. Would our Bourbons have done all this for us, Angelot? Are they, after all, worth the devotion of men like your uncle and—for instance—Monsieur des Barres? Does not true patriotism lead a man to think of his country's good and glory, not of the advantage of one special family? Your uncle can hardly believe in that mediæval fiction of divine right, I suppose?"

Angelot smiled. "My uncle belongs to the days of Saint Louis," he said.

"But you do not," the Prefect replied. "I find it hard to forgive him. He is free, of course, to put his own neck in danger. One of these days he will drive me to extremities, and will find himself and his friends in a state prison—lucky if nothing worse happens. But he has no right to involve you in these treasonous tricks of his. It is selfish and immoral. Your father should see to it. You ought not to have been there to-day."

The Prefect spoke low and earnestly. It was impossible to misunderstand him. Angelot felt something like a cold shiver running over him. But he smiled and answered bravely.

"If my uncle has been foolish, so have I, and I will share the consequences with him. But as to to-day, monsieur?"

"I know all," the Prefect said. "Your uncle had visitors this morning, who were spirited away out of our sight. Their horses were hidden in an inner stable; they

themselves in a hovel in the wood—and if they have waited there till we were gone, they must be tired of it. That famous breakfast we enjoyed was not prepared on such miraculously short notice. Your little cousin, poor child, was employed to carry food to the fugitives hidden in the wood. With all my heart I pity her; a life of political plots is not happiness. But if Monsieur de la Marinière does not hesitate to sacrifice his daughter, it is no wonder that he lightly runs his nephew into danger! You acted well, you and he. But I almost think it might have been safer to carry on that first breakfast-party, and not show its character by absurd attempts at concealment. You cannot contradict a word I have been saying, Angelot. I do not ask you to tell me the names of your uncle's guests."

"If you did, monsieur," the young fellow answered, "I should consider that an uncomfortable day had punished them enough, and so I should respectfully decline to answer you. I don't know how you made all these wonderful discoveries."

The Prefect looked at him and laughed. "You take it lightly!"

"I am speaking to a friend," Angelot said.

"That is all very well. Yes—too good a friend, I fear, from the point of view of duty. But I shall not repent, if you will be warned into prudence yourself, and will warn your uncle."

"I am rather afraid, monsieur, that my father has all the prudence of the family."

The Prefect would have argued further, but suddenly a sound like low thunder, still distant, echoed down the lane.

"What is that?" he said, looking round.

"Cattle, monsieur. Pull right into the bank and give them room to pass," said Angelot.

The gendarmes, who knew the country, had already taken this precaution. They were drawing up in single file by the side of the road, close under the steep bank, pressing into it, in the dark shadow of the pollards. But General Ratoneau, in advance, was riding stolidly forward, clanking along at a quick foot's pace in the very middle of the narrow lane, with all that swaggering air of a conqueror, which was better suited to German fields than to the quiet woody ways of France. Angelot hurried forward.

"Monsieur le Général!" he called out; but Ratoneau, though he must have heard, did not turn his head or take any notice.

"Insolent animal! I might as well leave him to fight it out with the cows," the young fellow muttered; but for the Prefect's sake he ran on, his dog scampering after him, caught up the General, and stretched out a hand to his bridle.

"What the devil do you want!" said the General, lifting his whip.

"There is a herd of cows coming," Angelot shouted, though the blood rushed into his face at the man's involuntary movement. "You must get out of their way, or they will knock you down and trample on you. This is their way home. Draw up under the bank at once."

"I shall get out of nobody's way," roared the General. "But you had better get out of mine, little ape of a Chouan, or—"

The whip quivered in the air; another moment would have brought it down on Angelot's bare hand. He cried out, "Take care!" and in that moment snatched the whip and threw it over the horse's head. It fell into a mass of blackberry briars which made a red and green thicket under the bank just here. The lane turned slightly and was very narrow at this place, with a stony slope upwards. It was a little more than usual like the dry bed of a torrent. Only under the right-hand bank there was a yard of standing-room, where it was possible to draw aside while the crowd of horned beasts rushed past. The thunder of their hoofs was drawing near. The Prefect, fifty yards behind, called out advice to his angry colleague, which fell on deaf ears. Angelot was pelted with some choice specimens of a soldier's vocabulary, as he seized the bridle and tried to pull the horse to the side of the road. But the rider's violent resistance made this impossible. The horse plunged: the General, swearing furiously, did his best to throw Angelot down under its feet. For a minute the young fellow did his best to save the obstinate man in spite of himself, but then he was obliged to let the bridle go, and stepped to the shelter of the bank, while man and horse filled up the roadway with prancing and swearing.

"Give me back my whip, you—" the various epithets which followed were new to Angelot's country ears, but their tone made them serious.

Still, there was something so ridiculous in the General's fury that Angelot could scarcely help laughing in his face as he called out in answer, "When the cows are gone, monsieur, if you ask me civilly! I had to take it, or you would have struck

me, and that was out of the question."

Even as he spoke, the cattle were coming. The lane was filled with a solid mass of padding feet, panting hides, low heads, and long fierce horns. An old bull of unfriendly aspect led the way, and one or two younger bulls came pushing and lowing among the quieter cows. Behind the large horned creatures came a few goats and sheep; then a dog, sharply barking, and a woman, shouting and flourishing her stick. But in this narrow space she had no control over the herd, which poured along like water in a stream's bed, irresistible, unresisted. They knew their own way home from pasture to the yards at La Marinière. This was their own road, worn hollow by no trampling but theirs and that of their ancestors. Anything or anybody they happened to meet always drew aside to let them pass, and they were not as a rule ill-tempered.

General Ratoneau thought he could ride through them, and spurred his restless horse, fresh from Monsieur Joseph's corn, straight at the wedged heads and shoulders of the advancing herd. The horse plunged, shied, tried to bolt; and there were a few moments of inextricable confusion. Angelot shouted to the woman in charge of the cows; she screamed to the dog, which dived among them, barking. Frightened, they scrambled and crushed together so that Angelot was pressed up by their broad sides against the bank, and only lifted himself out of their way by climbing to the trunk of a tree. The sun was setting; the dazzling light, in a sky all gold and red and purple, lay right across the lane: the General's uniform, his horse's smart trappings, flashed and swayed above the brown mass for a moment or two as it pushed down the slope. Then the horse fell, either slipping on a stone or pushed over by the cattle, but fortunately not under their feet. He and his master rolled over together into the briars on the farther side of the lane, and there lay struggling till the beasts had crowded by, hurrying on past the rest of the party, drawn prudently aside in the shelter of the bank.

As soon as they were gone, the Prefect and the gendarmes rode up to help Angelot, who had already pulled the General out of the briars, unhurt, except by scratches. The horse had at once struggled to its feet, and stood trembling in the road.

It was impossible for any one but the sufferer to take such an adventure seriously. Two of the gendarmes were convulsed with laughter; it was only Simon whose native cleverness and keen sense of his own advantage kept his face grave and sympathising, as he handed the General his hat and the other objects which his tumble had sent flying. The Prefect was smiling as he asked

anxiously whether any bones were broken. Angelot trembled with hardly restrained laughter. It had seized him with an overpowering force, when he saw the General's fat figure rise in the air with a most undignified jerk, then being deposited in the thicket with a fine pair of riding boots and shining spurs uppermost. This was so exactly the accident that suited the man's swaggering airs of superiority, Angelot felt that he could almost forgive him his insolent words and looks, could almost bear the incomprehensible language of five minutes ago, the threatened stroke with the whip—ah, by the by, here lay the precious whip, with its silver handle, safely deposited in the bushes out of the cows' way. Angelot magnanimously picked it up and presented it to the General with a bow. He grunted a word meant for thanks, but the eyes that met Angelot's flashed with a dark fury that startled the careless boy and came back to his mind afterwards.

"Whose beasts were those?" the General asked hoarsely.

"They were my father's beasts, monsieur," Angelot answered. "They did not realize, unfortunately—" He broke off under a warning look from the Prefect, who went on with the sentence for him—"No one would regret such a tiresome accident more than your father, I am sure."

"I was going to say so," Angelot murmured softly. "Now if they had been my uncle's cattle—"

The General turned his back and mounted his horse. "The owner does not signify," he growled. "He cannot be punished. But it was either foolishness or malice that brought us along such a road."

"Come, come, General, that was my fault, after all!" the Prefect said pleasantly. "And you must acknowledge that our young friend did his best to save you. We all knew this country and its ways better than you did—it is a pity, but there is no more to be said."

The General seemed to be of the same opinion, for he rode off without a word. Angelot, looking after him, thought that one of these days there might be a good deal more to be said.

But now the Prefect was asking a last direction as to the road, and wishing Angelot good-night, for the sun was actually setting. His last words were: "Adieu, my friend! Be prudent—and make my best compliments to your parents. No doubt we shall meet soon at Lancilly."

"And perhaps without Monsieur le Général!" said Angelot, smiling.

"Possibly! We are not inseparable," the Prefect replied, and waved his hand kindly as he rode away.

"How was it that I did not strike that reptile? he tried to strike me," Angelot reflected as he walked down the quiet lane. "Well! the Prefect and my father would have been vexed, and he had his little punishment. Some day we shall meet independently, and then we shall see, Monsieur Ratoneau, we shall see! But what a somersault the creature made! If the bushes had not broken his fall, he would have been hurt, or killed, perhaps."

He laughed at the remembrance of the scene, and thought how he would describe it to his mother. Then he became grave, remembering all that had gone before. The Prefect was a friend, and a gentleman, neither of which the General could ever be. But it was a serious thought that the Prefect was at present by far the most dangerous person of the two. Uncle Joseph's life and liberty were in his hands, at his mercy. Angelot frowned and whistled as he strode along. How did the Prefect find out all that? Why, of course, those men of his were not mere gendarmes; they were police spies. Especially that one with the villanous face who was lurking round the woods!

"We are all in their hands; they are the devil's own regiment," Angelot said to himself. "How can Monsieur de Mauves bring himself to do such work among his old friends, in his old country! It is inconceivable."

Another rough lane brought Angelot into the rough road that led past the Manor of La Marinière to the church and village lying beneath it, and so on into the valley and across the bridge to Lancilly.

The home of his family was one of those large homesteads, half farm, half castle, which are entirely Angevin in character; and it had not yet crumbled down into picturesque decay. Its white walls, once capable of defence, covered a large space on the eastern slope of the valley; it was much shaded all about by oak, beech, and fir trees, and a tall row of poplars bordered the road between its gateway and the church spire.

The high white arch of the gateway, where a gate had once been, opened on a paved road crossing the lower end of a farmyard, and up to the right were lines of low buildings where the cows, General Ratoneau's enemies, were now being safely housed for the night, and a dove-cote tower, round which a few late

pigeons were flapping. To the left another archway led into a square garden with lines of tall box hedges, where flowers and vegetables grew all together wildly, and straight on, through yet a third gate, Angelot came into a stone court in front of the house, white, tall, and very ancient, with a quaint porch opening straight upon its wide staircase, which seemed a continuation of the broad outside steps where Madame de la Marinière was now giving her chickens their evening meal.

In spite of the large cap and apron that smothered her, it was plain to see where Angelot got his singular beauty. His little mother, once upon a time, had been the loveliest girl in Brittany. Her small, fine, delicate features, clear dark skin, beautiful velvet eyes and cloud of dusky hair that curled naturally,—all this still remained, though youth and freshness and early happiness were gone. Her cheeks were thin, her eyes and mouth were sad, and yet there was hardly a grey hair in that soft mass which she covered and hid so puritanically. She had been married as almost a child, and was still under forty. Her family, very old but very poor, had married her to Urbain de la Marinière, quite without consulting any wishes of hers. He was well off and well connected, though his old name had never belonged exactly to the *grande noblesse*. The Pontvieux were too anxious to dispose of their daughter to consider his free opinions, which, after all, were the fashion in France before 1789, though never in Brittany. And probably Madame de la Marinière's life was saved by her marriage, for she was and remained just as ardently Catholic and Royalist as her relations who died one by one upon the scaffold.

She lived at La Marinière through the Revolution, in outward obedience to a husband whose opinions she detested, and most of whose actions she cordially disapproved, though it was impossible not to love him personally. Gratitude, too, there might very well have been; for Urbain's popularity had not only guarded his wife and son; it had enabled her to keep the old Curé of the village safe at La Marinière till some little liberty was restored to the Church and he was able to return to his post without danger. When madame used hard words of the Empire—and she was frank in her judgments—monsieur would point to the Curé with a smile. And the old man, come back from mass to breakfast at the manor, and resting in the chimney corner, would say, "Not so bad—not so bad!" rubbing his thin hands gently.

"Little mother!" Angelot said, and stepped up into the porch among the chickens.

His eyes, quick to read her face, saw a shadow on it, and he wondered who had done wrong, himself or his father.

"Enfin, te voilà!" said Madame de la Marinière. "Have you brought us any game? Ah, I am glad—" as he showed her his well-filled bag. "Your father came home two hours ago; he expected to find you here; he wanted you to do some service or other for these cousins."

"I am sorry," said Angelot. "I could not leave Uncle Joseph. I have a hundred things to tell you. Some rather serious, and some will make you die of laughing, as they did me."

"Mon Dieu! I should be glad to laugh," said his mother.

Angelot had taken the basket from her hand, and was throwing the chickens their last grain. She stood on the highest step, with a little sigh which might have been of fatigue or of disgust, and her eyes, as she gazed across the valley, were half angry, half melancholy. The sun had gone down behind the opposite hills, and the broad front of the Château de Lancilly, in full view of La Marinière, looked grey and cold against the woods, even in the warm twilight of that rosy evening.

"Strange, that it should be inhabited again!" Angelot had emptied the basket, and stood beside his mother; the chickens bustled and scrambled about the foot of the steps.

"Yes, and as I hear, by all the perfections," said Madame de la Marinière. "Hervé de Sainfoy is more friendly than ever—and well he may be—his wife is supremely pretty and agreeable, his younger girls are most amiable, and as for Hélène, nothing so enchantingly beautiful has ever set foot in Anjou. Take care, my poor Ange, I beseech you."

Angelot laughed. "Then I suppose my father's next duty will be to find a husband for her. I hear she is difficult—or her parents for her, perhaps."

"Who told you so?"

"Monsieur de Mauves."

"What? the Prefect?"

"Yes. He sent his respectful compliments to you. I have been spending the day at Les Chouettes with him and the new General. He—oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"

Angelot burst into a violent fit of laughing, and leaned, almost helpless, against a pillar of the porch.

"Are you mad?" said his mother.

"Ah—" he struggled to say—"if only you had seen the cows—our cows—and the General in the air—oh!"

A faint smile dawned in the depths of her eyes. "You have certainly lost your senses," she said, and slipped her hand into his arm. "Come down into the garden: I like it in the twilight—and that pile of stones over there will not weigh upon our eyes; the trees hide it. Come, my Ange: tell me all your news, serious and laughable. I am glad you were helping your uncle; but I do not like you to be away all day."

"I could not help it, mother," Angelot said. "Yes; I have indeed a great deal to tell you."

They strolled down together into the garden, where the vivid after-glow flushed all the flowers with rose. His mother leaned upon his arm, and they paced along by the tall box hedges. The serious part of the story was long, and interested her far more than the General's comic adventure, at which Angelot could only make her smile, though the telling of it sent him off into another fit of laughter.

"Poor Monsieur de Mauves, to go about with such a strange animal!" she said. "As for you, my child, you grow more childish every day. When will you be a man? Now be serious, for I hear your father coming."

CHAPTER VI

HOW LA BELLE HÉLÈNE TOOK AN EVENING WALK

Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière was always amiable and indulgent. He did not reproach his son for his long absence or ask him to give any account of himself; not, that is, till he had talked to his heart's content, all through the evening meal, of the coming of the Sainfoys, their adventures by the way, their impressions on arrival.

He was glad, on the whole, that he had not organised any public reception. Hervé had decided against it, fearing some jarring notes which might prejudice his wife against the place and the country. As it was, she was fairly well pleased. A few old people in the village had come out of their doors to wave a welcome as the carriages passed; groups of children had thrown flowers; the servants, some sent on from Paris, others hired by Urbain in the neighbourhood, had stood in lines at the entrance. Urbain himself had met them at the door. The Sainfoys, very tired, of course, after their many hours of rough driving, were delighted to find themselves at last within the old walls, deserted twenty years ago. Only the son, now fighting in Spain, had been born at Lancilly; the three girls were children of emigration, of a foreign land.

The excellent Urbain had indeed some charitable work to pride himself upon. Even he himself hardly knew how it had all been managed: the keeping of the château and its archives, the recovery of alienated lands, so that the spending of money in repairing and beautifying was all that was needed to set Lancilly in its place again as one of the chief country houses of Anjou, a centre of society. Urbain had worked for his cousin all these twenty years, quietly and perseveringly. To look at his happy face now, it would seem that he had gained his heart's desire, and that his cousin's gratitude would suffice him for the rest of his life. His eyes were wet as he looked at his wife and said: "There was only one thing lacking—I knew it would be so. If only you and Joseph had gone with me to welcome them! I never felt so insignificant as when I went out alone from that doorway to help my cousins out of the coach. And I saw her look round—Adélaïde—she was surprised, I know, to find me alone."

"Did she ask for me—or for Joseph?" said Madame de la Marinière, in her dry

little voice.

"Not at the moment—no—afterwards, of course. She has charming manners. And she looks so young. It is really hard to believe that she has a son of twenty-two. My dear old Hervé looks much older. His hair is grey. He has quite left off powder; nearly everybody has, I suppose. I wish you had been there! But you will go to-morrow, will you not?"

"Whenever you please," said Madame de la Marinière. "In my opinion, allow me to say, it was much better that I should not be there to-day. You had done everything; all the credit was yours. Madame de Sainfoy, tired and nervous, no doubt,—what could she have done with an unsympathetic old distant cousin, except wish heartily for her absence? No, no, I did not love Adélaïde twenty years ago. I thought her worldly and ambitious then—what should I think her now! I will be civil for your sake, of course,—but my dear Urbain, what have I to do with emigrants who have changed their flag, and have come back false to their old convictions? No—my place is not at Lancilly. Nor is Joseph's—and I hardly believe we should be welcome there."

"My dear, all this is politics!" cried Monsieur Urbain, flourishing his hands in the air. "It is agreed, it is our convention, yours and mine, that we never mention politics. It must be the same between you and our cousins. What does it matter, after all? You live under the Empire, you obey the laws as much as they do. Why should any of us spoil society by waving our private opinions. It is not philosophical, really it is not."

"I did not suppose it was," she said. "I leave philosophy to you, my dear friend."

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at Angelot, who was sitting in silence, watching his father with the rather puzzled and qualified admiration that he usually felt for him. This admiration was not unmixed with fear, for Urbain, so sweet and so clever, could be very stern; it was an iron will that had carried him through the past twenty years. Or rather, perhaps, a will of the finest steel, a character that had a marvellous faculty for bending without being broken.

"And you—" said Monsieur Urbain to his son—"you had a long day's sport with the uncle. Did you get a good bag?"

Angelot told him. "But that was only by myself till breakfast time," he said. "Since then I have been helping my uncle in other ways. I am afraid you wanted me, monsieur, but it was an important matter, and I could not leave him."

"Ah! Well, the other was not a very important matter—at least, I found another messenger who did as well. It was to ride to Sonnay, to tell the *coiffeur* there to come to Lancilly early to-morrow. Madame de Sainfoy's favourite maid was ill, and stayed behind in Paris. No one else can dress her hair. It was she herself who remembered the old hairdresser at Sonnay, a true artist of the old kind. I had a strong impression that he—well, that he died unfortunately in those unhappy days—you understand—but she thought he had even then a son growing up to succeed him, and it seemed worth while to send to enquire."

Angelot smiled; his mother frowned. "I am glad you were not here!" she murmured under her breath.

Later on they were sitting in the curious, gloomy old room which did duty for salon and library at La Marinière. Nothing here of the simple, cheerful, though old-time grace of Les Chouettes. Louis Quatorze chairs, with old worked seats, stood in a solemn row on the smooth stone floor; the walls were hung with ancient tapestry, utterly out of date and out of fashion now. A large bookcase rose from the floor to the dark painted beams of the ceiling, at one end of the room. It contained many books which Madame de la Marinière would gladly have burnt on the broad hearth, under her beautiful white stone chimney-piece—itself out of date, old and monstrous in the eyes of the Empire. But Madame de la Marinière was obliged to live with her husband's literary admirations, as well as with his political opinions, so Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Helvétius, with many earlier and healthier geniuses, such as Montaigne, looked down in handsomely gilt bindings from the upper shelves. High up they were: there was a concession. In the lower shelves lived Bousset, and other Catholic writers; the modern spirit in religion being represented by Chateaubriand's five volumes of *Le Géne du Christianisme* and two volumes of *Les Martyrs*. Corneille and Racine, among poets, had the honour of accessibility. When Monsieur Urbain wanted one of his own books, he had to fetch a little ladder from a cupboard in the hall. Angelot, from a child, was forbidden to use that ladder. The prohibition was hardly necessary. Angelot seldom opened a book at all, or read for more than five minutes at a time. He followed his uncle in this, as in so much else. The moors, the woods, the riverside, were monsieur Joseph's library: as to literal books, he had none but a few volumes on sport and on military history.

In this old room Madame de la Marinière would sit all the evening long, working at her tapestry frame; Urbain would read, sometimes aloud; Angelot would draw, or make flies and fishing tackle. On this special evening the little lady sat down to her frame—she was making new seats in cross-stitch for the old chairs against

the wall. Two candles, which lighted the room very dimly, and a tall glass full of late roses, stood on a solid oak table close to her chair.

She made a charming picture as she sat there, seemingly absorbed in her work, yet glancing up every instant to listen to the talk of the two men. Angelot was giving his father an account of the day's adventures, and Monsieur Urbain was as much annoyed as his easy-going temper would allow.

"Is he not mad and bad, that brother of mine!" he cried. "But what was it all about? What were they plotting and planning, these foolish men? Why could he not have two more places laid at table and entertain the whole party together? That would have been the clever thing to do. The Prefect has nothing special against any of those gentlemen—or had not, before this. What were they plotting, Angelot?"

Angelot knew nothing about that. He thought their consciences were bad, from the readiness with which they scuttled off into the woods. And from things they said as they went, he thought they and the imperial officers were best apart. The Messieurs d'Ombré especially, from their talk, would have been dangerous companions at table. Pistols, prisons, a general insurrection and so forth.

"My poor brother will be punished enough," said Urbain, "if he has to spend his time in Purgatory with these d'Ombrés."

He glanced at his wife, who did not like such allusions as this; but she bent over her frame and said nothing.

"Go on, tell me all," he said to his son.

Angelot told him the whole story. He was an emotional person, with a strong sense of humour. The Prefect's generosity brought tears into his eyes; the General's adventure made him laugh heartily, but he was soon grave again.

"I have not seen General Ratoneau," he said. "But I have heard that he is a very revengeful man, and I am sorry you should have offended him, my boy."

"He offended me!" said Angelot, laughing. "I tried to save him; he swore at me and would not be saved. Then he tried to strike me and I would not be struck. And it was I who pulled him out of the bushes, and a clumsy lump he was, too. I assure you, father, the debt is on his side, not mine. One of these days he shall pay it, if I live."

"Nonsense! forget all about it as soon as you can," said his father. "As to his language, that was natural to a soldier. Another time, leave a soldier to fight his own battles, even with a herd of cows. To run between a soldier and his enemy is like interfering between husband and wife, or putting your hand between the bark and the tree. Never do it again."

"You do not practise what you preach," said Madame de la Marinière, while Angelot looked a little crestfallen. "I wonder who has run between more adversaries than yourself, in the last few years!"

"My dear friend, I never yet differed with an imperial officer, or presumed to know better than my superiors, even on Angevin country subjects," said her husband, smiling.

"Ah!" she sighed. Her brows wrinkled up a little, and there was a touch of scorn in the pretty lines of her mouth. "Ah! Ange and I will never reach your philosopher's level," she said.

"I wish—I wish—" Monsieur Urbain muttered, pacing up and down, "that Joseph would grow a little wiser as he grows older. The Prefect is excellent—if it were only the Prefect—but the fellows who were with him—yes, it would be disagreeable to feel that there was a string round Joseph's neck and that the police held the end of it. A secret meeting to-day—at Joseph's house—and Joseph's and Angelot's the only names known!"

"Ange was not at the meeting!" cried Madame de la Marinière.

"I know—but who will believe that?"

Angelot was a little impressed. He had very seldom seen his father, so hopeful, so even-tempered, with a cloud of anxiety on his face. The very rarity of such uneasiness made it catching. A sort of apprehensive chill seemed to creep from the corners of the dark old room, steal along by the shuttered windows, hover about the gaping cavern of the hearth. It became an air, breathing through the room in the motionless September night, so that the candle-flames on madame's table bent and flickered suddenly.

Then the dogs out in the yard began to bark.

"They are barking at the moon," said Monsieur Urbain. "No, at somebody passing by."

"Somebody is coming in, father," said Angelot, "I hear footsteps in the court—they are on the steps—in the porch. Shall I see who it is?"

"Do, my boy."

The mother turned pale, half rose, as if to stop him. "Not the police!" were the words on her lips; but her husband's calmness reassured her.

Angelot went out into the hall, and reached the house-door just as somebody outside began to knock upon it. He opened it, and saw two figures standing in the half-darkness: for the moon was not yet very high, and while she bathed all the valley in golden light, making Lancilly's walls and windows shine with a fairy beauty, the house at La Marinière still cast a broad shadow. The figures were of a man and a woman, strangers to Angelot; he, standing in the dark doorway, was equally strange to them and only dimly visible. The stranger lifted his hand courteously to his hat, and there was a touch of hesitation in his very musical voice, as if—which was the fact—he did not know to whom he was speaking.

"Madame de la Marinière is at home? She receives this evening?"

"Certainly, monsieur," said Angelot. "One moment, and I will fetch a light—madame—" and he bowed low to the stranger's companion.

"What? Are you Angelot? Shake hands: there is light enough for that," said the visitor with sudden friendliness. "Let me present you to my daughter Hélène—your cousin, in fact."

The slender, silent girl who stood by Monsieur de Sainfoy might have been pretty or ugly—there was no light to show—but Angelot seemed to know by instinct at once all that he was to discover afterwards. He bowed again, and kissed Hélène's glove, and felt a most unreasonable dizziness, a wildfire rushing through his young veins; all this for the first time in his boyish life and from no greater apparent cause than the sweetness of her voice when she said, "Bonjour, mon cousin!"

Then, before he could turn round, his father was there, carrying one of the heavy candlesticks, and all the porch was full of light and of cheerful voices.

"I am triumphant," cried the Comte de Sainfoy. "My wife said I could not find my way. I felt sure I had not forgotten boyish days so completely, and Hélène was ready to trust herself to me, and glad to wait upon madame her cousin."

"She is most welcome—you are both most welcome," the beaming master of the house assured him. "Come in, dear neighbours, I beg. What happiness! What an end to all this weary time! If a few things in life were different, I could say I had nothing left to wish for."

"A few things? Can we supply them, dear Urbain?" said the Comte, affectionately.

"No, Hervé, no. They do not concern you, my beloved friend. On your side all is perfection. But alas! you are not everybody, or everywhere. Never mind! This is a joy, an honour, indeed, to make one forget one's troubles."

Angelot had taken the candlestick from his father as they crossed the hall. He carried it in before the party and set it down in its place, then stepped back into the shadow while Monsieur Urbain brought them in, and his mother, still pale, and a little shy or stiff in manner, went forward to receive them.

"After twenty years!" The Comte de Sainfoy bowed low over the small hand that lay in his, thin, delicate, if not so white and soft as a court lady's hand. His lips touched it lightly; he straightened himself, and looked smiling into her face. He had always admired Anne de Pontvieux. He might himself have thought of marrying her, in those last days of old France, from which so great a gulf now parted them, if her family had been richer and more before the world. As a young man, he had been surprised at Urbain's good fortune, and slightly envious of it.

"Utterly unchanged, belle cousine!" he said. "What does he mean, that discontented man, by finding his lot anything short of perfection! Here you have lived, you and he, in that quietest place that exists in the very heart of the storm. Both of you have kept your youth, your freshness, while as for me, wanderings and anxieties have turned me as grey as a badger."

"Your wife is still young and beautiful, I hear," said Madame de la Marinière. "And your hair, cousin, is the only thing that proves you more than twenty. At any rate, you have not lost a young man's genius for paying compliments."

"My compliments are simple truth, as they always were, even before I lived in more plain-spoken countries than this," said the Comte. "And now let me ask your kindness for this little eldest girl of mine—the eldest child that I have here—you know Georges is with the army."

"I know," said Madame de la Marinière.

Her look had softened, though it was still grave and a little distant. It was with a manner perfectly courteous, but not in the least affectionate, that she drew Hélène towards her and kissed her on the cheek. "She is more like you than her mother," she said. "I am charmed to make your acquaintance, my dear."

Words, words! Angelot knew his mother, and knew that whatever pretty speeches politeness might claim, she did not, and never could rejoice in the return of the cousins to Lancilly. But it amused and astonished him to notice the Comte's manner to his mother. Did it please her? he wondered. Gratitude to his father was right and necessary, but did she care for these airs of past and present devotion to herself, on the part of a man who had outraged all her notions of loyalty? It began to dawn on Angelot that he knew little of the world and its ways.

Standing in the background, he watched those four, and a more interesting five minutes he had never yet known. These were shadows become real: politics, family and national, turned into persons.

There stood his father beside the man to whose advantage he had devoted his life; whom he had loved as that kind of friend who sticks closer than a brother, almost with the adoration of a faithful dog, ever since the boys of the castle and of the old manor played together about the woods of La Marinière and Lancilly.

They were a contrast, those two. Urbain was short and broad, with quick eyes, a clever brow, a strong, good-tempered mouth and chin. He was ugly, and far from distinguished: Joseph had carried off the good looks and left the brains for him. Hervé de Sainfoy was tall, slight, elegant; his face was handsome, fair, and sleepy, the lower part weak and irresolute. A beard, if fashion had allowed it, would have become him well. His expression was amiable, his smile charming, with a shade of conscious superiority.

But Angelot understood, when he remembered it, the Prefect's remark that the Emperor found Monsieur de Sainfoy "a little half-hearted."

However, from that evening, Angelot ceased to think of Monsieur de Sainfoy as the unknown cousin, his father's friend, the master of Lancilly; he was Hélène's father, and thus to be, next to herself, the most important personage in poor Angelot's world. For it is not to be imagined that those few minutes, or even one of them, were spent in noting the contrast between the cousins, or in considering

the Comte's manner to Madame de la Marinière, and hers to him. There in the light of the candles, curtseying to the unknown cousin with a simple reverence, accepting her kiss with a faint smile of pleasure, stood the loveliest woman that young Angelot had ever seen, ever dreamed of—if his dreams had been occupied with such matters at all! Hélène was taller than French women generally; taller than his mother, very nearly as tall as himself. She was like a lily, he thought; one of those white lilies that grew in the broad border under the box hedge, and with which his mother decked the Virgin's altar, not listening at all to the poor old Curé when he complained that the scent made his head ache. Hélène had thrown off the hooded cloak that covered her white gown; the lovely masses of fair hair seemed almost too heavy for her small, bent head.

"No wonder they wanted a *coiffeur*! Oh, why was I not here to fetch him!" thought Angelot.

The beauty of whiteness of skin and perfect regularity of feature is sometimes a little cold; but Hélène was flushed with her walk in the warm night, her lips were scarlet; and if her grey eyes were strangely sad and wistful, they were also so beautiful in size, shape, and expression that Angelot felt he could gaze for ever and desire no change.

He started and blushed when his own name roused him from staring breathlessly at Mademoiselle Hélène, who since the lights came had given him one or two curious, half-veiled glances.

"And now let me congratulate you on this fine young man," said Monsieur de Sainfoy in his pleasant voice. "The age of my Georges, is he not? Yes, I remember his christening. His first name was Ange—I thought it a little confiding, you know, but no doubt it is justified. I forgot the rest—and I do not know why you have turned him into Angelot?"

Madame de la Marinière smiled; this was a way to her heart.

"Yes, it is justified," she said proudly. "Ange-Marie-Joseph-Urbain is his name. As to the nickname, it is something literary. I refer you to his father."

"It is a name to keep him true to his province," said Monsieur Urbain. "Read Ronsard, my friend. It was the name he gave to Henry, Duc d'Anjou. But I must fetch the book, and read you the pretty pastoral."

"My dear friend, you must excuse me. I am perfectly satisfied. A very good name, Angelot! But to read or listen to that ancient poetry before the flood—"

They all laughed. "What a wonderful man he is!" said the Comte to Madame Urbain. "As poetical as he is practical."

It all seemed pleasant trifling, then and for the rest of the evening. The young countryman of Ronsard's naming was rather silent and shy, and the Comte's daughter had not much to say; the elders talked for the whole party. This, they thought, was quite as it should be.

But the boy who had said that morning, "Young girls are hardly companions for me," and had talked lightly of his father's finding a husband for Mademoiselle de Sainfoy, lay down that night with a girl's face reigning in his dreams; and went so far as to tell himself that it was for good or evil, for time and for eternity.

CHAPTER VII

THE SLEEP OF MADEMOISELLE MOINEAU

"We must make the best of it," said Madame de Sainfoy. "To be practical is the great thing. I know you agree with me."

She had a dazzling smile, utterly without sweetness. Madame de la Marinière said it was like the flashing of sunbeams on ice; but it had a much more warming and inspiring effect on Urbain.

"It is one of the few consolations in life," he said, "to meet with supreme good sense like yours."

They were standing together in one of the deep windows of the Château de Lancilly; a window which looked out to the garden front towards the valley and La Marinière. A deep dry moat surrounded the great house on all sides; here, as on the other front, where there were wings and a courtyard, it was approached by a stiff avenue, a terrace, and a bridge. But this ancient and gloomy state of things could not be allowed to continue. An army of peasants was hard at work filling up the moat, laying out winding paths in the park, making preparations for the "English garden" of a thousand meaningless twists leading to nowhere, which was the Empire's idea of beauty. Monsieur and Madame de Sainfoy would have no rest till their stately old château was framed in this kind of landscape gardening, utterly out of character with it. It was only Monsieur Urbain's experience which had saved trees from being cut down in full leaf, to let in points of view, and had delayed the planting in hot September weather of a whole forest of shrubs on the sloping bank, where the moat had once been.

The interior of the house, too, was undergoing a great reformation. Madame de Sainfoy had sent down a quantity of modern furniture from Paris, the arrangement of which had caused the worthy Urbain a good deal of perplexity. He had prided himself on preserving many ancient splendours of Louis XIV, XV, XVI, not from any love for these relics of a former society, but because good taste and sentiment alike showed him how entirely they belonged to these old rooms and halls, where the ponderous, carved chimney-pieces rose from floor to painted ceiling, blazoned with arms which not even the Revolution had cut away.

But Madame de Sainfoy's idea was to sweep everything off: the tapestries, which she considered grotesque and hideous, from the walls; the rows of solemn old chairs and sofas, the large screens and heavy oak tables, the iron dogs from the fireplace, on which so many winter logs had flamed and died down into a heap of grey ashes. All must go, and the old saloon must be made into a modern drawing-room of the Empire.

Madame de la Marinière, being old-fashioned and prejudiced, resented these changes, which seemed to her both monstrous and ungrateful. She was angry with her husband for the angelic patience with which he bore them, throwing himself with undimmed enthusiasm into the carrying out of every wish, every new-fangled fancy, that Hervé and Adélaïde de Sainfoy had brought from Paris with them. If he was disappointed at the bundling off into garret and cellar of so much of Lancilly's old and hardly-kept glory, he only showed it by a shrug and a smile.

"If one does not know, one must be content to learn," he said. "A modern fish wants a modern shell, my dear Anne. I may have been foolish to forget it. The atmosphere that you enjoy gives Adélaïde the blues. Come, I will quote Scripture. 'New wine must be put into new bottles.'"

"Then, on the whole, it was a pity Lancilly was not burnt down," said his wife.

"Ah, Lancilly! Lancilly will see a few more fashions yet," he said.

And now he stood, quite happy and serene, in the cold sunshine of Adélaïde's smile, and together they watched the earthworks rising outside, and he agreed with her as to the necessity of being modern in everything, of marching with one's time, regretting nothing, using the present and making the best of it. She was utterly materialist and baldly practical. Her manners were frank and simple, she had suffered, she had studied the world and knew it, and used it without a scruple for her own advantage. The time and the court of Napoleon knew such women well: they had the fearless dignity of high rank, holding their own, in spite of all the Emperor's vulgarity; and the losses and struggles of their lives had given them a hard eye for the main chance, scarcely to be matched by any *bourgeois* shopkeeper. And with all this they had a real admiration for military glory. Success, in fact, was their God and their King.

Far down below in the park, within sight of the windows, Monsieur de Sainfoy was strolling about, watching the workmen, and talking to them with the pleasant grace which always made him popular. With him was young Angelot,

who had walked across with his father on that and several other mornings. It seemed as if Uncle Joseph and Les Chouettes had lost a little of their attraction, since Lancilly was inhabited. Angelot brought his gun, and Cousin Hervé, when he had time and energy, took his, and they had an hour or two's sport round about the woods and marshes and meadows of Lancilly. Once or twice Monsieur de Sainfoy brought the young man in to breakfast; his father was often there, in attendance on the Comtesse and her alterations. She took very little notice of Angelot, beyond a smile when he kissed her hand. He was of no particular use, and did not interest her; she was not fond of his mother, and thought him like her; it was not worth while to be kind to him for the sake of his father, whose devotion did not depend, she knew, on any such attentions.

Angelot was rather awed by her coldness, though he said nothing about it, even to his mother. And after all, he did not go to Lancilly to be entertained by Madame de Sainfoy. He went for the sake of a look, a possible word, or even a distant sight of the girl whose lovely face and sad eyes troubled him sleeping and waking, whose presence drew him with strong cords across the valley and made the smallest excuse a good reason for following his father to Lancilly. But he never spoke to Hélène, except formally and in public, till that day when he lingered about with his cousin in the park, watching the men as they dug the paths for the English garden, while Madame de Sainfoy and Monsieur Urbain talked good sense high up in the window.

Presently two figures approached the new garden, crossing the park from the old avenue, and Monsieur de Sainfoy went to meet them with an air of cordial welcome.

"Who are those people?" said the Comtesse, putting up her eyeglass.

"It is my brother Joseph and his little daughter," Urbain answered. "He has his gun, I see, as usual. I suppose he was shooting in this direction."

"Does he take the child out shooting with him? He is certainly very eccentric."

Urbain shrugged his shoulders. "Poor dear Joseph! A little, perhaps. Yes, he is unlike other people. To tell you the truth, I am only too glad when his odd fancies spend themselves on the management of Henriette."

"Or mis-management! He will ruin the child. He brought her here the other day, and she appeared to me quite savage."

"Really, madame! Poor Henriette! She is a sociable child and clever, too. My wife and Angelot are very fond of her. I think she must have been shy in your presence."

"Oh, not at all. She talked to Hervé like a grown-up woman. I was amused. When I say 'savage,' I mean that she had evidently been in no society, and had not the faintest idea how a young person of her age is expected to behave. She was far more at her ease than Hélène, for instance."

"Ah, dear madame! there is something pleasing, is there not, in such a frank trust in human nature! The child is very like her father."

"Those manners may be pretty in a child of six," said Madame de Sainfoy, "but they are quite out of place in a girl of her age—how old is she?"

"I don't exactly know. Twelve or thirteen, I think."

"Then there is still some hope for her. She may be polished into shape. I shall suggest to your brother that she come here every day to take lessons with Sophie and Lucie. I dare say she is very ignorant."

"I am afraid she is. What a charming idea! How like your kindness! My brother will certainly accept your offer with enthusiasm. I shall insist upon it."

"He will, if he is a wise man," said Madame de Sainfoy. They both laughed: evidently the wisdom of Monsieur Joseph was not proverbial in the family. "Mademoiselle Moineau is an excellent governess, though she is growing old," she went on. "I have known her make civilised women out of the most unpromising material. I shall tell your brother that I consider it settled. It will be good for Sophie and Lucie, too, to have the stimulus of a companion."

"You are not afraid that—You know my brother's very strong opinions?"

"Do you think a child of twelve is likely to make converts?" she said, with an amused smile. "No, cousin. The influence will be the other way, but your brother will not be foolish enough, I hope, to consider that a danger."

Urbain shook his head gently: he would answer for nothing. He murmured, "A charming plan! The best thing that could happen to the child."

"A pity, too," said Madame de Sainfoy, looking out of the window, "that she should grow up without any young companions but your son. Where are they

going now?"

"I don't know," said Urbain.

For a moment they watched silently, while Angelot and Henriette left the others in the garden, and walked away together, turning towards the château, and then disappearing behind a clump of trees.

"I know," said the Comtesse. "I told Hervé something of this plan of mine, and he approved highly: he has an old family affection for your brother. He is sending the young people to find Sophie and Lucie; they are out walking in the wood with Mademoiselle—Hélène is reading Italian in her own room."

She seemed to add this as an after-thought, and the faintest smile curled Monsieur Urbain's lips as he heard her. "No danger, dear Comtesse," he felt inclined to say. "My boy's heart is in the woods and fields—and he is discreet, too. You might even trust him for five minutes with that beautiful, silent girl of yours."

Had Madame de Sainfoy made some miscalculation as to her daughter's hours of study? or was it Hélène's own mistake? or had the sunshine and the waving woods, the barking of dogs, the chattering of workmen, all the flood of new life outside old Lancilly, made it impossible to sit reading in a chilly, thick-walled room and tempted the girl irresistibly to break her mother's strict rules. However it may have happened—when Angelot and Riette, laughing and talking, entered the wood beyond the château, not only square Sophie and tall Lucie and their fat little governess, but Mademoiselle Hélène herself, were found wandering along the soft path, through the glimmering maze of green flicked with gold.

Sophie and Lucie were good-natured girls, enchanted to see the new little cousin. They admired her dark eyes, the delicate smallness of her frame, a contrast with their own more solid fairness. In their family, Hélène had taken all the beauty; there was not much left for them, but they were honest girls and knew how to admire. Riette on her side, untroubled with any shyness or self-consciousness, quite innocent of the facts that her dress was old-fashioned and her education more than defective, was delighted to improve her acquaintance with the new cousins. She could tell them a thousand things they did not know. To begin with, Lancilly itself, the woods, the walled gardens and courts, even the staircases and galleries of the house—all was more familiar to her than to them. She and Angelot had found Lancilly a splendid playground, ever since she was old enough to walk so far; they had spent many happy hours there in digging out

rabbits, catching rats, birds-nesting, playing *cache-cache*, and other charming employments. She enlarged on these in the astonished ears of Sophie and Lucie, walking between them with linked arms, pulling them on with a dancing step, while they listened, fascinated, to the gay little spirit who led them where she pleased. It did not seem so certain, to look at the three young girls, that Madame de Sainfoy was right as to influence. But no political talk, no party secrets, escaped from the loyal lips of Riette. A word of warning from Angelot—a word which her father would not have dreamed of saying—had closed her mouth on subjects such as these. She could be friendly with her cousins, yet true to her father's friends.

"Let us go to the great garden," she said. "Have you seen the sundial, and the fish-ponds? You don't know the way? Ah, my dear children, but what discoveries you are going to make!"

"Sophie—Lucie—where are you going? Come back, come back!" cried Mademoiselle Moineau, who was pacing slowly behind with Angelot and Hélène.

But Sophie and Lucie could not stop if they wished it; an impetuous little whirlwind was carrying them along.

"To the garden—to the garden!" they called out as they fled. Mademoiselle Moineau was distracted. She was fat, she was no longer young; she could not race after the rebellious children; and even if she could, it was impossible to leave Hélène and Angelot alone in the wood.

"Where are they going?" she said helplessly to the young man.

He explained amiably that they were perfectly safe with his little cousin, who knew every corner of the place, and while Mademoiselle Moineau groaned, and begged that he would show her the way to the garden, he ventured a look and smile at Hélène. A sudden brightness came into her face, and she laughed softly. "Henriette might be your little sister," she said. "You are all alike, I think—at least monsieur your uncle, and madame your mother, and Henriette, and you—"

"Yes—I've often thought Uncle Joseph ought to be my mother's brother, not my father's," said Angelot.

He dared not trust himself to look very hard at Hélène. He kept his lightness of tone and manner, the friendly ease which was natural to him, though his pulses

were beating hard from her nearness, and though her gentle air of intimacy gave him almost a pang of passionate joy. How sweet she was, how simple, when for a moment she forgot the mysterious sadness which seemed sometimes to veil her whole nature! Angelot knew that she liked and trusted him, the strange young country cousin who looked younger than he was. She thought him a friendly boy, perhaps. Her eyes, when she looked at him, seemed to smile divinely; they were no longer doubtful and questioning, as at first. He longed to kneel down on the pine-needles and kiss the hem of her gown; he longed, he, the careless sportsman, the philosopher's son, to lay his life at her feet, to do what she pleased with. But Mademoiselle Moineau was there.

They walked on in the vast old precincts of Lancilly, following the children. It was all deep shade, with occasional patches of sunshine; great forest trees, wide-spreading, stretched their arms across sandy tracks, once roads, that wandered away at the back of the château: through the leaves they could see mountains of grey moss-stained roof and the peaked top of the old *colombier*. All the yards and buildings were now between them and the house itself. Along by a crumbling wall, once white, and roofed with tiles, they came to the broken-down gate of the garden. It was not much better than a wilderness; yet there were loaded fruit-trees, peaches, plums, figs, vines weighed down with masses of small sweet grapes, against the ancient trellis of the wall. Everywhere a forest of weeds; the once regular paths covered with burnt grass and stones and rubbish; the fountain choked and dry.

Mademoiselle Moineau groaned many times as she hobbled along; the walking was rough, the way seemed endless, and the garden, when they reached it, a sun-baked desert. Angelot guided them to the very middle, where the old sundial was, and while he showed it to Hélène, the little governess sat down on a stone bench that encircled a large mulberry tree, the only shady place in the garden. They could hear the children's voices not far off. Hélène sat down near Mademoiselle Moineau. Angelot went away and came back with a leaf filled with fruit, to which Hélène helped herself with a smile. As he was going to hand it to Mademoiselle Moineau, she put out a hand to stop him.

"She is asleep," she whispered.

It was true. The warmth, the fatigue, the sudden rest and silence, had been too much for the little lady, who was growing old. Her eyes were shut, her hands were folded, her chin had sunk upon her chest; and even as Angelot stared in unbelieving joy, a distinct snore set Hélène suddenly laughing.

"I must wake her," she said softly. "We must go, we must find the children."

"Oh no, no!" he murmured. "Let the poor thing rest—see how tired she is! The children are safe—you can hear them. Do not be so cruel to her—and to me."

"*I* cruel?" said Hélène; and she added half to herself—"No—other people are cruel—not I."

Angelot did not understand her. She looked up at him rather dreamily, as he stood before her. Perhaps the gulf of impossibility between them kept her, brought up and strictly sheltered as she had been, from realising the meaning of the young man's face. It was very grave; Angelot had never before felt so utterly in earnest. His eyes were no longer sleepy, for all the strength of his nature, the new passion that possessed him, was shining in them. It was a beautiful, daring face, so attractive that Hélène gazed for a speechless moment or two before she understood that the beauty and life and daring were all for her. Then the pale girl flushed a little and dropped her eyes. She had had compliments enough in Paris, had been told of her loveliness, but never with silent speech such as this. This conquest, though only of a young cousin, had something different, something new. Hélène, hopeless and tired at nineteen, confessed to herself that this Angelot was adorable. With a sort of desperation she gave herself up to the moment's enjoyment, and said no more about waking Mademoiselle Moineau, who snored on peacefully, or about finding the children. She allowed Angelot to sit down on her other side, and listened to him with a sweet surprise as he murmured in her ear—"Who is cruel, then, tell me! No, you are not, you are an angel—but who are you thinking of?"

"No one in particular, I suppose," the girl answered. "Life itself is cruel—cruel and sad. You do not find it so?"

"Life seems to me the most glorious happiness—at this moment, certainly."

"Ah, you must not say those things. Let us wake Mademoiselle Moineau."

"No," Angelot said. "Not till you have told me why you find life sad."

"Because I do not see anything bright in it. Books tell one that youth is so happy, so gay—and as for me, ever since I was a child, I have had nothing but weariness. All that travelling about, that banishment from one's own country—ill tempers, discontent, narrow ways, hard lessons—straps and backboards because I was not strong—loneliness, not a friend of my own age—and then this horrible

Paris—and things that might have happened there, if my father had not saved me—" She stopped, with a little catch in her breath, and Angelot understood, remembering the Prefect's talk at Les Chouettes, a few days before.

This was the girl they talked of sacrificing in a political marriage.

"But now that you are here—now that you have come home, you will be happy?" he said, and his voice shook a little.

"Perhaps—I hope so. Oh, you must not take me too much in earnest," Hélène said, and there was an almost imploring look in her eyes. She added quickly—"I hope I shall often see madame your mother. What a beautiful face she has—and I am sure she is good and happy."

This was a fine subject for Angelot. He talked of his mother, her religion, her charity, her heroism, while Hélène listened and asked childish questions about the life at La Marinière, to which her evening visit had attracted her strangely. And the minutes flew on, and these two cousins forgot the outside world and all its considerations in each other's eyes, and the shadows lengthened, till at last the children's voices began to come nearer. Mademoiselle Moineau snored on, it is true, but the enchanting time was coming to an end.

"Remember," Angelot said, "nothing sad or cruel can happen to you any more. You are in your own country; your own people will take care of you and love you—we are relations, remember—my father and mother and my uncle and Riette—and I, Hélène!"

He ended in the lowest whisper, and suddenly his slight brown hands closed on hers, and his dark face bent over her.

"Never—never be sad again! I adore you—my sweet, my beautiful—"

Very softly their lips met. Hélène, entirely carried out of herself, let him hold her for a moment in his arms, then started up with flaming cheeks in consternation, and began to hurry towards the gate.

At the same moment the three young girls came down the path towards the sun-dial, and Mademoiselle Moineau, waking with a violent start, got up and hobbled stiffly forward into the sunshine.

"Where are you, my children?" she cried. "Sophie, Lucie, it is quite time to go back to your lessons—see, your sister is gone already. Say good-by to your

cousins, my dears—"

SUDDENLY HIS SLIGHT BROWN HANDS CLOSED ON HERS.
SUDDENLY HIS SLIGHT BROWN HANDS CLOSED ON HERS.

"We may all go back to the château together, madame, may we not?" said Angelot with dancing eyes, and he hurried the children on, all chattering of the wonderful corners and treasures that Henriette had shown them.

But Mademoiselle Hélène flew before like the wind, and was not to be overtaken.

In the meanwhile, Madame de Sainfoy consulted Cousin Urbain about her new silk hangings for the large drawing-room, and also as to a list of names for a dinner, at which the chief guests were to be the Baron de Mauves, the Prefect of the Department, and Monsieur le Général Ratoneau, commanding the troops in that western district.

"And I suppose it is necessary to invite all these excellent cousins?" Madame de Sainfoy asked her husband that evening, when the cousins were gone.

"Entirely necessary, my dear Adélaïde!"

CHAPTER VIII

HOW MONSIEUR JOSEPH MET WITH MANY ANNOYANCES

Dark clouds were hanging over Les Chouettes. In the afternoon there had been a thunderstorm, with heavy rain which had refreshed the burnt slopes and filled the stream that wound through the meadows under the lines of poplars and willows, and set great orange slugs crawling among the wet grass. The storm had passed, but the air was heavy, electric, and still. The sun had set gloriously, wildly, like a great fire behind the woods, and now all the eastern sky was flaming red, as if from a still more tremendous fire somewhere beyond the moors and hills.

Two men were sitting on a bench under Monsieur Joseph's south wall; himself and white-haired Joubard, the farmer; before them was a table with bottles and glasses. Joubard had been trying a wine that rivalled his own. Monsieur Joseph had entertained him very kindly, as his way was; but the shadow of the evening rested on Monsieur Joseph's face. He was melancholy and abstracted; he frowned; he even ground his teeth with restrained irritation. Joubard too looked grave. He had brought a warning which had been lightly taken, he thought; yet looking sideways at Monsieur Joseph, he could not help seeing that something, possibly his words, was weighing on the little gentleman. There were plenty of other things to talk about; the farm, the vintage, the war in Spain, the chances of Martin's return, the works at Lancilly. Monsieur Joseph and Joubard were both talkers; they were capable of chattering for hours about nothing; but this evening conversation flagged, at least on Monsieur Joseph's side. Perhaps it was the weather.

At last the old man was ready to go. He stood up, staring hard at Monsieur Joseph in the twilight.

"Monsieur forgives me?" he said. "Perhaps I should have said nothing; the police have their ways. They may ask questions without malice. And yet one feels the difference between an honest man and a spy. Well, I could have laughed, if I did not hate the fellow. As if the talk of a few honest gentlemen could hurt the State!"

"Some day I hope it will," said Monsieur Joseph, coolly. "When the rising comes, Joubard, you will be on the right side—if only to avenge your sons, my good man!"

Joubard opened his eyes wider, hesitated, pushed his fingers through his bushy hair.

"Me, monsieur! The rising! But, monsieur, I never said I was a Chouan! I am afraid of some of them, though not of you, monsieur. They are people who can be dangerous. A rising, you said! Then—"

"Don't talk of it now," said Monsieur Joseph, impatiently.

As he spoke, little Henriette came round the corner of the house with some blue feathers in her hand. Tobie had been out shooting, making havoc among the wild birds, large and small, and sparing the squirrels, with regret, to please his master. Owls, kites, rooks, magpies, jays, thrushes, finches; those that were eatable went into pies, and the prettiest feathers were dressed and made into plumes for Mademoiselle Henriette. She was fond of adorning her straw bonnet with jay's feathers, which, as her uncle Urbain remarked, gave her the appearance of one of Monsieur de Chateaubriand's squaws. "See, papa, what Tobie has brought me," she cried. "Good evening, Maître Joubard! How are your chickens? and when will the vintage begin?"

Joubard would gladly have entered on a lengthy gossip with Mademoiselle Henriette, but Monsieur Joseph, with a shortness very unlike him, brought the interview to an end.

"You must not keep Maître Joubard now," he said. "It is late, and he must get back to the farm. Bonsoir, Joubard."

The farmer waved his large hat. "Bonsoir, la compagnie!" and with a smile departed.

As he passed the stables, Tobie, still carrying his gun, slipped out and joined him.

"Anything wrong with the master, Tobie?" said the old man, curiously. "His tongue has an edge to it this evening; he is not like himself."

"I think I know," said Tobie, and they strolled together up the lane.

"Go to bed, my child," said Monsieur Joseph to his little daughter. "It is too damp now for you to be out-of-doors. Yes, very pretty feathers. Good night, mon petit chou!"

Riette flung herself upon him and hugged him like a young bear.

"Ah," he exclaimed, as soon as he could speak, "and is this the way to behave to one's respected father? Do you suppose, now, that Mesdemoiselles de Sainfoy crush their parents to death like this?"

"I dare say not," said Riette, with another hug and a shower of kisses. "But their parents are grand people. They have not a little bijou of a papa like mine. And as for their mamma, she is a cardboard sort of woman."

"All that does not matter. Manners should be the same, whether people are tall or short, great or humble. You know nothing about it, my poor Riette."

"Nor do you!"

"It is becoming plain to me that you must be sent to learn manners."

"Where?"

"Go to bed at once. I must think about it. There, child—enough—I am tired this evening."

"Ah, you have had so many visitors to-day, and that old Joubard is a chatterbox."

"And he is not the only one in the world. Go—do you hear me?"

The child went. He heard her light feet scampering upstairs, clattering merrily about on the boards overhead. He sat very still. The glow in the east deepened, spreading a lurid glory over the dark velvety stillness of the woods. Crickets sang and curlews cried in the meadow, and the long ghostly hoot of an owl trembled through the motionless air. Joseph de la Marinière leaned his elbows on the table, his chin resting on his hands, and gazed up thus into the wild autumnal sky.

"What would become of her!" he said to himself.

He was not long alone. Angelot and his dog came lightly up through the shadows, and while the dog strayed off to join his favourites among the dark guards who lay round the house, the young man sat down beside his uncle.

Though with a mind full of his own matters, Angelot was sympathetic enough to feel and to wonder at the little uncle's depression. After a word or two on indifferent things—the storm, the marvellous sky—he said to him, "Has anything happened to worry you?"

Monsieur Joseph did not answer at once, and this was very unlike him.

"It is the thunder, perhaps?" said Angelot, cheerfully. "A tree was struck near us. My mother is spending the evening in church."

"And your father?"

"He is at Lancilly, playing boston."

"Why are you not with him?"

"Why should I be? I—I prefer a talk with my dear uncle."

"Ah! you ask if anything worries me, Angelot. Three or four things. First—I had a visit this morning from César d'Ombré. He had his breakfast in peace this time, poor fellow."

Angelot smiled, rather absently. "What had he to say?"

"Nothing special. The time is not quite ripe—I think they realised that the other day."

"I hope so," murmured Angelot.

"Hope what you please," said his uncle, with sudden irritation. "The time will come in spite of you all, remember. I, for one, shall not long be able to endure this abominable system of spying."

"What do you mean?" said Angelot, staring at him.

"This is what I mean. The instant d'Ombré was gone—while he was here, in fact—that fellow, the Prefect's jackal, was prowling round the stables and asking questions of Tobie. Some silly excuse—pretended he had lost a strap the other day. Asked which of my friends was here—asked if they often came, if they were generally expected. Suggested that Les Chouettes was well provided with hiding-places, as well for arms as for men. I don't think he made much out of Tobie; he is as solid as an old oak, with a spark of wit in the middle of his thick head. From his own account, he very nearly kicked him off the premises."

"What? that man Simon? I don't like him either, but was it not a little dangerous to treat him so? He is more than a gendarme, I think; he is an *agent de police*."

"I don't care what he is, nor does Tobie. He had better come to me with his impertinent questions. And I am angry with De Mauves. I suppose the rascal would not prowl about here without his orders. Of course it was he who found out everything the other day. I did not notice or know him at the time, but the servants tell me he is, as you say, a well-known police spy. Well, after what De Mauves said to you, I should have expected him to leave me in peace. I would rather have one thing or the other—be arrested or let alone. I say, this spying system is ungentlemanly, ungenerous, and utterly contemptible and abominable."

Monsieur Joseph rapped hard on the table, then took a pinch of snuff with much energy, folded his arms, and looked fiercely into Angelot's downcast face.

"I can hardly think the Prefect sent him," the young man said.

"Why should he act without his master's orders? In any case I shall have it out with De Mauves. Well, well, other annoyances followed, and I had half forgotten the rascal, your father being here, and the rain coming in at the roof and running down the stairs, when behold Joubard, to tell me the story over again!"

"What story?"

"Mille tonnerres! Angelot, you are very dull to-day. Why, the Simon story, of course. The fellow paid Joubard a visit on his way to us, it seems, and asked a thousand questions about me and my concerns—what visitors of mine passed La Joubardière on their way here, and so forth. He tried to make it all appear friendly gossip, so as to put Joubard off his guard, though knowing very well that the old man knew who he was."

"Does Joubard think the Prefect sent him?"

"I did not consult Joubard on that point," said Monsieur Joseph with dignity. "That is between De Mauves and myself."

"Oh, my little uncle," Angelot said with a low laugh, "you are a very gem among conspirators."

"None of you take me in earnest, I know," said Monsieur Joseph, and he smiled for the first time. "Your father scolds me, Joubard does not half believe in me, Riette takes liberties with me, you laugh at me. It is only that scoundrel of a

Prefect who thinks me worth watching."

"I don't believe he does," said Angelot.

"Then pray tell me, what brought that police rascal here to-day?"

"Some devilry of his own. Don't you know, Uncle Joseph, these fellows gain credit, and money too, by hunting out cases of disloyalty to the Empire. It is dirty work; officials like the Prefect do not always care to soil their hands with it. I have heard my father tell of cases where whole families were put in prison, just on the evidence of some police spy who wormed himself into their confidence and informed against them."

Monsieur Joseph sat in silence for a minute.

"Peste! France is not fit to live in," he said. "To change the subject—your excellent father proposed to-day that I should send Riette every morning to Lancilly, to learn lessons with Mesdemoiselles de Sainfoy. It seems that Madame de Sainfoy herself proposed this obliging plan. The governess, it seems, is a jewel of the first water. Is that the lady I saw with the children the other day?"

"Yes; Mademoiselle Moineau."

Angelot's breath came a little short; his heart seemed to beat unreasonably in his throat. How could he express with sufficient restraint his opinion of that sleepy old angel, Mademoiselle Moineau!

He felt himself colouring crimson; but it was growing dark, the gorgeous sunset had faded, the clouds hung blacker and heavier as the oppressive night closed in.

"No doubt a charming lady and a very good woman," said Monsieur Joseph, with his usual politeness, "but she has not the air of a genius. In any case, even if I saw any advantage for Riette in the plan, which I do not, I am too selfish to consent to it. Well, well, I have other reasons; I will tell them to your mother one of these days. I am sorry Madame de Sainfoy should have thought of it, as it seems ungracious to refuse. But I was miserable enough without Riette last year, when she spent those weeks at the Convent at Sonnay. By the by, the good nuns did not find her so ignorant. She knows her religion, she can dance and sing, she can make clothes for the poor, she understands the animals, and has read a little history. Pray what more does a girl want?"

"Nothing, I dare say," said Angelot, dreamily. "I did not think you would like it."

"I do not like it," said Monsieur Joseph. "Your father was astonished when I told him so. We did not discuss it long; the storm interrupted us. But how could I let my child be brought up in a household devoted to the Empire! It is unreasonable."

Angelot started suddenly to his feet.

"Are you going? It will rain again soon," said Monsieur Joseph.

"No, I am not going yet," said Angelot.

He marched up and down two or three times in front of the bench.

"Uncle Joseph," he burst out, "I have something to say to you. I came here to-night on purpose to consult you. You can help me, I think, if anybody can."

"What, what? Are they sending you into the army?" Monsieur Joseph was all interest, all affection. His own annoyances were forgotten. He started up too, standing in his most inspired attitude, with a sweet smile on his face. "Declare yourself, my boy!" he said. "Yes, I will stand by you. You cannot fight for that bloodthirsty wretch. Escape, dearest, if there is nothing else for it. Go and join the Princes. Your mother will agree with me. I will lend you money for the journey."

"Ah, a thousand thanks, Uncle Joseph!" cried the young man. "But no, it is not that at all." He lowered his voice suddenly. "I want to marry," he said.

"To marry! Angelot! You! In heaven's name, why?"

"Because I am in love."

"What a reason!"

Monsieur Joseph sat down again.

"This is serious," he said. "Sit down beside me on the bench, and tell me all about it. It sounds like madness, and I always thought you were a reasonable boy."

"It is madness in one way, I suppose," said Angelot. "And yet stranger things have happened. In fact, of course, nothing else could happen."

Monsieur Joseph frowned and stared. His quick brain was running round the neighbourhood and finding nobody; then it made an excursion at lightning speed

into the wilds of Brittany, where Angelot had sometimes visited his mother's relations; but there again, as far as he knew, no likely match was to be found. He was sure that Urbain and Anne had not yet taken any steps to find a wife for Angelot; he also thought it was a subject on which they were likely to disagree. And now the young rascal had hit on somebody for himself. Might Heaven forbid that he had followed modern theories and was ready to marry some woman of a rank inferior to his own—some good-for-nothing who had attracted the handsome, simple-hearted boy!

"No! He would not dare to tell me that," Monsieur Joseph said to himself, and added aloud, "Who is the lady?"

There was a touch of severity in his tone; a foretaste, even from the dear little uncle, of what was to be expected.

"But, dear uncle," Angelot said slowly, "it could only be one person."

"No—no, impossible!" said Monsieur Joseph, half to himself. "Angelot, my boy—not—not there?" and he waved his hand in the direction of Lancilly.

Angelot nodded. "You have seen her," he murmured; "you ought not to be surprised. You have never seen any one half so beautiful."

Monsieur Joseph laughed outright. "Have I always lived at Les Chouettes?" he said. "However, she is a pretty girl, fair, graceful, distinguished. Riette had more to tell me about the younger ones; that was only natural. Of course I have only exchanged a compliment with Mademoiselle Hélène. She looked to me cold and rather haughty—or melancholy, perhaps. When have you spoken to her, Angelot? or is it merely the sight of her which has given you this wild idea?"

"Yes, she is melancholy," Angelot said, "but not cold or haughty at all. She is sad; it is because she is alone, and her mother is hard and stern, though her father is kind, and she has had no peace in life from all their worldly ways. They wanted to marry her to people she detested—her mother did, at least—"

"Yes, yes, I have heard something of that," said Monsieur Joseph. "They expect a great deal from her. She is to make an advantageous marriage—it is necessary for her family. It will happen one of these days; it must. My dear little Angelot, you know nothing of the world—how can you possibly imagine—Besides, I do not care for the Sainfoys." Monsieur Joseph sighed. "I would rather you went to Brittany for a wife, and so would your mother."

"But you will help me, Uncle Joseph?" said Angelot.

"Help you! How can I? Anyhow, you must tell me more. How did you find out all this? When did those people give you an opportunity of speaking to her? From their own point of view, they are certainly very imprudent. But I suppose they think you harmless."

It is unpleasant to be thought harmless. Angelot blushed angrily.

"They may find themselves mistaken," he muttered. "I will tell you, Uncle Joseph;" and he went on to give a slight sketch of what had happened.

It seemed necessary to convince his uncle that he was not talking nonsense, that the fates had really allowed him a few minutes' talk with Hélène. He could only give half an explanation, after all; the old mulberry tree had been the only witness of what was too sacred to be told. He said that Mademoiselle Moineau's fortunate nap had given them time to understand each other.

"And this is the fine governess to whom they expect me to confide my Riette!" said Monsieur Joseph, laughing; but he became serious again directly. "And in this interview under the tree, my poor Angelot," he said very gravely, "you made up your mind to propose yourself as a husband for Mademoiselle Hélène?"

"It sounds solemn, Uncle Joseph, when you say it. But yes, I suppose you are right," said Angelot.

"It *is* solemn. Most solemn and serious. Something more than a flirtation, an amourette. For life, as I understand you. A real marriage à l'Anglais," said Monsieur Joseph.

For answer, Angelot raved a little. His uncle listened indulgently, with a charming smile, to all the pretty lunacies of the young man's first love, poured into an ear and a heart that would never betray or misunderstand him.

"And did you tell Mademoiselle Hélène all this? Did you ask her what she thought of you?" Monsieur Joseph said at last.

"She knows enough, and so do I," said Angelot.

It seemed like sacrilege to say more; but as his uncle waited, he added hastily—"She is sad, and I can make her happy. But I cannot live without her—voila! Now will you help me?"

"It does not occur to you, then, that you are astonishingly presumptuous?"

"No."

"Diable, my Angelot! It would occur to my cousins De Sainfoy!"

"We are not so poor. As to family, we have not a title, it is true, but we are their cousins—and look at my mother's descent! They can show nothing like it. And then see what they owe to my father. Without him, what would have become of Lancilly? They can make imperialist marriages for their two other daughters. You must help me, dear little uncle!"

"Do you suppose they would listen to me, an old Chouan? Where are your wits, my poor boy? All flown in pursuit of Mademoiselle Hélène!"

"Not they, no; they are too stupid to appreciate you. But speak to my father and mother for me. They love and honour you; they will listen. Tell them all for me; ask them to arrange it all. I will do anything they wish, live anywhere. Only let them give me Hélène."

Monsieur Joseph whistled, and took another large pinch of snuff. It was almost too dark now to see each other's face, and the heavy clouds, with a distant rolling of thunder, hung low over Les Chouettes.

Suddenly a child's voice from a window above broke the silence.

"Ah, forgive me, papa and Angelot, but I have heard all, every word you have been saying. It was so interesting, I could not shut the window and go to sleep. Well, little papa, what do you say to Angelot? Tell him you will help him, we will both help him, to the last drop of our blood."

Angelot sprang from his seat with an exclamation, to look up at the window. A small, white-clad figure stood there, a round dark head against the dim light of the room. The voice had something pathetic as well as comical.

"Mille tonnerres!" shouted Monsieur Joseph, very angry. "Go to bed this instant, little imp, or I shall come upstairs with a birch rod. You will gain nothing by your dishonourable listening. I shall send you to Mademoiselle Moineau to-morrow, to learn lessons all day long."

"Ah, papa, if you do, I can talk to Hélène about Angelot," said Henriette, and she hastily shut the window.

The two men looked at each other and laughed.

"Good night, dear uncle," said Angelot, gently. "I leave my cause in your hands—and Riette's!"

"You are mad—we are all mad together. Go home and expect nothing," said Monsieur Joseph.

CHAPTER IX

HOW COMMON SENSE FOUGHT AND TRIUMPHED

General Ratoneau found himself a hero at Madame de Sainfoy's dinner party, and was gratified. A new-comer, he had hardly yet made his way into provincial society, except by favour of the Prefect. Even the old families who regarded the Prefect as partly one of themselves, and for his birth and manners forgave his opinions, found a difficulty in swallowing the General. The idea that he was unwelcome, when it penetrated Ratoneau's brain, added to the insolence of his bearing. To teach these ignorant provincial nobles a lesson, to show these poor and proud people, returned from emigration, that they need not imagine the France of 1811 to be the same country as the France of 1788, to make them feel that they were subjects of the Emperor Napoleon and inferior to his officers—all this seemed to General Ratoneau part of his mission in Anjou. And at the same time it was the wish of his heart to be received as a friend and an equal by the very people he pretended to despise.

Lancilly enchanted him. Though the stately halls and staircases were bare, the great rooms half-furnished and dark—for Madame de Sainfoy had not yet carried out her plans of decoration—though there were few servants, no great display of splendid plate, no extravagance in the dinner itself, no magnificence in the ladies' dresses, for at this time simplicity was the fashion—yet everything pleased him, because of the perfections of his hostess. Madame de Sainfoy laid herself out to flatter him, to put him in a good humour with himself. Rather to the disgust of various old neighbours who had not dined at Lancilly for more than twenty years, she placed the Prefect and the General on her right and left at dinner, and while the Prefect made himself agreeable to an old lady on his right, whose satin gown was faded and her ancient lace in rags, she devoted all her powers of talk to the General.

In a way she admired the man. His extraordinary likeness to his master attracted her, for she was a hearty worshipper of Napoleon. She talked of Paris, the Empress, the Court; she talked of her son and his campaigns, asking the General's opinion and advice, but cleverly leading him off when he began to brag of his own doings; so cleverly that he had no idea of her tactics. He was a

little dazzled. She was a very handsome woman; her commanding fairness, her wonderful smile, the movements of her lovely hands and arms, the almost confidential charm of her manner; she was worthy to be an Empress herself, Ratoneau thought, and his admiration went on growing. He began to talk to her of his most private affairs and wishes, and she listened more and more graciously.

It was a large party; many of the old provincial families were represented there. All the company talked and laughed in the gayest manner, though now and then eyes would light on the hostess' left-hand neighbour with a kind of disgusted fascination, and somebody would be silent for a minute or two, or murmur a private remark in a neighbour's ear. One lady, an old friend and plain of speech, turned thus to Urbain de la Marinière:—

"Why does Adélaïde exert herself to entertain that creature?"

"Because, madame," he answered, smiling, "Adélaïde is the most sensible and practical woman of our acquaintance."

"Mon Dieu! But what does she expect to get by it?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

Angelot, the youngest man present, had been allowed to take his cousin Hélène in to dinner. Two minutes of happiness; for the arrangement of the table separated them by its whole length. But it had been enough to bring a smile and a tinge of lovely colour to Hélène's face, and to give her the rare feeling that happiness, after all, was a possibility. Then she found herself next to a person who, after Angelot, seemed to her the most delightful she had ever met; who asked her friendly questions, told her stories, watched her, in the intervals of his talk with others, with eyes full of admiration and a deep amusement which she did not understand, but which set her heart beating oddly and pleasantly, as she asked herself if Angelot could possibly have said anything to this dear uncle of his.

Poor Angelot! he looked unhappy enough, there in the distance, sitting in most unusual sulks and silence.

There was an opportunity for a word, as he led her back from the dining-room, through the smaller salon, into the large lighted room where all the guests had preceded them.

"I don't wonder that you love your uncle," she said to him.

"I don't love him, when I see him talking to you. I am too jealous."

"How absurd!"

"Besides, I am angry with him. He has not done something that I asked him. Delay is dangerous, and I live in terror."

"What?" she asked, turning a little white.

"If you would give me the Empire, I could not tell you now."

They were in the salon. He put his heels together and bowed; she swept him a curtsey.

"Help me to hand the coffee," she said under her breath.

So it came to pass, when the coffee-table was brought in, that they walked up together to the new sofa, polished mahogany and yellow satin, finished with winged Sphinxes in gilded bronze, where Madame de Sainfoy and General Ratoneau were sitting side by side.

The Prefect, of course, had brought his hostess back from the dining-room and had stood talking to her for a few minutes afterwards. But the General, having deposited his lady, came clanking up almost immediately to rejoin Madame de Sainfoy.

"Allow me, my dear Prefect," he said. "I have not finished an interesting talk with Madame la Comtesse."

Monsieur de Mauves looked at him, then glanced at her with a questioning smile.

"Yes, it is true. We had just touched on a subject of the very deepest interest," she said.

Her look, her smile, seemed to glide over the Prefect's tall figure and pleasant face, as if he was merely a not disagreeable obstacle, to rest thoughtfully, with satisfaction, on Ratoneau in his gorgeous uniform.

"Listen! I will confide in you, and then you will understand," said the General, seizing the Prefect's arm. "I am going to consult Madame la Comtesse on the subject of a marriage."

He showed his teeth in a broad smile, staring into the Prefect's face, which did not change in its expression of easy good-humour.

"Whose marriage, may I ask? Your own?"

"You have said it, monsieur. My own. Could I do better?"

"You could not have a better counsellor. I retire at once," said the Prefect.

Then an idea crossed his mind, for just as he was met, with a friendly greeting—"A word with you, Monsieur le Préfet"—from Joseph de la Marinière, his eyes fell on Hélène de Sainfoy as she turned away from Angelot at the door. He had already admired her at a distance, so far the most beautiful thing at Lancilly, in spite of the oppressed and weary air that suited so ill with her fresh girlhood.

"Mon Dieu, what a sacrilege! But no, impossible!" said the Prefect to himself.

Several young people were carrying the coffee-cups about the room, Sophie and Lucie in white frocks among them. It was generally the part of the young girls; the men did not often help them, so that Madame de Sainfoy looked at Angelot with surprise, and a shade of displeasure, when he approached her with Hélène.

Angelot was perfectly grave and self-possessed. On his side, no one would have known that he had ever met General Ratoneau before, certainly not that he regarded him as an enemy. He hardly changed colour, even when Ratoneau waved him aside with a scowl, and stretched across him, without rising, to take his cup from Hélène.

"Come," he said, "I'll have my coffee from those pretty hands, or not at all."

Hélène looked up startled, and met the man's bold eyes. Angelot turned away instantly, and in a few seconds more she had joined him, and they were attending to other guests. Angelot commanded himself nobly; his time for punishing the General would come some day, but was not yet. As he and his cousin walked together along the room, the Vicomte des Barres, Monsieur Joseph's friend, pointed them out to Madame de la Marinière.

"A pretty pair of cousins, madame!"

"Ah, yes," she said a little sadly. "I cannot always realise that Ange is grown up. To see him, a man, in the salon at Lancilly, makes me feel very old."

The Vicomte murmured smiling compliments, but they soon turned to talk which was more serious, if not a little treasonable.

And in the meanwhile other eyes followed the two young people: Madame de Sainfoy's, while she doubted whether it might be necessary to snub Monsieur Ange de la Marinière; General Ratoneau's, with a long, steady, considering gaze, at the end of which he turned to his hostess and said, "You advise me to marry, madame! Give me your daughter."

For the moment, even the practical Madame de Sainfoy was both startled and shocked; so much so that she lifted her fan to hide the change in her face. But she collected herself instantly, and lowered it with a smile.

"Indeed, Monsieur le Général, you do us great honour"—she began. "But you were good enough to ask my advice, and I should not, I think—in fact, my daughter is still rather young, rather unformed, for such a position—and then—"

"She is nineteen, I know," said General Ratoneau. "Too young for me, you think? Well, I am forty-two, the same age as the Emperor, and he married a young wife last year."

"You wish to resemble His Majesty in every way," said Madame de Sainfoy, smiling graciously; it was necessary to say something.

"I am like him, I know—sapristi, it is an advantage. But I am a better match in one way, madame. I have never been married. I have no wife to get rid of, before offering myself to Mademoiselle de Sainfoy. She looks like a good girl, and she is devilish pretty. I dare say she will do what she likes with me. Anyhow, it is a good marriage for her, and for me. I am well off, I shall not expect much money."

In Adélaïde de Sainfoy's heart there was amazement at herself for having listened even so long and so patiently. This was indeed a trial of her theories. But after all, common sense was stronger than sentiment.

"We must live in our own times," she reminded herself. "These are the people of the future; the past is dead."

Her eyes wandered round the room. Every man she saw there was a gentleman, with ancestors, with manners, with traditions. Whether they were returned emigrants or people who had by *force majeure* accepted the Revolution and the Empire, all bore the stamp of that old world which they alone kept in memory.

Differences of dress, a new simplicity, ease and freedom, a revolt against formalities, these things made a certain separation between the new country society and the old. But gentlemen and ladies all her guests were, except the man who sat beside her and asked for Hélène as coolly as if he were asking for one of her dog's puppies.

Yet Madame de Sainfoy repeated to herself, "The past is dead!"

"You do us great honour," she repeated; for so strong-minded a person, the tone and words were vague.

"That is precisely what you do not think, madame," said Ratoneau, looking her straight in the face with a not unpleasant smile.

She was very conscious of the resolute will, the power to command, which the man possessed in common with his master. Who could refuse Napoleon anything? except a man or woman here and there with whom the repulsion was stronger than the attraction. Adélaïde de Sainfoy was not one of these.

"You are mistaken; I do," she said, and smiled back with all her brilliancy.

"It is true," he said, "I am not yet a Duke, or a Marshal of France, like the others. I have had enemies—envious people: my very wounds, marks of honour, have come between me and glory. But next year, madame, when I have swept the Chouans out of the West, you will see. I have a friend at Court, now, besides. One of the Empress's equerries, Monsieur Monge, is an old brother-in-arms of mine. The Emperor has ennobled him; he is the Baron de Beauclair—a prettier name than Monge, n'est-ce pas?"

"But that is charming! Tell me more about this friend of yours," said Madame de Sainfoy, rather eagerly.

This was a new view, a new possibility. Ratoneau knew what he was doing; he had not forgotten the Prefect's remark at Les Chouettes, some days before, as to Madame de Sainfoy's ambition of a place at Court for herself, as lady-in-waiting to the Empress. For a minute or two he swaggered on about his friend Monge; then suddenly turned again upon the Comtesse.

"But my answer, madame! There, you must excuse me; I am a rough soldier; I am not accustomed to wait for anything. When I want a thing, I ask for it. When it is not given at once—"

"You take it, I suppose? Yes: the wonder is that you should ask at all!" said Madame de Sainfoy.

Her look and smile seemed to turn the words, which might have been very scornful, into an easy little jest; but none the less they were a slight check on the airs of this conquering hero. He laughed.

"Well, madame, you are right, I withdraw the words. If you refuse my request, I shall have to make my bow, I suppose. But you will not."

She leaned back with lowered eyelids, playing with her fan.

"At this moment," she said, "I can only give you a word of advice—Patience, Monsieur le Général. For myself I will speak frankly. I am entirely loyal to the Empire and the Army; they are the glory of France. I think a brave soldier is worthy of any woman. Personally, this sudden idea of yours does not at all displease me. But I am not the only or the chief person concerned. Monsieur de Sainfoy, too, has his own ideas, and among them is an extreme indulgence of his daughter's fancies. You observe, I am speaking to you in the frankest confidence. I treat you as you treat me—" she glanced up and smiled. "Only this year, in Paris, plans of mine have been spoilt in this way."

"But fortunately for me, madame!" exclaimed Ratoneau. "We will not regret those plans, if you please. Shall I speak to Monsieur de Sainfoy this evening?"

"No, I beg! Say nothing at all. Leave the affair in my hands. I promise, I will do my best for you."

She spoke low and hurriedly, for her husband was walking up to the retired corner where she and the General were sitting, and she, knowing his humours so well, could see that he was surprised and a little angry at the confidences which had been going on.

It was one of Hervé's tiresome points, unworthy of a man of the world, that he did not always let her go her own way without question, though he ought to have learnt by this time to trust her in everything.

He now came up and asked General Ratoneau if he would play a game of billiards. Most of the men had already left the salon. The General grunted an assent, and rose stiffly to follow his host, with a grave bow to Madame de Sainfoy. The Comte walked with him half across the room, then suddenly turned back to meet his wife, whose preoccupation he had noticed rather curiously.

"You have other guests, Adélaïde!" he said, so that she alone could hear.

"I have," she answered. "And I must talk to you presently. I have something to say."

He gazed an instant into her eyes, which were very blue and shining, but he found no answer to the question in his own, and hurried at once away. Without the Prefect's scrap of information or his wider knowledge of men, he did not even guess what those two could have been talking about. Something political, he supposed; Adélaïde loved politics, and could throw herself into them with anybody, even such a lump of arrogant vulgarity as this fellow Ratoneau. She thought it wise, no doubt, to cultivate imperial officials. But in that case why did she not bestow the lion's share of her smiles on the Prefect, a greater man and a gentleman into the bargain? Why did she let him waste his pleasant talk on the dowagers of Anjou, while she sat absorbed with that animal?

The guests, thirty or more, were scattered between the billiard-room, the smaller drawing-room, where card-tables were set out, and the large drawing-room, given up to conversation and presently to the acting of a proverb by several of the younger people and Mademoiselle Moineau, who played the part of a great-grandmother to perfection.

Angelot so distinguished himself as a jealous lover that Hélène could hardly sit calmly to look on, and several people told him and his mother that his right place was at the *Français*.

"It is part of our life at La Marinière," Anne said with a shade of impatience to the Prefect, who was talking to her. "When we are not singing or playing or dancing or shooting, we are acting. It does not sound like a very responsible kind of life."

"Ah, madame," Monsieur de Mauves said softly, in his kind way, "we French people know how to play and to work at the same time. All these little amusements do not hinder people from conspiring against the State."

A flush rose in her thin face; she threw herself eagerly forward.

"Are you speaking of my son, Monsieur le Préfet? Do not blame him for loyalty to his uncle. He is not a conspirator. Sometimes—" she laughed—"I think Ange has not character enough."

"Yes, he has character," the Prefect answered. "But you are right in one way,

madame; he does not yet care enough for one cause or the other. Something will draw him—some stronger love than this for his uncle."

"Heaven forbid!" sighed Madame de la Marinière.

For her eyes followed his. They fell on Hélène near the door, white and fair, her face lit up with some new and sweet feeling as she laughed with the little old governess dressed up in ancient brocades from a chest in the garret, the dowager Marquise of the proverb just played. And a little further, in the shadow of the doorway, stood Angelot in powdered wig, silk coat, and sword, looking like a handsome courtier from a group by Watteau, and his eyes showed plainly enough what woman, if not what cause, attracted him at the moment. As to causes, Monsieur Joseph and the Vicomte des Barres were deep in talk close by; two Chouans consulting in the very presence of the Prefect.

Monsieur de Mauves smiled, took a delicate pinch of snuff, and stroked his chin.

"Sometimes I congratulate myself, madame," he said, "on having no young people to marry. Yet, with a sense of duty, which, thank God, they generally have, they are more manageable than their elders. Look, for instance, at your dear and charming brother-in-law. There he is hatching fresh plots, when I have just assured him that the police are not supervising him by my orders, and never shall, if I can trust him to behave like a peaceable citizen."

"Ah, you are very good, Monsieur le Préfet," said Madame de la Marinière. She went on talking absently. "Whatever we may think of your politics," she said, "it seems a crime to annoy or disappoint you. Indeed you do much to reconcile us. But as to Ange—his father's son is never likely—"

"It is a world of surprises, dear madame," said the Prefect, as she did not finish her sentence. "I wish him all that is good—and so I wish that you and Monsieur de la Marinière would send him into the army. He should serve France—should make her his only mistress, at least for the next ten years. Then let him marry, settle down amongst us here—turn against the Emperor, if he chooses—but by that time there will be no danger!"

Thus flattering himself and his master, the Prefect wished her an almost affectionate good night.

In a few minutes more, nearly all the guests were gone. Angelot, still in his quaint acting costume, went out to the court with Monsieur de Sainfoy to see the

ladies into their carriages. He then went to change his clothes, his cousin returning to the salon. Hurrying back into the long hall, now empty of servants, vast and rather ghostly with its rows of family portraits dimly lighted, while caverns of darkness showed where passages opened and bare stone staircases led up or down, he saw Hélène, alone, coming swiftly towards him.

She flew up the stairs, the last landing of which he had just reached on his way down, where it turned sharply under a high barred window. Meeting Angelot suddenly, she almost screamed, but stopped herself in time. He laughed joyfully; he was wildly excited.

"Ah, belle cousine!" he said softly. "Dear, we shall say good night here better than in the salon!"

Never once, since that hour in the garden ten days ago, had these two met without witnesses. Hélène, as a rule, was far too well guarded for that. She tried even now, but not successfully, to keep her rather presumptuous lover at a little distance, but in truth she was too much enchanted to see him, her only friend, for this pretence of coldness to last long. Standing with Angelot's arms round her, trembling from head to foot with joy and fear, she tried between his kisses and tender words to tell him how indeed he must not stop her, for in real prosaic truth Madame de Sainfoy had sent her off to bed.

"But why, why, dear angel, before we were all gone! It was the best thing that could happen—but why?"

"That is what I do not know, and it frightens me a little," said Hélène.

"Frightened here with me!"

"Yes, Angelot!" She tried to speak, but he would hardly let her. She held him back with both hands, and went on hurriedly—"It was mamma's look—she looked at me so strangely, she spoke severely, as if I had done wrong, and indeed I have, mon Dieu! but she does not know it, and I hope she never may. If she knew, I believe she would kill me. Let me go, I must!"

"One moment, darling! Come away with me! I will fetch a horse and carry you off. Then it won't matter what any one knows!"

"You are distracted!" Hélène began to laugh, though her eyes were full of tears. "Listen, listen," she said. "Your father and mother and uncle were just going, when mamma called them back. She said to papa and them that she wished to consult the family. Oh, what is it all about? What can it be?"

"That matters very little as long as they don't want us. Let them talk. What are you afraid of, my sweet?"

"I can't tell you. I hardly know," murmured Hélène; and in the next instant she had snatched herself from him and flown upstairs.

There were quick steps in the hall below, and Monsieur Joseph's voice was calling "Angelot!"

CHAPTER X

HOW ANGELOT REFUSED WHAT HAD NOT BEEN OFFERED

Madame de Sainfoy herself hardly knew why she wished to consult the family, there and then, on the fate proposed for Hélène. The truth was, she relied on Urbain, and wanted his support against her husband, with whom the subject was a difficult one. As to Anne de la Marinière, no particular sympathy was to be expected from her, certainly; but one could not detain Urbain at that hour without detaining her too. It was the same with Joseph, in a less degree. Neither to him nor to Madame Urbain did it matter in the least what marriage was arranged for Hélène de Sainfoy; they had even no right to an opinion; they were neither aunt nor uncle, they had no special place in the world, and the girl had nothing to expect from them. But Madame de Sainfoy knew that her husband took a different view of all this, that he made a certain fuss with these old cousins, considered them as his family, and would not endure that they should be in any way shut out or slighted.

"He likes to be surrounded by these country admirers," Madame de Sainfoy would have said. "If I do not talk to them about this, he will; and it will please him that I should consult them. Urbain is different, of course. Urbain is a sensible man; he will be on my side."

So she put Madame Urbain, rather grave, indifferent, and tired, into a chair on her right, smiled brilliantly upon her, and turned her attention upon the two men standing before the fireplace, Hervé and Urbain, one troubled and curious, for he knew her well, and her drift puzzled him, the other gay, serene, and waiting her commands with ready deference. Monsieur Joseph, not much interested, thinking of his talks with the Prefect and Monsieur des Barres, impatient to hurry home and say good night to Riette, sat a little in the background.

With all her eagerness, with all her ambition and policy, Adélaïde de Sainfoy flushed and hesitated a little before she set forth her plan.

"My friends," she said, "this is a family council. Hervé and I are fortunate, here at Lancilly. We need no longer decide family affairs by our unassisted wits."

She smiled on Hervé's cousins, and Urbain bowed; he, at least, recognised the honour that was done them.

"A proposal of marriage has been made to me for our daughter Hélène."

She spoke to the company, but looked at her husband; there was fear as well as defiance in her eyes. He returned her gaze steadily, slightly frowning. Urbain bowed again, and looked at the floor with an inscrutable countenance. Anne shrugged her shoulders slightly, as if to say, "How does that concern me?" Joseph jumped suddenly from his chair, the colour rushing into his thin brown face, and stood like a point of exclamation. Nobody spoke, not even Hélène's father.

"Let me announce to you," said Madame de Sainfoy, still looking at him, "that the personage who has done us this honour is—Monsieur le Général Ratoneau."

The moment of dead silence that followed this was broken by a short laugh from the Comte.

"Was it worth while to consult a family council?" he said. "I should have thought, my dear Adélaïde, that a word from you might have settled that matter on the spot."

Monsieur Joseph said aside: "Honour! It is an insult!"

Anne opened her eyes wide with horror, and even Urbain was startled, but he prudently said nothing.

"It might—it certainly might—" said Madame de Sainfoy, "if I could have been sure that you would take my view, Hervé."

"I imagine that we could hardly differ on such a point!" he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"What is your opinion, then? Think well before you speak."

"On my honour, no thought is necessary. To speak very mildly, a man of that birth, manners, appearance, is not worth considering at all as a husband for Hélène. Come, it is ridiculous! You cannot have encouraged such an idea, Adélaïde! Was that the subject of all your long conversation? Waste of time, truly!"

"Pardon, it is not ridiculous," said Madame de Sainfoy. "Your prejudices will end

by sending Hélène into a convent; this, I believe, is the fourth good proposal that you have laughed at. Yes, a good proposal—listen, Urbain, I know you will agree with me, for every sensible man must. You talk of General Ratoneau's birth! All honour to him, that his talents and courage have raised him above it. As to his manners, they are those of a soldier; frank and rough, of course, but he seems to me both intelligent and sincere. Manners! It is a little late in the day to talk of them, when most of the Marshals of France and the new nobility have none better. Do you fancy yourself back in the eighteenth century, my poor Hervé?"

"Very well—but you would not like Georges to bring such manners home from Spain!"

"If Georges distinguishes himself, and gains the Emperor's favour, he may bring home what he likes," said Madame de Sainfoy, scornfully. "However, there is no danger; he is our son."

"I should have thought that our son-in-law mattered at least as much."

"We are not responsible for him. By the bye, as to the General's appearance, you can hardly object to that without bordering on treason. For my part, I call him a handsome man."

"A handsome butcher!" said Anne de la Marinière, under her breath.

"He is—he is a butcher's son," cried Joseph, suddenly. "I know it—the Prefect told me. His father is still alive—old Ratoneau—a wholesale butcher at Marseilles. He was one of the foremost among the Revolutionists there—a butcher, indeed. Oh, madame, Hervé is right! But it is more than ridiculous—it is impossible. Why, the very name is enough! Ratoneau!"

Madame de Sainfoy hardly seemed to hear him. She put him on one side with the slightest movement of her hand.

"Next year, probably," she said, "General Ratoneau will be a Marshal of France and ennobled. He will be the equal of all those other men who have already married into our best families. At this moment a friend of his, the Baron de Beauclair, formerly his equal, is an equerry to the Empress. General Ratoneau has only to do the Emperor's work here, to—to pacify and reconcile the West, and his turn will come."

She gave herself credit for not repeating Ratoneau's own words as to sweeping

out the Chouans. Joseph de la Marinière did not deserve such consideration, but she wished to be careful and politic.

"After all, do you not see how inconsistent we are?" she said to the company generally. "We take all the benefits of the Empire, we submit to a successful soldier, accept a new régime for ourselves, and refuse it for our children. Is it not unreasonable?"

"On the face of it, yes," said Urbain, speaking for the first time. "And there is nothing, they say, that pleases the Emperor so much as the marriage of his officers with young ladies of good family. I have no doubt at all, if my friend Hervé could reconcile himself, that Mademoiselle Hélène would further the fortunes of her family by such a marriage as this. General Ratoneau is a fine soldier, I believe. I agree with you, madame, he is handsome. He rubs our instincts a little the wrong way, but after all, this is not the time to be sensitive. As to Mademoiselle Hélène herself, I am sure she is most dutiful. I could imagine marriages more obnoxious to her. She would soon reconcile herself to a husband chosen for her by all the authorities."

"Poor Hélène!" sighed Madame de la Marinière.

"Come, Urbain, you friend of liberty!" exclaimed Joseph. "You advise internal tyranny, it seems; what would you say to the external? If I were in my cousin's place, I would wait for that before making such a sacrifice."

"What do you mean, Joseph?" said his brother.

"I mean that our dear Prefect has the fates of all our young daughters in his hands. He has only to report them to the Emperor, and a marriage to please His Majesty will be at once arranged. Is not that enough obedience? Cannot we wait for that necessity, instead of running beforehand to give a beautiful girl to the first brutal soldier who asks for her?"

And after that the argument waxed loud and strong. Monsieur Joseph was called upon for his authority, for particulars as to this new power given to the Prefects, which was hardly yet known, their own good Prefect being heartily ashamed of it. Hervé de Sainfoy declared that it was stupid and intolerable, but also impracticable, and in this he and his Royalist cousin agreed. No one would bear it, they were sure; but they were also convinced that De Mauves would never make use of it. Urbain shrugged his shoulders, and was of a different opinion. He thought the idea quite of a piece with many of Napoleon's other administrative

plans; it seemed to him far-reaching and clever, the foundation of a new Imperialist nobility. Madame de Sainfoy, her cheeks flushed, her blue eyes shining, applauded Urbain as he spoke. It seemed to her, as to him, common sense put into practice. If the foolish old families of France would not swallow and assimilate the new order of things, it must be forced down their throats. The Emperor, and no one else, had the power to do this. His resolute will had the task of making a new society, and it was useless to complain of his means. But, evidently, the way to the Emperor's favour was not to wait for coercion, but to accept this fine opportunity of ranging one's family definitely on his side. Georges an officer, Hélène married to an officer, herself a lady-in-waiting to Marie Louise; thus everything would be arranged for floating down the great river of the Empire into the ocean of a new world. And immediate action seemed all the more advisable, if the Prefect's false delicacy was likely to leave the Sainfoy family stranded on a reef of old-fashioned manners.

At last, when every one had ceased to talk at once and the clamour was a little stilled, Hervé de Sainfoy stepped forward and made his wife a low bow.

"Madame," he said, "I have heard all your arguments, and my old-fashioned prejudices remain the same. I have made some sacrifices to keep our country and position, and may have to make more; but when you ask me to give my eldest daughter to a man who is not even a poor imitation of a gentleman, you ask too much. I will choose a husband for Hélène myself, or she shall take the veil. That life, at least, has its distinction. Aunts, great-aunts, cousins, have chosen it before her. One of our best and most beautiful ancestors was a Carmelite nun."

Madame de la Marinière clapped her hands gently. Hervé smiled at her, and Madame de Sainfoy frowned.

"A convent! No, no!" cried Urbain, while Joseph muttered breathlessly, "But there is a better alternative, dear cousins!"

He flew out of the room. The rest of the council looked at each other, puzzled and smiling, except Madame de Sainfoy, whose irritation deepened. Who was this tiresome, old-fashioned little man, that he should interfere in her plans! and what *lubies* might possess him now!

The curtains at the door, flung back by Joseph, had hardly settled once more into their places when he came back again, clutching Angelot by the arm.

Coming from the darkness, from the presence of Hélène, Angelot was dazzled

and slightly out of breath when his uncle dragged him into the salon. He had not had time to ask a question; he came utterly unprepared into the presence of the family, and the faces that received him were not encouraging. Three at least were flushed with anger or confusion; his father's, his mother's, Madame de Sainfoy's. It was at her that he looked most intently; and he had never seen anything more unfriendly than the gleam of her eyes, the flash of her white teeth between lips suddenly drawn back like those of a fierce animal, while her flush faded, as Monsieur Joseph spoke, to a whiteness even more threatening. He understood Hélène's words, "If she knew, she would kill me." No, this woman would not have much mercy on anything that crossed her will—and Hélène was in her power.

Monsieur Joseph's slight hands, like Angelot's, were strong. The young fellow tried instinctively to wrench himself from his uncle's grasp on his arm, but it only tightened.

"Here, dear friends, I bring you the alternative!" cried Monsieur Joseph, in his joyfullest tone. "Why not marry Mademoiselle Hélène to the best and handsomest boy in Anjou—in France, for that matter—a boy we have all known from his cradle—who will have a good fortune, a prudent father's only child—who would, no doubt, though I grieve to say it, serve under any flag you please for such a prize. Yes, I am safe in saying so, for—"

The romantic little gentleman was stopped in his wild career. Angelot, his eyes blazing, with a white face and teeth set as furiously as Madame de Sainfoy's own, turned round upon him, seized him with his free hand by the other arm, and shook him with all his young strength, hissing out: "Will you be quiet, Uncle Joseph! Will you hold your tongue, if you please, and leave me to manage my own affairs."

"Come, come, what does all this mean?" cried Urbain, stepping forward.

"It means that my uncle is mad—mad—you know you are!" Angelot said in a choked voice.

Still holding Monsieur Joseph with a dog's firm grip, he stared into his eyes and shook his head violently.

"What, ungrateful—" the little uncle tried to say, but Angelot's face, his totally unexpected rage, seemed to suggest such unknown mysteries that the words died in his throat.

Suddenly released, he dropped into a chair and swore prodigiously under his breath, quite forgetting the presence of ladies in the unnatural, awful change that had come over his nephew. He stared at Angelot, who was indeed the centre of all eyes; his mother sitting upright in consternation; his father with angry brow and queerly smiling mouth; Hervé de Sainfoy very grave, with elevated eyebrows; the Comtesse leaning back in her chair, hard, fierce, watchful, yet a shade less angry than before. If this was only a fancy of that ridiculous Joseph, it might not signify—yet who knew? She was ready to suspect any one, every one, even the young man's father. The name of La Marinière was odious to her.

Angelot drew himself very upright, folded his arms, and turned to face the family council.

"See what it is to have an uncle!" he said, and his voice, though clear enough, was not quite so proud and convincing as his attitude. "He treats me like a child crying for the moon. If he could, he would fetch the moon out of the sky for me. But his kind pains are quite thrown away, mesdames et messieurs, for—I do not want the moon, any more than the moon wants me!"

He almost laughed; and only the quick change of colour in his young face showed that any feeling lay behind the words which sounded—in Monsieur Joseph's ears at least—heartlessly playful.

Angelot stepped up to Madame de Sainfoy and respectfully kissed her hand. "Bonsoir, madame!"

"Bonsoir, Angelot."

She spoke coldly; she was still uneasy, still suspicious; she gave him a keen look, and his eyelids were not lifted to meet it. In another moment he was gone.

Then the others gathered round poor Monsieur Joseph, and tried to make him explain his wild behaviour. At first he stared at them vaguely, then in a few quick words took all the blame upon himself. Yes, it was an idea that had suddenly seized him. His love for Angelot, the beauty and sweetness of Hélène, a dream of happiness for them both! A pastoral poem, in short! but it seemed that the young man was not worthy of his place as its hero.

"It seems, after all, I am more poetical than you," he said rather bitterly to Urbain.

"My dear," his brother said, "poetry at its best is the highest good sense. Now

your idea, as the boy himself let us know, is moonstruck madness."

"Ah, moonstruck madness! Ah, the boy! Yes, yes," said Monsieur Joseph, dreamily, and he also took his leave.

Monsieur Urbain and his wife followed immediately. Angelot had not waited for them and the little hooded carriage, but had walked on across the valley in the cool damp darkness. They talked very seriously as they drove home, for once in entire agreement. When they reached the manor, their son had shut himself into his own room, and they did not disturb him.

"I hope you will soon keep your word, and find a suitable husband for Hélène," Madame de Sainfoy said to her husband. "I am a little tired of the business."

"I don't think there will be much difficulty. We must look further afield. Plenty of men of our own rank have accepted the Empire, and Hélène is a match for a Prince, though our little cousin refuses her! I rather like that boy."

"Do you? I do not. Certainly he was candid—and he put an effectual stop to his uncle's absurdities. He is really out of his mind, that man. I wish the Chouans joy of him."

"Poor Joseph! After all, he is an excellent creature. In these days, it is amusing to meet any one so wild and so romantic."

"I find it tiresome," said Adélaïde.

CHAPTER XI

HOW MONSIEUR URBAIN SMOKED A CIGAR

These days before the vintage were very peaceful at La Marinière. Monsieur and Madame Urbain were practical people, and idleness, as a rule, had a bad time of it with them; but September was a holiday month, and there was little work going on, except the hammering of barrels in the yard, and other preparations for busy October. September was usually the month when Angelot could shoot and ramble to his heart's content, when Urbain had leisure to sit down with a book at other times than evening, when Anne, her poor people visited, nursed, comforted, her household in quiet old-fashioned order, could spend long hours alone praying and meditating in the little old church.

Lancilly had brought disturbance into September. It occupied Urbain's thoughts and time, it seemed now to be throwing its net over Angelot. Anne longed still more for peace and refuge under the low white arches of the church, in her visits to *le bon Dieu;* and even here her thoughts distracted her.

She came back from early mass, the morning after the dinner party, to find Angelot already gone out with his gun, and her husband just starting for Lancilly.

"He is not gone that way, I hope?" she said quickly.

"No, no, he is gone across the fields towards Les Chouettes. I told him to bring back some partridge and quail, and a hare or two, if possible. I think he is gone to make his peace with Joseph."

"I should like to know the meaning of all that. I must talk to him when he comes in."

"My dear Anne, do nothing of the sort. Let the boy alone. If he has a fancy for his cousin, and if Joseph guessed it, which I suspect, it is better for us to ignore it altogether."

"I am afraid he has, do you know. I did not think so till last night—but then I saw something. So did Monsieur de Mauves. He said as much. He advised sending

Ange into the army—but you will never do that, Urbain!"

A gold mist filled the valley, hiding Lancilly, and through it rose the glittering points of the poplars. She walked with him to the garden gate, past the trim box hedges, and then down the lane towards the church. Apple-trees, heavy with red fruit, bent over the way, as safe on that village road as in any fenced orchard.

"I do not want to send him into the army," Urbain said, and he looked at her tenderly.

He had long doubted whether, to please her, he was not spoiling and wasting the boy's life. He was sometimes angry with himself for his weakness; then again philosophy came to his aid: he laughed and shrugged his shoulders. It had always been so: on one side the bringing up of his son according to his own mind; and on the other, domestic peace. For his little Anne, with all her religion, perhaps because of it, was anything but meek as a wife and mother. It was fortunate for all parties, he now thought, that the present slight anxiety found her and himself on the same side, though for different reasons.

"Hélène is an astonishingly pretty girl," he said, "and the sooner she is married the better. Young men will be foolish."

"More than pretty—beautiful, I think. A little lifeless—I don't know that I should fall in love with her. Yes—but a good marriage, poor girl. Not to that monster! Adélaïde amazes me."

Urbain's ugly face curled up in a rather sardonic smile. He took his wife's hand and kissed it.

"My little lady, Adélaïde is to be admired. You are to be adored. Go and say your prayers for us all."

He disappeared into the morning mist, which just then moved and swept away under a light wind, opening to view all the opposite slope and the gorgeous, sun-bathed front of Lancilly.

"Ah, mon Dieu!" murmured Anne. "To lose both of them to Lancilly—come, it is too much. You shall not have Ange, you horrible old walls—no!"

By this time Urbain had disappeared round the corner of the church, and was hurrying down the hill. She slipped in at her own little door, to her place near the altar, so lately left. All was silent now, the Curé was gone; she knelt there alone

and prayed for them all, as Urbain had said. His words were mockery, she knew; but that only made her prayers more earnest.

The misty autumn morning grew into a cloudless day. Urbain came home to breakfast between ten and eleven, but Angelot did not appear. Urbain was grave and full of business. A short talk with Hervé, who was going out shooting, a much longer and more interesting talk with Adélaïde, had the consequence of sending him off that very day to the town of Sonnay-le-Loir, the Prefect's residence and General Ratoneau's headquarters.

It was not exactly a pleasant errand, to convey Monsieur and Madame de Sainfoy's refusal of his offer to a man like the General. It could have been done quite as easily by the post, thus sparing trouble and annoyance to the faithful cousin who had borne so much. But there were complications; and a careful talking over of these with Adélaïde, after Hervé was gone, had led Urbain to suggest going himself. He had a double reason for wishing to soften the effect of his cousin's rather short and haughty letter. It must go, of course, whatever his own and Madame de Sainfoy's disapproval; but there were things that diplomacy might do, without, as it seemed, any serious consequences to recoil on the diplomatists. Madame de Sainfoy might gain imperial favour, Monsieur de la Marinière might help her and save his foolish boy, and no one in the family, except themselves, need know what they were doing.

It was not an uncommon thing for Urbain to drive over to Sonnay, though he generally started much earlier. On this occasion he said nothing of his real errand to his wife, only telling her when she mentioned Hélène's marriage that Hervé continued in the same mind. Many things wanted for the house and the farm had come conveniently to his memory. He started with his groom at twelve o'clock, in the high, hooded carriage, with a pair of strong horses, which made short work of the rocky lanes about La Marinière. The high road towards Sonnay was smooth compared with these, running between belts of dark forest, and along it Monsieur Urbain drove at a good rattling pace of twelve miles an hour.

Sonnay-le-Loir was a beautiful and picturesque town, once strongly defended, both by walls and a deep river which flowed round below them. There was a good deal left of the old ramparts; the gates still stood, the narrow streets of tall old white houses, each with its court and carriage entrance and shady garden behind, went climbing up the hill to the large square where the Cathedral towered on one side, the town-hall and public offices filled up another, the Prefecture a third, and an old hotel, now used as military quarters, the fourth.

Though it was not market-day, the white cobbled square was cheerful enough; a few stalls of fruit and vegetables, sheltered by coloured umbrellas from the strong sunshine, were lodged about the broad steps of the Cathedral; peasants and townspeople were clattering about in their sabots, soldiers were being drilled in front of the hotel. The bells were chiming and clanging; high up into the blue air soared the tall pinnacles of the Cathedral, delicate stone lacework still fresh and young at five hundred years old, spared by the storm which twenty years ago had wrecked so much down below that was beautiful. A crowd of blue-grey pigeons flapped and cooed about the towers or strutted softly on the stones in the square.

Monsieur Urbain put up his horses at an old posting hotel in the street near the gateway, and walked up into the square. Finding that General Ratoneau was at home, he left Monsieur de Sainfoy's letter with his own card, and a message that he would have the honour of calling to see the General, later in the afternoon. He then went away to do his commissions. At the appointed time he returned to the hotel, and was at once shown upstairs to a large room at the back, looking on a broad, paved court surrounded by barracks.

Neither the room nor its inmate was attractive, and Urbain's humorous face screwed itself into a grimace of disgust as he walked in; but he did not, for that, renounce the errand with which Madame de Sainfoy had entrusted him. The floor was dusty and strewn with papers, the walls were stained, the furniture, handsome in itself, had been much ill-used, and two or three chairs now lay flung where it was tolerably evident that the General had kicked them. The western sun poured hotly in; the atmosphere was of wine, tobacco, and boots; dirty packs of cards were scattered on the table among bottles and glasses, pipes and cigars. General Ratoneau lay stretched on a large sofa in undress uniform, with a red face and a cigar in his mouth. Hervé de Sainfoy's letter, torn across, lay on the floor beside him.

He got up and received his visitor with formal civility, though his looks said plainly, "What the devil do you want here?"

Urbain was cool and self-possessed. He acted the *rôle* of an ordinary visitor, talking of the country and the news from Spain. The General, though extremely grumpy, was still capable of ordinary conversation, and his remarks, especially on the Spanish campaign, were those of an intelligent soldier who knew his subject.

"If the Emperor would send me to Spain," he growled, "I would teach those miserable Spaniards a lesson. As to the English, it is the desire of my life to fight them. They are bull-dogs, they say—sapristi, I am something of a bull-dog myself—when I lay hold, I don't often let go. You don't know me yet, monsieur, but you will find that that is my way. I am not easily thwarted, monsieur."

"A fine quality, Monsieur le Général!" said Urbain, calmly. "It is true, I hardly know you. I had heard of you from my brother, Joseph de la Marinière—"

"Your Chouan brother, ha, ha!"

"My Royalist brother, suppose we say. Every one has a right to his own private opinions, Monsieur le Général."

"A dangerous doctrine, that!"

"As long as he keeps them to himself, and does not disturb the public peace. I have acted successfully on that principle for the last thirty years, and it has carried me comfortably through various changes."

"What are you, monsieur?"

"A philosopher. I take life as it comes. That way happiness lies."

The General laughed. "I think differently. My idea is to make life come as I want it."

"That is a fine idea, too," Urbain said serenely. "Only it does not always seem to be within the limits of the possible."

"Ah, there I agree with the Emperor. He will not have the word 'impossible' in the dictionary."

"The Emperor is a great man," said Urbain, with his inscrutable smile.

It was certainly on Ratoneau's tongue to answer, "So am I!" but he only laughed again and muttered something about strength of will.

The dark, watchful eyes followed his visitor's to the floor, where Monsieur de Sainfoy's letter lay; that letter which seemed to belie his bull-dog boasting. Something he wanted in life had been refused him point-blank; in ceremonious terms, but with uncompromising plainness. The Comte de Sainfoy did not even trouble himself to find reasons for declining the offer of marriage that General

Ratoneau had done Mademoiselle de Sainfoy the honour to make.

"We met last night at Lancilly, monsieur," said Ratoneau, "but I did not expect the politeness of a visit from you—at any rate so soon. But I understand that you are your cousin's messenger. You brought me that letter—neither did I expect that so soon."

He pointed to the fragments on the floor. His manner was insolent, and La Marinière felt it so; even to his seasoned cheek a little warmth found its way. Something of him was on Hervé's side, while he was prepared and resolved to serve Adélaïde in this matter.

"My own affairs brought me to Sonnay," he said. "My cousin wished you to receive his letter as soon as might be. I therefore took charge of it."

"Do you know what it is about?"

To this abrupt question Urbain answered by a bow.

The General frowned angrily. "Then what brought you here, monsieur? Do you want to report my disappointment to your aristocratic fool of a cousin? Merci!" and he swore a few hearty oaths. "There are plenty more pretty girls in France, and plenty of their fathers who would gladly be linked with the Empire. Take that message back to your cousin, if you please."

"But no, Monsieur le Général," said Urbain, smiling and shaking his head. "If I were to repeat all you have just said, my cousin might send me back to you with a challenge. And I am a man of peace, a philosopher, as I tell you. No, I did not come to report your disappointment. And indeed, to tell you the truth, my cousin did not know that I was going to visit you at all. And I do not think he will ever be wiser."

Ratoneau stared at him. "May I be extinguished if I understand you!"

"However," said Urbain, rising from his chair, "I am glad, personally, that you take the matter so well. As you say, the young ladies of France, and their *fathers*, will not all be so shortsighted."

"Thousand thunders! Sit down again, monsieur. Take one of these cigars—I had them from Spain—and try this Château Latour. Rather a different sort of thing from the stuff that son of yours expected me to enjoy at Les Chouettes, the other day. That's right. I like you, monsieur. You are a man without prejudices; one can

talk frankly with you. Your health, monsieur!" and glasses were clinked together, for Urbain did not refuse the soldier's hospitality.

"Now tell me all about it!" cried the General, in a much better humour. "I understand your emphasis just now, sapristi! That was what puzzled me, that Madame la Comtesse should seem to have played me false. Last night, I assure you, she encouraged me to the utmost. At first, it's true, she muttered something about her daughter being too young, but I very soon convinced her what a foolish argument that was. I tell you, monsieur, when I left her, I considered the promise as good as made. She said her husband had a way of indulging his daughter's fancies—but after all, I took her to be a woman who could turn husband and daughter and everybody else round her little finger, if she chose. So this rag of a letter came upon me like a thunderbolt. Is that it? Has the young girl taken a dislike to me? Why, mille tonnerres, she has not even spoken to me, nor I to her!"

"No, Monsieur le Général," said Urbain, "Mademoiselle de Sainfoy has not been asked for her opinion. The decision comes from her father, and from him alone. Madame de Sainfoy was loyal to you; she urged your cause, but unsuccessfully. My cousin, I must say, much as I love him, showed a certain narrowness and obstinacy. He would hear nothing in favour of the marriage."

"Were you present when they discussed it?"

"I was. I am always on the advanced, the liberal side. I spoke in your favour."

"I am obliged to you. Your glass, monsieur. How do you find that cigar?"

"Excellent."

"Now, monsieur, give me your advice, for I see you are a clever man. First, is any other marriage on the tapis for Mademoiselle de Sainfoy?"

"Decidedly no, monsieur. None."

"Shall I then insist on seeing her, and pleading my cause for myself?"

"I should not advise that course," said Urbain, and there was something in his discreet smile which made the General's red face redder with a touch of mortification.

"Well, I should not eat her," he said. "Her mother found me agreeable enough,

and a shy young girl rather likes a man who takes her by storm."

"Nevertheless, I think that plan would not answer. For one thing, my cousin would object: he considers his refusal final. In fact—after much thought—for I agree with Madame de Sainfoy as to the probable advantages of a connection with a distinguished man like yourself—in fact, there is only one faint possibility that occurs to me."

"What is that, monsieur?"

Urbain hesitated. He sat looking out of the window, frowning slightly, the tips of his fingers pressed together.

"I wonder," he said—something, perhaps conscience, made the words long in coming—"I wonder if some day, in the course of the reports that he is bound, I believe, to make to the Emperor, it might occur to Monsieur le Préfet to mention —"

General Ratoneau stared blankly. "Monsieur le Préfet?"

"Well, am I wrong? I heard something of an imperial order—a list of young ladies—marriages arranged by His Majesty, without much consulting of family prejudices—"

General Ratoneau brought down his heavy fist on the table, so that the glasses jumped and clattered. His language was startling.

"Monsieur de la Marinière, you are the cleverest man in Anjou!" he shouted. "And Madame la Comtesse would not be angry?"

"I think not. But a command from the Emperor—a command coming independently from the highest quarter—would naturally carry all before it," said Urbain.

CHAPTER XII

HOW THE PREFECT'S DOG SNAPPED AT THE GENERAL

The shadows were lengthening when Urbain de la Marinière at last left the General's hotel, and walked thoughtfully across the square, past the Prefecture, down the street to find his carriage.

He had resisted the temptation of dining with the officers and playing cards afterwards, though he by no means disliked either a game of chance or a good dinner. It seemed to him that he had done as much in Madame de Sainfoy's interests as she could reasonably expect. Though there might be worse men, General Ratoneau could not be called a pleasant companion. His loud voice and swaggering manners could not be agreeable to a person of Monsieur Urbain's measured mind and self-controlled ways. He was a type, and in that way interesting. The strange likeness to his master lent him a touch of character, almost of distinction, neither of which really belonged to him; yet, somehow, by a certain appeal to the imagination, it made him a just possible husband for a girl of good family. Not a gentleman, or anything like one; yet not quite the ordinary *bourgeois*. Considering the times, it appeared to Urbain that his cousin de Sainfoy need not be actually ashamed of such a son-in-law. Anyhow, he had done his best to further the matter, with an earnest recommendation to the General to keep his name out of the affair.

"Why not?" said Ratoneau. "You only reminded me of what I knew before. In fact, it was through me you heard of it. I startled your brother with it; our dear Prefect would never have said a word on the subject—ha, ha! So I owe you no gratitude, monsieur. You have done nothing."

"Ah, but just a little gratitude, if you please," said Urbain, smiling. "Enough to shut your ears to any reports that may reach you about my brother Joseph."

Ratoneau looked at him sharply, and frowned.

"I can make no bargains as to my duty, monsieur. Let your brother be loyal."

"I do my utmost to make him so," said Urbain, still smiling, and they parted.

"He is right—the man is right—and by heaven, I respect him!" Urbain said to himself as he crossed the square.

Passing near the great gate of the Prefecture, he noticed a police officer loitering on the pavement, whose dark, keen, discontented face seemed not unknown to him.

As Urbain came nearer, this man raised his hand to his cap, and spoke with an impudent grin.

"Monsieur de la Marinière has been making peace with Monsieur le Général Ratoneau? It was a difficult matter, I bet! Monsieur has been successful?"

Urbain looked at the man steadily. He was not easily made angry.

"Who are you, my friend? and what do you mean?" he said.

"I am Simon, the police agent, monsieur. The affair rather interested me. I was there."

"What affair?"

"Your son's affair with the General. That droll adventure of the cattle in the lane—your cattle, monsieur, and it was your son's fault that the General was thrown. Monsieur heard of it, surely?"

"You are mistaken," Monsieur Urbain replied quietly. "It was an accident; it was not my son's fault. Nobody has ever thought of it or mentioned it since. It was nothing."

"General Ratoneau did not think it nothing. All we who were there, we saw the droll side of it, but he did not. He swore he would have his revenge on Monsieur Angelot, as they call him. He has not forgotten it, monsieur. Only last night, his servant told me, when he came back from dining at Lancilly, he was swearing about it again."

"Let him swear!" said Urbain, under his breath.

Then his eyes dwelt a moment on Simon, who looked the very incarnation of malice and mischief, and he smiled benignly.

"Merci, Monsieur Simon," he said. "We are fortunate in having you to watch over us. But do not let this anxiety trouble you. I have just been spending some

time with General Ratoneau, as you appear to know. We are the best of friends, and if my son irritated him the other day, I think he has forgotten it."

"So much the better," grinned Simon, "for Monsieur le Général would not be a pleasant enemy." Then, as Urbain was walking on, he detained him. "Everybody must respect Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière," he said. "He has a difficult position. If certain eyes were not wilfully shut, serious things might happen in his family. And we sometimes ask ourselves, we of the police, whether closed eyes at headquarters ought to mean a silent tongue all round. How does it strike you, monsieur?"

Urbain hesitated a moment. He had done a certain amount of bribery in his day, for the sake of those he loved, but his native good sense and obstinacy alike arose against being blackmailed by a police spy, a subordinate official at best. The fellow could not do Joseph much harm, he thought, the Prefect being friendly, and the General likely to be a connection. And Joseph must in the future be loyal, as the General said. No; he might as well keep his napoleons in his pocket.

"I really have no time to discuss the subject," he said. "The police, like every one else, must do their duty according to their lights. Good-day, Monsieur Simon."

He touched his hat and walked on. Simon looked after him, muttering viciously.

After some minutes, a clash of arms from the opposite hotel archway drew his attention. The sentries were saluting the General as he came out, now in full uniform, and followed by two orderlies, while a third went before to announce him at the Prefecture.

Ratoneau looked every inch a soldier, broad, sturdy, and swaggering, as he clanked across the square. Simon noticed with surprise that his face was bright with most unusual good-humour.

"Why, what can that grinning monkey have been saying to him?" Simon asked himself. "Licking the dust off his boots somehow, for that is what he likes, the parvenu! They are like cats, those La Marinières! they always know how to please everybody, and to get their own way. It seems to me they want a lesson."

He moved a little nearer to the great gates, and watched the General as he walked in. The bell clanged, the sentries saluted, the gates were set open ceremoniously. With all his frank, soldierly ways, Ratoneau was extremely

jealous of his position and the respect due to it. The Prefect, on the contrary, aimed at simplicity and liked solitude. His wife had died some years before, not surviving the death of her parents, guillotined in the Terror. If she had lived, her influence being very great, Monsieur de Mauves might never have held his present appointment; for her royalism was quite as pronounced as that of Anne de la Marinière and might have overpowered her husband's admiration for Napoleon. And this would have been a pity, for no part of France, at this time, had a wiser or more acceptable governor.

On that calm and sunny autumn afternoon, the Prefect was sitting in a classically pillared summerhouse near the open windows of his library. Late roses climbed and clustered above his amiable head; lines of orange trees in square green boxes were set along the broad gravel terrace outside, and there was a pleasant view down a walk to a playing fountain with trees about it, beyond which some of the high grey roofs of Sonnay shone in the sunlight.

The Prefect never smoked; his snuff-box and a book were enough for him. Monsieur de Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire de Paris a Jérusalem*, just published in three volumes, lay on a marble table beside him, and he was enjoying an hour of unusual peace and quietness, his only companions two little greyhounds sleeping at his feet.

"AN ORDER FROM THE EMPEROR!" HE REPEATED.
"AN ORDER FROM THE EMPEROR!" HE REPEATED.

It was with a touch of mental annoyance, therefore, that he received the announcement of General Ratoneau's visit. But he was far too well bred to show a sign of such feeling. He left that to the little dogs, who barked their disapproval. He closed his book, went to meet the General in the library, and invited him out to his favourite seat in the summer-house. They were an odd contrast as they sat there together; the quiet, graceful gentleman in ordinary morning dress of an easy description, the soldier, impatient and rough in manner, flashing at every point with gold lace and polished leather.

"Monsieur le Préfet, I have a favour to ask," Ratoneau began.

He did not often speak so civilly, and the Prefect felt relieved, for he had had more than one bad quarter of an hour with this colleague of his.

"How can I oblige you, Monsieur le Général?" he asked, smiling.

"By doing your duty," said Ratoneau, with a grin.

The Prefect shrugged his shoulders slightly, raised his eyebrows and looked at him.

"I ought not," he said, "to need the additional inducement of doing you a favour. I was not aware of having neglected any duty. To what, pray, do you refer?"

"I refer to an order from the Emperor which you have not obeyed."

"Indeed?"

The Prefect's smile had now quite faded. "An order from the Emperor!" he repeated.

"Yes. His Majesty ordered you to report to him the names and particulars of all young girls of good family in the department."

"And what of that, monsieur?"

"I am quite sure you have not done so."

Something in the General's tone was so displeasing to one of the Prefect's little dogs, that it suddenly sprang up and snapped at him. Its master just saved it from a kick by catching it up on his knee.

"A bas, Toutou!" he said, softly stroking it, and took a pinch of snuff, regarding the General with a curiously patient expression.

"I know you have done nothing of the sort!" Ratoneau repeated.

"And how, may I ask, does the matter interest you?"

The Prefect spoke slowly and gently; yet something in his manner irritated the General. He made an impatient movement and rattled his sword.

"It does interest me," he said. "How can you disobey an order from the Emperor?"

"As to that, my dear colleague, I am responsible. You know the view I take of that order. I am not alone. Several of my brother Prefects agree with me. It is impolitic, and worse, offensive. The Emperor is reasonable, and does not expect a blind obedience which would really do harm to the Empire."

"Do not make too sure of that, Monsieur le Préfet."

"If the old provincial families are to be brought round *en masse* to the Empire, it must be done by diplomacy, not by a tyrannical domestic legislation."

"At that rate, Monsieur le Préfet, the work will take a hundred years. They laugh at your diplomacy, these infernal old families. Propose a soldier as a husband for one of their daughters, and you will see."

"I have not done so," the Prefect said very drily, and the glance that shot from under his quiet eyelids might have made a thin-skinned person uncomfortable.

"And nothing would make you do so, I suppose," sneered the General. "Come, monsieur, you should forget your aristocracy now and then, and remember that you are a servant of the Emperor. People will begin to say that His Majesty might be better served."

Monsieur de Mauves shrugged his shoulders, and reflected that if the Emperor had wished to punish him for some crime, he could not have done it better than by giving him this person for a colleague. Fortunately he had a splendid temper; Urbain de la Marinière himself was not endowed with a larger share of sweet

reasonableness. Most men would not have endured the General's insolence for five minutes. The Prefect's love of peace and sense of public duty, united with extreme fairness of mind, helped him to make large allowances for his fellow-official. He knew that Ratoneau's vapouring talk was oftener in coarse joke than in sober earnest. He had, in truth, a very complete scorn of him, and hardly thought him worthy of a gentleman's steel. As to veiled threats such as that which had just fallen from his lips, the Prefect found them altogether beneath serious notice.

"Let us arrive at understanding each other, General," he said coldly, but very politely. "You began by asking me to do you a favour. Then you branched off to a duty I had neglected. You now give me a friendly warning. Is it, perhaps, because you fear to lose me as a colleague, that you have become anxious about my reports to His Majesty?" he smiled. "Or, how, I ask again, does the matter interest you?"

"In this way, Monsieur le Préfet," said Ratoneau. He pulled himself together, keeping his bullying instincts in check. After all, he knew he would be a fool to quarrel with the Prefect or to rouse his active opposition. "No offence?" he said gruffly. "You know me—you know my rough tongue."

The Prefect bowed courteously, and handed him his snuff-box.

"You saw last night at Lancilly," said Ratoneau, much more quietly, "that I had a long talk with Madame la Comtesse."

"A charming woman," said Monsieur de Mauves. "Certainly—you told me the subject of your talk, if you remember. Did you arrive then at any conclusion? What was our hostess's advice on that interesting subject? Did she suggest—the name of any lady, for instance?"

He noticed with a touch of amusement that the General looked slightly confused.

"*I* made a suggestion; and Madame de Sainfoy accepted it very kindly. In fact, Monsieur le Préfet, I asked her for her daughter, Mademoiselle Hélène."

Monsieur de Mauves knew that he ought to have been prepared for this answer; yet, somehow, he was not. Fixing his eyes on the yellow marble mosaic under his feet, he realised once more the frightful contrast that had struck him a few hours before in the lighted salon at Lancilly. "La belle Hélène," as everybody called her; the pale, beautiful girl with the sad eyes and enchanting smile,

walking through the long room with her boy cousin, himself in his slender *élancé* beauty a perfect match for her, so that the eighteenth century might have painted them as two young deities from the Court of Olympus, come down to earth to show mortals a vision of the ideal! And General Ratoneau, the ponderous bully in uniform, the incarnation of the Empire's worst side!

"Sacrilege!"

Last night, the Prefect had thought the same. But he had then added "Impossible!" and now it seemed that the girl's mother did not agree with him. Could ambition carry a woman through such a slough as this? did she really mean to gain imperial favour by such a sacrifice?

For a moment or two the Prefect was lost in a dream; then he suddenly recovered himself.

"Pardon—and you say that Madame de Sainfoy accepted—"

"She thanked me for the honour," said the General, a little stiffly. "She expressed herself favourably. She only asked me to have patience till she could consult her husband. Between ourselves, madame knows that I could be of use to her at Court."

"Could you?"

"Certainly, Monsieur le Préfet. My friend, the Baron de Beauclair, is an equerry to Her Majesty the Empress."

"Oh!" Evidently the Prefect knew and cared little about the Baron de Beauclair. "But, Monsieur le Général," he said, with a puzzled frown, "I am still at a loss to understand you. Your course is apparently smooth. Why do you want the help of an imperial order which, if it did no other harm, would almost certainly set Monsieur de Sainfoy against you?"

Ratoneau's dark face flushed crimson. "Mille tonnerres, Monsieur le Préfet," he growled out, "Monsieur de Sainfoy is against me already, confound him! This afternoon he sent me a letter, flatly declining my proposal for his daughter."

"Is it possible!"

The Prefect had some difficulty in hiding the sincere, if inconsistent, joy that this news gave him.

"Well done!" he thought. "I should have expected nothing less. Ah! I see, I see," he said aloud. "Monsieur de Sainfoy does not quite share his wife's ambitions. It is unfortunate for you, certainly. But if you wish to marry into an old family, there are others—"

Ratoneau stared at him and laughed.

"What do you take me for? Am I beaten so easily? No, monsieur! Mademoiselle de Sainfoy is the woman I mean to marry. I admire that white skin, that perfect distinction. You will not put me off with some ugly little brown toad out of Brittany, I assure you!"

The Prefect laughed.

"But what is to be done? Unless you can gain her father's consent—"

"That is the favour you will do me, Monsieur le Préfet. You will write to headquarters, do you see, and an order will be sent down—yes, an order which her father would not disobey if he were a dozen dukes rolled into one, instead of being what he is, a poor emigrant count helped back into France by wiser men than himself! Voilà, monsieur! Do you understand me now?"

"Ah—yes, General, I understand you," said Monsieur de Mauves.

He leaned back in the corner of the marble seat, calm and deliberate, gently stroking the little dog on his knee. Those long white fingers had lifted the lid of Henriette's basket, those keen eyes, now thoughtfully lowered, had seen the hiding-place of the Chouans in Monsieur Joseph's wood; yet no harm had come to the Royalist conspirators. And now, when an official of the Empire asked his help in a private matter, help strictly legal, even within the limits of an imperial command, again this blameworthy Prefect would not stir a finger. He was running himself into greater danger than he knew, in the satisfaction of his gentle instincts, when he glanced up into the bold, angry, eager face beside him, and said with uncompromising clearness: "Do not deceive yourself, monsieur. I shall not write to headquarters on any such subject, and no such order will be sent down through any action or influence of mine. The Comte de Sainfoy is my friend, remember."

Ratoneau was choking with rage.

"You defy me, monsieur!" he snarled.

"Why—if such a desperate course is necessary," the Prefect murmured. "But I would rather reason with you."

CHAPTER XIII

HOW MONSIEUR SIMON SHOWED HIMSELF A LITTLE TOO CLEVER

General Ratoneau had gone into the Prefecture in a good humour; he came out in a bad one. The change was not lost on the police agent, still loitering under the shade of the high white wall.

Simon was a malcontent. He had talent, he wanted power. No one was cleverer at hunting out the details of a case; he was a born detective. It was hard on such a man, who intended to rise high in his profession, and found the spying and chasing of state criminals an agreeable duty, to be under the orders of so weak-kneed an official as the Baron de Mauves. What was the use of giving in reports that were never acted on! In other departments there were substantial money rewards to be had, if a police spy, at his own risk, hunted out treason against the Empire. In other departments a Prefect made it worth while, in every sense, for his subordinates to do their duty. In this one, since the present Prefect came into office, there was neither rising pay nor quick promotion. He drove with a slack rein; his weapons were trust and kindness. He had to be driven to extremities before he would treat anybody, even a proved Chouan, with the rigour of the law. Simon tried to do a little terrorising on his own account, and had made some money by blackmailing less wide-awake men than Urbain de la Marinière; but, on the whole, he earned more hatred than anything else in his prowlings round the country.

Ratoneau, coming out with a sulky, scowling face from his interview with the Prefect, happened to look up as he passed Simon, and the fellow's expression struck him oddly. It was full of intelligence, and of a queer kind of sympathy. He had noticed it before. Simon had made himself useful to him in several underhand ways.

"What do you want?" he said, stopping suddenly.

Simon stepped up close to him, so that neither sentries nor passers-by might hear.

"Me? I want nothing. I was only thinking that Monsieur le Général had been annoyed. A thousand pardons! I was only wondering—well, I have my provocations too, plenty of them!"

"I'll be bound you have, in such a service as yours," said the General, staring at him. "Come to the hotel this evening, and I'll talk to you."

The officers who dined that day with their chief found his company less attractive than ever. He was wrapped up in his own thoughts, and to judge by his face, they were anything but agreeable. The whole mess was glad to be relieved of his scowling presence unusually early. He had drunk little, and went away unusually sober; but that was not always a good sign with him. If he chose to keep a clear brain, it was generally for his own ends, and they were seldom virtuous or desirable.

The General was scarcely in his own room when Simon presented himself, sneaking upstairs with a light tread and slipping noiselessly through the door, his dark face full of eager expectation. He had often wondered whether there might not be some special dirty work to be done for the General, and had taken pains to keep himself under his eye and in his good looks. If the civil power chose to let the Chouans have it all their own way, the military power might one of these days step in effectively. But Simon was not particular. Whatever the work might be, public or private, he was at the service of the authorities. If only the authorities would take his view of their interest and duty!

It was a little difficult to stand unmoved under General Ratoneau's bullying stare. Simon did so, however, his mouth only working a little at the corners. How far might he go with this man? he was asking himself. Ratoneau did not keep him long in suspense. He suddenly took his cigar from his mouth, swore a tremendous oath, and kicked a chair across the room.

"Are you to be trusted, fellow?" he said.

"I have kept a few secrets, monsieur," Simon answered discreetly.

"Then here is another for you. I wish that chair was Monsieur le Baron de Mauves."

"Ah! Indeed! There has been some disagreement. I saw it, when Monsieur le Général came out of the Prefecture this afternoon."

"You saw it, did you? No wonder! I try to hide nothing—why should I? But tell

me, I beseech you, why are we in this miserable department cursed with a feather-bed for a governor?"

"If I might venture in this presence to say so," murmured Simon, "I have often asked the same question. A feather-bed, yes—and it would be softer and quieter to kick than that arrangement of wood and nails!" He muttered the last sentence between his teeth with an amused grin, for General Ratoneau, striding round the room in a whirlwind of kicks and oaths, was making far too much noise to hear him.

At last, his wrath having exploded, the General flung himself back on his sofa and said, "The Prefect is a fool, and I hate him."

"Tiens!" Simon whistled softly and long. "This is something new—and serious!" he murmured.

The General turned upon him instantly, with a severe air.

"What is your grievance against the Prefect?"

"Ah—well, monsieur, when you come to grievances—a grievance is a valuable thing—yes, sometimes a small fortune lies in a grievance."

"I believe you are a liar!"

"Pardon, monsieur—what lie have I told?"

"You said you had had provocations. You called Monsieur le Préfet a feather-bed, meaning that he had smothered and stifled you. I don't believe a word of it!"

"Oh! Monsieur le Général is very clever!" Simon ventured on a small laugh.

"Come, don't play with me, you rascal. What complaint have you to make?"

"Monsieur le Général may have had a slight difference to-day with Monsieur le Préfet, but they will be reconciled to-morrow. Why should I give myself away and put myself in their power for nothing?"

"You are a fool! What complaint have you to make against Monsieur le Préfet?"

"I am not a fool, monsieur. That is just it. Therefore, I will not tell you—not yet, at least."

"Then why did you come here? What did you suppose I wanted you for?"

"To do some work, for which I might possibly be paid."

"Is it a question of pay?"

"Partly, monsieur. I made some valuable discoveries a week or two ago, and they have turned out of no use whatever. Here am I still an ordinary police officer, my work not acknowledged in any way, by praise, pay, or promotion. I tried on my own account to verify my discoveries and to find out more. This day, this very morning, I am warned to let the whole thing alone, to say nothing, even to the commissary of police."

The General hesitated. He was grave and thoughtful enough now.

He took out five napoleons and pushed them across the table to Simon, who picked them up quickly and greedily.

"Merci, Monsieur le Général!"

"Chouannerie?" said Ratoneau.

Simon grinned.

"Ah, monsieur, this is not enough to make me safe. I must have five thousand francs at least, to carry me away out of the Prefect's reach, if I tell his little secrets to Monsieur le Général."

"Five thousand devils! Do you think I am made of money? What do I want with your miserable secrets? What are the Chouans to me? The Prefect may be a Chouan himself, I dare say: stranger things have happened."

Simon shrugged his shoulders. His face was full of cunning and of secret knowledge.

"If Monsieur le Général wants a real hold over Monsieur le Préfet," he said, with his eyes fixed on Ratoneau's face—"why then, these secrets of mine are worth the money. Of course, there is another thing for me to do. I can go to Paris and lay the whole thing before the Minister of Police or Monsieur le Comte Réal. I had thought of that. But—the Government is generally ungrateful—and if there were any private service to be done for Monsieur le Général, I should like it better. Besides, it is just possible that I might be doing harm to some of your friends, monsieur."

"My friends? How?"

"Ah! voilà! I can mention no names," said Simon.

The General took out his pocket-book and gave him a note for a thousand francs.

"Out with it, fellow. I hate mysteries," he said.

"Pardon, Monsieur le Général! I said *five* thousand."

"Well, there are two more. Not another penny till you have explained yourself. And then, if I am not satisfied, I shall turn you over to my guard to be flogged for theft and lying. And I doubt if they will leave much in your pockets."

"You treat me like a Jew, monsieur!"

"You are a Jew. Go on. What are these grand discoveries that Monsieur le Préfet will have nothing to do with?"

"A Chouan plot, monsieur. The conspirators have met, more than once, I believe, at Monsieur de la Marinière's house, Les Chouettes. They were there that day, when Monsieur le Préfet and Monsieur le Général breakfasted with him. That day when we met a herd of cows in the lane—"

"Hold your tongue, you scoundrel. You are telling me a pack of lies. The place was quiet and empty, no one there but ourselves. Why, we strolled about there the whole afternoon without seeing a single living creature except a little girl gathering flowers in the meadow."

"Ah, monsieur! See what it is to be an agent de police. To have eyes and ears, and to know how to use them! Worth a reward, is it not? I had not been an hour at Les Chouettes before I knew everything."

And five minutes had not passed before General Ratoneau was in possession of all that Simon knew or suspected. Every one was implicated; master, servants, the four guests, whose voices he had recognised as he prowled in the wood, Angelot, and even the child Henriette.

"Gathering flowers in the meadow!" the spy laughed maliciously. "She ought to be in prison at this moment with her father and her cousin."

"Sapristi! And the Prefect knew all this?" growled the General.

"I told him at the time, monsieur. As he was strolling about after breakfast with Monsieur de la Marinière, I called him aside and told him. Of course I expected

an order to arrest the whole party. We were armed, we could have done it very well, even then, though they outnumbered us. Since then I have viewed the ground again, and caught the Baron d'Ombré breakfasting there, the most desperate Chouan in these parts. I questioned old Joubard the farmer, too, for his loyalty is none too firm. Well, when I came to report this to Monsieur le Préfet, he only told me again to be silent. And this very morning, after conferring with some of these Chouan gentlemen last night at Lancilly, as I happen to know, he told me to let the matter alone, to keep away from Les Chouettes and leave Monsieur de la Marinière to do as he pleased."

The General stared and grunted. Honestly, he was very much astonished.

"That afternoon! The devil! who would have thought it?" he muttered to himself.

"It is not that Monsieur le Préfet is disloyal to the Empire," Simon went on, "though he might easily be made to appear so. It is that he thinks there is no policy like a merciful one. Also he is too soft-hearted, and too kind to his friends."

"By heaven! those are fortunate who find him so."

"The old friends of the country, monsieur. It is amazing how they hang together. Monsieur Joseph de la Marinière is brother of Monsieur Urbain, Monsieur Ange is Monsieur Urbain's son, Monsieur le Comte de Sainfoy is their cousin—and I heard the servants saying, only last night, how beautiful the two young people looked, handing the coffee together—though I should certainly have thought, myself, that Monsieur le Comte would have made a better marriage than that for his daughter. But they say the young gentleman's face—"

"Stop your fool's chatter!" cried the General, furiously.

"But that is just what I said, monsieur, to the Prefect's fellow who told me. I said this young Angelot was a silly boy who cared for nothing but practical jokes. Besides, if he is mixed up in Chouan conspiracies, Monsieur de Sainfoy could hardly afford—and after all, cousins are cousins. You may be very intimate with a cousin, but it does not follow—does it, monsieur?"

"Once for all, put that foolery out of your head. Now listen. You have told me your grievance against the Prefect. I will tell you mine."

And the police officer listened with all his ears, while General Ratoneau told him his story of last night and to-day.

"Ah!" he said thoughtfully—"I see—I see very well. Monsieur le Comte is a foolish gentleman, and Madame la Comtesse is a wise lady. Then Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière—he is the friend of both—he visited Monsieur le Général to-day."

This was a touch of curiosity, which the General did not satisfy, for he saw no good to be gained, at present, by mixing up Urbain's name in the business. He had made a good suggestion, which had failed. The General was aware that in consulting Simon he might be entering on dark ways where no gentleman would follow him. Simon's help might mean a good deal. It might mean arrests rather too near Monsieur Urbain to be pleasant. On one thing the General was resolved; by hook or by crook, by fair means or foul, Hélène de Sainfoy should become his wife. With her mother on his side, he suspected that any means would in the end be forgiven. He was never likely again to have such an opportunity of marrying into the old noblesse. Personally, Hélène attracted him; he had been thinking of her a good deal that day.

"Monsieur de la Marinière—" he said rather gruffly—"Yes, he came to see me. He is of Madame de Sainfoy's opinion—he is a sensible man. No one would be more angry at your idiotic stories about his son. Now what next? I come down on the Prefect with your information, and demand the arrest of all these people, unless—hein?"

"There are objections to that plan, monsieur."

"What are they?"

"Well, to begin with, Monsieur le Préfet may not be managed so easily. He is quite capable of going to Paris and laying the whole case before the Emperor, who respects him. He might point out Monsieur Joseph de la Marinière's close relationship with all these people who have rallied to the Empire. He might make it appear like personal spite of yours, monsieur, because Monsieur de Sainfoy had refused you his daughter. And such a course would spoil your chance in another way, monsieur. It would make all the family hate you. Even Madame la Comtesse could hardly be on your side, if you had done that. And besides, it would kill at one blow all my chances in this department. I think we must go to work more quietly, monsieur. At least, I think we must keep threats and arrests for a last resort, now that you have told me everything."

"Then you would say no more to the Prefect?"

"Not another word, monsieur. I would be silent. I would appear to accept the Prefect's decision, and Monsieur de Sainfoy's answer. But after a few days I would make some pretext for going to Paris. I am going there myself next week; I have leave to visit my old father. Then, monsieur, by spending a little money at the centre of things—well, a thunderbolt out of a clear sky is very effective, monsieur, and that is what we will try to manufacture."

Simon grinned and licked his lips.

"Then what have I paid you three thousand one hundred francs for, rascal, if the information about all this Chouannerie is to be of no use?"

"Well, of course, it is at Monsieur le Général's service. It gives him a hold over Monsieur le Préfet, at any time. That was desired, I understood. All I say is, I would not use it just yet. The circumstances are delicate. When I sold the information, and dirt cheap too, I knew nothing of all the interesting romance Monsieur le Général has told me. An affair of marriage wants tender handling. This one, especially, wants very clever management. If I, in Monsieur le Général's place, meant to be the husband of Mademoiselle de Sainfoy, I would not begin by doing anything to make myself still more odious in the eyes of her friends and relations."

"Still more odious, fellow! What do you mean?"

"Pardon! I am only arguing from your own words, monsieur. You told me what her father said, and what Monsieur le Préfet said. One makes one's deductions, hein!"

"Ah! You had better not be impudent. I am not a person to be played with, Monsieur Simon!"

"Heaven forbid! I have the deepest respect for Monsieur le Général. And now let me explain my plan a little further."

"Hold your tongue with your infernal plans, and let me think," said Ratoneau.

He got up and began pacing up and down the room with his head bent, in a most unusually thoughtful state of mind. The dark, treacherous eyes of Simon followed him as he walked. His brain was working too, much more swiftly and sharply than the General's. This little affair was going to bring him in considerably more than five thousand francs, or he would know the reason why. Presently he spoke in a low, cautious voice.

"The person to approach is Monsieur le Duc de Frioul. A direct order from His Majesty would be the quickest and most certain way of bringing the marriage about. It is not a police question, that. Monsieur le Général has certainly deserved the favour, and the Emperor does not very often refuse officers in matters of this kind."

"Mille tonnerres, Simon, you talk like an ambassador," said Ratoneau, with a laugh. "Yes, I know Duroc; but there was never any love lost between us. However, I might get at him through Monge, and other people. Sapristi, Monge will have enough to do for me!" He was thinking aloud. But now he turned on his counsellor with sudden fierceness.

"And am I to leave this Chouan plot to go its own way under the Prefect's protection?" he said. "A pretty idea, that!"

"Ah! when once Monsieur le Général has peacefully secured his prize, *then* he can do as he thinks right about public affairs," said Simon, with a sneer.

"Then I can punish my enemies, hein?" said Ratoneau.

"You can indeed, monsieur. With my information, you might very probably ruin Monsieur le Préfet, besides causing the arrest of Monsieur de la Marinière, his nephew, Monsieur d'Ombré, and several other gentlemen whom I shall be able to point out. You could make a clean sweep of Chouannerie in Anjou, monsieur. It is very desirable. All I say is, make sure of your wife first."

Still Ratoneau walked up and down the room. With arms folded and head bent, he looked more *le gros caporal* than ever.

Presently he stopped short and turned to Simon.

"Get along with you, fellow, and hold your tongue," he said. "I will have nothing to do with your dirty tricks. I will settle the matter with Monsieur le Préfet."

"But me, monsieur? What will become of me?"

"What do I care! A snake in the grass, like you, can look after himself."

"But my other two thousand francs, Monsieur le Général?"

"You shall have them when the affair is settled. Do you hear me? Go—or wait to be kicked. Which shall it be?"

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH THREE WORDS CONTAIN A GOOD DEAL OF INFORMATION

It was not so easy for Angelot to make his peace with Uncle Joseph, who was more than a little angry with him.

"Yes, my boy, you were foolish, as well as ungrateful. It was a chance, it was a moment, that will not occur again. It was better that the idea should seem to come from me, not from you, and it seemed the only way to save that pretty girl from some marriage she will hate. I thought you would at least be ready to throw yourself at her feet—but you were not even that, Angelot. You refused her—you refused Mademoiselle Hélène, after all you had told me—and do you know what that mother of hers has been planning for her? No? Don't look at me with such eyes; it is your own doing. Madame de Sainfoy would arrange a marriage for her with General Ratoneau, if Hervé would consent. He says he will not, he says a convent would be better—"

"Ah!" Angelot gave a choked cry, and stamped violently in the sand. "Ah! Ratoneau or a convent! Dieu! Not while I live!"

"Very fine to say so now!" said Monsieur Joseph, shaking his head.

He was ready to go out shooting in the fresh morning air. His gun leaned against the bench where he was sitting, and his dog watched him with eager eyes. His delicate face was dark with melancholy disgust as he looked at the boy he loved, tramping restlessly up and down between him and the fir trees.

"You don't listen to me, Uncle Joseph; you don't understand me!" Angelot cried out passionately. "What do you take me for? It was for her sake that I answered as I did. It was because she had told me, one minute before, that her mother would kill her if she knew that she—that I—"

He sprang to the bench, threw himself down by Monsieur Joseph, flung his arm around his shoulders.

"Ah, little uncle, voyons, tell me everything. You said you would help me—"

"Help you! I am well repaid when I try to help you!" said Joseph, with a short laugh.

"But that was not the way! Come, come!" and Angelot laid his head against the little uncle's shoulder, coaxing and caressing him as he might have done ten years before, as Riette would do now.

"Ah, diable! what would you have? I offered them you in the place of Ratoneau or a convent, and you would not even wait to hear what they said. Nonsense about her mother! Mothers do not kill their children in these days. Mademoiselle is a little extravagant."

"I don't believe it. She knows her mother. I think Madame de Sainfoy would stop at nothing—no ill-treatment—to force her own way. I saw it in her face, I met her eyes when you dragged me into the room. Uncle Joseph, I tell you she hates me already, and if she thinks I am an obstacle to her plans, she will never let me see Hélène again."

"Where were you, then, when I called you, good-for-nothing?"

"I was on the stairs, talking to her. Her mother had sent her out of the room—"

"On my word, you snatch your opportunities!"

"Of course! And when you were young—"

"There—no impertinence—"

"Dear uncle, I asked you days ago to talk to my father and mother. Why did you never do it? Then I might have been beforehand with that man—as to him, of course, he is an utter impossibility, and if Cousin Hervé sees that, we are safe—but still—"

"Ah! there is a 'but' in the affair, I assure you. Madame would do anything for a nearer connection with her beloved Empire—and Ratoneau might be Napoleon's twin-brother, but that is a detail—and not only madame, your father is on the same side."

"My father!"

"He thinks there could not be a more sensible marriage. The daughter of the Comte de Sainfoy—a distinguished general of division; diable! what can anybody want more? So my Angelot, I was not a false prophet, it seems to me,

when I felt very sure that what you asked me was hopeless. Your father would have been against you, for the sake of the Sainfoys; your mother, for opposite reasons. There was one chance, Hervé himself. I saw that he was very angry at the Ratoneau proposal; I thought he might snatch at an alternative. I still think he might have done so, if you had not behaved like a maniac. It was the moment, Angelot; such moments do not return. I was striking while the iron was hot—you, you only, made my idea useless. You made me look even more mad and foolish than yourself—not that I cared for that. As to danger from her mother, why, after all, her father is the authority."

"Ah, but you are too romantic," sighed Angelot. "He would never have accepted me. He would never really oppose his wife, if her mind was set against him."

"He opposes her now. He plainly said that his daughter should marry a gentleman, therefore not Ratoneau. And where have all your fine presumptuous hopes flown to, my boy? The other day you found yourself good enough for Mademoiselle Hélène."

"Perhaps I do still," Angelot said, and laughed. "But I did not then quite understand the Comtesse. I know now that she detests me. Then, too, she had not seen or thought of Ratoneau—Dieu! What profanation! Was it quite new, the terrible idea? I saw the brute—pah! We were handing the coffee—"

"Yes," said Monsieur Joseph. "As far as I know, the seed was sown, the plant grew and flowered, all in that one evening, my poor Angelot. Well—I hope all is safe now, but women are very clever, and there is your father, too—he is very clever. If it is not this marriage, it will be another—but you are not interested now; you have put yourself out of the question."

"Don't say that, Uncle Joseph—and don't imagine that your troubles are over. You will have to do a good deal more for me yet, and for Hélène." He spoke slowly and dreamily, then added with a gesture of despair—"But my father—how could he! Why, the very sight of the man—"

"Ah! Very poetical, your dear father, but not very sentimental. I told him so. He said the best poetry was the highest good sense. I do not quite understand him, I confess. Allons! I am afraid I do. He is a philosopher. He also—well, well!"

"He also—what?"

"Nothing," said Monsieur Joseph, shortly. "What is to be done then, to help

you?"

"I am afraid—for her sake—I must not go quite so much to Lancilly. Not for a few days, at least, till last night is forgotten. I cannot meet her before all those people, with their eyes upon me. I believe Madame de Sainfoy saw that I was lying, that I would give my life for what I seemed to refuse."

"Do you think so? No, no, she laughed and teased and questioned me with the others."

"Nevertheless, I think so. But I must know that Hélène is well and safe and not tormented. Uncle Joseph, if you could go there a little oftener—you might see her sometimes—"

"How often?"

"Every two days, for instance?"

Monsieur Joseph smiled sweetly.

"No, mon petit. What should take me to Lancilly every two days? I have not much to say to Hervé; his ideas are not mine, either on sport or on politics. And as to Madame Adélaïde—no—we do not love each other. She is impatient of me—I distrust her. She has Urbain, and one in the family is enough, I think. Voyons! Would your Mademoiselle Moineau do any harm to Riette?"

"Ah! But no! I believe she is a most excellent woman."

"Only a little sleepy—hein? Well, I will change my mind about that offer I refused. I will send Riette every day to learn needlework and Italian with her cousins. She will teach more than she learns, by the bye! Yes, our little *guetteuse* shall watch for you, Angelot. But on one condition—that she knows no more than she does already. You can ask her what questions you please, of course—but no letters or messages, mind; I trust to your honour. I will not have the child made a go-between in my cousin's house, or mixed up with matters too old for her. She knows enough already to do what you want, to tell you that Mademoiselle Hélène is safe and well. I will have nothing more, you understand. But I think you will be wise to keep away, and this plan may make absence bearable."

He turned his anxious, smiling face to Angelot. And thus the entire reconciliation was brought about; the two understood and loved each other better

than ever before, and Riette, as she had herself suggested, was to take her part in helping Angelot.

Neither Monsieur Urbain, in his great discretion, nor his wife, in her extreme dislike of Lancilly and all connected with it, chose to say a word either to Angelot or his uncle about the strange little scene that had closed the dinner-party. It was better forgotten, they thought. And Angelot was too proud, too conscious of their opinion, to speak of it himself.

So the three talked that night about Sonnay-le-Loir and the markets there, and about the neighbours that Urbain had met, and about certain defects in one of his horses, and then about the coming vintage and its prospects.

Urbain fetched down a precious book, considerably out of date now, the *Théâtre d'Agriculture* of Olivier de Serres, Seigneur du Pradel, and began studying, as he did every year, the practical advice of that excellent writer on the management of vineyards. The experience of Angelot, gained chiefly in wandering round the fields with old Joubard, differed on some points from that of Monsieur de Serres. He argued with his father, not at all in the fashion of a young man hopelessly in love; but indeed, though Hélène was the centre of all his thoughts, he was far from hopeless.

There was a bright spring of life in Angelot, a faith in the future, which kept him above the most depressing circumstances. The waves might seem overwhelming, the storm too furious; Angelot would ride on the waves with an unreasoning certainty that they would finally toss him on the shore of Paradise. Had not Hélène kissed him? Could he not still feel the sweet touch of her lips, the velvet softness of that pale cheek? Could his eyes lose the new dream in their sleepy dark depths, the dream of waking smiles and light in hers, of bringing colour and joy into that grey, mysterious world of sadness! No; whatever the future might hold—and he did not fear it—Angelot could say to his fate:—

"To-morrow do thy worst, for I have lived to-day."

There was such a glory of happiness behind the present clouds that the boy had never seemed to his mother more light-hearted. She listened to his talk with his father, the smiling dispute as to what age of the moon was the most lucky for beginning the vintage. Monsieur de Serres, with a kindly word of indulgence for those who thought much of the moon, contented himself with recommending fine weather and a convenient day. Joubard, and Angelot with him, held to the old country superstition of the waning moon.

This would throw the vintage later than Monsieur Urbain wished, and he pointed out that De Serres was a sensible man and a philosopher. Silly fancies, lunatical, astrological, were not much in his line.

"He is also a Calvinist," said Madame de la Marinière. "He has no religion—no real religion. He believes in nothing but what he can see. Take my advice, leave Olivier on the shelf, and stick to the old ways of the country."

"Ah, bah! and do you know why my farming has always succeeded?" said her husband, laughing. "Because I have been guided by the wisdom of De Serres. He is a rare man. He has as little superstition as Montaigne himself."

"And is as worthy of a bonfire!" said Anne, but she smiled.

She was sitting at her tapestry frame, beside her two wax candles, and while her needle went industriously in and out, her eyes were constantly lifted to where those two sat talking. Urbain turned over the leaves of his fat, red-edged quarto, lingering lovingly on favourite pages. Angelot laughed and chattered, leaning easily on the table. The adventure of last night seemed to have left no impression upon him.

"How foolish that dear Joseph was!" his mother thought. "But oh, what a contrast to that odious dinner-party! Now, this is peace, this is what I have prayed for, to have them both happy at home, and free of Lancilly."

But when she kissed her boy that night, looking eagerly into his face, something cold touched her heart. For his look was far away, and the smile in his eyes was not for her at all.

"Urbain," she said, "are you sure that all is right with Ange?"

"All, my beloved, except a little superstition about the moon, of which life will cure him," her husband answered with his queer smile.

"The moon! Yes, he talked last night about the moon," she said. "That is what I mean, Urbain, not your moon for the vintage."

"Oh! la belle Hélène!" he said lightly. "Don't derange yourself. I did not tell you—I found her mother this morning in a resolute state of mind. She does not intend to have the young lady on her hands long. If not one marriage, it will be another, you will see. Hervé will find he must leave the matter to his wife. Ange! bah! children's fancies are not worth a thought. If you lived more in the world,

you would be happier, my poor Anne."

"I don't think so," Anne said as she turned away.

The next morning Monsieur Urbain stayed indoors till breakfast time. This was often enough a habit of his, but he was generally buried in his books and did not care to be disturbed. To-day he wandered about the house, took a turn into the porch, observed the clouds, looked at his watch, and behaved generally with a restlessness that Anne would have found unaccountable; but she was out with a sick woman in the village. She came in soon after ten, followed by Angelot from his shooting.

They sat down to breakfast, that warm day, with doors and windows open. The old, low room with its brick-paved floor was shady and pleasant, opening on the stone court where the porch was; the polished table was loaded with fruit. Angelot's dog lay stretched in a patch of sunshine; he was ordered out several times, but always came back. When the heat became too much he rose panting, and flung his long body into the shade; then the chilly bricks drove him back into the sun again.

The three were rather silent. Urbain, who always led their talk, was a little preoccupied that morning. After finishing his second large slice of melon, he looked up at Angelot and said, "After breakfast I will go with you to La Joubardière. We must settle with Joubard about the vintage; it is time things were fixed. I say the first of October. As to his moons, I cannot listen to such absurdities. He must arrange what suits me and the weather and the vines. First of all, me."

"That is decided," said Angelot, smiling. "Joubard will shake his head, but he will obey you. You are a tyrant in your way."

"Perhaps!" Urbain said, screwing up his mouth. "A benevolent despot. Obedience is good for the soul—n'est-ce pas, madame? I give my commands for the good of others, and pure reason lies behind them. What is it, Négo?"

The dog lifted his black head and growled. There was a sharp clank of footsteps on the stones outside.

"A bas, Négo!" cried Angelot, as a soldier, with a letter in his hand, appeared at the window.

The dog sprang up, barking furiously, about to fly at him.

"See to your dog! Take him away!" Monsieur Urbain shouted to Angelot.

The young man threw himself on the dog and dragged him, snarling, out of the room. Anne looked up with surprise at the soldier, who saluted, standing outside the low window-sill. Urbain went to him, and took the letter from his hand.

"It is Monsieur de la Marinière?" said the man. "At your service. From Monsieur le Général. Is there an answer?"

"Wait a moment, my man," said Urbain.

He broke the large red seal, standing by the window. One glance showed him the contents of the letter, for they were only three words and an initial.

—"*Tout va bien. R.*"—

But though the words were few, their significance was great, and it kept the sturdy master of La Marinière standing motionless for a minute or two in a dream, with the open letter in his hand, forgetful alike of the messenger waiting outside, and of his wife behind him at the table. A dark stain of colour stole up into his sunburnt face, his strong mouth quivered, then set itself obstinately. So! this thing was to happen. Treason to Hervé, was it? No, it was for his good, for everybody's good. Sentiment was out of place in a political matter such as this. Sacrifice of a girl? well, what was gained in the world without sacrifice? Let her think herself Iphigenia, if she chose; but, after all, many girls as noble and as pretty had shown her the way she was to go.

"All goes well!" he muttered between his teeth. "This gentleman is impatient; he does not let the grass grow. Odd enough that we have to thank our dear Joseph for suggesting it!" Then he woke to outside things, among them the waiting soldier, standing there like a wooden image in the blaze of sunshine.

"No answer, my friend," he said.

He took out a five-franc piece and gave it to the man, not without a glance at the splendid Roman head upon it.

"He only needs a little idealising!" he said to himself; then aloud to the soldier: "My best compliments to Monsieur le Général. Go to the kitchen; they will give you something to eat and drink after your ride."

"Merci, monsieur!" the soldier saluted and went.

Urbain folded the letter, put it into his pocket, and returned silently to his breakfast. Something about him warned his wife that it would be better not to ask questions; but Anne seldom observed such warnings, for she did not know what it was to be afraid of Urbain, though she was often angry with him. With Angelot it was different; he had sometimes reason to fear his father; but for Anne, the tenderness was always greater than the severity.

They were alone for a few minutes, Angelot not having reappeared. While Urbain hurriedly devoured his sorrel and eggs, his wife gazed at him with anxious eyes across the table.

"You correspond with that odious General!" she said. "What about, my dear friend? What can he have to say to you?"

"Ah, bah! the curiosity of women!" said Monsieur Urbain, bending over his plate.

"Yes," Anne said, smiling faintly. "It exists, and therefore it must be gratified. Is not that a doctrine after your own heart? What was that letter about, tell me? You could not hide that it interested you deeply."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Remember, we never talk politics, you and I. Not even the politics of the department."

"It has something to do with the Chouans, then? With Joseph? Ah, but do not trust that man, Urbain! he has a horrid face. Did you see him yesterday? Did he say anything about Joseph—and about Ange? He has a spite against Ange, I believe."

"Do not be uneasy," Monsieur Urbain replied. "I did see him yesterday, if you must know, my dear Anne. He is friendly; well, you can see the letter. I do not choose to explain it altogether, but it speaks for itself."

He took out the letter, unfolded it, and handed it to her with a curious smile.

"*Tout va bien!*" Anne read aloud. "What does he mean?"

"He means, I suppose, that my mind may be at rest. You see that he is in a good temper."

"It looks like it, certainly. But that is strange, too. Had Hervé de Sainfoy sent

him an answer? When you saw him, did he know—"

"Yes, he knew."

"How did he bear it?"

"Like a man."

"Really! One dislikes him a little less for that. But still, Urbain, why should you have anything to do with him? Is it not enough that the Prefect is so friendly to us all? With his protection, Joseph and Ange are not in any real danger."

"It is best to have two strings to one's bow," answered Urbain. "I prefer Ratoneau a friend to Ratoneau an enemy."

"I should like best no Ratoneau at all," said Anne. She flicked the letter back to him from the tips of her fingers, lightly and scornfully. "How could Adélaïde talk to him for a whole evening!" she sighed.

"Adélaïde is a woman of the world, as we have decided before," said Urbain. "Say no more; here is the boy. It is best that he should know nothing of this—do you understand?"

Anne understood, or thought she did; and a nod and smile from her went a long way towards reassuring Angelot, who had been a little puzzled by the sudden appearance of the soldier. But he was not curious; his father was by no means in the habit of telling him everything, making indeed a thin cloud of wilful mystery about some of his doings. It had always been so; and Angelot had grown up with a certain amount of blind trust in the hand which had guided his mother and himself through the thorny years of his childhood.

At this moment he was distracted by a very serious attack on Négo. The dog would have to be shot, Monsieur Urbain said, if he received people so savagely; and in defending Négo the rest of Angelot's breakfast-time was spent.

Later on he was a little surprised by his father's telling him to go alone to La Joubardière and arrange about the vintage. Urbain had remembered business, he said, which called him to Lancilly. He turned away and left the room without a word, without seeing, or perhaps choosing to see, the sudden flame of irritation in Anne's dark eyes, the light of another feeling in Angelot's.

The young fellow lingered a moment in the dining-room window, and watched

the sturdy figure walking away in linen clothes and a straw hat, the shoulders slightly bent from study, the whole effect that of honest strength and capacity, not at all of intrigue and ruse. Then he turned round and met his mother's eyes. For a moment it seemed as if they must read each other's soul. But Anne only said: "Do not delay, my boy. Go to Joubard; arrange things to please your father. We must remember; he is wiser than we are; he does the best for us all."

"Yes, my little mother," said Angelot. "Only—Négo shall not be shot. Yes, I am going this instant."

He took her hand and kissed it. She pushed back his hair and kissed his forehead.

"And what are you going to do?" he said. "Come with me to see the old Joubards."

"No, no. I must go to the church," she said. "I was hurried this morning."

As Urbain crossed the valley, going through the little hamlet, down the white stony lane, between high hedges, then by field paths across to the lower poplar-shaded road, then along by the slow, bright stream to the bridge and the first white houses of Lancilly, he thought with some amusement and satisfaction of that morning's diplomacy. He had not the smallest intention of taking his dear and pretty Anne into his confidence. The little plot, which Adélaïde and he had hatched so cleverly, must remain between them and the General.

This power of suggesting was a wonderful thing, truly. A word had been enough to set the whole machinery going. If he rightly understood that *Tout va bien*, it meant that the Prefect was ready at once to do his part. That seemed a little strange; but after all, De Mauves would not have reached his present position without some cleverness to help him, and no doubt he saw, as Urbain did, the excellence of this arrangement for everybody all round. Hervé de Sainfoy was really foolish; his own enemy: Urbain and Adélaïde were his friends; they knew how to make use of the mammon of unrighteousness. The advantages of such a connection with the Empire were really uncountable. Urbain was quite sure that he was justified in plotting against Hervé for his good. Did he not love him like a brother? Would he not have given him the last penny in his purse, the last crust if they were starving? And as for misleading Anne a little, that too seemed right to his conscience. It was only a case of economising truth, after all. In the end, the Ratoneau connection would be useful in saving Joseph and his friends, no doubt, from some of the consequences of their foolishness.

It was with the serenity of success and conscious virtue, deepened and brightened by the joy of pleasing the beautiful Adélaïde, that Urbain, finding her alone, put the General's letter into her hand.

There was an almost vulture look in the fair face as she stooped over it.

"Ah—and what does this mean?"

"It means," Urbain said, "that General Ratoneau has seen the Prefect, and that that excellent man is ready to oblige him—and you, madame."

"Me?" Adélaïde looked up sharply, with a sudden flush. "I hope you gave no message from me."

"How could I? you sent none. I am to be trusted, I assure you. I simply hinted that if the affair could be managed from outside, you would not be too much displeased."

"Nor would you," she said.

"No—no, I should not." He spoke rather slowly, stroking his face, looking at her thoughtfully. This pale passion of eagerness was not becoming, somehow, to his admired Adélaïde.

"Nor would you," she repeated. "Come, Urbain, be frank. You know it is necessary, from your point of view, that Hélène should be married soon. You know that silly boy of yours fancies himself in love with her."

"It would not be unnatural. All France might do the same. But pardon me, I do not know it."

"You mean that he has not confided in you. Well, well, do not lay hold of my words; you had eyes the night before last; you saw what I saw, what every one must have seen. You confessed as much to me yesterday, so do not contradict yourself now."

"Very well—yes!" Urbain smiled and bowed. "Let us agree that my poor boy may have such a fancy. But what does it matter?"

"Of course it does not really matter, because such a marriage would be absolutely impossible for Hélène. But it is better for a young man not to have such wild ambitions in his head at all. You know I am right. You agree with me. That is one reason why you are working with me now."

"It is true, madame. You are right. But did it not seem to you, the other night, that Angelot himself saw the impossibility—"

"No, it did not," she said, and her eyes flashed. "He had to protect himself from his uncle's madness—that was nothing. By the bye, that wonderful brother of yours has changed his mind about Henriette. He sent her here this morning with a letter to me, and she is now doing her lessons with Sophie and Lucie."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Urbain, absently. "But now, to return to our subject—the Ratoneau marriage—" he paused an instant, and whatever his words and actions may have been, Madame de Sainfoy was a little punished for her scorn of his son by the accent of utter disgust with which he dwelt on the General's name.

For she felt it, and he had the small satisfaction of seeing that she did. She had trodden on her worm a little too hard, in telling Ange de la Marinière's father that he might as well dream of a princess as of Hélène de Sainfoy.

"Yes, yes," she said hastily, and smiled brilliantly on Urbain as much as to say, "Dear friend, I was joking. We understand each other.—Tell me everything you did yesterday—what he said, and all about it," she went on aloud. "Ah, Hervé!" as her husband sauntered into the room—"do have the goodness to fetch me those patterns of silk hangings from the library. This dear Urbain has come at the right moment to be consulted about them."

CHAPTER XV

HOW HENRIETTE READ HISTORY TO SOME PURPOSE

The inside of the Château de Lancilly was a curious labyrinth of arched stone passages paved with brick, cold on the hottest day, with short flights of steps making unexpected changes of level; every wall so thick as to hold deep cupboards, even small rooms, or private staircases climbing steeply up or down. The old ghosts of the château, who slipped in and out of these walls and flitted about the hidden steps, had lost a good deal of their credit in the last twenty years. No self-respecting ghost could show itself to Urbain de la Marinière, and few mortals besides him haunted the remote passages while the great house stood empty.

And now one may be sure that the ghosts were careful to hide themselves from Madame de Sainfoy. No half-lights, no chilly shadows wavering on the wall, no quick passing of a wind from nowhere, such hints and vanishings as might send a shiver through ordinary bones, had any effect on Adélaïde's cool dignity. The light of reason shone in her clear-cut face; her voice, penetrating and decided, was enough to frighten any foolish spirit who chose to sweep rushingly beside her through the wall as she walked along the passages.

"Do you hear the rats?" she would say. "How can we catch them? These old houses are infested with them."

She spoke so firmly that even the ghost itself believed it was a rat, and scuttled away out of hearing.

To reach the north wing, where her three girls and their governess lived, Madame de Sainfoy had to mount a short flight of steps from the hall, then to go along a vaulted corridor lighted only by a small lucarne window here and there, then down a staircase which brought her to the level of the great salons and the dining-room at the opposite end, which formerly, like this north wing, had hung over the moat, but were now being brought nearer the ground by Monsieur de Sainfoy's earthworks.

This old north wing had been less restored than any other part of the château. The passage which ran through it, only lighted by a window at the foot of the

staircase, ended at the arched door of a silent, deserted chapel with an altar on its east side, a quaint figure of Our Lady in a carved niche, and a window half-darkened with ivy leaves, overhanging the green and damp depths of the moat, now empty of water.

Before reaching the chapel—lonely and neglected, but not desecrated, for by the care of Madame de la Marinière mass had been said in it once a year—there were four doors, two on each side of the corridor. The first on the left was that of the room where Sophie and Lucie both slept and did their lessons, a large room looking out west to the gardens and woods behind Lancilly; and opening from this, with a separate door into the passage, was Mademoiselle Moineau's room. On the right the rooms were smaller, the chapel cutting them off to the north, with a secret staircase in the thickness of the wall by the altar. A maid slept in the first; and the second, nearest the chapel, but with a wide, cheerful view of its own across the valley to the east, was Hélène's room.

Madame de Sainfoy, after disposing of Hervé and hearing all that Urbain had to tell her, with digressions to the almost equally interesting subject of silk hangings, set off across the château to inspect the young people at their lessons. She was an excellent mother. She did not, like so many women, leave her children entirely to the consciences of their teachers.

Her firm step, the sharp touch which lifted the heavy old latch, straightened the backs of Sophie and Lucie as if by magic. Lucie looked at her mother in terror. Too often her round shoulders caught that unsparing eye, and the dreaded backboard was firmly strapped on before Madame de Sainfoy left the room; for Lucie, growing tall and inclined to stoop, was going through the period of torture which Hélène, for the same reason, had endured before her.

They all got up, including Mademoiselle Moineau. The two girls went to kiss their mother's hand; Henriette, more slowly, followed their example.

"I hope your new pupil is obedient, mademoiselle," said Madame de Sainfoy, as her cold glance met the child's fearless eyes.

Mademoiselle Moineau cocked her little arched nose—she was very like a fluffy old bird—and smiled rather mischievously.

"We shall do very well, when Mademoiselle de la Marinière understands us," she said. "I have no wish to complain, but at present she is a little sure of herself, a little distrustful of me, and so—"

"Ignorance and ill-breeding," said the Comtesse, coolly. "Excuse her—she will know better in time."

Riette's eyes fell, and she became crimson. The good-natured Sophie caught her hand and squeezed it, thinking she was going to cry; but such weakness was far from Riette; the red of her cheeks was a flame of pure indignation. Ignorant! Ill-bred! She had been very much pleased when the little papa decided suddenly on sending her to join Sophie and Lucie in their lessons; she had been seized with a romantic admiration for Hélène, independent of the interest she took in her for Angelot's sake, and in other ways the Château de Lancilly was to her enchanted ground. And now this fair, tall lady, whom she had disliked from the first, talked of her ignorance and ill-breeding! She drew herself up, her lips trembled; another such word and she would have walked out of the room, fled down the corridor, escaped alone across the fields to Les Chouettes. She knew every turn, every step in the château, every path in the country, far better than these people did; they would not easily overtake her.

But Madame de Sainfoy was not thinking of Henriette.

"What are you doing? Reading history?" she said to the others. "Mademoiselle, I thought it was my wish that Hélène should read history with her sisters. The other day, if you remember, she could not tell Monsieur de Sainfoy the date of the marriage of Philippe Duc d'Orléans with the Princess Henriette of England. It is necessary to know these things. The Emperor expects a correct knowledge of the old Royal Family. Where is Hélène?"

"She is in her own room, madame. Allow me an instant—"

The three children were left alone. Madame de Sainfoy walked quickly into Mademoiselle Moineau's room, the little governess waddling after her, and the door was shut.

Riette made a skip in the air and pirouetted on one foot. Then while Sophie and Lucie stared open-mouthed, she was on a chair; then with a wild spring, she was hanging by her hands to the top cornice of a great walnut-wood press; then she was on her feet again, light as an india-rubber ball.

"Ah, mon Dieu! sit down, Riette, or we shall all be beaten!" sighed the trembling Lucie.

"Don't be frightened, children!" murmured Riette. "Where is our book? Now, my

angels, think, think of Henri Quatre and all his glory!"

In the meanwhile, Mademoiselle Moineau laid her complaint of Hélène before the Comtesse. Something was certainly the matter with the girl; she would not read, she would not talk, her tasks of needlework were neglected, she did not care to go out, or to do anything but sit in her window and gaze across the valley.

"Of course there has been no opportunity—they have never met, except in public—but if it were not entirely out of the question—" Mademoiselle Moineau stammered, blushing, conscious, though she would never confess it, of having nodded one day for a few minutes under a certain mulberry tree. "The other night, madame, at the dinner party, did it strike you that a certain gentleman was a little forward, a little intimate—"

Madame de Sainfoy lifted her brows and shrugged her shoulders.

"You mean young La Marinière? Bah! nonsense, mademoiselle. Only a little cousin, and a quite impossible one. We cannot keep him quite at arm's length, because of his father, who has been so excellent. But if you really think that Hélène has any such absurdity in her head—"

"Oh, madame, I do not say so. I have no positive reason for saying so. She has told me nothing—"

"I should think not," said Madame de Sainfoy, shortly.

Mademoiselle Moineau was dismissed back to her pupils, whom she found, under Henriette's surveillance, deep in the romance of French history.

Madame de Sainfoy crossed the passage and tried Hélène's door. It was not fastened, as she had half expected. Opening it quickly and gently, she found her daughter sitting in the window, as the governess had described her, with both arms stretched out upon its broad sill, and eyes fixed in a long wistful gaze on the small spire of the church at La Marinière, and the screen of trees which partly hid the old manor buildings from view.

"What are you doing, Hélène?" said Madame de Sainfoy.

Her voice, though low, was peremptory. The girl started up, turning her white face and tired eyes from the window. Her mother walked across the room and sat down in a high-backed chair close by.

"What a waste of time," she said, "to sit staring into vacancy! Why are you not reading history with your sisters, as I wished?"

"Mamma—my head aches," said Hélène.

"Then bathe it with cold water. What is the matter with you, child? You irritate me with your pale looks. Do you dislike Lancilly? Do you wish yourself back in Paris?"

"No, mamma."

"I could excuse you if you did," said Madame de Sainfoy, with a smile. "I find the country insupportable myself, but you see, as the fates have preserved to us this rat-infested ruin, we must make the best of it. I set you an example, Hélène. I interest myself in restoring and decorating. If you were to help me, time would not seem so long."

She did not speak at all unkindly.

"I like the country. I like Lancilly much better than Paris," said Hélène.

There was a moment's gleam of pity in Madame de Sainfoy's bright blue eyes. Languid, sad, yet not rebellious or sulky, her beautiful girl stood drooping like a white lily in the stern old frame of the window. The mother believed in discipline, and Hélène's childhood and youth had been spent in an atmosphere of cold severity. Punishments would have been very frequent, if her father's rather spasmodic and inconsequent kindness had not stepped in to save her. She owed a good deal to her father, but these debts only hardened her mother against both of them. Yet Madame de Sainfoy was not without a certain pride in the perfect form and features, the delicate, exquisite grace and distinction, which was one of these days to dazzle the Tuileries. On that, her resolution was firm and unchanging. *Tout va bien!* One of these days the Emperor's command might be expected. With that confident certainty in the background, she felt she need not trouble herself much about her husband's objections or her daughter's fancies.

"You are a very difficult young woman, Hélène," she said, still not unkindly, and her eyes travelled with slow consideration over every detail as the girl stood there. "I do not like that gown of yours," she said. "Don't wear it again. Give it to Jeanne—do you hear?"

"Must I? But it is not worn out, mamma. I would rather keep it," the girl said quickly, stroking her soft blue folds, which were in truth a little faded.

Then she flushed suddenly, for what reason could she give for loving the old gown! Not, certainly, that she had worn it one day in the garden—one day when Mademoiselle Moineau went to sleep!

"You will do as I tell you," said Madame de Sainfoy. Then she added with a slight laugh—"You are so fond of your own way, that I wonder you should object to being married. Do you think, perhaps, you would find a husband still more tyrannical?"

The girl shook her head. "No," she murmured.

"Then what is your reason? for you evidently intend not to be married at all."

"I do not say that," said Hélène; and Madame de Sainfoy was conscious, with sudden anger, that once more the dreamy grey eyes travelled out of the open window, far away to those lines of poplars and clipped elms opposite.

"How different things were when I was young!" she said. "My marriage with your father was arranged by our relations, without our meeting at all. I never saw him till everything was concluded. If I had disliked him, I could neither have said nor done anything."

"That was before the Revolution," said Hélène, with a faint smile.

"Indeed you are very much mistaken," her mother said quickly, "if you think the Revolution has altered the manners of society. It may have done good in some ways—I believe it did—but in teaching young people that they could disobey their parents, it did nothing but harm. And it deceived them, too. As long as our nation lasts, marriages will be arranged by those who know best. In your case, but for your father's absurd indulgence, you would have been married months ago. However, these delays cannot last for ever. I think you will not refuse the next marriage that is offered you."

The girl looked wonderingly at her mother, half in terror, half in hope. She spoke meaningly, positively. What marriage could this be?

"What would you say to a distinguished soldier?" said Madame de Sainfoy, watching her keenly. "Then, with some post about the Court and your husband always away at the wars, you could lead a life as independent as you chose. Now, pray do not think it necessary to throw yourself out of the window. I make a suggestion, that is all. I am quite aware that commands are thrown away on a young lady of your character."

"What do you mean, mamma?" the girl panted, with a quick drawing-in of her breath. "Who is it? Not that man who dined here—that man who was talking to you?"

Madame de Sainfoy flamed suddenly into one of those cold rages which had an effectiveness all their own.

"Idiot!" she said between her teeth. "Contemptible little fool! And if General Ratoneau, a handsome and distinguished man, did you the honour of asking for your hand, would you expect me to tell him that you had not taken a fancy to him?"

"Mon Dieu!" Hélène murmured. She turned away to the window for a moment, clasping her hands upon her breast; then, white as death, came back and stood before her mother.

"It is what I feared," she said. "It is what you were talking about; I knew it at the time. That was why you sent me out of the room—you wanted to talk it over. Have you settled it, then? What did papa say?"

Madame de Sainfoy hesitated. She had not at all intended to mention any name, or to make Hélène aware to any extent of the true facts of the case. Her sudden anger had carried her further than she meant to go. She neither wished to frighten the girl into flying to her father, nor to tell her that he had refused his consent.

"Really, Hélène, you are my despair," she said, and laughed, her eyes fixed on the girl's lovely, changing face. "You leap to conclusions in an utterly absurd way. If such a thing were already settled, or even under serious consideration, would you not have been formally told of it before now? Would your father have kept silence for two days, and would you not have heard of another visit from General Ratoneau? You would not be surprised, I suppose, to hear that he admires you—and by the bye, I think your taste is bad if you do not return his admiration—but that is absolutely all I have to tell you."

"Is it?" the girl sighed. "Ah, mamma, how you terrified me!"

Madame de Sainfoy shrugged her shoulders.

"I wonder," she said, "how I have deserved such a daughter as you! No courage, no ambition for your family, no feeling of duty to them. Nothing but—I am ashamed to say it, Hélène, and you can deny it if it is not true—some silly

sentimental fancy which carries your eyes and thoughts to that old farm over there. Ah, I see I am right. When did this preposterous nonsense begin? Why, the question is not worth asking, for you have hardly even spoken to that cousin of yours, and I will do him the justice to say that he, on his side, has no such ridiculous idea. He does not sit staring at Lancilly as you do at La Marinière! Yes, Hélène, I am ashamed of you."

Hélène stood crimson and like a culprit before her mother. She hardly understood her words; she only knew that her mother had read her heart, had known how to follow her thoughts as they escaped from this stony prison away to sunshine and free air and waving trees and a happy, homely life; away to Angelot. What was there to be ashamed of, after all? She expected no one to be on her side; she dreaded their anger and realised keenly what it might be; but as for shame!

Even as Madame de Sainfoy spoke, the thought of her young lover seemed to surround Hélène with an atmosphere of joyful sweetness. Yes, he was wonderful, her Angelot. Would he ever be afraid or ashamed to confess his love for her? Why could she not find courage then to tell of hers for him?

With a new and astonishing courage Hélène lifted her long lashes and looked up into her mother's face. It was a timid glance at the best; the furtive shadow lingered still in her eyes, result of a life of cold repression.

"Why should I deny it, mamma?" she said. Her voice was distinct, though it trembled. "It is true, and I am not ashamed of it. Angelot has been kinder to me than any one in the world. Yes—I love him."

"Ah!" Madame de Sainfoy drew a long breath. "Ah! Voyons! And what next, pray?"

"If you care at all to make me happy," the girl said, and she gained a little hope, heaven knows why, as she went on, "you and papa will—will give me to him. Yes, that is what I want. Mamma, see, I have no ambition. I don't care to live in Paris or to go to Court—I hate it! I want to live in the country—over there—at La Marinière."

A smile curled Madame de Sainfoy's pretty mouth. It was not an agreeable one; but it frightened Hélène much less than an angry word would have done. She came forward a step or two, knelt on her mother's footstool, timidly rested a hand on her knee. Madame de Sainfoy sat immovable, looking down and

smiling.

"Speak, mamma," murmured the girl.

"Hélène, are you deaf?" said Madame de Sainfoy. "Did you hear what I said just now?"

"You told me I had no courage or ambition. I suppose it is true."

"I told you something else, which you did not choose to hear. I told you that this fancy of yours was not only foolish and low, but one-sided. Trust me, Hélène. I know more of your precious cousin than you do, my dear."

"Pardon! Ah no, mamma, impossible."

"It is true. The other night, as you guessed, I sent you away that I might discuss your future with your father and his family. That very absurd person, Cousin Joseph de la Marinière, chose to give his opinion without being asked for it, and took upon himself to suggest a marriage between you and that little nephew of his. Take your hand away. I dislike being touched, as you know."

The girl's pale face was full of life and colour now, her melancholy eyes of light. She snatched away her hand and rose quickly to her feet, stepping back to her old place near the window.

"Dear Uncle Joseph!" she murmured under her breath.

"The young man was not grateful. He said in plain words that he did not wish to marry you. Yes, look as bewildered as you please. Ask your father, ask either of his cousins. I will say for young Ange that he has more wits than you have; he does not waste his time craving for the impossible. If it were not so, I should send you away to a convent. As it is, I shall stop this little flirtation by taking care that you do not meet him, except under supervision."

The girl looked stricken. She leaned against the wall, once more white as a statue, once more terrified.

"Angelot said—but it is not possible!" she whispered very low.

"Angelot very sensibly said that he did not care for you. Under those circumstances I think you are punished enough; and I will not insist on knowing how you came to deceive yourself so far. But I advise you not to spend any more time staring at that line of poplars," said Madame de Sainfoy. "Learn not to take

in earnest what other people mean in play; your country cousin admires you, no doubt, but he knows more of the world than you do, most idiotic and ill-behaved girl!"

As she said the last words she rose and crossed the room to the door, throwing them scornfully over her shoulder. Then she passed out, and Hélène, planted there, heard the key grind in the lock.

She was a prisoner in her room; but this did not greatly trouble her. She went back to the window, leaned her arms on the sill, gazed once more at La Marinière, its trees motionless in the afternoon sunlight, thought of the old room as she had first seen it that moonlit evening with its sweet air of peace and home, thought of the noble, delicate face of Angelot's mother, thought of Angelot himself as the candle-light fell upon him, of the first wonderful look, the electric current which changed the world for herself and him. And then all that had happened since, all that her mother did not and never must know. Was it really possible, could it be believed that he meant nothing, that he did not love her after all? No, it could not be believed. And yet how to be sure, without seeing him again?

Ah, well, for some people life must be all sadness, and Héléne had long believed herself one of these. Angelot's love seemed to have proved her wrong, but now the leaf in her book was turned back again, and she found herself at the old place. Not quite that either, for the old deadness had been waked into an agony of pain. Angelot false! Hell must certainly be worse to bear after a taste of Paradise.

She laid her fair head down on her arms at the open window, high in the bare wall. An hour passed by, and still she sat there in a kind of hopeless lethargy. She did not hear a gentle tapping at the door, nor the trying of the latch by some one who could not get in. But a minute later she started and exclaimed when a dark head was suddenly nestled against hers, her cheek kissed by rosy lips, her name whispered lovingly.

"Oh, little Riette!" she cried. "Where did you come from, child? Was the key in the door?"

"No, there was no key," Riette whispered. "You are locked in, ma belle; but never mind. I know my way about Lancilly. I am going home now, and I wanted to see you. They will ask me how you are looking."

Hélène blushed and almost laughed. She looked eagerly into the child's face.

"Who will ask you?"

"Papa, of course."

"Ah, yes, he is very kind. What will you say to him?"

Riette looked hard at her and shrugged her slight shoulders.

"I must go," she said. "Kiss me again, ma belle."

"Stop!" Hélène held her tight, with her hands on her shoulders. "Do you often see—your cousin—Angelot?"

Riette's face rippled with laughter. "Every day—nearly every hour."

"Why do you laugh?"

"How can I tell? It is my fault, my own wickedness," said Riette, penitently. "Why indeed should I laugh, when you look sad and ill? Can I say any little word to Angelot, ma cousine?"

"Tell him I must see him—I must speak to him. Tell him to fix the place and the hour."

"And you a prisoner?"

"Yes—but how did you get in? That way I can get out—Riette—Riette!"

"Precisely. Adieu! they are calling me."

The child was gone. Hélène, standing in the deep recess in the window, now came forward and looked round wonderingly. The old tapestried walls surrounded her; ancient scenes of hunting and dancing which at first had troubled her sleep. There was no visible exit from the room, except the locked door. But Riette was gone, and the message with her. Was she a real child, or only a comforting dream?

CHAPTER XVI

HOW ANGELOT PLAYED THE PART OF AN OWL IN AN IVY-BUSH

That night, while Hélène sat alone and in disgrace, her lover was dancing.

After dinner Riette persuaded her father to walk across with her to La Marinière, where they found Monsieur Urbain, his wife and son, spending the evening in their usual sober fashion; he, deep in vintage matters, still studying his friend De Serres, and arguing various points with Angelot whose day had been passed with Joubard in the vineyards; she, working at her frame, where a very rococo shepherd and shepherdess under a tree had almost reached perfection.

Madame de la Marinière had views of her own about little girls, and considered Riette by no means a model. She had tried to impress her ideas on Monsieur Joseph, but though he smiled and listened admiringly, he spoiled Riette all the more. So her Aunt Anne reluctantly gave her up. But still, in her rather severe way, she was kind to the child, and Riette, though a little shy and on her good behaviour, was not afraid of her. There was always a basket beside Aunt Anne, of clothes she was making for the poor, for her tapestry was only an evening amusement. In this basket there was a little white cap such as the peasant children wore, partly embroidered in white thread. This was Riette's special work, whenever she came to La Marinière. Sitting on a footstool beside her aunt, she stitched away at "le bonnet de la petite Lise." At her rate of progress, however, as her aunt pointed out with a melancholy smile, Lise would be a grown-up woman before the cap was finished.

And on this special evening the stitches were both few and crooked. Riette paid no attention to her work, but sat staring and smiling at Angelot across the room, and he, instead of talking to his father and uncle, watched her keenly under his eyelids. Presently he came and stood near his mother's chair while she asked Riette a few questions about her lessons that day. It appeared that all had been satisfactory.

"A good little woman, Mademoiselle Moineau," said Riette, softly, smiling at Angelot, who felt the colour mounting to his hair. "I like her very much. She

pretends to scold, but there is no malice in it, you know. I don't think she is very clever. Quite clever enough for Sophie and Lucie, who are most amiable, poor dear children, but stupid—ah!"

"They are older than you, I believe, Henriette," said her aunt, reprovingly.

"Yes, dear aunt, in years, but not in experience. I have lived, I know life"—she nodded gently—"while those poor girls—Ah, how charming! May I have a little dance with Ange, Aunt Anne?"

"I suppose so. Lise will not have her cap yet, it seems," said Madame de la Marinière, smiling in spite of herself.

Monsieur Joseph had sat down to the piano and was playing a lively polka. Angelot started up, seized his little cousin, and whirled her off down the room. In a minute or two Urbain took off his spectacles, shut the *Théâtre d'Agriculture* with a sharp clap, walked up to Anne and held out his hands with a smiling bow.

"I can't resist Joseph's music, if you can, my little lady!"

"It seems we must follow the children," she said. "Riette has just been pointing out that she, at least, is wiser than her elders."

Angelot and his father jumped their light partners up and down with all the merry energy of France and a new world. After a few turns, Angelot waltzed Riette out into the hall, and they stood still for a few moments under the porch, while she whispered Hélène's message into his ear.

"Mon Dieu! But how can she meet me? It must be at night, or they will see us. And if she is locked into her room?"

"She can get out of her room, mon petit! She knows there is a way, though I have not shown it to her. Then there is the secret staircase in the chapel wall."

"You are right, glorious child that you are. She will find me in the moat, close to the little door. Nothing can be safer, provided that no one misses her."

"At what time?"

"Nine o'clock, when they are all playing cards."

"I will tell her," said Riette. "Oh, my Ange! she looked so sweet when she talked of you. I think I love her as much as you do. Why don't you bring her to Les

Chouettes, that we may take care of her? There is an idea. Take her to Monsieur le Curé to-morrow night. He will be gone to bed, but no matter. Make him get up and marry you. Then come and live at Les Chouettes, both of you. We have plenty of room, and little papa would not be angry."

"Hush, child, what things you say!"

The very thoughts were maddening, there in the dim darkness under the stairs, with glimmering points of distant earthly light from Lancilly on the opposite hill. One of them might be Hélène's window, where she sat and watched La Marinière.

The music in the old room behind went swinging on. Monsieur Joseph played with immense spirit; Monsieur and Madame Urbain danced merrily up and down.

"Allons! we must go back," Angelot whispered to his little cousin, whose arms were round his neck. "And then you must dance with your uncle, because my mother likes a turn with me."

One cold touch of reflection came to dim his happiness. He had promised Uncle Joseph not to make Henriette a go-between. And it seemed no real excuse that it was Hélène's doing, not his. Well, this once it could not be helped. All the promises in the world would not make him disobey Hélène or disappoint her.

For the present, it seemed as if the attraction between himself and Hélène, a rapture to both of them, still meant very real misery to her. She was in deep disgrace with Madame de Sainfoy. Although she was allowed to come down to the meals, at which she sat statue-like and silent, she was sent back at once to her room, and either her mother or Mademoiselle Moineau locked her in.

Her father noticed these proceedings and shrugged his shoulders. He was sorry for Hélène, but had learnt by experience not to interfere, except on great and necessary occasions. No doubt girls were sometimes troublesome, and he did not pretend to know how to manage them. Adélaïde must bring up her children in her own way.

Another day of almost entire solitude, with a terrible doubt of Angelot added to the longing for his presence, so that peace was no longer to be found in the distant sight of La Marinière; another day had dragged its length through the hot hours of the afternoon, when, as Hélène walked restlessly up and down in her

room, the blue-green depths of a grove on her tapestried wall began to move, and out from the wall itself, as if to join the dancing peasants beyond the grove, came the slender little figure of Henriette. In an instant the panel of tapestry had closed behind her and she had sprung into Hélène's arms. The girl clutched her convulsively.

"What does he say?"

"To-night, at nine o'clock, he will be near the little door in the moat. Meet him there."

"The little door in the moat!"

"You see this. Let me show you the spring"—she dragged her to the wall, and opened the panel with a touch. Inside it there was a dark and narrow passage, but opposite another panel stood slightly ajar.

"That is the way into the chapel," Riette whispered. "I came that way. But you must turn to the right, and almost directly you will find the stairs. The door is at the foot of them. He will be there."

"It is unlocked?"

"There is no key. I believe there has been none for centuries. Adieu, my pretty angel. They will miss me; I must go. I told them I wanted to say a little prayer to Our Lady in the chapel. She often helped me when I used to play here."

"I hope she will help me, too!" murmured Hélène.

In another moment she was terrified at finding herself alone in the dark; for the child was gone, softly closing the secret door into the chapel. Hélène felt about for a minute or two before she could find the spring behind the tapestry, and stepped back into her room, shivering from the damp chill of the passage.

It seemed like an extraordinary fate that that night her mother kept her downstairs at needlework later than usual. It was in truth a slight mark of returning favour. Madame de Sainfoy was in a better temper, and realised that it might be unwise to treat a tall girl of nineteen quite like a disobedient child. So Hélène sat there stitching beside Mademoiselle Moineau, who was sometimes called upon to take a hand at cards. To-night this did not seem likely, for Urbain de la Marinière came in after dinner, and the snuffy, sharp-faced little Curé of Lancilly was there too. Madame de Sainfoy had asked him to dine that day,

partly to show herself superior to family prejudices; for this little man, unlike the venerable Curé of La Marinière, was one of the Constitutional priests of the Republic.

Flushing crimson, and feeling, as she well might, like a heroine of romance, Hélène heard the new Paris clock strike nine. Its measured, silvery tones had not died away, when she was by her mother's side at the card-table, timidly asking leave to go to her room.

Madame de Sainfoy had just glanced at her hand and found it an excellent one.

"Yes, my child, certainly," she said absently, and gave Hélène her free hand.

The girl touched it with her lips, and then her mother's fingers lightly patted her cheek.

"How feverish you are!" Adélaïde murmured, but took no further notice, absorbed in her game.

"Like a little flame! but it is a hot night," said Hervé as his daughter kissed him.

Mademoiselle Moineau was following Hélène from the room, when she was called back.

"No, mademoiselle, you must stay; we cannot do without you. Monsieur le Curé has to be home before ten o'clock."

The governess went back obediently to her corner. Hélène glanced back from the door at the group round the table, deep in their calculations, careless of what might be going on outside their circle of shaded candle-light. Only her father lifted his head and looked after her for an instant; her presence or absence was totally indifferent to the other men, though the square-headed cousin Urbain was Angelot's father; and her mother had forgotten her already.

Carrying her light, Hélène went with quick and trembling steps through the house to the north wing. As she entered the last passage, she met the maid who had been waiting on Sophie and Lucie, and who slept in the room next her own.

"Mademoiselle wants me?" said Jeanne, a little disappointed; she had hoped for half-an-hour's freedom.

"No, no, I do not want you," Hélène answered quickly. "I have things to do—you can stay till Mademoiselle Moineau comes up."

Jeanne went on her way rejoicing.

Hélène, once in her own room, locked the door inside, took a large black lace scarf and threw it over her head, hiding her white dress with it as much as possible; then, still carrying her candle, touched the mysterious tapestry door, that door which seemed to lead into old-time woods, into happy, romantic worlds far away, and stepped through into the passage in the thickness of the wall.

Almost instantly she came to the topmost step of the staircase. Black with dust and cobwebs, damp, with slimy snail-tracks on the stones, it went winding down to the lowest story of the old house. The steps were worn and irregular. Long ago they had been built, for this was the most ancient part of the château. In their first days the stairs had not ended with the moat, then full of water, but had gone lower still, leading to a passage under the moat that communicated with the open country. There were many such underground ways in the war-worn old province. But when Lancilly was restored and the moat drained, in the seventeenth century, the lower stairs and passage were blocked up, and the present door was made, opening on the green grass and bushes that grew at the bottom of the old moat.

Hélène went down the steep and narrow stairs as quickly as her trembling limbs would carry her. They seemed endless; but at last the light fell on a low, heavy door, deep set in the immense foundation wall. She seized the large rusty latch and lifted it without difficulty. Then she pulled gently; no result; she pushed hard, thinking the door must open outwards; it did not move. She set down her light on the stairs, and tried again with both hands; but the door was immovable. As her brain became a little steadier, and her eyes more accustomed to the dimness, she saw that a heavy iron bar was fastened across the upper panels of the door, and run into two enormous staples on the wall at each side. She touched the bar, tried to move it, but found her hands absolutely useless; it would have been a heavy task for a strong man. She stood and looked at the door, shivering with terror and distress. After all, it seemed, she was a real prisoner. She could not keep her appointment with Angelot. She gave a stifled cry and threw herself against the door, beating it with her fists and bruising them. Then a voice spoke outside, low and quickly.

"Hélène!"

"Ah! you are there!" she said, and leaned her head against the door.

"Open then, dearest—don't be afraid. Lift the latch, and pull it towards you.

There is only a keyhole on this side—but it can't be locked, for there is no key."

"I cannot," she said. "It is barred with a great iron bar. I cannot move it. Oh, how unhappy I am! Why should I be so unfortunate, so miserable?" she cried, and beat upon the door again.

"Ah, mon Dieu! My father's precautions! He went round the château six weeks ago, to examine all the doors. I was not with him, or I should have known it. Hélène! Will you do as I ask you?"

"Ah! there is nothing to be done. I had to speak to you—I cannot, with this dreadful door between us, and—Ah, heavens, something has put out my candle. I am in the dark! What shall I do!"

"Courage, courage!" he said, speaking close to the keyhole. "Go back up the stairs; go to the chapel window!"

"But I cannot speak to you from the window!"

"Yes, you can—you shall."

"But I am in the dark!"

"You cannot miss your way. Go—go quickly—we have not much time—it is late already."

"I could not help it," sighed Hélène.

She was almost angry with him, and for a moment she was sorry she had sent him any message.

"What is the use? How can I speak to him from the window? it is too high," she said to herself as she stumbled up the stairs, shuddering as her fingers touched the damp wall. "It is my fate—I am never to be happy. My mother knows she can do as she likes with me."

A sob rose in her throat, and burning tears blinded her. But she dashed them away when she reached the level, and saw the thin line of light which showed the entrance into her own room, where she had left a candle burning. The opposite panel flew open as she touched it; she stooped and crept into the chapel.

It was dark, cold, and lonely; no friendly red light in the seldom-used little sanctuary; but the window in the north wall was unshuttered, and let in the pale

glimmer of a sky lit by stars. Hélène had no difficulty in opening the window, though its rusty hinges groaned. There was a quick, loud rustling in the ivy beneath. Hélène stepped back with a slight scream as a hand shot suddenly up and caught the sill; in another instant Angelot had climbed to the level of the window and dropped on the brick floor. Hélène was almost in his arms, but she drew back and motioned him away, remembering just in time that she was angry.

"What is it?" he said quickly. "Why—"

"How—how did you get here?" she stammered. "I thought you were down in the moat."

"It is not the first time I have climbed the ivy, as the owls might tell you," he said. "It is easy; the old trunk is as thick as my body, and twists like a ladder. Hélène! You are angry with me! What have I done?"

He tried to take her hand, but she drew it from him. He fell on his knees and kissed the hem of her gown.

"Hélène!"

She stood motionless, unable to speak. But Angelot was not long to be treated in this chilling fashion. It seemed that he had a good conscience, and was not afraid to account for any of his actions. He rose to his feet; no words passed between them; but Hélène resisted him no longer. Her head was leaning on his breast; a long, happy sigh escaped her; and it was between kisses that he asked her again, "Why are you angry with me?"

"I am not—not now—I know it is not true," she murmured.

"What, my beloved?"

"You do care for me?"

Angelot laughed. Indeed it did not seem necessary to reassure her on such a point.

"Because, if you give me up, I shall die," she said. "I should have died, I think, if I had not seen you to-night. Now they may say and do what they please."

"What have they been saying and doing? Ah, my sweet, how have they been tormenting you? You are no happier than when I saw you first, though I love you so. How you tremble! Sit down here—there, softly—you are quite safe. What in

God's name are we to do? Must I leave you again with these people?"

For a few minutes they sat in a corner of an old carved bench under the window, one of the family seats in those more religious days when grandfathers and grandmothers came to the chapel to pray. Hélène leaned against Angelot, clinging to him, and past his dark profile, dimly visible in the twilight of stars, she could see the roughly carved and painted figure of Our Lady, brought from a Spanish convent and much venerated by that Mademoiselle de Sainfoy who became a Carmelite in the early days of the order. Hélène had fancied, before now, that there was something motherly in the smile of the statue, neglected so long. She thought, even as her lover kissed her, that neither the Blessed Virgin, nor St. Theresa, nor the ancestor who was her disciple, would have been angry with her and Angelot. Only her own mother, and she for worldly reasons alone, would find any sin in this sweet human love which wrapped her round, which, if allowed to have its way, would shield her from all the miseries of life and keep her in the rapturous peace she enjoyed in this moment, this fleeting moment, which she could not spoil even by telling her Angelot why she sent for him.

"Ah, how I wanted you!" she breathed in his ear.

"My love! But what—what are we to do!" he murmured passionately; her feelings of rest and peace and safety were not for him.

"Your father is very good, and loves you," he said. "At least we know that he will not have you sacrificed. I will ask him. If he refuses—then, mille tonnerres, I will carry you off into the woods, Hélène."

"It is no use asking him, dearest, none," she said. "Besides, you told them all that you did not care for me."

She lifted her head, and tried to look into his face.

"Ah, did they tell you that? Was that why you were angry?" Angelot cried.

"Yes," she said; "and now you had better ask to be forgiven."

Indeed, as they both knew too well, there were more serious things than kisses and loving words to occupy that stolen half-hour. They had to tell each other all —all they knew—and each became a little wiser. Hélène knew that General Ratoneau had actually asked for her, and that her father had refused to listen; thus realising that her mother was deceiving her, and also that for some hidden reason the plan seemed to Madame de Sainfoy still possible. Angelot, even as

they sat there together, realised vividly that he was living in a fool's paradise; that his love's confession to her mother had made things incalculably worse, justifying all the stern treatment, the violent means, which such a mother might think necessary.

"She means to marry her to Ratoneau," he thought, "and she will do it, unless Heaven interferes by a miracle. Uncle Joseph is my only friend, and he cannot help me—at least—if I do not act at once, we are lost."

He lifted Hélène's fair head a little, and its pale beauty, in the dim gleam from the open window, seemed to fill his whole being as he gazed. He drew her towards him and kissed her again and again; it might have been a last embrace, a last good-bye, but he did not mean it for that.

"Will you come with me now?" he said.

"Yes!" Hélène said faintly.

"Are you afraid?"

"No"—she hesitated—"not with you. I can be brave when I am with you—but when you are not here—"

"They shall not part us again," Angelot said.

"But how are we to get out?"

Though her lover was there, still holding her, the girl trembled as she asked the question.

"I can unbar the door," he said. "Come to the top of the stairs and wait there till I whistle; then come down to me."

This seemed enough for the moment, and the wild fellow had no further plan at all. To have her outside these prison walls, in the free air he loved, under the trees in the starlight, to make a right to her, as he vaguely thought, by running off with her in this fashion—that was all that concerned him at the moment. Where was he to take her? Would Uncle Joseph receive them? Such thoughts just flashed through the tumult of his brain, but seemed of no present importance. Angelot was mad that night, mad with love of his cousin, with the desperate necessity which needed to be met by desperate daring.

Hélène followed him, trembling very much, to the top of the stairs.

"You have a candle there? Fetch it for me," he said.

She obeyed him, slipping through the tapestry into her own room. Once there, she looked round with a wild wonder. Could this be herself—Hélène de Sainfoy—about to escape into the wide world with her lover—and empty-handed? She looked down vaguely at her white evening gown and thin shoes, snatched up her watch and chain and a diamond ring, which were lying on the table, and slipped them into her pocket. It was the work of a moment, yet when she carried the candle to Angelot, he was white as death, and stamping with impatience; the flame in his eyes frightened her.

He took the candle without a word and disappeared down the first steep winding of the stairs. His moving shadow danced gigantic on the wall, then was gone. Hélène waited in the darkness. Even love and faith, with hope added, were not strong enough to keep her brave and happy during the terrible minutes of lonely waiting there. Her limbs trembled, her heart thumped so that she had to lean for support against the cold damp wall. She bent her head forward, eagerly listening. Why had she not gone down with him? Somebody might hear him whistle. However, no whistle came; only a dull sound of banging, which echoed strangely, alarmingly, up the narrow staircase in the thickness of the wall.

It seemed to Hélène that she had waited long and was becoming stupefied with anxiety, when a light flashed suddenly upon her eyes, and she opened them wide; she had never lost the childish fear which made her shut them in the dark. Angelot had leaped up the stairs again and was standing beside her, white and frowning.

"It is impossible," he said, in a hurried whisper. "I cannot move the bar without tools. Come back into the chapel."

He set down the candlestick on the altar step, walked distractedly to the end of the low vaulted room, then back to where she stood gazing at him with a pitiful terror in her eyes.

"What is to be done! Is there no other way!" he said, half to himself. "Mon Dieu, Hélène, how beautiful you are! Ah, what is that? Listen!"

His ears, quicker than hers, had caught steps and a rustling sound in the passage that ended at the chapel door.

"Dear—go back to your room," he said. "They must not find you here. We shall

meet again—Good-night, my own!"

He was gone. The bewildered girl looked after him silently, and he was across the floor, on the window-sill, disappearing hand over head down his ladder of old twisted ivy stems, before she realised anything. Then, not the least aware that some one was knocking at her bedroom door in the passage, shaking the latch, calling her name, she flew after him to the window and leaned out, crying to him low and wildly, "Angelot, come back, come back! Why did you go? Ah, don't leave me! Help me to climb down, too,—please, please, darling!"

Angelot was out of sight, though not out of hearing. Forty feet of thick ivy and knotted stems, shelter of generations of owls, stretched between the chapel window and the moat's green floor; ivy two centuries old, the happy hunting-ground of many a lad of Lancilly and La Marinière. But that night, perhaps, the hospitable old tree reached the most romantic point of its history.

Hélène stretched down eager hands among the thick leaves.

"Angelot! Angelot!"

She heard nothing but the rustling down below, saw nothing but the thick leaves under the stars, though somebody had opened the chapel door, and though her treacherous candle, throwing a square of light upon the dark trees opposite, showed not only her own imploring shadow, but that of a tall figure stepping up behind her. In another moment her arm was seized in a grasp by no means gentle, and she turned round with a scream to face Madame de Sainfoy.

Her cry might have stopped Angelot in his swift descent and brought him to the window again, but as he neared the ground he saw that some one was waiting for him, some one standing on the flat grass, under the light of such stars as shone down into the moat, gazing with fixed gravity at the window from which Hélène was leaning.

Angelot's light spring to the ground brought him within a couple of yards of the motionless figure, and his white face flushed red when he saw that it was Hélène's father. The few moments during which he faced Comte Hervé silently were the worst his happy young life had ever known. The elder man did not speak till Hélène, with that last little cry, had disappeared from the window. Then he looked at Angelot.

"I am sorry, Ange," he said, "for I owe a good deal to your father. But I will ask

you to wait here while I fetch my pistols. It is best to settle such a matter on the spot—though you hardly deserve to be so well treated."

"Monsieur—" Angelot almost choked.

"Ah! Do not trouble yourself to hunt for excuses—there are none," said the Comte.

He was moving off, but Angelot threw himself in his way.

"Bring one pistol," he said. "One will be enough, for I cannot fight you—you know it. But you may kill me if it pleases you."

Hervé shrugged his shoulders.

"How long has this been going on? How many times have you met my daughter clandestinely? Does it seem to you the behaviour of a gentleman? On my soul, you deserve to be shot down like a dog, as you say!"

"No, monsieur," Angelot said quickly, "I give you leave to do it, for I see now that life must be misery. But I have done no such harm as to deserve to be shot! No! I love and adore my cousin, and you must have known it—every one knows it, I should think. Can I sit quietly at home while her family gives her the choice between General Ratoneau and a convent? No, I confess it is more than I can bear."

"And if her family had given her such a choice—which is false, by the bye—what could you do? Is it likely that they would change their minds and give her to you, as your uncle Joseph suggested? And would you expect to gain their favour by this sort of thing?" He pointed to the window. "No, young man; if you were not your father's son, my grooms might whip you out of Lancilly, and I should feel justified in giving the order."

Angelot broke into a short laugh. "A pistol-shot is not an insult," he said. "But you are angry."

"And you are Urbain's son," the Comte said.

There was a world of reproach in the words, but little violent anger. The two men stood and looked at each other; and it was not the least strange part of the position that they were still, as they had been all along, mutually attracted. Both natures were open, sweet-tempered, and generous. A certain grace and charm

about Hervé de Sainfoy drew Angelot, as it had drawn his father. The touch of romance in Angelot, his beauty, his bold, defiant air, took Hervé's fancy.

"You climb like a monkey or a sailor," he said. "But you tried another exit, did you not? Was it you who was hammering at the door down there?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Tell me all."

The questions were severe, but Angelot answered them frankly and truly, as far as he could do so and take the whole blame upon himself.

"It was I," he said; "I did the whole wrong, if it was wrong. Do not let madame her mother be angry with her. But for God's sake do not make her marry Ratoneau. She is timid, she is delicate—ah, monsieur—and we are cousins, after all—"

There was a break in his voice, and the Comte almost smiled.

"You are a pair of very absurd and troublesome children," he said, much more kindly. "But you are old enough to know better; it is ignorance of the world to think that lives can be arranged to suit private inclinations. I could not give you my daughter, even if I wished it; you ought to see, as your father would, that you are not in a position to expect such a wife. You are not even on my side in politics, though you very well might be. If you were in the army, with even the prospect of distinguishing yourself like General Ratoneau—and why not even now—"

It was a tremendous temptation, but only for a moment. Angelot thought of his mother and of his uncle Joseph.

"I cannot go into the army," he said quickly.

"No—you are a Chouan at heart, I know," said Hervé.

He added presently, as the young man stood silent and doubtful before him—"You will give me your word of honour, Angelot, that there is no more of this—that you do not attempt to see my daughter again."

Angelot answered him, after a moment's pause, "I warn you that I shall break my word, if I hear more of Ratoneau."

"The devil take Ratoneau!" replied his cousin. "You will give me your word, and I will give you mine. I will never consent to such a marriage as that for Hélène. Are you satisfied now?"

"You give me life and hope," said Angelot.

"Not at all. It is not for your sake, I assure you."

Angelot's poor love went to bed that night in a passion of tears. The time came for her to know and confess that Angelot's father, when he barred the postern door, might have had more than one guardian angel behind him; but that time was not yet.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW TWO SOLDIERS CAME HOME FROM SPAIN

The family scandal was great. Angelot, if he had ever thought about such possibilities at all, would never have imagined that his relations could be so angry with him; and this without exception. Monsieur de Sainfoy, the most entirely justified, was by far the gentlest. Madame de Sainfoy's flame of furious wrath enveloped every one. She refused at first even to see Monsieur Urbain; she vowed that she would leave Lancilly at once, take Hélène back to Paris, let the odious old place fall back into the ruin from which she wished it had never been rescued, shake herself and her children free from the contact of these low, insolent cousins who presumed so far on their position, on the gratitude that might be supposed due to them. Urbain, however, having stuck to his point and obtained a private interview with her, in which he promised that his son should be sent away, or at least should annoy her no more, her tone became a little milder and she did not insist on breaking up the establishment. After all, Urbain pointed out, *Tout va bien!* It was to be expected that an imperial order would very soon decide Hélène's future and check for ever young Angelot's ambition. Madame de Sainfoy perceived that it was worth while to wait.

In the meantime, the philosopher's nature was stirred to its depths. If it had not been for his wife's strong opposition, he would have insisted on Angelot's accepting one of those commissions which Napoleon was always ready to give to young men of good family, sometimes indeed, when the family was known to be strongly Royalist, making them sub-lieutenants in spite of themselves and throwing them into prison if they refused to serve. Anne would not have it. She was as angry with Angelot as any one. That he should not only have been taken captive, soul and body, by Lancilly, but should have put himself so hopelessly in the wrong, filled her with rage and grief. But she would not have matters made worse by committing her boy to the Empire. She would rather, as Monsieur Joseph suggested, pack him off across the frontier to join the army of the Princes. But then, again, his father would never consent to that.

"Why do they not send the girl away!" she cried. "Why not send her to a Paris convent till they find a husband for her! We do not want her here, with that pale

face and those tragic eyes of hers, making havoc of our young men. I respect Hervé for refusing that horrible General, but why does he not take means to find some one else! They are beyond my understanding, Hervé and Adélaïde. I wish they had never come back, never brought that girl here to distract my Angelot. He was free and happy till they came. Ah, mon Dieu! how they make me suffer, these people!"

"Do not blame them for Angelot's dishonourable weakness," said her husband, sternly. "If your son had possessed reason and self-control, which I have tried in vain all my life to teach him, none of all this need have happened. There is no excuse for him."

"I am making none. I am very angry with him. I am not blaming your dear Sainfoys. I only say that if they had never come, or if Providence had given them an ugly daughter, this could not have happened. You will not try to deny that, I suppose!"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Your logic is faultless, my dear Anne. If you had not married me, there would have been no handsome boy to fall in love with a pretty girl. And if La Marinière had not been near Lancilly—"

"Are you ever serious?" she said, and swept out of the room.

His strong face was grave enough as he looked after her.

But in Angelot's presence there was no such philosophical trifling. He was made to feel himself in deep disgrace with both his parents, and he was young enough to feel it very keenly. After the first tremendous scolding, they hardly spoke to him; he went in and out in a gloomy silence most strange to the sunny life of La Marinière. And at Les Chouettes it was no better.

In truth, Angelot found his uncle Joseph's deep displeasure harder to bear than that of any one else. There was something clandestine about the affair which touched the little gentleman's sense of honour; his code of manners and good breeding was also offended. He knew life; his own younger days had been stormy; and even now, though respecting morality, he was not strict or narrow. But such adventures as this of Angelot's seemed to him on a lower plane of society than belonged to Lancilly or La Marinière. A secret meeting at night; climbing ivy like a thief; making use of his familiarity with the old house to do

what, after all, was an injury as well as an offence to its owners,—all this was matter of deep disgust to Monsieur Joseph.

"I thought Ange was a gentleman!" he said; and to Henriette, who with bitter tears confessed to him her part in the story, he would not even admire the daring spirit in which he and she had often rejoiced together.

"Hélène's fault, you say, child? No, we will not make that excuse for him. If the poor girl was unhappy, there were other ways—"

"But what could he have done, papa? Now you are very unkind. If she asked him to come, could he have said no? Is that the way for a gentleman to treat a lady?"

Riette had posed him, and she knew it. But she did not reap any personal advantage.

"As to that," he said, "the whole thing was your fault. I did not send you to Lancilly to carry messages, but to learn your lessons. What did it matter to you if your cousin Hélène was unhappy? In this world we must all be unhappy sometimes, as you will find. Go to bed at once. Consider yourself in disgrace. You will stay in your room for two days on bread and water, and you will not go to Lancilly again for a long time, perhaps never. I am sorry I ever sent you there, but in future Mademoiselle Hélène's affairs will be arranged without you."

Riette went obediently away, shaking her head. As she went upstairs she heard her father calling to Marie Gigot, giving severe commands in a nervous voice, and she smiled faintly through her tears.

"Nevertheless, little papa, we love our Ange, you and I!" she said.

Angelot wandered about solitary with his gun and Négo, avoiding the Lancilly side of the country, and keeping to his father's and his uncle's land, where game abounded. For the present his good spirits were effectually crushed; and yet, even now, his native hopefulness rose and comforted him. It was true every one was angry; it was true he had given his word of honour not to attempt to see Hélène, and at any moment her future might be decided without him; but on the other hand, her father had promised that she should not marry Ratoneau; and he and she, they were both young, they loved each other; somehow, some day, the future could hardly fail to be theirs.

In the meantime, Angelot was better off among his woods and moorlands than Hélène in her locked room, all the old labyrinths and secret ways discovered and

stopped. The vintage was very near, for the last days of September had come. Again a young moon was rising over the country, for the moon which lighted Hélène to La Marinière on her first evening in Anjou had waned and gone. And the heather had faded, the woods and copses began to be tinted with bronze, to droop after the long, hot season, only broken by two or three thunderstorms. The evenings were drawing in, the mornings began to be chilly; autumn, even lovelier than summer in that climate which has the seasons of the poets, was giving a new freshness to the air and a new colour to the landscape.

One day towards evening Angelot visited La Joubardière. He went to the farm a good deal at this time, for it was pleasant to see faces that did not frown upon him, but smiled a constant welcome, and there was always the excuse of talking to Joubard about the vintage. And again, this evening, the Maîtresse brought out a bottle of her best wine, and the two old people talked of their son at the war; and all the time they were very well aware that something was wrong with Monsieur Angelot, whom they had known and loved from his cradle. The good wife's eyes twinkled a little as she watched him, and if nothing had happened later to distract her thoughts, she would have told her husband that the boy was in love. Joubard put down the young master's strange looks to anxiety, not unfounded, about his uncle Joseph and the Chouan gentlemen. Since Simon's spying and questioning, Joubard had taken a more serious view of these matters.

"Monsieur Angelot has been at Les Chouettes to-day?" he said. "No? Ah, perhaps it is as well. There were two gentlemen shooting with Monsieur Joseph—I think they were Monsieur des Barres and Monsieur César d'Ombré. A little dangerous, such company. Monsieur Joseph perhaps thinks a young man is better out of it."

Angelot did not answer, and turned the conversation back to the vintage.

"Yes, I believe it will be magnificent," said the farmer. "If Martin were only here to help me! But it is hard for me, alone, to do my duty by the vines. Hired labour is such a different thing. I believe in the old rhyme:—

> 'L'ombre du bon maître
> Fait la vigne croître!'

Monsieur your father explained to me the meaning of it, that there must be no trees in or near the vineyard, no shadow but that of the master. He found that in a book, he said. Surely, I thought, a man must have plenty of time on his hands, to write a book to prove what every child knows. Now I take its meaning to be

deeper than that. There is a shadow the vine needs and can't do without. You may talk as you please about sun and air and showers; 'tis the master's eye and hand and shadow that gives growth and health to the vines."

"Don't forget the good God," said Maîtresse Joubard. "All the shadows of the best masters won't do much without Him."

"Did I say so?" Her husband turned upon her. "It is His will, I suppose, that things are so. We must take His creation as we find it. All I say is, He gives me too much to do, when He sets me on a farm with five sons and leaves me there but takes them all away."

"Hush, hush, master; Martin will come back," his wife said.

Nearly a month ago she had said the same. Angelot, standing again in the low dark kitchen with her slender old glass in his hand, remembered the day vividly, for it had indeed been a marked day in his life. The breakfast at Les Chouettes, the hidden Chouans, General Ratoneau and his adventure in the lane, and then the wonderful moonlight evening, the coming of Hélène, the dreams which all that night waited upon her and had filled all the following days. Yes; it was on that glorious morning that Maîtresse Joubard, poor soul, had talked with so much faith and courage of her Martin's return. And Angelot, for his part, though he would not for worlds have said so, saw no hope of it at all. The last letter from Martin had come many months ago. The poor conscript, the young Angevin peasant, tall like his father, with his mother's quiet, dark face, was probably lying heaped and hidden among other dead conscripts at the foot of some Spanish fortress wall.

Angelot set down his glass, took up his gun, looked vaguely out of the door into the misty evening, bright with the spiritual brilliance of the young moon.

"If Martin comes back, anything is possible," he was thinking. "I should believe then that all would go well with me."

From the white, ruinous archway that opened on the lane, a figure hobbled slowly forward across the gleams and shadows of the yard. The great dog chained there began to yelp and cry; it was not the voice with which he received a stranger; Négo growled at his master's feet.

Angelot's gaze became fixed and intent. The figure looked like one of those wandering beggars, those *chemineaux*, who tramped the roads of France with a bag to collect bones and crusts of bread, the scraps of food which no good Christian refused them, who haunted the lonely farms at night and to whom a stray lamb or kid or chicken never came amiss. This figure was ragged like them; it stooped, and limped upon a wooden leg and a stick; an empty sleeve was pinned across its breast. And the rags were those of a soldier's uniform, and the dark, bent face was tanned by hotter suns than the sun of Anjou.

Angelot turned to the old Joubards and tried to speak, but his voice shook and was choked, and the tears blinded his eyes.

"My poor dear friends—" he was beginning, but Joubard started forward suddenly.

"What steps are those in the yard? The dog speaks—ah!"

The old man rushed through the doorway with arms stretched out, wildly sobbing, "Martin, Martin, my boy!"—and clasped the miserable figure in a long embrace.

"Did I not say so, Monsieur Angelot?" the little mother cried; and the young man, with a sudden instinct of joy and reverence, caught her rough hand and kissed it as she went out of the door. "Tell madame she was right," she said.

Angelot called Négo and walked silently away. As he went he heard their cries of welcome, their sobs of grief, and then he heard a hoarse voice ringing, echoed by the old walls all about, and it shouted—"Vive l'Empereur!"

Angelot felt strangely exalted as he walked away. The heroism of the crippled soldier touched him keenly; this was the Empire in a different aspect from any that he yet knew; the opportunism of his father and of Monsieur de Mauves, the bare worldliness of the Sainfoys, the military brutality of Ratoneau. The voice of

this poor soldier, wandering back, a helpless, destitute wreck, to end his days in his old home, sounded like the bugle-call of all that generous self-sacrifice, that pure enthusiasm for glory, which rose to follow Napoleon and made his career possible. Angelot felt as if he too could march in such an army. Then as he strode down the moor he heard Hervé de Sainfoy's voice again: "And why not even now?" and again he thought of those dearest ones now so angry with him, whose loyalty to old France and her kings was a part of their religion, and whom no present brilliancy of conquest and fame could dazzle or lead astray.

Thinking of these things, Angelot came down from the moor into a narrow lane which skirted it, part of the labyrinth of crossing ways which led from the south to La Marinière and Lancilly. This lane was joined, some way above, by the road which led across the moor from Les Chouettes. It was not the usual road from the south to Lancilly, but turned out of that a mile or two south, to wander westward round one or two lonely farms like La Joubardière. It ran deep between banks of stones covered with heather and ling and a wild mass of broom and blackberry bushes, the great round heads of the pollard oaks rising at intervals, so that there were patches of dark shadow, and the road itself was a succession of formidable ruts and holes and enormous stones.

In this thoroughfare two carriages had met, one going down-hill from the moorland road, the other, a heavy post-chaise and pair, climbing from the south. It was impossible for either conveyance to pass the other, and a noisy argument went on, first between the post-boy and the groom who drove the private carriage, a hooded, four-wheeled conveyance of the country, next between the travellers themselves.

Angelot came down from the steep footpath by which he had crossed the moor, just as the occupant of the post-chaise, after shouting angrily from the window, had got out to see the state of things for himself. He was a stranger to Angelot; a tall and very handsome young man of his own age, with a travelling cloak thrown over his showy uniform.

"What the devil is the matter? Why don't you drive on, you fool?" he said to the post-boy, who only gesticulated and pointed hopelessly to the obstacle in front of him.

"Well, but drive through them, or over them, or something," cried the imperious young voice. "Are you going to stop here all night staring at them? What is it? Some kind of *diligence*? Look here, fellow—you, driver—get out of my way,

can't you? Mille tonnerres, what a road! Get down and take your horse out, do you hear? Lead him up the bank, and then drag your machine out of the way. Any one with you? Here is a man; he can help you. Service of the Emperor; no delay."

Apparently he took Angelot, in the dusk, for a country lad going home. Before there was time to show him his mistake, a dark, angry face bent forward from the hooded carriage, and Angelot recognised the Baron d'Ombré, who gave his orders in a tone quite as peremptory, and much haughtier.

"Post-boy! Back your carriage down the hill. You see very well that there is no room to pass here. Pardon, monsieur!" with a slight salute to the officer.

"Pardon!" he responded quickly. "Sorry to derange you, monsieur, but my chaise will not be backed. Service of His Majesty."

"That is nothing to me, monsieur."

"The devil! Who are you then?"

"I will give you my card with pleasure."

César d'Ombré descended hastily from the carriage, while Monsieur des Barres, who was with him, leaned forward rather anxiously.

"Explain the rule of the road to this gentleman," he said. "He is evidently a stranger. I see he has two servants behind the carriage, who can help in backing the horses. Explain that it is no intentional discourtesy, but a simple necessity. The delay will be small."

The tall young stranger bowed in the direction of the voice.

"Merci, monsieur. Your rules of the road do not concern me. I give way to no one—certainly not to your companion, who appears to be disloyal. I had forgotten, for a moment, the character of this country. The dark ages still flourish here, I believe."

The Baron d'Ombré presented his card with a low bow.

"Merci, monsieur. Permit me to return the compliment. But it is almost too dark for you to see my name, which ought to be well known here. De Sainfoy, Captain 13th Chasseurs, at your service. Will you oblige me—"

"It is not necessary at this moment, monsieur. You will not meet me at the Château de Lancilly."

"But you may possibly meet me—Vicomte des Barres—for your father and I sometimes put our old acquaintance before politics—" cried the voice from the carriage. "You will be very welcome to your family. But this arranges matters, Monsieur le Capitaine, for you are on the wrong road."

"Sapristi! The wrong road! Why, I picked up a wounded fellow and brought him a few miles. He got down to take a short cut home, and told me the next turn to the right would bring me to Lancilly. He was lying, then? A fellow called Joubard, not of my regiment."

"What do you say?" said d'Ombré to Angelot, who had already greeted him, lingering in the background to see the end of the dispute.

Georges de Sainfoy now first looked at the sportsman standing by the roadside, and Angelot looked at him. Monsieur des Barres, a little stiff from a long day's shooting—for he was not so lithe and active as his host, and not so young as the Baron—now got down from the carriage and joined the group.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Ange," he said kindly. "You have been shooting, I see, but not with your uncle. Have you met before, you two?" He glanced at Georges de Sainfoy, who stared haughtily. Even in the dim dusk Angelot could see that he was wonderfully like his mother.

"No, monsieur," he answered. "Not since twenty years ago, at least, and I think my cousin remembers that time as little as I do."

He spoke carelessly and lightly. De Sainfoy's fine blue eyes considered him coldly, measured his height and breadth and found them wanting.

"Ah! You are a La Marinière, I suppose?" he said.

"Ange de la Marinière, at your service."

Georges held out his hand. It was with an oddly unwilling sensation that Angelot gave his. Though the action might be friendly, there was something slighting, something impatient, in the stranger's manner; and the cousins already disliked each other, not yet knowing why.

"Are my family well? Do they expect me?" said Georges de Sainfoy.

"I believe they are very well. I do not know if they expect you," Angelot answered.

"Is it true that this is not the road to Lancilly?"

D'Ombré growled something about military insolence, and Monsieur des Barres laughed.

"Pardon, gentlemen," said De Sainfoy. "I am impatient, I know. A soldier on his way home does not expect to be stopped by etiquettes about passing on the road. My cousin knows the country; I appeal to him, as one of you did just now. Is this the way to Lancilly, or not?"

Angelot laughed. "Yes—and no," he said.

"What do you mean by that? Come, I am in no humour for joking."

Angelot looked at him and shrugged his shoulders.

"It is *a* road, but not *the* road," he said. "No one in his senses would drive this way to Lancilly. This part of it is bad enough; further on, where it goes down into the valley, it is much worse; I doubt if a heavy carriage could pass. You turned to the right too soon. Martin Joubard forgot this lane, perhaps. He would hardly have directed you this way—unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless he wished to show you the nature of the country, in case you should think of invading it in force."

The two Chouans laughed.

"Well said, Angelot!" muttered César d'Ombré.

Georges de Sainfoy, stiff and haughty, did not trouble himself about any jest or earnest concealed under his cousin's speech and the way the neighbours took it. He realised, perhaps, that in this wild west country the name of Napoleon was not altogether one to conjure with, that he had not left the enemies of the Empire behind him in Spain. But he realised, too, that this was hardly the place or the time to assert his own importance and his master's authority.

"Do you mean that this road is utterly impassable?" he said to Angelot. "How then did these gentlemen—"

"They did not come from Lancilly. They drove across the moor from my uncle's house, Les Chouettes, and turned into the lane a few hundred yards higher up. As to impassable—I think your wheels will come off, if you attempt it, and your horses' knees will suffer. Where the ruts are not two feet deep, the bare rock is almost perpendicular."

"Still it is not impassable?"

"Not in a case of necessity. But you will not attempt it."

"And why not?"

"Because on this hill Monsieur des Barres and Monsieur d'Ombré cannot back out of your way, and you can back out of theirs—and must."

"'Must' to me!" Georges de Sainfoy said between his teeth.

"Let us assure you, monsieur, that we regret the necessity—" Monsieur des Barres interfered in his politest manner.

"Enough, monsieur."

De Sainfoy gave his orders. His servants sprang down and helped the post-boy to back the horses to the foot of the hill. It was a long business, with a great deal of kicking, struggling, scrambling, and swearing. Monsieur des Barres' carriage followed slowly, he and Georges de Sainfoy walking down together. The Baron d'Ombré lingered to say a friendly good-night to Angelot, who was not disposed to wait on his cousin any further. That night there was born a kind of sympathy, new and strange, between the fierce young Chouan and the careless boy still halting between two opinions.

"Old Joubard's son is come back, then?" César asked. "Will that attach the old man to the Empire? Your uncle can never tell us on which side he is likely to be."

"Dame! I should think not!" said Angelot. "Poor Martin—I saw him just now. He has left a leg and an arm in Spain."

"Poor fellow! That flourishing cousin of yours is better off. On my word, we are obliged to you, Monsieur des Barres and I. If you had not been there to bring him to his senses—Come, Angelot, this country is not a place for loyal men. Do you care to stay here and be bullied by upstart soldiers? Start off with me to join

the Princes; there is nothing to be done here."

"Ah!" Angelot laughed, though rather sadly. "Indeed, you tempt me—it is true, there is nothing here. But I have a father, and he has a vintage coming on. After that—I will consider."

"Yes, consider—and say nothing. I see you are discontented; the first step in the right way. Good-night, my friend."

If discontent had been despair, the army of the emigrants might have had a lively recruit in those days. But Martin Joubard had come back, so that anything seemed possible. Hope was not dead, and his native Anjou still held the heart of Angelot.

CHAPTER XVIII

HOW CAPTAIN GEORGES PAID A VISIT OF CEREMONY

Georges de Sainfoy had always been his mother's image and idol. It was not wonderful then that he should take her side strongly in this matter of his sister's love affair and marriage.

Hélène, for him, was a poor pretty fool just out of the schoolroom, who must learn her duty in life, and the sooner the better. Angelot was a country boy, his pretensions below contempt, who yet deserved sharp punishment for lifting his eyes so high, if not for the cool air of equality with which he had ordered back his superior cousin's carriage. General Ratoneau, in a soldier's eyes, was a distinguished man, a future Marshal of France. Nothing more was needed to make him a desirable brother-in-law. Georges was enthusiastic on that point.

Two things there were, which his mother impressed upon him earnestly and with difficulty; one, that Ratoneau's probable triumph was a secret, and must seem as great a surprise to herself and to him as it really would be to Hélène and his father; the other, that for the sake of Urbain de la Marinière, the valuable friend, he must pick no fresh quarrel with Angelot, already deep in disgrace with all the family.

"It is as well that you told me, or I should have been tempted to try a horse-whipping," said Captain Georges.

Two days after his arrival he rode off to Sonnay-le-Loir. It was the right thing for an officer on leave to pay a visit of ceremony to the General in command of the division, as well as to the Prefect of the department, and this necessity came in very well at the moment.

Madame de Sainfoy spoke confidently, but she was in reality not quite easy in her mind. She had seen and heard nothing of General Ratoneau since the day when Urbain put his short letter into her hand. Sometimes, impatient and anxious, worried by Hélène's pale face and the fear of some soft-hearted weakness on Hervé's part, she found it difficult to bear day after day of suspense and silence. Suppose the affair were going ill, and not well! Suppose that, after all, the Prefect had refused to gratify the General, and that no imperial command

was coming to break down Hervé's resistance, strong enough in that quarter! Georges promised her, as he rode away, that the matter should be cleared up to her satisfaction.

He found the town of Sonnay-le-Loir, and General Ratoneau himself, in a state of considerable agitation. The excellent Prefect was very ill. He was never a strong man physically, and the nervous irritation caused by such a colleague as Ratoneau might have been partly the cause of his present collapse. Sorely against his will he had listened to Ratoneau's fresh argument, and had consented to stop a whole string of political arrests by forwarding the marriage the General had set his heart upon. His own personal danger, if he had defied the General, would have been by no means small. Simon was right; Ratoneau could have represented his mild measures in such a light as to ruin him, along with those Angevin gentlemen whom he was trying by gentle means to reconcile with the Empire. At that precise moment he could not even punish the man he suspected of betraying him. Ratoneau had protected his tool so far as to leave him nameless; but in any case, from the imperial point of view, a man who denounced Chouans was doing his duty. As to the fact of sending up Mademoiselle de Sainfoy's name to the Emperor and suggesting for her the very husband whom her father had refused to accept—the chief sin, in the eyes of that day, was the unfriendly action towards her father.

The whole system was odious; it appeared more or less so, according to the degree of refinement in the officials who had to work it; yet it came from the Emperor, and could not be entirely set aside; also every marriage, in one way or another, was an arranged thing; it must suit family politics, if not the interests of the Empire. Nothing strange from the outside—and all the world would look at it so—in the marriage of the Comte de Sainfoy's daughter with the local General of division. The lady's unwillingness was a mere detail, of which the laws of society would take no cognizance. The sentimental view which called such a marriage sacrilege was absurd, after all, and the Prefect knew it. Indeed, after the first, the thought of Hélène's face did not trouble him so much as that of the *coup de patte* in store for her father, the stealthy blow to come from himself, the old, the trusted fellow-countryman.

But the injury to Hervé de Sainfoy weighed lightly, after all, when balanced with the arrest and ruin of Joseph de la Marinière and possibly his young nephew, as well as of Monsieur des Barres, Monsieur de Bourmont, the Messieurs d'Ombré, and other men more or less suspected of conspiring against the Empire. Even if this, perhaps deserved, had been all! but the Prefect knew very well that an

enemy such as Ratoneau would not be satisfied without his own degradation.

He had yet one resource, delay. There was the chance that Hervé de Sainfoy might arrange some other marriage for his daughter; and the Prefect went so far as to consider the possibility of sending him a word of warning, but then thought it too dangerous, not quite trusting Hervé's discretion, and gave up the idea. From day to day he put off sending the necessary papers to Paris. From day to day, after the eventful interview, he managed to avoid any private conversation with Ratoneau. This was possible, as the General was occupied in reviewing the troops in the neighbourhood, and was absent from Sonnay for several days. Then a new ally stepped in on Hélène's side, and touched the Prefect gently, but effectively. When General Ratoneau returned to Sonnay, the very day before Georges de Sainfoy's visit, he was met by the news that a slight stroke of paralysis had deprived Monsieur de Mauves of his speech, and of the use of his right hand. Going at once to the Prefecture, roughly demanding an interview with the Prefect, he encountered a will stronger than his own in that of the Sonnay doctor, who absolutely refused to let any one into the sickroom.

"But he must have written to Paris—he must—he promised me that he would," Ratoneau assured Georges de Sainfoy, who stood before him frowning doubtfully. "He dared not disappoint me. I have him under my thumb, I tell you—like that—" he crushed a fly on the table.

"I see—but why all this delay?" said the young man.

Ratoneau drummed with his fist and whistled. "Delay, yes—" he said. "I meant Monsieur le Préfet to give an account of himself yesterday—I suppose I am as impatient as you are—" he grinned. "After all, monsieur, this official business takes time. It is only a fortnight since I brought the good man to his marrow-bones. Ah, I wish you had seen him! the grimaces he made! When I went first he defied me, as bold as you please. Your father was his friend, he would do nothing to annoy your father. Then, when I went back with a little more information, he began to see all his beloved Chouans in prison, as well as himself. I had him then. He began to see, perhaps, that a man in my position was not such an impossible husband for a young girl of good family. Ha, ha!"

"A fortnight seems to me quite long enough to write to Paris and get an answer," said Georges.

He was a little sorry for himself. He wished he had seen Ratoneau for the first time on horseback, a smart, correct officer, reviewing his troops. Then it would

have been easy enough to accept him as a brother-in-law. But this red-faced, slovenly creature in careless undress, made even more repulsive by his uncanny likeness to Napoleon—vulgar in manners, bragging in talk! De Sainfoy had met strange varieties of men among his brother officers, but never anything quite so forbidding as this. He did not give his sister a thought of pity; it was not in him; but he had a moment of sympathy with his father, of surprise at his mother. However, he was not the man to be conquered by prejudice. If the affair was disagreeable, all the more reason to push it through quickly, to reach any advantages it might bring. His smooth young brow had a new line across it; that was all.

"You talk of the Prefect's 'beloved Chouans,' Monsieur le Général," he said. "It seems to me that in any case he is not fit for his position. It sounds like treason, what you say."

"Ah! that is another question," said Ratoneau. "That need not concern us just now, you and me. He must do what we want, first of all; later on we shall see. Remember, Monsieur le Vicomte, any active measures against the Chouans would touch your family—your connections, at least. Very complicated, the state of society in this province. I wish for nothing better than to sweep out all these tiresome people, but it behoves me to move gently."

Georges could not help smiling. "That must be against your principles and your inclinations, Monsieur le Général."

"It is against my interests," Ratoneau said, drily enough. "Inclinations—well, yes. I should be sorry to annoy Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière, who is on my side in these affairs. He is a sensible man. His brother's right place is in a state prison. As to that son of his—well, he wants a sharp lesson, and one of these days he will have it. He is an impudent young scoundrel, that little La Marinière."

Ratoneau lifted his dark eyes and looked straight at Georges, who flushed under his gaze.

"But perhaps you think better of your cousin?" the General said.

"No—I dislike him. He is a presumptuous fellow."

"Presumptuous in what way?"

Georges shrugged his shoulders. There were limits to the complaisance he found

due to this future relation; the family secrets, the family confidences, though they might indirectly concern him, should at least be kept from him for the present. Georges knew all his sister's story, as far as her mother knew it. The story was safe, though out of no kindness to Hélène.

"He thinks too much of himself," said Georges, and laughed rather awkwardly. "He orders his betters about as if he were the chief landowner of the country, instead of a farmer's son. This happened to me the other night, Monsieur le Général."

He went on to describe his adventure in the steep lane, and how Angelot had ordered his men to back the horses. The General listened with some impatience.

"Sapristi! he is a hero of the lanes, this Angelot. I have had my experience, too," but he did not describe it. "He will make himself plenty of enemies, that cousin of yours. However, let him swagger as he likes among horses and cows, till he finds himself between four walls with his friends the Chouans. I should like to be assured that his airs will carry him no further. To speak plainly, Monsieur le Vicomte, when I saw them together at Lancilly, I fancied that he and mademoiselle your sister—I see by your face that I was right!"

The General started up with an oath. Georges faced him, cool and dignified.

"My sister is safe in my mother's care, Monsieur le Général. Do not disturb yourself."

"But do you know, monsieur, that the servants thought the same as I did?"

"What can that signify to you or to me, monsieur?"

Ratoneau flung himself back into his chair with an angry laugh. The proud disgust of the young captain's tone had a certain effect upon him; yet he was not altogether reassured.

"Will you tell me on your honour," he growled, "that you know nothing of any love affair between that young cub and your sister? I swear, sir, I distrust you all. It is your mother's interest to marry her to me, but—"

"The imperial order has not yet been sent down," said Georges, his blue eyes flashing like steel.

He would have said more; he did not know what he might have said, for at that

moment his sympathy with his father was growing by leaps and bounds, and his mother's plan began to seem incomprehensible. However, to do her justice, she had never seen General Ratoneau as he saw him.

"What do you mean by that?" said Ratoneau, sharply, and Georges found himself already repenting.

For the thing had to be carried through, and he knew it.

Further argument was stopped, at that moment, by a gentle tap at the door.

"Come in!" roared the General. "What the devil have you got there, Simon?"

The police agent stepped lightly across the room. He laid a folded paper on the table, and drew out from between its pages an unsealed letter. He spread this out with the signature uppermost, "*De Mauves, Préfet du Loir.*"

Georges de Sainfoy, a silent looker-on, stood by the chimneypiece while General Ratoneau eagerly seized the papers. He first read the letter, which seemed to give him satisfaction, for he laughed aloud; then he snatched up the larger document, which looked like a government report of some kind. Simon, in his gendarme's dress, stood grinning in the background.

"But—but in the name of thunder what does all this mean?" Ratoneau's looks had changed to sudden fury. "Are these copies or originals? Simon, you ass, do you mean to tell me—"

Simon shrugged his shoulders and showed his teeth.

"Sorry, Monsieur le Général, but no fault of mine! I made sure they had gone to Paris by the last courier, if not before. The originals, undoubtedly."

"You make sure in a queer sort of way," said Ratoneau. "You told me the Prefect's secretary was in your hands, that you had access to his bureaux at any time. You lied, then?"

"No, Monsieur le Général," Simon answered, gently and readily. "Or how should I have got hold of the papers? We have nothing to do now but to get them dispatched at once to the Minister of Police, who will pass them on to Monsieur le Duc de Frioul."

"Go downstairs, and wait till I send for you."

Simon went, not without a side-glance at the silent young officer, standing tall, fair, and stiff as if on parade, no feeling of any sort showing itself through the correctness of his bearing.

"Is that her brother? Curious!" the spy muttered as he slipped away.

General Ratoneau ran his eye once more over the paper in his hand, then looked at Georges and held it out to him.

"The delay is vexatious," he said, "and my friend the Prefect shall pay for it, one of these days. But at any rate, the thing is now in our own hands, and there can be no cheating. Report and letter are what they should be—I might have guessed that the old villain would put off sending them—hoping for some loophole, I suppose. However, you can tell Madame la Comtesse that you have seen the documents, and that they start for Paris to-night."

Georges de Sainfoy read the document, truly a strange one, and it was a strange sort of man who had the effrontery to put it into his hand. Like a flash of blinding light, it showed the revolutionary, the tyrannical side of the Empire which had fascinated him on its side of military glory.

This paper gave a full description, as officially demanded, of Mademoiselle Hélène de Sainfoy, aged nineteen. It mentioned her personal attractions, her *éducation distinguée*, her probable dowry, the names and position of her parents, the extent and situation of her property—in short, every particular likely to be useful in arranging a marriage for Mademoiselle de Sainfoy. It was all highly complimentary, and it was supposed to be a confidential communication from the Prefect to Savary, Duc de Rovigo, the Minister of Police. But it was not pleasant reading for Mademoiselle de Sainfoy's brother, however devotedly imperialist he might be.

He stepped forward and laid it on the table without a remark. Ratoneau, watching him keenly, smiled, and held out the letter.

"A private letter from Monsieur le Préfet? I do not read it," said Georges, shortly.

"As you please, my friend," said Ratoneau. "I only show you these things for the satisfaction of Madame la Comtesse. Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière may be interested, too. The letter mentions my distinguished claims on His Majesty, and suggests me as a husband for mademoiselle. That is all. I think it will be effectual. But now, monsieur, you have not answered my little question about

your cousin Angelot. He is in love with your sister, n'est-ce pas?"

"As you put it so, monsieur, I think it is not unlikely," said Georges. "But what does that signify? Every one knows it is an impossibility, even himself, ambitious fool as he may be."

"And the young lady?" said Ratoneau, his face darkening.

"My mother answers for her," Georges answered coldly, and bowed himself out.

He had information enough to carry back to his mother.

He was not too comfortable in his mind, having ideas of honour, at the unscrupulous doings by which Hélène's future husband was protecting his own interests and bringing his marriage about. He rather wished, though he worshipped power, that this powerful General had been a different sort of man.

"Still he may make her a good husband," he thought. "He is jealous already."

He rode across the square, gay and stately in his Chasseur uniform, and dismounted at the Prefecture to leave his card and to enquire for Monsieur de Mauves.

Ratoneau watched him from the window with a dissatisfied frown, then rang sharply for Simon.

"That young fellow would turn against me on small provocation," he said. "Now—as to the seal for these papers—you can procure that, I suppose?"

"Leave that to me, monsieur."

"Another thing: this means further delay, and I am not sure that you were entirely wrong about young La Marinière. Listen. He would be better out of the way until this affair is settled. He has been met in company with known Chouans. A word to the wise, Simon. Devise something, or go to the devil, for I've done with you."

"But there is nothing easier, monsieur! Nothing in the world!" Simon cried joyfully.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TREADING OF THE GRAPES

The weather for the vintage was splendid. A slight frost in the morning curled and yellowed the vine-leaves, giving, as it does in these provinces, the last touch of ripeness to the grapes, so that they begin to burst their thin skins and to drop from the bunches. This is the perfect moment. Crickets sing; the land is alive with springing grasshoppers; harmless snakes rustle through the grass and bask in the warm sand. The sun shines through an air so light, so crystal clear, that men and beasts hardly know fatigue, though they work under his beams all day long. The evening closes early with hovering mists in the low places, the sudden chill of a country still wild and half-cultivated. This was the moment, in an older France, chosen for the Seigneur's vintage; the peasants had to deal with their own little vineyards either earlier or later, and thus their wine was never so good as his.

The laws of the vintage were old; they were handed down through centuries, from the days of the Romans, but the Revolution swept them and their obligations away. Napoleon's code knew nothing of them. Yet private individuals, when they were clever men like Urbain de la Marinière, were sure by hook or by crook to arrange the vintage at the time that suited their private arrangements. The ancient connection, once of lord and vassal, now of landlord and tenant, between La Marinière and La Joubardière, had been hardly at all disturbed by the Revolution. Joubard was not the man to turn against the old friends of his family. Besides, he believed in the waning moon. So when Monsieur Urbain hit on the precise moment for his own vintage, and summoned him and his people, as well as Monsieur Joseph's people, to help at La Marinière and to let their own vineyards wait a week or two, he made no grievance of it.

"The weather will last," he said, when Martin grumbled, "and the moon will be better. Besides, those slopes are always forwarder than ours. And we shall lose nothing by helping the master. But if we did, I would rather spoil my own wine than disappoint Monsieur Angelot."

"You and the mother are in love with his pretty face," growled the soldier. "Why doesn't he go to the war, and fight for his country, and come home a fine man

like his cousin? Ah, you think there are different ways of coming home, do you? Well, if you ask me, I am prouder of my lost limbs than the young captain is of his rank and his uniform."

"And Monsieur Angelot honours you, poor Martin, more than he does his smart cousin," said Joubard. "Allons! Our vintage will not suffer, now that you are at home to see to it. And they will not take you away again, my son!"

So, in those first days of October, the vintage was in full swing at La Marinière. All the peasants came to help, men and women, old and young. Dark, grave faces that matched oddly with a babel of voices and gay laughter; broad straw hats as sunburnt as their owners, white caps, blue shoulders, bobbing among the long rows of bronzed vines loaded with fruit. The vintagers cut off the bunches with sharp knives and dropped them into wooden pails; these were emptied into great *hottes* on men's backs, and carried to the carts, full of barrels, waiting in the lane. Slowly the patient white horses tramped down to the yard of La Marinière. There, in its own whitewashed building with the wide-arched door, the stone wine-press was ready; the grapes were thrown in in heaps, the barefooted men, splashed red to their waists, trod and crushed with a swishing sound; the red juice ran down in a stream, foaming into the vault beneath, into the vats where it was to ferment and become wine.

Angelot worked in the vineyard like anybody else, sometimes cutting grapes, sometimes leading the carts up and down, and feeding the horses with bunches of grapes, which they munched contentedly. So did the dogs who waited on the vintagers, not daring to venture in among the vines, but sitting outside with eager eyes and wagging tails till their portion of fruit was thrown to them. And the workers themselves, and the little bullet-headed boys and white-capped girls who played about the vineyard, all ate grapes to their satisfaction; for the crop was splendid, and there was no need to stint anybody.

A festal spirit reigned over all. Though most of these people were good Christians, ready to thank God for His gifts without any intention of misusing them, there was something of the old pagan feeling about. Purely a country feeling, a natural religion much older than Christianity, as Urbain remarked to the old Curé, who agreed with Madame Urbain in not quite caring for this way of looking at it. But he was accustomed to such views from Urbain, who never, for instance, let the Rogation processions pass singing through the fields without pointing out their descent from something ancient, pagan, devilish.

"But if you have cast out the devil, dear Curé, what does it matter?" said Urbain. "The beauty alone is left. And all true beauty is good by nature; and what is not beautiful is not good. You want nothing more, it seems to me."

"Ah, your philosophies!" sighed the old man.

However, in different ways, the vintage attracted everybody. Monsieur Joseph and Henriette were there, very busy among the vines; these people would help them another day. A party strolled across from Lancilly; Monsieur and Madame de Sainfoy, idly admiring the pretty scene; Captain Georges, casting superior glances, Sophie and Lucie hanging on their splendid brother's looks and words. They were allowed to walk with him, and were very happy, Mademoiselle Moineau having been left behind in charge of Hélène. The La Marinière vineyards were not considered safe ground for that young culprit. She had to be contented with a distant view, and could see from her window the white horses crawling up and down the steep hill.

Some patronising notice was bestowed by the people from the château on Martin Joubard, who moved slowly about among the old neighbours, a hero to them all, whatever their political opinions might be. For, after all, he went to the wars against his will; and when there he had done his duty; and his enthusiasm for the Emperor was a new spirit in that country, which roused curiosity, if nothing more. No one could fail to rejoice with old Joubard and his wife. Whatever they themselves thought, and hardly dared to say, was said for them by their neighbours. Few indeed had come back, of the conscript lads of Anjou. How much better, people said, to have Martin maimed than not at all. What was a wooden leg? a very useful appendage, on which Martin might limp actively about the farms; and the loss of an arm did not matter so much, for, by his father's account, he could do everything but hold and fire a gun with the one left to him. His mother had dressed him in clean country clothes, laying aside his tattered old uniform in a chest, for he would not have it destroyed. All the girls in the two villages were running after Martin, who had always been popular; all the men wanted to hear his tales of the war. He was certainly the hero of Monsieur Urbain's vintage, the centre figure of that sunny day.

Angelot felt himself drawn to the soldier, whose return home had touched him with so strange a thrill. There was a spark of the heroic in this young fellow. Angelot found himself watching him, listening to him, perhaps as a kind of refuge from the cold looks of his relations; for even Riette dared not run after him as of old.

When purple shadows began to lie long in the yellow evening glow, and the crickets sang louder than ever, and sweet scents came out of the warm ground—when the day's work was nearly done, Angelot walked away with Martin from the vineyard. He wanted some of those stirring stories to himself, it seemed. If one must go away and fight, if the old Angevin life became once for all impossible, then might it not be better under the eagles, as his wise father thought, than with that army and on that side for which, in spite of his mother and his uncle, he could not rouse in himself any enthusiasm? True, he liked little he knew of the Empire and its men, except this poor lamed conscript; but always in his whirling thoughts there was that will-o'-the-wisp, that wavering star of hope that Hélène's father had seemed to offer him. Could he forsake, for any other reason, the sight of the forbidden walls that held her!

He and Martin went away up the lane together, and climbed along the side of the moor towards La Joubardière, Martin telling wild stories of battles and sieges, of long marching and privation, Angelot listening fascinated, as he helped the crippled soldier over the rough ground.

Martin had been wounded under Suchet at the siege of Tortosa, so that he had seen little of the more recent events of the war, but his personal adventures, before and since, had been exciting; and not the least wonderful part of the story was his wandering life, a wounded beggar on his way back across the Pyrenees into his own country. As Angelot listened, the politics of French parties faded away, and he only realised that this was a Frenchman, fighting the enemies of France and giving his young life for her without a word of regret. Napoleon might have conquered the world, it seemed, with such conscript soldiers as this. These, not men like Ratoneau or Georges de Sainfoy, were the heroes of the war.

The sun had set, and swift darkness was coming down, before the young men reached La Joubardière. The lane, the same in which the two carriages had met, ran in a hollow between high banks studded with oaks like gigantic toadstools, adding to the deepness of the shadow.

"There are people following us," said Angelot.

He interrupted Martin in the midst of one of his stories; the soldier was standing still, leaning on his stick, and laughed with a touch of annoyance, for he was growing vain of his skill as a story-teller.

"My father and mother," he said. "And here I am forgetting their soup, which I promised to have ready."

"It is not—I know Maître Joubard's step," said Angelot.

"Some of the vintagers—" Martin was beginning, when he and Angelot were surrounded suddenly in the dusk by several men, two of whom seized Angelot by the shoulders.

"I arrest you, in the Emperor's name," said a third man.

Angelot struggled to free himself, and Martin lifted his stick threateningly.

"What is this, rascals? Do you know what you are saying? This is the son of Monsieur de la Marinière."

"It is some mistake. You have no business to arrest me. You will answer for this, police! You will answer it to Monsieur le Préfet. He is ill, and cannot have given the order. Show me your authority."

"Never mind our authority," said the chief. "We don't want Monsieur de la Marinière, but we do want his son. Are you coming quietly, young gentleman, or must we put on handcuffs? Get out of the way with your stick, you one-legged fellow, or I shall have to punish you."

"Keep back, Martin; you can do nothing. Go and tell my father," said Angelot. He shook off the men's hands, and stood still and upright in the midst of them.

"Why do you arrest me?" he said. "Where are you going to take me?"

"Ah, that you will see," said the police officer.

The snarling malice in his voice seemed suddenly familiar to Angelot.

"Why, I know you—you are—"

"Never mind who I am. It is my business to keep down Chouans."

"But I am not a Chouan!"

"A man is known by his company. Now then—quick march—away!"

"Adieu, Martin! This is all nonsense—I shall soon come back," Angelot cried, as they hustled him on.

A few moments, and the very tramp of their feet was lost in the dusk, for they had dragged their prisoner out of the lane and were crossing the open moor.

Martin, in much tribulation, made the best of his way back to meet his father and mother, and with them carried the news to La Marinière.

Half an hour later, Monsieur Urbain, whistling gaily, came back from a pleasant stroll home with his Sainfoy cousins. Everything seemed satisfactory; Adélaïde had been kind, the vintage was splendid. If only Angelot were a sensible boy, there would be nothing left to wish for.

The moon was up, flooding the old yards that were now empty and still. As he came near, he saw Anne waiting for him in the porch, and supposed that the moonlight made her so strangely pale.

"My dearest," he said, as he came up, "there is to be a ball this month at Lancilly, in honour of Georges. But I do not know whether that foolish son of yours will be invited."

Anne looked him in the face; no, it was not the moonlight that made her so pale.

"They have arrested Ange as a Chouan," she said.

CHAPTER XX

HOW ANGELOT CLIMBED A TREE

The police had caught Angelot; but they did not keep him long.

They had to do with a young man who knew every yard of that wild country far better than they did, and was almost as much a part of it as the birds and beasts that haunted it.

"Where are you taking me?" he said, as they walked across the high expanse of the *landes*, dimly lighted by the last glimmer of day. "This is a very roundabout way to Sonnay-le-Loir."

"It is not the way at all," said the officer who took the lead, "and we know that as well as you."

"But I demand to be taken to Sonnay," Angelot said, and stopped. "The warrant for my arrest, if you have such a thing, must be from the Prefect. Take me to him, and I will soon convince him that there is some mistake."

"Monsieur le Préfet is ill, as you know. Walk on, if you please."

"Then take me to the sous-Préfet, or whoever is in his place."

"You are going to a higher authority, monsieur, not a lower one."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You are going to Paris. Monsieur le Comte Réal, the head of our branch of the police, will decide what is to be done with you."

"Mon Dieu! The old Jacobin! He nearly had my uncle in his fangs once," said Angelot, half to himself. "But what do they accuse me of? Chouannerie? But I am not a Chouan, and you know enough of our affairs to know that, Monsieur Simon!"

The Chouan-catcher laughed sourly.

"I believe this is some private devilry," the prisoner went on, with careless

daring. "The Prefect has nothing to do with it. It is spite against my uncle—but you are a little afraid of touching him. Don't imagine, though, that you will annoy him particularly by carrying me off. We are not on good terms just now, my uncle and I. In truth, I have offended all my relations, and nobody will be sorry to have me away for a time."

"Tant mieux, monsieur!" said Simon. "Then you won't object to giving the Minister of Police a little information about your uncle and the other Chouan gentlemen, his friends."

"Ah! that is quite another story! That is the idea, is it? Monsieur le Duc de Rovigo, and Monsieur le Comte Réal, flatter themselves that they have got hold of a traitor?"

"Pardon, monsieur! It is the Chouans who are traitors."

"I think I could find a few others in our poor France this very night. But I am not one of them. Again, whose authority have you for arresting me? Is it Monsieur Réal who has stretched his long arm so far?"

"The authority is sufficient, and you are my prisoner," Simon answered coolly.

"I suspect you have no authority but your own!"

"They will enlighten you in Paris, possibly."

"Come, tell me, how much are they paying you for this little trick?"

One of the other men laughed suddenly, and Simon became angry.

"Hold your tongue, prisoner, or I shall have you gagged. You need not speak again till the authorities in Paris take means to make you. Yes, I assure you, they can persuade rather strongly when they like. Now, quick march—we have a post-chaise waiting in the road over there."

Angelot saw that his wisest course was to say no more. He was unarmed; they had taken away the knife he had used for cutting grapes; his faithful fowling-piece was hanging in the hall at La Marinière. He was guarded by five men, all armed, all taller and bigger than himself. He walked along in silence, apparently resigned to his fate, but thinking hard all the while.

His thoughts, busy and curious as they were, did not hit on the right origin of his very disagreeable adventure. Knowing a good deal of Simon by repute, and a

little by experience, and having heard legends of such police exploits in the West within the last ten years, though not since Monsieur de Mauves took office, he felt almost sure that the spy was taking advantage of the Prefect's illness to gain a little money and credit on his own account. And of course his own arrest, a young and unimportant man, was more easily managed and less likely to have consequences than that of his uncle, for instance, or Monsieur des Barres. He did not believe that the Paris authorities knew anything of it, yet; but he did believe that Simon knew what he was doing; that Réal, the well-known head of the police in the western *arrondissement*, trained under Fouché in suspicion, cunning and mercilessness, would make unscrupulous use of any means of knowing the present state of Royalist opinion in Anjou. He would be all the more severe, probably, because the mildness of the Prefect of the Loir had more than once irritated him. So Angelot thought he saw that Simon might easily drag his chosen victim into a dangerous place, from which it would be hard to escape with honour.

They reached the north-east edge of the moor just as the moon was rising. At first the low light made all things strangely confused, marching armies of shadows over the wild ground. Every bush might hide a man, and the ranks of low oaks stood like giants guarding the hollow black paths that wound between them. Les Chouettes, the only habitation near, lay a mile away below the vineyards. The high-road to Paris might be reached by one of the narrow roads that crossed the heath not far away.

When they came to the edge of the open ground, near a grove of oaks plunged in bracken, with a few crumbling walls beyond it where a farm had once stood, Simon halted his party and whistled. He seemed to expect a reply, but got none. After waiting a few minutes, whistling again, exclaiming impatiently, he beckoned one of the other men and they walked away together towards the road.

"Something wrong with the chaise?" said Angelot to the three who were left. "What will you do if it is not there? You will have to carry me to Paris, for I promise you I don't mean to walk."

"Monsieur will not be very heavy," one of the men answered, good-humouredly; the same who had laughed before.

"Lift me then, and see!" said Angelot. "All right, my good fellow, I'll ride on your shoulders. Voyons! you can carry me down the road."

They were standing in a patch of moonlight, just outside the shadow of the oaks.

The two other men stepped back for an instant, while their comrade stooped, laughing, to lift Angelot. He was met by a lightning-like blow worthy of an English training, and tumbled over into the bracken. One of the two others fell flat in the opposite direction, and the prisoner vanished into the shadows of the grove. The third man dashed after him, but came into violent contact, in the darkness, with the trunk of a tree, and fell down stunned at the foot of it.

By this time the chaise had slowly climbed the hill from a village in the further valley, where the post-boy had been refreshing himself and his horses. Simon stopped to scold him, then left his companion to keep guard over him, and himself mounted again the precipitous bit of stony lane which had once been the approach to the farm, and now opened on the wild moor. He whistled shrilly as he came, and then called in a subdued voice: "All right, men! Bring him down."

There was no answer. He quickened his pace, and coming up under the oaks found the two fellows sitting on the ground rubbing their heads, staring vacantly round with eyes before which all the moonshiny world was swimming.

Simon swore at them furiously. "What has happened, you fools? Where's Alexandre? Where is the prisoner? name of all that's—"

"Devil knows, I don't," said the fellow who had paid dear for his good-humour. "That little gentleman is cleverer than you or me, Master Simon, and stronger too. He knocked us down like ninepins. Where is he? Nearly back at La Marinière, I should think, and with Alexandre chasing after him!"

"Not so far off as that, I suspect," said Simon. "Up with you. He is hidden in this cover, and you have got to beat it till you find him. How did you come to let him escape, pair of idiots? You are not fit for your work."

He went back a few yards, while the men scrambled to their feet, and whistled sharply for the one he had left in charge of the post-boy. Then he lighted a lantern, and they pushed at various points into the wood. The first discovery was that of Alexandre, lying senseless; they dragged him into the road and left him there to come to himself. Then they unearthed a wild boar, which rushed out furiously from the depths of the bracken and charged at the light, then bolted off across the moor. Smaller animals fled from them in all directions; large birds rustled and cried, disturbed in the thick foliage of the oaks, impenetrable masses of shade.

"If we were to shoot into the trees? He may be hidden in one of them."

The suggestion came from Angelot's friend, whose frivolity had given him his chance, and whose anxiety to put himself on the right side by catching him again, dead or alive, very nearly brought his young life to a speedy end. For foolish François was wise this time, so wise, had he only known it, that Angelot was sitting in the very tree he touched with his hand as he spoke, a couple of yards above his head.

The boy had courage enough and to spare; but his heart seemed to stop at that moment, and he felt himself turning white in the darkness. The men could hardly shoot into the trees without hitting him, though he had slipped down as far as he could into the hollow trunk. He would be horribly wounded, if not killed. It was a hard fate, to be shot as a poacher might shoot a pheasant roosting on a bough. An unsportsmanlike sort of death, Uncle Joseph would say. He held his breath. Should he await it, or give himself back to the police by jumping down amongst them?

The moment of danger passed. Angelot smiled as the men moved on, and hid himself a little more completely.

"No," Simon said. "No shooting till you are obliged. His uncle lives only a mile off, and he will come out if he hears a gun."

"So he would, the blessed little man!" muttered Angelot.

The men went on searching the wood, but with such stealthy movements, so little noise, even so little perseverance, as it seemed to him, that he was confirmed in his idea of Simon's sole responsibility. These men were police, supposed to be all-powerful; but somehow they did not act or talk as if Savary and the Emperor, or even Réal, were behind them.

Angelot watched the light as it glimmered here and there, and listened to the rustling in the bracken. Presently, when they were far off on the other side of the little grove, he climbed out of the trunk and slipped down from his tree. Simon might change his mind about shooting; in any case it seemed safer to change one's position. Being close to the edge of the *landes*, Angelot's first thought was to take to his heels and run; then again that seemed risky, and a shot in the back was undesirable. He dived in among the bracken, which was taller than himself, and grew thick on the ground like a small forest. Half crawling, half walking, stopping dead still to watch the wandering gleams of light and to hear the steps and voices of the men, then pushing gently on again, Angelot reached a hiding-place on the other side of the grove. Here the bracken, taller and thicker than

ever, grew against and partly over the ruined walls of the old farm. In the very middle of it, where the wall made a sudden turn, there was a hollow, half sheltered by stones, and a black yawning hole below, the old well of the homestead. All the top of it was in ruins; a fox had made its hole halfway down; there was still water at the bottom of the well. Here, plunged in the darkness, Angelot sat on the edge of the well and waited. There were odd little sounds about him, the squeaking of young animals, the sleepy chirp of easily disturbed birds; a frog dived with a splash into the well, and then in a few unearthly croaks told his story to his mates down there. The bracken smelt warm and dry; it was not a bad place to spend a summer night in, for any one who knew wild nature and loved it.

All was so still that Angelot, after listening intently for a time, leaned his head against the white stones, fell asleep, and dreamed of Hélène. If he had carried her off that night, mad fellow as he was, some such shelter might have been all he had to offer her.

He woke with a start, and saw by the light that he must have been asleep at least two hours, for the moon was high in the sky. He got up cautiously, and crept through the bracken to the edge of the grove towards Les Chouettes.

It was fortunate that he took the precaution to move noiselessly, as if he were stalking game, for he had hardly reached the edge of the wood when he saw Simon standing in the moonlight. Evidently he had been sitting or lying on the bank and had just risen to his feet, for one of his comrades lay there still.

"He is hidden here. He must be here," said Simon, in a low, decided voice. "I will not go away without him. Hungry and thirsty—yes, I dare say you are. You deserve it, for letting him escape."

"I tell you, he is not here," said the other man. "We have been all round this bit of country; all through it. And look at the moonlight. A mouse couldn't get away without our seeing it. What's that? a rabbit?"

"I shall walk round again," said Simon. "Those other fellows may be asleep, if they are as drowsy and discontented as you. Look sharp now, while I am away."

Simon tramped down the lane. The other police officer stretched himself and stared after him.

"I'll eat my cap," he muttered, "if the young gentleman's in the wood still. He

deserves to be caught, if he is."

At that moment Angelot was standing under an oak two yards away. In the broad, deep shadow he was invisible. A longing seized him to knock the man's cap off his head and tell him to keep his word and eat it. But Simon was too near, and it was madness to risk the chase that must follow. Angelot laughed to himself as he slipped from that shadow to the next, the officer yawning desperately the while.

There was something unearthly about Les Chouettes in the moonlight. It seemed to float like a fairy dwelling, with its slim tower and high windows, on a snowy ocean of sand. The woods, dark guarding phalanxes of tall oaks and firs, seemed marshalled on the slopes for its defence. Angelot came down upon it by the old steep lane, having slipped across from the ruined farm to a vineyard, along by a tall hedge into another wood of low scrub and bracken, then into the road a hundred yards above the house. Before he reached it he heard the horses kicking in the stable, then a low bark from the nearest dog which he answered by softly whistling a familiar tune.

In consequence of this all the dogs about the place came running to meet him, softly patting over the sand, and it was on this group, standing under her window in the midnight stillness, that Riette looked out a few minutes later.

Something woke her, she did not know what, but this little watcher's sleep was always of the lightest, and she had not long fallen asleep, her eyelashes still wet with tears for Angelot. The window creaked as she opened it, leaning out into the moonlight.

"Is it you, my Ange? But they said—"

"I have escaped," said Angelot. "Quick, let me in! They may be following me."

"But go round to papa's window, dearest! And what business have the dogs there? Ah—do you hear, you wicked things? Go back to your places."

The dogs looked up, dropped their ears and tails, slunk away each to his corner. Only the dog who guarded Riette's end of the house remained; he stretched himself on the sand, slapped it with his tail, lolled out his tongue as if laughing.

"Don't you think my uncle will shoot me before he looks at me, if I attack his window?" said Angelot. "And in any case, I dare hardly ask him to take me in. He has not forgiven me. But you could hide me, Riette! or at least you could

give me something to eat before I take to the woods again."

"My boy!" the odd little figure in the flannel gown leaned farther out, and the dark cropped head was turned one way and the other, listening. "Go round into the north wood and wait as near papa's window as you can. I will go down to him. I think he cannot be asleep; he must be thinking of you."

"Merci!" said Angelot, and walked away.

But he did not go into the wood. He stole round very gently to where, in spite of the moon, he saw a light shining in Monsieur Joseph's uncurtained window. The guardian dog rubbed himself against his legs as he stood there.

Monsieur Joseph's room was panelled and furnished with the plainest wood. His bed was in the alcove at the back; the only ornament was the portrait of his wife, a dark, Italian-looking woman, which hung surrounded by guns, pistols, and swords, over the low stone mantelpiece. It was just midnight, but Monsieur Joseph was not in bed. He looked a quaint figure, in a dressing-gown and a tasselled night-cap, and he sat at the table writing a long letter. He started when Riette touched the door, and Angelot saw that his hand moved mechanically towards a pair of pistols that lay beside him. Monsieur Joseph did not trust entirely to his dogs for defence.

In she came, with bare white feet stepping lightly over the polished floor. Angelot moved back a pace or two that he might not hear what they said to each other. When Monsieur Joseph hastily opened the window, Riette had been sent back summarily to her room, and Angelot was waiting halfway to the wood.

"Come in, Ange! why do you stand there?" the little uncle exclaimed under his breath. "Sapristi, how do you know that you are not watched?"

"I think not, Uncle Joseph. And I fancy the fellows who caught me will hardly follow me here," said Angelot, stepping into the room. "You will forgive me for coming?"

"Where could you go? Come, come, tell me everything. Why—what did those devils of police want with you? Shut the window and draw the curtain—there, now we are safe. I was just writing to César d'Ombré. Do you know—here is a secret—he means to get away to England, and from there to the Princes. He is right; there is not much to be done here. You shall go with him!"

"Shall I?" said Angelot, vaguely. "Well, Uncle Joseph—it does not much matter

where I go."

Joseph de la Marinière swore his biggest oath.

"What are you staying here for?" he said. "To be caught on one side by a young lady, on the other by the police!"

"Give me something to eat, Uncle Joseph, or I shall die of hunger between you all," said Angelot, smiling at him.

The little gentleman shook his head. Angelot was not forgiven, not at all; even Riette had hardly been restored to favour, to ordinary meals in polite society.

"I will give you something to eat if I can find anything without calling Gigot," he said. "Riette thinks there is a pie in the pantry. Come into the gun-room; the light will not be seen there. And tell me what you have done to get yourself arrested, troublesome fellow! Not even a real honest bit of *Chouannerie*, I am afraid."

CHAPTER XXI

HOW MONSIEUR JOSEPH FOUND HIMSELF MASTER OF THE SITUATION

In the old labyrinth of rooms at Les Chouettes, Monsieur Joseph's gun-room was the best hidden from the outside. It had solid shutters, always kept closed and barred; the daylight only made its way in through their chinks, or through the doors, one of which opened into Monsieur Joseph's bedroom, the other into a little anteroom between that and the hall. Both doors were generally locked, and the keys safely stowed away.

The gun-room was not meant for ordinary visitors; Angelot himself, as a rule, was the only person admitted there. For the amount of arms and ammunition kept there, some of it in cupboards cleverly hidden in the panelling, some in a dry cellar entered by a trap-door in the floor, was very different, both in kind and quality, from anything the most energetic sportsman could require.

In this storehouse the amiable conspirator shut up his nephew, and Angelot spent the next few days there, well employed in cleaning and polishing wood and steel. He slept at night on a sofa in the anteroom, but was allowed to go no farther. Monsieur Joseph had reasons of his own.

He was a very authoritative person, when once he took a matter into his own hands, and his influence with Angelot was great. He took a far more serious view of the arrest than Angelot himself did. He was sure that his nephew had been kidnapped by special orders from Paris—probably from Réal, whom he knew of old—in order to gain information as to any existing Chouan plots in Anjou. Thus the authorities meant to protect themselves from any consequences of the Prefect's indulgent character. It was even possible that some suspicion of the mission to England, only lately discussed by himself and his friends, might have filtered through to Paris; and in that case several persons were in serious danger.

Monsieur Joseph was confirmed in these ideas by the fact that his brother started off to Sonnay to demand of the authorities there the reason of his son's arrest, and found that absolutely nothing was known of it. Coming back in a state of

rage and anxiety, which quite drove his philosophy out of the field, Urbain attacked his brother in words that Joseph found a little hard to bear, accusing him of having ruined Angelot's life with his foolish fancies, and of being the actual cause of this catastrophe which might bring the fate of a Chouan on the innocent fellow who cared for no politics at all.

"And what a life, to care for no cause at all!" cried Joseph, with eloquently waving hands. "But—you say you are going to Paris, to get to the bottom of this? Well, my friend, go! And I promise you, if Ange is in danger, I will follow and take his place. You and Anne may rely upon it, he shall not be punished for my sins."

"Come with me now, then! I start this very night," said Urbain.

"No, no! I will not accuse myself before it is necessary," said Joseph, shaking his head and smiling.

Urbain flung away in angry disgust. Joseph had a moment of profound sadness as he looked after him—they were standing in the courtyard of La Marinière—then stole away home through the lanes, carefully avoiding a sight of his sister-in-law.

"I let him go! I let him go, poor Urbain! and his boy safe at Les Chouettes all the time. Why do I do it? because the house is watched day and night; because neither I, nor Gigot, nor Tobie, can go into the woods without seeing the glitter of a police carbine through the leaves; because the dogs growl at night, and there is no safe place for Angelot outside Les Chouettes, till he is out of France altogether—and that I shall have to manage carefully. Because, if his father knew he had escaped from the police, all the world would know. Et puis,—I shall make a good Royalist of you in the end, my little Angelot. Your mother will not blame me for cutting you off from the Empire, and your father must comfort himself with his philosophy. And that hopeless passion for Mademoiselle Hélène—what can be kinder than to end it—and by the great cure of all—time, absence, impossibility! Yes; the matter is in my hands, and I shall carry it through, God helping me."

It was not a light burden that he had to carry, the little uncle. Never, since his brother's intervention brought him back to France and placed him where he and his old friends could amuse themselves with conspiracies which, as Joubard said, did little harm to any one, had he been in a position of such real difficulty. Riette did not at all realise what she was bringing upon her father, when she slipped

into his room that night with the news that Angelot had escaped from the police. He had to keep his nephew quietly imprisoned till he could get him away safely; it required all his arguments, all his influence and strength of will, to do that; for Angelot was not an easy person to keep within four narrow walls, and only love and gratitude restrained him from obeying his own instincts, going out into the woods, risking a second arrest—hardly to be followed by a second escape—venturing over to La Marinière to see his mother. It distressed him far more to think of her, terribly anxious, ignorant of his safety, than of his father on the way to Paris. He, at any rate, though he would not find him, might come to the bottom of the mysterious business.

Monsieur Joseph danced in the air, shrugged his shoulders, waved his hands. If Angelot chose to go, let him! His recapture would probably mean the arrest and ruin of the whole family. A little patience, and he could disappear for the time. What else did he expect to be able to do? Would a man on whom the police had once laid their hands be allowed to rescue himself and to live peaceably in his own country? What did he take them for, the police? were they children at play? or were their proceedings grim and real earnest? Had those men behind, who pulled the strings of the puppet-show, no other object in view than an hour's amusement? Did Angelot know that the woods were patrolled by the police, the roads watched? The only surprising thing was, that no domiciliary visit had yet been made, either at Les Chouettes or La Marinière.

"However, they know I am a good marksman," said Monsieur Joseph, with his sweetest smile. "And even Tobie, with my authority, might think a gendarme fair game."

"I don't believe it is fear of you that keeps them away, Uncle Joseph," said Angelot. "As to that, I too can hit a tree by daylight. But these stealthy ways of theirs seem to tell me what I have thought all along, that it is a private enterprise of our friend Simon's own, without any authority whatever. The fellows with him were not gendarmes; they were not in uniform. Monsieur le Préfet being laid up, the good man thinks it the moment to do a little hunting on his own account with his own dogs, and to curry favour by taking his game to Paris. But he is not quite sure of himself; he has no warrant to search houses without a better reason than any he can give. He will catch me again if he can, no doubt; but as you say, Uncle Joseph, as long as I stay here in your cupboard, I am safe."

"So safe," laughed his uncle, "that I am going to begin my vintage to-morrow under their very noses, leaving Riette and the dogs to guard you, mon petit. But

you are wrong, you are quite wrong. No police spy would dare to make such an arrest without a special order. If they have no warrant for searching, they will soon get one as soon as they are sure you are here. But at present you have vanished into the bowels of the earth. They can see that your father knows nothing of you; they have no reason to think that I am any wiser."

So passed those weary days, those long, mysterious nights at Les Chouettes.

Outside, with great care to keep themselves out of sight, Simon's scratch band searched the woods and lanes. Simon was mystified, as well as furious. He hardly dared return and report to his employer, who supposed that Angelot had been conveyed safely off to the mock prison where he meant to have him kept for a few weeks; then, when the affair of the marriage was arranged, to let him escape from it. Simon was himself too well known in the neighbourhood to make any enquiries; but one of his men found out at Lancilly that the family supposed young Ange to have been carried off to Paris, whither his father had followed him. Martin Joubard, the only witness of the arrest, had made the most of his story. He did not know the police officer by sight, but Monsieur Ange had seemed to do so. This had made them all think that the order for the arrest had come from Sonnay. But no! And as to any escape, this man was assured that the young gentleman had not been seen by any one but Martin Joubard, since he left his father's vineyard in the twilight of that fatal evening.

At Les Chouettes all went on outwardly in its usual fashion. Monsieur Joseph strolled out with his gun, directed the beginnings of his vintage; his servants, trustworthy indeed, showed no sign of any special watchfulness; Mademoiselle Henriette ordered the dogs about and sang her songs as usual. If Monsieur Joseph was grave and preoccupied, no wonder; every one knew he loved his nephew. But Simon, in truth, had met his match. He was almost convinced that no fugitive from justice, real or pretended, was hidden in or about Monsieur Joseph's habitation; and he gradually made his cordon wider, still watching the house, but keeping his men in cover by day, and searching the woods by night with less exact caution. His only satisfaction was being aware of two visits paid to Les Chouettes by the Baron d'Ombré, who came over the moor in the evening and slept there. The mission to England was as yet beyond police dreams, at least on this side of the country; but Simon kept his knowledge for future use.

It might naturally be imagined that Angelot would have found a refuge in some of the wild old precincts of La Marinière; but Simon soon convinced himself that this was not the case. No mother whose son was hidden about her home would

have spent her time as Anne did, wandering restlessly about, expecting nothing but her husband's return, or spending long hours before the altar in the church, praying for her son's safety. Simon began to suspect that his prisoner had got away to the west, into Brittany, among the Chouans who were there so numerous that it was better to leave them alone.

"Bien! his absence in any way will suit Monsieur le Général," Simon reflected. "As to that, it does not much matter. But I and my fellows will not get our promised pay, and that signifies a great deal. I, who have given up my furlough to serve that animal!"

So he gnawed his nails in distraction, and still watched with a sort of fascination the little square of country where he felt more and more afraid that Master Angelot was no longer to be found.

The sympathy that Anne de la Marinière, in her lonely sorrow, might have expected from the cousins at Lancilly who owed Urbain so much, she neither asked nor found. Once or twice, Hervé de Sainfoy came himself to the manor to ask if she had any news; but his manner was a little stiff and awkward; and Adélaïde never came; and the messages he brought from her were too evidently made by his politeness on the spur of the moment. Was it not possible, Anne thought, to be too worldly, too unforgiving? Had not her beautiful boy been punished enough for his presumption in falling in love with their daughter, and behaving like a lover of the olden time? They were even partly responsible for the arrest, she thought, for it was to escape them that Ange had walked away with Martin up the hill that evening.

Looking over at the great castle on the opposite hill, she accused it bitterly of having robbed her not only of Urbain, but of Angelot.

The October days brought wilder autumn weather; the winds began to blow in the woods, to howl at night in the wide old chimneys of La Marinière; sometimes the cry of a wolf, in distant depths of forest, made sportsmen and farmers talk of the hunts of which Lancilly used long ago to be the centre. Those days would return again, they hoped, though Count Hervé had not the energy or the country training of his ancestors. But his son, when the war was over, seemed likely to vie with any seigneur of them all. In the meanwhile, this young man's leave was shortened by an express from the army—a fact which seemed at first unlikely to have any influence on the fate of his cousin Angelot—but life has turns and twists that baffle the wisest calculations. Neither Georges nor his

mother had been displeased at the arrest of Angelot; though they had the decency to keep their congratulations for each other. As for Hélène, the news had been allowed to reach her through the servants and Mademoiselle Moineau. She dared not cry any more; her mother had scolded her enough for spoiling her eyes and complexion. Pale and silent, she took this new trouble as one more proof that she was never meant to be happy. Her fairy prince was a dream; yet, whatever the poets may say, she found a little joy and comfort, warmth and peace, in dreaming her dream again, and even in this worst time, by some strange instinct of love, Angelot seemed never far away from her.

One evening, when it was blowing and raining outside, a wood fire was flaming in the salon at La Marinière. For herself, Anne would not have cared for it; but the old Curé sat and warmed his hands after dining with her and playing a game of tric-trac. Not indeed to please and distract her, but himself; for he had long been accustomed to depend on her for comfort in all his troubles. After the game was over he had told her a piece of news; nothing that mattered very much, or that was very surprising, characters and circumstances considered; but Anne took it hardly.

"I cannot believe it," she said at first. "Who told you, do you say?"

"My brother at Lancilly told me," said the Curé. "You do not think him worthy of much confidence, madame—and it may not be true—he had heard the report in the village."

She shrugged her shoulders, with a little contempt for the Curé of Lancilly. Her old friend watched her face, pathetically changed since all this new sorrow came upon her; thinner, paler, its delicate beauty hardened, purple shadows under the still lovely eyes, and a look of bitter resentment that hurt him to see. He gazed at her imploringly.

"But, madame," he murmured—"it is nothing—Monsieur de la Marinière would say it was nothing—"

"I hope, Monsieur le Curé," Anne said, "that after such cruel hardness of heart he will waste his affection there no longer. Ah! who is that?"

There were quick steps outside. Somebody had come in, and might be heard shaking himself in the hall; then Monsieur Joseph walked lightly into the room, bringing a rush of outside air, a smell of wet leaves, and that atmosphere of life which in his saddest moments never left him.

Madame Urbain received him a little coldly; she was cold to every one in these days; but in truth his conscience told him that he might have visited her more since Urbain went away. But then—how keep the secret from Angelot's mother? No, impossible; and so he made his vintage an excuse for avoiding La Marinière. To-night, however, he had a mission to fulfil.

It was horribly difficult. He sat down between her and the Curé, looked from one to the other, drank the coffee she offered him, and blushed like a girl as he said, "No news from Urbain, I suppose?"

Anne's brows rose in a scornful arch; her lips pouted.

"News! How should there be any?" she said, as if Urbain had gone to Paris to amuse himself. "And your vintage, Joseph?"

"I finished it to-day. It was difficult—the weather was not very good—and—I have had distractions," said Monsieur Joseph, and waved away the subject. "My dear Anne," he went on, rushing headlong into another, "I have had a visitor to-day, who charged me to explain to you a certain matter—which vexes him profoundly, by the bye,—Hervé de Sainfoy, who for family reasons—"

"Oh, mon Dieu!" Anne cried, and burst out laughing. "You really mean that Hervé de Sainfoy has sent you as his ambassador—see our injustice, Monsieur le Curé, yours and mine—to announce to me that he is going to give a ball while my son is in prison, in danger of his life, or already dead, for all I know! Really, that is magnificent! What politeness, what feeling for Urbain, n'est-ce pas? He did not wish me to hear such interesting news through the gossip of the village—do you hear, Monsieur le Curé? You brought it too soon. And my invitation?" she held out her hand. "Did he give you a card for me, or will Madame la Comtesse take the trouble to send it herself?"

"Ah, bah!" cried Joseph, springing from his chair and pirouetting before the fire; "but you are a little too severe on poor Hervé, my dear sister! I assure you, I showed him what I thought. But I perceived that his vexation is real—real and sincere. The circumstances—he explained them all in the most amiable manner—"

Anne interrupted him, laughing again. "I see the facts—the one fact—what are the circumstances to me?"

"They are a great deal to Hervé," Monsieur Joseph persisted.

"Hervé, Hervé!" she cried. "But Joseph—mon Dieu, how can you take his wretched excuses! I thought you loved Ange! I thought the boy—"

She broke off with a sob, turning white as death. The two men stared at her, Monsieur Joseph with wild eyes and trembling lips. Would this be more than he could bear?

He took refuge in talking. He talked so fast that he hardly knew what he was saying. He poured out Hervé's explanations, his regrets, his trouble of mind. Georges was bent upon this ball; it had been proposed long before his return; the first invitations had been sent out directly he came. He wished to make acquaintance with all the neighbours, old and new, official, or friends of the family; he wished to pay a special compliment to the officers at Sonnay, his brothers in arms. A formal invitation had been sent to General Ratoneau, who had actually accepted it, to Hervé's great surprise. He had laughed and said that the dog wanted another thrashing. But let him come, if he chose to humble himself! He might see even more clearly that Hélène was not for him. In Adélaïde's opinion, no private prejudices must have anything to do with this ball. It was given chiefly as a matter of politics, under imperial colours; it was for the interest of Georges that his family should thus definitely range itself with the Empire.

"Poor Hervé said that he had already, more than once, spoilt his wife's calculations and failed to support her views. She and Georges, whatever private feeling might be, thought it impossible to put off this ball because of the misfortune that happened to Angelot. They would be understood to show sympathy with the Chouans. Then he abused me well, poor Hervé," said Monsieur Joseph, amiably. "He said, as Urbain did, that I had ruined Angelot's life, and it was no one's fault but mine. 'Well, dear cousin,' I said to him, 'I will punish myself by not appearing at this fine ball of yours. Not that my dancing days are over, but for me, Ange's absence would spoil all.' 'You love that fellow!' says Hervé, looking at me. 'Love him!' says I. 'I would cut off my right hand to serve him, and that is a good deal for a sportsman.' Hervé laughed as I said it. I do not dislike that poor Hervé, though his wife rules him. Listen to me, you two. I believe if Ange had been reasonable and honest, Hervé might have given him his daughter."

"Heaven forbid!" cried Anne. "But if you love Ange, do not blame him. He was young, he was mad, the girl was beautiful—and, after all, Joseph, you had something to do with putting that into his head. Ah, we are all to blame! We

have all been cruel, blind, selfish. You and I thought of the King, Urbain thought of his cousins, they thought of themselves. We left my boy to find his own way in a time like this, and your Chouan friends were as dangerous for him as Hélène de Sainfoy. Ah! and you excuse yourself with a laugh from dancing on his grave!"

She wrung her hands, threw herself back in her chair with a passionate sigh.

"Madame," said the Curé, suddenly;—his dim but watchful eyes had been fixed on Joseph; "Madame, Monsieur Joseph could tell you, if he would, what has become of Angelot. He is not dead; I doubt if he is even in prison. Ah, monsieur, you do not dissimulate well!" as Joseph made him an eager sign to be silent.

But it was too late, for Anne was holding his two hands, and in the light of her eyes all his secret doings lay open.

"Why did I come!" he said to himself, in the intervals of a very difficult explanation. "There is some magic in those walls of Lancilly, which attracts and ruins us all. If we live through this, thousand thunders, Hervé de Sainfoy may make his own excuses to our dear little Anne in future!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE LIGHTED WINDOWS OF LANCILLY

There was no way out of it, without telling all. Fortunately Joseph knew that his secrets were safe with these two, whose hearts were absolutely Royalist, though circumstances held them bound to inactivity. Presently Anne rose and left the room.

"Thank God! that is over," Joseph said, half to himself. "I must be going. Monsieur le Curé, I leave her to you. Do not let her be too anxious. D'Ombré is rough, but a good fellow; he will take care of our Angelot."

The old Curé was plunged in gloom. Tall and slight in his long black garment, he stood under the high chimneypiece, and leaned forward shivering, to warm his fingers at the blaze.

"Ah, monsieur!" he murmured. "Have you thought what you are doing? Can you expect good to come out of evil? Your brother, who has done everything for us all, how are you treating him? If madame does not see it, I do. You are taking Ange, making him a conspirator and a Chouan. If you save him from one danger, you plunge him into a greater, for if he and Monsieur d'Ombré are caught on this mission, they will certainly pay for it with their lives. You are doing all this without his father's knowledge—"

"Ah, my dear Curé, I know the police better than you do," Monsieur Joseph said hastily. "These young fellows will not be the first who have escaped to England; and Ange cannot stay here with their eyes and claws upon him. Even his father would not wish that. Leave it to me. What is it, Anne? what are you thinking of?"

His sister-in-law had come back into the room, wrapped in a cloak, with a hood drawn over her face.

"I am going with you to see Ange," she said.

The wind was howling, the rain was pattering outside. But Monsieur Joseph had all the trouble in the world to make her give up this idea. At last, after many

arguments and prayers, he persuaded her that she must not come to Les Chouettes but must absolutely trust Ange to him. He promised solemnly that the young man should not start without her knowing it, that, if possible, she should see her boy again.

"And if Urbain comes back before they are gone?" she said, looking whitely into his face. "I tell you positively, Joseph, I shall not dare—"

"My dear friend, owing to Monsieur le Curé's unfortunate second-sight, your son's life is in your hands. If Urbain comes back, tell him all, if you will. His presence did not save Ange from being arrested before, it will not save him from being retaken. My fault, perhaps, as Urbain said—all my fault—" He struck his breast as if in church, with his fine smile. "But then it is my place to save him, and I will do it, if you will let me—in my own way."

They were both trembling, and large tears ran down the old Curé's thin cheeks. Joseph, still smiling, bent to kiss her hand. He held it for a moment, then looked up with dark imploring eyes.

"Adieu, chère Anne! and think of me with all your charity!" he said.

A minute later he had slipped noiselessly out, and plunged alone into the wet, howling darkness.

Through those days of suspense, while Angelot was hidden at Les Chouettes, while master and servants alike acted on the supposition that the house was watched by gendarmes with all the power of the Ministry of Police behind them—through these days, one person alone was happy; it was Henriette. She adored her cousin; it was joy to watch over him, to scold him, to amuse him, to keep him, a difficult matter, within the bounds prescribed by his uncle. Every day Angelot said it was impossible; he must be ill, he must die, if he could not stretch his legs and breathe the open air. Every day Henriette, when her father was out, allowed him to race up and down the stairs, played at hide-and-seek with him in the passages, let him dance her round and round the lower rooms. Or else she played games with him, cards, chess, tric-trac; or he lay and listened to her while she told him fairy tales; listened with a dreamy half-understanding, with a certainty, underlying all his impatience, that there was nothing to live for now. What did it matter, after all? One moment, life and hope and youth made him thrill and tremble in every limb; the next, his fate weighed upon him like a millstone; he laid his head down on the broad pillow of the sofa, and while Henriette chattered his eyelashes were sometimes wet. All was settled now. He

must be banished to England, to Germany, banished in a cause he did not care for, in which he was involved against his will. Never again should he walk with his gun and Négo, light-hearted, over his own old country. Never again, more certainly, should he see Hélène, feel the maddening sweetness of her touch, her kiss. There was to be a ball. Henriette told him all about it; he heard of his cousin Hervé's visit, and was half amused, half miserable. Hélène would dance; white and slender, her eyes full of sadness. She would dance with other men, thinking, he knew, of her lost friend, her Angelot. In time, one of them would be presented to her as her husband. Not Ratoneau; Angelot had her father's word for that, and he drew a long breath when he thought of it. But some one else; that was inevitable. Ah! as life must pass, why cannot it pass more quickly? Why must every day have such an endless number of hours and minutes? What torture is there greater than this of waiting, stifled and idle, for a fate arranged in spite of one's self?

Henriette flitted in and out, eager and earnest like her father. After Monsieur Joseph's visit to La Marinière, he sent her there one day with Marie, and she was embraced by her aunt Anne with a quite new passion of tenderness, and trusted with a letter and a huge parcel of necessaries for Angelot's journey. Monsieur Joseph laughed a little angrily over these.

"Tiens, mon petit! your mother thinks you are going to drive to the coast in a chaise and four," he said; but Angelot bent his head very gravely over the coats and the shirts that those little thin hands had folded together for him.

"You must give me fair notice, Uncle Joseph," he said. "Police or no police, I do not go without wishing her good-bye."

Everything came at once, as fate would have it. It was after dark, a wild, windy evening, stars looking through the hurrying clouds, no moonrise till early morning. With every precaution, Monsieur Joseph now allowed his nephew to dine in the dining-room, taking care to place him where he could not be seen from outside when Gigot came in through the shutters from the kitchen. Angelot had now been kept in hiding for ten days, and the police seemed to have disappeared from the woods, so that Monsieur Joseph's mind was easier.

Suddenly, as they sat at dinner that evening, all the dogs began to bark.

"Go into your den!" said the little uncle, starting up.

"No, dear uncle, this game pie is too good," Angelot said coolly. "I heard a horse

coming down the lane. It is Monsieur d'Ombré's messenger."

"If it is—very true, you had better eat your dinner," said his uncle.

And to be sure, in a few minutes, Gigot came in with a letter, Angelot's marching orders. At five o'clock the next morning César d'Ombré would wait for him at the Étang des Morts, a lonely, legend-haunted pool in the woods where four roads met, about two leagues beyond the *landes* by way of La Joubardière.

"Very well; you will start at three o'clock," said Monsieur Joseph. "Give the man something to eat and send him back, Gigot, to meet his master."

"Three o'clock! I shall be asleep!" said Angelot. "Surely an hour will be enough to take me to the Étang des Morts—a cheerful rendezvous!"

He laughed and looked at Riette. She was very pale and grave, her dark eyes wide open.

"The good dead—they will watch over you, mon petit!" she murmured. "We must not be afraid of them."

"This is not a time for talking nonsense, children," said Monsieur Joseph; he looked at them severely, his mouth trembling. "Half-past three at latest; the boy might lose his way in the dark."

Riette got up suddenly and flung her arms round Angelot's neck.

"Mon petit, mon petit!" she repeated, burying her face on his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" he cried. "How am I to finish my dinner? You come between me and the best pie that Marie ever made! Get along with you, little good-for-nothing!"

He laughed; then Marie's pie seemed to choke him; he pushed back his chair, lifted Riette lightly and carried her out of the room.

"Now I am in prison no longer," he said. "I am going to run across to La Marinière; will you come too, little cousin?"

But Monsieur Joseph had something to say to that. He would not let Angelot go without sermons so long that the boy could hardly listen to them, on the care he was to take that no servant or dog at La Marinière saw him, on the things he might and might not say to his mother.

At last Angelot said aside to Henriette: "There is only one thing I regret—that I did not go straight home at first to my father and mother. That will bring misfortune on us all, if anything does—my uncle is absolutely too much of a conspirator."

"Hush, you are ungrateful," said Riette, gravely.

"Ah! It seems to me that I am nothing good or fortunate—everything bad and unlucky! My relations and their politics toss me like a ball," Angelot sighed impatiently. "I wish this night were over and we were on our way, I and that excellent grumpy César. And the farther I go, the more I shall want to come back. Tiens! Riette, I am miserable!"

The child gazed at him with her great eyes, full of the love and understanding of a woman.

"Courage!" she said. "You will come back—with the King."

"The King!" Angelot repeated bitterly. "Ask Martin Joubard about that. Hear him talk of the Emperor."

"A peasant! a common soldier! What does he know?" said the girl, scornfully. "I think my papa knows better."

"Ah, well! Believe in him; you are right," said Angelot.

They talked as they stood outside the house in the dim starlight, waiting a few moments for Monsieur Joseph: he chose to go part of the way with Angelot, and consented unwillingly to take Riette with him. The dead silence of the woods and fields was only broken by the moan of the wind; a sadness that struck to the heart brooded over the depths of lonely land; far down in the valley cold mists were creeping, and even on the lower slopes of Monsieur Joseph's meadow a chilly damp rose from the undrained ground. As far as one could tell, not a human being moved in the woods; the feet of Monsieur d'Ombré's messenger had passed up the lane out of hearing; all was solitary and silent about the quaint turreted house with its many shuttered windows and dark guards lying silent, stretched on the sand. Only one of these rose and shook himself and followed his master.

But the loneliness was not so great as it seemed. Behind a large tree to leeward of the house, Simon was lurking alone. He had sent his men away for the night, and he ground his teeth with rage when he saw his victim, out of reach for the

time. For he had not the courage, with no law or right on his side, to face the uncle and nephew, armed and together.

Avoiding the open starlit slope, those three with the dog passed at once into the shadow of the woods, thus taking the safest, though not the shortest way to La Marinière. Simon stole after them at a safe distance. They came presently to a high corner in a lane, where, over the bank on which the pollard oaks stood in line, they could look across to the other side of the valley. As a rule, the Château de Lancilly was hardly to be seen after sunset, facing east, and its own woods shadowing it on three sides; but to-night its long front shone and glowed and flashed with light; every window seemed to be open and illuminated; the effect was so festal, so dazzling, that Riette cried out in admiration. Monsieur Joseph exclaimed angrily, and Angelot gazed in silence.

"Ah, papa! It is the ball! How beautiful! How I wish I could be there!" cried the child.

"No doubt!" said Monsieur Joseph. "Exactly! You would like to dance till to-morrow morning, while Ange is escaping. Well, shall I take you across there now? One of your pretty cousins would lend you a ball-dress!"

Riette's blushes could not be seen in the dark, but she said no more. Monsieur Joseph walked on a few paces and stopped.

"Ange will go quicker without us," he said. "Go, my boy, and God bless and protect you. We have given those rascals of police the slip, I think, or they have decided that you are not to be caught here. For the last day or two Tobie has seen nothing of them. But remember you are not safe; go cautiously and come back quickly. Do not let your mother keep you long. I believe I am doing very wrong in letting you go to her at all!"

"As to that, Uncle Joseph, it is certain that I won't leave the country without seeing her," said Angelot.

"Go, then, and don't be long, don't be rash; remember that I am dying with impatience. You have the pistols I gave you?"

"Yes."

"Don't shoot a gendarme if you can help it. It might make things more serious. Away with you! Come, Riette."

As the two walked back along the lane, Simon scrambled out of their way, like Angelot out of his, into the thick mass of one of the old *truisses*. The dog looked up at the tree and growled as they passed. Monsieur Joseph glanced sharply that way, but saw nothing, and called the dog to follow him, walking on a little more quickly.

"He will go straight to La Marinière," he was saying to Riette, "stay twenty minutes or so with his mother, and be back at Les Chouettes in less than an hour"—a piece of information not lost on Simon, who climbed down carefully from his tree, looked to his carbine, and chuckled as he walked slowly on towards La Marinière.

"Nothing in the world like patience," he said to himself. "Monsieur le Général ought to double my reward for this. I was right from the beginning; that old devil of a Chouan had the boy hidden in that robber's den of his. The fellows thought I was wasting my time and theirs. They didn't like being half starved and catching cold in the woods. I have had all the trouble in the world to hold them down to it. But what does it matter, so that we catch our game after all! I must choose a good place to drop on the youngster—lucky for me that he couldn't live without seeing his mother. Is he armed? Never mind! I must be fit to die of old age if I can't give an account of a boy like that. His mother, eh? Why did his father go to Paris, if they knew he was here? Perhaps they thought it wiser to keep the good news from Monsieur Urbain; these things divide families. They let him go off on a wild-goose chase after a pardon or something. Well, so that I catch him, tie him up out of the General's way, get my money, start off to Paris to see my father, and—perhaps—never come back—for this affair may make another department pleasanter—"

So ruminated Simon, as he strolled through the lanes in the starlight, following, as he supposed, in the footsteps of Angelot, and preparing to lie in wait for him at some convenient corner on his return.

But when his uncle and cousin left him, disappearing into the shadows, Angelot leaped up on the bank and stood for a minute or two gazing across at Lancilly. To watch till her shadow passed by one of those lighted windows—if not to climb to some point where he might see her, herself, without breaking his word to her father and attempting to speak to her—it might cost an extra half-hour and Uncle Joseph's displeasure, perhaps. But after all, what was leaving all the rest of the world compared with leaving her, Hélène, and practically for ever? His gentle, frightened love, to whom he had promised all the strength and protection

he had to give, to whom invisible cords drew him across the valley!

"No, I cannot!" Angelot said to himself. He waited for no second thoughts, but jumped down into the field beyond the bank, and did not even trouble himself to keep in the shadow while with long light strides he ran towards Lancilly.

Two hours later Monsieur Joseph was pacing up and down, wildly impatient, in front of his house. Over his head, Riette listened behind closed shutters, and heard nothing but his quick tramp, and an angry exclamation now and then against Angelot. At last Monsieur Joseph stopped short and listened. The dogs barked, but he silenced them; then came a swinging light and two figures hurrying along the shadowy footpath from La Marinière. Another instant, and Urbain's strong voice rang through the night that brooded over Les Chouettes.

"Joseph, you incorrigible old Chouan! what have you done with my boy?"

CHAPTER XXIII

A DANCE WITH GENERAL RATONEAU

All this time, and lately with her son's energetic help, Madame de Sainfoy had been arranging her rooms in the most approved fashion of the day. The new furniture was far less beautiful than the old, and far less suited to the character of the house; still, like everything belonging to the Empire, it had a severe magnificence. The materials were mahogany and gilded bronze; the forms were classical, lyres, urns, winged sphinxes everywhere. In the large salon the walls were hung with yellow silk instead of the old, despised, but precious tapestries, the long curtains that swept the floor were yellow silk, with broad bands of red and yellow and a heavy fringe of red and yellow balls. These fashions were repeated in each room in different colours, green, blue, red; a smaller salon, Madame de Sainfoy's favourite, was hung with a peculiar green flecked with gold; and for the chairs in this room she, Hélène, Mademoiselle Moineau, and the young girls were working a special tapestry with wreaths of grapes or asters, lyres, Roman heads which suggested Napoleon. Certain unaccountable stains on this fine work brought a smile long years afterwards into the lovely eyes of Hélène.

Paper and paint, innovations at Lancilly, had much to do in beautifying the old place. Dark rooms were well lit up by a white paper with a broad border of red and yellow twisted ribbons. Old stone chimneypieces, window-sills, great solid shutters, were covered thick with yellow paint.

The ideas of Captain Georges were still more modern than those of Urbain, and suited his mother better. She was angry with Urbain for forsaking her business and hurrying off to Paris in search of his worthless son; she was especially angry that he went without giving her notice, or offering to do any of the thousand commissions she could gladly have given him. However, these faults in Urbain only made Georges more valuable; and it was with something not far short of fury that she refused to listen to her husband when he suggested that the ball might be put off because of the trouble and sorrow that hung over his cousins at La Marinière.

The ball was stately and splendid. At the dinner-party a few weeks before, only a

certain number of notables had been present, and chiefly old friends of the family. To the ball came everybody of any pretension whatever, within a radius of many miles. Lancilly stood in Anjou, but near the borders of Touraine and Maine; all these old provinces were well represented. Many of the guests were returned emigrants: old sentiment connected with the names of Sainfoy and Lancilly brought them. Many more were new people of the Empire; mushroom families, on whom the older ones looked curiously and scornfully. There was a brilliant and dashing body of officers from Sonnay-le-Loir, with General Ratoneau at their head. There were a number of civil officials of the Empire, though the Prefect himself was not there.

Ratoneau was in a strange state of mind. In his full-dress uniform, his gold lace and plumes, he looked his best, a manly and handsome soldier. Every one turned to look at him, struck by the likeness to Napoleon, stronger than ever that night, for he was graver, quieter, more dignified than usual. He was not at his ease, and oddly enough, the false position suited him. There could not be anything but extreme coolness and stiffness in the greeting between him and his host. Hervé de Sainfoy had refused the man his daughter, and heartily despised him for accepting the formal invitation to this ball. Ratoneau knew that he was going to be forced as a son-in-law on this coldly courteous gentleman, but let no sign of his coming triumph escape him. Not, at least, to Hélène's father; her mother was a different story. As the General drew himself upright again, after bending stiffly to kiss her hand, he met his hostess's eyes with such a bold look of confident understanding that she flushed a little and almost felt displeased. He was not discreet, she thought. He had no business so to take her sympathy for granted. Other people might have caught that glance and misunderstood it.

She stood for a moment, frowning a little, the graceful lines of her satin and lace, her head crowned with curls, making a perfect picture of what she meant to be, a great lady of the Empire. Then her look softened suddenly, as Georges came up to her.

"Listen to me a moment, mamma. General Ratoneau wishes to dance with Hélène. She told me this afternoon that she would not dance with him. I say she must. What do you say?"

Madame de Sainfoy twirled her fan impatiently.

"Where is she?"

"There."

A quadrille was just beginning; the dancers were arranging themselves. The Vicomte des Barres, one of the most strongly declared Royalists present, was leading Mademoiselle de Sainfoy forward.

He was familiar with the details of the mission to England, on which the Baron d'Ombré was to start that very night; but not even to him had been confided Angelot's escape and Monsieur Joseph's further plans. He was one of the many guests who had been struck by the heartlessness of the Sainfoys in giving a ball at this moment, but who came to it for reasons of their own. He came with the object of hoodwinking the local police, who were watching him and his friends, of scattering the Chouan party and giving César d'Ombré more chance of a safe and quiet start.

The manners, the looks, the talk of Des Barres were all of the old régime. He had its charm, its sympathetic grace; and it was with a feeling of relief and safety that Hélène gave her hand to him for the dance, rather than to one of the young Empire heroes whose eyes were eagerly following her.

"Your sister is a fool," said Madame de Sainfoy, very low.

"That is my impression," said Georges; and they both gazed for an instant at the couple as they advanced.

Hélène's loveliness that night was extraordinary. The music, the lights, the wonderful beauty of the scene in those gorgeous rooms, the light-hearted talk and laughter all about her, had lifted the heavy sadness that lay on her brow and eyes. When every one seemed so gay, could life be quite hopeless, after all? The tender pink in her cheeks that night was not due to her mother's rouge-box, with which she had often been threatened. She was smiling at some pretty old-world compliment from Monsieur des Barres. He, for his part, asked himself what the grief could be which lay behind that smile of hers, and found it easy enough to have his question answered. In a few minutes, in the intervals of the dance, they were talking of her cousin Angelot, his mysterious arrest, the possible reasons for it. Hélène's story was plainly to be read in the passion of her low voice, her darkening eyes, the quick changes of her colour. Monsieur des Barres was startled, yet hardly surprised; it seemed as natural that two such young creatures should be attracted to each other, as that their love should be a hopeless fancy; for no reasonable person could dream that Monsieur de Sainfoy would give his daughter to a cousin neither rich nor fortunate. He did his best to cheer the girl, without showing that he guessed her secret. It must be some mistake, he assured

her; the government could have no good reason for detaining her cousin, who—"unfortunately," said Monsieur des Barres, with a smile—"was not a Royalist conspirator at all." He had the satisfaction of gaining a look and a smile from Hélène which must have brought a young man to her feet, and which even made his well-trained heart beat a little quicker.

Georges de Sainfoy was resolved that his sister should not insult her family again by dancing with a known Chouan. For the next dance, Hélène found herself in the possession of General Ratoneau, clattering sword, creaking boots, and all. Monsieur des Barres, looking back as he withdrew, saw a cold statue, with white eyelids lowered, making a deep curtsey to the General under her brother's stern eyes.

"Poor little thing!" the Vicomte said to himself. "Poor children! The pretty boy is impossible, of course. These cousins are the devil. But it is a pity!"

General Ratoneau danced very badly, and did not care to dance much. He had no intention of making himself agreeable in this way to any lady but the daughter of the house, whom in his own mind he already regarded as betrothed to him. He had satisfactory letters from his friends in Paris, assuring him that the imperial order to the Comte de Sainfoy would be sent off immediately. It was difficult for him not to boast among his comrades of his coming marriage, but he had just decency enough to hold his tongue. According to his calculations, the order might have arrived at Lancilly to-day; it could scarcely be delayed beyond to-morrow.

Hélène endured him as a partner, and was a little proud of herself for it. She found him repulsive; disliked meeting the bold admiration of his eyes. But as no one had mentioned him to her during the last few weeks, Madame de Sainfoy and Georges prudently restraining themselves, and as he had not appeared at Lancilly since the dinner-party, she had ceased to have any immediate fear of him. And all the brilliancy of that evening, the triumphant swing of the music, the consciousness of her own beauty, delicately heightened by her first partner's looks and words, and last, not least, the comfort he had given her about Angelot, had raised her drooping spirits so that she found it not impossible to smile and speak graciously, even with General Ratoneau.

After dancing, he led her round the newly decorated rooms, and all the new fashions in furniture, in dress, in manners, made a subject for talk which helped her wonderfully. Ratoneau listened with a smiling stare, asked questions, and

laughed now and then.

On the surface, his manner was not offensive; he was behaving beautifully, according to his standard; probably no young woman had ever been so politely treated by him before. In truth, Hélène's fair beauty and stateliness, the white dignity of a creature so far above his experience, awed him a little. But with a man of his kind, no such feeling was likely to last long. Any strange touch of shyness which protected the lovely girl by his side was passing off as he swore to himself: "I have risked something, God knows, but she's worth it all. I am a lucky man—I shall be proud of my wife."

They were in the farther salon, not many people near. He turned upon her suddenly, with a look which brought the colour to her face, "Do you know, mademoiselle, you are the most beautiful woman in the world!"

Hélène shook her head, a faint smile struggling with instant disgust and alarm. She looked round, but saw no one who could release her from this rough admirer. She was obliged to turn to him again, and listened to him with lowered eyes, a recollection of her mother's words weighing now upon her brain.

"The first time I saw you, mademoiselle," said Ratoneau, "was in this room. You were handing coffee with that cousin of yours—young La Marinière."

He saw the girl's face quiver and grow pale. His own changed, and his smile became unpleasant. He had not meant to mention that fellow, now shut up safely somewhere—it was strange, by the bye, that Simon had never come back to report himself and take his money! However, as he had let Angelot's name fall, there might be some advantage to be had out of it.

"I see his father is not here to-night," he said. "Sensible man, his father."

"How should he be here!" said Hélène, turning her head away. "He is gone to Paris to find him. How could he be here, dancing and laughing—I ask myself, how can anybody—"

She spoke half aside, breaking off suddenly.

"Yourself, for instance?" said Ratoneau, staring at her. "And why should you shut yourself up and make the whole world miserable, because your cousin is a fool? But you have not done so."

"Because it is impossible, I am not free."

"What would you be doing now, if you were free?"

Hélène shrugged her shoulders. Ratoneau laughed.

"Does Monsieur de la Marinière expect to bring his son back with him?" he asked.

His tone was sneering, but Hélène did not notice it.

"I do not know, monsieur," she said. "But my cousin will come back. He has done nothing. He has been in no plots. The Emperor cannot punish an innocent man."

She looked up suddenly, cheered by repeating what Monsieur des Barres had told her. Her pathetic eyes met Ratoneau's for a moment; surely no one could be cruel enough to deny such facts as these. In the General's full gaze there was plenty of what was odious to her, but no real kindness or pity. She blushed as she thought: "How dares this man look at me so? He is nothing but the merest acquaintance. He is insupportable."

"If we were to go back into the ball-room, monsieur," she said gravely, beginning to move away. "My mother will be looking for me."

"No, mademoiselle," said Ratoneau, coolly, "I think not. Madame la Comtesse saw me take you this way."

He sat down on a sofa, spreading his broad left hand over the gilded sphinx of its arm. With his right hand he pointed to the place beside him.

"Sit down there," he said.

Hélène frowned with astonishment, caught her breath and looked round. There were two or three people at the other end of the room, but all strangers to her, and all passing out gradually; no one coming towards her, no one to rescue her from the extraordinary manners of this man.

The glance she gave him was as withering as her gentle eyes could make it; then she turned her back upon him and began to glide away, alone, down the room.

"Mademoiselle—" said Ratoneau; his voice grated on her ears.

Was he laughing? was he angry? in any case she was resolved not to speak to the insolent creature again.

"Listen, mademoiselle," said Ratoneau, more loudly, and without rising. "Listen! I will bring your cousin back."

She wavered, paused, then turned and looked at him. He gazed at her gravely, intently; his look and manner were a little less offensive now.

"Yes—I am not an ogre," he said. "I don't eat boys and girls. But I assure you there are people in the Empire who do. And you are quite wrong if you think that an innocent man is never punished. The police may have their reasons—bang—there go the big gates of Vincennes, and the stronger reason that opens them again is hard to find. Innocent or guilty—after all, that pretty cousin of yours has touched a good deal of pitch in the way of *chouannerie*, mademoiselle."

"You said—" Hélène waited and stammered.

"I said I would bring him back. You want to understand me? Sit down beside me here."

The girl hesitated. "Courage! for Angelot!" she said to herself.

She did not believe in the man; she dreaded him; shrank from him; but the name she loved was even more powerful than Ratoneau had expected.

"Ah, but we will send that little cousin to the wars, or to America," he thought, as she came slowly back and let herself sink down, pale and cold, in the opposite corner of the sofa.

"Where is my cousin, monsieur?" she said under her breath.

"I suppose, as the police arrested him, that he is in their hands," said Ratoneau. "Where he is at this moment I know no more than you do."

"But you said—"

"Yes—I will do it. You can believe, can you not, that I have more influence at headquarters than poor Monsieur de la Marinière—a little country squire who has saved himself by licking the dust before each man in power?"

"It is not right for you to speak so of my father's cousin, who has been so excellent for us all," Hélène said quickly; then she blushed at her own boldness. "But if you can really do this—I shall be grateful, monsieur."

The words were coldly, impatiently said; she might have been throwing a bone

to a begging dog. Ratoneau bent forward, devouring her with his eyes. The delicate line of her profile was partly turned away from him; the eyelids drooped so low that the long lashes almost rested on the cheek. All about her brow and ears, creeping down to her white neck, the fair curls clustered. Soft and narrow folds of white muslin, lace, and fine embroidery, clothed her slender figure with an exaggerated simplicity. Her foot, just advanced beyond the frills of the gown, her white long fingers clasping her fan; every feature, every touch, every detail, was as finely beautiful as art and nature could make it; Hélène was the perfection of dainty aristocracy in the exquisite freshness of its youth.

"I will do it—I will do it—for love of you," Ratoneau said, and his voice became suddenly hoarse. "You are beautiful—and you are mine—mine."

The girl shuddered from head to foot.

"No!" she said violently.

She did not look at Ratoneau. As to him, he did not speak, but laughed and bent nearer. She rose to her feet suddenly.

"You forget yourself—you are mad, Monsieur le Général," she said haughtily. "If that is the condition—no! Pray do not concern yourself about my cousin's affairs, you have nothing to do with them."

Ratoneau rose too, a little unsteadily.

"Listen one moment, mademoiselle," he said. "If I am mad, you are foolish, let me tell you. I said nothing about conditions, I stated facts. You will be my wife—therefore you are mine, you belong to me, and therefore there is nothing I will not do for love of you. My wife is the most beautiful woman in France, and she stands here."

"Never, never!" murmured Hélène. "It has come!" she said to herself.

Her mother had threatened her with this; and now, apparently, all had been settled without a word to her. Even her father, once on her side, must be against her now. He had been angry with her; not without reason, she knew. Yes, this horrible thing had been arranged by her father, her mother, Georges, while she was kept a prisoner upstairs. If they had been kinder to her in the last few days, it was only that they wished to bring their victim smiling to the sacrifice. No wonder Georges had insisted on her dancing with General Ratoneau. No wonder her mother had taken pains to dress her beautifully for this ball, which she hated

and dreaded so much.

These thoughts, with a wild desire to escape, rushed through Hélène's mind as she stood breathless before this man who laid such a daring claim to her. He was smiling, though his lips were white. It is not pleasant to be treated as horrible scum of the earth by the woman you have arranged to marry; to see scorn, disgust, hatred in a girl's face, answering to your finest compliments.

"This young lady has a character—she has a temper—" he muttered between his teeth. "But you will be tamed, ma belle. Who would have thought with those pale cheeks of yours—well, the Emperor's command will bring you to reason. Pity I spoke, perhaps—but a man cannot keep cool always. That command—Ah, thousand thunders! what do I see?"

The last words were spoken aloud. As Hélène stood before him, silent, rooted with horror to the ground, he watching her with folded arms in a favourite imperial attitude, several sets of people strolled across the lower end of the room, for this was one of a suite of salons. Suddenly came the master of the house alone, walking slowly, his eyes fixed on a letter in his hand, his face deathly white in the glimmer of the many wax candles. Hélène did not see her father at first, for her back was turned to him, but at the General's words she turned quickly, and was just aware of him as he passed into the next room. Without another word or look she left her partner standing there, and fled away in pursuit of him. Ratoneau watched the white figure vanishing, laughed aloud, and swore heartily.

"This is dramatic," he said. "Fortunate that I have a friend at Court in Madame la Comtesse! Suppose I go and join her."

Hélène searched for her father in vain. By the time she reached the other room, he had quite unaccountably vanished. As she flew on rather distractedly among the guests, hurrying back to the ball-room, her brother's peremptory hand was laid upon her arm.

"What is the matter, Hélène? Where are you running? Are you dancing with no one, and why do you look so wild?"

Hélène answered none of these questions.

"Find me a partner, if you please," she said, with a sudden effort at collecting herself. "But, Georges—no more of your officers."

Georges looked at her with a queer smile, but only said—

"And no more of your Chouans!"

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW MONSIEUR DE SAINFOY FOUND A WAY OUT

If Angelot expected to find the usual woodland stillness, that night, about the approaches to the Château de Lancilly, he was mistaken. The old place was surrounded; numbers of servants, ranks of carriages, a few gendarmes and soldiers. Half the villages were there, too, crowding about the courts, under the walls, and pressing especially round the chief entrance on the west, where a bridge over the old moat led into a court surrounded with high-piled buildings, one stately roof rising above another. Monsieur de Sainfoy kept up the old friendly fashion, and no gates shut off his neighbours from his domain.

Angelot came through the wood, which almost touched the house and shadowed the moat on the north side. He had meant to go in at some door, to pass through one of the halls, perhaps, and catch a glimpse of the dancing. All this now seemed more difficult; he could not go among the people without being recognised, and though, as far as himself was concerned, he would have dared anything for a sight of Hélène, loyalty to his uncle stood in the way of foolhardiness.

He walked cautiously towards the steps leading down into the moat. This corner, far from any entrance, was dark and solitary. The little door in the moat was probably still blocked; but in any case the ivy was there, and the chapel window —heaven send it open, or at least unbarred!

"I shall do no harm to-night, Cousin Hervé. I shall see her dancing with some happy fellow. If I don't know Lancilly well enough to spend ten minutes in the old gallery—nobody will be there—well, then—"

"Monsieur Angelot!" said a deep voice out of the darkness.

"Not an inch nearer, or I fire!" Angelot replied, and his pistol was ready.

"Tiens! Don't kill me, for I am desperately glad to see you," and Martin Joubard limped forward. "You got away from those ragamuffins, then? I thought as much, when I heard they had been watching the woods. But where are you hiding, and what are you doing here? Take care, there are a lot of police and

gendarmes about. Are you safe?"

"No, I'm not safe—at least my uncle says so. Did you think I would stay with those rascals long?" Angelot laughed. "I'm going out of the country to-night. Hold your tongue, Martin. Wait here. I will come back this way, and you can warn me if there is any one on the track."

"Going out of the country without seeing madame, and she breaking her heart?" said Martin, disapproving.

"No, I am on my way. Pst! I hear footsteps," and Angelot dropped into the moat, while the soldier stepped back into the shadow of the trees.

"On his way to La Marinière—from his uncle's! Rather roundabout, Monsieur Angelot. Ah, but to have all one's limbs!" sighed Martin, smiling, for plenty of gossip had reached him; and he listened to the gay music which made the air dance, and to the voices and laughter, till he forgot everything else in the thrilling knowledge that somebody was scrambling up through the ivy on the opposite wall. There was a slight clank and crash among the thick depth of leaves; then silence.

"He ought to be one of us, that boy!" thought Martin. "I'll wait for him. I like a spark of the devil. My father says Monsieur Joseph was a thorough *polisson*, and almost as pretty as his nephew. He's a pious little gentleman now. They are a curious family!"

Angelot slipped through the dark empty chapel, and the wind howled behind him. He ran down the passage between rooms that were empty and dark, for Mademoiselle Moineau and her pupils had been allowed to go down to the ball. He went through stone-vaulted corridors, unlighted, cold and lonely, across half the length of the great house. He had to watch his moment for passing the head of the chief staircase, for there were people going up and down, servants trying to see what they could of the gay doings below. Waves of warm and scented air rolled up against his face as he darted past, keeping close to the wall, one moving shadow more. Music, laughing, talking, filled old Lancilly like a flood, ebbing and flowing so; and every now and then the tramping of feet on the ball-room floor echoed loudest.

Angelot knew of a little gallery room with narrow slits in the stonework, opening out of the further passage that led to Monsieur and Madame de Sainfoy's rooms. It used to be empty or filled with lumber; it now held several large wardrobes,

but the perforated wall remained. He found the door open; it was not quite dark, for gleams of light made their way in from the chandeliers in the ball-room, one end of which it overlooked. There were also a couple of lights in the passage outside.

From this high point Angelot looked down upon the ball. And first it was nothing but a whirling confusion of sound and colour and light; the flying dresses, the uniforms, jewels, gold lace, glittering necklaces, flashing sword hilts. Then—that fair head, that white figure alone.

He could hear nothing of what was said; but he saw her brother come up with General Ratoneau, he watched the dance—and if those slits in the solid wall had been wider, there might have been danger of a young man's daring to drop down by his hands, trusting to fate to land him safely on the floor below. For he saw his love walk away with her partner down the ball-room, out of his sight, and then he waited in unbearable impatience, but saw her no more for what seemed a long time. He began to think that he must go, carrying with him the agony of leaving her in familiar talk with Ratoneau, when suddenly he saw her again, and forgot his mother, his uncle, César d'Ombré, and all the obligations of life. She came back alone; her brother was speaking to her; she looked troubled, there was something strange about it all, but Ratoneau was not there. That, at least, was well; and how divinely beautiful she looked!

Angelot gazed for a minute or two, holding his breath; then a sudden step and a voice in the corridor close by startled him violently. He had left the door half open, standing where he could not be seen through it. He now turned his head to see who was passing. It was the step of one person only, a quick and agitated step. Was this person then speaking to him? No, it was his cousin Hervé de Sainfoy, and he was talking to himself. He was repeating the same words over and over again: "But who can save us? What shall I do? What shall I do? Who can save us? A way out, he says? My God, there is none."

When his cousin had passed the door, Angelot stepped forward and looked after him. It was impossible not to do so. The Comte was like a man who had received some terrible blow. His face was white and drawn, and his whole frame trembled as he walked. He carried an open letter shaking and rustling in his hand, glanced at it now and then, flung his clenched fists out on each side of him.

Then he said aloud, "My God, it is her doing!"

Angelot forgot all caution and stepped out into the corridor. His cousin seemed

to be walking on to his own room at the end; but before he reached it he turned suddenly round and came hurrying back. Angelot stood and faced him.

He, too, was pale from his imprisonment and the excitement of the night, but as he met Hervé de Sainfoy's astonished gaze the colour flooded his young face and his brave bright eyes fell.

"*You* here, Angelot?" said the Comte.

He spoke absently, gently, with no great surprise and no anger at all. Angelot knew that he loved him, and felt the strangest desire to kneel and kiss his hand.

"Pardon, monsieur"—he began quickly—"I was looking at the ball—I leave France to-morrow, and—Can I help you, Uncle Hervé?" For he saw that the Comte was listening to no explanations of his. He stared straight before him, frowning, biting his lips, shaking the letter in his hand.

"It is some diabolical intrigue," he said. "How can you help, my poor boy? No! but I would rather see her dead at my feet—for her own sake—and the insult to me!"

"But tell me what it all means? Let me do something!" cried Angelot; for the words thrilled him with a new terror.

He almost snatched the letter from his cousin's hand.

"Yes, yes, read it. Oh, mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" Hervé groaned, and stamped his feet.

The letter was written in very shaky characters, and Angelot had to hold it under one of the candle sconces on the wall.

> "My dear Comte:—
>
> "You will receive to-morrow, I have reason to think, an Imperial recommendation—which means a command—to give Mademoiselle your daughter in marriage to General Ratoneau. If you see any way out of this dilemma, I need hardly advise you to take it. You would have been warned earlier of the danger, but circumstances have been too strong for me. My part in the affair I hope to explain. In the meanwhile believe in my sincere friendship, and burn this letter.
>
> "*De Mauves*."

Angelot drew in his breath sharply. "Ah! The Prefect is good," he said.

While he read the letter, his cousin was staring at him. Slowly, intently, yet with a sort of vague distraction, his eyes travelled over Angelot; the plain shooting clothes, so odd a contrast in that gay house, at that time of night, to his own elegant evening dress; the handsome, clear-cut, eager face, the young lips set with a man's firmness and energy.

"I thought you were in prison," said Hervé.

"I escaped from the police."

"Why did they arrest you?"

"I do not know. I believe it was a private scheme of that rascal Simon's—such things have happened."

"Tell me all—and quickly."

Angelot began to obey him, but after a few words broke off suddenly.

"Uncle Hervé, what is the use of talking about me? What are you going to do? Let us think—yes, I have a plan. If you were to call my cousin Hélène quietly out of the ball-room to change her dress, I would have horses ready in the north wood, and I would ride with you at least part of the way to Le Mans. There you could get a post-chaise and drive to Paris. Place her safely in a convent, and go yourself to the Emperor—"

"And do you suppose, Angelot, that I have enough influence with the Emperor to make him withdraw an order already given—and do you not know that this is a favourite amusement of his, this disgusting plan of giving our daughters to any butcher and son of a butcher who has slaughtered enough men to please him? Your uncle Joseph told us all about it. He said it was in the Prefect's hands—I can hardly believe that our Prefect would have treated me so. There is some intrigue behind all this. I suspect—ah, I will teach them to play their tricks on me! A convent—my poor boy, do you expect they would leave her there? Even a hundred years ago they would have dragged her out for a political marriage—how much more now!"

For a moment there was dead silence; they looked hard at each other, but if Angelot read anything in his cousin's eyes, it was something too extraordinary to be believed. He flushed again suddenly as he said, "You can never consent to such a marriage, for you gave me your word of honour that you would not."

"Will they ask my consent? I have refused it once already," said Hervé de Sainfoy.

He walked a few steps, and turned back; he was much calmer now, and his face was full of grave thought and resolution.

"Angelot," he said, "you are your father's son, as well as your uncle's nephew. Tell me, have you actually done anything to bring you under imperial justice?"

"Nothing," Angelot answered. "The police may pretend to think so. Uncle Joseph says I am in danger. But I have done nothing."

"Did you say you were leaving the country to-morrow? Alone?"

"With some of Uncle Joseph's friends."

"Ah! And your father?"

"I shall come back some day. Life is too difficult," said Angelot.

"You want an anchor," Hervé said, thoughtfully. "Now—will you do everything I tell you?"

"In honour."

"Tiens! Honour! Was it honour that brought you into my house to-night?"

"No—but not dishonour."

"Well, there is no time for arguing. I suppose you are not bound in honour to this wild-goose chase of your uncle's—or his friends'?"

"I don't know," Angelot said; and indeed he did not, but he knew that César d'Ombré looked upon him as an addition to his troubles, and had only accepted his company to please Monsieur Joseph.

And now the same power that had dragged Angelot out of his way to Lancilly was holding him fast, heart and brain, and was saying to him, "You cannot go"; the strongest power in the world. He was trembling from head to foot with a wilder, stranger madness than any he had ever known; the great decisive hour of his life was upon him, and he felt it, hard as it was to realise or understand anything in those dark, confused moments.

What wonderful words had Hervé de Sainfoy said? by what way had he brought him, and set him clear of the château? he hardly knew. He found himself out in the dark on the south, the village side; he had to skirt round the backs of the houses and then slip up the river bank till he came to the bridge between the long rows of whispering, rustling poplars. After that a short cut across the fields, where he knew every bush and every rabbit hole, brought him up under the

shadow of the church at La Marinière.

The Curé lived with his old housekeeper in a low white house above the church, on the way to the manor. She was always asleep early; but the old man, being very studious and too nervous to sleep much, often sat up reading till long after midnight. Angelot therefore counted on finding a light in his window, and was not disappointed. He cut his old friend's eager welcome very short.

"Monsieur le Curé, come with me at once to the château, if you please. Monsieur de Sainfoy wishes to see you."

"At this hour of the night! What can he want with me? I understood the whole world was dancing."

"So it is—but he wants you, he wants you. Quick, where is your hat?"

"How wild you look, Angelot! Is any one dying?"

"No, no!"

"Why does he not send for his own priest?"

"Because he wants a discreet man. He wants you."

The Curé began to hurry about the room.

"By the bye, take your vestments," said Angelot in a lower tone. "He wants you to say mass in the chapel. Take everything you ought to have. I will carry it all for you."

"The chapel is not in a fit state—and who will serve at the mass?"

"I will—or he will find somebody. Oh, trust me, Monsieur le Curé, and come, or I shall have to carry you."

"But *you*, Ange—I thought—"

"Don't think! All your thoughts are wrong."

"My dear boy, have you seen your father?"

"No! Has he come back?"

"Two hours ago. He has gone to Les Chouettes with your mother, to find you."

"Oh, mon Dieu!" cried Angelot, and laughed loudly.

The good old Curé was seriously frightened. He thought that this charming boy, whom he had known from his birth, was either crazy or drunk with strong wine. Yet, as he really could not be afraid to trust himself to Angelot, he did as he was told, collected all he wanted, asking questions all the time which the young man did not or could not answer, and started off with him into the dim and chilly dampness of the night.

Angelot nearly died of impatience. He had run all the way to La Marinière, he had to walk all the way back, and slowly. For the Curé was feeble, and his sight was not good, and the lanes and fields were terribly uneven. Angelot had prudence enough not to take a light, which would have been seen a mile off, moving on those slopes in the darkness. This precaution also helped to save him from Simon, who, after waiting about for some time between Les Chouettes and La Marinière, had seen Monsieur and Madame Urbain coming out with their lantern and had tracked them half the way, hearing enough of their talk to understand that he must lay hands on Angelot that night, or not at all. For it sounded as if the young man's protectors were more powerful than General Ratoneau, his enemy.

Simon was very uneasy, as he stole back, and turned towards Lancilly, shrewdly guessing that those bright windows had attracted Angelot. He crept through the lanes like a wolf in winter, searching for some lonely colt or sheep to devour. Furious and bewildered, worn out with his long watching, he almost resolved that young La Marinière should have short shrift if he met him. This, it seemed now, was the only way to remove him out of the General's path. None of his relations knew exactly where he was that night. If he were found dead in a ditch, the hand that struck him would never be known. For his own sake, General Ratoneau would never betray the suspicions he might have. At the same time, Simon was not such a devil incarnate as to think of cold-blooded murder without a certain horror and sickness; and he found it in his heart to wish that he had never seen Ratoneau.

He heard footsteps in a deep lane he was approaching, and lying down, peered over the bank and saw that two men had already passed him, walking cautiously between the ruts of the road. They carried no light, and it was so dark in the lane that he could hardly distinguish them. One seemed taller than the other, and walked more feebly. There was nothing to suggest the idea that one of these men might be Angelot. All pointed to the contrary. He would be coming towards La

Marinière, not going from it towards Lancilly. He would certainly be alone; and then his air and pace would be different from that of this shorter figure, who, carefully guiding his companion, was also carrying some bundle or load. There was a low murmur of talk which the police spy could not distinguish, and thus, his game within shooting distance, he allowed him to walk away unharmed. He followed the two men slowly, however, till he lost them on the edge of the park at Lancilly. There Angelot took the Curé by a way of his own into the wood, and led him up by a path soft with dead leaves to the north side of the château.

"Monsieur Angelot!"

It was once more Martin Joubard's voice. He was much astonished, not having seen Angelot leave the château. He stared at the Curé and took off his hat.

"All's well, Martin; you are a good sentry—but hold your tongue a little longer," said Angelot.

"Ah! but take care, Monsieur Angelot," said the soldier, pointing with his stick to the dark, tremendous walls which towered beyond the moat. "I don't know what is going on there, but don't venture too far. There's a light in the chapel window, do you see? and just now I heard them hammering at the little door down there in the moat. It may be a trap for you. Listen, though, seriously. I don't know what sport you may be after, but you ought not to run Monsieur le Curé into it, and so I tell you. It is not right."

The good fellow's voice shook with anxiety. He did not pretend to be extra religious, but his father and mother reverenced the Curé, and he had known him ever since he was born.

Angelot laughed impatiently.

"Come, Monsieur le Curé," he said. "We are going down into the moat, but the steps are uneven, so give me your hand."

"Do not be anxious, Martin," said the old man. "All is well, Monsieur de Sainfoy has sent for me."

The crippled sentry waited. In the deep shadows he could see no more, but he heard their steps as they climbed down and crossed the moat, and then he heard the creaking hinges of that door far below. It was cautiously closed. All was dark and still in the moat, but shadows crossed the lighted chapel window.

The wind was rising, the clouds were flying, and the stars shining out. Waves of music flowed from the south side of the long mass of building, and sobbed away into the rustling woods. An enchanting valse was being played. Georges de Sainfoy was dancing with the richest heiress in Touraine, and his mother was so engrossed with a new ambition for him that she forgot Hélène for the moment, and her more certain future as the wife of General Ratoneau.

Madame de Sainfoy had not seen her husband since he received the Prefect's letter, and was not aware of his disappearance from the ball, now at the height of its success and splendour.

CHAPTER XXV

HOW THE CURÉ ACTED AGAINST HIS CONSCIENCE

If the old priest had come in faith at Monsieur de Sainfoy's call, not knowing, not even suspecting what was wanted of him, Angelot, who knew all, yet found it impossible to believe. Therefore he could not bring himself to give the Curé any explanation, or even to mention Hélène's name. Her father, for whom he now felt a passionate, enthusiastic reverence and love, had trusted him in the matter. He had said, resting his hand on his shoulder: "Tell Monsieur le Curé what you please. Or leave it to me to tell him all;" and Angelot had felt that the Curé must be brought in ignorance. Afterwards he knew that there were other reasons for this, besides the vagueness in his own mind. The Curé had a great sense of the fitness of things. Also, next to God and his Bishop, he felt bound to love and serve Urbain and Anne de la Marinière.

When Angelot opened the little door, which he found ajar, there was a flickering light on the damp narrow stairs that wound up in the thickness of the wall. There stood Hervé de Sainfoy, tall, pale, very calm now, with a look of resolution quite new to his pleasant features.

"You are welcome, Monsieur le Curé," he said. "Follow me."

The old man obeyed silently, and the two passed on before Angelot. When they reached the topmost winding of the staircase, Hervé led the Curé round into the corridor, still carrying his light, and saying, "A word alone with you." At the same time he motioned to Angelot to go forward into the chapel.

The altar was partly arranged for service, the candles were lighted, and one white figure, its face hidden, was kneeling there. Angelot stood and looked for a moment, with dazzled eyes. The wind moaned, the distant valse flowed on. Here in the old neglected chapel, under the kind eyes of the Virgin's statue, he had left Hélène that night, weeks ago. He had never seen her since, except in the ball-room this very evening, lovely as a dream; but she was lovelier than any dream now.

He went up softly beside her, stooped on one knee and kissed the fingers that rested on the old worm-eaten bench. She looked up suddenly, blushing scarlet,

and they both rose to their feet and stood quite still, looking into each other's eyes. They did not speak; there was nothing to say, except "I love you," and words were not necessary for that. At first there was terror and bewilderment, rather than happiness, in Hélène's face, and her hands trembled as Angelot held them; but soon under his gaze and his touch a smile was born. All those weeks of desolate loneliness were over, her one and only friend stood beside her once again, to leave her no more. The horrors of that very night, the terrible ball-room full of glittering uniforms and clanking swords, the odious face and voice of Ratoneau;—her father had beckoned her away, had taken her from it all for ever. He had told her in a few words of the Prefect's letter and his resolution, without even taking the trouble to ask her if she would consent to marry her cousin. "It is the only thing to be done," he said. Neither of them had even mentioned her mother. The suspicion that his wife had had something to do with this imperial order made Hervé even more furious than the order itself, and more resolved to settle the affair in his own way.

"Now I understand," he thought, "why Adélaïde invited the brute to this ball. I wager that she knew what was coming. It is time I showed them all who is the master of this house!"

And now, when everything was arranged, when the bridegroom and the bride were actually waiting in the chapel, when every minute was of importance and might bring some fatal interruption—now, here was the excellent old Curé full of curious questions and narrow-minded objections.

"Monsieur le Comte, impossible!" he cried in the corridor. "Marry mademoiselle your daughter to Ange de la Marinière—and without any proper notice, without witnesses, at midnight, unknown to his parents! Do you take me for a constitutional priest, may I ask?"

"No, Monsieur le Curé, and that is why I demand this service of you. You, an old friend of both families, I send for you rather than for my own Curé of Lancilly."

"Ah, I dare say! But do I understand that you are disobeying an order from the Emperor? Am I to ruin myself, by aiding and abetting you? Besides—"

"No, Monsieur le Curé, you understand nothing of the kind. I explain nothing. You run yourself into no danger—but if you did, I should ask you all the more. A man like you, who held firm to his post through the Revolution—"

"Pardon—I did not hold firm. Monsieur de la Marinière protected me."

"And now I will protect you. Listen. I have had no order from the Emperor. I have heard, by means of a friend, that such an order is on its way. It would compel me to marry my daughter to a man she hates, a degrading connection for me. There is only one way of saving her. You know that she and young Ange love each other—they have suffered for it—we will legalise this love of theirs. When the order reaches me, my Hélène will be already married. The Emperor can say nothing. His General must seek a wife elsewhere. Now, Monsieur le Curé, are you satisfied? The children are waiting."

"No, monsieur, no, I am not satisfied. I think there is more risk than you tell me, but I do not mind that. I will not, I cannot, marry young Ange to your daughter without his father's knowledge. Your cousin—God bless him!—is not a religious man, but I owe him a debt I can never repay."

Count Hervé laughed angrily. "You know very well," he said, "that if Urbain is displeased at this marriage, it will be for our sake, not his own. How could he hope for such a match for Angelot?"

"His love for you is wonderful, Monsieur le Comte. But I am not talking of his likings or dislikings. I say that I will not marry these young people without his consent."

"And I say you will. Understand, I mean it. Listen; my cousin Joseph was sending Ange to England to-night with some of his friends out of the way of the police. I will dress Hélène up as a boy, and send her with him, trusting to a marriage when they land. I will do anything to get her off my hands to-night, and Angelot will not fail me. The responsibility is yours, Monsieur le Curé."

The old man wrung his hands. "Monsieur le Comte, you are mad!" he said.

But these threats were effectual, as no fear of personal suffering would have been, and the Curé, though solemnly protesting, submitted.

The delay he caused was not yet over, however. No angry frowns and impatient words would induce him to begin the service before the two young people had separately made their confession to him. Luckily, both were ready to do this, and neither was very long; when at last the Curé, properly vested, began with solemn deliberation the words of the service, his eyes were full of tears, not altogether unhappy.

"Two white souls, madame," he told Anne afterwards. "Your son and your

daughter—you may love them freely, and trust their love for you and for each other. Never did I join the hands of two such innocent children as our dear Ange and his Hélène."

He had, in fact, just joined their hands for the first time, when he looked round anxiously at Monsieur de Sainfoy and murmured, "There is no one you can trust, monsieur—no other possible witness?"

"None," the Comte answered shortly; and even as he spoke they all heard a sharp knocking in the corridor, and the opening and shutting of doors.

"Go on, go on! This comes of all your delay," he muttered, and Angelot looked round, alarmed, while Hélène turned white with fear.

Then the person in the corridor, whoever this might be, evidently saw a light through some chink in the chapel door, for the latch was lifted, and a small but impatient voice cried out, "Hélène—are you there?"

It was not the voice of Adélaïde. Angelot looked at Hélène and smiled; the Curé hesitated. Monsieur de Sainfoy walked frowning to the door, which he had locked, and flung it open.

"Come in, mademoiselle," he said. "Here is your witness, Monsieur le Curé."

Mademoiselle Moineau, flushed, agitated, in her best gown, stood on the threshold with hands uplifted.

"What—what is all this?" she stammered; and the scene that met her eyes was certainly strange enough to bewilder a respectable governess.

It had occurred to Madame de Sainfoy to miss her daughter from the ball-room. Suspecting that the stupid girl had escaped to her own room, she had told Mademoiselle Moineau to fetch her at once, to insist on her coming down and dancing. And even now, in spite of this amazing, horrifying spectacle, in spite of the Comte's presence, and his voice repeating, "Come in, mademoiselle!" the little woman was brave enough to protest.

"What is happening?" she said, and hurried a few steps forward. "Hélène, I am astonished. This must be stopped at once. Good heavens, what will Madame la Comtesse say!"

"Let me beg you to be silent, mademoiselle," said Hervé de Sainfoy.

He had already closed and locked the door. He now bent forward with an almost savage look; his pleasant face was utterly transformed by strong feeling.

"Sit down," he said peremptorily. "You see me; I am here. My authority is sufficient, remember—Monsieur le Curé, have the goodness to proceed."

Mademoiselle Moineau sank down on a bench and groaned. Her shocked, staring eyes took in every detail of the scene; the banished lover, the supposed prisoner, in his country clothes, with that dark woodland look of his; the white girl in her ball-dress, standing with bent head, and not moving or looking up, even at her mother's name. The joined hands, white and brown; the young, low voices, plighting their troth one to the other; then the trembling tones of the old priest alone in solemn Latin words, "*Ego conjungo vos in matrimonium....*"

The service went on; and now no one, not even Monsieur de Sainfoy, took any notice of the unwilling spectator. She was a witness in spite of herself. She sank on her knees and sobbed in a corner, partly from real distress at a marriage she thought most foolish and unsuitable, partly from fear of what Madame de Sainfoy might say or do. Her rage must certainly find some victim. She would never believe that Mademoiselle Moineau could not have escaped and called her in time to interrupt this frantic ceremony. As for Monsieur de Sainfoy, his brain must certainly have given way. The poor governess hoped little from him, though he showed some method in his madness by leaving her locked up in the chapel when they all went away and telling her to wait there in silence till he came back. At least that was better than being forced to go down alone to announce this catastrophe to Hélène's mother. The Comtesse would have been capable of turning her out into midnight darkness after the first dozen words.

Hélène, her dearest wish and wildest dream fulfilled in this strange fashion, seemed to be walking in her sleep. She obeyed her father's orders without a word to him or to Angelot, threw on a cloak, and followed them and the Curé down the steep blackness of the winding stairs. At the door her father put out his light, and it was his hand that guided her through the long grass and bushes in the moat, while Angelot gave all his care to the old priest. At the top of the steps, as the four hastily crossed into the deeper shadows of the wood, the tall and strange figure of Martin Joubard appeared out of the gloom. A few hurried words to him, and he readily undertook to see the Curé safely home. The sight of Monsieur de Sainfoy impressed him amazingly; it was evident that Monsieur Angelot had not been acting without authority. Martin stared with all his eyes at the cloaked woman's figure in the background, but promised himself to have all details from

the Curé on their way through the lanes.

Hervé de Sainfoy again gave his arm to his daughter, leading her down into the darkness of the wood. Angelot, more familiar with the ways, walked a yard or two in front of them. Several times—his sporting instinct not dulled by the wonderful thing that had happened—he was aware of a slight rustling in the bushes on the right, between the path where they were and the open ground of the park beyond the wood. He listened to this with one ear, while the other was attentive to his father-in-law. It did not strike Monsieur de Sainfoy, once away from the house, that caution and silence might be necessary; he talked out of the relief and gladness of his heart, while affectionately pressing Hélène's hand in his arm.

"Make my compliments to your uncle, Angelot. Ask him to forgive me for taking his nephew and sending him back a niece. He will see that your duty lies in France now. As to that dear father of yours, I shall soon make my peace with him."

"Papa!" Hélène spoke for the first time, and Angelot forgot the rustling in the bushes. "Cannot we—may not we go to La Marinière?"

"Not at first," said Hervé, more gravely. "Ange must make sure of a welcome there—and he knows his uncle Joseph."

"There is another reason," Angelot said eagerly. "My uncle is expecting me. He has made arrangements for me—this very night—I must come to an understanding with him. You know—" he said, looking at Hélène, "my uncle has risked much for me. To-morrow—or to-day, is it? my mother shall welcome you. You are not displeased?"

"No, no. Take me anywhere—I will go anywhere you like," Hélène answered a little faintly; the thought of Angelot's mother, slightly as she knew her, had been sweet and comforting.

For she was a timid girl, and these wild doings frightened her, though she loved Angelot and trusted him with all her heart.

Her father laughed.

"Certainly, my poor girl," he said, "no daughter of Lancilly was ever before married and smuggled away in such a fashion."

"I am satisfied, papa," said Hélène; and they passed on through the wood and came to the crossing of the roads, where he kissed her, and once more laid her hand in Angelot's.

"Take care of your wife," he said to him; and he stood a minute in the road, watching the two young figures, very close together, as they turned into a hollow lane that wound up into the fields and so on towards Les Chouettes.

The Curé and Martin Joubard started away from the château by a path that crossed the park and reached the bridge without going through the village. They were not yet clear of the park, walking slowly, when a man came out of the shadows of the wood to the north, and crossed their path, going towards the south side of the château. He passed at some yards' distance in the confusing darkness of the low ground, where mists were rising; but Martin Joubard had the eyes of a hawk, and knew him.

"Pardon, Monsieur le Curé!" he said, dropped the bundle he was carrying at the Curé's feet, and sped away at his wooden leg's best pace after the man.

"*Hé*, police!" he said, as he came up with him, "what are you spying about here? Looking after the Emperor's enemies?"

"You are not far wrong," said Simon. "And you—what are you doing here, soldier?"

"My fighting days are done. I look out for amusement now. Did you see some people just now, going down through the wood? A young gentleman you want—who gave you the slip—was he there?"

"I saw and heard enough to interest me," Simon answered drily. "It is time to finish off this business. I can't quite see what is going on, but I shall find out at the château. I have been following that young man all night, but I shall catch him up now."

"I might help you with a little information," Martin said.

The police agent looked at him suspiciously. "Tell me no lies," he said, "or"—he pointed to his carbine.

"Oh, if that is your game—" Martin said.

His heavy-headed stick swung in the air. "Crack!" it came down on the side of

Simon's head and laid him flat on the turf. Martin stood and looked at him.

"Now the saints grant I have not killed him," he said piously, "though I think he might very well be spared. But he won't go and catch Monsieur Angelot just at present."

He left Simon lying there, and went quietly back to join the Curé.

CHAPTER XXVI

HOW ANGELOT KEPT HIS TRYST

For Hélène, the next wonder in that autumn night's dream was the arrival at Les Chouettes, the mysterious house which bore the character of a den of Chouans, but the thought of which had always pleased her, as the home of Angelot's most attractive uncle.

Angelot hurried her through the lanes, almost in silence. At last he stopped under a tall poplar, which gleamed grey in the starlight among the other lower trees. It was close to the spot where, coming from Les Chouettes in the evening, he had been irresistibly drawn by the lights of Lancilly. Here he took Hélène in his arms and kissed her for the first time since the Curé had joined their hands.

"Mine!" he said. "My love, Hélène! you are not unhappy, you are not afraid, my own?"

"I am with you," the girl said, very low.

"Ah! if only—anyhow, I am the happiest man in the world. Come, dearest!"

Hélène wondered at him a little. He was changed, somehow, her gay, talkative, light-hearted, single-minded Angelot. He had become grave. She longed to ask him many things—how had he escaped or been released from prison?—was it his father's doing?—would his father and mother be displeased at his marriage?—but in spite of the rapture of knowing that they belonged to each other, she felt strangely shy of him. In that silent, hurried walk she dimly realised that her boy friend and lover had grown suddenly into a man. There was keen anxiety as well as joy in the quick, passionate embrace he allowed himself before bringing her to his uncle's hands.

They walked up to the house, over the grass and the spreading sand. All was silent and dark, except a gleam of light from Monsieur Joseph's window. A dog came up and jumped on Angelot, with a little whine of welcome; another pressed up to Hélène and licked her hand. She was standing between the dog and Angelot when Monsieur Joseph, hearing footsteps, suddenly opened the window and stepped out with his gun.

He stared a moment in astonished silence—then: "It is you, Anne! He has been home, then, the good-for-nothing! You have seen your father, Ange? Well, I told him, and I tell you, that you must go all the same—yes, my nephew does not break promises, or fail to keep appointments—but come in, Anne! What is the use of racing about the country all night? How did you miss him, the worthless fellow?"

"This is not my mother, Uncle Joseph," Angelot said, laughter struggling with earnestness, while his arm slid round Hélène. "Let me present you to my wife."

"What are you saying?" cried Monsieur Joseph, very sharply and sternly, coming a step nearer. "I see now—but who is this lady? None of your insolent jokes—who is it? Dieu! What have you done!"

"I have been to the ball at Lancilly," said Angelot. "You see, this is my cousin Hélène. She preferred a walk with me to a dance with other people. And Uncle Hervé thought—"

"Be silent," said Monsieur Joseph. He walked forward, pushed his nephew aside—a touch was enough for Angelot—and gently taking Hélène's hand, drew her into the light that streamed from his window. "Mademoiselle," he said, "my nephew is distracted. What truth is there in all this? Are you here with your father's knowledge. Something extraordinary must have happened, it seems to me."

"It is true, monsieur," Hélène said, blushing scarlet. "It was my father's doing. He sent for the Curé, and we were married in the chapel, not an hour ago. Do not be angry with us, I beg of you, monsieur. He said he must bring me to you first—and he loves you. My father did it to save me. Ange will explain. My father sent his compliments to you—and he said—he said you will see that your nephew's duty lies in France now."

Hélène was astonished at her own eloquent boldness. Angelot watched her, smiling, enchanted. Monsieur Joseph listened very gravely, his eyes upon her troubled face. When she paused, he bent and kissed her hand.

"I do not understand the mystery," he said. "I only see that my nephew is the most fortunate man in France. But I repeat, that he may hear me—honour comes before happiness. Go round to the salon, my friends. I will bring a light and open the door."

"Is it really myself—or am I dreaming?—yes, it must be all a dream!" Hélène murmured, as she sat alone in Monsieur Joseph's salon, beside a flaming wood fire that he had lighted with his own hands.

His first shock once over, the little uncle treated his nephew's wife like a princess. He made her sit in his largest chair, he put a cushion behind her, a footstool under her feet. With gentle hands he lifted the cloak that had slipped from her slight shoulders, advising her to keep it on till the room had grown warm, for she was shivering, though hardly conscious of it. He went himself to fetch wine and cakes, set them on a table beside her, tried unsuccessfully to make her eat and drink. Then he glanced at his watch and turned in his quick way to Angelot, who had been looking on at these attentions with a smile, almost jealous of the little uncle, yet happy that he should thus accept the new situation and take Hélène to his affectionate heart.

"Come with me, Angelot," said Monsieur Joseph. "Excuse us for a few minutes, my dear niece,"—he bowed to Hélène. "Affairs of state"—he smiled, dancing on tiptoe with his most birdlike air.

But as Angelot followed him out of the room, his look became as stern and secret as that of any fierce Chouan among them all.

Hélène waited; the time seemed long; and her situation almost too strange to be realised. Those small hours of the morning, dark and weird, brought their own special chill and shiver, both physical and spiritual; the thought began to trouble her that Angelot's father and mother would be very angry, perhaps—would not receive them, possibly—and that Uncle Joseph, in his lonely house, might be their only refuge; the thought of her own mother's indignation became a thought of terror, now that Angelot's dear presence was not there to send it away; all these ghosts crowded alarmingly upon her solitude, almost driving before them the one great certainty and wonder of the night. She looked round the shadowy, firelit room; she noticed with curious attention the quaint coverings of the furniture, the bright-coloured churches, windmills, farms, peasants at their work, all on a clear white ground, the ancient *perse* that had been bought and arranged by Angelot's grandmother. She thought it much prettier than anything at Lancilly. It distracted her a little, as the minutes went on; but surely these affairs took a long time to settle; and the wind rose higher, and howled in the chimney and whistled in the shutters, and she saw herself, white and solitary, in a great glass at the end of the room.

When Angelot at last opened the door, she sprang from the chair and ran to meet him; the only safe place was in his arms.

"Don't leave me again," she whispered, as soon as it was possible to speak.

Angelot was very pale, his eyes were burning. With broken words and passionate kisses he put her back into the chair, and kneeling down beside her, struggled for calmness to explain.

He was in honour bound to go; he must ride away; the horse was already saddled, and he had only a few minutes in which to say good-bye. He must leave her in Uncle Joseph's care till he came back. Uncle Joseph said it was his duty to go. That very morning he was to have started for England; his companion would be waiting for him and running a thousand risks; he must meet him at the appointed place and send him on his way alone. He did not tell her that Uncle Joseph, after all his chivalrous kindness to her, had cordially wished women, love affairs, and marriages at the devil, even when perfectly well aware that it was not only Hélène, with her soft hands, who was holding his nephew back and keeping him in Anjou.

"You know my father went to Paris, sweet?" said Angelot. "He has come back—he has been here this very night, looking for me. He would have found me at home, if you had not called me across the fields to see you dancing, you know! He saw all the authorities, even the Emperor himself. Nobody knew anything about that arrest of mine, and I think a certain Simon may get into hot water for it—though that is too much to expect, perhaps. Anyhow, they say it was a mistake."

"Monsieur des Barres told me so. He said he was sure of it," said the girl.

"Hélène—how beautiful you are!"

She had laid her hand on his head, and was looking down at him, smiling, though her eyes were wet. He took her hand and held it against his lips.

"How I adore you!" he whispered.

"Then you are free—free to be happy," she said.

"As far as I know—unless that clever father of mine has asked the Emperor for a commission for me—but I think, for my mother's sake, he would not do that. He has not told Uncle Joseph so, at any rate; the dear uncle would not have received

an officer of Napoleon's so nicely."

Hélène shuddered; the very word "officer" brought Ratoneau to her mind. But she felt safe at least, safe for ever now, from *him*.

"I hate soldiers," she said. "Must every one fight and kill?"

Her bridegroom was still kneeling at her feet when Monsieur Joseph came back, bringing Henriette with him. The child's dark eyes were full of sleep, her cropped hair stood on end, her small figure was wrapped in her little flannel gown; she looked a strange and pathetic creature, roused out of sleep, brought down to take her part in these realities. But she was equal to the occasion. Riette never failed in the duties of love; she was never called upon in vain. She went round to the back of Hélène's chair, took her face in her two small hands, leaned forward and kissed her forehead under the curls.

"Go, mon petit!" she said to Angelot. "I will keep her safe till you are back in the morning."

She spoke slowly, sleepily.

"Riette is always my friend," said Angelot.

"I told you long ago," said the child, "that papa and I would help you to the last drop of our blood."

"Ah! we have not reached that point yet," said Monsieur Joseph, laughing softly. "Now, my children, say good-bye. After all—for a few hours—it is not a tragedy."

The Lancilly ball was the most brilliant, the most beautiful, for many hours the most successful, that had taken place in that country-side since before the Revolution. Many people arriving late, the crowd of guests went on increasing, and they danced with so much energy, the music was so beautiful, the whole affair went with such a swing, strangely mixed as the company was from a political point of view, that Madame de Sainfoy in the midst of her duties as hostess had no time to give more than an occasional thought to her own family. She watched Georges and his proceedings with satisfaction, but after missing Hélène and sending Mademoiselle Moineau to look for her, she forgot her again;

and she did not miss her husband till he failed to be in his place at supper-time, to lead the oldest lady into the dining-room. When time went on, and he did not appear, she began to be puzzled and anxious, while exerting herself to the full, in order that no one should be aware of his absence.

She was passing through the inner salon, alone for the moment, on her way to find a servant that she might send in search of Monsieur de Sainfoy, when General Ratoneau, having made his bow to the lady he had brought back from supper, and who was heartily glad to be rid of him, came to meet her with a swaggering air, partly owing to champagne.

Smiling, he told her with an oath that her daughter was confoundedly pretty, the prettiest girl in Anjou, and the wildest and most unmanageable; that she would not listen to a word of compliment, and had run away from him when he told her, in plain soldier fashion—"as I always speak, madame"—that she was to be his wife.

"Ah, Monsieur le Général—you are so certain of that?" murmured Adélaïde, considering him with her blue eyes a little coldly.

"Certain, madame? I suppose it will not occur to you or to Monsieur de Sainfoy to disobey the Emperor! Why, the order might have arrived to-day—it certainly will to-morrow—ah, I mean yesterday or to-day, for midnight is long passed. Yes, but she is a detestable mixture, that daughter of yours, Madame la Comtesse, and it would take all my courage to venture on such a wife, without your encouragement. Cold as ice, as stately as an old queen of France—upon my soul, it needs a brave man to face the possibilities of such a ménage. But I suppose she is timid with it all—eh? I must be firm with her, I must show resolution, n'est-ce pas?"

"Apparently your compliments frightened her. Yes, she is timid enough," said Madame de Sainfoy. "She not only ran away from you, but from the ball. I understand her now. She is a mere child, Monsieur le Général, unaccustomed to —to—" Adélaïde broke off, a little absently. "I sent a person to find her. I will send again, but—if you will forgive me—" with a dazzling smile—"I would advise you not to say much more to Hélène till the affair is really decided beyond all question—yes, what is it?"

A servant came up to her, hesitating, glancing at the General, who said quickly, his face darkening, "I consider it decided now."

"So do I—so it is, of course," she said quickly. "Well?" to the servant.

"Monsieur de la Marinière asks if he can see Madame la Comtesse for five minutes."

"Ask him to wait—" she was beginning, coldly, when Monsieur Urbain came hurrying impatiently across the room.

"Ah—my very good friend, Monsieur de la Marinière," Ratoneau said with a grin.

He did not move away. Urbain came up and kissed Adélaïde's hand and looked at her with an extraordinary expression. He was plainly dressed for travelling, a strange-looking guest in those rooms. His square face was drawn into hard lines, his mouth was set, his eyes were staring. She gazed at him, fascinated, and her lips formed the words, "What is it, Urbain?" Then she suddenly said, turning white, "Something has happened to Hervé!"

"To Hervé? I don't know. Yes, he seems to have gone mad," said Urbain. "You know nothing of it? I thought as much—but I have come straight to you. Where is Hervé? He is here now, surely? I must speak to him."

"What are you talking about? Are you sure it is not *you* who have gone mad? As to Hervé, I have not seen him for the last hour. I was looking for him."

"He looked devilish queer when I saw him last," muttered the General. "Mademoiselle ran after him; they are a pretty pair."

Urbain and Adélaïde both looked at him vaguely; then again at each other.

"Where is he now? Do you know?" she said.

"He left the château, madame, with your daughter and her husband," Urbain said, slowly and indistinctly, grinding his teeth as he spoke.

"Urbain!" she cried.

"*What* are you saying, monsieur?" growled the General, with his hand on his sword.

"Peace, peace, Monsieur le Général, you will know all presently," Urbain said more calmly. "Some one has betrayed our plans," he went on, looking at Adélaïde, who was white and speechless. "These are my adventures. I went to

Paris in search of my son, to find out where he was, and why he had been arrested. I could hear nothing of him. I saw the Préfet de la Police, I saw the Duc de Rovigo, I saw Réal and a dozen more officials. No one knew anything. Finally I saw Duroc, an old acquaintance, and he introduced me to the Emperor. His Majesty was gracious. He gave me a free pardon for Angelot, in case he had been mixed up against his will with any Chouan conspiracies. I pledged my honour for him in the future. But still the mystery remained—I could not find him."

Adélaïde seemed turned to stone. These two gazed at each other, speechless, and did not now give a look or a thought to the third person present. He stood transfixed, listening; the angry blood rushed into his face, then ebbed as suddenly, leaving him a livid, deathlike yellow.

"But mon Dieu, why all this story?" Adélaïde burst out with almost a scream. "What is he to me, your silly Angelot? What did you say just now? My daughter and—I must have heard you wrongly."

Urbain gave a short, crackling laugh. "Nevertheless, I shall go on with my story. I came home a few hours ago. My wife told me that Angelot was safe with his uncle at Les Chouettes." The General started violently, but neither of them noticed him. "We went there together, and found that the boy was gone to La Marinière, to see his mother—Joseph had planned to pack him off out of the way of the police—with his usual discretion—but enough of that."

"Urbain, you will madden me! What do I care for all this?"

Adélaïde made a few steps and let herself fall into a chair.

"Patience!" he said; and there was something solemn, almost awful, in the way he stretched out his right hand to her. "We hastened back to La Marinière, and found no Angelot there. Then I began to think that Joseph's fears of the police might not be exaggerated—Angelot escaped from them on the very day he was arrested—the man who arrested him, why, I cannot discover, was that fellow Simon, the spy, and according to Joseph he has been watching the woods ever since. I went out, for I could not rest indoors, and as I walked down the road I met Monsieur le Curé and Martin Joubard, coming from Lancilly. I turned back with the old man, and he told me his story."

He stopped and drew a long breath.

"I hardly listened to the details," he said. "But by some means Hervé had heard of the expected order—and—distrusting all the world, it seems, even you, his wife, he sent for the Curé at midnight and forced him to celebrate the marriage. Ah, Monsieur le Général, you may well take it hardly; yet I do not believe you are more angry than I am."

"As to that, monsieur," said Ratoneau, glaring at him with savage fury, "I believe you have played me false and arranged the whole affair. Your scamp of a son has escaped the prison he richly deserved, and you have plotted to marry him to your cousin's daughter. I always thought you as clever as the devil, monsieur. But look here—and you too, madame, listen to me. I will ruin the whole set of you—and as to that boy of yours, let him beware how he meets me. I swear I will be his death."

Urbain shrugged his shoulders and turned from him to Adélaïde, who was beckoning feebly and could hardly find voice to speak.

"I am very stupid, I suppose," she said. "I cannot understand clearly. My husband has forced on Hélène's marriage with some one. Who is it, Urbain? Did the Curé tell you? Do not be afraid to tell me—I can bear it—you were always my friend."

There was something so unnatural in her manner, so terrible and stony in her look, that Urbain turned pale and hesitated.

"Mon Dieu!" he murmured. "You do not understand!"

"Mille tonnerres, Madame la Comtesse," roared the General, striding up to her chair—"they have married this man's son to your daughter. My congratulations on the splendid match. Ange de la Marinière and Hélène de Sainfoy—a pretty couple—but by all that's sacred their happiness shall not last long!"

"Hush, hush! Go away, for God's sake," cried Urbain. "You brute, you are killing her."

Adélaïde's eyelids had dropped, and she lay back unconscious.

There were people in the room, a confusion of voices, of wondering exclamations. Then, through the thickening crowd, Hervé de Sainfoy and Georges pushed their way, white and excited, followed by Mademoiselle Moineau, whose trembling limbs could hardly carry her.

The Comte de Sainfoy and General Ratoneau met face to face, and exchanged a few low words as Ratoneau walked out.

"You are a pretty host, Monsieur le Comte!"

"I have taught you a lesson, I hope, Monsieur le Général. I shall have no more interference with my family affairs."

"Sapristi! it is a new thing for you, is it not, to pose as the head of your own family? How did His Majesty's intention come to your knowledge? I am curious to know that."

"Let me ask you to leave my house. You shall hear from me. We will settle our affairs another day."

"Ah! You had better consult Madame la Comtesse. She is not pleased with you."

Ratoneau went out, snarling. Scarcely knowing which way he turned, he found himself in an outer vestibule at the foot of the great staircase. The autumn wind was blowing in, fresh and cool across the valley; grey light was beginning to glimmer, a shiver of dawn to pass over the world outside. A group of men were standing in the doorway, and Ratoneau found himself surrounded by them. One of them was Simon, with his head bound up; the others were some of the police employed to watch Chouan proceedings in the province generally.

"What, fool!" the General began furiously to Simon. "And all this time you—" he checked himself, remembering the presence of the others, who were looking at him curiously.

"We have something to report to Monsieur le Général," Simon said hurriedly, with an eager sign of caution. "To save time—as Monsieur le Préfet is not here. A new conspiracy has been hatched at Les Chouettes—*Les Chouettes*, monsieur! Some of the gentlemen are probably there now. Some are to meet at the Étang des Morts, to start for England this very morning. They will be caught easily. But Les Chouettes should be searched, monsieur—important arrests can be made there."

He came forward, almost pushing the General back against the stairs.

"There are enough of us," he said, "but not enough authority. If Monsieur le Général would go himself"—he came up closer and muttered in Ratoneau's ear —"I know all—they are there—we can at least arrest the men—safe this time—

the police have real evidence, and I have seen nightly visitors to Monsieur de la Marinière. But *they are there*, monsieur—I saw them on their way—I met the priest going back. And on my word, Monsieur le Comte managed it neatly."

"Did he give you that broken head, fool? And why did you not come to me sooner?"

"That was a gentleman with a wooden leg. Yes, he delayed me half an hour."

"More fool you! Come, we must have these Chouans. Say nothing. Get me a horse—one that will carry double, mind you. Four of you fellows go on and watch the house. I and Simon will overtake you."

He swore between his teeth as he turned away, "I will be the death of him, and I will have her yet!"

CHAPTER XXVII

HOW MONSIEUR JOSEPH WENT OUT INTO THE DAWN

At Les Chouettes, in those early hours of the morning, they were waiting for Angelot's return. Monsieur Joseph, the softest-hearted, most open-natured man who ever posed as a dark and hard conspirator, could not now forgive himself for having sent the boy away. "Why did I not go myself?" he muttered. Faithfulness to the cause, honour towards César d'Ombré, a touch of severity, really born of love, towards Angelot's light-hearted indifference; these had led him into something like cruelty towards the girl who had been thrown with such wild and passionate haste into Angelot's arms. Monsieur Joseph regarded Hervé de Sainfoy's sudden action as a great embarrassment for the family, though he himself had once suggested such a marriage, out of indulgence for his nephew. He saw that the situation would be terribly awkward for Urbain and Anne, that they would hardly welcome such a daughter-in-law; yet, though he said sharp words about women to Angelot, he was heartily sorry for Hélène.

"Pauvre petite!" he said to himself. "No, it was not right of Hervé. Ange is too young for such responsibility; there might have been other ways of saving her. But in the meanwhile, she is dreadfully frightened and lonely, and I have sent her little lover away. God grant he fall into no traps—but the police may be anywhere. Well, Riette must do her best—the woman-child—she seemed to me just now older than Angelot's wife—Angelot's wife—what an absurdity!"

The child had led the girl away to her own room above; the house was still. Monsieur Joseph went back to his room, walked up and down its length, from the west to the east window and back again; rather nervously examined his arms, and laid a sword and a pair of pistols on the table. He knew of no special danger; but for the last fortnight he had been living in a state of watchfulness which had sharpened all his senses and kept him unusually sleepless. Now he longed for the night to be over; for his present charge weighed upon him heavily. It was certain that in sending Angelot away to keep the tryst with César he had made himself responsible for Hélène. He thought over all the foolish little love-story, in which at first he had had some part, though nobody was more angry with Angelot when he took things into his own hands and climbed the old ivy-tree to visit his love.

"And now—is the fellow rewarded or punished? we shall see!" he thought. "In any case, I must stand by him now. He has not always been grateful or wise—but there, he is young, and I love the boy. Riette talks of 'the last drop of our blood.' Verily, I believe she would give it for Angelot—and I—well, I told Hervé and his mother that I would cut off my right hand for him. That was saying something! But Anne knew I meant it—and God knows the same."

Monsieur Joseph glanced up at the Crucifix hanging over his bed, and, presently, seeing a glimmer of dawn through the shutters, knelt down and said his morning prayers.

He had scarcely finished when all the dogs began to bark, and there was a frightful growling and snarling outside his window. He opened it, and pushed back the shutters. The woods were grey and misty in a pale, unearthly dawn, and the house threw a shadow from the waning moon, which had risen behind the buildings and trees to the east. The howling wind of the night had gone down; the air was cold and still.

Monsieur Joseph saw a man with his head tied up, armed with a police carbine, making a short cut over the grass from the western wood. It was this man, Simon, whom the dogs were welcoming after their manner. Monsieur Joseph's voice silenced them. He stepped out, unarmed as he was, and met Simon in the sandy square.

"Ah no, no, my friend!" he said. "Your tricks are over, your work is done."

"Pardon, monsieur!" said Simon, respectfully enough.

"Do you understand me? Come, now, what authority had you for arresting my nephew? You are going to find it was a serious mistake. Be off with you, and let him alone in the future."

"I know all about that, monsieur," Simon answered coolly. "Your nephew is lucky enough to have a loyal father, who can pull him out of his scrapes. Your nephew has plenty of friends—but even his connections won't save him, I think, if he is mixed up in this new plot of yours. I must search your house at once, if you please."

"What do you mean, you scoundrel? You will not search my house," said Monsieur Joseph, fiercely.

"By order, monsieur."

"Whose order? The Prefect's? Show it me."

"Pardon! There has not been time to apply to Monsieur le Préfet. We have intelligence of a plot, hatched here in your house, a plan for a rising. We know that certain gentlemen are starting this very morning on a mission to England, to bring back arms and men. They will be caught—are caught already, no doubt—at their rendezvous. There was not time to go to Sonnay for orders and warrants; we had to strike while the iron was hot. We applied to General Ratoneau, who was at the ball at Lancilly. He not only gave us authority to search your house for arms and conspirators—he accompanied us himself. He is there, beyond the wood, with enough men to enter your house by force, if you refuse to let us enter peaceably."

For a moment Monsieur Joseph said nothing. Simon grinned as well as his stiff and aching head would let him, as he watched the little gentleman's expressive face.

"We have got them, Monsieur le Général!" he said to himself. He added aloud and insolently: "An unpleasant experience for the young gentleman, so soon after his wedding, but a final warning, I imagine. If he comes free and happy out of this, he will have done with Chouannerie!"

"Silence!" said Monsieur Joseph. "If you want conspirators, there is one here, and that is myself. I will go to Sonnay with you—though your accusations are ridiculous, and there is no plan for a rising. But I will not allow you to search my house, if there were ten generals and an army behind the wood there. I will shoot down any one who attempts it."

"So much the worse for you, monsieur," said Simon.

"Go back to General Ratoneau and tell him what I say," said Monsieur Joseph. "He will not doubt my word. Wait. I will speak to him myself. Tell him I will meet him in ten minutes under the old oaks up there. I wish for a private word with him."

"Ten minutes, monsieur,"—Simon hesitated.

"Do as you are told," said Monsieur Joseph; and he stepped back into his room, pulled the shutters sharply to, and shut the window.

Simon lingered a minute or two, looking round the house, giving the growling dogs a wide berth, then went back with his message to the wood, and took the

precaution of sending a man to watch the lanes on the other side. He did not, of course, for a moment suppose that there was any one there, except, most probably, Ange de la Marinière and his bride; but it would not do to let him once again escape the General. What his plans might be, Simon only half guessed; but he knew they were desperate, and he knew that the man who balked him would repent it. And besides all this, he had not yet received a sou for all the dirty work he had lately done. But in the bitter depths of his discontented mind, Simon began to suspect that he had made a mistake in committing himself, body and soul, to General Ratoneau.

Monsieur Joseph took a small pistol from a cabinet, loaded it, then ran lightly upstairs and called Riette, who came flying to meet him. He took her in his arms and kissed her shaggy pate.

"Your hair wants brushing, mademoiselle," he said. "You are a contrast to your beautiful cousin."

"Oh, papa, isn't it glorious to think that Hélène has married Angelot? They do love each other so. She has been telling me that if only he were back safe from the Étang des Morts, she would be the very happiest woman in the world."

"I hope she will be, and soon," said Monsieur Joseph. But he trembled as he spoke, for if Simon was right, Angelot and César might be even now in the hands of the police.

"Listen, Riette," he said. "There are some men outside, police and officials—General Ratoneau is with them. Once again there are fancies in these people's heads about me and my friends. They want to search the house. There is no reason for it, and I will not have it done. I am going out now to speak to the General. Look at the clock. If I am not back in ten minutes, go out at the back with your cousin, take the path behind the stables, and make all the haste you can to La Marinière. It will be light, you cannot lose your way. Only keep in the shelter of the trees, that those people over in the wood may not see you."

Riette gazed at him with dark large eyes which seemed to read something behind his words.

"Why do you think you will not come back, papa? Because General Ratoneau is a wicked man?"

"Because Imperial justice may carry me to Sonnay. But the Prefect is my friend,"

said Monsieur Joseph, gravely. "Go back, and do as I tell you. Remember, Angelot's wife is in your care. Take this pistol, and defend her if necessary."

He left her without another word and ran downstairs. In the ground-floor rooms he found the servants waiting, the two men armed, Marie wildly excited, all talking at once, for they had heard from an upper window their master's conversation with Simon.

Before he could give them any orders, two tall shadows came across the white sand in that unearthly light of moon and dawn, and old Joubard and his son, pushing at the window, were immediately let in by Gigot. They explained that Monsieur Angelot, on his way to the Étang des Morts, had stopped at La Joubardière. He had found Martin, not long returned from Lancilly, busy telling his father the events of the night. He had begged them both to go down to Les Chouettes, to watch quietly about there till his return. They understood very well that his greatest treasure in life was there, and they had started off, Joubard with his gun, not intending to go to the house or disturb Monsieur Joseph. But coming down they found the man Simon had just sent to keep the eastern road, who told them the place was besieged by police and the house to be searched immediately. They took the liberty of depriving him of his carbine, tying him to a tree, and setting a dog to watch him there. Old Joubard explained this to Monsieur Joseph with an air of apology.

"Thank you. You could not have done better, Joubard. Listen, I am going out to speak to General Ratoneau. I have told Mademoiselle Henriette, if I am not back in ten minutes, to take Madame Ange to La Marinière. If the General insists on my going off to Sonnay, this will not be a place for ladies. Perhaps, Marie, you had better go with them. The police will try to insist on searching the house. I will not have it searched, without a warrant from Monsieur le Préfet. You four men, I leave it in your care. Defend the house, as you know I should defend it."

Tobie chuckled. "Spoil their beauty, eh!" and went on loading his gun. Old Joubard's face had lengthened slightly. "Anything within the law," he muttered. "But I am not a Chouan, dear little monsieur, nor is Martin—no!"

"Chouan or not, you are my friends, all of you," said Monsieur Joseph; and he turned and left them.

He went back to his room, wrote a short letter to his brother Urbain, and left it on the table. Then he took his sword, crossed himself, and went out into the slowly lightening day.

Ratoneau was waiting for him under the trees, just out of sight of the house, and they were practically alone. A groom held the General's horse at some little distance; Simon waited in the background, skulking behind the trees, and the other men were watching the house from various points. The road which passed Les Chouettes on the north crept on westward, and skirted that same wood of tall oaks, chestnuts, and firs where Monsieur Joseph's Chouan friends had been hidden from the Prefect and the General. The wood, with little undergrowth, but thickly carpeted with dead leaves, sloped down to the south; on its highest edge a line of old oaks, hollow and enormous, stood like grim sentinels. It was under one of these, hidden from the house by a corner of the wood, that Monsieur Joseph met the General.

Ratoneau was considerably cooler than when he had left Lancilly. His manner was less violent, but even more insolent than usual. He looked at his watch as Monsieur Joseph came up, walking over the rough grass with the light step of a boy.

"What do you mean, monsieur, by keeping an Imperial officer waiting?" he said. "Ten minutes? I have been standing here twenty, and you had no right to ask for one. You forget who you are, monsieur, and who I am."

"Kindly enlighten me on these points, Monsieur le Général," said Monsieur Joseph, smiling cheerfully.

"I will enlighten you so far—that you are twice a traitor, and the worst of a whole band of traitors."

"Et puis, monsieur? Once—it is possible from your point of view, but how twice?" said Monsieur Joseph, with that air of happy curiosity which had often, in earlier years, misled his enemies to their undoing.

Ratoneau stared at him, muttered an oath, and stammered out: "Not content with plotting against His Majesty's government—why you—you, monsieur—are aiding and abetting that nephew of yours in this scandalous affair of his marriage. Sapristi! you look as innocent as a new-born child! You laugh, monsieur! Do you suppose the Emperor will not learn the truth about this marriage? Yes, I can tell you, you will bitterly repent this night's work—Monsieur de Sainfoy and all of you. And to begin with, that accursed nephew of yours will spend his honeymoon in prison. I have not yet seen my way through the ins and outs of the affair—I do not know how Monsieur de Sainfoy heard of the Emperor's intention—but at least I can have my revenge on your nephew and

I will—I will!"

"Ah!" Monsieur Joseph laughed slightly. "I would not be too sure, monsieur. You can prove nothing against Ange. His father, let me tell you, has set him right with the Emperor. He is in no danger at all, unless from your personal malice. The prize you intended to have has been given to him. It is no doing of his family. I do not believe the Emperor will punish him or them. And—unless he values your services more highly than I should think probable, I fancy he will see excuses for Monsieur de Sainfoy!"

"No doing of his family! The intrigue has been going on for weeks," cried Ratoneau. "When have I not seen that odious boy pushing himself at Lancilly? Detestable little hound! as insolent as yourself, and far more of a fool. I have always hated him—always—since the day I first saw him in your house, the day when we met a herd of cattle in the lane, and he dared to laugh at my horse's misbehaviour. Little scum of the earth! if I had him under my heel—What are we losing time for? What do you want to say to me? It is my duty to arrest you, and to search your house for conspirators and arms, in the name of the Emperor."

"Yes; I know all that," said Monsieur Joseph, gently, with his head a little on one side.

He was wondering, as he wondered on first acquaintance with this man, for how long he would be able to refrain from striking him in the face. He was afraid that it would not, at this juncture, be a wise thing to do. The two girls in the house were much on his mind; perhaps a presentiment of something of this sort had made him arrange for their escape.

"I told that police fellow," he went on very mildly, "that I was ready to go with you to Sonnay, where the Prefect, of course, is the right person to deal with any suspected conspiracy. I also told him, and I tell you, that I will not have my house searched without the Prefect's warrant."

"And pray, how are you going to prevent it?" said Ratoneau, staring at him.

"Try it, and you will see," said Monsieur Joseph.

"Your nephew is shut up there, I know. He is taking care of his bride, and is afraid to come out and face me," said Ratoneau, with a frightful grin. "He will not dare to resist by force—miserable little coward!"

"All this shall be paid for by and by," Monsieur Joseph said to himself, consolingly. Aloud he said, "It happens that my nephew is not there, Monsieur le Général."

"Not there! where are they gone then? I believe that is a lie."

Monsieur Joseph bowed politely, with his hand on his sword.

"Allow me to remark, Monsieur le Général Ratoneau, that you are a cheat and a coward."

Ratoneau turned purple, and almost choked.

"Monsieur! You dare to use such words to me! I shall call my men up, and—"

"Call the whole of the usurper's army," said Monsieur Joseph, with unearthly coolness. "As they follow him they may follow you, his pasteboard image. But I am quite of your opinion, my words need explanation. I see through you, Monsieur le Général. You tried to cheat the Comte de Sainfoy out of his daughter, whom he had refused you. And I am sure now, that my nephew's arrest the other day was a scoundrelly piece of cheating, a satisfaction of your private spite, a means of getting him out of your way. Yes, I see through you now. A fine specimen of an Imperial officer, bribing police spies to carry out his private malice. Coward and cheat! Defend yourself!"

Both swords were out, and the fight began instantly. The steel clashed and darted lightly, flashing back the rising day. It was no ordinary duel, no mere satisfaction of honour, though each might have had the right to demand this of the other. It was a quarrel of life and death, personal hatred that must slay or be slain.

Monsieur Joseph, with all his grace and amiability, had the passionate nature of old France; his instincts were primitive and simple; he longed, and his longing had become irresistible, to send a villain out of the world. Perhaps, too, in Ratoneau's overbearing swagger, he saw and felt an incarnation of that Empire which had crushed his native country under its iron feet. But all mixed motives were fused together and flamed up in the fighting rage that drew that slight hand to the sword-hilt, and darted like lightning along the living blade.

Monsieur Joseph was a splendid swordsman. But Ratoneau, too, had perfect command of his weapon; and besides this, he was a taller and heavier man. And the fury of disappointment, of revenge, the dread of being found out, of probable

disgrace, if Joseph de la Marinière could prove his keen suspicions true; all this added to his caution, while he never lacked the bull-dog courage of a fighting soldier. Though foaming with rage, he was at that moment the cooler, the more self-possessed of the two.

Simon tried at first to interfere. He stepped out from among the trees, exclaiming, "Messieurs—messieurs!" but then withdrew again, for the very sight of the two men's faces, the sound of their breath, the quick clash of the swords, showed that this was a quarrel past mending. Simon watched. He was conscious, in the depths of his mind, of a knowledge that he would not mourn very deeply if General Ratoneau should be the one to fall. He hastily made his own plans. In that case he would slip away behind the trees, take the horse from the groom without a word, and ride away to Paris, trusting that he might never be called to account for any dark doings in Anjou. For there was not only the false arrest of Angelot; there were also certain dealings with the Prefect's secretary; there were tamperings with papers and seals, all to set forward that marriage affair that had failed so dismally, he hardly understood how. But he had hoped that the Prefect would die, and the news of his rapid recovery seemed strangely inopportune. It appeared to Simon that General Ratoneau's star was on the wane; and so, for those entangled in his rascally deeds, a lucky thrust of Monsieur de la Marinière's swiftly flashing sword—Ah, no! the fortune of war was on the wrong side that morning. A few passes; a fight three or four minutes long; a low cry, then silence, and the slipping down of a light body on the grass. General Ratoneau had run his adversary through the heart, had withdrawn his sword and stood, white but unmoved, looking at him as he lay.

"MONSIEUR LE GÉNÉRAL, YOU HAVE KILLED HIM!"

"MONSIEUR LE GÉNÉRAL, YOU HAVE KILLED HIM!"

Monsieur Joseph turned himself once, and stretched his slight limbs, as if composing himself to sleep. His face was towards his house and the rising dawn, and he gazed that way with dark eyes wide open. His lips moved, but no one heard what he said. All the fighting fury was gone from his face, and as a thin thread of blood trickled down from his side and began to redden the grass beneath, his look, at first startled and painful, became every moment more peaceful, more satisfied. His eyelids slowly drooped and fell; he died smiling, his whole attitude and expression so lifelike that the two witnesses, Ratoneau and Simon, could scarcely believe that he was dead.

The General stood immovable. Simon, after a minute, knelt down and felt the pulse and examined the wound. It had been almost instantly fatal, the pulse was still.

"Mon Dieu, Monsieur le Général, you have killed him!" Simon said, under his breath.

Ratoneau glared at him for a moment before he spoke.

"He tried to kill me," he said. "You were there, you can bear witness, he challenged and attacked me, the little fighting-cock. I wish it had been his nephew. But now for him! Come, leave the body there; the servants will fetch it in presently."

He started to walk towards the house, carrying his drawn sword in his hand. In the middle of the slope he turned round with a furious look to his follower.

"Those who insult me, and stand in my way—you see the lessons I teach them!" he said hoarsely, and walked on.

The western front of Les Chouettes, the tower rising into the slowly lightening sky, presented a lifeless face to the woods where its master lay. All the windows were closed and shuttered; dead silence reigned. When the General shouted an order to open, beating with his sword-hilt at a window, he was only answered by the growling and barking of the dogs, whom the defenders had called in. He walked round by the south to the east front; the same chorus accompanied him, but of human voices there were none. He whistled up the rest of the gendarmes, and ordered them to force the dining-room window. Then the shutters of a window above it were pushed open, and a white-haired man looked out into the court.

"Now, old Chouan, do you hear me?" shouted Ratoneau, in his most overbearing tones. "Come down and open some of these windows."

"Pardon, monsieur," old Joubard answered quietly. "I have Monsieur de la Marinière's orders to keep them shut."

"Have you, indeed? Well, it makes no difference to him whether they are shut or open. Tell his nephew, Monsieur Ange, with my compliments, to come down and speak to me. Tell him I want to see his pretty wife, and to congratulate him on his marriage. Tell him to bring a sword, if he knows how to use one, and to revenge his uncle."

There was a dead pause. The two Joubards and the servants, all together in that upper room, looked strangely at each other.

"Tiens, Maître Joubard, let me come to the window and I'll shoot that man dead!" groaned Tobie in the background.

"No, you fool, Tobie," Joubard said angrily. "Do you want us all to be massacred? Anyhow, let us first know what he means."

"I wonder where the master is!" said Gigot, and his teeth chattered.

"He has killed him," Martin whispered, looking at his father.

"This will be the ruin of us all," said old Joubard aside to him. "You, at least, keep out of the way. Those men have carbines. You have not come home from Spain to be shot by mistake for a Chouan. I will try to speak civilly. Monsieur le Général," he said, leaning out of the window, "your worship is mistaken. There are no Chouans here, and no ladies. And Monsieur Angelot is not here. Only we, a few harmless servants and neighbours, taking care of the house, left in charge while Monsieur de la Marinière went to speak to you, waiting till he comes back. We can do nothing without his orders, Monsieur le Général."

"Then you will do nothing till doomsday," said Ratoneau. "Don't you understand that he is dead, old fool, whoever you may be?"

"Dead! Impossible!" old Joubard stammered. "Monsieur Joseph dead—murdered! And the gendarmes on your side, monsieur! Why, he was here giving us our orders, a quarter of an hour ago."

In the horrified look he turned on Martin, there was yet the shadow of a smile. For Martin's eager persuasions had sent Hélène and Riette away with Marie Gigot through the woods to La Marinière, almost before Monsieur Joseph's appointed time.

Joubard leaned again out of the window, his rugged face in the full light of the morning.

"This is a bad business, Monsieur le Général," he said. "If it is true that you have killed Monsieur Joseph, you have done enough for one day. Take my advice, draw your men off and go away. Justice will follow you; and you have no right here. I am not a Chouan. I am Joubard, of La Joubardière, Monsieur Urbain de la Marinière's best tenant, and my only son lost his limbs fighting for the Emperor."

Simon drew near, with his bandaged head, and looked up at the window. "Ah! He has limbs enough left to do some mischief," he growled savagely. "Is he there, your precious cripple of a son? I shall have something to say to him, one of these days."

"Begone with you all," cried old Joubard, "for a pack of thieves and murderers! You are a disgrace to the Emperor, his police and his army!"

"Silence, old fool!" shouted Ratoneau. "What do you say about murder, you idiot? Did you never hear of a man being killed in a duel? Come down, some of you, I say, or I force my way in."

He would have done so, and easily, but for a sudden interruption.

There was a wild howl of pain from among the trees beyond the kitchen, where one of Monsieur Joseph's faithful dogs followed him to the land where all faithfulness is perhaps rewarded; and then the gendarme whom Joubard had tied to a tree came running down to the house with the comrade who had freed him and killed his guard. He was eager to tell the General what he had seen while every one but himself was away in the western wood. He had seen two women and a child escape from the house, and hurry away by the footpath under the trees towards La Marinière. One of the women was dressed in white; he could see it under her cloak; she spoke, and it was a lady's voice; they had passed quite near him. How long ago? Well, perhaps a quarter of an hour. General Ratoneau stamped his foot and ground his teeth.

"Bring my horse!" he said; and then he looked up again at the window, at old Joubard's stern face watching him.

"Monsieur Ange de la Marinière!" he shouted in tones of thunder. "Come out of your hole, little coward, if you are there. I will teach you to marry against the Emperor's commands! You shall meet me before you see your wife again. I will give account of you, and I will have what is my own. What! you dare not come out? Then follow me to Sonnay, monsieur, by way of La Marinière."

He flung himself into the saddle and rode off at a furious pace, turning round to shout back to Simon, "I shall overtake her! Go on—shoot them all—burn the house, if you must."

His horse plunged down into the shadows of the narrow lane, and they heard the heavy thud of its hoofs as it galloped away.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW GENERAL RATONEAU MET HIS MATCH

Within and without Les Chouettes the men all listened till those sounds died away. Then Simon turned to the little group of gendarmes and said: "Come along, fellows, make a rush for that window. If there are any Chouan gentlemen here, we must not let them escape."

Then the oldest of the gendarmes, a man well accustomed to hunting this sort of game, hung back and looked at him queerly.

"There are none—I'll answer for that," he said. "Certainly not Monsieur Ange de la Marinière, or he would have been out long ago—and none of us ever felt sure that he was mixed up in Chouannerie—"

"What are you talking about?" cried Simon. "Hold your tongue, and do your duty. The General ordered us to break into the house and search it. Why, you know yourself that it is the headquarters of this plot."

"If so, if I hear rightly, the master of it has paid for his Chouannerie with his life," said the man gravely, still holding back, and watching Simon with a dogged steadiness. "Our mates have caught the other gentlemen—they could not fail—and as for me, Monsieur Simon, I don't feel inclined to take any more orders from that General of yours. To me, he seems like a madman. There's private malice behind all this. It is not the sort of justice that suits me—to kill a gentleman and shoot his servants and burn his house down. I tell you, fellows, I don't like it—there are limits to what the police ought to do, and we shall find ourselves in the wrong box, if we go further without the Prefect's warrant."

"Obey your orders, or you'll pay for it!" shouted Simon. "Come on, men!" and he ran towards the house.

"Be off, or we fire!" cried a voice from the window above.

"All right, Maître Joubard, don't fire; we know you are a loyal man," said the spokesman of the gendarmes. "I am going straight back to Sonnay, to see what Monsieur le Préfet says to all this. Do you agree?" he turned to his comrades,

who had drawn up behind him, and who answered, even the man who had been tied to the tree, by a quick murmur of assent. "Come, Monsieur Simon, I advise you to cast in your lot with us; you have had too much to do with that madman. Everybody hates him. They sent him down here because they could not stand him in the army."

As Simon turned his back and walked sulkily away, the gendarme added: "Come down, some of you, and look for your master. He may be still alive."

The men in the room above looked at each other. They could not and did not believe that Monsieur Joseph was dead. To his old servants, it was one of those shocks too heavy for the brain to bear; the thought stunned them. Large tears were rolling down old Joubard's cheeks, but his brain and Martin's were active enough.

"What do you think?" he said to his son. "Are they safe at La Marinière?"

"I'll wager my wooden leg they are," Martin said cheerfully. "They had a good start, and that lumbering brute with his big horse would not know the shortest path. And once with Monsieur Urbain—"

"Ah, poor man! Well, let us go down and look for him, the little uncle. Ah, Martin, all the pretty girls in the world will take long to comfort Monsieur Angelot—and as to Mademoiselle Henriette!"

"The gendarme said he might be still alive," said Martin. "See, they are gone round to him."

"He is dead," said Joubard. "Come, Gigot, you and I must carry him in. As to you, Tobie, just keep watch on this side with your gun—that poisonous snake of a Simon is prowling about there. Don't shoot, of course, but keep him off; don't let him get into the house."

Martin lingered a moment behind his father. "Tobie," he said, "that Simon has been Monsieur Angelot's enemy all through. I thought I had finished him with my stick, two or three hours ago, but—"

"I know—I have my master's orders," said Tobie. He smiled, and lifted his gun to his shoulder.

The sun was rising when they found Monsieur Joseph on his bed of soft grass and leaves, at the foot of his own old oak just bronzed by the sun of August and

September. Up above the squirrels were playing; they did not disturb his sleep, though they scampered along the boughs and squeaked and peeped down curiously. The birds cried and chirped about him in the opening day; and one long ray of yellow sunshine pierced the eastern screen of trees, creeping all along up the broad slope where the autumn crocuses grew, till it laid itself softly and caressingly on the smiling face turned to meet it once more. The sportsman had gone out for the last time into his loved fields and woods; and perhaps he would have chosen to die there, rather than in a curtained room with fresh air and daylight shut out. No doubt the manner of his death had been terrible; but the pain was momentary, and he had gone to meet it in his highest mood, all one flame of indignation against evil, and ready, generous self-sacrifice. He had died for Angelot, fighting his enemy; he had carried out his little daughter's words, and the last drop of that good heart's blood was for Angelot, though indeed his dear boy's enemy was also the enemy of the cause he loved, to which his life had been given. No more conspiracies now for the little Royalist gentleman.

They all came and stood about him, Joubard, Martin, Gigot, and the party of gendarmes. At first they hardly liked to touch him; he lay so peacefully asleep under the tree, his thin right hand pressed over his heart, where the sword had wounded him, such a look of perfect content on the face that death had marked for its own. His sword lay on the grass beside him, where it had fallen from his dying hand. Martin picked it up, saying in a low voice, "This will be for Monsieur Angelot."

Sturdy Gigot, choking with sobs, turned upon him fiercely.

"It belongs to mademoiselle."

They lifted Monsieur Joseph—old Joubard at his head, Gigot at his feet—and carried their light burden down to his house, in at his own bedroom window. They laid him on his bed in the alcove, and then were afraid to touch him any more. All the group of strong men stood and looked at him, Gigot weeping loudly, Joubard silently; even the eyes of the gendarmes were wet.

"We must have women here," said Joubard.

Turning round, he saw Monsieur Joseph's letter to his brother lying on the table; he took it up and gave it to Gigot.

"Take this letter to La Marinière," he said, "and tell Monsieur Urbain what has happened. And you," to the gendarmes, "be off to Sonnay, and make your report

at once to Monsieur le Préfet. I doubt if he will justify all that is done in his name."

"We will do as you say, Maître Joubard," said the gendarme.

A few minutes later the only one of the General's party left at Les Chouettes was Simon. He skulked round behind the buildings, but could not persuade himself to go away. It seemed to him that there was a good deal of danger in escaping on foot; that the country people, enraged by Monsieur Joseph's death, delighted, as they probably would be, by Monsieur Angelot's marriage, would all be his enemies. He was half terrified by General Ratoneau's desperation. Suppose he had overtaken Angelot's young bride and her companions! suppose he had swung her up on his horse and carried her away, forgetting that he was not campaigning in a foreign country, but living peaceably in France, where the law protected people from such violent doings. It might be very inconvenient, in such a case, to appear at Sonnay as a friend and follower of General Ratoneau. Any credit he still had with the Prefect, for instance, would be lost for ever. And yet, if he deserted the General entirely, washed his hands, as far as possible, of him and his doings, what chance was there of receiving the large sums of money so grudgingly promised him!

"A hard master, the devil!" Simon muttered to himself.

He peeped cautiously round the corner of the kitchen wall, where the silver birches had scattered their golden leaves in the wind of the night. He watched the little band of gendarmes as they started down the road towards Sonnay. It struck him that his best plan would be to slip away across the *landes* towards the Étang des Morts, and to put himself right with the authorities by helping to capture a few Chouan gentlemen and conveying them to prison.

But first—how still all the place was! The men were busy, he supposed, with their dead master. Surely those windows were not so firmly fastened but that he could make his way in, and perhaps find some evidence to prove Monsieur Joseph's complicity in the plots of the moment. He walked lightly across the sand. A dog barked in the house, and Martin Joubard looked out from an upper window.

All the evil passions of his nature rose in Simon then. That was the man who knew he had arrested Angelot; that was the man who had knocked him down in the park and lost him half an hour of valuable time. As Angelot himself, in some mysterious way, was out of reach, here was this man on whom he might revenge

himself. Both for his own sake and the General's, this man would be better out of the way; Simon raised his loaded carbine and fired.

Martin stepped back at the instant, and he missed him. The shot grazed Tobie's cheek as he knelt inside the room, resting his long gun-barrel on the low window-sill.

"Ah, Chouan-catcher, your time is come!" muttered Tobie, and his gun went off almost of itself.

Simon flung up his arms in the air, and dropped upon the sand.

While these things were happening at Les Chouettes, Angelot was hurrying back from his mission to the Étang des Morts. He was full of wild happiness, a joy that could not be believed in, till he saw and touched Hélène again. His heart was as light as the air of that glorious morning, so keen, clear, and still on the high moorlands as he crossed them.

He had done all and more than the little uncle expected of him. In the darkness before dawn, as he rode through the deep lanes beyond La Joubardière, he had met a friendly peasant who warned him that a party of police and gendarmes was watching the country a little farther south, towards the Étang des Morts. He therefore left his horse in a shed, took to the fields and woods, and intercepted César d'Ombré on his way to the rendezvous. Explanations were not altogether easy, for César cared little for the private affairs of young La Marinière. He had never expected much from the son of Urbain. He took his warning, and gave up his companionship easily enough. Striking off across country, avoiding all roads likely to be patrolled by the police, he made his way alone to Brittany and the coast, while Angelot returned by the way he had come.

For the sake of taking the very shortest cut across the *landes*, he brought his horse up to La Joubardière and left him there. For no horse could carry him through the lanes, rocky as they were, at the pace that he could run and walk across country, and it was only because Uncle Joseph insisted on it that he had taken a horse at all.

The golden light of sunrise spread over the moor as he ran. He took long leaps through the heather, and coveys of birds scuttled out of his way; but their lives

were safe that morning, though his eyes followed them eagerly. Far beyond the purple *landes*, the woods of Lancilly lay heaped against the western sky, a billowy dark green sea of velvet touched with the bright gold of autumn and of sunrise; and the château itself shone out broad in its glittering whiteness. The guests were all gone now; the music was still; and for Angelot the place was empty, a mere shell, a pile of stones. Other roofs covered the joy of his life now.

This shortest cut from La Joubardière did not bring him to Les Chouettes by the usual road, but by a sharp slope of moorland, all stones and bushes and no path at all, and then across one or two small fields into a narrow lane, a bridle-path between high straggling hedges, one way from Les Chouettes to La Marinière. The poplars by the manor gate, a shining row, lifted their tall heads, always softly rustling, a quarter of a mile farther on.

Angelot ran across the fields, jumped a ditch, reached the lane at a sharp corner, and was turning to the right towards Les Chouettes, thinking in his joyful gladness that he would be back before even Hélène expected him, when something struck his ear and brought him to a sudden stand. It was a woman's scream.

"Help, help!" a voice cried; and then again there was a piteous shriek of pain or extreme terror.

For one moment Angelot hesitated. Who or what could this be? Some one was in trouble, some woman, and probably a woman he knew. Or could it be a child, hurt by some animal? One of the bulls at La Marinière was very fierce; there had been trouble with him before now. Ah! he must turn his back on Hélène and see what it meant, this cursed interruption. What were they doing to let that beast roam about alone? And even as he turned the shriek tore the air again, and now he could hear a man's voice, rough and furious, a confusion of voices, the stamping of a horse, the creaking of harness. No! Bellot the bull was not the aggressor here.

Angelot loosened his hunting knife as he ran along the lane. It turned sharply once or twice between its banks, dipping into the hollow, then climbing again to La Marinière. At its lowest point it touched the elbow of a stream, winding away under willows to join the river near Lancilly, and overflowing the lane in winter and stormy weather. Now, however, the passage was dry, and at that very point a group of figures was struggling. Angelot had the eyes of a hawk, and at that distance knew them all.

General Ratoneau was on horseback; his gold lace flashed in the sunlight. Before him on the horse's neck lay a girl's white figure, flung across the front of the saddle, struggling, shrieking, held down by his bridle hand which also clutched her dress, while with the butt-end of a pistol he threatened Marie Gigot, who screamed for help as she hung to the horse's head. He, good creature, not being one of the General's own chargers, but a harmless beast borrowed without leave from the Lancilly stables, backed from Marie instead of pushing and trampling her down in obedience to his desperate rider. Little Henriette did her best by clinging tightly to the white folds of her cousin's gown as they fell over the horse's shoulder, and was in great danger of being either pushed down or kicked away by Ratoneau, as soon as he should have disposed of Marie.

"Let go, woman!" he shouted, with frightful oaths. "Let go, or I'll kill you! Do you see this pistol? A moment more, and I'll dash your brains out—send you after your master, do you hear?—Ah, bah! keep still, beauty!" as Hélène almost struggled away from him. "I don't want to hurt you, but I will have what is my own. Get away, child, we don't want you. Morbleau! what's that?"

It was a sound of quick running, and Riette's keen ears had heard it already. It had, indeed, saved Ratoneau from being shot dead on the spot, for the child had let go her hold on her cousin's dress with one hand and had clutched the tiny, beautiful pistol with which her father had trusted her, and which she had hidden inside her frock. True, she was shaking with the terrible excitement of the moment, she was nearly dragged off her feet by the horse's plunging backwards, and a correct aim seemed almost impossible—but her father had told her to defend Angelot's wife, and Riette was very sure that this wicked man should not carry away Hélène, as long as she had life and a weapon to prevent it. And if she could have understood those words to Marie,—"send you after your master"—there would have been no hesitation at all.

At the same moment, she and the General turned their heads and looked up the lane. Something wild and lithe, bright and splendid, came flying straight down from the east, from the heart of the sunrise. The swiftness with which Angelot darted upon them was almost supernatural. He might have been a young god of the Greeks, flashing from heaven to rescue his earthly love from an earthly ravisher.

Ratoneau was not prepared for such a sudden and fiery onslaught. It was easy, the work he expected—to tear Hélène from the company of a woman and child, to carry her off to Sonnay. He considered her his own property, given to him by

the Emperor, stolen from him by her father and Angelot. It would be easy, he told himself, to have the absurd midnight ceremony declared illegal; or if not, he would soon find means to put Angelot out of his way. By fair means or by foul, he meant to have the girl and to marry her. If his method was that of the ancient Gauls—well, she would forgive him in time! Women love a hero, however roughly he may treat them. He thought he had learnt that from experience; and if Hélène de Sainfoy thought herself too good for him, she must find her level. The man swore to himself that he loved her, and would be good to her, when once she was his own. As he lifted her on the horse he knew he loved her with all the violent instincts of a coarse and unrestrained nature.

And now came vengeance, darting upon him like a bolt from the shining sky. Before his slower senses even knew what was happening, before, encumbered with his prey, he could fire a pistol or draw his sword, Hélène had been snatched from him into Angelot's arms. No leave asked of Ratoneau; a spring and a clutch; it might have been a tiger leaping at the horse's neck and carrying off its victim. The girl screamed again and again, as Angelot set her on the ground, and trembled so that she could not stand alone. As her lover supported her for an instant, saying to Marie Gigot, who ran forward from the horse's head, "Take her—take her home!" Ratoneau fired his pistol straight at the two young heads so near together. The bullet passed actually between them, touching Hélène's curls. Then the sturdy peasant woman threw a strong arm round her, and dragged her away towards La Marinière.

Angelot, with a flushed face and blazing eyes, turned to the General, who sat and glared in speechless fury. Then the young fellow smiled, lifted his hat, and set it jauntily on again. He had not drawn his hunting knife, and stood empty-handed, though this and a pair of pistols were in his belt.

"And now, Monsieur le Général!" he said, a little breathlessly.

Ratoneau stared at him, struck, even at that moment, by his extraordinary likeness to his uncle. There was the same easy grace, the same light gaiety, the same joy in battle and fearless confidence, with more outward dash and daring. Ah, well! as the other insolent life had ended, so in a few minutes this should end. It would be easy—a slip of a boy—it was fortunate indeed, that it happened so.

"Mille tonnerres! you can be buried together!" said Ratoneau.

"Merci, monsieur, I hope so—a hundred years hence," Angelot answered with a

laugh.

"You are mistaken—I am not talking of your wife," growled Ratoneau. "She will be a widow in ten minutes, and married to me in a month. I mean that you and your precious uncle can be buried together."

"Indeed! Is my uncle going to die?" Angelot said carelessly; but he looked at the madman a little more steadily, with the sudden idea that he was really and literally mad.

"He is dead already. I have killed him," said Ratoneau.

Angelot turned pale, and stepped back a pace, watching him cautiously.

"When? Where? I don't believe it," he said.

"We had a disagreement," said Ratoneau. "It was about you that we quarrelled, a worthless cause. He chose to take your part, and to insult me. I ran him through the body."

Saying this, he slowly dismounted and drew his sword. Angelot stood motionless, looking at him. The words had stunned him; his heart and brain seemed to be gripped by icy hands, crushing out all sensation. Henriette, who had not followed the others, came up and stood beside him, her great dark eyes, full of horror, fixed upon General Ratoneau. She was motionless and dumb; under the folds of her frock, her fingers gripped the little pistol. As long as she remained silent, neither of the men saw that she was there.

"Look!" said Ratoneau. He held out his sword, red and still wet, as he had thrust it back into the scabbard after killing Monsieur Joseph. "Give up the girl to me or you follow your uncle," he said, after a moment's frightful pause.

Henriette came a step nearer, came quite close and looked at the sword. Every drop of her own blood had forsaken her small face, always delicate and pale. Suddenly she stretched out her hand and touched the sword, saying in a low voice, "That was why he did not come back!"

"Oh, good God! Go away, child!" cried Angelot, suddenly waking from his trance of horror, and pushing her violently back.

Then he drew his knife and sprang furiously upon the General.

"Villain! murderer!" he shouted as he closed with him; for this was no formal

fight with swords.

"Keep off, little devil, or I'll tear you to pieces!" shrieked Ratoneau. "What! You will have it? Come on then, plague upon you, cursed wild cat!"

It was an unequal struggle; for Angelot, though strong, was slender and small, and Ratoneau had height and width of chest, besides great muscular power. And he hated Angelot with all the intensity of his violent nature. It was a case in which strength told, and Angelot had been unwise in trusting to his own. A duel with pistols, as he had no sword, would have been better for him. Still, at first, his furious attack brought him some advantage. He wrenched Ratoneau's sword from his hand and flung it into the stream. Twice he wounded him slightly with his knife, but Ratoneau, hugging him like a bear, made it difficult to strike, and the fight became a tremendous wrestling match, in which the two men struggled and panted and slipped and lurched from side to side, from the grassy bank to the willows by the water, each vainly trying to throw the other.

The issue of such a combat could not long be doubtful. Courage and energy being equal, the taller and heavier man was sure to have the better of it. Several times Angelot tried to trip his enemy up, but failed, for his wrestling skill, as well as his strength, was not equal to Ratoneau's. The General was more successful. A twist of his leg, and both men were dashed violently down upon the stones, Angelot underneath.

His knife had already dropped from his hand. Ratoneau snatched it up, and knelt over him, one knee on his chest, one hand on his throat, the knife in the other. Looking up into the dark, furious eyes bent upon him, watching the evil smile that broadened round the handsome, cruel mouth, Angelot felt that his last moment was come. That face leaning over him was the face of death itself. The little uncle would not be long alone in the unknown country to which this same hand had sent him.

"How about your pretty wife now, Monsieur Angelot?" the snarling voice said, and the sharp knife trembled and flashed in the sunshine.

Angelot set his teeth, and closed his eyes that he might not see it. Ratoneau went on saying something, but he did not hear, for in those few moments he dreamed a dream. Hélène's face was bending over his, her soft hair falling upon him, her lips touching his. Was death already over, and was this Paradise?

He came back to life with a violent start, at the discharge of a pistol close by;

and then the weight on his chest became suddenly unbearable, and the knife dropped from his enemy's hand, and the cruel face fell aside, changing into something still more dreadful. In another minute he had dragged himself out from under Ratoneau's dead body, and staring wildly round, saw Riette holding a pistol.

"Ah! do not look at me so!" she cried, as she met her cousin's horrified eyes. "I had to save you! Papa will not be angry."

"He is avenged. You are a heroine, Riette!" he said, and held out his arms to her; but the child flung away her little weapon which had done so great a deed, and threw herself upon the ground in a passionate agony of tears.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF MONSIEUR URBAIN

It was an afternoon late in November. A wild wind was blowing, and shadows were flying across the country and the leafless woods which rushed and cried like the sea. A great full moon shone in the sky, chased over and constantly obscured by thin racing clouds, silver and copper-coloured on the blue-black depths of air.

Madame de la Marinière was alone in her old room. The candles were lighted on her work-table, her embroidery frame stood beside it, the needle carelessly stuck in; a fire of logs was flaming up the wide black chimney. Anne was not working, but wandering restlessly up and down the room. Once she went to a window and dragged it open; the moonlight flowed in, and with it a soft rough blast that blew the candles about wildly and made smoke and flames fly out from the fire. Anne hastily, with some difficulty, closed the window and fastened it again.

She had not waited very long when slow heavy feet came tramping through the stone court, the house door opened and shut with a clang, and Monsieur Urbain came into the room. As he took Anne's hand and kissed it in the old pretty fashion, she looked anxiously into his face, a very sad face in these days. Urbain's philosophy had been hardly tried of late. And his wife was not mistaken in fancying that something new had happened that day to deepen the hollows round his eyes, the lines on his rugged brow. She would not, even dared not ask, for reasons of her own. It might well be that his grief and her joy should run on the same lines. Anne had been praying for something; she was half afraid, though she fully expected, to hear that her prayer was granted.

Urbain sat down by the fire, and stretched out his feet and hands to the blaze.

"Where are the children?" he said.

Anne smiled very sweetly. "Out somewhere in the moonlight. Ange thinks there is nothing for Hélène like fresh air."

"From her looks, he is right."

"It is not only the fresh air—" Anne broke off, then went on again. "Well, my friend, you went to Sonnay—you took the child to the convent?"

"Yes—she will be very safe there for a time—the reverend mothers received her excellently. I do not care for convents, as you know, but I am not sure that Henriette, even at this early age, has not found her vocation. Till to-day, I do not think I had seen the child smile since—"

"Ah, yes—" Anne murmured something under her breath. "Did you see Monsieur de Mauves?"

"For a few minutes. I talked so long with the Prioress that it was late before I reached the Prefecture. He had been to Paris. He explained all that tissue of rascality to the Emperor, so that no blame might fall on the wrong shoulders. Luckily His Majesty disliked Ratoneau; the man smoked and swore too much to please him."

"But after all," Anne said thoughtfully, "the Prefect drew up those papers himself, if he did not send them. And you, Urbain—"

He waved his hand sadly, impatiently. "No more of me, I am punished enough," he said. "I thought I was acting for everybody's good—but alas!—Yes, De Mauves drew up the papers, and then repented. He threw them into a drawer, and determined at least to delay sending them till circumstances and Ratoneau should force his hand further. Then came his illness; recovering, he believed the papers to be safe in his bureau, and left this affair, with many others, to arrange itself later. In the meanwhile, the rascal Simon had corrupted his foolish young secretary and stolen the papers—you know the rest. I suppose we should be glad that he found out in time—"

"Can any one be otherwise than glad?" Anne said gravely.

"Yes, my dear, there are those who are very sorry. And—before you blame them too hardly, remember that Angelot's marriage was the immediate cause of Joseph's death."

"The wickedness of a wicked man is alone to be blamed for that," said Anne. "Hélène's marriage with such an unspeakable wretch would have been a worse thing still."

Urbain sighed, and did not answer. Presently, gazing into the fire, while Anne watched him with intent, questioning eyes, he said, "It appears that the Emperor

is a little angry with Hervé for his hurried action, though he does not object to its consequence, being good enough to say that he values me and my influence in this country. But he does not like to be treated as a tyrant. De Mauves thinks that Adélaïde will not have the post of lady-in-waiting. It is a pity; she had set her heart on it."

Anne shrugged her shoulders slightly; it was beyond her power, being a truthful woman, to express any sympathy with Adélaïde. It was her coldest little voice that said, "Have you been to Lancilly to-day?"

"Yes," her husband answered.

"Did you see Adélaïde?"

"No."

A bitter smile curled Anne's still beautiful mouth as she stood near his chair and looked at him. Was it only or chiefly Adélaïde's unforgiving anger that weighed on his broad shoulders, bent his clever brow, drove the old contented smile from his face? True, Joseph's death might well have done all this; but she knew Urbain, and he was not the man to cower under the inevitable. It was his way to meet the blows of fate with a brave front, if not a gay one; he was a Frenchman, and had lived and laughed through the great Revolution. And yet Anne was puzzled; for she respected Urbain too much to acknowledge that Adélaïde's anger could have so great an effect upon him.

After a short silence he spoke, and told her all; told her of the disappointment of his dearest hopes, the failure of the schemes and struggles of a lifetime. And as he talked, Anne came gradually nearer, till at last, with a most unusual demonstrativeness, her arm was round his neck, and her cheek pressed against his whitening hair. Large tears ran down the man's face and dropped across his wife's hand and splashed on the tapestried arm of the chair.

The Sainfoys were about to leave Lancilly, and probably for ever. Adélaïde could not endure it; since her daughter's marriage it had become odious to her. Neither did Georges like it; and before going back to the army he had become engaged to the heiress with whom he had danced so much at the ball, who had a castle and large estates of her own in Touraine, and who considered Lancilly far too wild and old-fashioned to be inhabited, except perhaps for a month in the shooting season. Thus it was not unlikely that Lancilly would be sold; and for the present it was to be dismantled and shut up; once more the deserted place,

the preservation of which, the restoring to its right inhabitants, had been the dream and ambition of Urbain de la Marinière's life. For his cousin Hervé he had spent all his energies and a considerable part of his fortune; and to no purpose and worse than none. Even Hervé's love and gratitude failed him now; the knowledge that Hervé could never quite forget or forgive his plotting with Adélaïde and Ratoneau, was the sharpest sting of all; worse even, as his wife felt with a throb of rapturous joy, than the fact that Adélaïde would smile on him no more.

"My poor Urbain!" she murmured.

Her sympathy was tender and real, though she felt that her prayer had been answered, that she and her house had been delivered from the crushing weight of Lancilly, that the great castle on the hill would henceforth be a harmless pile of stones, to be viewed without the old dislike and jealousy. It seemed to her now that she had not known a happy day since the Sainfoys came back, or even for long before, while Urbain's whole soul was wrapped up in preparing for them. Yet she was very sorry for Urbain.

"All for nothing, and worse than nothing," he sighed; and she found no words to comfort him.

The fire crackled and blazed; outside, the wind rolled in great thundering blasts over the country. It roared so loudly in the chimneys that nothing else was to be heard. Urbain went on talking, so low that his wife, stooping over his chair, could hardly hear him; but she knew that all he said had the one refrain—"I have worked for twenty years, and this is the end of it all. I might have left poor Joseph in exile. I might have allowed Lancilly to tumble into ruins. What has come of it all! Nothing, nothing but disappointment and failure. Is it not enough to break a man's heart, to give the best of his whole life, and to fail!"

The wind went on roaring. Absorbed in his own thoughts, he did not hear the house door open and shut, then the door of the room, then the light steps of Angelot and Hélène across the floor.

"Look up, Urbain!" his wife said with a sudden inspiration. "*There* is your success, dear friend!"

There was a bright pink colour in Hélène's cheeks; her eyes and lips, once so sad, were smiling in perfect content; her fair curls were blown about her face; she was gloriously beautiful. Angelot held her hand, and his dark eyes glowed as

he looked at her.

"We have been fighting the elements," he said.

Urbain and Anne gazed at them, these two splendid young creatures for whom life was beginning. The philosopher's brow and eyes lightened suddenly, and he smiled.

"And by your triumphant looks, you have conquered them!" he said. "Is that my doing, Anne? Is that my success, my victory?" he added after a moment in her ear. "Yes, dearest, you are right. Embrace me, my children!"

Les Chouettes was shut up for seven years, and the country people were shy of passing it in the dusk, for they said that under the old oaks you might meet Monsieur Joseph with his gun and dog as of old, coming back from a day's shooting. When old Joubard heard that, he said—and his wife crossed herself at the saying—that he would rather meet Monsieur Joseph, dead, than any living gentleman of Anjou.

But there came a time when young life took possession again of Les Chouettes, and lovely little children played in the sandy court and picked wild flowers and ran after butterflies in the meadow; when Madame Ange de la Marinière wandered out in the soft twilight, without fear of ghosts or men, to meet her husband as he walked down the rugged lane from the *landes* after a long day's shooting.

And there were no plots now in Anjou, and neither Chouans nor police haunted the woods; for Napoleon was at St. Helena, and France could breathe throughout her provinces, for the iron bands were taken off her heart, and the young generation might grow up without being cut down in its flower.

It was at this time that Henriette de la Marinière decided to give Les Chouettes to her cousin Angelot, and finally to enter the convent where she had spent much time since her father's death, and where she died as Prioress late in the nineteenth century, having seen in France three Kings, a second Empire, and a Republic.

She remained through all, of course, a consistent Royalist like her father. But to

some minds, such an ebb and flow may seem to justify the philosophy of Urbain, and even more, perhaps, the light and happy indifference of Angelot.

Transcriber's note:
There is some inconsistency in placing of accents, all are as in the original.

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