HONORÉ DE BALZAC

AN HISTORICAL MYSTERY (THE GONDREVILLE MYSTERY)

Оноре де Бальзак

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де Бальзак О.

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Содержание

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PART I

CHAPTER I. JUDAS

The autumn of the year 1803 was one of the finest in the early part of that period of the present century which we now call “Empire.” Rain had refreshed the earth during the month of October, so that the trees were still green and leafy in November. The French people were beginning to put faith in a secret understanding between the skies and Bonaparte, then declared Consul for life, – a belief in which that man owes part of his prestige; strange to say, on the day the sun failed him, in 1812, his luck ceased!

About four in the afternoon on the fifteenth of November, 1803, the sun was casting what looked like scarlet dust upon the venerable tops of four rows of elms in a long baronial avenue, and sparkling on the sand and grassy places of an immense *rond-point*, such as we often see in the country where land is cheap enough to be sacrificed to ornament. The air was so pure, the atmosphere so tempered that a family was sitting out of doors as if it were summer. A man dressed in a hunting-jacket of green drilling with green buttons, and breeches of the same stuff, and wearing shoes with thin soles and gaiters to the knee, was cleaning a gun with the minute care a skilful huntsman gives to the work in his leisure hours. This man had neither game nor game-bag, nor any of the accoutrements which denote either departure for a hunt or the return from it; and two women sitting near were looking at him as though beset by a terror they could ill-conceal. Any one observing the scene taking place in this leafy nook would have shuddered, as the old mother-in-law and the wife of the man we speak of were now shuddering. A huntsman does not take such minute precautions with his weapon to kill small game, neither does he use, in the department of the Aube, a heavy rifled carbine.

“Shall you kill a roe-buck, Michu?” said his handsome young wife, trying to assume a laughing air.

Before replying, Michu looked at his dog, which had been lying in the sun, its paws stretched out and its nose on its paws, in the charming attitude of a trained hunter. The animal had just raised its head and was snuffing the air, first down the avenue nearly a mile long which stretched before them, and then up the cross road where it entered the *rond-point* to the left.

“No,” answered Michu, “but a brute I do not wish to miss, a lynx.”

The dog, a magnificent spaniel, white with brown spots, growled.

“Hah!” said Michu, talking to himself, “spies! the country swarms with them.”

Madame Michu looked appealingly to heaven. A beautiful fair woman with blue eyes, composed and thoughtful in expression and made like an antique statue, she seemed to be a prey to some dark and bitter grief. The husband’s appearance may explain to a certain extent the evident fear of the two women. The laws of physiognomy are precise, not only in their application to character, but also in relation to the destinies of life. There is such a thing as prophetic physiognomy. If it were possible (and such a vital statistic would be of value to society) to obtain exact likenesses of those who perish on the scaffold, the science of Lavatar and also that of Gall would prove unmistakably that the heads of all such persons, even those who are innocent, show prophetic signs. Yes, fate sets its mark on the faces of those who are doomed to die a violent death of any kind. Now, this sign,

this seal, visible to the eye of an observer, was imprinted on the expressive face of the man with the rifled carbine. Short and stout, abrupt and active in his motions as a monkey, though calm in temperament, Michu had a white face injected with blood, and features set close together like those of a Tartar, – a likeness to which his crinkled red hair conveyed a sinister expression. His eyes, clear and yellow as those of a tiger, showed depths behind them in which the glance of whoever examined the man might lose itself and never find either warmth or motion. Fixed, luminous, and rigid, those eyes terrified whoever gazed into them. The singular contrast between the immobility of the eyes and the activity of the body increased the chilling impression conveyed by a first sight of Michu. Action, always prompt in this man, was the outcome of a single thought; just as the life of animals is, without reflection, the outcome of instinct. Since 1793 he had trimmed his red beard to the shape of a fan. Even if he had not been (as he was during the Terror) president of a club of Jacobins, this peculiarity of his head would in itself have made him terrible to behold. His Socratic face with its blunt nose was surmounted by a fine forehead, so projecting, however, that it overhung the rest of the features. The ears, well detached from the head, had the sort of mobility which we find in those of wild animals, which are ever on the qui-vive. The mouth, half-open, as the custom usually is among country-people, showed teeth that were strong and white as almonds, but irregular. Gleaming red whiskers framed this face, which was white and yet mottled in spots. The hair, cropped close in front and allowed to grow long at the sides and on the back of the head, brought into relief, by its savage redness, all the strange and fateful peculiarities of this singular face. The neck which was short and thick, seemed to tempt the axe.

At this moment the sunbeams, falling in long lines athwart the group, lighted up the three heads at which the dog from time to time glanced up. The spot on which this scene took place was magnificently fine. The *rond-point* is at the entrance of the park of Gondreville, one of the finest estates in France, and by far the finest in the departments of the Aube; it boasts of long avenues of elms, a castle built from designs by Mansart, a park of fifteen hundred acres enclosed by a stone wall, nine large farms, a forest, mills, and meadows. This almost regal property belonged before the Revolution to the family of Simeuse. Ximeuse was a feudal estate in Lorraine; the name was pronounced Simeuse, and in course of time it came to be written as pronounced.

The great fortune of the Simeuse family, adherents of the House of Burgundy, dates from the time when the Guises were in conflict with the Valois. Richelieu first, and afterwards Louis XIV. remembered their devotion to the factious house of Lorraine, and rebuffed them. Then the Marquis de Simeuse, an old Burgundian, old Guiser, old leaguer, old *frondeur* (he inherited the four great rancors of the nobility against royalty), came to live at Cinq-Cygne. The former courtier, rejected at the Louvre, married the widow of the Comte de Cinq-Cygne, younger branch of the famous family of Chargeboeuf, one of the most illustrious names in Champagne, and now as celebrated and opulent as the elder. The marquis, among the richest men of his day, instead of wasting his substance at court, built the chateau of Gondreville, enlarged the estate by the purchase of others, and united the several domains, solely for the purposes of a hunting-ground. He also built the Simeuse mansion at Troyes, not far from that of the Cinq-Cygnes. These two old houses and the bishop's palace were long the only stone mansions at Troyes. The marquis sold Simeuse to the Duc de Lorraine. His son wasted the father's savings and some part of his great fortune under the reign of Louis XV., but he subsequently entered the navy, became a vice-admiral, and redeemed the follies of his youth by brilliant services. The Marquis de Simeuse, son of this naval worthy, perished with his wife on the scaffold at Troyes, leaving twin sons, who emigrated and were, at the time our history opens, still in foreign parts following the fortunes of the house of Conde.

The *rond-point* was the scene of the meet in the time of the "Grand Marquis" – a name given in the family to the Simeuse who built Gondreville. Since 1789 Michu lived in the hunting lodge at the entrance to the park, built in the reign of Louis XIV., and called the pavilion of Cinq-Cygne. The village of Cinq-Cygne is at the end of the forest of Nodesme (a corruption of Notre-Dame) which was

reached through the fine avenue of four rows of elms where Michu's dog was now suspecting spies. After the death of the Grand Marquis this pavilion fell into disuse. The vice-admiral preferred the court and the sea to Champagne, and his son gave the dilapidated building to Michu for a dwelling.

This noble structure is of brick, with vermiculated stone-work at the angles and on the casings of the doors and windows. On either side is a gateway of finely wrought iron, eaten with rust and connected by a railing, beyond which is a wide and deep ha-ha, full of vigorous trees, its parapets bristling with iron arabesques, the innumerable sharp points of which are a warning to evil-doers.

The park walls begin on each side of the circumference of the *rond-point*; on the one hand the fine semi-circle is defined by slopes planted with elms; on the other, within the park, a corresponding half-circle is formed by groups of rare trees. The pavilion, therefore, stands at the centre of this round open space, which extends before it and behind it in the shape of two horseshoes. Michu had turned the rooms on the lower floor into a stable, a kitchen, and a wood-shed. The only trace remaining of their ancient splendor was an antechamber paved with marble in squares of black and white, which was entered on the park side through a door with small leaded panes, such as might still be seen at Versailles before Louis-Philippe turned that Chateau into an asylum for the glories of France. The pavilion is divided inside by an old staircase of worm-eaten wood, full of character, which leads to the first story. Above that is an immense garret. This venerable edifice is covered by one of those vast roofs with four sides, a ridgepole decorated with leaden ornaments, and a round projecting window on each side, such as Mansart very justly delighted in; for in France, the Italian attics and flat roofs are a folly against which our climate protests. Michu kept his fodder in this garret. That portion of the park which surrounds the old pavilion is English in style. A hundred feet from the house a former lake, now a mere pond well stocked with fish, makes known its vicinity as much by a thin mist rising above the tree-tops as by the croaking of a thousand frogs, toads, and other amphibious gossips who discourse at sunset. The time-worn look of everything, the deep silence of the woods, the long perspective of the avenue, the forest in the distance, the rusty iron-work, the masses of stone draped with velvet mosses, all made poetry of this old structure, which still exists.

At the moment when our history begins Michu was leaning against a mossy parapet on which he had laid his powder-horn, cap, handkerchief, screw-driver, and rags, – in fact, all the utensils needed for his suspicious occupation. His wife's chair was against the wall beside the outer door of the house, above which could still be seen the arms of the Simeuse family, richly carved, with their noble motto, "Cy meurs." The old mother, in peasant dress, had moved her chair in front of Madame Michu, so that the latter might put her feet upon the rungs and keep them from dampness.

"Where's the boy?" said Michu to his wife.

"Round the pond; he is crazy about the frogs and the insects," answered the mother.

Michu whistled in a way that made his hearers tremble. The rapidity with which his son ran up to him proved plainly enough the despotic power of the bailiff of Gondreville. Since 1789, but more especially since 1793, Michu had been well-nigh master of the property. The terror he inspired in his wife, his mother-in-law, a servant-lad named Gaucher, and the cook named Marianne, was shared throughout a neighborhood of twenty miles in circumference. It may be well to give, without further delay, the reasons for this fear, – all the more because an account of them will complete the moral portrait of the man.

The old Marquis de Simeuse transferred the greater part of his property in 1790; but, overtaken by circumstances, he had not been able to put the estate of Gondreville into sure hands. Accused of corresponding with the Duke of Brunswick and the Prince of Cobourg, the marquis and his wife were thrust into prison and condemned to death by the revolutionary tribunal of Troyes, of which Madame Michu's father was then president. The fine domain of Gondreville was sold as national property. The head-keeper, to the horror of many, was present at the execution of the marquis and his wife in his capacity as president of the club of Jacobins at Arcis. Michu, the orphan son of a peasant, showered with benefactions by the marquise, who brought him up in her own home and gave him his

place as keeper, was regarded as a Brutus by excited demagogues; but the people of the neighborhood ceased to recognize him after this act of base ingratitude. The purchaser of the estate was a man from Arcis named Marion, grandson of a former bailiff in the Simeuse family. This man, a lawyer before and after the Revolution, was afraid of the keeper; he made him his bailiff with a salary of three thousand francs, and gave him an interest in the sales of timber; Michu, who was thought to have some ten thousand francs of his own laid by, married the daughter of a tanner at Troyes, an apostle of the Revolution in that town, where he was president of the revolutionary tribunal. This tanner, a man of profound convictions, who resembled Saint-Just as to character, was afterwards mixed up in Baboeuf's conspiracy and killed himself to escape execution. Marthe was the handsomest girl in Troyes. In spite of her shrinking modesty she had been forced by her formidable father to play the part of Goddess of Liberty in some republican ceremony.

The new proprietor came only three times to Gondreville in the course of seven years. His grandfather had been bailiff of the estate under the Simeuse family, and all Arcis took for granted that the citizen Marion was the secret representative of the present Marquis and his twin brother. As long as the Terror lasted, Michu, still bailiff of Gondreville, a devoted patriot, son-in-law of the president of the revolutionary tribunal of Troyes and flattered by Malin, representative from the department of the Aube, was the object of a certain sort of respect. But when the Mountain was overthrown and after his father-in-law committed suicide, he found himself a scape-goat; everybody hastened to accuse him, in common with his father-in-law, of acts to which, so far as he was concerned, he was a total stranger. The bailiff resented the injustice of the community; he stiffened his back and took an attitude of hostility. He talked boldly. But after the 18th Brumaire he maintained an unbroken silence, the philosophy of the strong; he struggled no longer against public opinion, and contented himself with attending to his own affairs, – wise conduct, which led his neighbors to pronounce him sly, for he owned, it was said, a fortune of not less than a hundred thousand francs in landed property. In the first place, he spent nothing; next, this property was legitimately acquired, partly from the inheritance of his father-in-law's estate, and partly from the savings of six-thousand francs a year, the salary he derived from his place with its profits and emoluments. He had been bailiff of Gondreville for the last twelve years and every one had estimated the probable amount of his savings, so that when, after the Consulate was proclaimed, he bought a farm for fifty thousand francs, the suspicions attaching to his former opinions lessened, and the community of Arcis gave him credit for intending to recover himself in public estimation. Unfortunately, at the very moment when public opinion was condoning his past a foolish affair, envenomed by the gossip of the country-side, revived the latent and very general belief in the ferocity of his character.

One evening, coming away from Troyes in company with several peasants, among whom was the farmer at Cinq-Cygne, he let fall a paper on the main road; the farmer, who was walking behind him, stooped and picked it up. Michu turned round, saw the paper in the man's hands, pulled a pistol from his belt and threatened the farmer (who knew how to read) to blow his brains out if he opened the paper. Michu's action was so sudden and violent, the tone of his voice so alarming, his eyes blazed so savagely, that the men about him turned cold with fear. The farmer of Cinq-Cygne was already his enemy. Mademoiselle de Cinq-Cygne, the man's employer, was a cousin of the Simeuse brothers; she had only one farm left for her maintenance and was now residing at her chateau of Cinq-Cygne. She lived for her cousins the twins, with whom she had played in childhood at Troyes and at Gondreville. Her only brother, Jules de Cinq-Cygne, who emigrated before the twins, died at Mayence, but by a privilege which was somewhat rare and will be mentioned later, the name of Cinq-Cygne was not to perish through lack of male heirs.

This affair between Michu and the farmer made a great noise in the arrondissement and darkened the already mysterious shadows which seemed to veil him. Nor was it the only circumstance which made him feared. A few months after this scene the citizen Marion, present owner of the Gondreville estate, came to inspect it with the citizen Malin. Rumor said that Marion was about to

sell the property to his companion, who had profited by political events and had just been appointed on the Council of State by the First Consul, in return for his services on the 18th Brumaire. The shrewd heads of the little town of Arcis now perceived that Marion had been the agent of Malin in the purchase of the property, and not of the brothers Simeuse, as was first supposed. The all-powerful Councillor of State was the most important personage in Arcis. He had obtained for one of his political friends the prefecture of Troyes, and for a farmer at Gondreville the exemption of his son from the draft; in fact, he had done services to many. Consequently, the sale met with no opposition in the neighborhood where Malin then reigned, and where he still reigns supreme.

The Empire was just dawning. Those who in these days read the histories of the French Revolution can form no conception of the vast spaces which public thought traversed between events which now seem to have been so near together. The strong need of peace and tranquillity which every one felt after the violent tumults of the Revolution brought about a complete forgetfulness of important anterior facts. History matured rapidly under the advance of new and eager interests. No one, therefore, except Michu, looked into the past of this affair, which the community accepted as a simple matter. Marion, who had bought Gondreville for six hundred thousand francs in assignats, sold it for the value of a couple of million in coin; but the only payments actually made by Malin were for the costs of registration. Grevin, a seminary comrade of Malin, assisted the transaction, and the Councillor rewarded his help with the office of notary at Arcis. When the news of the sale reached the pavilion, brought there by a farmer whose farm, at Grouage, was situated between the forest and the park on the left of the noble avenue, Michu turned pale and left the house. He lay in wait for Marion, and finally met him alone in one of the shrubberies of the park.

“Is monsieur about to sell Gondreville?” asked the bailiff.

“Yes, Michu, yes. You will have a man of powerful influence for your master. He is the friend of the First Consul, and very intimate with all the ministers; he will protect you.”

“Then you were holding the estate for him?”

“I don’t say that,” replied Marion. “At the time I bought it I was looking for a place to put my money, and I invested in national property as the best security. But it doesn’t suit me to keep an estate once belonging to a family in which my father was – ”

“ – a servant,” said Michu, violently. “But you shall not sell it! I want it; and I can pay for it.”

“You?”

“Yes, I; seriously, in good gold, – eight hundred thousand francs.”

“Eight hundred thousand francs!” exclaimed Marion. “Where did you get them?”

“That’s none of your business,” replied Michu; then, softening his tone, he added in a low voice: “My father-in-law saved the lives of many persons.”

“You are too late, Michu; the sale is made.”

“You must put it off, monsieur!” cried the bailiff, seizing his master by the hand which he held as in a vice. “I am hated, but I choose to be rich and powerful, and I must have Gondreville. Listen to me; I don’t cling to life; sell me that place or I’ll blow your brains out! – ”

“But do give me time to get off my bargain with Malin; he’s troublesome to deal with.”

“I’ll give you twenty-four hours. If you say a word about this matter I’ll chop your head off as I would chop a turnip.”

Marion and Malin left the chateau in the course of the night. Marion was frightened; he told Malin of the meeting and begged him to keep an eye on the bailiff. It was impossible for Marion to avoid delivering the property to the man who had been the real purchaser, and Michu did not seem likely to admit any such reason. Moreover, this service done by Marion to Malin was to be, and in fact ended by being, the origin of the former’s political fortune, and also that of his brother. In 1806 Malin had him appointed chief justice of an imperial court, and after the creation of tax-collectors his brother obtained the post of receiver-general for the department of the Aube. The State Councillor told Marion to stay in Paris, and he warned the minister of police, who gave orders that Michu should

be secretly watched. Not wishing to push the man to extremes, Malin kept him on as bailiff, under the iron rule of Grevin the notary of Arcis.

From that moment Michu became more absorbed and taciturn than ever, and obtained the reputation of a man who was capable of committing a crime. Malin, the Councillor of State (a function which the First Consul raised to the level of a ministry), and a maker of the Code, played a great part in Paris, where he bought one of the finest mansions in the Faubuorg Saint-Germain after marrying the only daughter of a rich contractor named Sibuelle. He never came to Gondreville; leaving all matters concerning the property to the management of Grevin, the Arcis notary. After all, what had he to fear? – he, a former representative of the Aube, and president of a club of Jacobins. And yet, the unfavorable opinion of Michu held by the lower classes was shared by the bourgeoisie, and Marion, Grevin, and Malin, without giving any reason or compromising themselves on the subject, showed that they regarded him as an extremely dangerous man. The authorities, who were under instructions from the minister of police to watch the bailiff, did not of course lessen this belief. The neighborhood wondered that he kept his place, but supposed it was in consequence of the terror he inspired. It is easy now, after these explanations, to understand the anxiety and sadness expressed in the face of Michu's wife.

In the first place, Marthe had been piously brought up by her mother. Both, being good Catholics, had suffered much from the opinions and behavior of the tanner. Marthe could never think without a blush of having marched through the street of Troyes in the garb of a goddess. Her father had forced her to marry Michu, whose bad reputation was then increasing, and she feared him too much to be able to judge him. Nevertheless, she knew that he loved her, and at the bottom of her heart lay the truest affection for this awe-inspiring man; she had never known him to do anything that was not just; never did he say a brutal word, to her at least; in fact, he endeavored to forestall her every wish. The poor pariah, believing himself disagreeable to his wife, spent most of his time out of doors. Marthe and Michu, distrustful of each other, lived in what is called in these days an "armed peace." Marthe, who saw no one, suffered keenly from the ostracism which for the last seven years had surrounded her as the daughter of a revolutionary butcher, and the wife of a so-called traitor. More than once she had overheard the laborers of the adjoining farm (held by a man named Beauvisage, greatly attached to the Simeuse family) say as they passed the pavilion, "That's where Judas lives!" The singular resemblance between the bailiff's head and that of the thirteenth apostle, which his conduct appeared to carry out, won him that odious nickname throughout the neighborhood. It was this distress of mind, added to vague but constant fears for the future, which gave Marthe her thoughtful and subdued air. Nothing saddens so deeply as unmerited degradation from which there seems no escape. A painter could have made a fine picture of this family of pariahs in the bosom of their pretty nook in Champagne, where the landscape is generally sad.

"Francois!" called the bailiff, to hasten his son.

Francois Michu, a child of ten, played in the park and forest, and levied his little tithes like a master; he ate the fruits; he chased the game; he at least had neither cares nor troubles. Of all the family, Francois alone was happy in a home thus isolated from the neighborhood by its position between the park and the forest, and by the still greater moral solitude of universal repulsion.

"Pick up these things," said his father, pointing to the parapet, "and put them away. Look at me! You love your father and your mother, don't you?" The child flung himself on his father as if to kiss him, but Michu made a movement to shift the gun and pushed him back. "Very good. You have sometimes chattered about things that are done here," continued the father, fixing his eyes, dangerous as those of a wild-cat, on the boy. "Now remember this; if you tell the least little thing that happens here to Gaucher, or to the Grouage and Bellache people, or even to Marianne who loves us, you will kill your father. Never tattle again, and I will forgive what you said yesterday." The child began to cry. "Don't cry; but when any one questions you, say, as the peasants do, 'I don't know.' There are

persons roaming about whom I distrust. Run along! As for you two," he added, turning to the women, "you have heard what I said. Keep a close mouth, both of you."

"Husband, what are you going to do?"

Michu, who was carefully measuring a charge of powder, poured it into the barrel of his gun, rested the weapon against the parapet and said to Marthe: —

"No one knows I own that gun. Stand in front of it."

Couraut, who had sprung to his feet, was barking furiously.

"Good, intelligent fellow!" cried Michu. "I am certain there are spies about – "

Man and beast feel a spy. Couraut and Michu, who seemed to have one and the same soul, lived together as the Arab and his horse in the desert. The bailiff knew the modulations of the dog's voice, just as the dog read his master's meaning in his eyes, or felt it exhaling in the air from his body.

"What do you say to that?" said Michu, in a low voice, calling his wife's attention to two strangers who appeared in a by-path making for the *rond-point*.

"What can it mean?" cried the old mother. "They are Parisians."

"Here they come!" said Michu. "Hide my gun," he whispered to his wife.

The two men who now crossed the wide open space of the *rond-point* were typical enough for a painter. One, who appeared to be the subaltern, wore top-boots, turned down rather low, showing well-made calves, and colored silk stockings of doubtful cleanliness. The breeches, of ribbed cloth, apricot color with metal buttons, were too large; they were baggy about the body, and the lines of their creases seemed to indicate a sedentary man. A marseilles waistcoat, overloaded with embroidery, open, and held together by one button only just above the stomach, gave to the wearer a dissipated look, – all the more so, because his jet black hair, in corkscrew curls, hid his forehead and hung down his cheeks. Two steel watch-chains were festooned upon his breeches. The shirt was adorned with a cameo in white and blue. The coat, cinnamon-colored, was a treasure to caricaturists by reason of its long tails, which, when seen from behind, bore so perfect a resemblance to a cod that the name of that fish was given to them. The fashion of codfish tails lasted ten years; almost the whole period of the empire of Napoleon. The cravat, loosely fastened, and with numerous small folds, allowed the wearer to bury his face in it up to the nostrils. His pimpled skin, his long, thick, brick-dust colored nose, his high cheek-bones, his mouth, lacking half its teeth but greedy for all that and menacing, his ears adorned with huge gold rings, his low forehead, – all these personal details, which might have seemed grotesque in many men, were rendered terrible in him by two small eyes set in his head like those of a pig, expressive of insatiable covetousness, and of insolent, half-jovial cruelty. These ferreting and perspicacious blue eyes, glassy and glacial, might be taken for the model of that famous Eye, the formidable emblem of the police, invented during the Revolution. Black silk gloves were on his hands and he carried a switch. He was certainly some official personage, for he showed in his bearing, in his way of taking snuff and ramming it into his nose, the bureaucratic importance of an office subordinate, one who signs for his superiors and acquires a passing sovereignty by enforcing their orders.

The other man, whose dress was in the same style, but elegant and elegantly put on and careful in its smallest detail, wore boots *a la* Suwaroff which came high upon the leg above a pair of tight trousers, and creaked as he walked. Above his coat he wore a spencer, an aristocratic garment adopted by the Clichiens and the young bloods of Paris, which survived both the Clichiens and the fashionable youths. In those days fashions sometimes lasted longer than parties, – a symptom of anarchy which the year of our Lord 1830 has again presented to us. This accomplished dandy seemed to be thirty years of age. His manners were those of good society; he wore jewels of value; the collar of his shirt came to the tops of his ears. His conceited and even impertinent air betrayed a consciousness of hidden superiority. His pallid face seemed bloodless, his thin flat nose had the sardonic expression which we see in a death's head, and his green eyes were inscrutable; their glance was discreet in meaning just as the thin closed mouth was discreet in words. The first man seemed on the whole a

good fellow compared with this younger man, who was slashing the air with a cane, the top of which, made of gold, glittered in the sunshine. The first man might have cut off a head with his own hand, but the second was capable of entangling innocence, virtue, and beauty in the nets of calumny and intrigue, and then poisoning them or drowning them. The rubicund stranger would have comforted his victim with a jest; the other was incapable of a smile. The first was forty-five years old, and he loved, undoubtedly, both women and good cheer. Such men have passions which keep them slaves to their calling. But the young man was plainly without passions and without vices. If he was a spy he belonged to diplomacy, and did such work from a pure love of art. He conceived, the other executed; he was the idea, the other was the form.

"This must be Gondreville, is it not, my good woman?" said the young man.

"We don't say 'my good woman' here," said Michu. "We are still simple enough to say 'citizen' and 'citizeness' in these parts."

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man, in a natural way, and without seeming at all annoyed.

Players of ecarte often have a sense of inward disaster when some unknown person sits down at the same table with them, whose manners, look, voice, and method of shuffling the cards, all, to their fancy, foretell defeat. The instant Michu looked at the young man he felt an inward and prophetic collapse. He was struck by a fatal presentiment; he had a sudden confused foreboding of the scaffold. A voice told him that that dandy would destroy him, although there was nothing whatever in common between them. For this reason his answer was rude; he was and he wished to be forbidding.

"Don't you belong to the Councillor of State, Malin?" said the younger man.

"I am my own master," answered Malin.

"Mesdames," said the young man, assuming a most polite air, "are we not at Gondreville? We are expected there by Monsieur Malin."

"There's the park," said Michu, pointing to the open gate.

"Why are you hiding that gun, my fine girl?" said the elder, catching sight of the carbine as he passed through the gate.

"You never let a chance escape you, even in the country!" cried his companion.

They both turned back with a sense of distrust which the bailiff understood at once in spite of their impassible faces. Marthe let them look at the gun, to the tune of Couraut's bark; she was so convinced that her husband was meditating some evil deed that she was thankful for the curiosity of the strangers.

Michu flung a look at his wife which made her tremble; he took the gun and began to load it, accepting quietly the fatal ill-luck of this encounter and the discovery of the weapon. He seemed no longer to care for life, and his wife fathomed his inward feeling.

"So you have wolves in these parts?" said the young man, watching him.

"There are always wolves where there are sheep. You are in Champagne, and there's a forest; we have wild-boars, large and small game both, a little of everything," replied Michu, in a truculent manner.

"I'll bet, Corentin," said the elder of the two men, after exchanging a glance with his companion, "that this is my friend Michu – "

"We never kept pigs together that I know of," said the bailiff.

"No, but we both presided over Jacobins, citizen," replied the old cynic, – "you at Arcis, I elsewhere. I see you've kept your Carmagnole civility, but it's no longer in fashion, my good fellow."

"The park strikes me as rather large; we might lose our way. If you are really the bailiff show us the path to the chateau," said Corentin, in a peremptory tone.

Michu whistled to his son and continued to load his gun. Corentin looked at Marthe with indifference, while his companion seemed charmed by her; but the young man noticed the signs of her inward distress, which escaped the old libertine, who had, however, noticed and feared the gun. The natures of the two men were disclosed in this trifling yet important circumstance.

"I've an appointment the other side of the forest," said the bailiff. "I can't go with you, but my son here will take you to the chateau. How did you get to Gondreville? did you come by Cinq-Cygne?"

"We had, like yourself, business in the forest," said Corentin, without apparent sarcasm.

"Francois," cried Michu, "take these gentlemen to the chateau by the wood path, so that no one sees them; they don't follow the beaten tracks. Come here," he added, as the strangers turned to walk away, talking together as they did so in a low voice. Michu caught the boy in his arms, and kissed him almost solemnly with an expression which confirmed his wife's fears; cold chills ran down her back; she glanced at her mother with haggard eyes, for she could not weep.

"Go," said Michu; and he watched the boy until he was entirely out of sight. Couraut was barking on the other side of the road in the direction of Grouage. "Oh, that's Violette," remarked Michu. "This is the third time that old fellow has passed here to-day. What's in the wind? Hush, Couraut!"

A few moments later the trot of a pony was heard approaching.

CHAPTER II. A CRIME RELINQUISHED

Violette, mounted on one of those little nags which the farmers in the neighborhood of Paris use so much, soon appeared, wearing a round hat with a broad brim, beneath which his wood-colored face, deeply wrinkled, appeared in shadow. His gray eyes, mischievous and lively, concealed in a measure the treachery of his nature. His skinny legs, covered with gaiters of white linen which came to the knee, hung rather than rested in the stirrups, seemingly held in place by the weight of his hob-nailed shoes. Above his jacket of blue cloth he wore a cloak of some coarse woollen stuff woven in black and white stripes. His gray hair fell in curls behind his ears. This dress, the gray horse with its short legs, the manner in which Violette sat him, stomach projecting and shoulders thrown back, the big chapped hands which held the shabby bridle, all depicted him plainly as the grasping, ambitious peasant who desires to own land and buys it at any price. His mouth, with its bluish lips parted as if a surgeon had pried them open with a scalpel, and the innumerable wrinkles of his face and forehead hindered the play of features which were expressive only in their outlines. Those hard, fixed lines seemed menacing, in spite of the humility which country-folks assume and beneath which they conceal their emotions and schemes, as savages and Easterns hide theirs behind an imperturbable gravity. First a mere laborer, then the farmer of Grouage through a long course of persistent ill-doing, he continued his evil practices after conquering a position which surpassed his early hopes. He wished harm to all men and wished it vehemently. When he could assist in doing harm he did it eagerly. He was openly envious; but, no matter how malignant he might be, he kept within the limits of the law, – neither beyond it nor behind it, like a parliamentary opposition. He believed his prosperity depended on the ruin of others, and that whoever was above him was an enemy against whom all weapons were good. A character like this is very common among the peasantry.

Violette's present business was to obtain from Malin an extension of the lease of his farm, which had only six years longer to run. Jealous of the bailiff's means, he watched him narrowly. The neighbors reproached him for his intimacy with "Judas"; but the sly old farmer, wishing to obtain a twelve years' lease, was really lying in wait for an opportunity to serve either the government or Malin, who distrusted Michu. Violette, by the help of the game-keeper of Gondreville and others belonging to the estate, kept Malin informed of all Michu's actions. Malin had endeavored, fruitlessly, to win over Marianne, the Michus' servant-woman; but Violette and his satellites heard everything from Gaucher, – a lad on whose fidelity Michu relied, but who betrayed him for cast-off clothing, waistcoats, buckles, cotton socks and sugar-plums. The boy had no suspicion of the importance of his gossip. Violette in his reports blackened all Michu's actions and gave them a criminal aspect by absurd suggestions, – unknown, of course, to the bailiff, who was aware, however, of the base part played by the farmer, and took delight in mystifying him.

"You must have a deal of business at Bellache to be here again," said Michu.

"Again! is that meant as a reproach, Monsieur Michu? – Hey! I did not know you had that gun. You are not going to whistle for the sparrows on that pipe, I suppose – "

"It grew in a field of mine which bears guns," replied Michu. "Look! this is how I sow them."

The bailiff took aim at a viper thirty feet away and cut it in two.

"Have you got that bandit's weapon to protect your master?" said Violette. "Perhaps he gave it to you."

"He came from Paris expressly to bring it to me," replied Michu.

"People are talking all round the neighborhood of this journey of his; some say he is in disgrace and has to retire from office; others that he wants to see things for himself down here. But anyway, why does he come, like the First Consul, without giving warning? Did you know he was coming?"

"I am not on such terms with him as to be in his confidence."

"Then you have not seen him?"

"I did not know he was here till I got back from my rounds in the forest," said Michu, reloading his gun.

"He has sent to Arcis for Monsieur Grevin," said Violette; "they are scheming something."

"If you are going round by Cinq-Cygne, take me up behind you," said the bailiff. "I'm going there."

Violette was too timid to have a man of Michu's strength on his crupper, and he spurred his beast. Judas slung his gun over his shoulder and walked rapidly up the avenue.

"Who can it be that Michu is angry with?" said Marthe to her mother.

"Ever since he heard of Monsieur Malin's arrival he has been gloomy," replied the old woman. "But it is getting damp here, let us go in."

After the two women had settled themselves in the chimney corner they heard Couraut's bark.

"There's my husband returning!" cried Marthe.

Michu passed up the stairs; his wife, uneasy, followed him to their bedroom.

"See if any one is about," he said to her, in a voice of some emotion.

"No one," she replied. "Marianne is in the field with the cow, and Gaucher – "

"Where is Gaucher?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"I distrust that little scamp. Go up in the garret, look in the hay-loft, look everywhere for him."

Marthe left the room to obey the order. When she returned she found Michu on his knees, praying.

"What is the matter?" she said, frightened.

The bailiff took his wife round the waist and drew her to him, saying in a voice of deep feeling: "If we never see each other again remember, my poor wife, that I loved you well. Follow minutely the instructions which you will find in a letter buried at the foot of the larch in that copse. It is enclosed in a tin tube. Do not touch it until after my death. And remember, Marthe, whatever happens to me, that in spite of man's injustice, my arm has been the instrument of the justice of God."

Marthe, who turned pale by degrees, became white as her own linen; she looked at her husband with fixed eyes widened by fear; she tried to speak, but her throat was dry. Michu disappeared like a shadow, having tied Couraut to the foot of his bed where the dog, after the manner of all dogs, howled in despair.

Michu's anger against Monsieur Marion had serious grounds, but it was now concentrated on another man, far more criminal in his eyes, – on Malin, whose secrets were known to the bailiff, he being in a better position than others to understand the conduct of the State Councillor. Michu's father-in-law had had, politically speaking, the confidence of the former representative to the Convention, through Grevin.

Perhaps it would be well here to relate the circumstances which brought the Simeuse and the Cinq-Cygne families into connection with Malin, – circumstances which weighed heavily on the fate of Mademoiselle de Cinq-Cygne's twin cousins, but still more heavily on that of Marthe and Michu.

The Cinq-Cygne mansion at Troyes stands opposite to that of Simeuse. When the populace, incited by minds that were as shrewd as they were cautious, pillaged the hotel Simeuse, discovered the marquis and marchioness, who were accused of corresponding with the nation's enemies, and delivered them to the national guards who took them to prison, the crowd shouted, "Now for the Cinq-Cygnes!" To their minds the Cinq-Cygnes were as guilty as other aristocrats. The brave and worthy Monsieur de Simeuse in the endeavor to save his two sons, then eighteen years of age, whose courage was likely to compromise them, had confided them, a few hours before the storm broke, to their aunt, the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne. Two servants attached to the Simeuse family accompanied the young men to her house. The old marquis, who was anxious that his name should not die out, requested that what was happening might be concealed from his sons, even in the event of dire disaster. Laurence, the only daughter of the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne, was then twelve years of age; her cousins both

loved her and she loved them equally. Like other twins the Simeuse brothers were so alike that for a long while their mother dressed them in different colors to know them apart. The first comer, the eldest, was named Paul-Marie, the other Marie-Paul. Laurence de Cinq-Cygne, to whom their danger was revealed, played her woman's part well though still a mere child. She coaxed and petted her cousins and kept them occupied until the very moment when the populace surrounded the Cinq-Cygne mansion. The two brothers then knew their danger for the first time, and looked at each other. Their resolution was instantly taken; they armed their own servants and those of the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne, barricaded the doors, and stood guard at the windows, after closing the wooden blinds, with the five men-servants and the Abbe d'Hauteserre, a relative of the Cinq-Cygnes. These eight courageous champions poured a deadly fire into the crowd. Every shot killed or wounded an assailant. Laurence, instead of wringing her hands, loaded the guns with extraordinary coolness, and passed the balls and powder to those who needed them. The Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne was on her knees.

"What are you doing, mother?" said Laurence.

"I am praying," she answered, "for them and for you."

Sublime words, – said also by the mother of Godoy, prince of the Peace, in Spain, under similar circumstances.

In a moment eleven persons were killed and lying on the ground among a number of wounded. Such results either cool or excite a populace; either it grows savage at the work or discontinues it. On the present occasion those in advance recoiled; but the crowd behind them were there to kill and rob, and when they saw their own dead, they cried out: "Murder! Murder! Revenge!" The wiser heads went in search of the representative to the Convention, Malin. The twins, by this time aware of the disastrous events of the day, suspected Malin of desiring the ruin of their family, and of causing the arrest of their parents, and the suspicion soon became a certainty. They posted themselves beneath the porte-cochere, gun in hand, intending to kill Malin as soon as he made his appearance; but the countess lost her head; she imagined her house in ashes and her daughter assassinated, and she blamed the young men for their heroic defence and compelled them to desist. It was Laurence who opened the door slightly when Malin summoned the household to admit him. Seeing her, the representative relied upon the awe he expected to inspire in a mere child, and he entered the house. To his first words of inquiry as to why the family were making such a resistance, the girl replied: "If you really desire to give liberty to France how is it that you do not protect us in our homes? They are trying to tear down this house, monsieur, to murder us, and you say we have no right to oppose force to force!"

Malin stood rooted to the ground.

"You, the son of a mason employed by the Grand Marquis to build his castle!" exclaimed Marie-Paul, "you have let them drag our father to prison – you have believed calumnies!"

"He shall be released at once," said Malin, who thought himself lost when he saw each youth clutch his weapon convulsively.

"You owe your life to that promise," said Marie-Paul, solemnly. "If it is not fulfilled to-night we shall find you again."

"As to that howling populace," said Laurence, "If you do not send them away, the next blood will be yours. Now, Monsieur Malin, leave this house!"

The Conventionalist did leave it, and he harangued the crowd, dwelling on the sacred rights of the domestic hearth, the habeas corpus and the English "home." He told them that the law and the people were sovereigns, that the law *was* the people, and that the people could only act through the law, and that power was vested in the law. The particular law of personal necessity made him eloquent, and he managed to disperse the crowd. But he never forgot the contemptuous expression of the two brothers, nor the "Leave this house!" of Mademoiselle de Cinq-Cygne. Therefore, when it was a question of selling the estates of the Comte de Cinq-Cygne, Laurence's brother, as national property, the sale was rigorously made. The agents left nothing for Laurence but the chateau, the park and gardens, and one farm called that of Cinq-Cygne. Malin instructed the appraisers that Laurence

had no rights beyond her legal share, – the nation taking possession of all that belonged to her brother, who had emigrated and, above all, had borne arms against the Republic.

The evening after this terrible tumult, Laurence so entreated her cousins to leave the country, fearing treachery on the part of Malin, or some trap into which they might fall, that they took horse that night and gained the Prussian outposts. They had scarcely reached the forest of Gondreville before the hotel Cinq-Cygne was surrounded; Malin came himself to arrest the heirs of the house of Simeuse. He dared not lay hands on the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne, who was in bed with a nervous fever, nor on Laurence, a child of twelve. The servants, fearing the severity of the Republic, had disappeared. The next day the news of the resistance of the brothers and their flight to Prussia was known to the neighborhood. A crowd of three thousand persons assembled before the hotel de Cinq-Cygne, which was demolished with incredible rapidity. Madame de Cinq-Cygne, carried to the hotel Simeuse, died there from the effects of the fever aggravated by terror.

Michu did not appear in the political arena until after these events, for the marquis and his wife remained in prison over five months. During this time Malin was away on a mission. But when Monsieur Marion sold Gondreville to the Councillor of State, Michu understood the latter's game, – or rather, he thought he did; for Malin was, like Fouche, one of those personages who are of such depth in all their different aspects that they are impenetrable when they play a part, and are never understood until long after their drama is ended.

In all the chief circumstances of Malin's life he had never failed to consult his faithful friend Grevin, the notary of Arcis, whose judgment on men and things was, at a distance, clear-cut and precise. This faculty is the wisdom and makes the strength of second-rate men. Now, in November, 1803, a combination of events (already related in the "Depute d'Arcis") made matters so serious for the Councillor of State that a letter might have compromised the two friends. Malin, who hoped to be appointed senator, was afraid to offer his explanations in Paris. He came to Gondreville, giving the First Consul only one of the reasons that made him wish to be there; that reason gave him an appearance of zeal in the eyes of Bonaparte; whereas his journey, far from concerning the interests of the State, related to his own interests only. On this particular day, as Michu was watching the park and expecting, after the manner of a red Indian, a propitious moment for his vengeance, the astute Malin, accustomed to turn all events to his own profit, was leading his friend Grevin to a little field in the English garden, a lonely spot in the park, favorable for a secret conference. There, standing in the centre of the grass plot and speaking low, the friends were at too great a distance to be overheard if any one were lurking near enough to listen to them; they were also sure of time to change the conversation if others unwarily approached.

"Why couldn't we have stayed in a room in the chateau?" asked Grevin.

"Didn't you take notice of those two men whom the prefect of police has sent here to me?"

Though Fouche made himself in the matter of the Pichegru, Georges, Moreau, and Polignac conspiracy the soul of the Consular cabinet, he did not at this time control the ministry of police, but was merely a councillor of State like Malin.

"Those men," continued Malin, "are Fouche's two arms. One, that dandy Corentin, whose face is like a glass of lemonade, vinegar on his lips and verjuice in his eyes, put an end to the insurrection at the West in the year VII. in less than fifteen days. The other is a disciple of Lenoir; he is the only one who preserves the great traditions of the police. I had asked for an agent of no great account, backed by some official personage, and they send me those past-masters of the business! Ah, Grevin, Fouche wants to pry into my game. That's why I left those fellows dining at the chateau; they may look into everything for all I care; they won't find Louis XVIII. nor any sign of him."

"But see here, my dear fellow, what game are you playing?" cried Grevin.

"Ha, my friend, a double game is a dangerous one, but this, taking Fouche into account, is a triple one. He may have nosed the fact that I am in the secrets of the house of Bourbon."

"You?"

"I," replied Malin.

"Have you forgotten Favras?"

The words made an impression on the councillor.

"Since when?" asked Grevin, after a pause.

"Since the Consulate for life."

"I hope there's no proof of it?"

"Not that!" said Malin, clicking his thumb-nail against his teeth.

In few words the Councillor of State gave a clear and succinct account of the critical position in which Bonaparte was about to hold England, by threatening her with invasion from the camp at Boulogne; he explained to Grevin the bearings of that project, which was unobserved by France and Europe but suspected by Pitt; also the critical position in which England was about to put Bonaparte. A powerful coalition, Prussia, Austria, and Russia, paid by English gold, was pledged to furnish seven hundred thousand men under arms. At the same time a formidable conspiracy was throwing a network over the whole of France, including among its members montagnards, chouans, royalists, and their princes.

"Louis XVIII. held that as long as there were three Consuls anarchy was certain, and that he could at some opportune moment take his revenge for the 13th Vendemiaire and the 18th Fructidor," said Malin, "but the Consulate for life has unmasked Bonaparte's intentions – he will soon be emperor. The late sub-lieutenant means to create a dynasty! This time his life is in actual danger; and the plot is far better laid than that of the Rue Saint-Nicaise. Pichegru, Georges, Moreau, the Duc d'Enghien, Polignac and Riviere, the two friends of the Comte d'Artois are in it."

"What an amalgamation!" cried Grevin.

"France is being silently invaded; no stone is left unturned; the thing will be carried with a rush. A hundred picked men, commanded by Georges, are to attack the Consular guard and the Consul hand to hand."

"Well then, denounce them."

"For the last two months the Consul, his minister of police, the prefect and Fouche, hold some of the clues of this vast conspiracy; but they don't know its full extent, and at this particular moment they are leaving nearly all the conspirators free, so as to discover more about it."

"As to rights," said the notary, "the Bourbons have much more right to conceive, plan, and execute a scheme against Bonaparte, than Bonaparte had on the 18th Brumaire against the Republic, whose product he was. He murdered his mother on that occasion, but these royalists only seek to recover what was theirs. I can understand that the princes and their adherents, seeing the lists of the *emigres* closed, mortgages suppressed, the Catholic faith restored, anti-revolutionary decrees accumulating, should begin to see that their return is becoming difficult, not to say impossible. Bonaparte being the sole obstacle now in their way, they want to get rid of him – nothing simpler. Conspirators if defeated are brigands, if successful, heroes; and your perplexity seems to me very natural."

"The matter now is," said Malin, "to make Bonaparte fling the head of the Duc d'Enghien at the Bourbons, just as the Convention flung the head of Louis XVI. at the kings, so as to commit him as fully as we are to the Revolution; *or else*, we must upset the idol of the French people and their future emperor, and seat the true throne upon his ruins. I am at the mercy of some event, some fortunate pistol-shot, some infernal machine which does its work. Even I don't know the whole conspiracy; they don't tell me all; but they have asked me to call the Council of State at the critical moment and direct its action towards the restoration of the Bourbons."

"Wait," said the notary.

"Impossible! I am compelled to make my decision at once."

"Why?"

"Well, the Simeuse brothers are in the conspiracy; they are here in the neighborhood; I must either have them watched, let them compromise themselves, and so be rid of them, or else I must privately protect them. I asked the prefect for underlings and he has sent me lynxes, who came through Troyes and have got the gendarmerie to support them."

"Gondreville is your real object," said Grevin, "and this conspiracy your best chance of keeping it. Fouche, Talleyrand, and those two fellows have nothing to do with that. Therefore play fair with them. What nonsense! those who cut Louis XVI.'s head off are in the government; France is full of men who have bought national property, and yet you talk of bringing back those who would require you to give up Gondreville! If the Bourbons were not imbeciles they would pass a sponge over all we have done. Warn Bonaparte, that's my advice."

"A man of my rank can't denounce," said Malin, quickly.

"Your rank!" exclaimed Grevin, smiling.

"They have offered to make me Keeper of the Seals."

"Ah! Now I understand your bewilderment, and it is for me to see clear in this political darkness and find a way out for you. Now, it is quite impossible to foresee what events may happen to bring back the Bourbons when a General Bonaparte is in possession of eighty line of battle ships and four hundred thousand men. The most difficult thing of all in expectant politics is to know when a power that totters will fall; but, my old man, Bonaparte's power is not tottering, it is in the ascendant. Don't you think that Fouche may be sounding you so as to get to the bottom of your mind, and then get rid of you?"

"No; I am sure of my go-between. Besides, Fouche would never, under those circumstances, send me such fellows as these; he would know they would make me suspicious."

"They alarm me," said Grevin. "If Fouche does not distrust you, and is not seeking to probe you, why does he send them? Fouche doesn't play such a trick as that without a motive; what is it?"

"What decides me," said Malin, "is that I should never be easy with those two Simeuse brothers in France. Perhaps Fouche, who knows how I am placed towards them, wants to make sure they don't escape him, and hopes through them to reach the Condes."

"That's right, old fellow; it is not under Bonaparte that the present possessor of Gondreville can be ousted."

Just then Malin, happening to look up, saw the muzzle of a gun through the foliage of a tall linden.

"I was not mistaken, I thought I heard the click of a trigger," he said to Grevin, after getting behind the trunk of a large tree, where the notary, uneasy at his friend's sudden movement, followed him.

"It is Michu," said Grevin; "I see his red beard."

"Don't let us seem afraid," said Malin, who walked slowly away, saying at intervals: "Why is that man so bitter against the owners of this property? It was not you he was covering. If he overheard us he had better ask the prayers of the congregation! Who the devil would have thought of looking up into the trees!"

"There's always something to learn," said the notary. "But he was a good distance off, and we spoke low."

"I shall tell Corentin about it," replied Malin.

CHAPTER III. THE MASK THROWN OFF

A few moments later Michu returned home, his face pale, his features contracted.

"What is the matter?" said his wife, frightened.

"Nothing," he replied, seeing Violette whose presence silenced him.

Michu took a chair and sat down quietly before the fire, into which he threw a letter which he drew from a tin tube such as are given to soldiers to hold their papers. This act, which enabled Marthe to draw a long breath like one relieved of a great burden, greatly puzzled Violette. The bailiff laid his gun on the mantel-shelf with admirable composure. Marianne the servant, and Marthe's mother were spinning by the light of a lamp.

"Come, Francois," said the father, presently, "it is time to go to bed."

He lifted the boy roughly by the middle of his body and carried him off.

"Run down to the cellar," he whispered, when they reached the stairs. "Empty one third out of two bottles of the Macon wine, and fill them up with the Cognac brandy which is on the shelf. Then mix a bottle of white wine with one half brandy. Do it neatly, and put the three bottles on the empty cask which stands by the cellar door. When you hear me open the window in the kitchen come out of the cellar, run to the stable, saddle my horse, mount it, and go and wait for me at Poteaudes-Gueux – That little scamp hates to go to bed," said Michu, returning; "he likes to do as grown people do, see all, hear all, and know all. You spoil my people, pere Violette."

"Goodness!" cried Violette, "what has loosened your tongue? I never heard you say as much before."

"Do you suppose I let myself be spied upon without taking notice of it? You are on the wrong side, pere Violette. If, instead of serving those who hate me, you were on my side I could do better for you than renew that lease of yours."

"How?" said the peasant, opening wide his avaricious eyes.

"I'll sell you my property cheap."

"Nothing is cheap when we have to pay," said Violette, sententiously.

"I want to leave the neighborhood, and I'll let you have my farm of Mousseau, the buildings, granary, and cattle for fifty thousand francs."

"Really?"

"Does that suit you?"

"Hang it! I must think – "

"We'll talk about it – I shall want earnest money."

"I have no money."

"Well, a note."

"Can't give it."

"Tell me who sent you here to-day."

"I am on my way back from where I spent this afternoon, and I only stopped in to say good-evening."

"Back without your horse? What a fool you must take me for! You are lying, and you shall not have my farm."

"Well, to tell you the truth, it was monsieur Grevin who sent me. He said 'Violette, we want Michu; do you go and get him; if he isn't at home, wait for him.' I saw I should have to stay here all this evening."

"Are those sharks from Paris still at the chateau?"

"Ah! that I don't know; but there were people in the salon."

"You shall have my farm; we'll settle the terms now. Wife, go and get some wine to wash down the contract. Take the best Roussillon, the wine of the ex-marquis, – we are not babes. You'll find a couple of bottles on the empty cask near the door, and a bottle of white wine."

"Very good," said Violette, who never got drunk. "Let us drink."

"You have fifty thousand francs beneath the floor of your bedroom under your bed, pere Violette; you will give them to me two weeks after we sign the deed of sale before Grevin – " Violette stared at Michu and grew livid. "Ah! you came here to spy upon a Jacobin who had the honor to be president of the club at Arcis, and you imagine he will let you get the better of him! I have eyes, I saw where your tiles have been freshly cemented, and I concluded that you did not pry them up to plant wheat there. Come, drink."

Violette, much troubled, drank a large glass of wine without noticing the quality; terror had put a hot iron in his stomach, the brandy was not hotter than his cupidity. He would have given many things to be safely home and able to change the hiding-place of his treasure. The three women smiled.

"Do you like that wine?" said Michu, refilling his glass.

"Yes, I do."

After a good half-hour's decision on the time when the buyer might take possession, and on the various punctilios which the peasantry bring forward when concluding a bargain, – in the midst of assertions and counter-assertions, the filling and emptying of glasses, the giving of promises and denials, Violette suddenly fell forward with his head on the table, not tipsy, but dead-drunk. The instant that Michu saw his eyes blur he opened the window.

"Where's that scamp, Gaucher?" he said to his wife.

"In bed."

"You, Marianne," said the bailiff to his faithful servant, "stand in front of his door and watch him. You, mother, stay down here, and keep an eye on this spy; keep your eyes and ears open and don't unfasten the door to any one but Francois. It is a question of life or death," he added, in a deep voice. "Every creature beneath my roof must remember that I have not quitted it this night; all of you must assert that – even though your heads were on the block. Come," he said to Marthe, "come, wife, put on your shoes, take your coat, and let us be off! No questions – I go with you."

For the last three quarters of an hour the man's demeanor and glance were of despotic authority, all-powerful, irresistible, drawn from the same mysterious source from which great generals on fields of battle who inflame an army, great orators inspiring vast audiences, and (it must be said) great criminals perpetrating bold crimes derive their inspiration. At such times invincible influence seems to exhale from the head and issue from the tongue; the gesture even can inject the will of the one man into others. The three women knew that some dreadful crisis was at hand; without warning of its nature they felt it in the rapid actions of the man, whose countenance shone, whose forehead spoke, whose brilliant eyes glittered like stars; they saw it in the sweat that covered his brow to the roots of his hair, while more than once his voice vibrated with impatience and fury. Marthe obeyed passively. Armed to the teeth and with his gun over his shoulder Michu dashed into the avenue, followed by his wife. They soon reached the cross-roads where Francois was in waiting hidden among the bushes.

"The boy is intelligent," said Michu, when he caught sight of him.

These were his first words. His wife had rushed after him, unable to speak.

"Go back to the house, hide in a thick tree, and watch the country and the park," he said to his son. "We have all gone to bed, no one is stirring. Your grandmother will not open the door until you ask her to let you in. Remember every word I say to you. The life of your father and mother depends on it. No one must know we did not sleep at home."

After whispering these words to the boy, who instantly disappeared in the forest like an eel in the mud, Michu turned to his wife.

"Mount behind me," he said, "and pray that God be with us. Sit firm, the beast may die of it." So saying he kicked the horse with both heels, pressing him with his powerful knees, and the animal

sprang forward with the rapidity of a hunter, seeming to understand what his master wanted of him, and crossed the forest in fifteen minutes. Then Michu, who had not swerved from the shortest way, pulled up, found a spot at the edge of the woods from which he could see the roofs of the chateau of Cinq-Cygne lighted by the moon, tied his horse to a tree, and followed by his wife, gained a little eminence which overlooked the valley.

The chateau, which Marthe and Michu looked at together for a moment, makes a charming effect in the landscape. Though it has little extent and is of no importance whatever as architecture, yet archaeologically it is not without a certain interest. This old edifice of the fifteenth century, placed on an eminence, surrounded on all sides by a moat, or rather by deep, wide ditches always full of water, is built in cobble-stones buried in cement, the walls being seven feet thick. Its simplicity recalls the rough and warlike life of feudal days. The chateau, plain and unadorned, has two large reddish towers at either end, connected by a long main building with casement windows, the stone mullions of which, being roughly carved, bear some resemblance to vine-shoots. The stairway is outside the house, at the middle, in a sort of pentagonal tower entered through a small arched door. The interior of the ground-floor together with the rooms on the first storey were modernized in the time of Louis XIV., and the whole building is surmounted by an immense roof broken by casement windows with carved triangular pediments. Before the castle lies a vast green sward the trees of which had recently been cut down. On either side of the entrance bridge are two small dwellings where the gardeners live, connected across the road by a paltry iron railing without character, evidently modern. To right and left of the lawn, which is divided in two by a paved road-way, are the stables, cow-sheds, barns, wood-house, bakery, poultry-yard, and the offices, placed in what were doubtless the remains of two wings of the old building similar to those that were still standing. The two large towers, with their pepper-pot roofs which had not been rased, and the belfry of the middle tower, gave an air of distinction to the village. The church, also very old, showed near by its pointed steeple, which harmonized well with the solid masses of the castle. The moon brought out in full relief the various roofs and towers on which it played and sparkled.

Michu gazed at this baronial structure in a manner that upset all his wife's ideas about him; his face, now calm, wore a look of hope and also a sort of pride. His eyes scanned the horizon with a glance of defiance; he listened for sounds in the air. It was now nine o'clock; the moon was beginning to cast its light upon the margin of the forest and to illumine the little bluff on which they stood. The position struck him as dangerous and he left it, fearful of being seen. But no suspicious noise troubled the peace of the beautiful valley encircled on this side by the forest of Nodesme. Marthe, exhausted and trembling, was awaiting some explanation of their hurried ride. What was she engaged in? Was she to aid in a good deed or an evil one? At that instant Michu bent to his wife's ear and whispered: —

"Go the house and ask to speak to the Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne; when you see her beg her to speak to you alone. If no one can overhear you, say to her: 'Mademoiselle, the lives of your two cousins are in danger, and he who can explain the how and why is waiting to speak to you.' If she seems afraid, if she distrusts you, add these words: 'They are conspiring against the First Consul and the conspiracy is discovered.' Don't give your name; they distrust us too much."

Marthe raised her face towards her husband and said: —

"Can it be that you serve them?"

"What if I do?" he said, frowning, taking her words as a reproach.

"You don't understand me," cried Marthe, seizing his large hand and falling on her knees beside him as she kissed it and covered it with her tears.

"Go, go, you shall cry later," he said, kissing her vehemently.

When he no longer heard her step his eyes filled with tears. He had distrusted Marthe on account of her father's opinions; he had hidden the secrets of his life from her; but the beauty of her simple nature had suddenly appeared to him, just as the grandeur of his had, as suddenly, revealed itself to her. Marthe had passed in a moment from the deep humiliation caused by the degradation

of the man whose name she bore, to the exaltation given by a sense of his nobleness. The change was instantaneous, without transition; it was enough to make her tremble. She told him later that she went, as it were, through blood from the pavilion to the edge of the forest, and there was lifted to heaven, in a moment, among the angels. Michu, who had known he was not appreciated, and who mistook his wife's grieved and melancholy manner for lack of affection, and had left her to herself, living chiefly out of doors and reserving all his tenderness for his boy, instantly understood the meaning of her tears. She had cursed the part which her beauty and her father's will had forced her to take; but now happiness, in the midst of this great storm, played, with a beautiful flame like a vivid lightning about them. And it was lightning! Each thought of the last ten years of misconception, and they blamed themselves only. Michu stood motionless, his elbow on his gun, his chin on his hand, lost in deep reverie. Such a moment in a man's life makes him willing to accept the saddest moments of a painful past.

Marthe, agitated by the same thoughts as those of her husband, was also troubled in heart by the danger of the Simeuse brothers; for she now understood all, even the faces of the two Parisians, though she still could not explain to herself her husband's gun. She darted forward like a doe, and soon reached the road to the chateau. There she was surprised by the steps of a man following behind her; she turned, with a cry, and her husband's large hand closed her mouth.

"From the hill up there I saw the silver lace of the gendarmes' hats. Go in by the breach in the moat between Mademoiselle's tower and the stables. The dogs won't bark at you. Go through the garden and call the countess by the window; order them to saddle her horse, and ask her to come out through the breach. I'll be there, after discovering what the Parisians are planning, and how to escape them."

Danger, which seemed to be rolling like an avalanche upon them, gave wings to Marthe's feet.

CHAPTER IV. LAURENCE DE CINQ-CYGNE

The old Frank name of the Cinq-Cygnes and the Chargeboeufs was Duineff. Cinq-Cygne became that of the younger branch of the Chargeboeufs after the defence of a castle made, during their father's absence, by five daughters of that race, all remarkably fair, and of whom no one expected such heroism. One of the first Comtes de Champagne wished, by bestowing this pretty name, to perpetuate the memory of their deed as long as the family existed. Laurence, the last of her race, was, contrary to Salic law, heiress of the name, the arms, and the manor. She was therefore Comtesse de Cinq-Cygne in her own right; her husband would have to take both her name and her blazon, which bore for device the glorious answer made by the elder of the five sisters when summoned to surrender the castle, "We die singing." Worthy descendant of these noble heroines, Laurence was fair and lily-white as though nature had made her for a wager. The lines of her blue veins could be seen through the delicate close texture of her skin. Her beautiful golden hair harmonized delightfully with eyes of the deepest blue. Everything about her belonged to the type of delicacy. Within that fragile though active body, and in defiance as it were of its pearly whiteness, lived a soul like that of a man of noble nature; but no one, not even a close observer, would have suspected it from the gentle countenance and rounded features which, when seen in profile, bore some slight resemblance to those of a lamb. This extreme gentleness, though noble, had something of the stupidity of the little animal. "I look like a dreamy sheep," she would say, smiling. Laurence, who talked little, seemed not so much dreamy as dormant. But, did any important circumstance arise, the hidden Judith was revealed, sublime; and circumstances had, unfortunately, not been wanting.

At thirteen years of age, Laurence, after the events already related, was an orphan living in a house opposite to the empty space where so recently had stood one of the most curious specimens in France of sixteenth-century architecture, the hotel Cinq-Cygne. Monsieur d'Hauteserre, her relation, now her guardian, took the young heiress to live in the country at her chateau of Cinq-Cygne. That brave provincial gentleman, alarmed at the death of his brother, the Abbe d'Hauteserre, who was shot in the open square as he was about to escape in the dress of a peasant, was not in a position to defend the interests of his ward. He had two sons in the army of the princes, and every day, at the slightest unusual sound, he believed that the municipals of Arcis were coming to arrest him. Laurence, proud of having sustained a siege and of possessing the historic whiteness of her swan-like ancestors, despised the prudent cowardice of the old man who bent to the storm, and dreamed only of distinguishing herself. So, she boldly hung the portrait of Charlotte Corday on the walls of her poor salon at Cinq-Cygne, and crowned it with oak-leaves. She corresponded by messenger with her twin cousins, in defiance of the law, which punished the act, when discovered, with death. The messenger, who risked his life, brought back the answers. Laurence lived only, after the catastrophes at Troyes, for the triumph of the royal cause. After soberly judging Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre (who lived with her at the chateau de Cinq-Cygne), and recognizing their honest, but stolid natures, she put them outside the lines of her own life. She had, moreover, too good a mind and too sound a judgment to complain of their natures; always kind, amiable, and affectionate towards them, she nevertheless told them none of her secrets. Nothing forms a character so much as the practice of constant concealment in the bosom of a family.

After she attained her majority Laurence allowed Monsieur d'Hauteserre to manage her affairs as in the past. So long as her favorite mare was well-groomed, her maid Catherine dressed to please her, and Gothard the little page was suitably clothed, she cared for nothing else. Her thoughts were aimed too high to come down to occupations and interests which in other times than these would doubtless have pleased her. Dress was a small matter to her mind; moreover her cousins were not there to see her. She wore a dark-green habit when she rode, and a gown of some common woollen stuff with a cape trimmed with braid when she walked; in the house she was always seen in a silk

wrapper. Gothard, the little groom, a brave and clever lad of fifteen, attended her wherever she went, and she was nearly always out of doors, riding or hunting over the farms of Gondreville, without objection being made by either Michu or the farmers. She rode admirably well, and her cleverness in hunting was thought miraculous. In the country she was never called anything but "Mademoiselle" even during the Revolution.

Whoever has read the fine romance of "Rob Roy" will remember that rare woman for whose making Walter Scott's imagination abandoned its customary coldness, – Diana Vernon. The recollection will serve to make Laurence understood if, to the noble qualities of the Scottish huntress you add the restrained exaltation of Charlotte Corday, surpassing, however, the charming vivacity which rendered Diana so attractive. The young countess had seen her mother die, the Abbe d'Hauteserre shot down, the Marquis de Simeuse and his wife executed; her only brother had died of his wounds; her two cousins serving in Conde's army might be killed at any moment; and, finally, the fortunes of the Simeuse and the Cinq-Cygne families had been seized and wasted by the Republic without being of any benefit to the nation. Her grave demeanor, now lapsing into apparent stolidity, can be readily understood.

Monsieur d'Hauteserre proved an upright and most careful guardian. Under his administration Cinq-Cygne became a sort of farm. The good man, who was far more of a close manager than a knight of the old nobility, had turned the park and gardens to profit, and used their two hundred acres of grass and woodland as pasturage for horses and fuel for the family. Thanks to his severe economy the countess, on coming of age, had recovered by his investments in the State funds a competent fortune. In 1798 she possessed about twenty thousand francs a year from those sources, on which, in fact, some dividends were still due, and twelve thousand francs a year from the rentals at Cinq-Cygne, which had lately been renewed at a notable increase. Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre had provided for their old age by the purchase of an annuity of three thousand francs in the Tontines Lafarge. That fragment of their former means did not enable them to live elsewhere than at Cinq-Cygne, and Laurence's first act on coming to her majority was to give them the use for life of the wing of the chateau which they occupied.

The Hauteserres, as niggardly for their ward as they were for themselves, laid up every year nearly the whole of their annuity for the benefit of their sons, and kept the young heiress on miserable fare. The whole cost of the Cinq-Cygne household never exceeded five thousand francs a year. But Laurence, who condescended to no details, was satisfied. Her guardian and his wife, unconsciously ruled by the imperceptible influence of her strong character, which was felt even in little things, had ended by admiring her whom they had known and treated as a child, – a sufficiently rare feeling. But in her manner, her deep voice, her commanding eye, Laurence held that inexplicable power which rules all men, – even when its strength is mere appearance. To vulgar minds real depth is incomprehensible; it is perhaps for that reason that the populace is so prone to admire what it cannot understand. Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre, impressed by the habitual silence and erratic habits of the young girl, were constantly expecting some extraordinary thing of her.

Laurence, who did good intelligently and never allowed herself to be deceived, was held in the utmost respect by the peasantry although she was an aristocrat. Her sex, name, and great misfortunes, also the originality of her present life, contributed to give her authority over the inhabitants of the valley of Cinq-Cygne. She was sometimes absent for two days, attended by Gothard, but neither Monsieur nor Madame d'Hauteserre questioned her, on her return, as to the reasons of her absence. Please observe, however, that there was nothing odd or eccentric about Laurence. What she was and what she did was masked, as it were, by a feminine and even fragile appearance. Her heart was full of extreme sensibility, though her head contained a stoical firmness and the virile gift of resolution. Her clear-seeing eyes knew not how to weep; but no one would have imagined that the delicate white wrist with its tracery of blue veins could defy that of the boldest horseman. Her hand, so noble, so flexible, could handle gun or pistol with the ease of a practised marksman. She always wore when

out of doors the coquettish little cap with visor and green veil which women wear on horseback. Her delicate fair face, thus protected, and her white throat tied with a black cravat, were never injured by her long rides in all weathers.

Under the Directory and at the beginning of the Consulate, Laurence had been able to escape the observation of others; but since the government had become a more settled thing, the new authorities, the prefect of the Aube, Malin's friends, and Malin himself had endeavored to undermine her in the community. Her preoccupying thought was the overthrow of Bonaparte, whose ambition and its triumphs excited the anger of her soul, – a cold, deliberate anger. The obscure and hidden enemy of a man at the pinnacle of glory, she kept her gaze upon him from the depths of her valley and her forests, with relentless fixity; there were times when she thought of killing him in the roads about Malmaison or Saint-Cloud. Plans for the execution of this idea may have been the cause of many of her past actions, but having been initiated, after the peace of Amiens, into the conspiracy of the men who expected to make the 18th Brumaire recoil upon the First Consul, she had thenceforth subordinated her faculties and her hatred to their vast and well laid scheme, which was to strike at Bonaparte externally by the vast coalition of Russia, Austria, and Prussia (vanquished at Austerlitz) and internally by the coalition of men politically opposed to each other, but united by their common hatred of a man whose death some of them were meditating, like Laurence herself, without shrinking from the word assassination. This young girl, so fragile to the eye, so powerful to those who knew her well, was at the present moment the faithful guide and assistant of the exiled gentlemen who came from England to take part in this deadly enterprise.

Fouche relied on the co-operation of the *emigres* everywhere beyond the Rhine to lure the Duc d'Enghien into the plot. The presence of that prince in the Baden territory, not far from Strasburg, gave much weight later to the accusation. The great question of whether the prince really knew of the enterprise, and was waiting on the frontier to enter France on its success, is one of those secrets about which, as about several others, the house of Bourbon has maintained an unbroken silence. As the history of that period recedes into the past, impartial historians will declare the imprudence, to say the least, of the Duc d'Enghien in placing himself close to the frontier at a time when a vast conspiracy was about to break forth, the secret of which was undoubtedly known to every member of the Bourbon family.

The caution which Malin displayed in talking with Grevin in the open air, Laurence applied to her every action. She met the emissaries and conferred with them either at various points in the Nodesme forest, or beyond the valley of the Cinq-Cygne, between the villages of Sezanne and Brienne. Often she rode forty miles on a stretch with Gothard, and returned to Cinq-Cygne without the least sign of weariness or pre-occupation on her fair young face.

Some years earlier, Laurence had seen in the eyes of a little cow-boy, then nine years old, the artless admiration which children feel for everything that is out of the common way. She made him her page, and taught him to groom a horse with the nicety and care of an Englishman. She saw in the lad a desire to do well, a bright intelligence, and a total absence of sly motives; she tested his devotion and found he had not only mind but nobility of character; he never dreamed of reward. The young girl trained this soul that was still so young; she was good to him, good with dignity; she attached him to her by attaching herself to him, and by herself polishing a nature that was half wild, without destroying its freshness or its simplicity. When she had sufficiently tested the almost canine fidelity she had nurtured, Gothard became her intelligent and ingenuous accomplice. The little peasant, whom no one could suspect, went from Cinq-Cygne to Nancy, and often returned before any one had missed him from the neighborhood. He knew how to practise all the tricks of a spy. The extreme distrust and caution his mistress had taught him did not change his natural self. Gothard, who possessed all the craft of a woman, the candor of a child, and the ceaseless observation of a conspirator, hid every one of these admirable qualities beneath the torpor and dull ignorance of a country lad. The little fellow had a silly, weak, and clumsy appearance; but once at work he was active

as a fish; he escaped like an eel; he understood, as the dogs do, the merest glance; he nosed a thought. His good fat face, both round and red, his sleepy brown eyes, his hair, cut in the peasant fashion, his clothes, and his slow growth gave him the appearance of a child of ten.

The two young d'Hauteserres and the twin brothers Simeuse, under the guidance of their cousin Laurence, who had been watching over their safety and that of the other *emigres* who accompanied them from Strasburg to Bar-sur-Aube, had just passed through Alsace and Lorraine, and were now in Champagne while other conspirators, not less bold, were entering France by the cliffs of Normandy. Dressed as workmen the d'Hauteserres and the Simeuse twins had walked from forest to forest, guided on their way by relays of persons, chosen by Laurence during the last three months from among the least suspected of the Bourbon adherents living in each neighborhood. The *emigres* slept by day and travelled by night. Each brought with him two faithful soldiers; one of whom went before to warn of danger, the other behind to protect a retreat. Thanks to these military precautions, this valuable detachment had at last reached, without accident, the forest of Nodesme, which was chosen as the rendezvous. Twenty-seven other gentlemen had entered France from Switzerland and crossed Burgundy, guided towards Paris with the same caution.

Monsieur de Riviere counted on collecting five hundred men, one hundred of whom were young nobles, the officers of this sacred legion. Monsieur de Polignac and Monsieur de Riviere, whose conduct as chiefs of this advance was most remarkable, afterwards preserved an impenetrable secrecy as to the names of those of their accomplices who were not discovered. It may be said, therefore, now that the Restoration has made matters clearer, that Bonaparte never knew the extent of the danger he then ran, any more than England knew the peril she had escaped from the camp at Boulogne; and yet the police of France was never more intelligently or ably managed.

At the period when this history begins, a coward – for cowards are always to be found in conspiracies which are not confined to a small number of equally strong men – a sworn confederate, brought face to face with death, gave certain information, happily insufficient to cover the extent of the conspiracy, but precise enough to show the object of the enterprise. The police had therefore, as Malin told Grevin, left the conspirators at liberty, though all the while watching them, hoping to discover the ramifications of the plot. Nevertheless, the government found its hand to a certain extent forced by Georges Cadoudal, a man of action who took counsel of himself only, and who was hiding in Paris with twenty-five *chouans* for the purpose of attacking the First Consul.

Laurence combined both hatred and love within her breast. To destroy Bonaparte and bring back the Bourbons was to recover Gondreville and make the fortune of her cousins. The two sentiments, one the counterpart of the other, were sufficient, more especially at twenty-three years of age, to excite all the faculties of her soul and all the powers of her being. So, for the last two months, she had seemed to the inhabitants of Cinq-Cygne more beautiful than at any other period of her life. Her cheeks became rosy; hope gave pride to her brow; but when old d'Hauteserre read the Gazette at night and discussed the conservative course of the First Consul she lowered her eyes to conceal her passionate hopes of the coming fall of that enemy of the Bourbons.

No one at the chateau had the faintest idea that the young countess had met her cousins the night before. The two sons of Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre had passed the preceding night in Laurence's own room, under the same roof with their father and mother; and Laurence, after knowing them safely in bed had gone between one and two o'clock in the morning to a rendezvous with her cousins in the forest, where she hid them in the deserted hut of a wood-dealer's agent. The following day, certain of seeing them again, she showed no signs of her joy; nothing about her betrayed emotion; she was able to efface all traces of pleasure at having met them again; in fact, she was impassible. Catherine, her pretty maid, daughter of her former nurse, and Gothard, both in the secret, modelled their behavior upon hers. Catherine was nineteen years old. At that age a girl is a fanatic and would let her throat be cut before betraying a thought of one she loves. As for Gothard, merely to inhale

the perfume which the countess used in her hair and among her clothes he would have born the rack without a word.

CHAPTER V. ROYALIST HOMES AND PORTRAITS UNDER THE CONSULATE

At the moment when Marthe, driven by the imminence of the peril, was gliding with the rapidity of a shadow towards the breach of which Michu had told her, the salon of the chateau of Cinq-Cygne presented a peaceful sight. Its occupants were so far from suspecting the storm that was about to burst upon them that their quiet aspect would have roused the compassion of any one who knew their situation. In the large fireplace, the mantel of which was adorned with a mirror with shepherdesses in paniers painted on its frame, burned a fire such as can be seen only in chateaus bordering on forests. At the corner of this fireplace, on a large square sofa of gilded wood with a magnificent brocaded cover, the young countess lay as it were extended, in an attitude of utter weariness. Returning at six o'clock from the confines of Brie, having played the part of scout to the four gentlemen whom she guided safely to their last halting-place before they entered Paris, she had found Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre just finishing their dinner. Pressed by hunger she sat down to table without changing either her muddy habit or her boots. Instead of doing so at once after dinner, she was suddenly overcome with fatigue and allowed her head with its beautiful fair curls to drop on the back of the sofa, her feet being supported in front of her by a stool. The warmth of the fire had dried the mud on her habit and on her boots. Her doeskin gloves and the little peaked cap with its green veil and a whip lay on the table where she had flung them. She looked sometimes at the old Boule clock which stood on the mantelshelf between the candelabra, perhaps to judge if her four conspirators were asleep, and sometimes at the card-table in front of the fire where Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre, the cure of Cinq-Cygne, and his sister were playing a game of boston.

Even if these personages were not embedded in this drama, their portraits would have the merit of representing one of the aspects of the aristocracy after its overthrow in 1793. From this point of view, a sketch of the salon at Cinq-Cygne has the raciness of history seen in dishabille.

Monsieur d'Hauteserre, then fifty-two years of age, tall, spare, high-colored, and robust in health, would have seemed the embodiment of vigor if it were not for a pair of porcelain blue eyes, the glance of which denoted the most absolute simplicity. In his face, which ended in a long pointed chin, there was, judging by the rules of design, an unnatural distance between his nose and mouth which gave him a submissive air, wholly in keeping with his character, which harmonized, in fact, with other details of his appearance. His gray hair, flattened by his hat, which he wore nearly all day, looked much like a skull-cap on his head, and defined its pear-shaped outline. His forehead, much wrinkled by life in the open air and by constant anxieties, was flat and expressionless. His aquiline nose redeemed the face somewhat; but the sole indication of any strength of character lay in the bushy eyebrows which retained their blackness, and in the brilliant coloring of his skin. These signs were in some respects not misleading, for the worthy gentlemen, though simple and very gentle, was Catholic and monarchical in faith, and no consideration on earth could make him change his views. Nevertheless he would have let himself be arrested without an effort at defence, and would have gone to the scaffold quietly. His annuity of three thousand francs kept him from emigrating. He therefore obeyed the government *de facto* without ceasing to love the royal family and to pray for their return, though he would firmly have refused to compromise himself by any effort in their favor. He belonged to that class of royalists who ceaselessly remembered that they were beaten and robbed; and who remained thenceforth dumb, economical, rancorous, without energy; incapable of abjuring the past, but equally incapable of sacrifice; waiting to greet triumphant royalty; true to religion and true to the priesthood, but firmly resolved to bear in silence the shocks of fate. Such an attitude cannot be considered that of maintaining opinions, it becomes sheer obstinacy. Action is the essence of party. Without intelligence, but loyal, miserly as a peasant yet noble in demeanor, bold in his wishes but discreet in word and action, turning all things to profit, willing even to be made mayor of Cinq-Cygne,

Monsieur d'Hauteserre was an admirable representative of those honorable gentlemen on whose brow God Himself has written the word *mites*, – Frenchmen who burrowed in their country homes and let the storms of the Revolution pass above their heads; who came once more to the surface under the Restoration, rich with their hidden savings, proud of their discreet attachment to the monarchy, and who, after 1830, recovered their estates.

Monsieur d'Hauteserre's costume, expressive envelope of his distinctive character, described to the eye both the man and his period. He always wore one of those nut-colored great-coats with small collars which the Duc d'Orleans made the fashion after his return from England, and which were, during the Revolution, a sort of compromise between the hideous popular garments and the elegant surtouts of the aristocracy. His velvet waistcoat with flowered stripes, the style of which recalled those of Robespierre and Saint-Just, showed the upper part of a shirt-frill in fine plaits. He still wore breeches; but his were of coarse blue cloth, with burnished steel buckles. His stockings of black spun-silk defined his deer-like legs, the feet of which were shod in thick shoes, held in place by gaiters of black cloth. He retained the former fashion of a muslin cravat in innumerable folds fastened by a gold buckle at the throat. The worthy man had not intended an act of political eclecticism in adopting this costume, which combined the styles of peasant, revolutionist, and aristocrat; he simply and innocently obeyed the dictates of circumstances.

Madame d'Hauteserre, forty years of age and wasted by emotions, had a faded face which seemed to be always posing for its portrait. A lace cap, trimmed with bows of white satin, contributed singularly to give her a solemn air. She still wore powder, in spite of a white kerchief, and a gown of puce-colored silk with tight sleeves and full skirt, the sad last garments of Marie-Antoinette. Her nose was pinched, her chin sharp, the whole face nearly triangular, the eyes worn-out with weeping; but she now wore a touch of rouge which brightened their grayness. She took snuff, and each time that she did so she employed all the pretty precautions of the fashionable women of her early days; the details of this snuff-taking constituted a ceremony which could be explained by one fact – she had very pretty hands.

For the last two years the former tutor of the Simeuse twins, a friend of the late Abbe d'Hauteserre, named Goujet, Abbe des Minimes, had taken charge of the parish of Cinq-Cygne out of friendship for the d'Hauteserres and the young countess. His sister, Mademoiselle Goujet, who possessed a little income of seven hundred francs, added that sum to the meagre salary of her brother and kept his house. Neither church nor parsonage had been sold during the Revolution on account of their small value. The abbe and his sister lived close to the chateau, for the wall of the parsonage garden and that of the park were the same in places. Twice a week the pair dined at the chateau, but they came every evening to play boston with the d'Hauteserres; for Laurence, unable to play a game, did not even know one card from another.

The Abbe Goujet, an old man with white hair and a face as white as that of an old woman, endowed with a kindly smile and a gentle and persuasive voice, redeemed the insipidity of his rather mincing face by a fine intellectual brow and a pair of keen eyes. Of medium height, and very well made, he still wore the old-fashioned black coat, silver shoe-buckles, breeches, black silk stockings, and a black waistcoat on which lay his clerical bands, giving him a distinguished air which detracted nothing from his dignity. This abbe, who became bishop of Troyes after the Restoration, had long made a study of young people and fully understood the noble character of the young countess; he appreciated her at her full value, and had shown her, from the first, a respectful deference which contributed much to her independence at Cinq-Cygne, for it led the austere old lady and the kind old gentleman to yield to the young girl, who by rights should have yielded to them. For the last six months the abbe had watched Laurence with the intuition peculiar to priests, the most sagacious of men; and although he did not know that this girl of twenty-three was thinking of overturning Bonaparte as she lay there twisting with slender fingers the frogged lacing of her riding-habit, he was well aware that she was agitated by some great project.

Mademoiselle Goujet was one of those unmarried women whose portrait can be drawn in one word which will enable the least imaginative mind to picture her; she was ungainly. She knew her own ugliness and was the first to laugh at it, showing her long teeth, yellow as her complexion and her bony hands. She was gay and hearty. She wore the famous short gown of former days, a very full skirt with pockets full of keys, a cap with ribbons and a false front. She was forty years of age very early, but had, so she said, caught up with herself by keeping at that age for twenty years. She revered the nobility; and knew well how to preserve her own dignity by giving to persons of noble birth the respect and deference that were due to them.

This little company was a god-send to Madame d'Hauteserre, who had not, like her husband, rural occupations, nor, like Laurence, the tonic of hatred, to enable her to bear the dulness of a retired life. Many things had happened to ameliorate that life within the last six years. The restoration of Catholic worship allowed the faithful to fulfil their religious duties, which play more of a part in country life than elsewhere. Protected by the conservative edicts of the First Consul, Monsieur and Madame d'Hauteserre had been able to correspond with their sons, and no longer in dread of what might happen to them could even hope for the erasure of their names from the lists of the proscribed and their consequent return to France. The Treasury had lately made up the arrearages and now paid its dividends promptly; so that the d'Hauteserres received, over and above their annuity, about eight thousand francs a year. The old man congratulated himself on the sagacity of his foresight in having put all his savings, amounting to twenty thousand francs, together with those of his ward, in the public Funds before the 18th Brumaire, which, as we all know, sent those stocks up from twelve to eighteen francs.

The chateau of Cinq-Cygne had long been empty and denuded of furniture. The prudent guardian was careful not to alter its aspect during the revolutionary troubles; but after the peace of Amiens he made a journey to Troyes and brought back various relics of the pillaged mansions which he obtained from the dealers in second-hand furniture. The salon was furnished for the first time since their occupation of the house. Handsome curtains of white brocade with green flowers, from the hotel de Simeuse, draped the six windows of the salon, in which the family were now assembled. The walls of this vast room were entirely of wood, with panels encased in beaded mouldings with masks at the angles; the whole painted in two shades of gray. The spaces over the four doors were filled with those designs, painted in cameo of two colors, which were so much in vogue under Louis XV. Monsieur d'Hauteserre had picked up at Troyes certain gilded pier-tables, a sofa in green damask, a crystal chandelier, a card-table of marquetry, among other things that served him to restore the chateau. In 1792 all the furniture of the house had been taken or destroyed, for the pillage of the mansions in town was imitated in the valley. Each time that the old man went to Troyes he returned with some relic of the former splendor, sometimes a fine carpet for the floor of the salon, at other times part of a dinner service, or a bit of rare old porcelain of either Sevres or Dresden. During the last six months he had ventured to dig up the family silver, which the cook had buried in the cellar of a little house belonging to him at the end of one of the long faubourgs in Troyes.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.