

АРТУР КОНАН ДОЙЛ

UNCLE BERNAC: A
MEMORY OF THE EMPIRE

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Arthur Conan Doyle

Uncle Bernac: A Memory of the Empire

CHAPTER I

THE COAST OF FRANCE

I dare say that I had already read my uncle's letter a hundred times, and I am sure that I knew it by heart. None the less I took it out of my pocket, and, sitting on the side of the lugger, I went over it again with as much attention as if it were for the first time. It was written in a prim, angular hand, such as one might expect from a man who had begun life as a village attorney, and it was addressed to Louis de Laval, to the care of William Hargreaves, of the Green Man in Ashford, Kent. The landlord had many a hogshead of untaxed French brandy from the Normandy coast, and the letter had found its way by the same hands.

'My dear nephew Louis,' said the letter, 'now that your father is dead, and that you are alone in the world, I am sure that you will not wish to carry on the feud which has existed between the two halves of the family. At the time of the troubles your father was drawn towards the side of the King, and I towards that of the people, and it ended, as you know, by his having to fly from the country, and by my becoming the possessor of the estates of Grosbois. No doubt it is very hard that you should find yourself in a different position to your ancestors, but I am sure that you would rather that the land should be held by a Bernac than by a stranger. From the brother of your mother you will at least always meet with sympathy and consideration.

'And now I have some advice for you. You know that I have always been a Republican, but it has become evident to me that there is no use in fighting against fate, and that Napoleon's power is far too great to be shaken. This being so, I have tried to serve him, for it is well to howl when you are among wolves. I have been able to do so much for him that he has become my very good friend, so that I may ask him what I like in return. He is now, as you are probably aware, with the army at Boulogne, within a few miles of Grosbois. If you will come over at once he will certainly forget the hostility of your father in consideration of the services of your uncle. It is true that your name is still proscribed, but my influence with the Emperor will set that matter right. Come to me, then, come at once, and come with confidence. 'Your uncle, 'C. BERNAC.'

So much for the letter, but it was the outside which had puzzled me most. A seal of red wax had been affixed at either end, and my uncle had apparently used his thumb as a signet. One could see the little rippling edges of a coarse skin imprinted upon the wax. And then above one of the seals there was written in English the two words, 'Don't come.' It was hastily scrawled, and whether by a man or a woman it was impossible to say; but there it stared me in the face, that sinister addition to an invitation.

'Don't come!' Had it been added by this unknown uncle of mine on account of some sudden change in his plans? Surely that was inconceivable, for why in that case should he send the invitation at all? Or was it placed there by some one else who wished to warn me from accepting this offer of hospitality? The letter was in French. The warning was in English. Could it have been added in England? But the seals were unbroken, and how could any one in England know what were the contents of the letter?

And then, as I sat there with the big sail humming like a shell above my head and the green water hissing beside me, I thought over all that I had heard of this uncle of mine. My father, the descendant of one of the proudest and oldest families in France, had chosen beauty and virtue rather than rank in his wife. Never for an hour had she given him cause to regret it; but this lawyer brother

of hers had, as I understood, offended my father by his slavish obsequiousness in days of prosperity and his venomous enmity in the days of trouble. He had hounded on the peasants until my family had been compelled to fly from the country, and had afterwards aided Robespierre in his worst excesses, receiving as a reward the castle and estate of Grosbois, which was our own. At the fall of Robespierre he had succeeded in conciliating Barras, and through every successive change he still managed to gain a fresh tenure of the property. Now it appeared from his letter that the new Emperor of France had also taken his part, though why he should befriend a man with such a history, and what service my Republican uncle could possibly render to him, were matters upon which I could form no opinion.

And now you will ask me, no doubt, why I should accept the invitation of such a man – a man whom my father had always stigmatised as a usurper and a traitor. It is easier to speak of it now than then, but the fact was that we of the new generation felt it very irksome and difficult to carry on the bitter quarrels of the last. To the older *emigres* the clock of time seemed to have stopped in the year 1792, and they remained for ever with the loves and the hatreds of that era fixed indelibly upon their souls. They had been burned into them by the fiery furnace through which they had passed. But we, who had grown up upon a strange soil, understood that the world had moved, and that new issues had arisen. We were inclined to forget these feuds of the last generation. France to us was no longer the murderous land of the *sans-culotte* and the guillotine basket; it was rather the glorious queen of war, attacked by all and conquering all, but still so hard pressed that her scattered sons could hear her call to arms for ever sounding in their ears. It was that call more than my uncle's letter which was taking me over the waters of the Channel.

For long my heart had been with my country in her struggle, and yet while my father lived I had never dared to say so; for to him, who had served under Conde and fought at Quiberon, it would have seemed the blackest treason. But after his death there was no reason why I should not return to the land of my birth, and my desire was the stronger because Eugenie – the same Eugenie who has been thirty years my wife – was of the same way of thinking as myself. Her parents were a branch of the de Choiseuls, and their prejudices were even stronger than those of my father. Little did they think what was passing in the minds of their children. Many a time when they were mourning a French victory in the parlour we were both capering with joy in the garden. There was a little window, all choked round with laurel bushes, in the corner of the bare brick house, and there we used to meet at night, the dearer to each other from our difference with all who surrounded us. I would tell her my ambitions; she would strengthen them by her enthusiasm. And so all was ready when the time came.

But there was another reason besides the death of my father and the receipt of this letter from my uncle. Ashford was becoming too hot to hold me. I will say this for the English, that they were very generous hosts to the French emigrants. There was not one of us who did not carry away a kindly remembrance of the land and its people. But in every country there are overbearing, swaggering folk, and even in quiet, sleepy Ashford we were plagued by them. There was one young Kentish squire, Farley was his name, who had earned a reputation in the town as a bully and a roisterer. He could not meet one of us without uttering insults not merely against the present French Government, which might have been excusable in an English patriot, but against France itself and all Frenchmen. Often we were forced to be deaf in his presence, but at last his conduct became so intolerable that I determined to teach him a lesson. There were several of us in the coffee-room at the Green Man one evening, and he, full of wine and malice, was heaping insults upon the French, his eyes creeping round to me every moment to see how I was taking it. 'Now, Monsieur de Laval,' he cried, putting his rude hand upon my shoulder, 'here is a toast for you to drink. This is to the arm of Nelson which strikes down the French.' He stood leering at me to see if I would drink it. 'Well, sir,' said I, 'I will drink your toast if you will drink mine in return.' 'Come on, then!' said he. So we drank. 'Now, monsieur, let us have your toast,' said he. 'Fill your glass, then,' said I. 'It is full now.' 'Well, then, here's to the cannon-ball which carried off that arm!' In an instant I had a glass of port wine running down my face, and within

an hour a meeting had been arranged. I shot him through the shoulder, and that night, when I came to the little window, Eugenie plucked off some of the laurel leaves and stuck them in my hair.

There were no legal proceedings about the duel, but it made my position a little difficult in the town, and it will explain, with other things, why I had no hesitation in accepting my unknown uncle's invitation, in spite of the singular addition which I found upon the cover. If he had indeed sufficient influence with the Emperor to remove the proscription which was attached to our name, then the only barrier which shut me off from my country would be demolished.

You must picture me all this time as sitting upon the side of the lugger and turning my prospects and my position over in my head. My reverie was interrupted by the heavy hand of the English skipper dropping abruptly upon my arm.

'Now then, master,' said he, it's time you were stepping into the dingey.'

I do not inherit the politics of the aristocrats, but I have never lost their sense of personal dignity. I gently pushed away his polluting hand, and I remarked that we were still a long way from the shore.

'Well, you can do as you please,' said he roughly; 'I'm going no nearer, so you can take your choice of getting into the dingey or of swimming for it.'

It was in vain that I pleaded that he had been paid his price. I did not add that that price meant that the watch which had belonged to three generations of de Lavals was now lying in the shop of a Dover goldsmith.

'Little enough, too!' he cried harshly. 'Down sail, Jim, and bring her to! Now, master, you can step over the side, or you can come back to Dover, but I don't take the Vixen a cable's length nearer to Ambleteuse Beef with this gale coming up from the sou'-west.'

'In that case I shall go,' said I.

'You can lay your life on that!' he answered, and laughed in so irritating a fashion that I half turned upon him with the intention of chastising him. One is very helpless with these fellows, however, for a serious affair is of course out of the question, while if one uses a cane upon them they have a vile habit of striking with their hands, which gives them an advantage. The Marquis de Chamfort told me that, when he first settled in Sutton at the time of the emigration, he lost a tooth when reproving an unruly peasant. I made the best of a necessity, therefore, and, shrugging my shoulders, I passed over the side of the lugger into the little boat. My bundle was dropped in after me – conceive to yourself the heir of all the de Lavals travelling with a single bundle for his baggage! – and two seamen pushed her off, pulling with long slow strokes towards the low-lying shore.

There was certainly every promise of a wild night, for the dark cloud which had rolled up over the setting sun was now frayed and ragged at the edges, extending a good third of the way across the heavens. It had split low down near the horizon, and the crimson glare of the sunset beat through the gap, so that there was the appearance of fire with a monstrous reek of smoke. A red dancing belt of light lay across the broad slate-coloured ocean, and in the centre of it the little black craft was wallowing and tumbling. The two seamen kept looking up at the heavens, and then over their shoulders at the land, and I feared every moment that they would put back before the gale burst. I was filled with apprehension every time when the end of their pull turned their faces skyward, and it was to draw their attention away from the storm-drift that I asked them what the lights were which had begun to twinkle through the dusk both to the right and to the left of us.

'That's Boulogne to the north, and Etaples upon the south,' said one of the seamen civilly.

Boulogne! Etaples! How the words came back to me! It was to Boulogne that in my boyhood we had gone down for the summer bathing. Could I not remember as a little lad trotting along by my father's side as he paced the beach, and wondering why every fisherman's cap flew off at our approach? And as to Etaples, it was thence that we had fled for England, when the folks came raving to the pier-head as we passed, and I joined my thin voice to my father's as he shrieked back at them, for a stone had broken my mother's knee, and we were all frenzied with our fear and our hatred. And

here they were, these places of my childhood, twinkling to the north and south of me, while there, in the darkness between them, and only ten miles off at the furthest, lay my own castle, my own land of Grosbois, where the men of my blood had lived and died long before some of us had gone across with Duke William to conquer the proud island over the water. How I strained my eager eyes through the darkness as I thought that the distant black keep of our fortalice might even now be visible!

'Yes, sir,' said the seaman, 'tis a fine stretch of lonesome coast, and many is the cock of your hackle that I have helped ashore there.'

'What do you take me for, then?' I asked.

'Well, 'tis no business of mine, sir,' he answered. 'There are some trades that had best not even be spoken about.'

'You think that I am a conspirator?'

'Well, master, since you have put a name to it. Lor' love you, sir, we're used to it.'

'I give you my word that I am none.'

'An escaped prisoner, then?'

'No, nor that either.'

The man leaned upon his oar, and I could see in the gloom that his face was thrust forward, and that it was wrinkled with suspicion.

'If you're one of Boney's spies – ' he cried.

'I! A spy!' The tone of my voice was enough to convince him.

'Well,' said he, 'I'm darned if I know what you are. But if you'd been a spy I'd ha' had no hand in landing you, whatever the skipper might say.'

'Mind you, I've no word to say against Boney,' said the other seaman, speaking in a very thick rumbling voice. 'He's been a rare good friend to the poor mariner.'

It surprised me to hear him speak so, for the virulence of feeling against the new French Emperor in England exceeded all belief, and high and low were united in their hatred of him; but the sailor soon gave me a clue to his politics.

'If the poor mariner can run in his little bit of coffee and sugar, and run out his silk and his brandy, he has Boney to thank for it,' said he. 'The merchants have had their spell, and now it's the turn of the poor mariner.'

I remembered then that Buonaparte was personally very popular amongst the smugglers, as well he might be, seeing that he had made over into their hands all the trade of the Channel. The seaman continued to pull with his left hand, but he pointed with his right over the slate-coloured dancing waters.

'There's Boney himself,' said he.

You who live in a quieter age cannot conceive the thrill which these simple words sent through me. It was but ten years since we had first heard of this man with the curious Italian name – think of it, ten years, the time that it takes for a private to become a non-commissioned officer, or a clerk to win a fifty-pound advance in his salary. He had sprung in an instant out of nothing into everything. One month people were asking who he was, the next he had broken out in the north of Italy like the plague; Venice and Genoa withered at the touch of this swarthy ill-nourished boy. He cowed the soldiers in the field, and he outwitted the statesmen in the council chamber. With a frenzy of energy he rushed to the east, and then, while men were still marvelling at the way in which he had converted Egypt into a French department, he was back again in Italy and had beaten Austria for the second time to the earth. He travelled as quickly as the rumour of his coming; and where he came there were new victories, new combinations, the crackling of old systems and the blurring of ancient lines of frontier. Holland, Savoy, Switzerland – they were become mere names upon the map. France was eating into Europe in every direction. They had made him Emperor, this beardless artillery officer, and without an effort he had crushed down those Republicans before whom the oldest king and the proudest nobility of Europe had been helpless. So it came about that we, who watched him dart

from place to place like the shuttle of destiny, and who heard his name always in connection with some new achievement and some new success, had come at last to look upon him as something more than human, something monstrous, overshadowing France and menacing Europe. His giant presence loomed over the continent, and so deep was the impression which his fame had made in my mind that, when the English sailor pointed confidently over the darkening waters, and cried 'There's Boney!' I looked up for the instant with a foolish expectation of seeing some gigantic figure, some elemental creature, dark, inchoate, and threatening, brooding over the waters of the Channel. Even now, after the long gap of years and the knowledge of his downfall, that great man casts his spell upon you, but all that you read and all that you hear cannot give you an idea of what his name meant in the days when he was at the summit of his career.

What actually met my eye was very different from this childish expectation of mine. To the north there was a long low cape, the name of which has now escaped me. In the evening light it had been of the same greyish green tint as the other headlands; but now, as the darkness fell, it gradually broke into a dull glow, like a cooling iron. On that wild night, seen and lost with the heave and sweep of the boat, this lurid streak carried with it a vague but sinister suggestion. The red line splitting the darkness might have been a giant half-forged sword-blade with its point towards England.

'What is it, then?' I asked.

'Just what I say, master,' said he. 'It's one of Boney's armies, with Boney himself in the middle of it as like as not. Them is their camp fires, and you'll see a dozen such between this and Ostend. He's audacious enough to come across, is little Boney, if he could dowse Lord Nelson's other eye; but there's no chance for him until then, and well he knows it.'

'How can Lord Nelson know what he is doing?' I asked.

The man pointed out over my shoulder into the darkness, and far on the horizon I perceived three little twinkling lights.

'Watch dog,' said he, in his husky voice.

'Andromeda. Forty-four,' added his companion.

I have often thought of them since, the long glow upon the land, and the three little lights upon the sea, standing for so much, for the two great rivals face to face, for the power of the land and the power of the water, for the centuries-old battle, which may last for centuries to come. And yet, Frenchman as I am, do I not know that the struggle is already decided? – for it lies between the childless nation and that which has a lusty young brood springing up around her. If France falls she dies, but if England falls how many nations are there who will carry her speech, her traditions and her blood on into the history of the future?

The land had been looming darker, and the thudding of waves upon the sand sounded louder every instant upon my ears. I could already see the quick dancing gleam of the surf in front of me. Suddenly, as I peered through the deepening shadow, a long dark boat shot out from it, like a trout from under a stone, making straight in our direction.

'A guard boat!' cried one of the seamen.

'Bill, boy, we're done!' said the other, and began to stuff something into his sea boot.

But the boat swerved at the sight of us, like a shying horse, and was off in another direction as fast as eight frantic oars could drive her. The seamen stared after her and wiped their brows. 'Her conscience don't seem much easier than our own,' said one of them. 'I made sure it was the preventives.'

'Looks to me as if you weren't the only queer cargo on the coast to-night, mister,' remarked his comrade. 'What could she be?'

'Cursed if I know what she was. I rammed a cake of good Trinidad tobacco into my boot when I saw her. I've seen the inside of a French prison before now. Give way, Bill, and have it over.'

A minute later, with a low grating sound, we ran aground upon a gravelly leach. My bundle was thrown ashore, I stepped after it, and a seaman pushed the prow off again, springing in as his

comrade backed her into deep water. Already the glow in the west had vanished, the storm-cloud was half up the heavens, and a thick blackness had gathered over the ocean. As I turned to watch the vanishing boat a keen wet blast flapped in my face, and the air was filled with the high piping of the wind and with the deep thunder of the sea.

And thus it was that, on a wild evening in the early spring of the year 1805, I, Louis de Laval, being in the twenty-first year of my age, returned, after an exile of thirteen years, to the country of which my family had for many centuries been the ornament and support. She had treated us badly, this country; she had repaid our services by insult, exile, and confiscation. But all that was forgotten as I, the only de Laval of the new generation, dropped upon my knees upon her sacred soil, and, with the strong smell of the seaweed in my nostrils, pressed my lips upon the wet and pringling gravel.

CHAPTER II

THE SALT-MARSH

When a man has reached his mature age he can rest at that point of vantage, and cast his eyes back at the long road along which he has travelled, lying with its gleams of sunshine and its stretches of shadow in the valley behind him. He knows then its whence and its whither, and the twists and bends which were so full of promise or of menace as he approached them lie exposed and open to his gaze. So plain is it all that he can scarce remember how dark it may have seemed to him, or how long he once hesitated at the cross roads. Thus when he tries to recall each stage of the journey he does so with the knowledge of its end, and can no longer make it clear, even to himself, how it may have seemed to him at the time. And yet, in spite of the strain of years, and the many passages which have befallen me since, there is no time of my life which comes back so very clearly as that gusty evening, and to this day I cannot feel the briny wholesome whiff of the seaweed without being carried back, with that intimate feeling of reality which only the sense of smell can confer, to the wet shingle of the French beach.

When I had risen from my knees, the first thing that I did was to put my purse into the inner pocket of my coat. I had taken it out in order to give a gold piece to the sailor who had handed me ashore, though I have little doubt that the fellow was both wealthier and of more assured prospects than myself. I had actually drawn out a silver half-crown, but I could not bring myself to offer it to him, and so ended by giving a tenth part of my whole fortune to a stranger. The other nine sovereigns I put very carefully away, and then, sitting down upon a flat rock just above high water mark, I turned it all over in my mind and weighed what I should do. Already I was cold and hungry, with the wind lashing my face and the spray smarting in my eyes, but at least I was no longer living upon the charity of the enemies of my country, and the thought set my heart dancing within me. But the castle, as well as I could remember, was a good ten miles off. To go there now was to arrive at an unseemly hour, unkempt and weather-stained, before this uncle whom I had never seen. My sensitive pride conjured up a picture of the scornful faces of his servants as they looked out upon this bedraggled wanderer from England slinking back to the castle which should have been his own. No, I must seek shelter for the night, and then at my leisure, with as fair a show of appearances as possible, I must present myself before my relative. Where then could I find a refuge from the storm?

You will ask me, doubtless, why I did not make for Etaples or Boulogne. I answer that it was for the same reason which forced me to land secretly upon that forbidding coast. The name of de Laval still headed the list of the proscribed, for my father had been a famous and energetic leader of the small but influential body of men who had remained true at all costs to the old order of things. Do not think that, because I was of another way of thinking, I despised those who had given up so much for their principles. There is a curious saint-like trait in our natures which draws us most strongly towards that which involves the greatest sacrifice, and I have sometimes thought that if the conditions had been less onerous the Bourbons might have had fewer, or at least less noble, followers. The French nobles had been more faithful to them than the English to the Stuarts, for Cromwell had no luxurious court or rich appointments which he could hold out to those who would desert the royal cause. No words can exaggerate the self-abnegation of those men. I have seen a supper party under my father's roof where our guests were two fencing-masters, three professors of language, one ornamental gardener, and one translator of books, who held his hand in the front of his coat to conceal a rent in the lapel. But these eight men were of the highest nobility of France, who might have had what they chose to ask if they would only consent to forget the past, and to throw themselves heartily into the new order of things. But the humble, and what is sadder the incapable, monarch of Hartwell still held the allegiance of those old Montmorencies, Rohans, and Choiseuls, who, having shared the greatness of

his family, were determined also to stand by it in its ruin. The dark chambers of that exiled monarch were furnished with something better than the tapestry of Gobelins or the china of Sevres. Across the gulf which separates my old age from theirs I can still see those ill-clad, grave-mannered men, and I raise my hat to the noblest group of nobles that our history can show.

To visit a coast-town, therefore, before I had seen my uncle, or learnt whether my return had been sanctioned, would be simply to deliver myself into the hands of the *gens d'armes*, who were ever on the look-out for strangers from England. To go before the new Emperor was one thing and to be dragged before him another. On the whole, it seemed to me that my best course was to wander inland, in the hope of finding some empty barn or out-house, where I could pass the night unseen and undisturbed. Then in the morning I should consider how it was best for me to approach my uncle Bernac, and through him the new master of France.

The wind had freshened meanwhile into a gale, and it was so dark upon the seaward side that I could only catch the white flash of a leaping wave here and there in the blackness. Of the lugger which had brought me from Dover I could see no sign. On the land side of me there seemed, as far as I could make it out, to be a line of low hills, but when I came to traverse them I found that the dim light had exaggerated their size, and that they were mere scattered sand-dunes, mottled with patches of bramble. Over these I toiled with my bundle slung over my shoulder, plodding heavily through the loose sand, and tripping over the creepers, but forgetting my wet clothes and my numb hands as I recalled the many hardships and adventures which my ancestors had undergone. It amused me to think that the day might come when my own descendants might fortify themselves by the recollection of that which was happening to me, for in a great family like ours the individual is always subordinate to the race.

It seemed to me that I should never get to the end of the sand-dunes, but when at last I did come off them I heartily wished that I was back upon them again; for the sea in that part comes by some creek up the back of the beach, forming at low tide a great desolate salt-marsh, which must be a forlorn place even in the daytime, but upon such a night as that it was a most dreary wilderness. At first it was but a softness of the ground, causing me to slip as I walked, but soon the mud was over my ankles and half-way up to my knees, so that each foot gave a loud flop as I raised it, and a dull splash as I set it down again. I would willingly have made my way out, even if I had to return to the sand-dunes, but in trying to pick my path I had lost all my bearings, and the air was so full of the sounds of the storm that the sea seemed to be on every side of me. I had heard of how one may steer oneself by observation of the stars, but my quiet English life had not taught me how such things were done, and had I known I could scarcely have profited by it, since the few stars which were visible peeped out here and there in the rifts of the flying storm-clouds. I wandered on then, wet and weary, trusting to fortune, but always blundering deeper and deeper into this horrible bog, until I began to think that my first night in France was destined also to be my last, and that the heir of the de Lavals was destined to perish of cold and misery in the depths of this obscene morass.

I must have toiled for many miles in this dreary fashion, sometimes coming upon shallower mud and sometimes upon deeper, but never making my way on to the dry, when I perceived through the gloom something which turned my heart even heavier than it had been before. This was a curious clump of some whitish shrub – cotton-grass of a flowering variety – which glimmered suddenly before me in the darkness. Now, an hour earlier I had passed just such a square-headed, whitish clump; so that I was confirmed in the opinion which I had already begun to form, that I was wandering in a circle. To make it certain I stooped down, striking a momentary flash from my tinder-box, and there sure enough was my own old track very clearly marked in the brown mud in front of me. At this confirmation of my worst fears I threw my eyes up to heaven in my despair, and there I saw something which for the first time gave me a clue in the uncertainty which surrounded me.

It was nothing else than a glimpse of the moon between two flowing clouds. This in itself might have been of small avail to me, but over its white face was marked a long thin V, which shot swiftly

across like a shaftless arrow. It was a flock of wild ducks, and its flight was in the same direction as that towards which my face was turned. Now, I had observed in Kent how all these creatures come further inland when there is rough weather breaking, so I made no doubt that their course indicated the path which would lead me away from the sea. I struggled on, therefore, taking every precaution to walk in a straight line, above all being very careful to make a stride of equal length with either leg, until at last, after half an hour or so, my perseverance was rewarded by the welcome sight of a little yellow light, as from a cottage window, glimmering through the darkness. Ah, how it shone through my eyes and down into my heart, glowing and twinkling there, that little golden speck, which meant food, and rest, and life itself to the wanderer! I blundered towards it through the mud and the slush as fast as my weary legs would bear me. I was too cold and miserable to refuse any shelter, and I had no doubt that for the sake of one of my gold pieces the fisherman or peasant who lived in this strange situation would shut his eyes to whatever might be suspicious in my presence or appearance.

As I approached it became more and more wonderful to me that any one should live there at all, for the bog grew worse rather than better, and in the occasional gleams of moonshine I could make out that the water lay in glimmering pools all round the low dark cottage from which the light was breaking. I could see now that it shone through a small square window. As I approached the gleam was suddenly obscured, and there in a yellow frame appeared the round black outline of a man's head peering out into the darkness. A second time it appeared before I reached the cottage, and there was something in the stealthy manner in which it peeped and whisked away, and peeped once more, which filled me with surprise, and with a certain vague apprehension.

So cautious were the movements of this sentinel, and so singular the position of his watch-house, that I determined, in spite of my misery, to see something more of him before I trusted myself to the shelter of his roof. And, indeed, the amount of shelter which I might hope for was not very great, for as I drew softly nearer I could see that the light from within was beating through at several points, and that the whole cottage was in the most crazy state of disrepair. For a moment I paused, thinking that even the salt-marsh might perhaps be a safer resting-place for the night than the headquarters of some desperate smuggler, for such I conjectured that this lonely dwelling must be. The scud, however, had covered the moon once more, and the darkness was so pitchy black that I felt that I might reconnoitre a little more closely without fear of discovery. Walking on tiptoe I approached the little window and looked in.

What I saw reassured me vastly. A small wood fire was crackling in one of those old-fashioned country grates, and beside it was seated a strikingly handsome young man, who was reading earnestly out of a fat little book. He had an oval, olive-tinted face, with long black hair, ungathered in a queue, and there was something of the poet or of the artist in his whole appearance. The sight of that refined face, and of the warm yellow firelight which beat upon it, was a very cheering one to a cold and famished traveller. I stood for an instant gazing at him, and noticing the way in which his full and somewhat loose-fitting lower lip quivered continually, as if he were repeating to himself that which he was reading. I was still looking at him when he put his book down upon the table and approached the window. Catching a glimpse of my figure in the darkness he called out something which I could not hear, and waved his hand in a gesture of welcome. An instant later the door flew open, and there was his thin tall figure standing upon the threshold, with his skirts flapping in the wind.

'My dear friends,' he cried, peering out into the gloom with his hand over his eyes to screen them from the salt-laden wind and driving sand, 'I had given you up. I thought that you were never coming. I've been waiting for two hours.'

For answer I stepped out in front of him, so that the light fell upon my face.

'I am afraid, sir – ' said I.

But I had no time to finish my sentence. He struck at me with both hands like an angry cat, and, springing back into the room, he slammed the door with a crash in my face.

The swiftness of his movements and the malignity of his gesture were in such singular contrast with his appearance that I was struck speechless with surprise. But as I stood there with the door in front of me I was a witness to something which filled me with even greater astonishment.

I have already said that the cottage was in the last stage of disrepair. Amidst the many seams and cracks through which the light was breaking there was one along the whole of the hinge side of the door, which gave me from where I was standing a view of the further end of the room, at which the fire was burning. As I gazed then I saw this man reappear in front of the fire, fumbling furiously with both his hands in his bosom, and then with a spring he disappeared up the chimney, so that I could only see his shoes and half of his black calves as he stood upon the brickwork at the side of the grate. In an instant he was down again and back at the door.

'Who are you?' he cried, in a voice which seemed to me to be thrilling with some strong emotion.

'I am a traveller, and have lost my way.' There was a pause as if he were thinking what course he should pursue.

'You will find little here to tempt you to stay,' said he at last.

'I am weary and spent, sir; and surely you will not refuse me shelter.

I have been wandering for hours in the salt-marsh.'

'Did you meet anyone there?' he asked eagerly.

'No.'

'Stand back a little from the door. This is a wild place, and the times are troublous. A man must take some precautions.'

I took a few steps back, and he then opened the door sufficiently to allow his head to come through. He said nothing, but he looked at me for a long time in a very searching manner.

'What is your name?'

'Louis Laval,' said I, thinking that it might sound less dangerous in this plebeian form.

'Whither are you going?'

'I wish to reach some shelter.'

'You are from England?'

'I am from the coast.'

He shook his head slowly to show me how little my replies had satisfied him.

'You cannot come in here,' said he.

'But surely –'

'No, no, it is impossible.'

'Show me then how to find my way out of the marsh.'

'It is easy enough. If you go a few hundred paces in that direction you will perceive the lights of a village. You are already almost free of the marsh.'

He stepped a pace or two from the door in order to point the way for me, and then turned upon his heel. I had already taken a stride or two away from him and his inhospitable hut, when he suddenly called after me.

'Come, Monsieur Laval,' said he, with quite a different ring in his voice; 'I really cannot permit you to leave me upon so tempestuous a night. A warm by my fire and a glass of brandy will hearten you upon your way.'

You may think that I did not feel disposed to contradict him, though I could make nothing of this sudden and welcome change in his manner.

'I am much obliged to you, sir,' said I.

And I followed him into the hut.

CHAPTER III

THE RUINED COTTAGE

It was delightful to see the glow and twinkle of the fire and to escape from the wet wind and the numbing cold, but my curiosity had already risen so high about this lonely man and his singular dwelling that my thoughts ran rather upon that than upon my personal comfort. There was his remarkable appearance, the fact that he should be awaiting company within that miserable ruin in the heart of the morass at so sinister an hour, and finally the inexplicable incident of the chimney, all of which excited my imagination. It was beyond my comprehension why he should at one moment charge me sternly to continue my journey, and then, in almost the same breath, invite me most cordially to seek the shelter of his hut. On all these points I was keenly on the alert for an explanation. Yet I endeavoured to conceal my feelings, and to assume the air of a man who finds everything quite natural about him, and who is much too absorbed in his own personal wants to have a thought to spare upon anything outside himself.

A glance at the inside of the cottage, as I entered, confirmed me in the conjecture which the appearance of the outside had already given rise to, that it was not used for human residence, and that this man was only here for a rendezvous. Prolonged moisture had peeled the plaster in flakes from the walls, and had covered the stones with blotches and rosettes of lichen. The whole place was rotten and scaling like a leper. The single large room was unfurnished save for a crazy table, three wooden boxes, which might be used as seats, and a great pile of decayed fishing-net in the corner. The splinters of a fourth box, with a hand-axe, which leaned against the wall, showed how the wood for the fire had been gathered. But it was to the table that my gaze was chiefly drawn, for there, beside the lamp and the book, lay an open basket, from which projected the knuckle-end of a ham, the corner of a loaf of bread, and the black neck of a bottle.

If my host had been suspicious and cold at our first meeting he was now atoning for his inhospitality by an overdone cordiality even harder for me to explain. With many lamentations over my mud-stained and sodden condition, he drew a box close to the blaze and cut me off a corner of the bread and ham. I could not help observing, however, that though his loose under-lipped mouth was wreathed with smiles, his beautiful dark eyes were continually running over me and my attire, asking and re-asking what my business might be.

'As for myself,' said he, with an air of false candour, 'you will very well understand that in these days a worthy merchant must do the best he can to get his wares, and if the Emperor, God save him, sees fit in his wisdom to put an end to open trade, one must come to such places as these to get into touch with those who bring across the coffee and the tobacco. I promise you that in the Tuileries itself there is no difficulty about getting either one or the other, and the Emperor drinks his ten cups a day of the real Mocha without asking questions, though he must know that it is not grown within the confines of France. The vegetable kingdom still remains one of the few which Napoleon has not yet conquered, and, if it were not for traders, who are at some risk and inconvenience, it is hard to say what we should do for our supplies. I suppose, sir, that you are not yourself either in the seafaring or in the trading line?'

I contented myself by answering that I was not, by which reticence I could see that I only excited his curiosity the more. As to his account of himself, I read a lie in those tell-tale eyes all the time that he was talking. As I looked at him now in the full light of the lamp and the fire, I could see that he was even more good-looking than I had at first thought, but with a type of beauty which has never been to my taste. His features were so refined as to be almost effeminate, and so regular that they would have been perfect if it had not been for that ill-fitting, slabbing mouth. It was a clever, and yet it was a weak face, full of a sort of fickle enthusiasm and feeble impulsiveness. I felt that the more

I knew him the less reason I should probably find either to like him or to fear him, and in my first conclusion I was right, although I had occasion to change my views upon the second.

'You will forgive me, Monsieur Laval, if I was a little cold at first,' said he. 'Since the Emperor has been upon the coast the place swarms with police agents, so that a trader must look to his own interests. You will allow that my fears of you were not unnatural, since neither your dress nor your appearance were such as one would expect to meet with in such a place and at such a time.'

It was on my lips to return the remark, but I refrained.

'I can assure you,' said I, 'that I am merely a traveller who have lost my way. Now that I am refreshed and rested I will not encroach further upon your hospitality, except to ask you to point out the way to the nearest village.'

'Tut; you had best stay where you are, for the night grows wilder every instant.' As he spoke there came a whoop and scream of wind in the chimney, as if the old place were coming down about our ears. He walked across to the window and looked very earnestly out of it, just as I had seen him do upon my first approach. 'The fact is, Monsieur Laval,' said he, looking round at me with his false-air of good fellowship, 'you may be of some good service to me if you will wait here for half an hour or so.'

'How so?' I asked, wavering between my distrust and my curiosity.

'Well, to be frank with you' – and never did a man look less frank as he spoke – 'I am waiting here for some of those people with whom I do business; but in some way they have not come yet, and I am inclined to take a walk round the marsh on the chance of finding them, if they have lost their way. On the other hand, it would be exceedingly awkward for me if they were to come here in my absence and imagine that I am gone. I should take it as a favour, then, if you would remain here for half an hour or so, that you may tell them how matters stand if I should chance to miss them.'

The request seemed reasonable enough, and yet there was that same oblique glance which told me that it was false. Still, I could not see what harm could come to me by complying with his request, and certainly I could not have devised any arrangement which would give me such an opportunity of satisfying my curiosity. What was in that wide stone chimney, and why had he clambered up there upon the sight of me? My adventure would be inconclusive indeed if I did not settle that point before I went on with my journey.

'Well,' said he, snatching up his black broad-brimmed hat and running very briskly to the door, 'I am sure that you will not refuse me my request, and I must delay no longer or I shall never get my business finished.' He closed the door hurriedly behind him, and I heard the splashing of his footsteps until they were lost in the howling of the gale.

And so the mysterious cottage was mine to ransack if I could pluck its secrets from it. I lifted the book which had been left upon the table. It was Rousseau's 'Social Contract' – excellent literature, but hardly what one would expect a trader to carry with him whilst awaiting an appointment with smugglers. On the fly-leaf was written 'Lucien Lesage,' and beneath it, in a woman's hand, 'Lucien, from Sibylle.' Lesage, then, was the name of my good-looking but sinister acquaintance. It only remained for me now to discover what it was which he had concealed up the chimney. I listened intently, and as there was no sound from without save the cry of the storm, I stepped on to the edge of the grate as I had seen him do, and sprang up by the side of the fire.

It was a very broad, old-fashioned cottage chimney, so that standing on one side I was not inconvenienced either by the heat or by the smoke, and the bright glare from below showed me in an instant that for which I sought. There was a recess at the back, caused by the fall or removal of one of the stones, and in this was lying a small bundle. There could not be the least doubt that it was this which the fellow had striven so frantically to conceal upon the first alarm of the approach of a stranger. I took it down and held it to the light. It was a small square of yellow glazed cloth tied round with white tape. Upon my opening it a number of letters appeared, and a single large paper folded up. The addresses upon the letters took my breath away. The first that I glanced at was to Citizen Talleyrand. The others were in the Republican style addressed to Citizen Fouche, to Citizen Soult,

to Citizen MacDonald, to Citizen Berthier, and so on through the whole list of famous names in war and in diplomacy who were the pillars of the new Empire. What in the world could this pretended merchant of coffee have to write to all these great notables about? The other paper would explain, no doubt. I laid the letters upon the shelf and I unfolded the paper which had been enclosed with them. It did not take more than the opening sentence to convince me that the salt-marsh outside might prove to be a very much safer place than this accursed cottage.

These were the words which met my eyes: —

'Fellow-citizens of France. The deed of to-day has proved that, even in the midst of his troops, a tyrant is unable to escape the vengeance of an outraged people. The committee of three, acting temporarily for the Republic, has awarded to Buonaparte the same fate which has already befallen Louis Capet. In avenging the outrage of the 18th Brumaire —'

So far I had got when my heart sprang suddenly into my mouth and the paper fluttered down from my fingers. A grip of iron had closed suddenly round each of my ankles, and there in the light of the fire I saw two hands which, even in that terrified glance, I perceived to be covered with black hair and of an enormous size.

'So, my friend,' cried a thundering voice, 'this time, at least, we have been too many for you.'

CHAPTER IV

MEN OF THE NIGHT

I had little time given me to realise the extraordinary and humiliating position in which I found myself, for I was lifted up by my ankles, as if I were a fowl pulled off a perch, and jerked roughly down into the room, my back striking upon the stone floor with a thud which shook the breath from my body.

'Don't kill him yet, Toussac,' said a soft voice. 'Let us make sure who he is first.'

I felt the pressure of a thumb upon my chin and of fingers upon my throat, and my head was slowly forced round until the strain became unbearable.

'Quarter of an inch does it and no mark,' said the thunderous voice.

'You can trust my old turn.'

'Don't, Toussac; don't!' said the same gentle voice which had spoken first. 'I saw you do it once before, and the horrible snick that it made haunted me for a long time. To think that the sacred flame of life can be so readily snuffed out by that great material finger and thumb! Mind can indeed conquer matter, but the fighting must not be at close quarters.'

My neck was so twisted that I could not see any of these people who were discussing my fate. I could only lie and listen.

'The fact remains, my dear Charles, that the fellow has our all-important secret, and that it is our lives or his.'

'I recognised in the voice which was now speaking that of the man of the cottage.'

'We owe it to ourselves to put it out of his power to harm us. Let him sit up, Toussac, for there is no possibility of his escaping.'

Some irresistible force at the back of my neck dragged me instantly into a sitting position, and so for the first time I was able to look round me in a dazed fashion, and to see these men into whose hands I had fallen. That they were murderers in the past and had murderous plans for the future I already gathered from what I had heard and seen. I understood also that in the heart of that lonely marsh I was absolutely in their power. None the less, I remembered the name that I bore, and I concealed as far as I could the sickening terror which lay at my heart.

There were three of them in the room, my former acquaintance and two new comers. Lesage stood by the table, with his fat brown book in his hand, looking at me with a composed face, but with that humorous questioning twinkle in his eyes which a master chess-player might assume when he had left his opponent without a move. On the top of the box beside him sat a very ascetic-faced, yellow, hollow-eyed man of fifty, with prim lips and a shrunken skin, which hung loosely over the long jerking tendons under his prominent chin. He was dressed in snuff-coloured clothes, and his legs under his knee-breeches were of a ludicrous thinness. He shook his head at me with an air of sad wisdom, and I could read little comfort in his inhuman grey eyes. But it was the man called Toussac who alarmed me most. He was a colossus; bulky rather than tall, but misshapen from his excess of muscle. His huge legs were crooked like those of a great ape; and, indeed, there was something animal about his whole appearance, something for he was bearded up to his eyes, and it was a paw rather than a hand which still clutched me by the collar. As to his expression, he was too thatched with hair to show one, but his large black eyes looked with a sinister questioning from me to the others. If they were the judge and jury, it was clear who was to be executioner.

'Whence did he come? What is his business? How came he to know the hiding-place?' asked the thin man.

'When he first came I mistook him for you in the darkness,' Lesage answered. 'You will acknowledge that it was not a night on which one would expect to meet many people in the salt-

marsh. On discovering my mistake I shut the door and concealed the papers in the chimney. I had forgotten that he might see me do this through that crack by the hinges, but when I went out again, to show him his way and so get rid of him, my eye caught the gap, and I at once realised that he had seen my action, and that it must have aroused his curiosity to such an extent that it would be quite certain that he would think and speak of it. I called him back into the hut, therefore, in order that I might have time to consider what I had best do with him.'

'Sapristi! a couple of cuts of that wood-axe, and a bed in the softest corner of the marsh, would have settled the business at once,' said the fellow by my side.

'Quite true, my good Toussac; but it is not usual to lead off with your ace of trumps. A little delicacy – a little finesse –'

'Let us hear what you did then?'

'It was my first object to learn whether this man Laval –'

'What did you say his name was?' cried the thin man.

'His name, according to his account, is Laval. My first object then was to find out whether he had in truth seen me conceal the papers or not. It was an important question for us, and, as things have turned out, more important still for him. I made my little plan, therefore. I waited until I saw you approach, and I then left him alone in the hut. I watched through the window and saw him fly to the hiding-place. We then entered, and I asked you, Toussac, to be good enough to lift him down – and there he lies.'

The young fellow looked proudly round for the applause of his comrades, and the thin man clapped his hands softly together, looking very hard at me while he did so.

'My dear Lesage,' said he, 'you have certainly excelled yourself. When our new republic looks for its minister of police we shall know where to find him. I confess that when, after guiding Toussac to this shelter, I followed you in and perceived a gentleman's legs projecting from the fireplace, even my wits, which are usually none of the slowest, hardly grasped the situation. Toussac, however, grasped the legs. He is always practical, the good Toussac.'

'Enough words!' growled the hairy creature beside me. 'It is because we have talked instead of acting that this Buonaparte has a crown upon his head or a head upon his shoulders. Let us have done with the fellow and come to business.'

The refined features of Lesage made me look towards him as to a possible protector, but his large dark eyes were as cold and hard as jet as he looked back at me.

'What Toussac says is right,' said he. 'We imperil our own safety if he goes with our secret.'

'The devil take our own safety!' cried Toussac. 'What has that to do with the matter? We imperil the success of our plans – that is of more importance.'

'The two things go together,' replied Lesage. 'There is no doubt that Rule 13 of our confederation defines exactly what should be done in such a case. Any responsibility must rest with the passers of Rule 13.'

My heart had turned cold when this man with his poet's face supported the savage at my side. But my hopes were raised again when the thin man, who had said little hitherto, though he had continued to stare at me very intently, began now to show some signs of alarm at the bloodthirsty proposals of his comrades.

'My dear Lucien,' said he, in a soothing voice, laying his hand upon the young man's arm, 'we philosophers and reasoners must have a respect for human life. The tabernacle is not to be lightly violated. We have frequently agreed that if it were not for the excesses of Marat –'

'I have every respect for your opinion, Charles,' the other interrupted. 'You will allow that I have always been a willing and obedient disciple. But I again say that our personal safety is involved, and that, as far as I see, there is no middle course. No one could be more averse from cruelty than I am, but you were present with me some months ago when Toussac silenced the man from Bow Street, and certainly it was done with such dexterity that the process was probably more painful to the

spectators than to the victim. He could not have been aware of the horrible sound which announced his own dissolution. If you and I had constancy enough to endure this – and if I remember right it was chiefly at your instigation that the deed was done – then surely on this more vital occasion –'

'No, no, Toussac, stop!' cried the thin man, his voice rising from its soft tones to a perfect scream as the giant's hairy hand gripped me by the chin once more. 'I appeal to you, Lucien, upon practical as well as upon moral grounds, not to let this deed be done. Consider that if things should go against us this will cut us off from all hopes of mercy. Consider also –'

This argument seemed for a moment to stagger the younger man, whose olive complexion had turned a shade greyer.

'There will be no hope for us in any case, Charles,' said he. 'We have no choice but to obey Rule 13.'

'Some latitude is allowed to us. We are ourselves upon the inner committee.'

'But it takes a quorum to change a rule, and we have no powers to do it.' His pendulous lip was quivering, but there was no softening in his eyes. Slowly under the pressure of those cruel fingers my chin began to sweep round to my shoulder, and I commended my soul to the Virgin and to Saint Ignatius, who has always been the especial patron of my family. But this man Charles, who had already befriended me, darted forwards and began to tear at Toussac's hands with a vehemence which was very different from his former philosophic calm.

'You *shall* not kill him!' he cried angrily.

'Who are you, to set your wills up against mine? Let him go, Toussac! Take your thumb from his chin! I won't have it done, I tell you!' Then, as he saw by the inflexible faces of his companions that blustering would not help him, he turned suddenly to tones of entreaty. 'See, now! I'll make you a promise!' said he. 'Listen to me, Lucien! Let me examine him! If he is a police spy he shall die! You may have him then, Toussac. But if he is only a harmless traveller, who has blundered in here by an evil chance, and who has been led by a foolish curiosity to inquire into our business, then you will leave him to me.'

You will observe that from the beginning of this affair I had never once opened my mouth, nor said a word in my defence, which made me mightily pleased with myself afterwards, though my silence came rather from pride than from courage. To lose life and self-respect together was more than I could face. But now, at this appeal from my advocate, I turned my eyes from the monster who held me to the other who condemned me. The brutality of the one alarmed me less than the self-interested attitude of the other, for a man is never so dangerous as when he is afraid, and of all judges the judge who has cause to fear you is the most inflexible.

My life depended upon the answer which was to come to the appeal of my champion. Lesage tapped his fingers upon his teeth, and smiled indulgently at the earnestness of his companion.

'Rule 13! Rule 13!' he kept repeating, in that exasperating voice of his.

'I will take all responsibility.'

'I'll tell you what, mister,' said Toussac, in his savage voice. 'There's another rule besides Rule 13, and that's the one that says that if any man shelters an offender he shall be treated as if he was himself guilty of the offence.'

This attack did not shake the serenity of my champion in the least.

'You are an excellent man of action, Toussac,' said he calmly; 'but when it comes to choosing the right course, you must leave it to wiser heads than your own.'

His air of tranquil superiority seemed to daunt the fierce creature who held me. He shrugged his huge shoulders in silent dissent.

'As to you, Lucien,' my friend continued, 'I am surprised, considering the position to which you aspire in my family, that you should for an instant stand in the way of any wish which I may express. If you have grasped the true principles of liberty, and if you are privileged to be one of the small band who have never despaired of the republic, to whom is it that you owe it?'

'Yes, yes, Charles; I acknowledge what you say,' the young man answered, with much agitation. 'I am sure that I should be the last to oppose any wish which you might express, but in this case I fear lest your tenderness of heart may be leading you astray. By all means ask him any questions that you like; but it seems to me that there can be only one end to the matter.'

So I thought also; for, with the full secret of these desperate men in my possession, what hope was there that they would ever suffer me to leave the hut alive? And yet, so sweet is human life, and so dear a respite, be it ever so short a one, that when that murderous hand was taken from my chin I heard a sudden chiming of little bells, and the lamp blazed up into a strange fantastic blur. It was but for a moment, and then my mind was clear again, and I was looking up at the strange gaunt face of my examiner.

'Whence have you come?' he asked.

'From England.'

'But you are French?'

'Yes.'

'When did you arrive?'

'To-night.'

'How?'

'In a lugger from Dover.'

'The fellow is speaking the truth,' growled Toussac. 'Yes, I'll say that for him, that he is speaking the truth. We saw the lugger, and someone was landed from it just after the boat that brought me over pushed off.'

I remembered that boat, which had been the first thing which I had seen upon the coast of France. How little I had thought what it would mean to me!

And now my advocate began asking questions – vague, useless questions – in a slow, hesitating fashion which set Toussac grumbling. This cross-examination appeared to me to be a useless farce; and yet there was a certain eagerness and intensity in my questioner's manner which gave me the assurance that he had some end in view. Was it merely that he wished to gain time? Time for what? And then, suddenly, with that quick perception which comes upon those whose nerves are strained by an extremity of danger, I became convinced that he really was awaiting something – that he was tense with expectation. I read it upon his drawn face, upon his sidelong head with his ear scooped into his hand, above all in his twitching, restless eyes. He expected an interruption, and he was talking, talking, talking, in order to gain time for it. I was as sure of it as if he had whispered his secret in my ear, and down in my numb, cold heart a warm little spring of hope began to bubble and run.

But Toussac had chafed at all this word-fencing, and now with an oath he broke in upon our dialogue.

'I have had enough of this!' he cried. 'It is not for child's play of this sort that I risked my head in coming over here. Have we nothing better to talk about than this fellow? Do you suppose I came from London to listen to your fine phrases? Have done with it, I say, and get to business.'

'Very good,' said my champion. 'There's an excellent little cupboard here which makes as fine a prison as one could wish for. Let us put him in here, and pass on to business. We can deal with him when we have finished.'

'And have him overhear all that we say,' said Lesage.

'I don't know what the devil has come over you,' cried Toussac, turning suspicious eyes upon my protector. 'I never knew you squeamish before, and certainly you were not backward in the affair of the man from Bow Street. This fellow has our secret, and he must either die, or we shall see him at our trial. What is the sense of arranging a plot, and then at the last moment turning a man loose who will ruin us all? Let us snap his neck and have done with it.'

The great hairy hands were stretched towards me again, but Lesage had sprung suddenly to his feet. His face had turned very white, and he stood listening with his forefinger up and his head slanted. It was a long, thin, delicate hand, and it was quivering like a leaf in the wind.

'I heard something,' he whispered.

'And I,' said the older man.

'What was it?'

'Silence. Listen!'

For a minute or more we all stayed with straining ears while the wind still whimpered in the chimney or rattled the crazy window.

'It was nothing,' said Lesage at last, with a nervous laugh.

'The storm makes curious sounds sometimes.'

'I heard nothing,' said Toussac.

'Hush!' cried the other. 'There it is again!'

A clear rising cry floated high above the wailing of the storm; a wild, musical cry, beginning on a low note, and thrilling swiftly up to a keen, sharp-edged howl.

'A hound!'

'They are following us!'

Lesage dashed to the fireplace, and I saw him thrust his papers into the blaze and grind them down with his heel.

Toussac seized the wood-axe which leaned against the wall. The thin man dragged the pile of decayed netting from the corner, and opened a small wooden screen, which shut off a low recess.

'In here,' he whispered, 'quick!'

And then, as I scrambled into my refuge, I heard him say to the others that I would be safe there, and that they could lay their hands upon me when they wished.

CHAPTER V

THE LAW

The cupboard – for it was little more – into which I had been hurried was low and narrow, and I felt in the darkness that it was heaped with peculiar round wickerwork baskets, the nature of which I could by no means imagine, although I discovered afterwards that they were lobster traps. The only light which entered was through the cracks of the old broken door, but these were so wide and numerous that I could see the whole of the room which I had just quitted. Sick and faint, with the shadow of death still clouding my wits, I was none the less fascinated by the scene which lay before me.

My thin friend, with the same prim composure upon his emaciated face, had seated himself again upon the box. With his hands clasped round one of his knees he was rocking slowly backwards and forwards; and I noticed, in the lamplight, that his jaw muscles were contracting rhythmically, like the gills of a fish. Beside him stood Lesage, his white face glistening with moisture and his loose lip quivering with fear. Every now and then he would make a vigorous attempt to compose his features, but after each rally a fresh wave of terror would sweep everything before it, and set him shaking once more. As to Toussac, he stood before the fire, a magnificent figure, with the axe held down by his leg, and his head thrown back in defiance, so that his great black beard bristled straight out in front of him. He said not a word, but every fibre of his body was braced for a struggle. Then, as the howl of the hound rose louder and clearer from the marsh outside, he ran forward and threw open the door.

'No, no, keep the dog out!' cried Lesage in an agony of apprehension.

'You fool, our only chance is to kill it.'

'But it is in leash.'

'If it is in leash nothing can save us. But if, as I think, it is running free, then we may escape yet.'

Lesage cowered up against the table, with his agonised eyes fixed upon the blue-black square of the door. The man who had befriended me still swayed his body about with a singular half-smile upon his face. His skinny hand was twitching at the frill of his shirt, and I conjectured that he held some weapon concealed there. Toussac stood between them and the open door, and, much as I feared and loathed him, I could not take my eyes from his gallant figure. As to myself, I was so much occupied by the singular drama before me, and by the impending fate of those three men of the cottage, that all thought of my own fortunes had passed completely out of my mind. On this mean stage a terrible all-absorbing drama was being played, and I, crouching in a squalid recess, was to be the sole spectator of it. I could but hold my breath and wait and watch.

And suddenly I became conscious that they could all three see something which was invisible to me. I read it from their tense faces and their staring eyes. Toussac swung his axe over his shoulder and poised himself for a blow. Lesage cowered away and put one hand between his eyes and the open door. The other ceased swinging his spindle legs and sat like a little brown image upon the edge of his box. There was a moist pattering of feet, a yellow streak shot through the doorway, and Toussac lashed at it as I have seen an English cricketer strike at a ball. His aim was true, for he buried the head of the hatchet in the creature's throat, but the force of his blow shattered his weapon, and the weight of the hound carried him backwards on to the floor. Over they rolled and over, the hairy man and the hairy dog, growling and worrying in a bestial combat. He was fumbling at the animal's throat, and I could not see what he was doing, until it gave a sudden sharp yelp of pain, and there was a rending sound like the tearing of canvas. The man staggered up with his hands dripping, and the tawny mass with the blotch of crimson lay motionless upon the floor.

'Now!' cried Toussac in a voice of thunder, 'now!' and he rushed from the hut.

Lesage had shrunk away into the corner in a frenzy of fear whilst Toussac had been killing the hound, but now he raised his agonised face, which was as wet as if he had dipped it into a basin.

'Yes, yes,' he cried; 'we must fly, Charles. The hound has left the police behind, and we may still escape.'

But the other, with the same imperturbable face, motionless save for the rhythm of his jaw muscles, walked quietly over and closed the door upon the inside.

'I think, friend Lucien,' said he in his quiet voice, 'that you had best stay where you are.'

Lesage looked at him with amazement gradually replacing terror upon his pallid features.

'But you do not understand, Charles,' he cried.

'Oh, yes, I think I do,' said the other, smiling.

'They may be here in a few minutes. The hound has slipped its leash, you see, and has left them behind in the marsh; but they are sure to come here, for there is no other cottage but this.'

'They are sure to come here.'

'Well, then, let us fly. In the darkness we may yet escape.'

'No; we shall stay where we are.'

'Madman, you may sacrifice your own life, but not mine. Stay if you wish, but for my part I am going.'

He ran towards the door with a foolish, helpless flapping of his hands, but the other sprang in front of him with so determined a gesture of authority that the younger man staggered back from it as from a blow.

'You fool!' said his companion. 'You poor miserable dupe!'

Lesage's mouth opened, and he stood staring with his knees bent and his spread-fingered hands up, the most hideous picture of fear that I have ever seen.

'You, Charles, you!' he stammered, hawking up each word.

'Yes, me,' said the other, smiling grimly.

'A police agent all the time! You who were the very soul of our society! You who were in our inmost council! You who led us on!

Oh, Charles, you have not the heart! I think I hear them coming,

Charles. Let me pass; I beg and implore you to let me pass.'

The granite face shook slowly from side to side.

'But why me? Why not Toussac?'

'If the dog had crippled Toussac, why then I might have had you both.

But friend Toussac is rather vigorous for a thin little fellow like me.

No, no, my good Lucien, you are destined to be the trophy of my bow and my spear, and you must reconcile yourself to the fact.'

Lesage slapped his forehead as if to assure himself that he was not dreaming.

'A police agent!' he repeated, 'Charles a police agent!'

'I thought it would surprise you.'

'But you were the most republican of us all. We were none of us advanced enough for you. How often have we gathered round you, Charles, to listen to your philosophy! And there is Sibylle, too! Don't tell me that Sibylle was a police spy also. But you are joking, Charles. Say that you are joking!'

The man relaxed his grim features, and his eyes puckered with amusement.

'Your astonishment is very flattering,' said he. 'I confess that I thought that I played my part rather cleverly. It is not my fault that these bunglers unleashed their hound, but at least I shall have the credit of having made a single-handed capture of one very desperate and dangerous conspirator.' He smiled drily at this description of his prisoner. 'The Emperor knows how to reward his friends,' he added, 'and also how to punish his enemies.'

All this time he had held his hand in his bosom, and now he drew it out so far as to show the brass gleam of a pistol butt.

'It is no use,' said he, in answer to some look in the other's eye.

'You stay in the hut, alive or dead.'

Lesage put his hands to his face and began to cry with loud, helpless sobbings.

'Why, you have been worse than any of us, Charles,' he moaned. 'It was you who told Toussac to kill the man from Bow Street, and it was you also who set fire to the house in the Rue Basse de la Rampart. And now you turn on us!'

'I did that because I wished to be the one to throw light upon it all – and at the proper moment.'

'That is very fine, Charles, but what will be thought about that when I make it all public in my own defence? How can you explain all that to your Emperor? There is still time to prevent my telling all that I know about you.'

'Well, really, I think that you are right, my friend,' said the other, drawing out his pistol and cocking it. 'Perhaps I *did* go a little beyond my instructions in one or two points, and, as you very properly remark, there is still time to set it right. It is a matter of detail whether I give you up living or give you up dead, and I think that, on the whole, it had better be dead.'

It had been horrible to see Toussac tear the throat out of the hound, but it had not made my flesh creep as it crept now. Pity was mingled with my disgust for this unfortunate young man, who had been fitted by Nature for the life of a retired student or of a dreaming poet, but who had been dragged by stronger wills than his own into a part which no child could be more incapable of playing. I forgave him the trick by which he had caught me and the selfish fears to which he had been willing to sacrifice me. He had flung himself down upon the ground, and floundered about in a convulsion of terror, whilst his terrible little companion, with his cynical smile, stood over him with his pistol in his hand. He played with the helpless panting coward as a cat might with a mouse; but I read in his inexorable eyes that it was no jest, and his finger seemed to be already tightening upon his trigger. Full of horror at so cold-blooded a murder, I pushed open my crazy cupboard, and had rushed out to plead for the victim, when there came a buzz of voices and a clanking of steel from without. With a stentorian shout of 'In the name of the Emperor!' a single violent wrench tore the door of the hut from its hinges.

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