

Weyman Stanley John

The Abbess Of Vlaye



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INTRODUCTION. A KING IN COUNCIL

Monsieur des Ageaux was a man of whom his best friends could not say that he shone, or tried to shine, in the pursuit of the fair sex. He was of an age, something over thirty, when experience renders more formidable the remaining charms of youth; and former conquests whet the sword for new emprises. And the time in which he lived and governed the province of Périgord for the King was a time in which the favour of ladies, and the good things to be gained thereby, stood for much, and morality for little. So that for the ambitious the path of dalliance presented almost as many chances of advancement as the more strenuous road of war.

Yet des Ageaux, though he was an ambitious man and one whose appetite success-and in his degree he had been very successful-had but sharpened, showed no inclination to take that path, or to rise by trifling. Nay, he turned from it; he shunned if he did not dislike the other sex. Whether he doubted his powers-he was a taciturn, grave man-or he had energy only for the one pursuit he loved, the government of men, the thing was certain. Yet he was not unpopular even at Court, the lax Court of Henry the Fourth. But he was known for a thoughtful, dry man, older than his years and no favourite with great ladies; of whom some dubbed him shy, and some a clown, and all-a piece of furniture.

None the less, where men were concerned, he passed for a man more useful than most; or, for certain, seeing that he boasted no great claims, and belonged to no great family, he had not been Governor of a province. Governors of provinces in those days were of the highest; cousins of the King, when these could be trusted, which was rare; peers and Marshals of France, great Dukes with vast hereditary possessions, old landed Vicomtes, and the like. Only at the tail of the list came some half-dozen men whom discretion and service, or the playfulness of fortune had-*mirabile dictum*-raised to office. And at the tail of all came des Ageaux; for Périgord, his province, land of the pie and the goose liver, was part of the King's demesne, the King was his own Governor in it, and des Ageaux bore only the title of "Lieutenant for the King in the country of Périgord."

Yet was it a wonderful post for such a man, and many a personage, many a lord well seen at Court, coveted it. All the same the burden was heavy; a thing not to be dismissed in a moment. The King found him no money, or little; no men, or few. Where greater Governors used their own resources he had to use-economy. And to make matters worse the man was just; it was part of his nature, it was part of his passion, to be just. So where they taxed not legally only, but illegally, he scrupled, he held his hand. And, therefore, though his dignity was almost as high as office could make it, and his power in his own country not small, no man who ever came to Court went with less splendour in the streets of Paris, or with a smaller following. Doubtless, as a result of this, a few despised him; a few even, making common cause with the Court ladies, and being themselves semi-royal, and above retort, flouted him as a thing negligible.

But, on the whole, he passed, though dry and grave, for a man to be envied, the ladies notwithstanding. And he held his own tolerably, and his post handsomely until a certain day in the summer of 1595, when word came to the young Governor to cross half France to meet the King at Lyons; where, in the early part of that year, Henry the Fourth lay, and was ill-content with a world which, on the surface, seemed to be treating him well.

But on the surface only. The long wars of religion, midway in which the Massacre of Bartholomew stands up, like some drear gibbet landmark in a waste, were, indeed, virtually over.

Not only had Henry come to the throne, but Paris, his capital, was his at last; had he not bought it eighteen months before by that mass, that abjuration of Protestant errors, of which the world has heard so much? And not Paris only. Orleans and Bourges, and this good city of Lyons, and Rouen, all were his now, and in their Notre-Dames or St. – Etiennes had sung their *Te Deums*, and more or less heartily cried "God save the King!" At last, after six years of fighting, of wild horse forays, that flamed across the Northern corn-lands, after a thousand sleepless nights and as many days of buying and bartering-at last the lover of Gabrielle, who was also the most patient and astute of men, was King of France and of Navarre, lord of all this pleasant realm.

Or, not lord; only over-lord, as six times a day they made him know. Nor even that, of all. For in Brittany a great noble still went his own way. And in Provence a great city refused to surrender. And north-eastwards Spain still clung to his border. Nevertheless it was none of these things filled Henry, the King, with discontent. It was at none of these things that he swore in his beard as he sulked at the end of the long Council Table this June morning; while des Ageaux, from his seat near the bottom of the board, watched his face.

In truth Henry was discovering, that, having bought, he must pay; that so great was the mortgage he had put on his kingdom, the profits belonged to others. Overlord he was-lord, no; except perhaps in Lyons where he lay, and where for that reason the Governor had to mind his manners. But in smiling Provence to south of him? Not a whit. The Duke of Epernon ruled the land of Roses, and would rule until the young Duke of Guise, to whom His Majesty had given commission, put him out; and then Guise would rule. In Dauphiny the same. In Languedoc, the great middle province of the south, Montmorency, son to the old Constable, was King in fact; in Guienne old Marshal Matignon. In Angoumois-here Epernon again; so firmly fixed that he deigned only to rule by quarterly letters from his distant home. True in Poitou was an obedient Governor, but the house of Trémouille from their red castle of Thouars outweighed his governorship. And in rocky Limousin the Governor could keep neither the King's peace nor his own.

So it was everywhere through the wide provinces of France; and Henry, who loved his people, knew it, and sulkily fingered the papers that told of it. Not that he had need of the papers. He knew before he cast eye on them in what a welter of lawlessness and disorder, of private feud and public poverty, thirty years of civil war had left his kingdom. One province was in arms, torn asunder by a feud between two great houses. Another laboured in the throes of a peasant rising, its hills alight night after night with the flames of burning farmsteads. A third was helpless in the grip of a gang of brigands, who held the roads. A fourth was beset by disbanded soldiers. The long wars of religion had dissolved all ties. Everywhere monks who had left their abbeys and nuns who had left their convents swarmed on the roads, with sturdy beggars, homeless peasants, broken gentry. Everywhere, beyond the walls of the great cities, the law was paralysed, the great committed outrage, the poor suffered wrong, the excesses of war enured, and, in this time of fancied peace, took grimmer shape.

He whom God had set over France, to rule it, knew these things and sat hopeless, brooding over the papers; hampered on the one side by lack of money, on the other by the grants of power that in evil days had bought a nominal allegiance. He began to see that he had won only the first bout of a match which must last him his life. Nor would it have consoled him much to know that in the college of Navarre that day played a little lad, just ten years old, whose frail white hand would one day right these things with a vengeance.

His people cried to him, and he longed to help them and could not. From a thousand market-places, splayed wooden shelters, covering each its quarter-acre of ground, their cry came up to him: "Give us peace, give us law!" and he could not. No wonder that he brooded over the papers, while the clerks looked askance at him, and the great lords who had won what he had lost whispered or played tric-trac at the board. Those who sat lower, and among these M. des Ageaux, were less at their ease. They wondered where the storm would break, and feared each for his own head.

Presently M. de Joyeuse, one of the great nobles, precipitated the outburst. "You have heard," said he, twiddling a pen between his delicate fingers, "what they call these peasants who are ravaging Poitou, sire?"

Before the King could answer the Governor of Poitou protested from his place lower down the table. "They are none of mine," he said. "It is in the Limousin next door to me that they are at work. I wash my hands of them!"

"They are as bad on your side as on mine!" he of the barren Limousin retorted.

"They started with you!" Poitou rejoined. "Who kindles a fire should put it out."

The King raised his hand for silence. "No matter who is responsible, the fact remains!" he said.

"But you have not heard the jest, sire," Joyeuse struck in. His thin handsome face, pale with excess, belied eyes thoughtful and dreamy, eyes that saw visions. He had been a King's favourite, he had spent years in a convent, he had come forth again, now he was head of the great Joyeuse house, lord of a third of Languedoc. By turns "Father Angel" – for he had been a noted preacher and Monseigneur, there were those who predicted that he would some day return to the cloister and die in his hood. "They call them the Tards-Avisés," he continued, "because they were foolish enough to rise when the war was over."

"God pity them!" the King said.

"*Morbleu!* Your Majesty is pitiful of a sudden!" The speaker was the Constable de Montmorency. He was a stout, gruff, choleric man, born, as the Montmorencys were, a generation too late.

"I pity them!" the King answered a trifle sharply. "But you" – he spoke to the table – "neither pity them nor put them down."

"You are speaking, sire," one asked, "of the Crocans?" It was so; from the name of a village in their midst, they called these revolted peasants of the Limousin of whom more will be said.

"Yes."

"They are not in my government," the speaker replied. "Nor in mine!"

"Nor mine!" And so all, except the Governor of the Limousin and the Governor of Poitou, who sat sulkily silent.

Another of the great ones, Marshal Matignon, nodded approval. "Let every man shoe his own ass," he said, pursing up his lips. He was a white-haired, red-faced, apoplectic man of sixty, who thought that in persuading the Estates of Bordeaux to acknowledge Henry he had earned the right to go his own way. "Otherwise we shall jostle one another," he continued, "and be at blows before we know it, sire! They are in the Limousin; let the Governor put them down. It is his business and no other's."

"Except mine," the King replied, with a frown of displeasure. "And if he cannot, what then?"

"Let him make way, sire, for one who can," the Constable answered readily. "Your Majesty will not have far to look for him," he continued in a playful tone. "My nephew, for instance, would like a government."

"A truce to jesting," Henry said. "The trouble began, it is true, in the Limousin, but it has spread into Poitou and into the Angoumois" – he looked at Epernon's agent, for the Duke of Epernon was so great a man he had not come himself. "Gentlemen," the King continued, sitting back in his great chair, "can you not come to some agreement? Can you not mass what force you have, and deal with them shortly but mercifully? The longer the fire burns, the more trouble will it be to extinguish it, and the greater the suffering."

"Why not let it burn out, sire?" Epernon's agent muttered with thinly veiled impudence. "It will then burn the more rubbish, with your Majesty's leave!"

But, the words said, he quailed. For, under his aquiline nose, the King's mustaches curled with rage. There were some with whom he must bear, lords who had brought him rich cities, wide provinces; and others whose deeds won them licence. But this man? "There spoke the hireling!" he

cried. And the stroke went home, for the man was the only one at the table who had no government of his own. "I will spare your attendance, sir," the King continued, with a scornful gesture. "M. de Guise will answer such questions as arise on your master's late government-of Provence. And for his other government-

"I represent him there also," the man muttered sulkily.

"Then you can represent his absence," Henry retorted with quick wit, "since he is never there! I need you not. Go, sir, and see that within three hours you are without the walls of Lyons!"

The man rose, divided between fear of the King and fear of the master to whom he must return. He paused an instant, then went down the room slowly, and went out.

"Now, gentlemen," Henry continued, with hard looks, "understand. You may shoe each his own ass, but you must shoe mine also. There must be an end put to this peasant rising. Who will undertake it?"

"The man who should undertake it," Matignon answered, "for the ass is of his providing, is the gentleman who has gone out."

"He is naught!"

"He is for much in this."

"How? Sometimes," the King continued irritably, "I think the men are shod, and the asses come to my Council Table!"

This was a stroke of wit on a level with the Constable's discernment; he laughed loudly. "Nevertheless," he said, "Matignon's right, sire. That man's master is for a good deal in this. If he had kept order his neighbour's house would not be on fire."

For the first time M. des Ageaux ventured a word from the lower end of the table. "Vlaye!" he muttered.

The Constable leaned forward to see who spoke. "Ay, you've hit on it, my lad, whoever you are. Vlaye it is!" And he looked at Matignon, who nodded his adhesion.

Henry frowned. "I am coming to the matter of Vlaye," he said.

"It is all one, sire," Matignon replied, his eyes half shut. He wheezed a little in his speech.

"How?"

The Constable explained. He leant forward and prodded the table with a short, stout finger-not overclean according to the ideas of a later time. "Angoumois is there," he said. "See, your Majesty. And Poitou is here" – with a second prod an inch from the first. "And the Limousin is here! And Périgord is there! And see, your Majesty, where their skirts all meet in this corner-or as good as meet-is Vlaye! Name of God, a strong place, that!" He turned for assent to old Matignon, who nodded silently.

"And you mean to say that Vlaye-

"Has been over heavy handed, your Majesty. And the clowns, beginning to find the thing beyond a joke, began by hanging three poor devils of toll gatherers, and the thing started. And what is on everybody's frontier is nobody's business."

"Except mine," the King muttered drily. "And Vlaye is Epernon's man?"

"That is it, sire," the Constable answered. "Epernon put him in the castle six years back for standing by him when the Angoulême people rose on him. But the man is no Vlaye, you understand. M. de Vlaye was in that business and died of his wounds. He had no near heirs, and the man whom Epernon put in took the lordship as well as the castle, the name and all belonging to it. They call him the Captain of Vlaye in those parts."

The King looked his astonishment.

"Oh, I could give you twenty cases!" the Constable continued, shrugging his shoulders. "What do you expect, sire, in such times as these?"

"Ventre St. Gris!" Henry swore. "And not content with what he has got, he robs the poor?"

"And the rich, too," Joyeuse murmured with a grin, "when he gets them into his net!"

Henry looked sternly from one to another. "But what do you while this goes on?" he said. "For shame! You, Constable? You, Matignon?" He turned from one to the other.

Matignon laughed wheezily. "Make me Governor in Epernon's place, sire," he said, "and I will account for him. But double work and single pay? No, no!"

The Constable laughed as at a great joke. "I say the same, sire," he said. "While Epernon has the Angoumois it is his affair."

The King looked stormily at the Governor of Poitou. But Poitou shook his head. "It is not in my government," he said moodily. "I cannot afford, sire, to get a hornets' nest about my ears for nothing."

He of the Limousin fidgeted. "I say the same, sire," he muttered. "Vlaye has three hundred spears. It would need an army to reduce him. And I have neither men nor money for the task."

"There you have, sire," the delicate-faced Joyeuse cried gaily, "three hundred and one good reasons why the Limousin leaves the man alone. For the matter of that" – he tried to spin his pen like a top—"there is a government as deeply concerned in this as any that has been named."

"Which?" Henry asked. He was losing patience. That which was so much to him was nothing to these.

"Périgord," Joyeuse answered with a bow. And at that several laughed softly-but not the King. He was himself, as has been said, Governor of Périgord.

Here at last, however, was one on whom he could vent his displeasure; and he would vent it! "Stand up, des Ageaux!" he cried harshly. And he scowled as des Ageaux, who was somewhat like him in feature, rose from his seat. "What have you to say, man?" Henry cried. "For yourself and for me! Speak, sir!" But before des Ageaux could answer, the King broke out anew-with abuse, with reproaches, giving his passion rein; while the great Governors listened and licked their lips, or winked at one another, when the King hit them a side blow. Presently, when des Ageaux would have defended himself, alleging that he was no deeper in fault than others,

"Ventre St. Gris! No words, sir!" Henry retorted. "I find kings enough here, I want not you in the number! I made not you that I might have your nobility cast in my teeth! You are not of the blood royal, nor even," leaning a little on the word, "Joyeuse or Epernon! Man, I made you! And not for show, I have enough of that-but to be of use and service, for common needs and not for parade-like the gentleman," bitterly, "who deigns to represent me in the Limousin, or he who is so good as to sign papers for me in Poitou! Man alive, it might be thought you were peer and marshal, from your way of idling here, while robbers ride your marches, and my peasants are driven to revolt. Go to, do you think you are one of these?" He indicated by a gesture the great lords who sat nearest him. "Do you think that because I made you, I cannot unmake you?"

The man on whom the storm had fallen bore it not ignobly. It has been said that he featured Henry himself, being prominent of nose, with a grave face, a brown beard, close-cropped, and a forehead high and severe. Only in his eyes shone, and that rarely, a gleam of humour. Now the sweat stood on his brow as he listened-they were cruel blows, the position a cruel one. Nevertheless, when the King paused, and he had room to answer, his voice was steady.

"I claim, sire," he said, "no immunity. Neither that, nor ought but the right of a soldier, who has fought for France-"

"And gallantly!" struck in one, who had not yet spoken-Lesdiguières, the Huguenot, the famous Governor of Dauphiny. He turned to the King. "I vouch for it, sire," he continued. "And M. de Joyeuse, who has the better right, will vouch for it, too."

But Joyeuse, who was sulkily prodding the table with his spoiled pen, neither lifted his eyes nor gave heed. He was bitterly offended by the junction of his name with that of Epernon, who, great and powerful as he was, had had a notary for his father. He was silent.

Des Ageaux, who had looked at him as hoping something, lifted his eyes. "Your Majesty will do me the justice to remember," he said, "that I had your order to have a special care of my province; and to mass what force I could in Périgueux. Few men as I have-"

"You build them up within walls!" Henry retorted.

"But if I lost Périgueux-"

The King snarled.

"Or aught happened there?"

"You would lose your head!" Henry returned. He was thoroughly out of temper. "By the Lord," he continued, "have I no man in my service? Must I take this fellow of Vlaye into hire because I have no honest man with the courage of a mouse! You call yourself Lieutenant of Périgord, and this happens on your border. I have a mind to break you, sir!"

Henry seldom let his anger have vent; and the man who stood before him knew his danger. From a poor gentleman of Brittany with something of pedigree but little of estate, he had risen to this post which eight out of ten at that table grudged him. He saw it slipping away; nay, falling from him-falling! A moment might decide his fate.

In the pinch his eyes sought Joyeuse, and the appeal in them was not to be mistaken. But the elegant sulked, and would not see. It was clear that, for him, des Ageaux might sink. For himself, the Lieutenant doubted if words would help him, and they might aggravate the King's temper. He was bravely silent.

It was Lesdiguières, the Huguenot, who came to the rescue. "Your Majesty is a little hard on M. des Ageaux," he said. And the King's lieutenant in Périgord knew why men loved the King's Governor in Dauphiny.

"In his place," Henry answered wrathfully, "I would pull down Vlaye if I did it with my teeth. It is easy for you, my friend, to talk," he continued, addressing the Huguenot leader. "They are not your peasants whom this rogue of a Vlaye presses, nor your hamlets he burns. I have it all here!" he repeated, his eyes kindling as he slapped with his open hand one of the papers before him, "and the things he has done make my blood boil! I swear if I were not King I would turn Crocan myself! But these things are little thought of by others. M. d'Epéron supports this man, and" – with a sudden glance at Matignon-"the Governor of Guienne makes use of his horses when he travels to see the King."

Matignon laughed something shamefacedly. "Well, sire, the horses have done no harm," he said. "Nor he in my government. He knows better. And things are upside down thereabouts."

"It is for us to right them!" Henry retorted. And then to des Ageaux, but with less temper. "Now, sir, I lay my order on you! I give you six weeks to rid me of this man, Vlaye. Fail, and I put in your place a man who will do it. You understand, Lieutenant? Then do not fail. By the Lord, I know not where I shall be bearded next!"

He turned then, but still muttering angrily, to other business. Matignon and the Constable were not concerned in this; and as soon as the King's shoulder was towards them they winked at one another. "Your nephew will not have long to wait," Matignon whispered, "if a lieutenancy will suit him."

"'Twould be a fair start," the Constable answered. "But a watched pot-you know the saying."

"This pot will boil at the end of six weeks," Matignon rejoined with a fat chuckle. "Chut, man, with his wage a year in arrear, and naught behind his wage, where is he to find another fifty men, let alone three or four hundred? He will need five and twenty score for this, and he dare not move a man!"

"He might squeeze his country?" the Constable objected.

"Pooh! He is a fool of the new school! He will go back to his cabbages before he will do that! I tell you," he continued, laying his hand on the other's knee, "he has got Périgord, the main part of it, into order! Ay, into order! And if he don't go, we shall have to mend our manners," with a grin, "and get our governments into order, too!"

"By the Lord, there is no finger wags in my country unless I will it!" the Constable rejoined with some tartness. "Since he" – he indicated Joyeuse-"came over to us, at any rate! Don't think it! But there it is. If there were no whifflesnaffles here and there, and no blood-letting, it would not suit us very well, would it? You don't want to go to cabbage planting, Marshal, more than I do?"

The Marshal smiled.

* * * * *

Late that night the young Duke of Joyeuse, leaving his people at the end of the street, went by himself to the house in which des Ageaux lodged in Lyons. A woman answered his summons, and not knowing the young grandee-for he was cloaked to the nose-fetched the Bat, an old, lean, lank-visaged captain who played squire of the body to des Ageaux. The Bat knew the Duke in spite of his cloak; perhaps he had him for a certain reason in his mind. And he bowed his long, stiff back before him, and would have fetched lights; yet with a glum face. But the Duke answered him shortly that he wanted no more than a word with his master, and would say it there.

On which, "You are too late, my lord," the Bat rejoined; and Joyeuse saw that with all his politeness he was as gloomy as his name. "He left Lyons this afternoon."

"With what attendance?" the Duke asked in great surprise. For he had not heard of it.

"Alone, my lord Duke."

"Does he return to-morrow?"

"I know not."

"But you know something!" the young noble retorted with more of vexation than the circumstances seemed to justify.

"My lord, nothing," the Bat answered, "save that we are ordered to follow him to-morrow by way of Clermont."

"To his province?"

"Even so, my lord."

Joyeuse struck his booted foot against the pavement, and the sombre Bat, whose ears-some said he got his name from them-were almost as long as his legs, caught the genial chink of gold crowns. It was such music as he seldom heard, for he had a vision of a heavy bag of them; and his eyes glistened.

But the chink was all he had of them. Joyeuse turned away, and with a stifled sigh and a shrug went back to the play-table at the Archbishop's palace. Sinning and repenting were the two occupations in which he had spent one half of his short life; and if there was a thing which he did with greater ardour than the first-it was the second.

CHAPTER I. VILLENEUVE-L'ABBESSE

The horse looked piteously at the man. Blood oozed from its broken knees and its legs quivered under it. The man holding his scratched and abraded hand to his mouth returned the beast's look, at first with promise of punishment, but by and by less unkindly. He was a just man, and he saw that the fault was his; since it was he who, after crossing the ridge, had urged the horse out of the path that he might be spared some part of the weary descent. Out of the path, and cunningly hidden by a tuft of rough grass, a rabbit-hole had lain in wait.

He contented himself with a word of disgust, therefore, chucked the rein impatiently-since justice has its limits-and began to lead the horse down the descent, which a short sward rendered slippery. But he had not gone many paces before he halted. The horse's painful limp and the sweat that broke out on its shoulders indicated that two broken knees were not the worst of the damage. The man let the rein go, resigned himself to the position, and, shrugging his shoulders, scanned the scene before him.

The accident had happened on the south side of the long swell of chalk hills which the traveller had been mounting for an hour past; and scarcely a stone's-throw below the ruined wind-mill that had been his landmark for leagues. To right and left of him, under a pale-blue sky, the breezy, open down, carpeted with wild thyme and vetches, and alive with the hum of bees, stretched in long soft undulations, marred by no sign of man save a second and a third wind-mill ranged in line on the highest breasts. Below him the slope of sward and fern, broken here by a solitary blackthorn, there by a clump of whin and briars, swept gently down to a shallow wide valley-almost a plain-green and thickly wooded, beyond which the landscape rose again slowly and imperceptibly into uplands. Through this wide valley flowed from left to right a silvery river, its meandering course marked by the lighter foliage of willows and poplars; and immediately below the traveller a cluster of roofless hovels on the bank seemed to mark a ford.

On all the hill about him, on the slopes of thyme, and heather, and yellow gorse, the low sun was shining-from his right, and from a little behind him, so that his shadow stretched far across the sward. But in the valley about the river and the ford evening was beginning to fall, grey, peaceful, silent. For a time his eyes roved hither and thither, seeking a halting-place of more promise than the ruined cots; and at length they found what they sought. He marked, rising from a mass of trees a little beyond the ford, a thin curl of smoke, so light, so grey, as to be undiscoverable by any but the sharpest eyes-but his were of the sharpest. The outline of the woods at the same point indicated a clearing within a wide loop of the river; and putting the one with the other, des Ageaux-for it was he-came to a fair certainty that a house of some magnitude lay hidden there.

At any rate he saw no better chance of shelter. It was that of the ruined hovels and the roadside, and taking the rein once more, he led the horse down the hill, and in the first dusk of the evening crossed the pale clear water on stepping-stones. He suffered the horse to stand awhile in the stream and drink and cool its legs amid the dark, waving masses of weed. Then he urged it up the bank, and led it along the track, that was fast growing dim, and grey, and lonesome.

The horse moved painfully, knuckling over at every step. Yet night had not quite fallen when the traveller, plodding along beside it, saw two stone pillars standing gaunt and phantom-like on the left of the path. Each bore aloft a carved escutcheon, and in that weird half-light and with a backing of dark forest trees the two might have been taken for ghosts. Their purpose, however, was plain, for they flanked the opening, at right angles to his path, of a rough road, at the end of which, at a distance of some ten score paces from the pillars, appeared an open gateway framed in a dim wall.

No more than that, for above was the pale sky, and on either hand the black line of trees hedged the narrow picture.

The traveller peered awhile at the escutcheons. But gathering darkness and the lichens which covered the stone foiled him, and he was little the wiser when he turned down the avenue. When he had traversed a half of its length the trees fell back on either hand, and revealed the sullen length of a courtyard wall, and rising within it, a little on his right, a dark mass of building, compact in the main of two round towers, of the date of Philip Augustus, with some additions of more modern times. The effect of the pile, viewed in that half-light, was gloomy if not forbidding; but the open gateway, the sled-marks that led to it, and the wisps of hay which strewed the road, no less than the broken yoke that hung in the old elm beside the entrance—all these, which the Lieutenant's eyes were quick to discern, seemed to offer a more homely and more simple welcome.

A silent welcome, nevertheless, borne on the scent of new-mown, half-gathered hay; a scent which des Ageaux was destined to associate ever after with this beginning of an episode, and with his entrance in the gloaming, amid quiet things. Slowly he passed under the gateway, leading the halting horse. Fallen hay, swept from the cart by the brow of the arch, deadened his footfalls, and before he was discovered he was able to appreciate the enclosure, half courtyard, half fold-yard, sloping downward from the house and shut in on the other sides by a tile-roofed wall. At the lower end on his left were stalls, and sheds, and stables, and a vague, mysterious huddle of ploughs and gear, and feeding beasts, and farm refuse. Between this mass—to which the night began to lend strange forms—and the great, towered house which loomed black against the sky, lay the slope of the court, broken midway by the walled marge of a swell something Italian in fashion, and speaking of more prosperous days. On this there sat, as the traveller saw, two figures.

And then one only. For as he looked, uncertain whether to betake himself first to the stables of the house, one of the two figures sprang from the wall-edge, and came bounding to him with hands upraised, flying skirts, a sharp cry of warning.

"Oh, take care, Charles!" it cried. "Go back before M. le Vicomte comes!"

Then, at six paces from him, she knew him for a stranger, and the last word fell scarcely breathed from her lips; while he, knowing her for a girl, and young by her voice, uncovered. "I seek only a night's shelter," he said stiffly. "Pardon me, mademoiselle, the alarm I fear I have caused you. My horse slipped on the hill, and is unable to travel farther."

She stood staring at him in astonishment, and until her companion at the well came forward made no reply. Something in the movements of this second figure as it crossed the court struck the eye as abnormal, but it was only when it came quite close that the stranger discovered that the lad before him was slightly hump-backed.

"You have met with a mischance," the youth said with awkward diffidence.

"Yes."

"Whatever the cause, you are welcome. Go, Bonne," the young man continued, addressing the girl, "it is better you went—and tell my father that a gentleman is here craving shelter. When I have stabled his horse I will bring him in. This way, if you please!" the lad continued, turning to lead the way to the stables, but casting from moment to moment timid looks at his guest. "The place is rough, but such as it is, it is at your service. Have you ridden far to-day, if it please you?"

"From Rochechouart."

"It is well we had not closed the gates," the youth answered shyly; "we close them an hour after sunset by rule. But to-day the men have been making hay, and we sup late."

The stranger expressed his obligation, and, following his guide, led his horse through one of the doors of a long range of stabling built against the western wall of the courtyard. Within all was dark, and he waited while his companion fetched a lanthorn. The light, when it came, disclosed a sad show of empty mangers, broken racks, and roof beams hung with cobwebs. Rain and sunshine, it was

evident, entered through more holes than one, and round the men's heads a couple of bats, startled by the lantern-light, flitted noiselessly to and fro.

At the farther end of the place, the roof above three or four stalls showed signs of recent repair; and here the young man invited his guest to place his beast.

"But I shall be turning out your horses," the stranger objected.

The youth laughed a little awry. "There's but my father's gelding," he said, "and old Panza the pony. And they are in the ox-stable where they have company. This," he added, pointing to the roof, "was made good for my sister the Abbess's horses."

The guest nodded, and, after examining his beast's injuries, bathed its knees with fresh water; then producing a bandage from his saddle-bag he soaked it in the water and skilfully wound it round the strained fetlock. The lad held the lantern, envy, mingled with admiration, growing in his eyes as he watched the other's skilled hands and method.

"You are well used to horses?" he said.

"Tolerably," des Ageaux answered, looking up. "Are not you?" For in those days it was an essential part of a gentleman's education.

The lad sighed. "Not to horses of this sort," he said, shrugging his shoulders. And des Ageaux took note of the sigh and the words, but said nothing. Instead he removed his sword and pistols from his saddle, and would have taken up his bags also, but the young man interposed and took possession of them. A moment and the two were crossing the darkened courtyard. The light of the lantern made it difficult to see aught beyond the circle of its rays, but the stranger noticed that the château consisted half of a steep-roofed house, and half of the two round towers he had seen; house and towers standing in one long line. Two rickety wooden bridges led across a moat to two doors, the one set in the inner of the two towers-probably this was the ancient entrance-the other in the more modern part.

On the bridge leading to the latter two serving-men with lights were awaiting them. The nearer domestic advanced, bowing. "M. le Vicomte will descend if" – and then, after a pause, speaking more stiffly, "M. le Vicomte has not yet heard whom he has the honour of entertaining."

"I have no pretensions to put him to the trouble of descending," the traveller answered politely. "Say if you please that a gentleman of Brittany seeks shelter for the night, and would fain pay his respects to M. le Vicomte at his convenience."

The servant bowed, and turning with ceremony, led the way into a bare, dimly-lit hall open to its steep oaken roof, and not measurably more comfortable or less draughty than the stable. Here and there dusty blazonings looked down out of the darkness, or rusty weapons left solitary in racks too large for them gave back gleams of light. In the middle of the stone floor a trestle table such as might have borne the weight of huge sirloins and great bustards, and feasted two score men-at-arms in the days of the great Francis, supported a litter of shabby odds and ends; old black-jacks jostling riding-spurs, and a leaping-pole lying hard by a drenching-horn. An open door on the tower side of the hall presented the one point of warmth in the apartment, for through it entered a stream of ruddy light and an odour that announced where the kitchen lay.

But if this were the dining-hall? If the guest felt alarm on this point he was soon reassured. The servant conducted him up a short flight of six steps which rose in one corner. The hall, in truth, huge as it seemed in its dreary emptiness, was but one half of the original hall. The leftward half had been partitioned off and converted into two storeys-the lower story raised a little from the ground for the sake of dryness-of more modern chambers. More modern; but if that into which the guest was ushered, a square room not unhandsome in its proportions, stood for sample, scarcely more cheerful. The hangings on the walls were of old Sarazinois, but worn and faded to the colour of dust. Carpets of leather covered the floor, but they were in holes and of a like hue; while the square stools clad in velvet and gilt-nailed, which stood against the walls, were threadbare of stuff and tarnished of nails. In winter, warmed by the ruddy blaze of a generous fire, and well sconced, and filled with pleasant company seated about a well-spread board, the room might have passed muster and even

conducted to ease. But as the dusky frame of a table, lighted by four poor candles-that strove in vain with the vast obscurity-and set with no great, store of provision, it wore an air of meagreness not a whit removed from poverty.

The man who stood beside the table in the light of the candles, and formed the life of the picture, blended well with the furnishings. He was tall and thin, with stooping shoulders and a high-nosed face, that in youth had been masterful and now was peevish and weary. He wore a sword and much faded lace, and on the appearance of his guest moved forward a pace and halted, with the precision and stiffness of clockwork. "I have the honour," he began, "to welcome, I believe-

"A gentleman of Brittany," des Ageaux answered, bowing low. It by no means suited his plans to be recognised. "And one, M. le Vicomte, who respectfully craves a night's hospitality."

"Which the château of Villeneuve-l'Abbesse," the Vicomte replied with grandeur, "has often granted to the greatest, nor" – he waved his hand with formal grace-"ever refused to the meanest. They have attended, I trust," he continued with the air of one who, at the head of a great household, knows, none the less, how to think for his guests, "to your people, sir?"

"Alas, M. le Vicomte," des Ageaux answered, a faint twinkle in his eyes belying the humility of his tone, "I have none; I am travelling alone."

"Alone?" The Vicomte repeated the word in a tone of wonder. "You have no servants with you-at all?"

"Alas-no."

"Is it possible?"

Des Ageaux shrugged his shoulders, and spread out his hands. "In these days, M. le Vicomte, yes."

The Vicomte seemed by the droop of his shoulders to admit the plea; perhaps because the other's eyes strayed involuntarily to the shabby furniture. He shook his head gloomily. "Since Coutras-" he began, and then, considering that he was unbending too soon, he broke off. "You met with some accident, I believe, sir?" he said. "But first, I did not catch your name?"

"Des Voeux," the Lieutenant answered, adopting on the spur of the moment one somewhat like his own. "My horse fell and cut its knees on the hill about a mile beyond the ford. I much fear it has also strained a fetlock."

"It will not be fit to travel to-morrow, I doubt?"

The guest spread out his hands, intimating that time and the morrow must take care of themselves; or that it was no use to fight against fate.

"I must lend you something from the stables, then," the Vicomte answered; as if at least a score of horses stood at rack and manger in his stalls. "But I am forgetting your own needs, sir. Circumstances have thrown my household out of gear, and we sup late tonight. But we shall not need to wait long."

He had barely spoken when the two serving-men who had met the Lieutenant on the bridge entered, one behind the other, bearing with some pomp of circumstance a couple of dishes. They set these on the board, and withdrawing-not without leaving behind them a pleasant scent of new-mown hay-returned quickly bearing two more. Then falling back they announced by the mouth of the least meagre that my lord was served.

The meal which they announced, though home-grown and of the plainest, was sufficient, and des Ageaux, on the Vicomte's invitation, took his seat upon a stool at a nicely regulated distance below his host. As he did so the girl he had seen in the courtyard glided in by a side door and silently took her seat on the farther side of the table. Apparently the Vicomte thought his guest below the honour of an introduction, for he said nothing. And the girl only acknowledged the Lieutenant's respectful salutation by a bow.

The four candles shed a feeble light on the table, and left the greater part of the room in darkness. Des Ageaux could not see the girl well, and he got little more than an impression of a

figure moderately tall and somewhat plump, and of a gentle, downcast face. Form and face owned, certainly, the charm of youth and freshness. But to eyes versed in the brilliance of a Court and the magnificence of *grandes dames* they lacked the more striking characteristics of beauty.

He gave her a thought, however, pondering while he gave ear to the Vicomte's querulous condescensions how so gentle a creature—for her gentleness and placidity struck him—came of so stiff and peevish a father. But that was all. Or it might have been all if as the thought passed through his mind his host had not abruptly changed the conversation and disclosed another side of his character.

"Where is Roger?" he asked, addressing the girl with sharpness.

"I do not know, sir," she murmured.

A retort seemed hovering on the Vicomte's lips, when the youth who had taken the guest to the stable, and had stayed without, perhaps to make some change in his rustic clothes, entered and slid timidly into his place beside his sister. He hoped, probably, to pass unseen, but the Vicomte, his great high nose twitching, fixed him with his eyes and pointed inexorably at him, with a spoon held delicately between thumb and finger. "You would not think," he said with grim abruptness, "that that-that, M. des Voeux, was son of mine?"

Des Ageaux started. "I fear," he said hastily, "that it was I, sir, who made him late. He was good enough to receive me."

"I can only assure you," the Vicomte replied with cruel wit, "that whoever made him late, it was not I who made him—as he is! The Villeneuves, till his day, I'd have you know, sir, have been straight and tall, and men of their hands, as ready with a blow as a word! Men to make their way in the world. But you see him! You see him! Can you," he continued, his eyes half-closed, dwelling on the lad, whose suffering was evident, "at Court? Or courting? Or stepping a *pavanne*? Or—"

"Father!"

The word burst from the girl's lips, drawn from her by sheer pain. The Vicomte turned to her with icy courtesy. "You spoke, I think?" he said in a tone which rebuked her for the freedom on which she had ventured. "Just so. I was forgetting. We live so quietly here, we use so little ceremony with one another, that even I forget at times that family matters are not interesting to a stranger. Were my elder daughter here, M. des-ah, des Voeux, yes—my daughter the Abbess, who knows the world, and has some tincture of manners, and is not taken commonly for a waiting-woman, she would be able to entertain you better. But you see what we are. For," with a smirk, "it were rude not to include myself with my family."

No wonder, the guest thought, as he listened, full of pity—no wonder the lad had spoken timidly and shyly, if this were the daily treatment he received! If poverty, working on pride, had brought the last of a great family to this—to repaying on the innocents who shared his decay the slings and arrows of unkind fortune! The girl's exclamation, wrung from her by her brother's suffering, had gone to the Lieutenant's heart, though that heart was not of the softest. He would have given something to silence the bitter old tyrant. But experience told him that he might make matters worse. He was no knight-errant, no rescuer of dames; and, after all, the Vicomte was their father. So while he hesitated, seeking in vain a safe subject, the sharp tongue was at work again.

"I would like you to see my elder daughter," the Vicomte resumed with treacherous blandness. "She has neither a ploughboy's figure, nor," slowly, "a dairymaid's speech. Her manners are quite like those of the world. She might go anywhere, even to Court, where she has been, without rendering herself the subject of ridicule and contempt. It is truly unfortunate for us" — with a bow—"that you cannot see her."

"She is not at home?" the Lieutenant said for the sake of saying something. He was full of pity for the girl whose face, now red, now pale, betrayed how she suffered under the discipline.

"She does not live at home," the Vicomte answered. And then—with curious inconsistency he now hid and now declared his poverty—"We have not much left of which we can be proud," he

continued, "since the battle of Coutras seven years back took from the late King's friends all they had. But the Abbey of Vlaye is still our appanage. My elder daughter is the Abbess."

"It lies, I think, near Vlaye?"

"Yes, some half-league from Vlaye and three leagues from here. You have heard of Vlaye, then, Monsieur-Monsieur des Voeux?"

"Without doubt, M. le Vicomte."

"Indeed! In what way, may I ask?" There was a faint tinge of suspicion in his tone.

"At Rochechouart I was told that the roads in that direction were not over safe."

The Vicomte laughed in his sardonic fashion. "They begin to cry out, do they?" he said. "The fat burgesses who fleece us? Not very safe, ha, ha! The roads! Not so safe as their back-shops where they lend to us at cent per cent!" – with bitterness. "It is well that there is some one to fleece them in their turn!"

"They told me as much as that," des Ageaux replied with gravity. "So much, indeed, that I was surprised to find your gates still open! They gave me to understand that no man slept without a guard within four leagues of Vlaye."

"They told you that, did they?" the Vicomte answered. And he chuckled, well satisfied. It pleased him to think that if he and his could no longer keep Jacques Bonhomme in order, there were others who could. "They told you not far from the truth. A little later, and you had been barred out even here. Not that I fear the Captain of Vlaye. Hawks pike not out hawks' eyes," with a lifting of the head, and an odd show of arrogance. "We are good friends, M. de Vlaye and I."

"Still you bar your gates, soon or late?" the Lieutenant replied with a smile.

A shadow fell across the Vicomte's face. "Not against him," he said shortly.

"No, of course not," des Voeux replied. "I had forgotten. You have the Crocans also at no great distance. I was forgetting them."

The sudden rigidity of his younger listeners, and the silence which fell on all, warned him, as soon as he had spoken, that he had said something amiss. Nor was the silence all. When his host next spoke-after an interval-it was with a passion as far removed from the cynical rudeness to which he had treated his children as are the poles apart. "That name is not named in this house!" he cried, his voice thin and tremulous. "By no one!" he struck the table with a shaking hand. "Understand me, sir, by no one! God's curse on them! Ay, and on all who-"

"No, sir, no!" The cry came from the girl. "Do not curse him!"

She was on her feet. For an instant the Lieutenant, seeing her father's distorted face, feared that he would strike her. But the result was different. The opposition that might have maddened the angry man, had the effect of sobering him. "Sit down!" he muttered, passing his napkin over his face. "Sit down, fool! Sit down! And you" – he paused a moment, striving to regain the gibing tone that was habitual to him-"you, sir, may now see how it is. I told you we had no manners. You have now the proof of it. I doubt I must keep you, until the Abbess, my daughter, pays her next visit, that you may see at least one Villeneuve who is neither clown nor dotard!"

Man of the world as he was, the King's Lieutenant knew not what to say to this outburst. He murmured a vague apology, and thought how different all was from the anticipations which the scent of hay and the farmyard peace had raised in him on his arrival. This old man, rotting in the husk of his former greatness, girding at his helpless children, gnawing, in the decay of his family's grandeur, on his heart and theirs, returning scorn for scorn, and spite for spite, but on those who were innocent of either, ignorant of either-this was a picture to the painting of which the most fanciful must have brought some imagination. Under the surface lay something more; something that had to do with the Crocans. He fancied that he could make a guess at the secret; and that it had to do with the girl's lover. But the meal was closing, the Vicomte's rising interrupted his thoughts, and whatever interest the question had for him, he was forced to put it away for the time.

The Vicomte bowed a stiff good-night. "Boor as he is, I fear that you must now put up with my son," he said, smiling awry. "He has the Tower Room, where, in my time, I have known the best company in the province lie, when good company was; it has been scarce," he continued bitterly, "since Coutras. He will find you a lodging there, and if the accommodation be rough, and your room-fellow what you see him," shrugging his shoulders, "at least you will have space enough and follow good gentry. I have known the Governor of Poitou and the Lieutenant of Périgord, with two of the Vicomtes of the Limousin, lie there-and fourteen truckle-beds about them. In those days was little need to bar our gates at night. Solomon! The lanthorn, fool! I bid you good-night, sir!"

Des Ageaux bowed his acknowledgements, and following in the train of an older serving-man than he had yet seen; who, bearing a lanthorn, led him up a small staircase. Roger the hapless followed. On the first floor the guest noted the doors of four rooms, two on either side of a middle passage, that got its light from a window at the end of the house. Such rooms-or rooms opening one through the other-were at that date reserved for the master and mistress of the château, and their daughters, maiden or married. For something of the old system which secluded women, and a century before had forbidden their appearance at Court, still prevailed; nor was the Lieutenant at all surprised when his guide, turning from these privileged apartments, led him up a flight of four or five steps at the hither end of the passage. And so through a low doorway.

He passed the door, and was surprised to find himself in the open air on the roof of the hall, the stars above him, and the night breeze cooling his brow. The steeply-pitched lead ended in a broad, flat gutter, fenced by a rail fixed in the parapet. The servant led him along the path which this gutter provided to a door in the wall of the great round tower that rose twenty feet above the house. This gave entrance to a small chamber-one of those commonly found between the two skins of such old buildings-which served both for landing and ante-room. From it the dark opening of a winding staircase led upwards on one hand; on the other a low-browed door masked the course of the downward flight.

Across this closet-bare as bare walls could make it-the grey-bearded servant led him in two strides, and opening a farther door introduced him into the chamber which had seen so much good company. It was a gloomy, octagonal room of great size, lighted in the daytime by four deep-sunk windows, and occupying-save for such narrow closets as that through which they entered-a whole storey of the tower. The lanthorn did but make darkness visible, but Solomon proceeded to light two rushlights that stood in iron sconces on the wall, and by their light the Lieutenant discerned three truckle-beds laid between two of the windows. He could well believe, so vast was the apartment, that fourteen had not cumbered its bareness. At this date a couple of chests, as many stools, a bundle of old spears and a heavy three-legged table made up, with some dingy, tattered hangings, the whole furniture of the chamber.

The old serving-man set down the lanthorn and looked about him sorrowfully.

"Thirty-four I've seen sleep here," he said. "The Governor of Poitou, and the Governor of Périgord, and the four Vicomtes of the Limousin, and twenty-eight gentles in truckles."

"Twenty-eight?" the Lieutenant questioned, measuring in some astonishment the space with his eye. "But your master said-"

"Twenty-eight, by your leave," the man answered obstinately. "And every man his dog! A gentleman was a gentleman then, and a Vicomte a Vicomte. But since that cursed battle at Coutras set us down and put these Huguenots up, there is an end of gentry almost. Ay, thirty-was it thirty, I said?"

"Four, you said. Thirty-four," des Ageaux answered, smiling. "Good-night."

The man shook his head sombrely, bade them goodnight, and closed the door on them.

An instant later he could be heard groping his way back through the closet and over the roof. The Lieutenant, as soon as the sound ceased, looked round and thought that he had seldom lain in a gloomier place. The windows were but wooden lattices innocent of glass, and through the slats of the nearest a strong shoot of ivy grew into the room. The night air entered with it and stirred the

ragged hangings that covered a part of the walls; hangings that to add to the general melancholy had once been black, a remnant, it is possible, of the funeral trappings of some dead Vicomte. Frogs croaked in a puddle without; one of the lattices creaked open at intervals, only to close again with a hollow report; the rushlights flared sideways in the draught. Des Ageaux had read of such a room in the old romances, in *Bevis of Hampton*, or the *History of Armida*; a room of shadows and gloom, owl-flittings and dead furnishings. But he smiled at the thoughts it called up. He had often lain in his cloak under the sky amid dead men. Nevertheless, "Do you sleep here alone?" he asked, turning to his companion, who had seated himself despondently on one of the beds.

The lad, oppressed by what had gone forward downstairs, barely looked up. "Yes," he began, "since" – and then, breaking off, he added sullenly, "Yes, I do."

"Then you don't lack courage!" des Ageaux replied.

"People sleep well when they are tired," the youth returned, "as I am to-night."

The Lieutenant accepted the hint, and postponed until the morrow the questions he had it in his mind to ask. Nodding a good-humoured assent he proceeded to his simple arrangements for the night, placed his sword and pistols beside the truckle-bed, and in a few minutes was sleeping as soundly on his thin palliasse as if he had been in truth the poverty-stricken gentleman of Brittany he once had been and still might be again.

CHAPTER II. THE TOWER CHAMBER

An hour or two later the Lieutenant awoke suddenly. He rose on his elbow, and listened. Inured to a life of change which had cast him many times into strange beds and the company of stranger bed-fellows, he had not to ask himself where he was, or how he came to be there. He knew these things with a soldier's instinct, before his eyes were open. That which he did ask himself was, what had roused him.

For it was still the dead of night, and all in the château, and all without, save the hoarse voices of the frogs, seemed quiet. Through the lattice that faced him the moonbeams fell on the floor in white, criss-cross patterns; which the pointed shape of the windows made to resemble chequered shields—the black and white escutcheons of his native province. These patches of light diffused about them a faint radiance, sufficient, but no more than sufficient, to reveal the outlines of the furniture, the darker masses of the beds, and even the vague limits of the chamber. He marked nothing amiss, however, except that which had probably roused him. The nearest lattice, that one through which he had noted the ivy growing, stood wide open. Doubtless the breeze, light as it was, had swung the casement inwards, and the creak of the hinge, or the coolness of the unbroken stream of air which blew across his bed, had disturbed him.

Satisfied with the explanation, he lay down with a sigh of content, and was about to sink into sleep when a low, sibilant sound caught his ear, fretted him awhile, finally dragged him up, broadly awake. What was it? What caused it? The gentle motion of the loosened ivy on the sill? Or the wind toying with the leaves outside? Or the stir of the ragged hangings that moved weirdly on the wall? Or was some one whispering?

The last was the fact, and, assured of it, des Ageaux peered through the gloom at the nearer pallet, and discovered that it was empty. Then he reflected. The ivy, which grew through the window, must have held the lattice firm against a much stronger breeze than was blowing. It followed that the casement had been opened by some one; probably by some one who had entered the room that way.

It might be no affair of his, but on the other hand it might be very much his affair. He looked about the room, making no sound, but keeping a hand raised to seize his weapons on the least alarm.

He could discover neither figure nor any sign of movement in the room. Yet the whispering persisted. More puzzled, he raised himself higher, and then a streak of light which the low, lumpy mass of one of the truckle-beds had hidden, broke on him. It shone under the door by which he had entered, and proceeded, beyond doubt, from a lanthorn or rushlight in the antechamber.

What was afoot? It is not as a rule for good that men whisper at dead of night, nor to say their prayers that they steal from their beds in the small hours. Des Ageaux was far from a timid man—or he had not been Lieutenant-Governor of Périgord—but he knew himself alone in a strange house, and a remote corner of that house; and though he believed that he held the map of the country he might be deceiving himself. Possibly, though he had seen no sign of it, he was known. His host styled himself the Captain of Vlaye's friend; he might think to do Vlaye a kindness at his guest's expense. Nor was that all. Lonely travellers ran risks in those days; it was not only from inns that they vanished and left no sign. He bore, it was true, not much of price about him, and riding without attendance might be thought to have less. But, all said and done, the house was remote, the Vicomte poor and a stranger. It might be as well to see what was passing.

He rose noiselessly to his feet, and, taking his sword, crept across the floor. He had lain down in the greater part of his clothes, and whatever awaited him, he was ready. As he drew near the door, the whispering on the farther side persisted. But it was low, the sound lacked menace, and before he laid his ear to the oak some shame of the proceeding seized him.

His scruples were wasted. He could not, even when close, distinguish a word; so wary were the speakers, so low their voices. Then the absurdity of his position, if he were detected and the matter had naught to do with him, took him by the throat. The chamber, with its patches of moonlight and its dim spaces, was all quiet about him, and either he must rest content with that, or he must open and satisfy himself. He took his resolution, found the latch, and opened the door.

He was more or less prepared for what he saw. Not so the three whom he surprised in their midnight conference. The girl whom he had seen at supper sprang with a cry of alarm from the step on which she had her seat, and retreating upwards as quickly as the cloak in which she was muffled would let her, made as if she would escape by the tower stairs. The two men-Roger, the son of the house, and another, a taller youth, who leant against the wall beside him-straightened themselves with a jerk; while the stranger, who had the air of being two or three years older than Roger, laid his hand on his weapon. A lanthorn which stood on the stone floor between the three, and was the only other object in the closet, cast its light upwards; which had the effect of distorting the men's features, and exaggerating looks already disordered.

The Lieutenant, we have said, was not wholly surprised. None the less the elder of the two young men was the first to find his tongue. "What do you here?" he cried, his eyes gleaming with resentment. "We came to be private here. What do you wish, sir?"

Des Ageaux took one step over the threshold and bowed low. "To offer my apologies," he replied, with a tinge of humour in his tone, "and then to withdraw. To be plain, sir, I heard whispering, and, half-roused, I fancied that it might concern me. Forgive me, mademoiselle," he continued, directing an easy and not ungraceful gesture to the shrinking girl, who cowered on the dark stairs as if she wished they might swallow her. "Your pardon also, Monsieur Charles."

"You know my name?" the stranger exclaimed, with a swift, perturbed glance at the others.

"Your name and no more," des Ageaux answered, smiling and not a whit disturbed. His manner was perfectly easy. "I heard it as I opened. But be at rest, that which is not meant for me I do not keep. You will understand that the hour was late, I found the window open, I heard voices-some suspicion was not unnatural. Have no fear, however. To-morrow I shall only have had one dream the more."

"But dream or no dream," the person he had addressed as Charles blurted out, "if you mention it-"

"I shall not mention it."

"To the Vicomte even?"

"Not even to him! The presence of mademoiselle's brother," des Ageaux continued, with a keen glance at Roger, "were warrant for silence, had I the right to speak."

The girl started and the hood of her cloak fell back. With loosened hair and parted lips she looked so pretty that he was sorry he had struck at her ever so slightly. "You think, sir," she exclaimed in a tone half-indignant, half-awestruck, "that this is my lover?"

His eyes passed from her to the taller young man. He bowed low. "I did," he said, the courtesy of his manner redoubled. "Now I see that he is your brother. Forgive me, mademoiselle, I am unlucky this evening. Lest I offend again-and my presence alone must be an offence-I take my leave."

Charles stepped forward. "Not," he said somewhat peremptorily, "before you have assured us again of your silence! Understand me, sir, this is no child's play! Were my father to hear of my presence, he would make my sister suffer for it. Were he to discover me here-you do not know him yet-it might cost a life!"

"What can I say more," des Ageaux replied with a little stiffness, "than I have said? Why should I betray you?"

"Enough, sir, if you understand."

"I understand enough!" And then, "If I can do no more than be silent-"

"You can do no more."

"I take my leave." And, bowing, with an air of aloofness he stepped back and closed the door on them.

When he had done so the three looked eagerly at one another. But they did not speak until his footsteps on the chamber floor had ceased to sound. Then, "What is this?" the elder brother muttered, frowning slightly at the younger. "There is something here I do not understand. Who is he? What is he? You told me that he was some poor gentleman adventuring alone, and without servants, and staying here for the night with a lame horse and an empty purse. But-"

"He was not like this at supper," Roger replied, excusing himself.

"But he has nothing of the tone of the man you described."

"Not now," Bonne said. "But at supper he was different in some way." And recalling how he had looked at her when he thought that Charles was her lover, she blushed.

"He is no poor man," Charles muttered. "Did you mark his ring?"

"No."

"May-be at supper it was turned inward, but as he stood there with his hand on the door post, the light fell on it. *Three leopards passant or on a field vert!* I have seen that coat, and more than once!"

"But why should not the poor gentleman wear his coat?" Bonne urged. "Perhaps it is all that is left of his grandeur."

"In gold on green enamel?" Charles asked, raising his eyebrows. "Certainly his sword was of the plainest. But I don't like it! Why is he here? What is he doing? Can he be friend to Vlaye, and on his way to help him?"

Abruptly the girl stepped forward, and flinging an arm round her brother's neck, pressed herself against him. "Give it up! Give it up!" she murmured. "Charles! Dear brother, listen to me. Give it up!"

"It were better you gave me up," he replied in a tone between humour and pathos, as he stroked her hair. "But you are Villeneuve at heart, Bonne-"

"Bonne by nature, Bonne by name!" Roger muttered, caressing her with his eyes.

"And stand by those you love, whatever come of it!" Charles continued. "Would you then have me leave those" – with a grimace which she, having her face on his shoulder, could not see-"whom, if I do not love, I have chosen! Leave them because danger threatens? Because Vlaye gives the word?"

"But what can you do against him?" she answered in a tearful tone. "You say yourself that they are but a rabble, your Crocans! Broken men, beggars and what not, peasants and ploughboys, ill-armed and ill-fed! What can they do against men-at-arms? Against Vlaye? I thought when I got word to you to come, in order that I might tell you what he was planning-I thought that you would listen to me!"

"And am I not listening, little one?" he replied, fondling her hair.

"But you will not be guided?"

"That is another thing," he replied more soberly. "Had I known, it is true, what I know now, had I known of what sort they were to whom I was joining myself, I might not have done it. I might have borne a little longer" – his tone grew bitter-"the life we lead here! I might have borne a little longer to rust and grow boorish, and to stand for clown and rustic in M. de Vlaye's eyes when he deigns to visit us! I might have put up a little longer with the answer I got when I craved leave to see the wars and the world-that as my fathers had made my bed I must lie on it. Ay, and more! If he will not call him father-had spared me his sneers only a little, if he had let a day go by without casting in my face the lack that was no fault of mine, I would have still tried to bear it. But not a day did he spare me! Not one day, as God is my witness!"

Her sorrowful silence acknowledged the truth of his words. At length, "But if these folk," she said timidly, "are of so wretched a sort, Charles?"

"Wretched they are," he answered, "but their cause is good. Better fall with them than rise by such deeds as have driven them to arms. I tell you that the things I have heard, as I sat over their fires by night in the caves about Bourdeilles where they lie, would arm not men's hands only, but women's!

Would spoil your sleep of nights, and strong men's sleep! Poor cottars killed and hamlets burned, in pure sport! Children flung out and women torn from homes, and through a whole country-side corn trampled wantonly, and oxen killed to make a meal for four! But I cannot tell you what they have suffered, for you are a woman and you could not bear it!"

Bonne forgot her fears for him. She leant forward-she had gone back to her seat on the stairs-and clenched her small hands. "And M. de Vlaye it is," she cried, "he who has done more than any other to madden them, who now proposes to rise upon their fall? Monsieur de Vlaye it is who, having driven them to this, will now crush them and say he does the King service, and so win pardon for a thousand crimes?"

But the light had gone out in Charles's eyes. "Ay, and win it he will. So it will go," he said moodily. "So it will happen! He has seen afar the chance of securing himself, and he will seize it, by doing what, for the time, no other has means to do."

"He who kindled the fire will be rewarded for putting it out?"

"Just so!"

"But can you do nothing against him?" Roger muttered.

"We may hold our own for a time, in the caves and hills about Brantôme perhaps," the elder brother answered. "But after a while he will starve us out. And in the open such folks as we have, ill-armed, ill-found, with scarce a leader older than myself, will melt before his pikes like smoke before the wind!"

Roger's eyes glistened. "Not if I were with you," he muttered. "There should be one blow struck before he rode over us! But" – he let his chin sink on his breast-"what am I?"

"Brave enough, I know," Charles answered, putting his hand affectionately on the lad's shoulder. "Braver than I am, perhaps. But it is not the end, be the end what it may, good lad, that weighs me down and makes me coward. It is the misery of seeing all go wrong hour by hour and day by day! Of seeing the cause with which I must now sink or swim mishandled! Of striving to put sense and discipline into the folk who are either clowns, unteachable by aught but force, or a rabble of worthless vagrants drawn to us as to any other cause that promises safety from the gallows. And yet, if I were older and had seen war and handled men, I feel that even of this stuff I could make a thing should frighten Vlaye. Ay, and for a time I thought I could," he continued gloomily. "But they would not be driven, and short of hanging half a dozen, which I dare not attempt, I must be naught!"

"Do you think," Roger muttered, "that if you had me beside you-I have strong arms-"

"God forbid!" Charles answered, looking sadly at him. "Dear lad, one is enough! What would Bonne do without you? It is not your place to go forth."

"If I were straight!"

The girl leaned forward and took his hand. "You are straight for me," she said softly. "Straight for me! More precious than the straightest thing in the world!"

He sighed and Bonne echoed the sigh. It was the first time the three had met since Charles's flight; since, fretted by inaction and stung beyond patience by the gibes of the father-who, while he withheld the means of making a figure in the world, did not cease to sneer at supineness-he had taken a step which had seemed desperate, and now seemed fatal. For if this Crocan rising were not a Jacquerie in name, if it were not stained as yet by the excesses which made that word a terror, it was still a peasant-rising. It was still a revolt of the canaille, of the mob; and more indulgent fathers than the Vicomte would have disowned the son who, by joining it, ranged himself against his caste.

The younger man had known that when he took the step; yet he had been content to take it. The farther it set him from the Vicomte the better! But he had not known nor had Bonne guessed how hopeless was the cause he was embracing, how blind its leaders, how shiftless its followers, how certain and disastrous its end! But he knew now. He knew that, to the attack which M. de Vlaye meditated, the mob of clods and vagrants must fall an easy prey.

Young and high-spirited, moved a little by the peasants' wrongs, and more by his own, he had done this thing. He had rushed on ruin, made good his father's gibes, played into M. de Vlaye's hands—the hands of the man who had patronised him a hundred times, and with a sneer made sport of his rusticity. The contempt of the man of the world for the raw boy had sunk into the lad's soul, and he hated Vlaye. To drag Vlaye down had been one of Charles's day-dreams. He had pined for the hour when, at the head of the peasants who were to hail him as their leader, he should tread the hated scutcheon under foot.

Now he saw that all the triumph would be M. de Vlaye's, and that by his bold venture he had but added a feather to the hated plume. And Bonne and Roger, mute because their love taught them when to speak and when to refrain, gazed sadly at the lanthorn. The silence lasted a long minute, and was broken in the end, not by their voices, but by the distant creak of a door.

Bonne sprang to her feet, the colour gone from her face. "Hush!" she cried. "What was that? Listen."

They listened, their hearts beating. Presently Roger, his face almost as bloodless as Bonne's, snatched up the lanthorn. "It is the Vicomte!" he gasped. "He is coming! Quick, Charles! You must go the way you came!"

"But Bonne?" his brother muttered, hanging back. "What is she to do?"

Roger, his hand on the door of the Tower Chamber, stood aghast. Charles might escape unseen, there was still time. But Bonne? If her father found the girl there? And the stranger was in the Tower Room, she could not retreat thither. What was she to do?

The girl's wits found the answer. She pointed to the stairs. "I will hide above," she whispered. "Do you go!" It was still of Charles she thought. "Do you go!" But the terror in her eyes—she feared her father as she feared no one else in the world—wring the brothers' hearts.

Charles hesitated. "The door at the top?" he babbled. "It is locked, I fear!"

"He will not go up!" she whispered. "And while he is in the Tower Room I can escape."

She vanished as she spoke, in the darkness of the narrow winding shaft—and it was time she did. The Vicomte was scarce three paces from the outer door when the two who were left sprang into the Tower Chamber.

The Lieutenant was on his feet by the side of his bed. He had not gone to sleep, and he caught their alarm, he had heard the last hurried whispers, he had guessed their danger. He was not surprised when Charles, without a word, crossed the floor in a couple of bounds, flung himself recklessly over the sill of the window, clung an instant by one hand, then disappeared. A moment the shoot of ivy that grew into the chamber jerked violently, the next the door was flung wide open, and the Vicomte, a gaunt figure bearing a sword in one hand, a lanthorn in the other, stood on the threshold. The light of the lanthorn which he held above his head that he might detect what was before him, obscured his face. But the weapon and the tone of his voice proclaimed the fury of his suspicions. "Who is here?" he cried. "Who is here?" And again, as if in his rage he could frame no other words, "Who is here, I say? Speak!"

Roger, on his feet, the tell-tale lanthorn in his hand, could not force a word. He stood speechless, motionless, self-convicted; and had all lain with him, all had been known. Fortunately des Ageaux took on himself to answer.

"Who is here, sir?" he said in a voice a tone louder and a shade easier than was natural. "The devil, I think! For I swear no one else could climb this wall!"

"What do you mean?"

"And climb it," des Ageaux persisted, disregarding the question, "very nearly to this sill! I heard him below five minutes ago. And if I had not been fool enough to rouse your son and bid him light we had had him safe by now on this floor!"

The Vicomte glared. The story was glib, well told, animated; but he doubted it. He knew what he had expected to find. "You lit the lanthorn?" he snarled. "When?"

"Two minutes back-it might be more," des Ageaux replied. "Now he is clean gone. Clean gone, I fear," he added as he stepped into the embrasure of the window and leant forward cautiously, as if he thought a shot from below a thing not impossible. "I hear nothing, at any rate."

The Vicomte, struggling with senile rage, stared about him. "But I saw a light!" he cried. "In the outer room!"

"The outer room!"

"Under the door."

"Shone under both doors, I suppose," des Ageaux replied, still intent to all appearance on the dark void outside. "I'll answer for it," he added carelessly as he turned, "that he did not go out by the door."

"He will not go out now," the Vicomte retorted with grim suspicion, "for I have locked the outer door." He showed the key hung on a finger of the hand which held the lanthorn.

The sight was too much for Roger; he understood at once that it cut off his sister's retreat. A sound between a groan and an exclamation broke from him.

The Vicomte lifted the lanthorn to his face. "What now, booby?" he said. "Who has hurt you?" And, seeing what he saw, he cursed the lad for a coward.

"I did not feel over brave myself five minutes ago," the Lieutenant remarked.

The Vicomte turned on him as if he would curse him also. But, meeting his eyes, he thought better of it, and swallowed the rage he longed to vent. He stared about him a minute or more, stalking here and there offensively, and trying to detect something on which to fasten. But he found nothing, and, having flung the light of his lanthorn once more around the room, he stood an instant, then, turning, went sharply-as if his suspicions had now a new direction-towards the door.

"Good-night!" he muttered churlishly.

"Good-night!" the Lieutenant answered, but in the act of speaking he met the look of horror in Roger's eyes, remembered and understood. "She is still there," the lad's white lips spelled out, as they listened to the grating noise of the key in the lock. "She could not escape. And he suspects. He is going to her room."

Des Ageaux stared a moment nonplussed. The matter was nothing to him, nothing, yet his face faintly mirrored the youth's consternation. Then, in a stride, he was at his bedside. He seized one of the horse-pistols which lay beside his pillow, and, before the lad understood his purpose, he levelled it at the open window and fired into the night.

The echoes of the report had not ceased to roll hollowly through the Tower before the door flew wide again, and the Vicomte reappeared, his eyes glittering, his weapon shaking in his excitement. "What is it?" he cried, for at first he could not see, the smoke obscured the room. "What is it? What is it?"

"A miss, I fear," des Ageaux answered coolly. He stood with his eyes fixed on the window, the smoking weapon in his hand. "I fear, a miss-I had a notion all the time that he was in the ivy outside, and when he poked up his head-

"His head?" the Vicomte exclaimed. He was shaking from head to foot.

"Well, it looked like his head," des Ageaux replied more doubtfully. He moved a step nearer to the window. "But I could not swear to it. It might have been an owl!"

"An owl?" the Vicomte answered in an unsteady tone. "You fired at an owl?"

"Whatever it was I missed it," des Ageaux answered with decision, and in a somewhat louder tone. "If you will step up here-but I fear you are not well, M. le Vicomte?"

He spoke truly, the Vicomte was not well. He had had a shock. Cast off his son as he might, hate him as he might-and hate him he did, as one who had turned against him and brought dishonour on his house-that shot in the night had shaken him. He leant against the wall, his lips white, his breath coming quickly. And a minute or more elapsed before he recovered himself and stood upright.

He kept his eyes averted from des Ageaux. He turned instead to Roger. Whether he feared for himself and would not be alone, or he suspected some complicity between the two, he signed to the lad to take up the lanthorn and go before him. And, moving stiffly and unsteadily across the floor, he got himself in silence to the door. With something between a bow and a glance-it was clear that he could not trust his tongue-he was out of the room.

The Lieutenant sat on his bed for some time, expecting Roger to return. But the lad did not appear, and after an interval des Ageaux took on himself to search the staircase. It was untenanted. The girl, using the chance he had afforded her, had escaped.

CHAPTER III. STILL WATERS TROUBLED

Had Bonne de Villeneuve, a day earlier, paid a visit much in fashion at that time, and consulted the "dark man" who, in an upper room on the wall of Angoulême, followed the stars and cast horoscopes, and was reputed to have foretold the death of the first Duke of Joyeuse as that nobleman passed southwards to the field of Coutras, she might have put faith in such of the events of the night as the magic crystal showed her; until it came to mirror, faint as an evening mist beside the river, her thoughts after the event. Then, had it foretold that, as she lay quaking in her bed, she would be thinking neither of the brother, whose desperate venture wrung her heart, nor of Roger, her dearer self, but of a stranger—a stranger, whose name she had not known six hours, and of whose past she knew nothing, she would have paused, refusing credence. She would have smiled at the phantasm of the impossible.

Yet so it was. Into the quiet pool of her maiden heart had fallen in an hour the stone that sooner or later troubles the sweet waters. As she lay thinking with wide-open eyes, her mind, which should have been employed with her brother's peril, or her own escape, or her father's rage, was busy with the stranger who had dropped so suddenly into her life, and had begun on the instant to play a sovereign part. She recalled his aspect as he looked in on them, cool and confident, at their midnight conference. She heard his tone as he baffled her father's questions with cunning answers. She marvelled at the wit that in the last pinch had saved her from discovery. He seemed to her a man of the world such as had not hitherto come within the range of her experience. Was he also the perfect knight of whom she had not been woman if she had not dreamed?

What, she wondered, must his life have been, who, cast among strange surroundings, bore himself so masterfully, and so shrewdly took his part! What chances he must have seen, what dangers run, how many men, how many cities visited! He might have known the Court, that strange *mélange* of splendour and wickedness, and mystery and valour. He might have seen the King, shrewdest of captains, bravest of princes; he might have encountered eye to eye men whose names were history. He came out of the great outer world of which she had visions, and already she was prepared to invest him with wonderful qualities. Her curiosity once engaged, she constructed for him first one life and then another, and then yet another—all on the same foundation, the one fact which he had told them, that he was a poor gentleman of Brittany. She considered his ring, and the shape of his clothes, and his manner of eating, which she found more delicate than her brothers'; and she fancied, but she told herself that she was foolish to think it, that she detected under his frigid bearing a habit of command that duller eyes failed to discern.

She was ashamed at last of the persistence with which her thoughts ran on him, and she tried to think of other things, and so thought of him again, and, awaking to the fact, smiled. But without blushing; partly because, whatever he was, he stood a great way from her, and partly because it was only her fancy that was touched, and not her heart; and partly again because she knew that he would be gone by mid-day, and could by no possibility form part of her life. Nevertheless, it was not until her time for rising came that anxiety as to her brother's safety and her father's anger eclipsed him. Then, uncertain how much the Vicomte knew, how near the truth he guessed, she forgot her hero, and thought exclusively of her father's resentment.

She might have spared her fears. The Vicomte was a sour and embittered man, but neither by nature nor habit a violent one. Rage had for an hour rendered him capable of the worst, capable of the murder of his son if, having an arm in his hand, he had met him, capable of the expulsion of his daughter from his house. But the fit was not natural to him; it was not so that he avenged the wrongs which the world had heaped upon him—since Coutras. He fell back easily and at once into the black

cynical mood that was his own. He was too old and weak, he had too long brooded in inaction, he had too long wreaked his vengeance on the feeble to take strong measures now, whatever happened to him.

But some hours elapsed before Bonne knew this, or how things would be. It was not her father's custom to descend before noon, for with his straitened means and shrunken establishment he went little abroad; and he would have died rather than stoop to the rustic tasks which Roger pursued, and of which Bonne's small brown hands were not ignorant. She had not seen him when, an hour before noon, she repaired to a seat in the most remote corner of the garden, taking with her some household work on which she was engaged.

The garden of the château of Villeneuve-the garden proper that is, for the dry moat which divided the house from the courtyard was planted with pot-herbs and cabbages-formed a square, having for its one side the length of the house. It lay along the face of the building remote from the courtyard, and was only accessible through it. Its level, raised by art or nature, stood more than a man's height above the surrounding country; of which, for this reason, it afforded a pleasant and airy prospect. The wall which surrounded and buttressed it stood on the inner side no more than three feet high, but rose on the outer from a moat, the continuation of that which has just been mentioned.

The pleasaunce thus secured on all sides from intrusion consisted first of a paved walk which ran under the windows of the château, and was boarded by a row of ancient mulberry-trees; secondly, beyond this, of a strip of garden ground planted with gooseberry-bushes and fruit-trees, and bisected by a narrow walk which led from the house to a second terrace formed on the outer wall. This latter terrace lay open towards the country and at either end, but was hidden from the prying eyes of the house by a line of elms, poled and cut espalier fashion. It offered at either extremity the accommodation of a lichen-covered stone bench which tempted the old to repose and the young to reverie. The east bench enabled a person seated sideways on it-and so many had thus sat that the wall was hollowed by their elbows-to look over the willow-edged river and the tract of lush meadows which its loop enclosed. The western seat had not this poetic advantage, but by way of compensation afforded to sharp eyes a glimpse of the track-road it could not be called-which after passing the château wound through the forest on its course to Vlaye and the south.

From childhood the seat facing the river had been Bonne's favourite refuge. Before she could walk she had played games in the dust beneath it. She had carried to it her small sorrows and her small joys, her fits of nursery passion, her moods as she grew older. She had nursed dolls on it, and fancies, dreamed dreams and built castles; and in a not unhappy, thought neglected girlhood, it had stood for that sweet and secret retreat, the bower of the budding life, which remains holy in the memory of worn men and women. The other bench, which commanded a peep of the road, had been more to her elder sister's taste; nor was the choice without a certain bearing on the character of each.

This morning, she had not been five minutes at work before she heard footsteps on the garden path. The sun, near its highest, had driven her to the inner end of the seat, where the elm in summer leaf straggled widely over it, growing low, as elms will. She knew that whoever came she would see before she was seen.

It turned out as she expected. M. des Ageaux lounged onto the terrace, and shading his eyes from the sun's rays, gazed on the prospect. She judged that he thought himself alone, for he took a short turn this way and that. Then, after a casual glance at the empty seats-empty as he doubtless judged, though she from her arbour of leaves could watch his every movement-he wheeled about, and, facing the château, seemed to satisfy himself that the wall of pollard elms sheltered him from sight.

His next proceeding was mysterious. He drew from his breast a packet, of parchment or paper, unfolded it, and laid it flat on the wall before him. Then he stooped and after poring over it, glanced at the view, referred again to the paper, then again to the lie of the country, and the course of the river which flowed on his left. Finally he measured off a distance on the map. For a map it was, beyond doubt.

A shadow fell on her as she watched him. Nor did his next movement dispel the feeling. Folding up the map he replaced it in his breast, and leaning over the wall he scrutinised the outer surface of the brickwork. Apparently he did not discover what he sought, for he raised himself again, and with eyes bent on the tangle of nettles and rough herbage that clothed the bottom of the moat, he moved slowly along the terrace towards her. He reached, without seeing her, the seat on which she sat, knelt on it with one knee, and leaning far over the moat, allowed a low laugh to escape him.

She fought the faint suspicion that, unwelcome, asserted itself. He had behaved so honourably, so reticently, in all that had happened that she was determined not to believe aught to his discredit. But her folly, if foolish she was, must not imperil another. She made a mental note that there was one thing she must not tell him. Very quickly that reflection passed through her brain. And then-

"Why do you laugh?" she said.

He wheeled about so sharply that in another mood she must have laughed, so much she had the advantage of him. For an instant he was so taken aback that he did not speak. Then, "Why did you startle me?" he asked, his eyes smiling.

"Because-yes, my brother came in that way."

"I know it," he answered; "but not why you startled me, mademoiselle, a minute ago."

"Nor I," she retorted, smiling faintly, "why you were so inquisitive, M. des Voeux?"

"I am going to tell you that," he said. He seated himself on the bench so as to face her, and doffing his hat, held it between his face and the sun. He was not, we know, very amenable to the charms of women, and he saw in her no more than a girl of rustic breeding, comely and gentle, and something commonplace, but a good sister whose aid with her brother he needed. "I am going to tell you," he said; "because I am anxious to meet your brother again and to talk with him."

She continued to meet his eyes, but her own were clouded. "On what subject," she asked, "if I am not too curious?"

"The Crocans."

On her guard as she was, the word put her out of countenance. She could not hide, and after one half-hearted attempt did not try to hide, her dismay. "The Crocans?" she said. "But why do you come to me?" her colour coming and going. "What have we to do with them, if you please? Or my brother?"

"He has been banished from his home for some offence," the Lieutenant answered quietly. "Your father forbids the mention of the name Crocans. It is reasonable to infer that the offence is connected with them, and, in a word, that your brother has done what any young man with generous instincts and a love of adventure might do. He has joined them. I do not blame him."

"You do not blame him?" she murmured. Never had she heard such words of the Crocans-except from her brother. "You mean that?"

"I say it and mean it," the Lieutenant replied. But he spoke without emotion, emotion was not his forte. "Nor am I alone," he went on, "in holding such opinions. But the point, mademoiselle, is this. I wish to find a means of communicating with them, and he can and probably will be willing to aid me. For certain, if the worst comes to the worst, I can aid him."

Bonne's heart beat rapidly. She did not-she told herself that she did not distrust him. Had it been her own secret he was seeking she would have delivered it to him freely. But the manner in which he had borne himself while he thought himself alone, the possession of the map, and the shrewdness with which he had traced her brother's movement and surprised a secret that was still a secret from the household, frightened her. And her very inexperience made her pause.

"But first, I take it, you need his aid?" she murmured.

"I wish to speak with him."

"Have you seen my father?"

He opened his eyes and bent a little nearer. "Do you mean, mademoiselle-"

"I mean only," she said gently, "that if you express to him the views on the Crocans which you have just expressed to me, your opportunities of seeing my brother will be scant."

He laughed. "I have not opened them to him," he said. "I have seen him, and whether he thinks that he was a little more exigent last night than the danger required, or he desires to prove to me that midnight alarms are not the rule at Villeneuve, he has not given me notice to go. His invitation to remain is not, perhaps," he smiled slightly, "of the warmest. But if you, mademoiselle, will second it-

She muttered-not without a blush-that it would give her pleasure. And he proceeded, "Then no difficulty on that point will arise."

She stooped lower over her work. What was she to do? He wanted that which she had decided she must not give him. Just that! What was she to do?

She was so long in answering, that he dubbed her awkward and mannerless. And thought it a pity, too; for she was a staunch sister, and had shown herself resourceful; and in repose her face, though brown and sunburnt, was not without grace. He came to the point. "May I count on you for this?" he asked bluntly.

"For-what?"

"That as soon as you can you will bring me face to face with your brother?"

She looked up and met his gaze. "As soon as I think it safe to do so," she said, "I will. You may depend on me."

He had not divined her doubt, nor did he discern her quibble. Still, "Could I not go to him to-day?" he said. "If he is still in the neighbourhood?"

She shook her head. "I do not know where he is," she answered, glad that she could say so much with truth. "But if he show himself, and it be safe, I will let you know. Roger-

"Ha! To be sure, Roger may know?"

She smiled. "Roger and I are one," she said. "You must not expect to get from him what I do not give." She said it naïvely, with just so much of a smile as showed her at her best, and he hastened to say that he left himself in her hands. She blushed through her sunburn at that, but clung to her quibble, telling herself that this was a stranger, the other a brother, and that if she destroyed Charles she could never forgive herself.

He saw that she was disturbed, and he changed the subject. "You have always lived here?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, "but I can remember when things were different with us. We were not always so broken. Before Coutras-but," with a faint smile, "you have heard my father on that, and will not wish to hear me."

"The Vicomte was present at the battle?"

"Yes, he was in the centre of the Catholic army with the Duke of Joyeuse. He escaped with his life. But we lay in the path of the pursuit after the flight, and they sacked the house, and burned the hamlet by the ford-the one you passed-and the two farms in the bend of the river-the two behind you. They swept off every four-legged thing, every horse, and cow, and sheep, and left us bare. One of the servants who resisted was killed, and-and my mother died of the shock."

She broke off with an uncontrollable shiver. She was silent. After a pause, "Perhaps you were at Coutras, M. des Voeux?" she said, looking up.

"I was not of the party who sacked your house," he answered gravely.

She knew then that he had fought on the other side; and she admired him for the tact with which he made it known to her. He was a soldier then. She wondered, as she bent over her work, if he had fought elsewhere, and under whom, and with what success. Had he prospered or sunk? He called himself a poor gentleman of Brittany, but that might have been his origin only, he might be something more now.

In the earnestness of her thoughts she turned her eyes on his ring, and she blushed brightly when with a quick, almost rude movement he hid his hand. "I beg your pardon!" she murmured. "I was not thinking."

"It is I should beg yours," he said quietly. "It is only that I do not want you to come to a false conclusion. This ring-in a word I wear it, but the arms are not mine. That is all."

"Does that apply also," she asked, looking at him ingenuously, "to the pistols you carry, M. des Voeux? Or should I address you-for I saw last evening that they bore a duke's coronet-as your Grace?"

He laughed gaily. "They are mine, but I am not a duke," he said.

"Nor are you M. des Voeux?"

Her acuteness surprised him. "I am afraid, mademoiselle," he said, "that you have a mind to exalt me into a hero of romance-whether I will or no."

She bent over her work to hide her face. "A duke gave them to you, I suppose?" she said.

"That is so," he replied sedately.

"Did you save his life?"

"I did not."

"I have heard," she returned, looking up thoughtfully, "that at Coutras a gentleman on the other side strove hard to save the Duke of Joyeuse's life, and did not desist until he was struck down by his own men."

"He looked to make his account by him, no doubt," the Lieutenant answered coldly. "Perhaps," with a scarcely perceptible bitterness, "the Duke, had he lived, would have given him-a pair of pistols!"

"That were a small return," she said indignantly, "for such a service!"

He shrugged his shoulders. And to change the subject-

"What are the grey ruins," he asked, "on the edge of the wood?"

"They are part of the old Abbey," she answered without looking up, "afterwards removed to Vlaye, of which my sister is Abbess. There was a time, I believe, when the convent stood so close to the house that it was well-nigh one with it. There was some disorder, I believe, and the Diocesan obtained leave to have it moved, and it was planted on lands that belonged to us at that time."

"Near Vlaye?"

"Within half a league of it."

"Your sister, then, is acquainted with the Captain of Vlaye?"

She did not look up. "Yes," she said.

"But you and your brothers?"

"We know him and hate him-only less than we fear him!" She regretted her vehemence the moment she had spoken.

But he merely nodded. "So do the Crocans, I fancy," he said. "It is rumoured that he is preparing something against them."

"You know that?" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Without being omniscient," he answered smiling. "I heard it in Barbesieux. It was that, perhaps," he continued shrewdly, "which you wished to tell your brother yesterday."

On that she was near confessing all to him and telling him, in spite of her resolutions, where on the next day he could find her brother. But she clung to her decision, and a minute later he rose and moved away in the direction of the house.

When they met at table the mystery of the Vicomte's sudden impulse to hospitality, which was something of a puzzle to her, began to clear.

It had its origin in nothing more substantial than his vanity; which was tickled by the opportunity of talking to a man who, with some pretensions to gentility, could be patronised. A little, too, he thought of the figure he had made the night before. It was possible that the stranger had been unfavourably impressed. That impression the Vicomte thought he must remove, and to that end he laboured, after his manner, to be courteous to his guest. But as his talk consisted, and had long consisted, of little but sneers and gibes at the companions of his fallen fortunes, his civility found its only vent in this direction.

Des Ageaux indeed would gladly have had less of his civility. More than once-though he was not fastidious-his cheek coloured with shame, and willingly would he, had that been all, have told the Vicomte what he thought of his witticisms. But he had his cards sorted, his course arranged. Circumstances had played for him in the dangerous game on which he was embarked, and he would have been unworldly indeed had he been willing to cast away, for a point of feeling-he who was no knight-errant-the advantages he had gained.

Not that he did not feel strongly for the two whose affection for one another touched him. Roger's deformity appealed to him, for he fancied that he detected in the lad a spirit which those who knew him better, but knew only his gentler side, did not suspect. And the girl who had grown from child to woman in the rustic stillness of this moated house-that once had rung with the tread of armed heels and been gay with festive robes and tourneys, but now was sinking fast into a lonely farmstead-she too awakened some interest in the man of the world, who smiled to find himself embedded for the time in a life so alien from his every-day experiences. Concern he felt for the one and the other; but such concern as weighed light in the balance against the interests he held in his hands, or even against his own selfish interest.

It soon appeared that the Vicomte had another motive for hospitality, in the desire to dazzle the stranger by the splendours of his eldest daughter, on whom he continued to harp. "There is still one of us," he said with senile vanity-"I doubt if, from the specimens you have seen, you will believe it-who is not entirely as God made her! Thank the Lord for that! Who is neither clod nor clout, sir, but has as much fashion as goes to the making of a modest gentlewoman."

His guest looked gravely at him. "I look forward much to seeing her, M. le Vicomte!" he said for the tenth time.

"Ay, you may say so!" the Vicomte answered. "For in her you will see a Villeneuve, and the last of the line!" with a scowl at Roger. "Neither a lout with his boots full of hay-seeds-pah! nor a sulky girl with as much manner as God gave her, and not a jot to it! Nice company I have, M. des Voeux," he continued bitterly. "Did you say des Voeux-I never heard the name?"

"Yes, M. le Vicomte."

"Nice company, I say, for a Villeneuve in his old age! What think you of it? Before Coutras, where was an end of the good old days, and the good old gentrice-"

"You were at Coutras?"

"Ay, to my cost, a curse on it! But before Coutras, I say, I had at least their mother, who was a Monclar from Rouergue. She had at any rate a tongue and could speak. And my daughter the Abbess takes after her, though may-be more after me, as you will think when you see her. She will be here, she says, to-morrow, for a night or two." This he told for the fifth time that evening.

"I am looking forward to seeing her!" the guest repeated gravely-also for the fifth time.

But the Vicomte could not have enough of boasting, which was doubly sweet to him; first because it exalted the absent, and secondly because it humiliated those who were present. "Thank God, she at least is not as God made her!" he said again, pleased with the phrase. "At Court last year the King noticed her, and swore she was a true Villeneuve, and a most perfect lady without fault or blemish!"

"His Majesty is certainly a judge," the listener responded, the twinkle in his eye more apparent than usual.

"To be sure!" the old man returned. "Who better? But, for the matter of that, I am a judge myself. My daughter-for there is only one worthy of the name" – with a withering glance at poor Bonne-"is not hand in glove with every base-born wench about the place, trapesing to a christening in a stable as readily as if the child were a king's son! Ay, and as I am a Catholic, praying beside old hags' beds till the lazy priest at the chapel has nought left to do for his month's meal! Pah!"

"Ranks are no doubt of God's invention," des Voeux said with his eyes on the table.

The Vicomte struck the board angrily. "Who doubts it?" he exclaimed. "Of God's invention, sir? Of course they are!"

"But I take it that they exist, in part at least," des Ageaux answered, "as a provision for the exercise of charity; and of-" he hesitated, unwilling-he read the gathering storm on the Vicomte's brow-to give offence; and, by a coincidence, he was saved from the necessity. As he paused the door flew open, and a serving-man, not one of the two who had waited on the table, but an uncouth creature, shaggy and field-stained, appeared gesticulating on the threshold. He was out of breath, apparently he could not speak; while the gust of wind which entered with him, by blowing sideways the long, straggling flames of the candles, and deepening the gloom of the ill-lit room, made it impossible to discern his face.

The Vicomte rose. They all rose. "What does this mean?" he cried in a rage. "What is it?"

"There's a party ringing at the gate, my lord, and-and won't take no!" the man gasped. "A half-dozen of spears, and others on foot and horse. A body of them. Solomon sent me to ask what's to do, and if he shall open."

"There's a petticoat with them," a second voice answered. The speaker showed his face over the other's shoulder.

"Imbeciles!" the Vicomte retorted, fired with rage. "It is your lady the Abbess come a day before her time! It is my daughter and you stay her at the door!"

"It is not my lady," the second man answered timidly. "It might be some of her company, my lord, but 'tis not her. And Solomon-"

"Well? Well?"

"Says that they are not her people, my lord."

The Vicomte groaned. "If I had a son worthy the name!" he said, and then he broke off, looking foolish. For Roger had left the room and des Ageaux also. They had slipped by the men while the Vicomte questioned them, and run out through the hall and to the gate-not unarmed. The Vicomte, seeing this, bade the men follow them; and when these too had vanished, and only four or five frightened women who had crowded into the room at the first alarm remained, he began to fumble with his sword, and to add to the confusion by calling fussily for this and that, and to bring him his arquebus, and not to open-not to open till he came! In truth years had worked imperceptibly on him. His nerves, like many things about him, were not what they had been-before Coutras. And he was still giving contrary directions, and scolding the women, and bidding them make way for him-since it seemed there was not a man to go to the gate but himself-when approaching voices broke on his ear and silenced him. An instant later one or two men appeared among the women in the doorway, and the little crowd fell back in wonder, to make room for a low dark man, bareheaded and breathing hard, with disordered hair and glittering eyes, who, thrusting the women to either side, cried-not once, but again, and yet again: -

"Room! Room for the Countess of Rochechouart! Way for the Countess!"

At the third repetition of this-which he seemed to say mechanically-his eyes took in the scene, the table, the room, and the waiting figure of the scandalized Vicomte, and his voice broke. "Saved!" he cried, flinging up his arms, and reeling slightly as if he would fall. "My lady is saved! Saved!"

And then, behind the low, dark man, who, it was plain, was almost beside himself, the Vicomte saw the white face and shrinking form of a small, slight girl little more than a child, whose eyes were like no eyes but a haunted hare's, so large and bright and affrighted were they.

CHAPTER IV. THE DILEMMA

Sheer amazement held the Vicomte silent. The Countess of Rochechouart, of the proud house of Longueville, that in those days yielded place to scarce a house in France—the Countess of Rochechouart to be seeking admittance at his door! And at this hour of the night! She, who was of the greatest heiresses of France, whose hand was weighted with a hundred manors, and of whose acquaintance the Abbess had lately boasted as a thing of which even a Villeneuve might be proud, she to be knocking at his gate in the dark hours! And seeking help! The Countess—his head went round. He was still gazing speechless with surprise when the short dark man who had entered with her fell on his knees before the girl, and seizing her hand mumbled upon it, wept on it, babbled over it, heedless alike of the crowd of gazers who pressed upon him, and of the master of the house, who stared aghast.

The Vicomte's amazement began at that to give place to perplexity. The Abbess, had she been here, would have known how to entertain such a guest. But Bonne and Roger—they were naught. Yet he must do something. He found his voice. "If I have, indeed," he said, for he was still suspicious of a trick, so forlorn and childish seemed the figure before him—"if I have indeed the honour," he repeated stiffly, "to address the Countess of Rochechouart, I-I bid her welcome to my poor house."

"I am Mademoiselle de Rochechouart," the girl murmured, speaking faintly. "I thank you."

It was apparent that she could say no more. Her face was scratched and bleeding, her hair was loose, her riding-dress, stained to the throat with dirt, was torn in more places than one. There were other signs that, frail as she was, she had ridden hard and desperately; ridden to the end of her strength.

But the Vicomte thought, not of her, but of himself, as was his custom; not of her plight, but of the figure he was making before his people, who stared open-mouthed at the unwonted scene. "Time was, mademoiselle," he replied, drawing himself up, "before Coutras, when I could have offered you" – with a bow—"a more fitting hospitality. Time was when the house of Villeneuve, which has entertained four kings, could have afforded a more fitting reception to—hem—to beauty in distress. But that was before Coutras. Since Coutras, destined to be the grave of the nobility of France—I—What is it?"

"I think she is faint, sir," Bonne murmured timidly. She, with a woman's eye, saw that the Countess was swaying, and she sprang forward to support her. "She is ill, sir," she continued hurriedly and with greater boldness. "Permit me, I beg you, sir, to take her to my room. She will be better there—until we can arrange a chamber." Already the child, half-fainting, was clinging to her, and but for her must have fallen.

The Vicomte, taken aback by his daughter's presumption, could only stare. "If this be so," he said grudgingly, "certainly! But I don't understand. How comes all this about? Eh? How—" But he found that the girl did not heed him, and he turned and addressed the attendant. "How, you, sir, comes your mistress here? And in this plight?"

But the dark man, as deaf as his mistress to the question, had turned to follow her. He seemed indeed to have no more notion of being parted from her than a dog which finds itself alone with its master among strangers. Bonne at the door discovered his presence at her elbow, and paused in some embarrassment. The Vicomte saw the pause, and glad to do something—he had just ordered off the women with fleas in their ears—he called loudly to the man to stand back. "Stand back, fellow," he repeated. "The Countess will be well tended. Let two of the women be sent to her to do what is needful—as is becoming."

But the Countess, faint as she was, heard and spoke. "He is my foster-father," she murmured without turning her head. "If he may lie at my door he will heed no one."

Bonne, whose arm was round her, nodded a cheerful assent, and, followed by two of the women, the three disappeared in the direction of the girl's chamber. The Vicomte, left to digest the matter, sniffed once or twice with a face of amazement, and then awoke to the fact that Roger and his guest were still absent. Fortunately, before he had done more than give vent to peevish complaints, they entered.

He waited, with his eyes on the door. To his surprise no one followed them-no steward, no attendant. "Well?" he cried, withering them with his glance. "What does this mean? Where are the others? Is there no one in the Countess's train of a condition to be presented to me? Or how comes it that you have not brought him, booby," – this to Roger-"to give me some account of these strange proceedings? Am I the last to be told who come into my house? But God knows, since Coutras-"

"There is no one, M. le Vicomte," the Lieutenant answered.

The Vicomte glared at him. "How? No one?" he retorted pompously. "Impossible! Do you suppose that the Countess of Rochechouart travels with no larger attendance than a poor gentleman of Brittany? You mean, sir, I take it, that there is no one of condition, though that is so contrary to rule that I can hardly believe it. A countess of Rochechouart and no gentlemen in her train! She should travel with four at the least!"

"I only know that there is no one, sir."

"I do not understand!"

"Neither do we," the Lieutenant of Périgord returned, somewhat out of patience. "The matter is as dark to us as it is to you, sir. It is plain that the Countess has experienced a serious adventure, but beyond that we know nothing, since neither she nor her attendant has spoken. He seems beside himself with joy and she with fatigue."

"But the spears?" his host retorted sharply. "The men on horse and foot who alarmed the porter?"

"They vanished as soon as we opened. One I did delay a moment, and learned-though he was in haste to be gone-that they fell in with the lady a half mile from here. She was then in the plight in which you have seen her, and it was at her attendant's prayer, who informed them of her quality, that they escorted her to this house. They learned no more from him than that the lady's train had been attacked in the woods between this and Vlaye, and that the man got his mistress away and hid with her, and was making for this house when the horsemen met them."

"Incredible!" the Vicomte exclaimed, stalking across the hearth and returning in excitement. "Since Coutras I have heard no such thing! A Countess of Rochechouart attacked on the road and put to it like a common herdgirl. It must be the work of those cursed-peasants! It must be so! But, then, the men who brought her to the door and vanished again, who are they? Travellers are not so common in these parts. You might journey three days before you fell in with a body of men-at-arms to protect you on your way."

"True," des Ageaux answered. "But I learned no more from them."

"And you, Master Booby?" the Vicomte said, addressing Roger with his usual sarcasm. "You asked nothing, I suppose?"

"I was busied about the Countess," the lad muttered. "It was dark, and I heard no more than their voices."

"Then it was only you who saw them?" the Vicomte exclaimed, turning again to des Ageaux. "Did you not notice what manner of men they were, sir, how many, and of what class? Strange that they should leave a warm house-door at this hour! Did you form no opinion of them? Were they" – he brought out the word with an effort-"Crocans, think you?"

The Lieutenant replied that he took them for the armed attendants of a gentleman passing that way, and the Vicomte, though ill-content with the answer, was obliged to put up with it. "Yet it seems passing strange to me," he retorted, "that you did not think their drawing off a little beside the ordinary. And who travels at this hour of the night, I would like to know?"

The Lieutenant made no answer, and the Vicomte too fell silent. From time to time serving-women had passed through the room-for, after the awkward fashion of those days, the passage to the inner apartments was through the dining-hall-some with lights, and some with fire in pans. The draught from the closing doors had more than once threatened to extinguish the flickering candles. Such flittings produced an air of bustle and a hum of preparation long unknown in that house; but they were certainly more to the taste of the menials than the master. At each interruption the Vicomte pished and pshawed, glaring as if he would slay the offender. But the women, emboldened by the event and the presence of strangers, did not heed him, and after some minutes of silent sufferance his patience came to an end.

"Go you," he cried to Roger, "and bid the girl come to me."

"The Countess, sir?" the lad exclaimed in astonishment.

The Vicomte swore. "No, fool!" he replied. "Your sister! Is she master of the house, or am I? Bid her descend this instant and tell me what is forward and what she has learned."

Roger, with secret reluctance, obeyed, and his father, sorely fretting, awaited his return. Two minutes elapsed, and three. Seldom stirring abroad, the Vicomte had, in spite of all his talk about Coutras, an overweening sense of his own importance, and he was about to break out in fury when Bonne at length entered. She was followed by Roger.

It was clear at a glance that the girl was frightened; less clear that mixed with her fear was another emotion. "Well," the Vicomte cried, throwing himself back in his great chair and fixing her with his angry eyes. "What is it? Am I to know nothing-in my own house?"

Bonne controlled herself by an effort. "On the contrary, sir, there is that which I think you should know," she murmured. "The Countess has told me the story. She was attacked on the road, some of her people she fears were killed, and all were scattered. She herself escaped barely with her life."

The Vicomte stared. "Where?" he said. "Where was it?"

"An hour from here, sir."

"Towards Vlaye?"

"Yes, sir."

"And she barely escaped?"

"You saw her, sir."

"And who-who does she say dared to commit this outrage?"

Bonne did not answer. Her eyes sought her brother's and sank again. She trembled.

The Vicomte, though not the keenest of observers, detected her embarrassment. He fancied that he knew its origin, and the cause of her hesitation. In a voice of triumph, "Ay, who?" he replied. "You don't wish to say. But I can tell you. I read it in your face. I can tell you, disobedient wench, who alone would be guilty of such an outrage. Those gutter-sweepings" – his face swelled with rage-"made up of broken lacqueys and ploughboys, whom they call Crocans! Eh, girl, is it not so?" he continued savagely. "Am I not right?"

"No, sir," she murmured without daring to look up.

His face fell. "No?" he repeated. "No? But I don't believe you! Who then? Don't lie to me! Who then?" He rapped the table before him.

"The Captain of Vlaye," she whispered.

The Vicomte sank back in his chair. "Impossible!" he cried. Then in a much lower tone: "Impossible!" he repeated. "You dream, girl. M. de Vlaye has done some things not quite-not regular. But-but in cases perfectly different. To people of-of no consequence! This cannot be!"

"I fear it is so, sir," she whispered, without raising her eyes. "Nor is that-the worst."

The Vicomte clenched his fingers about the arms of his chair and nodded the question he could not frame.

"It was with the Abbess, sir-with my sister," Bonne continued in a low tone, "that the Countess was to stay the night. I fear that it was from her that he learned where and how to beset her."

The Vicomte looked as if he was about to have a fit.

"What?" he cried. "Do you dare, unnatural girl, to assert that your sister was privy to this outrage?"

"Heaven forbid, sir!" Bonne answered fervently. "She knew naught of it. But-

"Then why-"

"But it was from her, I fear, that he learned where the child-she is little more-could be surprised."

The Vicomte glared at her without speaking. The Lieutenant, who had listened, not without admiration of the girl's sense and firmness, seized the opening to intervene. "Were it not well, sir," he said, his matter-of-fact tone calming the Vicomte's temper, "if mademoiselle told us as nearly as possible what she has heard? And, as she has been somewhat shaken, perhaps you will permit her to sit down! She will then, I think, be able to tell us more quickly what we want."

The Vicomte gave a surly assent, and the Lieutenant himself placed a stool for the girl where she could lean upon the table. Her father opened his eyes at the attention, but something in des Ageaux's face silenced the sneer on his lips, and he waited until Bonne began.

"The Countess lay at Pons last night, sir," she said in a low tone. "There the lady who was formerly her *gouvernante*, and still rules her household, fell ill. The plague is in Western Poitou, and though the Countess would have stayed, her physician insisted that she should proceed. Accordingly she left the invalid in his charge and that of some of her people, while she herself pursued her way through Jonsac and Barbesieux with a train reduced to fourteen persons, of whom eight were well armed."

"This is what comes of travelling in such a fashion," the Vicomte said contemptuously. "I remember when I never passed the gates without-but go on!"

"She now thinks that the *gouvernante's* food was tampered with. Be that as it may, her company passed our ford in the afternoon, and an hour later reached the ascent a league this side of Vlaye. They were midway on the ascent, when half a dozen shots were fired. Several of their horses were struck, and the rest seized by a number of men who sprang from the undergrowth. In the panic those who were at the rear attempted to turn, but found their retreat cut off. The Countess alone, who rode in the middle with her steward, escaped through the devotion of a servant, who thrust his horse before the leader of the bandits and brought him down. Fulbert, her steward, saw the opportunity, seized her rein, and, plunging into the undergrowth, reached by good luck the bottom of the hill, and, hidden by the wood, gained a start. He knew, however, that her strength would not hold out, and at the first sound of pursuit he alighted in a coppice, drove on the horses, and crept away with her through the underwood. He hoped to take shelter here, but passed the entrance in the darkness and walked into the midst of a party of men encamped at the ford. Then he thought all lost, deeming them the band that had waylaid the Countess-"

"And who were they, if they were not?" the Vicomte asked, unable to restrain his curiosity. "Eh? They were camping at the ford?"

"Some riders belonging to the household of the Lieutenant of Périgord, sir, on their way to join him in his government. They were so honest as to guard the Countess hither-"

"And go again? The good Lord!" the Vicomte cried irritably. "Why?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Go on, then. Why do you break off? But-enough!" The Vicomte looked at the other listeners with an air of triumph. "Where is Vlaye in this? Because it was within a league of his castle, you put it on him, you baggage?"

"No, sir, indeed!" Bonne cried anxiously. "But Fulbert the steward knows M. de Vlaye well, and recognised him. He wore a mask, it seems, but when his horse fell, the mask slipped, and Fulbert saw his face and knew him. Moreover-

"Well?"

"One of the band rode a bald-faced black horse, which the steward saw in M. de Vlaye's troop at Angoulême two months back, and to which he says he could swear among ten thousand."

The Vicomte swore as one among a large number. But at length, "And what is this to do with me?" he fumed. "What is this to me? Time was, before Coutras, when I might have been expected to keep the roads, and stay such things! But now-body of Satan, what is it to me?"

No one spoke, and he looked about him angrily, resenting their silence. "What is it?" he snarled. "What are you keeping back?"

"Nothing, sir," Bonne answered.

"Then what would you?"

"If," Bonne ventured desperately, "M. de Vlaye come to-morrow with my sister-with the Abbess, sir, as is not unlikely-and find the Countess here, will she be safe?"

The Vicomte's mouth opened, and slowly consternation settled upon his features. "*Mon Dieu!*" he muttered. "I had not thought of that. But here-no, no, he would not dare! He would not dare!"

"He went very far to-day, sir," Bonne objected, gaining courage from his face. "So far that he must go farther to ensure himself from the consequences."

The Vicomte was silent.

The Lieutenant coughed. "If his object," he said, "be to force a marriage with the Countess-

The Vicomte, with an oath, cut him short. "A marriage?" he said. "A marriage? When he and my daughter the Abbess are-but who said aught of the kind? Who said aught of a marriage?"

The Lieutenant did not answer, and the Vicomte, after growling in his beard, turned to him. "Why," he demanded in a tone that, though ungracious, was no longer violent, "why do you say that that was his object?"

"Because," the Lieutenant answered, "I happen to know that M. de Longueville, who is her guardian, has his hands full. His wife and children are prisoners with the Spaniards, and he is moving heaven and earth and the court to procure their release. He has no thought to spare for the Countess, his cousin; and were she once married, however violently, I doubt if he or any would venture to dispute her possessions with a Vlaye, whose resources her wealth would treble. Such knights-errant," he continued drily, "are not very common, M. le Vicomte. Set M. de Vlaye's strength at three hundred men-at-arms-

"Four!" the Vicomte muttered, despite himself.

"Then double the four-as such a marriage, however effected, would double them-and I doubt," with a courteous bow, "if even a Villeneuve would find it easy to avenge a wrong!"

The Vicomte fidgeted in his seat. "You seem to know a vast deal about it, sir," he said, with ill-feigned contempt.

"I should feel it an honour," the Lieutenant answered politely, "to be permitted to join in the defence."

"Defence!" the Vicomte exclaimed, staring at him in astonishment. "You go fast, sir! Defence? What do you mean?"

"If M. de Vlaye learn that the Countess has taken refuge here-I fear it will come to that."

"Pooh! Impossible! Defence, indeed! What are you dreaming of?"

But the guest continued to look grave, and the Vicomte, after muttering incoherently, and drumming on the table with his fingers, condescended to ask with a sneer what *he* would do-in the circumstances.

"I should keep her presence from him," des Ageaux answered. "I have no right, I know," he continued, in a more conciliatory tone, "to give counsel to one of your experience, M. le Vicomte. But I see no choice save to do what I suggest, or to pull up the drawbridge."

The Vicomte sat up straight. Pull up the drawbridge? Was he dreaming—he who had sat down to sup without a thought of misfortune? He with four hundred yards of wall to guard, and some seven pikes to hold it—to defy Vlaye and his four hundred ruffians? Body of Satan, he was not mad! Defy Vlaye, whom he feared even while he sneered at him as an adventurer? Vlaye, in whose star he believed even while he sneered. Or would he have dreamed of giving him his daughter? Pull up the drawbridge? Never!

"I am not mad," he said coldly. But his hands trembled.

"Then, M. le Vicomte, it remains to keep it from him."

"How? You talk at random," the exasperated man answered. "Can I close the mouth of every gossip in the house? Can I cut out every woman's tongue, beginning with that girl's? How can I keep out his men, or stop their ears over the wine-pot?"

"Could you not admit him only?"

"And proclaim from the housetop," the Vicomte retorted with contempt, "that I have something to hide?"

The Lieutenant did not reply at once, and it was plain that he was puzzled by this view of the position. "Certainly that has to be borne in mind," he said. "You are quite right."

"To be sure it has!" the Vicomte answered brusquely, glad to have the opportunity of putting this overzealous adviser in his right place. But the satisfaction of triumph faded quickly, and left him face to face with the situation. He cursed Vlaye for placing him in the dilemma. He cursed the Countess—why could she not have taken refuge elsewhere? Last of all, he cursed his guest, who, after showing himself offensively able to teach him his duty, failed the moment it came to finding an expedient.

The solution of the riddle came from a quarter whence—at any rate by the Vicomte—it was least expected. "May I say something?" Roger ventured timidly.

His father glared at him. "You?" he exclaimed. And then ungraciously, "Say on!" he growled.

"We have cut half the grass in the long meadow," the lad answered. "And to-morrow we ought to be both cutting and making, while it is fine. Last year, as we were short-handed, the women helped. If you were to order all but Solomon to the hay-field to-morrow—it is the farthest from here, beside the river—there would be no one to talk or tell, sir."

Des Ageaux struck his leg in approbation. "The lad has it!" he said. "With your permission, M. le Vicomte, what could be better?"

"Better?" the Vicomte retorted, throwing himself back in his chair. "What? I am to open my gate with my own hands?"

"Solomon would open. And he can be trusted."

"Receive my daughter without man or maid?" the Vicomte cried. "Show myself to strangers without my people? Appear like one of the base-born beggarly ploughmen with mud in their veins, with whom you love to mix? What mean you, sirrah, by such a suggestion? Shame on you, unnatural fool!"

"But, M. le Vicomte," the Lieutenant remonstrated, "if you will not do that—"

"Never! Never!"

"Then," des Ageaux answered, more stiffly, "it remains only to pull up the drawbridge. Since, I presume," he continued, his tone taking insensibly a note of disdain, "you do not propose to give up the young lady, or to turn her from your door."

"Turn her from my door?"

"That being at once to help M. de Vlaye to this marriage, and to drag the name of Villeneuve in the mud! But" — breaking off with a bow—"I am sure that the honour of the family is safe in your hands, M. le Vicomte."

"It is well you said that!" the Vicomte cried, his face purple, his hands palsied with rage. "It is well you broke off, sir, or I would have proved to you that my honour is safe with me. Body of Satan, am I to be preached to by everybody-every brainless lad," he continued, prudently diverting his tirade to the head of the unlucky Roger, "who chooses to prate before his elders! *Mon Dieu!* There was a time when children sat mute instead of preaching. But that was before Coutras!" – bitterly-"when most things came to an end."

This time des Ageaux had the shrewdness to be silent, and he garnered the reward of his reticence. The Vicomte, rant as wildly as he might, was no fool, though vanity was hourly putting foolish things into his mouth. He was not blind-had he not "since Coutras" always on his lips? – to the changes which time had wrought in the world, and he knew that face to face with his formidable neighbour he was helpless. Nor was he in the dark on Vlaye's character. So far the adventurer had respected him, and in presence, and at a distance, had maintained an observance and a regard that was flattering to the decayed gentleman. But the Vicomte had seen the fate of others who crossed the Captain of Vlaye. He knew how impotent the law had proved to save them, how slack their friends-in a word, how quickly the waters had rolled over them. And he was astute enough to see, with all his conceit, that as it had been with them, it might be with him, if he stood in M. de Vlaye's way.

On the other hand, had he been mean enough to deliver up the Countess, he dared not. In the first place, to do so would, at the best, be hazardous; she had powerful friends, and whether she escaped or married her captor she might not forgive him. In the second place, he did not lightly resign the plan, which he had conceived, of uniting his favourite daughter to the rising adventurer. True, M. de Vlaye's position was anomalous, was precarious. But a day, a bribe, a turn of the cards might legalise it and place him high in Court favour. And then-

The Vicomte's train of thought ran no farther in silence. With an oath and an ill grace he bade them do as they would. "Things," he cried, "are come to a pass indeed when guests-

"A thousand pardons, M. le Vicomte!"

"And children dictate what is to be done and what to be left undone!" He looked older as he spoke; more broken and more peevish. "But since Coutras the devil has all, I think."

CHAPTER V. THE CAPTAIN OF VLAYE

Danger, that by night sends forth a vanguard of fears, and quells the spirits before it delivers the attack, pursues a different course by day, seeking to surprise rather than to intimidate. Seldom had June sun shone on a fairer scene than that which the lifting of the river mists delivered to the eyes of the dwellers in the château on the following morning, or on one more fit to raise the despondent courage. The tract of meadow land that, enfolded by the river, formed the only clear ground about the house lay in breezy sunshine, which patches of shadow, flung on the sward by such of the surrounding trees as rose a little higher than the ordinary, did but heighten. The woods which enclosed this meadow land, here with a long straight wall of oaks, there with broken clumps of trees that left to view distant glades and alleys, sparkled, where the sun lighted their recesses, with unnumbered dew-drops, or with floating gossamers, harbingers of a fair day. The occasional caw of a rook flying fieldward over the open, or the low, steady coo of the pigeons in the great stone cote beside the gate, added the last touch of peace to the scene; a scene so innocent that it forbade the notion of danger and rendered it hard to believe that amid surroundings like these, and under the same sky of blue, man's passions were, in parts not distant, turning an earthly heaven to a hell.

Access to these meadows was by a sled-road, which, starting from the great gate, wound round the wall of the courtyard, and then, turning its back on the house, passed by a small stone bridge over the brook which had once supplied the moat. From the bridge the track ran across the meadows to the abandoned farms which stood on the river bank half a mile from the château. The only building among these which retained a roof was a long wooden barn, still used to contain waste fodder and the like.

It was from this bridge, a narrow span of stone, that Bonne, the following morning, gazed on the scene, her hand raised to shade her eyes from the sun. The whole of the Vicomte's household, with the exception of a deaf cook and of Solomon, who could be trusted, were gone to the hay-field; some with delight, as welcoming any change, and some with whispers and surmises. Thence their shrill voices and laughter were borne by the light breeze to the girl's ears.

Nothing had been heard of the Countess's train, and her concealment during the hours of danger had perplexed both the Vicomte and his advisers. His pride would not permit him to make her privy to the coming visit, or the precautions which it rendered needful. Yet without acknowledging his inability to protect her, it was not easy to confine her to one room. For, with the elasticity of youth, she had risen little the worse for her adventures.

The council sat long, and in the end the better course seemed to be to invite her to the hay-field. As it fell out, a small matter gave a natural turn to the proposal. Her riding-dress-and more of her dress than that-was so stained and torn as to be unwearable. And Bonne could not help her, for the child, though perfectly formed, and of a soft prettiness, was cast in a smaller mould. Here, then, was a Countess without so much as a stocking, had not Bonne thought of a little waiting-girl of about the same shape and size. This girl's holiday attire was borrowed, and found to be a charming fit-at least in the eyes of Roger. For the lad, because the Countess was shy, had become, after a sort, her protector.

The child's timidity was at standing odds with her rank, and on first descending in this dress she had been on the point of tears, as infants cry when they think themselves the objects of ridicule. A very little and she had fled. But a moment later, whether she read something that was not ridicule in the lad's eyes, as she walked up and down the terrace, or youth stirred in her and raised a childish pleasure in the masquerade, she preened herself, blushing, and presently she was showing herself off. So that at the first word she fell in with the notion of completing her make-believe by spending the day in the hay.

Fortunately, Fulbert, the steward, who attended her like a dog, and like a dog glared suspicion on all who approached her, raised no objection. And about three hours before noon the move was made. Bonne had gone with Mademoiselle as far as this bridge, where she now stood, and thence had sent her forward with Roger and Fulbert on the plea that she must herself attend to household cares. Nevertheless, as the three receded in the sun's eye, she lingered awhile looking thoughtfully after them.

The dainty creature, tripping in her queer travesty between her foster-father and Roger's misshapen form, showed like a fairy between two gnomes. Bonne watched and smiled, and presently the smile became a tear, for Roger's sake. She had other and more pressing cares, other and heavier burdens this morning; but her heart was warm for him. She had been mother as well as sister to him, and the reflection that his deformity-once she had heard a peasant call him goblin-would probably for ever set him apart and deprive him of the joys of manhood touched her with grief as she stood.

The tear was still on her lid when she heard a step behind her, turned and saw des Ageaux-to her des Voeux. He read trouble in her clear, youthful face, fancied she was in fear, and paused to reassure her. "Why so sad, mademoiselle," he asked, "when she" – with a good-humoured nod in the direction of the Countess-"who has so much more to fear, trips along gaily? She is another being to-day."

"I have others to fear for," she replied.

"Your brother?"

She fancied that he was about to press her to bring him to Charles, and to change the subject she avowed her trouble. Why, heaven knows; for though her presence of mind the previous evening had won a meed of admiration from him, he had made no sign.

"I was not thinking of him," she confessed. "I was thinking of Roger. I was thinking how sad it is-for him."

He understood her. "You make too much of it," he said lightly. "He has health and strength, and a good spirit when your father is not present. His arm is long, and will always keep his head. Have you never heard what M. de Gourdon, Governor of the March, who is-who is like your brother, you know-once said of himself? 'My back?' quoth he to one who mentioned it. 'My friends mind it not, and my enemies have never seen it!'"

She flushed and a light came into her eyes. "Oh, brave!" she cried. "Brave! And you think that Roger-"

"I think that Roger may some day make himself feared. And he who is feared," the Lieutenant continued, with a half cynical, half whimsical smile, "has ever love on his other hand-as surely as dog follows the hand that feeds it."

The words had barely left his lips when a wolf-hound, whose approach they had not noticed, darted upon them, and, leaping up at the Lieutenant's face, nearly overthrew him. Bonne recoiled, and with a cry looked round for help. Then she perceived that it was with joy, not with rage, that the dog was beside himself; for again and again, with sharp shrill cries of pleasure, it leapt on the Lieutenant, striving to lick his hands, his face, his hair. In vain he bade it "Down! Down, dog!" In vain he struck at it. It set its paws against his breast, and though often repulsed, as often with slobbering mouth and hanging tongue sought his face.

When he had a little calmed its transports and got it to heel, he turned to her, and for once showed an embarrassed countenance. "It is a dog," he said, "a dog of mine that has followed me."

"I see that," she replied, smiling with something of mischief in her looks.

"It must have followed me-"

"A full mile this morning," she said, stooping and patting the hound, which, with a dubious condescension, permitted the greeting. "It is both fed and dry. And its name is-"

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"Does this often happen to you?" she continued, feeling on a sudden a strange freedom with him. "To talk of dogs and they appear? Have you the habit when your horse falls lame of tying your

dog to a tree, and placing a sufficiency of food and water by it to last it two days?" And then, when he did not answer her, "Who are you, M. des Voeux?" she said in a different tone. "Whence do you come, and what is your business?"

"Have I not told you," he answered, "that I wish to communicate through your brother with the Crocans? That is my business."

"But you did not know when you came to us that I had a brother," she replied, "or that he had joined the Crocans, or that we were like to be in these straits. So that you did not come for that. Why did you come?" confronting him with clear eyes. "Are we to count you friend or enemy? Be frank with me and I will be frank with you."

He looked at her with the first gleam of admiration in his eyes. But he hesitated. In the candour of a young girl who, laying aside coquetry and advantage, speaks to a man as to a comrade there lies a charm new to him who has not known a sister; more new to him, more surprising to him whose wont has lain among the women of a court-women whose light lives and fickle ambitions mark them of those who are but just freed from the seraglio. He smiled at her, openly acknowledging by his silence and his air that he had a secret; acknowledging also, and in the same way, that he held her equal. But he shook his head. "In a little time I will be frank with you, mademoiselle," he said. "It is true I have a secret, and at this moment I cannot tell it safely."

"You do not trust me?"

"I trust no one at this moment," he answered steadily.

It was not the answer she expected. She had thought he would quibble. She was impressed by his firmness, but she did not betray the feeling. "Good!" she said, with the least possible lifting of her head. "Then you must not expect to be trusted, or that I shall bring you to my brother."

"But you promised, mademoiselle."

"That I would do so when I could do so-safely," she retorted with mischievous emphasis. "It is your own word, sir, and I shall not feel that I can do so-safely-until I learn who you are. I suppose if my brother were here you would tell him?"

"Possibly."

Her colour rose. "You would tell him, and you will not tell me!" she cried indignantly.

"Now you are angry," he replied smiling. "How can I appease you?"

She was not really angry. But she turned on her heel, willing to let him think it. "By hiding yourself until this is over," she answered. And leaving him standing on the bridge, where he had found her, she made her way back to the house, where the only man left was Solomon in his hutch beside the gate. He was an old servant, a garrulous veteran of high renown for the enormous fables he had ever on his lips-particularly when the Vicomte reverted to the greatness of the house before Coutras. Mademoiselle as she entered paused to speak to him. "Have you seen a strange dog, Solomon?" she asked.

"This morning, my lady?" he exclaimed in his shrill voice. "Strange dog? No, not I! Has one frightened you? Dog? Few dogs I see these sad days," he continued, with a gesture scornful of the present. "Dogs, indeed? Times were when we had packs for everything, for boars, and wolves, and deer, and hares, and vermin, and" – pausing in sheer inability to think of any other possible pack-"ay, each a pack, and more to them than I could ever count, or the huntsman either!"

"Yes, I know, Solomon. I have heard you say so at least. But you have not seen a strange dog this morning?"

"The morn! No, no, my lady! But last night I mind one-was't a deer-hound?"

"Yes, a deer-hound."

"Well, then, I can tell you," with a mysterious nod, "and no one else. It was with the riders who brought the young lady. But I'm mum," winking. "Not a word will they get out of me. Secrets? Ay, I'm the man can keep a secret. Why, I remember, talking of secrets and lives-and often they are all one-

"But what became of the deer-hound?" she asked, ruthlessly cutting him short.

"Became of the dog?" – more shrilly than usual-he was a little hurt. "Is that all you want? It went with them as brought it, I do suppose. It didn't stop, anywise. But as I was saying about secrets-the secrets I have kept in old days-when there was no family had so many as ours-"

But she was gone. She had discovered what she wanted. And she was midway across the courtyard when the shrill sound of a hawk-whistle caught her ear. Turning she went through the gate again, and listened-not without a nervous feeling. Presently she could distinguish the dull tramp of a number of horses moving on the sward, the gay jingle of bit and spur, and mingled with these sounds the voices of a number of persons talking at their ease.

Warmly as the sun shone, she was aware of a shiver; of a presentiment that gripped and chilled her. Whatever it portended, however, whatever misfortune was in the air, the risk could not now be evaded. Already bright patches of moving colour glanced among the trees at the end of the approach, and steel points glittered amid the foliage, and feathers waved gaily above the undergrowth. She had barely time to tell Solomon to run and apprise her father of the arrival, when the head of the cavalcade wheeled, talking and laughing, into the avenue, and her sister, who rode in the van by the side of M. de Vlaye, espied her standing before the gate and waved a greeting.

Behind the Abbess rode a couple of women, one in the lay costume, liberally interpreted, of her order, the other of the world confessed; following close on their heels half a dozen horsemen completed the first party. The young Abbess bore a hooded hawk on her wrist, and the tinkle of its light silver bells mingled with the ripple of her voice as she approached, while two or three pairs of coupled hounds ran at her horse's heels. A little behind, separated from this select company by an interval of two score yards, followed the main body, a troop of some forty horse, in steel caps and corslets, with long swords swinging, and pistols in their holsters.

A more picturesque or more gallant company, as they swept by threes and fours into sight between the two grey pillars and rode towards the house under sun and shade, or a band that moved with a lordlier air, it had been hard to find, even in those days of show and pageantry, when men wore their fortunes on their backs. The Captain of Vlaye, stooping his sinewy figure to his companion, well became a horse that moved as he moved, and caracoled because he allowed it. His dark, keen face would have been as handsome as his form but for a blemish. In some skirmish of his youth he had lost the sight of an eye, and the blind orb gave his face a hard look which, so his enemies said, brought it into consonance with his character. He wore upturned moustaches without a beard, therein departing from the mode of the day. But his hunting-dress of white doeskin, with a fawn hat and belt, was in the fashion, and his horse's trappings shone almost as fine as the riding-dress of green and silver which set off his companion's tall figure and haughty face. In first youth a nose, too like her father's, and something over large in Odette de Villeneuve's frame, had foreshadowed charms not of the most feminine or the first order. But three years had supplied the carriage and the ripened and fuller contours that made her what she now was. To-day, if it pleased her to have at her beck one whose will was law, and whose stern manners invited few to intimacy-and in truth her infatuation for the successful adventurer knew no limits-he on his side found his account in parading, where he went, a woman whose beauty exceeded even her birth, and fell little short of her pride.

And she was content; she at least aimed at no more than setting on a safer basis the power she looked to share. It was she who, ignorant that her brother had joined them, had mentioned to her sister Vlaye's plan of suppressing the Crocans. That he had any other plan, that his views rose higher than a union with herself, that he hoped by a bold and secret stroke not only to secure what he had gained but to treble his resources-that his ambition, passing by a Villeneuve, dared to dream of an alliance with the ducal house of Longueville-of these things she had, as yet, no inkling. Not a jot, not a tittle. Nor was she likely to believe in their existence, save on evidence the clearest and most overwhelming.

Bonne knew more. She knew these things; and, as she went forward to meet the party, and after greeting her sister turned to her cavalier, the word "Welcome" stuck in her throat. She was conscious

that her cheek grew a shade paler as she forced the word, that her knees shook. Her fear was that he would read the signs.

Ordinarily he would not have remarked them; partly because he was inured to meeting cowed looks, and partly because a careless scorn-masked where the Vicomte was concerned by a veneer of respect-was all to which he ever treated the Abbess's impoverished family. Crook-backed brother, tongue-tied sister, and the other fool, whose restive dislike had sometimes amused him-he held them all in equal and supreme contempt. But to-day he had his reasons for noting the girl more particularly; and the shadow of ill-temper that darkened his face lifted as her timid eye and fluttering colour confirmed his surmises.

"I thank you, I will not alight," he replied. "Your father is coming to the gate? M. le Vicomte is too kind, mademoiselle. But that being so, I will await him here."

The Abbess, with an air of patronage, touched Bonne's hair with the tip of her riding-switch. "Child, did you sleep in your clothes last night?" she said. "Or are you making hay with the kitchen-maids? See her blush, M. de Vlaye! What would you give me if I could blush as naïvely?" And her eyes rallied him, seeking a compliment in his. "But Abbesses who have been to Court-"

"Carry a court wherever they go," he replied. But his look did not leave Bonne's face. The Abbess's women and the rest of the company had drawn rein out of earshot, their horses making long necks that they might reach the grass, or poking their heads to crop a tender shoot. "I cannot alight," he continued, "for we are on an adventure, mademoiselle. I might almost say a pursuit."

"Do you know, child," her sister chimed in, "that Mademoiselle de Rochechouart never came to me last night? But you know nothing here-even, I daresay, that I expected her. How should you? You might as well live in a hole in the ground."

"She never came?" Bonne faltered, for the sake of saying something. The blush had subsided, leaving her paler than before.

"No, did I not say so? And she has not arrived today," the Abbess continued, flicking her horse's mane with her jewelled switch. "But some of her people were in by daylight this morning-from Heaven knows where-some hiding-place in the woods, I believe-making such a to-do as you would not credit. If they are to be believed, they were attacked near nightfall by the Crocans-"

"By the Crocans," M. de Vlaye repeated, nodding darkly at Bonne. He knew more than the Abbess knew of Charles's desperate venture.

"And M. de Vlaye," the Abbess continued, speaking in the negligent fashion, a trifle distant, in which she always addressed her family in his presence, "has most kindly sent out parties in search of her. Moreover, as I came this way on the same errand, he fell in with me, and came on-more, I believe, for her sake than mine" – with a look that called for contradiction-"to make inquiries in this direction. But on the way-but here is my father. Good morning, sir. M. de Vlaye-"

"Has been waiting some time, I fear," the Vicomte said hurriedly. He, too, was not free from embarrassment, but he hid it with fair success. "Why do you not alight and enter, my dear?"

"Because we have business, by your leave, sir," Vlaye answered, his politeness scarcely covering an undertone of meaning. And he told in a few words-while Bonne stood listening in an agony of suspense-what the Abbess had told her. "Fortunately, after I fell in with your daughter this morning," he proceeded, "I had news of the Countess. And where do you think, M. le Vicomte, we are told that she is?" he continued.

Fortunately the Vicomte, whose hands were beginning to tremble, and whose colour was mounting to his wrinkled cheek, could not immediately find his voice. It was his elder daughter who took on herself to answer. "Where do you think, sir?" she cried gaily. "In your hay-meadows-so M. de Vlaye says."

"Mademoiselle de Rochechouart? In my hay-meadows?" the Vicomte faltered.

"Yes."

"In my hay-meadows? It cannot be."

"It is so-or so we are told."

CHAPTER VI. IN THE HAY-FIELD

The Vicomte gasped; it was evident, it was certain, that M. de Vlaye knew all. What was he to say, what to do? While Bonne, though her ear hung upon his reply, was conscious only of a desperate search, a wild groping, after some method of giving the alarm to those whom it concerned—to Charles lurking in the barn beside the water, to the Countess making hay for sport and thinking no evil. She had heard of a woman who in such a strait sent a feather which put quick wits on the alert. But she had no feather, she had nothing, and if she had, at her first word of withdrawing M. de Vlaye, she knew, would interpose. At last—

"It must be!" the Vicomte exclaimed, taking anew line with some presence of mind. "But I would not believe it!"

"It must be? what must be, sir?" his daughter Odette rejoined.

"It must be the Countess!" the Vicomte repeated in a tone of surprise and conviction, not ill feigned. He saw that to persist in denying the truth—with the hayfield in sight—would not serve, and in the end must cover him with confusion. "Dressed in that fashion," he continued, "and with no attendant save one rough clown, I-I could not credit her story. The Countess of Rochechouart! It seems incredible even now!"

"Yes, the Countess of Rochechouart," M. de Vlaye replied in a tone which proved that the Vicomte's sudden frankness did not deceive him. "With your permission we will wait on her, M. le Vicomte," he continued in the same tone, "and as soon as horses can be provided, I will escort her to a place of safety."

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