

Leblanc Maurice

The Frontier



Maurice Leblanc
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The Frontier:

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PART I

CHAPTER I

A HEAD BETWEEN THE BUSHES

"They've done it!"

"What?"

"The German frontier-post ... at the circus of the Butte-aux-Loups."

"What about it?"

"Knocked down."

"Nonsense!"

"See for yourself."

Old Morestal stepped aside. His wife came out of the drawing-room and went and stood by the telescope, on its tripod, at the end of the terrace.

"I can see nothing," she said, presently.

"Don't you see a tree standing out above the others, with lighter foliage?"

"Yes."

"And, to the right of that tree, a little lower down, an empty space surrounded by fir-trees?"

"Yes."

"That's the circus of the Butte-aux-Loups and it marks the frontier at that spot."

"Ah, I've got it!.. There it is!.. You mean on the ground, don't you? Lying flat on the grass, exactly as if it had been rooted up by last night's storm..."

"What are you talking about? It has been fairly felled with an axe: you can see the gash from here."

"So I can ... so I can..."

She stood up and shook her head:

"That makes the third time this year... It will mean more unpleasantness."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" he exclaimed. "All they've got to do is to put up a solid post, instead of their old bit of wood." And he added, in a tone of pride, "The French post, two yards off, doesn't budge, you know!"

"Well, of course not! It's made of cast-iron and cemented into the stone."

"Let them do as much then! It's not money they're wanting ... when you think of the five thousand millions they robbed us of!.. No, but, I say ... three of them in eight months!.. How will the people take it, on the other side of the Vosges?"

He could not hide the sort of gay and sarcastic feeling of

content that filled his whole being and he walked up and down the terrace, stamping his feet as hard as he could on the ground.

But, suddenly going to his wife, he seized her by the arm and said, in a hollow voice:

"Would you like to know what I really think?"

"Yes."

"Well, all this will lead to trouble."

"No," said the old lady, quietly.

"How do you mean, no?"

"We've been married five-and-thirty years; and, for five-and-thirty years, you've told me, week after week, that we shall have trouble. So, you see..."

She turned away from him and went back to the drawing-room again, where she began to dust the furniture with a feather-broom.

He shrugged his shoulders, as he followed her indoors:

"Oh, yes, you're the placid mother, of course! Nothing excites you. As long as your cupboards are tidy, your linen all complete and your jams potted, you don't care!.. Still, you ought not to forget that they killed your poor father."

"I don't forget it ... only, what's the good? It's more than forty years ago..."

"It was yesterday," he said, sinking his voice, "yesterday, no longer ago than yesterday..."

"Ah, there's the postman!" she said, hurrying to change the conversation.

She heard a heavy footstep outside the windows opening on the garden. There was a rap at the knocker on the front-door. A minute later, Victor, the man-servant, brought in the letters.

"Oh!" said Mme. Morestal. "A letter from the boy... Open it, will you? I haven't my spectacles... I expect it's to say that he will arrive this evening: he was to have left Paris this morning."

"Not at all!" cried M. Morestal, glancing over the letter. "Philippe and his wife have taken their two boys to some friends at Versailles and started with the intention of sleeping last night at the Ballon de Colnard, seeing the sunrise and doing the rest of the journey on foot, with their knapsacks on their backs. They will be here by twelve."

She at once lost her head:

"And the storm! What about last night's storm?"

"My son doesn't care about the storm! It won't be the first that the fellow's been through. It's eleven o'clock. He will be with us in an hour."

"But that will never do! There's nothing ready for them!"

She at once went to work, like the active little old woman that she was, a little too fat, a little tired, but wide-awake still and so methodical, so orderly in her ways that she never made a superfluous movement or one that was not calculated to bring her an immediate advantage.

As for him, he resumed his walk between the terrace and the drawing-room. He strode with long, even steps, holding his body erect, his chest flung out and his hands in the pockets of his

jacket, a blue-drill gardening-jacket, with the point of a pruning-shears and the stem of a pipe sticking out of it. He was tall and broad-shouldered; and his fresh-coloured face seemed young still, in spite of the fringe of white beard in which it was framed.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "what a treat to set eyes upon our dear Philippe again! It must be three years since we saw him last. Yes, of course, not since his appointment as professor of history in Paris. By Jove, the chap has made his way in the world! What a time we shall give him during the fortnight that he's with us! Walking ... exercise... He's all for the open-air life, like old Morestal!"

He began to laugh:

"Shall I tell you what would be the thing for him? Six months in camp between this and Berlin!"

"I'm not afraid," she declared. "He's been through the Normal School. The professors keep to their garrisons in time of war."

"What nonsense are you talking now?"

"The school-master told me so."

He gave a start:

"What! Do you mean to say you still speak to that dastard?"

"He's quite a decent man," she replied.

"He! A decent man! With theories like his!"

She hurried from the room, to escape the explosion. But Morestal was fairly started:

"Yes, yes, theories! I insist upon the word: theories! As a district-councillor, as Mayor of Saint-Élophé, I have the right to

be present at his lessons. Oh, you have no idea of his way of teaching the history of France!.. In my time, the heroes were the Chevalier d'Assas, Bayard, La Tour d'Auvergne, all those beggars who shed lustre on our country. Nowadays, it's Mossieu Étienne Marcel, Mossieu Dolet... Oh, a nice set of theories, theirs!"

He barred the way to his wife, as she entered the room again, and roared in her face:

"Do you know why Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo?"

"I can't find that large breakfast-cup anywhere," said Mme. Morestal, engrossed in her occupation.

"Well, just ask your school-master; he'll give you the latest up-to-date theories about Napoleon."

"I put it down here, on this chest, with my own hand."

"But there, they're doing all they can to distort the children's minds."

"It spoils my set."

"Oh, I swear to you, in the old days, we'd have ducked our school-master in the horse-pond, if he had dared... But, by Jove, France had a place of her own in the world then! And such a place!

... That was the time of Solferino!.. Of Magenta!.. We weren't satisfied with chucking down frontier-posts in those days: we crossed the frontiers ... and at the double, believe me..."

He stopped, hesitating, pricking up his ears. Trumpet-blasts sounded in the distance, ringing from valley to valley, echoing

and re-echoing against the obstacles formed by the great granite rocks and dying away to right and left, as though stifled by the shadow of the forests.

He whispered, excitedly:

"The French bugle..."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, there are troops of Alpines manoeuvring ... a company from Noirmont... Listen ... listen... What gaiety!.. What swagger!.. I tell you, close to the frontier like this, it takes such an air..."

She listened too, seized with the same excitement, and asked, anxiously:

"Do you really think that war is possible?"

"Yes," he replied, "I do."

They were silent for a moment. And Morestal continued:

"It's a presentiment with me... We shall have it all over again, as in 1870... And, mark you, I hope that this time ..."

She put down her breakfast-cup, which she had found in a cupboard, and, leaning on her husband's arm:

"I say, the boy's coming ... with his wife. She's a dear girl and we're very fond of her... I want the house to look nice for them, bright and full of flowers... Go and pick the best you have in your garden."

He smiled:

"That's another way of saying that I'm boring you, eh? I can't help it. I shall be just the same to my dying day. The wound is

too deep ever to heal."

They looked at each other for a while with a great gentleness, like two old travelling-companions, who, from time to time, for no particular reason, stop, exchange glances or thoughts and then resume their journey.

He asked:

"Must I cut my roses? My Gloires de Dijon?"

"Yes."

"Come along then! I'll be a hero!"

Morestal, the son and grandson of well-to-do farmers, had increased his fathers' fortune tenfold by setting up a mechanical saw-yard at Saint-Élophé, the big neighbouring village. He was a plain, blunt man, as he himself used to say, "with no false bottom, nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves;" just a few moral ideas to guide his course through life, ideas as old and simple as could be. And those few ideas themselves were subject to a principle that governed his whole existence and ruled all his actions, the love of his country, which, in Morestal, stood for regret for the past, hatred of the present and, especially, the bitter recollection of defeat.

Elected Mayor of Saint-Élophé and a district-councillor, he sold his works and built, within view of the frontier, on the site of a ruined mill, a large house designed after his own plans and

constructed, so to speak, under his own eyes. The Morestals had lived here for the last ten years, with their two servants: Victor, a decent, stout, jolly-faced man, and Catherine, a Breton woman who had nursed Philippe as a baby.

They saw but few people, outside a small number of friends, of whom the most frequent visitors were the special commissary of the government, Jorancé, and his daughter Suzanne.

The Old Mill occupied the round summit of a hill with slopes shelving down in a series of fairly large gardens, which Morestal cultivated with genuine enthusiasm. The property was surrounded by a high wall, the top of which was finished off with an iron trellis bristling with spikes. A spring leapt from place to place and fell in cascades to the bottom of the rocks decked with wild flowers, moss, lichen and maiden-hair ferns.

Morestal picked a great armful of flowers, laid waste his rose-garden, sacrificed all the Gloires de Dijon of which he was so proud and returned to the drawing-room, where he himself arranged the bunches in large glass vases.

The room, a sort of hall occupying the centre of the house, with beams of timber showing and a huge chimney covered with gleaming brasses, the room was bright and cheerful and open at both fronts: to the east, on the terrace, by a long bay; to the west, by two windows, on the garden, which it overlooked from the

height of a first floor.

The walls were covered with War Office maps, Home Office maps, district maps. There was an oak gun-rack with twelve rifles, all alike and of the latest pattern. Beside it, nailed flat to the wall and roughly stitched together, were three dirty, worn, tattered strips of bunting, blue, white and red.

"They look very well: what do you say?" he asked, when he had finished arranging the flowers, as though his wife had been in the room. "And now, I think, a good pipe ..."

He took out his tobacco-pouch and matches and, crossing the terrace, went and leant against the stone balustrade that edged it.

Hills and valleys mingled in harmonious curves, all green, in places, with the glad green of the meadows, all dark, in others, with the melancholy green of the firs and larches.

At thirty or forty feet below him ran the road that leads from Saint-Élophé up to the Old Mill. It skirted the walls and then dipped down again to the Étang-des-Moines, or Monks' Pool, of which it followed the left bank. Breaking off suddenly, it narrowed into a rugged path which could be seen in the distance, standing like a ladder against a rampart, and which plunged into a narrow pass between two mountains wilder in appearance and rougher in outline than the ordinary Vosges landscape. This was the Col du Diable, or Devil's Pass, situated at a distance of sixteen hundred yards from the Old Mill, on the same level.

A few buildings clung to one of the sides of the pass: these belonged to Saboureux's Farm. From Saboureux's Farm to the

Butte-aux-Loups, or Wolves' Knoll, which you saw on the left, you could make out or imagine the frontier by following a line of which Morestal knew every guiding-mark, every turn, every acclivity and every descent.

"The frontier!" he muttered. "The frontier here ... at twenty-five miles from the Rhine ... the frontier in the very heart of France!"

Every day and ten times a day, he tortured himself in this manner, gazing at that painful and relentless line; and, beyond it, through vistas which his imagination contrived as it were to carve out of the Vosges, he conjured up a vision of the German plain on the misty horizon.

And this too he repeated to himself; and he did so this time as at every other time, with a bitterness which the years that passed did nothing to allay:

"The German plain ... the German hills ... all that land of Alsace in which I used to wander as a boy... The French Rhine, which was my river and the river of my fathers... And now *Deutschland ... Deutsches Rhein...*"

A faint whistle made him start. He leant over towards the staircase that climbed the terrace, a staircase cut out of the rock, by which people coming from the side of the frontier often entered his grounds so as to avoid the bend of the road. There was nobody there nor anybody opposite, on the roadside slope all tangled with shrubs and ferns.

And the sound was renewed, discreetly, stealthily, with the

same modulations as before.

"It's he ... it's he ..." thought M. Morestal, with an uncomfortable feeling of embarrassment.

A head popped from between the bushes, a head in which all the bones stood out, joined by prominent muscles, which gave it the look of the head of an anatomical model. On the bridge of the nose, a pair of copper-rimmed spectacles. Across the face, like a gash, the toothless, grinning mouth.

"You again, Dourlowski..."

"Can I come?" asked the man.

"No ... no ... you're mad..."

"It's urgent."

"Impossible... And besides, you know, I don't want any more of it. I've told you so before..."

But the man insisted:

"It's for this evening, for to-night... It's a soldier of the Borsweilen garrison... He says he's sick of wearing the German uniform."

"A deserter... I've had enough of them... Shut up and clear out!"

"Now don't be nasty, M. Morestal... Just think it over... Look here, let's meet at four o'clock, in the pass, near Saboureux's Farm ... like last time... I shall expect you... We'll have a talk ... and I shall be surprised if ..."

"Hold your tongue!" said Morestal.

A voice cried from the drawing-room:

"Here they come, sir, here they come!"

It was the man-servant; and Mme. Morestal also ran out and said:

"What are you doing here? Whom were you talking to?"

"Nobody."

"Why, I heard you!.."

"No, I assure you..."

"Well, I must have imagined it... I say you were quite right. It's twelve o'clock and they are here, the two of them."

"Philippe and Marthe?"

"Yes, they are coming. They are close to the garden-entrance. Let's hurry down and meet them..."

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL WITH THE BARE ARMS

"He hasn't changed a bit... His complexion is as fresh as ever... The eyes are a little tired, perhaps ... but he's looking very well..."

"When you've finished picking me to pieces, between you!" said Philippe, laughing. "What an inspection! Why don't you give my wife a kiss? That's more to the point!"

Marthe flung herself into Mme. Morestal's arms and into her father-in-law's and was examined from head to foot in her turn.

"I say, I say, we're thinner in the face than we were!.. We want picking up... But, my poor children, you're soaked to the skin!"

"We were out all through the storm," said Philippe.

"And what do you think happened to me?" asked Marthe. "I got frightened!.. Yes, frightened, like a little girl ... and I fainted... And Philippe had to carry me ... for half an hour at least..."

"What do you say to that?" said Morestal to his wife. "For half an hour! He's the same strong chap he was... And why didn't you bring the boys? It's a pity. Two fine little fellows, I feel sure. And well brought up too: I know my Marthe!.. How old are they now? Ten and nine, aren't they? By the way, mother got two rooms ready. Do you have separate rooms now?"

"Oh, no," said Marthe, "only down here!.. Philippe wants to

get up before day-break and ramble about the roads ... whereas I need a little rest."

"Capital! Capital! Show them to their rooms, mother ... and, when you're ready, children, come down to lunch. As soon as we've finished, I'll take the carriage and go and fetch your trunks at Saint-Élophé: the railway-omnibus will have brought them there by this time. And, if I meet my friend Jorancé, I'll bring him back with me. I expect he's in the dumps. His daughter left for Lunéville this morning. But she said she had written to you..."

"Yes," said Marthe, "I had a letter from Suzanne the other day. She didn't seem to like the idea, either, of going away..."

Two hours later, Philippe and his wife settled themselves in two pretty, adjoining bedrooms on the second floor, looking out on the French side. Marthe threw herself on her bed and fell asleep almost immediately, while her husband, with his elbows on the window-sill, sat gazing at the peaceful valley where the happiest days of his boyhood had been spent.

It was over yonder, in the straggling village of Saint-Élophé-la-Côte, in the modest dwelling which his parents occupied before they moved to the Old Mill. He was at the boarding-school at Noirmont and used to have glorious holidays playing in the village or roaming about the Vosges with his father: Papa Trompette, as he always called him, because of all the trumpets,

bugles, horns and cornets which, together with drums of every shape and kind, swords and dirks, helmets and breast-plates, guns and pistols, were the only presents that his childhood knew. Morestal was a little strict; a little too fond of everything that had to do with principle, custom, discipline, exactness; a little quick-tempered; but, at the same time, he was the kindest of men and had no difficulty in winning his son's love, his frank and affectionate respect.

Their only quarrel was on the day when Philippe, who was then in the top form, announced his intention of continuing his studies after he had passed his examination and of entering the Normal School. The father's whole dream was shattered, his great dream of seeing Philippe in uniform, with his sword at his side and the gold braid on the sleeve of his loose jacket.

It came as a violent and painful shock; and Morestal was stupefied to find himself faced by an obstinate, deliberate Philippe, a Philippe wholly master of himself and firmly resolved to lead his life according to his own views and his own ambitions. For a week on end, the two argued, hurt each other's feelings, made it up again, only to fall out once more. Then the father suddenly yielded, in the middle of a discussion and as though he had all at once realized the futility of his efforts:

"You have made up your mind?" he cried. "Very well! An usher you shall be, since that is your ideal; but I warn you that I decline all responsibility for the future and that I wash my hands of anything that happens."

What happened was simply that Philippe's career was swift and brilliant and that, after a probationary term at Lunéville and another at Châteauroux, he was appointed professor of history at Versailles. He then published, at a few months' interval, two remarkable books, which caused much heated controversy: *The Idea of Country in Ancient Greece* and *The Idea of Country before the Revolution*. Three years later, he was promoted to Paris, to the Lycée Carnot.

Philippe was now approaching his fortieth year. Day-work and night-work seemed to have no effect upon his sturdy highland constitution. Possessing a set of powerful muscles and built on the same strong lines as his father, he found rest and recreation from study in violent exercise, in long bicycle-rides into the country or through the woods on the outskirts of Paris. The boys at the school, who held him in a sort of veneration, told stories of his exploits and his feats of strength.

With all this, a great look of gentleness, especially about the eyes, a pair of very good, blue eyes, which smiled when he spoke and which, when at rest, were candid, childish almost, filled with dreams and kindness.

By this time, old Morestal was proud of his son. On the day when he heard of his nomination to Carnot, he wrote, frankly:

"Well done, my dear Philippe! So you're prospering now and in a fair way to obtain anything you like to ask for. Let me tell you that I am not in the least surprised, for I always expected that, with your great qualities, your perseverance

and your serious way of looking at life, you would win the place which you deserved. So, once more, well done!

"I confess, however, that your last book, on the idea of country in France, puzzled me not a little. I know, of course, that you will not change your opinions on this subject; but it seems to me that you are trying to explain the idea of patriotism as due to rather inferior motives and that this idea strikes you not as natural and inherent to human societies, but as though it were a momentary and passing phase of civilization. No doubt I have misunderstood you. Still, your book is not very clear. You almost appear to be hesitating. I shall look forward eagerly to the new work, on the idea of country in our own times and in the future, which I see that you are announcing..."

The book to which Morestal alluded had been finished for over a year, during which Philippe, for reasons which he kept to himself, refused to deliver the manuscript to his publishers.

"Are you glad to be here?"

Marthe had come up and folded her two hands over his arm.

"Very," he said. "And I should be still more pleased if I had not that explanation with my father before me ... the explanation which I came down here to have."

"It will be all right, my own Philippe. Your father is so fond of you. And then you are so sincere!.."

"My dear Marthe," he said, kissing her affectionately on the forehead.

He had first met her at Lunéville, through M. Jorancé, who was her distant cousin; and he had at once felt that she was the ideal companion of his life, who would stand by him in hours of trouble, who would bear him comely children, who would understand how to bring them up and how, with his assistance and with his principles, to make sturdy men of them, worthy to bear his name.

Perhaps Marthe would have liked something more; perhaps, as a girl, she had dreamt that a married woman is not merely the wife and mother, but also her husband's lover. But she soon saw that love went for little with Philippe, a studious man, much more interested in mental speculation and social problems than in any manifestation of sentimental feeling. She therefore loved him as he wished to be loved, stifling within herself, like smothered flames, a whole throbbing passion made up of unsatisfied longings, restrained ardours and needless jealousies and allowing only just so much of this to escape her as was needed to give him fresh courage at times of doubt and defeat.

Short, slender and of delicate build, she was plucky, hardened to trouble, fearless in the face of obstacles, proof against disappointment after a check. Her bright, dark eyes betokened her energy. In spite of all the influence which Philippe wielded over her, in spite of the admiration with which he inspired her, she retained her personality, her own standpoint towards life, her

likes and dislikes. And, to such a man as Philippe, nothing could be more precious.

"Won't you try and sleep a little?" she asked.

"No. I am going down to him."

"To your father?" she asked, anxiously.

"Yes, I don't want to put it off any longer. As it is, I have almost done wrong in coming here and embracing him without first letting him know the exact truth about me."

They were silent for a while. Philippe seemed undecided and worried.

He said to her:

"Don't you agree with me? Or do you think I ought to wait till to-morrow?.."

She opened the door for him to pass:

"No," she said, "you are right."

She often had those unexpected movements which cut short hesitation and put you face to face with events. Another would have launched out into words. But Marthe never shirked responsibility, even where it concerned but the smallest facts of ordinary life. Philippe used to laugh and call it her daily heroism.

He kissed her and felt strengthened by her confidence.

Downstairs, he was told that his father was not yet back and he resolved to wait for him in the drawing-room. He lit a cigarette, let it go out again and, at first in a spirit of distraction and then with a growing interest, looked around him, as though he were trying to gather from inanimate objects particulars relating to the

man who lived in their midst.

He examined the rack containing the twelve rifles. They were all loaded, ready for service. Against what foe?

He saw the flag which he had so often gazed upon in the old house at Saint-Élophe, the old, torn flag whose glorious history he knew so well.

He saw the maps hanging on the wall, all of which traced the frontier in its smallest details, together with the country adjoining it on either side of the Vosges.

He bent over the shelves of the little book-case and read the titles of the works: *The War of 1870, prepared in the historical section of the German General Staff; The Retreat of Bourbaki; The Way to prepare our Revenge; The Crime of the Peace-at-any-Price Party...*

But one volume caught his attention more particularly. It was his own book on the idea of country. He turned the pages and, seeing that some of them were covered and scored with pencil-marks, he sat down and began to read:

"It's as I thought," he muttered, presently. "How are he and I to understand each other henceforth? What common ground is there between us? I cannot expect him to accept my ideas. And how can I submit to his?"

He went on reading and noticed comments the harshness of which distressed him beyond measure. Twenty minutes passed in this way, disturbed by no sound but that of the leaves which he turned as he read.

And, suddenly, he felt two bare arms round his head, two cool, bare arms stroking his face. He tried to release himself. The two arms clasped him all the tighter.

He made an abrupt effort and rose to his feet:

"You!" he cried, stepping back. "You here, Suzanne!"

A most attractive creature stood before him, at once smiling and bashful, in an attitude of provocation and fear, with hands clasped, then with arms again outstretched, beautiful, white, fragrant arms that showed below the short sleeves of her fine cambric blouse. Her fair hair was divided into two loose waves, whose rebellious curls played about at random. She had grey, almond-shaped eyes, half-veiled by their dark lashes; and her tiny teeth laughed at the edge of her red lips, lips so red that one would have thought – and been quite wrong in thinking – that they were painted.

It was Suzanne Jorancé, the daughter of Jorancé the special commissary and a friend of Marthe, who knew her when she was quite a child at Lunéville. Suzanne had spent four months, last winter, in Paris with the Philippe Morestals.

"You!" he repeated. "You, Suzanne!"

She replied, gaily:

"Myself. Your father came to call on us at Saint-Élopie. And, as mine was out for a walk, he brought me back with him. I have just got out of the carriage. And here I am."

He seized her by the wrists, in a fit of anger, and, in a hollow voice:

"You had no business to be at Saint-Élophé. You wrote to Marthe that you were going away this morning. You ought not to have stayed. You know quite well that you ought not to have stayed."

"Why?" she asked, quite confused.

"Why? Because, at the end of your visit to Paris, you spoke to me in words which I was entitled to interpret ... which I took to mean ... And I would not have come, if you had not written that you were..."

He broke off, embarrassed by the violence of his own outburst. The tears stood in Suzanne's eyes and her face had flushed so deep a red that her crimson lips seemed hardly red at all.

Petrified by the words which he had uttered and still more by those which he had been on the verge of uttering, Philippe suddenly, in the girl's presence, felt a need to be gentle and friendly and to make amends for his inexplicable rudeness. An unexpected sense of pity softened him. He took the small, ice-cold hands between his own and said, kindly, with the intonation of a big brother scolding a younger sister:

"Why did you stay, Suzanne?"

"May I tell you, Philippe?"

"Certainly, or I shouldn't ask you," he replied, a little nervously.

"I wanted to see you, Philippe... When I knew that you were coming ... and that, by delaying my departure by one day ... just

one day... You understand, don't you?.."

He was silent, rightly thinking that, if he answered the least word, she would at once say something that he did not want to hear. And they no longer knew how to stand opposite each other and they no longer dared look each other in the face. But Philippe felt those small hands turn warm at the touch of his and felt all the life rush once more through that turbulent young being, like a source that is released and brings back joy and strength and hope.

Steps were heard and a sound of voices rose in the hall outside.

"M. Morestal," Suzanne whispered.

And old Morestal shouted, long before entering the room:

"Where are you, Suzanne? Here's your father coming. Quick, Jorancé, the children are here. Yes, yes, your daughter, too... I brought her back with me from Saint-Élophé... But how did you come? Through the woods?"

Suzanne slipped on a pair of long suède gloves and, at the moment when the door opened, said, in a tone of implacable resolve and as though the promise must needs fill Philippe's heart with delight:

"No one shall ever see my bare arms again... No one, Philippe, I swear to you... No one shall ever stroke them..."

CHAPTER III

THE VIOLET PAMPHLET

Jorancé was a heavy and rather unwieldy, pleasant-faced man. Twenty-five years before, when secretary to the commissary at Noirmont, he had married a girl of entrancing beauty, who used to teach the piano in a boarding-school. One evening, after four years of marriage, four years of torture, during which the unhappy man suffered every sort of humiliation, Jorancé came home to find the house empty. His wife had gone without a word of explanation, taking their little girl, Suzanne, with her.

The only thing that kept him from suicide was the hope of recovering the child and saving her from the life which her mother's example would have forced upon her in the future.

He did not have to look for her long. A month later, his wife sent back the child, who was no doubt in her way. But the wound had cut deep and lingered; and neither time nor the love which he bore his daughter could wipe out the memory of that cruel story.

He buckled to his work, accepted the most burdensome tasks so as to increase his income and give Suzanne a good education, was transferred to the commissary's office at Lunéville and, somewhat late in life, was promoted to be special commissary at the frontier. The position involved the delicate functions of a sentry on outpost duty whose business it is to see as much as possible of what goes on in the neighbour's country; and

Jorancé filled it so conscientiously, tactfully and skilfully that the neighbour aforesaid, while dreading his shrewdness and insight, respected his character and his professional qualities.

At Saint-Élophe, he renewed his intimacy with old Morestal, who was his grand-uncle by marriage and who was very much attached to him.

The two men saw each other almost every day. Jorancé and Suzanne used to dine at the Old Mill on Thursdays and Sundays. Suzanne would also often come alone and accompany the old man on his daily walk. He took a great fancy to her; and it was upon his advice and at the urgent request of Philippe and Marthe Morestal that Jorancé had taken Suzanne to Paris the previous winter.

His first words on entering the room were to thank Philippe: "You can't think, my dear Philippe, how glad I was to leave her with you. Suzanne is young. And I approve of a little distraction."

He looked at Suzanne with the fervent glance of a father who has brought up his daughter himself and whose love for her is mingled with a touch of feminine affection.

And he said to Philippe:

"Have you heard the news? I am marrying her."

"Really?" said Philippe.

"Yes, to one of my cousins at Nancy, a man rather well-on

in years, perhaps, but a serious, active and intelligent fellow. Suzanne likes him very much. You do like him very much, don't you, Suzanne?"

The girl seemed not to hear the question and asked:

"Is Marthe in her room, Philippe?"

"Yes, on the second floor."

"I know, the blue room. I was here yesterday, helping Mme. Morestal. I must run up and give her a kiss."

She turned round in the doorway and kissed her hand to the three men, keeping her eyes fixed on Philippe.

"How pretty and charming your daughter is!" said Morestal to Jorancé.

But they could see that he was thinking of something else and that he was eager to change the conversation. He shut the door quickly and, returning to the special commissary, said:

"Did you come by the frontier-road?"

"No."

"And you haven't been told yet?"

"What?"

"The German post ... at the Butte-aux-Loups..."

"Knocked down?"

"Yes."

"Oh, by Jove!"

Morestal stopped to enjoy the effect which he had produced and then continued:

"What do you say to it?"

"I say ... I say that it's most annoying... They're in a very bad temper as it is, on the other side. This means trouble for me."

"Why?"

"Well, of course. Haven't you heard that they're beginning to accuse me of encouraging the German deserters?"

"Nonsense!"

"I tell you, they are. It seems that there's a secret desertion-office in these parts. I'm supposed to be at the head of it. And you, you are the heart and soul of it."

"Oh, they can't stand me at any price!"

"Nor me either. Weisslicht, the German commissary at Börsweilen, has sworn a mortal hatred against me. We cut each other now when we meet. There's not a doubt but that he is responsible for the calumnies."

"But what proofs do they put forward?"

"Any number ... all equally bad... Among others, this: pieces of French gold which are said to have been found on their soldiers. So you see ... with the post tumbling down once more, the explanations that are certain to begin all over again, the enquiries that are certain to be opened..."

Philippe went up to him:

"Come, come, I don't suppose it's so serious as all that."

"You think not, my boy? Then you haven't seen the stop-press telegrams in this morning's papers?"

"No," said Philippe and his father. "What's the news?"

"An incident in Asia Minor. A quarrel between the French

and German officials. One of the consuls has been killed."

"Oh, oh!" said Morestal. "This time ..."

And Jorancé went into details:

"Yes, the position is exceedingly strained. The Morocco question has been opened again. Then there's the espionage business and the story of the French air-men flying over the fortresses in Alsace and dropping tricolour flags in the Strasburg streets... For six months, it has been one long series of complications and shocks. The newspapers are becoming aggressive in their language. Both countries are arming, strengthening their defences. In short, in spite of the good intentions of the two governments, we are at the mercy of an accident. A spark ... and the thing's done."

A heavy silence weighed upon the three men. Each of them conjured up the sinister vision according to his own temperament and instincts.

Jorancé repeated:

"A spark ... and the thing's done."

"Well, let it be done!" said Morestal, with an angry gesture.

Philippe gave a start:

"What are you saying, father?"

"Well, what! There must be an end to all this."

"But the end need not be in blood."

"Nonsense ... nonsense... There are injuries that can only be wiped out in blood. And, when a great country like ours has received a slap in the face like that of 1870, it can wait forty

years, fifty years, but a day comes when it returns the slap in the face ... and with both hands!"

"And suppose we are beaten?" said Philippe.

"Can't be helped! Honour comes first! Besides, we sha'n't be beaten. Let every man do his duty and we shall see! In 1870, as a prisoner of war, I gave my word not to serve in the French army again. I escaped, I collected the young rascals of Saint-Élophé and round about, the old men, the cripples, the women even... We took to the woods. Three rags served as a rallying-signal: a bit of white linen, a strip of red flannel and a piece out of a blue apron ... the flag of the band! There it hangs... It shall see the light of day again, if necessary."

Jorancé could not help laughing:

"Do you think that will stop the Prussians?"

"Don't laugh, my friend... You know the view I take of my duty and what I am doing. But it is just as well that Philippe should know, too. Sit down, my boy."

He himself sat down, put aside the pipe which he was smoking and began, with the obvious satisfaction of a man who is at last able to speak of what he has most at heart:

"You know the frontier, Philippe, or rather the German side of the frontier?.. A craggy cliff, a series of peaks and ravines which make this part of the Vosges an insuperable rampart..."

"Yes, absolutely insuperable," said Philippe.

"That's a mistake!" exclaimed Morestal. "A fatal mistake! From the first moment when I began to think of these matters,

I believed that a day would come when the enemy would attack that rampart."

"Impossible!"

"That day has come, Philippe. For the last six months, not a week has passed without my meeting some suspicious figure over there or knocking up against men walking about in smocks that were hardly enough to conceal their uniform... It is a constant, progressive underhand work. Everybody is helping in it. The electric factory which the Wildermann firm has run up in that ridiculous fashion on the edge of the precipice is only a make-believe. The road that leads to it is a military road. From the factory to the Col du Diable is less than half a mile. One effort and the frontier's crossed."

"By a company," objected Jorancé.

"Where a company passes, a regiment can pass and a brigade can follow... At Börsweilen, five miles from the Vosges, there are three thousand German soldiers: on a war-footing, mark you. At Gernach, twelve miles further, there are twelve thousand; and four thousand horses; and eight hundred waggons. By the evening of the day on which war is declared, perhaps even earlier, those fifteen thousand men will have crossed the Col du Diable. It's not a surprise which they mean to attempt: that wouldn't be worth their while. It is the absolute crossing of the frontier, the taking possession of our ridges, the occupation of Saint-Élophé. When our troops arrive, it will be too late! They will find Noirmont cut off, Belfort threatened, the south of the Vosges invaded... You

can picture the moral effect: we shall be done for! That is what is being prepared in the dark. That is what you have been unable to see, Jorancé, in spite of all your watchfulness ... and in spite of my warnings."

"I wrote to the prefect last week."

"You should have written last year! All this time, the other has been coming on, the other has been advancing... He hardly takes the trouble to conceal himself... There ... listen to him ... listen to him..."

In the far distance, like the sound of an echo, deadened by the mass of trees, a bugle-call had rung out, somewhere, through the air. It was an indistinct call, but Morestal was not mistaken and he hissed:

"Ah, it's he!.. It's he... I know the voice of Germany... I know it when I hear it ... the hoarse, the odious voice!.."

Presently, Philippe, who had not taken his eyes off his father, said:

"And then, father?"

"And then, my son, it was in anticipation of that day that I built my house on this hill, that I surrounded my gardens with a wall, that, unknown to anybody, I stocked the out-houses with means of defence: ammunition, bags of sand, gun-powder ... that, in short, I prepared for an alarm by setting up this unsuspected little fortress at twenty minutes from the Col du Diable ... on the very threshold of the frontier!"

He had planted himself with his face to the east, with his face

to the enemy; and, clutching his hips with his clenched hands, in an attitude of defiance, he seemed to be awaiting the inevitable assault.

The special commissary, who still feared that his zeal had been caught napping in this business, growled:

"Your shanty won't hold out for an hour."

"And who tells you," shouted Morestal, "who tells you that that hour is not exactly the one hour which we shall want to gain?.. An hour! You never spoke a truer word: an hour of resistance to the first attack! An hour of delay!.. That's what I wanted, that's what I offer to my country. Let every one be doing as I am, to the best of his power, let every one be haunted to fever-point by the obsession of the personal service which it is his duty to render to the country; and, if war breaks out, you shall see how a great nation can take its revenge!"

"And suppose we are beaten, in spite of all?" Philippe asked again.

"What's that?"

Old Morestal turned to his son as though he had received a blow; and a rush of blood inflamed his features. He looked Philippe in the face:

"What do you say?"

Philippe had an inkling of the conflict that would hurl them one against the other if he dared to state his objections more minutely. And he uttered words at random:

"Of course, the supposition is not one of those which we can

entertain... But, all the same ... don't you think we ought to face the possibility?.."

"Face the possibility of defeat?" echoed the old man, who seemed thunderstruck. "Are you suggesting that the fear of that ought to influence France in her conduct?"

A diversion relieved Philippe of his difficulty. Some one had appeared from the staircase at the end of the terrace and in so noisy a fashion that Morestal did not wait for his son to reply:

"Is that you, Saboureux? What a row you're making!"

It was Farmer Saboureux, whose house could be seen on the Col du Diable. He was accompanied by an old, ragged tramp.

Saboureux had come to complain. Some soldiers taking part in the manœuvres had helped themselves to two of his chickens and a duck. He seemed beside himself, furious at the catastrophe:

"Only, I've a witness in old Poussière here. And I want an indemnity, not to speak of damages and punishment. I call it a calamity, I do: soldiers of our own country!.. I'm a good Frenchman, but, all the same ..."

Morestal was too much absorbed in the discussion of his favourite ideas to take the least interest in the man's troubles; and the farmer's presence, on the contrary, seemed to him an excellent reason for returning to the subject in hand. They had other things to talk about than chickens and ducks! What about the chances of war? And the alarming rumours that were current?

"What do you say, Saboureux?"

The farmer presented the typical appearance of those peasants whom we sometimes find in the eastern provinces and who, with their stern, clean-shaven faces, like the faces on ancient medals, remind us of our Roman ancestors rather than of the Gauls or Franks. He had marched to battle in 1870 with the others, perishing with hunger and wretchedness, risking his skin. And, on his return, he had found his shanty reduced to ashes. Some passing Uhlans... Since that time, he had laboured hard to repair the harm done.

"And you want it all over again?" he said. "More Uhlans burning and sacking?.. Oh, no, I've had enough of that game! You just let me be as I am!"

He was filled with the small land-owner's hatred against all those, Frenchmen or others, who were likely to tread with a sacrilegious foot on the sown earth, where the harvest is so slow in coming. He crossed his arms, with a serious air.

"And you, Poussière, what would you say if we went to war?" asked Morestal, calling to the old tramp, who was sitting on the parapet of the terrace, breaking a crust.

The man was lean and wizened, twisted like a vine-shoot, with long, dust-coloured hair and a melancholy, impassive face that seemed carved out of old oak. He put in an appearance at Saint-Élophé once every three or four months. He knocked at the doors of the houses and then went off again.

"What country do you belong to, to begin with?"

He grunted:

"Don't know much about it ... it's so long ago..."

"Which do you like best? France, eh? The roads on this side?"

The old chap swung his legs without answering, perhaps without understanding. Saboureux grinned:

"He doesn't look at the roads, not he! He doesn't as much as know if he belongs to the country on the right or on the left! His country lies where the grub lies ... eh, Poussière?"

Thereupon, seized with sudden ill-humour, Morestal lost his temper and let fly at the lukewarm, at the indifferent – working-men, townsmen or farmers – who think only of their comfort, without caring whether the country is humiliated or victorious. But what else could one expect, with the detestable ideas spread by some of the newspapers and carried to the furthest ends of the country in the books and pamphlets hawked about by travelling agents?

"Yes," he cried, "the new ideas: those are the evil that is destroying us. The school-masters are poisoning the minds of the young. The very army is smitten with the canker. Whole regiments are on the verge of mutiny..."

He turned a questioning glance upon Philippe, who, from time to time, nodded his head without replying, with a movement which his father might take for one of approval.

"Isn't it so, Philippe? You see the thing close at hand, where you are: all those poltroons who weaken our energies with their fine dreams of peace at any price! You hear them, all the wind-bags at the public meetings, who preach their loathsome crusade

against the army and the country with open doors and are backed up by our rulers... And that's only speaking of the capital!.. Why, the very provinces haven't escaped the contagion!.. Here, have you read this abomination?"

He took a little volume in a violet wrapper from among the papers heaped up on his table and held it before his son's eyes. And he continued:

"Peace before All! No author's name. A book that's all the more dangerous because it's very well written, not by one of those wind-bags to whom I was referring just now, but by a scholar, a provincial and, what's more, a Frenchman from the frontier. He seems even to bear our name ... some distant cousin, no doubt: the Morestals are a large family."

"Are you sure?" blurted Philippe, who had turned pale at the sight of the pamphlet. "How do you know?"

"Oh, by accident... A letter which was addressed to me and which said, 'All good wishes for the success of your pamphlet, my dear Morestal.'"

Philippe remembered. He was to have gone to the Old Mill last year; and the letter must have been sent to him by one of his friends.

"And haven't you tried to find out?"

"What for? Because I have a scoundrel in my family, that's no reason why I should be in a hurry to make his acquaintance! Besides, he himself has had the decency not to put his name to his scurrilous nonsense... No matter: if ever I lay my hands on

him!.. But don't let's talk of it..."

He continued to talk of it, nevertheless, and at great length, as well as of all the questions of war and peace, history and politics that came to his mind. It was not until he had "got his budget off his chest," as he said, that he exclaimed, suddenly:

"Enough of this palavering, my friends! Why, it's four o'clock! Saboureux, I'm your man... So they've been making free with your poultry, have they? Are you coming, Jorancé? We'll see some fine soldier-chaps making their soup. There's nothing jollier and livelier than a French camp!"

CHAPTER IV

PHILIPPE AND HIS WIFE

Marthe and Suzanne were very intimate, in spite of the difference in their ages. Marthe was full of indulgent kindness for her friend, whom she had known as quite a child, motherless and left to herself; whereas Suzanne was less even-tempered with Marthe, now gushing and coaxing, now aggressive and satirical, but always full of charm.

When Marthe had finished unfastening the trunks, Suzanne herself insisted on emptying the travelling-bag and arranging on the table all the little things with which one tries, when away, to give one's room a look of home: portraits of the children, writing-cases, favourite books...

"You'll be very snug here, Marthe," she said. "It's a nice, light room ... and there's only a dressing-room between you and Philippe... But how did you come to want two bedrooms?"

"It was Philippe. He was afraid of disturbing me in the mornings..."

"Oh," repeated the girl. "It was Philippe's suggestion..."

Then she took up one of the photographs and examined it:

"How like his father your son Jacques is!.. Much more so than Paul ... don't you think?"

Marthe came to the table and, bending over her friend, looked at the picture with those mother's eyes which seem to see in the

inanimate image the life, the smile and the beauty of the absent one.

"Which do you like best, Jacques or Paul?" asked Suzanne.

"What a question! If you were a mother..."

"If I were a mother, I should like that one best who reminded me most of my husband. The other would make me suspect that my husband had ceased to love me..."

"You put down everything to love, my poor Suzanne! Do you imagine that there is nothing in the world but love?"

"There are heaps of other things. But you yourself, Marthe: wouldn't you like love to fill a greater place in your life?"

This was said with a certain sarcasm, of which Marthe felt the sting. But, before she had time to retort, Philippe appeared in the doorway.

Suzanne at once cried:

"We were talking about you, Philippe."

He made no reply. He went to the window, closed it and then came back to the two young women. Suzanne pointed to a chair beside her, but he sat down by Marthe; and Marthe saw by his look that something had happened:

"Have you spoken to him?"

"No."

"Still ..."

He told her, in a few sentences, of the conversation, with the incident of the pamphlet and the words which his father had spoken against the author of that work. He repeated the words,

a second time, with increasing bitterness. Then he stopped, reflected and, pressing his clenched fists to his temples, said, slowly, as though he were explaining matters to himself:

"It's three years now that this has lasted ... ever since his letter on my appointment, in which he wrote about my second book on the idea of country. Perhaps I ought to have written to him then and there and told him of the evolution of my mind and the tremendous change which the study of history and of vanished civilizations had wrought in me."

"Perhaps it would have been better," said Marthe.

"I was afraid to. I was afraid of hurting him... It would have hurt him so terribly!.. And my love for him is so great!.. And then, Marthe, you see, the ideas which he defends and of which, in my eyes, he is the living and splendid incarnation are so beautiful in themselves that, after one has ceased to share them, one continues, for a long time, for always, to retain a sort of involuntary affection for them, deep down in one's inner self. They constituted the greatness of our country for centuries. They are vigorous, like everything that is religious and pure. One feels a renegade at losing them; and any word spoken against them sounds like blasphemy. How could I say to my father, 'Those ideas, which you gave me and which were the life of my youth, I have ceased to hold. Yes, I have ceased to think as you do. My love of humanity does not stop at the boundaries of the country in which I was born; and I do not hate those who are on the other side of the frontier. I am one of those men who will not have war,

who will not have it at any price and who would give their life-blood to save the world the horror of that scourge.' How could I say such things as that to my father?"

He rose and, pacing the room, continued:

"I did not say them. I concealed the true state of my mind, as though I were hiding a shameful sore. At the meetings, in the newspapers to which I contribute by stealth, to my adversaries and to the majority of the men on my own side I was M. Philippe, denying my name and my personality, setting a bad example to those who are silent for prudence' sake and for fear of compromising themselves. I do not sign the pamphlets which I write; and the book in which I give the conclusion of my work has been ready for more than a year, without my daring to publish it. Well, that's over now. I can't go on as I have been doing. Silence is choking me. By humbling myself, I lower my ideals. I must speak aloud, in the hearing of all men. I will speak."

He had gradually become animated, excited by his own words. His voice had increased in volume. His face expressed the glowing, irresistible, often blind enthusiasm of those who devote themselves to generous causes. And, yielding to a need to speak out which was anything but frequent with him, he went on:

"You don't know, you don't know what it means to a man to be fired with a great idea ... whether it be love of humanity, hatred of war or any other beautiful illusion. It lights us and leads us. It is our pride and our faith. We seem to have a second life, the real life, that belongs to it, and an unknown heart that beats for

it alone. And we are prepared to suffer any sacrifice, any pain, any wretchedness, any insult ... provided that it gain the day."

Suzanne listened to him with obvious admiration. Marthe appeared uneasy. Knowing Philippe's nature thoroughly, she was well aware that, in thus letting himself go, he was not only being carried away by a flood of eloquent words.

He opened the window and drew a deep breath of the pure air which he loved. Then he returned and added:

"We are even prepared to sacrifice those around us."

Marthe felt all the importance which he attached to this little sentence; and, after a moment, she said:

"Are you referring to me?"

"Yes," said Philippe.

"But you know, Philippe, that, when I agreed to marry you, I agreed to share your life, whatever it might be."

"My life as it looked like being, but not as I shall be compelled to make it."

She looked at him with a glimmer of apprehension. For some time now, she had noticed that he was even less communicative than usual, that he hardly ever spoke of his plans and that he no longer told her what he was working at.

"How do you mean, Philippe?" she asked.

He took a sealed letter from his pocket and showed her the address:

"To the Minister of Public Instruction."

"What is in that letter?" asked Marthe.

"My resignation."

"Your resignation! The resignation of your professorship?"

"Yes. I shall send this letter the moment I have confessed everything to my father. I did not like to tell you before, for fear of your objections... But I was wrong... It is necessary that you should know..."

"I don't understand," she stammered. "I don't understand..."

"Yes, you do, Marthe: you understand. The ideas which have taken possession of me little by little and to which I want to devote myself without reserve are dangerous for young brains to listen to. They form the belief of an age for which I call with might and main, but it is not the belief of to-day; and I have no right to teach it to the children entrusted to my care."

She was on the verge – thinking of her own children, whose well-being and whose future were about to suffer through this decision – she was on the verge of exclaiming:

"Why need you shout it from the house-tops? Stifle your vain scruples and go on teaching what you find in the manuals and school-books."

But she knew that he was like those priests who prefer to incur poverty and opprobrium rather than preach a religion which they no longer believe.

And she simply said:

"I do not share all your opinions, Philippe. There are even some that terrify me ... especially those which I do not know, but which I half suspect. But, whatever the goal to which you are

leading us, I will walk to it with my eyes closed."

"And ... so far ... you approve?"

"Entirely. You must act according to your conscience, send that letter and, first of all, tell your father everything. Who knows? Perhaps he will admit ..."

"Never!" exclaimed Philippe. "Men who look into the future can still understand the beliefs of former days, because those were their own beliefs when they were young. But men who cling to the past cannot accept ideas which they do not understand and which clash with their feelings and with their instincts."

"So ...?"

"So we shall quarrel and cause each other pain; and the thought of it distresses me infinitely."

He sat down, with a movement of weariness. She leant over him:

"Do not lose courage. I am sure that things will turn out better than you think. Wait a few days... There is no hurry; and you will have time to see ... to prepare..."

"Everything turns out well when you speak," he said, smiling and allowing himself to be caressed.

"Unfortunately ..."

He did not finish his sentence. He saw Suzanne opposite him, glaring at the pair of them. She was ghastly pale; and her mouth was wrung with a terrible expression of pain and hatred. He felt that she was ready to fling herself upon them and proclaim her rage aloud.

He released himself quickly and, making an effort to jest:

"Tush!" he said. "Time will show... Enough of these jeremiads: what say you, Suzanne?.. Suppose you saw to putting away my things?.. Is everything done?"

Marthe was surprised at the abrupt change in his manner. However, she replied:

"There are only your papers; and I always prefer you to arrange them yourself."

"Come on, then," he said, gaily.

Marthe walked through the dressing-room to her husband's bedroom. Philippe was about to follow her and his foot touched the door-sill when Suzanne darted in front of him and barred the way with her outstretched arms.

It happened so suddenly that he uttered a slight exclamation. Marthe asked, from the further room:

"What is it?"

"Nothing," said Suzanne. "We're coming."

Philippe tried to pass. She pushed him back violently and with such a look of her eyes that he yielded at once.

They watched each other for a few seconds, like two enemies. Philippe fumed:

"Well? What does all this mean? Do you propose to keep me here indefinitely?.."

She came nearer to him and, in a voice that shook with restraint and implacable energy:

"I shall expect you this evening... It's quite easy... You can

get out... I shall be outside my door at eleven."

He was petrified:

"You are mad!.."

"No... But I want to see you ... to speak to you ... I must ... I am suffering more than I can bear... It's enough to kill me."

Her eyes were full of tears, her chin seemed convulsed with spasms, her lips trembled.

Philippe's anger was mingled with a little pity; and, above all, he felt the need of putting an end to the scene as quickly as possible:

"Look here, baby, look here!" he said, employing an expression which he often used to her.

"You will come ... you must come ... that is why I stayed... One hour, one hour of your presence!.. If you don't, I shall come here, I shall indeed... I don't care what happens!"

He had retreated to the window. Instinctively, he looked to see if it was possible to climb over the balcony and jump. It would have been absurd.

But, as he bent forward, he saw his wife, two windows further, lean out and catch sight of him. He had to smile, to conceal his perturbation; and nothing could be more hateful to him than this comedy which a child's whims were compelling him to play.

"You're quite pale," said Marthe.

"Do you think so? I'm a little tired, I suppose. You too, you are looking ..."

She broke in:

"I thought I saw your father."

"Is he back?"

"Yes, there he is, at the end of the garden, with M. Jorancé. They are making signs to you."

Morestal and his friend were climbing up beside the waterfall and waving their hands to attract Philippe's attention. When he came under the windows, Morestal cried:

"This is what we have arranged, Philippe. You and I are dining at Jorancé's."

"But ..."

"There's no but about it; we'll explain why. I'll have the carriage got ready and Jorancé will go ahead with Suzanne."

"What about Marthe?" asked Philippe.

"Marthe can come if she likes. Come down here. We'll fix it all up."

When Philippe turned round, Suzanne was standing close against him:

"You'll come, won't you?" she said, eagerly.

"Yes, if Marthe does."

"Even if Marthe doesn't ... I insist ... I insist... Oh, Philippe, I implore you, don't drive me to extremities!"

He was afraid of an outburst:

"As a matter of fact," he said, "why shouldn't I come? It's quite natural that I should dine at your house with my father."

"Do you mean it?" she murmured. "Will you really come?"

She seemed suddenly calmed; and her face assumed a look of

childish delight:

"Oh, how happy I am!.. How happy I am! My beautiful dream will be fulfilled... We shall walk together in the dark, without speaking a word... And I shall never forget that hour... Nor you either, Philippe ... nor you either..."

CHAPTER V

THE SHEET OF NOTE-PAPER

A hand was passed through the bars of the gate at the top of the staircase leading to the terrace and seized the clapper of the little bell fastened to one of the bars. A push ... and the gate was open.

"Not much difficulty about that," said the man, carefully stepping on to the terrace. "Since the mountain won't come to Dourlowski, Dourlowski must ..."

The man stopped: he had heard voices. But, on listening, he found that the sound of voices came from behind the house. He quietly entered the drawing-room, therefore, walked straight across it and reached the windows on the other side. A little further, at the foot of the steps, he saw a carriage ready to start, with Suzanne and her father sitting in it. The Morestal family were standing round the carriage.

"That's all right," said Morestal. "Philippe and I will walk ... and we'll do the same coming home, won't we, my boy?"

"And you, Marthe?" asked Jorancé.

"No, thank you. I will stay with mamma."

"Well, we'll send your men home to you soon ... especially as Morestal likes going to bed early. They will leave the house at ten o'clock precisely; and I will go a bit of the way with them, as far as the Butte."

"That's it," said Morestal. "We shall see the demolished post by moonlight. And we shall be here by half-past ten, mother. That's a promise. Off you go, Victor."

The carriage drove off. Dourlowski, in the drawing-room, took out his watch and set it by the clock, whispering:

"Consequently, they'll reach the Butte at a quarter past ten. That's a good thing to know. And now to inform old Morestal that his friend Dourlowski has come to hunt him up in his happy home."

Putting two of his fingers to his mouth, he gave the same faint whistle which Morestal had heard that morning, something like the unfinished note of certain birds:

"That's done it," he grinned. "The old boy pricked up his ears. He has sent the others for a stroll in the garden and he's coming this way..."

He made a movement backwards on hearing Morestal's footstep in the hall, for he knew the old fellow was not given to joking. And, in fact, Morestal, the moment he entered, ran up to him and took him by the collar of his jacket:

"What are you doing here? What do you mean by it? How dare you?.. I'll show you a road which you don't know of!"

Dourlowski began to laugh with his crooked mouth:

"My dear M. Morestal, you'll dirty your hands."

His clothes were shiny and thick with grease, stretched over a small round body, that contrasted strangely with his lean and bony face. And all this formed a jovial, grotesque and rather

alarming picture.

Morestal let go his hold and, in an imperative tone:

"Explain yourself and quickly. I don't want my son to see you here. Speak."

There was no time to be lost, as Dourlowski saw:

"Well, look here," he said. "It's a question of a young soldier in the Borsweilen garrison. He's too unhappy for words where he is ... and he's mad at having to serve Germany."

"A ne'er-do-well," growled Morestal. "A slacker who doesn't want to work."

"No, not this one, I tell you, not this one. He means to enlist in the Foreign Legion. He loves France."

"Yes, always the same story. And then – pah! – one never hears of them again. More gallows' seed!"

Dourlowski seemed shocked and scandalized:

"How can you say such a thing, M. Morestal?.. If you only knew! A brave soldier who asks nothing better than to die fighting for our country."

The old man started:

"'Our country,' indeed! I forbid you to speak like that. Have you the least idea where you hail from? A scamp like you has no country."

"You forget all that I have done, M. Morestal... You and I, between us, have 'passed' four of them already."

"Hold your tongue!" said Morestal, who seemed to take no pleasure in this recollection. "Hold your tongue... If the thing

had never happened ..."

"It would happen just the same, because you are a good-natured man and because there are things... There... It's like with this lad... It would break your heart to see him... Johann Baufeld his name is... His father is just dead ... and he wants to go out to his mother, who was divorced and who lives in Algeria... Such a nice lad, full of pluck..."

"Well," said Morestal, "he's only got to 'pass'! You don't want me for that."

"And what about the money? He hasn't a sou. Besides, there's no one like you to tell us all the paths, the best place to cross at, the best time to select..."

"I'll see about it... I'll see about it," said Morestal. "There's no hurry..."

"Yes, there is..."

"Why?"

"The Børsweilen regiment is manœuvring on the slopes of the Vosges. If you'll lend us a hand, I'll run down to Saint-Élophe first, buy a suit of second-hand French peasant's clothes and go and find my man. Then I'll bring him to the old barn in your little farm to-night ... as I have done before..."

"Where is he at this moment?"

"His company is quartered in the Albern Woods."

"But that's next door to the frontier!" cried Morestal. "An hour's walk, no more."

"Just so; but how he is to reach the frontier? Where is he to

cross it?"

"That's quite easy," said Morestal, taking up a pencil and a sheet of note-paper. "Look, here are the Albern Woods. Here's the Col du Diable. Here's the Butte-aux-Loups... Well, he's only got to leave the woods by the Fontaine-Froide and take the first path to the left, by the Roche de ..."

He suddenly interrupted himself, looked at Dourlowski with a suspicious air and said:

"But you know the road as well as I do ... there's no doubt about that... So ..."

"My word," said Dourlowski, "I always go by the Col du Diable and the factory."

Morestal reflected for a moment, scribbled a few lines and a few words in an absent-minded sort of way and then, with a movement of quick resolution, took the sheet of note-paper, crumpled it into a ball and flung it into the waste-paper basket:

"No, no, certainly not!" he cried. "I've had enough of this nonsense! One succeeds four times; and, at the fifth attempt... Besides, it's not a business I care about... A soldier's a soldier ... whatever uniform he wears..."

"Still ..." mumbled Dourlowski.

"I refuse. Not to mention that they suspect me over yonder. The German commissary gives me a queer look when he meets me; and I won't risk ..."

"You're risking nothing."

"That'll do; and clear out of this as fast as you can... Oh, wait

a second!.. I think I ... Listen ..."

Morestal ran to the windows overlooking the garden. Quick as thought, Dourlowski stooped and fished Morestal's crumpled sheet out of the waste-paper basket. He hid it in the palm of his hand and, raising his voice:

"We'll say no more about it, as you don't see your way to help me," he said. "I give it up."

"That's it," said Morestal, who had seen no one in the garden. "You give it up, my friend: it's the best thing you can do."

He took Dourlowski by the shoulders and pushed him towards the terrace:

"Be off ... and don't come back... There's nothing more for you to do here ... absolutely nothing..."

He hoped to get rid of the fellow without being perceived, but, as he reached the gate, he saw his wife, his son and Marthe come up the staircase, after strolling round the walls of the Old Mill.

Dourlowski took off his hat and distributed bows all round. Then, as soon as the road was clear, he disappeared.

Mme. Morestal expressed her astonishment:

"What! Do you still see that rogue of a Dourlowski?"

"Oh, it was an accident!.."

"You are very wrong to have him in the house. We don't even know where he comes from or what his trade is."

"He's a hawker."

"A spy, rather: that's what they say about him."

"Tah! In the pay of which country?"

"Of both, very likely. Victor thinks he saw him with the German commissary, two Sundays ago."

"With Weisslicht? Impossible. He doesn't even know him."

"I'm telling you what they say. In any case, Morestal, be careful with that fellow. He's a bird of ill-omen."

"Come, come, mother, no hard words. This is a day of rejoicing... Are you ready, Philippe?"

CHAPTER VI

THE PLASTER STATUE

There were several ways leading to Saint-Élopie. First of all, the high-road, which goes winding down a slope some two miles long; next, a few rather steep short cuts; and, lastly, further north, the forest-path, part of which skirts the ridge of the Vosges.

"Let's go by the road, shall we?" said Morestal to his son.

And, as soon as they had started, he took Philippe's arm and said, gleefully:

"Only think, my boy, at the camp, just now, we met one of the lieutenants of the manœuvring company. We talked about the Saboureux business and, this evening, he is going to introduce us to his captain, who happens to be a nephew of General Daspry, commanding the army-corps. So I shall tell him what I have done at the Old Mill, you see; he will report it to his uncle Daspry; and Fort Morestal will be listed at once..."

He beamed with delight, held his head high and flung out his chest, while, with his free hand, he made warlike flourishes with his cane. Once he even halted and placed himself on guard and stamped his foot on the ground:

"Three appels ... Engage ... Lunge! What do you say to that, Philippe, eh? Old Morestal is game yet!"

Philippe, full of affection for the old man, smiled. Now that he was acting on Marthe's advice and delaying the painful

explanation, life seemed better to him, quite simple and quite easy, and he surrendered himself to the pleasure of seeing his father again and the scenes which he loved and renewing the childhood memories that seemed to await him at every turn of the road and to rise up at his approach:

"Do you remember, father? This is where I fell off my bicycle... I was standing under that tree when it was struck by lightning..."

They stopped, recalled all the circumstances of the event and set off again, arm in arm.

And, a little further, Morestal took up the thread:

"And over there, do you remember? That's where you killed your first rabbit ... with a catapult! Ah, even in those days you promised to be a good shot ... the best at Saint-Élophe, as I live!.. But I was forgetting: you have given up your gun! A fellow of your build! Why, sport, my boy, is the great apprenticeship for war!.."

Saint-Élophe-la-Côte, once a flourishing little town, had never quite recovered from the wounds earned by its heroism during the war. It stood crowding round an old ruined castle which became visible at the last turn in the road. Nevertheless, situated on the borders of the department, at twelve or thirteen miles from Noirmont, the sub-prefecture, it owed a certain importance to its

position near the frontier, facing the German garrisons, whose increasing activity was becoming a subject of uneasiness and had led to Jorancé's appointment as special commissary.

Jorancé, the first holder of this newly-created office, lived at the other end of the village and a little way outside it, in a low-storeyed house which had been greatly improved by Suzanne's good taste and fancy. It was surrounded by a garden with arbours and quaintly-clipped old trees and a clear, winding stream that flowed under the very doorstep.

It was nearly dark when Morestal entered, accompanied by Philippe. Everything was ready for their reception: the table was laid in a room hung with bright stuffs; flowers were scattered over the cloth; two lamps shed a calm and even light; and Suzanne sat smiling, happy and charming.

All this was very simple. And yet Philippe received the impression that special pains had been taken on his account. It was he who was expected; he was the master who was to be conquered and chained with invisible bonds. He felt sure of this; and Suzanne told him as much throughout dinner, with her fond glances, her attentive movements, her whole person bending towards him.

"I ought not to have come," he thought. "No, I ought not to have."

And, each time that he met Suzanne's eyes, he called to mind his wife's discreet manner and her thoughtful air.

"How absorbed you are, Philippe!" cried Morestal, who had

never ceased talking while eating. "And you, Suzanne, what are you thinking about? Your future husband?"

"Not I!" she replied, without the least embarrassment. "I was thinking of those months I spent in Paris last winter. How good you were to me, Philippe! I remember the walks we used to take!.."

They spoke of those walks; and, little by little, Philippe was surprised to realize the extent to which their lives had been mingled during that stay. Marthe, retained by her household duties, used to remain at home, while they two escaped, like a couple of free and careless play-fellows. They visited the museums and churches of Paris, the little towns and castles of the Ile-de-France. An intimacy sprang up between them. And now it confused him to find Suzanne at once so near to him and so far, so near as a friend, so far as a woman.

When dinner was over, he moved round to his father. Morestal, eager to go and keep his appointment with Captain Daspry, stood up:

"Are you coming with us, Philippe?"

"Certainly."

The three men took their hats and sticks; but, when they reached the hall-door, after a whispered colloquy with Jorancé, Morestal said to his son:

"On second thoughts, it's better that we should go alone. The interview must remain as secret as possible; and we shall be less easy if there are three of us..."

"Besides," added the special commissary, "you may just as well keep Suzanne company: it is her last evening. Good-bye for the present, children. You can be sure that the two conspirators will be back when the belfry-clock strikes ten, eh, Morestal?"

They went off, leaving Philippe not a little perplexed.

Suzanne burst out laughing:

"My poor Philippe, you look very uncomfortable. Come, cheer up! I sha'n't eat you, I promise you!"

"No, I don't expect you will," he said, laughing in his turn. "But, all the same, it's strange ..."

"All the same, it's strange," she said, completing the sentence, "that we should take a walk round the garden together, as I asked you. You will have to make the best of a bad job. Here comes the harmless, necessary moonlight."

The moon emerged slowly from the great clouds stacked around a mountain-crest; and its light cast the regular shadows of the yews and fir-trees on the lawns. The weather was heavy with approaching storms. A warm breeze wafted the perfumes of plants and grass.

Three times, they followed the outer path, along a hedge and along a wall. They said nothing; and this silence, which he found it impossible to break, filled Philippe with remorse. At that moment, he experienced a feeling of aversion for that capricious and unreasonable little girl, who had brought about those compromising minutes between them. Unaccustomed to women and always rather shy in their company, he suspected her

of some mysterious design.

"Let's go over there," said Suzanne, pointing to the middle of the garden, where the shadows seemed to gather round a thick clump of shrubs and hornbeams.

They made for the place through an arcade of verdure which brought them to a short flight of steps. It was a sunk amphitheatre, surrounded by a stone balustrade, with a small pond in the middle and, opposite, in a leafy frame, a female statue, with a moonbeam quivering upon it. A musty smell arose from this old-fashioned spot.

"Venus or Minerva? Corinne perhaps?" said Philippe, joking to conceal his uneasiness. "I confess I can't quite make out. What is she wearing: a peplum or an Empire frock? And is that a helmet or a turban on her head?"

"It depends," said Suzanne.

"How do you mean? What upon?"

"Yes, it depends upon my humour. When I'm good and sensible, she's Minerva. When I look at her with a yearning heart, she becomes Venus. And she is also, according to the mood of the moment, the goddess of madness ... and the goddess of tears ... and the goddess of death."

She spoke with a playfulness that saddened Philippe. He asked:

"And what is she the goddess of to-day?"

"The goddess of farewell."

"Of farewell?"

"Yes, farewell to Suzanne Jorancé, to the girl who has come here every day, for the last five years, and who will never come here again."

She leant against the statue:

"My dear goddess, what dreams we two have had, you and I! We used to wait together. For whom? For the Blue Bird ... for Prince Charming. The prince was to arrive on horseback, one day, jump the garden-wall and carry me off, slung across his saddle. He was to slip through the trees, one evening, and go up the steps on his knees, sobbing. And all the vows I made to my dear goddess! Just think, Philippe: I promised her never to bring a man into her presence unless I loved him! And I kept my promise. You are the first, Philippe."

He flushed red in the dark; and she continued, in a voice the gaiety of which rang false:

"If you only knew how silly a girl is, dreaming and vowing things! Why, I even promised her that that man and I should exchange our first kiss before her. Isn't it ridiculous? Poor goddess! She will never see that kiss of love; for, after all, I don't suppose you intend to kiss me?"

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