DUMAS ALEXANDRE

THE WOLF-LEADER

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The Wolf-Leader:

Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH the introductory chapters were not signed until May 31st, 1856, *The Wolf-Leader* is to be associated in conception with the group of romances which Dumas wrote at Brussels between the years 1852 and 1854, that is to say, after his financial failure and the consequent defection of his collaborator Maquet, and before his return to Paris to found his journal *Le Mousquetaire*. Like *Conscience l'Innocent* and *Catherine Blum*, which date from that period of exile, the present story was inspired by reminiscences of our author's native place – Villers-Cotterets, in the department of the Aisne.

In *The Wolf-Leader* Dumas, however, allows his imagination and fancy full play. Using a legend told to him nearly half a century before, conjuring up the scenes of his boyhood, and calling into requisition his wonderful gift of improvisation, he contrives in the happiest way to weave a romance in which are combined a weird tale of *diablerie* and continual delightful glimpses of forest life. Terror, wood-craft, and humour could not be more felicitously intermingled. The reader, while kept under the spell of the main theme of the story, experiences all the charm

of an open-air life in the great forest of Villers-Cotterets – the forest in which the little town seemed to occupy a small clearing, and into which the boy Alexandre occasionally escaped for days together from the irksome routine of the school or from the hands of relatives who wanted to make a priest of him.

Thus Dumas, the most impressionable of men, all his life remained grateful to the forest for the poetic fancies derived from its beauty and the mysteries of its recesses, as well as for the hiding-places it afforded him, and for the game and birds which he soon learnt to shoot and snare there. Listen to his indignation at the destruction of the trees in the neighbouring park. We quote from his *Memoirs*: – "That park, planted by François I., was cut down by Louis Philippe. Beautiful trees! under whose shade once reclined François I. and Madame d'Etampes, Henri II. and Diana of Poitiers, Henri IV. and Gabrielle – you had a right to believe that a Bourbon would have respected you, that you would have lived your long life – the life of beech trees and oaks; that the birds would have warbled on your branches when green and leafy. But over and above your inestimable value of poetry and memories, you had, unhappily, a material value. You beautiful beeches with your polished silvery cases! you beautiful oaks with your sombre wrinkled bark! – you were worth a hundred thousand crowns. The King of France, who, with his six millions of private revenue, was too poor to keep you – the King of France sold you. For my part, had you been my sole fortune, I would have preserved you; for, poet as I am,

there is one thing that I would set before all the gold of the earth, and that is the murmur of the wind in your leaves; the shadow that you made to flicker beneath my feet; the sweet visions, the charming phantoms which, at evening time, betwixt the day and night, in twilight's doubtful hour would glide between your age-long trunks as glide the shadows of the ancient Abencerrages amid the thousand columns of Cordova's royal mosque."

The Wolf-Leader was published in 1857, in three volumes (Paris: Cadot). Dumas reprinted it in his journal *Le Monte-Cristo* in 1860.

R. S. G.

INTRODUCTION
WHO MOCQUET WAS, AND HOW THIS TALE BECAME KNOWN TO THE NARRATOR

I

WHY, I ask myself, during those first twenty years of my literary life, from 1827 to 1847, did I so rarely turn my eyes and thoughts towards the little town where I was born, towards the woods amid which it lies embowered, and the villages that cluster round it? How was it that during all that time the world of my youth seemed to me to have disappeared, as if hidden behind a cloud, whilst the future which lay before me shone clear and resplendent, like those magic islands which Columbus and his companions mistook for baskets of flowers floating on the sea?

Alas! simply because during the first twenty years of our life, we have Hope for our guide, and during the last twenty, Reality.

From the hour when, weary with our journey, we ungird ourselves, and dropping the traveller's staff, sit down by the wayside, we begin to look back over the road that we have traversed; for it is the way ahead that now is dark and misty, and so we turn

and gaze into the depths of the past.

Then with the wide desert awaiting us in front, we are astonished, as we look along the path which we have left behind, to catch sight of first one and then another of those delicious oases of verdure and shade, beside which we never thought of lingering for a moment, and which, indeed we had passed by almost without notice.

But, then, how quickly our feet carried us along in those days! we were in such a hurry to reach that goal of happiness, to which no road has ever yet brought any one of us.

It is at this point that we begin to see how blind and ungrateful we have been; it is now that we say to ourselves, if we could but once more come across such a green and wooded resting-place, we would stay there for the rest of our lives, would pitch our tent there, and there end our days.

But the body cannot go back and renew its existence, and so memory has to make its pious pilgrimage alone; back to the early days and fresh beginnings of life it travels, like those light vessels that are borne upward by their white sails against the current of a river. Then the body once more pursues its journey; but the body without memory is as the night without stars, as the lamp without its flame… And so body and memory go their several ways.

The body, with chance for its guide, moves towards the unknown.

Memory, that bright will-o'-the-wisp, hovers over the land-marks that are left behind; and memory, we may be sure, will not

lose her way. Every oasis is revisited, every association recalled, and then with a rapid flight she returns to the body that grows ever more and more weary, and like the humming of a bee, like the song of a bird, like the murmur of a stream, tells the tale of all that she has seen.

And as the tired traveller listens, his eyes grow bright again, his mouth smiles, and a light steals over his face. For Providence in kindness, seeing that he cannot return to youth, allows youth to return to him. And ever after he loves to repeat aloud what memory tells, him in her soft, low voice.

And is our life, then, bounded by a circle like the earth? Do we, unconsciously, continue to walk towards the spot from which we started? And as we travel nearer and nearer to the grave, do we again draw closer, ever closer, to the cradle?

II

I cannot say. But what happened to myself, that much at any rate I know. At my first halt along the road of life, my first glance backwards, I began by relating the tale of Bernard and his uncle Berthelin, then the story of Ange Pitou, his fair *fiancée*, and of Aunt Angélique; after that I told of Conscience and Mariette; and lastly of Catherine Blum and Father Vatrin.

I am now going to tell you the story of Thibault and his wolves, and of the Lord of Vez. And how, you will ask, did I become acquainted with the events which I am now about to bring before you? I will tell you.

Have you read my *Mémoires*, and do you remember one, by name Mocquet, who was a friend of my father's?

If you have read them, you will have some vague recollection of this personage. If you have not read them, you will not remember anything about him at all.

In either case, then, it is of the first importance that I should bring Mocquet clearly before your mind's eye.

As far back as I can remember, that is when I was about three years of age, we lived, my father and mother and I, in a little Château called Les Fossés, situated on the boundary that separates the departments of Aisne and Oise, between Haramont and Longpré. The little house in question had doubtless been named Les Fossés on account of the deep and broad moat, filled

with water, with which it was surrounded.

I do not mention my sister, for she was at school in Paris, and we only saw her once a year, when she was home for a month's holiday.

The household, apart from my father, mother and myself, consisted – firstly: of a large black dog, called Truffe, who was a privileged animal and made welcome wherever he appeared, more especially as I regularly went about on his back; secondly: of a gardener, named Pierre, who kept me amply provided with frogs and snakes, two species of living creatures in which I was particularly interested; thirdly: of a negro, a valet of my father's, named Hippolyte, a sort of black merry-andrew, whom my father, I believe, only kept that he might be well primed with anecdotes wherewith to gain the advantage in his encounters with Brunel[1] and beat his wonderful stories; fourthly: of a keeper named Mocquet, for whom I had a great admiration, seeing that he had magnificent stories to tell of ghosts and were-wolves, to which I listened every evening, and which were abruptly broken off the instant the General – as my father was usually called – appeared on the scene; fifthly: of a cook, who answered to the name of Marie, but this figure I can no longer recall, it is lost to me in the misty twilight of life; I remember only the name, as given to someone of whom but a shadowy outline remains in my memory, and about whom, as far as I recollect, there was nothing of a very poetic character.

[1] See *Mémoires*.

Mocquet, however, is the only person that need occupy our attention for the present. Let me try to make him known to you, both as regards his personal appearance and his character.

III

MOCQUET was a man of about forty years of age, short, thick-set, broad of shoulder, and sturdy of leg. His skin was burnt brown by the sun, his eyes were small and piercing, his hair grizzled, and his black whiskers met under his chin in a half circle.

As I look back, his figure rises before me, wearing a three-cornered hat, and clad in a green waistcoat with silver buttons, velveteen cord breeches, and high leathern gaiters, with a game-bag over his shoulder, his gun in his hand, and a cutty-pipe in his mouth.

Let us pause for a moment to consider this pipe, for this pipe grew to be, not merely an accessory, but an integral part of Mocquet. Nobody could remember ever having seen Mocquet without it. If by any chance Mocquet did not happen to have it in his mouth, he had it in his hand.

This pipe, having to accompany Mocquet into the heart of the thickest coverts, it was necessary that it should be of such a kind as to offer the least possible opportunity to any other solid body of bringing about its destruction; for the destruction of his old, well-coloured cutty would have been to Mocquet a loss that years alone could have repaired. Therefore the stem of Mocquet's pipe was not more than half-an-inch long; moreover you might always wager that half that half inch at least was supplied by the quill

of a feather.

This habit of never being without his pipe, which, by causing the almost entire disappearance of both canines, had hollowed out a sort of vice for itself on the left side of his mouth, between the fourth incisor and the first molar, had given rise to another of Mocquet's habits; this was to speak with his teeth clenched, whereby a certain impression of obstinacy was conveyed by all he said. – This became even more marked if Mocquet chanced at any moment to take his pipe out of his mouth, for there was nothing then to prevent the jaws closing and the teeth coming together in a way which prevented the words passing through them at all except in a sort of whistle, which was hardly intelligible.

Such was Mocquet with respect to outward appearance. In the following pages I will endeavour to give some idea of his intellectual capacity and moral qualities.

IV

EARLY one morning, before my father had risen, Mocquet walked into his room, and planted himself at the foot of the bed, stiff and upright as a sign-post.

"Well, Mocquet," said my father, "what's the matter now? what gives me the pleasure of seeing you here at this early hour?"

"The matter is, General," replied Mocquet with the utmost gravity, "the matter is that I am *nightmared*."

Mocquet had, quite unawares to himself, enriched the language with a double verb, both active and passive.

"You are *nightmared*?" responded my father, raising himself on his elbow. "Dear, dear, that's a serious matter, my poor Mocquet."

"You are right there, General."

And Mocquet took his pipe out of his mouth, a thing he did rarely, and only on the most important occasions.

"And how long have you been *nightmared*?" continued my father compassionately.

"For a whole week, General."

"And who by, Mocquet?"

"Ah! I know very well who by," answered Mocquet, through his teeth, which were so much the more tightly closed that his pipe was in his hand, and his hand behind his back.

"And may I also know by whom?"

"By Mother Durand, of Haramont, who, as you will have heard, is an old witch."

"No, indeed, I assure you I had no idea of such a thing."

"Ah! but I know it well enough; I've seen her riding past on her broomstick to her Witches' Sabbath."

"You have seen her go by on her broomstick?"

"As plainly as I see you, General; and more than that, she has an old black billy-goat at home that she worships."

"And why should she come and nightmare you?"

"To revenge herself on me, because I came upon her once at midnight on the heath of Gondreville, when she was dancing round and round in her devil's circle."

"This is a most serious accusation which you bring against her, my friend; and before repeating to anyone what you have been telling me in private, I think it would be as well if you tried to collect some more proofs."

"Proofs! What more proofs do I want! Does not every soul in the village know that in her youth she was the Mistress of Thibault, the wolf-leader?"

"Indeed! I must look carefully into this matter, Mocquet."

"I am looking very carefully into it myself, and she shall pay for it, the old mole!"

Old mole was an expression that Mocquet had borrowed from his friend Pierre, the gardener, who, as he had no worse enemies to deal with than moles, gave the name of mole to everything and everybody that he particularly detested.

V

"I must look carefully into this matter" – these words were not said by my father by reason of any belief he had in the truth of Mocquet's tale about his nightmare; and even the fact of the nightmare being admitted by him, he gave no credence to the idea that it was Mother Durand who had *nightmared* the keeper. Far from it; but my father was not ignorant of the superstitions of the people, and he knew that belief in spells was still wide-spread among the peasantry in the country districts. He had heard of terrible acts of revenge carried out by the victims on some man or woman who they thought had bewitched them, in the belief that the charm would thus be broken; and Mocquet, while he stood denouncing Mother Durand to my father, had had such an accent of menace in his voice, and had given such a grip to his gun, that my father thought it wise to appear to agree with everything he said, in order to gain his confidence and so prevent him doing anything without first consulting him.

So, thinking that he had so far gained an influence over Mocquet, my father ventured to say:

"But before you make her pay for it, my good Mocquet, you ought to be quite sure that no one can cure you of your nightmare."

"No one can cure me, General," replied Mocquet in a tone of conviction.

"How! No one able to cure you?"

"No one; I have tried the impossible."

"And how did you try?"

"First of all, I drank a large bowl of hot wine before going to bed."

"And who recommended that remedy? was it Monsieur Lécosse?" Monsieur Lécosse was the doctor in repute at Villers-Cotterets.

"Monsieur Lécosse?" exclaimed Mocquet. "No, indeed! What should he know about spells! By my faith, no! it was not Monsieur Lécosse."

"Who was it, then?"

"It was the shepherd of Longpré."

"But a bowl of wine, you dunderhead! Why, you must have been dead drunk."

"The shepherd drank half of it."

"I see; now I understand why he prescribed it. And did the bowl of wine have any effect?"

"Not any, General; she came trampling over my chest that night, just as if I had taken nothing."

"And what did you do next? You were not obliged, I suppose, to limit your efforts to your bowl of hot wine?"

"I did what I do when I want to catch a *wily beast*."

Mocquet made use of a phraseology which was all his own; no one had ever succeeded in inducing him to say a *wild beast*; every time my father said *wild beast*, Mocquet would answer,

"Yes, General, I know, a *wily beast*."

"You still stick to your *wily beast*, then?" my father said to him on one occasion.

"Yes, General, but not out of obstinacy."

"And why then, may I ask?"

"Because, General, with all due respect to you, you are mistaken about it."

"Mistaken? I? How?"

"Because you ought not to say a *wild beast*, but a *wily beast*."

"And what is a *wily beast*, Mocquet?"

"It is an animal that only goes about at night; that is, an animal that creeps into the pigeon-houses and kills the pigeons, like the pole-cat, or into the chicken-houses, to kill the chickens, like the fox; or into the folds, to kill the sheep, like the wolf; it means an animal which is cunning and deceitful, in short, a *wily beast*."

It was impossible to find anything to say after such a logical definition as this. – My father, therefore, remained silent, and Mocquet, feeling that he had gained a victory, continued to call *wild beasts*, *wily beasts*, utterly unable to understand my father's obstinacy in continuing to call *wily beasts*, *wild beasts*.

So now you understand why, when my father asked him what else he had done, Mocquet answered, "I did what I do when I want to catch a *wily beast*."

We have interrupted the conversation to give this explanation; but as there was no need of explanation between my father and Mocquet, they had gone on talking, you must understand,

without any such break.

VI

"And what is it you do, Mocquet, when you want to catch this animal of yours?" asked my father.

"I set a *trarp*, General." Mocquet always called a trap a trarp.

"Do you mean to tell me you have set a trap to catch Mother Durand?"

My father had of course said *trap*; but Mocquet did not like anyone to pronounce words differently from himself, so he went on:

"Just so, General; I have set a *trarp* for Mother Durand."

"And where have you put your *trarp*? Outside your door?"

My father, you see, was willing to make concessions.

"Outside my door! Much good that would be! I only know she gets into my room, but I cannot even guess which way she comes."

"Down the chimney, perhaps?"

"There is no chimney, and besides, I never see her until I feel her."

"And you do see her, then?"

"As plainly I see you, General."

"And what does she do?"

"Nothing agreeable, you may be sure; she tramples all over my chest: thud, thud! thump, thump!"

"Well, where *have* you set your trap, then?"

"The *trarp*, why, I put it on my own stomach."

"And what kind of a *trarp* did you use?"

"Oh! a first-rate *trarp*!"

"What was it?"

"The one I made to catch the grey wolf with, that used to kill M. Destournelles' sheep."

"Not such a first-rate one, then, for the grey wolf ate up your bait, and then bolted."

"You know why he was not caught, General."

"No, I do not."

"Because it was the black wolf that belonged to old Thibault, the sabot-maker."

"It could not have been Thibault's black wolf, for you said yourself just this moment that the wolf that used to come and kill M. Destournelles' sheep was a grey one."

"He is grey now, General; but thirty years ago, when Thibault the sabot-maker was alive, he was black; and, to assure you of the truth of this, look at my hair, which was black as a raven's thirty years ago, and now is as grey as the Doctor's."

The Doctor was a cat, an animal of some fame, that you will find mentioned in my *Mémoires* and known as the Doctor on account of the magnificent fur which nature had given it for a coat.

"Yes," replied my father, "I know your tale about Thibault, the sabot-maker; but, if the black wolf is the devil, Mocquet, as you say he is, he would not change colour."

"Not at all, General; only it takes him a hundred years to become quite white, and the last midnight of every hundred years, he turns black as a coal again."

"I give up the case, then, Mocquet: all I ask is, that you will not tell my son this fine tale of yours, until he is fifteen at least."

"And why, General?"

"Because it is no use stuffing his mind with nonsense of that kind, until he is old enough to laugh at wolves, whether they are white, grey or black."

"It shall be as you say, General; he shall hear nothing of this matter."

"Go on, then."

"Where had we got to, General?"

"We had got to your *trarp*, which you had put on your stomach, and you were saying that it was a first-rate *trarp*."

"By my faith, General, that was a first-rate *trarp*!" It weighed a good ten pounds. What am I saying! fifteen pounds at least with its chain!

I put the chain over my wrist.

"And what happened that night?"

"That night? why, it was worse than ever! Generally, it was in her leather overshoes she came and kneaded my chest, but that night she came in her wooden *sabots*."

"And she comes like this…?"

"Every blessed one of God's nights, and it is making me quite thin; you can see for yourself, General, I am growing as thin as

a lath. However, this morning I made up my mind."

"And what did you decide upon, Mocquet?"

"Well, then, I made up my mind I would let fly at her with my gun."

"That was a wise decision to come to. And when do you think of carrying it out?"

"This evening, or to-morrow at latest, General."

"Confound it! And just as I was wanting to send you over to Villers-Hellon."

"That won't matter, General. Was it something that you wanted done at once?"

"Yes, at once."

"Very well, then, I can go over to Villers-Hellon, – it's not above a few miles, if I go through the wood – and get back here this evening; the journey both ways is only twenty-four miles, and we have covered a few more than that before now out shooting, General."

"That's settled, then; I will write a letter for you to give to M. Collard, and then you can start."

"I will start, General, without a moment's delay."

My father rose, and wrote to M. Collard; the letter was as follows:

"My dear Collard,

"I am sending you that idiot of a keeper of mine, whom you know; he has taken into his head that an old woman *nightmares* him every night, and, to rid himself of this vampire, he intends

nothing more nor less than to kill her.

"Justice, however, might not look favourably on this method of his for curing himself of indigestion, and so I am going to start him off to you on a pretext of some kind or other. Will you, also, on some pretext or other, send him on, as soon as he gets to you, to Danré, at Vouty, who will send him on to Dulauloy, who, with or without pretext, may then, as far as I care, send him on to the devil?

"In short, he must be kept going for a fortnight at least. By that time we shall have moved out of here and shall be at Antilly, and as he will then no longer be in the district of Haramont, and as his nightmare will probably have left him on the way, Mother Durand will be able to sleep in peace, which I should certainly not advise her to do if Mocquet were remaining anywhere in her neighbourhood.

"He is bringing you six brace of snipe and a hare, which we shot while out yesterday on the marshes of Vallue.

"A thousand-and-one of my tenderest remembrances to the fair Herminie, and as many kisses to the dear little Caroline.

"Your friend,
"Alex. Dumas."

An hour later Mocquet was on his way, and, at the end of three weeks, he rejoined us at Antilly.

"Well," asked my father, seeing him reappear in robust health, "well, and how about Mother Durand?"

"Well, General," replied Mocquet cheerfully, "I've got rid of

the old mole; it seems she has no power except in her own district."

VII

TWELVE years had passed since Mocquet's nightmare, and I was now over fifteen years of age. It was the winter of 1817 to 1818; ten years before that date I had, alas! lost my father.

We no longer had a Pierre for gardener, a Hippolyte for valet, or a Mocquet for keeper; we no longer lived at the Château of Les Fossés or in the villa at Antilly, but in the market-place of Villers Cotterets, in a little house opposite the fountain, where my mother kept a *bureau de tabac*, selling powder and shot as well over the same counter.

As you have already read in my *Mémoires*, although still young, I was an enthusiastic sportsman. As far as sport went, however, that is according to the usual acceptation of the word, I had none, except when my cousin, M. Deviolaine, the ranger of the forest at Villers-Cotterets, was kind enough to ask leave of my mother to take me with him. I filled up the remainder of my time with poaching.

For this double function of sportsman and poacher I was well provided with a delightful single-barrelled gun, on which was engraven the monogram of the Princess Borghese, to whom it had originally belonged. My father had given it me when I was a child, and when, after his death, everything had to be sold, I implored so urgently to be allowed to keep my gun, that it was not sold with the other weapons, and the horses and carriages.

The most enjoyable time for me was the winter; then the snow lay on the ground, and the birds, in their search for food, were ready to come wherever grain was sprinkled for them. Some of my father's old friends had fine gardens, and I was at liberty to go and shoot the birds there as I liked. So I used to sweep the snow away, spread some grain, and, hiding myself within easy gun-shot, fire at the birds, sometimes killing six, eight, or even ten at a time.

Then, if the snow lasted, there was another thing to look forward to, – the chance of tracing a wolf to its lair, and a wolf so traced was everybody's property. The wolf, being a public enemy, a murderer beyond the pale of the law, might be shot at by all or anyone, and so, in spite of my mother's cries, who dreaded the double danger for me, you need not ask if I seized my gun, and was first on the spot ready for sport.

The winter of 1817 to 1818 had been long and severe; the snow was lying a foot deep on the ground, and so hard frozen that it had held for a fortnight past, and still there were no tidings of anything.

Towards four o'clock one afternoon Mocquet called upon us; he had come to lay in his stock of powder. While so doing, he looked at me and winked with one eye. When he went out, I followed.

"What is it, Mocquet?" I asked, "tell me."

"Can't you guess, Monsieur Alexandre?"

"No, Mocquet."

"You don't guess, then, that if I come and buy powder here from Madame, your mother, instead of going to Haramont for it, – in short, if I walk three miles instead of only a quarter that distance, that I might possibly have a bit of a shoot to propose to you?"

"Oh, you good Mocquet! and what and where?"

"There's a wolf, Monsieur Alexandre."

"Not really?"

"He carried off one of M. Destournelles' sheep last night, I have traced him to the Tillet woods."

"And what then?"

"Why then, I am certain to see him again to-night, and shall find out where his lair is, and to-morrow morning we'll finish his business for him."

"Oh, this is luck!"

"Only, we must first ask leave…"

"Of whom, Mocquet?"

"Leave of Madame."

"All right, come in, then, we will ask her at once."

My mother had been watching us through the window; she suspected that some plot was hatching between us.

"I have no patience with you, Mocquet," she said, as we went in, "you have no sense or discretion."

"In what way, Madame?" asked Mocquet.

"To go exciting him in the way you do; he thinks too much of sport as it is."

"Nay, Madame, it is with him, as with dogs of breed; his father was a sportsman, he is a sportsman, and his son will be a sportsman after him; you must make up your mind to that."

"And supposing some harm should come to him?"

"Harm come to him with me? With Mocquet? No, indeed! I will answer for it with my own life, that he shall be safe. Harm happen to him, to him, the General's son? Never, never, never!"

But my poor mother shook her head; I went to her and flung my arms round her neck.

"Mother, dearest," I cried, "please let me go."

"You will load his gun for him, then, Mocquet?"

"Have no fear, sixty grains of powder, not a grain more or less, and a twenty to the pound bullet."

"And you will not leave him?"

"I will stay by him like his shadow."

"You will keep him near you?"

"Between my legs."

"I give him into your sole charge, Mocquet."

"And he shall be given back to you safe and sound. Now, Monsieur Alexandre, gather up your traps, and let us be off; your mother has given her permission."

"You are not taking him away this evening, Mocquet."

"I must, Madame, to-morrow morning will be too late to fetch him; we must hunt the wolf at dawn."

"The wolf! it is for a wolf-hunt that you are asking for him to go with you?"

"Are you afraid that the wolf will eat him?"

"Mocquet! Mocquet!"

"But when I tell you that I will be answerable for everything!"

"And where will the poor child sleep?"

"With father Mocquet, of course, he will have a good mattress laid on the floor, and sheets white as those which God has spread over the fields, and two good warm coverlids; I promise you that he shall not catch cold."

"I shall be all right, mother, you may be sure! Now then, Mocquet, I am ready."

"And you don't even give me a kiss, you poor boy, you!"

"Indeed, yes, dear mother, and a good many more than one!"

And I threw myself on my mother's neck, stifling her with my caresses as I clasped her in my arms.

"And when shall I see you again?"

"Oh, do not be uneasy if he does not return before to-morrow evening."

"How, to-morrow evening! and you spoke of starting at dawn!"

"At dawn for the wolf; but if we miss him, the lad must have a shot or two at the wild ducks on the marshes of Vallue."

"I see! you are going to drown him for me!"

"By the name of all that's good, Madame, if I was not speaking to the General's widow – I should say – "

"What Mocquet? What would you say?"

"That you will make nothing but a wretched milksop of your

boy… If the General's mother had been always behind him, pulling at his coat-tails, as you are behind this child, he would never even have had the courage to cross the sea to France."

"You are right, Mocquet! take him away! I am a poor fool."

And my mother turned aside, to wipe away a tear.

A mother's tear, that heart's diamond, more precious than all the pearls of Ophir! I saw it running down her cheek. I ran to the poor woman, and whispered to her, "Mother, if you like, I will stay at home."

"No, no, go, my child," she said, "Mocquet is right; you must, sooner or later, learn to be a man."

I gave her another last kiss; then I ran after Mocquet, who had already started.

After I had gone a few paces, I looked round; my mother had run into the middle of the road, that she might keep me in sight as long as possible; it was my turn now to wipe away a tear.

"How now?" said Mocquet, "you crying too, Monsieur Alexandre!"

"Nonsense, Mocquet! it's only the cold makes my eyes run."

But Thou, O God, who gavest me that tear, Thou knowest that it was not because of the cold that I was crying.

VIII

IT was pitch dark when we reached Mocquet's house. We had a savoury omelette and stewed rabbit for supper, and then Mocquet made my bed ready for me. He kept his word to my mother, for I had a good mattress, two white sheets and two good warm coverlids.

"Now," said Mocquet, "tuck yourself in there, and go to sleep; we may probably have to be off at four o'clock to-morrow morning."

"At any hour you like, Mocquet."

"Yes, I know, you are a capital riser over night, and to-morrow morning I shall have to throw a jug of cold water over you to make you get up."

"You are welcome to do that, Mocquet, if you have to call me twice."

"Well, we'll see about that."

"Are you in a hurry to go to sleep, Mocquet?"

"Why, whatever do you want me to do at this hour of the night?"

"I thought, perhaps, Mocquet, you would tell me one of those stories that I used to find so amusing when I was a child."

"And who is going to get up for me at two o'clock to-morrow, if I sit telling you tales till midnight? Our good priest, perhaps?"

"You are right, Mocquet."

"It's fortunate you think so!"

So I undressed and went to bed. Five minutes later Mocquet was snoring like a bass viol.

I turned and twisted for a good two hours before I could get to sleep. How many sleepless nights have I not passed on the eve of the first shoot of the season! At last, towards midnight fatigue gained the mastery over me. A sudden sensation of cold awoke me with a start at four o'clock in the morning; I opened my eyes. Mocquet had thrown my bed-clothes off over the foot of the bed, and was standing beside me, leaning both hands on his gun, his face beaming out upon me, as, at every fresh puff of his short pipe, the light from it illuminated his features.

"Well, how have you got on, Mocquet?"

"He has been tracked to his lair."

"The wolf? and who tracked him?"

"This foolish old Mocquet."

"Bravo!"

"But guess where he has chosen to take covert, this most accommodating of good wolves!"

"Where was it then, Mocquet?"

"If I gave you a hundred chances you wouldn't guess! in the Three Oaks Covert."

"We've got him, then?"

"I should rather think so."

The Three Oaks Covert is a patch of trees and undergrowth, about two acres in extent, situated in the middle of the plain of

Largny, about five hundred paces from the forest.

"And the keepers?" I went on.

"All had notice sent them," replied Mocquet; "Moynat, Mildet, Vatrin, Lafeuille, all the best shots in short, are waiting in readiness just outside the forest. You and I, with Monsieur Charpentier, from Vallue, Monsieur Hochedez, from Largny, Monsieur Destournelles, from Les Fossés, are to surround the Covert; the dogs will be slipped, the field-keeper will go with them, and we shall have him, that's certain."

"You'll put me in a good place, Mocquet?"

"Haven't I said that you will be near me; but you must get up first."

"That's true – Brrou!"

"And I am going to have pity on your youth and put a bundle of wood in the fire-place."

"I didn't dare ask for it; but, on my word of honour, it will be kind of you if you will."

Mocquet went out and brought in an armful of wood from the timber-yard, and threw it on to the hearth, poking it down with his foot; then he threw a lighted match among the twigs, and in another moment the clear bright flames were dancing and crackling up the chimney. I went and sat on the stool by the fireside, and there dressed myself; you may be sure that I was not long over my toilette; even Mocquet was astonished at my celerity.

"Now, then," he said, "a drop of this, and then off!" And

saying this, he filled two small glasses with a yellowish coloured liquor, which did not require any tasting on my part to recognize.

"You know I never drink brandy, Mocquet."

"Ah, you are your father's son, all over! What will you have, then?"

"Nothing, Mocquet, nothing."

"You know the proverb: 'Leave the house empty; the devil will be there.' Believe me, you had better put something into your stomach, while I load your gun, for I must keep my promise to that poor mother of yours."

"Well, then, I will have a crust of bread and a glass of *pignolet*." *Pignolet* is a light wine made in non-winegrowing districts, generally said to require three men to drink it, one to drink, and two to hold him; I was, however, pretty well accustomed to *pignolet*, and could drink it up without help. So I swallowed my glass of wine while Mocquet loaded my gun.

"What are you doing, Mocquet?" I asked him.

"Making a cross on your bullet," he replied. "As you will be near me, we shall probably let fly together, and, although I know you would give me up your share, still, for the glory of it, it will be as well to know which of us killed him, if the wolf falls. So, mind you aim straight."

"I'll do my best, Mocquet."

"Here's your gun, then, loaded for bird-shooting; and now, gun over your shoulder, and off we start."

IX

THE meeting-place was on the road leading to Chavigny. Here we found the keepers and some of the huntsmen, and within another ten minutes those who were missing had also joined us. Before five o'clock struck, our number was complete, and then we held a council of war to decide our further proceedings. It was finally arranged that we should first take up our position round the Three Oaks Covert at some considerable distance from it, and then gradually advance so as to form a cordon round it. Everything was to be done with the utmost silence, it being well known that wolves decamp on hearing the slightest noise. Each of us was ordered to look carefully along the path he followed, to make quite sure that the wolf had not left the covert. Meanwhile the field-keeper was holding Mocquet's hounds in leash.

One by one we took our stand facing the covert, on the spot to which our particular path had conducted us. As it happened, Mocquet and I found ourselves on the north side of the warren, which was parallel with the forest.

Mocquet had rightly said that we should be in the best place, for the wolf would in all probability try and make for the forest, and so would break covert on our side of it.

We took our stand, each in front of an oak tree, fifty paces apart from one another, and then we waited, without moving, and hardly daring to breathe. The dogs on the farther side of the

warren were now uncoupled; they gave two short barks, and were then silent. The keeper followed them into the covert, calling halloo as he beat the trees with his stick. But the dogs, their eyes starting out of their heads, their lips drawn back, and their coats bristling, remained as if nailed to the ground. Nothing would induce them to move a step further.

"Halloa, Mocquet!" cried the keeper, "this wolf of yours must be an extra plucky one, Rocador and Tombelle refuse to tackle him."

But Mocquet was too wise to make any answer, for the sound of his voice would have warned the wolf that there were enemies in that direction.

The keeper went forward, still beating the trees, the two dogs after him cautiously advancing step by step, without a bark, only now and then giving a low growl.

All of a sudden there was a loud exclamation from the keeper, who called out, "I nearly trod on his tail! the wolf! the wolf! Look out, Mocquet, look out!"

And at that moment something came rushing towards us, and the animal leapt out of the covert, passing between us like a flash of lightning. It was an enormous wolf, nearly white with age. Mocquet turned and sent two bullets after him; I saw them bound and rebound along the snow.

"Shoot, shoot!" he called out to me.

Only then did I bring my gun to the shoulder; I took aim, and fired; the wolf made a movement as if he wanted to bite his

shoulder.

"We have him! we have him!" cried Mocquet, "the lad has hit his mark! Success to the innocent!"

But the wolf ran on, making straight for Moynat and Mildet, the two best shots in the country round.

Both their first shots were fired at him in the open; the second, after he had entered the forest.

The two first bullets were seen to cross one another, and ran along the ground, sending up spurts of snow; the wolf had escaped them both, but he had no doubt been struck down by the others; that the two keepers who had just fired should miss their aim, was an un-heard of thing. I had seen Moynat kill seventeen snipe one after the other; I had seen Mildet cut a squirrel in two as he was jumping from tree to tree.

The keepers went into the forest after the wolf; we looked anxiously towards the spot where they had disappeared. We saw them reappear, dejected, and shaking their heads.

"Well?" cried Mocquet interrogatively.

"Bah!" answered Mildet, with an impatient movement of his arm, "he's at Taille-Fontaine by this time."

"At Taille-Fontaine!" exclaimed Mocquet, completely taken aback. "What! the fools have gone and missed him, then!"

"Well, what of that? you missed him yourself, did you not?"

Mocquet shook his head.

"Well, well, there's some devilry about this," he said. "That I should miss him was surprising, but it was perhaps possible;

but that Moynat should have shot twice and missed him is not possible, no, I say, no."

"Nevertheless, so it is, my good Mocquet."

"Besides, you, you hit him," he said to me.

"I!.. are you sure?"

"We others may well be ashamed to say it. But as sure as my name is Mocquet, you hit the wolf."

"Well, it's easy to find out if I did hit him, there would be blood on the snow. – Come, Mocquet, let us run and see." And suiting the action to the word, I set off running.

"Stop, stop, do not run, whatever you do," cried Mocquet, clenching his teeth and stamping. "We must go quietly, until we know better what we have to deal with."

"Well, we will go quietly, then; but at any rate, let us go!"

Mocquet then began to follow the wolf's track, step by step.

"There's not much fear of losing it," I said.

"It's plain enough."

"Yes, but that's not what I am looking for."

"What are you looking for, then?"

"You will know in a minute or two."

The other huntsmen had now joined us, and as they came along after us, the keeper related to them what had taken place. Meanwhile, Mocquet and I continued to follow the wolf's footprints, which were deeply indented in the snow. At last we came to the spot where he had received my fire.

"There, Mocquet," I said to him, "you see I did miss him after

all!"

"How do you know that you missed him?"

"Because there are no blood marks."

"Look for the mark of your bullet, then, in the snow."

I looked to see which way my bullet would have sped if it had not hit the wolf, and then went in that direction; but I tracked for more than a quarter of a mile to no purpose, so I thought I might as well go back to Mocquet. He beckoned to the keepers to approach, and then turning to me, said: —

"Well, and the bullet?"

"I cannot find it."

"I have been luckier than you, then, for I have found it."

"What, you found it?"

"Right about and come behind me."

I did as I was told, and the huntsmen having come up, Mocquet pointed out a line to them beyond which they were not to pass. The keepers Mildet and Moynat now joined us. "Well?" said Mocquet to them in their turn.

"Missed," they both answered at once.

"I saw you had missed him in the open, but when he had reached covert …?"

"Missed him there too."

"Are you sure?"

"Both the bullets have been found, each of them in the trunk of a tree."

"It is almost past belief," said Vatrin.

"Yes," rejoined Mocquet, "it is almost past belief, but I have something to show you which is even more difficult to believe."

"Show it us, then."

"Look there, what do you see on the snow?"

"The track of a wolf; what of that?"

"And close to the mark of the right foot – there – what do you see?"

"A little hole."

"Well, do you understand?"

The keepers looked at each other in astonishment.

"Do you understand now?" repeated Mocquet.

"The thing's impossible!" exclaimed the keepers.

"Nevertheless it is so, and I will prove it to you."

And so saying, Mocquet plunged his hand into the snow, felt about a moment or two, and then, with a cry of triumph, pulled out a flattened bullet.

"Why, that's my bullet," I said.

"You recognise it, then?"

"Of course I do, you marked it for me."

"And what mark did I put on it?"

"A cross."

"You see, sirs," said Mocquet.

"Yes, but explain how this happened."

"This is it; he could turn aside the ordinary bullets, but he had no power over the youngster's, which was marked with a cross; it hit him in the shoulder, I saw him make a movement as if to

try and bite himself."

"But," I broke in, astonished at the silence and amazement which had fallen on the keepers, "if my bullet hit him in the shoulder, why did it not kill him?"

"Because it was made neither of gold nor of silver, my dear boy; and because no bullets but those that are made of gold or silver can pierce the skin of the devil, or kill those who have made a compact with him."

"But, Mocquet," said the keepers, shuddering, "do you really think …?"

"Think? Yes, I do! I could swear that we have had to do this morning with Thibault, the sabot-maker's wolf."

The huntsman and keepers looked at one another; two or three of them made the sign of the cross; and they all appeared to share Mocquet's opinion, and to know quite well what he meant by Thibault's wolf. I, alone, knew nothing about it, and therefore asked impatiently, "What is this wolf, and who is this Thibault, the sabot-maker?"

Mocquet hesitated before replying, then, "Ah! to be sure!" he exclaimed, "the General told me that I might let you know about it when you were fifteen. You are that age now, are you not?"

"I am sixteen," I replied with some pride.

"Well, then, my dear Monsieur Alexandre, Thibault, the sabot-maker's wolf, is the devil. You were asking me last night for a tale, were you not?"

"Yes."

“Come back home with me this morning, then, and I will tell you a tale, and a fine one too.”

The keepers and huntsmen shook hands with one another in silence and separated, each going his own way; I went back with Mocquet, who then told me the tale which you shall now hear.

Perhaps you will ask me why, having heard it so long ago, I have not told it before. I can only answer you by saying it has remained hidden away in a drawer of my memory, which has remained closed ever since, and which I only opened again three days ago. I would tell you what induced me to do this, but you might, I fear, find the recital somewhat tedious, and as it would take time, I prefer starting at once upon my tale.

I say my tale; I ought perhaps to call it Mocquet’s tale – but, upon my word! when you have been sitting on an egg for thirty-eight years, you may be excused for coming to believe at last that you’ve laid it yourself!

CHAPTER I
THE GRAND MASTER OF HIS HIGHNESS' WOLF HOUNDS

THE Seigneur Jean, Baron of Vez, was a hardy and indefatigable sportsman.

If you follow the beautiful valley which runs between Berval and Longpré, you will see, on your left hand, an old tower, which by reason of its isolated position will appear doubly high and formidable to you.

At the present moment it belongs to an old friend of the writer of this tale, and everyone is now so accustomed to its forbidding aspect, that the peasant passing that way in summer has no more fear of seeking shelter from the heat beneath its walls than the martins with their long black wings and shrill cries, and the swallows with their soft chirrupings, have of building their nests under its eaves.

But at the time we are now speaking of, somewhere about 1780, this lordly dwelling of Vez was looked upon with different eyes, and, it must be confessed, it did not then offer so safe a place of retreat. It was a building of the twelfth or thirteenth century, rugged and gloomy, its terrifying exterior having assumed no kindlier aspect as the years rolled by. True, the sentinel with his measured tread and flashing steel-cap no longer paced its

ramparts, the archer with his shrill-sounding horn no longer kept watch and ward on the battlements; true the postern was no longer guarded by true men at arms, ready at the least signal of danger to lower the portcullis and draw up the bridge; but the solitude alone which surrounded this grim giant of granite was sufficient to inspire the feeling of awe-inspiring majesty awakened by all mute and motionless things.

The lord of this old fortress, however, was by no means so much to be dreaded; those who were more intimately acquainted with him than were the peasants, and could do him more justice, asserted that his bark was worse than his bite, and that he caused more fear than harm – that is, among his fellow Christians. With the animals of the forest it was different, for he was avowedly their mortal and implacable enemy.

He was chief wolf-hunter to his Royal Highness Louis Philippe of Orleans, the fourth of that name, – a post which allowed him to gratify the inordinate passion he had for the chase. Although it was not easy, it was yet possible to bring the Baron to listen to reason in other matters; but as regards the chase, if once he had got a fixed idea in his head, nothing would satisfy him until he had carried it out and had achieved his purpose.

His wife, according to report, was the natural daughter of the Prince, which, in conjunction with his title of chief wolf-hunter, gave him almost absolute power throughout the domains of his illustrious father-in-law, a power which no one dared to contest with him, especially after the re-marriage of his Royal

Highness with Madame de Montesson. This had taken place in 1773, since which date he had almost abandoned his castle at Villers-Cotterets for his delightful residence at Bagnolet, where he entertained all the first wits of the day and amused himself with play-acting.

And so, whether the sun was shining to rejoice the earth, or the rain was saddening it, whether the winter fields lay hidden beneath a shroud of snow, or the spring had spread her fresh green carpet over the meadows, it was rare, on any day of the year, not to see the great gates of the Castle thrown wide open between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, and first the Baron come forth, and immediately after him his chief pricker, Marcotte, followed by the other prickers. Then appeared the dogs, coupled and held in leash by the keepers of the hounds, under the superintendence of Engoulevent, who aspired to become a pricker. Even as the German executioner walks alone, behind the nobles and in front of the citizens, to show that he is the least of the former and the first of the latter, so he walked immediately after the prickers and ahead of the keepers of the hounds, as being the chief of the whippers-in and least of the prickers.

The whole procession filed out of the castle court in full hunting array, with the English horses and the French hounds; twelve horses, and forty dogs.

Before we go any farther, let me say that with these twelve horses and forty dogs the Baron hunted every sort of quarry, but

more especially the wolf, in order no doubt to do honour to his title.

No further proof will be needed by the genuine sportsman of the fine faith he had in the general quality of his hounds, and in their keenness of scent, than the fact that next to the wolf he gave preference to the boar, then to the red deer, then to the fallow-deer, and lastly to the roebuck; finally, if the keepers of the pack failed to sight the animal they had tracked, he uncoupled at random, and went after the first hare that crossed his path. For, as we have already stated, the worthy Baron went out hunting every day, and he would sooner have gone for four-and-twenty hours without food or drink, although he was often thirsty, than have spent that time without seeing his hounds run.

But, as everybody knows, however swift the horses, and however keen the dogs, hunting has its bad times as well as its good.

One day, Marcotte came up to where the Baron was awaiting him, with a crestfallen expression of countenance.

"How now, Marcotte," asked the Baron frowning, "what is the matter this time? I see by your face we are to expect bad sport to-day."

Marcotte shook his head.

"Speak up, man," continued the Baron with a gesture of impatience.

"The matter is, my Lord, that the black wolf is about."

"Ah! ah!" exclaimed the Baron, his eyes sparkling; for you

must know that this made the fifth or sixth time that the worthy Baron had started the animal in question, but never once had he been able to get within gun-shot of him or to run him down.

"Yes," Marcotte went on, "but the damned beast has employed himself so well all night crossing his track and doubling, that after having traced him over half the forest, I found myself at the place from which I started."

"You think then, Marcotte, that there is no chance of getting near him."

"I am afraid not."

"By all the devils in hell!" exclaimed the Lord of Vez, who had not had his equal in swearing since the mighty Nimrod, "however, I am not feeling well to-day, and I must have a burst of some kind, to get rid of these bad humours. What do you think we can hunt, Marcotte, in place of this damned black wolf?"

"Well, having been so taken up with the wolf," answered Marcotte, "I have not traced any other animal. Will my Lord uncouple at random and hunt the first animal that we come across?"

The Baron was about to express his willingness to agree to this proposal when he caught sight of little Engoulevent coming towards them cap in hand.

"Wait a moment," he said, "here comes Engoulevent, who, I fancy, has some advice to give us."

"I have no advice to give to a noble Lord like yourself," replied Engoulevent, assuming an expression of humility on his sly and

crafty face; “it is, however, my duty to inform you that there is a splendid buck in the neighbourhood.”

“Let us see your buck, Engoulevent,” replied the chief wolf-hunter, “and if you are not mistaken about it, there will be a new crown for you.”

“Where is this buck of yours?” asked Marcotte, “but look to your skin, if you make us uncouple to no purpose.”

“Let me have Matador and Jupiter, and then we shall see.” Matador and Jupiter were the finest among the hounds belonging to the Lord of Vez. And indeed, Engoulevent had not gone a hundred paces with them through the thicket, before, by the lashing of their tails, and their repeated yelping, he knew that they were on the right scent. In another minute or two a magnificent ten-tined stag came into view. Marcotte cried Tally-ho, sounded his horn, and the hunt began, to the great satisfaction of the Lord of Vez, who, although regretting the black wolf, was willing to make the best of a fine buck in its stead. The hunt had lasted two hours, and the quarry still held on. It had first led its pursuers from the little wood of Haramont to the Chemin du Pendu, and thence straight to the back of Oigny, and it still showed no sign of fatigue; for it was not one of those poor animals of the flat country who get their tails pulled by every wretched terrier.

As it neared the low grounds of Bourg-fontaine, however, it evidently decided that it was being run rather hard, for it gave up the bolder measures which had hitherto enabled it to keep ahead,

and began to double.

Its first manœuvre was to go down to the brook which joins the ponds of Baisemont and Bourg, then to walk against stream with the water up to its haunches, for nearly half a mile; it then sprang on to the right bank, back again into the bed of the stream, made another leap to the left, and with a succession of bounds, as vigorous as its failing strength allowed, continued to out-distance its pursuers. But the dogs of my lord Baron were not animals to be put out by such trifles as these. Being both sagacious and well-bred, they, of their own accord, divided the task between themselves, half going up stream, and half down, these hunting on the right those on the left, and so effectually that they ere long put the animal off its changes, for they soon recovered the scent, rallying at the first cry given by one of the pack, and starting afresh on the chase, as ready and eager as if the deer had been only twenty paces in front of them.

And so with galloping of horses, with cry of hounds and blare of horn, the Baron and his huntsmen reached the ponds of Saint Antoine, a hundred paces or so from the Confines of Oigny. Between these and the Osier-beds stood the hut of Thibault, the sabot-maker.

We must pause to give some description of this Thibault, the shoe-maker, the real hero of the tale.

You will ask why I, who have summoned kings to appear upon the stage, who have obliged princes, dukes, and barons to play secondary parts in my romances, should take a simple shoe-

maker for the hero of this tale.

First, I will reply by saying that, in my dear home country of Villers-Cotterets, there are more sabot-makers than barons, dukes and princes, and that, as soon as I decided to make the forest the scene of the events I am about to record, I was obliged to choose one of the actual inhabitants of this forest as hero, unless I had wished to represent such fantastic persons as the *Incas* of Marmontel or the *Abencerrages* of M. de Florian.

More than that, it is not the author who decides on the subject, but the subject which takes possession of the author, and, good or bad, this particular subject has taken possession of me. I will therefore endeavour to draw Thibault's portrait for you, plain shoe-maker as he was, as exactly as the artist paints the portrait which a prince desires to send to his lady-love.

Thibault was a man between twenty-five and twenty-seven years of age, tall, well made, physically robust, but by nature melancholy and sad of heart. This depression of spirits arose from a little grain of envy, which, in spite of himself, perhaps unconsciously to himself, he harboured towards all such of his neighbours as had been more favoured by fortune than himself.

His father had committed a fault, a serious one at all times, but more especially in those days of absolutism, when a man was not able to rise above his station as now-a-days, when with sufficient capacity he may attain to any rank. Thibault had been educated above his position; he had been at school under the Abbé Fortier, at Villers-Cotterets, and had learnt to read, write,

and cypher; moreover he knew a little Latin, which made him inordinately proud of himself. Thibault had spent a great part of his time in reading, and his books had been chiefly those which were in vogue at the close of the preceding century. But he had not been a sufficiently clever analyst to know how to separate the good from the bad, or rather he *had* separated what was bad, and swallowed it in large doses, leaving the good to precipitate itself at the bottom of the glass.

At twenty years of age Thibault had certainly had dreams of being something other than a sabot-maker. He had, for instance, for a very little while, cast his eyes towards the army. But his comrades who had worn the double livery of king and country, had left the service as they entered it, mere soldiers of the ranks, having failed during five or six years of slavery to obtain promotion, even to the not very exalted grade of corporal.

Thibault had also thought of becoming a sailor. But a career in the navy was as much forbidden to the plebeian as one in the army. Possibly after enduring danger, and storm and battle for fifteen or twenty years, he might be made a boatswain's mate, that was all, and then! besides, it was by no means Thibault's ambition to wear a short vest and sail-cloth trousers, but the blue uniform of the king with red vest and gold epaulettes. He had moreover known of no single case in which the son of a mere shoe-maker had become Master of a Frigate, or even Lieutenant. So he was forced to give up all idea of joining the King's Navy.

Thibault would not have minded being a Notary, and at one

time thought of apprenticing himself to the Royal Scrivener, Maître Niquet, as a stepping-stone, and of making his way up on the strength of his own legs and with the help of his pen. But supposing him to have risen to the position of head clerk with a salary of a hundred crowns, where was he to find the thirty thousand francs which would be required for the purchase of the smallest village practice.

There was, therefore, no better chance of his becoming a scrivener than of becoming an officer on sea or land. Meanwhile, Thibault's father died, leaving very little ready money. There was about enough to bury him, so he was buried, and this done, there remained some thirty or forty francs over for Thibault.

Thibault knew his trade well; indeed, he was a first-rate workman; but he had no inclination to handle either auger or parer. It ended, therefore, by his leaving all his father's tools in the care of a friend, a remnant of prudence still remaining to him, and selling every vestige of furniture; having thus realised a sum of five hundred and forty livres, he determined to make what was then called the tour of France.

Thibault spent three years in travelling; he did not make his fortune during that time, but he learnt a great many things in the course of his journey of which he was previously ignorant, and acquired certain accomplishments which he had previously been without.

He learned amongst other things that, although it was as well to keep one's word on matters of business with a man, it was no

use whatever keeping love vows made to a woman.

So much for his character and habits of mind. As to his external accomplishments, he could dance a jig beautifully, could hold his own at quarter-staff against four men, and could handle the boar-spear as cleverly as the best huntsman going. All these things had not a little served to increase Thibault's natural self-esteem, and, seeing himself handsomer, stronger, and cleverer than many of the nobles, he would exclaim against Providence, crying, "Why was I not nobly born? why was not that nobleman yonder born a peasant?"

But as Providence took care not to make any answer to these apostrophés, and as Thibault found that dancing, playing at quarter-staff, and throwing the boar-spear only fatigued the body, without procuring him any material advantage, he began to turn his thoughts towards his ancient trade, humble though it was, saying to himself, if it enabled the father to live, it would also enable the son. So Thibault went and fetched away his tools; and then, tools in hand, he went to ask permission of the Steward of his Royal Highness Louis Philippe of Orleans, to build a hut in the forest, in which to carry on his trade. He had no difficulty in obtaining this, for the steward knew by experience that his master was a very kind-hearted man, expending as much as two hundred and forty thousand francs a year on the poor; he felt sure, therefore, that one who gave away a sum like this, would be willing to let an honest workman who wished to ply his trade, have thirty or forty feet of ground.

As he had leave to establish himself in whatever part of the forest he liked best, Thibault chose the spot near the osier-beds, where the roads crossed, one of the most beautiful parts of the woods, less than a mile from Oigny and about three times that distance from Villers-Cotterets. The shoe-maker put up his work-shop, built partly of old planks given him by M. Panisis, who had been having a sale in the neighbourhood, and partly of the branches which the steward gave him leave to cut in the forest.

When the building of the hut, which consisted of a bedroom, cosily shut in, where he could work during the winter, and of a lean-to, open to the air, where he could work in the summer, was completed, Thibault began to think of making himself a bed. At first, a layer of fern had to serve for this purpose; but after he had made a hundred pairs of wooden shoes and had sold these to Bedeau, who kept a general shop at Villers-Cotterets, he was able to pay a sufficient deposit to get a mattress, to be paid for in full by the end of three months. The framework of the bed was not difficult to make; Thibault was not the shoe-maker he was without being a bit of a carpenter into the bargain, and when this was finished he plaited osiers to take the place of sacking, laid the mattress upon them, and found himself at last with a bed to lie upon.

Little by little came the sheets, and then in their turn the coverlids; the next purchase was a chafing-dish, and earthenware pots to cook in, and finally some plates and dishes. Before the year was out Thibault had also made additions to his furniture

of a fine oak chest and a fine walnut-wood cupboard, both, like the bed, his own handiwork. All the while he was driving a brisk trade, for none could beat Thibault in turning a block of beech into a pair of shoes, and in converting the odd chips into spoons, salt-cellars and natty little bowls.

He had now been settled in his work-shop for three years, that is, ever since his return after the completion of his tour round France, and there was nothing for which anyone could have reproached him during this interval except the failing we have already mentioned – that he was rather more envious of the good fortune of his neighbour than was altogether conducive to the welfare of his soul. But this feeling was as yet so inoffensive, that his confessor had no need to do more than awaken in him a sense of shame for harbouring thoughts which had, so far, not resulted in any active crime.

CHAPTER II
THE SEIGNEUR JEAN AND THE SABOT-MAKER

AS already said, the buck began to dodge and double on reaching Oigny, turning and twisting round Thibault's hut, and the weather being fine although the autumn was well advanced, the shoe-maker was sitting at his work in his open lean-to. Looking up, he suddenly espied the trembling animal, quivering in every limb, standing a few paces in front of him, gazing at him with intelligent and terrified eyes.

Thibault had been for a long time aware that the hunt was circling around Oigny, at one time drawing near to the village, and then receding, only to draw near again.

There was nothing therefore very surprising to him in the sight of the buck, yet he stayed his hand, although he was busy at work, and contemplated the animal.

"Saint Sabot!" he exclaimed – I should explain, that the festival of Saint Sabot is the wooden-shoe fête – "Saint Sabot! but that is a dainty morsel and would taste as fine, I warrant, as the chamois I ate at Vienne once at the grand banquet of the Jolly Shoe-makers of Dauphiné. Lucky folk who can dine on the like every day. I tasted such once, it is now nearly four years ago, and my mouth waters now when I think of it. Oh! these lords!

these lords! with their fresh meats and their old wines at every meal, while I have to be satisfied with potatoes to eat and water to drink from one week's end to the other; and it is a chance if even on Sunday, I can feast myself with a lump of rusty bacon and an old cabbage, and a glass of *pignolet* fit to make my old goat stand on her head."

It need scarcely be said, that as soon as Thibault began this monologue, the buck had turned and disappeared. Thibault had finished rounding his periods, and had just declaimed his peroration, when he heard himself roughly accosted in forcible terms:

"Ho, there, you scoundrel! answer me."

It was the Baron, who seeing his dogs wavering, was anxious to make sure that they were not on the wrong scent.

"Ho, there, you scoundrel!" repeated the wolf-hunter, "have you seen the beast?"

There was evidently something in the manner of the Baron's questioning which did not please our philosophical shoe-maker, for although he was perfectly aware what was the matter, he answered: "what beast?"

"Curse you! why, the buck we are hunting! He must have passed close by here, and standing gaping as you do, you must have seen him. It was a fine stag of ten, was it not? Which way did he go? Speak up, you blackguard, or you shall have a taste of my stirrup-leather!"

"The black plague take him, cub of a wolf!" muttered the

shoe-maker to himself.

Then, aloud, with a fine air of pretended simplicity, "Ah, yes!" he said, "I did see him."

"A buck, was it not? a ten-tiner, eh? with great horns."

"Ah, yes to be sure, a buck, with great horns, – or great corns, was it? yes, I saw him as plain as I see you, my Lord. But there, I can't say if he had any corns, for I did not look at his feet, anyhow," he added, with the air of a perfect simpleton, "if he had corns, they did not prevent him running."

At any other time the Baron would have laughed at what he might have taken for genuine stupidity; but the doublings of the animal were beginning to put him into a regular huntsman's fever.

"Now, then, you scoundrel, a truce to this jesting! If you are in a humour for jokes, it is more than I am!"

"I will be in whatever humour it may please your Lordship I should be."

"Well, then, answer me."

"Your Lordship has asked me nothing as yet."

"Did the deer seem tired?"

"Not very."

"Which way did he come?"

"He did not come, he was standing still."

"Well, but he must have come from one side or the other."

"Ah! very likely, but I did not see him come."

"Which way did he go?"

"I would tell you directly; only I did not see him go."

The Lord of Vez cast an angry look at Thibault.

"Is it some while ago the buck passed this way, Master Simpleton?"

"Not so very long, my Lord."

"About how long ago?"

Thibault made as if trying to remember; at last he replied:

"It was, I think, the day before yesterday," but in saying this, the shoe-maker, unfortunately, could not suppress a grin. This grin did not escape the Baron, who, spurring his horse, rode down on Thibault with lifted whip.

Thibault was agile, and with a single bound he reached the shelter of his lean-to, whither the wolf-hunter could not follow, as long as he remained mounted; Thibault was therefore in momentary safety.

"You are only bantering and lying!" cried the huntsman, "for there is Marcassino, my best hound, giving cry not twenty yards off, and if the deer passed by where Marcassino is, he must have come over the hedge, and it is impossible, therefore, that you did not see him."

"Pardon, my Lord, but according to our good priest, no one but the Pope is infallible, and Monsieur Marcassino may be mistaken."

"Marcassino is never mistaken, do you hear, you rascal! and in proof of it I can see from here the marks where the animal scratched up the ground."

"Nevertheless, my Lord, I assure you, I swear…" said

Thibault, who saw the Baron's eyebrows contracting in a way that made him feel uneasy.

"Silence, and come here, blackguard!" cried my lord.

Thibault hesitated a moment, but the black look on the sportsman's face became more and more threatening, and fearing to increase his exasperation by disobeying his command, he thought he had better go forward, hoping that the Baron merely wished to ask a service of him.

But it was an unlucky move on his part, for scarcely had he emerged from the protection of the shed, before the horse of the Lord of Vez, urged by bit and spur, gave a leap, which brought his rider swooping down upon Thibault, while at the same moment a furious blow from the butt end of the Baron's whip fell upon his head.

The shoe-maker, stunned by the blow, tottered a moment, lost his balance and was about to fall face downwards, when the Baron, drawing his foot out of the stirrup, with a violent kick in the chest, not only straightened him again, but sent the poor wretch flying in an opposite direction, where he fell with his back against the door of his hut.

"Take that!" said the Baron, as he first felled Thibault with his whip, and then kicked him, "take that for your lie, and that for your banter!"

And then, without troubling himself any further about the man, whom he left lying on his back, the Lord of Vez, seeing that the hounds had rallied on hearing Marcassino's cry, gave them a

cheery note on his horn, and cantered away.

Thibault lifted himself up, feeling bruised all over, and began feeling himself from head to foot to make sure that no bones were broken.

Having carefully passed his hand over each limb in succession, "that's all right," he said, "there is nothing broken either above or below, I am glad to find. So, my Lord Baron, that is how you treat people, because you happen to have married a Prince's bastard daughter! But let me tell you, my fine fellow, it is not you who will eat the buck you are hunting to-day; it will be this blackguard, this scoundrel, this simpleton of a Thibault who will eat it. Yes, it shall be I who eat it, that I vow!" cried Thibault, confirming himself more and more in his bold resolution, and it is no use being a man if having once made a vow, one fails to keep it.

So without further delay, Thibault thrust his bill-hook into his belt, seized his boar-spear, and after listening for a moment to the cry of the hounds to ascertain in which direction the hunt had gone, he ran off with all the speed of which a man's legs are capable to get the start of them, guessing by the curve which the stag and its pursuers were following what would be the straight line to take so as to intercept them.

There were two ways of doing his deed open to Thibault; either to hide himself beside the path which the buck must take and kill him with his boar-spear, or else to surprise the animal just as he was being hunted down by the dogs, and collar him there and then.

And as he ran, the desire to revenge himself on the Baron for the latter's brutality, was not so uppermost in Thibault's mind as the thoughts of the sumptuous manner in which he would fare for the next month, on the shoulders, the back, and the haunches of the deer, either salted to a turn, roasted on the spit, or cut in slices and done in the pan. And these two ideas, moreover, of vengeance and gluttony, were so jumbled up in his brain, that while still running at the top of his speed he laughed in his sleeve, as he pictured the dejected mien of the Baron and his men returning to the castle after their fruitless day's hunt, and at the same time saw himself seated at table, the door securely fastened, and a pint of wine beside him, tête-à-tête with a haunch of the deer, the rich and delicious gravy escaping as the knife returned for a third or fourth cut.

The deer, as far as Thibault could calculate, was making for the bridge which crosses the Ourcq, between Noroy and Troesne. At the time of which we are now speaking there was a bridge spanning the river, formed of two joists and a few planks. As the river was very high and very rapid, Thibault decided that the deer would not attempt to ford it; so he hid himself behind a rock, within reach of the bridge, and waited.

It was not long before he saw the graceful head of the deer appear above the rock at some ten paces' distance; the animal was bending its ears to the wind, in the endeavour to catch the sound of the enemy's approach as it was borne along the breeze. Thibault, excited by this sudden appearance, rose from behind

the rock, poised his boar-spear and sent it flying towards the animal.

The buck, with a single bound, reached the middle of the bridge, a second carried him on to the opposite bank, and a third bore him out of sight.

The boar-spear had passed within a foot of the animal, and had buried itself in the grass fifteen paces from where Thibault was standing. Never before had he been known to make such an unskilful throw; he, Thibault, of all the company who made the tour of France, the one known to be surest of his aim! Enraged with himself, therefore, he picked up his weapon, and bounded across the bridge with an agility equal to that of the deer.

Thibault knew the country quite as well as the animal he was pursuing, and so got ahead of the deer and once more concealed himself, this time behind a beech-tree, half-way up, and not too far from a little footpath.

The deer now passed so close to him, that Thibault hesitated as to whether it would not be better to knock the animal down with his boar-spear than to throw the weapon at it; but his hesitation did not last longer than a flash of lightning, for no lightning could be quicker than the animal itself, which was already twenty paces off when Thibault threw his boar-spear, but without better luck than the time before.

And now the baying of the hounds was drawing nearer and nearer; another few minutes, and it would, he felt, be impossible for him to carry out his design. But in honour to his spirit

of persistence, be it said, that in proportion as the difficulty increased, the greater became Thibault's desire to get possession of the deer.

"I must have it, come what will," he cried, "I must! and if there is a God who cares for the poor, I shall have satisfaction of this confounded Baron, who beat me as if I were a dog, but I am a man notwithstanding, and I am quite ready to prove the same to him." And Thibault picked up his boar-spear and once more set off running. But it would appear that the good God whom he had just invoked, either had not heard him, or wished to drive him to extremities, for his third attempt had no greater success than the previous ones.

"By Heaven!" exclaimed Thibault, "God Almighty is assuredly deaf, it seems Let the Devil then open his ears and hear me! In the name of God or of the Devil, I want you and I will have you, cursed animal!"

Thibault had hardly finished this double blasphemy when the buck, doubling back, passed close to him for the fourth time, and disappeared among the bushes, but so quickly and unexpectedly, that Thibault had not even time to lift his boar-spear.

At that moment he heard the dogs so near him, that he deemed it would be imprudent to continue his pursuit. He looked round him, saw a thickly-leaved oak tree, threw his boar-spear into a bush, swarmed up the trunk, and hid himself among the foliage. He imagined, and with good reason, that since the deer had gone ahead again, the hunt would only pass by following on its track.

The dogs had not lost the scent, in spite of the quarry's doublings, and they were not likely to lose it now. Thibault had not been seated among the branches for above five minutes, when first the hounds came into sight, then the Baron, who in spite of his fifty-five years, headed the chase as if he had been a man of twenty. It must be added that the Lord of Vez was in a state of rage that we will not even endeavour to describe.

To lose four hours over a wretched deer and still to be running behind it! Such a thing had never happened to him before.

He stormed at his men, he whipped his dogs, and had so ploughed his horse's sides with his spurs, that the thick coating of mud which covered his gaiters was reddened with blood.

On reaching the bridge over the Ourcq, however, there had been an interval of alleviation for the Baron, for the hounds had so unanimously taken up the scent, that the cloak which the wolf-hunter carried behind him would have sufficed to cover the whole pack as they crossed the bridge.

Indeed the Baron was so pleased, that he was not satisfied with humming a tirra-la, but, unslinging his hunting-horn he sounded it with his full lung-power, a thing which he only did on great occasions.

But, unfortunately, the joy of my Lord of Vez was destined to be short lived.

All of a sudden, just as the hounds, that were crying in concert in a way which more and more delighted the Baron's ears, were passing under the tree where Thibault was perched, the whole

pack came to a standstill, and every tongue was silenced as by enchantment. Marcotte, at his master's command, dismounted to see if he could find any traces of the deer, the whippers-in ran up, and they and Marcotte looked about, but they could find nothing.

Then Engoulevent, who had set his heart on a view-halloo being sounded for the animal he had tracked down, joined the others, and he too began to search. Everyone was searching, calling out and trying to rouse the dogs, when above all the other voices, was heard, like the blast of a tempest, the voice of the Baron.

"Ten thousand devils!" he thundered.

"Have the dogs fallen into a pit-hole, Marcotte?"

"No, my Lord, they are here, but they are come to a check."

"How! come to a standstill!" exclaimed the Baron.

"What is to be done, my Lord? I cannot understand what has happened, but such is the fact."

"Come to a check!" again exclaimed the Baron, "come to a standstill, here, in the middle of the forest, here where there is no stream where the animal could have doubled, or rock for it to climb. You must be out of your mind, Marcotte!"

"I, out of my mind, my Lord?"

"Yes, you, you fool, as truly as your dogs are all worthless trash!"

As a rule, Marcotte bore with admirable patience the insults which the Baron was in the habit of lavishing upon everybody about him at critical moments of the chase, but this word *trash*,

applied to his dogs, was more than his habitual long-suffering could bear, and drawing himself up to his full height, he answered vehemently, "Trash, my Lord? my dogs worthless trash! dogs that have brought down an old wolf after such a furious run that the best horse in your stable was foundered! my dogs trash!"

"Yes, trash, worthless trash, I say it again, Marcotte. Only trash would stop at a check like that, after hunting one wretched buck so many hours on end."

"My Lord," answered Marcotte, in a tone of mingled dignity and sorrow, "My Lord, say that it is my fault, call me a fool, a blockhead, a scoundrel, a blackguard, an idiot; insult me in my own person, or in that of my wife, of my children, and it is nothing to me; but for the sake of all my past services to you, do not attack me in my office of chief pricker, do not insult your dogs."

"How do you account for their silence, then? tell me that! How do you account for it? I am quite willing to hear what you have to say, and I am listening."

"I cannot explain it any more than you can, my Lord; the damned animal must have flown into the clouds or disappeared in the bowels of the earth."

"What nonsense are you talking!" exclaimed the Baron – "do you want to make out that the deer has burrowed like a rabbit, or risen from the ground like a grouse?"

"My Lord, I meant it only as a manner of speech. What is a truth, what is the fact, is that there is some witchcraft behind

all this. As sure as it is now daylight, my dogs, every one of them, lay down at the same moment, suddenly, without an instant hesitation. Ask anybody who was near them at the time. And now they are not even trying to recover the scent, but there they lie flat on the ground like so many stags in their lair. I ask you, is it natural?"

"Thrash them, man! thrash them, then," cried the Baron, "flay the skin off their backs; there is nothing like it for driving out the evil spirit."

And the Baron was going forward to emphasise with a few blows from his own whip the exorcisms which Marcotte, according to his orders, was distributing among the poor beasts, when Engoulevent, hat in hand, drew near to the Baron and timidly laid his hand on the horse's bridle.

"My Lord," said the keeper of the kennel, "I think I have just discovered a cuckoo in that tree who may perhaps be able to give us some explanation of what has happened."

"What the devil are you talking about, with your cuckoo, you ape?" said the Baron.

"If you wait a moment, you scamp, I will teach you how to come chaffing your master like that!"

And the Baron lifted his whip. But with all the heroism of a Spartan, Engoulevent lifted his arm above his head as a shield and continued:

"Strike, if you will, my Lord, but after that look up into this tree, and when your Lordship has seen the bird that is perched

among the branches, I think you will be more ready to give me a crown than a blow."

And the good man pointed to the oak tree in which Thibault had taken refuge on hearing the huntsmen approach. He had climbed up from branch to branch and had finally hoisted himself on to the topmost one.

The Baron shaded his eyes with his hand, and, looking up, caught sight of Thibault.

"Well, here's something mighty queer!" he cried, "It seems that in the forest of Villers-Cotterets the deer burrow like foxes, and men perch on trees like crows. However," continued the worthy Baron, "we will see what sort of creature we have to deal with." And putting his hand to his mouth, he halloed:

"Ho, there, my friend! would it be particularly disagreeable for you to give me ten minutes' conversation?"

But Thibault maintained the most profound silence.

"My Lord" said Engoulevent "if you like …" and he made a sign to show that he was ready to climb the tree.

"No, no," said the Baron, at the same time putting out his hand to hold him back.

"Ho, there, my friend!" repeated the Baron still without recognising Thibault, "will it please you to answer me, yes or no."

He paused a second.

"I see, it is evidently, no; you pretend to be deaf, my friend; wait a moment, and I will get my speaking-trumpet," and he held out his hand to Marcotte, who, guessing his intention, handed

him his gun.

Thibault, who wished to put the huntsmen on the wrong scent, was meanwhile pretending to cut away the dead branches, and he put so much energy into this feigned occupation that he did not perceive the movement on the part of the Baron, or, if he saw, only took it as a menace, without attaching the importance to it which it merited.

The wolf-hunter waited for a little while to see if the answer would come, but as it did not, he pulled the trigger; the gun went off, and a branch was heard to crack.

The branch which cracked was the one on which Thibault was poised; the Baron was a fine shot and had broken it just between the trunk and the shoe-maker's foot.

Deprived of his support, Thibault fell, rolling from branch to banch. Fortunately the tree was thick, and the branches strong, so that his fall was broken and less rapid than it might have been, and he finally reached the ground, after many rebounds, without further ill consequences than a feeling of great fear and a few slight bruises on that part of his body which had first come in contact with the earth.

"By Beelzebub's horns!" exclaimed the Baron, delighted with his own skill, "if it is not my joker of the morning! Ah! so, you scamp! did the discourse you had with my whip seem too short to you, that you are so anxious to take it up again where we left off?"

"Oh, as to that, I assure you it is not so, my Lord," answered

Thibault in a tone of the most perfect sincerity.

"So much the better for your skin, my good fellow. Well, and now tell me what you were doing up there, perched on the top of that oak-tree?"

"My Lord can see himself," answered Thibault, pointing to a few dry twigs lying here and there on the ground, "I was cutting a little dry wood for fuel."

"Ah! I see. Now then, my good fellow, you will please tell us, without any beating about the bush, what has become of our deer."

"By the devil, he ought to know, seeing that he has been perched up there so as not to lose any of its movements," put in Marcotte.

"But I swear, my Lord," said Thibault, "that I don't know what it is you mean about this wretched buck."

"Ah, I thought so," cried Marcotte, delighted to divert his master's ill-humour from himself, "he has not seen it, he has not seen the animal at all, he does not know what we mean by this wretched buck! But look here, my Lord, see, the marks on these leaves where the animal has bitten; it was just here that the dogs came to a full stop, and now, although the ground is good to shew every mark, we can find no trace of the animal, for ten, twenty, or a hundred paces even?"

"You hear?" said the Baron, joining his words on to those of the pricker, "you were up there, and the deer here at your feet. It did not go by like a mouse without making any sound, and you

did not see or hear. You must needs have seen or heard it!"

"He has killed the deer," said Marcotte "and hidden it away in a bush, that's as clear as the day."

"Oh, my Lord," cried Thibault, who knew better than anybody else how mistaken the pricker was in making this accusation, "My Lord, by all the saints in paradise, I swear to you that I have not killed your deer; I swear it to you on the salvation of my soul, and, may I perish on the spot if I have given him even the slightest scratch. And besides, I could not have killed him without wounding him, and if I had wounded him, blood would have flowed; look, I pray you, sir," continued Thibault turning to the pricker "and God be thanked, you will find no trace of blood. I, kill a poor beast! and, my God, with what? Where is my weapon? God knows I have no other weapon than this bill-hook. Look yourself, my Lord."

But unfortunately for Thibault, he had hardly uttered these words, before Maître Engoulevent, who had been prowling about for some minutes past, re-appeared, carrying the boar-spear which Thibault had thrown into one of the bushes before climbing up the tree.

He handed the weapon to the Baron.

There was no doubt about it – Engoulevent was Thibault's evil genius.

CHAPTER III
AGNELETTE

THE Baron took the weapon which Engoulevent handed him, and carefully and deliberately examined the boar-spear from point to handle, without saying a word. On the handle had been carved a little wooden shoe, which had served as Thibault's device while making the tour of France, as thereby he was able to recognise his own weapon. The Baron now pointed to this, saying to Thibault as he did so:

"Ah, ah, Master Simpleton! there is something which witnesses terribly against you! I must confess this boar-spear smells to me uncommonly of venison, by the devil it does! However, all I have now to say to you is this: You have been poaching, which is a serious crime; you have perjured yourself, which is a great sin; I am going to enforce expiation from you for the one and for the other, to help towards the salvation of that soul by which you have sworn."

Whereupon turning to the pricker, he continued: "Marcotte, strip off that rascal's vest and shirt, and tie him up to a tree with a couple of the dog leashes – and then give him thirty-six strokes across the back with your shoulder belt, a dozen for his perjury, and two dozen for his poaching; no, I make a mistake, a dozen for poaching and two dozen for perjuring himself, God's portion

must be the largest."

This order caused great rejoicing among the menials, who thought it good luck to have a culprit on whom they could avenge themselves for the mishaps of the day.

In spite of Thibault's protestations, who swore by all the saints in the calender, that he had killed neither buck, nor doe, neither goat nor kidling, he was divested of his garments and firmly strapped to the trunk of a tree; then the execution commenced.

The pricker's strokes were so heavy that Thibault, who had sworn not to utter a sound, and bit his lips to enable himself to keep his resolution, was forced at the third blow to open his mouth and cry out.

The Baron, as we have already seen, was about the roughest man of his class for a good thirty miles round, but he was not hard-hearted, and it was a distress to him to listen to the cries of the culprit as they became more and more frequent. As, however, the poachers on His Highness's estate had of late grown bolder and more troublesome, he decided that he had better let the sentence be carried out to the full, but he turned his horse with the intention of riding away, determined no longer to remain as a spectator.

As he was on the point of doing this, a young girl suddenly emerged from the underwood, threw herself on her knees beside the horse, and lifting her large, beautiful eyes, all wet with tears, to the Baron, cried:

"In the name of the God of mercy, my Lord, have pity on that

man!"

The Lord of Vez looked down at the young girl. She was indeed a lovely child; hardly sixteen years of age, of a slender and exquisite figure, with a pink and white complexion, large blue eyes, soft and tender in expression, and a crown of fair hair, which fell in luxuriant waves over neck and shoulders, escaping from underneath the shabby little grey linen cap, which endeavoured in vain to imprison them.

All this the Baron took in with a glance, in spite of the humble clothing of the beautiful suppliant, and as he had no dislike to a pretty face, he smiled down on the charming young peasant girl, in response to the pleading of her eloquent eyes.

But, as he looked without speaking, and all the while the blows were still falling, she cried again, with a voice and gesture of even more earnest supplication.

"Have pity, in the name of Heaven, my Lord! Tell your servants to let the poor man go, his cries pierce my heart."

"Ten thousand fiends!" cried the Grand Master; "you take a great interest in that rascal over there, my pretty child. Is he your brother?"

"No, my Lord."

"Your cousin?"

"No, my Lord."

"Your lover?"

"My lover! My Lord is laughing at me."

"Why not? If it were so, my sweet girl, I must confess I should

envy him his lot."

The girl lowered her eyes.

"I do not know him, my Lord, and have never seen him before to-day."

"Without counting that now she only sees him wrong side before," Engoulevent ventured to put in, thinking that it was a suitable moment for a little pleasantry.

"Silence, sirrah!" said the Baron sternly. Then, once more turning to the girl with a smile.

"Really!" he said. "Well, if he is neither a relation nor a lover, I should like to see how far your love for your neighbour will let you go. Come, a bargain, pretty girl!"

"How, my Lord?"

"Grace for that scoundrel in return for a kiss."

"Oh! with all my heart!" cried the young girl. "Save the life of a man with a kiss! I am sure that our good *Curé* himself would say there was no sin in that."

And without waiting for the Baron to stoop and take himself what he had asked for, she threw off her wooden-shoe, placed her dainty little foot on the tip of the wolf-hunter's boot, and taking hold of the horse's mane, lifted herself up with a spring to the level of the face of the hardy huntsman, and there of her own accord offered him her round cheek, fresh, and velvety as the down of an August peach.

The Lord of Vez had bargained for one kiss, but he took two; then, true to his sworn word, he made a sign to Marcotte to stay

the execution.

Marcotte was religiously counting his strokes; the twelfth was about to descend when he received the order to stop, and he did not think it expedient to stay it from falling. It is possible that he also thought it would be as well to give it the weight of two ordinary blows, so as to make up good measure and give a thirteenth in; however that may be, it is certain that it furrowed Thibault's shoulders more cruelly than those that went before. It must be added, however, that he was unbound immediately after.

Meanwhile the Baron was conversing with the young girl.

"What is your name, my pretty one?"

"Georgine Agnelette, my Lord, my mother's name! but the country people are content to call me simply Agnelette."

"Ah, that's an unlucky name, my child," said the Baron.

"In what way my Lord?" asked the girl.

"Because it makes you a prey for the wolf, my beauty. And from what part of the country do you come, Agnelette?"

"From Préciamont, my Lord."

"And you come alone like this into the forest, my child? that's brave for a lambkin."

"I am obliged to do it, my Lord, for my mother and I have three goats to feed."

"So you come here to get grass for them?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"And you are not afraid, young and pretty as you are?"

"Sometimes, my Lord, I cannot help trembling."

"And why do you tremble?"

"Well, my Lord, I hear so many tales, during the winter evenings, about were-wolves, that when I find myself all alone among the trees, and can hear no sound but the west wind, and the branches creaking as it blows through them, I feel a kind of shiver run through me, and my hair seems to stand on end; but when I hear your hunting horn and the dogs crying, then I feel at once quite safe again."

The Baron was pleased beyond measure with this reply of the girl's, and stroking his beard complaisantly, he said:

"Well, we give Master Wolf a pretty rough time of it; but, there is a way, my pretty one, whereby you may spare yourself all these fears and tremblings."

"And how, my Lord?"

"Come in future to the Castle of Vez; no were-wolf, or any other kind of wolf, has ever crossed the moat there, except when slung by a cord on to a hazel-pole."

Agnelette shook her head.

"You would not like to come? and why not?"

"Because I should find something worse there than the wolf."

On hearing this, the Baron broke into a hearty fit of laughter, and, seeing their Master laugh, all the huntsmen followed suit and joined in the chorus. The fact was, that the sight of Agnelette had entirely restored the good humour of the Lord of Vez, and he would, no doubt, have continued for some time laughing and talking with Agnelette, if Marcotte, who had been recalling the

dogs, and coupling them, had not respectfully reminded my Lord that they had some distance to go on their way back to the Castle. The Baron made a playful gesture of menace with his finger to the girl, and rode off followed by his train.

Agnelette was left alone with Thibault. We have related what Agnelette had done for Thibault's sake, and also said that she was pretty.

Nevertheless, for all that, Thibault's first thoughts on finding himself alone with the girl, were not for the one who had saved his life, but were given up to hatred and the contemplation of vengeance.

Thibault, as you see, had, since the morning, been making rapid strides along the path of evil.

"Ah! if the devil will but hear my prayer this time," he cried, as he shook his fist, cursing the while, after the retiring huntsmen, who were just out of view, "if the devil will but hear me, you shall be paid back with usury for all you have made me suffer this day, that I swear."

"Oh, how wicked it is of you to behave like that!" said Agnelette, going up to him.

"The Baron is a kind Lord, very good to the poor, and always gently behaved with women."

"Quite so, and you shall see with what gratitude I will repay him for the blows he has given me."

"Come now, frankly, friend, confess that you deserved those blows," said the girl, laughing.

"So, so!" answered Thibault, "the Baron's kiss has turned your head, has it, my pretty Agnelette?"

"You, I should have thought, would have been the last person to reproach me with that kiss, Monsieur Thibault. But what I have said, I say again; my Lord Baron was within his rights."

"What, in belabouring me with blows!"

"Well, why do you go hunting on the estates of these great lords?"

"Does not the game belong to everybody, to the peasant just as much as to the great lords?"

"No, certainly not; the game is in their woods, it is fed on their grass, and you have no right to throw your boar-spear at a buck which belongs to my lord the Duke of Orleans."

"And who told you that I threw a boar-spear at his buck?" replied Thibault, advancing towards Agnelette in an almost threatening manner.

"Who told me? why, my own eyes, which, let me tell you, do not lie. Yes, I saw you throw your boar-spear, when you were hidden there, behind the beech-tree."

Thibault's anger subsided at once before the straightforward attitude of the girl, whose truthfulness was in such contrast to his falsehood.

"Well, after all," he said, "supposing a poor devil does once in a way help himself to a good dinner from the super-abundance of some great lord! Are you of the same mind, Mademoiselle Agnelette, as the judges who say that a man ought to be hanged

just for a wretched rabbit? Come now, do you think God created that buck for the Baron more than for me?"

"God, Monsieur Thibault, has told us not to covet other men's goods; obey the law of God, and you will not find yourself any the worse off for it!"

"Ah, I see, my pretty Agnelette, you know me then, since you call me so glibly by my name?"

"Certainly I do; I remember seeing you at Boursonnes, on the day of the fête; they called you the beautiful dancer, and stood round in a circle to watch you."

Thibault, pleased with this compliment, was now quite disarmed.

"Yes, yes, of course," he answered, "I remember now having seen you; and I think we danced together, did we not? but you were not so tall then as you are now, that's why I did not recognise you at first, but I recall you distinctly now. And I remember too that you wore a pink frock, with a pretty little white bodice, and that we danced in the dairy. I wanted to kiss you, but you would not let me, for you said that it was only proper to kiss one's vis-á-vis, and not one's partner."

"You have a good memory, Monsieur Thibault!"

"And do you know, Agnelette, that during these last twelve months, for it is a year since that dance, you have not only grown taller, but grown prettier too; I see you are one of those people who understand how to do two things at once."

The girl blushed and lowered her eyes, and the blush and the

shy embarrassment only made her look more charming still.

Thibault's eyes were now turned towards her with more marked attention than before, and, in a voice, not wholly free from a slight agitation, he asked:

"Have you a lover, Agnelette?"

"No, Monsieur Thibault," she answered, "I have never had one, and do not wish to have one."

"And why is that? Is Cupid such a bad lad that you are afraid of him?"

"No, not that, but a lover is not at all what I want."

"And what do you want?"

"A husband."

Thibault made a movement, which Agnelette either did not, or pretended not to see.

"Yes," she repeated, "a husband. Grandmother is old and infirm, and a lover would distract my attention too much from the care which I now give her; whereas, a husband, if I found a nice fellow who would like to marry me, – a husband would help me to look after her in her old age, and would share with me the task which God has laid upon me, of making her happy and comfortable in her last years."

"But do you think your husband," said Thibault, "would be willing that you should love your grandmother more than you loved him? and do you not think he might be jealous at seeing you lavish so much tenderness upon her?"

"Oh," replied Agnelette, with an adorable smile, "there is no

fear of that, for I will manage so as to let him have such a large share of my love and attention that he will have no cause to complain; the kinder and the more patient he is for the dear old thing, the more I shall devote myself to him, the harder shall I work that there may be nothing wanting to our little household. You see me looking small and delicate, and you doubt that I should have strength for this; but I have plenty of spirit and energy for work, and then, when the heart gives consent, one can work day and night without fatigue. Oh! how I should love the man who loved my grandmother! I promise you, that she, and my husband, and I, we should be three happy folks together."

"You mean that you would be three very poor folks together, Agnelette!"

"And do you think the loves and friendships of the rich are worth a farthing more than those of the poor? At times, when I have been loving and caressing my grandmother, Monsieur Thibault, and she takes me on her lap and clasps me in her poor weak trembling arms, and puts her dear old wrinkled face against mine, and I feel my cheek wet with the loving tears she sheds, I begin to cry myself, and, I tell you, Monsieur Thibault, so soft and sweet are my tears, that there is no woman or girl, be she queen or princess, who has ever, I am sure, even in her happiest days, known such a real joy as mine. And, yet, there is no one in all the country round who is so destitute as we two are."

Thibault listened to what Agnelette was saying without answering; his mind was occupied with many thoughts, such

thoughts as are indulged in by the ambitious; but his dreams of ambition were disturbed at moments by a passing sensation of depression and disillusionment.

He, the man who had spent hours at a time watching the beautiful and aristocratic dames belonging to the Court of the Duke of Orleans, as they swept up and down the wide entrance stairs; who had often passed whole nights gazing at the arched windows of the Keep at Vez, when the whole place was lit up for some festivity, he, that same man, now asked himself, if what he had so ambitiously desired to have, a lady of rank and a rich dwelling, would, after all, be so much worth possessing as a thatched roof and this sweet and gentle girl called Agnelette. And it was certain that if this dear and charming little woman were to become his, that he would be envied in turn by all the earls and barons in the countryside.

"Well, Agnelette," said Thibault "and suppose a man like myself were to offer himself as your husband, would you accept him?"

It has been already stated that Thibault was a handsome young fellow, with fine eyes and black hair, and that his travels had left him something better than a mere workman. And it must further be borne in mind that we readily become attached to those on whom we have conferred a benefit, and Agnelette had, in all probability, saved Thibault's life; for, under such strokes as Marcotte's, the victim would certainly have been dead before the thirty-sixth had been given.

"Yes," she said, "if it would be a good thing for my grandmother?"

Thibault took hold of her hand.

"Well then, Agnelette," he said "we will speak again about this, dear child, and that as soon as may be."

"Whenever you like, Monsieur Thibault."

"And you will promise faithfully to love me if I marry you, Agnelette?"

"Do you think I should love any man besides my husband?"

"Never mind, I want you just to take a little oath, something of this kind, for instance; Monsieur Thibault, I swear that I will never love anyone but you."

"What need is there to swear? the promise of an honest girl should be sufficient for an honest man."

"And when shall we have the wedding, Agnelette?" and in saying this, Thibault tried to put his arm round her waist.

But Agnelette gently disengaged herself.

"Come and see my grandmother," she said, "it is for her to decide about it; you must content yourself this evening with helping me up with my load of heath, for it is getting late, and it is nearly three miles from here to Préciamont."

So Thibault helped her as desired, and then accompanied her on her way home as far as the Forest-fence of Billemont, that is until they came in sight of the village steeple. Before parting, he so begged of pretty Agnelette to give him one kiss as an earnest of his future happiness, that at last she consented, and then, far

more agitated by this one kiss than she had been by the Baron's double embrace, Agnelette hastened on her way, in spite of the load which she was carrying on her head, and which seemed far too heavy for so slender and delicate a creature.

Thibault stood for some time looking after her as she walked away across the moor. All the flexibility and grace of her youthful figure were brought into relief as the girl lifted her pretty rounded arms to support the burden upon her head, and thus silhouetted against the dark blue of the sky she made a delightful picture. At last, having reached the outskirts of the village, the land dipping at that point, she suddenly disappeared, passing out of sight of Thibault's admiring eyes. He gave a sigh, and stood still, plunged in thought; but it was not the satisfaction of thinking that this sweet and good young creature might one day be his that had caused his sigh. Quite the contrary; he had wished for Agnelette, because Agnelette was young and pretty, and because it was part of his unfortunate disposition to long for everything that belonged or might belong to another. His desire to possess Agnelette had been quickened by the innocent frankness with which she had talked to him; but it had been a matter of fancy rather than of any deeper feeling, of the mind, and not of the heart. For Thibault was incapable of loving as a man ought to love, who, being poor himself, loves a poor girl; in such a case there should be no thought, no ambition on his part beyond the wish that his love may be returned. But it was not so with Thibault; on the contrary, I repeat, the farther he walked away

from Agnelette, leaving it would seem his good genius farther behind him with every step, the more urgently did his envious longings begin again as usual to torment his soul. It was dark when he reached home.

CHAPTER IV
THE BLACK WOLF

THIBAULT'S first thought was to get himself some supper, for he was terribly tired. The past day had been an eventful one for him, and certain things which had happened to him had evidently been calculated to produce a craving for food. The supper, it must be said, was not quite such a savoury one as he had promised himself, when starting to kill the buck; but the animal, as we know, had not been killed by Thibault, and the ferocious hunger which now consumed him made his black bread taste almost as delicious as venison.

He had hardly, however, begun his frugal repast, when he became conscious that his goat – of which I think we have already spoken – was uttering the most plaintive bleatings. Thinking that she, too, was in want of her supper, he went into the lean-to for some fresh grass, which he then carried to her, but as he opened the little door of the shed, out she rushed with such precipitancy that she nearly knocked Thibault over, and without stopping to take the provender he had brought her, ran towards the house. Thibault threw down the bundle of grass and went after her, with the intention of re-installing her in her proper place; but he found that this was more than he was able to do. He had to use all his force to get her along, for the goat, with all the strength of which

a beast of her kind is capable, resisted all his efforts to drag her back by the horns, arching her back, and stubbornly refusing to move. At last, however, being vanquished in the struggle, it ended by the goat being once more shut up in her shed, but, in spite of the plentiful supper which Thibault left her with, she continued to utter the most lamentable cries. Perplexed, and cross at the same time, the shoe-maker again rose from his supper and went to the shed, this time opening the door so cautiously that the goat could not escape. Once inside he began feeling about with his hands in all the nooks and corners to try and discover the cause of her alarm. Suddenly his fingers came in contact with the warm, thick coat of some other animal. Thibault was not a coward, far from it, none the less, he drew back hastily. He returned to the house and got a light, but it almost fell from his hand, when, on re-entering the shed, he recognised in the animal that had so frightened the goat, the buck of the Lord of Vez; the same buck that he had followed, had failed to kill, that he had prayed for in the devil's name, if he could not have it in God's; the same that had thrown the hounds out; the very same in short which had cost him such hard blows. Thibault, after assuring himself that the door was fastened, went gently up to the animal; the poor thing was either so tired, or so tame, that it did not make the slightest attempt to move, but merely gazed out at Thibault with its large dark velvety eyes, rendered more appealing than ever by the fear which agitated it.

"I must have left the door open," muttered the shoe-maker

to himself, “and the creature, not knowing where to hide itself, must have taken refuge here.” But on thinking further over the matter, it came back to him that when he had gone to open the door, only ten minutes before, for the first time, he had found the wooden bolt pushed so firmly into the staple that he had had to get a stone to hammer it back; and then, besides, the goat, which, as we have seen, did not at all relish the society of the new-comer, would certainly have run out of the shed before, if the door had been open. What was, however, still more surprising was that Thibault, looking more closely at the buck, saw that it had been fastened up to the rack by a cord.

Thibault, as we have said, was no coward, but now a cold sweat began to break out in large drops on his brow, a curious kind of a shiver ran through his body, and his teeth chattered violently. He went out of the shed, shutting the door after him, and began looking for his goat, which had taken advantage of the moment when the shoe-maker had gone to fetch a light, and ran again into the house, where she was now lying beside the hearth, having evidently quite made up her mind this time not to forsake a resting place, which, for that night at least, she found preferable to her usual abode.

Thibault had a perfect remembrance of the unholy invocation he had addressed to Satan, and although his prayer had been miraculously answered, he still could not bring himself to believe that there was any diabolic intervention in the matter.

As the idea, however, of being under the protection of the

spirit of darkness filled him with an instinctive fear, he tried to pray; but when he wished to raise his hand to make the sign of the cross on his forehead, his arm refused to bend, and although up to that time he had never missed a day saying his *Ave Maria*, he could not remember a single word of it.

These fruitless efforts were accompanied by a terrible turmoil in poor Thibault's brain; evil thoughts came rushing in upon him, and he seemed to hear them whispering all around him, as one hears the murmur of the rising tide, or the laughing of the winter wind through the leafless branches of the trees.

"After all," he muttered to himself, as he sat pale, and staring before him, "the buck is a fine windfall, whether it comes from God or the Devil, and I should be a fool not to profit by it. If I am afraid of it as being food sent from the nether regions, I am in no way forced to eat it, and what is more, I could not eat it alone, and if I asked anyone to partake of it with me, I should be betrayed; the best thing I can do is to take the live beast over to the Nunnery of Saint-Rémy, where it will serve as a pet for the Nuns and where the Abbess will give me a good round sum for it. The atmosphere of that holy place will drive the evil out of it, and I shall run no risk to my soul in taking a handful of consecrated crown pieces.

"What days of sweating over my work, and turning my auger, it would take, to earn even the quarter of what I shall get by just leading the beast to its new fold! The devil who helps one is certainly better worth than the angel who forsakes one. If my lord

Satan wants to go too far with me, it will then be time enough to free myself from his claws: bless me! I am not a child, nor a young lamb like Georgine, and I am able to walk straight in front of me and go where I like." He had forgotten, unhappy man, as he boasted of being able to go where and how he liked, that only five minutes before he had tried in vain to lift his hand to his head.

Thibault had such convincing and excellent reasons ready to hand, that he quite made up his mind to keep the buck, come whence it might, and even went so far as to decide that the money he received for it should be devoted to buying a wedding dress for his betrothed. For, strange to say, by some freak of memory, his thoughts would keep returning towards Agnelette; and he seemed to see her clad in a long white dress with a crown of white lilies on her head and a long veil. If, he said to himself, he could have such a charming guardian angel in his house, no devil, however strong and cunning he might be, would ever dare to cross the threshold. "So," he went on, "there is always that remedy at hand, and if my lord Satan begins to be too troublesome, I shall be off to the grandmother to ask for Agnelette; I shall marry her, and if I cannot remember my prayers or am unable to make the sign of the cross, there will be a dear pretty little woman, who has had no traffic with Satan, who will do all that sort of thing for me."

Having more or less re-assured himself with the idea of this compromise, Thibault, in order that the buck should not run down in value, and might be as fine an animal as possible to offer to the holy ladies, to whom he calculated to sell it, went and filled

the rack with fodder and looked to see that the litter was soft and thick enough for the buck to rest fully at its ease. The remainder of the night passed without further incident, and without even a bad dream.

The next morning, my lord Baron again went hunting, but this time it was not a timid deer that headed the hounds, but the wolf which Marcotte had tracked the day before and had again that morning traced to his lair.

And this wolf was a genuine wolf, and no mistake; it must have seen many and many a year, although those who had that morning caught sight of it while on its track, had noted with astonishment that it was black all over. Black or grey, however, it was a bold and enterprising beast, and promised some rough work to the Baron and his huntsmen. First started near Vertefeuille, in the Dargent covert, it had made over the plain of Meutard, leaving Fleury and Dampleux to the left, crossed the road to Ferté-Milou, and finally begun to run cunning in the Ivors coppices. Then, instead of continuing in the same direction, it doubled, returning along the same track it had come, and so exactly retracing its own steps, that the Baron, as he galloped along, could actually distinguish the prints left by his horse's hoofs that same morning.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.