HONORÉ DE BALZAC

THE CHOUANS

Оноре де Бальзак

The Chouans

де Бальзак О.

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Содержание

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DEDICATION
To Monsieur Theodore Dablin, Merchant.
To my first friend, my first work.
De Balzac.

I. AN AMBUSCADE

Early in the year VIII., at the beginning of Vendemiaire, or, to conform to our own calendar, towards the close of September, 1799, a hundred or so of peasants and a large number of citizens, who had left Fougeres in the morning on their way to Mayenne, were going up the little mountain of La Pelerine, half-way between Fougeres and Ernee, a small town where travellers along that road are in the habit of resting. This company, divided into groups that were more or less numerous, presented a collection of such fantastic costumes and a mixture of individuals belonging to so many and diverse localities and professions that it will be well to describe their characteristic differences, in order to give to this history the vivid local coloring to which so much value is attached in these days, – though some critics do assert that it injures the representation of sentiments.

Many of the peasants, in fact the greater number, were barefooted, and wore no other garments than a large goatskin, which covered them from the neck to the knees, and trousers of white and very coarse linen, the ill-woven texture of which betrayed the slovenly industrial habits of the region. The straight locks of their long hair mingling with those of the goatskin hid their faces, which were bent on the ground, so completely that the garment might have been thought their own skin, and they themselves mistaken at first sight for a species of the animal which served them as clothing. But through this tangle of hair their eyes were presently seen to shine like dew-drops in a thicket, and their glances, full of human intelligence, caused fear rather than pleasure to those who met them. Their heads were covered with a dirty head-gear of red flannel, not unlike the Phrygian cap which the Republic had lately adopted as an emblem of liberty. Each man carried over his shoulder a heavy stick of knotted oak, at the end of which hung a linen bag with little in it. Some wore, over the red cap, a coarse felt hat, with a broad brim adorned by a sort of woollen chenille of many colors which was fastened round it. Others were clothed entirely in the coarse linen of which the trousers and wallets of all were made, and showed nothing that was distinctive of the new order of civilization. Their long hair fell upon the collar of a round jacket with square pockets, which reached to the hips only, a garment peculiar to the peasantry of western France. Beneath this jacket, which was worn open, a waistcoat of the same linen with large buttons was visible. Some of the company marched in wooden shoes; others, by way of economy, carried them in their hand. This costume, soiled by long usage, blackened with sweat and dust, and less original than that of the other men, had the historic merit of serving as a transition between the goatskins and the brilliant, almost sumptuous, dress of a few individuals dispersed here and there among the groups, where they shone like flowers. In fact, the blue linen trousers of these last, and their red or yellow waistcoats, adorned with two parallel rows of brass buttons and not unlike breast-plates, stood out as vividly among the white linen and shaggy skins of their companions as the corn-flowers and poppies in a wheat-field. Some of them wore wooden shoes, which the peasants of Brittany make for themselves; but the greater number had heavy hobnailed boots, and coats of coarse cloth cut in the fashion of the old regime, the shape of which the peasants have religiously retained even to the present day. The collars of their shirts were held together by buttons in the shape of hearts or anchors. The wallets of these men seemed to be better than those of their companions, and several of them added to their marching outfit a flask, probably full of brandy, slung round their necks by a bit of twine. A few burgesses were to be seen in the midst of these semi-savages, as if to show the extremes of civilization in this region. Wearing round hats, or flapping brims or caps, high-topped boots, or shoes and gaiters, they exhibited as many and as remarkable differences in their costume as the peasants themselves. About a dozen of them wore the republican jacket known by the name of “la carmagnole.” Others, well-to-do mechanics, no doubt, were clothed from head to foot in one color. Those who had most pretension to their dress wore swallow-tail coats or surtouts of blue or green cloth, more or less defaced. These last, evidently characters, marched in boots of various kinds, swinging heavy canes with the air and manner of

those who take heart under misfortune. A few heads carefully powdered, and some queues tolerably well braided showed the sort of care which a beginning of education or prosperity inspires. A casual spectator observing these men, all surprised to find themselves in one another's company, would have thought them the inhabitants of a village driven out by a conflagration. But the period and the region in which they were gave an altogether different interest to this body of men. Any one initiated into the secrets of the civil discords which were then agitating the whole of France could easily have distinguished the few individuals on whose fidelity the Republic might count among these groups, almost entirely made up of men who four years earlier were at war with her.

One other and rather noticeable sign left no doubt upon the opinions which divided the detachment. The Republicans alone marched with an air of gaiety. As to the other individuals of the troop, if their clothes showed marked differences, their faces at least and their attitudes wore a uniform expression of ill-fortune. Citizens and peasantry, their faces all bore the imprint of deepest melancholy; their silence had something sullen in it; they all seemed crushed under the yoke of a single thought, terrible no doubt but carefully concealed, for their faces were impenetrable, the slowness of their gait alone betraying their inward communings. From time to time a few of them, noticeable for the rosaries hanging from their necks (dangerous as it was to carry that sign of a religion which was suppressed, rather than abolished) shook their long hair and raised their heads defiantly. They covertly examined the woods, and paths, and masses of rock which flanked the road, after the manner of a dog with his nose to the wind trying to scent his game; and then, hearing nothing but the monotonous tramp of the silent company, they lowered their heads once more with the old expression of despair, like criminals on their way to the galleys to live or die.

The march of this column upon Mayenne, the heterogeneous elements of which it was composed, and the divers sentiments which evidently pervaded it, will explain the presence of another troop which formed the head of the detachment. About a hundred and fifty soldiers, with arms and baggage, marched in the advance, commanded by the *chief of a half-brigade*. We may mention here, for the benefit of those who did not witness the drama of the Revolution, that this title was made to supersede that of colonel, proscribed by patriots as too aristocratic. These soldiers belonged to a demi-brigade of infantry quartered at Mayenne. During these troublous times the inhabitants of the west of France called all the soldiers of the Republic "Blues." This nickname came originally from their blue and red uniforms, the memory of which is still so fresh as to render a description superfluous. A detachment of the Blues was therefore on this occasion escorting a body of recruits, or rather conscripts, all displeased at being taken to Mayenne where military discipline was about to force upon them the uniformity of thought, clothing, and gait which they now lacked entirely.

This column was a contingent slowly and with difficulty raised in the district of Fougeres, from which it was due under the levy ordered by the executive Directory of the Republic on the preceding 10th Messidor. The government had asked for a hundred million of francs and a hundred thousand men as immediate reinforcements for the armies then fighting the Austrians in Italy, the Prussians in Germany, and menaced in Switzerland by the Russians, in whom Suwarow had inspired hopes of the conquest of France. The departments of the West, known under the name of La Vendee, Brittany, and a portion of Lower Normandy, which had been tranquil for the last three years (thanks to the action of General Hoche), after a struggle lasting nearly four, seemed to have seized this new occasion of danger to the nation to break out again. In presence of such aggressions the Republic recovered its pristine energy. It provided in the first place for the defence of the threatened departments by giving the responsibility to the loyal and patriotic portion of the inhabitants. In fact, the government in Paris, having neither troops nor money to send to the interior, evaded the difficulty by a parliamentary gasconade. Not being able to send material aid to the faithful citizens of the insurgent departments, it gave them its "confidence." Possibly the government hoped that this measure, by arming the insurgents against each other, would stifle the insurrection at its birth. This ordinance, the cause of future fatal reprisals, was thus worded: "Independent companies of troops shall be organized in the

Western departments." This impolitic step drove the West as a body into so hostile an attitude that the Directory despaired of immediately subduing it. Consequently, it asked the Assemblies to pass certain special measures relating to the independent companies authorized by the ordinance. In response to this request a new law had been promulgated a few days before this history begins, organizing into regular legions the various weak and scattered companies. These legions were to bear the names of the departments, – Sarthe, Orne, Mayenne, Ille-et-Vilaine, Morbihan, Loire-Inferieure, and Maine-et-Loire. "These legions," said the law, "will be specially employed to fight the Chouans, and cannot, under any pretence, be sent to the frontier."

The foregoing irksome details will explain both the weakness of the Directory and the movement of this troop of men under escort of the Blues. It may not be superfluous to add that these finely patriotic Directorial decrees had no realization beyond their insertion among the statutes. No longer restrained, as formerly, by great moral ideas, by patriotism, nor by terror, which enforced their execution, these later decrees of the Republic created millions and drafted soldiers without the slightest benefit accruing to its exchequer or its armies. The mainspring of the Revolution was worn-out by clumsy handling, and the application of the laws took the impress of circumstances instead of controlling them.

The departments of Mayenne and Ille-et-Vilaine were at this time under the command of an old officer who, judging on the spot of the measures that were most opportune to take, was anxious to wring from Brittany every one of her contingents, more especially that of Fougeres, which was known to be a hot-bed of "Chouannerie." He hoped by this means to weaken its strength in these formidable districts. This devoted soldier made use of the illusory provisions of the new law to declare that he would equip and arm at once all recruits, and he announced that he held at their disposal the one month's advanced pay promised by the government to these exceptional levies. Though Brittany had hitherto refused all kinds of military service under the Republic, the levies were made under the new law on the faith of its promises, and with such promptness that even the commander was startled. But he was one of those wary old watch-dogs who are hard to catch napping. He no sooner saw the contingents arriving one after the other than he suspected some secret motive for such prompt action. Possibly he was right in ascribing it to the fact of getting arms. At any rate, no sooner were the Fougeres recruits obtained than, without delaying for laggards, he took immediate steps to fall back towards Alencon, so as to be near a loyal neighborhood, – though the growing disaffection along the route made the success of this measure problematical. This old officer, who, under instruction of his superiors, kept secret the disasters of our armies in Italy and Germany and the disturbing news from La Vendee, was attempting on the morning when this history begins, to make a forced march on Mayenne, where he was resolved to execute the law according to his own good pleasure, and fill the half-empty companies of his own brigade with his Breton conscripts. The word "conscript" which later became so celebrated, had just now for the first time taken the place in the government decrees of the word *requisitionnaire* hitherto applied to all Republican recruits.

Before leaving Fougeres the chief secretly issued to his own men ample supplies of ammunition and sufficient rations of bread for the whole detachment, so as to conceal from the conscripts the length of the march before them. He intended not to stop at Ernee (the last stage before Mayenne), where the men of the contingent might find a way of communicating with the Chouans who were no doubt hanging on his flanks. The dead silence which reigned among the recruits, surprised at the manoeuvring of the old republican, and their lagging march up the mountain excited to the very utmost the distrust and watchfulness of the chief – whose name was Hulot. All the striking points in the foregoing description had been to him matters of the keenest interest; he marched in silence, surrounded by five young officers, each of whom respected the evident preoccupation of their leader. But just as Hulot reached the summit of La Pelerine he turned his head, as if by instinct, to inspect the anxious faces of the recruits, and suddenly broke silence. The slow advance of the Bretons had put

a distance of three or four hundred feet between themselves and their escort. Hulot's face contorted after a fashion peculiar to himself.

"What the devil are those dandies up to?" he exclaimed in a sonorous voice. "Creeping instead of marching, I call it."

At his first words the officers who accompanied him turned spasmodically, as if startled out of sleep by a sudden noise. The sergeants and corporals followed their example, and the whole company paused in its march without receiving the wished for "Halt!" Though the officers cast a first look at the detachment, which was creeping like an elongated tortoise up the mountain of La Pelerine, these young men, all dragged, like many others, from important studies to defend their country, and in whom war had not yet smothered the sentiment of art, were so much struck by the scene which lay spread before their eyes that they made no answer to their chief's remark, the real significance of which was unknown to them. Though they had come from Fougeres, where the scene which now presented itself to their eyes is also visible (but with certain differences caused by the change of perspective), they could not resist pausing to admire it again, like those dilettanti who enjoy all music the more when familiar with its construction.

From the summit of La Pelerine the traveller's eye can range over the great valley of Couesnon, at one of the farthest points of which, along the horizon, lay the town of Fougeres. From here the officers could see, to its full extent, the basin of this intervale, as remarkable for the fertility of its soil as for the variety of its aspects. Mountains of gneiss and slate rose on all sides, like an ampitheatre, hiding their ruddy flanks behind forests of oak, and forming on their declivities other and lesser valleys full of dewy freshness. These rocky heights made a vast enclosure, circular in form, in the centre of which a meadow lay softly stretched, like the lawn of an English garden. A number of evergreen hedges, defining irregular pieces of property which were planted with trees, gave to this carpet of verdure a character of its own, and one that is somewhat unusual among the landscapes of France; it held the teeming secrets of many beauties in its various contrasts, the effects of which were fine enough to arrest the eye of the most indifferent spectator.

At this particular moment the scene was brightened by the fleeting glow with which Nature delights at times in heightening the beauty of her imperishable creations. While the detachment was crossing the valley, the rising sun had slowly scattered the fleecy mists which float above the meadows of a September morning. As the soldiers turned to look back, an invisible hand seemed to lift from the landscape the last of these veils – a delicate vapor, like a diaphanous gauze through which the glow of precious jewels excites our curiosity. Not a cloud could be seen on the wide horizon to mark by its silvery whiteness that the vast blue arch was the firmament; it seemed, on the contrary, a dais of silk, held up by the summits of the mountains and placed in the atmosphere, to protect that beautiful assemblage of fields and meadows and groves and brooks.

The group of young officers paused to examine a scene so filled with natural beauties. The eyes of some roved among the copses, which the sterner tints of autumn were already enriching with their russet tones, contrasting the more with the emerald-green of the meadows in which they grew; others took note of a different contrast, made by the ruddy fields, where the buckwheat had been cut and tied in sheaves (like stands of arms around a bivouac), adjoining other fields of rich ploughed land, from which the rye was already harvested. Here and there were dark slate roofs above which puffs of white smoke were rising. The glittering silver threads of the winding brooks caught the eye, here and there, by one of those optic lures which render the soul – one knows not how or why – perplexed and dreamy. The fragrant freshness of the autumn breeze, the stronger odors of the forest, rose like a waft of incense to the admirers of this beautiful region, who noticed with delight its rare wild-flowers, its vigorous vegetation, and its verdure, worthy of England, the very word being common to the two languages. A few cattle gave life to the scene, already so dramatic. The birds sang, filling the valley with a sweet, vague melody that quivered in the air. If a quiet imagination will picture to itself these rich fluctuations of light and shade, the vaporous outline of the mountains, the

mysterious perspectives which were seen where the trees gave an opening, or the streamlets ran, or some coquettish little glade fled away in the distance; if memory will color, as it were, this sketch, as fleeting as the moment when it was taken, the persons for whom such pictures are not without charm will have an imperfect image of the magic scene which delighted the still impressionable souls of the young officers.

Thinking that the poor recruits must be leaving, with regret, their own country and their beloved customs, to die, perhaps, in foreign lands, they involuntarily excused a tardiness their feelings comprehended. Then, with the generosity natural to soldiers, they disguised their indulgence under an apparent desire to examine into the military position of the land. But Hulot, whom we shall henceforth call the commandant, to avoid giving him the inharmonious title of "chief of a half-brigade" was one of those soldiers who, in critical moments, cannot be caught by the charms of a landscape, were they even those of a terrestrial paradise. He shook his head with an impatient gesture and contracted the thick, black eyebrows which gave so stern an expression to his face.

"Why the devil don't they come up?" he said, for the second time, in a hoarse voice, roughened by the toils of war.

"You ask why?" replied a voice.

Hearing these words, which seemed to issue from a horn, such as the peasants of the western valleys use to call their flocks, the commandant turned sharply round, as if pricked by a sword, and beheld, close behind him, a personage even more fantastic in appearance than any of those who were now being escorted to Mayenne to serve the Republic. This unknown man, short and thick-set in figure and broad-shouldered, had a head like a bull, to which, in fact, he bore more than one resemblance. His nose seemed shorter than it was, on account of the thick nostrils. His full lips, drawn from the teeth which were white as snow, his large and round black eyes with their shaggy brows, his hanging ears and tawny hair, – seemed to belong far less to our fine Caucasian race than to a breed of herbivorous animals. The total absence of all the usual characteristics of the social man made that bare head still more remarkable. The face, bronzed by the sun (its angular outlines presenting a sort of vague likeness to the granite which forms the soil of the region), was the only visible portion of the body of this singular being. From the neck down he was wrapped in a "sarrau" or smock, a sort of russet linen blouse, coarser in texture than that of the trousers of the less fortunate conscripts. This "sarrau," in which an antiquary would have recognized the "saye," or the "sayon" of the Gauls, ended at his middle, where it was fastened to two leggings of goatskin by slivers, or thongs of wood, roughly cut, – some of them still covered with their peel or bark. These hides of the nanny-goat (to give them the name by which they were known to the peasantry) covered his legs and thighs, and masked all appearance of human shape. Enormous sabots hid his feet. His long and shining hair fell straight, like the goat's hair, on either side of his face, being parted in the centre like the hair of certain statues of the Middle-Ages which are still to be seen in our cathedrals. In place of the knotty stick which the conscripts carried over their shoulders, this man held against his breast as though it were a musket, a heavy whip, the lash of which was closely braided and seemed to be twice as long as that of an ordinary whip. The sudden apparition of this strange being seemed easily explained. At first sight some of the officers took him for a recruit or conscript (the words were used indiscriminately) who had outstripped the column. But the commandant himself was singularly surprised by the man's presence; he showed no alarm, but his face grew thoughtful. After looking the intruder well over, he repeated, mechanically, as if preoccupied with anxious thought: "Yes, why don't they come on? do you know, you?"

"Because," said the gloomy apparition, with an accent which proved his difficulty in speaking French, "there Maine begins" (pointing with his huge, rough hand towards Ernee), "and Bretagne ends."

Then he struck the ground sharply with the handle of his heavy whip close to the commandant's feet. The impression produced on the spectators by the laconic harangue of the stranger was like

that of a tom-tom in the midst of tender music. But the word "harangue" is insufficient to reproduce the hatred, the desires of vengeance expressed by the haughty gesture of the hand, the brevity of the speech, and the look of sullen and cool-blooded energy on the countenance of the speaker. The coarseness and roughness of the man, – chopped out, as it seemed by an axe, with his rough bark still left on him, – and the stupid ignorance of his features, made him seem, for the moment, like some half-savage demigod. He stood stock-still in a prophetic attitude, as though he were the Genius of Brittany rising from a slumber of three years, to renew a war in which victory could only be followed by twofold mourning.

"A pretty fellow this!" thought Hulot; "he looks to me like the emissary of men who mean to argue with their muskets."

Having growled these words between his teeth, the commandant cast his eyes in turn from the man to the valley, from the valley to the detachment, from the detachment to the steep acclivities on the right of the road, the ridges of which were covered with the broom and gorse of Brittany; then he suddenly turned them full on the stranger, whom he subjected to a mute interrogation, which he ended at last by roughly demanding, "Where do you come from?"

His eager, piercing eye strove to detect the secrets of that impenetrable face, which never changed from the vacant, torpid expression in which a peasant when doing nothing wraps himself.

"From the country of the Gars," replied the man, without showing any uneasiness.

"Your name?"

"Marche-a-Terre."

"Why do you call yourself by your Chouan name in defiance of the law?"

Marche-a-Terre, to use the name he gave to himself, looked at the commandant with so genuine an air of stupidity that the soldier believed the man had not understood him.

"Do you belong to the recruits from Fougeres?"

To this inquiry Marche-a-Terre replied by the bucolic "I don't know," the hopeless imbecility of which puts an end to all inquiry. He seated himself by the roadside, drew from his smock a few pieces of thin, black buckwheat-bread, – a national delicacy, the dismal delights of which none but a Breton can understand, – and began to eat with stolid indifference. There seemed such a total absence of all human intelligence about the man that the officers compared him in turn to the cattle browsing in the valley pastures, to the savages of America, or the aboriginal inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope. Deceived by his behavior, the commandant himself was about to turn a deaf ear to his own misgivings, when, casting a last prudence glance on the man whom he had taken for the herald of an approaching carnage, he suddenly noticed that the hair, the smock, and the goatskin leggings of the stranger were full of thorns, scraps of leaves, and bits of trees and bushes, as though this Chouan had lately made his way for a long distance through thickets and underbrush. Hulot looked significantly at his adjutant Gerard who stood beside him, pressed his hand firmly, and said in a low voice: "We came for wool, but we shall go back sheared."

The officers looked at each other silently in astonishment.

It is necessary here to make a digression, or the fears of the commandant will not be intelligible to those stay-at-home persons who are in the habit of doubting everything because they have seen nothing, and who might therefore deny the existence of Marche-a-Terre and the peasantry of the West, whose conduct, in the times we are speaking of, was often sublime.

The word "gars" pronounced "ga" is a relic of the Celtic language. It has passed from low Breton into French, and the word in our present speech has more ancient associations than any other. The "gais" was the principal weapon of the Gauls; "gaisde" meant armed; "gais" courage; "gas," force. The word has an analogy with the Latin word "vir" man, the root of "virtus" strength, courage. The present dissertation is excusable as of national interest; besides, it may help to restore the use of such words as: "gars, garcon, garconette, garce, garcette," now discarded from our speech as unseemly; whereas their origin is so warlike that we shall use them from time to time in the course of this history.

"She is a famous 'garce'!" was a compliment little understood by Madame de Stael when it was paid to her in a little village of La Vendee, where she spent a few days of her exile.

Brittany is the region in all France where the manners and customs of the Gauls have left their strongest imprint. That portion of the province where, even to our own times, the savage life and superstitious ideas of our rude ancestors still continue – if we may use the word – rampant, is called "the country of the Gars." When a canton (or district) is inhabited by a number of half-savages like the one who has just appeared upon the scene, the inhabitants call them "the Gars of such or such a parish." This classic name is a reward for the fidelity with which they struggle to preserve the traditions of the language and manners of their Gaelic ancestors; their lives show to this day many remarkable and deeply embedded vestiges of the beliefs and superstitious practices of those ancient times. Feudal customs are still maintained. Antiquaries find Druidic monuments still standing. The genius of modern civilization shrinks from forcing its way through those impenetrable primordial forests. An unheard-of ferociousness, a brutal obstinacy, but also a regard for the sanctity of an oath; a complete ignoring of our laws, our customs, our dress, our modern coins, our language, but withal a patriarchal simplicity and virtues that are heroic, – unite in keeping the inhabitants of this region more impoverished as to all intellectual knowledge than the Redskins, but also as proud, as crafty, and as enduring as they. The position which Brittany occupies in the centre of Europe makes it more interesting to observe than Canada. Surrounded by light whose beneficent warmth never reaches it, this region is like a frozen coal left black in the middle of a glowing fire. The efforts made by several noble minds to win this glorious part of France, so rich in neglected treasures, to social life and to prosperity have all, even when sustained by government, come to nought against the inflexibility of a population given over to the habits of immemorial routine. This unfortunate condition is partly accounted for by the nature of the land, broken by ravines, mountain torrents, lakes, and marshes, and bristling with hedges or earth-works which make a sort of citadel of every field; without roads, without canals, and at the mercy of prejudices which scorn our modern agriculture. These will further be shown with all their dangers in our present history.

The picturesque lay of the land and the superstitions of the inhabitants prevent the formation of communities and the benefits arising from the exchange and comparison of ideas. There are no villages. The rickety buildings which the people call homes are sparsely scattered through the wilderness. Each family lives as in a desert. The only meetings among them are on Sundays and feast-days in the parish church. These silent assemblies, under the eye of the rector (the only ruler of these rough minds) last some hours. After listening to the awful words of the priest they return to their noisome hovels for another week; they leave them only to work, they return to them only to sleep. No one ever visits them, unless it is the rector. Consequently, it was the voice of the priesthood which roused Brittany against the Republic, and sent thousands of men, five years before this history begins, to the support of the first Chouannerie. The brothers Cottereau, whose name was given to that first uprising, were bold smugglers, plying their perilous trade between Laval and Fougeres. The insurrections of Brittany had nothing fine or noble about them; and it may be truly said that if La Vendee turned its brigandage into a great war, Brittany turned war into a brigandage. The proscription of princes, the destruction of religion, far from inspiring great sacrifices, were to the Chouans pretexts for mere pillage; and the events of this intestine warfare had all the savage moroseness of their own natures. When the real defenders of the monarchy came to recruit men among these ignorant and violent people they vainly tried to give, for the honor of the white flag, some grandeur to the enterprises which had hitherto rendered the brigands odious; the Chouans remain in history as a memorable example of the danger of uprousing the uncivilized masses of the nation.

The sketch here made of a Breton valley and of the Breton men in the detachment of recruits, more especially that of the "gars" who so suddenly appeared on the summit of Mont Pelerine, gives a brief but faithful picture of the province and its inhabitants. A trained imagination can by the help of these details obtain some idea of the theatre of the war and of the men who were its instruments.

The flowering hedges of the beautiful valleys concealed the combatants. Each field was a fortress, every tree an ambush; the hollow trunk of each old willow hid a stratagem. The place for a fight was everywhere. Sharpshooters were lurking at every turn for the Blues, whom laughing young girls, unmindful of their perfidy, attracted within range, – for had they not made pilgrimages with their fathers and their brothers, imploring to be taught wiles, and receiving absolution from their wayside Virgin of rotten wood? Religion, or rather the fetichism of these ignorant creatures, absolved such murders of remorse.

Thus, when the struggle had once begun, every part of the country was dangerous, – in fact, all things were full of peril, sound as well as silence, attraction as well as fear, the family hearth or the open country. Treachery was everywhere, but it was treachery from conviction. The people were savages serving God and the King after the fashion of Red Indians. To make this sketch of the struggle exact and true at all points, the historian must add that the moment Hoche had signed his peace the whole country subsided into smiles and friendliness. Families who were rending each other to pieces over night, were supping together without danger the next day.

The very moment that Commandant Hulot became aware of the secret treachery betrayed by the hairy skins of Marche-a-Terre, he was convinced that this peace, due to the genius of Hoche, the stability of which he had always doubted, was at an end. The civil war, he felt, was about to be renewed, – doubtless more terrible than ever after a cessation of three years. The Revolution, mitigated by the events of the 9th Thermidor, would doubtless return to the old terrors which had made it odious to sound minds. English gold would, as formerly, assist in the national discords. The Republic, abandoned by young Bonaparte who had seemed to be its tutelary genius, was no longer in a condition to resist its enemies from without and from within, – the worst and most cruel of whom were the last to appear. The Civil War, already threatened by various partial uprisings, would assume a new and far more serious aspect if the Chouans were now to attack so strong an escort. Such were the reflections that filled the mind of the commander (though less succinctly formulated) as soon as he perceived, in the condition of Marche-a-Terre's clothing, the signs of an ambush carefully planned.

The silence which followed the prophetic remark of the commandant to Gerard gave Hulot time to recover his self-possession. The old soldier had been shaken. He could not hinder his brow from clouding as he felt himself surrounded by the horrors of a warfare the atrocities of which would have shamed even cannibals. Captain Merle and the adjutant Gerard could not explain to themselves the evident dread on the face of their leader as he looked at Marche-a-Terre eating his bread by the side of the road. But Hulot's face soon cleared; he began to rejoice in the opportunity to fight for the Republic, and he joyously vowed to escape being the dupe of the Chouans, and to fathom the wily and impenetrable being whom they had done him the honor to employ against him.

Before taking any resolution he set himself to study the position in which it was evident the enemy intended to surprise him. Observing that the road where the column had halted was about to pass through a sort of gorge, short to be sure, but flanked with woods from which several paths appeared to issue, he frowned heavily, and said to his two friends, in a low voice of some emotion: —

"We're in a devil of a wasp's-nest."

"What do you fear?" asked Gerard.

"Fear? Yes, that's it, *fear*," returned the commandant. "I have always had a fear of being shot like a dog at the edge of a wood, without a chance of crying out 'Who goes there?'"

"Pooh!" said Merle, laughing, "'Who goes there' is all humbug."

"Are we in any real danger?" asked Gerard, as much surprised by Hulot's coolness as he was by his evident alarm.

"Hush!" said the commandant, in a low voice. "We are in the jaws of the wolf; it is as dark as a pocket; and we must get some light. Luckily, we've got the upper end of the slope!"

So saying, he moved, with his two officers, in a way to surround Marche-a-Terre, who rose quickly, pretending to think himself in the way.

"Stay where you are, vagabond!" said Hulot, keeping his eye on the apparently indifferent face of the Breton, and giving him a push which threw him back on the place where he had been sitting.

"Friends," continued Hulot, in a low voice, speaking to the two officers. "It is time I should tell you that it is all up with the army in Paris. The Directory, in consequence of a disturbance in the Assembly, has made another clean sweep of our affairs. Those pentarchs, – puppets, I call them, – those directors have just lost a good blade; Bernadotte has abandoned them."

"Who will take his place?" asked Gerard, eagerly.

"Milet-Mureau, an old blockhead. A pretty time to choose to let fools sail the ship! English rockets from all the headlands, and those cursed Chouan cockchafers in the air! You may rely upon it that some one behind those puppets pulled the wire when they saw we were getting the worst of it."

"How getting the worst of it?"

"Our armies are beaten at all points," replied Hulot, sinking his voice still lower. "The Chouans have intercepted two couriers; I only received my despatches and last orders by a private messenger sent by Bernadotte just as he was leaving the ministry. Luckily, friends have written me confidentially about this crisis. Fouche has discovered that the tyrant Louis XVIII. has been advised by traitors in Paris to send a leader to his followers in La Vendee. It is thought that Barras is betraying the Republic. At any rate, Pitt and the princes have sent a man, a *ci-devant*, vigorous, daring, full of talent, who intends, by uniting the Chouans with the Vendeans, to pluck the cap of liberty from the head of the Republic. The fellow has lately landed in the Morbihan; I was the first to hear of it, and I sent the news to those knaves in Paris. 'The Gars' is the name he goes by. All those beasts," he added, pointing to Marche-a-Terre, "stick on names which would give a stomach-ache to honest patriots if they bore them. The Gars is now in this district. The presence of that fellow" – and again he signed to Marche-a-Terre – "as good as tells me he is on our back. But they can't teach an old monkey to make faces; and you've got to help me to get my birds safe into their cage, and as quick as a flash too. A pretty fool I should be if I allowed that *ci-devant*, who dares to come from London with his British gold, to trap me like a crow!"

On learning these secret circumstances, and being well aware that their leader was never unnecessarily alarmed, the two officers saw the dangers of the position. Gerard was about to ask some questions on the political state of Paris, some details of which Hulot had evidently passed over in silence, but a sign from his commander stopped him, and once more drew the eyes of all three to the Chouan. Marche-a-Terre gave no sign of disturbance at being watched. The curiosity of the two officers, who were new to this species of warfare, was greatly excited by this beginning of an affair which seemed to have an almost romantic interest, and they began to joke about it. But Hulot stopped them at once.

"God's thunder!" he cried. "Don't smoke upon the powder-cask; wasting courage for nothing is like carrying water in a basket. Gerard," he added, in the ear of his adjutant, "get nearer, by degrees, to that fellow, and watch him; at the first suspicious action put your sword through him. As for me, I must take measures to carry on the ball if our unseen adversaries choose to open it."

The Chouan paid no attention to the movements of the young officer, and continued to play with his whip, and fling out the lash of it as though he were fishing in the ditch.

Meantime the commandant was saying to Merle, in a low voice: "Give ten picked men to a sergeant, and post them yourself above us on the summit of this slope, just where the path widens to a ledge; there you ought to see the whole length of the route to Ernee. Choose a position where the road is not flanked by woods, and where the sergeant can overlook the country. Take Clef-des-Coeurs; he is very intelligent. This is no laughing matter; I wouldn't give a farthing for our skins if we don't turn the odds in our favor at once."

While Merle was executing this order with a rapidity of which he fully understood the importance, the commandant waved his right hand to enforce silence on the soldiers, who were standing at ease, and laughing and joking around him. With another gesture he ordered them to take

up arms. When quiet was restored he turned his eyes from one end of the road to the other, listened with anxious attention as though he hoped to detect some stifled sound, some echo of weapons, or steps which might give warning of the expected attack. His black eye seemed to pierce the woods to an extraordinary depth. Perceiving no indications of danger, he next consulted, like a savage, the ground at his feet, to discover, if possible, the trail of the invisible enemies whose daring was well known to him. Desperate at seeing and hearing nothing to justify his fears, he turned aside from the road and ascended, not without difficulty, one or two hillocks. The other officers and the soldiers, observing the anxiety of a leader in whom they trusted and whose worth was known to them, knew that his extreme watchfulness meant danger; but not suspecting its imminence, they merely stood still and held their breaths by instinct. Like dogs endeavoring to guess the intentions of a huntsman, whose orders are incomprehensible to them though they faithfully obey him, the soldiers gazed in turn at the valley, at the woods by the roadside, at the stern face of their leader, endeavoring to read their fate. They questioned each other with their eyes, and more than one smile ran from lip to lip.

When Hulot returned to his men with an anxious look, Beau-Pied, a young sergeant who passed for the wit of his company, remarked in a low voice: “Where the deuce have we poked ourselves that an old trooper like Hulot should pull such a gloomy face? He’s as solemn as a council of war.”

Hulot gave the speaker a stern look, silence being ordered in the ranks. In the hush that ensued, the lagging steps of the conscripts on the creaking sand of the road produced a recurrent sound which added a sort of vague emotion to the general excitement. This indefinable feeling can be understood only by those who have felt their hearts beat in the silence of the night from a painful expectation heightened by some noise, the monotonous recurrence of which seems to distil terror into their minds, drop by drop.

The thought of the commandant, as he returned to his men, was: “Can I be mistaken?” He glanced, with a concentrated anger which flashed like lightning from his eyes, at the stolid, immovable Chouan; a look of savage irony which he fancied he detected in the man’s eyes, warned him not to relax in his precautions. Just then Captain Merle, having obeyed Hulot’s orders, returned to his side.

“We did well, captain,” said the commandant, “to put the few men whose patriotism we can count upon among those conscripts at the rear. Take a dozen more of our own bravest fellows, with sub-lieutenant Lebrun at their head, and make a rear-guard of them; they’ll support the patriots who are there already, and help to shove on that flock of birds and close up the distance between us. I’ll wait for you.”

The captain disappeared. The commander’s eye singled out four men on whose intelligence and quickness he knew he might rely, and he beckoned to them, silently, with the well-known friendly gesture of moving the right forefinger rapidly and repeatedly toward the nose. They came to him.

“You served with me under Hoche,” he said, “when we brought to reason those brigands who call themselves ‘Chasseurs du Roi’; you know how they hid themselves to swoop down on the Blues.”

At this commendation of their intelligence the four soldiers nodded with significant grins. Their heroically martial faces wore that look of careless resignation to fate which evidenced the fact that since the struggle had begun between France and Europe, the ideas of the private soldiers had never passed beyond the cartridge-boxes on their backs or the bayonets in front of them. With their lips drawn together like a purse when the strings are tightened, they looked at their commander attentively with inquiring eyes.

“You know,” continued Hulot, who possessed the art of speaking picturesquely as soldier to soldiers, “that it won’t do for old hares like us to be caught napping by the Chouans, – of whom there are plenty all round us, or my name’s not Hulot. You four are to march in advance and beat up both sides of this road. The detachment will hang fire here. Keep your eyes about you; don’t get picked off; and bring me news of what you find – quick!”

So saying he waved his hand towards the suspected heights along the road. The four men, by way of thanks raised the backs of their hands to their battered old three-cornered hats, discolored

by rain and ragged with age, and bent their bodies double. One of them, named Larose, a corporal well-known to Hulot, remarked as he clicked his musket: “We’ll play ‘em a tune on the clarinet, commander.”

They started, two to right and two to left of the road; and it was not without some excitement that their comrades watched them disappear. The commandant himself feared that he had sent them to their deaths, and an involuntary shudder seized him as he saw the last of them. Officers and soldiers listened to the gradually lessening sound of their footsteps, with feelings all the more acute because they were carefully hidden. There are occasions when the risk of four lives causes more excitement and alarm than all the slain at Jemmapes. The faces of those trained to war have such various and fugitive expressions that a painter who has to describe them is forced to appeal to the recollections of soldiers and to leave civilians to imagine these dramatic figures; for scenes so rich in detail cannot be rendered in writing, except at interminable length.

Just as the bayonets of the four men were finally lost to sight, Captain Merle returned, having executed the commandant’s orders with rapidity. Hulot, with two or three sharp commands, put his troop in line of battle and ordered it to return to the summit of La Pelerine where his little advanced-guard were stationed; walking last himself and looking backward to note any changes that might occur in a scene which Nature had made so lovely, and man so terrible. As he reached the spot where he had left the Chouan, Marche-a-Terre, who had seen with apparent indifference the various movements of the commander, but who was now watching with extraordinary intelligence the two soldiers in the woods to the right, suddenly gave the shrill and piercing cry of the *chouette*, or screech-owl. The three famous smugglers already mentioned were in the habit of using the various intonations of this cry to warn each other of danger or of any event that might concern them. From this came the nickname of “Chuin” which means *chouette* or owl in the dialect of that region. This corrupted word came finally to mean the whole body of those who, in the first uprising, imitated the tactics and the signals of the smugglers.

When Hulot heard that suspicious sound he stopped short and examined the man intently; then he feigned to be taken in by his stupid air, wishing to keep him by him as a barometer which might indicate the movements of the enemy. He therefore checked Gerard, whose hand was on his sword to despatch him; but he placed two soldiers beside the man he now felt to be a spy, and ordered them in a loud, clear voice to shoot him at the next sound he made. In spite of his imminent danger Marche-a-Terre showed not the slightest emotion. The commandant, who was studying him, took note of this apparent insensibility, and remarked to Gerard: “That fool is not so clever as he means to be! It is far from easy to read the face of a Chouan, but the fellow betrays himself by his anxiety to show his nerve. Ha! ha! if he had only pretended fear I should have taken him for a stupid brute. He and I might have made a pair! I came very near falling into the trap. Yes, we shall undoubtedly be attacked; but let ‘em come; I’m all ready now.”

As he said these words in a low voice, rubbing his hands with an air of satisfaction, he looked at the Chouan with a jeering eye. Then he crossed his arms on his breast and stood in the road with his favorite officers beside him awaiting the result of his arrangements. Certain that a fight was at hand, he looked at his men composedly.

“There’ll be a row,” said Beau-Pied to his comrades in a low voice. “See, the commandant is rubbing his hands.”

In critical situations like that in which the detachment and its commander were now placed, life is so clearly at stake that men of nerve make it a point of honor to show coolness and self-possession. These are the moments in which to judge men’s souls. The commandant, better informed of the danger than his two officers, took pride in showing his tranquillity. With his eyes moving from Marche-a-Terre to the road and thence to the woods he stood expecting, not without dread, a general volley from the Chouans, whom he believed to be hidden like brigands all around him; but his face remained impassible. Knowing that the eyes of the soldiers were turned upon him, he wrinkled his

brown cheeks pitted with the small-pox, screwed his upper lip, and winked his right eye, a grimace always taken for a smile by his men; then he tapped Gerard on the shoulder and said: "Now that things are quiet tell me what you wanted to say just now."

"I wanted to ask what this new crisis means, commandant?" was the reply.

"It is not new," said Hulot. "All Europe is against us, and this time she has got the whip hand. While those Directors are fighting together like horses in a stable without any oats, and letting the government go to bits, the armies are left without supplies or reinforcements. We are getting the worst of it in Italy; we've evacuated Mantua after a series of disasters on the Trebia, and Joubert has just lost a battle at Novi. I only hope Massena may be able to hold the Swiss passes against Suwarow. We're done for on the Rhine. The Directory have sent Moreau. The question is, Can he defend the frontier? I hope he may, but the Coalition will end by invading us, and the only general able to save the nation is, unluckily, down in that devilish Egypt; and how is he ever to get back, with England mistress of the Mediterranean?"

"Bonaparte's absence doesn't trouble me, commandant," said the young adjutant Gerard, whose intelligent mind had been developed by a fine education. "I am certain the Revolution cannot be brought to naught. Ha! we soldiers have a double mission, – not merely to defend French territory, but to preserve the national soul, the generous principles of liberty, independence, and rights of human reason awakened by our Assemblies and gaining strength, as I believe, from day to day. France is like a traveller bearing a light: he protects it with one hand, and defends himself with the other. If your news is true, we have never the last ten years been so surrounded with people trying to blow it out. Principles and nation are in danger of perishing together."

"Alas, yes," said Hulot, sighing. "Those clowns of Directors have managed to quarrel with all the men who could sail the ship. Bernadotte, Carnot, all of them, even Talleyrand, have deserted us. There's not a single good patriot left, except friend Fouche, who holds 'em through the police. There's a man for you! It was he who warned me of a coming insurrection; and here we are, sure enough, caught in a trap."

"If the army doesn't take things in hand and manage the government," said Gerard, "those lawyers in Paris will put us back just where we were before the Revolution. A parcel of ninnies! what do they know about governing?"

"I'm always afraid they'll treat with the Bourbons," said Hulot. "Thunder! if they did *that* a pretty pass we should be in, we soldiers!"

"No, no, commandant, it won't come to that," said Gerard. "The army, as you say, will raise its voice, and – provided it doesn't choose its words from Pichegru's vocabulary – I am persuaded we have not hacked ourselves to pieces for the last ten years merely to manure the flax and let others spin the thread."

"Well," interposed Captain Merle, "what we have to do now is to act as good patriots and prevent the Chouans from communicating with La Vendee; for, if they once come to an understanding and England gets her finger into the pie, I wouldn't answer for the cap of the Republic, one and invisible."

As he spoke the cry of an owl, heard at a distance, interrupted the conversation. Again the commander examined Marche-a-Terre, whose impassible face still gave no sign. The conscripts, their ranks closed up by an officer, now stood like a herd of cattle in the road, about a hundred feet distant from the escort, which was drawn up in line of battle. Behind them stood the rear-guard of soldiers and patriots, picked men, commanded by Lieutenant Lebrun. Hulot cast his eyes over this arrangement of his forces and looked again at the picket of men posted in advance upon the road. Satisfied with what he saw he was about to give the order to march, when the tricolor cockades of the two soldiers he had sent to beat the woods to the left caught his eye; he waited therefore till the two others, who had gone to the right, should reappear.

"Perhaps the ball will open over there," he said to his officers, pointing to the woods from which the two men did not emerge.

While the first two made their report Hulot's attention was distracted momentarily from Marche-a-Terre. The Chouan at once sent his owl's-cry to an apparently vast distance, and before the men who guarded him could raise their muskets and take aim he had struck them a blow with his whip which felled them, and rushed away. A terrible discharge of fire-arms from the woods just above the place where the Chouan had been sitting brought down six or eight soldiers. Marche-a-Terre, at whom several men had fired without touching him, vanished into the woods after climbing the slope with the agility of a wild-cat; as he did so his sabots rolled into the ditch and his feet were seen to be shod with the thick, hobnailed boots always worn by the Chouans.

At the first cries uttered by the Chouans, the conscripts sprang into the woods to the right like a flock of birds taking flight at the approach of a man.

"Fire on those scoundrels!" cried Hulot.

The company fired, but the conscripts knew well how to shelter themselves behind trees, and before the soldiers could reload they were out of sight.

"What's the use of *decreeing* levies in the departments?" said Hulot. "It is only such idiots as the Directory who would expect any good of a draft in this region. The Assembly had much better stop voting more shoes and money and ammunition, and see that we get what belongs to us."

At this moment the two skirmishers sent out on the right were seen returning with evident difficulty. The one that was least wounded supported his comrade, whose blood was moistening the earth. The two poor fellows were half-way down the slope when Marche-a-Terre showed his ugly face, and took so true an aim that both Blues fell together and rolled heavily into the ditch. The Chouan's monstrous head was no sooner seen than thirty muzzles were levelled at him, but, like a figure in a pantomime, he disappeared in a second among the tufts of gorse. These events, which have taken so many words to tell, happened instantaneously, and in another moment the rear-guard of patriots and soldiers had joined the main body of the escort.

"Forward!" cried Hulot.

The company moved quickly to the higher and more open ground on which the picket guard was already stationed. There, the commander formed his troop once more into line of battle; but, as the Chouans made no further hostile demonstrations, he began to think that the deliverance of the conscripts might have been the sole object of the ambuscade.

"Their cries," he said to his two friends, "prove that they are not numerous. We'll advance at a quick step, and possibly we may be able to reach Ernee without getting them on our backs."

These words were overheard by one of the patriot conscripts, who stepped from the ranks, and said respectfully: —

"General, I have already fought the Chouans; may I be allowed a word?"

"A lawyer," whispered Hulot to Merle. "They always want to harangue. Argue away," he said to the young man.

"General, the Chouans have no doubt brought arms for those escaped recruits. Now, if we try to outmarch them, they will catch us in the woods and shoot every one of us before we can get to Ernee. We must argue, as you call it, with cartridges. During the skirmish, which will last more time than you think for, some of us ought to go back and fetch the National Guard and the militia from Fougeres."

"Then you think there are a good many Chouans?"

"Judge for yourself, citizen commander."

He led Hulot to a place where the sand had been stirred as with a rake; then he took him to the opening of a wood-path, where the leaves were scattered and trampled into the earth, – unmistakable signs of the passage of a large body of men.

"Those were the 'gars' from Vitre," said the man, who came himself from Fougeres; "they are on their way to Lower Normandy."

"What is your name?" asked Hulot.

"Gudin, commander."

"Well, then, Gudin, I make you a corporal. You seem to me trustworthy. Select a man to send to Fougeres; but stay yourself with me. In the first place, however, take two or three of your comrades and bring in the muskets and ammunition of the poor fellows those brigands have rolled into the ditch. These Bretons," added Hulot to Gerard, "will make famous infantry if they take to rations."

Gudin's emissary started on a run to Fougeres by a wood-road to the left; the soldiers looked to their arms, and awaited an attack; the commandant passed along their line, smiling to them, and then placed himself with his officers, a little in front of it. Silence fell once more, but it was of short duration. Three hundred or more Chouans, their clothing identical with that of the late recruits, burst from the woods to the right with actual howls and planted themselves, without any semblance of order, on the road directly in front of the feeble detachment of the Blues. The commandant thereupon ranged his soldiers in two equal parts, each with a front of ten men. Between them, he placed the twelve recruits, to whom he hastily gave arms, putting himself at their head. This little centre was protected by the two wings, of twenty-five men each, which manoeuvred on either side of the road under the orders of Merle and Gerard; their object being to catch the Chouans on the flank and prevent them from posting themselves as sharp-shooters among the trees, where they could pick off the Blues without risk to themselves; for in these wars the Republican troops never knew where to look for an enemy.

These arrangements, hastily made, gave confidence to the soldiers, and they advanced in silence upon the Chouans. At the end of a few seconds each side fired, with the loss of several men. At this moment the two wings of the Republicans, to whom the Chouans had nothing to oppose, came upon their flanks, and, with a close, quick volley, sent death and disorder among the enemy. This manoeuvre very nearly equalized the numerical strength of the two parties. But the Chouan nature was so intrepid, their will so firm, that they did not give way; their losses scarcely staggered them; they simply closed up and attempted to surround the dark and well-formed little party of the Blues, which covered so little ground that it looked from a distance like a queen-bee surrounded by the swarm.

The Chouans might have carried the day at this moment if the two wings commanded by Merle and Gerard had not succeeded in getting in two volleys which took them diagonally on their rear. The Blues of the two wings ought to have remained in position and continued to pick off in this way their terrible enemies; but excited by the danger of their little main body, then completely surrounded by the Chouans, they flung themselves headlong into the road with fixed bayonets and made the battle even for a few moments. Both sides fought with a stubbornness intensified by the cruelty and fury of the partisan spirit which made this war exceptional. Each man, observant of danger, was silent. The scene was gloomy and cold as death itself. Nothing was heard through the clash of arms and the grinding of the sand under foot but the moans and exclamations of those who fell, either dead or badly wounded. The twelve loyal recruits in the republican main body protected the commandant (who was guiding his men and giving orders) with such courage that more than once several soldiers called out "Bravo, conscripts!"

Hulot, imperturbable and with an eye to everything, presently remarked among the Chouans a man who, like himself, was evidently surrounded by picked men, and was therefore, no doubt, the leader of the attacking party. He was eager to see this man distinctly, and he made many efforts to distinguish his features, but in vain; they were hidden by the red caps and broad-brimmed hats of those about him. Hulot did, however, see Marche-a-Terre beside this leader, repeating his orders in a hoarse voice, his own carbine, meanwhile, being far from inactive. The commandant grew impatient at being thus baffled. Waving his sword, he urged on the recruits and charged the centre of the Chouans with such fury that he broke through their line and came close to their chief, whose face, however, was still hidden by a broad-brimmed felt hat with a white cockade. But the invisible leader, surprised at so bold an attack, retreated a step or two and raised his hat abruptly, thus enabling Hulot to get a hasty idea of his appearance.

He was young, – Hulot thought him to be about twenty-five; he wore a hunting-jacket of green cloth, and a white belt containing pistols. His heavy shoes were hobnailed like those of the Chouans; leather leggings came to his knees covering the ends of his breeches of very coarse drilling, and completing a costume which showed off a slender and well-poised figure of medium height. Furious that the Blues should thus have approached him, he pulled his hat again over his face and sprang towards them. But he was instantly surrounded by Marche-a-Terre and several Chouans. Hulot thought he perceived between the heads which clustered about this young leader, a broad red ribbon worn across his chest. The eyes of the commandant, caught by this royal decoration (then almost forgotten by republicans), turned quickly to the young man's face, which, however, he soon lost sight of under the necessity of controlling and protecting his own little troop. Though he had barely time to notice a pair of brilliant eyes (the color of which escaped him), fair hair and delicate features bronzed by the sun, he was much struck by the dazzling whiteness of the neck, relieved by a black cravat carelessly knotted. The fiery attitude of the young leader proved him to be a soldier of the stamp of those who bring a certain conventional poesy into battle. His well-gloved hand waved above his head a sword which gleamed in the sunlight. His whole person gave an impression both of elegance and strength. An air of passionate self-devotion, enhanced by the charms of youth and distinguished manners, made this *emigre* a graceful image of the French *noblesse*. He presented a strong contrast to Hulot, who, ten feet distant from him, was quite as vivid an image of the vigorous Republic for which the old soldier was fighting; his stern face, his well-worn blue uniform with its shabby red facings and its blackened epaulettes hanging back of his shoulders, being visible signs of its needs and character.

The graceful attitude and expression of the young man were not lost on the commandant, who exclaimed as he pressed towards him: "Come on, opera-dancer, come on, and let me crush you!"

The royalist leader, provoked by his momentary disadvantage, advanced with an angry movement, but at the same moment the men who were about him rushed forward and flung themselves with fury on the Blues. Suddenly a soft, clear voice was heard above the din of battle saying: "Here died Saint-Lescure! Shall we not avenge him?"

At the magic words the efforts of the Chouans became terrible, and the soldiers of the Republic had great difficulty in maintaining themselves without breaking their little line of battle.

"If he wasn't a young man," thought Hulot, as he retreated step by step, "we shouldn't have been attacked in this way. Who ever heard of the Chouans fighting an open battle? Well, all the better! they won't shoot us off like dogs along the road." Then, raising his voice till it echoed through the woods, he exclaimed, "Come on, my men! Shall we let ourselves be *fooled* by those brigands?"

The word here given is but a feeble equivalent of the one the brave commandant used; but every veteran can substitute the real one, which was far more soldierly in character.

"Gerard! Merle!" added Hulot, "call in your men, form them into a battalion, take the rear, fire upon those dogs, and let's make an end of this!"

The order was difficult to obey, for the young chief, hearing Hulot's voice, cried out: "By Saint Anne of Auray, don't let them get away! Spread out, spread out, my lads!" and each of the two wings of the Blues was followed by Chouans who were fully as obstinate and far superior in numbers. The Republicans were surrounded on all sides by the Goatskins uttering their savage cries, which were more like howls.

"Hold your tongues, gentlemen," cried Beau-Pied; "we can't hear ourselves be killed."

This jest revived the courage of the Blues. Instead of fighting only at one point, the Republicans spread themselves to three different points on the table-land of La Pelerine, and the rattle of musketry woke all the echoes of the valleys, hitherto so peaceful beneath it. Victory might have remained doubtful for many hours, or the fight might have come to an end for want of combatants, for Blues and Chouans were equally brave and obstinate. Each side was growing more and more incensed, when the sound of a drum in the distance told that the body of men must be crossing the valley of Couesnon.

"There's the National Guard of Fougeres!" cried Gudin, in a loud voice; "my man has brought them."

The words reached the ears of the young leader of the Chouans and his ferocious aide-de-camp, and the royalists made a hasty retrograde movement, checked, however, by a brutal shout from Marche-a-Terre. After two or three orders given by the leader in a low voice, and transmitted by Marche-a-Terre in the Breton dialect, the Chouans made good their retreat with a cleverness which disconcerted the Republicans and even the commandant. At the first word of command they formed in line, presenting a good front, behind which the wounded retreated, and the others reloaded their guns. Then, suddenly, with the agility already shown by Marche-a-Terre, the wounded were taken over the brow of the eminence to the right of the road, while half the others followed them slowly to occupy the summit, where nothing could be seen of them by the Blues but their bold heads. There they made a rampart of the trees and pointed the muzzles of their guns on the Republicans, who were rapidly reformed under reiterated orders from Hulot and turned to face the remainder of the Chouans, who were still before them in the road. The latter retreated slowly, disputing the ground and wheeling so as to bring themselves under cover of their comrades' fire. When they reached the broad ditch which bordered the road, they scaled the high bank on the other side, braving the fire of the Republicans, which was sufficiently well-directed to fill the ditch with dead bodies. The Chouans already on the summit answered with a fire that was no less deadly. At that moment the National Guard of Fougeres reached the scene of action at a quick step, and its mere presence put an end to the affair. The Guard and some of the soldiers crossed the road and began to enter the woods, but the commandant called to them in his martial voice, "Do you want to be annihilated over there?"

The victory remained to the Republicans, though not without heavy loss. All the battered old hats were hung on the points of the bayonets and the muskets held aloft, while the soldiers shouted with one voice: "Vive la Republique!" Even the wounded, sitting by the roadside, shared in the general enthusiasm; and Hulot, pressing Gerard's hand, exclaimed: —

"Ha, ha! those are what I call *veterans*!"

Merle was directed to bury the dead in a ravine; while another party of men attended to the removal of the wounded. The carts and horses of the neighborhood were put into requisition, and the suffering men were carefully laid on the clothing of the dead. Before the little column started, the National Guard of Fougeres turned over to Hulot a Chouan, dangerously wounded, whom they had captured at the foot of the slope up which his comrades had escaped, and where he had fallen from weakness.

"Thanks for your help, citizens," said the commandant. "God's thunder! if it hadn't been for you, we should have had a pretty bad quarter of an hour. Take care of yourselves; the war has begun. Adieu, friends." Then, turning to the prisoner, he asked, "What's the name of your general?"

"The Gars."

"Who? Marche-a-Terre?"

"No, the Gars."

"Where does the Gars come from?"

To this question the prisoner, whose face was convulsed with suffering, made no reply; he took out his beads and began to say his prayers.

"The Gars is no doubt that young *ci-devant* with the black cravat, – sent by the tyrant and his allies Pitt and Coburg."

At that words the Chouan raised his head proudly and said: "Sent by God and the king!" He uttered the words with an energy which exhausted his strength. The commandant saw the difficulty of questioning a dying man, whose countenance expressed his gloomy fanaticism, and he turned away his head with a frown. Two soldiers, friends of those whom Marche-a-Terre had so brutally killed with the butt of his whip, stepped back a pace or two, took aim at the Chouan, whose fixed eyes

did not blink at the muzzles of their guns, fired at short range, and brought him down. When they approached the dead body to strip it, the dying man found strength to cry out loudly, “Vive le roi!”

“Yes, yes, you canting hypocrite,” cried Clef-des-Coeurs; “go and make your report to that Virgin of yours. Didn’t he shout in our faces, ‘Vive le roi!’ when we thought him cooked?”

“Here are his papers, commandant,” said Beau-Pied.

“Ho! ho!” cried Clef-des-Coeurs. “Come, all of you, and see this minion of the good God with colors on his stomach!”

Hulot and several soldiers came round the body, now entirely naked, and saw upon its breast a blue tattooing in the form of a swollen heart. It was the sign of initiation into the brotherhood of the Sacred Heart. Above this sign were the words, “Marie Lambrequin,” no doubt the man’s name.

“Look at that, Clef-des-Coeurs,” said Beau-Pied; “it would take you a hundred years to find out what that accoutrement is good for.”

“What should I know about the Pope’s uniform?” replied Clef-des-Coeurs, scornfully.

“You worthless bog-trotter, you’ll never learn anything,” retorted Beau-Pied. “Don’t you see that they’ve promised that poor fool that he shall live again, and he has painted his gizzard in order to find himself?”

At this sally – which was not without some foundation – even Hulot joined in the general hilarity. At this moment Merle returned, and the burial of the dead being completed and the wounded placed more or less comfortably in two carts, the rest of the late escort formed into two lines round the improvised ambulances, and descended the slope of the mountain towards Maine, where the beautiful valley of La Pelerine, a rival to that of Couesnon lay before it.

Hulot with his two officers followed the troop slowly, hoping to get safely to Ernee where the wounded could be cared for. The fight we have just described, which was almost forgotten in the midst of the greater events which were soon to occur, was called by the name of the mountain on which it took place. It obtained some notice at the West, where the inhabitants, observant of this second uprising, noticed on this occasion a great change in the manner in which the Chouans now made war. In earlier days they would never have attacked so large a detachment. According to Hulot the young royalist whom he had seen was undoubtedly the Gars, the new general sent to France by the princes, who, following the example of the other royalist chiefs, concealed his real name and title under one of those pseudonyms called “noms de guerre.” This circumstance made the commandant quite as uneasy after his melancholy victory as he had been before it while expecting the attack. He turned several times to consider the table-land of La Pelerine which he was leaving behind him, across which he could still hear faintly at intervals the drums of the National Guard descending into the valley of Couesnon at the same time that the Blues were descending into that of La Pelerine.

“Can either of you,” he said to his two friends, “guess the motives of that attack of the Chouans? To them, fighting is a matter of business, and I can’t see what they expected to gain by this attack. They have lost at least a hundred men, and we” – he added, screwing up his right cheek and winking by way of a smile, “have lost only sixty. God’s thunder! I don’t understand that sort of speculation. The scoundrels needn’t have attacked us; we might just as well have been allowed to pass like letters through the post – No, I don’t see what good it has done them to bullet-hole our men,” he added, with a sad shake of his head toward the carts. “Perhaps they only intended to say good-day to us.”

“But they carried off our recruits, commander,” said Merle.

“The recruits could have skipped like frogs into the woods at any time, and we should never have gone after them, especially if those fellows had fired a single volley,” returned Hulot. “No, no, there’s something behind all this.” Again he turned and looked at La Pelerine. “See!” he cried; “see there!”

Though they were now at a long distance from the fatal plateau, they could easily distinguish Marche-a-Terre and several Chouans who were again occupying it.

“Double-quick, march!” cried Hulot to his men, “open your compasses and trot the steeds faster than that! Are your legs frozen?”

These words drove the little troop into a rapid motion.

"There's a mystery, and it's hard to make out," continued Hulot, speaking to his friends. "God grant it isn't explained by muskets at Ernee. I'm very much afraid that we shall find the road to Mayenne cut off by the king's men."

The strategical problem which troubled the commandant was causing quite as much uneasiness to the persons whom he had just seen on the summit of Mont Pelerine. As soon as the drums of the National Guard were out of hearing and Marche-a-Terre had seen the Blues at the foot of the declivity, he gave the owl's cry joyously, and the Chouans reappeared, but their numbers were less. Some were no doubt busy in taking care of the wounded in the little village of La Pelerine, situated on the side of the mountain which looks toward the valley of Couesnon. Two or three chiefs of what were called the "Chasseurs du Roi" clustered about Marche-a-Terre. A few feet apart sat the young noble called The Gars, on a granite rock, absorbed in thoughts excited by the difficulties of his enterprise, which now began to show themselves. Marche-a-Terre screened his forehead with his hand from the rays of the sun, and looked gloomily at the road by which the Blues were crossing the valley of La Pelerine. His small black eyes could see what was happening on the hill-slopes on the other side of the valley.

"The Blues will intercept the messenger," said the angry voice of one of the leaders who stood near him.

"By Saint Anne of Auray!" exclaimed another. "Why did you make us fight? Was it to save your own skin from the Blues?"

Marche-a-Terre darted a venomous look at his questioner and struck the ground with his heavy carbine.

"Am I your leader?" he asked. Then after a pause he added, pointing to the remains of Hulot's detachment, "If you had all fought as I did, not one of those Blues would have escaped, and the coach could have got here safely."

"They'd never have thought of escorting it or holding it back if we had let them go by without a fight. No, you wanted to save your precious skin and get out of their hands – He has bled us for the sake of his own snout," continued the orator, "and made us lose twenty thousand francs in good coin."

"Snout yourself!" cried Marche-a-Terre, retreating three steps and aiming at his aggressor. "It isn't that you hate the Blues, but you love the gold. Die without confession and be damned, for you haven't taken the sacrament for a year."

This insult so incensed the Chouan that he turned pale and a low growl came from his chest as he aimed in turn at Marche-a-Terre. The young chief sprang between them and struck their weapons from their hands with the barrel of his own carbine; then he demanded an explanation of the dispute, for the conversation had been carried on in the Breton dialect, an idiom with which he was not familiar.

"Monsieur le marquis," said Marche-a-Terre, as he ended his account of the quarrel, "it is all the more unreasonable in them to find fault with me because I have left Pille-Miche behind me; he'll know how to save the coach for us."

"What!" exclaimed the young man, angrily, "are you waiting here, all of you, to pillage that coach? – a parcel of cowards who couldn't win a victory in the first fight to which I led you! But why should you win if that's your object? The defenders of God and the king are thieves, are they? By Saint Anne of Auray! I'd have you know, we are making war against the Republic, and not robbing travellers. Those who are guilty in future of such shameful actions shall not receive absolution, nor any of the favors reserved for the faithful servants of the king."

A murmur came from the group of Chouans, and it was easy to see that the authority of the new chief was about to be disputed. The young man, on whom this effect of his words was by no means lost, was thinking of the best means of maintaining the dignity of his command, when the trot of a horse was heard in the vicinity. All heads turned in the direction from which the sound came. A

lady appeared, sitting astride of a little Breton horse, which she put at a gallop as soon as she saw the young leader, so as to reach the group of Chouans as quickly as possible.

"What is the matter?" she said, looking first at the Chouans and then at their chief.

"Could you believe it, madame? they are waiting to rob the diligence from Mayenne to Fougeres when we have just had a skirmish, in order to release the conscripts of Fougeres, which has cost us a great many men without defeating the Blues."

"Well, where's the harm of that?" asked the young lady, to whom the natural shrewdness of a woman explained the whole scene. "You have lost men, but there's no lack of others; the coach is bringing gold, and there's always a lack of that. We bury men, who go to heaven, and we take money, which goes into the pockets of heroes. I don't see the difficulty."

The Chouans approved of her speech by unanimous smiles.

"Do you see nothing in all that to make you blush?" said the young man, in a low voice. "Are you in such need of money that you must pillage on the high-road?"

"I am so eager for it, marquis, that I should put my heart in pawn if it were not already captured," she said, smiling coquettishly. "But where did you get the strange idea that you could manage Chouans without letting them rob a few Blues here and there? Don't you know the saying, 'Thieving as an owl'? – and that's a Chouan. Besides," she said, raising her voice to be heard by the men, "it is just; haven't the Blues seized the property of the Church, and our own?"

Another murmur, very different from the growl with which the Chouans had answered their leader, greeted these words. The young man's face grew darker; he took the young lady aside and said in the annoyed tone of a well-bred man, "Will those gentlemen be at La Vivetiere on the appointed day?"

"Yes," she replied, "all of them, the Claimant, Grand-Jacques, and perhaps Ferdinand."

"Then allow me to return there. I cannot sanction such robbery. Yes, madame, I call it robbery. There may be honor in being robbed, but – "

"Well, well," she said, interrupting him, "then I shall have your share of the booty, and I am much obliged to you for giving it up to me; the extra sum will be extremely useful, for my mother has delayed sending me money, so that I am almost destitute."

"Adieu!" cried the marquis.

He turned away, but the lady ran after him.

"Why won't you stay with me?" she said, giving him the look, half-despotic, half-caressing, with which women who have a right to a man's respect let him know their wishes.

"You are going to pillage that coach?"

"Pillage? what a word!" she said. "Let me explain to you – "

"Explain nothing," he said, taking her hand and kissing it with the superficial gallantry of a courtier. "Listen to me," he added after a short pause: "if I were to stay here while they capture that diligence our people would kill me, for I should certainly – "

"Not kill them," she said quickly, "for they would bind your hands, with all the respect that is due to your rank; then, having levied the necessary contribution for their equipment, subsistence, and munitions from our enemies, they would unbind you and obey you blindly."

"And you wish me to command such men under such circumstances? If my life is necessary to the cause which I defend allow me at any rate to save the honor of my position. If I withdraw now I can ignore this base act. I will return, in order to escort you."

So saying, he rapidly disappeared. The young lady listened to his receding steps with evident displeasure. When the sound on the dried leaves ceased, she stood for a moment as if confounded, then she hastily returned to the Chouans. With a gesture of contempt she said to Marche-a-Terre, who helped her to dismount, "That young man wants to make regular war on the Republic! Ah, well! he'll get over that in a few days. How he treated me!" she thought, presently.

She seated herself on the rock where the marquis had been sitting, and silently awaited the arrival of the coach. It was one of the phenomena of the times, and not the least of them, that this young and noble lady should be flung by violent partisanship into the struggle of monarchies against the spirit of the age, and be driven by the strength of her feelings into actions of which it may almost be said she was not conscious. In this she resembled others of her time who were led away by an enthusiasm which was often productive of noble deeds. Like her, many women played heroic or blameworthy parts in the fierce struggle. The royalist cause had no emissaries so devoted and so active as these women; but none of the heroines on that side paid for mistaken devotion or for actions forbidden to their sex, with a greater expiation than did this lady when, seated on that wayside rock, she was forced to admire the young leader's noble disdain and loyalty to principle. Insensibly she dropped into reverie. Bitter memories made her long for the innocence of her early years, and regret that she had escaped being a victim of the Revolution whose victorious march could no longer be arrested by feeble hands.

The coach, which, as we now see, had much to do with the attack of the Chouans, had started from the little town of Ernee a few moments before the skirmishing began. Nothing pictures a region so well as the state of its social material. From this point of view the coach deserves a mention. The Revolution itself was powerless to destroy it; in fact, it still rolls to this present day. When Turgot bought up the privileges of a company, obtained under Louis XIV., for the exclusive right of transporting travellers from one part of the kingdom to another, and instituted the lines of coaches called the "turgotines," all the old vehicles of the former company flocked into the provinces. One of these shabby coaches was now plying between Mayenne and Fougeres. A few objectors called it the "turgotine," partly to mimic Paris and partly to deride a minister who attempted innovations. This turgotine was a wretched cabriolet on two high wheels, in the depths of which two persons, if rather fat, could with difficulty have stowed themselves. The narrow quarters of this rickety machine not admitting of any crowding, and the box which formed the seat being kept exclusively for the postal service, the travellers who had any baggage were forced to keep it between their legs, already tortured by being squeezed into a sort of little box in shape like a bellows. The original color of coach and running-gear was an insoluble enigma. Two leather curtains, very difficult to adjust in spite of their long service, were supposed to protect the occupants from cold and rain. The driver, perched on a plank seat like those of the worst Parisian "coucous," shared in the conversation by reason of his position between his victims, biped and quadruped. The equipage presented various fantastic resemblances to decrepit old men who have gone through a goodly number of catarrhs and apoplexies and whom death respects; it moaned as it rolled, and squeaked spasmodically. Like a traveller overtaken by sleep, it rocked alternately forward and back, as though it tried to resist the violent action of two little Breton horses which dragged it along a road which was more than rough. This monument of a past era contained three travellers, who, on leaving Ernee, where they had changed horses, continued a conversation begun with the driver before reaching the little town.

"What makes you think the Chouans are hereabouts?" said the coachman. "The Ernee people tell me that Commandant Hulot has not yet started from Fougeres."

"Ho, ho, friend driver!" said the youngest of the travellers, "you risk nothing but your own carcass! If you had a thousand francs about you, as I have, and were known to be a good patriot, you wouldn't take it so easy."

"You are pretty free with your tongue, any way," said the driver, shaking his head.

"Count your lambs, and the wolf will eat them," remarked another of the travellers.

This man, who was dressed in black, seemed to be about forty years old, and was, probably, the rector of some parish in the neighborhood. His chin rested on a double fold of flesh, and his florid complexion indicated a priest. Though short and fat, he displayed some agility when required to get in or out of the vehicle.

"Perhaps you are both Chouans!" cried the man of the thousand francs, whose ample goatskin, covering trousers of good cloth and a clean waistcoat, bespoke a rich farmer. "By the soul of Saint Robespierre! I swear you shall be roughly handled."

He turned his gray eyes from the driver to his fellow-travellers and showed them a pistol in his belt.

"Bretons are not afraid of that," said the rector, disdainfully. "Besides, do we look like men who want your money?"

Every time the word "money" was mentioned the driver was silent, and the rector had wit enough to doubt whether the patriot had any at all, and to suspect that the driver was carrying a good deal.

"Are you well laden, Coupiau?" he asked.

"Oh, no, Monsieur Gudin," replied the coachman. "I'm carrying next to nothing."

The priest watched the faces of the patriot and Coupiau as the latter made this answer, and both were imperturbable.

"So much the better for you," remarked the patriot. "I can now take measures to save my property in case of danger."

Such despotic assumption nettled Coupiau, who answered gruffly: "I am the master of my own carriage, and so long as I drive you – "

"Are you a patriot, or are you a Chouan?" said the other, sharply interrupting him.

"Neither the one nor the other," replied Coupiau. "I'm a postilion, and, what is more, a Breton, – consequently, I fear neither Blues nor nobles."

"Noble thieves!" cried the patriot, ironically.

"They only take back what was stolen from them," said the rector, vehemently.

The two men looked at each other in the whites of their eyes, if we may use a phrase so colloquial. Sitting back in the vehicle was a third traveller who took no part in the discussion, and preserved a deep silence. The driver and the patriot and even Gudin paid no attention to this mute individual; he was, in truth, one of those uncomfortable, unsocial travellers who are found sometimes in a stage-coach, like a patient calf that is being carried, bound, to the nearest market. Such travellers begin by filling their legal space, and end by sleeping, without the smallest respect for their fellow-beings, on a neighbor's shoulder. The patriot, Gudin, and the driver had let him alone, thinking him asleep, after discovering that it was useless to talk to a man whose stolid face betrayed an existence spent in measuring yards of linen, and an intellect employed in selling them at a good percentage above cost. This fat little man, doubled-up in his corner, opened his porcelain-blue eyes every now and then, and looked at each speaker with a sort of terror. He appeared to be afraid of his fellow-travellers and to care very little about the Chouans. When he looked at the driver, however, they seemed to be a pair of free-masons. Just then the first volley of musketry was heard on La Pelerine. Coupiau, frightened, stopped the coach.

"Oh! oh!" said the priest, as if he had some means of judging, "it is a serious engagement; there are many men."

"The trouble for us, Monsieur Gudin," cried Coupiau, "is to know which side will win."

The faces of all became unanimously anxious.

"Let us put up the coach at that inn which I see over there," said the patriot; "we can hide it till we know the result of the fight."

The advice seemed so good that Coupiau followed it. The patriot helped him to conceal the coach behind a wood-pile; the abbe seized the occasion to pull Coupiau aside and say to him, in a low voice: "Has he really any money?"

"Hey, Monsieur Gudin, if it gets into the pockets of your Reverence, they won't be weighed down with it."

When the Blues marched by, after the encounter on La Pelerine, they were in such haste to reach Ernee that they passed the little inn without halting. At the sound of their hasty march, Gudin and the innkeeper, stirred by curiosity, went to the gate of the courtyard to watch them. Suddenly, the fat ecclesiastic rushed to a soldier who was lagging in the rear.

"Gudin!" he cried, "you wrong-headed fellow, have you joined the Blues? My lad, you are surely not in earnest?"

"Yes, uncle," answered the corporal. "I've sworn to defend France."

"Unhappy boy! you'll lose your soul," said the uncle, trying to rouse his nephew to the religious sentiments which are so powerful in the Breton breast.

"Uncle," said the young man, "if the king had placed himself at the head of his armies, I don't say but what – "

"Fool! who is talking to you about the king? Does your republic give abbeys? No, it has upset everything. How do you expect to get on in life? Stay with us; sooner or later we shall triumph and you'll be counsellor to some parliament."

"Parliaments!" said young Gudin, in a mocking tone. "Good-bye, uncle."

"You sha'n't have a penny at my death," cried his uncle, in a rage. "I'll disinherit you."

"Thank you, uncle," said the Republican, as they parted.

The fumes of the cider which the patriot copiously bestowed on Coupiau during the passage of the little troop had somewhat dimmed the driver's perceptions, but he roused himself joyously when the innkeeper, having questioned the soldiers, came back to the inn and announced that the Blues were victorious. He at once brought out the coach and before long it was wending its way across the valley.

When the Blues reached an acclivity on the road from which the plateau of La Pelerine could again be seen in the distance, Hulot turned round to discover if the Chouans were still occupying it, and the sun, glinting on the muzzles of the guns, showed them to him, each like a dazzling spot. Giving a last glance to the valley of La Pelerine before turning into that of Ernee, he thought he saw Coupiau's vehicle on the road he had just traversed.

"Isn't that the Mayenne coach?" he said to his two officers.

They looked at the venerable turgotine, and easily recognized it.

"But," said Hulot, "how did we fail to meet it?"

Merle and Gerard looked at each other in silence.

"Another enigma!" cried the commandant. "But I begin to see the meaning of it all."

At the same moment Marche-a-Terre, who also knew the turgotine, called his comrades' attention to it, and the general shout of joy which they sent up roused the young lady from her reflections. She advanced a little distance and saw the coach, which was beginning the ascent of La Pelerine with fatal rapidity. The luckless vehicle soon reached the plateau. The Chouans, who had meantime hidden themselves, swooped on their prey with hungry celerity. The silent traveller slipped to the floor of the carriage, bundling himself up into the semblance of a bale.

"Well done!" cried Coupiau from his wooden perch, pointing to the man in the goatskin; "you must have scented this patriot who has lots of gold in his pouch – "

The Chouans greeted these words with roars of laughter, crying out: "Pille-Miche! hey, Pille-Miche! Pille-Miche!"

Amid the laughter, to which Pille-Miche responded like an echo, Coupiau came down from his seat quite crestfallen. When the famous Cibot, otherwise called Pille-Miche, helped his neighbor to get out of the coach, a respectful murmur was heard among the Chouans.

"It is the Abbe Gudin!" cried several voices. At this respected name every hat was off, and the men knelt down before the priest as they asked his blessing, which he gave solemnly.

"Pille-Miche here could trick Saint Peter and steal the keys of Paradise," said the rector, slapping that worthy on the shoulder. "If it hadn't been for him, the Blues would have intercepted us."

Then, noticing the lady, the abbe went to speak to her apart. Marche-a-Terre, who had meantime briskly opened the boot of the cabriolet, held up to his comrades, with savage joy, a bag, the shape of which betrayed its contents to be rolls of coin. It did not take long to divide the booty. Each Chouan received his share, so carefully apportioned that the division was made without the slightest dispute. Then Marche-a-Terre went to the lady and the priest, and offered them each about six thousand francs.

"Can I conscientiously accept this money, Monsieur Gudin?" said the lady, feeling a need of justification.

"Why not, madame? In former days the Church approved of the confiscation of the property of Protestants, and there's far more reason for confiscating that of these revolutionists, who deny God, destroy chapels, and persecute religion."

The abbe then joined example to precept by accepting, without the slightest scruple, the novel sort of tithe which Marche-a-Terre offered to him. "Besides," he added, "I can now devote all I possess to the service of God and the king; for my nephew has joined the Blues, and I disinherit him."

Coupiau was bemoaning himself and declaring that he was ruined.

"Join us," said Marche-a-Terre, "and you shall have your share."

"They'll say I let the coach be robbed on purpose if I return without signs of violence."

"Oh, is that all?" exclaimed Marche-a-Terre.

He gave a signal and a shower of bullets riddled the turgotine. At this unexpected volley the old vehicle gave forth such a lamentable cry that the Chouans, superstitious by nature, recoiled in terror; but Marche-a-Terre caught sight of the pallid face of the silent traveller rising from the floor of the coach.

"You've got another fowl in your coop," he said in a low voice to Coupiau.

"Yes," said the driver; "but I make it a condition of my joining you that I be allowed to take that worthy man safe and sound to Fougeres. I'm pledged to it in the name of Saint Anne of Auray."

"Who is he?" asked Pille-Miche.

"That I can't tell you," replied Coupiau.

"Let him alone!" said Marche-a-Terre, shoving Pille-Miche with his elbow; "he has vowed by Saint Anne of Auray, and he must keep his word."

"Very good," said Pille-Miche, addressing Coupiau; "but mind you don't go down the mountain too fast; we shall overtake you, – a good reason why; I want to see the cut of your traveller, and give him his passport."

Just then the gallop of a horse coming rapidly up the slopes of La Pelerine was heard, and the young chief presently reappeared. The lady hastened to conceal the bag of plunder which she held in her hand.

"You can keep that money without any scruple," said the young man, touching the arm which the lady had put behind her. "Here is a letter for you which I have just found among mine which were waiting for me at La Vivetiere; it is from your mother." Then, looking at the Chouans who were disappearing into the woods, and at the turgotine which was now on its way to the valley of Couesnon, he added: "After all my haste I see I am too late. God grant I am deceived in my suspicions!"

"It was my poor mother's money!" cried the lady, after opening her letter, the first lines of which drew forth her exclamation.

A smothered laugh came from the woods, and the young man himself could not help smiling as he saw the lady holding in her hand the bag containing her share in the pillage of her own money. She herself began to laugh.

"Well, well, marquis, God be praised! this time, at least, you can't blame me," she said, smiling.

"Levity in everything! even your remorse!" said the young man.

She colored and looked at the marquis with so genuine a contrition that he was softened. The abbe politely returned to her, with an equivocal manner, the sum he had received; then he followed

the young leader who took the by-way through which he had come. Before following them the lady made a sign to Marche-a-Terre, who came to her.

"Advance towards Mortagne," she said to him in a low voice. "I know that the Blues are constantly sending large sums of money in coin to Alencon to pay for their supplies of war. If I allow you and your comrades to keep what you captured to-day it is only on condition that you repay it later. But be careful that the Gars knows nothing of the object of the expedition; he would certainly oppose it; in case of ill-luck, I will pacify him."

"Madame," said the marquis, after she had rejoined him and had mounted his horse *en croupe*, giving her own to the abbe, "my friends in Paris write me to be very careful of what we do; the Republic, they say, is preparing to fight us with spies and treachery."

"It wouldn't be a bad plan," she replied; "they have clever ideas, those fellows. I could take part in that sort of war and find foes."

"I don't doubt it!" cried the marquis. "Pichegru advises me to be cautious and watchful in my friendships and relations of every kind. The Republic does me the honor to think me more dangerous than all the Vendeans put together, and counts on certain of my weaknesses to lay hands upon me."

"Surely you will not distrust me?" she said, striking his heart with the hand by which she held to him.

"Are you a traitor, madame?" he said, bending towards her his forehead, which she kissed.

"In that case," said the abbe, referring to the news, "Fouche's police will be more dangerous for us than their battalions of recruits and counter-Chouans."

"Yes, true enough, father," replied the marquis.

"Ah! ah!" cried the lady. "Fouche means to send women against you, does he? I shall be ready for them," she added in a deeper tone of voice and after a slight pause.

At a distance of three or four gunshots from the plateau, now abandoned, a little scene was taking place which was not uncommon in those days on the high-roads. After leaving the little village of La Pelerine, Pille-Miche and Marche-a-Terre again stopped the turgotine at a dip in the road. Coupiau got off his seat after making a faint resistance. The silent traveller, extracted from his hiding place by the two Chouans, found himself on his knees in a furze bush.

"Who are you?" asked Marche-a-Terre in a threatening voice.

The traveller kept silence until Pille-Miche put the question again and enforced it with the butt end of his gun.

"I am Jacques Pinaud," he replied, with a glance at Coupiau; "a poor linen-draper."

Coupiau made a sign in the negative, not considering it an infraction of his promise to Saint Anne. The sign enlightened Pille-Miche, who took aim at the luckless traveller, while Marche-a-Terre laid before him categorically a terrible ultimatum.

"You are too fat to be poor. If you make me ask you your name again, here's my friend Pille-Miche, who will obtain the gratitude and good-will of your heirs in a second. Who are you?" he added, after a pause.

"I am d'Orgemont, of Fougeres."

"Ah! ah!" cried the two Chouans.

"I didn't tell your name, Monsieur d'Orgemont," said Coupiau. "The Holy Virgin is my witness that I did my best to protect you."

"Inasmuch as you are Monsieur d'Orgemont, of Fougeres," said Marche-a-Terre, with an air of ironical respect, "we shall let you go in peace. Only, as you are neither a good Chouan nor a true Blue (thought it was you who bought the property of the Abbey de Juvigny), you will pay us three hundred crowns of six francs each for your ransom. Neutrality is worth that, at least."

"Three hundred crowns of six francs each!" chorussed the luckless banker, Pille-Miche, and Coupiau, in three different tones.

"Alas, my good friend," continued d'Orgemont, "I'm a ruined man. The last forced loan of that devilish Republic for a hundred millions sucked me dry, taxed as I was already."

"How much did your Republic get out of you?"

"A thousand crowns, my dear man," replied the banker, with a piteous air, hoping for a reduction.

"If your Republic gets forced loans out of you for such big sums as that you must see that you would do better with us; our government would cost you less. Three hundred crowns, do you call that dear for your skin?"

"Where am I to get them?"

"Out of your strong-box," said Pille-Miche; "and mind that the money is forthcoming, or we'll singe you still."

"How am I to pay it to you?" asked d'Orgemont.

"Your country-house at Fougeres is not far from Gibarry's farm where my cousin Galope-Chopine, otherwise called Cibot, lives. You can pay the money to him," said Pille-Miche.

"That's not business-like," said d'Orgemont.

"What do we care for that?" said Marche-a-Terre. "But mind you remember that if that money is not paid to Galope-Chopine within two weeks we shall pay you a little visit which will cure your gout. As for you, Coupiau," added Marche-a-Terre, "your name in future is to be Mene-a-Bien."

So saying, the two Chouans departed. The traveller returned to the vehicle, which, thanks to Coupiau's whip, now made rapid progress to Fougeres.

"If you'd only been armed," said Coupiau, "we might have made some defence."

"Idiot!" cried d'Orgemont, pointing to his heavy shoes. "I have ten thousand francs in those soles; do you think I would be such a fool as to fight with that sum about me?"

Mene-a-Bien scratched his ear and looked behind him, but his new comrades were out of sight.

Hulot and his command stopped at Ernee long enough to place the wounded in the hospital of the little town, and then, without further hindrance, they reached Mayenne. There the commandant cleared up his doubts as to the action of the Chouans, for on the following day the news of the pillage of the turgotine was received.

A few days later the government despatched to Mayenne so strong a force of "patriotic conscripts," that Hulot was able to fill the ranks of his brigade. Disquieting rumors began to circulate about the insurrection. A rising had taken place at all the points where, during the late war, the Chouans and Bretons had made their chief centres of insurrection. The little town of Saint-James, between Pontorson and Fougeres was occupied by them, apparently for the purpose of making it for the time being a headquarters of operations and supplies. From there they were able to communicate with Normandy and the Morbihan without risk. Their subaltern leaders roamed the three provinces, roused all the partisans of monarchy, and gave consistence and unity to their plans. These proceedings coincided with what was going on in La Vendee, where the same intrigues, under the influence of four famous leaders (the Abbe Vernal, the Comte de Fontaine, De Chatillon, and Suzannet), were agitating the country. The Chevalier de Valois, the Marquis d'Esgrignon, and the Troisvilles were, it was said, corresponding with these leaders in the department of the Orne. The chief of the great plan of operations which was thus developing slowly but in formidable proportions was really "the Gars," – a name given by the Chouans to the Marquis de Montauran on his arrival from England. The information sent to Hulot by the War department proved correct in all particulars. The marquis gained after a time sufficient ascendancy over the Chouans to make them understand the true object of the war, and to persuade them that the excesses of which they were guilty brought disgrace upon the cause they had adopted. The daring nature, the nerve, coolness, and capacity of this young nobleman awakened the hopes of all the enemies of the Republic, and suited so thoroughly the grave and even solemn enthusiasm of those regions that even the least zealous partisans of the king did their part in preparing a decisive blow in behalf of the defeated monarchy.

Hulot received no answer to the questions and the frequent reports which he addressed to the government in Paris.

But the news of the almost magical return of General Bonaparte and the events of the 18th Brumaire were soon current in the air. The military commanders of the West understood then the silence of the ministers. Nevertheless, they were only the more impatient to be released from the responsibility that weighed upon them; and they were in every way desirous of knowing what measures the new government was likely to take. When it was known to these soldiers that General Bonaparte was appointed First Consul of the Republic their joy was great; they saw, for the first time, one of their own profession called to the management of the nation. France, which had made an idol of this young hero, quivered with hope. The vigor and energy of the nation revived. Paris, weary of its long gloom, gave itself up to fetes and pleasures of which it had been so long deprived. The first acts of the Consulate did not diminish any hopes, and Liberty felt no alarm. The First Consul issued a proclamation to the inhabitants of the West. The eloquent allocutions addressed to the masses which Bonaparte had, as it were, invented, produced effects in those days of patriotism and miracle that were absolutely startling. His voice echoed through the world like the voice of a prophet, for none of his proclamations had, as yet, been belied by defeat.

INHABITANTS:

> An impious war again inflames the West.
>
> The makers of these troubles are traitors sold to the English, or brigands who seek in civil war opportunity and license for misdeeds.
>
> To such men the government owes no forbearance, nor any declaration of its principles.
>
> But there are citizens, dear to France, who have been misled by their wiles. It is so such that truth and light are due.
>
> Unjust laws have been promulgated and executed; arbitrary acts have threatened the safety of citizens and the liberty of consciences; mistaken entries on the list of *emigres* imperil citizens; the great principles of social order have been violated.
>
> The Consuls declare that liberty of worship having been guaranteed by the Constitution, the law of 11 Prairial, year III., which gives the use of edifices built for religious worship to all citizens, shall be executed.
>
> The government will pardon; it will be merciful to repentance; its mercy will be complete and absolute; but it will punish whosoever, after this declaration, shall dare to resist the national sovereignty.

"Well," said Hulot, after the public reading of this Consular manifesto, "Isn't that paternal enough? But you'll see that not a single royalist brigand will be changed by it."

The commandant was right. The proclamation merely served to strengthen each side in their own convictions. A few days later Hulot and his colleagues received reinforcements. The new minister of war notified them that General Brune was appointed to command the troops in the west of France. Hulot, whose experience was known to the government, had provisional control in the departments of the Orne and Mayenne. An unusual activity began to show itself in the government offices. Circulars from the minister of war and the minister of police gave notice that vigorous measures entrusted to the military commanders would be taken to stifle the insurrection at its birth. But the Chouans and the Vendeans had profited by the inaction of the Directory to rouse the whole region and virtually take possession of it. A new Consular proclamation was therefore issued. This time, it was the general speaking to his troops: —

SOLDIERS:

There are none but brigands, *emigres*, and hirelings of England now remaining in the West.

The army is composed of more than fifty thousand brave men. Let me speedily hear from them that the rebel chiefs have ceased to live.

Glory is won by toil alone; if it could be had by living in barracks in a town, all would have it.

Soldiers, whatever be the rank you hold in the army, the gratitude of the nation awaits you. To be worthy of it, you must brave the inclemencies of weather, ice, snow, and the excessive coldness of the nights; you must surprise your enemies at daybreak, and exterminate those wretches, the disgrace of France.

Make a short and sure campaign; be inexorable to those brigands, and maintain strict discipline.

National Guards, join the strength of your arms to that of the line.

If you know among you any men who fraternize with the brigands, arrest them. Let them find no refuge; pursue them; if traitors dare to harbor and defend them, let them perish together.

"What a man!" cried Hulot. "It is just as it was in the army of Italy – he rings in the mass, and he says it himself. Don't you call that talking, hey?"

"Yes, but he speaks by himself and in his own name," said Gerard, who began to feel alarmed at the possible results of the 18th Brumaire.

"And where's the harm, since he's a soldier?" said Merle.

A group of soldiers were clustered at a little distance before the same proclamation posted on a wall. As none of them could read, they gazed at it, some with a careless eye, others with curiosity, while two or three hunted about for a citizen who looked learned enough to read it to them.

"Now you tell us, Clef-des-Coeurs, what that rag of a paper says," cried Beau-Pied, in a saucy tone to his comrade.

"Easy to guess," replied Clef-des-Coeurs.

At these words the other men clustered round the pair, who were always ready to play their parts.

"Look there," continued Clef-des-Coeurs, pointing to a coarse woodcut which headed the proclamation and represented a pair of compasses, – which had lately superseded the level of 1793. "It means that the troops – that's us – are to march firm; don't you see the compasses are open, both legs apart? – that's an emblem."

"Such much for your learning, my lad; it isn't an emblem – it's called a problem. I've served in the artillery," continued Beau-Pied, "and problems were meat and drink to my officers."

"I say it's an emblem."

"It's a problem."

"What will you bet?"

"Anything."

"Your German pipe?"

"Done!"

"By your leave, adjutant, isn't that thing an emblem, and not a problem?" said Clef-des-Coeurs, following Gerard, who was thoughtfully walking away.

"It is both," he replied, gravely.

"The adjutant was making fun of you," said Beau-Pied. "That paper means that our general in Italy is promoted Consul, which is a fine grade, and we are to get shoes and overcoats."

II. ONE OF FOUCHE'S IDEAS

One morning towards the end of Brumaire just as Hulot was exercising his brigade, now by order of his superiors wholly concentrated at Mayenne, a courier arrived from Alencon with despatches, at the reading of which his face betrayed extreme annoyance.

"Forward, then!" he cried in an angry tone, sticking the papers into the crown of his hat. "Two companies will march with me towards Mortagne. The Chouans are there. You will accompany me," he said to Merle and Gerard. "May be I created a nobleman if I can understand one word of that despatch. Perhaps I'm a fool! well, anyhow, forward, march! there's no time to lose."

"Commandant, by your leave," said Merle, kicking the cover of the ministerial despatch with the toe of his boot, "what is there so exasperating in that?"

"God's thunder! nothing at all – except that we are fooled."

When the commandant gave vent to this military oath (an object it must be said of Republican atheistical remonstrance) it gave warning of a storm; the diverse intonations of the words were degrees of a thermometer by which the brigade could judge of the patience of its commander; the old soldier's frankness of nature had made this knowledge so easy that the veriest little drummer-boy knew his Hulot by heart, simply by observing the variations of the grimace with which the commander screwed up his cheek and snapped his eyes and vented his oath. On this occasion the tone of smothered rage with which he uttered the words made his two friends silent and circumspect. Even the pits of the small-pox which dented that veteran face seemed deeper, and the skin itself browner than usual. His broad queue, braided at the edges, had fallen upon one of his epaulettes as he replaced his three-cornered hat, and he flung it back with such fury that the ends became untied. However, as he stood stock-still, his hands clenched, his arms crossed tightly over his breast, his mustache bristling, Gerard ventured to ask him presently: "Are we to start at once?"

"Yes, if the men have ammunition."

"They have."

"Shoulder arms! Left wheel, forward, march!" cried Gerard, at a sign from the commandant.

The drum-corps marched at the head of the two companies designated by Gerard. At the first roll of the drums the commandant, who still stood plunged in thought, seemed to rouse himself, and he left the town accompanied by his two officers, to whom he said not a word. Merle and Gerard looked at each other silently as if to ask, "How long is he going to keep us in suspense?" and, as they marched, they cautiously kept an observing eye on their leader, who continued to vent rambling words between his teeth. Several times these vague phrases sounded like oaths in the ears of his soldiers, but not one of them dared to utter a word; for they all, when occasion demanded, maintained the stern discipline to which the veterans who had served under Bonaparte in Italy were accustomed. The greater part of them had belonged, like Hulot, to the famous battalions which capitulated at Mayenne under a promise not to serve again on the frontier, and the army called them "Les Mayencais." It would be difficult to find leaders and men who more thoroughly understood each other.

At dawn of the day after their departure Hulot and his troop were on the high-road to Alencon, about three miles from that town towards Mortagne, at a part of the road which leads through pastures watered by the Sarthe. A picturesque vista of these meadows lay to the left, while the woodlands on the right which flank the road and join the great forest of Menil-Broust, serve as a foil to the delightful aspect of the river-scenery. The narrow causeway is bordered on each side by ditches the soil of which, being constantly thrown out upon the fields, has formed high banks covered with furze, – the name given throughout the West to this prickly gorse. This shrub, which spreads itself in thorny masses, makes excellent fodder in winter for horses and cattle; but as long as it was not cut the Chouans hid themselves behind its breastwork of dull green. These banks bristling with gorse, signifying to travellers their approach to Brittany, made this part of the road at the period of which we write as

dangerous as it was beautiful; it was these dangers which compelled the hasty departure of Hulot and his soldiers, and it was here that he at last let out the secret of his wrath.

He was now on his return, escorting an old mail-coach drawn by post-horses, which the weariness of his soldiers, after their forced march, was compelling to advance at a snail's pace. The company of Blues from the garrison at Mortagne, who had escorted the rickety vehicle to the limits of their district, where Hulot and his men had met them, could be seen in the distance, on their way back to their quarters, like so many black specks. One of Hulot's companies was in the rear, the other in advance of the carriage. The commandant, who was marching with Merle and Gerard between the advance guard and the carriage, suddenly growled out: "Ten thousand thunders! would you believe that the general detached us from Mayenne to escort two petticoats?"

"But, commandant," remarked Gerard, "when we came up just now and took charge I observed that you bowed to them not ungraciously."

"Ha! that's the infamy of it. Those dandies in Paris ordered the greatest attention paid to their damned females. How dare they dishonor good and brave patriots by trailing us after petticoats? As for me, I march straight, and I don't choose to have to do with other people's zigzags. When I saw Danton taking mistresses, and Barras too, I said to them: 'Citizens, when the Republic called you to govern, it was not that you might authorize the vices of the old regime!' You may tell me that women – oh yes! we must have women, that's all right. Good soldiers of course must have women, and good women; but in times of danger, no! Besides, where would be the good of sweeping away the old abuses if patriots bring them back again? Look at the First Consul, there's a man! no women for him; always about his business. I'd bet my left mustache that he doesn't know the fool's errand we've been sent on!"

"But, commandant," said Merle, laughing, "I have seen the tip-end of the nose of the young lady, and I'll declare the whole world needn't be ashamed to feel an itch, as I do, to revolve round that carriage and get up a bit of a conversation."

"Look out, Merle," said Gerard; "the veiled beauties have a man accompanying them who seems wily enough to catch you in a trap."

"Who? that *incroyable* whose little eyes are ferretting from one side of the road to the other, as if he saw Chouans? The fellow seems to have no legs; the moment his horse is hidden by the carriage, he looks like a duck with its head sticking out of a pate. If that booby can hinder me from kissing the pretty linnet – "

"'Duck'! 'linnet'! oh, my poor Merle, you have taken wings indeed! But don't trust the duck. His green eyes are as treacherous as the eyes of a snake, and as sly as those of a woman who forgives her husband. I distrust the Chouans much less than I do those lawyers whose faces are like bottles of lemonade."

"Pooh!" cried Merle, gaily. "I'll risk it – with the commandant's permission. That woman has eyes like stars, and it's worth playing any stakes to see them."

"Caught, poor fellow!" said Gerard to the commandant; "he is beginning to talk nonsense!"

Hulot made a face, shrugged his shoulders, and said: "Before he swallows the soup, I advise him to smell it."

"Bravo, Merle," said Gerard, "judging by his friend's lagging step that he meant to let the carriage overtake him. Isn't he a happy fellow? He is the only man I know who can laugh over the death of a comrade without being thought unfeeling."

"He's the true French soldier," said Hulot, in a grave tone.

"Just look at him pulling his epaulets back to his shoulders, to show he is a captain," cried Gerard, laughing, – "as if his rank mattered!"

The coach toward which the officer was pivoting did, in fact, contain two women, one of whom seemed to be the servant of the other.

"Such women always run in couples," said Hulot.

A lean and sharp-looking little man ambled his horse sometimes before, sometimes behind the carriage; but, though he was evidently accompanying these privileged women, no one had yet seen him speak to them. This silence, a proof either of respect or contempt, as the case might be; the quantity of baggage belonging to the lady, whom the commandant sneeringly called "the princess"; everything, even to the clothes of her attendant squire, stirred Hulot's bile. The dress of the unknown man was a good specimen of the fashions of the day then being caricatured as "incroyable," – unbelievable, unless seen. Imagine a person trussed up in a coat, the front of which was so short that five or six inches of the waistcoat came below it, while the skirts were so long that they hung down behind like the tail of a cod, – the term then used to describe them. An enormous cravat was wound about his neck in so many folds that the little head which protruded from that muslin labyrinth certainly did justify Captain Merle's comparison. The stranger also wore tight-fitting trousers and Suwaroff boots. A huge blue-and-white cameo pinned his shirt; two watch-chains hung from his belt; his hair, worn in ringlets on each side of his face, concealed nearly the whole forehead; and, for a last adornment, the collar of his shirt and that of his coat came so high that his head seemed enveloped like a bunch of flowers in a horn of paper. Add to these queer accessories, which were combined in utter want of harmony, the burlesque contradictions in color of yellow trousers, scarlet waistcoat, cinnamon coat, and a correct idea will be gained of the supreme good taste which all dandies blindly obeyed in the first years of the Consulate. This costume, utterly uncouth, seemed to have been invented as a final test of grace, and to show that there was nothing too ridiculous for fashion to consecrate. The rider seemed to be about thirty years old, but he was really twenty-two; perhaps he owed this appearance of age to debauchery, possibly to the perils of the period. In spite of his preposterous dress, he had a certain elegance of manner which proved him to be a man of some breeding.

When the captain had dropped back close to the carriage, the dandy seemed to fathom his design, and favored it by checking his horse. Merle, who had flung him a sardonic glance, encountered one of those impenetrable faces, trained by the vicissitudes of the Revolution to hide all, even the most insignificant, emotion. The moment the curved end of the old triangular hat and the captain's epaulets were seen by the occupants of the carriage, a voice of angelic sweetness said: "Monsieur l'officier, will you have the kindness to tell us at what part of the road we now are?"

There is some inexpressible charm in the question of an unknown traveller, if a woman, – a world of adventure is in every word; but if the woman asks for assistance or information, proving her weakness or ignorance of certain things, every man is inclined to construct some impossible tale which shall lead to his happiness. The words, "Monsieur l'officier," and the polite tone of the question stirred the captain's heart in a manner hitherto unknown to him. He tried to examine the lady, but was cruelly disappointed, for a jealous veil concealed her features; he could barely see her eyes, which shone through the gauze like onyx gleaming in the sunshine.

"You are now three miles from Alencon, madame," he replied.

"Alencon! already!" and the lady threw herself, or, rather, she gently leaned back in the carriage, and said no more.

"Alencon?" said the other woman, apparently waking up; "then you'll see it again."

She caught sight of the captain and was silent. Merle, disappointed in his hope of seeing the face of the beautiful incognita, began to examine that of her companion. She was a girl about twenty-six years of age, fair, with a pretty figure and the sort of complexion, fresh and white and well-fed, which characterizes the women of Valognes, Bayeux, and the environs of Alencon. Her blue eyes showed no great intelligence, but a certain firmness mingled with tender feeling. She wore a gown of some common woollen stuff. The fashion of her hair, done up closely under a Norman cap, without any pretension, gave a charming simplicity to her face. Her attitude, without, of course, having any of the conventional nobility of society, was not without the natural dignity of a modest young girl, who can look back upon her past life without a single cause for repentance. Merle knew her at a glance for one of those wild flowers which are sometimes taken from their native fields to Parisian hot-

houses, where so many blasting rays are concentrated, without ever losing the purity of their color or their rustic simplicity. The naive attitude of the girl and her modest glance showed Merle very plainly that she did not wish a listener. In fact, no sooner had he withdrawn than the two women began a conversation in so low a tone that only a murmur of it reached his ear.

"You came away in such a hurry," said the country-girl, "that you hardly took time to dress. A pretty-looking sight you are now! If we are going beyond Alencon, you must really make your toilet."

"Oh! oh! Francine!" cried the lady.

"What is it?"

"This is the third time you have tried to make me tell you the reasons for this journey and where we are going."

"Have I said one single word which deserves that reproach?"

"Oh, I've noticed your manoeuvring. Simple and truthful as you are, you have learned a little cunning from me. You are beginning to hold questioning in horror; and right enough, too, for of all the known ways of getting at a secret, questions are, to my mind, the silliest."

"Well," said Francine, "since nothing escapes you, you must admit, Marie, that your conduct would excite the curiosity of a saint. Yesterday without a penny, to-day your hands are full of gold; at Mortagne they give you the mail-coach which was pillaged and the driver killed, with government troops to protect you, and you are followed by a man whom I regard as your evil genius."

"Who? Corentin?" said the young lady, accenting the words by two inflections of her voice expressive of contempt, a sentiment which appeared in the gesture with which she waved her hand towards the rider. "Listen, Francine," she said. "Do you remember Patriot, the monkey I taught to imitate Danton?"

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"Well, were you afraid of him?"

"He was chained."

"And Corentin is muzzled, my dear."

"We used to play with Patriot by the hour," said Francine, – "I know that; but he always ended by serving us some bad trick." So saying, Francine threw herself hastily back close to her mistress, whose hands she caught and kissed in a coaxing way; saying in a tone of deep affection: "You know what I mean, Marie, but you will not answer me. How can you, after all that sadness which did so grieve me – oh, indeed it grieved me! – how can you, in twenty-four hours, change about and become so gay? you, who talked of suicide! Why have you changed? I have a right to ask these questions of your soul – it is mine, my claim to it is before that of others, for you will never be better loved than you are by me. Speak, mademoiselle."

"Why, Francine, don't you see all around you the secret of my good spirits? Look at the yellowing tufts of those distant tree-tops; not one is like another. As we look at them from this distance don't they seem like an old bit of tapestry? See the hedges from behind which the Chouans may spring upon us at any moment. When I look at that gorse I fancy I can see the muzzles of their guns. Every time the road is shady under the trees I fancy I shall hear firing, and then my heart beats and a new sensation comes over me. It is neither the shuddering of fear nor an emotion of pleasure; no, it is better than either, it is the stirring of everything within me – it is life! Why shouldn't I be gay when a little excitement is dropped into my monotonous existence?"

"Ah! you are telling me nothing, cruel girl! Holy Virgin!" added Francine, raising her eyes in distress to heaven; "to whom will she confess herself if she denies the truth to me?"

"Francine," said the lady, in a grave tone, "I can't explain to you my present enterprise; it is horrible."

"Why do wrong when you know it to be wrong?"

"How can I help it? I catch myself thinking as if I were fifty, and acting as if I were still fifteen. You have always been my better self, my poor Francine, but in this affair I must stifle conscience.

And," she added after a pause, "I cannot. Therefore, how can you expect me to take a confessor as stern as you?" and she patted the girl's hand.

"When did I ever blame your actions?" cried Francine. "Evil is so mixed with good in your nature. Yes, Saint Anne of Auray, to whom I pray to save you, will absolve you for all you do. And, Marie, am I not here beside you, without so much as knowing where you go?" and she kissed her hands with effusion.

"But," replied Marie, "you may yet desert me, if your conscience – "

"Hush, hush, mademoiselle," cried Francine, with a hurt expression. "But surely you will tell me – "

"Nothing!" said the young lady, in a resolute voice. "Only – and I wish you to know it – I hate this enterprise even more than I hate him whose gilded tongue induced me to undertake it. I will be rank and own to you that I would never have yielded to their wishes if I had not foreseen, in this ignoble farce, a mingling of love and danger which tempted me. I cannot bear to leave this empty world without at least attempting to gather the flowers that it owes me, – whether I perish in the attempt or not. But remember, for the honor of my memory, that had I ever been a happy woman, the sight of their great knife, ready to fall upon my neck, would not have driven me to accept a part in this tragedy – for it is a tragedy. But now," she said, with a gesture of disgust, "if it were countermanded, I should instantly fling myself into the Sarthe. It would not be destroying life, for I have never lived."

"Oh, Saint Anne of Auray, forgive her!"

"What are you so afraid of? You know very well that the dull round of domestic life gives no opportunity for my passions. That would be bad in most women, I admit; but my soul is made of a higher sensibility and can bear great tests. I might have been, perhaps, a gentle being like you. Why, why have I risen above or sunk beneath the level of my sex? Ah! the wife of Bonaparte is a happy woman! Yes, I shall die young, for I am gay, as you say, – gay at this pleasure-party, where there is blood to drink, as that poor Danton used to say. There, there, forget what I am saying; it is the woman of fifty who speaks. Thank God! the girl of fifteen is still within me."

The young country-girl shuddered. She alone knew the fiery, impetuous nature of her mistress. She alone was initiated into the mysteries of a soul rich with enthusiasm, into the secret emotions of a being who, up to this time, had seen life pass her like a shadow she could not grasp, eager as she was to do so. After sowing broadcast with full hands and harvesting nothing, this woman was still virgin in soul, but irritated by a multitude of baffled desires. Weary of a struggle without an adversary, she had reached in her despair to the point of preferring good to evil, if it came in the form of enjoyment; evil to good, if it offered her some poetic emotion; misery to mediocrity, as something nobler and higher; the gloomy and mysterious future of present death to a life without hopes or even without sufferings. Never in any heart was so much powder heaped ready for the spark, never were so many riches for love to feed on; no daughter of Eve was ever moulded, with a greater mixture of gold in her clay. Francine, like an angel of earth, watched over this being whose perfections she adored, believing that she obeyed a celestial mandate in striving to bring that spirit back among the choir of seraphim whence it was banished for the sin of pride.

"There is the clock-tower of Alencon," said the horseman, riding up to the carriage.

"I see it," replied the young lady, in a cold tone.

"Ah, well," he said, turning away with all the signs of servile submission, in spite of his disappointment.

"Go faster," said the lady to the postilion. "There is no longer any danger; go at a fast trot, or even a gallop, if you can; we are almost into Alencon."

As the carriage passed the commandant, she called out to him, in a sweet voice: —

"We will meet at the inn, commandant. Come and see me."

"Yes, yes," growled the commandant. "'The inn'! 'Come and see me'! Is that how you speak to an officer in command of the army?" and he shook his fist at the carriage, which was now rolling rapidly along the road.

"Don't be vexed, commandant, she has got your rank as general up her sleeve," said Corentin, laughing, as he endeavored to put his horse into a gallop to overtake the carriage.

"I sha'n't let myself be fooled by any such folks as they," said Hulot to his two friends, in a growling tone. "I'd rather throw my general's coat into that ditch than earn it out of a bed. What are these birds after? Have you any idea, either of you?"

"Yes," said Merle, "I've an idea that that's the handsomest women I ever saw! I think you're reading the riddle all wrong. Perhaps she's the wife of the First Consul."

"Pooh! the First Consul's wife is old, and this woman is young," said Hulot. "Besides, the order I received from the minister gives her name as Mademoiselle de Verneuil. She is a *ci-devant*. Don't I know 'em? They all plied one trade before the Revolution, and any man could make himself a major, or a general in double-quick time; all he had to do was to say 'Dear heart' to them now and then."

While each soldier opened his compasses, as the commandant was wont to say, the miserable vehicle which was then used as the mail-coach drew up before the inn of the Trois Maures, in the middle of the main street of Alencon. The sound of the wheels brought the landlord to the door. No one in Alencon could have expected the arrival of the mail-coach at the Trois Maures, for the murderous attack upon the coach at Mortagne was already known, and so many people followed it along the street that the two women, anxious to escape the curiosity of the crowd, ran quickly into the kitchen, which forms the inevitable antechamber to all Western inns. The landlord was about to follow them, after examining the coach, when the postilion caught him by the arm.

"Attention, citizen Brutus," he said; "there's an escort of the Blues behind us; but it is I who bring you these female citizens; they'll pay like *ci-devant* princesses, therefore – "

"Therefore, we'll drink a glass of wine together presently, my lad," said the landlord.

After glancing about the kitchen, blackened with smoke, and noticing a table bloody from raw meat, Mademoiselle de Verneuil flew into the next room with the celerity of a bird; for she shuddered at the sight and smell of the place, and feared the inquisitive eyes of a dirty *chef*, and a fat little woman who examined her attentively.

"What are we to do, wife?" said the landlord. "Who the devil could have supposed we would have so many on our hands in these days? Before I serve her a decent breakfast that woman will get impatient. Stop, an idea! evidently she is a person of quality. I'll propose to put her with the one we have upstairs. What do you think?"

When the landlord went to look for the new arrival he found only Francine, to whom he spoke in a low voice, taking her to the farther end of the kitchen, so as not to be overheard.

"If the ladies wish," he said, "to be served in private, as I have no doubt they wish to do, I have a very nice breakfast all ready for a lady and her son, and I dare say wouldn't mind sharing it with you; they are persons of condition," he added, mysteriously.

He had hardly said the words before he felt a tap on his back from the handle of a whip. He turned hastily and saw behind him a short, thick-set man, who had noiselessly entered from a side room, – an apparition which seemed to terrify the hostess, the cook, and the scullion. The landlord turned pale when he saw the intruder, who shook back the hair which concealed his forehead and eyes, raised himself on the points of his toes to reach the other's ears, and said to him in a whisper: "You know the cost of an imprudence or a betrayal, and the color of the money we pay it in. We are generous in that coin."

He added a gesture which was like a horrible commentary to his words. Though the rotundity of the landlord prevented Francine from seeing the stranger, who stood behind him, she caught certain words of his threatening speech, and was thunderstruck at hearing the hoarse tones of a Breton voice. She sprang towards the man, but he, seeming to move with the agility of a wild animal, had already

darted through a side door which opened on the courtyard. Utterly amazed, she ran to the window. Through its panes, yellowed with smoke, she caught sight of the stranger as he was about to enter the stable. Before doing so, however, he turned a pair of black eyes to the upper story of the inn, and thence to the mail-coach in the yard, as if to call some friend's attention to the vehicle. In spite of his muffling goatskin and thanks to this movement which allowed her to see his face, Francine recognized the Chouan, Marche-a-Terre, with his heavy whip; she saw him, indistinctly, in the obscurity of the stable, fling himself down on a pile of straw, in a position which enabled him to keep an eye on all that happened at the inn. Marche-a-Terre curled himself up in such a way that the cleverest spy, at any distance far or near, might have taken him for one of those huge dogs that drag the hand-carts, lying asleep with his muzzle on his paws.

The behavior of the Chouan proved to Francine that he had not recognized her. Under the hazardous circumstances which she felt her mistress to be in, she scarcely knew whether to regret or to rejoice in this unconsciousness. But the mysterious connection between the landlord's offer (not uncommon among innkeepers, who can thus kill two birds with one stone), and the Chouan's threats, piqued her curiosity. She left the dirty window from which she could see the formless heap which she knew to be Marche-a-Terre, and returned to the landlord, who was still standing in the attitude of a man who feels he has made a blunder, and does not know how to get out of it. The Chouan's gesture had petrified the poor fellow. No one in the West was ignorant of the cruel refinements of torture with which the "Chasseurs du Roi" punished those who were even suspected of indiscretion; the landlord felt their knives already at his throat. The cook looked with a shudder at the iron stove on which they often "warmed" ("chauffaient") the feet of those they suspected. The fat landlady held a knife in one hand and a half-peeled potato in the other, and gazed at her husband with a stupefied air. Even the scullion puzzled himself to know the reason of their speechless terror. Francine's curiosity was naturally excited by this silent scene, the principal actor of which was visible to all, though departed. The girl was gratified at the evident power of the Chouan, and though by nature too simple and humble for the tricks of a lady's maid, she was also far too anxious to penetrate the mystery not to profit by her advantages on this occasion.

"Mademoiselle accepts your proposal," she said to the landlord, who jumped as if suddenly awakened by her words.

"What proposal?" he asked with genuine surprise.

"What proposal?" asked Corentin, entering the kitchen.

"What proposal?" asked Mademoiselle de Verneuil, returning to it.

"What proposal?" asked a fourth individual on the lower step of the staircase, who now sprang lightly into the kitchen.

"Why, the breakfast with your persons of distinction," replied Francine, impatiently.

"Distinction!" said the ringing and ironical voice of the person who had just come down the stairway. "My good fellow, that strikes me as a very poor inn joke; but if it's the company of this young female citizen that you want to give us, we should be fools to refuse it. In my mother's absence, I accept," he added, striking the astonished innkeeper on the shoulder.

The charming heedlessness of youth disguised the haughty insolence of the words, which drew the attention of every one present to the new-comer. The landlord at once assumed the countenance of Pilate washing his hands of the blood of that just man; he slid back two steps to reach his wife's ear, and whispered, "You are witness, if any harm comes of it, that it is not my fault. But, anyhow," he added, in a voice that was lower still, "go and tell Monsieur Marche-a-Terre what has happened."

The traveller, who was a young man of medium height, wore a dark blue coat and high black gaiters coming above the knee and over the breeches, which were also of blue cloth. This simple uniform, without epaulets, was that of the pupils of the Ecole Polytechnique. Beneath this plain attire Mademoiselle de Verneuil could distinguish at a glance the elegant shape and nameless *something* that tells of natural nobility. The face of the young man, which was rather ordinary at first sight, soon

attracted the eye by the conformation of certain features which revealed a soul capable of great things. A bronzed skin, curly fair hair, sparkling blue eyes, a delicate nose, motions full of ease, all disclosed a life guided by noble sentiments and trained to the habit of command. But the most characteristic signs of his nature were in the chin, which was dented like that of Bonaparte, and in the lower lip, which joined the upper one with a graceful curve, like that of an acanthus leaf on the capital of a Corinthian column. Nature had given to these two features of his face an irresistible charm.

"This young man has singular distinction if he is really a republican," thought Mademoiselle de Verneuil.

To see all this at a glance, to brighten at the thought of pleasing, to bend her head softly and smile coquettishly and cast a soft look able to revive a heart that was dead to love, to veil her long black eyes with lids whose curving lashes made shadows on her cheeks, to choose the melodious tones of her voice and give a penetrating charm to the formal words, "Monsieur, we are very much obliged to you," – all this charming by-play took less time than it has taken to describe it. After this, Mademoiselle de Verneuil, addressing the landlord, asked to be shown to a room, saw the staircase, and disappeared with Francine, leaving the stranger to discover whether her reply was intended as an acceptance or a refusal.

"Who is that woman?" asked the Polytechnique student, in an airy manner, of the landlord, who still stood motionless and bewildered.

"That's the female citizen Verneuil," replied Corentin, sharply, looking jealously at the questioner; "a *ci-devant*; what is she to you?"

The stranger, who was humming a revolutionary tune, turned his head haughtily towards Corentin. The two young men looked at each other for a moment like cocks about to fight, and the glance they exchanged gave birth to a hatred which lasted forever. The blue eye of the young soldier was as frank and honest as the green eye of the other man was false and malicious; the manners of the one had native grandeur, those of the other were insinuating; one was eager in his advance, the other deprecating; one commanded respect, the other sought it.

"Is the citizen du Gua Saint-Cyr here?" said a peasant, entering the kitchen at that moment.

"What do you want of him?" said the young man, coming forward.

The peasant made a low bow and gave him a letter, which the young cadet read and threw into the fire; then he nodded his head and the man withdrew.

"No doubt you've come from Paris, citizen?" said Corentin, approaching the stranger with a certain ease of manner, and a pliant, affable air which seemed intolerable to the citizen du Gua.

"Yes," he replied, shortly.

"I suppose you have been graduated into some grade of the artillery?"

"No, citizen, into the navy."

"Ah! then you are going to Brest?" said Corentin, interrogatively.

But the young sailor turned lightly on the heels of his shoes without deigning to reply, and presently disappointed all the expectations which Mademoiselle de Verneuil had based on the charm of his appearance. He applied himself to ordering his breakfast with the eagerness of a boy, questioned the cook and the landlady about their receipts, wondered at provincial customs like a Parisian just out of his shell, made as many objections as any fine lady, and showed the more lack of mind and character because his face and manner had seemed to promise them. Corentin smiled with pity when he saw the face he made on tasting the best cider of Normandy.

"Heu!" he cried; "how can you swallow such stuff as that? It is meat and drink both. I don't wonder the Republic distrusts a province where they knock their harvest from trees with poles, and shoot travellers from the ditches. Pray don't put such medicine as that on the table; give us some good Bordeaux, white and red. And above all, do see if there is a good fire upstairs. These country-people are so backward in civilization!" he added. "Alas!" he sighed, "there is but one Paris in the world; what a pity it is I can't transport it to sea! Heavens! spoil-sauce!" he suddenly cried out to the cook;

“what makes you put vinegar in that fricassee when you have lemons? And, madame,” he added, “you gave me such coarse sheets I couldn’t close my eyes all night.” Then he began to twirl a huge cane, executing with a silly sort of care a variety of evolutions, the greater or less precision and agility of which were considered proofs of a young man’s standing in the class of the Incroyables, so-called.

“And it is with such dandies as that,” said Corentin to the landlord confidentially, watching his face, “that the Republic expects to improve her navy!”

“That man,” said the young sailor to the landlady, in a low voice, “is a spy of Fouche’s. He has ‘police’ stamped on his face, and I’ll swear that spot he has got on his chin is Paris mud. Well, set a thief to catch – ”

Just then a lady to whom the young sailor turned with every sign of outward respect, entered the kitchen of the inn.

“My dear mamma,” he said. “I am glad you’ve come. I have recruited some guests in your absence.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.