

ЭЖЕН СЮ

THE PONIARD'S HILT;
OR, KARADEUCQ AND
RONAN. A TALE OF
BAGAUDERS AND
VAGRES

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Eugène Sue

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The invasion of Gaul by Clovis introduced feudalism in France, which is equivalent to saying in Europe, France being the teeming womb of the great historic events of that epoch. It goes without saying that so vast a social system as that of feudalism could not be perfected in a day, or even during one reign. Indeed, generations passed, and it was not until the Age of Charlemagne that feudalism can be said to have taken some measure of shape and form. Between the Ages of Clovis and Charlemagne a period of turbulence ensued altogether peculiar to the combined circumstances that feudalism was forced to struggle with two foes – one internal, the disintegrating forces that ever accompany a new movement; the other external, the stubborn and inspiring resistance, on the part of the native masses, to the conqueror from the wilds of Germania. Historians, with customary levity, have neglected to reproduce this interesting epoch in the annals of that social structure that is mother to the social structure now prevalent. The task was undertaken and successfully accomplished by Eugene Sue in this boisterous historic novel entitled *The Poniard's Hilt; or, Karadeucq and Ronan*, the sixth of his majestic series of historic novels, *The Mysteries of the People; or, History of a Proletarian Family Across the Ages*. The leading characters are all historic. It required the genius, the learning, the poetry, the tact, withal the daring of a Sue to weave these characters into a fascinating tale and draw a picture as vivid as the quartos, from which the facts are gathered, are musty with old age.

Daniel De Leon.

January, 1908.

PART I

THE KORRIGANS

CHAPTER I

ARAIM

Occasionally they are long-lived, these descendants of the good Joel, who, five hundred and fifty years ago and more lived in this identical region, near the sacred stones of the forest of Karnak. Yes, the descendants of the good Joel are, occasionally, long-lived, seeing that I, Araith, who to-day trace these lines in the seventy-seventh year of my life, saw my grandfather Gildas die fifty-six years ago at the advanced age of ninety-six, after having inscribed in his early youth a few lines in our family archives.

My grandfather Gildas buried his son Goridek, my father. I was then ten years old. Nine years later I lost my grandfather also. A few years after his demise I married. I have survived my wife, Martha, and I have seen my son Jocelyn become, in turn, a father. To-day he has a daughter and two boys. The girl is called Roselyk, she is eighteen; the elder of the two boys, Kervan, is three years his sister's senior; the younger, my pet, Karadeucq, is seventeen.

When you read these lines, as you will some day, my son Jocelyn, you will surely ask:

"What can have been the reason that my great-grandfather Gildas made no other entry in our chronicles than the death of his father Amael? And what can be the reason that my grandfather Goridek wrote not a line? And, finally, what can be the reason that my own father, Araith, waited so long – so very long before fulfilling the wishes of the good Joel?"

To that, my son, I would make this answer:

Your great-grandfather had no particular liking for desks and parchments. Besides, very much after the style of his own father Amael, he liked to postpone for to-morrow whatever he could avoid doing to-day. For the rest, his life of a husbandman was neither less peaceful nor less industrious than that of our fathers since the return of Schanvoch to the cradle of our family, after such a very long line of generations, kept away from Armorica by the hard trials and the slavery that followed in the wake of the Roman conquest. Your great-grandfather was in the habit of saying to my father:

"There will always be time for me to add a few lines to our family's narrative; besides, it seems to me, and I admit the notion is foolish, that to write 'I have lived', sounds very much like saying 'I am about to die' – Now, then, I am so happy that I cling to life, just as oysters do to their rocks."

And so it came about that, from to-morrow to to-morrow, your great-grandfather reached his ninety-sixth year without increasing the history of our family with a single word. When he lay on his deathbed he said to me:

"My child, I wish you to write the following lines for me in our archives:

" 'My grandfather Gildas and my father Goridek lived in our house quietly and happy, like good husbandmen; they remained true to their love for old Gaul and to the faith of our fathers; they blessed Hesus for having allowed them to be born and to die in the heart of Brittany, the only province where, for so very many years, the shocks that have elsewhere shaken Gaul have hardly ever been felt – those shocks died out before the impregnable frontiers of Breton Armorica, as the furious waves of our ocean dash themselves at the feet of our granite rocks.' "

That, then, my son Jocelyn, is the reason why neither your grandfather Goridek nor his father wrote a line themselves.

"And why," you will insist, "did you, Araith, my father, why did you wait so long, until you had a son and grandchildren, before you paid your tribute to our chronicle?"

There are two reasons for that: the first is that I never had enough to say; the second is that I would have had too much to write.

"Oh!" you will be thinking when you read this. "His advanced age has deranged old Araim's mind. He says in one breath that he had too much and too little to say. Is that sensible?"

Wait a moment, my son; be not in a hurry to believe that your old father has fallen into his second infancy. Listen, and you will discover how it is that I have at once too much and not enough to write upon.

As to what concerns my own life, being an old husbandman, I have been in the same predicament as my ancestors since Schanvoch – there never was sufficient matter for me to write about. Indeed, the interesting and charming narrative would have run somewhat after this fashion:

"Last year the autumn crop was richer than the winter crop; this year it is the reverse."

Or, "The large black cow yields daily six pints of milk more than the brindled cow."

Or, "The January sheep have turned out more woolly than the sheep of last March."

Or, "Last year grain was so dear, so very dear, that a 'muid' of old wheat sold at from twelve to thirteen deniers. The price of cattle and poultry is also on the upward tack: we now pay two gold sous for a draft ox, one gold sou for a milch-cow, six gold sous for a draft horse."

Or, "Will not our descendants be delighted to know that in these days a pig, if good and fat, fetches twelve deniers in autumn, which is neither more nor less than the cost of a bell-wether? And will they not rejoice to learn that our last coop of one hundred fat geese was sold last winter at the market of Vannes for a full pound of silver by the weight? And imagine how well posted they will feel when they learn that the day-laborers whom we hire during harvest time are paid by us one denier a day."

That would hardly be considered either a charming or a thrilling narrative.

On the other hand, would our descendants feel more elated if I were to tell them:

"That in which my pride lies is the knowledge that there is no better field-laborer than my son Jocelyn, no better housekeeper than his wife Madalen, no sweeter creature than my granddaughter Roselyk, no handsomer and more daring lads than my two grandsons, Kervan and Karadeucq – especially the latter, the youngest of the set, my own pet! – a very demon for deviltry, bravery and attractiveness. One should see him, at seventeen years of age, break in the wild colts of our meadows, dive into the sea like a fish, not lose an arrow out of ten when he shoots at the sea-gulls on the wing, along the beach, during a storm – or handling the 'pen-bas,' our redoubtable Breton stick! Five or six soldiers armed with lances or swords would find more sores than pleasure if they rubbed against my Karadeucq with his 'pen-bas.' He is so robust, so agile, so dexterous! And then, he is so handsome, with his beautiful blond hair cut round and falling over the collar of his Gallic blouse; his eyes of the blue of heaven, and his stout cheeks tanned by the wind of the fields and the breeze of the sea!"

No! By the glorious bones of old Joel. No! He could not have been prouder of his three sons – Guilhern the field-laborer, Michael the armorer, and Albinik the mariner; or of his daughter Hena, the Virgin of the Isle of Sen – a now deserted island that, at this moment, looking out at the window, I see yonder, far away, almost in the open sea, veiled in mist. No! The good Joel could not be any prouder of his family than I, old Araim, am of my grandchildren! But the sons of Joel either fought valiantly for freedom or remained dead on the battlefield; and his daughter Hena, whose saintly and sweet name is sung to this day and has come down from century to century, disinterestedly laid her life on the altars of Hesus for the welfare of her country, while the children of my son will die, obscure like their father, in this corner of Gaul. At least they will die free! The barbarous Franks have twice dashed forward as far as the frontiers of our Brittany, but never dared to enter it; our impenetrable forests, our bottomless marshes, our inaccessible and rocky mountains, above all our sturdy men, quickly up and in arms in response to the call of our ever-beloved druids, the Christian as well as the non-Christian druids, have rolled back the Frankish marauders, who, however, have rendered themselves masters of our other provinces since nearly fifteen years ago.

Alas! After nearly two centuries, the gloomy prophecy of the foster sister of our ancestor Schanvoch has been verified. Victoria the Great predicted it but too accurately. Long ago did the Franks pour over our frontier of the Rhine; they have since spread themselves over the whole of Gaul and subjugated the land – except our Breton Armorica.

These are the reasons why old Araim believed that neither as a father nor a Breton did his obscure happiness deserve to be chronicled in our family records, and these are the reasons why, alas! he had too much to write as a Gaul. Is not the account of the defeat, the shame, the renewed slavery of our common country, too much to write about, although we here in Brittany are ourselves free from the misfortunes that overwhelm our brothers elsewhere?

"But," meseems I hear you, my son Jocelyn, still insist, "why should old Araim, who has too little or too much to say, why should he begin his narrative to-day, rather than yesterday, or why did he not postpone starting to write until to-morrow?"

This is my answer, my son:

Read the narrative that I am now writing on that winter's evening when you, your wife and your children will gather by the fire in the large hall of our farmhouse and await the return of my pet Karadeucq, who left for the chase early in the morning promising to bring home a stag. Read this narrative, it will recall to your mind the family gathering of the previous evening, my son Jocelyn – it will also inform you of something that you do not know. You will not thereafter ask again:

"Why did good Araim start this narrative to-day, and not yesterday?"

CHAPTER II

FAIRIES AND HOBGOBLINS

The January snow and hail are falling in torrents; the wind moans; at a distance the sea roars and dashes inshore as far as the sacred stones of Karnak. It is only four o'clock in the afternoon, and yet it is night to all intents and purposes; the warmly stalled cattle are locked in; the gates of the farmyard are closed tightly out of fear of prowling wolves; a large fire shoots up its flames in the fireplace of the hall; old Araim is seated in his armchair, at the chimney-corner, with his large grey dog, its head streaked with the white of old age, stretched out at his feet. The old man is at work on a net for fishing; his son Jocelyn is fashioning a plough handle; Kervan is adjusting new thongs to a yoke; Karadeucq is sharpening the points of his arrows on a flint-stone. The tempest will last till morning if not longer, because the sun went down like a ball of fire behind thick black clouds that wreathed the isle of Sen like a dense fog. Whenever the sun sets in that fashion and the wind blows from the west the tempest lasts two, three, sometimes four and five days. The next morning Karadeucq will be out on the beach to shoot sea-gulls while they graze with their wings the still raging waves. It is the lad's amusement – my pet is such a skilful and expert archer!

The sea roars from the distance like rumbling thunder; the house rocks in the gale; the hail is heard clattering in the chimney. Roar, tempest! Blow, sea gale! Drop, both snow and hail! Ah! How good it feels to hear the ice-laden blast thunder, when one sees his family merrily gathered in the house around a blazing fireplace! And then, the young lads and their sister whisper things to one another that make them shiver and smile at once. For it does, indeed, look as if during the last century all the hobgoblins and all the fairies of Gaul have taken refuge in Brittany. Is it not a positive pleasure to hear tell during a tempest and by the fire those wonders to which one gives a lingering credence if one has not seen them himself, and more so if one has seen them?

This is what the young folks are saying to one another. My grandson Kervan starts the ball rolling as he shakes his head:

"The traveler who has lost his way and who should happen to pass to-night by the cavern of Pen-March will hear the hammers clang – "

"Yes, the hammers that beat in time while the devilish hammerers themselves sing their song, the burden of which ever is: 'One, two, three, four, five, six, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday – ' "

"And it is said they even add 'Thursday,' 'Friday' and 'Saturday,' but never 'Sunday,' the day of the mass – of the Christians."

"And the traveler may prize himself happy if the little Dus do not drop their false coiners' hammers and start to dance, compelling him to join in their reel until death closes upon him."

"What dangerous demons those Dus must be, dwarfs no taller than barely two feet high! Meseems I see them, with their hairy and shriveled faces, their cats' claws, their goats' hoofs and their eyes flashing fire. The bare thought of them is enough to make one shiver."

"Look out, Roselyk! There is one under the bin. Look out!"

"How imprudent you are, brother Karadeucq, to sport in that way over the Dus! Those hobgoblins are spiteful things. I tremble when I think of them."

"As for me, were I to come across a band of these customers, I would capture two or three brace of them, I would tie them together by the legs like partridges – and off I would make with them – "

"Oh! You, Karadeucq, are not afraid of anything."

"Justice should be done the little Dus. Although they do coin false money in the cavern of Pen-March, they are said to be excellent blacksmiths, and matchless in the shoeing of horses."

"Yes, you may rely on that! From the moment a horse has been shod by those devilish dwarfs, he shoots fire out of his nostrils; and as to running – as to running without ever stopping for breath – either night or day – to even take a look at his rider – "

"Children, what a tempest! What a night!"

"Fine night for the little Dus, mother! They love storms and darkness! But it is a bad night for the poor little Korrigans, who love only the mild nights of the month of May."

"Certes, I am dreadfully afraid of the hairy and clawy dwarfs with their purses full of false coin dangling from their belts and their blacksmith's hammers on their shoulders. But I would be still more afraid if I were to run across a Korrigan, only two feet high, combing her hair, and looking at herself in some secluded fountain, in the clear water of which she is admiring those blonde tresses that they are so proud of."

"What! Afraid of those pretty little fairies, brother Kervan! I, on the contrary, have often tried to meet one of them. It is said positively that they assemble at the fountain of Lyrwac'h-Hen, which lies in the thickest of the large oak forest that shades several druid stones. I have gone thither three times – and all the three times I saw nothing – "

"Luckily for you that you saw nothing Karadeucq, because it is said that the Korrigans never meet for their nocturnal dances except near the sacred stones. Woe to him who sees them!"

"I gather that they are expert musicians and that they sing like nightingales."

"It is also said of them that they like to pilfer food like cats. Yes, Karadeucq, you may laugh – but you should believe me; I am no fibber," observed his sister indignantly. "I have heard the rumor that at their nocturnal feasts they spread upon the sward, but always near a fountain, a cloth white as snow, and woven of the dainty thread that we find in summer on the meadows. In the very center of the cloth they place a crystal cup that shines so brightly, so very brightly, that it serves the fairies for a torch. People add that a single drop of the liquid in the cup would make one as wise as God."

"And what do the Korrigans eat on that table cloth as white as snow? Do you know, Karadeucq, you who love them so much?"

"The dear little darlings! It can not be costly to nourish their rosy and transparent bodies that are hardly two feet high. Sister Roselyk says they are gourmands. What is it they eat? The juice of night flowers, served upon gold grass blades?"

"Gold grass blades? That superb grass that, if you step upon it, puts you to sleep and imparts to you the knowledge of the language of birds – "

"And what do the Korrigans drink?"

"The dew of heaven in the azure shell of wrens' eggs – what boozers they are! But at the slightest sound of human feet – off they vanish. They vanish into the fountain and return to their crystal and coral palace at the bottom of the water. It is to the end of being able to escape quickly the sight of men that they always stay near the water. Oh, the pretty little fairies! I would give my best bow and twenty arrows, I would give all my fishing nets, I would give ten years, twenty years of my life to see a Korrigan!"

"Karadeucq, my son, make not such impious vows on such a stormy night as this – it may bring ill luck – I have never heard the enraged sea roar like this – it sounds like thunder – "

"Good mother, I would brave murky darkness, tempest and thunder to see a Korrigan!"

"Hold your tongue, rash boy, hold your tongue – do not say such words!"

"What a bold and venturesome lad you are, my boy!"

"Grandfather, you should join us in scolding my brother Karadeucq instead of encouraging him in his dangerous wishes. Do you not know – "

"What, my blonde Roselyk?"

"Alas! grandfather, the Korrigans steal the children of poor mothers and put little monsters in their place. The song so has it – "

"Let's hear that song, my little Roselyk."

"It runs this way, grandfather:

"Mary is very sad; she has lost her little Laoik; the Korrigan snatched him away."

"As I went to the spring for water I left my Laoik in his cradle; when I came back to the house, my little one was gone far away.

"And in its place the Korrigan left me this monster – with a face as red as a toad's; he scratches and bites.

"And all day he wants to be nursed, and yet he is seven years old – and yet he wants to be nursed.

"Mary is very sad; she has lost her little Laoik; the Korrigan snatched him away!

"That is the song, grandfather. And will brother still want to meet the wicked things, these Korrigan fairies who snatch away babes?"

"What have you now to say in defense of your fairies, my pet?"

"Grandfather, my sweet sister Roselyk has been imposed upon by evil tongues. All mothers with ugly urchins for children declare that the Korrigans substituted a little monster for their darling."

"Well answered, my grandson!"

"And, on my part, I maintain that the Korrigans are, on the contrary, sweet and serviceable. Do you know the valley of Helle?"

"Yes, my dare-devil."

"One time the finest hay in the world was to be got in that valley —

" 'Hay from Helle, perfumed hay.' "

"Well, that was thanks to the Korrigans – "

"Indeed? Tell me how – "

"When the time for mowing and haymaking came around, the Korrigans arrived and camped on the crests of the rocks around the valley to watch over the meadow. If during the day the sun parched the grass too much, the Korrigans caused a plentiful dew to drop. When the grass was mowed, they scattered the clouds that might have interfered with the making of hay. A foolish and wicked bishop wanted to chase away the pretty and kind fairies. He caused a large heather fire to be kindled early one night all over the rocks; when these were sufficiently hot, the ashes, were all carefully removed. At their regular hour, and suspecting nothing, the dear Korrigans came to hold watch over the meadow, but they instantly burned their feet on the hot rocks. They then wept and cried: 'Oh! Wicked world! Oh! Wicked world!' Since then they never more returned to the place, and as a consequence, ever since, the hay has been either rotted by the rain, or burned by the sun in the valley of Helle. That is what comes of being unkind to the Korrigans. No, I shall not die happy if I do not see at least one of them – "

"Children, children, put no faith in such witcheries; above all never wish to witness any. It brings bad luck – "

"What, mother, simply because I desire to see a Korrigan, some misfortune will befall me? What kind of misfortune?"

"Hesus only knows, wild boy! I wish you would keep still; your talk frightens me."

"What a tempest! The house shakes!"

"And it is on such a night that Karadeucq dared to say he would give his life to see a Korrigan."

"Come, dear wife, your fears only show weakness."

"Mothers are weak and timid, Jocelyn. We must not tempt God – "

Old Araim stops working for a moment at his net; his head drops on his chest.

"What is the matter, folks? You seem to be in a brown study! Do you fear, like Madalen, that danger may threaten Karadeucq just because, on such a tempestuous night as this, he wishes to see a Korrigan?"

"I am not thinking of the fairies; I am thinking of this frightful storm, Jocelyn. I read to you and your children the narrative of our ancestor Joel, who lived about five hundred and odd years ago, if not in this very house, at least in the neighborhood of where we now are. I was thinking that on a somewhat similar stormy night, Joel and his son, both greedy after stories like the inquisitive Gauls that they were – "

"Did the trick of stopping a traveler at the pass of Craig'h, binding him fast, and carrying him home to tell stories – "

"And the traveler happened to be the Chief of the Hundred Valleys – a hero!"

"Oh! Oh! How your eyes sparkle as you speak, Karadeucq."

"If they sparkle, grandfather, it is because they are moist. Whenever I hear you speak of the Chief of the Hundred Valleys tears come to my eyes."

"What is the matter with Erer, father? The dog growls between his teeth and pricks up his ears."

"Grandfather, do you hear the watchdog bark?"

"Something must be going on outside of the house – "

"Alas! If it is the gods who wish to punish my son for his audacious wishes, their anger is swift – Karadeucq, come near me."

"What! Madalen – there you are weeping and embracing the boy, as if really misfortune threatened him. Come, be more sensible!"

"Do you not hear the dogs barking louder and louder? And there is Erer now running to the door. There is something wrong going on outside – "

"Fear not, mother; it is some wolf prowling about. Where is my bow?"

"Karadeucq, you stay here – "

"Dear Madalen, be not in such fear for your son, nor you my sweet Roselyk for your brother. Perhaps it is better not to challenge the hobgoblins and fairies on a stormy night, but your fears are idle. There is no wolf prowling about here; if there were, Erer would long ago have bitten off the panel of the door and rushed to the encounter of the unwelcome guest – "

"Father is right – it may be a stranger who lost his way."

"Come, Kervan, come brother, let's to the gate of the yard."

"My son, you stay here by my side – "

"But, mother, I cannot allow my brother Kervan to go out alone."

"Hark! Hark! It seems to me I hear a voice calling – "

"Alas! mother, some misfortune threatens our house – you said it – "

"Roselyk, my child, do not add fuel to your mother's fright. What is there astonishing in a traveler calling from without to have the door opened to him – "

"His cries are not human – I am frozen with fear – "

"You come with me, Kervan, seeing that your mother wishes to keep Karadeucq near her. Although this is a quiet neighborhood, hand me my 'pen-bas,' and take yours along, my boy."

"My husband, my son, I conjure you, do not go out – "

"Dear wife, suppose some stranger is outside in such weather as this! Come Kervan!"

"Alas! I tell you the cries that I heard are not human. Kervan! Jocelyn! They will not listen – they are gone – Alas! Alas!"

"My father and brother go out to face danger, and I remain here – "

"Do not stamp your feet that way, bad boy! You are the cause of all this evil with your impious wishes – "

"Calm yourself, Madalen – and you, my pet, do not put on, if you please, the air of a wild colt that seeks to snap his reins; just obey your mother."

"I hear steps – they are drawing near – Oh! grandfather!"

"Well, my dear Roselyk, why tremble? What is there frightful in the steps that are approaching? Good – do you hear them laughing aloud? Are you now at ease?"

"Laughing! – on such a night!"

"It is frightful to hear, is it not, my sweet Roselyk, especially when the laughs are your own father and brother? Well – here they are. Well, my children?"

"The misfortune that threatened our house – "

"The cries that were not human – "

"Will you be done laughing? Just look at them! The father is as crazy as the son! Will you speak?"

"The great misfortune is a poor peddler who lost his way – "

"The voice that was not human was his voice – "

And father and son laughed merrily, it must be admitted, like people who are happy to find their apprehensions unfounded. The mother's fears, however, were not so quickly allayed; she did not join the laughter; but both the boys, the girl and even Jocelyn himself, all cried out joyously:

"A peddler! A peddler!"

"He has pretty ribbons and fine needles."

"Iron for arrows, strings for bows, scissors to clip the sheep."

"Nets for fishing, seeing that he comes to the seashore."

"He will tell us the news of outlying places."

"But where is he? Where is the good peddler that Hesus sends to us to help enliven this long winter's night?"

"What a happiness to be able to see all his merchandise at one's ease!"

"But where is he? Where is he?"

"He is shaking off the ice that his clothes are frozen stiff with."

"Good mother, now see the misfortune that threatened us because I wished to see a Korrigan!"

"Be still, son! To-morrow rests with God!"

"Here is the peddler! Here he is!"

CHAPTER III

HEVIN THE PEDDLER

The man who stepped into the house gave at the threshold a last shake to his traveling boots, which were so covered with snow that he seemed to be clad in white hose. He was of a robust frame, but squat and square, in the full strength of manhood, jovial and of an open yet determined face. Still uneasy, Madalen did not take her eyes from him, and twice she made a sign to her son to return to her side. Removing the hood from his thick, ice-pearled coat, the peddler laid down his bulky bale, a heavy burden that, however, seemed light to his sturdy shoulders. He then removed his cap and stepped towards Araim, the oldest member of the household:

"Long life and happy days to hospitable people! This is Hevin the Peddler's wish to yourself and your family. I am a Breton. I was going to Falgoët, when the night and the tempest overtook me on the beach. I saw the light of this house from a distance; I came, I called, and the door was opened to me. Thanks to you all, thanks to hospitable people!"

"Madalen, what gives you that absent and pensive look? Do not the peddler's pleasant face and kind words set you at ease?"

"Father, to-morrow rests with God – I feel all the more uneasy since the stranger's arrival."

"Speak lower, lower still, dear daughter. The poor fellow might overhear you and be grieved. Oh! these mothers! these mothers!"

And addressing the stranger:

"Draw near the fire, you sturdy peddler. The night is rough. Karadeucq, while we wait for supper, fetch a pot of hydromel for our guest."

"I accept, good old man! The fire will warm me from without, the hydromel from within."

"You seem to be a gay stroller."

"So I am. Joy is my companion; however long or rough my road may be, joy never tires of following me."

"Here – drink – "

"Your health, good mother and sweet girl; to the health of you all – "

And clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth: "This is the best hydromel I ever tasted. A cordial hospitality renders the best of potions still better."

"Do you come from afar, gay stroller?"

"Do you mean since I started this morning or since the beginning of my journey?"

"Yes, since the beginning of your journey."

"It is now two months since I departed from Paris."

"From the city of Paris?"

"Does that surprise you, good old man?"

"What! Cross half Gaul in such times as these, when the cursed Franks overrun the country?"

"I am an old roadster. For the last twenty years I have crossed Gaul from end to end. Is the main road hazardous, I take the by-path. Is the plain risky, I go over the mountain. Is it dangerous to travel by day, I journey by night."

"And have you not been rifled a hundred times by those thievish Franks?"

"I am an old roadster, I tell you. Accordingly, before entering Brittany, I bravely donned a priest's robe, and painted on my pack a big cross with flames red as hell-fire. The Frankish thieves are as stupid as they are savage; they fear the devil, whom the bishops frighten them with in order to share with them the spoils of Gaul. They would not dare to attack me, taking me for a priest."

"Come, supper is ready – to table," said old Araim; and addressing his son's wife, who continued to give signs of preoccupation, he said to her in a low voice:

"What is the matter, Madalen? Are you still thinking of the Korrigans?"

"This stranger who disguises himself in the robe of a priest without being one will bring misfortune over our house. The tempest's fury seems to have redoubled since he came in."

It is an impossible thing to allay a mother's apprehensions once they are aroused.

The family and the guest sat down to table, ate and drank. The peddler drank and ate like a man to whom the road imparts a good appetite. The jaws did their ample duty; teeth and tongues played their parts well; the family was in good spirits. It is not every long winter's night that one has a peddler from Paris in his company.

"And what is going on in Paris, brave roadster?"

"The most satisfactory thing that I have seen in the city was the burying of the King of the cursed Franks!"

"Ah! Is their King dead?"

"He died more than two months ago – on the 25th of November of last year, of the year 512 of the 'Incarnation of the Word,' as the bishops say who blessed and gave sepulchre to the crowned murderer in the basilica of the Holy Apostles at Paris."

"Ah! He is dead, that Frankish King! And what was his name?"

"He had a devil of a name, Hlode-Wig."

"It must choke one to pronounce it – "

"Hlode-Wig was his name. His wife, whom they call the Queen, is no less happily endowed – her name is Chrotechild – and her four children are named Chlotachaire, Theudeber – "

"Enough! Friend peddler! A truce of those savage names! Those who wear them are worthy of them."

"Right you are, as you may judge by the deceased Hlode-Wig, or Clovis, as he is popularly pronounced; and his family bids fair to surpass even him. Imagine gathered in that monster, whom St. Remi baptised a son of the Church – imagine gathered in that one monster the cunning of the fox and the cowardly ferocity of the wolf. To enumerate to you the murders that he committed with his dagger or his axe would take too long. I shall only mention some of the leading ones. An old Frankish chief, a hunchback named Sigebert, was King of Cologne. This is the way these bandits become Kings: they pillage and ravage a province at the head of a band, massacre or sell like so many heads of cattle men, women and children, reduce the rest of the inhabitants to slavery, and then they say: 'Here we are Kings'; the bishops echo back: 'Yes, our friends the Franks are Kings here; we shall baptize them into the Church; and you, people of Gaul, obey them or we will damn you!'"

"And has there never been found any courageous man to plant a dagger in the heart of such a King?"

"Karadeucq, my pet, do not heat yourself in that manner. Thanks to God, that Clovis is dead. That is, at any rate, one less. Proceed, good peddler!"

"Well, as I was saying, Sigebert the hunchback was King of Cologne. He had a son. Clovis said to him: 'Your father is old – kill him and you will inherit his power.' The son sympathized with the idea and killed his father. And what does Clovis do but kill the parricide and appropriate the kingdom of Cologne!"

"You shudder, my children! I can well imagine it. Such are the new Kings of Gaul!"

"What, you shudder, my hosts, at so little? Only wait. Shortly after that murder, Clovis strangled with his own hands two of his near relatives, father and son, named Chararic, and plundered them of what they themselves had plundered Gaul of. But here is a still worse incident: Clovis was at war with another bandit of his own royal family named Ragnacaire. He ordered a set of necklaces and baldrics to be made of imitation gold, and sent them through one of his familiars to the leudes who accompanied Ragnacaire with the message that, in exchange for the present, they deliver to him their chief and his son. The bargain was struck, and the two Ragnacaires were delivered to Clovis. This great King thereupon struck them both down with his axe like oxen in the slaughter house; he thus at one stroke committed two crimes – cheated the leudes of Ragnacaire and murdered their chiefs."

"And yet the Catholic bishops preach to the people submission to such monsters?"

"Certes, seeing that the crimes committed by these monsters are the source of the Church's wealth. You can figure it out for yourself, good old man, the murders, fratricides, parricides and acts of incest committed by the great Frankish seigneurs yield more gold sous to the fat and do-nothing bishops than all the lands, that your hard and daily toil fructifies, yield deniers to you. But listen to another of Clovis' prowesses. In the course of time he had either himself despatched or ordered others to massacre all his relatives. One day he gathers around him his forces and says with a moan:

" 'Woe is me! I am now left all alone, like a traveler among strangers; I have no relatives left to help me in case adversity overtake me.' "

"Well, so at last he repented his many crimes – it is the least of the punishments that await him."

"He repent? Clovis? He would have been a big fool if he had, good old man! Do you forget that the priests relieve him of the burden of remorse in consideration of good round pounds of gold or silver?"

"And why, then, did he use those terms; why did he say: 'Woe is me! I am now left all alone, like a traveler among strangers; I have no relatives left to help me in case adversity overtake me?' "

"Why? Another trick of his. No, in the language of a bishop himself who chronicled the life of Clovis, it was not that Clovis grieved over the death of all the relatives whom he had caused to be put to death; no, it was a ruse on his part when he held that language, malefactor that he was; he only wished thereby to ascertain whether there was any relative left, and then to kill him."

"And yet was there not a single man resolute enough to plant a dagger in the monster's breast?"

"Keep quiet, bad boy! This is the second time that you have given vent to those sentiments of murder and vengeance! You only do so to frighten me!"

"Dear wife, our son Karadeucq is indignant, like anyone else, at the crimes of that Frankish King. By my father's bones! I who am not of an adventurous disposition, I say myself – it is a shame to Gaul that such a monster should have reigned fourteen years over our country – Brittany fortunately excepted."

"And I, who in my trade of peddler have crossed Gaul from end to end, and seen the country's wretchedness and the bloody slavery that oppresses it, I say that the people's hatred should fall as heavily upon the bishops! Was it not they who called the Franks into Gaul? Was it not they who baptised the murderer a son of the Roman Church? Did they not propose to canonize the monster with the title of 'Saint Clovis?' "

"God in heaven! Is it craziness or cowardly terror on the part of those priests?"

"It is unbridled ambition and inveterate cupidity, good old man. At first, allied to the Roman emperors from the time that Gaul became again a Roman province, the bishops succeeded by underhanded means to secure large endowments for themselves and their churches and to occupy the leading magistracies in the cities. That did not satisfy them; they counted upon being better able to dominate the barbarous Franks than the civilized Romans. They betrayed the Romans to the Franks. The latter came; Gaul was ravaged, pillaged and subjugated, and the bishops shared the plunder with the conquerors whom they speedily placed under their thumb through the fear of the devil. And so it happens that these sanctimonious men have become richer and more powerful under the Frankish than under the Roman rule. Now old Gaul has become their quarry jointly with the barbarians; they now possess vast domains, all manner of wealth, innumerable slaves – slaves that are so well chosen, trained and docile to the whip that an 'ecclesiastical slave' generally fetches twenty gold sous in the market, while other slaves fetch only twelve sous. Would you form an idea of the wealth of the bishops? This identical St. Remi, who baptised Clovis in the basilica of Reims, and thus approved him a worthy son of the holy Roman Church, was so fatly remunerated that he was able to pay five thousand pounds of silver by the weight for the domain of Epernay."

"Oh! Thus to traffic in the blood of Gaul! It is horrible! It is shocking!"

"Oh! That is still nothing, good father. Had you traveled as I have done over regions that were once so flourishing, and seen them now, ravaged and burned down by the Franks! Had you seen the bands of men, women and children, bound two by two, marching among the cattle and wagons heaped with booty of all sorts, that the barbarians drove before them after they conquered the country of Amiens, which I then happened to cross – had you seen that, you would have felt your heart bleed as mine did."

"And where did they take those men, women and children whom they carried away as slaves?"

"Alas! good mother, they took them to the banks of the Rhine, where the Franks keep a large market of Gallic flesh. All the barbarians of Germany who have not yet broken into our unhappy country, repair thither to supply themselves with slaves of our race – men, women and children."

"And what becomes of those who remain in Gaul?"

"The men of the fields are enslaved and made to cultivate under the rod of the Franks their own ancestral estates that King Clovis divided with his leaders, his old comrades in pillage and massacre, and whom he since has made dukes, marquises and counts of our country. But there are still some drops of generous blood left in the veins of old Gaul. Even if the rule of the Franks and the bishops is to endure, they will, at least, not enjoy their conquest in peace."

"How so?"

"Did you ever hear of the Bagaudy?"

"Certainly, and praisefully, too."

"What is the Bagaudy, grandfather?"

"Let me first answer our friend the peddler – it will be information to you also. My grandfather Gildas told me that he heard from his father that, a few years after the death of Victoria the Great, the first Bagaudy took place, not in Brittany, but in the other provinces. Irritated at seeing herself again reduced to the level of a Roman province, as a result of the treason of Tetricus, and of being obliged to pay heavy imposts into the empire's fisc, Gaul rose in rebellion. The uprisings were called 'Bagaudies.' They threw the emperor Diocletian into such consternation that he hurried an army into Gaul to combat them; at the same time, however, he remitted the imposts, and granted almost everything that the Bagauders demanded. As you see, it is only a question of knowing how to present one's demand to kings and emperors. Bend your back and they will load it to the breaking point; show your teeth and they remove the load – "

"Well said, old father – beg them with clasped hands, and they laugh; make your demand with clenched fists, and they yield – that was another good feature of the Bagaudy."

"Well, there were so many good features about it, that, towards the middle of last century, it was started against the Romans anew. That time it spread as far as Brittany, to the very heart of Armorica. But we only talked about it, there was no occasion for serious action. The time was well chosen; if my memory serves me right, I was one of those who accompanied our venerated druids to Vannes, to the curia of that town which consisted of Roman magistrates and officers. To them we said:

" 'You govern us Breton Gauls in the name of your emperor; you lay rather heavy imposts upon us, always in the name and for the benefit of the same emperor. For a long time we have found that very unjust. We enjoy, it is true, our freedom and citizen rights. Nevertheless our subjection to Rome galls us. We think the hour has come for us to emancipate ourselves. The other provinces are of the same mind, seeing that they are rebelling against your emperor. Accordingly, it now pleases us to become free once more, as independent of Rome as we were before the Conquest of Caesar, as we were at the time of Victoria the Great. Accordingly, ye Roman officials and tax-gatherers, pack yourselves off. Brittany will henceforth keep her silver and gold to herself, and will govern herself without your help. A happy journey to you, and do not come back again; if you do, you will find us in arms ready to receive you with our swords, and, if need be, our scythes and forks.' "

"The Romans went, their garrisons along with them. Without troops to enforce their decrees, the magistrates took their departure, and never returned. The Bagaudy in Gaul and the Franks on the

Rhine kept their hands full. This second Bagaudy, like the first, had its good effect, in our province even better than elsewhere, seeing that the bishops, having joined the Romans, succeeded in imposing themselves upon the other provinces of Gaul, but were prevented by the Bagaudy from making their weight felt as heavily as in former years. As to ourselves, of Breton Armorica, Rome never sought to resubjugate us. From that time on, and obedient to our ancient custom, each tribe chooses its own chief, and these choose a chief of chiefs who governs the land. He is kept if he does well, he is removed if he does not give satisfaction. It has continued so to this day, and I hope will ever be, despite the doings of the cursed Franks outside of Brittany. The last Breton will have died before our Armorica shall be conquered by the barbarians as they have done the rest of Gaul. And now, friend peddler, I understand you to say that the Bagaudy is again raising its head, now against the Franks? So much the better! They will, at least, as you say, not enjoy their conquest in peace, if the new Bagauders are worthy of the old."

"They are, good old man; they are; I have seen them at work."

"The Bagauders are, then, numerous armed troops?"

"Karadeucq, my pet, do not excite yourself – listen without interrupting."

"Bad boy, he can only think of battles, revolts and adventures!"

And the poor woman added in a low voice in Araim's ear:

"Was there any occasion for the peddler to mention such matters before my son? Alas! I told you so, father, it is an ill wind that blew this man into our house."

"Do you think him in league with the Dus and Korrigans, Madalen?"

"What I believe is, father, that a misfortune threatens this house. I wish this night were over, and it were to-morrow!"

And the alarmed mother sighed while the peddler answered Karadeucq, who hung upon the stranger's words:

"The new Bagauders, my brave lad, are what the old ones were. Terrible to the oppressors, kind to the people."

"Do the people love them?"

"Whether they love them! Aëlian and Aman, the two chiefs of the first Bagaudy who were put to death nearly two centuries ago in an old Roman castle near Paris, at the confluence of the Seine and the Marne – Aëlian and Aman are to this day loved by the people as martyrs!"

"Ah! Theirs is a happy fate! To be still loved by the people after two centuries! Did you hear that, grandfather?"

"Yes, I did, and so did your mother – see how sad she looks."

But the "bad boy," as the poor woman called him, already seeming in thought to be running the Bagaudy, cast inquisitive and ardent looks at the peddler, and asked:

"Did you ever see the Bagauders? Were there many of them? Had they already run any raids against the Franks and bishops? Is it long since you saw them?"

"Three weeks ago, on my way hither, as I crossed Anjou. One day I missed my road in the forest. Night fell upon me. After having walked a long, long while, and going astray ever deeper in the woods, I noticed at a distance a bright light that issued from a cavern. I ran thither. There I found about a hundred lusty Bagauders. They were resting around a fire with their Bagaudines, because you must know that they are generally accompanied by determined women. A few nights before, they had made a descent upon some Frankish seigneurs, our conquerors, and attacked their 'burgs' as the barbarians term their castles. The Bagauders fought furiously and without neither mercy or pity; they pillaged churches and episcopal villas, exacted ransom from the bishops, hung from the trees the most perverse of the priests who fell into their hands, rifled the coffers of the royal tax-collectors, and slew whatever Frank came in their way. But, as fast as they took from the rich, they gave to the poor. They generously distributed among these the plunder of the rich prelates and Frankish counts, and set free all the chained slaves whom they found. Ah! By Aëlian and Aman, the patrons of the

Bagauders, the life of those gay and brave fellows is a noble and happy one. Had I not been on my way to Brittany in order to see my old mother once more, I would have then and there joined them in running the Bagaudy in Anjou and the contiguous provinces."

"And what must one do in order to be admitted into the ranks of those intrepid people?"

"The first thing to do, my brave lad, is to sacrifice one's skin in advance; you have to be robust, agile, courageous; you must love the poor, swear eternal hatred for the Frankish counts and the bishops; feast by day and bagaude by night."

"And where are their haunts?"

"You might as well ask the birds of the air where they perch, the beasts of the wood where they lie down. Yesterday on the mountain, to-morrow in the woods, marching ten leagues during the night, hiding for days in succession in the nearest cave – the Bagauder knows not to-day where he will be to-morrow."

"It must, then, be a lucky accident that would make one run across them?"

"A lucky accident for good people, an unlucky one for counts, bishops or tax-collectors!"

"Was it in Anjou that you met that troop of Bagauders?"

"Yes, in Anjou – in a forest about eight leagues from Angers, whither I was then bound – "

"Do you notice my pet Karadeucq? Look at him! See how his eyes sparkle and his cheeks burn. Truly, if he does not dream of little Korrigans to-night, he will surely dream of Bagauders. Am I wrong, my lad?"

"And it is my opinion, my grandson, that you will surely run it to-night with your head upon your pillow. I wish you pleasant dreams of the Bagaudy, my pet. Now go to bed, it is late; you are making your mother feel unnecessarily uneasy."

CHAPTER IV OFF TO THE BAGAUDY!

I broke off this narrative three days ago.

I began writing it on the afternoon of the day when the peddler, after having spent the night under our roof, proceeded on his journey. When he appeared at the hall the next morning the tempest had subsided. After the peddler left the house, before he disappeared at the turning of the road, and as he waved us a last adieu, I said to Madalen:

"Well, now, you silly thing! You poor frightened mother – did the angry gods punish my pet Karadeucq for having wished to see the Korrigans? Where is the misfortune that this stranger was to bring down upon our house? The tempest has blown over, the sky is serene, and the sea is calming down and looking as blue again as ever! Why is your mien still preoccupied? Yesterday, Madalen, you said: 'To-morrow rests with God.' Here we are at yesterday's to-morrow. What evil has befallen us? Nothing, absolutely nothing."

"You are right, good father, my forebodings have proved false. And yet, I do not feel at ease. I still am sorry that my son spoke the way he did of the Korrigans."

"Turn around, here is your Karadeucq with his hunting dog in the leash, his pouch on his back, his bow in his hand, his arrows at his side. How handsome he is! How handsome! How alert and determined his mien!"

"Where are you going, son?"

"Mother, yesterday you said to me that it was two days since we have had any venison in the house. This is a good day for the purpose. I shall endeavor to bring down a doe in the forest of Karnak. The chase may take me long; I am carrying some provisions along – bread, fruits and a bottle of our wine."

"No, Karadeucq, you shall not go hunting to-day; I shall not allow it – "

"And why not, mother?"

"I do not know. You might lose your way and fall into some pit in the forest."

"Mother, do not feel alarmed; why, I know all the paths and pits in the forest."

"No, no; you shall not go hunting to-day. I forbid you to leave the house."

"Good grandfather, intercede for me – "

"Willingly. I delight in eating venison. But you must promise me, my pet, that you will not go on the side of the spring where you may encounter the Korrigans."

"I swear to you, grandfather!"

"Come, Madalen, let my skilful archer depart for the chase – he swears to you that he will not think of the fairies."

"Is it really your wish that he go, father?"

"I beg you; let him go; see how crossed he looks."

"Well, let it be as you wish – it is against my wish, however!"

"A kiss, mother!"

"No, bad boy, leave me alone!"

"A kiss, good mother; I beg you – do not deny me a caress – "

"Madalen, see those big tears in his eyes. Would you have the courage to refuse him an embrace?"

"Kiss me, dear child – I felt sorrier than you. Be gone, but come back early."

"One more kiss, good mother – good-bye – good-bye!"

Karadeucq left, wiping his tears. Three or four times he turned around to look at his mother – he then disappeared behind the trees. The day passed. My favorite did not return. The chase must have carried him far away. He will be here in the evening. I started to write this narrative that sorrow

interrupted. It grew dark. Suddenly someone burst into my room. It was my son Jocelyn, closely followed by his wife. He cried.

"Father! Father! A great misfortune."

"Alas! Alas! father. I told you that the Korrigans and the stranger would be fatal to my son. Why did I yield to you? Why did I allow him to depart this morning? Why did I allow my beloved Karadeucq to go away! It is done for him! I shall never more see him again! Oh! unhappy woman that I am!"

"What is the matter, Madalen? What is the matter, Jocelyn? What makes you look so pale? Why those tears? What has happened to Karadeucq?"

"Read, father, read this little parchment that Yvon the neat-herd has just brought me –"

"Oh! A curse! A curse upon that peddler with his Bagaudy! He bewitched my son – the Korrigans are the cause of this misfortune –"

While my son and his wife wrung their arms in desolation I read what my grandson had written:

"Good father and good mother – when you will read this I, your son Karadeucq, will be very far away from our house. I have told Yvon the neat-herd, whom I met this morning in the fields, not to put this parchment into your hands until night, to the end that I may have twelve hours the lead, and may thus escape your efforts to overtake me. I am going to run the Bagaudy against the Franks and bishops. The times of the Chiefs of the Hundred Valleys, the Sacrovirs and Vindexes are past. But I could never remain quiet in a corner of Brittany, the only free section of Gaul, without avenging, if but upon one of the sons of Clovis, the slavery of our beloved country. Good father, good mother, you have left beside you my elder brother, Kervan, and my sister Roselyk. Be not angry with me. And you, grandfather, who love me so much, obtain my pardon and keep my dear parents from cursing their son – Karadeucq."

Alas, all efforts to recover the unhappy boy were futile.

I started this narrative because the conversation of the peddler impressed me deeply. I talked long with the stranger, who for twenty years had been traveling over all parts of Gaul and who thus had exceptional opportunities to observe events. He solved to me the mystery – how our people, who had known how to emancipate themselves from the powerful Roman yoke, fell and remained under the yoke of the Franks, a people whom our own surpass a thousandfold in courage and in numbers.

I had meant to insert here the stranger's answer. But the departure of that unhappy boy who was the joy of my old days, has broken my heart. I lack the courage to continue this narrative. Later, perhaps, if some good news from my pet Karadeucq should revive the hope of seeing him again, I shall finish what I meant to say. Alas! Shall I ever hear from him? Poor boy! To leave all alone, at the age of seventeen, to run the Bagaudy!

Can it be true, after all, that the gods punish us for wishing to see the malign spirits? Alas! Alas! I now also say, with the poor mother, who incessantly runs to the door demented in the hope that she may be able to see whether her son is coming back:

"The gods have punished Karadeucq, my pet, for having wished to see the Korrigans!"

* * * * *

My father Araim died of a broken heart shortly after the departure of my second son. He left me the family archives.

I write these lines ten years after my father's death, and have never had any tidings of my poor son Karadeucq. He probably met his death in the adventurous life of a Bagauder.

Britanny preserves her independence, the Franks dare not attack us. All the other provinces of Gaul have remained under the yoke of the bishops and the sons of Clovis. The latter, it is said, surpass their father in ferocity. Their names are Thierry, Childebert and Clotaire; the fourth, Chlodimir, is said to have died this year.

How many years of life are left to me and what events are in store for me? I know not. But I wish this day to bequeath to you, my eldest child, Kervan, the chronicles of our family. I bequeath them to you five hundred and twenty-six years after our ancestress Genevieve witnessed the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

* * * * *

I, Kervan, the son of Jocelyn, who died seven years after he bequeathed to me our family archives have this to add:

The narrative that follows was brought to me here, at my house, near Karnak, by Ronan, one of the sons of my brother Karadeucq, who left our house to run the Bagaudy, the year after the death of Clovis. These two narratives contain the adventures of my brother Karadeucq and of his two sons Loysik and Ronan. The first portion of the narrative brought to me by Ronan, and which I here subjoin, entitled "The Vagres," and "The Burg of Neroweg," was written by Ronan himself in the ardor of youth, and in a style and form that differ greatly from those of the previous narratives of our family chronicle; the second, which I have entitled "Ghilde," I wrote from the word of mouth account that Ronan left with me, and which I think should not be lost.

Britanny, still in peace, governs herself by chiefs of her own choice. The Franks have not dared to penetrate into our fastnesses. But in the course of my nephew's narrative, our descendants will find the secret of that mystery that my grandfather Araim had not the courage to put in writing:

"How the Gallic people, who had known how to emancipate themselves from the powerful Roman yoke, fell and remained under the yoke of the Franks, whom they surpass a thousandfold in courage and in numbers."

May it please the gods that it may not some day be in Britanny as in the other provinces of Gaul! May it please the gods that our country, the only one that to-day remains free, may never fall under the domination of the Franks and the bishops of Rome. May our druids, both the Christian and the non-Christian, continue to inspire us with a love for freedom and with the virile virtues of our ancestors.

PART II

THE VAGRES

CHAPTER I

"WOLVES' HEADS."

"The devil take the Franks! Long live the Vagrery and Old Gaul!" Such is the cry of all Vagres. The Franks call us 'Wand'ring Men,' 'Wolves,' 'Wolves' Heads.' Let us be wolves!

"My father ran the Bagaudy, and I now run the Vagrery, but both to the one cry – 'The devil take the Franks!' and 'Long Live Gaul!'"

"Aëlian and Aman, Bagauders in their days, as we in ours are Vagres, in revolt against the Romans, as we against the Franks – Aëlian and Aman, put to death two centuries ago in their old castle near Paris, they are our prophets. We take communion with the wine, the treasures and the wives of the seigneurs, the bishops and rich Gauls who made common cause with the Frankish counts and dukes to whom King Clovis gave our old Gaul. The Franks have pillaged us, they massacred and burned down; so let us do likewise – pillage, massacre and burn! And let us live in joy – 'Wolves,' 'Wolves' Heads' and Wand'ring men!" Vagres that we are! Let us live in summer under the green foliage, and in winter in caverns warm!

"Death unto oppressors! Freedom to the slave! Let us take from the seigneurs! Let us give unto the poor!"

"What! A hundred kegs of wine in the master's cellar, and only the water of the stream for the wornout slave?"

"What! A hundred cloaks in the wardrobe, and only rags for the toiling slave?"

"Who was it planted the vine? Who harvested the grape and pressed it into wine? The slave! Who should drink the wine? The slave!"

"Who was it that tended and sheared the sheep and wove the cloth and made the cloak? The slave!"

"Who should wear the cloak? The slave!"

"Up, ye poor and oppressed! Up! Revolt! Here are your good friends the Vagres! They approach! Death to the seigneurs and the bishops!"

"Six men united are stronger than a hundred divided: Let us unite! Each for all, and all for each! 'The devil take the Franks! Long live the Vagrery and Old Gaul!'"

Who sang this song? Ronan the Vagre. Where did he sing it? On a mountain path that led to the city of Clermont in Auvergne, that grand and beautiful Auvergne, land of magnificent traditions – Bituit, who gave Roman legions to his pack of hounds for breakfast in the morning; the Chief of the Hundred Valleys! Vindex! and so many other heroes of Gaul, were they not all sons of Auvergne? of the beautiful Auvergne, to-day the prey of Clotaire, the most odious, the most ferocious of the four sons of Clovis?

Other voices answered in chorus to the song of Ronan the Vagre. They had met on a mild summer's night; there were about thirty Vagres gathered at the spot – gay customers, rough boys, clad in all styles, but armed to the teeth, and all carrying in their caps a twig of green oak as the emblem of their solidarity.

They arrive at a place where the roads fork – one road leads to the right, another to the left. Ronan halts. A voice is heard – the voice of Wolf's-Tooth. What a Titan the man is! He is six feet high, with the neck of a bull and enormous hands; only the hoop of a barrel could encircle his waist:

"Ronan, you said to us: 'Brothers, arm yourselves!' We armed ourselves. 'Furnish yourselves with torches of straw!' Here are the torches. 'Follow me!' We did. You halt; and we have halted."

"Wolf's-Tooth, I am considering. Now, brothers, answer me. Which is to be preferred, the wife of a Frankish count or a bishopess?"

"A bishopess smells of holy water – the bishop blesses; a count's wife smells of wine – the count, her husband, drinks himself drunk."

"Wolf's-Tooth, it is exactly the contrary: the wily prelate drinks the wine, and leaves the water to the stupid Frank."

"Ronan is right!"

"To the devil with the holy water, and long live wine!"

"Yes, long live the wine of Clermont, with which Luern, the great Auvergnan chief of former days, used to fill up the ditches wide as ponds, in order to refresh the warriors of his tribe."

"That would have been a cup worthy of you, Wolf's-Tooth! But, brothers, do answer me; to whom shall we give the preference, to a bishopess or to a count's wife?"

"To the bishopess! To the bishopess!"

"No, to the count's wife!"

"Brothers, so as to please all, we shall take both – "

"Well said, Ronan!"

"One of these roads leads to the burg of Count Neroweg, the other to the episcopal villa of Bishop Cautin."

"We must carry off both the bishopess and the countess – we must pillage both burg and villa!"

"With which shall we start? Shall we start with the prelate, or shall we start with the seigneur? The bishop spends more time over his cup; he loves to roll the sweet morsels over his tongue, and to taste the wine leisurely; the seigneur drinks larger quantities; he gulps them down like a toper – "

"Ronan is right!"

"Consequently, at this hour of the night, midnight, the hour of the Vagres, Count Neroweg must be full as a tick, and snoring in his bed; his wife or some concubine, lying beside him, must be dreaming with eyes wide open. Bishop Cautin, on the other hand, will be leaning with both his elbows on a table, and face to face with a bowl of old wine and one of his favorite boon companions, cracking jokes."

"First to the count; he will be in bed."

"Brothers, let us first call on the bishop; he will be found up; there is more sport in surprising a prelate at his wine than a seigneur at his snores."

"Well said, Ronan! The bishop first!"

"March! I know the house!"

Who was it that said this? A young and handsome Vagre of about twenty-five years of age. He went by the name of "Master of the Hounds." There was no more accurate marksman than he with his bow and arrow. His arrow simply traveled as he wished. Once the forester slave of a Frankish duke, he was caught in an amour with one of the women of his seigneur's household, and escaped death by flight. He thereupon ran the Vagrery.

"I know the episcopal house," repeated the daring fellow. "Feeling it in my bones that some day or other we would be holding communion with the bishop's treasury, like a good master of the hounds, I went one day and took observations around his lair. I saw the dear old man there. Never did I see a buck with blacker or more fiery eyes!"

"And the house, Master of the Hounds, the house; how is it arranged?"

"Bad! The windows are high; the doors heavy; the walls strong."

"Master of the Hounds," replied Ronan the Vagre, "we shall reach the heart of the bishop's house without crossing either the door, the windows or the walls – on the same principle that you reach your sweetheart's heart without penetrating by her eyes – the night is favorable."

"Brothers, to you the treasures – to me the handsome bishopess!"

"Yours, Master of the Hounds, be the bishopess; ours, the booty of the episcopal villa! Long live the Vagrery!"

CHAPTER II

BISHOP AND COUNT

In the summer season Bishop Cautin inhabited a villa situated not far from the city of Clermont, the seat of his episcopacy. Magnificent gardens, crystalline springs, thick arbors, green lawns, excellent meadows, gold harvests, purpled vines, forests well stocked with game, ponds well supplied with fish, excellently equipped stables – such were the surroundings of the holy man's palace. Two hundred ecclesiastical slaves, male and female, cultivated the church's "vineyard," without counting the domestic personnel – the cup-bearer, the cook and his assistants, the butcher, the baker, the superintendent of the bath, the shoemaker, the tailor, the turner, the carpenter, the mason, the master of the hounds, besides the washerwomen and the weavers, most of the latter young, often handsome female slaves. Every evening one of these girls took to Bishop Cautin, who lay softly tucked on a feather bed, a cup of warm and highly spiced wine. Early in the morning another girl took in a cup of creamy milk for the first breakfast of the pious man. And thus lived that good apostle of humility, chastity and poverty!

And who is that portly, handsome and still young woman, who resembles Diana the huntress? With her bare neck and arms, clad in a simple linen tunic and her long black hair half undone, she leans on her elbows over the balcony that crowns the terrace of the villa. At once burning and languishing, the eyes of this woman now rise towards the starry sky, now seem to peer through this mild summer's night, under shelter of which, with the stealthy step of wolves, the Vagres are wending their way towards the bishop's residence. The woman is Fulvia, Cautin's bishopess, whom he married when, still a simple friar, he did not yet aspire to a bishopric. After he was promoted to the higher office that he now fills in the hierarchy, he piously calls her "my sister," agreeable to the canons of the councils.

"Woe is me!" the bishopess was saying. "Woe to these summer nights during which one is left alone to inhale the perfume of the flowers, to listen to the murmur of the nocturnal breezes in the foliage of the trees, murmurs that so much resemble the stolen kisses of lovers! Oh! I always fear the unnerving heat of these summer nights! It penetrates through my whole frame! I am twenty-eight years of age. I am now twelve years, married, and I have counted these conjugal years with my tears! A recluse in the city, a recluse in the country by the orders of my lord and master, my husband, Bishop Cautin, who spends his time in the women's part of the house among my female slaves, whom the profligate debauches while pleading the canons of the councils that, he says, order him to live chastely with his wife – such is my life – my sad life! My youth is ebbing away without my enjoying a single day of love or of freedom. Love! Freedom! Shall I grow old without knowing you? Woe is me!"

And the handsome bishopess rose, shook her black hair to the night breeze, puckered her black eyebrows and cried defiantly:

"Woe to violent and debauched husbands! They hurl women into perdition! Loved, respected, treated, if not as wife, at least truly as his sister by the bishop, I would have remained chaste and gentle. But disdained and humiliated before the lowest of the domestic slaves, I have grown to be wrathful and vindictive. From the height of this terrace, and often my cheeks mantling with shame, I follow with distracted gaze the young slaves of the field when they go out to work in the morning and return in the evening. I have struck my husband's concubines with my hands – and yet, poor wretches that they are, they do not yield to the lover who begs, but to the master who orders. I struck them in anger, not in jealousy. Before that man became odious to me, I was indifferent to him. Nevertheless, I might have loved him, had he wished it – and as he willed. 'Sister-wife' of a bishop – it looked attractive! How much good could not be done! How many tears could not be dried! But I have had only my own to dry, soon finding myself degraded and despised. The measure overflows; I have wept enough; I have moaned enough; I have sufficiently resisted the temptations that devour me! I shall flee from this house, even at the risk of being captured and sold as a slave! Can it be called to live, this

dragging of my days in this opulent villa, a gilded grave? No! No! I wish to leave this sepulchre! I wish to breathe the free air! I wish to see the sun! I wish to move free in space! I crave a single day of love and freedom! Oh! If I could only see again the young lad, who more than once went by this terrace early in the morning! What warm and loving glances he shot at me! What a beautiful and fearless face looked from under his red headcover! What a robust and graceful build did not his Gallic blouse reveal with the belt of his hunting knife! He must be some forester slave of the neighborhood! A slave! What does it matter! He is young, handsome, nimble and amorous! My husband's concubines also are slaves! Oh! Shall I never enjoy a day of love, of freedom?"

In the meantime, what is the bishop doing while his bishopess, lost in reverie on the balcony over the terrace, contemplates the stars, sighs into the darkness, and breathes her sorrows and her devilish hopes upon the midnight breezes? The holy man is drinking and conferring with Count Neroweg, who happens on this night to be his guest. The banquet hall in which they are seated is built after the Roman fashion. It is a spacious room, ornamented with marble pillars, and decked with gilded work and fresco paintings. Gold and silver vases are ranged on ivory sideboards. The floor is slabbed with rich mosaics that are pleasing to the eye. But still more pleasing to the eye is the large table loaded with drinking cups and half-emptied amphoras. The leudes, Neroweg's companions in arms and his equals in time of peace, have gone to play at dice with the bishop's clerks and familiars in the vestibule, after having partaken of supper at the same table with the count, as is the custom. Here and there along the walls the rough weapons of the leudes are stacked up – wooden bucklers, iron-rimmed staves, 'francisques' or double-edged axes, 'haugons' or demi-pikes furnished with iron grappling hooks. The count's buckler is illumined with a painting that represents three eagle's talons. Left alone at table with his guest, the prelate induces Neroweg to drain cup after cup. At the lower end of the table sits a hermit laborer. He drinks not, neither does he speak. At times he seems to listen to the conversation of the two toppers. Oftener, however, he is steeped in thought.

The Frank, Count Neroweg, has the appearance and emits the odor of a wild-boar in spring; his face resembles a bird of prey, with his beaked nose and restless little eyes that alternately assume a savage and then a sleepy look; his coarse yellow hair, tied over his head with a leather thong, falls back over his neck like a mane; the coiffure of these barbarians remained unchanged during the last two centuries. Neroweg's chin and cheeks are closely shaven, but his long reddish moustache droops down to his chest, which is covered by a doe-skin jacket, shines with grease, and is dotted with wine spots. Long leathern straps criss-cross over his lower hose from his coarse iron-spiked shoes up to his knees. He has removed his heavy sword from his broad and loosely hanging baldric and laid it upon a seat nearby, beside a stout holly club. Such is the convivial guest of the prelate, such is Count Neroweg, one of these new masters of the old lands of Gaul.

Bishop Cautin resembles a large, fat, ruttish fox – lascivious and sly eyes, red ears, a mobile and pointed nose, hirsute hands. He prinks in his violet robe of fine woven silk. And what a paunch! One would say there was a barrel under the gown.

As to the hermit-laborer – all respect for that priest, a worthy disciple of the young man of Nazareth! He is thirty years of age at the most. His face is pale, and it is at once mild and firm; his beard is blonde, his head is prematurely bald; his long brown robe, made of some coarse material, is here and there frayed by the brambles on the lands that his toil has cleared. The man's bearing is rustic, his hands are strong, the plow and the hoe-handle have made them horny.

The bishop again fills another large cup to the Frank, saying:

"Count – I repeat it – the twenty gold sous, the meadow lands and the little blonde female slave – either I must have them, or you get no absolution!"

"Bishop! I shall fall upon your house with all my leudes and sack it; I shall roast you over a slow fire – and you will give me absolution – "

"Impious man! Sacrilegious blasphemer! Pharaoh! Hog of profligacy! Reservoir of wine! How dare you hold such language to your bishop! And you a son of our apostolic Church!"

"You shall give me absolution, will ye, nill ye!"

"Oh! The beast! Is it that you are itching to fall into the very bottom of hell? Is it that you are itching to remain for centuries in succession broiling in pails full of burning pitch! You seem to be itching after a thorough trouncing with the forks of the devils! Devils with toads' heads, rams' horns, serpents for their tails, elephants' trunks for arms, and cloven hoofs – aye archcloven!"

"Did you see them?" queried the Frank with a savage and yet frightened mien. "Did you, bishop? Did you see those demons?"

"Whether I saw them! They brought before me in a cloud of bitumen and sulphur Duke Rauking, who, the sacrilegious wretch! struck Bishop Basile with his cane!"

"And did the devils carry off Duke Rauking?"

"They threw him into the bottomless pit! I counted them; there were thirteen of them; a large red devil, that was Lucifer, led them. Such a fate is in store for you, if I refuse you absolution."

"Bishop, you may be saying all that only to frighten me out of my twenty gold sous, the fine meadow lands, and the pretty blonde slave!"

The prelate rang a bell; one of his confidential servants stepped in; the holy man said to him a few words in Latin while with his eyes he indicated a spot on the mosaic floor. The servant went out again. The hermit-laborer thereupon addressed the bishop, also in Latin:

"What you propose to do is an unworthy trick! It is a sacrilegious fraud!"

"Hermit, is not everything allowed to the clergy of our holy Church in order to terrify these brutes of Franks into subjection?"

"Fraud never is allowed – "

Cautin shrugged his shoulders, and addressing the count in the Frankish tongue – the prelate spoke the language like any of the barbarians – he said:

"Are you a Christian and a Catholic? Did you receive holy baptism?"

"Bishop Macaire, twenty years ago, ordered me to step naked into the stone tank of his basilica; he then threw a handful of water upon my head and mumbled some Latin words."

"You are a Catholic – a son of our holy Church – by reason of which you must respect and obey me as your father in Christ!"

"Bishop, you are trying to confuse me by such language, but I will not be duped by you. Our great King Clovis conquered and subjugated Gaul at the head of his brave leudes. My father Gonthram Neroweg was one of his warriors, and – "

"You lie, count! It is to the bishops that your King owed his conquest; it was they who ordered the people to submit to Clovis; without them, your great King would have remained only a chief of brigands. Never forget that, barbarian! You may now proceed with what you had to say, and speak respectfully."

"When Theodorik lived, the son of Clovis who had Auvergne as one of his kingdoms, he allotted to me vast domains in this region – lands, people, cattle and houses, and he sent me here as his representative. He made me what is called 'graf' of this country, and what we Franks call 'count'; and he authorized me to preside together with the chief bishop of the city and the magistrates of the city of Clermont."

"What are you driving at with that long digression?"

"I wish to prove, first of all, that King Clovis committed many more crimes than I did, and that his crimes did not prevent him from entering paradise, as the bishops themselves declare."

"True enough, brute that you are! But you seem to forget what that paradise cost him. St. Remi, who baptized him, was so richly endowed by him that the holy prelate was able to buy an estate in Champagne that cost him five thousand pounds of silver by weight."

"I then meant to say that if you are bishop, I am count of the conquered country, and I can force you to give me absolution!"

"Ah! You blaspheme!" and the bishop struck under the table with his foot. "Ah! You dare to defy the anger of the Lord! You – soiled with execrable crimes!"

"Well! Yes! Is it perchance an unpardonable crime to kill a brother? I confess that I murdered my brother Ursio! Give me absolution!"

"You seem to forget the murder of your concubine Isanie, and of your fourth wife Wisigarde, whom you married when two previous ones were still alive, and you then took a fifth wife, Godegisele – "

"And did you not give me absolution for all those sins? By the faith of the Terrible Eagle, my glorious ancestor! It cost me five hundred acres of the best stretches of my forest, thirty-eight gold sous, twenty slaves, together with the superb cloak of Northern marten skin in which you strutted about last winter, and which King Clovis presented to my father!"

"You have been absolved of those first crimes – as to them you are as white as the pascal lamb, but for the fresh crime of your brother's murder."

"I did not kill Ursio out of hatred, I only killed him for his part of our inheritance."

"And what else should you have killed your brother for, beast? To eat him up?"

"Did not the great Clovis also kill all his relatives for their heritage, and yet you declare that he entered paradise. I also wish to go there, and I have killed fewer people. If you do not promise paradise to me on the spot and without any further payments, if you refuse to give me absolution, I shall have you torn into pieces by four horses, or hacked to pieces by my leudes."

"And I tell you that if you do not expiate your fratricide by a gift to the Church, you shall go to hell, like a new Cain who killed his brother."

"What you are after is my hundred acres of meadow land, my twenty gold sous, and my pretty little blonde slave."

"What I am after is the salvation of your soul, unhappy man! What I aim at is to save you the torments of hell, the very thought of which should make you shudder with terror."

"You are always talking of hell. Where is hell?"

Bishop Cautin again struck the floor with his feet under the table.

"Count, do you smell that odor of sulphur?"

"I do feel a pungent odor."

"Do you see the smoke that is coming up from between those stone slabs?"

"Whence does that smoke proceed?" cried Neroweg affrighted, rising from the table and jumping back from a near place where a thick black vapor was curling upward. "Bishop, what magic is this? Come to my help!"

"Oh, Lord God! You have heard the voice of your unworthy servant!" said Cautin clasping his hands and falling upon his knees. "You wish to manifest yourself to this barbarian!" And turning his head toward Neroweg: "You asked where hell was? Look at your feet – see the abyss – see that sea of flames, all ready to engulf you!"

As the bishop spoke, one of the mosaic slabs sank below the floor, drawn down by an artful contrivance of ropes and weights; a large gap was thus left open, and out of it a whirl of flames leaped up, spreading a suffocating odor of sulphur.

"The earth is opening!" cried the terrorized Frank. "Fire! Fire! My feet burn! Help! Help!"

"It is the everlasting fire," said the bishop rising and striking a threatening attitude, while the count, dropping on both his knees, hid his face in his hands. "Ah! You asked me where hell was, impious, blaspheming brute!"

"Father! Good father – have pity upon me!"

"Do you hear those underground cries? It is the devils; they are coming for you. Listen! Do you hear them cry: 'Neroweg! Neroweg! The fratricide! Come to us! Cain, you are ours!' "

"Oh! Those cries are frightful. Good father in Christ, pray to the Lord that he forgive me!"

"Ah! Now you are on your knees, pale and distracted, with hands clasped, your eyes closed with terror! Will you still ask where is hell?"

"No! No! Holy bishop! Holy Bishop Cautin! Absolve me of the death of my brother; you shall have the meadow lands, the twenty gold pieces – "

"And the pretty blonde slave?"

"Oh! You want my pretty blonde slave also?"

"I have a donation deed ready made out. You shall order one of your leudes to come in and sign the parchment as your witness – yonder hermit shall be my witness, and you will sign the document in their presence. The donation will then be in order and binding."

"I consent to everything – have pity upon me. Order the devils back. Order them back! Oh! good father, order them away! Keep them from dragging me to hell!"

"They will certainly drag you thither if you fail in your promise."

"I shall keep all my promises."

"Seeing that you are no longer in doubt of the power of the Lord," the bishop proceeded to say while he again stamped on the floor with his foot, "you may rise, count, open your eyes, the abyss of hell is closed again"; the slab had in the meantime been raised and adjusted in its former place. "Hermit, bring the parchment to me and writing materials. You shall be my witness."

"I decline, seigneur bishop, to aid in the accomplishment of such a sacrilegious knavery," the hermit-laborer answered in Latin, "but if I reveal your trick to that barbarian he will put you to death! I shall not be the means of your death. God will one day judge you! In the meantime I shall raise my voice against your unworthy comedies."

"What! Would you be capable of abusing your influence over the masses in order to incite them to a rebellion in my diocese? Is it a declaration of war that you make to me? Do you not know that the officers of the Church must stand by one another? Or is it some favor that you mean to draw from me through intimidation? Answer!"

"To-morrow, before proceeding upon my journey, I shall tell you what I demand of you – "

Cautin, who stood in awe of the hermit, rang a bell while the count, who remained upon his knees, still trembled at every limb, and mopped the cold sweat that inundated his forehead. At the bishop's call, the confidential servant appeared. The holy man said to him in Latin:

"The hell was very satisfactory. Have the fires put out!"

And he added in the Frankish tongue:

"Order one of the count's leudes, one who can write, to step in. You shall come back with him; I shall need your services."

The servant left, and the bishop addressed the kneeling Frank:

"You have believed, you repent – you may now rise!"

"My good father, I am afraid of returning to my burg to-night. The devils might come for me on the road and take me to hell. I am terror-stricken. Keep me in your house to-night!"

"You shall be my guest until to-morrow. But I want the pretty blonde slave to be delivered to me this very evening. I promised her to my bishopess, who was once my wife according to the flesh, and is to-day my sister in God. She needs a young girl for her service – and I promised her that one. The sooner she has her, all the better pleased will she be."

"And so, bishop," said the count scratching himself behind his ear, "you must have that blonde slave?"

"Will you dare to break your engagement?"

"Oh, no! No, father! One of my leudes shall take horse, ride to my burg, and bring the slave to you on the crupper."

The deed of the donation was signed and duly witnessed by the bishop's servant and one of the count's leudes. It provided that Neroweg, count of the King of Auvergne and the city of Clermont, donated to the Church, represented by Cautin, and in remission of his sins, a hundred acres of meadow

land, twenty gold sous, and a spinner female slave, fifteen years old, named Odille. After the ceremony of signing was concluded the bishop gave the Frankish count absolution for the murder of his brother and offered him three full cups of wine to comfort him.

"Sigefrid," said the count to his leude, smothering a last sigh of regret, "be a good friend to me; ride to my burg; take Odille the spinner girl on the crupper of your horse and bring her here."

CHAPTER III

AT THE CHAPEL OF ST. LOUP

The Vagres arrived near the episcopal villa.

"Ronan, the gates are solid, the windows high, the walls thick – how shall we penetrate into the place and reach the bishop?" asked the Master of the Hounds. "You promised to lead us to the very heart of the house. As for me, I'm off to the heart of the bishopess."

"Brothers, do you see yonder, at the foot of the hill, that little structure surrounded by pillars?"

"We see it – the night is clear!"

"That building was formerly a warm water bath. The warm spring lay in the mountain. The bath is reached from the villa by a long underground gallery. The bishop had the stream turned away, and transformed the former bath into a chapel that he consecrated to St. Loup. Now, then, my sturdy Vagres, we will penetrate to the very heart of the episcopal villa by that underground gallery, without need of boring holes through walls or breaking doors or windows. If I promised, did I keep?"

"As always, Ronan! You promised and kept!"

The troop entered the former warm water bath, now chapel of St. Loup. It was dark as a pocket. A voice was heard saying:

"Is that you, Ronan?"

"I and mine. Lead, Simon, you good servant of the episcopal villa! Lead on, we follow."

"We shall have to wait."

"Why delay?"

"Count Neroweg is still with the bishop, with his leudes."

"All the better! We shall capture a fox and a wild-boar at once! A superb hunt!"

"The count has with him twenty-four well armed leudes."

"We are thirty! That is fifteen Vagres more than enough for such a raid. Lead on, Simon, we follow."

"The passage is not yet free."

"Why is not the passage free that leads underground into the banquet hall?"

"The bishop prepared a miracle for this evening, in order to frighten the Frankish count with hell. Two clerks carried into the apartment under the banquet hall large bales of hay, bundles of fagots and boxes of sulphur. They are to set them on fire and yell like devils possessed; then one of the mosaic slabs of the flooring in the hall will sink down; it drops by means of the same contrivance that used to remove it in order to descend to this gallery for the warm baths."

"And the stupid Frank, imagining he sees one of the mouths of hell yawning wide, will make some generous donation to the holy man –"

"You guessed it, Ronan. So, then, we shall have to wait until the miracle is over. When the count is gone and the villa slumbering you and your men can come in safely."

"The bishopess for me!"

"To us the iron money-chest, the gold and silver vases! To us the bishop's full money-bags – and then we shall scatter alms among the poor who have not a denier!"

"To us," cried another set, "the full wine pouches and bags of grain – to us the hams and smoked meats! Alms, alms to the poor who hunger!"

"To all of us the wardrobes, the fine clothes, the warm robes – and then alms, alms to the poor who suffer with cold!"

"And then, fire to the episcopal villa – and to the sack!"

"Freedom to the slaves!"

"We shall take with us the young girls, who will follow us gladly!"

"Long live love and the Vagrery!" cried Ronan, saying which he struck up the song:

"My father was a Bagauder, and I a Vagre am; born under the green foliage as any bird in May.

"Where is my mother? I do not know, forsooth!

"A Vagre has no wife.

"The poniard in one hand, the torch held in the other, he moves from burg to burg and villas kept by bishops; he carries off the wives or concubines of bishops and of counts, and takes the belles along into the thickest of the woods!

"And first they weep and then they laugh. The jolly Vagre knows the art of love. In his strong arms the loving belles forget full soon the cacochymic bishop or the brutified duke!"

"Long live the Vagre's love!"

"You are in rollicking mood – "

"Aye, Simon, we are about to put a bishop's house to the sack!"

"You will be hanged, burned, quartered!"

"No more nor less so than Aman and Aëlian, our prophets, Bagauders in their days as we are Vagres in ours. For all that, the poor say: 'Good Aëlian!' 'Good Aman!' May they some day say: 'Good Ronan!' I would die happy, Simon!"

"Always living in the recesses of the woods – "

"Verdure is so cheerful!"

"At the bottom of caverns – "

"It is warm there in winter, cool in summer!"

"Always on the alert; always on the run over hill and valley; always wandering without hearth or home – "

"But always living free, old Simon. Yes, free! free! instead of leading a slave's life under the whip of some Frankish master or some bishop! Join us, Simon!"

"I am too old for that!"

"Do you not hate your master, Bishop Cautin, and the whole seigniory?"

"One time I was young, rich and happy. The Franks invaded Touraine, my native country. They slew my wife after violating her; they dashed my little girl's head against the wall; they pillaged my house; they sold me into slavery, and from master to master, I have finally fallen into the hands of Bishop Cautin. So you see, I have every reason to execrate the Franks; but worse than them, if possible, I execrate the Gallic bishops, who hold us Gauls in bondage, and sanctify the crime of our foreign oppressors. I would hang them all if I could!"

"Who goes there?" cried Ronan noticing a human form on the outside, creeping on its knees and approaching the door of the chapel in that posture. "Who goes there?"

"I, Felibien, ecclesiastical slave of our holy bishop."

"Poor man! Why do you crawl on your knees in that style?"

"It is in obedience to a vow that I took. I come on my knees – over the stones of the road – to pray to St. Loup, the great St. Loup, to whom this chapel is dedicated. I come at night so that I may be back at dawn when I must start to work. My hut is far from here."

"But why do you inflict such a punishment upon yourself, brother? Is it not hard enough to have to rise with the sun, and to lie down upon straw at night worn out with fatigue?"

"I come upon my knees to pray St. Loup, the great St. Loup, to request the Lord to grant a long and happy life to our seigneur, the bishop."

"To pray for a long and happy life for your master is to pray for a lengthening of the whip of the superintendents who flay your back."

"Blessed be their blows! The more we suffer here below, all the happier will we be in paradise!"

"But the wheat that you sow is eaten by your bishop; the wine that you press is drunk by him; the cloth that you weave, clothes him – and you remain wan, hungry, in rags!"

"I would be willing to feed on the offal of swine, clothe myself in thorns that tear my skin to the veins – my happiness will be all the greater in paradise!"

"The Lord created the grain, the grapes, the honey, the fruits, the creamy milk, the soft fleece of the sheep – was all that done in order that any of His creatures should live on ordure and dress in thorns? Answer me, my poor brother."

"You are an impious fellow!"

"Alas! Almost all the slaves are, like this unhappy fellow, steeped in the abjectest besotment – the evil spreads by the day – it is done for old Gaul – "

"If so, let us sing the refrain of the Vagres:

"The Franks call us 'Wand'ring Men,' 'Wolves,' 'Wolves' Heads' – Let us live like wolves! Let us live in joy! In summer under the green foliage, in winter in caverns warm!"

"Come, Simon, the bishop's miracle must be over by this time."

"Yes – I shall precede you alone, a little way in this underground passage; should I see light I shall return and notify you."

"But what about that slave, who is mumbling his prayers on his knees to the great St. Loup?"

"Lightning might strike at his very feet and he would not budge from the spot – he will go back as he came, on his knees. Follow me!"

And led by the ecclesiastical slave, the Vagres vanished in the subterranean passage which led from the former warm baths into the episcopal villa. As they proceeded in the dark, they sang in an undertone:

"The jolly Vagre has no wife. The poniard in one hand, the torch held in the other, he moves from burg to burg and villas kept by bishops; he carries off the wives and concubines of bishops and of counts, and takes the belles along into the thickest of the woods!"

CHAPTER IV

THE DEMONS! THE DEMONS!

What were the prelate and the count engaged in while the Vagres were approaching the ecclesiastical villa through the underground gallery? What were they engaged in? They were emptying cup upon cup. The count's leude had returned to the burg in quest of the pretty blonde slave girl. While waiting for him, Bishop Cautin, hardly able to contain himself for the joy that he anticipated in the possession of the girl whom he coveted, had returned to his seat at the table. Neroweg had not yet recovered from his recent fright; ever and anon a shiver would run over him. Every time it occurred to him that hell had just yawned at his very feet and might be located under the very room in which he found himself, he would gladly have left the banquet hall. He dared not. He believed himself protected by the holy presence of the bishop against the attacks of the devils, who might elsewhere fall upon him. In vain did the man of God urge his guest to drain another cup; the count pushed the cup back with his hand while his gimlet eyes, resembling the eyes of a frightened bird of prey, rolled uneasily over the hall.

Impassible in his seat, the hermit laborer remained sunk in meditation, or observed what took place around him.

"What ails you?" the bishop asked the count. "You look downcast and drink no more! A minute ago you were a fratricide, and now, thanks to the absolution that I gave you, you are white as snow. Is your conscience still uneasy? Can it be that you hid some other crime from me? If you did, you chose your time ill – as you saw, hell is not far away – "

"Keep still, father! Keep still! I feel so weak just now that I could not carry a lamb on my back – I who can otherwise raise a wild-boar. Do not leave your son in Christ alone! You are able to conjure the demons away – I shall not leave you till it is broad day – "

"You will nevertheless have to leave me the moment the pretty blonde slave arrives; I must take her to the women's section of the house near Fulvia."

"As truly as one of my ancestors was called the Terrible Eagle in Germany, I shall not quit you any more than your shadow."

"An ancestor of that Neroweg was called the Terrible Eagle in Germany – the meeting is odd," thought the hermit to himself. "It does seem that our two hostile families, the one Frank the other Gaul, having crossed each other's path in the past, must cross it again – and are to recross it, perhaps, again and again through the centuries to come – "

"Count, your terror proves to me that your soul is not at ease – I mistrust that your confession was not complete."

"Yes, yes; I confessed everything!"

"I hope to God it be so, for the salvation of your soul. But cheer up! Let us talk of the hunt. Oh! By the way of the hunt, I have a complaint against you and your forester slaves. The other day they pursued three stags into the very heart of the Church's forest – in that part of the wood that is separated from the rest of your domains by the river."

"If my forester slaves pursued any stag into your forest, I shall allow yours to pursue one into mine; our woods are separated only by a narrow road."

"A better boundary would be the river itself."

"In that case I would have to abandon to you fully a thousand acres of woodland, which lie on this side of the stream."

"Do you place much store by that little corner of your forest? The trees do not thrive very well at that spot."

"Not as poorly as you would make out. There are among them oak trees more than twenty feet around; besides, it is that portion of my domains that game seems to like best."

"You boast of the beauty of your trees; it is your right; but your domains would have a better and safer boundary if you took the river, and if you consented to yield to the Church that corner of a thousand acres."

"What makes you speak of my woods? I have no need of any further absolution from you – "

"No – you killed one of your wives, one of your concubines and your brother Ursio – you have expiated those crimes by endowing the Church – you have received absolution. Nevertheless, coming to think of it, there is one thing that both of us have overlooked – and it is of capital importance – "

"What is it, father?"

"Your fourth wife, Wisigarde, died a violent death at your hands. She did not receive priestly assistance at her death – her soul is in pain. She might come to torment you during the night in the shape of some frightful phantom until you will have drawn her poor soul from purgatory – "

"How can I do that?"

"Through the holy mass and through the prayers of a priest of the Lord."

"Well, father, I wish you to make those prayers for the soul of the departed."

"I shall grant your request. For twenty years prayers shall be recited at the altar for the repose of the soul of Wisigarde, but only under condition that you pass over to me the corner of your woods that is separated from your domains by the stream – "

"Give again to your Church! Ever give! Ever!"

"Would you prefer to be tormented by nocturnal phantoms?"

The Frank looked at the bishop with an angry and defiant eye:

"Rapacious Gaul! You are seeking to pluck piece by piece from me the share of the conquests that our kings have presented to my family as our hereditary possessions. Endow the Church still more! I will sooner endow the devil! Yes, by all the horns of Lucifer!"

"Do! Endow him! Here he is!" came from a rude loud voice that seemed to issue from the center of the earth.

At the sound of the voice the hermit started from his seat; the bishop threw himself back and quickly crossed himself, but a reassuring thought flashed through his mind, and he said to himself aloud in Latin:

"It must be my good assistant who remained below – the trick is good!"

The count, however, struck with terror and believing himself pursued by the archfiend in person, screamed aloud and fled from the banquet hall distracted. So precipitate was his flight and headlong his bewilderment that he nearly upset the leude who, back at that moment from his errand to the count's burg, entered the hall pushing before him the young blonde slave whom he was sent in quest of:

"Here is the slave girl, Odille," said the leude.

The bishop started to run towards the poor lass, but at the very moment when he dashed forward to seize her, a vigorous hand that rose from the opening of the now again removed mosaic slab held the prelate back by the fold of his robe, and a voice shouted:

"A profligate you shall no longer be, holy man of God! That pretty lass is not for you!"

When the startled bishop looked around, he saw with terror Ronan issuing from the underground recess at the head of his companions, all of whom were yelling at the top of their voices. In order to carry on the humor of the trick that the bishop played upon the count, the Vagres had all blackened their faces with the charred remains of the fagots that shortly before furnished the "flames of hell."

At the sight of those black men rising from under the ground, and yelling as if possessed, the leude who brought in the young slave also believed that they issued from hell, and rushed out close upon Neroweg's heels, crying:

"The demons! The demons!"

More and more frightened by these cries, the count ran to the stable, leaped upon his horse, and dashed full tilt away from the episcopal villa. His leudes followed his example; they, in turn, took to their mounts, and leaving their arms behind in the banquet hall, fled tumultuously, repeating in terror:

"The demons! The demons!"

CHAPTER V

VAGRES IN JUDGMENT

The episcopal villa has been invaded by the Vagres. They carried the place, and they did so without striking a blow.

Who is he who is celebrating night mass in the bishop's chapel? The wax candles are lighted on the altar with all the gorgeousness of an Easter Sunday. Their brilliant light illumines the near vault, while the rest of the chapel is thrown into the shade, down to the Gothic main entrance, that now and then a ruddy gleam flickers through like the reflection of an extinguishing bonfire. What bonfire was that? It was the bonfire of the episcopal villa in flames.

Was, then, the villa set on fire by the Vagres? Certes; for what other reason should they have brought along torches and straw?

In the center of the yard the riches of the bishop lie in a high heap – gold and silver vases, holy chalices, together with drinking goblets, Bible cases of precious wood, together with platters of the banquet table, patines, together with bowls used for cooling the bishop's wine; good sized and ripped-up bags, from which silver and gold sous roll out; costly cloth, purple and blue, that but awaited the tailor's scissors; warm and rare furs, some black as crows, others white as doves. In the way of trophies, the axes, bucklers and pikes of the leudes, who ran away out of fear for the devil, are stacked up at the four corners of the superb heap of booty. Gold, silver, steel, the brilliant colors of the cloths – they all scintillate and sparkle, each with its own lustre, and all with the resplendence that is so pleasing to the eye of the Vagre.

The Vagres are there! They are in the holy chapel of the episcopal villa, where they do that which all Vagres do after they have drunk their fill, ravaged and pillaged. Some are snoring at the foot of the altar exhausted by their labors or overcome by the fumes of wine; others balance themselves on their unsteady limbs and cast loving glances at the wealth which they are about to scatter on their route and that will make so many poor people happy. The Vagres of Ronan are ever faithful to the sacred commandments of the Vagrery:

"Let us take from the rich and give to the poor. The Vagre who preserves a sou for the morrow ceases to be a Vagre, a 'Wolf's-head,' a 'wand'ring man.' He ever divides the booty of the previous evening among the poor, so that he be compelled to pillage fresh renegade bishops, and Frankish oppressors of old Gaul. Nor peace nor truce to the oppressors!"

And as to those other Vagres, who lean against the shafts of the pillars, or are seated on the step of the altar near the snorers – their eyes are as steady as their limbs; have they perchance, not also tasted the old wines of the episcopal villa?

Oh! They did drink, twice, ten times more than the others; but they are veterans at the trade, old Vagres, sturdy customers who drain a pouch at one gulp, and immediately after are able to walk with steady step over a beam across the conflagration that they have lighted in the burg of a Frank, or the villa of a bishop.

And these others – men with shaven heads, wan, clad in rags; these women and these girls, some of whom are pretty – who are they?

They are the slaves of the Church; they look happy at the sight of their day of justice and vengeance. But other slaves there are, not a few in number, who fled terrified into the woods. They imagined they saw the fires of heaven roll down upon the Vagres, who could be sacrilegious enough to put to the sack and fire the house of the vice-regent of God on earth, their holy bishop.

And what is Ronan doing? There he sits in full gala on the episcopal bench, decked in sacerdotal garb, and coiffed in the fur cap which count Neroweg left behind when he fled demented out of the banquet hall. Four Vagres assist Ronan. They are odd-looking clerks! Jolly deacons! Among them is Wolf's-Tooth, the giant whose waist a barrel's hoop would hardly encircle.

"Brother, are we all together?"

"Ronan, only the Master of the Hounds is missing. When the conflagration was at its height, he was seen by one of our men running towards the door of the bishopess; he leaped through the flames and re-issued at the garden door running with a fainting woman in his arms."

"He is doubtlessly engaged in making her regain consciousness. Well, while the bishopess is being revived, shall we try the bishop?"

"The holy man has tried people, whom he said were under his jurisdiction, as bishop of the city of Clermont. He is now under our jurisdiction. Let us try him!"

Louder than the Vagres themselves, the slaves of the prelate set up the cry:

"Let us judge the bishop!"

"Bring him forward, on the spot!"

Two Vagres went out in quest of the holy man of God, who had been kept locked up in a contiguous compartment. He was brought in pinioned. Pale and wrathful he was pushed before the tribunal of Ronan and his four Vagre clerks.

"Seigneur bishop," said Ronan to him, "thy 'charity,' thy 'piety,' thy 'exalted chastity' (thou seest I am giving thee all the honorary titles that thou and thine bestow upon one another, holy men that ye are) thy 'exalted chastity' will be kind enough to inform us of thy name?"

"Incendiary! Pillager! Sacrilegious wretch! Those are your names! I damn and excommunicate you, you, together with your whole band! You stand excommunicated in this world and in the next, where you will suffer everlasting tortures!"

"Thy 'exalted chastity' answers my question with insults. Seeing that thou refusest to state thy name, I shall answer for thee. Thy name is Cautin – "

"May my name burn your tongue!"

"Slaves of the bishopric," proceeded Ronan addressing those who surrounded him, "what charges have you to prefer against your bishop?"

"He grinds us down with toil and with taxes. He oppresses us from morning till night all the year long!"

"For food he lets us have a handful of beans, for clothes rags, and for shelter rickety mud huts!"

"Our slightest oversights are visited with the whip!"

"He violates our daughters! What resistance can the female slave offer when threatened? She submits with a shudder – she weeps – "

"That a Frank should be ready to subjugate us and overwhelm us with misery we can understand: he is a conqueror who abuses his power. But that bishops, Gauls like ourselves, should join the Frank in order to share with him the plunder that he levies upon us – that we cannot understand; such action must draw down the severest punishment upon the heads of the perpetrators. Oh! Our old priests, the venerated druids, never allied themselves with the Roman conquerors of Gaul. No! No! With the sword in one hand, the mistletoe twig in the other, they were ever the first to give the signal for war against the foreigner; they roused the peoples to revolt with the words: 'The country and freedom!' The response came swift from the masses; out of their midst arose the Chief of the Hundred Valleys, Sacrovir, Vindex, Marik, Civilis! And the Romans trembled in their very Capitol!"

"Bishop," Ronan proceeded, "has thy exalted truthfulness anything to answer to the accusations of thy slaves?"

"They are all damned criminals, sacrilegious wretches who will have to answer for their crimes when they appear before the throne of God, on the day of last judgment. Ever after they will gnash their teeth – "

"Bishop, has thy exalted purity nothing else to say than utter insults?"

"And may it please the Lord to turn these insults into so many tongues of fire to pierce your bodies, ye accursed men!"

"While waiting for the fulfillment of thy wishes, listen to the further indictment against thee: Thou didst covet the goods of one of thy priests named Anastasius; he declined to let thee have them; thou didst inveigle him to Clermont; thou didst there have him seized, bound hand and foot and thrown alive into a grave with a decomposing corpse. Wilt thou dare deny that thou art guilty of that felony?"

"A wonderful council this is, made up of beggars, sacrilegious wretches and slaves, to interrogate a bishop!"

"We shall proceed. Thy exalted poverty, in its rage to augment its wealth, conceived this evening, under guise of a miracle, a veritable bandit's trick: thou didst plunder Count Neroweg under pressure of the fear of the devil. Under the code of the Vagrery, to plunder a Frank is a pious act. But if the Vagres delight in pillaging our conquerors, it is only in order to administer to the wants of the poor by making them sharers in the plunder. On the other hand, to plunder a thief for self-gain is a sin according to the code of the Vagrery. Moreover, thou didst absolve the count of a crime in order that thou mightst possess a young slave, a girl of barely fifteen years. Now, then, under the code of the Vagrery, such episcopal profligacy also is a damnable sin that demands punishment."

And addressing himself to the Vagres, Ronan added:

"Bring in the young slave!"

Ronan was right. To impute fifteen years to the girl was to add to her actual age. Her blonde hair that was parted in two long and thick braids, reached almost down to her feet, which were bare, like her arms and shoulders. In fetching her from the burg, the brutal leude had barely given her time to dress before lifting her on the crupper of his horse. Accordingly, now that she faced the Vagres what suppliant fear was not readable in the large blue eyes of the poor child, who still trembled visibly! Her nocturnal ride on the crupper of the Frankish warrior's horse, the burning of the episcopal villa, the strange aspect of the Vagres – how many subjects of alarm to her young heart! The young girl's cheeks must once have been full and rosy; they now were hollow and pale. The infantine figure, bearing the stamp of suffering, was painful to behold. As the young slave stepped into the chapel a feeling of sadness came over Ronan; his very voice betrayed his emotion when he addressed her:

"What is your name, my child?"

"I am called Odille."

"Where were you born?"

"Far from here – in one of the uplands of the Mont-Dore."

"How old are you, little Odille?"

"My mother said to me this spring: 'Odille, it is to-day fourteen years that you have been the joy of my life.' "

"How did you become the slave of the Frankish count? Tell us your history."

"My father died young. I lived in the mountain with my grandfather, my brother and my mother. We lived off the yield of our herd, and we spun wool. No sorrow had ever befallen us except my father's death. One day the Franks scaled the mountain in arms. They took our herd and said to us: 'We shall carry you to the burg of our count to restock his domain with slaves and cattle.' My brother attempted to defend us. The Franks killed him. They tied my mother and me to one rope, and drove us together with our herd of sheep before them. My grandfather begged them on his knees to allow him to follow us. But the Franks said to him: 'You are too old to gain your bread as a slave.' 'But if I am left alone, I shall die of hunger on the mountain!' 'Die, then!' was their answer, and they made us move on before them. My grandfather followed us, weeping, at a distance. The Franks stoned him to death. On their way they captured other slaves, took in other droves of cattle, and killed other people of the mountain when they refused to follow. They descended into the valley; there they made some further captures of people and cattle. There were about fifty of us, men, women and girls. The Franks slaughtered all the children as being worthless. The first night we slept in a wood. On that night the Franks violated the women despite all their entreaties. I heard the sobs of my mother. They separated me from her in the evening and did me no harm. The chief of the band kept me, he said, for the

count. The next morning we resumed our march, with me separated from my mother. More people were killed who did not wish to march on – more slaves and cattle were taken. After that the troop marched to the burg. Before arriving there a second night was spent in the woods. The chief who reserved me for the count made me sleep beside his horse. Early the next morning we proceeded on our route. I tried to discover my mother in the crowd – the Frank said to me: 'She died; two warriors contended for her last night; in the tussle she was killed.' I wished to lie down and die, but the chief raised me on his horse, and we arrived on the count's domain – "

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