Leblanc Maurice

The Woman of Mystery

Maurice Leblanc

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Leblanc M.

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE MURDER

"Suppose I were to tell you," said Paul Delroze, "that I once stood face to face with him on French.."

Élisabeth looked up at him with the fond expression of a bride to whom the least word of the man she loves is a subject of wonder:

"You have seen William II. in France?"

"Saw him with my own eyes; and I have never forgotten a single one of the details that marked the meeting. And yet it happened very long ago."

He was speaking with a sudden seriousness, as though the revival of that memory had awakened the most painful thoughts in his mind.

"Tell me about it, won't you, Paul?" asked Élisabeth.

"Yes, I will," he said. "In any case, though I was only a child at the time, the incident played so tragic a part in my life that I am bound to tell you the whole story."

The train stopped and they got out at Corvigny, the last station on the local branch line which, starting from the chief town in the department, runs through the Liseron Valley and ends, fifteen miles from the frontier, at the foot of the little Lorraine city which Vauban, as he tells us in his "Memoirs," surrounded "with the most perfect demilunes imaginable."

The railway-station presented an appearance of unusual animation. There were numbers of soldiers, including many officers. A crowd of passengers – tradespeople, peasants, workmen and visitors to the neighboring health-resorts served by Corvigny – stood amid piles of luggage on the platform, awaiting the departure of the next train for the junction.

It was the last Thursday in July, the Thursday before the mobilization of the French army.

Élisabeth pressed up against her husband:

"Oh, Paul," she said, shivering with anxiety, "if only we don't have war!"

"War! What an idea!"

"But look at all these people leaving, all these families running away from the frontier!"

"That proves nothing."

"No, but you saw it in the paper just now. The news is very bad. Germany is preparing for war. She has planned the whole thing… Oh, Paul, if we were to be separated!.. I should know nothing about you.. and you might be wounded.. and."

He squeezed her hand:

"Don't be afraid, Élisabeth. Nothing of the kind will happen. There can't be war unless somebody declares it. And who would be fool enough, criminal enough, to do anything so abominable?"

"I am not afraid," she said, "and I am sure that I should be very brave if you had to go. Only.. only it would be worse for us than for anybody else. Just think, darling: we were only married this morning!"

At this reference to their wedding of a few hours ago, containing so great a promise of deep and lasting joy, her charming face lit up, under its halo of golden curls, with a smile of utter trustfulness; and she whispered:

"Married this morning, Paul!.. So you can understand that my load of happiness is not yet very heavy."

There was a movement among the crowd. Everybody gathered around the exit. A general officer, accompanied by two aides-de-camp, stepped out into the station-yard, where a motor-car stood waiting for him. The strains were heard of a military band; a battalion of light infantry marched down the road. Next came a team of sixteen horses, driven by artillery-men and dragging an enormous siege-piece which, in spite of the weight of its carriage, looked light, because of the extreme length of the gun. A herd of bullocks followed.

Paul, who was unable to find a porter, was standing on the pavement, carrying the two traveling-bags, when a man in leather gaiters, green velveteen breeches and a shooting-jacket with horn buttons, came up to him and raised his cap:

"M. Paul Delroze?" he said. "I am the keeper at the château."

He had a powerful, open face, a skin hardened by exposure to the sun and the cold, hair that was already turning gray and that rather uncouth manner often displayed by old servants whose place allows them a certain degree of independence. For seventeen years he had lived on the great estate of Ornequin, above Corvigny, and managed it for Élisabeth's father, the Comte d'Andeville.

"Ah, so you're Jérôme?" cried Paul. "Good! I see you had the Comte d'Andeville's letter. Have our servants come?"

"They arrived this morning, sir, the three of them; and they have been helping my wife and me to tidy up the house and make it ready to receive the master and the mistress."

He took off his cap again to Élisabeth, who said:

"Then you remember me, Jérôme? It is so long since I was here!"

"Mlle. Élisabeth was four years old then. It was a real sorrow for my wife and me when we heard that you would not come back to the house.. nor Monsieur le Comte either, because of his poor dead wife. So Monsieur le Comte does not mean to pay us a little visit this year?"

"No, Jérôme, I don't think so. Though it is so many years ago, my father is still very unhappy."

Jérôme took the bags and placed them in a fly which he had ordered at Corvigny. The heavy luggage was to follow in the farm-cart.

It was a fine day and Paul told them to lower the hood. Then he and his wife took their seats.

"It's not a very long drive," said the keeper. "Under ten miles. But it's up-hill all the way."

"Is the house more or less fit to live in?" asked Paul.

"Well, it's not like a house that has been lived in; but you'll see for yourself, sir. We've done the best we could. My wife is so pleased that you and the mistress are coming! You'll find her waiting for her at the foot of the steps. I told her that you would be there between half-past six and seven.."

The fly drove off.

"He seems a decent sort of man," said Paul to Élisabeth, "but he can't have much opportunity for talking. He's making up for lost time."

The street climbed the steep slope of the Corvigny hills and constituted, between two rows of shops, hotels and public buildings, the main artery of the town, blocked on this day with unaccustomed traffic. Then it dipped and skirted Vauban's ancient bastions. Next came a switchback road across a plain commanded on the right and left by the two forts known as the Petit and the Grand Jonas.

As they drove along this winding road, which meandered through fields of oats and wheat beneath the leafy vault formed overhead by the close-ranked poplars, Paul Delroze came back to the episode of his childhood which he had promised to tell to Élisabeth:

"As I said, Élisabeth, the incident is connected with a terrible tragedy, so closely connected that the two form only one episode in my memory. The tragedy was much talked about at the time; and your father, who was a friend of my father's, as you know, heard of it through the newspapers. The reason why he did not mention it to you was that I asked him not to, because I wanted to be the first to tell you of events.. so painful to myself."

Their hands met and clasped. He knew that every one of his words would find a ready listener; and, after a brief pause, he continued:

"My father was one of those men who compel the sympathy and even the affection of all who know them. He had a generous, enthusiastic, attractive nature and an unfailing good-humor, took a passionate interest in any fine cause and any fine spectacle, loved life and enjoyed it with a sort of precipitate haste. He enlisted in 1870 as a volunteer, earned his lieutenant's commission on the battlefield and found the soldier's heroic existence so well suited to his tastes that he volunteered a second time for Tonkin, and a third to take part in the conquest of Madagascar… On his return from this campaign, in which he was promoted to captain and received the Legion of Honor, he married. Six years later he was a widower."

"You were like me, Paul," said Élisabeth. "You hardly enjoyed the happiness of knowing your mother."

"No, for I was only four years old. But my father, who felt my mother's death most cruelly, bestowed all his affection upon me. He made a point of personally giving me my early education. He left nothing undone to perfect my physical training and to make a strong and plucky lad of me. I loved him with all my heart. To this day I cannot think of him without genuine emotion… When I was eleven years old, I accompanied him on a journey through France, which he had put off for years because he wanted me to take it with him at an age when I could understand its full meaning. It was a pilgrimage to the identical places and along the roads where he had fought during the terrible year."

"Did your father believe in the possibility of another war?"

"Yes; and he wanted to prepare me for it. 'Paul,' he said, 'I have no doubt that one day you will be facing the same enemy whom I fought against. From this moment pay no attention to any fine words of peace that you may hear, but hate that enemy with all the hatred of which you are capable. Whatever people may say, he is a barbarian, a vain-glorious, bloodthirsty brute, a beast of prey. He crushed us once and he will not rest content until he has crushed us again and, this time, for good. When that day comes, Paul, remember all the journeys which we have made together. Those which you will take will mark so many triumphant stages, I am sure of it. But never forget the names of these places, Paul; never let your joy in victory wipe out their names of sorrow and humiliation: Froeschwiller, Mars-la-Tour, Saint-Privat and the rest. Mind, Paul, and remember!' And he then smiled. 'But why should I trouble? He himself, the enemy, will make it his business to arouse hatred in the hearts of those who have forgotten and those who have not seen. Can he change? Not he! You'll see, Paul, you'll see. Nothing that I can say to you will equal the terrible reality. They are monsters.'"

Paul Delroze ceased. His wife asked him a little timidly:

"Do you think your father was absolutely right?"

"He may have been influenced by cruel recollections that were too recent in his memory. I have traveled a good deal in Germany, I have even lived there, and I believe that the state of men's minds has altered. I confess, therefore, that I sometimes find a difficulty in understanding my father's words. And yet.. and yet they very often disturb me. And then what happened afterwards is so inexplicable."

The carriage had slackened its pace. The road was rising slowly towards the hills that overhang the Liseron Valley. The sun was setting in the direction of Corvigny. They passed a diligence, laden with trunks, and two motor cars crowded with passengers and luggage. A picket of cavalry galloped across the fields.

"Let's get out and walk," said Paul Delroze.

They followed the carriage on foot; and Paul continued:

"The rest of what I have to tell you, Élisabeth, stands out in my memory in very precise details, that seem to emerge as though from a thick fog in which I cannot see a thing. For instance, I just know that, after this part of our journey, we were to go from Strasburg to the Black Forest. Why our plans were changed I cannot tell… I can see myself one morning in the station at Strasburg, stepping into the train for the Vosges.. yes, for the Vosges… My father kept on reading a letter which he had

just received and which seemed to gratify him. The letter may have affected his arrangements; I don't know. We lunched in the train. There was a storm brewing, it was very hot and I fell asleep, so that all I can remember is a little German town where we hired two bicycles and left our bags in the cloak-room. It's all very vague in my mind. We rode across the country."

"But don't you remember what the country was like?"

"No, all I know is that suddenly my father said: 'There, Paul, we're crossing the frontier; we're in France now.' Later on – I can't say how long after – he stopped to ask his road of a peasant, who showed him a short-cut through the woods. But the road and the short-cut are nothing more in my mind than an impenetrable darkness in which my thoughts are buried… Then, all of a sudden, the darkness is rent and I see, with astonishing plainness, a glade in the wood, tall trees, velvety moss and an old chapel. And the rain falls in great, thick drops, and my father says, 'Let's take shelter, Paul.' Oh, how I remember the sound of his voice and how exactly I picture the little chapel, with its walls green with damp! We went and put our bicycles under shelter at the back, where the roof projected a little way beyond the choir. Just then the sound of a conversation reached us from the inside and we heard the grating of a door that opened round the corner. Some one came out and said, in German, 'There's no one here. Let us make haste.' At that moment we were coming round the chapel, intending to go in by this side door; and it so happened that my father, who was leading the way, suddenly found himself in the presence of the man who had spoken in German. Both of them stepped back, the stranger apparently very much annoyed and my father astounded at the unexpected meeting. For a second or two, perhaps, they stood looking at each other without moving. I heard my father say, under his breath, 'Is it possible? The Emperor?' And I myself, surprised as I was at the words, had not a doubt of it, for I had often seen the Kaiser's portrait; the man in front of us was the German Emperor."

"The German Emperor?" echoed Élisabeth. "You can't mean that!"

"Yes, the Emperor in France! He quickly lowered his head and turned the velvet collar of his great, flowing cape right up to the brim of his hat, which was pulled down over his eyes. He looked towards the chapel. A lady came out, followed by a man whom I hardly saw, a sort of servant. The lady was tall, a young woman still, dark and rather good-looking… The Emperor seized her arm with absolute violence and dragged her away, uttering angry words which we were unable to hear. They took the road by which we had come, the road leading to the frontier. The servant had hurried into the woods and was walking on ahead. 'This really is a queer adventure,' said my father, laughing. 'What on earth is William doing here? Taking the risk in broad daylight, too! I wonder if the chapel possesses some artistic interest. Come and see, Paul.'.. We went in. A dim light made its way through a window black with dust and cobwebs. But this dim light was enough to show us some stunted pillars and bare walls and not a thing that seemed to deserve the honor of an imperial visit, as my father put it, adding, 'It's quite clear that William came here as a tripper, at hazard, and that he is very cross at having his escapade discovered. I expect the lady who was with him told him that he was running no danger. That would account for his irritation and his reproaches.'"

Paul broke off again. Élisabeth nestled up against him timidly. Presently he continued:

"It's curious, isn't it, Élisabeth, that all these little details, which really were comparatively unimportant for a boy of my age, should have been recorded faithfully in my mind, whereas so many other and much more essential facts have left no trace at all. However, I am telling you all this just as if I still had it before my eyes and as if the words were still sounding in my ears. And at this very moment I can see, as plainly as I saw her at the moment when we left the chapel, the Emperor's companion coming back and crossing the glade with a hurried step; and I can hear her say to my father, 'May I ask a favor of you, monsieur?' She had been running and was out of breath, but did not wait for him to answer and at once added, 'The gentleman you saw would like to speak to you.' This was said in perfect French without the least accent… My father hesitated. But his hesitation seemed to shock her as though it were an unspeakable offense against the person who had sent her; and she said, in a harsher tone, 'Surely you do not mean to refuse!' 'Why not?' said my father, with obvious

impatience. 'I am not here to receive orders.' She restrained herself and said, 'It is not an order, it is a wish.' 'Very well,' said my father, 'I will agree to the interview. I will wait for your friend here.' She seemed shocked. 'No, no,' she said, 'you must.' 'I must put myself out, must I?' cried my father, in a loud voice. 'You expect me to cross the frontier to where somebody is condescending to expect me? I am sorry, madam, but I will not consent to that. Tell your friend that if he fears an indiscretion on my part he can set his mind at rest. Come along, Paul.' He took off his hat to the lady and bowed. But she barred his way: 'No, no,' she said, 'you must do what I ask. What is a promise of discretion worth? The thing must be settled one way or the other; and you yourself will admit..' Those were the last words I heard. She was standing opposite my father in a violent and hostile attitude. Her face was distorted with an expression of fierceness that terrified me. Oh, why did I not foresee what was going to happen?.. But I was so young! And it all came so quickly!.. She walked up to my father and, so to speak, forced him back to the foot of a large tree, on the right of the chapel. They raised their voices. She made a threatening gesture. He began to laugh. And suddenly, immediately, she whipped out a knife – I can see the blade now, flashing through the darkness – and stabbed him in the chest, twice.. twice, there, full in the chest. My father fell to the ground."

Paul Delroze stopped, pale with the memory of the crime.

"Oh," faltered Élisabeth, "your father was murdered?.. My poor Paul, my poor darling!" And in a voice of anguish she asked, "What happened next, Paul? Did you cry out?"

"I shouted, I rushed towards him, but a hand caught me in an irresistible grip. It was the man, the servant, who had darted out of the woods and seized me. I saw his knife raised above my head. I felt a terrible blow on my shoulder. Then I also fell."

CHAPTER II
THE LOCKED ROOM

The carriage stood waiting for them a little way ahead. They had sat down by the roadside on reaching the upland at the top of the ascent. The green, undulating valley of the Liseron opened up before them, with its little winding river escorted by two white roads which followed its every turn. Behind them, under the setting sun, some three hundred feet below, lay the clustering mass of Corvigny. Two miles in front of them rose the turrets of Ornequin and the ruins of the old castle.

Terrified by Paul's story, Élisabeth was silent for a time. Then she said:

"Oh, Paul, how terrible it all is! Were you very badly hurt?"

"I can remember nothing until the day when I woke up in a room which I did not know and saw a nun and an old lady, a cousin of my father's, who were nursing me. It was the best room of an inn somewhere between Belfort and the frontier. Twelve days before, at a very early hour in the morning, the innkeeper had found two bodies, all covered with blood, which had been laid there during the night. One of the bodies was quite cold. It was my poor father's. I was still breathing, but very slightly… I had a long convalescence, interrupted by relapses and fits of delirium, in which I tried to make my escape. My old cousin, the only relation I had left, showed me the most wonderful and devoted kindness. Two months later she took me home with her. I was very nearly cured of my wound, but so greatly affected by my father's death and by the frightful circumstances surrounding it that it was several years before I recovered my health completely. As to the tragedy itself.."

"Well?" asked Élisabeth, throwing her arm round her husband's neck, with an eager movement of protection.

"Well, they never succeeded in fathoming the mystery. And yet the police conducted their investigations zealously and scrupulously, trying to verify the only information which they were able to employ, that which I gave them. All their efforts failed. You know, my information was very vague. Apart from what had happened in the glade and in front of the chapel, I knew nothing. I could not tell them where to find the chapel, nor where to look for it, nor in what part of the country the tragedy had occurred."

"But still you had taken a journey, you and your father, to reach that part of the country; and it seems to me that, by tracing your road back to your departure from Strasburg.."

"Well, of course they did their best to follow up that track; and the French police, not content with calling in the aid of the German police, sent their shrewdest detectives to the spot. But this is exactly what afterwards, when I was of an age to think out things, struck me as so strange: not a single trace was found of our stay at Strasburg. You quite understand? Not a trace of any kind. Now, if there was one thing of which I was absolutely certain, it was that we had spent at least two days and nights at Strasburg. The magistrate who had the case in hand, looking upon me as a child and one who had been badly knocked about and upset, came to the conclusion that my memory must be at fault. But I knew that this was not so; I knew it then and I know it still."

"What then, Paul?"

"Well, I cannot help seeing a connection between the total elimination of undeniable facts – facts easily checked or reconstructed, such as the visit of a Frenchman and his son to Strasburg, their railway journey, the leaving of their luggage in the cloak-room of a town in Alsace, the hiring of a couple of bicycles – and this main fact, that the Emperor was directly, yes, directly mixed up in the business."

"But this connection must have been as obvious to the magistrate's mind as to yours, Paul."

"No doubt; but neither the examining magistrate nor any of his colleagues and the other officials who took my evidence was willing to admit the Emperor's presence in Alsace on that day."

"Why not?"

"Because the German newspapers stated that he was in Frankfort at that very hour."

"In Frankfort?"

"Of course, he is stated to be wherever he commands and never at a place where he does not wish his presence known. At any rate, on this point also I was accused of being in error and the inquiry was thwarted by an assemblage of obstacles, impossibilities, lies and alibis which, to my mind, revealed the continuous and all-powerful action of an unlimited authority. There is no other explanation. Just think: how can two French subjects put up at a Strasburg hotel without having their names entered in the visitors' book? Well, whether because the book was destroyed or a page torn out, no record whatever of the names was found. So there was one proof, one clue gone. As for the hotel proprietor and waiters, the railway booking clerks and porters, the man who owned the bicycles: these were so many subordinates, so many accomplices, all of whom received orders to be silent; and not one of them disobeyed."

"But afterwards, Paul, you must have made your own search?"

"I should think I did! Four times since I came of age I have been over the whole frontier from Switzerland to Luxemburg, from Belfort to Longwy, questioning the inhabitants, studying the country. I have spent hours and hours in cudgeling my brains in the vain hope of extracting the slightest recollection that would have given me a gleam of light. But all without result. There was not one fresh glimmer amid all that darkness. Only three pictures showed through the dense fog of the past, pictures of the place and the things which witnessed the crime: the trees in the glade, the old chapel and the path leading through the woods. And then there was the figure of the Emperor and.. the figure of the woman who killed my father."

Paul had lowered his voice. His face was distorted with grief and loathing.

"As for her," he went on, "if I live to be a hundred, I shall see her before my eyes as something standing out in all its details under the full light of day. The shape of her lips, the expression of her eyes, the color of her hair, the special character of her walk, the rhythm of her movements, the outline of her body: all this is recorded within myself, not as a vision which I summon up at will, but as something that forms part of my very being. It is as though, during my delirium, all the mysterious powers of my brain had collaborated to assimilate entirely those hateful memories. There was a time when all this was a morbid obsession: nowadays, I suffer only at certain hours, when the night is coming in and I am alone. My father was murdered; and the woman who murdered him is alive, unpunished, happy, rich, honored, pursuing her work of hatred and destruction."

"Would you know her again if you saw her, Paul?"

"Would I know her again! I should know her among a thousand. Even if she were disfigured by age, I should discover in the wrinkles of the old woman that she had become the face of the younger woman who stabbed my father to death on that September evening. Know her again! Why, I noticed the very shade of the dress she wore! It seems incredible, but there it is. A gray dress, with a black lace scarf over the shoulders; and here, in the bodice, by way of a brooch, a heavy cameo, set in a gold snake with ruby eyes. You see, Élisabeth, I have not forgotten and I never shall forget."

He ceased. Élisabeth was crying. The past which her husband had revealed to her was filling her with the same sense of horror and bitterness. He drew her to him and kissed her on the forehead.

"You are right not to forget," she said. "The murder will be punished because it has to be punished. But you must not let your life be subject to these memories of hatred. There are two of us now and we love each other. Let us look towards the future."

The Château d'Ornequin is a handsome sixteenth century building of simple design, with four peaked turrets, tall windows with denticulated pinnacles and a light balustrade projecting above the first story. The esplanade is formed by well-kept lawns which surround the courtyard and lead on the right and left to gardens, woods and orchards. One side of these lawns ends in a broad terrace

overlooking the valley of the Liseron. On this terrace, in a line with the house, stand the majestic ruins of a four-square castle-keep.

The whole wears a very stately air. The estate, surrounded by farms and fields, demands active and careful working for its maintenance. It is one of the largest in the department.

Seventeen years before, at the sale held upon the death of the last Baron d'Ornequin, Élisabeth's father, the Comte d'Andeville, bought it at his wife's desire. He had been married for five years and had resigned his commission in the cavalry in order to devote himself entirely to the woman he loved. A chance journey brought them to Ornequin just as the sale, which had hardly been advertised in the local press, was about to be held. Hermine d'Andeville fell in love with the house and the domain; and the Count, who was looking for an estate whose management would occupy his spare time effected the purchase through his lawyer by private treaty.

During the winter that followed, he directed from Paris the work of restoration which was necessitated by the state of disrepair in which the former owner had left the house. M. d'Andeville wished it to be not only comfortable but also elegant; and, little by little, he sent down all the tapestries, pictures, objects of art and knicknacks that adorned his house in Paris.

They were not able to take up their residence until August. They then spent a few delightful weeks with their dear Élisabeth, at this time four years old, and their son, Bernard, a lusty boy to whom the Countess had given birth that same year. Hermine d'Andeville was devoted to her children and never went beyond the confines of the park. The Count looked after his farms and shot over his coverts, accompanied by Jérôme, his gamekeeper, a worthy Alsatian, who had been in the late owner's service and who knew every yard of the estate.

At the end of October, the Countess took cold; the illness that followed was pretty serious; and the Comte d'Andeville decided to take her and the children to the south. A fortnight later she had a relapse; and in three days she was dead.

The Count experienced the despair which makes a man feel that life is over and that, whatever happens, he will never again know the sense of joy nor even an alleviation of any sort. He lived not so much for the sake of his children as to cherish within himself the cult of her whom he had lost and to perpetuate a memory which now became the sole reason of his existence.

He was unable to return to the Château d'Ornequin, where he had known too perfect a happiness; on the other hand, he would not have strangers live there; and he ordered Jérôme to keep the doors and shutters closed and to lock up the Countess' boudoir and bedroom in such a way that no one could ever enter. Jérôme was also to let the farms and to collect the tenants' rents.

This break with the past was not enough to satisfy the Count. It seems strange in a man who existed only for the sake of his wife's memory, but everything that reminded him of her – familiar objects, domestic surroundings, places and landscapes – became a torture to him; and his very children filled him with a sense of discomfort which he was unable to overcome. He had an elder sister, a widow, living in the country, at Chaumont. He placed his daughter Élisabeth and his son Bernard in her charge and went abroad.

Aunt Aline was the most devoted and unselfish of women; and under her care Élisabeth enjoyed a grave, studious and affectionate childhood in which her heart developed together with her mind and her character. She received the education almost of a boy, together with a strong moral discipline. At the age of twenty, she had grown into a tall, capable, fearless girl, whose face, inclined by nature to be melancholy, sometimes lit up with the fondest and most innocent of smiles. It was one of those faces which reveal beforehand the pangs and raptures held in store by fate. The tears were never far from her eyes, which seemed as though troubled by the spectacle of life. Her hair, with its bright curls, lent a certain gaiety to her appearance.

At each visit that the Comte d'Andeville paid his daughter between his wanderings he fell more and more under her charm. He took her one winter to Spain and the next to Italy. It was in this way that she became acquainted with Paul Delroze at Rome and met him again at Naples and Syracuse,

from which town Paul accompanied the d'Andevilles on a long excursion through Sicily. The intimacy thus formed attached the two young people by a bond of which they did not realize the full strength till the time came for parting.

Like Élisabeth, Paul had been brought up in the country and, again like her, by a fond kinswoman who strove, by dint of loving care, to make him forget the tragedy of his childhood. Though oblivion failed to come, at any rate she succeeded in continuing his father's work and in making of Paul a manly and industrious lad, interested in books, life and the doings of mankind. He went to school and, after performing his military service, spent two years in Germany, studying some of his favorite industrial and mechanical subjects on the spot.

Tall and well set up, with his black hair flung back from his rather thin face, with its determined chin, he made an impression of strength and energy.

His meeting with Élisabeth revealed to him a world of ideas and emotions which he had hitherto disdained. For him as for her it was a sort of intoxication mingled with amazement. Love created in them two new souls, light and free as air, whose ready enthusiasm and expansiveness formed a sharp contrast with the habits enforced upon them by the strict tendency of their lives. On his return to France he asked for Élisabeth's hand in marriage and obtained her consent.

On the day of the marriage contract, three days before the wedding, the Comte d'Andeville announced that he would add the Château d'Ornequin to Élisabeth's dowry. The young couple decided that they would live there and that Paul should look about in the valleys of the neighboring manufacturing district for some works which he could buy and manage.

They were married on Thursday, the 30th of July, at Chaumont. It was a quiet wedding, because of the rumors of war, though the Comte d'Andeville, on the strength of information to which he attached great credit, declared that no war would take place. At the breakfast in which the two families took part, Paul made the acquaintance of Bernard d'Andeville, Élisabeth's brother, a schoolboy of barely seventeen, whose holidays had just begun. Paul took to him, because of his frank bearing and high spirits; and it was arranged that Bernard should join them in a few days at Ornequin. At one o'clock Élisabeth and Paul left Chaumont by train. They were going hand-in-hand to the château where the first years of their marriage were to be spent and perhaps all that happy and peaceful future which opens up before the dazzling eyes of lovers.

It was half-past six o'clock when they saw Jérôme's wife standing at the foot of the steps. Rosalie was a stout, motherly body with ruddy, mottled cheeks and a cheerful face.

Before dining, they took a hurried turn in the garden and went over the house. Élisabeth could not contain her emotion. Though there were no memories to excite her, she seemed, nevertheless, to rediscover something of the mother whom she had known for such a little while, whose features she could not remember and who had here spent the last happy days of her life. For her, the shade of the dead woman still trod those garden paths. The great, green lawns exhaled a special fragrance. The leaves on the trees rustled in the wind with a whisper which she seemed already to have heard in that same spot and at the same hour of the day, with her mother listening beside her.

"You seem depressed, Élisabeth," said Paul.

"Not depressed, but unsettled. I feel as though my mother were welcoming us to this place where she thought she was to live and where we have come with the same intention. And I somehow feel anxious. It is as though I were a stranger, an intruder, disturbing the rest and peace of the house. Only think! My mother has been here all alone for such a time! My father would never come here; and I was telling myself that we have no right to come here either, with our indifference for everything that is not ourselves."

Paul smiled:

"Élisabeth, my darling, you are simply feeling that impression of uneasiness which one always feels on arriving at a new place in the evening."

"I don't know," she said. "I daresay you are right… But I can't shake off the uneasiness; and that is so unlike me. Do you believe in presentiments, Paul?"

"No, do you?"

"No, I don't either," she said, laughing and giving him her lips.

They were surprised to find that the rooms of the house looked as if they had been constantly inhabited. By the Count's orders, everything had remained as it was in the far-off days of Hermine d'Andeville. The knickknacks were there, in the same places, and every piece of embroidery, every square of lace, every miniature, all the handsome eighteenth century chairs, all the Flemish tapestry, all the furniture which the Count had collected in the old days to add to the beauty of his house. They were thus entering from the first into a charming and home-like setting.

After dinner they returned to the gardens, where they strolled to and fro in silence, with their arms entwined round each other's waists. From the terrace they looked down upon the dark valley, with a few lights gleaming here and there. The old castle-keep raised its massive ruins against a pale sky, in which a remnant of vague light still lingered.

"Paul," said Élisabeth, in a low voice, "did you notice, as we went over the house, a door closed with a great padlock?"

"In the middle of the chief corridor, near your bedroom, you mean?"

"Yes. That was my poor mother's boudoir. My father insisted that it should be locked, as well as the bedroom leading out of it; and Jérôme put a padlock on the door and sent him the key. No one has set foot in it since. It is just as my mother left it. All her own things – her unfinished work, her books – are there. And on the wall facing the door, between the two windows that have always been kept shut, is her portrait, which my father had ordered a year before of a great painter of his acquaintance, a full-length portrait which, I understand, is the very image of her. Her *prie-Dieu* is beside it. This morning my father gave me the key of the boudoir and I promised him that I would kneel down on the *prie-Dieu* and say a prayer before the portrait of the mother whom I hardly knew and whose features I cannot imagine, for I never even had a photograph of her."

"Really? How was that?"

"You see, my father loved my mother so much that, in obedience to a feeling which he himself was unable to explain, he wished to be alone in his recollection of her. He wanted his memories to be hidden deep down in himself, so that nothing would remind him of her except his own will and his grief. He almost begged my pardon for it this morning, said that perhaps he had done me a wrong; and that is why he wants us to go together, Paul, on this first evening, and pray before the picture of my poor dead mother."

"Let us go now, Élisabeth."

Her hand trembled in her husband's hand as they climbed the stairs to the first floor. Lamps had been lighted all along the passage. They stopped in front of a tall, wide door surmounted with gilded carvings.

"Unfasten the lock, Paul," said Élisabeth.

Her voice shook as she spoke. She handed him the key. He removed the padlock and seized the door-handle. But Élisabeth suddenly gripped her husband's arm:

"One moment, Paul, one moment! I feel so upset. This is the first time that I shall look on my mother's face.. and you, my dearest, are beside me… I feel as if I were becoming a little girl again."

"Yes," he said, pressing her hand passionately, "a little girl and a grown woman in one."

Comforted by the clasp of his hand, she released hers and whispered:

"We will go in now, Paul darling."

He opened the door and returned to the passage to take a lamp from a bracket on the wall and place it on the table. Meanwhile, Élisabeth had walked across the room and was standing in front of the picture. Her mother's face was in the shadow and she altered the position of the lamp so as to throw the full light upon it.

"How beautiful she is, Paul!"

He went up to the picture and raised his head. Élisabeth sank to her knees on the *prie-Dieu*. But presently, hearing Paul turn round, she looked up at him and was stupefied by what she saw. He was standing motionless, livid in the face, his eyes wide open, as though gazing at the most frightful vision.

"Paul," she cried, "what's the matter?"

He began to make for the door, stepping backwards, unable to take his eyes from the portrait of Hermine d'Andeville. He was staggering like a drunken man; and his arms beat the air around him.

"That.. that." he stammered, hoarsely.

"Paul," Élisabeth entreated, "what is it? What are you trying to say?"

"That.. that is the woman who killed my father!"

CHAPTER III
THE CALL TO ARMS

The hideous accusation was followed by an awful silence. Élisabeth was now standing in front of her husband, striving to understand his words, which had not yet acquired their real meaning for her, but which hurt her as though she had been stabbed to the heart.

She moved towards him and, with her eyes in his, spoke in a voice so low that he could hardly hear:

"You surely can't mean what you said, Paul? The thing is too monstrous!"

He replied in the same tone:

"Yes, it is a monstrous thing. I don't believe it myself yet. I refuse to believe it."

"Then – it's a mistake, isn't it? – Confess it, you've made a mistake."

She implored him with all the distress that filled her being, as though she were hoping to make him yield. He fixed his eyes again on the accursed portrait, over his wife's shoulder, and shivered from head to foot:

"Oh, it is she!" he declared, clenching his fists. "It is she – I recognize her – it is the woman who killed my – "

A shock of protest ran through her body; and, beating her breast, she cried:

"My mother! My mother a murderess! My mother, whom my father used to worship and went on worshiping! My mother, who used to hold me on her knee and kiss me! – I have forgotten everything about her except that, her kisses and her caresses! And you tell me that she is a murderess!"

"It is true."

"Oh, Paul, you must not say anything so horrible! How can you be positive, such a long time after? You were only a child; and you saw so little of the woman.. hardly a few minutes."

"I saw more of her than it seems humanly possible to see," exclaimed Paul, loudly. "From the moment of the murder her image never left my sight. I have tried to shake it off at times, as one tries to shake off a nightmare; but I could not. And the image is there, hanging on the wall. As sure as I live, it is there; I know it as I should know your image after twenty years. It is she.. why, look, on her breast, that brooch set in a gold snake!.. a cameo, as I told you, and the snake's eyes.. two rubies!.. and the black lace scarf around the shoulders! It's she, I tell you, it's the woman I saw!"

A growing rage excited him to frenzy; and he shook his fist at the portrait of Hermine d'Andeville.

"Hush!" cried Élisabeth, under the torment of his words. "Hold your tongue! I won't allow you to."

She tried to put her hand on his mouth to compel him to silence. But Paul made a movement of repulsion, as though he were shrinking from his wife's touch; and the movement was so abrupt and so instinctive that she fell to the ground sobbing while he, incensed, exasperated by his sorrow and hatred, impelled by a sort of terrified hallucination that drove him back to the door, shouted:

"Look at her! Look at her wicked mouth, her pitiless eyes! She is thinking of the murder!.. I see her, I see her!.. She goes up to my father.. she leads him away.. she raises her arm.. and she kills him!.. Oh, the wretched, monstrous woman!."

He rushed from the room.

Paul spent the night in the park, running like a madman wherever the dark paths led him, or flinging himself, when tired out, on the grass and weeping, weeping endlessly.

Paul Delroze had known no suffering save from his memory of the murder, a chastened suffering which, nevertheless, at certain periods became acute until it smarted like a fresh wound. This time the pain was so great and so unexpected that, notwithstanding his usual self-mastery and

his well-balanced mind, he utterly lost his head. His thoughts, his actions, his attitudes, the words which he yelled into the darkness were those of a man who has parted with his self-control.

One thought and one alone kept returning to his seething brain, in which his ideas and impressions whirled like leaves in the wind; one terrible thought:

"I know the woman who killed my father; and that woman's daughter is the woman whom I love."

Did he still love her? No doubt, he was desperately mourning a happiness which he knew to be shattered; but did he still love Élisabeth? Could he love Hermine d'Andeville's daughter?

When he went indoors at daybreak and passed Élisabeth's room, his heart beat no faster than before. His hatred of the murderess destroyed all else that might stir within him: love, affection, longing, or even the merest human pity.

The torpor into which he sank for a few hours relaxed his nerves a little, but did not change his mental attitude. Perhaps, on the contrary, and without even thinking about it, he was still more unwilling than before to meet Élisabeth. And yet he wanted to know, to ascertain, to gather all the essential particulars and to make quite certain before taking the resolve that would decide the great tragedy of his life in one way or another.

Above all, he must question Jérôme and his wife, whose evidence was of no small value, owing to the fact that they had known the Comtesse d'Andeville. Certain matters concerning the dates, for instance, might be cleared up forthwith.

He found them in their lodge, both of them greatly excited, Jérôme with a newspaper in his hand and Rosalie making gestures of dismay.

"It's settled, sir," cried Jérôme. "You can be sure of it: it's coming!"

"What?" asked Paul.

"Mobilization, sir, the call to arms. You'll see it does. I saw some gendarmes, friends of mine, and they told me. The posters are ready."

Paul remarked, absent-mindedly:

"The posters are always ready."

"Yes, but they're going to stick them up at once, you'll see, sir. Just look at the paper. Those swine – you'll forgive me, sir, but it's the only word for them – those swine want war. Austria would be willing to negotiate, but in the meantime the others have been mobilizing for several days. Proof is, they won't let you cross into their country any more. And worse: yesterday they destroyed a French railway station, not far from here, and pulled up the rails. Read it for yourself, sir!"

Paul skimmed through the stop-press telegrams, but, though he saw that they were serious, war seemed to him such an unlikely thing that he did not pay much attention to them.

"It'll be settled all right," he said. "That's just their way of talking, with their hand on the sword-hilt; but I can't believe."

"You're wrong, sir," Rosalie muttered.

He no longer listened, thinking only of the tragedy of his fate and casting about for the best means of obtaining the necessary replies from Jérôme. But he was not able to contain himself any longer and he broached the subject frankly:

"I daresay you know, Jérôme, that madame and I have been to the Comtesse d'Andeville's room."

The statement produced an extraordinary effect upon the keeper and his wife, as though it had been a sacrilege to enter that room so long kept locked, the mistress' room, as they called it among themselves.

"You don't mean that, sir!" Rosalie blurted out.

And Jérôme added:

"No, of course not, for I sent the only key of the padlock, a safety-key it was, to Monsieur le Comte."

"He gave it us yesterday morning," said Paul.

And, without troubling further about their amazement, he proceeded straightaway to put his questions:

"There is a portrait of the Comtesse d'Andeville between the two windows. When was it hung there?"

Jérôme did not reply at once. He thought for a moment, looked at his wife, and then said:

"Why, that's easily answered. It was when Monsieur le Comte sent all his furniture to the house.. before they moved in."

"When was that?"

Paul's agony was unendurable during the three or four seconds before the reply.

"Well?" he asked.

When the reply came at last it was decisive:

"Well, it was in the spring of 1898."

"Eighteen hundred and ninety-eight!"

Paul repeated the words in a dull voice: 1898 was the year of his father's murder!

Without stopping to reflect, with the coolness of an examining magistrate who does not swerve from the line which he has laid out, he asked:

"So the Comte and Comtesse d'Andeville arrived."

"Monsieur le Comte and Madame le Comtesse arrived at the castle on the 28th of August, 1898, and left for the south on the 24th of October."

Paul now knew the truth, for his father was murdered on the 19th of September. And all the circumstances which depended on that truth, which explained it in its main details or which proceeded from it at once appeared to him. He remembered that his father was on friendly terms with the Comte d'Andeville. He said to himself that his father, in the course of his journey in Alsace, must have learnt that his friend d'Andeville was living in Lorraine and must have contemplated paying him a surprise visit. He reckoned up the distance between Ornequin and Strasburg, a distance which corresponded with the time spent in the train. And he asked:

"How far is this from the frontier?"

"Three miles and three-quarters, sir."

"On the other side, at no great distance, there's a little German town, is there not?"

"Yes, sir, Èbrecourt."

"Is there a short-cut to the frontier?"

"Yes, sir, for about half-way: a path at the other end of the park."

"Through the woods?"

"Through Monsieur le Comte's woods."

"And in those woods."

To acquire total, absolute certainty, that certainty which comes not from an interpretation of the facts but from the facts themselves, which would stand out visible and palpable, all that he had to do was to put the last question: in those woods was not there a little chapel in the middle of a glade? Paul Delroze did not put the question. Perhaps he thought it too precise, perhaps he feared lest it should induce the gamekeeper to entertain thoughts and comparisons which the nature of the conversation was already sufficient to warrant. He merely asked:

"Was the Comtesse d'Andeville away at all during the six weeks which she spent at Ornequin? For two or three days, I mean?"

"No, sir, Madame le Comtesse never left the grounds."

"She kept to the park?"

"Yes, sir. Monsieur le Comte used to drive almost every afternoon to Corvigny or in the valley, but Madame la Comtesse never went beyond the park and the woods."

Paul knew what he wanted to know. Not caring what Jérôme and his wife might think, he did not trouble to find an excuse for his strange series of apparently disconnected questions. He left the lodge and walked away.

Eager though he was to complete his inquiry, he postponed the investigations which he intended to pursue outside the park. It was as though he dreaded to face the final proof, which had really become superfluous after those with which chance had supplied him. He therefore went back to the château and, at lunch-time, resolved to accept this inevitable meeting with Élisabeth. But his wife's maid came to him in the drawing-room and said that her mistress sent her excuses. Madame was not feeling very well and asked did monsieur mind if she took her lunch in her own room. He understood that she wished to leave him entirely free, refusing, on her side, to appeal to him on behalf of a mother whom she respected and, if necessary, submitting beforehand to whatever eventual decision her husband might make.

Lunching by himself under the eyes of the butler and footman waiting at table, he felt in the utmost depths of his heart that his happiness was gone and that Élisabeth and he, thanks to circumstances for which neither of them was responsible, had on the very day of their marriage become enemies whom no power on earth could bring together. Certainly, he bore her no hatred and did not reproach her with her mother's crime; but unconsciously he was angry with her, as for a fault, inasmuch as she was her mother's daughter.

For two hours after lunch he remained closeted with the portrait in the boudoir: a tragic interview which he wished to have with the murderess, so as to fill his eyes with her accursed image and give fresh strength to his memories. He examined every slightest detail. He studied the cameo, the swan with unfurled wings which it represented, the chasing of the gold snake that formed the setting, the position of the rubies and also the draping of the lace around the shoulders, not to speak of the shape of the mouth and the color of the hair and the outline of the face.

It was undoubtedly the woman whom he had seen that September evening. A corner of the picture bore the painter's signature; and underneath, on the frame, was a scroll with the inscription:

Portrait of the Comtesse H

No doubt the portrait had been exhibited with that discreet reference to the Comtesse Hermine.

"Now, then," said Paul. "A few minutes more, and the whole past will come to life again. I have found the criminal; I have now only to find the place of the crime. If the chapel is there, in the woods, the truth will be complete."

He went for the truth resolutely. He feared it less now, because it could no longer escape his grasp. And yet how his heart beat, with great, painful throbs, and how he loathed the idea of taking the road leading to that other road along which his father had passed sixteen years before!

A vague movement of Jérôme's hand had told him which way to go. He crossed the park in the direction of the frontier, bearing to his left and passing a lodge. At the entrance to the woods was a long avenue of fir-trees down which he went. Four hundred yards farther it branched into three narrow avenues. Two of these proved to end in impenetrable thickets. The third led to the top of a mound, from which he descended, still keeping to his left, by another avenue of fir-trees.

In selecting this road, Paul realized that it was just this avenue of firs the appearance of which aroused in him, through some untold resemblance of shape and arrangement, memories clear enough to guide his steps. It ran straight ahead for some time and then took a sudden turn into a cluster of tall beeches whose leafy tops met overhead. Then the road sloped upwards; and, at the end of the dark tunnel through which he was walking, Paul perceived the glare of light that points to an open space.

The anguish of it all made his knees give way beneath him; and he had to make an effort to proceed. Was it the glade in which his father had received his death-blow? The more that luminous

space became revealed to his eyes, the more did he feel penetrated with a profound conviction. As in the room with the portrait, the past was recovering the very aspect of the truth in and before him.

It was the same glade, surrounded by a ring of trees that presented the same picture and covered with a carpet of grass and moss which the same paths divided as of old. The same glimpse of sky was above him, outlined by the capricious masses of foliage. And there, on his left, guarded by two yew-trees which Paul recognized, was the chapel.

The chapel! The little old massive chapel, whose lines had etched themselves like furrows into his brain! Trees grow, become taller, alter their form. The appearance of a glade is liable to change. Its paths will sometimes interlock in a different fashion. A man's memory can play him a trick. But a building of granite and cement is immutable. It takes centuries to give it the green-gray color that is the mark which time sets upon the stone; and this bloom of age never alters. The chapel that stood there, displaying a grimy-paned rose-window in its east front, was undoubtedly that from which the German Emperor had stepped, followed by the woman who, ten minutes later, committed the murder.

Paul walked to the door. He wanted to revisit the place in which his father had spoken to him for the last time. It was a moment of tense emotion. The same little roof which had sheltered their bicycles projected at the back; and the door was the same, with its great rusty clamps and bars.

He stood on the single step that led to it, raised the latch and pushed the door. But as he was about to enter, two men, hidden in the shadow on either side, sprang at him.

One of them aimed a revolver full in his face. By some miracle, Paul noticed the gleaming barrel of the weapon just in time to stoop before the bullet could strike him. A second shot rang out, but he had hustled the man and now snatched the revolver from his hand, while his other aggressor threatened him with a dagger. He stepped backwards out of the chapel, with outstretched arm, and twice pulled the trigger. Each time there was a click but no shot. The mere fact, however, of his firing at the two scoundrels terrified them, and they turned tail and made off as fast as they could.

Bewildered by the suddenness of the attack, Paul stood for a second irresolute. Then he fired at the fugitives again, but to no purpose. The revolver, which was obviously loaded in only two chambers, clicked but did not go off.

He then started running after his assailants; and he remembered that long ago the Emperor and his companion, on leaving the chapel, had taken the same direction, which was evidently that of the frontier.

Almost at the same moment the men, seeing themselves pursued, plunged into the wood and slipped in among the trees; but Paul, who was swifter of foot, rapidly gained ground on them, all the more so as he had gone round a hollow filled with bracken and brambles into which the others had ventured.

Suddenly one of them gave a shrill whistle, probably a warning to some accomplice. Soon after they disappeared behind a line of extremely dense bushes. When he had passed through these, Paul saw at a distance of sixty yards before him a high wall which seemed to shut in the woods on every side. The men were half-way to it; and he perceived that they were making straight for a part of the wall containing a small door.

Paul put on a spurt so as to reach the door before they had time to open it. The bare ground enabled him to increase his speed, whereas the men, who were obviously tired, had reduced theirs.

"I've got them, the ruffians!" he murmured. "I shall at last know."

A second whistle sounded, followed by a guttural shout. He was now within twenty yards of them and could hear them speak.

"I've got them, I've got them!" he repeated, with fierce delight.

And he made up his mind to strike one of them in the face with the barrel of his revolver and to spring at the other's throat.

But, before they even reached the wall, the door was pushed open from the outside and a third man appeared and let them through.

Paul flung away the revolver; and his impetus was such and the effort which he made so great that he managed to seize the door and draw it to him.

The door gave way. And what he then saw scared him to such a degree that he started backwards and did not even dream of defending himself against this fresh attack. The third man – Oh, hideous nightmare! Could it moreover be anything but a nightmare? – the third ruffian was raising a knife against him; and Paul knew his face.. it was a face resembling the one which he had seen before, a man's face and not a woman's, but the same sort of face, undoubtedly the same sort: a face marked by fifteen additional years and by an even harder and more wicked expression, but the same sort of face, the same sort!

And the man stabbed Paul, even as the woman of fifteen years ago, even as she who was since dead had stabbed Paul's father.

Paul Delroze staggered, but rather as the result of the nervous shock caused by the sudden appearance of this ghost of the past; for the blade of the dagger, striking the button on the shoulder-strap of his shooting-jacket, broke into splinters. Dazed and misty-eyed, he heard the sound of the door closing, the grating of the key in the lock and lastly the hum of a motor car starting on the other side of the wall. When Paul recovered from his torpor there was nothing left for him to do. The man and his two confederates were out of reach.

Besides, for the moment he was utterly absorbed in the mystery of the likeness between the figure from the past and that which he had just seen. He could think of but one thing:

"The Comtesse d'Andeville is dead; and here she is revived under the aspect of a man whose face is the very face which she would have to-day. Is it the face of some relation, of a brother of whom I never heard, a twin perhaps?"

And he reflected:

"After all, am I not mistaken? Am I not the victim of an hallucination, which would be only natural in the crisis through which I am passing? How do I know for certain that there is any connection between the present and the past? I must have a proof."

The proof was ready to his hand; and it was so strong that Paul was not able to doubt for much longer. He caught sight of the remains of the dagger in the grass and picked up the handle. On it four letters were engraved as with a red-hot iron: an H, an E, an R and an M.

H, E, R, M; the first four letters of Hermine!.. At this moment, while he was staring at the letters which were to him so full of meaning, at this moment, a moment which Paul was never to forget, the bell of a church nearby began to ring in the most unusual manner: a regular, monotonous, uninterrupted ringing, which sounded at once brisk and unspeakably sinister.

"The tocsin," he muttered to himself, without attaching the full sense to the word. And he added: "A fire somewhere, I expect."

A few minutes later Paul had succeeded in climbing over the wall by means of the projecting branches of a tree. He found a further stretch of woods, crossed by a forest road. He followed the tracks of a motor car along this road and reached the frontier within an hour.

A squad of German constabulary were sitting round the foot of the frontier post; and he saw a white road with Uhlans trotting along it. At the end of it was a cluster of red roofs and gardens. Was this the little town where his father and he had hired their bicycles that day, the little town of Èbrecourt?

The melancholy bell never ceased. He noticed that the sound came from France; also that another bell was ringing somewhere, likewise in France, and a third from the direction of the Liseron; and all three on the same hurried note, as though sending forth a wild appeal around them.

He repeated, anxiously:

"The tocsin!.. The alarm!.. And it's being passed on from church to church… Can it mean that."

But he drove away the terrifying thought. No, his ears were misleading him; or else it was the echo of a single bell thrown back in the hollow valleys and ringing over the plains.

Meanwhile he was gazing at the white road which issued from the little German town, and he observed that a constant stream of horsemen was arriving there and spreading across-country. Also a detachment of French dragoons appeared on the ridge of a hill. The officer in command scanned the horizon through his field-glasses and then trotted off with his men.

Thereupon, unable to go any farther, Paul walked back to the wall which he had climbed and found that the wall was prolonged around the whole of the estate, including the woods and the park. He learnt besides from an old peasant that it was built some twelve years ago, which explained why Paul had never found the chapel in the course of his explorations along the frontier. Once only, he now remembered, some one had told him of a chapel; but it was one situated inside a private estate; and his suspicions had not been aroused.

While thus following the road that skirted the property, he came nearer to the village of Ornequin, whose church suddenly rose at the end of a clearing in the wood. The bell, which he had not heard for the last moment or two, now rang out again with great distinctness. It was the bell of Ornequin. It was frail, shrill, poignant as a lament and more solemn than a passing-bell, for all its hurry and lightness.

Paul walked towards the sound. A charming village, all aflower with geraniums and Marguerites, stood gathered about its church. Silent groups were studying a white notice posted on the Mayor's office. Paul stepped forward and read the heading:

"Mobilization Order."

At any other period of his life these words would have struck him with all their gloomy and terrific meaning. But the crisis through which he was passing was too powerful to allow room for any great emotion within him. He scarcely even contemplated the unavoidable consequences of the proclamation. Very well, the country was mobilizing: the mobilization would begin at midnight… Very well, every one must go; he would go… And this assumed in his mind the form of so imperative an act, the proportions of a duty which so completely exceeded every minor obligation and every petty individual need that he felt, on the contrary, a sort of relief at thus receiving from the outside the order that dictated his conduct. There was no hesitation possible. His duty lay before him: he must go.

Go? In that case why not go at once? What was the use of returning to the house, seeing Élisabeth again, seeking a painful and futile explanation, granting or refusing a forgiveness which his wife did not ask of him, but which the daughter of Hermine d'Andeville did not deserve?

In front of the principal inn a diligence stood waiting, marked, "Corvigny-Ornequin Railway Service." A few passengers were getting in. Without giving a further thought to a position which events were developing in their own way, he climbed into the diligence.

At the Corvigny railway station he was told that his train would not leave for half an hour and that it was the last, as the evening train, which connected with the night express on the main line, was not running. Paul took his ticket and then asked his way to the jobmaster of the village. He found that the man owned two motor cars and arranged with him to have the larger of the two sent at once to the Château d'Ornequin and placed at Mme. Paul Delroze's disposal.

And he wrote a short note to his wife:

"*Élisabeth:*

"Circumstances are so serious that I must ask you to leave Ornequin. The trains have become very uncertain; and I am sending you a motor car which will take you to-night to your aunt at Chaumont. I suppose that the servants will go with you and that, if there should be war (which seems to me very unlikely, in spite of everything), Jérôme and Rosalie will shut up the house and go to Corvigny.

"As for me, I am joining my regiment. Whatever the future may hold in store for us, Élisabeth, I shall never forget the woman who was my bride and who bears my name.
"Paul Delroze."

CHAPTER IV
A LETTER FROM ÉLISABETH

It was nine o'clock; there was no holding the position; and the colonel was furious.

He had brought his regiment in the middle of the night – it was in the first month of the war, on the 22nd of August, 1914 – to the junction of those three roads one of which ran from Belgian Luxemburg. The Germans had taken possession of the lines of the frontier, seven or eight miles away, on the day before. The general commanding the division had expressly ordered that they were to hold the enemy in check until mid-day, that is to say, until the whole division was able to come up with them. The regiment was supported by a battery of seventy-fives.

The colonel had drawn up his men in a dip in the ground. The battery was likewise hidden. And yet, at the first gleams of dawn, both regiment and battery were located by the enemy and lustily shelled.

They moved a mile or more to the right. Five minutes later the shells fell and killed half a dozen men and two officers.

A fresh move was effected, followed in ten minutes by a fresh attack. The colonel pursued his tactics. In an hour there were thirty men killed or wounded. One of the guns was destroyed. And it was only nine o'clock.

"Damn it all!" cried the colonel. "How can they spot us like this? There's witchcraft in it."

He was hiding, with his majors, the captain of artillery and a few dispatch-riders, behind a bank from above which the eye took in a rather large stretch of undulating upland. At no great distance, on the left, was an abandoned village, with some scattered farms in front of it, and there was not an enemy to be seen in all that deserted extent of country. There was nothing to show where the hail of shells was coming from. The seventy-fives had "searched" one or two points with no result. The firing continued.

"Three more hours to hold out," growled the colonel. "We shall do it; but we shall lose a quarter of the regiment."

At that moment a shell whistled between the officers and the dispatch-riders and plumped down into the ground. All sprang back, awaiting the explosion. But one man, a corporal, ran forward, lifted the shell and examined it.

"You're mad, corporal!" roared the colonel. "Drop that shell and be quick about it."

The corporal replaced the projectile quietly in the hole which it had made; and then without hurrying, went up to the colonel, brought his heels together and saluted:

"Excuse me, sir, but I wanted to see by the fuse how far off the enemy's guns are. It's two miles and fifty yards. That may be worth knowing."

"By Jove! And suppose it had gone off?"

"Ah, well, sir, nothing venture, nothing have!"

"True, but, all the same, it was a bit thick! What's your name?"

"Paul Delroze, sir, corporal in the third company."

"Well, Corporal Delroze, I congratulate you on your pluck and I dare say you'll soon have your sergeant's stripes. Meanwhile, take my advice and don't do it again.."

He was interrupted by the sudden bursting of a shrapnel-shell. One of the dispatch-riders standing near him fell, hit in the chest, and an officer staggered under the weight of the earth that spattered against him.

"Come," said the colonel, when things had restored themselves, "there's nothing to do but bow before the storm. Take the best shelter you can find; and let's wait."

Paul Delroze stepped forward once more.

"Forgive me, sir, for interfering in what's not my business; but we might, I think, avoid."

"Avoid the peppering? Of course, I have only to change our position again. But, as we should be located again at once… There, my lad, go back to your place."

Paul insisted:

"It might be a question, sir, not of changing our position, but of changing the enemy's fire."

"Really!" said the colonel, a little sarcastically, but nevertheless impressed by Paul's coolness. "And do you know a way of doing it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Give me twenty minutes, sir, and by that time the shells will be falling in another direction."

The colonel could not help smiling:

"Capital! You'll make them drop where you please, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"On that beet-field over there, fifteen hundred yards to the right?"

"Yes, sir."

The artillery-captain, who had been listening to the conversation, made a jest in his turn:

"While you are about it, corporal, as you have already given me the distance and I know the direction more or less, couldn't you give it to me exactly, so that I may lay my guns right and smash the German batteries?"

"That will be a longer job, sir, and much more difficult," said Paul. "Still, I'll try. If you don't mind examining the horizon, at eleven o'clock precisely, towards the frontier, I'll let off a signal."

"What sort of signal?"

"I don't know, sir. Three rockets, I expect."

"But your signal will be no use unless you send it off immediately above the enemy's position."

"Just so, sir."

"And, to do that, you'll have to know it."

"I shall, sir."

"And to get there."

"I shall get there, sir."

Paul saluted, turned on his heel and, before the officers had time either to approve or to object, he slipped along the foot of the slope at a run, plunged on the left down a sort of hollow way, with bristling edges of brambles, and disappeared from sight.

"That's a queer fellow," said the colonel. "I wonder what he really means to do."

The young soldier's pluck and decision disposed the colonel in his favor; and, though he felt only a limited confidence in the result of the enterprise, he could not help looking at his watch, time after time, during the minutes which he spent with his officers, behind the feeble rampart of a hay-stack. They were terrible minutes, in which the commanding officer did not think for a moment of the danger that threatened himself, but only of the danger of the men in his charge, whom he looked upon as children.

He saw them around him, lying at full length on the stubble, with their knapsacks over their heads, or snugly ensconced in the copses, or squatting in the hollows in the ground. The iron hurricane increased in violence. It came rushing down like a furious hail bent upon hastily completing its work of destruction. Men suddenly leapt to their feet, spun on their heels and fell motionless, amid the yells of the wounded, the shouts of the soldiers exchanging remarks and even jokes and, over everything, the incessant thunder of the bursting bomb-shells.

And then, suddenly, silence! Total, definite silence, an infinite lull in the air and on the ground, giving a sort of ineffable relief!

The colonel expressed his delight by bursting into a laugh:

"By Jupiter, Corporal Delroze knows his way about! The crowning achievement would be for the beet-field to be shelled, as he promised."

He had not finished speaking when a shell exploded fifteen hundred yards to the right, not in the beet-field, but a little in front of it. The second went too far. The third found the spot. And the bombardment began with a will.

There was something about the performance of the task which the corporal had set himself that was at once so astounding and so mathematically accurate that the colonel and his officers had hardly a doubt that he would carry it out to the end and that, notwithstanding the insurmountable obstacles, he would succeed in giving the signal agreed upon.

They never ceased sweeping the horizon with their field-glasses, while the enemy redoubled his efforts against the beet-field.

At five minutes past eleven, a red rocket went up. It appeared a good deal farther to the right than they would have suspected. And it was followed by two others.

Through his telescope the artillery-captain soon discovered a church-steeple that just showed above a valley which was itself invisible among the rise and fall of the plateau; and the spire of the steeple protruded so very little that it might well have been taken for a tree standing by itself. A rapid glance at the map showed that it was the village of Brumoy.

Knowing, from the shell examined by the corporal, the exact distance of the German batteries, the captain telephoned his instructions to his lieutenant. Half an hour later the German batteries were silenced; and as a fourth rocket had gone up the seventy-fives continued to bombard the church as well as the village and its immediate neighborhood.

At a little before twelve, the regiment was joined by a cyclists company riding ahead of the division. The order was given to advance at all costs.

The regiment advanced, encountering no resistance, as it approached Brumoy, except a few rifle shots. The enemy's rearguard was falling back.

The village was in ruins, with some of its houses still burning, and displayed a most incredible disorder of corpses, of wounded men, of dead horses, demolished guns and battered caissons and baggage-wagons. A whole brigade had been surprised at the moment, when, feeling certain that it had cleared the ground, it was about to march to the attack.

But a shout came from the top of the church, the front and nave of which had fallen in and presented an appearance of indescribable chaos. Only the tower, perforated by gun-fire and blackened by the smoke from some burning joists, still remained standing, bearing by some miracle of equilibrium, the slender stone spire with which it was crowned. With his body leaning out of this spire was a peasant, waving his arms and shouting to attract attention.

The officers recognized Paul Delroze.

Picking their way through the rubbish, our men climbed the staircase that led to the platform of the tower. Here, heaped up against the little door admitting to the spire, were the bodies of eight Germans; and the door, which was demolished and had dropped crosswise, barred the entrance in such a way that it had to be chopped to pieces before Paul could be released.

Toward the end of the afternoon, when it was manifest that the obstacles to the pursuit of the enemy were too serious to be overcome, the colonel embraced Corporal Delroze in front of the regiment mustered in the square.

"Let's speak of your reward first," he said. "I shall recommend you for the military medal; and you will be sure to get it. And now, my lad, tell your story."

And Paul stood answering questions in the middle of the circle formed around him by the officers and the non-commissioned officers of each company.

"Why, it's very simple, sir," he said. "We were being spied upon."

"Obviously; but who was the spy and where was he?"

"I learnt that by accident. Beside the position which we occupied this morning, there was a village, was there not, with a church?"

"Yes, but I had the village evacuated when I arrived; and there was no one in the church."

"If there was no one in the church, sir, why did the weather-vane point the wind coming from the east, when it was blowing from the west? And why, when we changed our position, was the vane pointed in our direction?"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, sir. And that was why, after obtaining your leave, I did not hesitate to slip into the church and to enter the steeple as stealthily as I could. I was not mistaken. There was a man there whom I managed to overmaster, not without difficulty."

"The scoundrel! A Frenchman?"

"No, sir, a German dressed up as a peasant."

"He shall be shot."

"No, sir, please. I promised him his life."

"Never!"

"Well, you see, sir, I had to find out how he was keeping the enemy informed."

"Well?"

"Oh, it was simple enough! The church has a clock, facing the north, of which we could not see the dial, where we were. From the inside, our friend worked the hands so that the big hand, resting by turns on three or four figures, announced the exact distance at which we were from the church, in the direction pointed by the vane. This is what I next did myself; and the enemy at once, redirecting his fire by my indications, began conscientiously to shell the beet-field."

"He did," said the colonel, laughing.

"All that remained for me to do was to move on to the other observation-post, where the spy's messages were received. There I would learn the essential details which the spy himself did not know; I mean, where the enemy's batteries were hidden. I therefore ran to this place; and it was only on arriving here that I saw those batteries and a whole German brigade posted at the very foot of the church which did the duty of signaling-station."

"But that was a mad piece of recklessness! Didn't they fire on you?"

"I had put on the spy's clothes, sir, *their* spy's. I can speak German, I knew the pass-word and only one of them knew the spy and that was the officer on observation-duty. Without the least suspicion, the general commanding the brigade sent me to him as soon as I told him that the French had discovered me and that I had managed to escape them."

"And you had the cheek.. ?"

"I had to, sir; and besides I held all the trump cards. The officer suspected nothing; and, when I reached the platform from which he was sending his signals, I had no difficulty in attacking him and reducing him to silence. My business was done and I had only to give you the signals agreed upon."

"Only that! In the midst of six or seven thousand men!"

"I had promised you, sir, and it was eleven o'clock. The platform had on it all the apparatus required for sending day or night signals. Why shouldn't I use it? I lit a rocket, followed by a second and a third and then a fourth; and the battle commenced."

"But those rockets were indications to draw our fire upon the very steeple where you were! It was you we were firing on!"

"Oh, I assure you, sir, one doesn't think of those things at such moments! I welcomed the first shell that struck the church. And then the enemy left me hardly any time for reflection. Half-a-dozen fellows at once came climbing the tower. I accounted for some of them with my revolver; but a second assault came and, later on, still another. I had to take refuge behind the door that closes the spire. When they had broken it down, it served me as a barricade; and, as I had the arms and ammunition

which I had taken from my first assailants and was inaccessible and very nearly invisible, I found it easy to sustain a regular siege."

"While our seventy-fives were blazing away at you."

"While our seventy-fives were releasing me, sir; for you can understand that, once the church was destroyed and the nave in flames, no one dared to venture up the tower. I had nothing to do, therefore, but wait patiently for your arrival."

Paul Delroze had told his story in the simplest way and as though it concerned perfectly natural things. The colonel, after congratulating him again, confirmed his promotion to the rank of sergeant and said:

"Have you nothing to ask me?"

"Yes, sir, I should like to put a few more questions to the German spy whom I left behind me and, at the same time, to get back my uniform, which I hid."

"Very well, you shall dine here and we'll give you a bicycle afterwards."

Paul was back at the first church by seven o'clock in the evening. A great disappointment awaited him. The spy had broken his bonds and fled.

All Paul's searching, in the church and village, was useless. Nevertheless, on one of the steps of the staircase, near the place where he had flung himself upon the spy, he picked up the dagger with which his adversary had tried to strike him. It was exactly similar to the dagger which he had picked up in the grass, three weeks before, outside the little gate in the Ornequin woods. It had the same three-cornered blade, the same brown horn handle and, on the handle, the same four letters: H, E, R, M.

The spy and the woman who bore so strange a resemblance to Hermine d'Andeville, his father's murderess, both made use of an identical weapon.

Next day, the division to which Paul's regiment belonged continued the offensive and entered Belgium after repulsing the enemy. But in the evening the general received orders to fall back.

The retreat began. Painful as it was to one and all, it was doubly so perhaps to those of our troops which had been victorious at the start. Paul and his comrades in the third company could not contain themselves for rage and disappointment. During the half a day which they spent in Belgium, they saw the ruins of a little town that had been destroyed by the Germans, the bodies of eighty women who had been shot, old men hung up by their feet, stacks of murdered children. And they had to retire before those monsters!

Some of the Belgian soldiers had attached themselves to the regiment; and, with faces that still bore traces of horror at the infernal visions which they had beheld, these men told of things beyond the conception of the most vivid imagination. And our fellows had to retire. They had to retire with hatred in their hearts and a mad desire for vengeance that made their hands close fiercely on their rifles.

And why retire? It was not a question of being defeated, because they were falling back in good order, making sudden halts and delivering violent counter-attacks upon the disconcerted enemy. But his numbers overpowered all resistance. The wave of barbarians reformed itself. The place of each thousand dead was taken by two thousand of the living. And our men retired.

One evening, Paul learnt one of the reasons for this retreat from a week-old newspaper; and he was painfully affected by the news. On the 20th of August, Corvigny had been taken by assault, after some hours of bombardment effected under the most inexplicable conditions, whereas the stronghold was believed to be capable of holding out for at least some days, which would have strengthened our operations against the left flank of the Germans.

So Corvigny had fallen; and the Château d'Ornequin, doubtless abandoned, as Paul himself hoped, by Jérôme and Rosalie, was now destroyed, pillaged and sacked with the methodical thoroughness which the Huns applied to their work of devastation. On this side, too, the furious horde were crowding precipitately.

Those were sinister days, at the end of August, the most tragic days perhaps that France has ever passed through. Paris was threatened, a dozen departments were invaded. Death's icy breath hung over our gallant nation.

It was on the morning of one of these days that Paul heard a cheerful voice calling to him from a group of young soldiers behind him:

"Paul, Paul! I've got my way at last! Isn't it a stroke of luck?"

Those young soldiers were lads who had enlisted voluntarily and been drafted into the regiment; and Paul at once recognized Élisabeth's brother, Bernard d'Andeville. He had no time to think of the attitude which he had best take up. His first impulse would have been to turn away; but Bernard had seized his two hands and was pressing them with an affectionate kindness which showed that the boy knew nothing as yet of the breach between Paul and his wife.

"Yes, it's myself, old chap," he declared gaily. "I may call you old chap, mayn't I? It's myself and it takes your breath away, what? You're thinking of a providential meeting, the sort of coincidence one never sees: two brothers-in-law dropping into the same regiment. Well, it's not that: it happened at my express request. I said to the authorities, 'I'm enlisting by way of a duty and pleasure combined,' or words to that effect. 'But, as a crack athlete and a prize-winner in every gymnastic and drill-club I ever joined, I want to be sent to the front straight away and into the same regiment as my brother-in-law, Corporal Paul Delroze.' And, as they couldn't do without my services, they packed me off here… Well? You don't look particularly delighted.. ?"

Paul was hardly listening. He said to himself:

"This is the son of Hermine d'Andeville. The boy who is now touching me is the son of the woman who killed."

But Bernard's face expressed such candor and such open-hearted pleasure at seeing him that he said:

"Yes, I am. Only you're so young!"

"I? I'm quite ancient. Seventeen the day I enlisted."

"But what did your father say?"

"Dad gave me leave. But for that, of course, I shouldn't have given him leave."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he's enlisted, too."

"At his age?"

"Nonsense, he's quite juvenile. Fifty the day he enlisted! They found him a job as interpreter with the British staff. All the family under arms, you see… Oh, I was forgetting, I've a letter for you from Élisabeth!"

Paul started. He had deliberately refrained from asking after his wife. He now said, as he took the letter:

"So she gave you this.. ?"

"No, she sent it to us from Ornequin."

"From Ornequin? How can she have done that? Élisabeth left Ornequin on the day of mobilization, in the evening. She was going to Chaumont, to her aunt's."

"Not at all. I went and said good-bye to our aunt: she hadn't heard from Élisabeth since the beginning of the war. Besides, look at the envelope: 'M. Paul Delroze, care of M. d'Andeville, Paris, etc.' And it's post-marked Ornequin and Corvigny."

Paul looked and stammered:

"Yes, you're right; and I can read the date on the post-mark: 18 August. The 18th of August.. and Corvigny fell into the hands of the Germans two days later, on the 20th. So Élisabeth was still there."

"No, no," cried Bernard, "Élisabeth isn't a child! You surely don't think she would have waited for the Huns, so close to the frontier! She would have left the château at the first sound of firing. And that's what she's telling you, I expect. Why don't you read her letter, Paul?"

Paul, on his side, had no idea of what he was about to learn on reading the letter; and he opened the envelope with a shudder.

What Élisabeth wrote was:

> "*Paul*,
>
> "I cannot make up my mind to leave Ornequin. A duty keeps me here in which I shall not fail, the duty of clearing my mother's memory. Do understand me, Paul. My mother remains the purest of creatures in my eyes. The woman who nursed me in her arms, for whom my father retains all his love, must not be even suspected. But you yourself accuse her; and it is against you that I wish to defend her. To compel you to believe me, I shall find the proofs that are not necessary to convince me. And it seems to me that those proofs can only be found here. So I shall stay.
>
> "Jérôme and Rosalie are also staying on, though the enemy is said to be approaching. They have brave hearts, both of them, and you have nothing to fear, as I shall not be alone.
>
> *Élisabeth Delroze."*

Paul folded up the letter. He was very pale.

Bernard asked:

"She's gone, hasn't she?"

"No, she's there."

"But this is madness! What, with those beasts about! A lonely country-house!.. But look here, Paul, she must surely know the terrible dangers that threaten her!.. What can be keeping her there? Oh, it's too dreadful to think of.."

Paul stood silent, with a drawn face and clenched fists..

CHAPTER V
THE PEASANT-WOMAN AT CORVIGNY

Three weeks before, on hearing that war was declared, Paul had felt rising within him the immediate resolution to get killed at all costs. The tragedy of his life, the horror of his marriage with a woman whom he still loved in his heart, the certainty which he had acquired at the Château d'Ornequin: all this had affected him to such a degree that he came to look upon death as a boon. To him, war represented, from the first and without the least demur, death. However much he might admire the solemnly impressive and magnificently consoling events of those first few weeks – the perfect order of the mobilization, the enthusiasm of the soldiers, the wonderful unity that prevailed in France, the awakening of the souls of the nation – none of these great spectacles attracted his attention. Deep down within himself he had determined that he would perform acts of such kind that not even the most improbable hazard could succeed in saving him.

Thus he thought that he had found the desired occasion on the first day. To overmaster the spy whose presence he suspected in the church steeple and then to penetrate to the very heart of the enemy's lines, in order to signal the position, meant going to certain death. He went bravely. And, as he had a very clear sense of his mission, he fulfilled it with as much prudence as courage. He was ready to die, but to die after succeeding. And he found a strange unexpected joy in the act itself as well as in the success that attended it.

The discovery of the dagger employed by the spy made a great impression on him. What connection did it establish between this man and the one who had tried to stab him? What was the connection between these two and the Comtesse d'Andeville, who had died sixteen years ago? And how, by what invisible links, were they all three related to that same work of treachery and spying of which Paul had surprised so many instances?

But Élisabeth's letter, above all, came upon him as a very violent blow. She was over there, amidst the bullets and the shells, the hot fighting around the château, the madness and the fury of the victors, the burning, the shooting, the torturing and atrocities! She was there, she so young and beautiful, almost alone, with no one to defend her! And she was there because he, Paul, had not had the grit to go back to her and see her once more and take her away with him!

These thoughts produced in Paul fits of depression from which he would suddenly awaken to thrust himself in the path of some danger, pursuing his mad enterprises to the end, come what might, with a quiet courage and a fierce obstinacy that filled his comrades with both surprise and admiration. And from that time onward he seemed to be seeking not so much death as the unspeakable ecstasy which a man feels in defying it.

Then came the 6th of September, the day of the unheard-of miracle when our great general-in-chief, addressing his armies in words that will never perish, at last ordered them to fling themselves upon the enemy. The gallantly-borne but cruel retreat came to an end. Exhausted, breathless, fighting against odds for days, with no time for sleep, with no time to eat, marching only by force of prodigious efforts of which they were not even conscious, unable to say why they did not lie down in the road-side ditches to await death, such were the men who received the word of command:

"Halt! About face! And now have at the enemy!"

And they faced about. Those dying men recovered their strength. From the humblest to the most illustrious, each summoned up his will and fought as though the safety of France depended upon him alone. There were as many glorious heroes as there were soldiers. They were asked to conquer or die. They conquered.

Paul shone in the front rank of the fearless. He himself knew that what he did and what he endured, what he tried to do and what he succeeded in doing surpassed the limits of reality. On the

6th and the 7th and the 8th and again from the 11th to the 13th, despite his excessive fatigue, despite the deprivations of sleep and food which it seemed impossible for the human frame to resist, he had no other sensation than that of advancing and again advancing – and always advancing. Whether in sunshine or in shade, whether on the banks of the Marne or on the woody slopes of the Argonne, whether north or east, when his division was sent to reinforce the troops on the frontier, whether lying flat and creeping along in the plowed fields or on his feet and charging with the bayonet, he was always going forward and each step was a delivery and each step was a conquest.

Each step also increased the hatred in his heart. Oh, how right his father had been to loathe those people! Paul now saw them at work. On every side were stupid devastation and unreasoning destruction, on every side arson, pillage and death, hostages shot, women murdered, bestially, for the love of the thing. Churches, country-houses, mansions of the rich and cabins of the poor: nothing remained. The very ruins had been razed to the ground, the very corpses tortured.

O the delight of defeating such an enemy! Though reduced to half its full strength, Paul's regiment, released like a pack of hounds, never ceased biting at the wild beast which it was hunting. The quarry seemed more vicious and formidable the nearer it approached to the frontier; and our men kept rushing at it in the mad hope of giving it the death-stroke.

One day Paul read on a sign-post at a cross-roads:

Corvigny, 14 Kil.
Ornequin, 31 Kil. 400.
The Frontier, 33 Kil. 200.

Corvigny! Ornequin! A thrill passed through his frame when he saw those unexpected words. As a rule, absorbed as he was by the heat of the conflict and by his private cares, he paid little attention to the names of the places which he passed; and he learnt them only by chance. And now suddenly he was within so short a distance of the Château d'Ornequin! "Corvigny, 14 kilometers: " less than nine miles!.. Were the French troops making for Corvigny, for the little fortified place which the Germans had taken by assault and taken under such strange conditions?

That day, they had been fighting since daylight against an enemy whose resistance seemed to grow slacker and slacker. Paul, at the head of a squad of men, was sent to the village of Bléville with orders to enter it if the enemy had retired, but go no farther. And it was just beyond the last houses of the village that he saw the sign-post.

At the time, he was not quite easy in his mind. A Taube had flown over the country a few minutes before. There was the possibility of an ambush.

"Let's go back to the village," he said. "We'll barricade ourselves while we wait."

But there was a sudden noise behind a wooded hill that interrupted the road in the Corvigny direction, a noise that became more and more definite, until Paul recognized the powerful throb of a motor, doubtless a motor carrying a quick-firing gun.

"Crouch down in the ditch," he cried to his men. "Hide yourselves in the haystacks. Fix bayonets. And don't move any of you!"

He had realized the danger of that motor's passing through the village, plunging in the midst of his company, scattering panic and then making off by some other way.

He quickly climbed the split trunk of an old oak and took up his position in the branches a few feet above the road.

The motor soon came in sight. It was, as he expected, an armored car, but one of the old pattern, which allowed the helmets and heads of the men to show above the steel plating.

It came along at a smart pace, ready to dart forward in case of alarm. The men were stooping with bent backs. Paul counted half-a-dozen of them. The barrels of two Maxim guns projected beyond the car.

He put his rifle to his shoulder and took aim at the driver, a fat Teuton with a scarlet face that seemed dyed with blood. Then, when the moment came, he calmly fired.

"Charge, lads!" he cried, as he scrambled down from his tree.

But it was not even necessary to take the car by storm. The driver, struck in the chest, had had the presence of mind to apply the brakes and pull up. Seeing themselves surrounded, the Germans threw up their hands:

"*Kamerad! Kamerad!*"

And one of them, flinging down his arms, leapt from the motor and came running up to Paul:

"An Alsatian, sergeant, an Alsatian from Strasburg! Ah, sergeant, many's the day that I've been waiting for this moment!"

While his men were taking the prisoners to the village, Paul hurriedly questioned the Alsatian:

"Where has the car come from?"

"Corvigny."

"Any of your people there?"

"Very few. A rearguard of two hundred and fifty Badeners at the most."

"And in the forts?"

"About the same number. They didn't think it necessary to mend the turrets and now they've been taken unprepared. They're hesitating whether to try and make a stand or to fall back on the frontier; and that's why we were sent to reconnoiter."

"So we can go ahead?"

"Yes, but at once, else they will receive powerful reinforcements, two divisions."

"When?"

"To-morrow. They're to cross the frontier, to-morrow, about the middle of the day."

"By Jove! There's no time to be lost!" said Paul.

While examining the guns and having the prisoners disarmed and searched, Paul was considering the best measures to take, when one of his men, who had stayed behind in the village, came and told him of the arrival of a French detachment, with a lieutenant in command.

Paul hastened to tell the officer what had happened. Events called for immediate action. He offered to go on a scouting expedition in the captured motor.

"Very well," said the officer. "I'll occupy the village and arrange to have the division informed as soon as possible."

The car made off in the direction of Corvigny, with eight men packed inside. Two of them, placed in charge of the quick-firing guns, studied the mechanism. The Alsatian stood up, so as to show his helmet and uniform clearly, and scanned the horizon on every side.

All this was decided upon and done in the space of a few minutes, without discussion and without delaying over the details of the undertaking.

"We must trust to luck," said Paul, taking his seat at the wheel. "Are you ready to see the job through, boys?"

"Yes; and further," said a voice which he recognized, just behind him.

It was Bernard d'Andeville, Élisabeth's brother. Bernard belonged to the 9th company; and Paul had succeeded in avoiding him, since their first meeting, or at least in not speaking to him. But he knew that the youngster was fighting well.

"Ah, so you're there?" he said.

"In the flesh," said Bernard. "I came along with my lieutenant; and, when I saw you getting into the motor and taking any one who turned up, you can imagine how I jumped at the chance!" And he added, in a more embarrassed tone, "The chance of doing a good stroke of work, under your orders, and the chance of talking to you, Paul.. for I've been unlucky so far… I even thought that.. that you were not as well-disposed to me as I hoped.."

"Nonsense," said Paul. "Only I was bothered.."

"You mean, about Élisabeth?"

"Yes."

"I see. All the same, that doesn't explain why there was something between us, a sort of constraint."

At that moment, the Alsatian exclaimed:

"Lie low there!.. Uhlans ahead!."

A patrol came trotting down a cross-road, turning the corner of a wood. He shouted to them, as the car passed:

"Clear out, Kameraden! Fast as you can! The French are coming!"

Paul took advantage of the incident not to answer his brother-in-law. He had forced the pace; and the motor was now thundering along, scaling the hills and shooting down them like a meteor.

The enemy detachments became more numerous. The Alsatian called out to them or else by means of signs incited them to beat an immediate retreat.

"It's the funniest thing to see," he said, laughing. "They're all galloping behind us like mad." And he added, "I warn you, sergeant, that at this rate we shall dash right into Corvigny. Is that what you want to do?"

"No," replied Paul, "we'll stop when the town's in sight."

"And, if we're surrounded?"

"By whom? In any case, these bands of fugitives won't be able to oppose our return."

Bernard d'Andeville spoke:

"Paul," he said, "I don't believe you're thinking of returning."

"You're quite right. Are you afraid?"

"Oh, what an ugly word!"

But presently Paul went on, in a gentler voice:

"I'm sorry you came, Bernard."

"Is the danger greater for me than for you and the others?"

"No."

"Then do me the honor not to be sorry."

Still standing up and leaning over the sergeant, the Alsatian pointed with his hand:

"That spire straight ahead, behind the trees, is Corvigny. I calculate that, by slanting up the hills on the left, we ought to be able to see what's happening in the town."

"We shall see much better by going inside," Paul remarked. "Only it's a big risk.. especially for you, Alsatian. If they take you prisoner, they'll shoot you. Shall I put you down this side of Corvigny?"

"You haven't studied my face, sergeant."

The road was now running parallel with the railway. Soon, the first houses of the outskirts came in sight. A few soldiers appeared.

"Not a word to these," Paul ordered. "It won't do to startle them.. or they'll take us from behind at the critical moment."

He recognized the station and saw that it was strongly held. Spiked helmets were coming and going along the avenues that led to the town.

"Forward!" cried Paul. "If there's any large body of troops, it can only be in the square. Are the guns ready? And the rifles? See to mine for me, Bernard. And, at the first signal, independent fire!"

The motor rushed at full speed into the square. As he expected, there were about a hundred men there, all massed in front of the church-steps, near their stacked rifles. The church was a mere heap of ruins; and almost all the houses in the square had been leveled to the ground by the bombardment.

The officers, standing on one side, cheered and waved their hands on seeing the motor which they had sent out to reconnoiter and whose return they seemed to be expecting before making their decision about the defense of the town. There were a good many of them, their number no doubt

including some communication officers. A general stood a head and shoulders above the rest. A number of cars were waiting some little distance away.

The street was paved with cobble-stones and there was no raised pavement between it and the square. Paul followed it; but, when he was within twenty yards of the officers, he gave a violent turn of the wheel and the terrible machine made straight for the group, knocking them down and running over them, slanted off slightly, so as to take the stacks of rifles, and then plunged like an irresistible mass right into the middle of the detachment, spreading death as it went, amid a mad, hustling flight and yells of pain and terror.

"Independent fire!" cried Paul, stopping the car.

And the firing began from this impregnable blockhouse, which had suddenly sprung up in the center of the square, accompanied by the sinister crackle of the two Maxim guns.

In five minutes, the square was strewn with killed and wounded men. The general and several officers lay dead. The survivors took to their heels.

Paul gave the order to cease fire and took the car to the top of the avenue that led to the station. The troops from the station were hastening up, attracted by the shooting. A few volleys from the guns dispersed them.

Paul drove three times quickly round the square, to examine the approaches. On every side the enemy was fleeing along the roads and paths to the frontier. And on every hand the inhabitants of Corvigny came out of their houses and gave vent to their delight.

"Pick up and see to the wounded," Paul ordered. "And send for the bell-ringer, or some one who understands about the bells. It's urgent!"

An aged sacristan appeared.

"The tocsin, old man, the tocsin for all you're worth! And, when you're tired, have some one to take your place! The tocsin, without stopping for a second!"

This was the signal which Paul had agreed upon with the French lieutenant, to announce to the division that the enterprise had succeeded and that the troops were to advance.

It was two o'clock. At five, the staff and a brigade had taken possession of Corvigny and our seventy-fives were firing a few shells. By ten o'clock in the evening, the rest of the division having come up meantime, the Germans had been driven out of the Grand Jonas and the Petit Jonas and were concentrating before the frontier. It was decided to dislodge them at daybreak.

"Paul," said Bernard to his brother-in-law, at the evening roll-call, "I have something to tell you, something that puzzles me, a very queer thing: you'll judge for yourself. Just now, I was walking down one of the streets near the church when a woman spoke to me. I couldn't make out her face or her dress at first, because it was almost dark, but she seemed to be a peasant-woman from the sound of her wooden shoes on the cobbles. 'Young man,' she said – and her way of expressing herself surprised me a little in a peasant-woman – 'Young man, you may be able to tell me something I want to know.' I said I was at her service and she began, 'It's like this: I live in a little village close by. I heard just now that your army corps was here. So I came, because I wanted to see a soldier who belonged to it, only I don't know the number of his regiment. I believe he has been transferred, because I never get a letter from him; and I dare say he has not had mine. Oh, if you only happened to know him! He's such a good lad, such a gallant fellow.' I asked her to tell me his name; and she answered, 'Delroze, Corporal Paul Delroze.'"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.