Chapter 11

CHÂTEAU DES NOIRES-FONTAINES

The Château of Noires-Fontaines, whither we have just conducted two of the principal characters of our story, stood in one of the most charming spots of the valley, where the city of Bourg is built. The park, of five or six acres, covered with venerable oaks, was inclosed on three sides by freestone walls, one of which opened in front through a handsome gate of wrought-iron, fashioned in the style of Louis XV.; the fourth side was bounded by the little river called the Reissouse, a pretty stream that takes its rise at Journaud, among the foothills of the Jura, and flowing gently from south to north, joins the Saône at the bridge of Fleurville, opposite Pont-de-Vaux, the birthplace of Joubert, who, a month before the period of which we are writing, was killed at the fatal battle of Novi.

Beyond the Reissouse, and along its banks, lay, to the right and left of the Château des Noires-Fontaines, the village of Montagnac and Saint-Just, dominated further on by that of Ceyzeriat. Behind this latter hamlet stretched the graceful outlines of the hills of the Jura, above the summits of which could be distinguished the blue crests of the mountains of Bugey, which seemed to be standing on tiptoe in order to peer curiously over their younger sisters' shoulder at what was passing in the valley of the Ain.

It was in full view of this ravishing landscape that Sir John awoke. For the first time in his life, perhaps, the morose and taciturn Englishman smiled at nature. He fancied himself in one of those beautiful valleys of Thessaly celebrated by Virgil, beside the sweet slopes of Lignon sung by Urfé, whose birthplace, in spite of what the biographers say, was falling into ruins not three miles from the Château des Noires-Fontaines. He was roused by three light raps at his door. It was Roland who came to see how he had passed the night. He found him radiant as the sun playing among the already yellow leaves of the chestnuts and the lindens.

"Oh! oh! Sir John," cried Roland, "permit me to congratulate you. I expected to find you as gloomy as the poor monks of the Chartreuse, with their long white robes, who used to frighten me so much in my childhood; though, to

tell the truth, I was never easily frightened. Instead of that I find you in the midst of this dreary October, as smiling as a morn of May."

"My dear Roland," replied Sir John, "I am an orphan; I lost my mother at my birth and my father when I was twelve years old. At an age when children are usually sent to school, I was master of a fortune producing a million a year; but I was alone in the world, with no one whom I loved or who loved me. The tender joys of family life are completely unknown to me. From twelve to eighteen I went to Cambridge, but my taciturn and perhaps haughty character isolated me from my fellows. At eighteen I began to travel. You who scour the world under the shadow of your flag; that is to say, the shadow of your country, and are stirred by the thrill of battle, and the pride of glory, cannot imagine what a lamentable thing it is to roam through cities, provinces, nations, and kingdoms simply to visit a church here, a castle there; to rise at four in the morning at the summons of a pitiless guide, to see the sun rise from Rigi or Etna; to pass like a phantom, already dead, through the world of living shades called men; to know not where to rest; to know no land in which to take root, no arm on which to lean, no heart in which to pour your own! Well, last night, my dear Roland, suddenly, in an instant, in a second, this void in my life was filled. I lived in you; the joys I seek were yours. The family which I never had, I saw smiling around you. As I looked at your mother I said to myself: 'My mother was like that, I am sure.' Looking at your sister, I said: 'Had I a sister I could not have wished her otherwise.' When I embraced your brother, I thought that I, too, might have had a child of that age, and thus leave something behind me in the world, whereas with the nature I know I possess, I shall die as I have lived, sad, surly with others, a burden to myself. Ah! you are happy, Roland! you have a family, you have fame, you have youth, you have that which spoils nothing in a man--you have beauty. You want no joys. You are not deprived of a single delight. I repeat it, Roland, you are a happy man, most happy!"

"Good!" said Roland. "You forget my aneurism, my lord."

Sir John looked at Roland increduously. Roland seemed to enjoy the most perfect health.

"Your aneurism against my million, Roland," said Lord Tanlay, with a feeling of profound sadness, "providing that with this aneurism you give me this mother who weeps for joy on seeing you again; this sister who faints with delight at your return; this child who clings upon your neck like some fresh young fruit to a sturdy young tree; this château with its dewy shade, its river with its verdant flowering banks, these blue vistas dotted with pretty villages and white-capped belfries graceful as swans. I would welcome your aneurism, Roland, and with death in two years, in one, in six months; but six months of stirring, tender, eventful and glorious life!"

Roland laughed in his usual nervous manner.

"Ah!" said he, "so this is the tourist, the superficial traveller, the Wandering Jew of civilization, who pauses nowhere, gauges nothing, judges everything by the sensation it produces in him. The tourist who, without opening the doors of these abodes where dwell the fools we call men, says: 'Behind these walls is happiness!' Well, my dear friend, you see this charming river, don't you? These flowering meadows, these pretty villages? It is the picture of peace, innocence and fraternity; the cycle of Saturn, the golden age returned; it is Eden, Paradise! Well, all that is peopled by beings who have flown at each other's throats. The jungles of Calcutta, the sedges of Bengal are inhabited by tigers and panthers not one whit more ferocious or cruel than the denizens of these pretty villages, these dewy lawns, and these charming shores. After lauding in funeral celebrations the good, the great, the immortal Marat, whose body, thank God! they cast into the common sewer like carrion that he was, and always had been; after performing these funeral rites, to which each man brought an urn into which he shed his tears, behold! our good Bressans, our gentle Bressans, these poultry-fatteners, suddenly decided that the Republicans were all murderers. So they murdered them by the tumbrelful to correct them of that vile defect common to savage and civilized man--the killing his kind. You doubt it? My dear fellow, on the road to Lons-le-Saulnier they will show you, if you are curious, the spot where not six months ago they organized a slaughter fit to turn the stomach of our most ferocious troopers on the battlefield. Picture to yourself a tumbrel of prisoners on their way to Lons-le-Saulnier. It was a staff-sided cart, one of those immense wagons in which they take cattle to market. There were some thirty men in this tumbrel, whose sole crime was foolish exaltation of thought and threatening language. They were bound and gagged; heads hanging, jolted by the bumping of the cart; their throats

parched with thirst, despair and terror; unfortunate beings who did not even have, as in the times of Nero and Commodus, the fight in the arena, the hand-to-hand struggle with death. Powerless, motionless, the lust of massacre surprised them in their fetters, and battered them not only in life but in death; their bodies, when their hearts had ceased to beat, still resounded beneath the bludgeons which mangled their flesh and crushed their bones; while women looked on in calm delight, lifting high the children, who clapped their hands for joy. Old men who ought to have been preparing for a Christian death helped, by their goading cries, to render the death of these wretched beings more wretched still. And in the midst of these old men, a little septuagenarian, dainty, powdered, flicking his lace shirt frill if a speck of dust settled there, pinching his Spanish tobacco from a golden snuff-box, with a diamond monogram, eating his "amber sugarplums" from a Sevres bonbonnière, given him by Madame du Barry, and adorned with the donor's portrait--this septuagenarian--conceive the picture, my dear Sir John--dancing with his pumps upon that mattress of human flesh, wearying his arm, enfeebled by age, in striking repeatedly with his gold-headed cane those of the bodies who seemed not dead enough to him, not properly mangled in that cursed mortar! Faugh! My friend, I have seen Montebello, I have seen Arcole, I have seen Rivoli, I have seen the Pyramids, and I believe I could see nothing more terrible. Well, my mother's mere recital, last night, after you had retired, of what has happened here, made my hair stand on end. Faith! that explains my poor sister's spasms just as my aneurism explains mine."

Sir John watched Roland, and listened with that strange wonderment which his young friend's misanthropical outbursts always aroused. Roland seemed to lurk in the niches of a conversation in order to fall upon mankind whenever he found an opportunity. Perceiving the impression he had made on Sir John's mind, he changed his tone, substituting bitter raillery for his philanthropic wrath.

"It is true," said he, "that, apart from this excellent aristocrat who finished what the butchers had begun, and dyed in blood the red heels of his pumps, the people who performed these massacres belonged to the lower classes, bourgeois and clowns, as our ancestors called those who supported them. The nobles manage things much more daintily. For the rest, you saw yourself what happened at Avignon. If you had been told that, you would never have believed it, would you? Those gentlemen pillagers of stage

coaches pique themselves on their great delicacy. They have two faces, not counting their mask. Sometimes they are Cartouche and Mandrin, sometimes Amadis and Galahad. They tell fabulous tales of these heroes of the highways. My mother told me yesterday of one called Laurent. You understand, my dear fellow, that Laurent is a fictitious name meant to hide the real name, just as a mask hides the face. This Laurent combined all the qualities of a hero of romance, all the accomplishments, as you English say, who, under pretext that you were once Normans, allow yourselves occasionally to enrich your language with a picturesque expression, or some word which has long, poor beggar! asked and been refused admittance of our own scholars. This Laurent was ideally handsome. He was one of seventy-two Companions of Jehu who have lately been tried at Yssen-geaux. Seventy were acquitted; he and one other were the only ones condemned to death. The innocent men were released at once, but Laurent and his companion were put in prison to await the guillotine. But, pooh! Master Laurent had too pretty a head to fall under the executioner's ignoble knife. The judges who condemned him, the curious who expected to witness him executed, had forgotten what Montaigne calls the corporeal recommendation of beauty. There was a woman belonging to the jailer of Yssen-geaux, his daughter, sister or niece; history--for it is history and not romance that I am telling you--history does not say which. At all events the woman, whoever she was, fell in love with the handsome prisoner, so much in love that two hours before the execution, just as Master Laurent, expecting the executioner, was sleeping, or pretending to sleep, as usually happens in such cases, his guardian angel came to him. I don't know how they managed; for the two lovers, for the best of reasons, never told the details; but the truth is--now remember; Sir John, that this is truth and not fiction--that Laurent was free, but, to his great regret, unable to save his comrade in the adjoining dungeon. Gensonné, under like circumstances, refused to escape, preferring to die with the other Girondins; but Gensonné did not have the head of Antinous on the body of Apollo. The handsomer the head, you understand, the more one holds on to it. So Laurent accepted the freedom offered him and escaped; a horse was waiting for him at the next village. The young girl, who might have retarded or hindered his flight, was to rejoin him the next day. Dawn came, but not the guardian angel. It seems that our hero cared more for his mistress than he did for his companion; he left his comrade, but he would not go without her. It was six o'clock, the very hour for his execution. His impatience mastered him. Three times had he turned his horse's head toward the town, and each time drew nearer and nearer. At the third time a thought flashed through his brain. Could his mistress have been taken, and would she pay the penalty for saving him? He was then in the suburbs. Spurring his horse, he entered the town with face

uncovered, dashed through people who called him by name, astonished to see him free and on horseback, when they expected to see him bound and in a tumbrel on his way to be executed. Catching sight of his guardian angel pushing through the crowd, not to see him executed, but to meet him, he urged his horse past the executioner, who had just learned of the disappearance of one of his patients, knocking over two or three bumpkins with the breast of his Bayard. He bounded toward her, swung her over the pommel of his saddle, and, with a cry of joy and a wave of his hat, he disappeared like M. de Condé at the battle of Lens. The people all applauded, and the women thought the action heroic, and all promptly fell in love with the hero on the spot."

Roland, observing that Sir John was silent, paused and questioned him by a look. "Go on," replied the Englishman; "I am listening. And as I am sure you are telling me all this in order to come to something you wish to say, I await your point."

"Well," resumed Roland, laughing, "you are right, my dear friend, and, on my word, you know me as if we had been college chums. Well, what idea do you suppose has been cavorting through my brain all night? It is that of getting a glimpse of these gentlemen of Jehu near at hand."

"Ah, yes, I understand. As you failed to get yourself killed by M. de Barjols, you want to try your chance of being killed by M. Morgan."

"Or any other, my dear Sir John," replied the young officer calmly; "for I assure you that I have nothing in particular against M. Morgan; quite the contrary, though my first impulse when he came into the room and made his little speech--don't you call it a speech--?"

Sir John nodded affirmatively.

"Though my first thought," resumed Roland, "was to spring at his throat and strangle him with one hand, and to tear off his mask with the other."

"Now that I know you, my dear Roland, I do indeed wonder how you refrained from putting such a fine project into execution."

"It was not my fault, I swear! I was just on the point of it when my companion stopped me."

"So there are people who can restrain you?"

"Not many, but he can."

"And now you regret it?"

"Honestly, no! This brave stage-robber did the business with such swaggering bravado that I admired him. I love brave men instinctively. Had I not killed M. de Barjols I should have liked to be his friend. It is true I could not tell how brave he was until I had killed him. But let us talk of something else; that duel is one of my painful thoughts. But why did I come up? It was certainly not to talk of the Companions of Jehu, nor of M. Laurent's exploits--Ah! I came to ask how you would like to spend your time. I'll cut myself in quarters to amuse you, my dear guest, but there are two disadvantages against me: this region, which is not very amusing, and your nationality, which is not easily amused."

"I have already told you, Roland," replied Lord Tanlay, offering his hand to the young man, "that I consider the Château des Noires-Fontaines a paradise."

"Agreed; but still in the fear that you may find your paradise monotonous, I shall do my best to entertain you. Are you fond of archeology--Westminster and Canterbury? We have a marvel here, the church of Brou; a wonder of sculptured lace by Colonban. There is a legend about it which I will tell you some evening when you cannot sleep. You will see there the tombs of

Marguerite de Bourbon, Philippe le Bel, and Marguerite of Austria. I will puzzle you with the problem of her motto: 'Fortune, infortune, fort'une,' which I claim to have solved by a Latinized version: 'Fortuna, in fortuna, forti una.' Are you fond of fishing, my dear friend? There's the Reissouse at your feet, and close at hand a collection of hooks and lines belonging to Edouard, and nets belonging to Michel; as for the fish, they, you know, are the last thing one thinks about. Are you fond of hunting? The forest of Seillon is not a hundred yards off. Hunting to hounds you will have perforce to renounce, but we have good shooting. In the days of my old bogies, the Chartreuse monks, the woods swarmed with wild boars, hares and foxes. No one hunts there now, because it belongs to the government; and the government at present is nobody. In my capacity as General Bonaparte's aide-de-camp I'll fill the vacancy, and we'll see who dares meddle with me, if, after chasing the Austrians on the Adige and the Mamelukes on the Nile, I hunt the boars and deer and the hares and foxes on the Reissouse. One day of archeology, one day of fishing, and one of hunting, that's three already. You see, my dear fellow, we have only fifteen or sixteen left to worry about."

"My dear Roland," said Sir John sadly, and without replying to the young officer's wordy sally, "won't you ever tell me about this fever which sears you, this sorrow which undermines you?"

"Ah!" said Roland, with his harsh, doleful laugh. "I have never been gayer than I am this morning; it's your liver, my lord, that is out of order and makes you see everything black."

"Some day I hope to be really your friend," replied Sir John seriously; "then you will confide in me, and I shall help you to bear your burden."

"And half my aneurism!--Are you hungry, my lord?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I hear Edouard on the stairs, coming up to tell us that breakfast is ready."

As Roland spoke, the door opened and the boy burst out: "Big brother Roland, mother and sister Amélie are waiting breakfast for Sir John and you."

Then catching the Englishman's right hand, he carefully examined the first joint of the thumb and forefinger.

"What are you looking at, my little friend?" asked Sir John.

"I was looking to see if you had any ink on your fingers."

"And if I had ink on my fingers, what would it mean?"

"That you had written to England, and sent for my pistols and sword."

"No, I have not yet written," said Sir John; "but I will to-day."

"You hear, big brother Roland? I'm to have my sword and my pistols in a fortnight!"

And the boy, full of delight, offered his firm rosy cheek to Sir John, who kissed it as tenderly as a father would have done. Then they went to the dining-room where Madame de Montrevel and Amélie were awaiting them.