Chapter 14

AN UNPLEASANT COMMISSION

The hunt was over, darkness was falling, and it was now a question of returning to the château. The horses were nearby; they could hear them neighing impatiently. They seemed to be asking if their courage was so doubted that they were not allowed to share in the exciting drama.

Edouard was bent upon dragging the boar after them, fastening it to the saddle-bow, and so carrying it back to the château; but Roland pointed out that it was simpler to send a couple of men for it with a barrow. Sir John being of the same opinion, Edouard--who never ceased pointing to the wound in the head, and saying, "That's my shot; that's where I aimed"--Edouard, we say, was forced to yield to the majority. The three hunters soon reached the spot where their horses were tethered, mounted, and in less than ten minutes were at the Château des Noires-Fontaines.

Madame de Montrevel was watching for them on the portico. The poor mother had waited there nearly an hour, trembling lest an accident had befallen one or the other of her sons. The moment Edouard espied her he put his pony to a gallop, shouting from the gate: "Mother, mother! We killed a boar as big as a donkey. I shot him in the head; you'll see the hole my ball, made; Roland stuck his hunting knife into the boar's belly up to the hilt, and Sir John fired at him twice. Quick, quick! Send the men for the carcass. Don't be frightened when you see Roland. He's all covered with blood--but it's from the boar, and he hasn't a scratch."

This was delivered with Edouard's accustomed volubility while Madame de Montrevel was crossing the clearing between the portico and the road to open the gate. She intended to take Edouard in her arms, but he jumped from his saddle and flung himself upon her neck. Roland and Sir John came up just then, and Amélie appeared on the portico at the same instant.

Edouard left his mother to worry over Roland, who, covered as he was with blood, looked very terrifying, and rushed to his sister with the tale he had

rattled off to his mother. Amélie listened in an abstracted manner that probably hurt Edouard's vanity, for he dashed off to the kitchen to describe the affair to Michel, who was certain to listen to him.

Michel was indeed interested; but when, after telling him where the carcass lay, Edouard gave him Roland's order to send a couple of men after the beast, he shook his head.

"What!" demanded Edouard, "are you going to refuse to obey my brother?"

"Heaven forbid! Master Edouard. Jacques shall start this instant for Montagnac."

"Are you afraid he won't find any body?"

"Goodness, no; he could get a dozen. But the trouble is the time of night. You say the boar lies close to the pavilion of the Chartreuse?"

"Not twenty yards from it."

"I'd rather it was three miles," replied Michel scratching his head; "but never mind. I'll send for them anyway without telling them what they're wanted for. Once here, it's for your brother to make them go."

"Good! Good! Only get them here and I'll see to that myself."

"Oh!" exclaimed Michel, "if I hadn't this beastly sprain I'd go myself. But to-day's doings have made it worse. Jacques! Jacques!"

Jacques came, and Edouard not only waited to hear the order given, but until he had started. Then he ran upstairs to do what Roland and Sir John were already doing, that is, dress for dinner.

The whole talk at table, as may be easily imagined, centred upon the day's prowess. Edouard asked nothing better than to talk about it, and Sir John, astounded by Roland's skill, courage, and good luck, improved upon the child's narrative. Madame de Montrevel shuddered at each detail, and yet she made them repeat it twenty times. That which seemed most clear to her in all this was that Roland had saved Edouard's life.

"Did you thank him for it?" she asked the boy. "Thank whom?"

"Your brother."

"Why should I thank him?" retorted Edouard. "I should have done the same thing."

"Ah, madame, what can you expect!" said Sir John; "you are a gazelle who has unwittingly given birth to a race of lions."

Amélie had also paid the closest attention to the account, especially when the hunters spoke of their proximity to the Chartreuse. From that time on she listened with anxious eyes, and seemed scarcely to breathe, until they told of leaving the woods after the killing.

After dinner, word was brought that Jacques had returned with two peasants from Montagnac. They wanted exact directions as to where the hunters had left the animal. Roland rose, intending to go to them, but Madame de Montrevel, who could never see enough of her son, turned to the messenger and said: "Bring these worthy men in here. It is not necessary to disturb M. Roland for that."

Five minutes later the two peasants entered, twirling their hats in their hands.

"My sons," said Roland, "I want you to fetch the boar we killed in the forest of Seillon."

"That can be done," said one of the peasants, consulting his companion with a look.

"Yes, it can be done," answered the other.

"Don't be alarmed," said Roland. "You shall lose nothing by your trouble."

"Oh! we're not," interrupted one of the peasants. "We know you, Monsieur de Montrevel."

"Yes," answered the other, "we know that, like your father, you're not in the habit of making people work for nothing. Oh! if all the aristocrats had been like you, Monsieur Louis, there wouldn't have been any revolution."

"Of course not," said the other, who seemed to have come solely to echo affirmatively what his companion said.

"It remains to be seen now where the animal is," said the first peasant.

"Yes," repeated the second, "remains to be seen where it is."

"Oh! it won't be hard to find."

"So much the better," interjected the peasant.

"Do you know the pavilion in the forest?"

"Which one?"

"Yes, which one?"

"The one that belongs to the Chartreuse of Seillon."

The peasants looked at each other.

"Well, you'll find it some twenty feet distant from the front on the way to Genoud."

The peasants looked at each other once more.

"Hum!" grunted the first one.

"Hum!" repeated the other, faithful echo of his companion.

"Well, what does this 'hum' mean?" demanded Roland.

"Confound it."

"Come, explain yourselves. What's the matter?"

"The matter is that we'd rather that it was the other end of the forest."

"But why the other end?" retorted Roland, impatiently; "it's nine miles from here to the other end, and barely three from here to where we left the boar."

"Yes," said the first peasant, "but just where the boar lies--" And he paused and scratched his head.

"Exactly; that's what," added the other.

"Just what?"

"It's a little too near the Chartreuse."

"Not the Chartreuse; I said the pavilion."

"It's all the same. You know, Monsieur Louis, that there is an underground passage leading from the pavilion to the Chartreuse."

"Oh, yes, there is one, that's sure," added the other.

"But," exclaimed Roland, "what has this underground passage got to do with our boar?"

"This much, that the beast's in a bad place, that's all."

"Oh, yes! a bad place," repeated the other peasant.

"Come, now, explain yourselves, you rascals," said Roland, who was growing angry, while his mother seemed uneasy, and Amélie visibly turned pale.

"Beg pardon, Monsieur Louis," answered the peasant; "we are not rascals; we're God-fearing men, that's all."

"By thunder," cried Roland, "I'm a God-fearing man myself. What of that?"

"Well, we don't care to have any dealings with the devil."

"No, no, no," asserted the second peasant.

"A man can match a man if he's of his own kind," continued the first peasant.

"Sometimes two," said the second, who was built like a Hercules.

"But with ghostly beings phantoms, spectres--no thank you," continued the first peasant.

"No, thank you," repeated the other.

"Oh, mother, sister," queried Roland, addressing the two women, "in Heaven's name, do you understand anything of what these two fools are saying?"

"Fools," repeated the first peasant; "well, possibly. But it's not the less true that Pierre Marey had his neck twisted just for looking over the wall. True, it was of a Saturday--the devil's sabbath."

"And they couldn't straighten it out," affirmed the second peasant, "so they had to bury him with his face turned round looking the other way.

"Oh!" exclaimed Sir John, "this is growing interesting. I'm very fond of ghost stories."

"That's more than sister Amélie is it seems," cried Edouard.

"What do you mean?"

"Just see how pale she's grown, brother Roland."

"Yes, indeed," said Sir John; "mademoiselle looks as if she were going to faint."

"I? Not at all," exclaimed Amélie, wiping the perspiration from her forehead; "only don't you think it seems a little warm here, mother?"

"No," answered Madame de Montrevel.

"Still," insisted Amélie, "if it would not annoy you, I should like to open the window."

"Do so, my child."

Amélie rose hastily to profit by this permission, and went with tottering steps to a window opening upon the garden. After it was opened, she stood leaning against the sill, half-hidden by the curtains.

"Ah!" she said, "I can breathe here."

Sir John rose to offer her his smelling-salts, but Amélie declined hastily: "No, no, my lord. Thank you, but I am better now."

"Come, come," said Roland, "don't bother about that; it's our boar."

"Well, Monsieur Louis, we will fetch your boar tomorrow."

"That's it," said the second peasant, "to-morrow morning, when it's light."

"But to go there at night--"

"Oh! to go there at night--"

The peasant looked at his comrade and both shook their heads.

"It can't be done at night."

"Cowards."

"Monsieur Louis, a man's not a coward because he's afraid."

"No, indeed; that's not being a coward," replied the other.

"Ah!" said Roland, "I wish some stronger minded men than you would face me with that argument; that a man is not a coward because he's afraid!"

"Well, it's according to what he's afraid of, Monsieur Louis. Give me a good sickle and a good cudgel, and I'm not afraid of a wolf; give me a good gun and I'm not afraid of any man, even if I knew he's waiting to murder me."

"Yes," said Edouard, "but you're afraid of a ghost, even when it's only the ghost of a monk."

"Little Master Edouard," said the peasant, "leave your brother to do the talking; you're not old enough to jest about such things--"

"No," added the other peasant, "wait till your beard is grown, my little gentleman."

"I haven't any beard," retorted Edouard, starting up, "but just the same if I was strong enough to carry the boar, I'd go fetch it myself either by day or night."

"Much good may it do you, my young gentleman. But neither my comrade nor myself would go, even for a whole louis."

"Nor for two?" said Roland, wishing to corner them.

"Nor for two, nor four, nor ten, Monsieur de Montrevel. Ten louis are good, but what could I do with them if my neck was broken?"

"Yes, twisted like Pierre Marey's," said the other peasant.

"Ten louis wouldn't feed my wife and children for the rest of my life, would they?"

"And besides, when you say ten louis," interrupted the second peasant, "you mean really five, because I'd get five, too."

"So the pavilion is haunted by ghosts, is it?" asked Roland.

"I didn't say the pavilion--I'm not sure about the pavilion--but in the Chartreuse--"

"In the Chartreuse, are you sure?"

"Oh! there, certainly."

"Have you seen them?"

"I haven't; but some folks have."

"Has your comrade?" asked the young officer, turning to the second peasant.

"I haven't seen them; but I did see flames, and Claude Philippon heard chains."

"Ah! so they have flames and chains?" said Roland.

"Yes," replied the first peasant, "for I have seen the flames myself."

"And Claude Philippon on heard the chains," repeated the other.

"Very good, my friends, very good," replied Roland, sneering; "so you won't go there to-night at any price?"

"Not at any price."

"Not for all the gold in the world."

"And you'll go to-morrow when it's light?"

"Oh! Monsieur Louis, before you're up the boar will be here."

"Before you're up," said Echo.

"All right," said Roland. "Come back to me the day after tomorrow."

"Willingly, Monsieur Louis. What do you want us to do?"

"Never mind; just come."

"Oh! we'll come."

"That means that the moment you say, 'Come,' you can count upon us, Monsieur Louis."

"Well, then I'll have some information for you."

"What about?"

"The ghosts."

Amélie gave a stifled cry; Madame de Montrevel alone heard it. Louis dismissed the two peasants, and they jostled each other at the door in their efforts to go through together.

Nothing more was said that evening about the Chartreuse or the pavilion, nor of its supernatural tenants, spectres or phantoms who haunted them.