

Chapter 15

THE STRONG-MINDED MAN

At ten o'clock everyone was in bed at the Château des Noires-Fontaines, or, at any rate, all had retired to their rooms.

Three or four times in the course of the evening Amélie had approached Roland as if she had something to say to him; but each time the words died upon her lips. When the family left the salon, she had taken his arm, and, although his room was on the floor above hers, she had accompanied him to his very door. Roland had kissed her, bade her good-night, and closed his door, declaring himself very tired.

Nevertheless, in spite of this assertion, Roland, once alone, did not proceed to undress. He went to his collection of arms, selected a pair of magnificent pistols, manufactured at Versailles, and presented to his father by the Convention. He snapped the triggers, and blew into the barrels to see that there were no old charges in them. They were in excellent condition. After which he laid them side by side on the table; then going to the door, looking out upon the stairs, he opened it softly to see if any one were watching. Finding the corridor and stairs empty, he went to Sir John's door and knocked.

"Come in," said the Englishman. Sir John, like himself, was not prepared for bed.

"I guessed from the sign you made me that you had something to say to me," said Sir John, "so I waited for you, as you see."

"Indeed, I have something to say to you," returned Roland, seating himself gayly in an armchair.

"My kind host," replied the Englishman, "I am beginning to understand you. When I see you as gay as you are now, I am like your peasants, I feel afraid."

"Did you hear what they were saying?"

"I heard them tell a splendid ghost story. I, myself, have a haunted castle in England."

"Have you ever seen the ghosts, my lord?"

"Yes, when I was little. Unfortunately, since I have grown up they have disappeared."

"That's always the way with ghosts," said Roland gayly; "they come and go. How lucky it is that I should return just as the ghosts have begun to haunt the Chartreuse of Seillon."

"Yes," replied Sir John, "very lucky. Only are you sure that there are any there?"

"No. But I'll know by the day after to-morrow."

"How so?"

"I intend to spend to-morrow night there."

"Oh!" said the Englishmen, "would you like to have me go with you?"

"With pleasure, my lord. Only, unfortunately, that is impossible."

"Impossible, oh!"

"As I have just told you, my dear fellow."

"But why impossible?"

"Are you acquainted with the manners and customs of ghosts, Sir John?"
asked Roland gravely.

"No."

"Well, I am. Ghosts only show themselves under certain conditions."

"Explain that."

"Well, for example, in Italy, my lord, and in Spain, the most superstitious of countries, there are no ghosts, or if there are, why, at the best, it's only once in ten or twenty years, or maybe in a century."

"And to what do you attribute their absence?"

"To the absence of fogs."

"Ah! ah!"

"Not a doubt of it. You understand the native atmosphere of ghosts is fog. Scotland, Denmark and England, regions of fog, are overrun with ghosts. There's the spectre of Hamlet, then that of Banquo, the shadows of Richard III. Italy has only one spectre, Cæsar, and then where did he appear to Brutus? At Philippi, in Macedonia and in Thessaly, the Denmark of Greece, the Scotland of the Orient; where the fog made Ovid so melancholy he named the odes he wrote there Tristia. Why did Virgil make the ghost of Anchises appear to Eneas? Because he came from Mantua. Do you know Mantua? A marsh, a frog-pond, a regular manufactory of rheumatism, an atmosphere of vapors, and consequently a nest of phantoms."

"Go on, I'm listening to you."

"Have you seen the Rhine?"

"Yes."

"Germany, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Still another country of fairies, water sprites, sylphs, and consequently phantoms ('for whoso does the greater see, can see the less'), and all that on account of the fog. But where the devil can the ghosts hide in Italy and Spain? Not the least bit of mist. And, therefore, were I in Spain or Italy I should never attempt to-morrow's adventure."

"But all that doesn't explain why you refuse my company," insisted Sir John.

"Wait a moment. I've just explained to you that ghosts don't venture into certain countries, because they do not offer certain atmospheric conditions. Now, let me explain the precautions we must take if we wish to see them."

"Explain! explain!" said Sir John, "I would rather hear you talk than any other man, Roland."

And Sir John, stretching himself out in his easy-chair, prepared to listen with delight to the improvisations of this fantastic mind, which he had seen under so many aspects during the few days of their acquaintance.

Roland bowed his head by way of thanks.

"Well, this is the way of it, and you will grasp it readily enough. I have heard so much about ghosts in my life that I know the scamps as if I had made them. Why do ghosts appear?"

"Are you asking me that?" inquired Sir John.

"Yes, I ask you."

"I own that, not having studied ghosts as you have, I am unable to give you a definitive answer."

"You see! Ghosts show themselves, my dear fellow, in order to frighten those who see them."

"That is undeniable."

"Of course! Now, if they don't frighten those to whom they appear, they are frightened by them; witness M. de Turenne, whose ghosts proved to be counterfeiters. Do you know that story?"

"No."

"I'll tell it to you some day; don't let's get mixed up. That is just why, when they decide to appear--which is seldom--ghosts select stormy nights, when it thunders, lightens and blows; that's their scenery."

"I am forced to admit that nothing could be more correct."

"Wait a moment! There are instances when the bravest man feels a shudder run through his veins. Even before I was suffering with this aneurism it has happened to me a dozen times, when I have seen the flash of sabres and heard the thunder of cannon around me. It is true that since I have been subject to this aneurism I rush where the lightning flashes and the thunder growls. Still there is the chance that these ghosts don't know this and believe that I can be frightened."

"Whereas that is an impossibility, isn't it?" asked Sir John.

"What will you! When, right or wrong, one feels that, far from dreading death, one has every reason to seek it, what should he fear? But I repeat, these ghosts, who know so much, may not know that only ghosts know this; they know that the sense of fear increases or diminishes according to the seeing and hearing of exterior things. Thus, for example, where do phantoms prefer to appear? In dark places, cemeteries, old cloisters, ruins, subterranean passages, because the aspect of these localities predisposes the soul to fear. What precedes their appearance? The rattling of chains, groans, sighs, because there is nothing very cheerful in all that? They are careful not to appear in the bright light, or after a strain of dance music. No, fear is an abyss into which you descend step by step, until you are overcome by vertigo; your feet slip, and you plunge with closed eyes to the bottom of the precipice. Now, if you read the accounts of all these apparitions, you'll find they all proceed like this: First the sky darkens, the thunder growls, the wind howls, doors and windows rattle, the lamp--if there is a lamp in the room of the person the ghosts are trying to frighten--the lamp flares, flickers

and goes out--utter darkness! Then, in the darkness, groans, wails and the rattling of chains are heard; then, at last, the door opens and the ghost appears. I must say that all the apparitions that I have not seen but read about have presented themselves under similar circumstances. Isn't that so, Sir John?"

"Perfectly."

"And did you ever hear of a ghost appearing to two persons at the same time?"

"I certainly never did hear of it."

"It's quite simple, my dear fellow. Two together, you understand, have no fear. Fear is something mysterious, strange, independent of the will, requiring isolation, darkness and solitude. A ghost is no more dangerous than a cannon ball. Well, a soldier never fears a cannon ball in the daytime, when his elbows touch a comrade to the right and left. No, he goes straight for the battery and is either killed or he kills. That's not what the phantoms want. That's why they never appear to two persons at the same time, and that is the reason I want to go to the Chartreuse alone, my lord. Your presence would prevent the boldest ghost from appearing. If I see nothing, or if I see something worth the trouble, you can have your turn the next day. Does the bargain suit you?"

"Perfectly! But why can't I take the first night?"

"Ah! first, because the idea didn't occur to you, and it is only just that I should benefit by my own cleverness. Besides, I belong to the region; I was friendly with the good monks in their lifetime, and there may be a chance of their appearing to me after death. Moreover, as I know the localities, if it becomes necessary to run away or pursue I can do it better than you. Don't you see the justice of that, my dear fellow?"

"Yes, it couldn't be fairer; but I am sure of going the next night."

"The next night, and the one after, and every day and night if you wish; I only hold to the first. Now," continued Roland rising, "this is between ourselves, isn't it? Not a word to any one. The ghosts might be forewarned and act accordingly. It would never do to let those gay dogs get the best of us; that would be too grotesque."

"Oh, be easy about that. You will go armed, won't you?"

"If I thought I was only dealing with ghosts, I'd go with my hands in my pockets and nothing in my fobs. But, as I told you, M. de Turenne's ghosts were counterfeits, so I shall take my pistols."

"Do you want mine?"

"No, thanks. Though yours are good, I am about resolved never to use them again." Then, with a smile whose bitterness it would be impossible to describe, he added: "They brought me ill-luck. Good-night! Sir John. I must sleep soundly to-night, so as not to want to sleep to-morrow night."

Then, shaking the Englishman's hand vigorously a second time, he left the room and returned to his own. There he was greatly surprised to find the door, which he was sure he had left closed, open. But as soon as he entered, the sight of his sister explained the matter to him.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, partly astonished, partly uneasy; "is that you, Amélie?"

"Yes, it is I," she said. Then, going close to her brother, and letting him kiss her forehead, she added in a supplicating voice: "You won't go, will you, dear Roland?"

"Go where?" asked Roland.

"To the Chartreuse."

"Good! Who told you that?"

"Oh! for one who knows, how difficult it is to guess!"

"And why don't you want me to go to the Chartreuse?"

"I'm afraid something might happen to you."

"What! So you believe in ghosts, do you?" he asked, looking fixedly into Amélie's eyes.

Amélie lowered her glance, and Roland felt his sister's hand tremble in his.

"Come," said Roland; "Amélie, at least the one I used to know, General de Montrevel's daughter and Roland's sister, is too intelligent to yield to these vulgar terrors. It's impossible that you can believe these tales of apparitions, chains, flames, spectres, and phantoms."

"If I did believe them, Roland, I should not be so alarmed. If ghosts do exist, they must be souls without bodies, and consequently cannot bring their material hatred from the grave. Besides, why should a ghost hate you, Roland; you, who never harmed any one?"

"Good! You forget all those I have killed in war or in duels."

Amélie shook her head. "I'm not afraid of them."

"Then what are you afraid of?"

The young girl raised her beautiful eyes, wet with tears, to Roland, and threw herself in his arms, saying: "I don't know, Roland. But I can't help it, I am afraid."

The young man raised her head, which she was hiding in his breast, with gentle force, and said, kissing her eyelids softly and tenderly: "You don't believe I shall have ghosts to fight with to-morrow, do you?"

"Oh, brother, don't go to the Chartreuse!" cried Amélie, eluding the question.

"Mother told you to say this to me, didn't she?"

"Oh, no, brother! Mother said nothing to me. It is I who guessed that you intended to go."

"Well, if I want to go," replied Roland firmly, "you ought to know, Amélie, that I shall go."

"Even if I beseech you on my knees, brother?" cried Amélie in a tone of anguish, slipping down to her brother's feet; "even if I beseech you on my knees?"

"Oh! women! women!" murmured Roland, "inexplicable creatures, whose words are all mystery, whose lips never tell the real secrets of their hearts, who weep, and pray, and tremble--why? God knows, but man, never! I shall

go, Amélie, because I have resolved to go; and when once I have taken a resolution no power on earth can make me change it. Now kiss me and don't be frightened, and I will tell you a secret."

Amélie raised her head, and gazed questioningly, despairingly, at Roland.

"I have known for more than a year," replied the young man, "that I have the misfortune not to be able to die. So reassure yourself, and don't be afraid."

Roland uttered these words so dolefully that Amélie, who had, until then, kept her emotion under control, left the room sobbing.

The young officer, after assuring himself that her door was closed, shut his, murmuring: "We'll see who will weary first, Fate or I."