

Chapter 16

THE GHOST

The next evening, at about the same hour, the young officer, after convincing himself that every one in the Château des Noires-Fontaines had gone to bed, opened his door softly, went downstairs holding his breath, reached the vestibule, slid back the bolts of the outer door noiselessly, and turned round to make sure that all was quiet. Reassured by the darkened windows, he boldly opened the iron gate. The hinges had probably been oiled that day, for they turned without grating, and closed as noiselessly as they had opened behind Roland, who walked rapidly in the direction of Pont d'Ain at Bourg.

He had hardly gone a hundred yards before the clock at Saint-Just struck once; that of Montagnac answered like a bronze echo. It was half-past ten o'clock. At the pace the young man was walking he needed only twenty minutes to reach the Chartreuse; especially if, instead of skirting the woods, he took the path that led direct to the monastery. Roland was too familiar from youth with every nook of the forest of Seillon to needlessly lengthen his walk ten minutes. He therefore turned unhesitatingly into the forest, coming out on the other side in about five minutes. Once there, he had only to cross a bit of open ground to reach the orchard wall of the convent. This took barely another five minutes.

At the foot of the wall he stopped, but only for a few seconds. He unhooked his cloak, rolled it into a ball, and tossed it over the wall. The cloak off, he stood in a velvet coat, white leather breeches, and top-boots. The coat was fastened round the waist by a belt in which were a pair of pistols. A broad-brimmed hat covered his head and shaded his face.

With the same rapidity with which he had removed his garment that might have hindered his climbing the wall, he began to scale it. His foot readily found a chink between the stones; he sprang up, seizing the coping, and was on the other side without even touching the top of the wall over which he bounded. He picked up his cloak, threw it over his shoulder, hooked it, and crossed the orchard to a little door communicating with the cloister. The

clock struck eleven as he passed through it. Roland stopped, counted the strokes, and slowly walked around the cloister, looking and listening.

He saw nothing and heard no noise. The monastery was the picture of desolation and solitude; the doors were all open, those of the cells, the chapel, and the refectory. In the refectory, a vast hall where the tables still stood in their places, Roland noticed five or six bats circling around; a frightened owl flew through a broken casement, and perched upon a tree close by, hooting dismally.

"Good!" said Roland, aloud; "I'll make my headquarters here; bats and owls are the vanguards of ghosts."

The sound of that human voice, lifted in the midst of this solitude, darkness and desolation, had something so uncanny, so lugubrious about it, that it would have caused even the speaker to shudder, had not Roland, as he himself said, been inaccessible to fear. He looked about for a place from which he could command the entire hall. An isolated table, placed on a sort of stage at one end of the refectory, which had no doubt been used by the superior of the convent to take his food apart from the monks, to read from pious books during the repast, seemed to Roland best adapted to his needs. Here, backed by the wall, he could not be surprised from behind, and, once his eye grew accustomed to the darkness, he could survey every part of the hall. He looked for a seat, and found an overturned stool about three feet from the table, probably the one occupied by the reader or the person dining there in solitude.

Roland sat down at the table, loosened his cloak to insure greater freedom of movement, took his pistols from his belt, laid one on the table, and striking three blows with the butt-end of the other, he said, in a loud voice: "The meeting is open; the ghosts can appear!"

Those who have passed through churches and cemeteries at night have often experienced, without analyzing it, the supreme necessity of speaking low and reverently which attaches to certain localities. Only such persons can understand the strange impression produced on any one who heard it

by that curt, mocking voice which now disturbed the solitude and the shadows. It vibrated an instant in the darkness, which seemed to quiver with it; then it slowly died away without an echo, escaping by all the many openings made by the wings of time.

As he had expected, Roland's eyes had accustomed themselves to the darkness, and now, by the pale light of the rising moon, whose long, white rays penetrated the refectory through the broken windows, he could see distinctly from one end to the other of the vast apartment. Although Roland was as evidently without fear internally as externally, he was not without distrust, and his ear caught the slightest sounds.

He heard the half-hour strike. In spite of himself the sound startled him, for it came from the bell of the convent. How was it that, in this ruin where all was dead, a clock, the pulse of time, was living?

"Oh! oh!" said Roland; "that proves that I shall see something."

The words were spoken almost in an aside. The majesty of the place and the silence acted upon that heart of iron, firm as the iron that had just tolled the call of time upon eternity. The minutes slowly passed, one after the other. Perhaps a cloud was passing between earth and moon, for Roland fancied that the shadows deepened. Then, as midnight approached, he seemed to hear a thousand confused, imperceptible sounds, coming no doubt from the nocturnal universe which wakes while the other sleeps. Nature permits no suspension of life, even for repose. She created her nocturnal world, even as she created her daily world, from the gnat which buzzes about the sleeper's pillow to the lion prowling around the Arab's bivouac.

But Roland, the camp watcher, the sentinel of the desert, Roland, the hunter, the soldier, knew all those sounds; they were powerless to disturb him.

Then, mingling with these sounds, the tones of the clock, chiming the hour, vibrated above his head. This time it was midnight. Roland counted the twelve strokes, one after the other. The last hung, quivering upon the air, like a bird with iron wings, then slowly expired, sad and mournful. Just then the young man, thought he heard a moan. He listened in the direction whence it came. Again he heard it, this time nearer at hand.

He rose, his hands resting upon the table, the butt-end of a pistol beneath each palm. A rustle like that of a sheet or a gown trailing along the grass was audible on his right, not ten paces from him. He straightened up as if moved by a spring.

At the same moment a shade appeared on the threshold of the vast hall. This shade resembled the ancient statues lying on the tombs. It was wrapped in an immense winding-sheet which trailed behind it.

For an instant Roland doubted his own eyes. Had the preoccupation of his mind made him see a thing which was not? Was he the dupe of his senses, the sport of those hallucinations which physicians assert, but cannot explain? A moan, uttered by the phantom, put his doubts to flight.

"My faith!" he cried in a burst of laughter, "now for a tussle, friend ghost!"

The spectre paused and extended a hand toward the young officer. "Roland! Roland!" said the spectre in a muffled voice, "it would be a pity not to follow to the grave those you have sent there."

And the spectre, without hastening its step, continued on its way.

Roland, astounded for an instant, came down from the stage, and resolutely followed the ghost. The path was difficult, encumbered with stones, benches awry, and over-turned tables. And yet, through all these obstacles, an

invisible channel seemed open for the spectre, which pursued its way unchecked.

Each time it passed before a window, the light from with out, feeble as it was, shone upon the winding-sheet and the ghost, outlining the figure, which passed into the obscurity to reappear and vanish again at each succeeding one, Roland, his eyes fixed upon the figure, fearing to lose sight of it if he diverted his gaze from it, dared not look at the path, apparently so easy to the spectre, yet bristling with obstacles for him. He stumbled at every step. The ghost was gaining upon him. It reached the door opposite to that by which it had entered. Roland saw the entrance to a dark passage. Feeling that the ghost would escape him, he cried: "Man or ghost, robber or monk, halt or I fire!"

"A dead body cannot be killed twice, and death has no power over the spirit," replied the ghost in its muffled voice.

"Who are you?"

"The Shade of him you tore violently from the earth."

The young officer burst into that harsh, nervous laugh, made more terrible by the darkness around him.

"Faith!" said he, "if you have no further indications to give me, I shall not trouble myself to discover you."

"Remember the fountain at Vauclose," said the Shade, in a voice so faint the words seemed to escape his lips like a sigh rather than articulate speech.

For an instant Roland felt, not his heart failing him, but the sweat pouring from his forehead. Making an effort over himself, he regained his voice and

cried, menacingly: "For a last time, apparition or reality, I warn you that, if you do not stop, I shall fire!"

The Shade did not heed him, but continued on its way.

Roland paused an instant to take aim. The spectre was not ten paces from him. Roland was a sure shot; he had himself loaded his pistols, and only a moment before he had looked to the charge to see that it was intact.

As the spectre passed, tall and white, beneath the gloomy vault of the passage, Roland fired. The flash illumined the corridor like lightning, down which the spectre passed with unfaltering, unhastening steps. Then all was blacker than before. The ghost vanished in the darkness. Roland dashed after him, changing his other pistol from the left hand to the right. But short as his stop had been, the ghost had gained ground. Roland saw him at the end of the passage, this time distinctly outlined against the gray background of the night. He redoubled his pace, and as he crossed the threshold of the passage, he fancied that the ghost was plunging into the bowels of the earth. But the torso still remained visible.

"Devil or not," cried Roland, "I follow you!"

He fired a second shot, which filled the cavernous space, into which the ghost had disappeared, with flame and smoke.

When the smoke had cleared away, Roland looked vainly around. He was alone. He sprang into the cistern howling with rage. He sounded the walls with the butt-end of his pistol, he stamped on the ground; but everywhere, earth and stone gave back the sound of solid objects. He tried to pierce the darkness, but it was impossible. The faint moonlight that filtered into the cistern died out at the first steps.

"Oh!" cried Roland, "a torch! a torch!"

No one answered. The only sound to be heard was the spring bubbling close at hand. Realizing that further search would be useless, he emerged from the cavern. Drawing a powder-horn and two balls from his pocket, he loaded his pistols hastily. Then he took the path along which he had just come, found the dark passage, then the vast refectory, and again took his place at the end of the silent hall and waited.

But the hours of the night sounded successively, until the first gleam of dawn cast its pallid light upon the walls of the cloister.

"Well," muttered Roland, "it's over for to-night. Perhaps I shall be more fortunate the next time."

Twenty minutes later he re-entered the Château des Noires-Fontaines.