

## Chapter 68

### THE WATER.

As the travelers advanced, the country took an equally strange aspect, for it was utterly deserted, as well as the towns and villages. Nowhere were the calves to be seen grazing in the meadows, nor the goat perched on the top of the mountain, or nibbling the green shoots of the brier or young vine; nowhere the shepherd with his flock; nowhere the cart with its driver; no foreign merchant passing from one country to another with his pack on his back; no plowman singing his harsh song or cracking his long whip. As far as the eye could see over the magnificent plains, the little hills and the woods, not a human figure was to be seen, not a voice to be heard. It seemed like the earth before the creation of animals or men. The only people who animated this dreary solitude were Remy and his companion, and Henri following behind and preserving ever the same distance. The night came on dark and cold, and the northeast wind whistled in the air, and filled the solitude with its menacing sound.

Remy stopped his companion, and putting his hand on the bridle of her horse, said--

"Madame, you know how inaccessible I am to fear; you know I would not turn my back to save my life; but this evening some strange feeling possesses me, and forbids me to go further. Madame, call it terror,

timidity, panic, what you will, I confess that for the first time in my life I am afraid."

The lady turned.

"Is he still there?" she said.

"Oh! I was not thinking of him; think no more of him, madame, I beg of you; we need not fear a single man. No, the danger that I fear or rather feel, or divine with a sort of instinct, is unknown to me, and therefore I dread it. Look, madame, do you see those willows bending in the wind?"

"Yes."

"By their side I see a little house; I beg you, let us go there. If it is inhabited, we will ask for hospitality; and if not, we will take possession of it. I beg you to consent, madame."

Remy's emotion and troubled voice decided Diana to yield, so she turned her horse in the direction indicated by him. Some minutes after, they knocked at the door. A stream (which ran into the Nethe, a little river about a mile off), bordered with reeds and grassy banks, bathed the feet of the willows with its murmuring waters. Behind the house, which was built of bricks, and covered with tiles, was a little garden, encircled by a quickset hedge.

All was empty, solitary, and deserted, and no one replied to the blows struck by the travelers. Remy did not hesitate; he drew his knife, cut a branch of willow, with which he pushed back the bolt and opened the door. The lock, the clumsy work of a neighboring blacksmith, yielded almost without resistance. Remy entered quickly, followed by Diana, then, closing the door again, he drew a massive bolt, and thus intrenched, seemed to breathe more freely. Feeling about, he found a bed, a chair, and a table in an upper room. Here he installed his mistress, and then, returning to the lower room, placed himself at the window, to watch the movements of Du Bouchage.

His reflections were as somber as those of Remy. "Certainly," said he to himself, "some danger unknown to us, but of which the inhabitants are not ignorant, is about to fall on the country. War ravages the land; perhaps the French have taken, or are about to assault Antwerp, and the peasants, seized with terror, have gone to take refuge in the towns."

But this reasoning, however plausible, did not quite satisfy him. Then he thought, "But what are Remy and his mistress doing here? What imperious necessity drags them toward this danger? Oh, I will know; the time has come to speak to this woman, and to clear away all my doubts. Never shall I find a better opportunity."

He approached the house, and then suddenly stopped, with a hesitation common to hearts in love.

"No," said he, "no, I will be a martyr to the end. Besides, is she not

mistress of her own actions? And, perhaps, she does not even know what fable was invented by Remy. Oh, it is he alone that I hate; he who assured me that she loved no one. But still let me be just. Ought this man for me, whom he did not know, to have betrayed his mistress's secrets? No, no. All that remains for me now is to follow this woman to the camp, to see her hang her arms round some one's neck and hear her say, 'See what I have suffered, and how I love you.' Well, I will follow her there, see what I dread to see, and die of it; it will be trouble saved for the musket or cannon. Alas! I did not seek this; I went calmly to meet a glorious death, and I wished to die with her name on my lips. It is not so to be; I am destined to a death full of bitterness and torture. Well, I accept it."

Then, recalling his days of waiting, and his nights of anguish before the inexorable house, he found that he was less to be pitied here than at Paris, and he went on.

"I will stay here, and take these trees for a shelter, and then I can hear her voice when she speaks, and see her shadow on the window."

He lay down, then, under the willows, listening, with a melancholy impossible to describe, to the murmur of the water that flowed at his side. All at once he started; the noise of cannon was brought distinctly to him by the wind.

"Ah!" said he, "I shall arrive too late; they are attacking Antwerp."

His first idea was to rise, mount his horse, and ride on as quickly as possible; but to do this he must quit the lady, and die in doubt, so he remained.

During two hours he lay there, listening to the reports. He did not guess that what he heard was his brother's ships blowing up. At last, about two o'clock, all grew quiet.

"Now," thought Henri, "Antwerp is taken, and my brother is a conqueror; but after Antwerp will come Ghent, and then Bruges; I shall not want an occasion for a glorious death. But before I die I must know what this woman wants in the French camp."

He lay still, and had just fallen asleep, when his horse, which was grazing quietly near him, pricked up his ears and neighed loudly.

Henri opened his eyes. The animal had his head turned to the breeze, which had changed to the southeast, as if listening.

"What is it, my good horse?" said the young man; "have you seen some animal which frightened you, or do you regret the shelter of your stable?"

The animal stood still, looking toward Lier, with his eyes fixed and his nostrils distended, and listening.

"Ah!" said Henri, "it is more serious; perhaps some troops of wolves

following the army to devour the corpses."

The horse neighed and began to run forward to the west, but his master caught the bridle and jumped on his back, and then was able to keep him quiet. But after a minute, Henri himself began to hear what the horse had heard. A long murmur, like the wind, but more solemn, which seemed to come from different points of the compass, from south to north.

"What is it?" said Henri; "can it be the wind? No, it is the wind which brings this sound, and I hear the two distinctly. An army in march, perhaps? But no; I should hear the sound of voices and of regular marching. Is it the crackling of a fire? No, there is no light in the horizon; the heaven seems even to grow darker."

The noise redoubled and became distinct; it was an incessant growling and rolling, as if thousands of cannon were being dragged over a paved road. Henri thought of this. "But no," said he, "there is no paved road near."

The noise continued to increase, and Henri put his horse to the gallop and gained an eminence.

"What do I see?" cried he, as he attained the summit. What he saw his horse had seen before him; for he had only been able to make him advance by furious spurring, and when they arrived at the top of the hill he reared so as nearly to fall backward. They saw in the horizon an infinite body rolling over the plain, and visibly and rapidly

approaching. The young man looked in wonder at this strange phenomenon, when, looking back to the place he had come from, he saw the plain beginning to be covered with water, and that the little river had overflowed, and was beginning to cover the reeds which a quarter of an hour before had stood up stiffly on its banks.

"Fool that I am," cried he, "I never thought of it. The water! the water! The Flemings have broken their dykes!"

Henri flew to the house, and knocked furiously at the door.

"Open! open!" cried he.

No one replied.

"Open, Remy!" cried he, furious with terror; "it is I, Henri du Bouchage."

"Oh! you need not name yourself, M. le Comte," answered Remy from within, "I recognized you long ago; but I warn you, that if you break in the door you will find me behind it, with a pistol in each hand."

"But you do not understand," cried Henri; "the water; it is the water!"

"No fables, no pretexts or dishonorable ruses, M. le Comte; I tell you that you will only enter over my body."

"Then I will pass over it, but I will enter. In Heaven's name, in the name of your own safety and your mistress's, will you open?"--"No."

Henri looked round him, and perceived an immense stone. He raised it and threw it against the door, which flew open. A ball passed over Henri's head, but without touching him; he jumped toward Remy, and seizing his other arm, cried, "Do you not see that I have no arms? do not defend yourself against a man who does not attack. Look! only look!" and he drew him to the window.

"Well," said he, "do you see now?" and he pointed to the horizon.

"The water!" cried Remy.

"Yes, the water! it invades us; see, at our feet, the river overflows, and in five minutes we shall be surrounded."

"Madame! madame!" cried Remy.

"Do not frighten her, Remy; get ready the horses at once."

Remy ran to the stable, and Henri flew up the staircase. At Remy's cry Diana had opened her door; Henri seized her in his arms and carried her away as he would have done a child. But she, believing in treason or violence, struggled, and clung to the staircase with all her might.

"Tell her that I am saving her, Remy!" cried Henri.

Remy heard the appeal, and cried:

"Yes, yes, madame, he is saving you, or rather he will save you. Come, for Heaven's sake!"