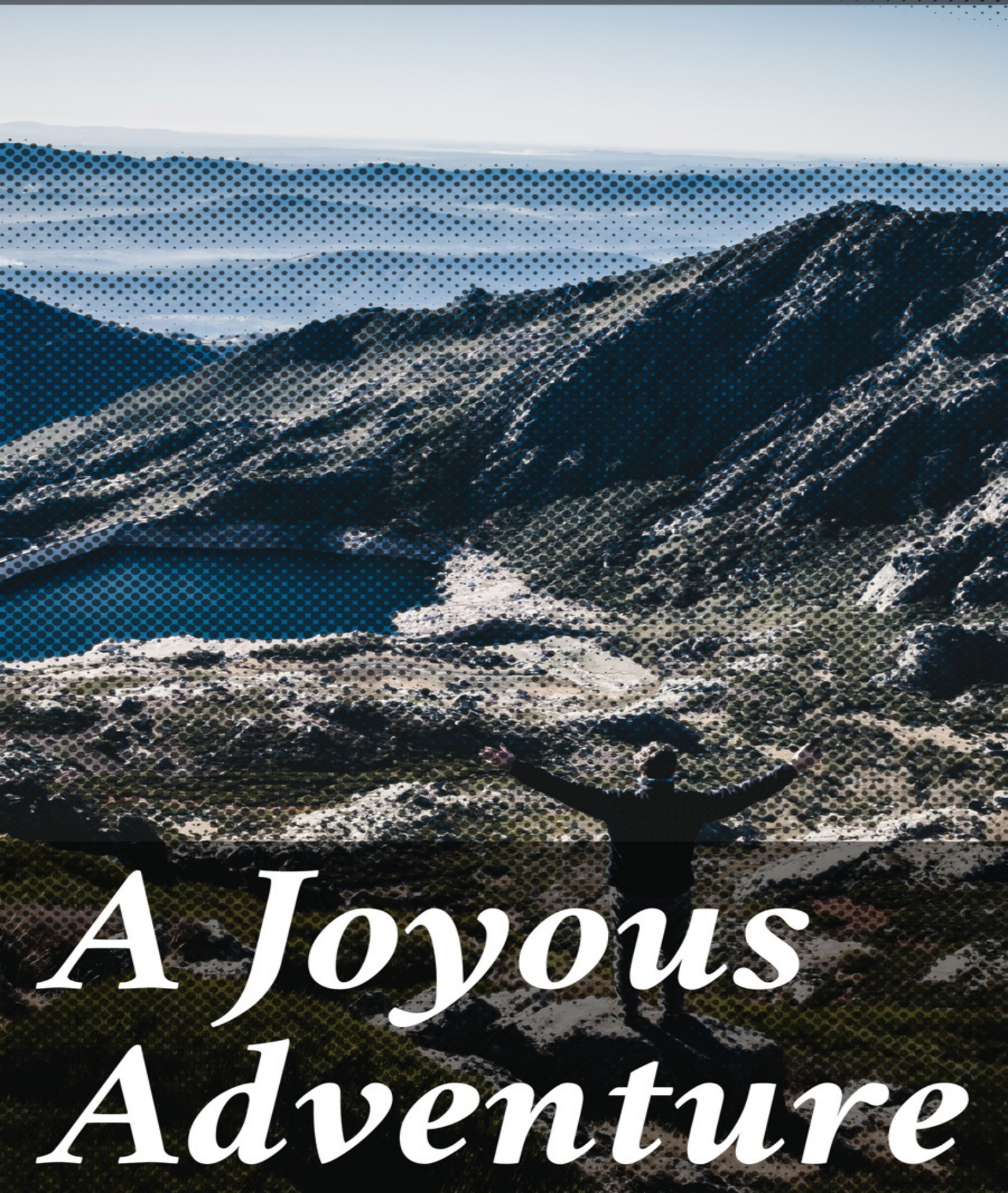
Baroness Orczy



A Joyous Adventure

Baroness Orczy

A Joyous Adventure

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338089083

Table of Contents

"

Chapter 1

Table of Contents

In the days before the Revolution put an end to all the privileges enjoyed by this sacrosanct caste M. le Marquis de la Villorée lived in his château and in his palace in Paris with the pomp and splendour of a royal court. He had servants and retainers, and an army of sycophants around him; when he drove along the roads of Normandy all heads were uncovered—even that of the parish priest—until his carriage had gone by.

Then came the Revolution, and with it the sudden shattering of every illusion of privilege or prerogative. The noble dukes and marquises were rudely awakened from their dream and made to understand that neither their fortunes nor their possessions were secured to them by divine ordinance, and that if they refused to bow their necks to the dictates of this new tyrannical democracy, their lives would pay the price of their arrogance. Noble heads, heads of King, Queen, princes, dukes and countless aristocrats fell beneath the knife of the guillotine like golden ears beneath a labourer’s scythe.

Warned by an anonymous friend of the imminence of arrest on a trumped-up charge of treason, M. le Marquis de Marillac de la Villorée on one evening seven years ago packed hastily together a few necessities, and at dead of night was luckily able to make the coast and there embark on an English ship which took him safely across the Channel. Since then he had lived in exile partly in England, partly in Belgium. A few scattered bits of his once colossal

fortune being invested in foreign countries, he was able to render a few minor financial services to his exiled King, and more than one small debt owing by the French royal family to tradespeople in England was paid by M. le Marquis de Marillac.

He had not seen his wife and children for over seven years. Madame la Marquise, with her daughter and two sons, had chosen to remain at La Villorée and never yielded to the temptation of joining her husband in exile. Strong-willed and almost insanely loyal to the monarchical cause in France, she was convinced that within a very little while the forces of law and of tradition would triumph over those of organised murder, outrage and anarchy, and she felt it her duty to remain on the spot among her own people, her husband's retainers, ready to share their poverty, as well as the many dangers which threatened them through their unswerving loyalty to the cause of the Bourbon kings. She knew well enough that by so doing she risked not only her own life but that of her children, but Mme. la Marquise could be counted more valorous than the Mother of the Gracchi, and certainly more fanatical, for she looked upon René and Alain and even Félise as instruments fashioned by God for the sole purpose of aiding the royal cause.

So she stayed on at La Villorée after most of her kindred and friends had shaken the dust of their country from their shoes. Strangely enough, the tigers of the Revolution passed her by. Once or twice she was molested, threatened even, but it never came to an arrest or the menace of the guillotine—probably because she did not care enough.

“If my death should help the cause of our King,” she had said more than once, “how gladly would I die!”

And she meant every word she said.

Selfless, dignified, and solitary save for the companionship of her children, her life was spent in hoping, always hoping that God would tire one day of the wickedness of men and open their eyes to the dictates of His will, which was nothing else but the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. She had seen the overthrow of the worst elements of the Revolution, and at the death of Robespierre and his murderous crowd her hopes rose to their giddiest heights, but five years had gone by since then, and the rightful King of France was still biding his time over in England. An abominable usurper named Napoleon Bonaparte, the bourgeois son of an obscure Corsican attorney, had now the pretension to rule France, and with his arms, his police and his spies to suppress any attempt at fighting for God and the rightful King. He was the idol of the people, styled Chief Consul of the Republic, and had the impudence to try and correspond on terms of equality with the King of England.

Mme. de Marillac spent her days turning to God in her despair and sighing: “How long, O Lord? How long?”

But she did all she could to infuse patience in all those hotheads in her own district who were for ever plotting to murder Bonaparte, to rise *en masse* against his tyranny, to march on Paris, to enter, in fact, in a hundred mad schemes for the overthrow of the new tyrant.

“The time is not yet,” Madame would declare in her quiet, resolute voice. “How can a lot of ignorant and

undisciplined peasants wage war against the greatest military genius of all times who has conquered Italy and brought the proud Austrians to their knees?”

“Our men are burning with enthusiasm,” the leaders of the irregular bands of royalists would try to argue, “and enthusiasm is worth—”

“Nothing,” Madame would break in in her own authoritative way, “without some money and sound leadership.”

She didn’t care if it was Georges Cadoudal himself to whom she said this—Cadoudal who had raised an army in Vendée and in Brittany in the King’s cause. She had her own way of thinking and was always sure that she was right.

“If only we could induce the Duc de Berry to come over. He would put such confidence into the hearts of our men.”

This was Jacques Cottereau’s pet scheme, and Cottereau stood very high in Cadoudal’s councils. He wished to induce the Duc de Berry—own nephew to the uncrowned King of France and heir to his throne—to leave the security of Hartwell and English hospitality and to take command of these irregular troops in Normandy and Brittany, which he, Cottereau, along with Cadoudal and Pichegru, was raising with a view to waging guerrilla warfare against Bonaparte.

“You will never induce Monseigneur to come over,” Madame declared, “save at the head of disciplined troops. It is for this that M. le Marquis and all loyal adherents of our King are working at this moment. To precipitate events now would be madness.”

Cottereau protested with great vehemence.

“Madness? Madness? In Heaven’s name, why madness?”

“Because in Heaven’s name,” Madame replied coolly, “it is the will of His Majesty himself that we should do nothing without his sanction. And you know quite well, my good Jacques, that His Majesty is all against dragging our poor ignorant country-folk from their villages, and sending them back, starving, a year or two later, back to their miserable homes where in the meanwhile their wives and children would probably have perished from want. I am quoting you His Majesty’s own words in his last letter to me. Men must eat, you know, Cottereau. How are you going to feed your army?”

“We’d soon find means,” Cottereau declared sullenly.

“Oh, I know!” Madame retorted again; “by highway robbery, robbing mail-coaches, by murder and intimidation. Not that I object to killing and robbing Bonaparte’s adherents, who are infamous traitors to their country and their King, any more than I object to shooting a mad dog, or putting my heel on an adder’s head, but His Majesty dislikes those methods, and we must conform to his will.”

“Will you change your mind, Madame,” Cottereau argued, “if I induce Monseigneur to come over?”

“If I get my orders from His Majesty, or from Monseigneur the Duc de Berry, I will obey, of course,” Madame responded coldly. “But you are talking nonsense, Cottereau. Monseigneur, thank God! is in England—”

Cottereau gave a short, derisive laugh.

“And do you really think me such a weakling, Madame, that I could not find the means of landing in England if I chose?”

“I think,” Madame retorted coldly, though not quite so unkindly as before, “that you are capable of devising any mad scheme if you set your mind to it. All I can hope is that if you do succeed in landing in England, Monseigneur will be wise enough not to listen to you. I know His Majesty won’t.”

“We shall see,” Cottereau murmured in the end.

After which Madame rose, intimating that the interview was at an end.

Jacques Cottereau took his leave. It were impossible to guess from his sullen, glowering face what were his thoughts as he strode down the palatial staircase of the Château de la Villorée.

At the foot of the stairs he was met by René de Marillac, Madame’s elder son, a lad not more than eighteen. He had been present at a part of the interview between his mother and Jacques Cottereau. At a critical moment he had tiptoed out of the room, because he wanted to have a private word with this man. With glowing eyes he had drunk in every word that Cottereau had spoken, for René Vicomte de Marillac was only a boy, and his dreary life in the old château irked him. He had all a boy’s longing for excitement and adventure; he longed to shoulder a musket, to manoeuvre, to march and to plan; he wanted to take his share of all the glory which he felt awaited those who went forth into the world to fight for their country and their King.

He waited down in the hall till Cottereau came downstairs and Madame la Marquise was safely out of the way. Then he sidled up to the man and held out his slender hand to him, looking straight into the glowering face with the sullen-

looking eyes and the unkempt beard, and said in a voice quivering with emotion:

“Remember, Jacques, that I am ready to follow you anywhere when duty and our King call me. I am only a boy, but I can shoot straight—”

He wanted to say more, but sobs had risen to his throat—and, boy-like, he would have been ashamed of tears—so without waiting for a reply he turned abruptly and ran quickly up the stairs.

Cottereau watched him for a moment with a queer expression in his deep-sunken eyes; then he shrugged his broad shoulders and went his way.

Chapter 2

Table of Contents

This interview had occurred in May in the year 1800. A few months later half a dozen were gathered round a deal table in the low whitewashed room of the *Cabaret du Pélican*, a lonely house which stands at the extreme end of the village street of Soulanges. They were eating bread and cheese and drinking cider. The room gave on a side door of the *cabaret*. It was bare, save for the table, a rickety bench or two and an old-fashioned clock up on the wall. In the corner nearest the door a number of muskets, staves and scythes were propped up. On the table a couple of tallow candles guttered in their pewter sconces.

It was past ten o'clock of a squally evening in October. Outside the wind howled dismally; heavy storm-clouds swept across the sky and occasional gusts of rain beat against the window-panes.

From time to time for the past hour there had come a knock at the outside door. In answer to the challenge: "*Qui va là?*" from within, the reply had invariably been: "Le Gros"—the Fat One; whereupon the door creaked on its hinges and another man, clad like the others in the roughest of clothes, slipped into the room. In most cases the new-comer carried a gun or scythe, which he deposited in the corner with the others.

"It is for to-night, then?" he would then ask before joining his comrades at food and drink.

"Yes—to-night!" was the unvarying reply.

The hours sped by leaden-footed. The old-fashioned clock up on the rough whitewashed wall ticked away the minutes with exasperating solemnity.

Toward midnight some thirty men were assembled round the table. The jugs of cider were empty. Bread and cheese had vanished from the board.

“We may as well start,” said one man, who appeared to be in authority over the others. He was a rough-looking fellow with a huge black beard that entirely hid the lower part of his face, and his dark tousled hair fell in masses over his brow. He wore a wide leather belt into which he had tucked a pair of pistols. “What arms have we?” he asked.

Two of the men counted over the guns and scythes.

“Thirty-eight,” they said.

“How many guns?”

“Twenty-five.”

“Take those,” the black-bearded man commanded. “Leave the scythes. We’ll pick up guns in plenty. Remember, now—this is life and death for us all! Guns we must have and men, or we are doomed—the lot of us. Hey, la mère Gaillard!” he went on, and rapped with his fist on the table.

The door of an inner room was pushed open and a stout, slatternly-looking woman thrust her head in.

“*Eh bien, eh bien*? Was it thou calling, Cottereau? What is it now?”

“More cider,” Cottereau commanded, “and quickly! We are going.”

The woman disappeared, muttering something about time, bed and midnight. A moment or two later she returned, carrying two large jugs which she set on the table.

“That’s the last,” she said curtly. “We’ve no more.”

The men filled their mugs and they and the woman together drank to the success of the expedition.

Cottereau then gave the order: “*En avant!*”

Twenty-five men armed themselves with guns or muskets; four others, after fingering the scythes with some hesitation, finally decided to leave them as their leader had commanded and thrust their hands in their pockets. They all made for the door—all, that is, except one man, who sat silent and skulking on the rickety bench.

“It’s nothing but madness,” he murmured sullenly. “I’m not going.”

The others paused and turned to look at the speaker. They gazed on him with a kind of dull astonishment, their eyes somewhat blurred through the potency of Mother Gaillard’s home-brewed cider. Cottereau merely shrugged.

“Come, Gilbert—don’t be a fool!” he said curtly, and himself made for the door.

But Gilbert did not move. The woman, busily collecting débris of food off the table, muttered with a sneer:

“Drink and eat—drink and eat! That’s all some of them are good for! And they know just enough to turn spy and traitor. Thou, too, art a fool, Cottereau…!”

“That’s enough, Mère Gaillard,” Cottereau broke in roughly. “We are not afraid of traitors. We’ll march in a close column, and if one or other plays the traitor or the coward —”

He broke off abruptly, closing his lips beneath his scrubby beard with a snap. With a significant gesture he half drew one of the pistols out of his belt. Nothing more was said.

One of the men had pulled open the door; gusts of wind blew into the room. For the moment the rain had ceased and a fitful moon peered at intervals through the storm-clouds that still swept across the sky. One by one the men, silent and furtive, straggled out, those who carried a gun taking the lead. The others followed until Cottereau, the woman and Gilbert were left alone in the room. For a moment or two Gilbert kept up his attitude of obstinacy. He even tried to throw a defiant glance at his comrade. But the latter still had his hand on the pistol and, as if in answer to the other's defiance, he once more drew the murderous weapon partly out of his belt.

"You had best follow the others, Gilbert," he said quietly.

Gilbert, without another word, slunk out of the door. The woman watched him with a sneer on her face and a contemptuous shrug.

Cottereau then followed, after which the woman bolted the door, picked up the pewter candlesticks and went within, leaving the room in darkness.

Chapter 3

Table of Contents

Outside the small band started on its way.

“Where do we go first?” one of the men had asked as soon as Cottereau had joined them.

“To Glatigny,” he replied. “There are three men there and they have a good many guns.”

The road was soggy from the recent rain and a head wind made going still more difficult. But the men—most of them, at any rate—appeared strong and resolute. Those who carried guns had formed fours, taking others, such as Gilbert and one or two who did not appear over-enthusiastic, between them.

The farm of Glatigny was only distant a few hundred *mètres*. The band trudged across the muddy road, then over a ploughed field, and came to a halt in front of a low irregular building flanked by a square tower, under the roof of which pigeons were roosting.

Two of the men knocked loudly against the door with the butt-end of their muskets. After a time the shutters of one of the windows above were thrown open and a man thrust his head out of the window.

“*Qui va là?*” he called.

“*Le Gros*,” one of the men replied, and Cottereau added peremptorily: “Don’t keep us waiting! We have still far to go.”

After which they all waited down in the lane, while inside the house awakened activity showed itself by dim lights appearing here and there at the windows, by quick steps

scurrying up and down stairs, by calls and oaths and admonitions.

“Eh, Joseph! Get the guns while I find my boots.”

“Lazy lout to have fallen asleep! ’Twas thy turn to watch.”

“No harm done! Everything is ready.”

There were also intermittent cries from a woman:

“*Nom de nom de Dieu*! What an affair! Don’t go, my man. It is madness!”

Cottereau and the men below waxed impatient.

“We shall never get on if we have to wait like this everywhere.”

“Here we are! here we are!” came with an excited shout as the front door was thrust open and three men appeared on the threshold—an elderly man and two younger ones, obviously father and sons. Each of them had a musket slung over his shoulder and carried another in his hand; and behind them a woman with tousled hair about her head, kirtle and shift awry, obviously just out of bed, held a candle aloft with one hand and with the other mopped her streaming eyes.

“*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!* What madness!” she lamented.

Cottereau gave a cry of satisfaction at sight of the guns.

“A splendid beginning!” he declared. “A good augury!”

The farmer and his two sons fell in with the others, and without further heed to the wailing woman the little party set out once more on its way. From house to house they went, from farm to cottage or to château; trudging sometimes ankle-deep in the mud of the fields, or pushing their way through a bit of woodland to find a short cut. The proceedings were always the same: a halt, a challenge, a

demand for men and guns. Nearly always the men were ready, eager for the enterprise. This was Cottereau's scheme, to fight Bonaparte, the Italian usurper, who drove their priests away from their parishes and forced men to leave their villages and join his army, drill, march, obey orders, all of which was hateful to the independent Normandy peasant, yeoman, farmer, *seigneur*, or whatever he might be.

To-night was the night when the whole of Normandy would rise and take up arms against the usurper and restore King Louis XVIII by the Grace of God to the throne of France.

Fight? They were only too ready to fight. They had always hated the Revolution, which had deprived them of their *curé* and sent their *seigneur* to exile or to death. They were ready to fight—most of them, that is—though there were a few waverers, like Gilbert—*cowards* Cottereau called them, and had his own short way with them.

Thus, at Plancy, where lived Farmer Chatel and his three sons, when the men pounded against the massive oaken door of the substantial farm-house there was no answer for a long time. It was only when Cottereau gave the order in a loud voice to break the door open that a woman's head appeared at one of the windows on the floor above.

"What do you want?" she called.

"It is for to-night," one man shouted in reply. "Chatel has had the word. Where is he?"

"Sick," the woman replied curtly, "in bed."

The men jeered.

"And Paul?" they shouted. "And Georges? And Henri? Are they sick, too?"

“They have work to do in the fields to-morrow. They cannot come.”

With that she pulled the shutters to with a bang, but not before Cottereau had called out in his stentorian voice: “Break open the door, comrades!”

With great gusto and lusty shouts the men hammered on the door. After a time it was opened from within and a young man appeared holding a lighted candle in his hand. His hair, all rough about his head, his flushed face, his bare feet, showed that he had only just tumbled out of bed. He looked wide-eyed and scared as he peered into the night.

“Now then, Paul,” Cottereau commanded, “do not keep us waiting. Tell thy brothers to hurry, and pull thy father out of bed. Where are the guns?”

“My father—” Paul commenced, stammering.

“We’ll see about him,” Cottereau broke in curtly. “Get thy coat and thy brothers and bring us the guns.”

Paul hesitated a moment or two longer. By a strange freak the flickering light of the tallow candle glinted on the brass-studded butt-end of Cottereau’s pistols and on Cottereau’s hand, which rested upon them. Without another word Paul turned on his heel and went up the creaking stairs.

“Where are the guns?” one or two of the men shouted after him.

As Paul made no reply, they invaded the house, some going in one direction, some in another. Cottereau followed the boy up the stairs. He overtook him on the landing and seized him roughly by the arm.

“No nonsense, Paul, remember!” he said in a rough hoarse whisper. “This is a matter of life and death to us all. The allied armies are marching on Paris and the King of France by the Grace of God looks to us just as much as to Prussian or English soldiers to set him back on his throne. To-night throughout Normandy, in every city, village and hamlet, men are rallying, arming ready to fight. For Bonaparte’s police have got wind of this rising; they are well armed and well trained—far better than we are—and it is only by superior numbers and steadfast loyalty that we can hope to cope with them. Anyway, we have gone too far now to retreat. We are not going to play the coward and let our comrades of Caen and Falaise, of Evreux and Coutances, call us traitors. Those who are not with us are against us. And those who are against us are traitors whom I will shoot with my own hand like dogs.”

Paul Chatel had listened in silence to this long peroration delivered in short, crisp sentences, each one of which seemed to strike a warning blow against his attempts at defiance. Cottereau was a fanatic, and with such a fanatic armed and ruthless there was no use in arguing, still less in resistance. Paul nearly lost his balance when the grip on his arm suddenly relaxed.

“Now go and fetch thy brothers,” Cottereau concluded curtly. “I’ll deal with thy father myself. Where does he lie?”

Paul, without a word, pointed to a door at the farther end of a narrow passage. He watched with very obvious apprehension Cottereau’s big, ungainly figure stalk across the landing, then roughly kick open the door which had been pointed out to him and disappear within the room. He

heard his mother’s outcry, his father’s vigorous oaths, and after that nothing more.

What happened in that room the three brothers Chatel never knew. Presumably, Cottereau used the same arguments which had already got the better of Paul’s resistance. Certain it is that ten minutes later Farmer Chatel and his three sons, each of them armed with a gun, formed part of the recruiting band, now swelled to considerably over a hundred. Most of the men had come willingly; others had yielded to the threats of the irascible Cottereau, who was just as ready to murder waverers in cold blood as he was to shed his own in King Louis’s cause.

And the band marched on through the night to the many villages that lie dotted along the valley of the Orne. Glatigny and Donnay, Meslay and Plancy, Le Quesnay and Aubigny, and many more did they visit that night; and every time, in cottage or farm, they left the women lamenting—a sister in tears, a mother or wife protesting at the madness of it all.

The women wept because they knew. Somehow, women always seem to know when their menfolk engage in a forlorn hope.

But Cottereau and the enthusiasts were exultant.

“Three hundred,” they declared, “three hundred from our small district to fight for King Louis! We’ll not stop till there are five hundred of us to join our comrades at Caen. And then let Bonaparte and his army look to themselves!”

Chapter 4

Table of Contents

There was still the château to visit. Its *seigneur*, the Marquis de Marillac de la Villorée, had been abroad since the dark days of the Revolution when he joined the allied armies which were fighting in the cause of King Louis. But his son René was now a lad of eighteen, quite capable of handling a gun, and the prestige of his name and presence would be valuable to Cottereau and his band. It was known all over Normandy that the de Marillacs were ardently loyal to the King: they had been bitter opponents of the Revolution while it lasted, and almost more bitter still of the usurper Napoleon Bonaparte. Many of Madame la Marquise's kith and kin had perished on the guillotine during the Reign of Terror; her younger boy Alain was born during the dark year when Louis XVI and the unfortunate Marie Antoinette fell victims to the murder-lust of the Terrorists. The men, therefore, did not doubt for a moment that René de Marillac would give his enthusiastic support to this expedition which was destined to restore King Louis XVIII on the throne of his forbears. It was only Cottereau who, remembering many heated arguments with the domineering Marquise, was a little doubtful of the issue of his present high-handed enterprise; but he said nothing about that to the men. They had given a loud cheer when the château came in sight. There it stood, as it had done for centuries, on the wooded heights, towering above the surrounding landscape, the road and the busy river below, and flanked by the gently undulating hills of the Collines de Normandie,

now ablaze with the glory of autumn tints. There was romance in every stone of the stately irregular building: the whole history of France seemed writ upon its façade and its high encircling wall, with its four square bastions and steep pointed roof and the tall wrought-iron gates which gave access to the road.

It was early dawn when Cottereau and his band came to a halt in front of the gates and demanded admittance. They tugged at the bell-chain, and the bell gave a loud clang; but no one came. It was only when Cottereau gave the heavy ironwork a vicious kick that it was discovered that the gate was not locked. It swung open on its rusty hinges, and the men hustled one another through. Cottereau led them up the terraced gardens toward the house, which was closely shuttered.

Neither in the gardens nor the château were there any signs of life. Neglect and decay were apparent everywhere; the paths were overgrown with weeds, fountain and marble statues green with slime, stone steps broken, balustrades fallen in disrepair. An air of settled melancholy and of almost weird silence reigned over this place which, with its gardens and avenues, its park and dependencies, had once been the glory of the country-side. But Cottereau was not the man to pay heed to any of these things. He knew quite well in what a state of penury the proud Marquise and her children had lived for the past few years. But he was not the man to waste sympathy on such trifling matters as a lack of luxury. He himself had given up everything he possessed in the world for the cause which he had at heart. Jacques Cottereau had been a rich man once, a man of good family,

belonging to the old landed nobility, and of high consideration in the province. He had sold his land bit by bit, his farms, his house. Homeless, he had taken to the road and the woods, sleeping in huts or in the shelter of a haystack, ill-clothed, unwashed, unkempt and more often hungry than satisfied. But every time he tightened his belt in order to still the pangs of hunger, he would murmur sullenly in his beard: “The time will come when we shall eat our fill and our enemies will starve.”

By force of example he infused courage and power in the men, taught them ruthlessness and utter disregard of self. He was their acknowledged leader, but he shared every danger and every hardship equally with them. Because of this they respected and obeyed him. They feared him, too, but did not love him. At his word they would face death without a murmur, but did it for the King, not for Jacques Cottereau. And he knew that he ruled by fear, but he didn’t care. Like Robespierre and his gang his dictum was: “Terror is the order of the day!”

Consumed by an overweening ambition he nursed the thought that his name would go down to posterity as another Richelieu, as “Cottereau the King Maker.”

And now that he had entered the precincts of the stately château, he trod the garden paths and mounted the terrace steps with the firm tread of a leader of men. He felt that his mission had reached the culmination of its importance. The young Vicomte de Marillac was not only to be pressed into this irregular army but he was to be its nominal leader, in spite of his youth, but with Cottereau as the real head and moving spirit, his aide-de-camp and adviser.

Having reached the topmost terrace the men once more came to a halt. They were now at the foot of the perron which led up by a double flight of marble steps to a delicately wrought and once gilded iron grille. Cottereau called to half a dozen of his most favoured stalwarts and the men followed him up the steps. They tried the grille; it was locked. They banged against it and demanded admittance. Through the delicate ironwork they could just see the vast empty hall with its exquisite marble columns and the few bits of furniture, no doubt priceless, covered with dust sheets, over which the slowly creeping dawn shed its grey mysterious light. After a few moments of banging and shouting, timid shuffling footsteps were heard to approach, and after a moment or two an old man in shirt and faded cloth breeches, his bare feet thrust into shabby buckled shoes, came across the hall.

“Who are you, and what do you want?” he asked in a quaking, timorous voice. No doubt this shouting and this banging reminded him of those awful days of the Terror when soldiers of the Republic would demand admittance in the early dawn in the châteaux around, and when such visits meant domiciliary search in the château, arrest sometimes and often death.

“You know quite well who we are and what we want. Your master has had word,” Cottereau said in his usual dictatorial tone.

“Monsieur le Marquis is abroad—” the old man began.

“We know that,” Cottereau retorted, “but Monsieur le Vicomte is here.”

“A child! Madame la Marquise would never permit...”

“It is not for Madame la Marquise to permit or not to permit. We want Monsieur René. Tell him to come down. But first of all,” Cottereau added roughly, “open these gates or we will break them down.”

“You wouldn’t dare!...” the old man protested. “Madame la Marquise...”

“At it, comrades!” was Cottereau’s curt retort.

Up went the muskets, and the first vigorous hammering shook the delicate grille in its hinges.

“Unlock the gates, Matthieu. Let us hear what these intruders have to say.”

The voice, loud and commanding, was that of a woman. It had risen above the din of the muskets striking against the ironwork. At once the hammering ceased. Matthieu unlocked the gate. It swung open, and the men, somewhat abashed, stepped into the hall. The old respect for their *seigneur*, innate in every peasant of Normandy and Brittany, caused those who wore hats to doff them and the others to touch their forelock at sight of Madame la Marquise. Most of them knew her, of course, by sight, though many years had gone by since they had worked on Monsieur le Marquis’s estate. Since then sorrow and anxiety, the perpetual fight against gnawing poverty that must at all costs be kept a secret, had blanched Louise de Marillac’s hair and graven deep furrows in her cheeks. She had been beautiful once, her figure had always been commanding and she still held her head high. She was still the *grande dame* accustomed to receive homage from her subordinates, and even the irascible Cottereau appeared less arrogant, less sure of himself, as he met Madame la Marquise’s haughty stare.

“Now then, Jacques Cottereau,” she commanded, “what’s all this? How dare you present yourself before me at this hour and demand admittance? Have you taken leave of your senses? And who are all these men?”

Louise de Marillac had rasped out these questions one after another. Her cold grey eyes, hard as steel—they had been soft once—swept over Cottereau and his stalwarts with such a glance of scorn that it made the stoutest of them wear suddenly a hang-dog look.

But Cottereau was not the man to allow a sense of intimidation to get the better of him. He was the first to throw off the spell which the presence of Madame la Marquise seemed to have cast over them all. He gave his wide shoulders a shrug and said quite deferentially but firmly:

“You know quite well, Madame la Marquise, why we have come. You have had word from Le Gros. He—we all—expect Monsieur le Vicomte to join us. We want him to lead these men to fight in the King’s cause.”

“Monsieur le Vicomte is too young,” Madame rejoined curtly. “At eighteen years of age a boy cannot be a leader of men.”

“Am I not there to help and advise him?” Cottereau retorted. “And you yourself, Madame, would not wish a de Marillac to be cuddled up at home when all the men in the district are ready to fight for their King.”

“I am the best judge,” Madame said haughtily, “as to what a de Marillac should or should not do. Monsieur le Marquis is fighting for his King. The enterprise which you have in view will do no good to His Majesty’s cause. I have

told you that once before, Jacques Cottereau. It will discredit it in the eyes of the world and it will ruin the hopes of his loyal subjects ever to see him on the throne of France."

"Madame la Marquise..." Cottereau protested.

But Louise de Marillac broke in with stern authority: "I have spoken, Cottereau, and that is my last word. You are a fool indeed to imagine that a de Marillac would join a horde of undisciplined vagabonds who think to serve the King by committing every outrage that brings disgrace upon our province. It is not with intimidation, with highway robbery—aye!—and with murder that His Majesty will be served. Go back to your homes, all of you, and wait in patience until such time as your betters are ready to raise an army that can hold its own against Napoleon Bonaparte and the finest disciplined troops in the world. Then you can begin to talk of loyalty and of fighting for your King."

When first Madame la Marquise began to speak the men had listened in sullen silence. But when the words "outrage" and "undisciplined vagabonds" struck their ears, when she spoke of "murder" and "highway robbery," they grew all the more resentful, as the truth of what she said even they themselves could not deny. They were vagabonds, for they were leaving their homes and taking to the road; they were out for highway robbery, as money would have to be got somehow, and the pistols in Cottereau's belt were a dumb testimony to the acts of murder which they were prepared to commit. Their resentment gave itself vent in murmurs that grew louder and louder while Madame spoke.

"Where is Monsieur le Vicomte?" they demanded.

"To hell with all these arguments!"

“Where is the boy hiding?”

“Sneaking like a coward!”

“Afraid to fight? He—a Marillac!”

“I am for searching the house and dragging the whelp out of his lair.”

Madame disdained both the murmurs and the threats. Having said her say, she turned her back on the men and prepared to sail majestically out of their sight, when a young voice rose suddenly from the top of the stairs at the far end of the hall.

“No one need search for me. I am no coward. I’m not afraid to fight.”

René de Marillac had come running helter-skelter downstairs: a pretty boy, just eighteen, with fair curly hair, a delicate skin and large deep-blue eyes; his cheeks were aflame with unrepressed excitement. He was greeted with a lusty cheer.

“That’s brave, René,” Cottereau cried at the top of his sonorous voice. “I knew you would never play the coward. We’ve come to fetch you. You know why. Are you ready?”

“Yes, yes! I am ready.... That is ... I...”

The boy’s enthusiasm had cooled down all of a sudden, as if a bucketful of cold water had been thrown over a fire, for he had reached the bottom of the stairs and there encountered Madame la Marquise, who was slowly going up. Quietly but very firmly she took him by the hand, and all she said was:

“Come, René!”

Never in all his life had René de Marillac disobeyed his mother. He was a French boy to the core, born and bred in