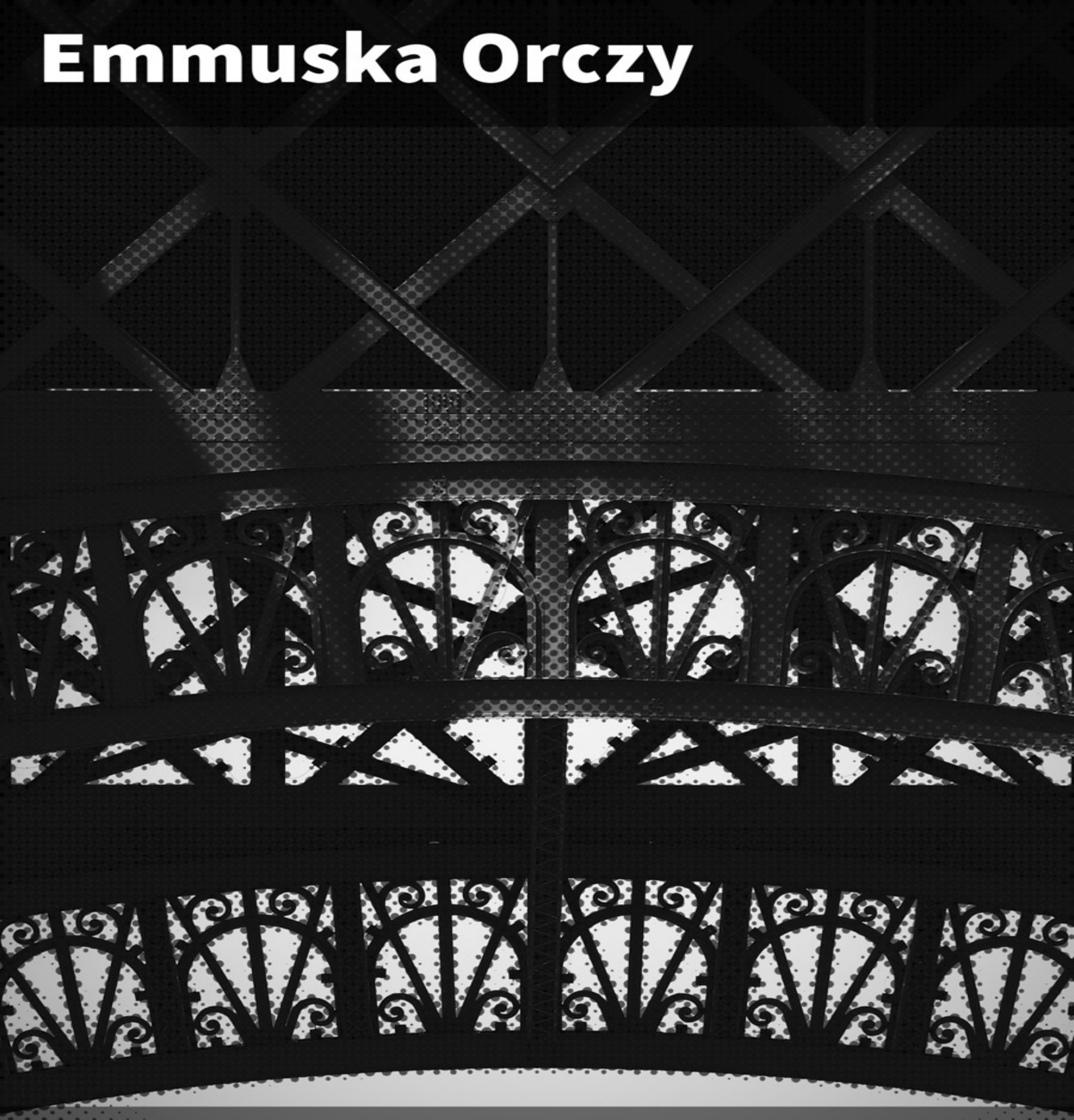
Emmuska Orczy



A Child of the Revolution

Emmuska Orczy

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Table of Contents

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Foreword

Table of Contents

This is the story which Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., told to His Royal highness that evening in the Assembly Rooms at Bath.

The talk was of the recent events in France, the astounding fall of Robespierre: the change in the whole aspect of the unfortunate country: and His Royal Highness expressed his opinion that among all those men who had made and fostered the Revolution, there was not one who was anything but a scoundrel, a reprobate, a murderer, and worker of iniquity.

Sir Percy then remarked: "I would not say that, sir. I have known men—"

"You, Blakeney?" His Royal Highness broke in, with an incredulous laugh.

"Even I, sir. May I tell you of one, at least, whose career I happened to follow with great interest?"

And that is how the story came to be told.

Book I

Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Table of Contents

"In Heaven's name, what has happened to the child?"

This exclaimed Marianne Vallon when, turning from her wash-tub, she suddenly caught sight of André at the narrow garden gate.

"In Heaven's name!" she reiterated, but only to herself, for Marianne was not one to give vent to her feelings before anyone, not even before her own son.

She raised her apron and wiped her large, ruddy face first and then her big, capable hands, all dripping with soapsuds; after which she stumped across the yard to the gate: her sabots clacked loudly against the stones, for Marianne Vallon was a good weight and a fair bulk; her footsteps were heavy, and her movements slow.

No wonder that the good soul was, inwardly, invoking the name of Heaven, for never in all his turbulent life had André come home looking such a terrible object. His shirt and his breeches were hanging in strips; his feet, his legs, the whole of his body, and even his face, were plastered with mud and blood. Yes, blood! Right across his forehead, just missing his right eye, fortunately, there was a deep gash from which the blood was still oozing and dripping down his nose. His lip was cut and his mouth swollen out of all recognition.

"In Heaven's name!" she reiterated once more, and aloud this time, "thou little good-for-nothing, what mischief hast thou been in in now?"

Marianne waited for no explanation; obviously the boy was not in a fit state to give her any. She just seized him by

the wrist and dragged him to her washtub. It was not much Marianne Vallon knew of nursing or dressing of wounds, but her instinct of cleanliness probably saved André life this day, as it had done many a time before. Despite his protests, she stripped him to the skin; then she started scrubbing.

Soap and water stung horribly, and André yelled as much with impatience as with pain; he fought like a young demon, but his mother, puffing like a fat pug dog, imperturbable and energetic, scrubbed away until she was satisfied that no mud or dirt threatened the festering of wounds. She ended by holding the tousled young head under the pump, swilling it and the lithe, muscular body down with plenty of cold water.

"Now dry thyself over there in the sun," she commanded finally, satisfied that in his present state of dripping nudity he couldn't very well get into mischief again. Then, apparently quite unruffled by the incident, she went back to her washtub. This sort of thing happened often enough; sometimes with less, once or twice with even more disastrous results. Marianne Vallon never asked questions, knowing well enough that the boy would blurt out the whole story all in good time: she didn't even glance round at him as he law stretched out full length, arms and legs outspread, as perfect a specimen of the young male as had ever stirred a mother's pride, the warm July sun baking his skin to a deeper shade of brown and glinting on the ruddy gold of the curls which clustered above his forehead and all around his ears.

"What a beautiful boy!" strangers had been heard to exclaim when they happened to pass down the road and

caught sight of André Vallon bending to some hard task in garden or field.

"What a beautiful boy!" more than one mother in the village had sighed before now, half in tenderness, half in envy. And "André Vallon is so handsome!" tall girls not yet out of their teens would whisper, giggling, to one another. If Marianne Vallon's heart swelled with pride when she overheard some of this praise, she never showed it. No one really knew what went on behind that large red face of hers, which some wag in the village had once compared to a bladder of lard. People called her hard and unfeeling because she was not wont to indulge in those "*Mon Dieu!*'s" and "*Sainte Vierge!*'s" when she passed the time of day with her neighbours, or in any of the "*Mon chou*"'s and "*Mon pigeon*"'s when she spoke to her André.

She just went about her business in and around her cottage, or at the château when she wanted up there to do the washing, uncomplaining, untiring, making the most of the meagre pittance which was all that was left to her now of a once substantial fortune. Her husband had died a comparatively rich man—measured by village standards, of course. He had left his widow a roomy cottage, with its bit of garden and a few hectares of land whereon she could plant her cabbages, cultivate her vines, keep a few chickens and graze a cow. But, bit by bit, the land had to be sold in order to meet the ever growing burden of taxes, of seignorial dues, to be paid by those who had so little to others who seemed to have so much, of tithes and rents and rights, all falling on the shoulders of the poor toilers of the land, while the *seigneurs* were exempt from all taxation. Then came

two lean years—drought lasting seven months in each case, resulting in a total failure of the crops and poor quality of the wine. André was ten when the last piece of land was sold, which his father had acquired and his mother tended with the sweat of her brow; he was twelve when first he saw his mother stooping over her own washtub. Hitherto, Annette from down the village had come daily to do the rough work of the household; then one day she didn't come. André took no notice. It was nothing to him that at dinner-time it was his mother who brought in the soup tureen, that it was she who carried away the plates and the knives, and that she disappeared into the kitchen after dinner instead of sitting in the old wing chair sipping her glass of wine, the one luxury she had indulged in of late. Annette or Maman, what cared he who brought him his dinner? He was just a child.

But when he saw his mother at the washtub with a huge coarse apron round her portly person, her sleeves tucked up above those powerful arms, the weight of which he had so often felt on the rear part of his person when he had been a naughty boy, then he began to ask questions.

And Marianne told him. He was only twelve at the time, and she did not mince matters. The sooner he knew, the better. The sooner he spared her those direct questions and those inquiring looks out of his great dark eyes, the sooner, she thought, would he become a fine man. So she told him that the patrimony which his father had left in trust for him had all dwindled away, bit by bit, because the tax collector's visits were getting more and more frequent, the sums demanded more and more beyond her capacity to pay.

There were the imposts due to the seigneur, and the *tallage* levied by the King; there were the rates due to the commune, and the tithes due to the Church.

Pay! Pay! Pay! It was that all the time. And two years' drought, during which the small revenues from the diminished land had shrunk only two palpably. Pay! Pay! Pay! And there were the seignorial rights. No corn or wine or live stock allowed to be sold in the market until Monseigneur's wine and corn and live stock, which he wished to sell, had all been disposed of. No wine press or mill to be used, except those set up by Monseigneur and administered by his bailiffs, who charged usurious prices for their use. Pay! Pay! Pay! It was best that André should know. He was twelve—almost a man. It was time that he knew.

And André had listened while Maman talked on that cold December afternoon three years ago, when the fire no longer blazed in the wide-open hearth because wood was scarce and no one was allowed to purchase any until Monseigneur's requirements were satisfied. André had listened, with those great inquiring eyes fixed upon his mother, his fingers buried in the forest of his chestnut curls, and his brows closely knit in the great endeavour to take it all in. He wanted to understand; to understand poverty as his mother explained it to him: the want of flour with which to make bread, the want of wood wherewith to make a fire, even the want of a bit of thread or a needle, simple tools with which his breeches and shirts—which were forever torn—could, as heretofore, be mended.

Poor? Yes, he was beginning to understand that he and Maman were now poor as Annette and her father down in

the village were poor, so that Annette had to go and scrub floors in other people's houses and wash other people's soiled linen so as to bring a few sous home every day wherewith to buy salt and bread. Not that this primitive idea of poverty worried the young brain overmuch. It was not like a sudden descent from affluence to indigence. It was some time now since his favourite dishes had been put upon the table and since he had last wore a pair of shoes. The descent into the present slough of want had been very gradual, and, childlike, he had not noticed it.

Nor did his mother's lengthened homily make a very deep impression upon his mind. From a race of children of the soil he had inherited a sound measure of philosophy and a passionate love of the countryside. While he could run about in the meadows, or watch the rabbits at evening scurrying away across the fields, while he could pick black berries in the hedgerows and gather the windfalls in the neighbouring orchards, while he could scramble up the old walnut trees and furtively touch the warm smooth eggs in the nests among the branches, he was perfectly happy.

What he didn't like was when Marianne set him to do the tasks which used to devolved on Annette. He didn't like scrubbing the kitchen floor, and he hated wringing out the linen and hanging it up to dry. But it never as much entered his dead to disobey. Mother was not one of those whom anyone had ever though of disobeying, André least of all. She was large and fat and comfortable, and—especially in the olden days—she loved a good joke and would laugh heartily till the tears rolled down her fat cheeks, but she knew how to use the flat of her hand, as André had often

learned to his cost. She was not one of those who believed in sparing the rod, and many a time had André gone to sleep on his narrow plank bed lying on his side because it hurt him to lie on his back.

But the fear of his mother's heavy hand did not really keep him out of mischief. As he grew older the desire for mischief grew up with him. A vague sense of injustice would, moreover, inflame that desire until it led him to acts which caused not only Mother's hand to descend upon him, but, also, of a certain hard stick, which was very painful indeed. That time when he chased Lucile Godart, the miller's daughter, all down the road and then kissed her in sigh of Hector Talon, her fiancé, who was short, fat, and bandy-legged, and was too slow in his movements to come to her rescue, was a memorable occasion, for, though Hector had not felt sufficiently valiant to administer punishment to the young rascal, godar, the miller, had no such qualms. And André got his punishment twice over, Mother's being by far the more severe. But he said that it was worth it. To kiss a girl, he declared, when she is placid and willing was well enough, but when she was a little spitfire like Lucile and fought and scratched like a wildcat, then to hold her down, kiss her throat and shoulder and, finally, her mouth, that was as great a lark as ever came a man's way—and well worth a whipping, or even two. What Lucile thought about it he neither knew nor cared.

Chapter 2

Table of Contents

The incident with Lucile Godart had occurred two years ago. André was thirteen then, and already the girls were wont to blush when their eyes met his, so dark and bold.

Since the Lucile had married her Hector, who was now an assistant bailiff on Monseigneur's estate and lived with his young wife in a stone house on the edge of the wood. At the side of the house there was a field, which at eventide was alive with rabbits. That field exercised an irresistible fascination over André Vallon. He would cower behind the hedge and for hours watch the little cottontails bobbing in and out of the scrub. More than once he had been warned off by Hector Talon; once he had actually been caught unawares and driven off with some hard kicks.

But to-day a tragedy had occurred.

Lying on his back at this moment on the hard stones not far from his mother's washtub, and in the state in which God first made him, he was perhaps wondering whether in this instance the game was going to be worth the candle. He was too old now to get a whipping from Mother, and he did not think that what he had done was punishable by law. Still, Hector Talon was a spiteful beast, and Lucile...Well, the little she-devil would get her deserts one day, on the faith of André Vallon.

While the hot July sun was baking his skin and staunching the blood of his wounds, his brain was working away on the possible consequences of to-day's adventure. He wondered what his mother thought about it. For the moment she

appeared to be immersed, both with hands and with mind, in her washtub. Her broad back was turned towards him, and André thought that it looked uncompromising. Still, Mother would have to know sooner or later, so better now, perhaps, while she was busy with other things. And before he knew that he had begun to think aloud, words were pouring out of him a kind of passionate outburst of resentment.

"Rabbits! Rabbits!...Why! there are thousands and thousands of them in that field," he went on with childish sense of exaggeration. "M. Talon himself is obliged to put fencing round his kitchen garden to keep them away. And I didn't put up any snare or trap—I swear I didn't. There was nobody about, and I just got over the fence to see...Well, I don't know. I just did get over the fence, and there in the long grass was the tiniest wee rabbitkins you ever saw! He was all crouching together till he looked like a ball of brown fur, and his round eyes were wide open, looking—I suppose he was horribly frightened—so frightened that he couldn't move. Anyway, I just stooped to pick him up. The house was all quiet, there didn't seem to be any one at home, and that brute of a dog of theirs was on the chain."

André paused a moment; his hand had gone mechanically up to his forehead, to his lips, his shoulder, all of which were smartin horribly. Perhaps, he thought, it was time Mother said something, but she just went on with her washing, and all that André saw of her was that large, uncompromising back.

"How could I guess?" the boy went on; and suddenly he sat up, his brown arms encircling his knees, his chest striped

with the red of the blood oozing from his shoulder. "How could I guess that that little vixen Lucile was spying from the window? I had got the young beggar by the ears, and I remember just thinking at the moment what luscious strew he was going to make. Of course, I had no intention of putting him down again, and I was trying to tuck him out of sight inside my shirt. And then, all of a sudden, I heard Lucile's voice calling to that dog of hers: 'Hue! César! hue!' What a devil! My god! what a devil! That great brute César! He was on me before I could drop the rabbit and take to my heels. He was on me and got me on the shoulder. Then I did drop the rabbit, and it scooted away. I wanted both my hands to defend myself. I knew it would be no use trying to run, and César would have had me by the throat if I hadn't got him. And there was that little devil Lucile, running down the field and shouting, 'Hue! hue!' all the time."

André was warming to his story. He was fighting his battle with César over again. His nostrils quivered; perspiration glistened on his forehead; his eyes, wide open and dilated, were as dark as the blackberries in the hedgerows.

"I got César by the throat," he went on in a shaky, hoarse voice, his words coming out jerkily, interspersed with gasps that were half laughter and half tears. "I squeezed and I squeezed, and all the while his horrid hot breath made me feel so sick that I thought I should have to let go. Once he got me on the forehead, and once I felt his nasty slimy teeth right inside my mouth. That gave me the strength to squeeze tighter, for I thought that I didn't he would probably kill me. Then that little devil Lucile began to laugh, and I

could hear bits of words that she said, 'That will teach you to insult honest girls. César also thinks it a lark to get a boy down a kiss him on the shoulder, what? And on the mouth. Hue, César! hue!' Isn't she a troll, Mother, a witch, a vixen, a she-devil, nursing vengeance like this for two years—or is it three?—but I'll kiss her again. I will! And what's more, I will..."

Once more André paused. His mother's broad back was still turned towards him, but she had turned her head, and through the corner of her eye she was looking at him. That is why he did not complete the sentence or put into words the ugly thought that had taken root in his brain. He remained quite still and silent for a moment or two, then he said abruptly:

"I never let go of César's throat till I had squeezed the life out of him."

But at this bald statement of fact, Marianne Vallon's outward placidity gave way. "*Jésus! Mon Dieu!*" she exclaimed, and faced that naked young daredevil with horror and anxiety distorting her squab features. "Not content with poaching in M. Talon's field, thou hast killed his dog?"

"He would have killed me else. Would'st rather César had killed me, Mother?" André retorted with an indifferent shrug of his lean shoulders.

"Don't be a fool, André!" Marianne Vallon went on once more, in her usual placid way. "M. Talon—dost not know it?—has only to go before the magistrate and denounce thee--"

"Well, they can't hang me for killing a dog in self-defense, and I didn't poach the rabbit."

"No, but they can..."

It was the mother's turn to leave the phrase incomplete which involuntarily had come to her lips. Just like André a moment ago, she did not wish to put into words the thoughts that had come tumbling into her brain and were filling her heart with the foreknowledge of a calamity which she knew she could not avert.

If she could she would have packed André off somewhere, to friends, relations, anywhere; away from the spite of Talon, who already had a grudge against the child and who would feel doubly vindictive now. But when Marianne Vallon first fell on evil days she lost touch with her former friends or relations, who, in their turn, were content to forget her. André must stop at home and face the calamity like a man.

It came soon enough.

Talon, who was a man of consideration in the commune, laud a complaint before M. le Substitut against André Vallon for poaching and savage assault on a valuable dog, resulting in the latter's death.

André, in consideration of his youth—he was only fifteen—was condemned to be publicly whipped. M. le Substitut told him that he could consider himself most fortunate in being let off with so mild a punishment.

Chapter 3

Table of Contents

A blind unreasoning rage, an irresistible thirst for revenge; a black hatred of all those placed in authority; of all those who were rich, or independent, or influential, filled André Vallon's young soul to the exclusion of every other thought and every other aspiration.

He was only fifteen, and in his mind he measured the long years that lay before him in which he could find the means, the power, to be even with those who had inflicted that overwhelming shame upon him. It was not the blows he minded...Heavens above! that lithe, young body of his was inured to every kind of hardship, to every kind of pain. It was not the blows, it was the shame. Talon, who was influential and who was egged on by his wife, had prevailed upon the magistrate to make an order that all the inhabitants of the commune who were not engaged in work were to be present in the market place to see justice done on the young reprobate. And these were still the days when no one dared go against an order, however absurd and however unjust, framed by M. le Substitut du Procureeur Général.

Monseigneur also came in his coach and brought friends to see the spectacle. There were two ladies among them who put up their lorgnettes and stared at the straight, sinewy young body, so like a statue of the Hermes with its slender, perfectly modelled limbs and narrow hips, and its broad shoulders and wide chest, smooth and dark as if cast in bronze.

"But the boy is an Adonis!" one of the ladies exclaimed in ecstasy.

"*Quelle horreur!*" she exclaimed a moment later when the stripes fell thick and fast on the smooth back she had admired. The days were not yet very far distant when ladies of high degree would crowed on balconies and windows to watch the execution of conspirators who perhaps had been their friends before then.

But for André Vallon, the bitter, humiliating shame!

His mother was waiting for him when he got home. She had prepared a little bit of hot supper for him, to which sympathisers in the village had also contributed: things he liked—a little hot soup, a baked potato, a bit of bread and salts. André ate because he was a young, healthy animal and was hungry, but he never said a word. Silent and sullen, he sat and ate. Not a tear came to those big dark eyes of his, in which there burned a fierce hatred and an overpowering humiliation.

Marianne, of course, said nothing. It was never her way to talk. She saw to it that André had his supper, and when he had finished she took him by the wrist and led him to his little room at the back. She undressed him and washed and dried his poor aching young body; then she wrapped him up in one of her wide gingham skirts which had become soft as silk after many washings, and laid him down on his narrow plank bed with his head resting on an old coat of his father's, which had survived the dispersal of most of the household goods. Before she had finished tucking him up in her wool shawl he was asleep.

She watched for a moment or two the beautiful young face, with the blue-veined lids veiling in sleep the sullen, glowering look of the eyes; stooped and softly touched the moist forehead with her lips. Two heavy tears found their way down her furrowed cheeks; a heavy sigh came though the firm obstinate lips, and slowly she came down on her knees. With clasped hands flung across the bed, she remained kneeling there for some time, praying for guidance, for strength to fight a brave fight with this turbulent young soul, and for power to guide it in the path of rectitude.

This was the year of grace 1782, and Marianne Vallon, in common with many men and women in the land these days, was not blind to the tempest which already was gathering force in every corner of France, framed by the ardour of young enthusiasts with a grievance like her André, or by the greed of profligate agitators, soon to burst in all its fury, sweeping before it all the old traditions, the old beliefs, the old righteousness of this country and its people, and inflicting wounds that it would take centuries to heal.

Chapter 4

Table of Contents

M. le Curé de Val-le-Roi, in the province of Burgundy, where they make such excellent wine, was a kindly and worthy man. He came of a good family—the Rosemondes of Nièvre, and though his intelligence was perhaps not of the highest order, his piety was sincere and his human understanding very real.

On the tragic day of André Vallon's public punishment he stood beside the whipping post the whole time that Marius Legendre—the local butcher employed by the Commune to administer punishment to juvenile offenders—was lamming into the boy. André, with teeth set and eyes resolutely closed, appeared not to hear the Curé's gentle words, exhorting him to patience and humility.

Patience and humility, forsooth! Never was there a vainer exhortation.

It was only when it was all over and he was freed from the post that André opened his eyes and cast a glowering, rankling look around the market square. Legendre had thrown down the whip and was handing the lad his shirt and coat. André snatched them out of his hand, and Legendre—a worthy man, not unkind—smiled indulgently. The two gendarmes stood at attention, waiting for orders, their faces wooden and impassive. Part of the crowd had already dispersed: the men silent and sullen, the women sniffing audibly. The younger ones—girls and boys—muttered words of pity or of wrath. Monseigneur was standing beside the door of his coach, helping the ladies to step back into the

carriage. One of them—the one with the largnette—cast a final backward glance at André; then piped in a high-pitched, flutelike voice:

"See, my dear Charles, so would a fallen angel have looked had the Almighty punished the rebels with thongs."

A man in the forefront of the crowd, close to Monseignuer's coach, laughed obsequiously at the sally. André saw him. It was Talon. Lucile stood beside her husband. When she met André's glance, she, too, gave a laugh, but quickly turned her head away. Then only did a groan rise from the boy's breast. It was a groan of an overwhelming, impotent rage. His breath came whistling through his teeth. He made a movement like a wild beast about to spring, but instinctively the gendarmes had already placed each a hand upon his shoulder and held him down. André was weak after the punishment, though he would not have admitted it even to himself; but his knees shook under him, and he nearly collapsed under the heavy hands of the gendarmes. M. le Curé murmured gentle words. "My son, remember that our Lord—"

André turned on him with a cry that was like a snarl. "Go away! Go away!" he muttered hoarsely. "I hate you."

But the Curé did not go away. He stayed to help the lad on with his shirt and coat; then, when André, avoiding the crowd, went staggering round a back street and then down the lane towards his mother's cottage, the kindly old priest followed him at a short distance, ready to render assistance should the boy be seized with giddiness and collapse on the way. Only when he saw Marianne standing at the narrow garden gate waiting for her son did he went his way back to

his presbytery. Contrary to his usual habit, he did not take his breviary out of his pocket or murmur orisons while he walked. With his soutane hitched up around his waist, he strode along, obviously buried in thought, for now and again he would shake his head and then nod, as if in secret communion with himself.

The results of M. le Curé's agitation were, firstly, a lengthy interview with Monseigneur, and secondly a summons to Marianne Vallon to bring her son André up to the château. Monseigneur desired to see him.

André, of course, refused to go. "I hate him!" he declared when M. le Curé came to announce what he thought was great news for Marianne and the boy.

"Monseigneur," the priest had explained, "was interested. He is always so kind and so gracious, but when I spoke to him of André he was pleased to be genial, facetious; he toyed, as one might say, with the idea of doing something for the boy. Then there were the ladies. Madame la Marquise d'Epinay put in a word here and there, so charming she was, so sprightly. She spoke of André as the bronze Hermes, and though the latter we know is nothing but a heathen god, and I would not care to think that our André had any likeness to such idolatrous things, I could not have it in my heart to reprove the witty lady, especially as Monseigneur appeared more and more diverted. Then Mademoiselle Aurore came in—such a pretty child—her governess was with her, and I gathered at once she knew something about our André—domestics will talk, you know, my good Marianne—and Mademoiselle was even more interested than Monseigneur. She put her little hands together and

begged and begged of her father that André might come up to the château, as she desired to see him. And Monseigneur, who since the death of Madame la Duchesse gives in to all the child's whims, gave me permission to bring our André to him."

The good Curé spoke thus lenghily and uninterruptedly, for Marianne, absorbed in her knitting, said never a word: she was never much of a talker, and André only glowered and muttered unintelligible words between his teeth. There was perhaps something a little unctuous, a little complacent in M. le Curé's verbiage. He was not forgetting that besides being the incumbent of this poor little village, he was also by birth a Rosemonde de Nièvre, and that by tradition and upbringing he belonged to the same caste as Monseigneur le Duc de Marigny de Borne, whose gracious sympathy in facour of "our André" he had been fortunate enough to arouse.

"I hate him! I will not go!" was all that could be got out of André that day. "You can drag me to that accursed château," he went on sullenly, "as you did to the whipping post, but willingly I will not go."

"But, my dear child," the Curé protested, "Monseigneur said—"

"Whatever he said," the boy broke in with a snarl, like an animal that is being teased, "may his words choke him!—I hate him!"

"You are overwrought and agitated, my boy," the priest said placing his well manicured podgy white hand on André's shoulder, who promptly shook it off. "When the good God and your dear patron saint have prevailed over

your rebellious spirit, you will realize how much Monseigneur's kindness and Mademoiselle Aurore's intercession—"

"Don't speak to me of those women up at the château," André cried hoarsely, "or I shall see red!"

Marianne Vallon at this point put down her knitting. She knew well enough that to carry on the discussion any further to-day would only drive the boy to exasperation. All that he had gone through in the past few days had, in a way, made a man of him, but a man with all a child's unreasoning resentment at what he deemed an injustice.

M. le Curé took the hint. With characteristic tact he changed the subject of conversation, spoke to Marianne on village matters—the washing of surplices which she had undertaken to do for a small stipend, and finally took his leave, deliberately ignoring André's ill manners and glowering looks. At the door, however, he turned once more to where the boy sat, chin cupped in his hand, staring dully into the gathering shadows.

"Remember, my dear child," he said with gentle earnestness; all his small, worldly ways drowned in a flood of genuine sympathy, "that your future does not belong entirely to yourself: your sainted mother works her fingers to the bone so that you should be clothed and fed. She performs menial tasks to which neither by birth nor upbringing was she ever ordained. Think of her, my lad, before you spurn the hand that can help you up the ladder that may lead you to an honourable career and give you the chance of repaying part of your debt to her."

Mother and son spoke little to each other during the rest of the day. Marianne appeared more than usually busy with knitting and sewing and spoke even less than was her wont. After sundown André went out from a tramp in woods and fields. Ever since the fatal day he had made a point of wandering over the countryside only after dark. He dreaded to meet familiar faces in the country lanes, dreaded to see either compassion or ridicule in the glances that would meet his.

To-night his young soul was brimful with bitterness. Never before had he felt such an all-embracing hatred for everything, and every human being who had made possible the humiliation that had been put upon him. Childlike, he wandered down the lane past the house where lived talon and his wife, the prime authors of the whole tragedy. He stood for a long time looking at the house. There were lights in one or two of the window. The Talons were rich, they could afford candles. They were people of consideration. They got the ear of the Substitut and engineered his, André's, lasting disgrace. He hated them—hated their house, their garden, their flowers; he wished with all his might that some awful calamity would overtake them.

The fields around were bathed in moonlight; the air was fragrant and warm; a gentle breeze fluttered the branches of the forest trees, causing a gentle murmur to fill the night with its subtle sound. The scent of hay and clover rose from the adjoining meadows, and from the depths of the wood there came from to time the melancholy call of a night bird or the crackling of trigs under tiny, furtive feet.

Only a very few days ago André would have revelled in all that: the little cottontails scurrying past, the bard-door owl flying by with great flapping of wings; fantastically shaped clouds veiling from time to time the face of the moon. All would have delighted him, those few short days ago. Now he had eyes only for that house of evil. He watched its windows till the lights were extinguished one by one, and then wished once more with all his might that hideous nightmares should disturb the sleep of those whom he hated so bitterly.

Chapter 5

Table of Contents

When André finally turned to go home again, it was close on midnight. Coming in sight of the cottage, he was surprised to see that, contrary to his mother's rigid rules of economy, there was still a light in the parlour. He pushed open the door and peeped in. Mother was sitting sewing by the light of a tallow candle. She looked up as he came in and gave him a welcoming smile. He thought she looked quite old, and her eyes were circled with red, as if she had been crying. But he pretended not to notice. Still, it was funny, her burning a candle so late at night when candles were so dear. And why did she look so tired and so old?

He asked no questions, however. Somehow he didn't feel as if he could say anything just then. He knew that presently his mother would come into his room to hear him say his prayers, to tuck him up in the old wool shawl and give him a last good-night kiss. Of late he had refused to say his prayers. Le bon Dieu, he thought, only bothered Himself about rich and powerful people—nobles, bishops, and such like—s what was the good of murmuring prayers that were never listened to and asking for things that were never granted? When Mother said her prayers as usual beside his bed in spite of his obstinacy, he turned his head sullenly away. He had even caught himself wishing that she would leave him alone, once he was in bed: alone, nursing his thoughts of future retribution on all those whom he hated so.