"Very good, Madame la Marquise."

Leroux was standing waiting in the hall, when Matthieu came to tell him that Madame la Marquise would see him in the library. He shuffled into the room, looking sulky and villainous, nor did he moderate his attitude or assume the slightest show of respect when he found himself alone in the presence of Madame. He did not remove his tricorne hat as he entered, but merely pushed it with a nervy gesture to the back of his head. The first word which he spoke was a curse, and he spat on the carpet as he uttered it.

"Well?" queried Madame haughtily.

"Well!" he retorted with a leer.

She would have given worlds for the power to flare up at his impertinence, but she and her friends were too deeply involved with the brutish creature to venture on rousing his resentment at this hour, when the very throne of the King of France rested on the insecure foundation of a recreant's loyalty to a bond. The sinister aspect of the ex-convict caused her to shudder; she longed for the presence of her brother or her son to help her deal with the arrogant ruffian, to turn him from her presence with the contumely which she felt, yet dared not express. At the same time, she was longing, with a desperate, passionate earnestness, to hear what he had come to say—she longed to hear him put into actual words those thoughts of evil and of darkness which had assailed her ever since Ronnay had gone and which she did not dare to face. She felt like a man who has been mysteriously and grievously wounded, who feels some awful pain which he has not yet had the chance to locate, and knows that somewhere on his body there is a hideous and gaping sore, unseen as yet by him, which is gnawing at his very life, torturing him insidiously and hitherto only felt—not yet seen—by him. And, like him, she felt that at all costs must she see that hidden wound and realize exactly how deeply she was hurt.

Leroux, with keen, shifty eyes, was watching the play of emotions on Madame's haughty face. His mouth was distorted by a hideous grin of scorn and of arrogance. He knew well enough how completely he now had all these scheming aristocrats at his mercy. One word from him and he could send the lot to moulder in jail or else to the guillotine. But strive how he might, he could not perceive one single trait of fear in the cold, pale eyes which Madame kept fixed upon him; her calmness irritated him, even though he knew well enough that it only lay on the surface. An insensate desire seized him to see that proud lady cringe with terror, to see her blanch when he made her understand plainly the bond which existed between her and him.

"Why have you come back?" queried Madame after a while. "Have you not realized that M. de Maurel might return, too, and that . . . ?"

"Well," retorted Leroux fiercely, "and if he does . . . you don't want him in the way, I presume."

She made no reply, but lifted her handkerchief up to her mouth in order to smother the cry which had so instinctively risen to her lips.

"I thought," resumed the man gruffly, "that you would wish to know that, as far as I am concerned, the Maréchal's interference will not affect our plans in any way. There's plenty of time between now and the close of day to talk things over with my mates. Do not be afraid, my fine lady, we are prepared for every eventuality."

"Prepared?" she asked, and her voice sounded choked and hoarse. "Prepared?" she reiterated. "In what way do you mean?"

"Well, we must assume that the Maréchal is not coming down in force to-night to turn me out of my Lodge, mustn't we?" he queried with a snarl.

"No . . . I suppose not," she replied vaguely.

"Well, then," he rejoined slowly, "we can deal with him easily enough if he is alone—what?"

Once more Madame had to make a vigorous effort to repress a cry of horror. The combat which she was fighting with herself while the impudent wretch stood looking down on her, his hands buried in the pockets of his breeches, his feet planted wide apart, his whole attitude one of arrogance and of scorn—was, indeed, a bitter one. On one side were ranged her fanatical enthusiasm for a cause which she held to be as sacred as that of her faith, and her boundless belief in the efficacy of the coup which had been planned for this night. To jeopardize its success now at this eleventh hour, by allowing her sensibilities to overmaster her, would in her eyes have been akin to the blackest, the most dire treachery toward her King and her country.

Indeed, at this moment she was putting to pagan uses and misinterpreting the dictum of the Gospel: "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out." She was wilfully closing her heart against every dictate of sentiment or of motherhood. As she would have been ready—and more than ready—to risk her own life for the sake of her cause, so was she willing to throw into the balance of her King's cause the safety of a man who happened to be in the way, even if at the same time he happened to be her son.

And Leroux, the servile tool in the nefarious work, knew exactly what was passing in the proud lady's mind: he knew

that she had understood the covert hint which he had thrown out, and that by her very silence she had acquiesced in his schemes.

He had no intention of relinquishing the ten thousand francs which had been offered him because of that obstacle which he was more than ready to sweep out of his path. Murderer, incendiary, thief, jail-bird and convict!—what was a crime more or less upon the conscience of such a man? Nor did he feel the slightest respect for these people who had bribed him to do a monstrous treachery. Brute as he was, he was shrewd enough to look upon them as his equals in villainy, and to realize that they had far more to gain by the iniquitous deed which he contemplated than he had himself.

And for a while there was silence in the room while this man and this woman—the jail-bird and the high-born lady—looked straight into one another's eyes and tacitly sealed a bond of fraternity between them. The measured ticking of a clock upon the mantelpiece marked the passage of time which separated this unspoken and monstrous compact from its fulfilment by and by. A bundle of papers beneath Madame's hand rustled with weird persistency, and suddenly Leroux gave a laugh, throwing back his head and showing his ugly yellow teeth, and he shrugged his shoulders and spat once more on the carpet ere he queried with contemptuous familiarity:

"Then our plans are as they were—eh?"

"As they were," replied Madame.

The man turned on his heel and started whistling the old "*Ça ira*" of Revolution times through his teeth.

"*Ça ira! Ça ira! Les aristos à la lanterne!*"

His hand was already on the handle of the door, when he looked once more over his shoulder and said roughly:

"Your people are not going to leave me in the lurch, I suppose?"

"That is out of the question," replied Madame coldly.

"Because you know, my good woman," he said, still over his shoulder, as he opened the door and stepped across the threshold, "if the Maréchal gives us trouble to-night and your people fail us afterwards, it will mean hanging for some of us."

He looked at Madame and nodded with studied insolence by way of farewell. But she seemed to have forgotten his presence already. She sat upright and stiff in the high-backed chair, the silk of her gown falling in rigid folds around her, the darkness of her attire relieved by a white scarf round her shoulders. Her face was set and pale beneath the hard line of her white hair dressed in the mode of the past generation, her eyes stared unseeing before her. Leroux laughed once more—it was the scornful laugh of a hardened criminal for

what he termed a white-livered beginner. Once more he shrugged his shoulders, then with a final muttered imprecation he stalked out of the hall.

II

The moment he had gone Madame pulled herself together with an almost superhuman effort of will : she shook herself free from the torpor which had momentarily paralysed her limbs, and, rising to her feet, she went quickly to the door which Leroux had left ajar

It had seemed to her that the moment when the man's shuffling footsteps began to resound against the marble floor of the hall, he had uttered an exclamation of surprise, and that exclamation from Leroux had at once been followed by another sound—one soft and mournful like a sigh.

Less than five seconds later Madame was in the hall—just in time to see Fernande walking rapidly across it toward the monumental glazed doors which gave on the outside stairway and on the terraces.

" Fernande," she called authoritatively, " where are you going ? "

Instinctively the young girl had paused when she heard her name, but it was only for an instant : the next she had resumed her quick walk, and had just reached the first glazed door when Madame overtook her and, without warning, seized her peremptorily by the wrist.

" Where are you going, Fernande ? " she reiterated harshly.

The girl looked round at her somewhat wildly, then she made a vigorous effort to disengage her wrist.

" I am going out, *ma tante*," she replied, with a quietude which in no way deceived Madame la Marquise.

" Out ? " queried Madame. " Whither ? "

" Into the garden, *ma tante*. The heat indoors is oppressive and . . ."

" You lie, Fernande," broke in Madame curtly.

" *Ma tante* . . ."

" You lie. Tell me where you are going."

Then, as the girl made no reply but drew up her slim, graceful figure to its full height and looked fearlessly into the austere face of Madame de Mortain, the latter continued sternly :

" Did you see Leroux just now ? "

" Yes," replied Fernande quietly.

" And you heard what he said just as he was leaving ? "

" Yes."

For a moment or two longer the two women stood looking keenly into one another's eyes. The vast château was solitary

and still; not a sound came from within, and the heavy doors shut out effectually all the many sounds which fill the air on a warm, midsummer afternoon: the call of thrush and blackbird, the distant croaking of frogs and cooing of wood-pigeons, the flutter of parched leaves upon the tiny boughs and tripping of unseen little beasts through thicket and shrubbery.

It was Madame whose eyes were the first to veil themselves behind their heavy lids, in order to conceal the thoughts within from the searching gaze of the younger woman. The next moment Fernande was free to go; Madame no longer held her wrist.

"I will not ask you again, my child, whither you are going," she said quietly. "Since first the rising nations were torn between conflicting parties of men who had divergent aims there have been traitors as well as heroes in the world."

"*Ma tante* . . ."

"Listen to me, my child, for at this supreme moment of your whole existence you are standing at the parting of the ways, at the cross-roads where many a woman has stood before you, hesitating at the two turnings which faced her on the tortuous path of life. Many a woman before you has taken the wrong turning, Fernande. Take care that you do not do the same and for ever after weep endless tears of remorse and of shame."

"I would indeed weep bitter tears, *ma tante*," retorted the girl firmly, "if I were to allow the monstrous outrage to be perpetrated which that dastardly wretch hath even now set out to do."

"You rave, Fernande," rejoined Madame quietly, "and 'tis not my purpose to probe into the thoughts which are leading you at this moment into the path of treachery."

"There is no treachery, *ma tante*, in warning an unsuspecting man that a murderer's hand is raised against him in the dark."

"You talk at random, child, and your ears deceived you if you attribute such intentions to Leroux."

"In any event, *ma tante*, will you send a runner over to M. de Puisaye and let him know what has occurred?"

"What has occurred?" queried Madame, with a slight lift of her eyebrow in token of contemptuous surprise. "What—in your estimation—has occurred, my dear Fernande, that would justify my upsetting M. de Puisaye at this hour?"

"Will you let M. de Puisaye know that M. de Maurel will be at the factory to-night?"

"Why should I? In what way do you suppose that M. de Maurel's comings and goings can possibly affect the business of His Majesty the King, or the plans which his faithful adherents have formed for the triumph of his cause?"

"*Ma tante*," protested Fernande, with all the fervour and all the strength at her command, "you know quite well what I mean. M. de Puisaye must be told that if M. de Maurel goes to the factory to-night, Leroux has it in him to commit a dastardly murder."

"M. de Puisaye cannot obviously prevent M. de Maurel from going to his own factory to-night."

"No. But he can prevent the dastardly deed from being accomplished."

"It is not for me to try and influence the actions of our chiefs."

"It is for every woman—every human being who has a spark of loyalty and Christianity in them—to try and prevent murder being done."

For the space of a second or two Madame made no retort; there was a cold glance of mockery in her eyes. Then she said slowly:

"Had you perchance thought of confronting M. de Puisaye yourself and trying to turn him from his purpose by your wild and incredible tales? Let me assure you, child, that our chief is not the man to allow one life—and that the life of our bitter enemy—to stand in the way of His Majesty's cause and of its success."

"*Ma tante!*" exclaimed Fernande in horror.

"Of a truth, child," rejoined Madame coldly, "I do but waste my time in arguing with you. You are self-willed and obstinate, and in your heart you have chosen to range yourself on the side of the enemy of your King and of your kindred. Therefore, I will not argue. 'Tis for you to probe your heart, and find out for yourself how much disloyalty doth lurk in it against Laurent, against your father, against all your friends. With that I have nothing to do. In the happy times which are so near to us now, when the King of France comes to his throne again through the self-sacrifice and the heroism of those whom in your heart you proclaim murderers and outcasts —when that happy time comes, I say, repentance will come with it for you. Until then nothing I may say now will turn you back to the path of loyalty But let me tell you this, Fernande," continued Madame with desperate earnestness, "that whatever you may think whatever you may suspect, whatever you may fear, if you speak one word of warning to Ronnay de Maurel you will not only be betraying the cause of your King and of your country, but you will also betray your father, your lover—every one of your kindred and your friends. Your father, M. de Puisaye and Laurent are in camp at this moment in the Cerf-Volant woods on the other side of Mortain; within the next few hours they will have started upon their

march; Laurent for Domfront, M. de Puisaye for La Frontenay, your father to carry out the surprise attack against the garrison of Mortain. If the slightest alarm be given to the garrison of Domfront—and you may be sure that after your warning, that is one of the first things which Ronnay de Maurel will do—Laurent will be the first to fall into the *guet-apens* which you will have been the means of preparing for him; with Laurent's failure to surprise that garrison, your father's attack on Mortain is bound to fail. Domfront will warn Mortain; your father's small force will be cut up, he himself either killed or a prisoner in the hands of the Imperialist forces, with the prospect of the guillotine or, at best, deportation before him. Of myself I will not even speak, and will leave you to imagine the fate which will await M. de Puisaye on his march hither, once de Maurel's five thousand works men are prepared against his coming. The catastrophe of 1800, when Cadoudal and all his followers perished for our cause, will be repeated once again; and this time the fate of your kindred, of your lover, and of your father, will be laid at your door, their blood will sully your hands. To save the man whom in your treacherous heart you have come to set above your King and your caste, you will have sacrificed your father, the lives of your nearest kin and the honour of your name. And now, child," she concluded calmly, "thank God on your knees that I was here in time to save you from committing a crime, beside which in the years to come the foulest betrayal that hath ever blackened the pages of our country's history will seem like the thoughtless prank of a child. I'll say no more, Fernande. You are free to take the turning which your heart will indicate."

The harsh, strident voice resounded from end to end of the vast hall; it beat against Fernande's brain long after the marble walls had ceased to send back its echo. Madame gathered her heavy silk skirts around her and then, without another word, without another look for the unhappy girl on whose finest feelings she had so ruthlessly trampled, she sailed across the hall and up the monumental staircase, and her soft footfall alone went echoing now through the silent house.

For a few moments Fernande remained quite still . . . white and rigid like the marble pillars around her; only her mouth twitched convulsively, and there was a look of mute agony in her face. The swish of Madame's skirts soon ceased to resound from above; after a while Fernande's straining senses heard the opening and shutting of a door. . . then nothing more—silence absolute, and the utter solitude of a soul that is irrevocably parted from its mate.

A heartrending sob broke from the unfortunate girl's overburdened heart. She staggered forward and, pushing open

the heavy glazed door, she ran like one pursued down the monumental stone steps which led to the garden beyond. She ran—looking neither to right nor left—across the terrace to a distant shrubbery which screened her favourite walk and a seat whereon she liked to sit and dream. As soon as she felt that she was quite alone, and that no prying eyes could look upon her misery, she fell on her knees, and throwing her arms over the seat, she buried her head between them.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned. "Dear God! tell me what to do! Give me some sign—a word—a token! Oh, my God have mercy! Tell me what to do! Tell me which road to take!"

CHAPTER XX

THE STRAW

I

The clock in the tower of the château struck nine when Fernande, wrapped in a dark cloak and with a hood thrown over her head, stole on tip-toe across the hall and slipped through the glazed doors and down the perron steps. She went along with utmost caution, peering all round her ere she ventured along.

Once past the terrace she felt freer, and without hesitation she dived into the path which, winding through the shrubberies, led both to the main entrance of the park and to a small postern gate in the boundary wall.

After the sultriness of the day the evening was oppressive and dark; heavy banks of clouds had gathered before the crescent moon, and there was a stillness in the air which presaged a storm. The splendid gardens of La Frontenay were wrapped in gloom; not a breath stirred the leaves of secular oaks and chestnuts; not a sound came from out the thicket, save now and then the crackling of tiny twigs under the feet of furtive little beasts that ran scurrying by.

From over the hills there came from time to time the roll of distant thunder, and ever and anon a flash of summer lightning threw for the merest fraction of a second a weird glow on the far-off woods, and the vague outline of the factory buildings some three kilomètres away.

Fernande, holding her cloak tightly around her, slipped through the postern gate, and found herself in the lane which after a few hundred mètres abuts on the high road; from this point the foundries could be reached in a little over half an hour. She walked as quickly as the darkness would allow. She had never been along this way before, but she knew that

she could not miss it. Darkness was her friend and her ally in her nocturnal expedition, since it kept her hidden from the view of the occasional passer-by.

The road was lonely enough. It was long after working hours; the factory hands and foundry men had, for the most part, returned to their homes; here and there in the distance a tiny light from a cottage window glimmered feebly like a yellow winking eye out of the surrounding blackness; and up on the height the village of La Vieuville clustered around its church and its château.

After the excitement and the soul agony of the day, Fernande felt perfectly calm. The horrible alternative which Madame la Marquise had so ruthlessly placed before her had put all her sensibilities and every one of her nerves on the rack, until the very faculty for suffering had gone from her, and she felt numbed and bruised both physically and mentally. But during that terrible hour, when driven forth like a hunted creature to seek shelter and solitude from the cruel taunts of Madame, she had prayed to God to guide her in her terrible perplexity, a resolution had gradually taken form in her mind, a resolution which she firmly believed had been instilled into her in answer to her impassioned prayer.

Madame la Marquise was, no doubt, right when she said that the life or death of a bitter enemy was not like to turn Joseph de Puisaye from his present purpose. An appeal or a warning to him at this hour from anyone but Madame herself would obviously not only be futile, but would waste several precious, irreclaimable hours.

On the other hand, if she—Fernande—did go to La Vieuville—as her first instinct had prompted her to do—and warned de Maurel not to go alone to the factory this night, there was no doubt that the plans of de Puisaye would not only be gravely jeopardized, but they would be rendered impossible of execution, and her father's position, not to speak of Laurent's and of the other chiefs', would be irretrievably compromised—their lives probably in danger. De Maurel, scenting a conspiracy, would at once pass the word round to the garrisons close by, and until their arrival he would know how to protect his property with the help of his own loyal workmen.

This, Madame had undoubtedly put very clearly before Fernande: she could not save de Maurel from the *guet-apens* which had been prepared against him, except by sacrificing Laurent, her father and her friends—her King and his cause. Indeed, it was only God who could show a way through such an appalling perplexity, and Fernande was more than justified in her conviction that the thought which came to her

whilst she knelt heart-broken and in prayer, was a direct manifestation of His will.

"I can at least save him from that assassin," she thought, when at nine o'clock she started on her way.

II

Fernande had only once been to the La Frontenay factories, and that was over a year ago in the company of de Maurel. Since then she had purposely avoided taking her walks in that direction, and her recollection of the place was, therefore, hazy and incomplete. She had now been walking a little over half an hour when a sudden bend in the road revealed the proximity of the huge pile of irregular buildings—standing partly within iron fencings, partly inside the precincts of high boundary walls—which nestled at the foot of the hills and represented Ronnay de Maurel's priceless patrimony.

Up to now she had met an occasional passer-by on the highway—a belated workman going to his home, a young pair of lovers out for a stroll, a housewife with heavy basket returning from Domfront—but here silence and loneliness appeared to be absolute. A row of street-lanthorns fixed in the boundary walls of the group of buildings shed uneven circles of light at intervals, and inside the precincts a few of the windows showed a light, whilst higher up two clock-towers loomed out of the darkness like monster glow-worms.

Fernande walked a few hundred mètres further on and then she came to a standstill, trying to co-ordinate her recollections of the place. That time—a year ago—de Maurel had conducted her through the foundries first, and then he had led her through a gate in the iron fencing, across a clearing to another gate built in the high wall. This gave on a vast quadrangle, on every side of which lay the worksheds of the powder factory. Her thoughts on it all were still very chaotic, but she had a vague remembrance of the large storehouse standing in the centre of the quadrangle and surmounted by its clock-tower, of Mathurin escorting her after she had taken leave of de Maurel, back through the postern gate and along a footpath until she came once more to the main road, where the carriole and the high-stepper stood waiting to take her home again to Courson.

Now when she closed her eyes, shutting away the confusion of lights which flickered through the impenetrable shadows, she was able to visualize the locality more accurately. The foundries obviously lay to her right behind the iron fencing; the powder factory lay beyond, some two-thirds of a kilomètre away, isolated, and well away from the road inside its high encircling walls. With the various positions thus fixed

upon her mind, Fernande advanced more boldly. Her heart was beating tumultuously in her bosom—not with fear, but with vague wonderment as to what was to come. The sight of the high walls had given her the first pang of doubt. If gates were closed against her, if sentries challenged, what would she do?

But she had no mind to draw back. On her actions, she felt, depended the life of a brave man and also the honour of her cause. She walked quickly past the foundries on the opposite side of the road; then when she saw the factory walls, she crossed over, and keeping well within the shadows, she found herself presently outside the main gates. They were of forged iron high, massive and forbidding; a metal lanthorn was fixed immediately above them, and at the moment when she passed into the circle of light projected by the lanthorn, a peremptory voice called out from within: "Who goes there?"

At once she beat a hasty retreat and a frown of deep perplexity settled upon her brow. If she could not get to the Lodge at all, how would she speak with Leroux? What would she do to save an unsuspecting man—a brave man—from assassination?

Vividly, as in a flash of awakened memory, there came back to her mind every word of that conversation which she had overheard this afternoon between Madame, Leroux and de Maurel, she heard once more—as distinctly as she had heard it then—Leroux' savage question: "Who is to sleep at the Lodge to-night?" She heard the simple answer: "I am!" She heard Leroux' snarls and his overt threats, she heard de Maurel's accusing words: "Your disobedience is only equalled by your criminal carelessness!"

Then her heart gave a leap. Memory did not play her false; it brought back also the very words which now gave her renewed hope and courage. "Last night, after closing hours," de Maurel had said, "I found the side gate open and unguarded." Leroux, most like, surly and obstinate, would not redeem the carelessness of the day before. It was more than probable that he would leave the gate unguarded again to-night.

Buoyed by this hope, excitement getting the better of her quietude of a while ago, Fernande now retraced her steps in order to find the footpath which, somewhere between the foundry fencing and the factory wall, must, she knew, lead to the side gate through which Mathurin had conducted her a year ago.

Her memory had not deceived her; after a minute or two she struck the path and at once turned to walk rapidly along it. Darkness here was absolute: there were no lanthorns

fixed either in the wall or the fencing, only a couple of hundred mètres on ahead a tiny glimmer of light flickered feebly through the gloom. Fernande was walking more cautiously now, and she felt the wall as she went all along with her hand. She had fixed her eyes on that tiny glimmer which seemed to her like a beacon which would lead her to her goal. Soon it revealed itself as a small, well-screened light fixed just above a low iron gate.

No one challenged her this time as she approached, and by the dim light above she felt for the latch. It yielded. She pushed open the gate, and the next moment she found herself inside the precincts of the powder factory Everything was dark around her, and through the darkness there loomed up dense and black the pile of irregular low buildings—the sheds, the offices, the workshops, with, in the centre, the somewhat taller edifice of the storehouse, which contained the vast reserves of explosives. It was surmounted by a clock-tower, from which the rays of an unseen lamp projected a large circle of light on the pavement below; close by was a small building, presumably the Lodge. At any rate, this was the only spot in the large quadrangle which showed signs of life inside its walls. Everything else was absolutely still as well as dark. Fernande ventured nearer, then she paused, breathless. She had come to the end of her journey, to the point where her powers of persuasion would be put to the test, where she would have to rely upon herself, upon her own eloquence, her own personality, in order to compel a few miscreants to abandon their dastardly purpose.

For the first time here, where only a few mètres separated her from that band of assassins, she realized the possibility of failure; and she realized that her plan, which had seemed so simple and so direct at home, was, indeed, like a mere straw at which a dying man might clutch.

There was a light in two of the windows of the Lodge; one of these was open; through it came the murmur of muffled voices. Fernande tip-toed up to it as closely as she dared. She would have given worlds to hear what was said in there—by Leroux and his mates, whose purpose it was to betray their master this night—God help them!—to murder him if he stood in their way.

Oh, for the power to avert that awful catastrophe without betraying her own father, her friends and her King!

But though thoughts, projects, wild hopes and wilder fears went on hammering at the portals of her brain, it seemed to her that they went round and round in a continuous circle, which never diverged from that one appalling centre: "If the alarm is given, the forces which have started from Mortain

under de Puisaye, under Laurent and under her father, cannot fail to be surprised—cannot fail to be overwhelmed and possibly annihilated · at best, the whole project whereon now rest the hopes of the entire Royalist party is doomed to fail; and she—Fernande de Courson—would be the traitor who had betrayed her own kindred and the cause of her King."

After a while she felt more calm. Finality to a brave soul does not mean despair—it means a renewal of courage to face or fight even the inevitable. No longer hesitating now, Fernande walked boldly up the steps which led to the entrance door of the Lodge; then she rapped on the door with her knuckles.

The strain of muffled voices which had come from within died down at her loud rat-tat, and through the open window she heard a sound like the shuffling and scurrying of heavy, furtive feet; then nothing more.

The roll of distant thunder had become louder and more continuous, the flashes of summer lightning more frequent. From the wooded heights behind the factories there came the intermittent soughing of the wind through the trees, followed by an absolute stillness, a calm which was the direct forerunner of the coming storm.

The air was sultry and filled with the sickening odour of sulphur. From time to time a heavy raindrop descended, large as a thumbnail, and Fernande fell to wondering how her father and Laurent would fare on their march if the storm broke with its threatened violence, and how far de Puisaye and his four hundred men were at this hour from La Frontenay.

III

After a while she knocked again. This time she heard distinctly a heavy, shuffling footstep approaching the door. Though her heart was beating so violently that its throbbing felt nigh to choking her, she was not the least afraid, and when, after a moment or two, the door was thrown open and Leroux' ungainly figure appeared before her, silhouetted against the light beyond, she spoke quite calmly and without the slightest tremor in her voice.

"It is I, Leroux," she said—"Mademoiselle de Courson—you know me?"

The man came nearer to her. She was standing on a step below him and the light from a hanging lamp in the room behind him fell full upon her face. He looked at her keenly for a few seconds, then he replied curtly: "Yes. I know you! What do you want?"

"To speak with you, Leroux," she said. "I have a message for you from Madame la Marquise de Mortain. Let me in."

"Madame la Marquise chooses her messenger strangely," he retorted sullenly, "at this hour of the night."

"No one else was willing to affront the coming storm. Our servants are cowards. Let me in, Leroux."

Leroux made no immediate reply. He looked over his shoulder into the interior of the room, apparently with a view to taking counsel with his mates. Fernande, with her hood and cloak drawn closely round her, waited on the doorstep.

That moment a vivid flash of lightning rent the heavy bank of clouds in the east, and a clap of thunder rolled echoing above the hills. She suppressed an involuntary cry of terror, but she called out more insistently:

"Let me in, Leroux. 'Tis a matter of life and death."

But Leroux did not stand aside; instead of this, he stepped over the threshold, and as Fernande instinctively retreated, he came down the steps, and then he closed the door behind him.

"Let me in, Leroux," she said more peremptorily. "I cannot speak with you out here."

"Why not?" he retorted. "I have no secrets that the night birds may not hear."

IV

Every time that he spoke Leroux came a step or two nearer to her, and every time she retreated as far away from him as she dared, without arousing his resentment and causing him to turn sullenly from her and refuse to listen to what she had come to say. Thus he had forced her as far back as the circle of light which came from the clock-tower. Here he paused and looked her up and down with every mark of surliness and insolence imprinted upon his face.

"Now what is it?" he queried roughly. "And be quick about it. There's men's work to be done here to-night. 'Tis not a place for women."

"I know that," replied Fernande boldly; "the work that I am doing now is really men's work. It is nearly four kilomètres from La Frontenay, and I have walked all the way. The storm will be at its height ere I can get home again. Think you I would have come, had it not been a matter of life and death?"

She looked the man fearlessly in the eyes. For the first time since she left home more than an hour ago, she realized the enormity of what she had done. Through the partially opened window of the Lodge she could hear men moving and whispering. How many of them there were she could not say. She was here all alone, unknown to every one at home, at the mercy of men who already had every conceivable

crime upon their conscience. Not that she feared any violence on their part; she was under the unseen ægis of their new employers, of those who were paying them for the abominable work which was to be done this night. She had no thought of her own personal safety. What she dreaded was the failure of her enterprise, a failure which would result, perhaps, in her being forced to witness that which she would give her life's blood to avert.

"Say what you want, then," said Leroux gruffly, "and get you gone. Madame la Marquise should have known better than to send a comely wench like you philandering at night upon the high roads."

"She had no choice," rejoined Fernande quietly. "She had no one else to send, and she desired me to tell you that you must not think of misinterpreting her words of this afternoon."

"What words?" he queried with a frown.

"Madame la Marquise feared that she had not put it plainly enough to you, that whatever else happened this night, she and all our leaders would hold you responsible for the life and safety of M. de Maurel."

Leroux was silent for a moment or two, but it had seemed to Fernande as if through the open window she had heard a low laugh—one that in the stillness of the night sounded weirdly mirthless and satanic.

"Oho! that's it, is it?" quoth Leroux after a while, with a leer. "Madame la Marquise is suddenly troubled with remorse. The precious son, whom a few hours ago she was ready enough to sacrifice to her own schemes, has suddenly become as the apple of her eye. . . ."

"You must not say that, Leroux," broke in Fernande steadily. "Madame la Marquise never dreamed of sacrificing any of her friends to her schemes—let alone her own son; and apparently she was justified in thinking that you had misinterpreted her thoughts. . . ."

"And you think that she was justified in sending you to plead de Maurel's cause—what?" retorted the creature with a snarl. "But if you have come here, my wench, in order to stand between me and that man, then the sooner you go back home the better it will be for you. You can tell Madame la Marquise that I'll deal with the Maréchal as I choose . . . and if he were twenty times her son and twenty times your lover."

"You forget yourself, Leroux," said Fernande with quiet dignity, choosing to ignore the hideous wretch's coarse insult. "You are being paid—and heavily paid, in order that you should do as you are told. When Madame la Marquise gave you the orders for to-night, she did not reckon on M. de

Maurel standing in the way of M. de Puisaye's plans. No one can prevent his coming here anon, we know, but his presence here—alone—cannot possibly interfere with any of our plans; therefore, it rests with you to see that no harm comes to him."

Again that muffled laugh, coming from the Lodge, grated ominously on Fernande's ear.

"Well," said Leroux cynically, "if it rests with me to see that no harm comes to the man whom I hate most in all the world, we may as well reckon that Bonaparte will have one Marshal less by to-morrow wherewith to beat the Prussians."

"And you will find," retorted Fernande, who was determined not to allow a hideous sense of foreboding to paralyse her courage, "that if you disregard Madame de Mortain's orders . . . if you touch but a hair of M. de Maurel's head, my father and all our chiefs will exact the fullest reprisals from you. And, in Heaven's name, Leroux," she added in more persuasive tones, "will you reflect for one moment? What is there to gain by an act of violence which will redound with unmitigated severity against you? Our chiefs will disclaim any participation in such an outrage, and you will be left to bear the utmost consequences of your own act."

He looked at her for a moment, and his attitude now became so insolent, that, much against her will, a burning flush overspread Fernande's cheeks. After a while he gave a low chuckle and shrugged his shoulders.

"You are, of a truth, in a sad quandary—eh, my girl?" he said. "You dare not go to your sweetheart and tell him to keep out of my way, for fear that he might smell a rat and interfere with your precious friends' plans. At the same time, I for one do not see what else there is left for you to do. Go to him by all means and see if you cannot persuade him to remain quietly at home with you—no harm would come to him then, I promise you that—and he wouldn't be wasting his time, either. But if he chooses to come here and try any of his arrogance upon me, then, by the name of Satan, there'll be trouble . . . that is all!"

While the abominable wretch spat out his hideous insults, his ugly face, by the dim light from above, appeared distorted by a significant leer. Fernande now was almost overcome with horror—not at her own helplessness, for, of a truth, she was ready to brave the villain to the last—but at the utter failure of her appeal, and at the certainty that, strive how she might, nothing would move him from his fell purpose. The man meant murder—dastardly, cowardly murder—against a defenceless man; his whole attitude proclaimed it, his words, his awful sneers. And Fernande, feeling now

like a poor captive beast on the leash, knew that she was bruising her pride, her heart, her hands against the bond of impotence which she was powerless to tear asunder. The sense of horror had gradually crept into her innermost being —it was paralysing her limbs and her will.

But suddenly the man paused ; the impudent leer fled from his face, giving place to an expression of tense excitement. He put up his hand as if to enjoin silence, then placed a grimy finger to his lips.

" Hark ! " he whispered.

And Fernande, straining her ears to listen, caught the clicking sound of an iron latch and the creaking of a gate upon its hinges.

" Here comes M. le Maréchal," said Leroux curtly.

At once and with sudden impulse Fernande had drawn back hastily out of the circle of light into the dense shadow cast by the tall storehouse.

" He must not see me here," she whispered hurriedly.

" I thought not," riposted Leroux dryly. " But 'tis too late, my wench, to run that way," he added, seeing that Fernande was ready to fly. " You would fall straight into his arms."

Then, without any warning and before she had time or desire to scream, he seized her wrist, and drawing quite close to her, he whispered in her ear :

" You have just two minutes in which to make up your mind, my girl. Go to the Lodge now, at once, and wait there ; he'll go in after you. Talk to him, persuade him, do anything you like. We don't want to hurt him . . . curse him ! . . . unless he interferes with us. I'll let my mates out by the back door, then lock you both in together in the Lodge—eh ? And you and he would be quite safe and snug," he added, with a chuckle which was far more offensive than any words he might utter, " while we do your party's work out here."

With an exclamation of loathing, Fernande managed to disengage her wrist, and a savage oath escaped the vile creature's lips.

" Well, which is it to be ? " he queried fiercely. " Am I to speak with the Maréchal or are you ? "

With an almost superhuman effort Fernande contrived to conquer the feeling of sheer physical nausea wherewith this abominable wretch inspired her, and she even succeeded in saying almost calmly under her breath :

" You are to act on the message which I brought you from Madame la Marquise. She and my father, M. de Courson, will hold you responsible for the life of M. de Maurel."

" Tshaw ! " he exclaimed contemptuously.

Then suddenly, as the imminence of the catastrophe appeared to come nearer and nearer the while that firm footstep, still a few mètres away, dragged along the flagstones of the yard, Fernande suddenly felt all her pride falling away from her.

"Leroux!" she cried, and she was nothing but an humble suppliant now. She would have gone down on her knees had she thought to mollify him by this act of self-abasement. "Leroux! you would not sully your hands and our cause by such an abominable crime. . . ."

But the whispered words died upon her lips, a hot, evil-smelling hand was summarily pressed against them, and a raucous voice murmured in her ear:

"Silence! He'll hear you! Silence, I say, or I'll strangle you first and shoot him after. Now, then, if you don't want him to see you, slip away round the storehouse; while he argues with me, you can run as far as the gate—and you may thank your stars that I don't happen to have the time or the wish to deal more harshly with you."

He pushed her roughly away from him, and she, feeling faint and sick, was only just able to totter back against the protecting wall of the building. Leroux had already turned his back on her, and suddenly through the gloom she perceived de Maurel's tall figure coming at a quiet, moderate pace across the quadrangle, swinging as he walked a safety lanthorn which he carried.

There was no time now for further pleadings, protests, admonitions; there was no time even to think. Fernande's mind was in a whirl, out of which only one thought remained clear: that she would stay and save Ronnay de Maurel even now if she could.

"They will not dare . . . while I stand by," was the one distinct impression which she retained in the midst of her chaotic emotions. She had just time to withdraw within the shelter of a projecting piece of masonry, from whence she could still see Leroux standing in the full light of the tower lamp, defiant and expectant, not twenty paces away from her, and de Maurel approaching slowly, swinging his safety lanthorn in his hand.

CHAPTER XXI

THE CRASH OF THE STORM

I

He wore his working blouse and a cap upon his head. In addition to the safety lanthorn he carried a bundle tied up in a handkerchief.

He hailed Leroux as soon as he came near.

"So now, my man," he said quietly, "'tis time you went."

Leroux did not move. He stood with legs wide apart, his hands buried in the pockets of his breeches. The light from the clock-tower above lit up the top of his shaggy head, his wide shoulders and the tip of his nose. De Maurel had approached, quite unconscious apparently of the glowering looks which Leroux cast upon him.

"You had best get to the compound," he added, "before the rain comes down."

And quite unconcernedly he walked past Leroux and continued to advance toward the Lodge. The man watched him from over his shoulder, and when de Maurel had reached the steps of the Lodge, he said sullenly:

"I am not going."

De Maurel calmly shrugged his shoulders.

"What is the use of all that obstinacy?" he said. "We argued everything out this afternoon. You had best go quietly now, my man . . . or there'll be trouble."

"Trouble?" riposted Leroux with a sneer. "I doubt not but that there will be trouble this night, M. le Maréchal. . . ."

His first instinctive terror at sight of the man whom he feared above all others was gradually falling away from him. He had turned on his heel and was now facing the open window of the Lodge, through which he could feel, even if he could not see, his mates, who were there ready to stand by him, if necessary, if it came to an open conflict between himself and the employer whom he was pledged to betray. The sense of their presence close by gave him a measure of defiance and of courage.

De Maurel stood quite still for a moment or two, then he retraced his steps and came back to within a mètre or so of where the man was standing.

"You are contemplating mischief, Leroux," he said with his accustomed calm. "Someone has been egging you on to one of your attacks of futile rebellion, which you must know by now invariably lead to more severe measures being taken against you. You know how lenient I can be, but also how severe. This night's work can only end in disaster for you . . . the gallows probably, unless you realize that submission even at this eleventh hour will be your best policy."

"Very well spoken, M. le Maréchal," retorted Leroux, with a sneer; "but let me tell you that the hour has gone by when your arrogance and your threats had the power to cow me. To-day I am a desperate man, and desperate men are not apt to count the costs of their actions. I will not vacate the Lodge to-night, and unless . . ."

He paused and shrugged his shoulders. De Maurel had thrown down his bundle and transferred the lanthorn to his left hand, whilst with his right he drew a pistol from beneath his blouse.

"Put away that weapon, M. le Maréchal," said Leroux, "it will avail you nothing. There are twenty of us inside the Lodge, all well armed. Twenty others overpowered your night-watchmen half an hour ago. We are expecting a fresh contingent of our mates from the compound at any moment. Resistance or bluster on your part were, indeed, worse than futile. You have run your head into a noose this time, my fine gentleman, and your threats are about as useful as the pistol which you have in your hand. And if it comes to that," he added with a savage oath, "I, too, of late have learned how to shoot."

With a rapid movement he drew a pistol from his belt; but before he had time to level it, de Maurel had fired. The man uttered a convulsive cry of rage; his left hand grabbed at his shoulder, while his weapon fell with a clatter to the ground.

"You have shot me, you devil!" he shouted hoarsely. "*A moi*, my mates!"

The pistol shot and Leroux' raucous cry had drowned a woman's call—a call of warning and of agonized terror: "Take care!" but not before de Maurel's keen ear had perceived it, and even while an evil-looking rabble came pouring out from the Lodge the call was repeated, and the next moment a woman's slender form was interposed between him and the foremost group among the crowd.

"In God's name, save yourself," came in a frenzied murmur in his ear, and a pair of hands clung to his arm with the strength of unspoken anguish. "Into the shadow . . . quick . . . they'll not touch me . . . only save yourself!"

The voice, the touch, sent a tumultuous flood of passion seething through de Maurel's veins. Overhead the thunder crashed and a vivid streak of lightning showed him a brutish menacing gang of miscreants advancing towards him, their faces misshapen and distorted with the fulsomeness of their own savagery and malignant anticipation of triumph. There was a score or so of them, and the light from the clock-tower glinted on the steel of muskets.

"*A moi*, my mates!" shouted Leroux once again at the top of his voice, and in response there came from left and right the sound of tramping of many feet; and within a few seconds the open space in front of the great storehouse was filled with a moving, oscillating crowd, the numbers of which could only be vaguely guessed at in the gloom. The

light from above caught the outline here of a face, there of a square shoulder, always of a musket, a pistol, or even a knife held tightly in a rough, grimy hand.

II

Instinctively de Maurel had stepped back into the shadow. Perfect calm had immediately followed that sudden hot wave of passion which had filled his heart and brain at the moment that he became conscious of Fernande's presence so close to him.

He had but a few seconds wherein to act, wherein to disengage himself with almost savage violence from her dear clinging arms, and to force her into the shadow behind him. A few seconds wherein to whisper to her in desperate tones of appeal and of command: "While I parley with them, run to the gate . . . they'll not see you. . . . Fernande, in the name of God, go! . . ."

He placed himself in front of her, his back to the storehouse; he had her life and his own to guard or to sell as dearly as he could.

"Go, Fernande," he commanded once again. He would have picked her up in his arms and run with her into safety had he dared. But the brutes were armed with muskets, and a stray shot meant for him might easily have reached her. He covered her with his body, praying with all his might that she might obey and seek safety while there was yet time, yet knowing all the while, with an intuitive conviction born of his own tumultuous passion, that she was resolved to remain by his side.

"Go, Fernande," he implored.

"I'll not go," she replied quietly; and he, feeling her so near him, hearing her voice quivering with emotion, with anguish for him, counted life well lost for these few rapturous seconds.

"Can I do anything?" she asked with perfect calm.

"Nothing," he replied. "There are at least a hundred against us, and the alarm bell is above the Lodge, the chain-handle just by the door. . . . Those cowardly brutes have cut us off from any chance of help."

Indeed, the crowd was pressing closer round him now; wherever he looked he could see faces on which the lamp from above cast a lurid glow—faces rendered grotesque by the flickering light and the dense shadows which hid eyes and mouth and accentuated nose and chin—faces in which menace and hatred had been fanned into open revolt by bribery and greed, and execration of all discipline and authority. De Maurel knew them all individually. Even

through the gloom he could distinguish the ringleaders—the malcontents with whom last year he had had many a tussle—whom the more iron rule of the military representatives had goaded into this senseless and abominable treachery.

De Maurel's quick eye had soon enough measured the odds that were against him; of a truth, they were overwhelming. Nothing but a miracle could save him if these men did, indeed, contemplate murder, of which he had little doubt. The great question was how to save Fernande—his brave, beautiful, exquisite Fernande, who was standing so magnificently by him, whose heroism and courage filled him with as much wonder as her beauty and tenderness had filled his heart with love. Forgotten were the humiliation and the bitterness of a twelve-month ago; forgotten was her cruelty, the hurt she had done to him; she was standing by him now—shoulder to shoulder—his friend in this hour of difficulty, his comrade at the moment of peril.

Oh! if he only had the strength, the wits to keep those maddened wolves at bay, the whole world would not wrench the memory of this blissful night from out his heart again.

But there was no time even to think of happiness or of the future; the present lay there before him, grim and hand in hand with death. The few seconds' respite while he stood facing the murderous crowd—eye to eye and silently—were already gone; the men were gathering more menacingly around him. What their ultimate purpose was he had as yet only vaguely guessed. On this, before everything, he wanted to be quite clear—definite knowledge on the point would then help him how to act.

"So that's it, my men, is it?" he said coolly. "Open mutiny, eh?"

"You may call it that, an it please you," said one of the men.

"Hatched during my absence—ready against my home-coming ere I had time to realize the treachery that was brewing. I ought to have guessed, I suppose."

Leroux, with a wound in his shoulder that was bleeding profusely, was in the forefront of the pack, supported on either side by one of his mates.

"Yes," he said huskily, "you might have guessed that men would not put up indefinitely with tyranny and oppression. We are not dogs, nor yet savage brutes to be kept to our task with threats of punishment. Those men who were here, who went two days ago—curse them!—were ready to use the lash on us had they dared!"

"And you dared not rebel while they were here! Were you frightened of the lash?" retorted de Maurel contemptu-

ously. "You waited for my return. Did you think I should be a weaker fool than they?"

"We were not ready then. We are ready now," came from one of the men.

"Ready for what?" queried de Maurel. "What do you hope to gain by this senseless mutiny? To overpower the watchmen for one night and run riot through the factories? To-morrow must bring reprisals. Ye know that well enough."

"To-morrow you'll no longer be here, M. le Maréchal," sneered Leroux, who, though losing blood freely, had still sufficient strength left to maintain his position as ringleader of the gang. "To-morrow you'll not be here," he reiterated roughly, "to browbeat and threaten us."

"You mean to kill me, I know," rejoined de Maurel coolly. "But my death will avail you little. Reprisals will be all the more severe. Think you the law will let you escape? I am not a man who can be assassinated and then thrown into a ditch without causing some stir. Where will you hide when your Emperor himself will demand from you an account of what you have done with me?"

"Bah! when we have done with you, my fine Marshal of France," replied Leroux, with an insolent laugh, "there will be no Emperor. We are working for the King—not for Bonaparte . . . and when we hold the factories and foundries in the name of the King . . . why, there's little we'll have to fear from the Emperor; and, moreover . . ."

A terrific clash of thunder drowned the rest of his words, while the lightning literally tore the dark clouds asunder. Some of the men—more superstitious than the rest—instinctively crouched back, muttering blasphemies—pushing those behind them back, too, so that the entire human mass seemed suddenly to be heaving and then receding like the scum of sea-waves upon the ebbing tide; a gust of wind swept across the quadrangle, driving dust and dried leaves before it. Some of the men cursed, others hastily crossed themselves, with a vague remembrance of past devotions long buried beneath the dark mantle of crime.

The silence which ensued was absolute. It lasted less than ten seconds, perhaps, during which hardly a man dared to breathe—so absolute was it, that the click of every firearm striking against its neighbour was distinctly audible, as was the soughing of the wind in the silver birches on the wooded heights behind the factory. Something of a nameless terror had crept into the bones of these godless miscreants. By that vivid flash of lightning they had seen their master standing alone unflinching before them—against the background of the huge storehouse—his massive figure appearing preter-

naturally tall, his face pale and determined. His head was bare to the winds and the storm, and it was turned full upon them, and neither in the dark, deep-set eyes nor round the firm mouth was there the slightest sign of fear. And they had caught sight of the slim silhouette of Fernande de Courson standing behind him, her graceful form seeming ethereal, like that of a protecting angel.

And for the space of those ten seconds de Maurel had just time to look on the situation squarely and with a clearer understanding than before. With his clumsy words, Leroux had in an instant revealed to him something of the dark treachery which had brought this mutinous crowd together —something of the murky undercurrent of intrigue which was driving the torrent of discontent to the flood of open rebellion. So this was the history of Leroux' defiance? this was the key to the riddle which had puzzled de Maurel when first he realized that these senseless brutes were actually not only in organized rebellion against him, but intent on murder—a stupid, purposeless and useless murder, which in itself would carry immediate discovery in its train, and with it the absolute certainty of terrible reprisals and penalties.

But now the whole thing became clear. It was his mother and her party who had engineered this trickery, and Heaven alone knew how near they were to succeed in the abominable project!

And in a flash he seemed to see every phase of the intrigue: his factories and foundries in the hands of these dastards, whilst the Royalist bands marched on La Frontenay. There were other details, of course—plots and counterplots—at which it was impossible to guess. Only the facts remained —the facts which confronted him now, together with this murderous pack of hungry wolves and the muskets which were levelled against him.

For his own life he cared less than nothing; many a time had he faced Prussian muskets as he faced those of a set of mutinous ruffians now. A few minutes ago he had felt one thrill of exultant happiness when Fernande's arms clung around his shoulders, and her sweet body lay against his breast in her endeavour to shield him against his aggressors. He was more than content that that one supreme moment of delight should be the last which this world held for him— more than content to go to his eternal sleep with the sweet memory of her last caress to be his lullaby.

But his life had suddenly assumed an importance which he himself never granted it before. He alone, at this moment stood for the protection of these mighty engines of warfare around him, of the materials which his Emperor needed for

overcoming the enemies of France. The very instant that he—Ronnay de Maurel—fell, they would become the prey of traitors, the prey of those who concerted with the foreigner against their country, who trafficked with Prussia, with Austria, with Russia, in order to force upon the people of France a government and a King whom they abhorred. At this very hour, perhaps, a band of Royalists was on its way to La Frontenay. It was all so simple—so absolutely, so perfectly, so hellishly simple! If he fell, they would reach the factories and the foundries, and these murderous traitors here would deliver his patrimony into their hands—the patrimony which he devoted to the service of France—the new guns, the small-arms, the explosives, the stores . . . everything. If anon he lay with shattered head or breast on the threshold of this precious storehouse, which he had been powerless to protect, the cause of freedom, of the Emperor and of his armies, would receive a blow from which it could only recover after years more of fratricidal combat and more streams yet of bloodshed.

This he owed to his mother, to his brother, to his kindred, who had fanned the flame of hatred and rebellion against him, whose hands were raised against their country, whom they professed to love, and who had coolly and callously decreed his death because he stood in their way. With the very wealth which he had placed at his mother's disposal, she had paid these brutes to betray and to murder him.

And Fernande?

At Leroux' words he had felt her quivering behind him; he had heard the moan which escaped from her lips. Fernande knew of the treachery as she had known of his danger, and, knowing of his deadly peril, she had come here in order to share it with him. That thought, as it flashed before him, lent de Maurel's entire soul a courage and an exultation which was almost superhuman. As the thunder clashed above him, and the lightning tore the dark clouds asunder, it seemed to him as if God Himself, in His glory, had deigned to reveal Himself, to give him the strength and the power that he needed, the guidance which comes as a divine breath from Heaven in the supreme hour of a man's life, when Death and Duty and Love stand at the parting of the ways and beckon with unseen hands.

III

The silence that ensued had only lasted a moment. Already the men were recovering from their brief access of terror; some of them were shaking themselves like curs after a douche. They all drew nearer to one another, satisfied to feel one

another's support and grasping their muskets more determinedly in their hands.

De Maurel had turned once more to Fernande.

"It means death, my beloved," he murmured.

"I know," she replied quietly.

"You are not afraid?"

"No."

Questions and answers came in rapid succession. His hand closed upon hers.

"In my heart," he said, "I kiss your exquisite hands, your feet, your hair, your lips. You forgive me?"

"Everything."

There was not a quiver in her voice; for one second her fingers rested in his, and they were firm and warm to his touch. They were made to understand one another, these two; their courage was equally undaunted; they both looked on death without a tremor. He would have given his life bit by bit for her, but at this hour, when the needs of France demanded a sacrifice so sublime that none but an heroic heart could have conceived it, not even the thought of his beloved came between him and his determination.

La Frontenay must be saved for the Emperor and for France at all costs—even at the cost of that one life which was more precious to him than his own, more precious than all the world, save France. And with one pressure of her slender hand she yielded up her will—her life to him. For this one supreme moment—a moment which held in it an infinity of love and passion—they met one another soul to soul. Hand in hand, in the face of death, this second was for them an eternity of ecstasy.

"You love me, Fernande!" he murmured.

"Until death," she replied.

"Then pray to God, dear heart," he whispered. "He alone can save us now."

Then he faced the crowd of cut-throats once more.

"Listen, my men," he said, speaking coolly and quietly. "For the last time let me tell you how you stand. As far as I can see, there are about fivescore of you standing there before me, and you think that you hold my life in the hollow of your hands. And so you do, in a measure. Your muskets are levelled against me, and even if I were to sell my life very dearly and blow out the brains of a few amongst you, you would have small work to lay me low in the end. You have been lured to this treachery by promises and bribery; you have listened to insidious suggestions of treason. But let me tell you this. Others before you have listened to promises which came from that same quarter, and their bones lie mouldering now in forgotten graves. You think that if you delivered

these works into the hands of M. de Puisaye and his followers you would be rendering such a service to the Royalist cause, that that effete and obese creature who dares to call himself King of France will inevitably come to the throne which his forbears have forfeited, and that he will reward you handsomely for any service you may have rendered him. But, believe me, that even if this night a few bands of rebellious peasants took possession of La Frontenay and its works, their triumph and yours would be short-lived. No one in France at this hour wants a Bourbon king; the army worships the Emperor, the people adore him, and with the army and the people against you, what do you think that you can do? La Frontenay is not the only armament factory in France; think you that you will cripple the Emperor because you deliver our stores into the hands of his enemies? Take care, men, take care," he added more earnestly; "'tis you who have run your heads into a noose, and with every outrage which you commit this night that noose will become tighter round your necks, and you'll find that I—your master—will be more menacing and more fearsome to you dead—murdered foully by you—than ever I was in life."

His powerful, rugged voice rose above the murmur of the storm. Some of the men listened to him in sullen silence; the magnetic influence which "the General" had exercised over them in the past was not altogether gone; his powerful personality, his cool courage, the simplicity of his words, reacted upon their evil natures, and also upon their cowardice. There was a vast deal of common sense in what M. le Maréchal was saying, and they, after all, had only been promised a hundred francs apiece for an exceedingly risky piece of work. But there were some ringleaders among them who expected to get far more out of their treachery than a paltry hundred francs; they relied on de Puisaye's vague promises of freedom, on his assurance that unconditional pardon for past infractions against the law would be granted to them by a grateful King. They—and, above all, Leroux—felt also that they were committed too far now to dare to draw back, and even while de Maurel spoke they broke in on his words with sneers and taunts, and, above all, with threats.

"You seem to think, M. le Maréchal," said Leroux in husky tones—for he was getting feeble with loss of blood—"you seem to think that I and my mates are here to murder you."

"Why else are you here?" rejoined de Maurel coolly. "You do not suppose, I imagine, that I am like to vacate the place and leave you to work your evil will with my property?"

"'Twere the wisest thing to do," retorted one of the men. Eh, mates?"

"Yes! yes!" came with a volley of savage oaths from every side.

"Throw up your hands, M. le Maréchal," added a voice from he crowd, "and we'll see that neither you nor your sweetheart come to any harm!"

"Silence, you blackguard," thundered de Maurel fiercely, "or, by God, I'll pick you out of the crowd and shoot you like the dog that you are."

"Throw up your hands, M. le Maréchal," broke in Leroux roughly; "the men have no quarrel with you. But cease to defy and threaten them, or by Satan there'll be trouble."

"The trouble will come, my men, if you persist in this insensate mutiny. Throw down your muskets now at once, and go back to your compounds while there's yet time, and before the consequences of your own folly descend upon your heads."

A shout of derision greeted these words.

"The consequences of your folly will descend on your head, M. le Maréchal," sneered Leroux. "Get out of our way. We have parleyed enough. Eh, my mates?"

"Yes! yes! enough talk," some of them cried, whilst others added fiercely: "Put a bullet through him and silence his accursed tongue at last."

"Pierre Deprez, I know you," said de Maurel loudly. "Now then, all of you, for the last time—throw down your muskets—hands up!"

There came another shout of derision, wilder than the first.

"Hark at him!" cried Paul Leroux scornfully. "Even now he thinks that he can order us about—just as if we were a lot of craven curs."

"You are a lot of craven curs! And since you choose to be deaf to the voice of persuasion you shall listen to that of power. Down with your muskets! Hands up! . . . 'Tis the second time I ve spoken."

"You may speak an hundred times, we'll not obey," retorted one of the men. "The days of obedience are past; the place is ours. . . ."

"For the third and last time . . ." began de Maurel.

Beforé the word was out of his mouth a shot was fired at him out of the crowd. The sound appeared as the signal for the breaking down of the last barrier which held these men's murderous passions in check.

"'Tis our turn to command," shouted Leroux excitedly. "Throw up your hands, M. le Maréchal, or . . ."

"Down with the muskets!" cried de Maurel in thunderous accents, that reached to the furthermost ends of the vast quadrangle, "or by the living God whom you have outraged,

I'll bury myself and you and your dastardly crime in one common grave."

With a movement as rapid as that of the lightning above he swung the safety lanthorn against the wall behind him, and the protecting glass flew shattered in every direction, leaving a light naked and flaring, on which the storm immediately seized and tossed about in every direction. Above him towered the huge edifice which contained fifty thousand barrels of explosives. Immediately on his right was a narrow entrance into the building, to which a couple of stone steps gave access. In the space of a second he had run up those steps, his shoulder was against the door. The flame danced around him and lit up his stern face, which was set in a grim resolve.

"If one shout is uttered," he continued in a sonorous and resounding voice, "if another shot is fired, if one of you but dares to move, I break open this door, and within ten seconds, long before any man can find safety in flight, the first barrel of gunpowder will be aflame."

Overhead the thunder crashed—the storm raged in all its fury, and in the great quadrangle there was a sudden silence as in the city of the dead. Fivescore men were held paralysed with the horror of what they saw, spell-bound by the might and power of a man who knew not fear; inert by the near sight of a hideous death. And while the crowd stood there, meek and obedient, quivering with terror like a pack of wild beasts under the lash of the tamer, he added with withering scorn:

"And you thought that you could filch from me that which I hold in trust for the Empire of France! You fools! You wretched, slinking, cowardly fools!"

"In God's name, M. le Maréchal!" came in an awed whisper from one or two men in the forefront of the crowd—"in God's name throw away that light!"

"Not until you have thrown down your muskets!"

A hundred muskets fell with a dull clatter to the ground.

"The light, M. le Maréchal! the light . . .!"

"Now one of you ring the alarm bell!"

"The light . . .!"

"Silence!" he called aloud, so that the night air rang with his sonorous voice. "The alarm bell, I said. Pierre Deprez—you! The others stand at attention. Hands up!"

One man slunk away from the rest, and, shrinking, walked slowly in the direction of the Lodge.

The naked light of the lanthorn flickered in the storm; every moment it seemed as if it must catch the edge of de Maurel's blouse or the woodwork round the door. One hundred pairs of eyes were fixed in frenzied terror upon him

yet so potent was the feeling of horror which held the men in thrall, that not one of them dared to move if only to stretch out his hand toward that light which threatened them all with such an appalling death.

A moment or so later the first clang of the alarm bell reverberated through the manifold sounds of the storm. It was followed almost immediately by the multisonous hooting of sirens in the distance and the peal of the alarm bell from the foundry half a kilometre away.

And as the measured sounds of the bells and the sirens swelled to one majestic resonance, drowning now the roll of thunder and the soughing of the stormy blast, it seemed—for the space of one supreme second—that the men would repent them of their terror; for one second it seemed as if they would gather up their weapons again, and, throwing all prudence to the winds, rush and overcome that man who—single-handed—held them so completely in his power.

De Maurel, standing beside the door a step or two above them, saw the first sign of this reaction—the unmistakable oscillation of a crowd when it is moved by one common impulse. He felt the one weak spot in his armour—the possibility of his being struck even now by a chance musket-shot, so that not even with a dying gesture could he accomplish that which he was so grimly resolved to do. And without an instant's hesitation, even as like a wave the crowd swayed towards him, he lifted one corner of his linen blouse and held it to the flame; another second and the woodwork would most inevitably be ablaze.

A cry of horror rose from a hundred lips; the crowd swayed back—the supreme second had gone by; and coolly, with his free hand, de Maurel extinguished the flame on his blouse. Then he threw back his head and a loud laugh broke from his lips.

"And 'tis to such cowards," he said loudly, "that French men and women would entrust the destinies of France!"

IV

Five minutes later the quadrangle was seething with men. Mathurin had been the first to reach the precincts of the factory with the armed watchmen from the foundries; he was the first to recognize his master still standing with his back against the wall of the powder-magazine, holding a naked, wind-tossed light in his hand. There was no time for puzzlement or surprise; something of what had actually happened rose as a swift yet vivid picture before the loyal overseer's mind. The crowd of mutineers was not difficult to overpower—surrounded by the watchmen, they gave in without a struggle.

They were still dazed with the fright which they had had and made no attempt at resistance. At any rate, until they were well in hand, de Maurel did not move from his post. But he had put down the lanthorn and stamped out the light with his heel; after that, he stood quite still, only giving a few directions now and again in his resonant voice to Mathurin and his capable coadjutors. The watchmen of the factory, who had been surprised, overpowered and imprisoned in the Lodge before de Maurel's advent on the scene, were soon released, and their numbers added materially to the easiness of the task.

Soon the mutineers, in orderly array, were mustered up in the quadrangle preparatory to being marched back to their compound. Order reigned once more within the vast precincts of the factory. The excitement of a while ago, the shouts, the threats, the tumultuous cries of rage, of hatred and of fear, had given place to quick words of command, to brisk comings and goings, to measured tramps of feet and methodical click of arms. Overhead the thunder still rolled at intervals, and now and again the sky was rent by a flash of lightning; but the brunt of the storm had spent itself in the two terrific crashes which had proved de Maurel's most faithful allies in arousing the superstitious terror of those ignorant dastards. A warm, soft rain began to fall, further damping the ardour of the gang of rebels, as they filed past with hunched-up shoulders and shuffling footsteps—like whipped curs that feared more severe punishment yet to come.

CHAPTER XXII

HEAVEN AND EARTH

I

THEN at last de Maurel was able to turn to Fernande.

He came down the steps of the storehouse, and his eyes, so long dazed by the flicker of the naked light, searched for her in the gloom.

She had not moved from the spot which he had originally assigned to her, and he found her there, leaning against the wall, within the shelter of the recess formed by the framework and the steps of the doorway.

"Now I can carry you home, my beloved," he said simply.

After the nerve-rending emotion of a while ago, Fernande felt a sudden slackening of all her muscles, a numbness which invaded heart and brain. While de Maurel had stood facing the murderous crowd, with her life and his and that of all these men in his hand, while he was there resolved to annihilate his entire patrimony rather than to surrender it to the enemies

of his Emperor, she had felt only conscious of one desperate longing, which was to be held tightly in his arms and to meet death with her lips touching his.

That she loved him with her whole heart, with every fibre of her body, and all the fervour of her soul, she had known since that day in the woods, when he had almost wrenched an admission of her love from her, and only Laurent's intervention had frozen the avowal on her lips. When—silent and cold—she had then been forced to part from him, she had done so believing that he would never forgive her for the shame which she had put on him, and that his love for her, tumultuous and passionate as was his whole nature, had quickly enough turned to hate. During the year that ensued, when she felt that never in life perhaps would she ever see him again, she had realized that, unknowing, she had loved him from the hour when first he lifted her in his strong arms and carried her through the woods, the while the birds twittered overhead, and she could watch his face and the play of emotion and of passion in his deep-set eyes through the cool veil of a sheaf of bluebells. She had loved him then, even though in the weeks that followed she often thought that she hated him; by the time that true knowledge came to her it was too late.

Since then the irrevocable had happened: she had become Laurent de Mortain's promised wife, and a gulf now lay between her and the man whom she loved, which nothing but death could have helped them to bridge over. In the hour of that deadly peril, the unspoken word of a year ago had come to her lips; it had come, now as then, in response to his own compelling will, to that triumphant possession of her which already a year ago had nearly thrown her in his arms. "You love me, Fernande?" he had asked, and, face to face with the actuality which she had thought lay buried deep down in her heart, she could not deny its truth without perjuring her soul. And when he whispered in her ear: "It means death, my beloved!" she had been ready to throw herself in his arms, to ask for that one last kiss which would have made death both welcome and sweet. She felt then as if she were being lifted up on a huge wave of light to a glorious empyrean above, where her body fell away from her, and soul and spirit swooned in the enchantment of a divine ecstasy. She felt then that she was no longer mortal, that she had reached a state which was akin to that of the angels. She felt that sublime rapture which alone makes of Man a true child of God.

But now the danger was past; the tumultuous excitement of a while ago, the wild ecstasy of love in the face of death, had yielded to the sober reality of everyday life. It seemep

almost as if, when de Maurel finally stamped out with his heel the naked light which threatened annihilation, he had, at the same time, extinguished the flame of passion which was searing Fernande's soul. With the last dying flicker of that light, exultation which had carried her to the giddy heights of bliss folded its wings, and she came down to earth once more. It had been a steep and vertiginous descent, and she felt sore, bruised and dazed, groping blindly for the light which had so suddenly gone out of her life and left her lonely and cold. The mystic veil wherewith love had enveloped her vision of reality in this past hour, was being slowly torn from before her eyes; and the world appeared before her, not as she had seen it a while ago, through the blinding light of an overmastering passion, but as it was now in its dull and grim positiveness.

Gradually the thought of Laurent first, then of her father, then of de Puisaye, of her cause, and of her King, penetrated into her brain.

Duty, honour, loyalty, began to whisper in her ear, and soon their voices succeeded in drowning the still insistent murmur of love.

Laurent!

All this while she had forgotten him; nay, not only him, but her father and her King, her kindred and her cause. While she allowed swift passion to course through her veins, while she yielded to the delight of Ronnay's voice, of his nearness, of the love-light which gleamed in his eyes, her father and Laurent were on the high road between Mortain and Domfront and Tinchebrai, still secure in the thought that the projected coup had been successful, and that de Puisaye was even now on his way to take possession of La Frontenay and its accumulated wealth of arms. She pictured them both—her father and her betrothed—weary and footsore, risking their lives without a murmur, in order to accomplish the task which their chiefs had assigned to them to do; she pictured them defeated in their purpose—the garrisons of Domfront and Mortain on the qui vive—de Puisaye surprised with his force . . . the rebel army surrounded . . . scattered . . . annihilated . . . her father and Laurent fugitives or dead! . . . whilst she stood here oblivious of all save of the man whom she loved.

She dared not think of what would happen within the next few hours—she hardly dared to think of her father and of Laurent; but now that their loved image once more flitted across her mental vision, she endured the tortures of bitter self-abasement. God had manifested His will. He had stood by the brave man who, all alone and undaunted, had

known how to defend his heritage and the cause of his Emperor and of France. And she—Fernande—seeing the pack of murdering wolves around him, had yielded to a moment of frenzied horror at a crime which was nigh to being committed before her eyes.

In her heart she had betrayed her people when that moment of madness wrung an avowal of love from her lips. She had betrayed her kindred when she interposed herself between their sworn enemy and the murderer's bullet which would have laid him low. And she still betrayed them now when, instead of flying back to them on the wings of loyalty and of love, she lingered here, if only for a few brief minutes, savouring the bitter-sweet delights of the inevitable farewell.

Was there ever blacker, more hideous treachery ?

The light from the lamp above showed her Ronnay quite clearly, his brown hair taken back from the low, square forehead, the firm jaw and sensitive mouth, the toil-worn hands and linen blouse whereon the charred corner still bore mute and eloquent testimony to the unflinching heart that beat beneath its folds. And, above all, it revealed to her those eyes of his of a deep violet-blue, wherein passion and tenderness had kindled an all-compelling flame, and she knew that duty, loyalty, honour, compelled her to fly while there was yet time, and as far away as she could, lest the magnetism of his love drew her back to his arms once more.

Her place now was by the side of Laurent and of her father —in the midst of her friends at this hour, when black failure had dashed to naught all their dearest hopes. At La Frontenay, at Courson, at Mortain, there would be tears to quench and wounds to heal—God grant that a veil of mourning be not spread over all the land !—and she Fernande must be there to comfort and to soothe.

II

All these thoughts and emotions coursed so swiftly through heart and brain that they left her dazed, bewildered, with limbs icy cold and teeth chattering, the while her head felt as if it were on fire. Reaction had set in ; the excitement had been so intense, when death and passion fought for mastery over her entire soul, that the sudden relaxation of her nerves nearly caused an utter collapse of every one of her faculties.

It required an almost superhuman effort to regain complete possession of herself, to collect her thoughts, to chase away the last shreds of the dream. It would require a greater effort still to wrench herself away from this spot where she felt that henceforward her heart would remain buried. For the moment it meant gaining power over her limbs, which seemed

disinclined to render her service, and over her head wherein tumultuous thoughts still refused to be marshalled in orderly array; it meant, in fact, waiting for an opportunity to slip away as soon as she could. She knew in which direction lay the postern gate, and she knew her way back to La Frontenay. If she only could reach the château within the next half-hour, some means might yet be found to acquaint de Puisaye of what had occurred. She wondered vaguely how much de Maurel knew at this hour of what was in preparation over by Mortain, or what he could do if he knew everything.

The sight of the crowd still moving or standing, compact and busy, all round the storehouse maddened her. These men were impeding her way to the postern gate; they stood in the way of her getting to La Frontenay in time to send a runner over, even at this hour, to de Puisaye. It was nearly two hours since she left home—an eternity!—over half an hour since the first hooting of the sirens must have roused the countryside; and she still was so shaken, so numbed, so bruised, that she hadn't it in her to make a dash through the crowd, to push her way through all these men who would intercept her and would draw de Maurel's attention to her movements.

If he captured her and brought her back, if he refused to let her go, would she have the physical strength to resist? Oh, for a moment's darkness, an instant of silence, which would cover her flight!

Then at last the opportunity came. The groups around the storehouse gradually dispersed; the way lay clear as far as the angle of the building beyond which was darkness and solitude. Mathurin was engaging de Maurel's attention, and he—Ronnay—was standing half turned away from her. She gave one last look round her—one last look at the man whom she loved, and whom mayhap she would never in life see again, and in her heart she spoke a last, fond farewell. But as surely as a magnet draws to itself a piece of steel, so did this look of love from her compel and draw his gaze. Before she had time to move, he was down the steps and standing in front of her, so that he barred the way.

"Now I can carry you home, my beloved," he said.

He put out his arms ready to take hold of her. The wild excitement of the past half-hour had left no impress upon his iron physique save in a certain pallor of the cheeks and a stiffening of the firm jaw.

"I would have given my life's blood, drop by drop," he said simply, "to have spared you all that. You do believe me, Fernande, do you not?"

She could not reply. The instinct to fly, to run away, to

close her ears to his voice, her eyes to his gaze, was so insistent, that she could have screamed with longing and a maddened feeling of impotence. By an impulsive gesture of self-protection she put up her hands.

"Yes, yes!" she said, trying to speak coldly, indifferently, even though her voice sounded hoarse and choked, and she could not control the nervous chattering of her teeth and the trembling of her limbs. "Yes, yes! of course I'll believe you, *mon cousin!* . . . You did what was right . . . and I . . . But now I entreat you to let me go home. . . . My aunt will be so anxious and . . ."

"And you are cold and overwrought," he said ruefully. "Curse those brutes," he added, with a sudden access of primitive savagery, "curse them for the evil their treachery has wrought!"

Then as he saw that she suddenly shrank away from him and drew her cloak closer round her, he chided himself for his roughness. "I am a brute," he said gently, "and am for ever begging your forgiveness. My beloved, will you not trust yourself to me? You must be so tired . . . and the rain is coming down. We could be at La Frontenay in half an hour."

The events of the past fateful hour seemed to have faded from his ken. It seemed as if he had never stood there—a few paces away—that naked light in his hand, threatening destruction to a crowd of mutineers, destruction to himself, to his patrimony and to his beloved. He was just the same as he had always been—half clumsy, wholly compelling—whenever Fernande met him in the woods, and there was nothing between them save a still unavowed passion. She looked round her helplessly in vain search for a means of escape. She could not—dared not—speak for the moment. If she did, she knew that she must break down. She had gone through too much to have full power over her nerves; she felt unutterably weary, even though she knew that so much still lay before her, and though she was firmly resolved to play a loyal part to the end. In her heart she called out to him: "Yes! take me in your arms, my beloved; let me nestle against your shoulder; care for me, comfort me! The world is too difficult for my weak hands to grapple with!" And she had to close her eyes and to hold her lips tightly pressed together, or the heartrending cry would certainly have escaped them.

How long she remained standing thus silent and with eyes closed, she did not know—a minute perhaps—perhaps a cycle of ages. During that time she fought for mastery over her nerves and over her senses, and in the fight she felt herself growing strange and old, with every emotion in her dead, and

only the determination subsisting that he, too, must be made to remember that she was tokened to his brother, and that never, never while all three of them lived must the past hour be recalled again.

And de Maurel, the while, remained beside her, waiting patiently.

That was his way! Vehement as were his passions, tumultuous when they broke through the barrier of self-restraint, he had with it all the supreme virtue of infinite patience; in wrath, as in love, he always knew how to bide his time. Perhaps he guessed something of what went on behind those blue-veined lids on which he was aching to imprint a kiss. He could not see her face clearly, only just the delicate outline of her against the dark background of the wall, and occasionally a glint of gold when the light from above caught the loose tendrils of her hair.

When at last her fight was won, and nerves and senses fell into line with her determination to be loyal to Laurent in the spirit as well as in the letter, she felt as if every emotion in her was dead—as if she never would again be able to laugh and make merry, to cry, to love, or to hate—as if she would henceforth be just a callous, heartless, unfeeling thing without even the capacity for sorrow.

She looked at Ronnay and endured his glance without a tremor, and at last she was able to speak, knowing that there would be no quiver in her voice now to betray the agony of what she suffered.

"Of a truth, *mon cousin*," she said, with an indifferent little laugh, "it is passing kind of you to offer to be my beast of burden once again, but I assure you that I would not care to become quite so ludicrous a spectacle as you suggest before good old Mathurin and all your work-people. Believe me, I would far sooner go back to La Frontenay on my own feet. It would not be very dignified—would it?—for the future Marquise de Mortain to be carried along the road like a bundle of goods."

He said nothing for a moment or two, nor could she, by the dim light, read very clearly in his eyes whether her words had conveyed to him the full meaning which she intended, until he said quite simply: "Ah! I had forgotten."

A curious ashen colour overspread his face like that of a man suffering great physical pain.

And Fernande—poor Fernande!—with a forced laugh plunged the knife still more deeply into the gaping wound.

"Forgotten, *mon cousin?*" she said. "How could you have forgotten that I am your brother's promised wife? Did you not tender me your congratulations yesterday?"

"Of course, of course; I understand," he murmured vaguely, and he passed his hand once or twice mechanically across his brow. Then suddenly, with that rough directness which was so characteristic of him, he added simply: "But as long as life lasts, my beloved, I shall thank God on my knees for the one glimpse of Heaven which He gave me this night."

"There is a great deal, *mon cousin*,' she rejoined cold and firmly, "that both you and I must forget after this."

"Yes," he retorted. "I, for one, shall have to forget that my mother and my brother armed the hands of assassins against me."

Instinctively she called out: "It is false!"

"It is true, Fernande," he rejoined quietly, "and you know it. Some of my men who have just arrived from Domfront say that the woods beyond Mortain are alive with rebels. That murderous dastard Leroux has already betrayed the various threads of de Puisaye's latest intrigues. In order to try and save his own skin, which he will not succeed in doing," he continued grimly, "he has chosen to tell us all he knew—that my brother Laurent is on the high road at this hour with a gang of armed Chouans at his heels; so is M. de Courson. Another gang is on its way to these works in order to reap the fruits of Leroux' treachery. But our alarm bells have set the garrison of Domfront afoot; couriers are on their way to warn the commandants of Mortain and Tinchebrai. This comes of bribing a coward to become a traitor," he concluded harshly; "the disasters of this night will lie at the door of those who trafficked with assassins."

But Fernande no longer listened to him. Her dream had, indeed, vanished—vanished beyond recall, and she was back in the midst of all the calamity, the sorrow which would follow on the mistakes of this night. Indeed, the pitiless cowardice which had sent a brave man to face a band of murderers, alone and unwarned, had already received its awful punishment. Everything had been foreseen in de Puisaye's plans, everything had been thought out and arranged . . . save this: that one man, single-handed, would cow and dominate a crowd of murderous rebels!

Now there was nothing left but to stand shoulder to shoulder, and trust to God that the small armies under de Puisaye, de Courson and Laurent de Mortain, escaped with their lives. There was nothing left to do but to tend the wounded and bury the dead. Fernande's very soul ached now with the longing to be back at La Frontenay, and the magnitude of her desire gave her just the strength which she needed. Swift as a hare, she took advantage of a slight movement on his part and managed to slip by him out of her corner. And she had

started to run towards the postern gate ere he succeeded in overtaking her at the angle of the storehouse and once more barring her way.

This time he seized her in his arms.

"Where are you going, Fernande?" he cried peremptorily.

"Home!" she retorted. "Let me go!"

"You cannot go alone. The roads are unsafe."

"Let me go!"

"Not without me."

"Let me go! My place is with those I love."

In a moment his arms dropped down to his side and she was free. But the violence with which he had seized hold of her had made her unsteady on her feet; she tottered back a little, and then had to stand still a moment while she recovered her balance. The spell of his arms round her was upon her still; the dream voices of a while ago called out to her from afar . . . a last lingering farewell.

"Even so, an you will allow me," he said, after a moment or two, and his voice sounded cold and toneless; "even so I would like to escort you home. The sirens will by now have alarmed half the country-side—a vast number of men will be on their way hither—there will be a crowd upon the road—some of the men may be rough. Those who . . . those whom you love," he added with a harsh laugh, "would not wish you to go to them alone."

Then he continued more gently, and his voice became full of tender yearning: "Think you, my dear, that I do not understand? Why, there is nothing that you might think, or feel, or say, to which my heart would not immediately respond. You want to be at this time with those . . . with those whom you love; that is only natural, and in accordance with your sweetness and your kind and loyal soul. Your heart now is at La Frontenay. Let me take you thither. I swear to you that I will not come nigh you, that I will not speak to you unless you grant me leave. So I entreat you let me come with you. . . . I would not else know a moment's peace."

"You are very kind," she murmured, "but indeed, indeed, there is no cause for anxiety. Wrapped in my cloak I shall be quite safe, and the passers-by will be too busy to think of molesting me."

"Is my company, then, so distasteful to you, that you are so anxious to rid yourself of me?"

She felt her eyes filling with tears, but still she contrived to say firmly: "It were best that I went alone."

"As you will," he rejoined coldly.

He stood aside, and as she moved away from him, he called loudly: "Mathurin!"

"Here, M. le Maréchal," came from a distant corner of the quadrangle, and hurrying footsteps drew quickly near in answer to the master's call. Fernande, the while, busied herself with her cloak.

"Mathurin," said de Maurel curtly, as soon as the overseer was in sight. "Detail two of the men whom you can best trust—Henri Gresset and Michel Picart, if you can spare them—to escort Mademoiselle de Courson back to the château."

"Very good, M. le Maréchal," replied Mathurin.

"Tell them to await Mademoiselle at the postern gate."

"It shall be done, M. le Maréchal."

Then Mathurin saluted and turned on his heel. It was not his place to question or to show surprise. Even in the most remote cell of his brain there was not room for a rebellious or a disloyal thought. He had his orders and at once he set about to execute them, and a moment or two later his voice was heard calling to Gresset and to Picart.

"Will you at least allow me to walk with you as far as the gate?" asked de Maurel, after the man had gone.

"If you wish it," she replied. Then, with sudden unconquerable impulse, she added in a tone of agonized entreaty:

"My father . . . and Laurent?"

"What can I do?" he said with an impatient sigh.

"You have influence," she pleaded; "you can save them if you have the will."

"From the consequences of their own treachery?" he retorted harshly.

"Treachery?" she protested hotly.

"Let us call it folly. If Leroux' coup had succeeded the heritage which I hold in trust for France would have been wrenched from me with the help of assassins and of traitors."

"My father . . ." she pleaded.

"And my brother," he added grimly. "Both caught probably this night in arms against their country—condemned to be shot as traitors. . . ."

"Oh!"

"As traitors," he reiterated firmly. "A year ago the Emperor granted an unconditional pardon and amnesty to M. le Comte de Courson and to M. le Marquis de Mortain . . . and every day since then these loyal gentlemen have worked and plotted to hurl him from his throne."

"My father . . ." she pleaded once again. And she added under her breath: "You said just now that you could understand . . . everything. And M. de Courson is my father. . . ."

"And M. de Mortain, your future husband," he broke in with a derisive laugh and a shrug of his broad shoulders.

Then suddenly a swift wave of passion seemed to sweep right over him—a wave of rebellion against Fate, against his destiny, against all the misery, the sorrow, the endless desolation which that fact stood for. "Ah, Fernande!" he exclaimed hoarsely, "how can you trust me so completely, yet give your love to another man?"

She drew in her breath with a little moan of pain. He had hurt her by these words more surely than she had ever hurt him, for she, on her side, had never thought to doubt his love. She believed in it more than ever before, now that she knew that this parting must be for always. But she felt that she had his answer—his promise to help her father and Laurent if he could. Almost she was ashamed to have appeared before him in the end as a suppliant, yet proud in her heart that she had gained so much in the cause which she had pleaded; proud in the fact that Love held him so completely in its thrall, that no base thought, no mean desire for vengeance, had a place beside it in his heart.

Now there was nothing more to be said. The last word had been spoken between them, the last save the one which rose to their lips now ere they parted, but which must henceforth and for ever remain unsaid.

III

She pulled the hood of her cloak over her head, and then turned to go the way she had come just half an hour ago. The clock-tower was just striking eleven. At different points of the vast quadrangle small patrols of watchmen could be perceived making their rounds, seeing that everything now was well and safe. The last of the mutineers had been marched out through the main gates, the tramp of heavy feet was even now dying away in the distance.

The silence and quietude of a perfectly ordered organization was once more descending on Ronnay de Maurel's princely heritage, whilst in the heart of its owner there raged a tempest of sorrow and of longing which nothing on earth could ever still.

But he walked silently by her side, and though she was aching to get home as quickly as may be, she went along slowly, because she could hear him dragging his wounded leg more painfully than he had been wont to do.

It was a matter of two or three minutes only ere the postern gate, with its tiny light above, was in sight. Each side of it a man was standing at attention.

"Good-bye, dear cousin," she said, speaking as lightly as her aching heart would allow, "and thank you. I shall, indeed, feel quite safe under the protection of those stalwarts."

She paused, and for a moment it seemed as if she would hold her hand out to him. They were some twenty paces still from the gate—alone and with the darkness hiding them from every view.

"Fernande!" he called, in a voice which held a world of misery, of regret and of passion in its breaking tone.

"I must not tarry," she rejoined. "Laurent . . . your brother . . . will be anxious about me."

And with that she turned and ran quickly to the gate. The two men fell in behind her. Just for one brief second the tiny light from above glinted upon an aureole of gold. The hood had slipped down from her head, and she raised and slightly turned her face for one instant, just as she went through the gate.

And thus he saw her fair profile outlined by the flickering light, the line of nose and lips and the exquisite curve of her throat. A few drops of moisture clung to the loose tendrils of her hair and glistened like tiny diamonds in a setting of living gold.

Then she passed out of his sight into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER XXIII

AN HOUR'S FOLLY

I

MADAME LA MARQUISE DE MORTAIN had spent the evening shut up in her own room. At seven o'clock, and then again at nine, Annette had brought her some food on a tray. She ate it mechanically, feeling neither hunger nor fatigue. She did not know that Fernande had gone out, nor did she inquire after her. Of a truth, all thought of the young girl, of her own household, of everything, in fact, save the momentous events which were to occur this night had faded from her mind. After the solemn warning which she had given Fernande she felt no anxiety as to what the latter might do. The girl was undoubtedly under the spell of an unexplainable infatuation; but Madame la Marquise, self-absorbed and as callous of anyone else's feelings as she was of her own, put it all down to childish exaltation and somewhat unhealthy romanticism; marriage with Laurent would, she was sure, soon effect a cure. In the meanwhile Fernande would certainly do nothing to jeopardize de Puisaye's plan of campaign, now that Madame had put it so clearly before her, that M. de Courson's own life would be seriously imperilled if Ronnay de Maurel got wind of what was in the air.

Thus did Madame la Marquise dismiss from her mind all thoughts of her niece.

But she strove in vain to do likewise with those of her son. His face haunted her during those hours of lonely vigil in the privacy of her own room, while she waited for the first breath of news which would come wafted on the wings of the storm from the foundries to the Château of La Frontenay. She had steeled her heart against Ronnay—her eldest born—the son of the man whom she had hated beyond every other human creature on this earth. She had hated Ronnay during all the years that he was kept away from her; she had hated him when first she saw him again—a stranger to herself and to her kindred, an enemy to her caste. And when something indefinable in his character compelled her admiration and respect, she shut her ears to the call of Nature, to the insistent call of child to mother—that sweet, imperative call, which was all the more potent in this case as it had remained unspoken.

Entirely against her will, she could not help but see herself—her own character—reflected in Ronnay far more truly than in Laurent; she saw in him her own unbendable will, her energy, her impatience of restraint: and, above all, she saw in him that same worship of a political ideal—even though the ideal differed from her own—and the same readiness to sacrifice everything at its shrine.

And because there was so much in him that was akin to her own temperament, she continued to hate Ronnay de Maurel even though she no longer could despise him. To-night she was able to envisage coldly the possibility of his falling a victim to political schemes in which she had a hand. There was no compunction in her heart, no pity. In Ronnay she saw only the enemy of her cause, the traitor to his King. She felt like the incorruptible justiciary of old, who condemned his own son to the gallows when that son had offended against the laws of God; and if at times in the silence and loneliness which encompassed her while she watched and prayed, a feeling of softness or a pang of remorse knocked at the portals of her heart, she dismissed them resolutely, and soon both softness and remorse were consumed in the fire of her indomitable enthusiasm and energy.

And the hours went by leaden-footed. Madame, in her mind, was able to trace every movement of the Royalist army on its march from Mortain to Tinchebrai, to Domfront, to Sourdeval, to La Frontenay; she reckoned the hours and counted the minutes, ere she could assume with any certainty that Laurent had reached Domfront, M. de Courson, Mortain, and that de Puisaye had arrived at the factories. By that time Leroux would have reckoned with de Maurel, if, indeed, the latter had put his threat into execution and attempted to interfere in the defence of his own property, at the very

hour when the blow for the seizure of the factories would have to be struck. By midnight de Puisaye's men should be at La Frontenay and in undisputed possession of all the armament works; an hour later two contingents of them would be on their way to Domfront and back to Mortain, to relieve Laurent and M. de Courson and help them to complete the capture of the garrisons there.

After ten o'clock the lonely watcher began to strain every nerve in a wild endeavour to catch the first sound of distant firing, or see the first lurid glow that would illumine the sky. The storm then was at its height and vivid flashes of lightning, accompanied by terrific crashes of thunder, lit up for a second at intervals the park of La Frontenay and the heights far away in the distance, with the dusty main road winding its way like a pale-coloured riband through the woods and the villages scattered on the plain.

Madame stood by the open window in her boudoir, and to her overwrought fancy it seemed that the whole landscape was peopled with the armies of the King; that from Domfront and Mortain, from the valleys and the hills, there poured down toward the factories a victorious horde of Royalists who already held half the country-side in their power. Her heart was filled with a great joy—she felt like intoning a triumphant hymn of praise.

She could no longer stand still, but started pacing up and down the room like a caged panther. She had twisted her handkerchief into a tight, damp ball, and now and again she put it to her lips, else she would have screamed aloud in the agony of her suspense.

She carried the lamp into her bedroom, which opened out of the boudoir, leaving the latter in complete darkness, so that she might see more clearly out of the window.

"De Puisaye should be nearing the factories by now," she thought, "and Laurent should be well on his way to Domfront at this hour. Oh, God!" she added, in a fever of passionate excitement, "for one brief moment of second sight!"

II

Just then there came a knock at her bedroom door.

Madame thought it might be Fernande, or else Annette bringing her more food which she did not want, and impatiently she called: "Come in!"

The door was thrown open; she could see it from where she stood, and she turned, thinking that it must be Annette. The next moment she gave a cry:

"Laurent!"

She ran into the next room, her heart and mind suddenly assailed with a horrible foreboding. Laurent was standing on the threshold, pale, haggard, trembling visibly. His clothes were soiled, his boots muddy, his eyes looked dazed and feverish.

"Laurent, in the name of God, what has happened?" queried Denise de Mortain as calmly as she could, after she had dragged Laurent into the room and closed the door behind him.

He staggered to a chair and threw himself into it, in an obvious state of physical exhaustion.

"Where is Fernande?" were the first words which came to his lips.

"Fernande?" queried Madame with a frown. "I don't know. In her room, I think. But never mind about Fernande now. Tell me, in God's name, why you are here?"

"Fernande is not in her room," he retorted savagely, and, wearied though he so obviously was, he jumped up from his chair and stood facing his mother with hands clenched, eyes glowing and cheeks aflame. "Where is she?"

"I don't know," replied Madame as firmly and unconcernedly as she could. "She may be as impatient as I am and, unable to sit still, she may be wandering about somewhere in the house or round the gardens. I don't know, I tell you," she added fiercely. "Laurent, I insist upon knowing what your presence here means at this hour, when I thought you on the way to Domfront."

She tried to force him to look her squarely in the eyes. There was something so awful, so paralysing in the terror which was invading her whole being, that she dared not yet face the thoughts which at sight of Laurent had rushed wildly through her brain. She wanted to force an explanation from him, for she felt now that anything he said must be simpler, more intelligible than the horrible surmises which froze the very blood in her veins. But Laurent would not meet her searching gaze. Instead of this, he threw himself back into the chair, and, burying his head in his hands, he burst into a passionate flood of weeping.

He was weak, exhausted, footsore, his nerves were obviously strained to breaking point. Denise de Mortain's cold heart melted at the sight of his grief, but she made no movement to soothe him. The puzzled frown settled more deeply between her brows, and after a while, when Laurent's paroxysm had somewhat subsided, and he leaned his head in utter dejection and weariness against the back of the chair, she tapped her foot impatiently against the ground.

"Laurent," she said more quietly after a while, "you must

tell me what all this means. You must try and collect yourself as quickly as you can and try to explain to me why you are here—and in this state—wildly calling for Fernande, when I, your mother, thought you at Domfront engaged in the execution of your duty."

"A man's first duty, Mother," he retorted fiercely, "is to watch over the treasure which God has placed in his hands. Something told me that a wolf was prowling round my fold, and I came to guard what was mine and to shoot the wolf . . . if I could."

He spoke more coherently now. The violent paroxysm of weeping had eased the tension on his nerves. The look in his eyes was more full of anger, but less wild, and though heavy sobs still shook his frame from time to time, and a hot, feverish flush glowed on his cheeks and on his forehead, he was, on the whole, more master of himself.

"Will you explain more clearly what you mean?" queried Madame la Marquise coldly.

"I mean," he replied, "that ever since I parted from Fernande two days ago, torturing doubts have racked me till I thought my brain would burst. I have been on the threshold of frenzy, enduring torments of hell, the while de Puisaye and M. de Courson and all the others talked and manœuvred, and drilled and discussed plans, for the thousand thousandth time. Oh!" he continued vehemently, "I fought against my own thoughts, against my fears, against that lashing, flaying, maddening doubt. I fought against it till my head was in a whirl, and I began to marvel if, indeed, I was not insane."

"But why?" exclaimed Madame, in deeper perplexity than before. "In Heaven's name, why?"

"Will you deny, Mother," he riposted hotly, "that you, too, have felt doubts about Fernande?—that you, too, have watched the play of emotion on her face, the quiver of her mouth, the soft look in her eyes, the moment my brother Ronnay's name is mentioned?"

"Laurent!"

"Can you deny it?" he insisted.

Then, as she remained silent and merely shrugged her shoulders with well-affected indifference, he continued with the same vehemence: "Ah, you see, you cannot deny it! You cannot! You know that my doubts and fears are not the outcome of feverish hallucinations! Oh, my God!" he exclaimed, and put his hand up to his throat as if he were choking, "if only I could kill him with mine own hands. . . ."

"I'll deny nothing, Laurent," interposed Madame calmly,

and her harsh, stern voice acted like an icy douche on the young man's fierce passion. "I think that Fernande is foolish, childishly romantic. Something about de Maurel's personality has stirred her imagination. But there's nothing more in it than that, and . . ."

"Then why is she not here to-night?" he broke in savagely.

"You say that she is not here. But how do you know?"

"Because," he began, speaking slowly and measuredly, and Denise de Mortain had no cause to complain now that her son did not look her squarely in the face—"because two hours ago I saw Fernande stealing out of the château, wrapped in a dark cloak and alone, and making her way across the park. I did not want her to see me, so I stole to the gates and there watched for her coming. I wished to know whither she was going and I was determined to follow her. I watched and I waited, marvelling why she tarried. She did not come, and then I realized what a fool I had been. Whilst I had been standing on guard outside the great gates, she had slipped out by the side door in the wall, and I did not know whither she had gone. I was ready to dash my head against the iron gates; and there I stood, stupid, semi-imbecile, marvelling what I should do. Suddenly a passer-by came along and I hailed him. I asked him if he had seen a lady on the high road walking unattended and closely wrapped in a dark cloak. He answered me yes, and pointed the way she went. I thanked him, and as soon as his back was turned I started to run in the wake, as I thought, of Fernande. Then I came to a cross-road, where there was a sign-post, one arm of which bore the legend: 'La Frontenay,' and the other, 'La Vieuville.' La Vieuville, where my brother dwells! I spelt out every letter. I saw that it was distant five kilomètres. La Vieuville! Fernande had gone to La Vieuville to betray us all to Ronnay de Maurel!"

"That is false, I'll swear," exclaimed Madame, "and you, Laurent, are mad to imagine anything so monstrous against the girl whom you profess to love."

"Mad!" he riposted. "Of course I am mad! Did I not tell you that I had become mad?"

"What were you doing outside the gates of this château at nine o'clock to-night when . . ."

"When I should have been at Mortain," he broke in with a strident laugh, which seemed to go right through his mother's heart like a knife. "At Mortain, drilling a few oafs in the use of muskets which they haven't got. What was I doing here? Did I not say that I was watching over my property? I could not stay away, Mother," he cried wildly. "I could not! I suffered too much. I was going mad."

"So you—my son—Laurent Marquis de Mortain preferred to turn deserter?" she asked coldly.

"Mother!"

"I have yet to learn how it comes that when my son is under orders from his chiefs, at the hour when the destinies of his King and his country are at stake, how it comes that he has deserted his post."

"I left my men in charge of young de Fleurot, my most able lieutenant. I only wanted to speak with Fernande—only to see her for five minutes. I was here—outside the gates at nine o'clock—I could have seen her and spoken with her and be back at my post long before now. Even so, there is no harm done. Our contingent was not due to start until midnight. I have arranged with de Fleurot—in case I was detained—that he shall start at the appointed hour, and I would pick up the company at the cross-roads less than a kilomètre from here and not more than three from Domfront. But I should have been back at Mortain long before now," he reiterated testily, "only when I saw Fernande stealing out of the park like a pert wench going to meet her gallant, I lost my head and I followed her."

"All the way to La Vieuville?"

"All the way."

"And you saw her?"

"No."

"Had she been to the château?"

"No one could tell me. The château was shut up and dark. I hammered on the door. No one replied. I would have broken in the door, but it resisted my every onslaught."

"Then what did you do?"

"I lay in wait for some time—my pistol in my hand. If I had seen him, I would have shot him . . . him and Fernande too."

"How long did you wait?"

"I don't know . . . half an hour perhaps—perhaps more. No one came. The château was deserted. Somewhere in it, no doubt, Gaston de Maurel, that old reprobate, lay dying. But I realized that Fernande was not there, so I came away."

"Well? And then?"

"I came back here," he replied savagely. "I am here now to ask you where is Fernande?"

"Yes, you are here, my son," rejoined Denise de Mortain harshly, "at the post of dishonour, while your father and kindred are fighting for France."

"Mother!"

But now at last she turned on him with all the fury of a tigress roused to wrath. She had interrogated him coolly,

firmly, smothering the horror and the indignation which she felt. But the floodgates of her emotion would no longer be kept back; they broke into a torrent of unbridled vituperation.

"Traitor! deserter!" she cried. "How dare you remain here another minute? How dare you whine and fret before me, while every moment of the night is fraught with danger for your King and his cause? How dare you run on the high roads after a wench, like a jealous, love-sick swain, while your King hath need of every ounce of energy, of courage which you possess. Out of my sight, craven deserter! and pray to God that He may grant you grace to atone for your treachery with your blood!"

"Mother . . ." he protested firmly, as, stung by her words as with a lash, he had jumped to his feet and made a desperate effort to pull himself together.

"Not another word," she commanded. "When you have redeemed your cowardice by prodigies of valour, when you have held Domfront for your King in the face of overwhelming odds, you may come to me again . . . but not before."

She turned her back on him without another look and swept out of the room, leaving him standing there miserable, dejected, a hot flush of shame on each cheek as if she had struck him there. Once in the darkened boudoir, she tottered as far as the open window. Her knees were giving way under her. She leaned against the window-frame and with her hand clung desperately to the heavy curtain. Not a breath of air came from outside; the storm was at its height—vivid flashes of lightning tore the heavens asunder and the thunder crashed continuously overhead. A great sob broke from Denise de Mortain's throat. She had suffered this night the keenest torture, the deadliest ignominy, which heart of woman can endure; she had seen her beloved son—the one cherished idol of her loveless heart—sunk to a level of degradation from which nothing could ever raise him again.

She had seen him the prey of a base and futile passion, tortured by insensate jealousy which caused him to forget the most elementary dictates of honour. Desertion at the hour preceding the battle was infamy so heinous, that in her heart Denise de Mortain would have been vastly happier if they had brought Laurent to her on a stretcher—dead.

III

She stared out into the night, and suddenly she perceived a sound which came to her straining ears above the roll of thunder, from the direction of La Frontenay—a sound which at first brought a frown of deep puzzlement to her brow and then an icy feeling like the grip of death to her heart.

At the same time a slight noise behind her caused her to turn sharply round, and she saw Laurent standing under the lintel of the communicating door. He stood with his back to the light, so she could not see his face, but only the silhouette of him, the graceful, well-proportioned figure, the straight and slender limbs.

"I am going now at once, Mother," he said coldly, though his voice sounded hoarse and choked, and as he spoke he passed his hand once or twice across his brow. "You are quite right, I deserve all you say. But my reason had fled from me—I was not fully conscious of mine actions. Thank God that it is not too late to redeem my folly. In any event, I can meet de Fleurot at the cross-roads, and we'll be at Domfront soon after midnight. . . ."

"It is too late, my son," she broke in calmly—"too late for a de Mortain to do aught but die like a hero, even if he have lived his last hours like a coward."

"What do you mean, Mother?" he queried with a frown, for, indeed, for the moment he thought that it was his mother's turn to feel her brain unhinged. She had remained standing by the window, and now a flash of lightning showed her to him for one brief instant, a rigid, menacing figure, like that of a Sibyl presiding over his destiny, her head thrown back, her hand grasping the curtain; her face was the colour of ashes, and her eyes, large and glowing, were fixed denouncingly upon him.

"'Tis futile to take on such tragic airs," he added irritably, "just because I chose to spend my time on the high roads rather than cool my heels in the ditches of Mortain. I have told you that there's no harm done—that de Fleurot is in charge—that I shall pick him up on the way to Domfront—that I shall still lead our contingent just as it was arranged. I tell you that there's nothing lost. . . ."

"Everything is lost, my son," she replied coldly; "even your honour."

Then as he made no reply, but with a shrug of the shoulders quietly turned to go, she called out peremptorily:

"Hark!"

Instinctively he paused on the threshold. From far away, in the direction where lay the factories of La Frontenay, there came through the intermittent hush of the storm the loud clang of a bell, followed immediately by the shrill hooting of a siren.

"The alarm bell and the sirens at the factories," said Denise de Mortain slowly.

"Good God!" exclaimed Laurent, as, rooted to the spot, he remained standing for one short second, straining his ears to listen. "What can it mean?"

"That the unforeseen has occurred," she rejoined harshly, "and that there are two traitors in our family, my son—you and Fernande."

"No! no!" he cried, horrified to hear his mother put into words that which he himself had dared to think.

"Fernande de Courson has betrayed her King in order to save her lover," continued the Marquise, as she pointed an accusing finger in the direction whence the hooting of sirens and the continuous clang of alarm bells rose above the confused sounds of the storm. "And whilst friends and kindred prepare to conquer or to die for their faith, Laurent de Mortain goes philandering after a petticoat!"

But the sting of her last words had not the time to reach him. Already he had run to the door, tearing it open as he ran; the next moment his scurrying footsteps were heard echoing all through the silent château—along the vast corridors, down the monumental staircase and across the marble hall, until the clang of the great glazed doors proclaimed that he was out of the house.

Then Madame leaned out of the window as far as she could. She could still hear Laurent running down the perron steps and at full speed along the gravelled drive. Once the lightning lit up the whole extent of the park, the trees, the paths, the flower-beds, and the tall iron gates in the distance; but she could not see Laurent. He was already far away.

The sound of sirens and alarms had not ceased. Over there around Mortain men were making ready to fight or die for their King. One of the last efforts for restoring an effete Bourbon to his throne was about to be drowned in a sea of bloodshed. The unforeseen had happened—what it was the lonely watcher could not conjecture. But she fell on her knees beside the open window, and, burying her head in her hands, she moaned and prayed: "God, my God! grant that he may die fighting; do not punish one moment's folly by a lifelong disgrace."

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER THE STORM

I

It was close upon midnight when Fernande made her way to Madame la Marquise's boudoir. She found her there, on her knees still, her hands folded and stretched out over the window-sill, her head buried in her arms.

The rain was coming down in torrents. Fernande herself, on her way home, had been drenched to the skin. But this

was not the time to think of wet and cold, of health or of prudence. She had thrown down her cloak in the hall and at once went up to her aunt's room.

The boudoir was dark, only from the next room there came the feeble rays of reflected light from the lamp. With a cry of burning anxiety Fernande ran to Madame. Denise de Mortain had knelt before the open window ever since her son's flying footsteps had ceased to resound through the château; she had knelt here absolutely prostrate with grief, her heart tortured with the desire to see her beloved son killed rather than openly disgraced. Fernande, as she bent over her, could feel that her arms and shoulders, her hands and her hair were soaked through. With gentle words and persuasive strength she tried to drag her away from the window.

"*Ma tante,*" she said appealingly, "it is I—Fernande. Won't you speak to me?"

She felt a shiver going right through Denise's kneeling form; she racked her brain in wonderment as to what had caused this utter moral collapse in a woman who was always so full of indomitable energy.

"*Ma tante!*" she reiterated more firmly, "I pray you listen to me. There is something which I must tell you now—at once."

She managed gradually to raise Madame up in her own strong young arms, and to lead her to a chair close by. Denise was only half conscious. She sat in the chair, with her head rolling from left to right against its back, her eyes closed, her hands inert. Fernande ran into the bedroom. She brought in the lamp and a towel, and she dried Madame's face and hands and wiped the moisture from her dress and hair. Then she took the cold, numb hands in hers and began chafing them, rubbing the fingers, trying to infuse life into them with her warm breath.

After a while consciousness began to return. The head ceased its weird rolling, and lay quite still against the back of the chair. A certain degree of warmth communicated itself to the fingers and an occasional tremor shook the pain-wearied frame.

Then Madame la Marquise opened her eyes. For a moment or two she looked round her dazed, and still held in the arms of semi-consciousness. She looked straight into the lamp, and the pupils of her eyes slowly contracted until they appeared like small pin-points, with the iris round them steely and pale.

Then her gaze fastened itself on Fernande—first on the hem of her gown, wet and muddy after the long tramp through

the rain; then it wandered up by degrees to the girl's slender, white hands, with the delicate fingers interlaced and the diamond ring—Laurent's gift—gleaming in the lamplight.

Then she met the girl's blue eyes fixed compassionately, tenderly upon her. In a moment full consciousness returned to her. She drew herself up, and, leaning her hands against the arms of the chair, she was able to struggle to her feet.

"*Ma tante* . . ." began Fernande gently.

"Who are you?" queried Madame la Marquise coldly, "and what do you want?"

Instinctively Fernande put out her arms: the strange query, the raucous timbre of the voice, struck with unexplainable terror into her heart—something, she thought, had happened during her absence—something awesome and terrific, which had unhinged this woman's cool and powerful brain.

"Who are you?" reiterated Denise de Mortain coldly.

"Why, *ma tante*," rejoined Fernande gently, "do you not know me? I am Fernande—I have just come home and found you here. . . ."

"No, you are not Fernande," broke in Madame harshly—"not my niece, Fernande de Courson, the daughter of my dear, dear brother. You are a ghoul!" she cried excitedly, "a monster . . . a hideous abortion . . . a de Courson turned traitor. . . . I do not know you!"

Still Fernande did not realize the truth. She was convinced now that the excitement of the day and the weary watching throughout the evening had acted banefully on Denise de Mortain's brain. That she was unnerved there could be no doubt; there was an unnatural glow in her eyes, and the pallor of her cheeks was almost ghost-like. The young girl, genuinely alarmed, made a movement in the direction of the bell-pull. She and Annette could, at any rate, put Madame to bed ere a high fever brought on any further complications. But before she could reach the bell Madame had interposed calmly:

"I am neither ill nor insane," she said. "But this is my room, and I order you out of it. Go! Out of my sight—now—at once—do you hear?"

"*Ma tante*," protested Fernande, who, of a truth, felt so bewildered that she did not know what to think, what to say, what to make of this extraordinary, this appalling situation. "Something has unnerved you," she continued with calm dignity. "An you will not allow me to attend to you or to ring for Annette, I had best retire until you are in a fit condition to listen to what I have to say. But I warn you that it is urgent. Every second wasted in this unex-

plainable misunderstanding may mean danger . . . if not worse . . . to my father and to our friends."

"Your treachery," retorted Madame quietly, "has already wrought all the evil and brought untold danger to all our friends and death to a great many—to your father, perhaps, to Laurent, certainly. There is nothing that you can say to me now which can avert the awful catastrophe for which you and you alone are responsible."

"Treachery!" exclaimed Fernande. "I?"

"Yes, you! The surprise coup planned by de Puisaye has failed. The alarm was given at the armament works an hour and a half ago; since then there has been continuous firing in the direction of Mortain. The garrison there has been aroused, that of Domfront, too, no doubt. Some of our contingents have been surprised. They are selling their lives dearly at this hour. Your father is probably fighting over there. Who is it, then, who has betrayed us to Ronnay de Maurel and delivered our brave little army into the hands of our enemies?"

"Not I!" protested Fernande loudly.

Light had suddenly broken on the hideous mystery which had confronted her when she first entered this room. She understood everything now—her aunt's prostration, her despair the semi-insanity which was overclouding her brain, making her see lurid phantoms of treachery. She—Fernande—was suspected of having betrayed her father, her lover, her friends; and Madame la Marquise, clinging to that abominable thought, was rapidly losing all sense of justice, of reasoning and of right. The girl's very soul was outraged at the monstrous accusation.

"How dared you harbour such abominable thoughts of me?" she cried indignantly.

A strident laugh broke from Denise de Mortain's throat.

"Would you prefer it if I thought that you had stolen out of the château to-night—and alone—in order to meet a swain behind the nearest hedge?"

"Oh!"

"That was Laurent's estimate of you; and I—like a fool—thought he must be mad."

"Laurent?"

"Laurent was here—to-night," continued Madame, as she came a step or two nearer to Fernande, and the words—hot, passionate, fierce—came tumbling through her lips. "For two days he was tortured with thoughts of your treachery. I tell you he seemed nearly mad. To-night he could hold out no longer. He deserted his post—he, who is the soul of honour! He came here, just in time to see you steal out

of the château like a flirty wench. An hour and a half ago the alarm bell from the factories clanged through the night. Laurent was here then, pouring out his heart in bitterness and in misery. But the sound recalled him to his duty, which he had forgotten while thinking of you. He went back in order to redeem the hour of folly which led him to desert his post. He went back in order to die fighting beside my brother and his friends."

"Oh, my God!" moaned Fernande, as she covered her face with her hands.

Even while she allowed the torrent of Madame's unjust reproaches to break over her innocent head, she had already realized the hopelessness of her own situation, the hopelessness of it all. Guiltless as she knew herself to be, she almost understood, and was nigh to forgiving Madame's horrible suspicions of her. The awful seed of the dastardly murder projected against a defenceless man had, indeed, borne bitter fruits of disaster and of shame; and she, who had tried to avert one awful catastrophe, had unknowingly precipitated another. By her absence from home to-night she had left Laurent at the mercy of his mother; and he, with the guilt of desertion upon his conscience, was left to face her until, driven to desperation by the harshness and the cruelty which still glittered in Denise de Mortain's eyes, he had rushed off, blindly perhaps, to his death.

An overwhelming pity for this hard, callous woman suddenly filled Fernande's sensitive heart. All that she herself had suffered, all that she was yet destined to suffer, was as nothing compared to the bitterness of self-reproach which anon must assail the mother of Laurent—the mother of Ronnay de Maurel: and when, exhausted by the vehemence of her own eloquence, Madame la Marquise fell back into her chair, panting and overwrought, Fernande drew near to her, despite her vigorous protest, and knelt affectionately by her side.

"*Ma tante*," she said gently, while tears of sweet compassion gathered in her eyes, "you have been passing cruel and unjust to me, and just for a moment I felt nothing but anger against you. But since you have told me about Laurent, I feel that I can understand. Before the God who made me, I swear to you that I had no hand in warning our enemies of what was intended. How could I have, seeing that my own dear father's life was involved in the affair? I went to the factory to-night with the sole intention of staying Leroux' hand from committing a dastardly murder—a murder, *ma tante*," she continued with firm energy, "that despite victory, despite the utmost triumphs, would for ever have sullied our cause and weighed us all down with

bitter self-reproach. Had Leroux listened to me, I still believe that M. de Maurel would never have suspected what was in the air; it was Leroux' threats, Leroux' attitude, which put him on the scent. I was there; I saw it all. When Leroux, with his wild and menacing talk, had given away the best part of M. de Puisaye's plan, Ronnay de Maurel—your son, *ma tante*—stood with a naked light in his hand ready to blow up the entire factory rather than let it fall into our hands. Leroux and his mates were cowed; they were poltroons as well as fools, and M. de Maurel forced one of the men to ring the alarm bell. That is what happened at the La Frontenay works, *ma tante*. The hooting of the sirens roused the neighbouring villages and the garrison of Domfront. I escaped out of the factory as soon as I was able; since then I have been on the high road, tortured with fears as to what has happened to my father and what to Laurent. But by all that I hold most dear, *ma tante*, what I have told you is the truth."

Madame had listened in silence, at first with averted head and with a look of sullen obstinacy on her face. She would have given much to remain unconvinced. The burning indignation which she had felt at Laurent's conduct had to vent itself on the innocent cause of it. After a while she looked into Fernande's face with a piercing, searching gaze. She would have liked to hold the girl's soul naked before her eyes, and to search within its innermost recesses for a sign of guilt or even of weakness. But it was impossible to look for long into the sweet, earnest face and the limpid blue eyes which were the true mirrors of candour and of purity, and to affect doubt which no longer could exist. In her heart, Madame knew that Fernande spoke the truth. Everything that she said bore the impress of actual facts witnessed and faithfully recorded. Madame was bound to admit it, but she was far too self-willed and obstinate to do so generously—and, above all, she knew that never as long as she lived would she forgive Fernande de Courson for having been the cause—however innocent—of Laurent's unpardonable conduct.

"It may be the truth," she said grudgingly—"it is the truth, no doubt, since you are prepared to swear it."

"Do you still doubt me, *ma tante?*"

"No. But one thing, my girl, is certain—and that is if Laurent had not seen you stealing out of the château—if he had spoken for five minutes with you—he would have hone straight back to his post, and would not now be under gte suspicion of having deserted his men in the hour of danger."

To this senseless accusation Fernande made no reply. What would have been the use? She could not have convinced

Madame that it was Laurent's insensate jealousy which had been the primary cause of his undoing. Except for those few brief seconds, when she boldly faced a horrible death beside the man whom she loved, she had not harboured one disloyal thought of Laurent, or spoken one disloyal word. Her love for Ronnay de Maurel she could not destroy; it had its roots in the innermost fibres of her heart. She was no more responsible for that feeling than was Denise de Mortain for her callousness or Laurent for his vehement temper. All that she could do to wrench herself away from its influence she had done; and in the process she had plucked out her heart-strings and martyrized her very soul. In the lonely walk from the factories to the château she had fought against the veriest thought of rebellion; she had sacrificed her whole life, her every hope of happiness on the altar of unimpassioned loyalty. Whenever she met Laurent again she could look him fearlessly in the eyes, she could grasp his hand in all honour and friendship. The image of Ronnay de Maurel lay buried deep down in her heart, and to the memory of that one mad and rapturous moment she had bidden an eternal farewell.

Now when she felt Madame's cold enmity enveloping her as with an icy mantle, she felt how desperately far from her would happiness lie in the future. On the merest threshold of her life she saw the endless years that were in store for her, between a man who would for ever torture her with his turbulent passion and a woman who would paralyse her with relentless animosity. The catastrophe of this night—and God alone knew yet its full extent—would always be laid at her door. She saw this in Denise de Mortain's every look, in the scornful stiffening of her whole attitude, as she drew herself away from the slightest contact with her niece; and after a moment or two of silence, the involuntary appeal broke from the poor girl's lips: "Will you always hate me like this, *ma tante?*"

Madame la Marquise looked at her coldly.

"I do not know," she replied. "Always is a long time, and it is impossible for any human mind to know if it will ever forgot. But this I do know, that never with my consent will you become my daughter. If Laurent is spared this night, I shall devote every hour, every moment of my life, to parting him from you."

"You will remain unjust to the last?"

"Unjust?"—and Denise de Mortain shrugged her shoulders calmly. "Love and hate are never just, and I could never dissociate you from the memories of this night."

She rose from her chair, her whole attitude now one of

cool indifference. Ever since she had accepted Fernande's explanation she had made desperate efforts to regain the mastery over her nerves and to conceal every outward manifestation of the burning anxiety which she felt. At last she had succeeded, but the struggle had left her weary and wellnigh spent. Her face was pale, her eyes circled with purple, and there was a feeble quiver round her bloodless lips.

"It may be hours," she said coldly, "and it may be days, ere we get authentic news. What do you propose to do?"

"To start for Courson at daybreak," replied Fernande with equal calm. "I must be on the spot in case my father is able to return there."

"And I will remain here until I know that both he and Laurent are safe. But remember," she added, and something of the old domineering, managing tone crept back into her voice, "that the peace and quietude of the past year are at an end; that once more we are on the branch, once more we stand with one foot on the way to exile. For the next few days there will be perquisitions, molestations arrests. The infamous police of Bonaparte will not be slow to avenge the scare it has received this night."

"I shall be ready to follow my father whenever or wherever he may want me," rejoined Fernande coldly.

For a moment it was on the tip of her tongue to tell Madame that Ronnay de Maurel would look after the safety of her father and of Laurent. She had his promise, and he was not a man to leave a stone unturned ere he fulfilled that promise. Though her heart was aching with anxiety, she felt comforted in the thought that the one man who could help those she cared for, by standing by them at this hour, would do it whole-heartedly, and would throw into the scales of any pending reprisals the whole weight of his influence and of his wealth.

But it would have been worse than futile to mention de Maurel's name again now. Madame, in any case, would refuse to be comforted, and the floodgates of her resentment would certainly break out afresh. She—Fernande—was sorely in need of quietude; she felt that she could not endure another scene. She was desperately sorry for her aunt; Madame's anxiety for Laurent must be positively heartrending, but nothing could be gained by further recriminations, further reproaches, which only helped to embitter these hours of suspense and of dread.

Fernande felt confident that de Maurel would send her news as soon as he knew anything definite; until then many weary hours would go by, she knew, but at least let them go by in peace. Her hope rested in God and, next to Him,

in the loyalty and the power of the man who loved her so selflessly.

So she bade her aunt a formal good-night, and with a great sense of relief she went quickly to her room.

II

Denise de Mortain, too, was glad to find herself alone once more. She drew the chair to the open window and sat down, prepared to wait. Though she was so tired that she could hardly move, she felt that she could not rest. The house was very still now; all the servants had long since gone to bed. They were a set of faithful but utterly stupid peasants from the village, and had no notion of what went on outside the park gates. Matthieu Renard and Annette knew, and they remained on the watch. Old Matthieu would not go to bed until he could bring Madame la Marquise some news which would comfort her, and Annette waited where she could hear the bell, in case Madame wanted anything.

Madame, sitting by the open window, peered out into the night. The firing sounded more distant now and more intermittent; the rain had ceased and the darkness was less intense. Overhead large patches of star-studded indigo appeared between the fissures in the clouds. The weary watcher, gazing out into nothingness, her eyes aching with sleeplessness and many unshed tears, fell anon into a semi-wakeful languor, while the early hours of the morning sped leaden-footed by.

Suddenly something woke her to full consciousness. She sat up, shivering a little; the morning air struck fresh and cool against her face. Through her torpor-like sleep she had been conscious of the swift gallop of a horse on the hard road drawing rapidly nearer. Now she was fully awake, she could hear the clatter of the hoofs—someone was coming along at break-neck speed—bringing news probably. She jumped to her feet; the horse had been brought to a halt outside the gates; the next moment she heard a murmur of voices and then the sound of footsteps coming up the drive.

Madame, leaning out of the window, called out peremptorily: "Who goes there?"

But she received no reply. Whoever had arrived at this early hour had gone into the house. Through the dream-like recollections of what she had heard, it seemed to Denise that the voice of Fernande had mingled with that of two men, one of whom might have been old Matthieu.

She rang the bell violently. Then she looked at the clock. It was close on five.

After a few minutes there was a knock at the door, and in response to an impatient "Come in!" it was opened, and Fernande, pale, obviously tired to death, and with dark circles under her eyes, came into the room.

"What is it?" queried Madame, in a voice broken by fatigue and nerve-strain.

"One of the overseers from the armament works, *ma tante*," replied Fernande, "with a message from M. de Maurel."

"I desire no message from M. de Maurel," said Madame curtly; "let him tell you what he wants and go back the way he came."

"There is another man with him, *ma tante*," hazarded Fernande, after some hesitation—"one of our people—a prisoner with news of M. de Puisaye."

Madame waited a moment or two, frowning, debating between her pride which prompted her to refuse to see an emissary of de Maurel, and the agony of suspense which was near to killing her. Anxiety gained the victory.

"Very well," she said. "Let the men come up."

Fernande went, and a minute or two later she returned followed by two men, one of whom was Mathurin, chief overseer of the de Maurel smelting works. Both men looked as if they had ridden hard. Mathurin's coat and hat were covered with dust; the other—a true type of the Chouans, of those who had fought under de Frotté and Cadoudal—was dressed in a tattered blouse and ragged linen breeches; the soles of his boots had parted from their uppers; he was unkempt and unwashed. Fernande closed the door behind them, then she slipped round behind Madame to the corner by the open window, where she could feel the fresh morning air and rest her aching head against the heavy curtain. Mathurin had already told her briefly what he had been sent to say; his orders were to see Mademoiselle de Courson first, and then Madame la Marquise if she asked for him. Fernande, ensconced beside the window, unseen by her aunt, could safely indulge in the luxury of tears and of silence.

When the men entered, Madame la Marquise had looked for a moment keenly and searchingly at the old Chouan. She was ready and eager to catch the slightest movement or flitting glance which might have been meant for a signal. She felt anxious and puzzled, marvelling why de Maurel had sent a messenger to her—at this hour—and what was the meaning of this prisoner brought hither to speak with her. Then she turned haughtily to Mathurin.

"Who has sent you?" she queried peremptorily.

"M. le Maréchal Comte de Maurel," replied Mathurin, after he had touched his forelock with every mark of respect.

"And who are you?" asked Madame again.

"Chief overseer at the smelting works."

"Why did M. de Maurel send you?"

"M. le Maréchal thought Madame la Marquise and Mademoiselle de Courson would be anxious to know what had happened last night."

"Well," she said coldly, "what did happen?"

"Our alarm bells and sirens went off at half-past ten, Madame la Marquise."

"I know that—I heard them."

"The mutineers, with Paul Leroux at their head, have been arrested by our watchmen. Leroux confessed that he had been bribed to murder M. le Maréchal, and to deliver the armament works into the hands of a band of Royalists under M. de Puisaye."

"Did M. de Maurel order you to say this?"

"He desired Madame la Marquise to know that Leroux was a coward as well as a traitor."

"Leroux' personality . . . Who is Leroux, by the way? . . . does not interest me. Go on."

"Our sirens aroused the garrison of Domfront. The commandant sent over one of his officers with a small detachment of infantry to see what was amiss. He only thought of fire or of a mutiny among the convicts, and he was ready to send us help."

"Well? And then?"

"M. le Maréchal interrogated Leroux in the presence of the officer. Leroux made a clean breast of all he knew. M. de Maurel then sent his own couriers from the works to Domfront, to Tinchebrai, and to Mortain, warning the different commandants against possible attacks from roaming bands of Chouans. Within a couple of hours all the garrisons were afoot and in touch with one another."

"Then what happened?"

"This man here, Madame la Marquise," said Mathurin, indicating his companion, "will be able to tell you better than I can what happened in the ranks of the Chouans. He fell a prisoner in our hands early in the night. M. le Maréchal had ridden over to Mortain, and I was with him when this man was brought in a prisoner. M. le Maréchal questioned him, and then gave him over into my charge. 'Take the fellow over to La Frontenay, Mathurin,' he said to me. 'Madame la Marquise de Mortain and Mademoiselle de Courson will want to hear what he has to say.' So we both got to horse and rode hither as fast as we could."

"Very good," said Madame determinedly. "Leave the man here with me. I desire to speak with him alone."

Mathurin, at the peremptory command, appeared to hesitate. "Madame la Marquise . . ." he stammered.

"*Ah çà*," she retorted haughtily, "has M. de Maurel sent you here perchance as my jailer?"

Mathurin, thus challenged, did not know what to say. Madame la Marquise had a way with her which imposed her will on every one around her. The worthy overseer was certainly not vested with powers to gainsay her wishes. He was a shrewd man, loyal to the depth of his simple heart and ready to be hacked to pieces for M. le Maréchal; he would have defied an army of haughty ladies if he thought any harm could come from a private interview with this ill-conditioned old rascal; but in this case prudence and conciliation was perhaps the wisest course. And somehow he felt that Mademoiselle de Courson's presence was, in any case, a safeguard against any further intrigues against his master. So after an imperceptible moment of hesitation he made a curt obeisance and backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Far be it from me to suggest that good old Mathurin listened at the keyhole, but I make bold to assert that very little of Madame la Marquise's private conversation with the old Chouan escaped him.

III

As soon as the door had closed on Mathurin, Denise de Mortain turned to the man and said, speaking curtly and rapidly:

"Your name is Jean Blanchet. I know you. Well, tell me quickly everything you know. When was the alarm given in your camp?"

"At about half-past eleven, Madame la Marquise," replied the man. "I and six of my mates were patrolling the approaches of the town, when we heard a rumour that the garrison inside the city was astir. News had arrived, so 'twas said, that bands of Chouans were preparing a surprise attack. M. de Puisaye had his headquarters in the Cerf-Volant woods south of the town; there was only just time to run and warn him of what was in the air."

"Well?"

"M. de Puisaye at once ordered the alarm to be sounded. Within ten minutes the whole camp was afoot and M. de Puisaye then commanded the retreat."

"What?" exclaimed Madame. "Without striking a blow?"

"What would have been the use?" retorted the man with a shrug of the shoulders. "We had next to no arms, and to make a stand would have meant fighting against at least two companies of infantry and a battery of artillery, which could