

The Honor of the Name

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Chapter 1

On the first Sunday in the month of August, 1815, at ten o'clock precisely--as on every Sunday morning--the sacristan of the parish church at Sairmeuse sounded the three strokes of the bell which warn the faithful that the priest is ascending the steps of the altar to celebrate high mass.

The church was already more than half full, and from every side little groups of peasants were hurrying into the church-yard. The women were all in their bravest attire, with cunning little fichus crossed upon their breasts, broad-striped, brightly colored skirts, and large white coifs.

Being as economical as they were coquettish, they came barefooted, bringing their shoes in their hands, but put them on reverentially before entering the house of God.

But few of the men entered the church. They remained outside to talk, seating themselves in the porch, or standing about the yard, in the shade of the century-old elms.

For such was the custom in the hamlet of Sairmeuse.

The two hours which the women consecrated to prayer the men employed in discussing the news, the success or the failure of the crops; and, before the service ended, they could generally be found, glass in hand, in the bar-room of the village inn.

For the farmers for a league around, the Sunday mass was only an excuse for a reunion, a sort of weekly bourse.

All the cures who had been successively stationed at Sairmeuse had endeavored to put an end to this scandalous habit, as they termed it; but all their efforts had made no impression upon country obstinacy.

They had succeeded in gaining only one concession. At the moment of the elevation of the Host, voices were hushed, heads uncovered, and a few even bowed the knee and made the sign of the cross.

But this was the affair of an instant only, and conversation was immediately resumed with increased vivacity.

But to-day the usual animation was wanting.

No sounds came from the little knots of men gathered here and there, not an oath, not a laugh. Between buyers and sellers, one did not overhear a single one of those interminable discussions, punctuated with the popular oaths, such as: "By my faith in God!" or "May the devil burn me!"

They were not talking, they were whispering together. A gloomy sadness was visible upon each face; lips were placed cautiously at the listener's ear; anxiety could be read in every eye.

One scented misfortune in the very air. Only a month had elapsed since Louis XVIII. had been, for the second time, installed in the Tuileries by a triumphant coalition.

The earth had not yet had time to swallow the sea of blood that flowed at Waterloo; twelve hundred thousand foreign soldiers desecrated the soil of France; the Prussian General Muffling was Governor of Paris.

And the peasantry of Sairmeuse trembled with indignation and fear.

This king, brought back by the allies, was no less to be dreaded than the allies themselves.

To them this great name of Bourbon signified only a terrible burden of taxation and oppression.

Above all, it signified ruin--for there was scarcely one among them who had not purchased some morsel of government land; and they were assured now that all estates were to be returned to the former proprietors, who had emigrated after the overthrow of the Bourbons.

Hence, it was with a feverish curiosity that most of them clustered around a young man who, only two days before, had returned from the army.

With tears of rage in his eyes, he was recounting the shame and the misery of the invasion.

He told of the pillage at Versailles, the exactions at Orleans, and the pitiless requisitions that had stripped the people of everything.

"And these accursed foreigners to whom the traitors have delivered us, will not go so long as a shilling or a bottle of wine is left in France!" he exclaimed.

As he said this he shook his clinched fist menacingly at a white flag that floated from the tower.

His generous anger won the close attention of his auditors, and they were still listening to him with undiminished interest, when the sound of a horse's hoofs resounded upon the stones of the only street in Sairmeuse.

A shudder traversed the crowd. The same fear stopped the beating of every heart.

Who could say that this rider was not some English or Prussian officer? He had come, perhaps, to announce the arrival of his regiment, and imperiously demand money, clothing, and food for his soldiers.

But the suspense was not of long duration.

The rider proved to be a fellow-countryman, clad in a torn and dirty blue linen blouse. He was urging forward, with repeated blows, a little, bony, nervous mare, fevered with foam.

"Ah! it is Father Chupin," murmured one of the peasants with a sigh of relief.

"The same," observed another. "He seems to be in a terrible hurry."

"The old rascal has probably stolen the horse he is riding."

This last remark disclosed the reputation Father Chupin enjoyed among his neighbors.

He was, indeed, one of those thieves who are the scourge and the terror of the rural districts. He pretended to be a day-laborer, but the truth was, that he held work in holy horror, and spent all his time in sleeping and idling about his hovel. Hence, stealing was the only means of support for himself, his wife, two sons--terrible youths, who, somehow, had escaped the conscription.

They consumed nothing that was not stolen. Wheat, wine, fuel, fruits-- all were the rightful property of others. Hunting and fishing at all seasons, and with forbidden appliances, furnished them with ready money.

Everyone in the neighborhood knew this; and yet when Father Chupin was pursued and captured, as he was occasionally, no witness could be found to testify against him.

"He is a hard case," men said; "and if he had a grudge against anyone, he would be quite capable of lying in ambush and shooting him as he would a squirrel."

Meanwhile the rider had drawn rein at the inn of the Boeuf Couronne.

He alighted from his horse, and, crossing the square, approached the church.

He was a large man, about fifty years of age, as gnarled and sinewy as the stem of an old grape-vine. At the first glance one would not have taken him for a scoundrel. His manner was humble, and even gentle; but the restlessness of his eye and the expression of his thin lips betrayed diabolical cunning and the coolest calculation.

At any other time this despised and dreaded individual would have been avoided; but curiosity and anxiety led the crowd toward him.

"Ah, well, Father Chupin!" they cried, as soon as he was within the sound of their voices; "whence do you come in such haste?"

"From the city."

To the inhabitants of Sairmeuse and its environs, "the city" meant the country town of the arrondissement, Montaignac, a charming sub-prefecture of eight thousand souls, about four leagues distant.

"And was it at Montaignac that you bought the horse you were riding just now?"

"I did not buy it; it was loaned to me."

This was such a strange assertion that his listeners could not repress a smile. He did not seem to notice it, however.

"It was loaned me," he continued, "in order that I might bring some great news here the quicker."

Fear resumed possession of the peasantry.

"Is the enemy in the city?" anxiously inquired some of the more timid.

"Yes; but not the enemy you refer to. This is the former lord of the manor, the Duc de Sairmeuse."

"Ah! they said he was dead."

"They were mistaken."

"Have you seen him?"

"No, I have not seen him, but someone else has seen him for me, and has spoken to him. And this someone is Monsieur Laugeron, the proprietor of the Hotel de France at Montaignac. I was passing the house this morning, when he called me. 'Here, old man,' he said, 'do you wish to do me a favor?' Naturally I replied: 'Yes.' Whereupon he placed a coin in my hand and said: 'Well! go and tell them to saddle a horse for you, then gallop to Sairmeuse, and tell my friend Lacheneur that the Duc de Sairmeuse arrived here last night in a post-chaise, with his son, Monsieur Martial, and two servants.'"

Here, in the midst of these peasants, who were listening to him with pale cheeks and set teeth, Father Chupin preserved the subdued mien appropriate to a messenger of misfortune.

But if one had observed him carefully, one would have detected an ironical smile upon his lips and a gleam of malicious joy in his eyes.

He was, in fact, inwardly jubilant. At that moment he had his revenge for all the slights and all the scorn he had been forced to endure. And what a revenge!

And if his words seemed to fall slowly and reluctantly from his lips, it was only because he was trying to prolong the sufferings of his auditors as much as possible.

But a robust young fellow, with an intelligent face, who, perhaps, read Father Chupin's secret heart, brusquely interrupted him:

"What does the presence of the Duc de Sairmeuse at Montaignac matter to us?" he exclaimed. "Let him remain at the Hotel de France as long as he chooses; we shall not go in search of him."

"No! we shall not go in search of him," echoed the other peasants, approvingly.

The old rogue shook his head with affected commiseration.

"Monsieur le Duc will not put you to that trouble," he replied; "he will be here in less than two hours."

"How do you know?"

"I know it through Monsieur Laugeron, who, when I mounted his horse, said to me: 'Above all, old man, explain to my friend Lacheneur that the duke has ordered horses to be in readiness to convey him to Sairmeuse at eleven o'clock.'"

With a common movement, all the peasants who had watches consulted them.

"And what does he want here?" demanded the same young farmer.

"Pardon! he did not tell me," replied Father Chupin; "but one need not be very cunning to guess. He comes to revisit his former estates, and to take them from those who have purchased them, if possible. From you, Rousselet, he will claim the meadows upon the Oiselle, which always yield two crops; from you, Father Gauchais, the ground upon which the Croix-Brulee stands; from you, Chanlouineau, the vineyards on the Borderie---
_"

Chanlouineau was the impetuous young man who had interrupted Father Chupin twice already.

"Claim the Borderie!" he exclaimed, with even greater violence; "let him try, and we will see. It was waste land when my father bought it-- covered with briars; even a goat could not have found pasture there. We have cleared it of stones, we have scratched up the soil with our very nails, we have watered it with our sweat, and now they would try to take it from us! Ah! they shall have my last drop of blood first!"

"I do not say but----"

"But what? Is it any fault of ours that the nobles fled to foreign lands? We have not stolen their lands, have we? The government offered them for sale; we bought them, and paid for them; they are lawfully ours."

"That is true; but Monsieur de Sairmeuse is the great friend of the king."

The young soldier, whose voice had aroused the most noble sentiments only a moment before, was forgotten.

Invaded France, the threatening enemy, were alike forgotten. The all-powerful instinct of avarice was suddenly aroused.

"In my opinion," resumed Chanlouineau, "we should do well to consult the Baron d'Escorval."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the peasants; "let us go at once!"

They were starting, when a villager who sometimes read the papers, checked them by saying:

"Take care what you do. Do you not know that since the return of the Bourbons Monsieur d'Escorval is of no account whatever? Fouché has him upon the proscription list, and he is under the surveillance of the police."

This objection dampened the enthusiasm.

"That is true," murmured some of the older men; "a visit to Monsieur d'Escorval would, perhaps, do us more harm than good. And, besides, what advice could he give us?"

Chanlouineau had forgotten all prudence.

"What of that?" he exclaimed. "If Monsieur d'Escorval has no counsel to give us about this matter, he can, perhaps, teach us how to resist and to defend ourselves."

For some moments Father Chupin had been studying, with an impassive countenance, the storm of anger he had aroused. In his secret heart he experienced the satisfaction of the incendiary at the sight of the flames he has kindled.

Perhaps he already had a presentiment of the infamous part he would play a few months later.

Satisfied with his experiment, he assumed, for the time, the role of moderator.

"Wait a little. Do not cry before you are hurt," he exclaimed, in an ironical tone. "Who told you that the Duc de Sairmeuse would trouble you? How much of his former domain do you all own between you? Almost nothing. A few fields and meadows and a hill on the Borderie. All these together did not in former times yield him an income of five thousand francs a year."

"Yes, that is true," replied Chanlouineau; "and if the revenue you mention is quadrupled, it is only because the land is now in the hands of forty proprietors who cultivate it themselves."

"Another reason why the duke will not say a word; he will not wish to set the whole district in commotion. In my opinion, he will dispossess only one of the owners of his former estates, and that is our worthy ex-mayor--Monsieur Lacheneur, in short."

Ah! he knew only too well the egotism of his compatriots. He knew with what complacency and eagerness they would accept an expiatory victim whose sacrifice should be their salvation.

"That is a fact," remarked an old man; "Monsieur Lacheneur owns nearly all the Sairmeuse property."

"Say all, while you are about it," rejoined Father Chupin. "Where does Monsieur Lacheneur live? In that beautiful Chateau de Sairmeuse whose gable we can see there through the trees. He hunts in the forests which once belonged to the Ducs de Sairmeuse; he fishes in their lakes; he drives the horses which once belonged to them, in the carriages upon which one could now see their coat-of-arms, if it had not been painted out.

"Twenty years ago, Lacheneur was a poor devil like myself; now, he is a grand gentleman with fifty thousand livres a year. He wears the finest broadcloth and top-boots like the Baron d'Escorval. He no longer works; he makes others work; and when he passes, everyone must bow to the earth. If you kill so much as a sparrow upon his lands, as he says, he will cast you into prison. Ah, he has been fortunate. The emperor made him mayor. The Bourbons deprived him of his office; but what does that matter to him? He is still the real master here, as the Sairmeuse were in other days. His son is pursuing his studies in Paris, intending to become a notary. As for his daughter, Mademoiselle Marie-Anne--"

"Not a word against her!" exclaimed Chanlouineau; "if she were mistress, there would not be a poor man in the country; and yet, how some of her pensioners abuse her bounty. Ask your wife if this is not so, Father Chupin."

Undoubtedly the impetuous young man spoke at the peril of his life.

But the wicked old Chupin swallowed this affront which he would never forget, and humbly continued:

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