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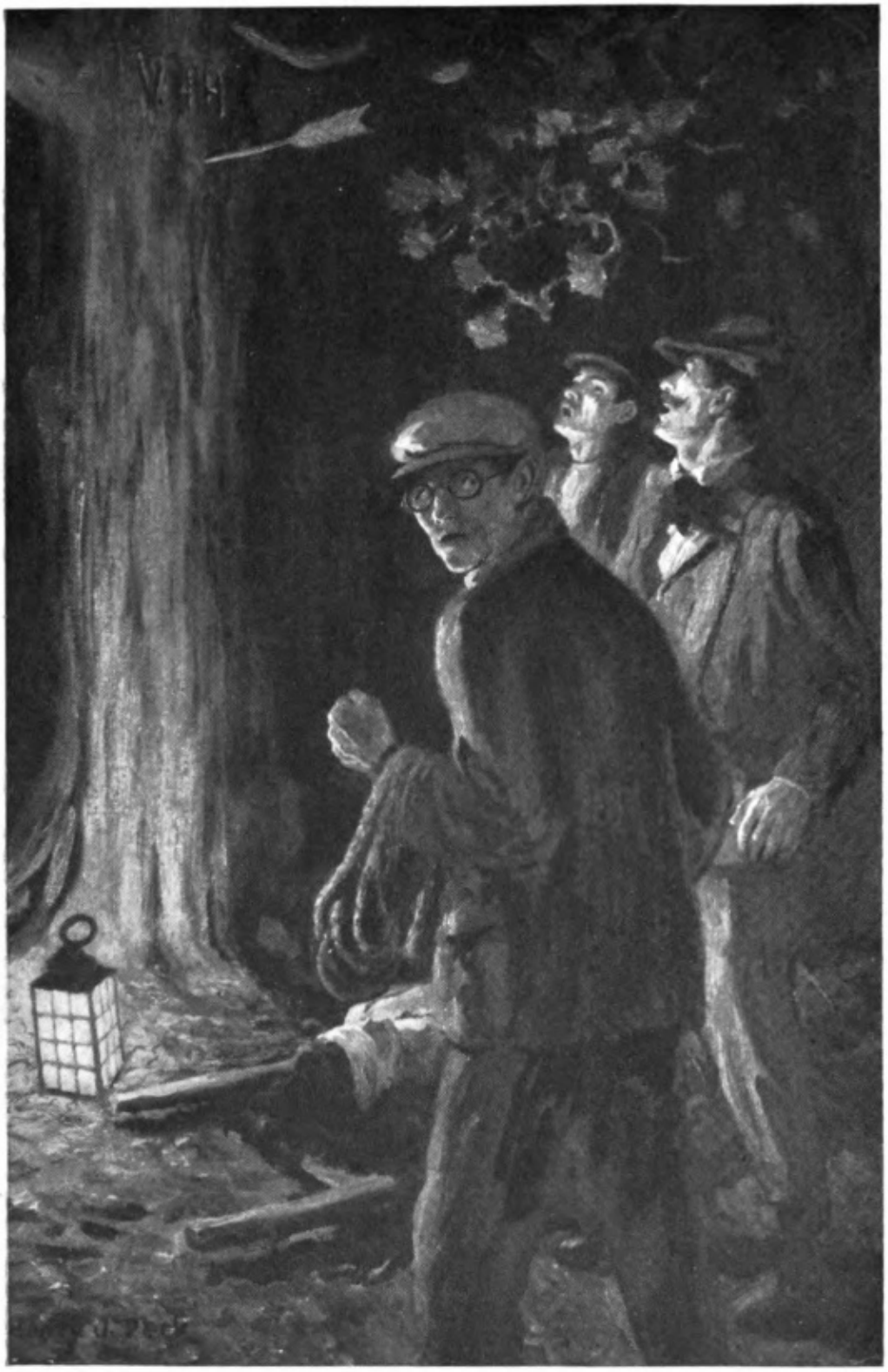

"We're Done For! They Are Aiming At Us!"

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THE SECRET OF SAREK

BY

MAURICE LEBLANC

Author of "The Golden Triangle," "The Woman of Mystery," "Arsène Lupin," etc.

TRANSLATED BY

ALEXANDER TEIXEIRA DE MATTOS

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THE MACAULAY COMPANY

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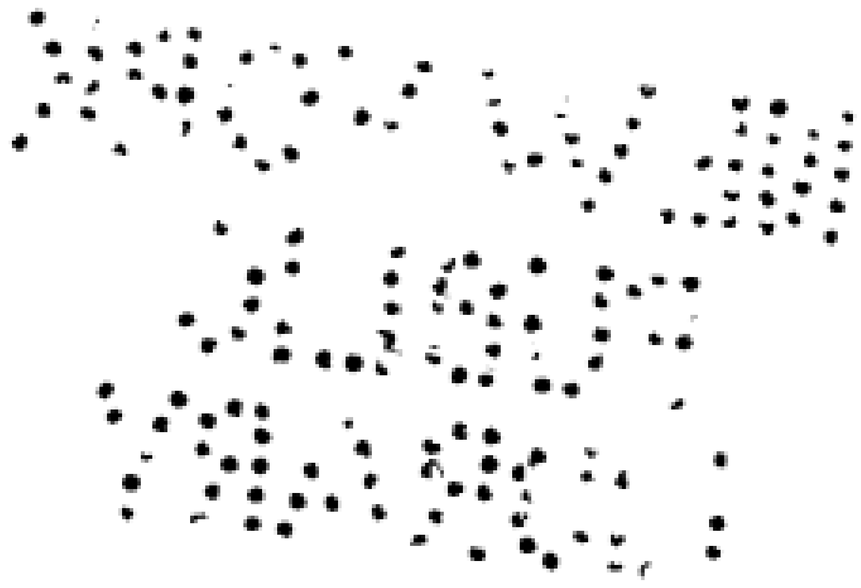

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FOREWORD

The war has led to so many upheavals that not many people now remember the Hergemont scandal of seventeen years ago. Let us recall the details in a few lines.

One day in July 1902, M. Antoine d'Hergemont, the author of a series of well-known studies on the megalithic monuments of Brittany, was walking in the Bois with his daughter Véronique, when he was assaulted by four men, receiving a blow in the face with a walking-stick which felled him to the ground.

After a short struggle and in spite of his desperate efforts, Véronique, the beautiful Véronique, as she was called by her friends, was dragged away and bundled into a motor-car which the spectators of this very brief scene saw making off in the direction of Saint-Cloud.

It was a plain case of kidnapping. The truth became known next morning. Count Alexis Vorski, a young Polish nobleman of dubious reputation but of some social prominence and, by his own account, of royal blood, was in love with Véronique d'Hergemont and Véronique with him. Repelled and more than once insulted by the father, he had planned the incident entirely without Véronique's knowledge or complicity.

Antoine d'Hergemont, who, as certain published letters showed, was a man of violent and morose

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disposition and who, thanks to his capricious temper, his ferocious egoism and his sordid avarice, had made his daughter exceedingly unhappy, swore openly that he would take the most ruthless revenge.

He gave his consent to the wedding, which took place two months later, at Nice. But in the following year a series of sensational events transpired. Keeping his word and cherishing his hatred, M. d'Hergemont in his turn kidnapped the child born of the Vorski marriage and set sail in a small yacht which he had bought not long before.

The sea was rough. The yacht foundered within sight of the Italian coast. The four sailors who formed the crew were picked up by a fishing-boat. According to their evidence M. d'Hergemont and the child had disappeared amid the waves.

When Véronique received the proof of their death, she entered a Carmelite convent.

These are the facts which, fourteen years later, were to lead to the most frightful and extraordinary adventure, a perfectly authentic adventure, though certain details, at first sight, assume a more or less fabulous aspect. But the war has complicated existence to such an extent that events which happen outside it, such as those related in the following narrative, borrow something abnormal, illogical and at times miraculous from the greater tragedy. It needs all the dazzling light of truth to restore to those events the character of a reality which, when all is said, is simple enough.

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THE SECRET OF SAREK

CHAPTER I

THE DESERTED CABIN

INTO the picturesque village of Le Faouet, situated in the very heart of Brittany, there drove one morning in the month of May a lady whose spreading grey cloak and the thick veil that covered her face failed to hide her remarkable beauty and perfect grace of figure.

The lady took a hurried lunch at the principal inn. Then, at about half-past eleven, she begged the proprietor to look after her bag for her, asked for a few particulars about the neighbourhood and walked through the village into the open country.

The road almost immediately branched into two, of which one led to Quimper and the other to Quimperlé. Selecting the latter, she went down into the hollow of a valley, climbed up again and saw on her right, at the corner of another road, a sign-post bearing the inscription, "Locriff, 3 kilometers."

"This is the place," she said to herself.

Nevertheless, after casting a glance around her, she was surprised not to find what she was looking for and wondered whether she had misunderstood her instructions.

There was no one near her nor any one within

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sight, as far as the eye could reach over the Breton country-side, with its tree-lined meadows and undulating hills. Not far from the village, rising amid the budding greenery of spring, a small country house lifted its grey front, with the shutters to all the windows closed. At twelve o'clock, the angelus-bells pealed through the air and were followed by complete peace and silence.

Véronique sat down on the short grass of a bank, took a letter from her pocket and smoothed out the many sheets, one by one.

The first page was headed:

"DUTREILLIS' AGENCY.

"Consulting Rooms.
"Private Enquiries.
"Absolute Discretion Guaranteed."

Next came an address:

"Madame Véronique,
"Dressmaker,
"BESANÇON."

And the letter ran:

"MADAM,

"You will hardly believe the pleasure which it gave me to fulfill the two commissions which you were good enough to entrust to me in your last favour. I have never forgotten the conditions under which I was able, fourteen years ago, to give you my practical assistance at a time when your life was saddened by painful events. It was I who succeeded in obtaining all the facts relating to the death of your honoured father, M. Antoine d'Hergemont, and of your beloved son François. This was my first triumph in a career which was to afford so many other brilliant victories.

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"It was I also, you will remember, who, at your request and seeing how essential it was to save you from your husband's hatred and, if I may add, his love, took the necessary steps to secure your admission to the Carmelite convent. Lastly, it was I who, when your retreat to the convent had shown you that a life of religion did not agree with your temperament, arranged for you a modest occupation as a dressmaker at Besançon, far from the towns where the years of your childhood and the months of your marriage had been spent. You had the inclination and the need to work in order to live and to escape your thoughts. You were bound to succeed; and you succeeded.

"And now let me come to the fact, to the two facts in hand.

"To begin with your first question: what has become, amid the whirlwind of war, of your husband, Alexis Vorski, a Pole by birth, according to his papers, and the son of a king, according to his own statement? I will be brief. After being suspected at the commencement of the war and imprisoned in an internment-camp near Carpentras, Vorski managed to escape, went to Switzerland, returned to France and was re-arrested, accused of spying and convicted of being a German. At the moment when it seemed inevitable that he would be sentenced to death, he escaped for the second time, disappeared in the Forest of Fontainebleau and in the end was stabbed by some person unknown.

"I am telling you the story quite crudely, Madam, well knowing your contempt for this person, who had deceived you abominably, and knowing also that you have learnt most of these facts from the newspapers, though you have not been able to verify their absolute genuineness.

"Well, the proofs exist. I have seen them. There is no doubt left. Alexis Vorski lies buried at Fontainebleau.

"Permit me, in passing, Madam, to remark upon the strangeness of this death. You will remember the curious prophecy about Vorski which you mentioned to me. Vorski, whose undoubted intelligence and exceptional energy were

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spoilt by an insincere and superstitious mind, readily preyed upon by hallucinations and terrors, had been greatly impressed by the prediction which overhung his life and which he had heard from the lips of several people who specialize in the occult sciences:

"'Vorski, son of a king, you will die by the hand of a friend and your wife will be crucified!'

"I smile, Madam, as I write the last word. Crucified! Crucifixion is a torture which is pretty well out of fashion; and I am easy as regards yourself. But what do you think of the dagger-stroke which Vorski received in accordance with the mysterious orders of destiny?

"But enough of reflections. I now come . . ."

Véronique dropped the letter for a moment into her lap. M. Dutreillis' pretentious phrasing and familiar pleasantries wounded her fastidious reserve. Also she was obsessed by the tragic image of Alexis Vorski. A shiver of anguish passed through her at the hideous memory of that man. She mastered herself, however, and read on:

"I now come to my other commission, Madam, in your eyes the more important of the two, because all the rest belongs to the past.

"Let us state the facts precisely. Three weeks ago, on one of those rare occasions when you consented to break through the praiseworthy monotony of your existence, on a Thursday evening when you took your assistants to a cinema-theatre, you were struck by a really incomprehensible detail. The principal film, entitled 'A Breton Legend,' represented a scene which occurred, in the course of a pilgrimage, outside a little deserted road-side hut which had nothing to do with the action. The hut was obviously there by accident. But something really extraordinary attracted your attention. On the tarred boards of the old door were three letters, drawn by hand: 'V. d'H.,' and those three letters were precisely

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your signature before you were married, the initials with which you used to sign your intimate letters and which you have not used once during the last fourteen years! Véronique d'Hergemont! There was no mistake possible. Two capitals separated by the small 'd' and the apostrophe. And, what is more, the bar of the letter 'H.', carried back under the three letters, served as a flourish, exactly as it used to do with you!

"It was the stupefaction due to this surprising coincidence that decided you, Madam, to invoke my assistance. It was yours without the asking. And you knew, without any telling, that it would be effective.

"As you anticipated, Madam, I have succeeded. And here again I will be brief.

"What you must do, Madam, is to take the night express from Paris which brings you the next morning to Quimperlé. From there, drive to Le Faouet. If you have time, before or after your luncheon, pay a visit to the very interesting Chapel of St. Barbe, which stands perched on the most fantastic site and which gave rise to the 'Breton Legend' film. Then go along the Quimper road on foot. At the end of the first ascent, a little way short of the parish-road which leads to Locriff, you will find, in a semicircle surrounded by trees, the deserted hut with the inscription. It has nothing remarkable about it. The inside is empty. It has not even a floor. A rotten plank serves as a bench. The roof consists of a worm-eaten framework, which admits the rain. Once more, there is no doubt that it was sheer accident that placed it within the range of the cinematograph. I will end by adding that the 'Breton Legend' film was taken in September last, which means that the inscription is at least eight months old.

"That is all, Madam. My two commissions are completed. I am too modest to describe to you the efforts and the ingenious means which I employed in order to accomplish them in so short a time, but for which you will certainly think the sum of five hundred francs, which is all that

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I propose to charge you for the work done, almost ridiculous.

"I beg to remain,

"Madam, &c."

Véronique folded up the letter and sat for a few minutes turning over the impressions which it aroused in hēr, painful impressions, like all those revived by the horrible days of her marriage. One in particular had survived and was still as powerful as at the time when she tried to escape it by taking refuge in the gloom of a convent. It was the impression, in fact the certainty, that all her misfortunes, the death of her father and the death of her son, were due to the fault which she had committed in loving Vorski. True, she had fought against the man's love and had not decided to marry him until she was obliged to, in despair and to save M. d'Hergemont from Vorski's vengeance. Nevertheless, she had loved that man. Nevertheless, at first, she had turned pale under his glance: and this, which now seemed to her an unpardonable example of weakness, had left her with a remorse which time had failed to weaken.

"There," she said, "enough of dreaming. I have not come here to shed tears."

The craving for information which had brought her from her retreat at Besançon restored her vigour; and she rose resolved to act.

"A little way short of the parish-road which leads to Locriff . . . a semicircle surrounded by trees," said Dutreillis' letter. She had therefore passed the place. She quickly retraced her steps and at once perceived, on the right, the clump of

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trees which had hidden the cabin from her eyes. She went nearer and saw it.

It was a sort of shepherd's or road-labourer's hut, which was crumbling and falling to pieces under the action of the weather. Véronique went up to it and perceived that the inscription, worn by the rain and sun, was much less clear than on the film. But the tree letters were visible, as was the flourish; and she even distinguished, underneath, something which M. Dutreillis had not observed, a drawing of an arrow and a number, the number 9.

Her emotion increased. Though no attempt had been made to imitate the actual form of her signature, it certainly was her signature as a girl. And who could have affixed it there, on a deserted cabin, in this Brittany where she had never been before?

Véronique no longer had a friend in the world. Thanks to a succession of circumstances, the whole of her past girlhood had, so to speak, disappeared with the death of those whom she had known and loved. Then how was it possible for the recollection of her signature to survive apart from her and those who were dead and gone? And, above all, why was the inscription here, at this spot? What did it mean?

Véronique walked round the cabin. There was no other mark visible there or on the surrounding trees. She remembered that M. Dutreillis had opened the door and had seen nothing inside. Nevertheless she determined to make certain that he was not mistaken.

The door was closed with a mere wooden latch, which moved on a screw. She lifted it; and, strange to say, she had to make an effort, not a phy-

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sical so much as a moral effort, an effort of will, to pull the door towards her. It seemed to her that this little act was about to usher her into a world of facts and events which she unconsciously dreaded.

"Well," she said, "what's preventing me?"

She gave a sharp pull.

A cry of horror escaped her. There was a man's dead body in the cabin. And, at the moment, at the exact second when she saw the body, she became aware of a peculiar characteristic: one of the dead man's hands was missing.

It was an old man, with a long, grey, fan-shaped beard and long white hair falling about his neck. The blackened lips and a certain colour of the swollen skin suggested to Véronique that he might have been poisoned, for no trace of an injury showed on his body, except the arm, which had been severed clean above the wrist, apparently some days before. His clothes were those of a Breton peasant, clean, but very threadbare. The corpse was seated on the ground, with the head resting against the bench and the legs drawn up.

These were all things which Véronique noted in a sort of unconsciousness and which were rather to reappear in her memory at a later date, for, at the moment, she stood there all trembling, with her eyes staring before her, and stammering:

"A dead body! . . . A dead body! . . ."

Suddenly she reflected that she was perhaps mistaken and that the man was not dead. But, on touching his forehead, she shuddered at the contact of his icy skin.

Nevertheless this movement roused her from her torpor. She resolved to act and, since there was

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no one in the immediate neighbourhood, to go back to Le Faouet and inform the authorities. She first examined the corpse for any clue which could tell her its identity.

The pockets were empty. There were no marks on the clothes or linen. But, when she shifted the body a little in order to make her search, it came about that the head drooped forward, dragging with it the trunk, which fell over the legs, thus uncovering the lower side of the bench.

Under this bench, she perceived a roll consisting of a sheet of very thin drawing-paper, crumpled, buckled and almost wrung into a twist. She picked up the roll and unfolded it. But she had not finished doing so before her hands began to tremble and she stammered:

"Oh, God! . . . Oh, my God! . . . "

She summoned all her energies to try and enforce upon herself the calm needed to look with eyes that could see and a brain that could understand.

The most that she could do was to stand there for a few seconds. And during those few seconds, though an ever-thickening mist that seemed to shroud her eyes, she was able to make out a drawing in red, representing four women crucified on four tree-trunks.

And, in the foreground, the first woman, the central figure, with the body stark under its clothing and the features distorted with the most dreadful pain, but still recognizable, the crucified woman was herself! Beyond the least doubt, it was she herself, Véronique d'Hergemont!

Besides, above the head, the top of the post bore, after the ancient custom, a scroll with a plainly

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legible inscription. And this was the three initials, underlined with the flourish, of Véronique's maiden name, " V. d'H.", Véronique d'Hergemont.

A spasm ran through her from head to foot. She drew herself up, turned on her heel and, reeling out of the cabin, fell on the grass in a dead faint.

Véronique was a tall, energetic, healthy woman, with a wonderfully balanced mind; and hitherto no trial had been able to affect her fine moral sanity or her splendid physical harmony. It needed exceptional and unforeseen circumstances such as these, added to the fatigue of two nights spent in railway-travelling, to produce this disorder in her nerves and will.

It did not last more than two or three minutes, at the end of which her mind once more became lucid and courageous. She stood up, went back to the cabin, picked up the sheet of drawing-paper and, certainly with unspeakable anguish, but this time with eyes that saw and a brain that understood, looked at it.

She first examined the details, those which seemed insignificant, or whose significance at least escaped her. On the left was a narrow column of fifteen lines, not written, but composed of letters of no definite formation, the down-strokes of which were all of the same length, the object being evidently merely to fill up. However, in various places, a few words were visible. And Véronique read:

" Four women crucified."

Lower down:

XII.

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"Thirty coffins."

And the bottom line of all ran:

"The God-Stone which gives life or death."

The whole of this column was surrounded by a frame consisting of two perfectly straight lines, one ruled in black, the other in red ink; and there was also, likewise in red, above it, a sketch of two sickles fastened together with a sprig of mistletoe under the outline of a coffin.

The right-hand side, by far the more important, was filled with the drawing, a drawing in red chalk, which gave the whole sheet, with its adjacent column of explanations, the appearance of a page, or rather of a copy of a page, from some large, ancient illuminated book, in which the subjects were treated rather in the primitive style, with a complete ignorance of the rules of drawing.

And it represented four crucified women. Three of them showed in diminishing perspective against the horizon. They wore Breton costumes and their heads were surmounted by caps which were likewise Breton but of a special fashion that pointed to local usage and consisted chiefly of a large black bow, the two wings of which stood out as in the bows of the Alsatian women. And in the middle of the page was the dreadful thing from which Véronique could not take her terrified eyes. It was the principal cross, the trunk of a tree stripped of its lower branches, with the woman's two arms stretched to right and left of it.

The hands and feet were not nailed but were

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fastened by cords which were wound as far as the shoulders and the upper part of the tied legs. Instead of the Breton costume, the woman wore a sort of winding-sheet which fell to the ground and lengthened the slender outline of a body emaciated by suffering.

The expression on the face was harrowing, an expression of resigned martyrdom and melancholy grace. And it was certainly Véronique's face, especially as it looked when she was twenty years of age and as Véronique remembered seeing it at those gloomy hours when a woman gazes in a mirror at her hopeless eyes and her overflowing tears.

And about the head was the very same wave of her thick hair, flowing to the waist in symmetrical curves:

And above it the inscription, " V. d'H."

Véronique long stayed thinking, questioning the past and gazing into the darkness in order to link the actual facts with the memory of her youth. But her mind remained without a glimmer of light. Of the words which she had read, of the drawing which she had seen, nothing whatever assumed the least meaning for her or seemed susceptible of the least explanation.

She examined the sheet of paper again and again. Then, slowly, still pondering on it, she tore it into tiny pieces and threw them to the wind. When the last scrap had been carried away, her decision was taken. She pushed back the man's body, closed the door and walked quickly towards the village, in order to ensure that the incident should have the legal conclusion which was fitting for the moment.

But, when she returned an hour later with the

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mayor of Le Faouet, the rural constable and a whole group of sightseers attracted by her statements, the cabin was empty. The corpse had disappeared.

And all this was so strange, Véronique felt so plainly that, in the disordered condition of her ideas, it was impossible for her to answer the questions put to her, or to dispel the suspicions and doubts which these people might and must entertain of the truth of her evidence, the cause of her presence and even her very sanity, that she forthwith ceased to make any effort or struggle. The inn-keeper was there. She asked him which was the nearest village that she would reach by following the road and if, by so doing, she would come to a railway-station which would enable her to return to Paris. She retained the names of Scaër and Rosporden, ordered a carriage to bring her bag and overtake her on the road and set off, protected against any ill feeling by her great air of elegance and by her grave beauty.

She set off, so to speak, at random. The road was long, miles and miles long. But such was her haste to have done with these incomprehensible events and to recover her tranquillity and to forget what had happened that she walked with great strides, quite oblivious of the fact that this wearisome exertion was superfluous, since she had a carriage following her.

She went up hill and down dale and hardly thought at all, refusing to seek the solution of all the riddles that were put to her. It was the past which was reascending to the surface of her life; and she was horribly afraid of that past, which extended from her abduction by Vorski to the death of her father

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and her child. She wanted to think of nothing but the simple, humble life which she had contrived to lead at Besançon. There were no sorrows there, no dreams, no memories; and she did not doubt but that, amid the little daily habits which enfolded her in the modest house of her choice, she would forget the deserted cabin, the mutilated body of the man and the dreadful drawing with its mysterious inscription.

But, a little while before she came to the big market-town of Scaër, as she heard the bell of a horse trotting behind her, she saw, at the junction of the road that led to Rosporden, a broken wall, one of the remnants of a half-ruined house.

And on this broken wall, above an arrow and the number 10, she again read the fateful inscription, "V. d'H."

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CHAPTER II

ON THE EDGE OF THE ATLANTIC

VERONIQUE'S state of mind underwent a sudden alteration. Even as she had fled resolutely from the threat of danger that seemed to loom up before her from the evil past, so she was now determined to pursue to the end the dread road which was opening before her.

This change was due to a tiny gleam which flashed abruptly through the darkness. She suddenly realized the fact, a simple matter enough, that the arrow denoted a direction and that the number 10 must be the tenth of a series of numbers which marked a course leading from one fixed point to another.

Was it a sign set up by one person with the object of guiding the steps of another? It mattered little. The main thing was that there was here a clue capable of leading Véronique to the discovery of the problem which interested her: by what prodigy did the initials of her maiden name reappear amid this tangle of tragic circumstances?

The carriage sent from Le Faouet overtook her. She stepped in and told the driver to go very slowly to Rosporden.

She arrived in time for dinner; and her anticipations had not misled her. Twice she saw her signa-

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ture, each time before a division in the road, accompanied by the numbers 11 and 12.

Véronique slept at Rosporden and resumed her investigations on the following morning.

The number 12, which she found on the wall of a church-yard, sent her along the road to Concarneau, which she had almost reached before she saw any further inscriptions. She fancied that she must have been mistaken, retraced her steps and wasted a whole day in useless searching.

It was not until the next day that the number 13, very nearly obliterated, directed her towards Fouesnant. Then she abandoned this direction, to follow, still in obedience to the signs, some country-roads in which she once more lost her way.

At last, four days after leaving Le Faouet, she found herself facing the Atlantic, on the great beach of Beg-Meil.

She spent two nights in the village without gathering the least reply to the discreet questions which she put to the inhabitants. At last, one morning, after wandering among the half-buried groups of rocks which intersect the beach and upon the low cliffs, covered with trees and copses, which hem it in, she discovered, between two oaks stripped of their bark, a shelter built of earth and branches which must at one time have been used by custom-house officers. A small menhir stood at the entrance. The menhir bore the inscription, followed by the number 17. No arrow. A full stop underneath; and that was all.

In the shelter were three broken bottles and some empty meat-tins.

"This was the goal," thought Véronique.

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"Some one has been having a meal here. Food stored in advance, perhaps."

Just then she noticed that, at no great distance, by the edge of a little bay which curved like a shell amid the neighbouring rocks, a boat was swinging to and fro, a motor-boat. And she heard voices coming from the village, a man's voice and a woman's.

From the place where she stood, all that she could see at first was an elderly man carrying in his arms half-a-dozen bags of provisions, potted meats and dried vegetables. He put them on the ground and said:

"Well, had a pleasant journey, M'ame Honorine?"

"Fine!"

"And where have you been?"

"Why, Paris . . . a week of it . . . running errands for my master."

"Glad to be back?"

"Of course I am."

"And you see, M'ame Honorine, you find your boat just where she was. I came to have a look at her every day. This morning I took away her tarpaulin. Does she run as well as ever?"

"First-rate."

"Besides, you're a master pilot, you are. Who'd have thought, M'ame Honorine, that you'd be doing a job like this?"

"It's the war. All the young men in our island are gone and the old ones are fishing. Besides, there's no longer a fortnightly steamboat service, as there used to be. So I go the errands."

"What about petrol?"

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"We've plenty to go on with. No fear of that."

"Well, good-bye for the present, M'ame Honorine. Shall I help you put the things on board?"

"Don't you trouble; you're in a hurry."

"Well, good-bye for the present," the old fellow repeated. "Till next time, M'ame Honorine. I'll have the parcels ready for you."

He went away, but, when he had gone a little distance, called out:

"All the same, mind the jagged reefs round that blessed island of yours! I tell you, it's got a nasty name! It's not called Coffin Island, the island of the thirty coffins, for nothing! Good luck to you, M'ame Honorine!"

He disappeared behind a rock.

Véronique had shuddered. The thirty coffins! The very words which she had read in the margin of that horrible drawing!

She leant forward. The woman had come a few steps nearer the boat and, after putting down some more provisions which she had been carrying, turned round.

Véronique now saw her full-face. She wore a Breton costume; and her head-dress was crowned by two black wings.

"Oh," stammered Véronique, "that head-dress in the drawing . . . the head-dress of the three crucified women!"

The Breton woman looked about forty. Her strong face, tanned by the sun and the cold, was bony and rough-hewn but lit up by a pair of large, dark, intelligent, gentle eyes. A heavy gold chain hung down upon her breast. Her velvet bodice fitted her closely.

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She was humming in a very low voice as she took up her parcels and loaded the boat, which made her kneel on a big stone against which the boat was moored. When she had done, she looked at the horizon, which was covered with black clouds. She did not seem anxious about them, however, and, loosing the painter, continued her song, but in a louder voice, which enabled Véronique to hear the words. It was a slow melody, a children's lullaby; and she sang it with a smile which revealed a set of fine, white teeth.

"And the mother said,
Rocking her child a-bed:

'Weep not. If you do,
The Virgin Mary weeps with you.

Babes that laugh and sing
Smiles to the Blessed Virgin bring.

Fold your hands this way
And to sweet Mary pray.'"

She did not complete the song. Véronique was standing before her, with her face drawn and very pale.

Taken aback, the other asked:

"What's the matter?"

Véronique, in a trembling voice, replied:

"That song! Who taught it you? Where do you get it from? . . . It's a song my mother used to sing, a song of her own country, Savoy . . . . And I have never heard it since . . . since she died . . . . So I want . . . I should like . . ."

She stopped. The Breton woman looked at her

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in silence, with an air of stupefaction, as though she too were on the point of asking questions. But Véronique repeated:

"Who taught it you?"

"Some one over there," the woman called Honorine answered, at last.

"Over there?"

"Yes, some one on my island."

Véronique said, with a sort of dread:

"Coffin Island?"

"That's just a name they call it by. It's really the Isle of Sarek."

They still stood looking at each other, with a look in which a certain doubt was mingled with a great need of speech and understanding. And at the same time they both felt that they were not enemies.

Véronique was the first to continue:

"Excuse me, but, you see, there are things which are so puzzling . . ."

The Breton woman nodded her head in approval and Véronique continued:

"So puzzling and so disconcerting! . . . For instance, do you know why I'm here? I must tell you. Perhaps you alone can explain . . . It's like this: an accident — quite a small accident, but really it all began with that — brought me to Brittany for the first time and showed me, on the door of an old, deserted, road-side cabin, the initials which I used to sign when I was a girl, a signature which I have not used for fourteen or fifteen years. As I went on, I discovered the same inscriptior. many times repeated, with each time a different consecutive number. That was how I came here, to the beach at

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Beg-Meil and to this part of the beach, which appeared to be the end of a journey foreseen and arranged by . . . I don't know whom."

"Is your signature here?" asked Honorine, eagerly. "Where?"

"On that stone, above us, at the entrance to the shelter."

"I can't see from here. What are the letters?"

"V. d'H."

The Breton woman suppressed a movement. Her bony face betrayed profound emotion, and, hardly opening her lips, she murmured:

"Véronique . . . Véronique d'Hergemont."

"Ah," exclaimed the younger woman, "so you know my name, you know my name!"

Honorine took Véronique's two hands and held them in her own. Her weather-beaten face lit up with a smile. And her eyes grew moist with tears as she repeated:

"Mademoiselle Véronique! . . . Madame Véronique! . . . So it's you, Véronique! . . . O Heaven, is it possible! The Blessed Virgin Mary be praised!"

Véronique felt utterly confounded and kept on saying:

"You know my name . . . you know who I am . . . . Then you can explain all this riddle to me?"

After a long pause, Honorine replied:

"I can explain nothing. I don't understand either. But we can try to find out together . . . . Tell me, what was the name of that Breton village?"

"Le Faouet."

"Le Faouet. I know. And where was the deserted cabin?"

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"A mile and a quarter away."

"Did you look in?"

"Yes; and that was the most terrible thing of all. Inside the cabin was . . . "

"What was in the cabin?"

"First of all, the dead body of a man, an old man, dressed in the local costume, with long white hair and a grey beard . . . . Oh, I shall never forget that dead man! . . . He must have been murdered, poisoned, I don't know what . . . ."

Honorine listened greedily, but the murder seemed to give her no clue and she merely asked:

"Who was it? Did they have an inquest?"

"When I came back with the people from Le Faouet, the corpse had disappeared."

"Disappeared? But who had removed it?"

"I don't know."

"So that you know nothing?"

"Nothing. Except that, the first time, I found in the cabin a drawing . . . a drawing which I tore up; but its memory haunts me like a nightmare that keeps on recurring. I can't get it out of my mind . . . . Listen, it was a roll of paper on which some one had evidently copied an old picture and it represented . . . Oh, a dreadful, dreadful thing, four women crucified! And one of the women was myself, with my name . . . . And the others wore a head-dress like yours."

Honorine had squeezed her hands with incredible violence:

"What's that you say?" she cried. "What's that you say? Four women crucified?"

"Yes; and there was something about thirty coffins, consequently about your island."

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The Breton woman put her hands over Véronique's lips to silence them:

"Hush! Hush! Oh, you mustn't speak of all that! No, no, you mustn't . . . . You see, there are devilish things . . . which it's a sacrilege to talk about . . . . We must be silent about that . . . . Later on, we'll see . . . another year, perhaps . . . . Later on . . . . Later on . . . . "

She seemed shaken by terror, as by a gale which scourges the trees and overwhelms all living things. And suddenly she fell on her knees upon the rock and muttered a long prayer, bent in two, with her hands before her face, so completely absorbed that Véronique asked her no more questions.

At last she rose and, presently, said:

"Yes, this is all terrifying, but I don't see that it makes our duty any different or that we can hesitate at all."

And, addressing Véronique, she said, gravely:

"You must come over there with me."

"Over there, to your island?" replied Véronique, without concealing her reluctance.

Honorine again took her hands and continued, still in that same, rather solemn tone which appeared to Véronique to be full of secret and unspoken thoughts:

"Your name is truly Véronique d'Hergemont?"

"Yes."

"Who was your father?"

"Antoine d'Hergemont."

"You married a man called Vorski, who said he was a Pole?"

"Yes, Alexis Vorski."

"You married him after there was a scandal

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about his running off with you and after a quarrel between you and your father?"

"Yes."

"You had a child by him?"

"Yes, a son, François."

"A son that you never knew, in a manner of speaking, because he was kidnapped by your father?"

"Yes."

"And you lost sight of the two after a shipwreck?"

"Yes, they are both dead."

"How do you know?"

It did not occur to Véronique to be astonished at this question, and she replied:

"My personal enquiries and the police enquiries were both based upon the same indisputable evidence, that of the four sailors."

"Who's to say they weren't telling lies?"

"Why should they tell lies?" asked Véronique, in surprise.

"Their evidence may have been bought; they may have been told what to say."

"By whom?"

"By your father."

"But what an idea! . . . Besides, my father was dead!"

"I say once more: how do you know that?"

This time Véronique appeared stupefied:

"What are you hinting?" she whispered.

"One minute. Do you know the names of those four sailors?"

"I did know them, but I don't remember them."

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"You don't remember that they were Breton names?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't see that . . ."

"If you never came to Brittany, your father often did, because of the books he used to write. He used to stay in Brittany during your mother's lifetime. That being so, he must have had relations with the men of the country. Suppose that he had known the four sailors a long time, that these men were devoted to him or bribed by him and that he engaged them specially for that adventure. Suppose that they began by landing your father and your son at some little Italian port and that then, being four good swimmers, they scuttled and sank their yacht in view of the coast. Just suppose it."

"But the men are living!" cried Véronique, in growing excitement. "They can be questioned."

"Two of them are dead; they died a natural death a few years ago. The third is an old man called Maguennoc; you will find him at Sarek. As for the fourth, you may have seen him just now. He used the money which he made out of that business to buy a grocer's shop at Beg-Meil."

"Ah, we can speak to him at once!" cried Véronique, eagerly. "Let's go and fetch him."

"Why should we? I know more than he does."

"You know? You know?"

"I know everything that you don't. I can answer all your questions. Ask me what you like."

But Véronique dared not put the great question to her, the one which was beginning to quiver in the darkness of her consciousness. She was afraid of a truth which was perhaps not inconceivable, a truth

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of which she seemed to catch a faint glimpse; and she stammered, in mournful accents:

"I don't understand, I don't understand . . . . Why should my father have behaved like that? Why should he wish himself and my poor child to be thought dead?"

"Your father had sworn to have his revenge."

"On Vorski, yes; but surely not on me, his daughter? . . . . And such a revenge!"

"You loved your husband. Once you were in his power, instead of running away from him, you consented to marry him. Besides, the insult was a public one. And you know what your father was, with his violent, vindictive temperament and his rather . . . his rather unbalanced nature, to use his own expression."

"But since then?"

"Since then! Since then! He felt remorseful as he grew older, what with his affection for the child . . . and he tried everywhere to find you. The journeys I have taken, beginning with my journey to the Carmelites at Chartres! But you had left long ago . . . and where for? Where were you to be found?"

"You could have advertised in the newspapers."

"He did try advertising, once, very cautiously, because of the scandal. There was a reply. Some one made an appointment and he kept it. Do you know who came to meet him? Vorski, Vorski, who was looking for you too, who still loved you . . . and hated you. Your father became frightened and did not dare act openly."

Véronique did not speak. She felt very faint and sat down on the stone, with her head bowed.

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Then she murmured:

"You speak of my father as though he were still alive to-day."

"He is."

"And as though you saw him often."

"Daily."

"And on the other hand"— Véronique lowered her voice —" on the other hand you do not say a word of my son. And that suggests a horrible thought: perhaps he did not live? Perhaps he is dead since? Is that why you do not mention him?"

She raised her head with an effort. Honorine was smiling.

"Oh, please, please," Véronique entreated, "tell me the truth! It is terrible to hope more than one has a right to. Do tell me."

Honorine put her arm round Véronique's neck:

"Why, my poor, dear lady, would I have told you all this if my handsome François had been dead?"

"He is alive, he is alive?" cried Véronique, wildly.

"Why, of course he is and in the best of health! Oh, he's a fine, sturdy little chap, never fear, and so steady on his legs! And I have every right to be proud of him, because it's I who brought him up, your little François."

She felt Véronique, who was leaning on her shoulder, give way to emotions which were too much for her and which certainly contained as much suffering as joy; and she said:

"Cry, my dear lady, cry; it will do you good. It's a better sort of crying than it was, eh? Cry, until you've forgotten all your old troubles. I'm going

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back to the village. Have you a bag of any kind at the inn? They know me there. I'll bring it back with me and we'll be off."

When the Breton woman returned, half an hour later, she saw Véronique standing and beckoning to her to hurry and heard her calling:

"Quick, quick! Heavens, what a time you've been! We have not a minute to lose."

Honorine, however, did not hasten her pace and did not reply. Her rugged face was without a smile.

"Well, are we going to start?" asked Véronique, running up to her. "There's nothing to delay us, is there, no obstacle? What's the matter? You seem quite changed."

"No, no."

"Then let's be quick."

Honorine, with her assistance, put the bag and the provisions on board. Then, suddenly standing in front of Véronique, she said:

"You're quite sure, are you, that the woman on the cross, as she was shown in the drawing, was yourself?"

"Absolutely. Besides, there were my initials above the head."

"That's a strange thing," muttered Honorine, "and it's enough to frighten anybody."

"Why should it be? It must have been someone who used to know me and who amused himself by . . . It's merely a coincidence, a chance fancy reviving the past."

"Oh, it's not the past that's worrying me! It's the future."

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"The future?"

"Remember the prophecy."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, yes, the prophecy made about you to Vorski."

"Ah, you know?"

"I know. And it is so horrible to think of that drawing and of other much more dreadful things which you don't know of."

Véronique burst out laughing:

"What! Is that why you hesitate to take me with you, for, after all, that's what we're concerned with?"

"Don't laugh. People don't laugh when they see the flames of hell before them."

Honorine crossed herself, closing her eyes as she spoke. Then she continued:

"Of course . . . you scoff at me . . . you think I'm a superstitious Breton woman, who believes in ghosts and jack-o'-lanterns. I don't say you're altogether wrong. But there, there! There are some truths that blind one. You can talk it over with Maguennoc, if you get on the right side of him."

"Maguennoc?"

"One of the four sailors. He's an old friend of your boy's. He too helped to bring him up. Maguennoc knows more about it than the most learned men, more than your father. And yet . . . "

"What?"

"And yet Maguennoc tried to tempt fate and to get past what men are allowed to know."

"What did he do?"

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"He tried to touch with his hand — you understand, with his own hand: he confessed it to me himself — the very heart of the mystery."

"Well?" said Véronique, impressed in spite of herself.

"Well, his hand was burnt by the flames. He showed me a hideous sore: I saw it with my eyes, something like the sore of a cancer; and he suffered to that degree . . . "

"Yes?"

"That it forced him to take a hatchet in his left hand and cut off his right hand himself."

Véronique was dumbfounded. She remembered the corpse at Le Faouet and she stammered:

"His right hand? You say that Maguennoc cut off his right hand?"

"With a hatchet, ten days ago, two days before I left . . . . I dressed the wound myself . . . . Why do you ask?"

"Because," said Véronique, in a husky voice, "because the dead man, the old man whom I found in the deserted cabin and who afterwards disappeared, had lately lost his right hand."

Honorine gave a start. She still wore the sort of scared expression and betrayed the emotional disturbance which contrasted with her usually calm attitude. And she rapped out:

"Are you sure? Yes, yes, you're right, it was he, Maguennoc . . . . He had long white hair, hadn't he? And a spreading beard? . . . Oh, how abominable!"

She restrained herself and looked around her, frightened at having spoken so loud. She once more

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made the sign of the cross and said, slowly, almost under her breath:

"He was the first of those who have got to die . . . he told me so himself . . . and old Maguennoc had eyes that read the book of the future as easily as the book of the past. He could see clearly where another saw nothing at all. 'The first victim will be myself, Ma'me Honorine. And, when the servant has gone, in a few days it will be the master's turn.'"

"And the master was . . . ?" asked Véronique, in a whisper.

Honorine drew herself up and clenched her fists violently:

"I'll defend him! I will!" she declared. "I'll save him! Your father shall not be the second victim. No, no, I shall arrive in time! Let me go!"

"We are going together," said Véronique, firmly.

"Please," said Honorine, in a voice of entreaty, "please don't be persistent. Let me have my way. I'll bring your father and your son to you this very evening, before dinner."

"But why?"

"The danger is too great, over there, for your father . . . and especially for you. Remember the four crosses! It's over there that they are waiting . . . . Oh, you mustn't go there! . . . The island is under a curse."

"And my son?"

"You shall see him to-day, in a few hours."

Véronique gave a short laugh:

"In a few hours! Woman, you must be mad! Here am I, after mourning my son for fourteen

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years, suddenly hearing that he's alive; and you ask me to wait before I take him in my arms! Not one hour! I would rather risk death a thousand times than put off that moment."

Honorine looked at her and seemed to realize that Véronique's was one of those resolves against which it is useless to fight, for she did not insist. She crossed herself for the third time and said, simply:

"God's will be done."

They both took their seats among the parcels which encumbered the narrow space. Honorine switched on the current, seized the tiller and skilfully steered the boat through the rocks and sand-banks which rose level with the water.

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CHAPTER III

VORSKI'S SON

VERONIQUE smiled as she sat to starboard on a packing-case, with her face turned towards Honorine. Her smile was anxious still and undefined, full of reticence and flickering as a sunbeam that tries to pierce the last clouds of the storm; but it was nevertheless a happy smile.

And happiness seemed the right expression for that wonderful face, stamped with dignity and with that particular modesty which gives to some women, whether stricken by excessive misfortune or preserved by love, the habit of gravity, combined with an absence of all feminine affectation.

Her black hair, touched with grey at the temples, was knotted very low down on the neck. She had the dead-white complexion of a southerner and very light blue eyes, of which the white seemed almost of the same colour, pale as a winter sky. She was tall, with broad shoulders and a well-shaped bust.

Her musical and somewhat masculine voice became light and cheerful when she spoke of the son whom she had found again. And Véronique could speak of nothing else. In vain the Breton woman tried to speak of the problems that harassed her and kept on interrupting Véronique:

"Look here, there are two things which I cannot understand. Who laid the trail with the clues that brought you from Le Faouet to the exact spot where

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I always land? It almost makes one believe that someone had been from Le Faouet to the Isle of Sarek. And, on the other hand, how did old Maguennoc come to leave the island? Was it of his own free will? Or was it his dead body that they carried? If so, how?"

"Is it worth troubling about?" Véronique objected.

"Certainly it is. Just think! Besides me, who once a fortnight go either to Beg-Meil or Pont-l'Abbé in my motor-boat for provisions, there are only two fishing-boats, which always go much higher up the coast, to Audierne, where they sell their catch. Then how did Maguennoc get across? Then again, did he commit suicide? But, if so, how did his body disappear?"

But Véronique protested:

"Please don't! It doesn't matter for the moment. It'll all be cleared up. Tell me about François. You were saying that he came to Sarek . . ."

Honorine yielded to Véronique's entreaties:

"He arrived in poor Maguennoc's arms, a few days after he was taken from you. Maguennoc, who had been taught his lesson by your father, said that a strange lady had entrusted him with the child; and he had it nursed by his daughter, who has since died. I was away, in a situation with a Paris family. When I came home again, François had grown into a fine little fellow, running about the moors and cliffs. It was then that I took service with your father, who had settled in Sarek. When Maguennoc's daughter died, we took the child to live with us."

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"But under what name?"

"François, just François. M. d'Hergemont was known as Monsieur Antoine. François called him grandfather. No one ever made any remark upon it."

"And his character?" asked Véronique, with some anxiety.

"Oh, as far as that's concerned, he's a blessing!" replied Honorine. "Nothing of his father about him . . . nor of his grandfather either, as M. d'Hergemont himself admits. A gentle, lovable, most willing child. Never a sign of anger; always good-tempered. That's what got over his grandfather and made M. d'Hergemont come round to you again, because his grandson reminded him so of the daughter he had cast off. 'He's the very image of his mother,' he used to say. 'Véronique was gentle and affectionate like him, with the same fond and coaxing ways.' And then he began his search for you, with me to help him; for he had come to confide in me."

Véronique beamed with delight. Her son was like her! Her son was bright and kind-hearted!

"But does he know about me?" she said. "Does he know that I'm alive?"

"I should think he did! M. d'Hergemont tried to keep it from him at first. But I soon told him everything."

"Everything?"

"No. He believes that his father is dead and that, after the shipwreck in which he, I mean François, and M. d'Hergemont disappeared, you became a nun and have been lost sight of since. And he is so eager for news, each time I come back

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from one of my trips! He too is so full of hope! Oh, you can take my word for it, he adores his mother! And he's always singing that song you heard just now, which his grandfather taught him."

"My François, my own little François!"

"Ah, yes, he loves you! There's Mother Honorine. But you're mother, just that. And he's in a great hurry to grow up and finish his schooling, so that he may go and look for you."

"His schooling? Does he have lessons?"

"Yes, with his grandfather and, since two years ago, with such a nice fellow that I brought back from Paris, Stéphane Maroux, a wounded soldier covered with medals and restored to health after an internal operation. François dotes on him."

The boat was running quickly over the smooth sea, in which it ploughed a furrow of silvery foam. The clouds had dispersed on the horizon. The evening boded fair and calm.

"More, tell me more!" said Véronique, listening greedily. "What does my boy wear?"

"Knickerbockers and short socks, with his calves bare; a thick flannel shirt with gilt buttons; and a flat knitted cap, like his big friend, M. Stéphane; only his is red and suits him to perfection."

"Has he any friends besides M. Maroux?"

"All the growing lads of the island, formerly. But with the exception of three or four ship's boys, all the rest have left the island with their mothers, now that their fathers are at the war, and are working on the mainland, at Concarneau or Lorient, leaving the old people at Sarek by themselves. We are not more than thirty on the island now."

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"Whom does he play with? Whom does he go about with?"

"Oh, as for that, he has the best of companions!"

"Really? Who is it?"

"A little dog that Maguennoc gave him."

"A dog?"

"Yes; and the funniest dog you ever saw: an ugly ridiculous-looking thing, a cross between a poodle and a fox-terrier, but so comical and amusing! Oh, there's no one like Master All's Well!"

"All's Well?"

"That's what François calls him; and you couldn't have a better name for him. He always looks happy and glad to be alive. He's independent, too, and he disappears for hours and even days at a time; but he's always there when he's wanted, if you're feeling sad, or if things aren't going as you might like them to. All's Well hates to see any one crying or scolding or quarrelling. The moment you cry, or pretend to cry, he comes and squats on his haunches in front of you, sits up, shuts one eye, half-opens the other and looks so exactly as if he was laughing that you begin to laugh yourself. 'That's right, old chap,' says François, 'you're quite right: all's well. There's nothing to take on about, is there?' And, when you're consoled, All's Well just trots away. His task is done."

Véronique laughed and cried in one breath. Then she was silent for a long time, feeling more and more gloomy and overcome by a despair which overwhelmed all her gladness. She thought of all the happiness that she had missed during the fourteen years of her childless motherhood, wearing her mourning for a son who was alive. All the cares

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that a mother lavishes upon the little creature newborn into the world, all the pride that she feels at seeing him grow and hearing him speak, all that delights a mother and uplifts her and makes her heart overflow with daily renewed affection: all this she had never known.

"We are half-way across," said Honorine.

They were running in sight of the Glenans Islands. On their right, the headland of Penmarch, whose coast-line they were following at a distance of fifteen miles, marked a darker line which was not always differentiated from the horizon.

And Véronique thought of her sad past, of her mother, whom she hardly remembered, of her childhood spent with a selfish, disagreeable father, of her marriage, ah, above all of her marriage! She recalled her first meetings with Vorski, when she was only seventeen. How frightened she had been from the very beginning of that strange and unusual man, whom she dreaded while she submitted to his influence, as one does at that age submit to the influence of anything mysterious and incomprehensible!

Next came the hateful day of the abduction and the other days, more hateful still, that followed, the weeks during which he had kept her imprisoned, threatening her and dominating her with all his evil strength, and the promise of marriage which he had forced from her, a pledge against which all the girl's instincts and all her will revolted, but to which it seemed to her that she was bound to agree after so great a scandal and also because her father was giving his consent.

Her brain rebelled against the memories of her

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years of married life. Never that! Not even in the worst hours, when the nightmares of the past haunt one like spectres, never did she consent to revive, in the innermost recesses of her mind, that degrading past, with its mortifications, wounds and betrayals, and the disgraceful life led by her husband, who, shamelessly, with cynical pride, gradually revealed himself as the man he was, drinking, cheating at cards, robbing his boon companions, a swindler and blackmailer, giving his wife the impression, which she still retained and which made her shudder, of a sort of evil genius, cruel and unbalanced.

"Have done with dreams, Madame Véronique," said Honorine.

"It's not so much dreams and memories as remorse," she replied.

"Remorse, Madame Véronique? You, whose life has been one long martyrdom?"

"A martyrdom that was a punishment."

"But all that is over and done with, Madame Véronique, seeing that you are going to meet your son and your father again. Come, come, you must think of nothing but being happy."

"Happy? Can I be happy again?"

"I should think so! You'll soon see! . . . Look, there's Sarek."

Honorine took from a locker under her seat a large shell which she used as a trumpet, after the manner of the mariners of old, and, putting her lips to the mouthpiece and puffing out her cheeks, she blew a few powerful notes, which filled the air with a sound not unlike the lowing of an ox.

Véronique gave her a questioning look.

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"It's him I'm calling," said Honorine.

"François? You're calling François?"

"Yes, it's the same every time I come back. He comes scrambling from the top of the cliffs where we live and runs down to the jetty."

"So I shall see him?" exclaimed Véronique, turning very pale.

"You will see him. Fold your veil double, so that he may not know you from your photographs. I'll speak to you as I would to a stranger who has come to look at Sarek."

They could see the island distinctly, but the foot of the cliffs was hidden by a multitude of reefs.

"Ah, yes, there's no lack of rocks! They swarm like a shoal of herring!" cried Honorine, who had been obliged to switch off the motor and was using two short paddles. "You know how calm the sea was just now. It's never calm here."

Thousands and thousands of little waves were dashing and clashing against one another and waging an incessant and implacable war upon the rocks. The boat seemed to be passing through the backwater of a torrent. Nowhere was a strip of blue or green sea visible amid the bubbling foam. There was nothing but white froth, whipped up by the indefatigable swirl of the forces which desperately assailed the pointed teeth of the reefs.

"And it's like that all round the island," said Honorine, "so much so that you may say that Sarek isn't accessible except in a small boat. Ah, the Huns could never have established a submarine base on our island! To make quite sure and remove all doubts, some officers came over from Lorient, two years ago, because of a few caves on the west, which

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can only be entered at low tide. It was waste of time. There was nothing doing here. Just think, it's like a sprinkle of rocks all around; and pointed rocks at that, which get at you treacherously from underneath. And, though these are the most dangerous, perhaps it is the others that are most to be feared, the big ones which you see and have got their name and their history from all sorts of crimes and shipwrecks. Oh, as to those! . . . "

Her voice grew hollow. With a hesitating hand, which seemed afraid of the half-completed gesture, she pointed to some reefs which stood up in powerful masses of different shapes, crouching animals, crenellated keeps, colossal needles, sphynx-heads, jagged pyramids, all in black granite stained with red, as though soaked in blood.

And she whispered:

"Oh, as to those, they have been guarding the island for centuries and centuries, but like wild beasts that only care for doing harm and killing. They . . . they . . . no, it's better never to speak about them or even think of them. They are the thirty wild beasts. Yes, thirty, Madame Véronique, there are thirty of them . . . . "

She made the sign of the cross and continued, more calmly:

"There are thirty of them. Your father says that Sarek is called the island of the thirty coffins because the people instinctively ended in this case by confusing the two words *écueils* and *cercueils*.[1] Perhaps . . . . It's very likely . . . . But, all the same, they are thirty real coffins, Madame Véronique; and, if we could open them, we should be sure

[1] "Reefs" and "coffins."— *Translator's Note.*

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to find them full of bones and bones and bones. M. d'Hergemont himself says that Sarek comes from the word Sarcophagus, which, according to him, is the learned way of saying coffin. Besides, there's more than that . . . . "

Honorine broke off, as though she wanted to think of something else, and, pointing to a reef of rocks, said:

"Look, Madame Véronique, past that big one right in our way there, you will see, through an opening, our little harbour and, on the quay, François in his red cap."

Véronique had been listening absent-mindedly to Honorine's explanations. She leant her body farther out of the boat, in order to catch sight the sooner of her son, while the Breton woman, once more a victim to her obsession, continued, in spite of herself:

"There's more than that. The Isle of Sarek — and that is why your father came to live here — contains a collection of dolmens which have nothing remarkable about them, but which are peculiar for one reason, that they are all nearly alike. Well, how many of them do you think there are? Thirty! Thirty, like the principal reefs. And those thirty are distributed round the islands, on the cliffs, exactly opposite the thirty reefs; and each of them bears the same name as the reef that corresponds to it: Dol-er-H'roeck, Dol-Kerlitu and so on. What do you say to that?"

She had uttered these names in the same timid voice in which she spoke of all these things, as if she feared to be heard by the things themselves, to

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which she was attributing a formidable and sacred life.

"What do you say to that, Madame Véronique? Oh, there's plenty of mystery about it all; and, once more, it's better to hold one's tongue! I'll tell you about it when we've left here, right away from the island, and when your little François is in your arms, between your father and you."

Véronique sat silent, gazing into space at the spot to which Honorine had pointed. With her back turned to her companion and her two hands gripping the gunwale, she stared distractedly before her. It was there, through that narrow opening, that she was to see her child, long lost and now found; and she did not want to waste a single second after the moment when she would be able to catch sight of him.

They reached the rock. One of Honorine's paddles grazed its side. They skirted and came to the end of it.

"Oh," said Véronique, sorrowfully, "he is not there!"

"François not there? Impossible!" cried Honorine.

She in her turn saw, three or four hundred yards in front of them, the few big rocks on the beach which served as a jetty. Three women, a little girl and some old seafaring men were waiting for the boat, but no boy, no red cap.

"That's strange," said Honorine, in a low voice. "It's the first time that he's failed to answer my call."

"Perhaps he's ill?" Véronique suggested.

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"No, François is never ill."

"What then?"

"I don't know."

"But aren't you afraid?" asked Véronique, who was already becoming frightened.

"For him, no . . . but for your father. Maguennoc said that I oughtn't to leave him. It's he who is threatened."

"But François is there to defend him; and so is M. Maroux, his tutor. Come, answer me: what do you imagine?"

After a moment's pause, Honorine shrugged her shoulders.

"A pack of nonsense! I get absurd, yes, absurd things into my head. Don't be angry with me. I can't help it: it's the Breton in me. Except for a few years, I have spent all my life here, with legends and stories in the very air I breathed. Don't let's talk about it."

The Isle of Sarek appears in the shape of a long and undulating table-land, covered with ancient trees and standing on cliffs of medium height than which nothing more jagged could be imagined. It is as though the island were surrounded by a reef of uneven, diversified lacework, incessantly wrought upon by the rain, the wind, the sun, the snow, the frost, the mist and all the water that falls from the sky or oozes from the earth.

The only accessible point is on the eastern side, at the bottom of a depression where a few houses, mostly abandoned since the war, constitute the village. A break in the cliffs opens here, protected by the little jetty. The sea at this spot is perfectly calm.

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Two boats lay moored to the quay.

Before landing, Honorine made a last effort:

"We're there, Madame Véronique, as you see. Now is it really worth your while to get out? Why not stay where you are? I'll bring your father and your son to you in two hours' time and we'll have dinner at Beg-Meil or at Pont-l'Abbé. Will that do?"

Véronique rose to her feet and leapt on to the quay without replying. Honorine joined her and insisted no longer:

"Well, children, where's young François? Hasn't he come?"

"He was here about twelve," said one of the women. "Only he didn't expect you until to-morrow."

"That's true enough . . . but still he must have heard me blow my horn. However, we shall see."

And, as the man helped her to unload the boat, she said:

"I shan't want all this taken up to the Priory. Nor the bags either. Unless . . . Look here, if I am not back by five o'clock, send a youngster after me with the bags."

"No, I'll come myself," said one of the seamen.

"As you please, Corréjou. Oh, by the way, where's Maguennoc?"

"Maguennoc's gone. I took him across to Pont-l'Abbé myself."

"When was that, Corréjou?"

"Why, the day after you went, Madame Honorine."

"What was he going over for?"

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"He told us he was going . . . I don't know where . . . . It had to do with the hand he lost . . . . a pilgrimage . . . . "

"A pilgrimage? To Le Faouet, perhaps? To St. Barbe's Chapel?"

"That's it . . . that's it exactly: St. Barbe's Chapel, that's what he said."

Honorine asked no more. She could no longer doubt that Maguennoc was dead. She moved away, accompanied by Véronique, who had lowered her veil; and the two went along a rocky path, cut into steps, which ran through the middle of an oak-wood towards the southernmost point of the island.

"After all," said Honorine, "I am not sure — and I may as well say so — that M. d'Hergemont will consent to leave. He treats all my stories as crotchets, though there's plenty of things that astonish even him . . . . "

"Does he live far from here?" asked Véronique.

"It's forty minutes' walk. As you will see, it's almost another island, joined to the first. The Benedictines built an abbey there."

"But he's not alone there, is he, with François and M. Maroux?"

"Before the war, there were two men besides. Lately, Maguennoc and I used to do pretty well all the work, with the cook, Marie Le Goff."

"She remained, of course, while you were away?"

"Yes."

They reached the top of the cliffs. The path, which followed the coast, rose and fell in steep gradients. On every hand were old oaks with their bunches of mistletoe, which showed among the as

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yet scanty leaves. The sea, grey-green in the distance, girded the island with a white belt.

Véronique continued:

"What do you propose to do, Honorine?"

"I shall go in by myself and speak to your father. Then I shall come back and fetch you at the garden-gate; and in François' eyes you will pass for a friend of his mother's. He will guess the truth gradually."

"And you think that my father will give me a good welcome?"

"He will receive you with open arms, Madame Véronique," cried the Breton woman, "and we shall all be happy, provided . . . provided nothing has happened . . . It's so funny that François doesn't run out to meet me! He can see our boat from every part of the island . . . as far off as the Glenans almost."

She relapsed into what M. d'Hergemont called her crotchets; and they pursued their road in silence. Véronique felt anxious and impatient.

Suddenly Honorine made the sign of the cross:

"You do as I'm doing, Madame Véronique," she said. "The monks have consecrated the place, but there's lots of bad, unlucky things remaining from the old days, especially in that wood, the wood of the Great Oak."

The old days no doubt meant the period of the Druids and their human sacrifices; and the two women were now entering a wood in which the oaks, each standing in isolation on a mound of moss-grown stones, had a look of ancient gods, each with his own altar, his mysterious cult and his formidable power.

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Véronique, following Honorine's example, crossed herself and could not help shuddering as she said:

"How melancholy it is! There's not a flower on this desolate plateau."

"They grow most wonderfully when one takes the trouble. You shall see Maguennoc's, at the end of the island, to the right of the Fairies' Dolmen . . . a place called the Calvary of the Flowers."

"Are they lovely?"

"Wonderful, I tell you. Only he goes himself to get the mould from certain places. He prepares it. He works it up. He mixes it with some special leaves of which he knows the effect." And she repeated, "You shall see Maguennoc's flowers. There are no flowers like them in the world. They are miraculous flowers . . . ."

After skirting a hill, the road descended a sudden declivity. A huge gash divided the island into two parts, the second of which now appeared, standing a little higher, but very much more limited in extent.

"It's the Priory, that part," said Honorine.

The same jagged cliffs surrounded the smaller islet with an even steeper rampart, which itself was hollowed out underneath like the hoop of a crown. And this rampart was joined to the main island by a strip of cliff fifty yards long and hardly thicker than a castle-wall, with a thin, tapering crest which looked as sharp as the edge of an axe.

There was no thoroughfare possible along this ridge, inasmuch as it was split in the middle with a wide fissure, for which reason the abutments of a wooden bridge had been anchored to the two extremities. The bridge started flat on the rock and subsequently spanned the intervening crevice.

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They crossed it separately, for it was not only very narrow but also unstable, shaking under their feet and in the wind.

"Look, over there, at the extreme point of the island," said Honorine, "you can see a corner of the Priory."

The path that led to it ran through fields planted with small fir-trees arranged in quincunxes. Another path turned to the right and disappeared from view in some dense thickets.

Véronique kept her eyes upon the Priory, whose low-storied front was lengthening gradually, when Honorine, after a few minutes, stopped short, with her face towards the thickets on the right, and called out:

"Monsieur Stéphane!"

"Whom are you calling?" asked Véronique.

"M. Maroux?"

"Yes, François' tutor. He was running towards the bridge: I caught sight of him through a clearing . . . Monsieur Stéphane! . . . But why doesn't he answer? Did you see a man running?"

"No."

"I declare it was he, with his white cap. At any rate, we can see the bridge behind us. Let us wait for him to cross."

"Why wait? If anything's the matter, if there's a danger of any kind, it's at the Priory."

"You're right. Let's hurry."

They hastened their pace, overcome with forebodings; and then, for no definite reason, broke into a run, so greatly did their fears increase as they drew nearer to the reality.

The islet grew narrower again, barred by a low

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wall which marked the boundaries of the Priory domain. At that moment, cries were heard, coming from the house.

Honorine exclaimed:

"They're calling! Did you hear? A woman's cries! It's the cook! It's Marie Le Goff! . . ."

She made a dash for the gate and grasped the key, but inserted it so awkwardly that she jammed the lock and was unable to open it.

"Through the gap!" she ordered. "This way, on the right!"

They rushed along, scrambled through the wall and crossed a wide grassy space filled with ruins, in which the winding and ill-marked path disappeared at every moment under trailing creepers and moss.

"Here we are! Here we are!" shouted Honorine. "We're coming!"

And she muttered:

"The cries have stopped! It's dreadful! Oh, poor Marie Le Goff!"

She grasped Véronique's arm:

"Let's go round. The front of the house is on the other side. On this side the doors are always locked and the window-shutters closed."

But Véronique caught her foot in some roots, stumbled and fell to her knees. When she stood up again, the Breton woman had left her and was hurrying round the left wing. Unconsciously, Véronique, instead of following her, made straight for the house, climbed the step and was brought up short by the door, at which she knocked again and again.

The idea of going round, as Honorine had done, seemed to her a waste of time which nothing could

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ever make good. However, realising the futility of her efforts, she was just deciding to go, when once more cries sounded from inside the house and above her head.

It was a man's voice, which Véronique seemed to recognize as her father's. She fell back a few steps. Suddenly one of the windows on the first floor opened and she saw M. d'Hergemont, his features distorted with inexpressible terror, gasping:

"Help! Help! Oh, the monster! Help!"

"Father! Father!" cried Véronique, in despair. "It's I!"

He lowered his head for an instant, appeared not to see his daughter and made a quick attempt to climb over the balcony. But a shot rang out behind him and one of the window-panes was blown into fragments.

"Murderer, murderer!" he shouted, turning back into the room.

Véronique, mad with fear and helplessness, looked around her. How could she rescue her father? The wall was too high and offered nothing to cling to. Suddenly, she saw a ladder, lying twenty yards away, beside the wall of the house. With a prodigious effort of will and strength, she managed to carry the ladder, heavy though it was, and to set it up under the open window.

At the most tragic moment in life, when the mind is no more than a seething confusion, when the whole body is shaken by the tremor of anguish, a certain logic continues to connect our ideas: and Véronique wondered why she had not heard Honorine's voice and what could have delayed her coming.

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She also thought of François. Where was François? Had he followed Stéphane Maroux in his inexplicable flight? Had he gone in search of assistance? And who was it that M. d'Hergemont had apostrophized as a monster and a murderer?

The ladder did not reach the window; and Véronique at once became aware of the effort which would be necessary if she was to climb over the balcony. Nevertheless she did not hesitate. They were fighting up there; and the struggle was mingled with stifled shouts uttered by her father. She went up the ladder. The most that she could do was to grasp the bottom rail of the balcony. But a narrow ledge enabled her to hoist herself on one knee, to put her head through and to witness the tragedy that was being enacted in the room.

At that moment, M. d'Hergemont had once more retreated to the window and even a little beyond it, so that she almost saw him face to face. He stood without moving, haggard-eyed and with his arms hanging in an undecided posture, as though waiting for something terrible to happen. He stammered:

"Murderer! Murderer! . . . Is it really you? Oh, curse you! François! François!"

He was no doubt calling upon his grandson for help; and François no doubt was also exposed to some attack, was perhaps wounded, was possibly dead!

Véronique summoned up all her strength and succeeded in setting foot on the ledge.

"Here I am! Here I am!" she meant to cry. But her voice died away in her throat. She had

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seen! She saw! Facing her father, at a distance of five paces, against the opposite wall of the room, stood some one pointing a revolver at M. d'Hergemont and deliberately taking aim. And that some one was . . . oh, horror! Véronique recognized the red cap of which Honorine had spoken, the flannel shirt with the gilt buttons. And above all she beheld, in that young face convulsed with hideous emotions, the very expression which Vorski used to wear at times when his instincts, hatred and ferocity, gained the upper hand.

The boy did not see her. His eyes were fixed on the mark which he proposed to hit; and he seemed to take a sort of savage joy in postponing the fatal act.

Véronique herself was silent. Words or cries could not possibly avert the peril. What she had to do was to fling herself between her father and her son. She clutched hold of the railings, clambered up and climbed through the window.

It was too late. The shot was fired. M. d'Hergemont fell with a groan of pain.

And, at the same time, at that very moment, while the boy still had his arm outstretched and the old man was sinking into a huddled heap, a door opened at the back. Honorine appeared; and the abominable sight struck her, so to speak, full in the face.

"François!" she screamed. "You! You!"

The boy sprang at her. The woman tried to bar his way. There was not even a struggle. The boy took a step back, quickly raised his weapon and fired.

Honorine's knees gave way beneath her and she

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fell across the threshold. And, as he jumped over her body and fled, she kept on repeating:

"François . . . . François . . . . No, it's not true! . . . Oh, can it be possible? . . . François . . . ."

There was a burst of laughter outside. Yes, the boy had laughed. Véronique heard that horrible, infernal laugh, so like Vorski's laugh; and it all agonized her with the same anguish which used to sear her in Vorski's days!

She did not run after the murderer. She did not call out.

A faint voice beside her was murmuring her name:

"Véronique . . . . Véronique . . . ."

M. d'Hergemont lay on the ground, staring at her with glassy eyes which were already filled with death.

She knelt down by his side; but, when she tried to unbutton his waistcoat and his bloodstained shirt, in order to dress the wound of which he was dying, he gently pushed her hand aside. She understood that all aid was useless and that he wished to speak to her. She stooped still lower.

"Véronique . . . forgive . . . Véronique . . . ."

It was the first utterance of his failing thoughts. She kissed him on the forehead and wept:

"Hush, father . . . . Don't tire yourself . . . ."

But he had something else to say; and his mouth vainly emitted syllables which did not form words and to which she listened in despair. His life was ebbing away. His mind was fading into the darkness. Véronique glued her ear to the lips which

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exhausted themselves in a supreme effort and she caught the words:

"Beware . . . beware . . . the God-Stone . . . ."

Suddenly he half raised himself. His eyes flashed as though lit by the last flicker of an expiring flame. Véronique received the impression that her father, as he looked at her, now understood nothing but the full significance of her presence and foresaw all the dangers that threatened her; and, speaking in a hoarse and terrified but quite distinct voice, he said:

"You musn't stay . . . . It means death if you stay . . . . Escape this island . . . . Go . . . Go . . . ."

His head fell back. He stammered a few more words which Véronique was just able to grasp:

"Oh, the cross! . . . The four crosses of Sarek! . . . My daughter . . . my daughter . . . crucified! . . ."

And that was all.

There was a great silence, a vast silence which Véronique felt weighing upon her like a burden that grows heavier second after second.

"You must escape from this island," a voice repeated. "Go, quickly. Your father bade you, Madame Véronique."

Honorine was beside her, livid in the face, with her two hands clasping a napkin, rolled into a plug and red with blood, which she held to her chest.

"But I must look after you first!" cried Véronique. "Wait a moment . . . . Let me see . . . ."

"Later on . . . they'll attend to me presently," spluttered Honorine "Oh, the monster! . . . If

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I had only come in time! But the door below was barricaded . . . .”

“Do let me see to your wound,” Véronique implored. “Lie down.”

“Presently . . . . First Marie Le Goff, the cook, at the top of the staircase . . . . She's wounded too . . . mortally perhaps . . . . Go and see.”

Véronique went out by the door at the back, the one through which her son had made his escape. There was a large landing here. On the top steps, curled into a heap, lay Marie Le Goff, with the death-rattle in her throat.

She died almost at once, without recovering consciousness, the third victim of the incomprehensible tragedy. As foretold by old Maguennoc, M. d'Hergemont had been the second victim.

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CHAPTER IV

HONORINE'S wound was deep but did not seem likely to prove fatal. When Véronique had dressed it and moved Marie Le Goff's body to the room filled with books and furnished like a study in which her father was lying, she closed M. d'Hergemont's eyes, covered him with a sheet and knelt down to pray. But the words of prayer would not come to her lips and her mind was incapable of dwelling on a single thought. She felt stunned by the repeated blows of misfortune. She sat down in a chair, holding her head in her hands. Thus she remained for nearly an hour, while Honorine slept a feverish sleep.

With all her strength she rejected her son's image, even as she had always rejected Vorski's. But the two images became mingled together, whirling around her and dancing before her eyes like those lights which, when we close our eyelids tightly, pass and pass again and multiply and blend into one. And it was always one and the same face, cruel, sardonic, hideously grinning.

She did not suffer, as a mother suffers when mourning the loss of a son. Her son had been dead these fourteen years; and the one who had come to life again, the one for whom all the wells of her

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maternal affection were ready to gush forth, had suddenly become a stranger and even worse: Vorski's son! How indeed could she have suffered?

But ah, what a wound inflicted in the depths of her being! What an upheaval, like those cataclysms which shake the whole of a peaceful countryside! What a hellish spectacle! What a vision of madness and horror! What an ironical jest, a jest of the most hideous destiny! Her son killing her father at the moment when, after all these years of separation and sorrow, she was on the point of embracing them both and living with them in sweet and homely intimacy! Her son a murderer! Her son dispensing death and terror broadcast! Her son levelling that ruthless weapon, slaying with all his heart and soul and taking a perverse delight in it!

The motives which might explain these actions interested her not at all. Why had her son done these things? Why had his tutor, Stéphane Maroux, doubtless an accomplice, possibly an instigator, fled before the tragedy? These were questions which she did not seek to solve. She thought only of the frightful scene of carnage and death. And she asked herself if death was not for her the only refuge and the only ending.

"Madame Véronique," whispered Honorine.

"What is it?" asked Véronique, roused from her stupor.

"Don't you hear?"

"What?"

"A ring at the bell below. They must be bringing your luggage."

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She sprang to her feet.

"But what am I to say? How can I explain? . . . If I accuse that boy . . ."

"Not a word, please. Let me speak to them."

"You're very weak, my poor Honorine."

"No, no, I'm feeling better."

Véronique went downstairs, crossed a broad entrance-hall paved with black and white flags and drew the bolts of a great door.

It was, as they expected, one of the sailors:

"I knocked at the kitchen-door first," said the man. "Isn't Marie Le Goff there? And Madame Honorine?"

"Honorine is upstairs and would like to speak to you."

The sailor looked at her, seemed impressed by this young woman, who looked so pale and serious, and followed her without a word.

Honorine was waiting on the first floor, standing in front of the open door:

"Ah, it's you, Corréjou? . . . Now listen to me . . . and no silly talk, please."

"What's the matter, M'ame Honorine? Why, you're wounded! What is it?"

She stepped aside from the doorway and, pointing to the two bodies under their winding-sheets, said simply:

"Monsieur Antoine and Marie Le Goff . . . both of them murdered."

The man's face became distorted. He stammered:

"Murdered . . . you don't say so . . . . Why?"

"I don't know; we arrived after it happened."

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"But . . . young François? . . . Monsieur Stéphane? . . ."

"Gone . . . . They must have been killed too."

"But . . . but . . . Maguennoc?"

"Maguennoc? Why do you speak of Maguennoc?"

"I speak of Maguennoc, I speak of Maguennoc . . . because, if he's alive . . . this is a very different business. Maguennoc always said that he would be the first. Maguennoc only says things of which he's certain. Maguennoc understands these things thoroughly."

Honorine reflected and then said:

"Maguennoc has been killed."

This time Corréjou lost all his composure: and his features expressed that sort of insane terror which Véronique had repeatedly observed in Honorine. He made the sign of the cross and said, in a low whisper:

"Then . . . then. . . it's happening, Ma'me Honorine? . . . Maguennoc said it would . . . . Only the other day, in my boat, he was saying, 'It won't be long now . . . . Everybody ought to get away.'"

And suddenly the sailor turned on his heel and made for the staircase.

"Stay where you are, Corréjou," said Honorine, in a voice of command.

"We must get away. Maguennoc said so. Everybody has got to go."

"Stay where you are," Honorine repeated.

Corréjou stopped, undecidedly. And Honorine continued:

"We are agreed. We must go. We shall

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start to-morrow, towards the evening. But first we must attend to Monsieur Antoine and to Marie Le Goff. Look here, you go to the sisters Archignat and send them to keep watch by the dead. They are bad women, but they are used to doing that. Say that two of the three must come. Each of them shall have double the ordinary fee."

"And after that, Ma'me Honorine?"

"You and all the old men will see to the coffins; and at daybreak we will bury the bodies in consecrated ground, in the cemetery of the chapel."

"And after that, Ma'me Honorine?"

"After that, you will be free and the others too. You can pack up and be off."

"But you, Ma'me Honorine?"

"I have the boat. That's enough talking. Are we agreed?"

"Yes, we're agreed. It means one more night to spend here. But I suppose that nothing fresh will happen between this and to-morrow? . . ."

"Why no, why no . . . Go, Corréjou. Hurry. And above all don't tell the others that Maguennoc is dead . . . or we shall never keep them here."

"That's a promise, Ma'me Honorine."

The man hastened away.

An hour later, two of the sisters Archignat appeared, two skinny, shrivelled old hags, looking like witches in their dirty, greasy caps with the black-velvet bows. Honorine was taken to her own room on the same floor, at the end of the left wing.

And the vigil of the dead began.

Véronique spent the first part of the night beside her father's body and then went and sat with

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Honorine, whose condition seemed to grow worse. She ended by dozing off and was wakened by the Breton woman, who said to her, in one of those accesses of fever in which the brain still retains a certain lucidity:

"François must be hiding . . . and M. Stéphane too . . . The island has safe hiding-places, which Maguennoc showed them. We shan't see them, therefore; and no one will know anything about them."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite. So listen to me. To-morrow, when everybody has left Sarek and when we two are alone, I shall blow the signal with my horn and he will come here."

Véronique was horrified:

"But I don't want to see him!" she exclaimed, indignantly. "I loathe him! . . . Like my father, I curse him! . . . Have you forgotten? He killed my father, before our eyes! He killed Marie Le Goff! He tried to kill you! . . . No, what I feel for him is hatred and disgust! The monster!"

The Breton woman took her hand, as she had formed a habit of doing, and murmured:

"Don't condemn him yet . . . . He did not know what he was doing."

"What do you mean? He didn't know? Why, I saw his eyes, Vorski's eyes!"

"He did not know . . . he was mad."

"Mad? Nonsense!"

"Yes, Madame Véronique. I know the boy. He's the kindest creature on earth. If he did all this, it was because he went mad suddenly . . . he

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and M. Stéphane. They must both be weeping in despair now."

"It's impossible. I can't believe it."

"You can't believe it because you know nothing of what is happening . . . and of what is going to happen . . . . But, if you did know . . . Oh, there are things . . . there are things!"

Her voice was no longer audible. She was silent, but her eyes remained wide open and her lips moved without uttering a sound.

Nothing occurred until the morning. At five o'clock Véronique heard them nailing down the coffins; and almost immediately afterwards the door of the room in which she sat was opened and the sisters Archignat entered like a whirlwind, both greatly excited.

They had heard the truth from Corréjou, who, to give himself courage, had taken a drop too much to drink and was talking at random:

"Maguennoc is dead!" they screamed. "Maguennoc is dead and you never told us! Give us our money, quick! We're going!"

The moment they were paid, they ran away as fast as their legs would carry them; and, an hour later, some other women, informed by them, came hurrying to drag their men from their work. They all used the same words:

"We must go! We must get ready to start! . . . It'll be too late afterwards. The two boats can take us all."

Honorine had to intervene with all her authority and Véronique was obliged to distribute money. And the funeral was hurriedly conducted. Not far away was an old chapel, carefully restored by M.

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d'Hergemont, where a priest came once a month from Pont-l'Abbé to say mass. Beside it was the ancient cemetery of the abbots of Sarek. The two bodies were buried here; and an old man, who in ordinary times acted as sacristan, mumbled the blessing.

All the people seemed smitten with madness. Their voices and movements were spasmodic. They were obsessed with the fixed idea of leaving the island and paid no attention to Véronique, who knelt a little way off, praying and weeping.

It was all over before eight o'clock. Men and women made their way down across the island. Véronique, who felt as though she were living in a nightmare world where events followed upon one another without logic and with no connected sequence, went back to Honorine, whose feeble condition had prevented her from attending her master's funeral.

"I'm feeling better," said the Breton woman. "We shall go to-day or to-morrow and we shall go with François."

Véronique protested angrily; but Honorine repeated:

"With François, I tell you, and with M. Stéphane. And as soon as possible. I also want to go . . . and to take you with me . . . and François too. There is death in the island. Death is the master here. We must leave Sarek. We shall all go."

Véronique did not wish to thwart her. But at nine o'clock hurried steps were heard outside. It was Corréjou, coming from the village. On reaching the door he shouted:

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"They've stolen your motor-boat, Ma'me Honorine! She's disappeared!"

"Impossible!" said Honorine.

But the sailor, all out of breath, declared:

"She's disappeared. I suspected something this morning early. But I expect I had had a glass too much; I did not give it another thought. Others have since seen what I did. The painter has been cut . . . . It happened during the night. And they've made off. No one saw or heard them."

The two women exchanged glances; and the same thought occurred to both of them: François and Stéphane Maroux had taken to flight.

Honorine muttered between her teeth:

"Yes, yes, that's it: he understands how to work the boat."

Véronique perhaps felt a certain relief at knowing that the boy had gone and that she would not see him again. But Honorine, seized with a renewed fear, exclaimed:

"Then . . . then what are we to do?"

"You must leave at once, Ma'me Honorine. The boats are ready . . . everybody's packing up. There'll be no one in the village by eleven o'clock."

Véronique interposed:

"Honorine's not in a condition to travel."

"Yes, I am; I'm better," the Breton woman declared.

"No, it would be ridiculous. Let us wait a day or two . . . . Come back in two days, Corréjou."

She pushed the sailor towards the door. He, for that matter, was only too anxious to go:

"Very well," he said, "that'll do: I'll come back the day after to-morrow. Besides, we can't take

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everything with us. We shall have to come back now and again to fetch our things . . . . Good-bye, Ma'me Honorine; take care of yourself."

And he ran outside.

"Corréjou! Corréjou!"

Honorine was sitting up in bed and calling to him in despair:

"No, no, don't go away, Corréjou! . . . Wait for me and carry me to your boat."

She listened; and, as the man did not return, she tried to get up:

"I'm frightened," she said. "I don't want to be left alone."

Véronique held her down:

"You're not going to be left alone, Honorine. I shan't leave you."

There was an actual struggle between the two women; and Honorine, pushed back on her bed by main force, moaned, helplessly:

"I'm frightened . . . . I'm frightened . . . . The island is accursed . . . . It's tempting Providence to remain behind . . . . Maguennoc's death was a warning . . . . I'm frightened . . . ."

She was more or less delirious, but still retained a half-lucidity which enabled her to intersperse a few intelligible and reasonable remarks among the incoherent phrases which revealed her superstitious Breton soul.

She gripped Véronique by her two shoulders and declared:

"I tell you, the island's cursed. Maguennoc confessed as much himself one day: 'Sarek is one of the gates of hell,' he said. 'The gate is closed now,

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but, on the day when it opens, every misfortune you can think of will be upon it like a squall.' "

She calmed herself a little, at Véronique's entreaty, and continued, in a lower voice, which grew fainter as she spoke:

"He loved the island, though . . . as we all do. At such times he would speak of it in a way which I did not understand: 'The gate is a double one, Honorine, and it also opens on Paradise.' Yes, yes, the island was good to live in . . . . We loved it . . . . Maguennoc made flowers grow on it . . . . Oh, those flowers! They were enormous: three times as tall . . . and as beautiful . . ."

The minutes passed slowly. The bedroom was at the extreme left of the house, just above the rocks which overhung the sea and separated from them only by the width of the road.

Véronique sat down at the window, with her eyes fixed on the white waves which grew still more troubled as the wind blew more strongly. The sun was rising. In the direction of the village she saw nothing except a steep headland. But, beyond the belt of foam studded with the black points of the reefs, the view embraced the deserted plains of the Atlantic.

Honorine murmured, drowsily:

"They say that the gate is a stone . . . and that it comes from very far away, from a foreign country. It's the God-Stone. They also say that it's a precious stone . . . the colour of gold and silver mixed . . . . The God-Stone . . . . The stone that gives life or death . . . . Maguennoc saw it . . . . He opened the gate and put his arm through

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. . . . And his hand . . . his hand was burnt to a cinder."

Véronique felt oppressed. Fear was gradually overcoming her also, like the oozing and soaking of stagnant water. The horrible events of the last few days, of which she had been a terrified witness, seemed to evoke others yet more dreadful, which she anticipated like an inevitable hurricane that is bound to carry off everything in its headlong course.

She expected them. She had no doubt that they would come, unloosed by the fatal power which was multiplying its terrible assaults upon her.

"Don't you see the boats?" asked Honorine.

"No," she said, "you can't see them from here."

"Yes, you can: they are sure to come this way. They are heavy boats: and there's a wider passage at the point."

The next moment, Véronique saw the bow of a boat project beyond the end of the headland. The boat lay low in the water, being very heavily laden, crammed with crates and parcels on which women and children were seated. Four men were rowing lustily.

"That's Corréjou's," said Honorine, who had left her bed, half-dressed. "And there's the other: look."

The second boat came into view, equally burdened. Only three men were rowing, with a woman to help them.

Both boats were too far away — perhaps seven or eight hundred yards — to allow the faces of the occupants to be seen. And no sound of voices rose from those heavy hulls with their cargoes of wretchedness, which were fleeing from death.

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"Oh dear, oh dear!" moaned Honorine. "If only they escape this hell!"

"What can you be afraid of, Honorine? They are in no danger."

"Yes, they are, as long as they have not left the island."

"But they have left it."

"It's still the island all around the island. It's there that the coffins lurk and lie in wait."

"But the sea is not rough."

"There's more than the sea. It's not the sea that's the enemy."

"Then what is?"

"I don't know . . . . I don't know . . . ."

The two boats veered round at the southern point. Before them lay two channels, which Honorine pointed out by the name of two reefs, the Devil's Rock and the Sarek Tooth.

It at once became evident that Corréjou had chosen the Devil's Channel.

"They're touching it," said Honorine. "They are there. Another hundred yards and they are safe."

She almost gave a chuckle:

"Ah, all the devil's machinations will be thwarted, Madame Véronique! I really believe that we shall be saved, you and I and all the people of Sarek."

Véronique remained silent. Her depression continued and was all the more overwhelming because she could attribute it only to vague presentiments which she was powerless to fight against. She had drawn an imaginary line up to which the danger threatened, would continue to threaten, and where it

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still persisted; and this line Corréjou had not yet reached.

Honorine was shivering with fever. She mumbled:

"I'm frightened . . . . I'm frightened . . . ."

"Nonsense," declared Véronique, pulling herself together, "It's absurd! Where can the danger come from?"

"Oh," cried the Breton woman, "what's that? What does it mean?"

"What? What is it?"

They had both pressed their foreheads to the panes and were staring wildly before them. Down below, something had so to speak shot out from the Devil's Rock. And they at once recognized the motor-boat which they had used the day before and which according to Corréjou had disappeared.

"François! François!" cried Honorine, in stupefaction. "François and Monsieur Stéphane!"

Véronique recognized the boy. He was standing in the bow of the motor-boat and making signs to the people in the two rowing-boats. The men answered by waving their oars, while the women gesticulated. In spite of Véronique's opposition, Honorine opened both halves of the window; and they could hear the sound of voices above the throbbing of the motor, though they could not catch a single word.

"What does it mean?" repeated Honorine. "François and M. Stéphane! . . . Why did they not make for the mainland?"

"Perhaps," Véronique explained, "they were afraid of being observed and questioned on landing."

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"No, they are known, especially François, who often used to go with me. Besides, the identity-papers are in the boat. No, they were waiting there, hidden behind the rock."

"But, Honorine, if they were hiding, why do they show themselves now?"

"Ah, that's just it, that's just it! . . . I don't understand . . . and it strikes me as odd . . . . What must Corréjou and the others think?"

The two boats, of which the second was now gliding in the wake of the first, had almost stopped. All the passengers seemed to be looking round at the motor-boat, which came rapidly in their direction and slackened spend when she was level with the second boat. In this way, she continued on a line parallel with that of the two boats and fifteen or twenty yards away.

"I don't understand . . . . I don't understand," muttered Honorine.

The motor had been cut off and the motor-boat now very slowly reached the space that separated the two fish-boats.

And suddenly the two women saw François stoop and then stand up again and draw his right arm back, as though he were going to throw something.

And at the same time Stéphane Maroux acted in the same way.

Then the unexpected, terrifying thing happened.

"Oh!" cried Véronique.

She hid her eyes for a second, but at once raised her head again and saw the hideous sight in all its horror.

Two things had been thrown across the little

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space, one from the bow, flung by François, the other from the stern, flung by Stéphane Maroux.

And two bursts of fire at once shot up from the two boats, followed by two whirls of smoke.

The explosions re-echoed. For a moment, nothing of what happened amid that black cloud was visible. Then the curtain parted, blown aside by the wind, and Véronique and Honorine saw the two boats swiftly sinking, while their occupants jumped into the sea.

The sight, the infernal sight, did not last long. They saw, standing on one of the buoys that marked the channel, a woman holding a child in her arms, without moving: then some motionless bodies, no doubt killed by the explosion; then two men fighting, mad perhaps. And all this went down with the boats.

A few eddies, some black specks floating on the surface; and that was all.

Honorine and Véronique, struck dumb with terror, had not uttered a single word. The thing surpassed the worst that their anguished minds could have conceived.

When it was all over, Honorine put her hand to her head and, in a hollow voice which Véronique was never to forget, said:

"My head's bursting. Oh, the poor people of Sarek! They were my friends, the friends of my childhood; and I shall never see them again . . . . The sea never gives up its dead at Sarek: it keeps them. It has its coffins all ready: thousands and thousands of hidden coffins . . . . Oh, my head is bursting! . . . I shall go mad . . . mad like François, my poor François!"

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Véronique did not answer. She was grey in the face. With clutching fingers she clung to the balcony, gazing downwards as one gazes into an abyss into which one is about to fling oneself. What would her son do? Would he save those people, whose shouts of distress now reached her ears, would he save them without delay? One may have fits of madness;but the attacks pass away at the sight of certain things.

The motor-boat had backed at first to avoid the eddies. François and Stéphane, whose red cap and white cap were still visible, were standing in the same positions at the bow and the stern; and they held in their hands . . . what? The two women could not see clearly, because of the distance, what they held in their hands. It looked like two rather long sticks.

"Poles, to help them," suggested Véronique.

"Or guns," said Honorine.

The black specks were still floating. There were nine of them, the nine heads of the survivors, whose arms also the two women saw moving from time to time and whose cries for help they heard.

Some were hurriedly moving away from the motor-boat, but four were swimming towards it; and, of those four, two could not fail to reach it.

Suddenly François and Stéphane made the same movement, the movement of marksmen taking aim.

There were two flashes, followed by the sound of a single report.

The heads of the two swimmers disappeared.

"Oh, the monsters!" stammered Véronique, almost swooning and falling on her knees.

Honorine, beside her, began screaming:

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"François! François!"

Her voice did not carry, first because it was too weak and then the wind was in her face. But she continued:

"François! François!"

She next stumbled across the room and into the corridor, in search of something, and returned to the window, still shouting:

"François! François!"

She had ended by finding the shell which she used as a signal. But, on lifting it to her mouth, she found that she could produce only dull and indistinct sounds from it:

"Oh, curse the thing!" she cried, flinging the shell away. "'I have no strength left . . .'. François! François!"

She was terrible to look at, with her hair all in disorder and her face covered with the sweat of fever. Véronique implored her:

"Please, Honorine, please!"

"But look at them, look at them!"

The motor-boat was drifting forward down below, with the two marksmen at their posts, holding their guns ready for murder.

The survivors fled. Two of them hung back in the rear.

These two were aimed at. Their heads disappeared from view.

"But look at them!" Honorine said, explosively, in a hoarse voice. "They're hunting them down! They're killing them like game! . . . Oh, the poor people of Sarek! . . ."

Another shot. Another black speck vanished.

Véronique was writing in despair. She shook

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the rails of the balcony, as she might have shaken the bars of a cage in which she was imprisoned.

"Vorski! Vorski!" she groaned, stricken by the recollection of her husband. "He's Vorski's son!"

Suddenly she felt herself seized by the throat and saw, close to her own face, the distorted face of the Breton woman.

"He's your son!" spluttered Honorine. "Curse you! You are the monster's mother and you shall be punished for it!"

And she burst out laughing and stamping her feet, in an overpowering fit of hilarity.

"The cross, yes, the cross! You shall be crucified, with nails through your hands! . . . What a punishment, nails through your hands!"

She was mad.

Véronique released herself and tried to hold the other motionless: but Honorine, filled with malicious rage, threw her off, making her lose balance, and began to climb into the balcony.

She remained standing outside the window, lifting up her arms and once more shouting:

"François! François!"

The first floor was not so high on this side of the house, owing to the slope of the ground. Honorine jumped into the path below, crossed it, pushed her way through the shrubs that lined it and ran to the ridge of rocks which formed the cliff and overhung the sea.

She stopped for a moment, thrice called out the name of the child whom she had reared and flung herself headlong into the deep.

In the distance, the man-hunt drew to a finish.

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The heads sank one by one. The massacre was completed.

Then the motor-boat with François and Stéphane on board fled towards the coast of Brittany, towards the beaches of Beg-Meil and Concarneau.

Véronique was left alone on Coffin Island.

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CHAPTER V

"FOUR WOMEN CRUCIFIED"

VERONIQUE was left alone on Coffin Island. Until the sun sank among the clouds that seemed, on the horizon, to rest upon the sea, she did not move, but sat huddled against the window, with her head buried in her two arms resting on the sill.

The dread reality passed through the darkness of her mind like pictures which she strove not to see, but which at times became so clearly defined that she imagined herself to be living through those atrocious scenes again.

Still she sought no explanation of all this and formed no theories as to all the motives which might have thrown a light upon the tragedy. She admitted the madness of François and of Stéphane Maroux, being unable to suppose any other reasons for such actions as theirs. And, believing the two murderers to be mad, she did not even try to attribute to them any projects or definite wishes.

Moreover, Honorine's madness, of which she had, so to speak, observed the outbreak, impelled her to look upon all that had happened as provoked by a sort of mental upset to which all the people of Sarek had fallen victims. She herself at moments felt that her brain was reeling, that her ideas were fading away in a mist, that invisible ghosts were hovering around her.

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She dozed off into a sleep which was haunted by these images and in which she felt so wretched that she began to sob. Also it seemed to her that she could hear a slight noise which, in her benumbed wits, assumed a hostile significance. Enemies were approaching. She opened her eyes.

A couple of yards in front of her, sitting upon its haunches, was a queer animal, covered with long mud-coloured hair and holding its fore-paws folded like a pair of arms.

It was a dog; and she at once remembered François' dog, of which Honorine had spoken as a dear, devoted, comical creature. She even remembered his name, All's-Well.

As she uttered this name in an undertone, she felt an angry impulse and was almost driving away the animal endowed with such an ironical nickname. All's-Well! And she thought of all the victims of the horrible nightmare, of all the dead people of Sarek, of her murdered father, of Honorine killing herself, of François going mad. All's-Well, forsooth!

Meanwhile the dog did not stir. He was sitting up as Honorine had described, with his head a little on one side, one eye closed, the corners of his mouth drawn back to his ears and his arms crossed in front of him; and there was really something very like a smile flitting over his face.

Véronique now remembered: this was the manner in which All's-Well displayed his sympathy for those in trouble. All's-Well could not bear the sight of tears. When people wept, he sat up until they in their turn smiled and petted him.

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Véronique did not smile, but she pressed him against her and said:

"No, my poor dog, all's not well; on the contrary, all's as bad as it can be. No matter: we must live, mustn't we, and we mustn't go mad ourselves like the others?"

The necessities of life obliged her to act. She went down to the kitchen, found some food and gave the dog a good share of it. Then she went upstairs again.

Night had fallen. She opened, on the first floor, the door of a bedroom which at ordinary times must have been unoccupied. She was weighed down with an immense fatigue, caused by all the efforts and violent emotions which she had undergone. She fell asleep almost at once. All's Well lay awake at the foot of her bed.

Next morning she woke late, with a curious feeling of peace and security. It seemed to her that her present life was somehow connected with her calm and placid life at Besançon. The few days of horror which she had passed fell away from her like distant events whose return she had no need to fear. The men and women who had gone under in the great horror became to her mind almost like strangers whom one has met and does not expect to see again. Her heart ceased bleeding. Her sorrow for them did not reach the depths of her soul.

It was due to the unforeseen and undisturbed rest, the consoling solitude. And all this seemed to her so pleasant that, when a steamer came and anchored on the spot of the disaster, she made no signal. No doubt yesterday, from the mainland,

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they had seen the flash of the explosions and heard the report of the shots. Véronique remained motionless.

She saw a boat put off from the steamer and supposed that they were going to land and explore the village. But not only did she dread an enquiry in which her son might be involved: she herself did not wish to be found, to be questioned, to have her name, her identity, her story discovered and to be brought back into the infernal circle from which she had escaped. She preferred to wait a week or two, to wait until chance brought within hailing-distance of the island some fishing-boat which could pick her up.

But no one came to the Priory. The steamer put off; and nothing disturbed her isolation.

And so she remained for three days. Fate seemed to have reconsidered its intention of making fresh assaults upon her. She was alone and her own mistress. All's Well, whose company had done her a world of good, disappeared.

The Priory domain occupied the whole end of the island, on the site of a Benedictine abbey, which had been abandoned in the fifteenth century and gradually fallen into ruin and decay.

The house, built in the eighteenth century by a wealthy Breton ship-owner out of the materials of the old abbey and the stones of the chapel, was in no way interesting either outside or in. Véronique, for that matter, did not dare to enter any of the rooms. The memory of her father and son checked her before the closed doors.

But, on the second day, in the bright spring sunshine, she explored the park. It extended to the

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point of the island and, like the sward in front of the house, was studded with ruins and covered with ivy. She noticed that all the paths ran towards a steep promontory crowned with a clump of enormous oaks. When she reached the spot, she found that these oaks stood round a crescent-shaped clearing which was open to the sea.

In the centre of the clearing was a cromlech with a rather short, oval table upheld by two supports of rock, which were almost square. The spot possessed an impressive magnificence and commanded a boundless view.

"The Fairies' Dolmen, of which Honorine spoke," thought Véronique. "I cannot be far from the Calvary and Maguennoc's flowers."

She walked round the megalith. The inner surface of the two uprights bore a few illegible engraved signs. But the two outer surfaces facing the sea formed as it were two smooth slabs prepared to receive an inscription; and here she saw something that caused her to shudder with anguish. On the right, deeply encrusted, was an unskilful, primitive drawing of four crosses with four female figures writhing upon them. On the left was a column of lines of writing, whose characters, inadequately carved in the stone, had been almost obliterated by the weather, or perhaps even deliberately effaced by human hands. A few words remained, however, the very words which Véronique had read on the drawing which she found beside Maguennoc's corpse:

"Four women crucified .... Thirty coffins .... The God-Stone which gives life or death."

Véronique moved away, staggering. The mys-

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tery was once more before her, as everywhere in the island, and she was determined to escape from it until the moment when she could leave Sarek altogether.

She took a path which started from the clearing and led past the last oak on the right. This oak appeared to have been struck by lightning, for all that remained of it was the trunk and a few dead branches.

Farther on, she went down some stone steps, crossed a little meadow in which stood four rows of menhirs and stopped suddenly with a stifled cry, a cry of admiration and amazement, before the sight that presented itself to her eyes.

"Maguennoc's flowers," she whispered.

The last two menhirs of the central alley which she was following stood like the posts of a door that opened upon the most glorious spectacle, a rectangular space, fifty yards long at most, which was reached by a short descending flight of steps and bordered by two rows of menhirs all of the same height and placed at accurately measured intervals, like the columns of a temple. The nave and side-aisles of this temple were paved with wide, irregular, broken granite flag-stones, which the grass, growing in the cracks, marked with patterns similar to those of the lead which frames the pieces of a stained-glass window.

In the middle was a small bed of flowers thronging around an ancient stone crucifix. But such flowers! Flowers which the wildest imagination or fancy never conceived, dream-flowers, miraculous flowers, flowers out of all proportion to ordinary flowers!

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Véronique recognized all of them; and yet she stood dumbfounded at their size and splendour. There were flowers of many varieties, but few of each variety. It was like a nosegay made to contain every colour, every perfume and every beauty that flowers can possess.

And the strangest thing was that these flowers, which do not usually bloom at the same time and which open in successive months, were all growing and blossoming together! On one and the same day, these flowers, all perennial flowers whose time does not last much more than two or three weeks, were blooming and multiplying, full and heavy, vivid, sumptuous, proudly borne on their sturdy stems.

There were spiderworts, there were ranunculi, tiger-lilies, columbines, blood-red potentillas, irises of a brighter violet than a bishop's cassock. There were larkspurs, phlox, fuchsias, monk's-hoods, montbretias. And, above all this, to Véronique's intense emotion, above the dazzling flower-bed, standing a little higher in a narrow border around the pedestal of the crucifix, with all their blue, white and violet clusters seeming to lift themselves so as to touch the Saviour's very form, were veronicas!

She was faint with emotion. As she came nearer, she had read on a little label fastened to the pedestal these two words.

"Mother's flowers."

Véronique did not believe in miracles. She was obliged to admit that the flowers were wonderful, beyond all comparison with the flowers of our climes. But she refused to think that this anomaly

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was not to be explained except by supernatural causes or by magic recipes of which Maguennoc held the secret. No, there was some reason, perhaps a very simple one, of which events would afford a full explanation.

Meanwhile, amid the beautiful pagan setting, in the very centre of the miracle which it seemed to have wrought by its presence, the figure of Christ Crucified rose from the mass of flowers which offered Him their colours and their perfumes. Véronique knelt and prayed.

Next day and the day after, she returned to the Calvary of the Flowers. Here the mystery that surrounded her on every side had manifested itself in the most charming fashion; and her son played a part in it that enabled Véronique to think of him, before her own flowers, without hatred or despair.

But, on the fifth day, she perceived that her provisions were becoming exhausted; and in the middle of the afternoon she went down to the village.

There she noticed that most of the houses had been left open, so certain had their owners been, on leaving, of coming back again and taking what they needed in a second trip.

Sick at heart, she dared not cross the thresholds. There were geraniums on the window-ledges. Tall clocks with brass pendulums were ticking off the time in the empty rooms. She moved away.

In a shed near the quay, however, she saw the sacks and boxes which Honorine had brought with her in the motor-boat.

"Well," she thought, "I shan't starve. There's enough to last me for weeks; and by that time . . ."

She filled a basket with chocolate, biscuits, a few

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tins of preserved meat, rice and matches; and she was on the point of returning to the Priory, when it occurred to her that she would continue her walk to the other end of the island. She would fetch her basket on the way back.

A shady road climbed upwards on the right. The landscape seemed to be the same: the same flat stretches of moorland, without ploughed fields or pastures; the same clumps of ancient oaks. The island also became narrower, with no obstacle to block the view of the sea on either side or of the Penmarch headland in the distance.

There was also a hedge which ran from one cliff to the other and which served to enclose a property, a shabby property, with a straggling, dilapidated, tumbledown house upon it, some out-houses with patched roofs and a dirty, badly-kept yard, full of scrap-iron and stacks of firewood.

Véronique was already retracing her steps, when she stopped in alarm and surprise. It seemed to her that she heard some one moan. She listened, striving to plumb the vast silence, and once again the same sound, but this time more distinctly, reached her ears; and there were others: cries of pain, cries for help, women's cries. Then had not all the inhabitants taken to flight? She had a feeling of joy mingled with some sorrow, to know that she was not alone in Sarek, and of fear also, at the thought that events would perhaps drag her back again into the fatal cycle of death and horror.

So far as Véronique was able to judge, the noise came not from the house, but from the buildings on the right of the yard. This yard was closed with a simple gate which she had only to push and which

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opened with the creaking sound of wood upon wood.

The cries in the out-house at once increased in number. The people inside had no doubt heard Véronique approach. She hastened her steps.

Though the roof of the out-buildings was gone in places, the walls were thick and solid, with old arched doors strengthened with iron bars. There was a knocking against one of these doors from the inside, while the cries became more urgent:

"Help! Help!"

But there was a dispute; and another, less strident voice grated:

"Be quiet, Clémence, can't you? It may be them!"

"No, no, Gertrude, it's not! I don't hear them! . . . Open the door, will you? The key ought to be there."

Véronique, who was seeking for some means of entering, now saw a big key in the lock. She turned it; and the door opened.

She at once recognized the sisters Archignat, half-dressed, gaunt, evil-looking, witch-like. They were in a wash-house filled with implements; and Véronique saw at the back, lying on some straw, a third woman, who was bewailing her fate in an almost inaudible voice and who was obviously the third sister.

At that moment, one of the first two collapsed from exhaustion; and the other, whose eyes were bright with fever, seized Véronique by the arm and began to gasp:

"Did you see them, tell me? . . . Are they there? . . . How is it they didn't kill you? . . . They are the masters of Sarek since the others went

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off . . . . And it's our turn next . . . . We've been locked in here now for six days . . . . Listen, it was on the day when everybody left We three came here, to the wash-house, to fetch our linen, which was drying. And then *they* came . . . . We didn't hear them . . . . One never does hear them . . . . And then, suddenly, the door was locked on us . . . . A slam, a turn of the key . . . and the thing was done . . . . We had bread, apples and best of all, brandy . . . . We didn't do so badly . . . . Only, were they going to come back and kill us? Was it our turn next? . . . Oh, my dear good lady, how we strained our ears! And how we trembled with fear! . . . My eldest sister's gone crazy . . . . Hark, you can hear her raving . . . . The other, Clémence, has borne all she can . . . . And I . . . I . . . Gertrude . . ."

Gertrude had plenty of strength left, for she was twisting Véronique's arm:

"And Corréjou? He came back, didn't he, and went away again? Why didn't anyone come to look for us? It would have been easy enough: everybody knew where we were; and we called out at the least sound. So what does it all mean?"

Véronique hesitated what to reply. Still, why should she conceal the truth?

She replied:

"The two boats went down."

"What?"

"The two boats sank in view of Sarek. All on board were drowned. It was opposite the Priory . . . after leaving the Devil's Passage."

Véronique said no more, so as to avoid mentioning the names of François and his tutor or speaking

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of the part which these two had played. But Clémence now sat up, with distorted features. She had been leaning against the door and raised herself to her knees.

Gertrude murmured:

"And Honorine?"

"Honorine is dead."

"Dead!"

The two sisters both cried out at once. Then they were silent and looked at each other. The same thought struck them both. They seemed to be reflecting. Gertrude was moving her fingers as though counting. And the terror on their two faces increased.

Speaking in a very low voice, as though choking with fear, Gertrude, with her eyes fixed on Véronique, said:

"That's it . . . that's it . . . I've got the total . . . . Do you know how many there were in the boats, without my sisters and me? Do you know? Twenty . . . . Well, reckon it up: twenty . . . and Maguennoc, who was the first to die . . . and M. Antoine, who died afterwards . . . and little François and M. Stéphane, who vanished, but who are dead too . . . and Honorine and Marie Le Goff, both dead . . . . So reckon it up: that makes twenty-six, twenty-six . . . The total's correct, isn't it? . . . Now take twenty-six from thirty . . . . You understand, don't you? The thirty coffins: they have to be filled . . . . So twenty-six from thirty . . . leaves four, doesn't it?"

She could no longer speak; her tongue faltered. Nevertheless the terrible syllables came from her mouth; and Véronique heard her stammering:

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"Eh? Do you understand? . . . That leaves four . . . us four . . . the three sisters Archignat, who were kept behind and locked up . . . and yourself . . . . So — do you follow me? — the three crosses — you know, the 'four women crucified' — the number's there . . . it's our four selves . . . there's no one besides us on the island . . . four women . . . ."

Véronique had listened in silence. She broke out into a slight perspiration.

She shrugged her shoulders, however:

"Well? And then? If there's no one except ourselves on the island, what are you afraid of?"

"*Them*, of course! *Them!*"

Véronique lost her patience:

"But if everybody has gone!" she exclaimed.

Gertrude took fright:

"Speak low. Suppose they heard you!"

"But who?"

"*They*: the people of old.

"The people of old?"

"Yes, those who used to make sacrifices . . . the people who killed men and women . . . to please their gods."

"But that's a thing of the past! The Druids: is that what you mean? Come, come; there are no Druids nowadays."

"Speak quietly! Speak quietly! There are still . . . there are evil spirits . . ."

"Then they're ghosts?" asked Véronique, horror-stricken by these superstitions.

"Ghosts, yes, but ghosts of flesh and blood . . . with hands that lock doors and keep you imprisoned . . . creatures that sink boats, the same, I tell you,

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that killed M. Antoine, Marie le Goff and the others . . . that killed twenty-six of us . . . ."

Véronique did not reply. There was no reply to make. She knew, she knew only too well who had killed M. d'Hergemont, Marie Le Goff and the others and sunk the two boats.

"What time was it when the three of you were locked in?" she asked.

"Half-past ten . . . . We had arranged to meet Corréjou in the village at eleven."

Véronique reflected. It was hardly possible that François and Stéphane should have had time to be at half-past ten in this place and an hour later to be behind the rock from which they had darted out upon the two boats. Was it to be presumed that one or more of their accomplices were left on the island?

"In any case," she said, "you must come to a decision. You can't remain in this state. You must rest yourselves, eat something . . . ."

The second sister had risen to her feet. She said, in the same hollow and violent tones as her sister:

"First of all, we must hide . . . and be able to defend ourselves against *them*."

"What do you mean?" asked Véronique.

She too, in spite of herself, felt this need of a refuge against a possible enemy.

"What do I mean? I'll tell you. The thing has been talked about a lot in the island, especially this year; and Maguennoc decided that, at the first attack, everybody should take shelter in the Priory."

"Why in the Priory?"

"Because we could defend ourselves there. The

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cliffs are perpendicular. You're protected on every side."

"What about the bridge?"

"Maguennoc and Honorine thought of everything. There's a little hut fifteen yards to the left of the bridge. That's the place they hit on to keep their stock of petrol in. Empty three or four cans over the bridge, strike a match . . . and the thing's done. You're just as in your own home. You can't be got at and you can't be attacked."

"Then why didn't they come to the Priory instead of taking to flight in the boats?"

"It was safer to escape in the boats. But we no longer have the choice."

"And when shall we start?"

"At once. It's daylight still; and that's better than the dark."

"But your sister, the one on her back?"

"We have a barrow. We've got to wheel her. There's a direct road to the Priory, without passing through the village."

Véronique could not help looking with repugnance upon the prospect of living in close intimacy with the sisters Archignat. She yielded, however, swayed by a fear which she was unable to overcome:

"Very well," she said. "Let's go. I'll take you to the Priory and come back to the village to fetch some provisions."

"Oh, you mustn't be away long!" protested one of the sisters. "As soon as the bridge is cut, we'll light a bonfire on Fairies' Dolmen Hill and they'll send a steamer from the mainland. To-day the fog is coming up; but to-morrow . . ."

Véronique raised no objection. She now accepted

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the idea of leaving Sarek, even at the cost of an enquiry which would reveal her name.

They started, after the two sisters had swallowed a glass of brandy. The madwoman sat huddled in the wheel-barrow, laughing softly and uttering little sentences which she addressed to Véronique as though she wanted her to laugh too:

"We shan't meet them yet . . . . They're getting ready . . . ."

"Shut up, you old fool!" said Gertrude. "You'll bring us bad luck."

"Yes, yes, we shall see some sport . . . . It'll be great fun . . . . I have a cross of gold hung round my neck . . . and another cut into the skin of my head . . . . Look! . . . Crosses everywhere . . . . One ought to be comfortable on the cross . . . . One ought to sleep well there . . . ."

"Shut up, will you, you old fool?" repeated Gertrude, giving her a box on the ear.

"All right, all right! . . . But it's they who'll hit you; I see them hiding! . . ."

The path, which was pretty rough at first, reached the table-land formed by the west cliffs, which were loftier, but less rugged and worn away than the others. The woods were scarcer; and the oaks were all bent by the wind from the sea.

"We are coming to the heath which they call the Black Heath," said Clémence Archignat.

"*They* live underneath."

Véronique once more shrugged her shoulders:

"How do you know?"

"We know more than other people," said Gertrude. "They call us witches; and there's something in it. Maguennoc himself, who knew a great

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deal, used to ask our advice about anything that had to do with healing, lucky stones, the herbs you gather on St. John's Eve . . ."

"Mugwort and vervain," chuckled the madwoman. "They are picked at sunset."

"Or tradition too," continued Gertrude. "We know what's been said in the island for hundreds of years; and it's always been said that there was a whole town underneath, with streets and all, in which *they* used to live of old. And there are some left still, I've seen them myself."

Véronique did not reply.

"Yes, my sister and I saw one. Twice, when the June moon was six days old. He was dressed in white . . . and he was climbing the Great Oak to gather the sacred mistletoe . . . with a golden sickle. The gold glittered in the moonlight. I saw it, I tell you, and others saw it too . . . . And he's not the only one. There are several of them left over from the old days to guard the treasure . . . . Yes, as I say, the treasure . . . . They say it's a stone which works miracles, which can make you die if you touch it and which makes you live if you lie down on it. That's all true, Maguennoc told us so, all perfectly true. *They* of old guard the stone, the God-Stone, and *they* are to sacrifice all of us this year . . . . yes, all of us, thirty dead people for the thirty coffins . . . . ."

"Four women crucified," crooned the madwoman.

"And it will be soon. The sixth day of the moon is near at hand. We must be gone before *they* climb the Great Oak to gather the mistletoe. Look, you can see the Great Oak from here. It's in the

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wood on this side of the bridge. It stands out above the others."

"*They* are hiding behind it," said the madwoman, turning round in her wheel-barrow. "*They* are waiting for us."

"That'll do; and don't you stir . . . . As I was saying, you see the Great Oak . . . over there . . . beyond the end of the heath. It is . . . it is . . ."

She dropped the wheel-barrow, without finishing her sentence.

"Well?" asked Clémence. "What's the matter?"

"I've seen something," stammered Gertrude. "Something white, moving about."

"Something? What do you mean? *They* don't show themselves in broad daylight! You've gone cross-eyed."

They both looked for a moment and then went on again. Soon the Great Oak was out of sight.

The heath which they were now crossing was wild and rough, covered with stones lying flat like tombstones and all pointing in the same direction.

"It's *their* burying-ground," whispered Gertrude.

They said nothing more. Gertrude repeatedly had to stop and rest. Clémence had not the strength to push the wheel-barrow. They were both of them tottering on their legs; and they gazed into the distance with anxious eyes.

They went down a dip in the ground and up again. The path joined that which Véronique had taken with Honorine on the first day; and they entered the wood which preceded the bridge.

Presently the growing excitement of the sisters

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Archignat made Véronique understand that they were approaching the Great Oak; and she saw it standing on a mound of earth and roots, bigger than the others and separated from them by wider intervals. She could not help thinking that it was possible for several men to hide behind that massive trunk and that perhaps several were hiding there now.

Notwithstanding their fears, the sisters had quickened their pace; and they kept their eyes turned from the fatal tree.

They left it behind. Véronique breathed more freely. All danger was passed; and she was just about to laugh at the sisters Archignat, when one of them, Clémence, spun on her heels and dropped with a moan.

At the same time something fell to the ground, something that had struck Clémence in the back. It was an axe, a stone axe.

"Oh, the thunder-stone, the thunder-stone!" cried Gertrude.

She looked up for a second, as if, in accordance with the inveterate popular belief, she believed that the axe came from the sky and was an emanation of the thunder.

But, at that moment, the madwoman, who had got out of her barrow, leapt from the ground and fell head forward. Something else had whizzed through the air. The madwoman was writhing with pain. Gertrude and Véronique saw an arrow which had been driven through her shoulder and was still vibrating.

Then Gertrude fled screaming.

Véronique hesitated. Clémence and the mad-

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woman were rolling about on the ground. The madwoman giggled:

"Behind the oak! They're hiding . . . I see them."

Clémence stammered:

"Help! . . . Lift me up . . . carry me . . . I'm terrified!"

But another arrow whizzed past them and fell some distance farther.

Véronique now also took to her heels, urged not so much by panic, though this would have been excusable, as by the eager longing to find a weapon and defend herself. She remembered that in her father's study there was a glass case filled with guns and revolvers, all bearing the word "loaded," no doubt as a warning to François; and it was one of these that she wished to seize in order to face the enemy. She did not even turn round. She was not interested to know whether she was being pursued. She ran for the goal, the only profitable goal.

Being lighter and swifter of foot, she overtook Gertrude, who panted:

"The bridge . . . . We must burn it . . . . The petrol's there . . . ."

Véronique did not reply. Breaking down the bridge was a secondary matter and would even have been an obstacle to her plan of taking a gun and attacking the enemy.

But, when she reached the bridge, Gertrude whirled about in such a way that she almost fell down the precipice. An arrow had struck her in the back.

"Help! Help!" she screamed. "Don't leave me!"

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"I'm coming back," replied Véronique, who had not seen the arrow and thought that Gertrude had merely caught her foot in running. "I'm coming back, with two guns. You join me."

She imagined in her mind that, once they were both armed, they would go back to the wood and rescue the other sisters. Redoubling her efforts, therefore, she reached the wall of the estate, ran across the grass and went up to her father's study. Here she stopped to recover her breath; and, after she had taken the two guns, her heart beat so fast that she had to go back at a slower pace.

She was astonished at not meeting Gertrude, at not seeing her. She called her. No reply. And it was not till then that the thought occurred to her that Gertrude had been wounded like her sisters.

She once more broke into a run. But, when she came within sight of the bridge, she heard shrill cries pierce through the buzzing in her ears and, on coming into the open opposite the sharp ascent that led to the wood of the Great Oak, she saw . . .

What she saw rivetted her to the entrance to the bridge. On the other side, Gertrude was sprawling upon the ground, struggling, clutching at the roots, digging her nails into the grass and slowly, slowly, with an imperceptible and uninterrupted movement, moving along the slope.

And Véronique became aware that the unfortunate woman was fastened under the arms and round the waist by a cord which was hoisting her up, like a bound and helpless prey, and which was pulled by invisible hands above.

Véronique raised one of the guns to her shoulder. But at what enemy was she to take aim? What

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enemy was she to fight? Who was hiding behind the trees and stones that crowned the hill like a rampart?

Gertrude slipped between those stones, between those trees. She had ceased screaming, no doubt she was exhausted and swooning. She disappeared from sight.

Véronique had not moved. She realized the futility of any venture or enterprise. By rushing into a contest in which she was beaten beforehand she would not be able to rescue the sisters Archignat and would merely offer herself to the conqueror as a new and final victim.

Besides, she was overcome with fear. Everything was happening in accordance with the ruthless logic of facts of which she did not grasp the meaning but which all seemed connected like the links of a chain. She was afraid, afraid of those beings, afraid of those ghosts, instinctively and unconsciously afraid, afraid like the sisters Archignat, like Honorine, like all the victims of the terrible scourge.

She stooped, so as not to be seen from the Great Oak, and, bending forward and taking the shelter offered by some bramble-bushes, she reached the little hut of which the sisters Archignat had spoken, a sort of summer-house with a pointed roof and coloured tiles. Half the summer-house was filled with cans of petrol.

From here she overlooked the bridge, on which no one could step without being seen by her. But no one came down from the wood.

Night fell, a night of thick fog silvered by the

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moon which just allowed Véronique to see the opposite side.

After an hour, feeling a little reassured, she made a first trip with two cans which she emptied on the outer beams of the bridge.

Ten times, with her ears pricked up, carrying her gun slung over her shoulder and prepared at any moment to defend herself, she repeated the journey. She poured the petrol a little at random, groping her way and yet as far as possible selecting the places where her sense of touch seemed to tell her that the wood was most rotten.

She had a box of matches, the only one that she had found in the house. She took out a match and hesitated a moment, frightened at the thought of the great light it would make:

"Even so," she reflected, "if it could be seen from the mainland . . . But, with this fog . . ."

Suddenly she struck the match and at once lit a paper torch which she had prepared by soaking it in petrol.

A great flame blazed and burnt her fingers. Then she threw the paper in a pool of petrol which had formed in a hollow and fled back to the summer-house.

The fire flared up immediately and, at one flash, spread over the whole part which she had sprinkled. The cliffs on the two islands, the strip of granite that united them, the big trees around, the hill, the wood of the Great Oak and the sea at the bottom of the ravine: these were all lit up.

"*They* know where I am . . . . *They* are looking at the summer-house where I am hiding,"

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thought Véronique, keeping her eyes fixed on the Great Oak.

But not a shadow passed through the wood. Not a sound of voices reached her ears. Those concealed above did not leave their impenetrable retreat.

In a few minutes, half the bridge collapsed, with a great crash and a gush of sparks. But the other half went on burning; and at every moment a piece of timber tumbled into the precipice, lighting up the depths of the night.

Each time that this happened, Véronique had a sense of relief and her overstrung nerves grew relaxed. A feeling of security crept over her and became more and more justified as the gulf between her and her enemies widened. Nevertheless she remained inside the summer-house and resolved to wait for the dawn in order to make sure that no communication was henceforth possible.

The fog increased. Everything was shrouded in darkness. About the middle of the night, she heard a sound on the other side, at the top of the hill, so far as she could judge. It was the sound of woodcutters felling trees, the regular sound of an axe biting into branches which were finally removed by breaking.

Véronique had an idea, absurd though she knew it to be, that they were perhaps building a footbridge; and she clutched her gun resolutely.

About an hour later, she seemed to hear moans and even a stifled cry, followed, for some time, by the rustle of leaves and the sound of steps coming and going. This ceased. Once more there was a great silence which seemed to absorb in space every

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stirring, every restless, every quivering, every living thing.

The numbness produced by the fatigue and hunger from which she was beginning to suffer left Véronique little power of thought. She remembered above all that, having failed to bring any provisions from the village, she had nothing to eat. She did not distress herself, for she was determined, as soon as the fog lifted — and this was bound to happen before long — to light bonfires with the cans of petrol. She reflected that the best place would be at the end of the island, at the spot where the dolmen stood.

But suddenly a dreadful thought struck her: had she not left her box of matches on the bridge? She felt in her pockets but could not find it. All search was in vain.

This also did not perturb her unduly. For the time being, the feeling that she had escaped the attacks of the enemy filled her with such delight that it seemed to her that all the difficulties would disappear of their own accord.

The hours passed in this way, endlessly long hours, which the penetrating fog and the cold made more painful as the morning approached.

Then a faint gleam overspread the sky. Things emerged from the gloom and assumed their actual forms. And Véronique now saw that the bridge had collapsed throughout its length. An interval of fifty yards separated the two islands, which were only joined below by the sharp, pointed, inaccessible ridge of the cliff.

She was saved.

But, on raising her eyes to the hill opposite, she

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saw, right at the top of the slope, a sight that made her utter a cry of horror. Three of the nearest trees of those which crowned the hill and belonged to the wood of the Great Oak had been stripped of their lower branches. And, on the three bare trunks, with their arms strained backward, with their legs bound, under the tatters of their skirts, and with ropes drawn tight beneath their livid faces, half-hidden by the black bows of their caps, hung the three sisters Archignat.

They were crucified.

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CHAPTER VI

ALL'S WELL

WALKING erect, with a stiff and mechanical gait, without turning round to look at the abominable spectacle, without recking of what might happen if she were seen, Véronique went back to the Priory.

A single aim, a single hope sustained her: that of leaving the Isle of Sarek. She had had her fill of horror. Had she seen three corpses, three women who had had their throats cut, or been shot, or even hanged, she would not have felt, as she did now, that her whole being was in revolt. But this, this torture, was too much. It involved an ignominy, it was an act of sacrilege, a damnable performance which surpassed the bounds of wickedness.

And then she was thinking of herself, the fourth and last victim. Fate seemed to be leading her towards that catastrophe as a person condemned to death is pushed on to the scaffold. How could she do other than tremble with fear? How could she fail to read a warning in the choice of the hill of the Great Oak for the torture of the three sisters Archignat?

She tried to find comfort in words:

"Everything will be explained. At the bottom of these hideous mysteries are quite simple causes, actions apparently fantastic but in reality performed

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by beings of the same species as myself, who behave as they do from criminal motives and in accordance with a determined plan. No doubt all this is only possible because of the war; the war brings about a peculiar state of affairs in which events of this kind are able to take place. But, all the same, there is nothing miraculous about it nor anything inconsistent with the rules of ordinary life."

Useless phrases! Vain attempts at argument which her brain found difficulty in following! In reality, upset as she was by violent nervous shocks, she came to think and feel like all those people of Sarek whose death she had witnessed. She shared their weakness, she was shaken by the same terrors, besieged by the same nightmares, unbalanced by the persistence within her of the instincts of bygone ages and lingering superstitions ever ready to rise to the surface.

Who were these invisible beings who persecuted her? Whose mission was it to fill the thirty coffins of Sarek? Who was it that was wiping out all the inhabitants of the luckless island? Who was it that lived in caverns, gathering at the fateful hours the sacred mistletoe and the herbs of St. John, using axes and arrows and crucifying women? And in view of what horrible task, of what monstrous duty? In accordance with what inconceivable plans? Were they spirits of darkness, malevolent genii, priests of a dead religion, sacrificing men, women and children to their blood-thirsty gods?

"Enough, enough, or I shall go mad!" she said, aloud. "I must go! That must be my only thought: to get away from this hell!"

But it was as though destiny were taking special

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pains to torture her! On beginning her search for a little food, she suddenly noticed, in her father's study, at the back of a cupboard, a drawing pinned to the wall, representing the same scene as the roll of paper which she had found near Maguennoc's body in the deserted cabin.

A portfolio full of drawings lay on one of the shelves in the cupboard. She opened it. It contained a number of sketches of the same scene, likewise in red chalk. Each of them bore above the head of the first woman the inscription, "V. d'H." One of them was signed, "Antoine d'Hergemont."

So it was her father who had made the drawing on Maguennoc's paper! It was her father who had tried in all these sketches to give the tortured woman a closer and closer resemblance to his own daughter!

"Enough, enough!" repeated Véronique. "I won't think, I won't reflect!"

Feeling very faint, she pursued her search but found nothing with which to stay her hunger.

Nor did she find anything that would allow her to light a fire at the point of the island, though the fog had lifted and the signals would certainly have been observed.

She tried rubbing two flints against each other, but she did not understand how to go to work and she did not succeed.

For three days she kept herself alive with water and wild grapes gathered among the ruins. Feverish and utterly exhausted, she had fits of weeping which nearly every time produced the sudden appearance of All's Well; and her physical suffering was such that she felt angry with the poor dog for

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having that ridiculous name and drove him away. All's Well, greatly surprised, squatted on his haunches farther off and began to sit up again. She felt exasperated with him, as though he could help being François' dog!

The least sound made her shake from head to foot and covered her with perspiration. What were the creatures in the Great Oak doing? From which side were they preparing to attack her? She hugged herself nervously, shuddering at the thought of falling into those monsters' hands, and could not keep herself from remembering that she was a beautiful woman and that they might be tempted by her good looks and her youth.

But, on the fourth day, a great hope uplifted her. She had found in a drawer a powerful reading-glass. Taking advantage of the bright sunshine, she focussed the rays upon a piece of paper which ended by catching fire and enabling her to light a candle.

She believed that she was saved. She had discovered quite a stock of candles, which allowed her, to begin with, to keep the precious flame alive until the evening. At eleven o'clock, she took a lantern and went towards the summer-house, intending to set fire to it. It was a fine night and the signal would be perceived from the coast.

Fearing to be seen with her light, fearing above all the tragic vision of the sisters Archignat, whose tragic Calvary was flooded by the moonlight, she took, on leaving the Priory, another road, more to the left and bordered with thickets. She walked anxiously, taking care not to rustle the leaves or stumble over the roots. When she reached open country, not far from the summer-house, she felt so

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tired that she had to sit down. Her head was buzzing. Her heart almost refused to beat.

She could not see the place of execution from here either. But, on turning her eyes, despite herself, in the direction of the hill, she received the impression that something resembling a white figure had moved. It was in the very heart of the wood, at the end of an avenue which intersected the thick mass of trees on that side.

The figure appeared again, in the full moonlight; and Véronique saw, notwithstanding the considerable distance, that it was the figure of a person clad in a robe and perched amid the branches of a tree which stood alone and higher than the others.

She remembered what the sisters Archignat had said:

"The sixth day of the moon is near at hand. *They* will climb the Great Oak and gather the sacred mistletoe."

And she now remembered certain descriptions which she had read in books and different stories which her father had told her; and she felt as if she were present at one of those Druid ceremonies which had appealed to her imagination as a child. But at the same time she felt so weak that she was not convinced that she was awake or that the strange sight before her eyes was real. Four other figures formed a group at the foot of the tree and raised their arms as though to catch the bough ready to fall. A light flashed above. The high-priest's golden sickle had cut off the bunch of mistletoe.

Then the high-priest climbed down from the oak; and all five figures glided along the avenue, skirted the wood and reached the top of the knoll.

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Véronique, who was unable to take her haggard eyes from those creatures, bent forward and saw the three corpses hanging each from its tree of torment. At the distance where she stood, the black bows of the caps looked like crows. The figures stopped opposite the victims as though to perform some incomprehensible rite. At last the high-priest separated himself from the group and, holding the bunch of mistletoe in his hand, came down the hill and went towards the spot where the first arch of the bridge was anchored.

Véronique was almost fainting. Her wavering eyes, before which everything seemed to dance, fastened on to the glittering sickle which swung from side to side on the priest's chest, below his long white beard. What was he going to do? Though the bridge no longer existed, Véronique was convulsed with anguish. Her legs refused to carry her. She lay down on the ground, keeping her eyes fixed upon the terrifying sight.

On reaching the edge of the chasm, the priest again stopped for a few seconds. Then he stretched out the arm in which he carried the mistletoe and, preceded by the sacred plant as by a talisman which altered the laws of nature in his favour, he took a step forward above the yawning gulf.

And he walked thus in space, all white in the moonlight.

What happened Véronique did not know, nor was she quite sure what had been happening, if she had not been the sport of an hallucination, nor at what stage of the strange ceremony this hallucination had originated in her enfeebled brain.

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She waited with closed eyes for events which did not take place and which, for that matter, she did not even try to foresee. But other, more real things preoccupied her mind. Her candle was going out inside the lantern. She was aware of this; and yet she had not the strength to pull herself together and return to the Priory. And she said to herself that, if the sun should not shine again within the next few days, she would not be able to light the flame and that she was lost.

She resigned herself, weary of fighting and realizing that she was defeated beforehand in this unequal contest. The only ending that was not to be endured was that of being captured. But why not abandon herself to the death that offered, death from starvation, from exhaustion? If you suffer long enough, there must come a moment when the suffering decreases and when you pass, almost unconsciously, from life, which has grown too cruel, to death, which Véronique was gradually beginning to desire.

"That's it, that's it," she murmured. "To go from Sarek or to die: it's all the same. What I want is to get away."

A sound of leaves made her open her eyes. The flame of the candle was expiring. But behind the lantern All's Well was sitting, beating the air with his fore-paws.

And Véronique saw that he carried a packet of biscuits, fastened round his neck by a string.

"Tell me your story, you dear old All's Well," said Véronique, next morning, after a good night's rest in her bedroom at the Priory. "For, after all,

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I can't believe that you came to look for me and bring me food of your own accord. It was an accident, wasn't it? You were wandering in that direction, you heard me crying and you came to me. But who tied that little box of biscuits round your neck? Does it mean that we have a friend in the island, a friend who takes an interest in us? Why doesn't he show himself? Speak and tell me, All's Well."

She kissed the dog and went on:

"And whom were those biscuits intended for? For your master, for François? Or for Honorine? No? Then for Monsieur Stéphane perhaps?"

The dog wagged his tail and moved towards the door. He really seemed to understand. Véronique followed him to Stéphane Maroux's room. All's Well slipped under the tutor's bed. There were three more cardboard boxes of biscuits, two packets of chocolate and two tins of preserved meat. And each parcel was supplied with a string ending in a wide loop, from which All's Well must have released his head.

"What does it mean?" asked Véronique, bewildered. Did you put them under there? But who gave them to you? Have we actually a friend in the island, who knows us and knows Stéphane Maroux? Can you take me to him? He must live on this side of the island, because there is no means of communicating with the other and you can't have been there."

Véronique stopped to think. But, in addition to the provisions stowed away by All's Well, she also noticed a small canvas-covered satchel under the bed; and she wondered why Stéphane Maroux had hidden

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it. She thought that she had the right to open it and to look for some clue to the part played by the tutor, to his character, to his past perhaps, to his relations with M. d'Hergemont and François:

"Yes," she said, "it is my right and even my duty."

Without hesitation, she took a pair of big scissors and forced the frail lock.

The satchel contained nothing but a manuscript-book, with a rubber band round it. But, the moment she opened the book, she stood amazed.

On the first page was her own portrait, her photograph as a girl, with her signature in full and the inscription:

"To my friend Stéphane."

"I don't understand, I don't understand," she murmured. "I remember the photograph: I must have been sixteen. But how did I come to give it to him? I must have known him!"

Eager to learn more, she read the next page, a sort of preface worded as follows:

"Véronique, I wish to lead my life under your eyes. In undertaking the education of your son, of that son whom I ought to loathe, because he is the son of another, but whom I love because he is your son, my intention is that my life shall be in full harmony with the secret feeling that has swayed it so long. One day, I have no doubt, you will resume your place as François' mother. On that day you will be proud of him. I shall have effaced all that may survive in him of his father and I shall

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have exalted all the fine and noble qualities which he inherits from you. The aim is great enough for me to devote myself to it body and soul. I do so with gladness. Your smile shall be my reward."

Véronique's heart was flooded with a singular emotion. Her life was lit with a calmer radiance; and this new mystery, which she was unable to fathom any more than the others, was at least, like that of Maguennoc's flowers, gentle and comforting.

As she continued to turn the pages, she followed her son's education from day to day. She beheld the pupil's progress and the master's methods. The pupil was engaging, intelligent, studious, zealous loving, sensitive, impulsive and at the same time thoughtful. The master was affectionate, patient and borne up by some profound feeling which showed through every line of the manuscript.

And, little by little, there was a growing enthusiasm in the daily confession, which expressed itself in terms less and less restrained:

"François, my dearly-beloved son — for I may call you so, may I not? — François, your mother lives once again in you. Your eyes are pure and limpid as hers. Your soul is grave and simple as her soul. You are unacquainted with evil; and one might almost say that you are unacquainted with good, so closely is it blended with your beautiful nature."

Some of the child's exercises were copied into the book, exercises in which he spoke of his mother with passionate affection and with the persistent hope that he would soon see her again.

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"We shall see her again, François," Stéphane added, "and you will then understand better what beauty means and light and the charm of life and the delight of beholding and admiring."

Next came anecdotes about Véronique, minor details which she herself did not remember or which she thought that she alone knew:

"One day, at the Tuileries — she was only sixteen — a circle was formed round her . . . by people who looked at her and wondered at her loveliness. Her girl friends laughed, happy at seeing her admired . . . .

"Open her right hand, François. You will see a long, white scar in the middle of the palm. When she was quite a little girl, she ran the point of an iron railing into her hand . . . ."

But the last pages were not written for the boy and had certainly not been read by him. The writer's love was no longer disguised beneath admiring phrases. It displayed itself without reserve, ardent, exalted, suffering, quivering with hope, though always respectful.

Véronique closed the book. She could read no more.

"Yes, I confess, All's Well," she said to the dog, who was already sitting up, "my eyes are wet with tears. Devoid of feminine weaknesses as I am, I will tell you what I would say to nobody else: that really touches me. Yes, I must try to recall the unknown features of the man who loves me like this . . . some friend of my childhood whose af-

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fection I never suspected and whose name has not left even a trace in my memory."

She drew the dog to her:

"Two kind hearts, are they not, All's Well? Neither the master nor the pupil is capable of the crimes which I saw them commit. If they are the accomplices of our enemies here, they are so in spite of themselves and without knowing it. I cannot believe in philtres and incantations and plants which deprive you of your reason. But, all the same, there is something, isn't there, you dear little dog? The boy who planted veronicas round the Calvary of Flowers and who wrote, 'Mother's flowers,' is not guilty, is he? And Honorine was right, when she spoke of a fit of madness, and he will come back to look for me, won't he? Stéphane and he are sure to come back."

The hours that went by were full of soothing quiet. Véronique was no longer lonely. The present had no terrors for her; and she had faith in the future.

Next morning, she said to All's Well, whom she had locked up to prevent his running away:

"Will you take me there now my man? Where? Why, to the friend, of course, who sent provisions to Stéphane Maroux. Come along."

All's Well was only waiting for Véronique's permission. He dashed off in the direction of the grassy sward that led to the dolmen; and he stopped half way. Véronique came up with him. He turned to the right and took a path which brought them to a huddle of ruins near the edge of the cliffs. Then he stopped again.

"Is it here?" asked Véronique.

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The dog lay down flat. In front of him, at the foot of two blocks of stones leaning against each other and covered with the same growth of ivy, was a tangle of brambles with under it a little passage like the entrance to a rabbit-warren. All's Well slipped in, disappeared and then returned in search of Véronique, who had to go back to the Priory and fetch a bill-hook to cut down the brambles.

She managed in half an hour to uncover the top step of a staircase, which she descended, feeling her way and preceded by All's Well, and which took her to a long tunnel, cut in the body of the rock and lighted on the left by little openings. She raised herself on tip-toe and saw that these openings overlooked the sea.

She walked on the level for ten minutes and then went down some more steps. The tunnel grew narrower. The openings, which all looked towards the sky, no doubt so as not to be seen from below, now gave light from both the right and the left. Véronique began to understand how All's Well was able to communicate with the other part of the island. The tunnel followed the narrow strip of cliff which joined the Priory estate to Sarek. The waves lapped the rocks on either side.

They next climbed by steps under the knoll of the Great Oak. Two tunnels opened at the top. All's Well chose the one on the left, which continued to skirt the sea.

Then on the right there were two more passages, both quite dark. The island appeared to be riddled in this way with invisible communications; and Véronique felt something clutch at her heart as she

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