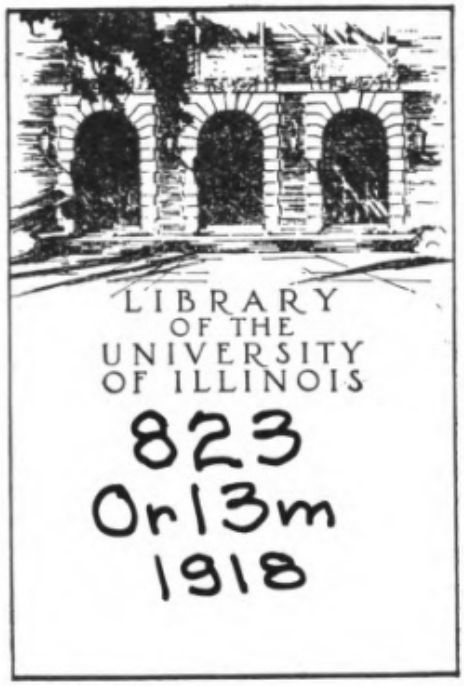

THE MAN IN GREY

First published 1918

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THE MAN IN GREY

PROEM

It has been a difficult task to piece together the fragmentary documents which alone throw a light—dim and flickering at the best—upon that mysterious personality known to the historians of the Napoleonic era as the Man in Grey. So very little is known about him. Age, appearance, domestic circumstances, everything pertaining to him has remained a matter of conjecture—even his name! In the reports sent by the all-powerful Minister to the Emperor he is invariably spoken of as "The Man in Grey." Once only does Fouché refer to him as "Fernand."

Strange and mysterious creature! Nevertheless, he played an important part—*the* most important, perhaps—in bringing to justice some of those reckless criminals who, under the cloak of Royalist convictions and religious and political aims, spent their time in pillage, murder and arson.

Strange and mysterious creatures, too, these men so aptly named Chouans—that is, "chats-huants"; screech-owls—since they were a terror by night and disappeared within their burrows by day. A world of

romance lies buried within the ruins of the châteaux which gave them shelter—Tournebut, Bouvesse, Donnai, Plélan. A world of mystery encompasses the names of their leaders and, above all, those of the women—ladies of high degree and humble peasants alike—often heroic, more often misguided, who supplied the intrigue, the persistence, the fanatical hatred which kept the fire of rebellion smouldering and spluttering even while it could not burst into actual flame. D'Aché, Cadoudal, Frotté, Armand le Chevallier, Marquise de Combray, Mme. Aquet de Férolles—the romance attaching to these names pales beside that which clings to the weird anonymity of their henchmen—"Dare-Death," "Hare-Lip," "Fear-Nought," "Silver-Leg," and so on. Theirs were the hands that struck whilst their leaders planned—they were the screech-owls who for more than twenty years terrorised the western provinces of France and, in the name of God and their King, committed every crime that could besmirch the Cause which they professed to uphold.

Whether they really aimed at the restoration of the Bourbon kings and at bolstering up the fortunes of an effete and dispossessed monarchy with money wrung from peaceable citizens, or whether they were a mere pack of lawless brigands made up of deserters from the army and fugitives from conscription, of felons and bankrupt aristocrats, will for ever remain a bone of contention between the apologists of the old régime and those of the new.

With partisanship in those strangely obscure though comparatively recent episodes of history we have nothing to do. Facts alone—undeniable and undenied—must be left to speak for themselves. It was but meet that these men—amongst whom were to be found the bearers of some of the noblest names in France—should be tracked down and brought to justice by one whose personality has continued to be as complete an enigma as their own.

I

SILVER-LEG

1

"FORWARD now! And at foot-pace, mind, to the edge of the wood—or——"

The ominous click of a pistol completed the peremptory command.

Old Gontran, the driver, shook his wide shoulders beneath his heavy caped coat and gathered the reins once more in his quivering hands; the door of the coach was closed with a bang; the postilion scrambled into the saddle; only the passenger who had so peremptorily been ordered down from the box-seat beside the driver had not yet climbed back into his place. Well! old Gontran was not in a mood to fash about the passengers. His horses, worried by the noise, the shouting, the click of firearms and the rough handling meted out to them by strange hands in the darkness, were very restive. They would have liked to start off at once at a brisk pace so as to leave these disturbers of their peace as far behind them as possible, but Gontran was holding them in with a firm hand and they had to walk—walk!—along this level bit of road, with the noisy enemy still present in their rear.

The rickety old coach gave a lurch and started on its way; the clanking of loose chains, the grinding of the wheels in the muddy roads, the snorting and travail of the horses as they finally settled again into their collars, drowned the coachman's muttered imprecations.

"A fine state of things, forsooth!" he growled to himself more dejectedly than savagely. "What the Emperor's police are up to no one knows. That such things can happen is past belief. Not yet six o'clock in the afternoon, and Alençon less than five kilomètres in front of us."

But the passenger who, on the box-seat beside him, had so patiently and silently listened to old Gontran's florid loquacity during the early part of the journey, was no longer there to hear these well-justified lamentations. No doubt he had taken refuge with his fellow-sufferers down below.

There came no sound from the interior of the coach. In the darkness, the passengers—huddled up against one another, dumb with fright and wearied with excitement—had not yet found vent for their outraged feelings in whispered words or smothered oaths. The coach lumbered on at foot-pace. In the affray the head-light had been broken; the two lanterns that remained lit up fitfully the tall pine trees on either side of the road and gave momentary glimpses of a mysterious, fairy-like world beyond, through the curtain of dead branches and the veil of tiny bare twigs.

Through the fast gathering gloom the circle of light toyed with the haze of damp and steam which rose from the cruppers of the horses, and issued from their snorting nostrils. From far away came the cry of a screech-owl and the call of some night beasts on the prowl.

Instinctively, as the road widened out towards the edge of the wood, Gontran gave a click with his tongue and the horses broke into a leisurely trot. Immediately from behind, not forty paces to the rear, there came the sharp detonation of a pistol shot. The horses, still quivering from past terrors, were ready to plunge once more, the wheelers stumbled, the leaders reared, and the team would again have been thrown into confusion but for the presence of mind of the driver and the coolness of the postilion.

"Oh! those accursed brigands!" muttered Gontran through his set teeth as soon as order was restored. "That's just to remind us that they are on the watch. Keep the leaders well in hand, Hector," he shouted to the postilion; "don't let them trot till we are well out of the wood."

Though he had sworn copiously and plentifully at first, when one of those outlaws held a pistol to his head whilst the others ransacked the coach of its contents and terrorised the passengers, he seemed inclined to take the matter philosophically now. After all, he himself had lost nothing; he was too wise a man was old Gontran to carry his wages in his breeches pocket these days, when those accursed

Chouans robbed, pillaged and plundered rich and poor alike. No! Gontran flattered himself that the rogues had got nothing out of him: he had lost nothing—not even prestige, for it had been a case of twenty to one at the least, and the brigands had been armed to the teeth. Who could blame him that in such circumstances the sixty-two hundred francs, all in small silver and paper money—which the collector of taxes of the Falaise district was sending up to his chief at Alençon—had passed from the boot of the coach into the hands of that clever band of rascals?

Who could blame him? I say. Surely, not the Imperial Government up in Paris who did not know how to protect its citizens from the depredations of such villains, and had not even succeeded in making the high road between Caen and Alençon safe for peaceable travellers.

Inside the coach the passengers were at last giving tongue to their indignation. Highway robbery at six o'clock in the afternoon, and the evening not a very dark one at that! It were monstrous, outrageous, almost incredible, did not the empty pockets and ransacked valises testify to the scandalous fact. M. Fouché, Duc d'Otrante, was drawing a princely salary as Minister of Police, and yet allowed a mail-coach to be held up and pillaged—almost by daylight and within five kilomètres of the county town!

The last half-hour of the eventful journey flew by like magic: there was so much to say that it became

impossible to keep count of time. Alençon was reached before everyone had had a chance of saying just what he or she thought of the whole affair, or of consigning M. le Duc d'Otrante and all his myrmidons to that particular chamber in Hades which was most suitable for their crimes.

Outside the "Adam et Ève," where Gontran finally drew rein, there was a gigantic clatter and din as the passengers tumbled out of the coach, and by the dim light of the nearest street lantern tried to disentangle their own belongings from the pile of ransacked valises which the ostlers had unceremoniously tumbled out in a heap upon the cobble stones. Everyone was talking—no one in especial seemed inclined to listen—anecdotes of former outrages committed by the Chouans were bandied to and fro.

Gontran, leaning against the entrance of the inn, a large mug of steaming wine in his hand, watched with philosophic eye his former passengers struggling with their luggage. One or two of them were going to spend the night at the "Adam et Ève": they had already filed past him into the narrow passage beyond, where they were now deep in an altercation with Gilles Blaise, the proprietor, on the subject of the price and the situation of their rooms; others had homes or friends in the city, and with their broken valises and bundles in their hands could be seen making their way up the narrow main street, still gesticulating excitedly.

"It's a shocking business, friend Gontran," quoth

Gilles Blaise as soon as he had settled with the last of his customers. His gruff voice held a distinct note of sarcasm, for he was a powerful fellow and feared neither footpads nor midnight robbers, nor any other species of those *satané* Chouans. "I wonder you did not make a better fight for it. You had three or four male passengers aboard——"

"What could I do?" retorted Gontran irritably. "I had my horses to attend to, and did it, let me tell you, with the muzzle of a pistol pressing against my temple."

"You didn't see anything of those miscreants?"

"Nothing. That is——"

"What?"

"Just when I was free once more to gather the reins in my hands and the order 'Forward' was given by those impudent rascals, he who had spoken the order stood for a moment below one of my lanterns."

"And you saw him?"

"As plainly as I see you—except his face, for that was hidden by the wide brim of his hat and by a shaggy beard. But there is one thing I should know him by, if the police ever succeed in laying hands on the rogue."

"What is that?"

"He had only one leg, the other was a wooden one."

Gilles Blaise gave a loud guffaw. He had never heard of a highwayman with a wooden leg before.

"The rascal cannot run far if the police ever do get after him," was his final comment on the situation.

Thereupon Gontran suddenly bethought himself of the passenger who had sat on the box-seat beside him until those abominable footpads had ordered the poor man to get out of their way.

"Have you seen anything of him, Hector?" he queried of the postilion.

"Well, now you mention him," replied the young man slowly, "I don't remember that I have."

"He was not among the lot that came out of the coach."

"He certainly was not."

"I thought when he did not get back to his seat beside me, he had lost his nerve and gone inside."

"So did I."

"Well, then?" concluded Gontran.

But the puzzle thus propounded was beyond Hector's powers of solution. He scratched the back of his head by way of trying to extract thence a key to the enigma.

"We must have left him behind," he suggested.

"He would have shouted after us if we had," commented Gontran. "Unless——" he added with graphic significance.

Hector shook himself like a dog who has come out of the water. The terror of those footpads and of those pistols clicking in the dark, unpleasantly close to his head, was still upon him.

"You don't think——" he murmured through chattering teeth.

Gontran shrugged his shoulders.

"It won't be the first time," he said sententiously, "that those miscreants have added murder to their other crimes."

"Lost one of your passengers, Gontran?" queried Gilles Blaise blandly.

"If those rogues have murdered him——" quoth Gontran with an oath.

"Then you'd have to make a special declaration before the chief commissary of police, and that within an hour. Who was your passenger, Gontran?"

"I don't know. A quiet, well-mannered fellow. Good company he was, too, during the first part of the way."

"What was his name?"

"I can't tell. I picked him up at Argentan. The box-seat was empty. No one wanted it, for it was raining then. He paid me his fare and scrambled up beside me. That's all I know about him."

"What was he like? Young or old?"

"I didn't see him very well. It was already getting dark," rejoined Gontran impatiently. "I couldn't look him under the nose, could I?"

"But *sacrebleu!* Monsieur le Commissaire de Police will want to know something more than that. Did you at least see how he was dressed?"

"Yes," replied Gontran, "as far as I can recollect he was dressed in grey."

"Well then, friend Gontran," concluded Gilles Blaise with a jovial laugh, "you can go at once to Monsieur le Commissaire de Police, and you can tell him that an industrious Chouan, who has a wooden leg and a shaggy beard but whose face you did not see, has to the best of your belief murdered an unknown passenger whose name, age and appearance you know nothing about, but who, as far as you can recollect, was dressed in grey—— And we'll see," he added with a touch of grim humour, "what Monsieur le Commissaire will make out of this valuable information."

2

The men were cowering together in a burrow constructed of dead branches and caked mud, with a covering of heath and dried twigs. Their heads were close to one another and the dim light of a dark lantern placed upon the floor threw weird, sharp shadows across their eager faces, making them appear grotesque and almost ghoulish—the only bright spots in the surrounding gloom.

One man on hands and knees was crouching by the narrow entrance, his keen eyes trying to pierce the density of the forest beyond.

The booty was all there, spread out upon the damp earth—small coins and bundles of notes all smeared with grease and mud; there were some trinkets, too, but of obviously little value: a pair of showy gold ear-

rings, one or two signets, a heavy watch in a chased silver case. But these had been contemptuously swept aside—it was the money that mattered.

The man with the wooden leg had counted it all out and was now putting coins and notes back into a large leather wallet.

"Six thousand two hundred and forty-seven francs," he said quietly, as he drew the thongs of the wallet closely together and tied them securely into a knot. "One of the best hauls we've ever had. 'Tis Madame who will be pleased."

"Our share will have to be paid out of that first," commented one of his companions.

"Yes, yes!" quoth the other lightly. "Madame will see to it. She always does. How many of you are there?" he added carelessly.

"Seven of us all told. They were a pack of cowards in that coach."

"Well!" concluded the man with the wooden leg, "we must leave Madame to settle accounts. I'd best place the money in safety now."

He struggled up into a standing position—which was no easy matter for him with his stump and in the restricted space—and was about to hoist the heavy wallet on to his powerful shoulders, when one of his mates seized him by the wrist.

"Hold on, Silver-Leg!" he said roughly, "we'll pay ourselves for our trouble first. Eh, friends?" he added, turning to the others.

But before any of them could reply there came a

peremptory command from the man whom they had called "Silver-Leg."

"Silence!" he whispered hoarsely. "There's someone moving out there among the trees."

At once the others obeyed, every other thought lulled to rest by the sense of sudden danger. For a minute or so every sound was hushed in the narrow confines of the lair save the stertorous breathing which came from panting throats. Then the look-out man at the entrance whispered under his breath:

"I heard nothing."

"Something moved, I tell you," rejoined Silver-Leg curtly. "It may only have been a beast on the warpath."

But the brief incident had given him the opportunity which he required; he had shaken off his companion's hold upon his wrist and had slung the wallet over his shoulder. Now he stumped out of the burrow.

"Friend Hare-Lip," he said before he went, in the same commanding tone wherewith he had imposed silence awhile ago on his turbulent mates, "tell Monseigneur that it will be 'Corinne' this time, and you, Mole-Skin, ask Madame to send Red-Poll over on Friday night for the key."

The others growled in assent and followed him out of their hiding-place. One of the men had extinguished the lantern, and another was hastily collecting the trinkets which had so contemptuously been swept aside.

"Hold on, Silver-Leg!" shouted the man who had been called Hare-Lip; "short reckonings make long friends. I'll have a couple of hundred francs now," he continued roughly. "It may be days and weeks ere I see Madame again, and by that time God knows where the money will be."

But Silver-Leg stumped on in the gloom, paying no heed to the peremptory calls of his mates. It was marvellous how fast he contrived to hobble along, winding his way in and out in the darkness, among the trees, on the slippery carpet of pine needles and carrying that heavy wallet—six thousand two hundred francs, most of it in small coin—upon his back. The others, however, were swift and determined, too. Within the next minute or two they had overtaken him, and he could no longer evade them; they held him tightly, surrounding him on every side and clamouring for their share of the spoils.

"We'll settle here and now, friend Silver-Leg," said Hare-Lip, who appeared to be the acknowledged spokesman of the malcontents. "Two hundred francs for me out of that wallet, if you please, ere you move another step, and two hundred for each one of us here, or——"

The man with the wooden leg had come to a halt, but somehow it seemed that he had not done so because the others held and compelled him, but because he himself had a desire to stand still. Now when Hare-Lip paused, a world of menace in every line of his gaunt, quivering body, Silver-Leg laughed with

gentle irony, as a man would laugh at the impotent vapourings of a child.

"Or what, my good Hare-Lip?" he queried slowly.

Then as the other instinctively lowered his gaze and mumbled something between his teeth, Silver-Leg shrugged his shoulders and said with kind indulgence, still as if he were speaking to a child:

"Madame will settle, my friend. Do not worry. It is bad to worry. You remember Fear-Nought: he took to worrying—just as you are doing now—wanted to be paid out of his turn, or more than his share, I forget which. But you remember him?"

"I do," muttered Hare-Lip with a savage oath. "Fear-Nought was tracked down by the police and dragged to Vincennes, or Force, or Bicêtre—we never knew."

"To the guillotine, my good Hare-Lip," rejoined Silver-Leg blandly, "along with some other very brave Chouans like yourselves, who also had given their leaders some considerable trouble."

"Betrayed by you," growled Hare-Lip menacingly.

"Punished—that's all," concluded Silver-Leg as he once more turned to go.

"Treachery is a game at which more than one can play."

"The stakes are high. And only one man can win," remarked Silver-Leg dryly.

"And one man must lose," shouted Hare-Lip,

now beside himself with rage, "and that one shall be you this time, my fine Silver-Leg. À moi, my mates!" he called to his companions.

And in a moment the men fell on Silver-Leg with the vigour born of terror and greed, and for the first moment or two of their desperate tussle it seemed as if the man with the wooden leg must succumb to the fury of his assailants. Darkness encompassed them all round, and the deep silence which dwells in the heart of the woods. And in the darkness and the silence these men fought—and fought desperately—for the possession of a few hundred francs just filched at the muzzle of a pistol from a few peaceable travellers.

Pistols of course could not be used; the police patrols might not be far away, and so they fought on in silence, grim and determined, one man against half a dozen, and that one halt, and weighted with the spoils. But he had the strength of a giant, and with his back against a stately fir tree he used the heavy wallet as a flail, keeping his assailants at arm's length with the menace of death-dealing blows.

Then, suddenly, from far away, even through the dull thuds of this weird and grim struggle, there came the sound of men approaching—the click of sabres, the tramp and snorting of horses, the sense of men moving rapidly even if cautiously through the gloom. Silver-Leg was the first to hear it.

"Hush!" he cried suddenly, and as loudly as he dared, "the police!"

Again, with that blind instinct born of terror and ever-present danger, the others obeyed. The common peril had as swiftly extinguished the quarrel as greed of gain had fanned it into flame.

The cavalcade was manifestly drawing nearer.

"Disperse!" commanded Silver-Leg under his breath. "Clear out of the wood, but avoid the tracks which lead out of it, lest it is surrounded. Remember 'Corinne' for Monseigneur, and that Red-Poll can have the key for Madame on Friday."

Once again he had made use of his opportunity. Before the others had recovered from their sudden fright he had quietly stumped away, and in less than five seconds was lost in the gloom among the trees. For a moment or two longer an ear, attuned by terror or the constant sense of danger, might have perceived the dull, uneven thud of his wooden leg against the soft carpet of pine needles, but even this soon died away in the distance, and over the kingdom of darkness which held sway within the forest there fell once more the pall of deathlike silence. The posse of police in search of human quarry had come and gone, the stealthy footsteps of tracked criminals had ceased to resound from tree to tree; all that could be heard was the occasional call of a night-bird, or the furtive movement of tiny creatures of the wild.

Silence hung over the forest for close upon an hour. Then from behind a noble fir a dark figure detached itself and, more stealthily, more furtively than any tiny beast, it stole along the track which

leads to the main road. The figure, wrapped in a dark mantle, glided determinedly along despite the difficulties of the narrow track, complicated now by absolute darkness. Hours went by ere it reached the main road, on the very spot where some few hours ago the mail-coach had been held up and robbed by a pack of impudent thieves. Here the figure halted for awhile, and just then the heavy rain clouds, which had hung over the sky the whole evening, slowly parted and revealed the pale waning moon. A soft light gradually suffused the sky and vanquished the impenetrable darkness.

Not a living soul was in sight save that solitary figure by the roadside—a man, to all appearances, wearing a broad-brimmed hat casting a deep shadow over his face; the waning moon threw a cold light upon the grey mantle which he wore. On ahead the exquisite tower of the church of Notre Dame appeared vague and fairylike against the deep sapphire of the horizon far away. Then the solitary figure started to walk briskly in the direction of the city.

3

M. le Procureur Impérial, sitting in his comfortable armchair in the well-furnished apartment which he occupied in the Rue St. Blaise at Alençon, was surveying his visitor with a quizzical and questioning gaze.

On the desk before him lay the letter which that

same visitor had presented to him the previous evening—a letter penned by no less a hand than that of M. le Duc d'Otrante himself, Minister of Police, and recommending the bearer of this august autograph to the good will of M. de Saint-Tropèze, Procureur Impérial at the tribunal of Alençon. Nay, more! M. le Ministre in that same autograph letter gave orders, in no grudging terms, that the bearer was to be trusted implicitly, and that every facility was to be given him in the execution of his duty: said duty consisting in the tracking down and helping to bring to justice of as many as possible of those saucy Chouans who, not content with terrorising the countryside, were up in arms against the Government of His Imperial Majesty.

A direct encroachment this on the rights and duties of M. le Procureur Impérial; no wonder he surveyed the quiet, insignificant-looking individual before him, with a not altogether benevolent air.

M. le préfet sitting on the opposite side of the high mantelpiece was discreetly silent until his chief chose to speak.

After a brief while the Procureur Impérial addressed his visitor.

"Monsieur le Duc d'Otrante," he said in that dry, supercilious tone which he was wont to affect when addressing his subordinates, "speaks very highly of you, Monsieur—Monsieur— By the way, the Minister, I perceive, does not mention your name. What is your name, Monsieur?"

"Fernand, Monsieur le Procureur," replied the man.

"Fernand? Fernand what?"

"Nothing, Monsieur le Procureur. Only Fernand."

The little Man in Grey spoke very quietly in a dull, colourless tone which harmonised with the neutral tone of his whole appearance. For a moment it seemed as if a peremptory or sarcastic retort hovered on M. le Procureur's lips. The man's quietude appeared like an impertinence.

M. de Saint-Tropèze belonged to the old Noblesse. He had emigrated at the time of the Revolution and spent a certain number of years in England, during which time a faithful and obscure steward administered his property and saved it from confiscation.

The blandishments of the newly-crowned Emperor had lured M. de Saint-Tropèze back to France. Common sense and ambition had seemingly got the better of his antiquated ideals, whilst Napoleon was only too ready to surround himself with as many scions of the ancient nobility as were willing to swear allegiance to him. He welcomed Henri de Saint-Tropèze and showered dignities upon him with a lavish hand; but the latter never forgot that the Government he now served was an upstart one, and he never departed from that air of condescension and high breeding which kept him aloof from his more plebeian subordinates and which gave him an authority and an influence in the

province which they themselves could never hope to attain.

M. le préfet had coughed discreetly. The warning was well-timed. He knew every word of the Minister's letter by heart, and one phrase in it might, he feared, have escaped M. le Procureur's notice. It ordered that the bearer of the Ministerial credentials was to be taken entirely on trust—no questions were to be pressed on him save those to which he desired to make reply. To disregard even the vaguest hint given by the all-powerful Minister of Police was, to say the least, hazardous. Fortunately M. de Saint-Tropèze understood the warning. He pressed his thin lips tightly together and did not pursue the subject of his visitor's name any farther.

"You propose setting to work immediately, Monsieur—er—Fernand?" he asked with frigid hauteur.

"With your permission, Monsieur le Procureur," replied the Man in Grey.

"In the matter of the highway robbery the other night, for instance?"

"In that and other matters, Monsieur le Procureur."

"You were on the coach which was attacked by those damnable Chouans, I believe?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Procureur. I picked up the coach at Argentan and sat next to the driver until the vehicle was ordered to halt."

"Then what happened?"

"A man scrambled up on the box-seat beside me,

and holding a pistol to my head commanded me to descend."

"And you descended?"

"Yes," replied the man quietly. He paused a moment and then added by way of an explanation: "I hurt my knee coming down; the pain caused me to lose some measure of consciousness. When I returned to my senses, I found myself on the roadside —all alone—there was no sign either of the coach or of the footpads."

"An unfortunate beginning," said M. de Saint-Tropèze with a distinct note of sarcasm in his voice, "for a secret agent of His Majesty's Police sent down to track some of the most astute rascals known in the history of crime."

"I hope to do better in the future, Monsieur le Procureur," rejoined the Man in Grey simply.

M. de Saint-Tropèze made no further remark, and for a moment or two there was silence in the room. The massive Louis XIV clock ticked monotonously; M. de Saint-Tropèze seemed to be dissociating his well-bred person from the sordid and tortuous affairs of the Police. The Man in Grey appeared to be waiting until he was spoken to again, and M. le préfet had a vague feeling that the silence was becoming oppressive, as if some unspoken enmity lurked between the plebeian and obscure police agent and the highly connected and influential Procurator of His Majesty the Emperor. He threw himself blandly into the breach.

"Of course, of course," he said genially. "You, Monsieur—er—Fernand, are lucky to have escaped with your life. Those rascals stick at nothing nowadays. The driver of the coach fully believed that you had been murdered. I suppose you saw nothing of the rogue?"

But this was evidently not one of the questions which the Man in Grey had any desire to answer, and M. Vimars did not insist. He turned obsequiously to M. le Procureur.

"The driver," he said, "spoke of one having a wooden leg. But the worthy Gontran was very vague in all his statements. I imagine that he and all the male passengers must have behaved like cowards or the rascals would never have got so clean away."

"The night was very dark, Monsieur le Préfet," observed the Man in Grey dryly, "and the Chouans were well armed."

"Quite so," here broke in M. le Procureur impatiently, "and no object can be served now in recriminations. See to it, my good Vimars," he continued in a tone that was still slightly sarcastic but entirely peremptory, "that the Minister's orders are obeyed to the last letter. Place yourself and all your personnel and the whole of the local police at Monsieur —er—Fernand's disposal, and do not let me hear any more complaints of inefficiency or want of good will on your part until those scoundrels have been laid by the heel."

4

M. de Saint-Tropèze paused after his peroration. With an almost imperceptible nod of his handsome head he indicated both to his visitor and to his subordinate that the audience was at an end. But M. le Préfet, though he knew himself to be dismissed, appeared reluctant to go. There was something which M. le Procureur had forgotten, and the worthy préfet was trying to gather up courage to jog his memory. He had a mightily wholesome respect for his chief, had M. Vimars, for the Procureur was not only a man of vast erudition and of the bluest blood, but one who was held in high consideration by His Majesty's government in Paris, ay, and, so 'twas said, by His Majesty himself.

So M. Vimars hummed and hawed and gave one or two discreet little coughs, whilst M. le Procureur with obvious impatience was drumming his well-manicured nails against the arm of his chair. At last he said testily:

"You have something you wish to say to me, my good Monsieur Vimars?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Procureur," hazarded the préfet in reply, "that is—there is the matter of the burglary—and—and the murder last night—that is——"

M. le Procureur frowned: "Those are local matters," he said loftily, "which concern the commissary of police, my good Vimars, and are beneath the notice of Monsieur le Ministre's secret agent."

The préfet, conscious of a reprimand, blushed to the very roots of his scanty hair. He rose with some haste and the obvious desire to conceal his discomfiture in a precipitate retreat, when the Man in Grey interposed in his quiet, even monotone:

"Nothing is beneath the notice of a secret agent, Monsieur le Procureur," he said; "and everything which is within the province of the commissary of police concerns the representative of the Minister."

M. Vimars literally gasped at this presumption. How anyone dared thus to run counter to M. le Procureur's orders simply passed his comprehension. He looked with positive horror on the meagre, insignificant personage who even now was meeting M. le Procureur's haughty, supercilious glance without any sign of contrition or of shame.

M. de Saint-Tropèze had raised his aristocratic eyebrows, and tried to wither the audacious malapert with his scornful glance, but the little Man in Grey appeared quite unconscious of the enormity of his offence; he stood by—as was his wont—quietly and silently, his eyes fixed inquiringly on the préfet, who was indeed hoping that the floor would open conveniently and swallow him up ere he was called upon to decide whether he should obey the orders of his official chief, or pay heed to the commands of the accredited agent of M. the Minister of Police.

But M. le Procureur decided the question himself and in the only way possible. The Minister's letter with its peremptory commands lay there before him—

the secret agent of His Majesty's Police was to be aided and obeyed implicitly in all matters relating to his work; there was nothing to be done save to comply with those orders as graciously as he could, and without further loss of dignity.

"You have heard the wishes of Monsieur le Ministre's agent, my good Vimars," he said coldly; "so I pray you speak to him of the matter which exercises your mind, for of a truth I am not well acquainted with all the details."

Whereupon he fell to contemplating the exquisite polish on his almond-shaped nails. Though the overbearing little upstart in the grey coat could command the obsequiousness of such men as that fool Vimars, he must be shown at the outset that his insolence would find no weak spot in the armour of M. de Saint-Tropèze's lofty self-respect.

"Oh! it is very obvious," quoth the préfet, whose only desire was to conciliate both parties, "that the matter is not one which affects the graver question of those *satané* Chouans. At the same time both the affairs of last night are certainly mysterious and present some unusual features which have greatly puzzled our exceedingly able commissary of police. It seems that in the early hours of this morning the library of Monseigneur the Constitutional Bishop of Alençon was broken into by thieves. Fortunately nothing of any value was stolen, and this part of the affair appeared simple enough, until an hour or two later a couple of peasants, who were walking from

Lonrai towards the city, came across the body of a man lying face upwards by the roadside. The man was quite dead—had been dead some time apparently. The two louts hurried at once to the commissariat of police and made their depositions. Monsieur Lefèvre, our chief commissary, proceeded to the scene of the crime; he has now the affair in hand."

The préfet had perforce to pause in his narrative for lack of breath. He had been talking volubly and uninterruptedly, and indeed he had no cause to complain of lack of attention on the part of his hearer. M. le Ministre's secret agent sat absolutely still, his deep-set eyes fixed intently upon the narrator. Alone M. le Procureur Impérial maintained his attitude of calm disdain. He still appeared deeply absorbed in the contemplation of his finger-nails.

"At first," resumed the préfet after his dramatic pause, "these two crimes, the greater and the less, seemed in no way connected, and personally I am not sure even now that they are. A certain air of similarity and mystery, however, clings to them both, for in both cases the crimes appear at the outset so very purposeless. In the case of the burglary in Monseigneur's palace the thieves were obviously scared before they could lay hands on any valuables, but even so there were some small pieces of silver lying about which they might have snatched up, even if they were in a vast hurry to get away; whilst in the case of the murder, though the victim's silver watch was stolen and his pockets ransacked, the

man was obviously poor and not worth knocking down."

"And is the identity of the victim known to the police?" here asked the Man in Grey in his dull, colourless voice.

"Indeed it is," replied the préfet; "the man was well known throughout the neighbourhood. He was valet to Madame la Marquise de Plélan."

M. le Procureur looked up suddenly from his engrossing occupation.

"Ah?" he said, "I did not know that. Lefèvre did not tell me that he had established the identity of the victim."

He sighed and once more gazed meditatively upon his finger-nails.

"Poor Maxence! I have often seen him at Plélan. There never was a more inoffensive creature. What motive could the brute have for such a villainous murder?"

The préfet shrugged his shoulders.

"Some private quarrel, I imagine," he said.

"A love affair?" queried the Man in Grey.

"Oh no, Monsieur. Maxence was the wrong side of fifty."

"A smart man?"

"Anything but smart—a curious, shock-headed, slouch-looking person with hair as red as a fox's."

Just for the space of one second the colourless eyes of the Man in Grey lit up with a quick and intense light; it seemed for the moment as if an ex-

clamation difficult to suppress would escape his thin, bloodless lips, and his whole insignificant figure appeared to be quivering with a sudden, uncontrollable eagerness. But this departure from his usual quietude was so momentary that M. le Préfet failed to notice it, whilst M. le Procureur remained as usual uninterested and detached.

"Poor Maxence!" resumed M. Vimars after awhile. "He had, as far as is known, not a single enemy in the world. He was devoted to Madame la Marquise and enjoyed her complete confidence; he was not possessed of any savings, nor was he of a quarrelsome disposition. He can't have had more than a few francs about his person when he was so foully waylaid and murdered. Indeed, it is because the crime is ostensibly so wanton that the police at once dismissed the idea that those abominable Chouans had anything to do with it."

"Is the road where the body was found very lonely of nights?" asked the Man in Grey.

"It is a lonely road," replied the préfet, "and never considered very safe, as it is a favourite haunt of the Chouans—but it is the direct road between Alençon and Mayenne, through Lonrai and Plélan."

"Is it known what business took the confidential valet of Madame la Marquise de Plélan on that lonely road in the middle of the night?"

"It has not been definitely established," here broke in M. le Procureur curtly, "that the murder was committed in the middle of the night."

"I thought——"

"The body was found in the early morning," continued M. de Saint-Tropèze with an air of cold condescension; "the man had been dead some hours—the leech has not pronounced how many. Maxence had no doubt many friends or relations in Alençon: it is presumed that he spent the afternoon in the city and was on his way back to Plélan in the evening when he was waylaid and murdered."

"That presumption is wrong," said the Man in Grey quietly.

"Wrong?" retorted M. le Procureur frigidly. "What do you mean?"

"I was walking home from Plélan towards Alençon in the small hours of the morning. There was no dead body lying in the road then."

"The body lay by the roadside, half in the ditch," said M. le Procureur dryly, "you may have missed seeing it."

"Possibly," rejoined the Man in Grey equally dryly, "but unlikely."

"Were you looking out for it then?" riposted the Procureur. But no sooner were the words out of his mouth than he realised his mistake. The Man in Grey made no reply; he literally appeared to withdraw himself into an invisible shell, to efface himself yet further within a colourless atmosphere, out of which it was obviously unwise to try to drag him. M. le Procureur pressed his thin lips together, impatient with himself at an unnecessary loss of dignity.

As usual M. le préfet was ready to throw himself into the breach.

"I am sure," he said with his usual volubility, "that we are wasting Monsieur le Procureur's valuable time now. I can assure you Monsieur—er—Fernand, that our chief commissary of police can give you all the details of the crime—if, indeed, they interest you. Shall we go now?—that is," he added, with that same feeling of hesitation which overcame him every time he encountered the secret agent's calm, inquiring look, "that is—er—unless there's anything else you wish to ask of Monsieur le Procureur."

"I wish to know with regard to the murder, what was the cause of death," said the Man in Grey quietly.

"A pistol shot, sir," replied M. de Saint-Tropèze coldly, "right between the shoulder blades, delivered at short range apparently, seeing that the man's coat was charred and blackened with powder. The leech avers that he must have fallen instantly."

"Shot between the shoulders, and yet found lying on his back," murmured the Man in Grey. "And was nothing at all found upon the body that would give a clue to the motive of the crime?"

"Nothing, my dear sir," broke in the préfet glibly, "nothing at all. In his breeches pocket there was a greasy and crumpled sheet of letter-paper, which on examination was found to be covered with a row of numerals all at random—like a child's exercise-book."

"Could I see the paper?"

"It is at the commissariat of police," explained the Procureur curtly.

"Where I can easily find it, of course," concluded the Man in Grey with calm decision. "In the meanwhile perhaps Monsieur le Préfet will be kind enough to tell me something more about the burglary at the Archbishop's palace."

"There's very little to tell, my good Monsieur Fernand," said M. Vimars, who, far more conscious than was the stranger of the Procureur's growing impatience, would have given a month's salary for the privilege of making himself scarce.

"With what booty did the burglars make off?"

"With nothing of any value; and what they did get they dropped in their flight. The police found a small silver candlestick and a brass paper weight in the street close to the gate of Monseigneur's palace, also one or two books which no doubt the burglars had seized in the hope that they were valuable editions."

"Nothing, then, has actually been stolen?"

"Nothing. I believe that Monseigneur told the chief commissary that one or two of his books are still missing, but none of any value. So you see, my good Monsieur—er—Fernand," concluded M. Vimars blandly, "that the whole matter is quite beneath your consideration. It is a case of a vulgar murder with only a private grudge by way of motive—and an equally vulgar attempt at burglary, fortunately with no evil results. Our local police—though none

too efficient, alas! in these strenuous days, when His Majesty's army claims the flower of our manhood—is well able to cope with these simple matters, which, of course, must occur in every district from time to time. You may take it from me—and I have plenty of experience, remember—that the matter has no concern whatever with the Chouans and with your mission here. You can, quite conscientiously, devote the whole of your time to the case of the highway robbery the other night, and the recovery of the sixty-two hundred francs which were stolen from the coach, as well as the tracking of that daring rascal with the wooden leg."

Satisfied with his peroration, M. Vimars at last felt justified in moving towards the door.

"I don't think," he concluded with suave obsequiousness, "that we need take up any more of Monsieur le Procureur's valuable time, and with his gracious permission——"

To his intense relief, M. Vimars perceived that the Man in Grey was at last prepared to take his leave.

M. de Saint-Tropèze, plainly at the end of his patience, delighted to be rid of his tiresome visitors, at once become pleasantly condescending. To the secret agent of His Majesty's Police he gave a quite gracious nod, and made the worthy préfet proud and happy by whispering in his ear:

"Do not allow that little busybody to interfere with you too much, my dear Monsieur Vimars. I

am prepared to back your skill and experience in such matters against any young shrimp from Paris."

The nod of understanding which accompanied this affable speech sent M. Vimars into an empyrean of delight. After which M. le Procureur finally bowed his visitors out of the room.

The little Man in Grey walked in silence beside M. Vimars along the narrow network of streets which lead to the Hôtel de Ville. The préfet had a suite of apartments assigned to him in the building, and once he was installed in his own well-furnished library, untrammelled by the presence of his chief, and with the accredited agent of His Majesty's Minister sitting opposite to him, he gave full rein to his own desire for perfect amity with so important a personage.

He began by a lengthy disquisition on the merits of M. le Procureur Impérial. Never had there been a man of such consideration and of such high culture in the city. M. de Saint-Tropèze was respected alike by the municipal officials, by the townspeople and by the landed aristocracy of the neighbourhood—and he was a veritable terror to the light-fingered gentry, as well as to the gangs of Chouans that infested the district.

The Man in Grey listened to the fulsome panegyric with his accustomed deep attention. He asked a few questions as to M. de Saint-Tropèze's domestic circumstances. "Was he married?" "Was he wealthy?" "Did he keep up a luxurious mode of life?"

To all these questions M. Vimars was only too ready to give reply. No, Monsieur le Procureur was not married. He was presumably wealthy, for he kept up a very elegant bachelor establishment in the Rue St. Blaise with just a few old and confidential servants. The sources of his income were not known, as Monsieur de Saint-Tropèze was very proud and reserved, and would not condescend to speak of his affairs with anyone.

Next the worthy préfet harked back, with wonted volubility, to the double outrage of the previous night, and rehearsed at copious length every circumstance connected with it. Strangely enough, the secret agent, who had been sent by the Minister all the way from Paris in order to track down that particular band of Chouans, appeared far more interested in the murder of Mme. de Plélan's valet and the theft of a few books out of Monseigneur the Bishop's library than he was in the daring robbery of the mail-coach.

"You knew the unfortunate Maxence, did you not, Monsieur le Préfet?" he asked.

"Why, yes," replied M. Vimars, "for I have often paid my respects to Madame la Marquise de Plélan."

"What was he like?"

"You can go over to the commissariat of police and see what's left of the poor man," rejoined the préfet, with a feeble attempt at grim humour. "The most remarkable feature about him was his red hair—an unusual colour among our Normandy peasantry."

Later M. Vimars put the finishing touch to his

amiability by placing his services unreservedly at the disposal of M. le Ministre's agent.

"Is there anything that I can do for you, my good Monsieur Fernand?" he asked urbanely.

"Not for the moment, I thank you," replied Fernand. "I will send to you if I require any assistance from the police. But in the meanwhile," he added, "I see that you are something of a scholar. I should be greatly obliged if you could lend me a book to while away some of my idle hours."

"A book? With pleasure!" quoth M. Vimars, not a little puzzled. "But how did you know?"

"That you were a scholar?" rejoined the other with a vague smile. "It was a fairly simple guess, seeing your well-stocked cases of books around me, and that a well-fingered volume protrudes even now from your coat-pocket."

"Ah! Ah!" retorted the préfet ingenuously, "I see that truly you are a great deal sharper, Monsieur Fernand, than you appear to be. But in any case," he added, "I shall be charmed to be of service to you in the matter of my small library. I flatter myself that it is both comprehensive and select —so if there is anything you especially desire to read——"

"I thank you, sir," said the Man in Grey; "as a matter of fact I have never had the opportunity of reading Madame de Staël's latest work, *Corinne,* and if you happen to possess a copy——"

"With the greatest of pleasure, my dear sir,"

exclaimed the préfet. He went at once to one of his well-filled bookcases, and after a brief search found the volume and handed it with a smile to his visitor.

"It seems a grave pity," he added, "that no new edition of this remarkable work has ever been printed. But Madame de Staël is not in favour with His Majesty, which no doubt accounts for the publisher's lack of enterprise."

A few more words of polite farewell: after which M. Vimars took final leave of the Minister's agent. The little Man in Grey glided out of the stately apartment like a ghost, even his footsteps failing to resound along the polished floor.

5

Buried in a capacious armchair, beside a cheerfully blazing fire, M. le Procureur Impérial had allowed the copy of the *Moniteur* which he had been reading to drop from his shapely hands on to the floor. He had closed his eyes and half an hour had gone by in peaceful somnolence, even while M. Lefèvre, chief commissary of police, was cooling his heels in the antechamber, preparatory to being received in audience on most urgent business.

M. le Procureur Impérial never did anything in a hurry, and, on principle, always kept a subordinate waiting until any officiousness or impertinence which might have been lurking in the latter's mind had been duly squelched by weariness and sore feet.

So it was only after he had indulged in a short and refreshing nap that M. de Saint-Tropèze rang for his servant, and ordered him to introduce M. Lefèvre, chief commissary of police. The latter, a choleric, apoplectic, loud-voiced official, entered the audience chamber in a distinctly chastened spirit. He had been shown the original letter of credentials sent to M. le Procureur by the Minister, and yesterday he had caught sight of the small grey-clad figure as it flitted noiselessly along the narrow streets of the city. And inwardly the brave commissary of police had then and there perpetrated an act of high treason, for he had sworn at the ineptitude of the grand Ministries in Paris, which sent a pack of incompetent agents to interfere with those who were capable of dealing with their own local affairs.

Monsieur le Procureur Impérial, who no doubt sympathised with the worthy man's grievances, was inclined to be gracious.

"Well? And what is it now, my good Monsieur Lefèvre?" he asked as soon as the commissary was seated.

"In one moment, Monsieur le Procureur," growled Lefèvre. "First of all, will you tell me what I am to do about that secret agent who has come here, I suppose, to poke his ugly nose into my affairs?"

"What you are to do about him?" rejoined M. de Saint-Tropèze with a smile. "I have shown you the Minister's letter: he says that we must leave all matters in the hands of his accredited agent."

"By your leave," quoth Lefèvre wrathfully, "that accredited agent might as well be polishing the flagstones of the Paris boulevards, for all the good that he will do down here."

"You think so?" queried M. le Procureur, and with a detached air, he fell into his customary contemplation of his nails.

"And with your permission," continued the commissary, "I will proceed with my own investigations of the outrages committed by those abominable Chouans, for that bundle of conceit will never get the hang of the affair."

"But the Minister says that we must not interfere. We must render all the assistance that we can."

"Bah! we'll render assistance when it is needed," retorted Lefèvre captiously. "But in the meantime I am not going to let that wooden-legged scoundrel slip through my fingers, to please any grey-coated marmoset who thinks he can lord it over me in my own district."

M. de Saint-Tropèze appeared interested.

"You have a clue?" he asked.

"More than that. I know who killed Maxence."

"Ah! You have got the man? Well done, my brave Lefèvre," exclaimed M. le Procureur, without, however, a very great show of enthusiasm.

"I haven't got him yet," parried Lefèvre. "But I have the description of the rascal. A little patience and I can lay my hands on him—provided that busybody does not interfere."

"Who is he, then?" queried M. de Saint-Tropèze.

"One of those damned Chouans."

"You are sure?"

"Absolutely. All day yesterday I was busy interrogating witnesses, who I knew must have been along the road between Lonrai and the city in the small hours of the morning—workpeople and so on, who go to and from their work every morning of their lives. Well! after a good deal of trouble we have been able to establish that the murder was actually committed between the hours of five and half-past, because although no one appears actually to have heard the pistol shot, the people who were on the road before five saw nothing suspicious, whilst the two louts who subsequently discovered the body actually heard the tower clock of Notre Dame striking the half-hour at the very time."

"Well? And——"

"No fewer than three of the witnesses state that they saw a man with a queer-shaped lip, dressed in a ragged coat and breeches, and with stockingless feet thrust into sabots, hanging about the road shortly before five o'clock. They gave him a wide berth, for they took him to be a Chouan."

"Why should a Chouan trouble to kill a wretched man who has not a five-franc piece to bless himself with?"

"That's what we've got to find out," rejoined the commissary of police, "and we will find it out, too, as soon as we've got the ruffian and the rest of the

gang. I know the rogue, mind you—the man with the queer lip. I have had my eye on him for some time. Oh! he belongs to the gang, I'll stake mine oath on it: a youngish man who should be in the army and is obviously a deserter—a ne'er-do-well who never does a day's honest work and disappears o' nights. What his name is and where he comes from I do not know. But through him we'll get the others, including the chief of the gang—the man with the wooden leg."

"God grant you may succeed!" ejaculated M. le Procureur sententiously. "These perpetual outrages in one's district are a fearful strain on one's nerves. By the way," he added, as he passed his shapely hand over a number of miscellaneous papers which lay in a heap upon his desk, "I don't usually take heed of anonymous letters, but one came to me this morning which might be worth your consideration."

He selected a tattered, greasy paper from the heap, fingering it gingerly, and having carefully unfolded it passed it across the table to the chief commissary of police. Lefèvre smoothed the paper out: the writing was almost illegible, and grease and dirt had helped further to confuse the characters, but the commissary had had some experience of such communications, and contrived slowly to decipher the scrawl.

"It is a denunciation, of course," he said. "The rogues appear to be quarrelling amongst themselves. 'If,' says the writer of the epistle, 'M. le Procureur

will send his police to-night between the hours of ten and twelve to the Cache-Renard woods and they follow the directions given below, they will come across the money and valuables which were taken from the mail-coach last Wednesday, and also those who robbed the coach and murdered Mme. de Plélan's valet. Strike the first bridle-path on the right after entering the wood by the main road, until you come to a fallen fir tree lying across another narrow path; dismount here and follow this track for a further three hundred mètres, till you come to a group of five larches in the midst of a thicket of birch and oak. Stand with your back to the larch that is farthest from you, and face the thicket; there you will perceive another track which runs straight into the depths of the wood, follow it until you come to a tiny clearing, at the bottom of which the thicket will seem so dense that you would deem it impenetrable. Plunge into it boldly to where a nest of broken branches reveals the presence of human footsteps, and in front of you you will see a kind of hut composed of dead branches and caked mud and covered with a rough thatch of heather. In that hut you will find that for which you seek.' "

"Do you think it worth while to act upon this anonymous denunciation?" queried M. de Saint-Tropèze when Lefèvre had finished reading.

"I certainly do," replied the commissary. "In any case it can do no harm."

"You must take plenty of men with you."

"Leave that to me, Monsieur le Procureur," re-

joined Lefèvre, "and I'll see that they are well armed, too."

"What about the secret agent?"

Lefèvre swore.

"That worm?" was his sole but very expressive comment.

"Will you see him about the matter?"

"What do you think?"

"I suppose you must."

"And if he gives me orders?"

"You must obey them, of course. Have you seen him this morning?"

"Yes. He had ordered me to come to his lodgings in the Rue de France."

"What did he want?"

"The scrap of paper which we had found in the breeches pocket of Maxence."

"You gave it to him?"

"Of course," growled Lefèvre savagely. "Haven't we all got to obey him?"

"You left him in his lodgings, then?"

"Yes."

"Doing what?"

"Reading a book."

"Reading a book?" exclaimed M. de Saint-Tropèze with a harsh laugh. "What book?"

"I just noticed the title," replied Lefèvre, "though I'm nothing of a scholar and books don't interest me."

"What was the title?"

"*Corinne*," said the commissary of police.

Apparently M. le Procureur Impérial had come to the end of the questions which he desired to put to the worthy M. Lefèvre, for he said nothing more, but remained leaning back in his chair and gazing straight out of the window beside him. His pale, aristocratic profile looked almost like chiselled marble against the purple damask of the cushions. He seemed absorbed in thought, or else supremely bored; M. Lefèvre—nothing of a psychologist, despite his calling—could not have said which.

The ticking of the massive Louis XIV clock upon the mantelpiece and the sizzling of damp wood on the hearth alone broke the silence which reigned in the stately apartment. Through the closed window the manifold sounds which emanate from a busy city came discreet and subdued.

Instinctively M. Lefèvre's glance followed that of his chief: he, too, fell to gazing out of the window where only a few passers-by were seen hurrying homewards on this late dreary October afternoon. Suddenly he perceived the narrow, shrinking figure of the little Man in Grey gliding swiftly down the narrow street. The commissary of police smothered the savage oath which had risen to his lips: he turned to his chief, and even his obtuse perceptions were aroused by what he saw. M. le Procureur Impérial was no longer leaning back listlessly against the damask cushions: he was leaning forward, his fine, white hands clutching the arms of his chair. He,

too, had apparently caught sight of the grey-clad figure, for his eyes, wide open and resentful, followed it as it glided along, and on his whole face there was such an expression of hatred and savagery that the worthy commissary felt unaccountably awed and subdued. Next moment, however, he thought he must have been dreaming, for M. de Saint-Tropèze had once more turned to him with that frigid urbanity which became his aristocratic personality so well.

"Well, my good Lefèvre," he said, "I don't really think that I can help you further in any way. I quite appreciate your mistrust of the obtrusive stranger, and personally I cannot avoid a suspicion that he will hamper you by interfering at a critical moment to-night during your expedition against the Chouans. He may just be the cause of their slipping through your fingers, which would be such a terrible pity now that you have gathered the net so skilfully around them."

Lefèvre rose, and with firm, deliberate movements tightened the belt around his portly waist, re-adjusted the set of his tunic, and generally contrived to give himself an air of determination and energy.

"I'll say nothing to the shrimp about our expedition to-night," he said with sullen resolution. "That is, unless you, Monsieur le Procureur, give me orders to do so."

"Oh, I?" rejoined M. de Saint-Tropèze carelessly. "I won't say anything one way or the other. The whole matter is out of my hands and you must act

as you think best. Whatever happens," he added slowly and emphatically, "you will get no blame from me."

Which was such an extraordinary thing for M. le Procureur to say—who was one of the most pedantic, most censorious and most autocratic of men—that Lefèvre spoke of it afterwards to M. le préfet and to one or two of his friends. He could not understand this attitude of humility and obedience on the part of his chief: but everyone agreed that it was small wonder M. le Procureur Impérial was upset, seeing that the presence of that secret police agent in Alençon was a direct snub to all the municipal and departmental authorities throughout the district, and M. de Saint-Tropèze was sure to resent it more than anyone else, for he was very proud, and acknowledged to be one of the most capable of highly-placed officials in the whole of France.

6

The night that followed was unusually dark. Out in the Cache-Renard woods the patter of the rain on the tall crests of the pines and the soughing of the wind through the branches of the trees drowned every other sound. In the burrow built of dead branches, caked mud and dried heather, five men sat waiting, their ears strained to the crackling of every twig, to the fall of every drop of moisture from the overladen boughs. Among them the dark lantern threw a dim, flickering light on their sullen, glowering faces. De-

spite the cold and the damp outside, the atmosphere within was hot to suffocation; the men's breath came panting and laboured, and now and again they exchanged a few whispered words.

"In any case," declared one of them, "if we feel that he is playing us false we shall have to do for him to-night, eh, mates?"

A kind of muffled assent went round the circle, and one man murmured:

"Do you really mistrust him, Hare-Lip?"

"I should," replied Hare-Lip curtly, "if I thought he knew about Red-Poll."

"You don't think that he suspects?" queried another.

"I don't see how he can. He can't have shown his face, or rather his wooden leg, inside Alençon since the mail-coach episode. The police are keen after him. But if he did hear rumours of the death of Red-Poll he will also have heard that the murder was only an ordinary case of robbery—watch and money stolen—and that a sheet of letter-paper covered with random numerals was found in the breeches pocket of the murdered man."

One of the men swore lustily in the dark.

"The paper covered with numerals!" he muttered savagely under his breath. "You clumsy fool to have left that behind!"

"What was the use——" began another.

But Hare-Lip laughed, and broke in quietly:

"Do ye take me for a fool, mates? I was not

going to take away that original sheet of paper and proclaim to our chiefs that it was one of us who killed Red-Poll. No! I took the sheet of letter-paper with me when I went to meet Red-Poll. After he fell—I shot him between the shoulders—I turned him over on his back and ransacked his pockets; that was a blind. Then I found the paper with the figures and copied them out carefully—that was another blind—in case Silver-Leg heard of the affair and suspected us."

One or two of the others gave a growl of dissent.

"You might have been caught while you were playing that silly game," said one of the men, "which would not deceive a child."

"Silver-Leg is no gaby," murmured another.

"Well, he'll be here anon," concluded Hare-Lip lightly. "If you think he means to play a dirty trick, he can go and join Red-Poll, that's all."

"He may not come, after all."

"He must come. I had his message to meet him here to-night without fail. The chiefs have planned another attack: on the Orleans coach this time. Silver-Leg wants us to be of the party."

"We ought to have got hold of the last booty before now!"

"Impossible! Mole-Skin and I have not figured out all the directions from the book and the numerals yet. It is not an easy task, I tell you, but it shall be done soon, and we can take you straight to the spot as soon as we have the directions before us."

"Unless Silver-Leg and Madame remove the booty in the meanwhile," grunted one of the party caustically.

"I sometimes wonder——" said another. But he got no further. A peremptory "Hush!" from Hare-Lip suddenly silenced them all.

With a swift movement one of them extinguished the lantern, and now they cowered in absolute darkness within their burrow like so many wild beasts tracked to earth by the hunters. The heat was suffocating: the men vainly tried to subdue the sound of their breath as it came panting from their parched throats.

"The police!" Hare-Lip muttered hoarsely.

But they did not need to be told. Just like tracked beasts they knew every sound which portended danger, and already from afar off, even from the very edge of the wood, more than a kilomètre away, their ears, attuned to every sound, had perceived the measured tramp of horses upon the soft, muddy road. They cowered there, rigid and silent. The darkness encompassed them, and they felt safe enough in their shelter in the very heart of the woods, in this secret hiding-place which was known to no living soul save to them. The police on patrol duty had often passed them by: the nearest track practicable on horseback was four hundred mètres away, the nearest footpath made a wide détour round the thicket, wherein these skulking miscreants had contrived to build their lair.

As a rule, it meant cowering, silent and motionless,

inside the burrow whilst perhaps one posse of police, more venturesome than most, had dismounted at the end of the bridle-path and plunged afoot into the narrower track, scouring the thicket on either side for human quarry. It involved only an elementary amount of danger, distant and intangible, not worth an accelerated heart-beat, or even a gripping of knife or pistol wherewith to sell life and liberty at a price.

And so, for the first five minutes, while the tramp of horses' hoofs drew nearer, the men waited in placid silence.

"I hope Silver-Leg has found shelter," one of the men murmured under his breath.

"He should have been here by now," whispered another.

Then they perceived the usual sound of men dismounting, the rattle of chains, the champing of bits, peremptory words of command. Even then they felt that they had nothing to fear: these were all sounds they had heard before. The thicket and the darkness were their allies; they crouched in silence, but they felt that they were safe. Their ears and senses, however, were keenly on the alert: they heard the crackling of dried twigs under the heavy footsteps of the men, the muttered curses that accompanied the struggle against the density of the thicket, the clashing of metal tools against dead branches of intervening trees. Still they did not move. They were not afraid—not yet! But somehow in the obscurity which held them as in a pall their attitude had become more

tense, their breathing more laboured, and one or two strong quivering hands went out instinctively to clutch a neighbouring one.

Then suddenly Hare-Lip drew in his breath with a hissing sound like that of an angry snake. He suppressed an imprecation which had forced itself to his lips. Through the almost imperceptible aperture of the burrow he had perceived the flicker of lanterns: and sounds of broken twigs, of trampling feet, of moving, advancing humanity appeared suddenly to be strangely near.

"By Satan!" he said almost inaudibly; "they are in the clearing!"

"They are attacking the thicket," added Mole-Skin in a hoarse whisper.

Never before had the scouring posse of police come so near to the stronghold of these brigands. It was impossible to see how many of them there were, but that they were both numerous and determined could not for a moment be disputed. Voices now became more distinct.

"This way!" "No—that!" "Here, Marcel, where's your pick?" "Lend us your knife, Jules Marie; the bramble has got into my boots."

Some of the men were joking, others swearing lustily. But there were a great number of them, and they were now desperately near.

"They are on us!" came in a husky murmur from Hare-Lip. "They know their way."

"We are betrayed!" was the stifled response.

"By Silver-Leg!" ejaculated Hare-Lip hoarsely, and with such an intensity of vengeful hatred as would have made even the autocratic wooden-legged chief of this band of brigands quake. "The accursed informer! By all the demons in hell he shall pay for his treachery!"

Indeed, there was no longer any doubt that it was not mere chance which was guiding the posse of police to this secret spot. They were making their way unhesitatingly by the dim light of the dark lanterns which their leaders carried before them. One of the men suddenly hit upon the almost imperceptible track which led straight to the burrow. There was no mistaking the call which he gave to his comrades.

"I have it now, mates!" he shouted. "Follow me!"

The sharp report of a pistol came by way of a reply from the lurking-hole of the Chouans, and the man who had just uttered the call to his mates fell forward on his face.

"Attention, my men!" commanded the officer in charge. "Close the lanterns and put a charge of powder into the brigands' den."

Once more the report of a pistol rang out through the night. But the men of the police, though obviously scared by the mysterious foe who struck at them out of the darkness, were sufficiently disciplined not to give ground: they fought their way into line, and the next moment a terrific volley of gunfire rent the echoes of the wood from end to end. In front of the

men now there was a wide clearing, where the undergrowth had been repeatedly broken and trampled upon. This they had seen, just before the lanterns were closed, and beyond it the burrow with its thatch of heather and its narrow aperture which revealed the muzzle of two or three muskets, and through the aperture several pairs of glowing eyes and shadowy forms vaguely discernible in the gloom.

"Up with the lights and charge!" commanded the officer.

The lanterns were opened, and three sharp reports came in immediate answer from the lair.

One or two men of the police fell amidst the bed of brambles; but the others, maddened by this resistance and by the fall of their comrades, rushed forward in force.

Dividing their line in the centre, they circled round the clearing, attacking the stronghold from two sides. The commissary of police, leaving nothing to chance, had sent half a company to do the work. In a few seconds the men were all over the burrow, scrambling up the thatch, kicking aside the loose walls of dead branches, and within two minutes they had trampled every fragment of the construction under foot.

But of the gang of Chouans there remained only a few traces, and two or three muskets abandoned in their hasty flight: they had succeeded in making good their escape under cover of the darkness. The sergeant in command of the squad of police ordered the débris of the den to be carefully searched. Very little

of importance was found beyond a few proofs that the robbery of the mail-coach the other night, the murder of Maxence, and the abortive burglary in Monseigneur's palace were the work of the same gang. One or two watches and pocket-books were subsequently identified by the passengers of the coach that had been held up; there was the silver watch which had belonged to the murdered valet, and a couple of books which bore Monseigneur the Bishop of Alençon's book-plate.

But of the man with the wooden leg and his rascally henchmen, or of the sixty-two hundred francs stolen from the coach, there was not a sign.

The chief commissary of police swore lustily when his men returned to the bridle-path where he had been waiting for them, and the sergeant reported to him that the rogues had made good their escape. But even his wrath—violent and wordy as it was—was as nothing to the white heat of anger wherewith M. le Procureur Impérial received the news of the dire failure of the midnight raid in the Cache-Renard woods.

Indeed, he appeared so extraordinarily upset at the time that his subsequent illness was directly attributable to this cause. The leech vowed that his august patient was suffering from a severe shock to his nerves. Be that as it may, M. de Saint-Tropèze, who was usually in such vigorous health, was confined to his room for some days after the raid. It was a fortnight and more ere he again took his walks

abroad, as had been his wont in the past, and his friends, when they saw him, could not help but remark that something of M. le Procureur's elasticity and proud bearing had gone. He who used to be so upright now walked with a decided stoop; his face looked at times the colour of ashes; and now and again, when he was out in the streets, he would throw a look around him almost as if he were afraid.

On the other hand, the secret agent of His Imperial Majesty's Police had received the news of the escape of the Chouans with his habitual quietude and equanimity.

He did not make any comment on the commissary's report of the affair, nor did he offer the slightest remonstrance to M. le Procureur Impérial for having permitted the expedition without direct instructions from the official representative of the Minister.

Nothing was seen of the little Man in Grey for the next two or three weeks: he appeared absorbed in the books which M. le préfet so graciously lent him, and he did not trouble either the latter, or M. le Procureur, or the commissary of police with many visits.

The matter of the highway robbery, as well as that of the murdered valet Maxence, appeared to be already relegated to the growing list of the mysterious crimes perpetrated by those atrocious Chouans, with which the police of His Imperial Majesty were unable to cope. The appearance of the enigmatic person in grey had had no deterrent effect on the rascals, nor was it likely to have any, if he proved as

inept as the local officials had been in dealing with such flagrant and outrageous felony.

7

And once again the silence of the forest was broken in the night by the sound of human creatures on the prowl. Through the undergrowth which lies thickest at the Lonrai end of the woods, to the left of the intersecting main road, the measured tread of a footfall could be faintly perceived—it was a strange and halting footfall, as of a man walking with a stump.

Behind the secular willow, which stands in the centre of the small clearing beside the stagnant pool in the very heart of this dense portion of the forest, a lonely watcher crouched, waiting. He had lain there and waited night after night, and for hours at a stretch the surrounding gloom held him in its close embrace: his ears and senses were strained to hear that uneven footfall, whenever its faint thud broke the absolute silence. To no other sound, no other sight, did he pay any attention, or no doubt he would have noticed that in the thicket behind him another watcher cowered. The stalker was stalked in his turn: the watcher was watched. Someone else was waiting in this dense corner for the man with the wooden leg—a small figure wrapped in a dark mantle, a silent, furtive creature, more motionless, more noiseless than any beast in its lair.

At last, to-night, that faint, uneven thud of a

wooden stump against the soft carpet of the woods reached the straining ears of the two watchers. Anon the feeble flicker of a dark lantern was vaguely discernible in the undergrowth.

The man who was crouching behind the willow drew in his breath with a faint, hissing sound; his hand grasped more convulsively the pistol which it held. He was lying flat upon his stomach, like a creeping reptile watching for its prey; his eyes were fixed upon the tiny flickering light as it slowly drew near towards the stagnant pool.

In the thicket behind him the other watcher also lay in wait: his hand, too, closed upon a pistol with a firm and determined grip; the dark mantle slid noiselessly down from his shoulders. But he did not move, and not a twig that helped to give him cover, quivered at his touch.

The next moment a man dressed in a rough blouse and coarse breeches and with a woollen cap pulled over his shaggy hair came out into the clearing. He walked deliberately up to the willow tree. In addition to the small dark lantern which he held in one hand, he carried a spade upon his shoulder. Presently he threw down the spade and then proceeded so to arrange the lantern that its light fell full upon one particular spot, where the dry moss appeared to have been recently disturbed. The man crouching behind the willow watched his every movement; the other behind the thicket hardly dared to breathe.

Then the newcomer did a very curious thing.

Sitting down upon the soft, sodden earth, he stretched his wooden stump out before him: it was fastened with straps to the leg which was bent at the knee, the shin and foot beyond appearing like a thick and shapeless mass, swathed with bandages. The supposed maimed man, however, now set to work to undo the straps which bound the wooden stump to his leg, then he removed the stump, straightened out his knee, unwound the few mètres of bandages which concealed the shape of his shin and foot, and finally stood up on both legs, as straight and hale as nature had originally made him. The watcher behind the willow had viewed all his movements with tense attention. Now he could scarcely repress a gasp of mingled astonishment and rage, or the vengeful curse which had risen to his lips.

The newcomer took up his spade and, selecting the spot where the moss and the earth bore traces of having been disturbed, he bent to his task and started to dig. The man behind the tree raised his pistol and fired: the other staggered backwards with a groan —partly of terror and partly of pain and his left hand went up to his right shoulder with a quick, convulsive gesture. But already the assassin, casting his still smoking pistol aside, had fallen upon his victim; there was a struggle, brief and grim, a smothered call for help, a savage exclamation of rage and satisfied vengeance, and the wounded man fell at last with a final cry of horror, as his enemy's grip fastened around his throat.

For a second or two the murderer stood quite still

contemplating his work. With a couple of vigorous kicks with his boot he turned the body callously over. Then he picked up the lantern and allowed the light to play on the dead man's face; he gave one cursory glance at the straight, marble-like features, and at the full, shaggy beard and hair which disfigured the face, and another contemptuous one at the wooden stump which still lay on the ground close by.

"So dies an informer!" he ejaculated with a harsh laugh.

He searched for his pistol, and having found it he tucked it into his belt; then putting his fingers to his lips he gave a cry like that of a screech-owl. The cry was answered by a similar one some little distance away; a minute or two later another man appeared through the undergrowth.

"Have you done for him?" queried this stranger in a husky whisper.

"He is dead," replied the other curtly. "Come nearer, Mole-Skin," he added, "you will see something that will amaze you."

Mole-Skin did as his mate ordered; he, too, stood aghast when Hare-Lip pointed to the wooden stump and to the dead man's legs.

"It was not a bad idea!" said Hare-Lip after a while. "It put the police on a wrong scent all the time: while they searched for a man with one leg, he just walked about on two. Silver-Leg was no fool. But," he added savagely, "he was a traitor, and now he'll neither bully nor betray us again."

"What about the money?"

"We'd best get that now. Didn't I tell you that Silver-Leg would come here sooner or later? We lost nothing by lying in wait for him."

Without another word Mole-Skin picked up the spade, and in his turn began to dig at the spot where Silver-Leg had toiled when the bullet of his betrayed comrade laid him low. There was only the one spade, and Hare-Lip kept watch while his comrade dug. The light from the dark lantern revealed the two miscreants at their work.

While Hare-Lip had thus taken the law into his own hands against the informer, the watcher in the thicket had not stirred. But now he, also, began to crawl slowly and cautiously out of his hiding-place. No snake, or lizard, or crawling, furtive beast could have been more noiseless than he was; the moss beneath him dulled the sound of every movement, till he, too, had reached the willow tree.

The two Chouans were less than thirty paces away from him. Intent upon their work they had been oblivious of every other sound. Now when the tracker of his human quarry raised his arm to fire, Hare-Lip suddenly turned and at once gave a warning call to his mate. But the call broke upon his lips, there came a sharp report, immediately followed by another—the two brigands, illumined by the lantern, had been an easy target, and the hand which wielded the pistol was steady and unerring.

And now stillness more absolute than before