

HE was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad. And that was all his patrimony. His very paternity was obscure, although the village of Gavrillac had long since dispelled the cloud of mystery that hung about it. Those simple Brittany folk were not so simple as to be deceived by a pretended relationship which did not even possess the virtue of originality. When a nobleman, for no apparent reason, announces himself the godfather of an infant fetched no man knew whence, and thereafter cares for the lad's rearing and education, the most unsophisticated of country folk perfectly understand the situation. And so the good people of Gavrillac permitted themselves no illusions on the score of the real relationship between André-Louis Moreau—as the lad had been named—and Quintin de Kercadiou, Lord of Gavrillac, who dwelt in the big grey house that dominated from its eminence the village clustering below.

André-Louis had learnt his letters at the village school, lodged the while with old Rabouillet, the attorney, who in the capacity of fiscal intendant, looked after the affairs of M. de Kercadiou. Thereafter, at the age of fifteen, he had been packed off to Paris, to the Lycée of Louis Le Grand, to study the law which he was now returned to practise in conjunction with Rabouillet. All this at the charges of his godfather, M. de Kercadiou, who by placing him once more under the tutelage of Rabouillet would seem thereby quite clearly to be making provision for his future.

André-Louis, on his side, had made the most of his opportunities. You behold him at the age of four-and-twenty stuffed with learning enough to produce an intellectual indigestion in an ordinary mind. Out of his zestful study of Man, from Thucydides to the Encyclopædists, from Seneca to Rousseau, he had confirmed into an unassailable conviction his earliest conscious impressions of the general insanity of his own species. Nor can I discover that anything in his eventful life ever afterwards caused him to waver in that opinion.

In body he was a slight wisp of a fellow, scarcely above middle height, with a lean, astute countenance, prominent of nose and cheek-bones, and with lank, black hair that reached almost to his shoulders. His mouth was long, thin-lipped, and humorous. He was only just redeemed from ugliness by the splendour of a pair of ever-questing, luminous eyes, so dark as to be almost black. Of the whimsical quality of his mind and his rare gift of graceful expression, his writings — unfortunately but too scanty—and particularly his Confessions, afford us very ample evidence. Of his gift of oratory he was hardly conscious yet, although he had already achieved a certain fame for it in the Literary Chamber of Rennes—one of those clubs by now ubiquitous in the land, in which the intellectual youth of France foregathered to study and discuss the new philosophies that were permeating social life. But the fame he had acquired there was hardly enviable. He was too impish, too caustic, too much disposed—so thought his colleagues—to ridicule their sublime theories for the regeneration of mankind. Himself he protested that he merely held them up to the mirror of truth, and that it was not his fault if when reflected there they looked ridiculous.

All that he achieved by this was to exasperate; and his expulsion from a society grown mistrustful of him must already have followed but for his friend, Philippe de Vilmorin, a divinity student of Rennes, who, himself, was one of the most popular members of the Literary Chamber.

Coming to Gavrillac on a November morning, laden with news of the political storms which were then gathering over France, Philippe found in that sleepy Breton village matter to quicken his

already lively indignation. A peasant of Gavrillac, named Mabey, had been shot dead that morning in the woods of Meupont, across the river, by a gamekeeper of the Marquis de La Tour d'Azyr. The unfortunate fellow had been caught in the act of taking a pheasant from a snare, and the gamekeeper had acted under explicit orders from his master.

Infuriated by an act of tyranny so absolute and merciless, M. de Vilmorin proposed to lay the matter before M. de Kercadiou. Mabey was a vassal of Gavrillac, and Vilmorin hoped to move the Lord of Gavrillac to demand at least some measure of reparation for the widow and the three orphans which that brutal deed had made.

But because André-Louis was Philippe's dearest friend—indeed, his almost brother—the young seminarist sought him out in the first instance. He found him at breakfast alone in the long, low-ceilinged, white-panelled dining-room at Rabouillet's—the only home that André-Louis had ever known—and after embracing him, deafened him with his denunciation of M. de La Tour d'Azyr.

"I have heard of it already," said André-Louis.

"You speak as if the thing had not surprised you," his friend reproached him.

"Nothing beastly can surprise me when done by a beast. And La Tour d'Azyr is a beast, as all the world knows. The more fool Mabey for stealing his pheasants. He should have stolen somebody else's."

"Is that all you have to say about it?"

"What more is there to say? I've a practical mind, I hope."

"What more there is to say I propose to say to your godfather, M. de Kercadiou. I shall appeal to him for justice."

"Against M. de La Tour d'Azyr?" André-Louis raised his eyebrows.

"Why not?"

"My dear ingenuous Philippe, dog doesn't eat dog."

"You are unjust to your godfather. He is a humane man."

"Oh, as humane as you please. But this isn't a question of humanity. It's a question of game-laws."