ELEANOR C. PRICE

ANGELOT

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CHAPTER I
IN THE DEPTHS OF OLD FRANCE

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"Drink, Monsieur Angelot," said the farmer.

His wife had brought a bottle of the sparkling white wine of the country, and two tall old treasures of cut glass. The wine slipped out in a merry foam. Angelot lifted his glass with a smile and bow to the mistress.

"The best wine in the country," he said as he set it down.

The hard lines of her face, so dark, so worn with perpetual grief and toil, softened suddenly as she looked at him, and the farmer from his solemn height broke into a laugh.

"Martin's wine," he said. "That was before they took him, the last boy. But it is still rather new, Monsieur Angelot, though you are so amiable. Ah, but it is the last good wine I shall ever have here at La Joubardière. I am growing old—see my white hair—I cannot work or make other men work as the boys did. Our vintage used to be one of the sights of the country—I needn't tell you, for you know—but now the vines don't get half the care and labour they did ten years ago; and they feel it, like children, they feel it. Still, there they remain, and give us what fruit they can—but the real children, Monsieur Angelot, their life-blood runs to waste in far-away lands. It does not enrich France. Ah, the vines of Spain will grow the better for it, perhaps—"

"Hush, hush, master!" muttered the wife, for the old man was not laughing now; his last words were half a sob, and tears ran suddenly down. "I tell you always," she said, "Martin will come back. The good God cannot let our five

boys die, one after the other. Madame your mother thinks so too," she said, nodding at Angelot. "I spoke to her very plainly. I said, '*They* cannot be unjust—and surely, to take all the five children of a poor little farmer, and to leave not one, not even the youngest, to do the work of the farm—come, what sort of justice is that!' And she said: 'Listen, maîtresse: the good God will bring your Martin back to you. He cannot be unjust, as you say. If my Angelot had to go to the war—and I always fear it—I should expect him back as surely as I expect my husband back from Lancilly at this moment.'"

Angelot smiled at her. "Yes, yes, Martin will come back," he said. But he shrugged his shoulders, for he could not himself see much comfort for these poor people in his mother's argument. If you have lost four, it is surely more logical to expect to lose a fifth. His father, a philosopher, would not have said so much as this to the Joubards, but would have gone on another tack altogether. He would have pointed out to them that the glory of France depended on their sons; that this conscription, which seemed to them so cruel, which now, in 1811, was becoming really oppressive, was the means of making France, under her brilliant leader, the most powerful and magnificent nation in the world. He would have waved the tricolour before those sad eyes, would have counted over lists of victories; and so catching was his enthusiasm that Joubard's back would have straightened under it, and he would have gone home—it happened more than once—feeling like a hero and the father of heroes. But the old fellow's sudden flame of faith in his landlord and Napoleon was not so lasting as his wife's faith in Madame and the justice of God.

Angelot wished the maîtresse good-day, left a brace of birds on the table, and stepped out from the grimy darkness of the farm kitchen into the dazzling sunshine of that

September morning. The old white farm, with crumbling walls about it, remnants of attempts at fortification long ago, looked fairly prosperous in its untidiness. The fresh stacks of corn were golden still; poultry made a great clatter, a flock of geese on their way out charging at the two men as they left the house. An old peasant was hammering at barrels, in preparation for the vintage; a wild girl with a stick and a savage-looking brindled dog was starting off to fetch the cows in from their morning graze.

All the place was bathed in crystal air and golden light, fresh and life-giving. It stood high on the edge of the moors, the ground falling away to the south and east into a wild yet fertile valley; vineyards, cornfields not long reaped, small woods, deep and narrow lanes, then tall hedges studded with trees, green rich meadows by the streams far below. On the slope, a mile or two away, there was a church spire with a few grey roofs near it, and the larger roofs, half-hidden by trees, of the old manor of La Marinière, Angelot's home. On the opposite slope of the valley, rising from the stream, another spire, another and larger village; and above it, commanding the whole country side, with great towers and shining roofs, solid lengths of wall gleaming in newly restored whiteness, lines of windows still gold in the morning sun, stood the old château of Lancilly, backed by the dark screen of forest that came up close about it and in old days had surrounded it altogether. Twenty years of emptiness; twenty years, first of revolution and emigration, then of efforts to restore an old family, which the powerful aid of a faithful cousin and friend had made successful; and now the Comte de Sainfoy and his family were at last able to live again at Lancilly in their old position, though there was much yet to be done by way of restoration and buying back lost bits of property. But all this could not be in better

hands than those of Urbain de la Marinière, the cousin, the friend, somewhat despised among the old splendours of a former régime, and thought the less of because of the opinions which kept him safe and sound on French soil all through the Revolution, enabling him both to save Lancilly for its rightful owners, and to keep a place in the old and loved country for his own elder brother Joseph, a far more consistent Royalist than Hervé de Sainfoy with all his grand traditions. For the favour of the Emperor had been made one great step to the restoration of these noble emigrants. Therefore in this small square of Angevin earth there were great divisions of opinion: but Monsieur Urbain, the unprejudiced, the lover of both liberty and of glory, and of poetry and philosophy beyond either, who had passed on with France herself from the Committee of Public Safety to the Directory, and then into the arms of First Consul and Emperor—Monsieur Urbain, the cousin, the brother, whose wife was an ardent Royalist and devout Catholic, whose young son was the favourite companion of his uncle Joseph, a more than suspected Chouan—Monsieur Urbain, Angelot's father, was everybody's friend, everybody's protector, everybody's adviser, and the one peacemaker among them all. And naturally, in such a case, Monsieur Urbain's hardest task was the management of his own wife—but of this more hereafter.

"Your father's work, Monsieur Angelot," said old Joubard, pointing across the valley to Lancilly, there in the blaze of the sun.

Angelot lifted his sleepy eyelids, his long lashes like a girl's, and the glance that shot from beneath them was half careless, half uneasy.

"We have done without them pretty well for twenty years," the farmer went on, "but I suppose we must be glad

to see them back. Is it true that they are coming to-day?"

"I believe so."

"Your uncle Joseph won't be glad to see them. The Emperor's people: they may disturb certain quiet little games at Les Chouettes."

"That is my uncle's affair, Maître Joubard."

"I know. Well, a still tongue is best for me. Monsieur Urbain is a good landlord—and I've paid for my place in the Empire, *dame*, yes, five times over. Yet, if I could choose my flag at this time of day, I should not care for a variety of colours. Mind you, your father is a wise man and knows best, I dare say. I am only a poor peasant. But taking men and their opinions all round, Monsieur Angelot, and though some who think themselves wise call him a fool,—with respect I say it,—your dear little uncle is the man for me. Yes—I would back Monsieur Joseph against all his brother's wisdom and his cousin's fine airs, and I am sorry these Sainfoy people are coming back to trouble him and to spoil his pretty little plots, which do no harm to any one."

Angelot laughed outright. "My uncle would not care to hear that," he said.

"Nevertheless, you may tell him old Joubard said it. And what's more, monsieur, your father thinks the same, or he would not let you live half your life at Les Chouettes."

"He has other things to think of."

"Ah, I know—and Madame your mother to reckon with."

"You are too clever," said Angelot, laughing again. "Well, I must go, for my uncle is expecting me to breakfast."

"Ah! and he has other guests. I saw them riding over from the south, half an hour ago."

"You have a watch-tower here. You command the country."

"And my sight is a hawk's sight," said the old man. "Good-day, dear boy. Give my duty to Monsieur Joseph."

Angelot started lightly on his way over the rough moorland road. The high ridge of tableland extended far to the north; the *landes*, purple and gold with the low heather and furze which covered them, unsheltered by any tree, except where crossed in even lines by pollard oaks of immense age, their great round heads so thick with leaves that a man might well hide in them. These *truisses*, cut every few years, were the peasants' store of firewood. Their long processions gave a curious look of human life to the lonely moor, only inhabited by game, of which Angelot saw plenty. But he did not shoot, his game-bag being already stuffed with birds, but marched along with gun on shoulder and dog at heel over the yellow sandy track, loudly whistling a country tune. There was not a lighter heart than Angelot's in all his native province, nor a handsomer face. He only wanted height to be a splendid fellow. His daring mouth and chin seemed to contradict the lazy softness of his dark eyes. With a clear, brown skin and straight figure, and dressed in brown linen and heavy shooting boots, he was the picture of a healthy sportsman.

A walk of a mile or two across the *landes* brought him into a green lane with tall wild hedges, full of enormous blackberries, behind which were the vineyards, rather weedy as to soil, but loaded with the small black and white grapes which made the good pure wine of the country.

Angelot turned in and looked at the grapes and ate a few; this was one of his father's vineyards. The yellow grapes tasted of sunshine and the south. Angelot went on eating them all the way down the lane; he was thirsty, in spite of Joubard's sparkling wine, after tramping with dog and gun since six o'clock in the morning. The green lane led

to another, very steep, rough, and stony. Corners of red and white rock stood out in it; such a surface would have jolted a strong cart to pieces, but Les Chouettes had no better approach on this side.

"I want no fine ladies to visit me," Monsieur Joseph would say, with his sweet smile. "My friends will travel over any road."

Down plunged the lane, with a thick low wood on one side and a sloping stubble field edged by woods on the other; here again stood a row of old pollard oaks, like giant guards of the solitude. Then the deep barking of many dogs, Monsieur Joseph's real protectors, and a group of Spanish chestnuts sending their branches over the road, announced the strange hermitage that its master called by the fanciful name of Les Chouettes. There had indeed been a time, not long before, when owls had been its chief inhabitants. Now, if report was to be believed, night-birds of a different species were apt to congregate there.

The lane opened suddenly on Monsieur Joseph's out-buildings, with no gates or barriers, things unknown in Anjou. Tall oaks and birches, delicate and grey, leaned across the cream-coloured walls and the high grey stone roofs where orange moss grew thickly. Low arched doorways with a sandy court between them led into the kitchen on one side, the stables on the other. Beyond these again, in the broad still sunshine, standing squarely alone in a broad space of yellow sand, was Monsieur Joseph's house, not very old, for the kitchens and stables had belonged to a little château long since pulled down. It also was built of cream-coloured stone, with a little tower to the west of it, with playful ironwork and high mansard windows. An odd feature was that it had no actual door. All the lower windows opened down to the ground, with nothing but a stone step between

them and the sandy soil, so that the house could be entered or left at any point, through any room.

Two rough roads or country tracks, continuing the lane, passed the house to the north and south, the northern road wandering away westward under a wild avenue of old oaks on the edge of a wood into high fields beyond, the southern crossing broad green slopes that descended gradually into the valley towards Lancilly, past low copses and brimming streams, leaving to the east the high moors and La Marinière with its small village and spire.

Thus Les Chouettes had a view of its own to the west and south, but could be seen far off from the south only; woods covering the upper slope against the sunset. Woods and high land sheltered it again from the north and east, and the only roads near it were little better than cart-tracks.

There were long hours at Les Chouettes when no sound was to be heard but the hooting of owls or screaming of curlews or the odd little squeak of the squirrels as they darted up and down and about the oak trees.

"He mews like a cat, the little *fouquet*," Monsieur Joseph used to say; and passionate sportsman as he was, he would never shoot the squirrels or allow them to be shot by his man, who lamented loudly. Angelot had caught his uncle's liking for that swift red spirit of the woods, and so the squirrels had a fine time all over the lands of La Marinière.

Evidently there was a good deal going on at Les Chouettes, when Angelot came down from the moors that morning. He was not surprised, after old Joubard's report, to see his uncle's outdoor factotum, a bullet-headed creature with scarcely anything on but his shirt, leading the last of several horses into the shadowy depths of the stable. Opposite, the cook looked out smiling from the kitchen, where she lived with her solemn husband, the valet-de-

chambre. He, in apron and sabots, was now in the act of carrying the first dishes across to the dining-room window.

"Just in time, Monsieur Angelot!" cried the cook.

Four large black dogs came barking and leaping to meet the young man and his dog, an intimate friend of theirs. Then a small slender figure, with a cropped head and a clinging dark blue frock, flashed across from the wood, ordered the dogs back in a voice that they obeyed, and clinging to Angelot's arm, led him on towards the corner of the house.

"Ah, my Ange! I began to think you were not coming," she said. "There are four of them in the salon with papa, and I was afraid to go in till you came."

"What! Mademoiselle Riette afraid of anything on earth—and especially of four old gentlemen!"

"They are not very old, and they look so fierce and secret this morning. But come, come, you must put down your game-bag and wash your hands, and then we will go in together."

CHAPTER II
HOW THE OWLS HOOTED IN THE DAYTIME

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The sun poured into the little salon, all polished wood and gay-coloured chintz, where Monsieur Joseph de la Marinière and his four friends were talking at the top of their voices.

The four guests sat in more or less tired attitudes round the room; the host stood poised on the hearth-rug, a dark, dandy little gentleman with a brilliant smile. He had a way of balancing himself on one foot and slightly extending both arms, as if he were going to fly off into space. This, and his gentle, attractive manner, sometimes touched with melancholy, gave him a sort of angelic, spiritual air. It was difficult to imagine him either a soldier or a conspirator, yet he had been one and was still the other. More than once, only a politic indulgence not often extended by Napoleon's administrators, and the distinguished merits of his younger brother, had saved Monsieur Joseph from sharing the fate of some of his friends at Joux, Ham, or Vincennes.

These fortress prisons held even now many men of good family whom only the Restoration was to set free. They, as well as plenty of inferior prisoners, owed their captivity in most cases to a secret meeting betrayed, a store of arms discovered, a discontented letter opened, or even to an expression of opinion, such as that France had been better off under the Bourbons. Napoleon kept France down with an iron hand, while the young men and lads in hundreds of thousands shed their blood for him, the women wept, and

the old men sometimes raged: but yet France as a whole submitted. The memory of the Terror made this milder tyranny bearable. And genius commands, as long as it is victorious, and till this year of the Spanish war, there had been no check to Napoleon. He had not yet set out to extinguish the flame of his glory in Russian snows.

The police all over France obeyed his orders only too well —"*Surveillez tout le monde, excepté moi!*" To a great degree it was necessary, for French society, high and low, was honeycombed with Royalist plots, some of them hardly worthy of a cause which called itself religious as well as royal. Leaders like Cadoudal and Frotté were long dead; some of their successors in conspiracy were heroes rather of scandal than of loyalty, and many a tragic legend lingers in French society concerning the men and women of those days.

To a great extent, the old families of La Vendée, the La Rochejacqueleins at their head, refrained from mixing themselves up in the smaller plots against the Empire in which hundreds of Chouans, noble and peasant, men and women, were constantly involved during these years with probable loss of life and liberty. It was not till later that the general feeling became intensified so that Napoleon had to weaken his army, in the Waterloo campaign, by sending some thousands of men against a new insurrection in the West, under Louis de la Rochejaquelein, a second La Vendée war, only stopped by the final return of the Bourbons.

Monsieur Joseph's gay little room looked like anything but a haunt of conspirators; but his friends were earnestly discussing with him the possibility of raising the country, arming the peasants, marching on the chief town of the department, capturing the Prefect, as well as the General in command of the division, and holding them as hostages

while the insurrection went on spreading through Anjou and the neighbouring provinces.

The most eager, the most original of the plotters was the Baron d'Ombré, a dark, square young man with frowning brows. He turned quite fiercely on a milder-looking person, a Monsieur de Bourmont, a distant cousin of the well-known leader of that name, who doubted whether the peasants would rise as readily as César d'Ombré expected.

"I tell you," he said, "they hate, they detest the Empire. Look at their desolate homes, their deserted fields! I tell you, the women of France alone, if they had a leader, would drive the usurper out of the country."

"There is your mission, then, dear César," said the Vicomte des Barres, a delicate, sarcastic-looking man of middle age. "March on Paris with your phalanx of Amazons."

"César is right, nevertheless, gentlemen," growled the Comte d'Ombré, the young man's father, the oldest of the party. "It is energy, it is courage, that our cause wants. And I go farther than my son goes. Take the Prefect and the General by all means—excellent idea—"

"If you can catch them—" murmured Monsieur des Barres, and was frowned upon furiously by César d'Ombré.

The Comte was rather deaf. "What? What?" he asked sharply, being aware of the interruption.

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing!" cried their host, with one spring from the fireplace to the old man's chair—"and what would you do, monsieur, with the Prefect and the General? I am dying of curiosity."

Monsieur d'Ombré stared up into the sweet, birdlike face, which bent over him with flashing eyes and a delighted smile.

"Do? I should shoot them on the spot," he said. "They are traitors: I would treat all traitors the same. Yes, I know the

Prefect is a friend of your brother's—of your own, possibly. I know my son and I are your guests, too. Never mind! Any other conduct would be cowardly and abominable. No member of my family would ever be guilty of opportunism, and remain in my family. Those two men have done more harm in this province than Napoleon Buonaparte and all his laws and police. They never tried to make his government popular. The Prefect, at least, has done this—I know nothing about the General."

"A wooden image of his master," said Monsieur des Barres.

Monsieur Joseph returned, rather sobered, to his hearth rug. "Shoot them, well, well!" he muttered. "A strong measure, but possibly politic. It is what one would *like* to do, of course, officially. Not personally—no—though Monsieur d'Ombré may be right. It is a crime, no doubt, to make the Empire popular. I am afraid my poor brother has tried to do the same, and succeeded—yes, succeeded a little."

"My father is quite wrong," César d'Ombré muttered in the ear of Monsieur de Bourmont, who listened with a superior smile. "Such mad violence would ruin the cause altogether. Now as hostages, those two men would be invaluable."

"Time enough to discuss that when you have got them," said Monsieur de Bourmont. "To me, I must confess, this plan of a rising sounds premature and unpractical. What we want first is money—money from England, and stronger support, too—as well as a healthier public opinion all through this part of the country."

"Ah! but none of your waiting games for me," cried the young Baron. "*'De l'audace'*—you know—that is the motto for Frenchmen."

"Boldness and rashness need not be the same thing," said Monsieur de Bourmont, drily. "And remember whom you are quoting, my dear César. A dangerous person, to say the least."

A grim smile lightened d'Ombré's hard face. "It was the right thing to say, if the devil said it," he answered.

The Vicomte des Barres rose from his chair and lounged into the middle of the room.

"To be practical, friends," he said, "the feeling among the peasants is the question. In this country side, Monsieur de la Marinière ought to know pretty well what it is. And I fear he will tell us that a good deal of exertion will be necessary, before they will take up their guns and pikes, and march where they are led. It goes without saying that he, himself, is the one man to lead them. I believe, though he chooses to live like a hermit, he is the most popular man in Anjou."

"But no—no, dear Vicomte," said Monsieur Joseph, shaking his head violently. "It is true there are some of them who love me—but their interest, you see, is on the other side. My brother is more popular than I am, and he deserves it, in spite of his lamentable opinions."

"Ah, monsieur, forgive me, but do you understand your peasants?" cried César d'Ombré. "Are you doing them justice? Would they set a good farm against their king, their religion, the salvation of their country? Bleeding from the loss of their sons—will they think more of money and corn-stacks and vintages than of that true peace and freedom which can only be won by driving out tyranny? Nobody wants to put them back as they were before 1789. The feudal ages are gone—we have given up our rights, and there is an end of it—but we want our own kings again, and we want peace for France, and time to breathe and to let her wounds heal. We want to be rid of this accursed usurper

who is draining her life blood. That, I say, is what the peasants feel, most of them, as strongly as we do. But they are of course uneducated. They need stirring up, drilling, leading. And I can hardly believe, monsieur, that the weight of one man in the other scale—even of your learned and distinguished brother—would outweigh all the claims of faith and affection and loyalty. No—delay and hesitation are useless. Trust the peasants, I say."

"You may be right—I hope you are—" said Monsieur Joseph, more gravely than usual. "But my brother will not now be alone in the left-hand scale. Lancilly, under his care, has given the people work and wages for years, remember. And now, with Hervé de Sainfoy's return—"

A howl from César d'Ombré, a groan from his father, a grimace of disgust from Monsieur de Bourmont, who had reason, for his own cousin, once a Chouan, was now an Imperial officer—a laugh from Monsieur des Barres; all this greeted the name of the owner of Lancilly.

"Although that renegade is your cousin, monsieur," old d'Ombré growled, "I hope the country side may soon be made too hot to hold him."

Monsieur Joseph shrugged his shoulders, smiled, looked on the floor. He did not take up the old man's words; he could not very well have done so. But there was something about him which reminded his guests that the slender little boyish man was a dead shot and a perfect swordsman, and that once, long ago, in old La Vendée days, he had challenged a man who had said something insulting of his brother Urbain, and after one or two swift passes had laid him dead at his feet.

There was a moment of rather awkward silence. Then Monsieur des Barres took up the word again.

"To be practical, my friends," he repeated, "the first step to action, it seems to me, is to sound and encourage the peasants. Each of us must be responsible for his own neighbourhood."

"We will answer for ours," said César d'Ombré.

Monsieur de Bourmont, the most cautious of the party, murmured something to the same effect, and Monsieur Joseph nodded gravely.

The Vicomte's eyes dwelt on him, a little anxiously. It seemed as if that word "renegade," applied to his cousin and neighbour, might have a tendency to stick in his throat. Des Barres, who admired and loved the little gentleman, was sorry. He wanted to remind him how the old Comte d'Ombré was universally known for bad manners, stupidity, and violence. He would have liked to reason with him, too, on the subject of that cousin, and to point out kindly, as a friend, how Monsieur de Sainfoy had had absolutely no real and good excuse for going over to the Emperor. Nothing but ambition and worldiness could have led him into the course he had taken. Urbain de la Marinière, known even before 1789 as a philosophical Republican, held a very different place in the estimation of honest men.

"That farmer on the *landes*"—said the Vicomte, looking at his host—"a good example of a superior peasant, is he not? We passed near his farm this morning. What line does he take?"

"Joubard? He is a fine old fellow, that. His fifth son was taken by the conscription a year ago. Four are dead. I think his heart is in the right place. But he is my brother's best tenant. Yes—I don't know. Old Joubard is made of good stuff, and he loves me."

"And probably he loved his sons, and their mother loved them too," said César d'Ombré.

"Here are my children," said Monsieur Joseph, looking out of the window. "Breakfast will be ready immediately. With your leave we will finish our discussion afterwards."

All the faces lightened, except that of the Baron d'Ombré, whose soul was too much in earnest to be glad of a bodily interruption. But the ride had been long, over difficult roads and under a hot sun, and breakfast was later than usual. The three elder conspirators were not sorry to lay aside their plotting for an hour, and they knew by experience that Monsieur Joseph's cook was an artist. On an occasion such as this, dishes of the rarest distinction crossed the sandy court from that quaint high-roofed kitchen.

The children, as Monsieur Joseph called them, came to the glass door and opened it gently. They were Angelot and Henriette, first cousins, and alike enough to be brother and sister, in spite of the ten years between them.

The girl, with her fearless eyes, walked first; it seemed natural to her. All the men rose and bowed as she came in. She made a formal curtsey to each one separately, and smiled when Monsieur des Barres, the man of the world, bent gracefully to kiss her hand as if she had been a grown-up woman.

"Good morning, my dear uncle," said Angelot, and kissed Monsieur Joseph on both cheeks; then bowed deeply to the company.

They looked upon him with not altogether friendly eyes; the Comte d'Ombré even muttered something between his teeth, and hardly returned the young fellow's salutation. The son of Urbain de la Marinière, a notorious example of two odious things, republicanism and opportunism! the mutual affection of him and his uncle Joseph only made him more of a possible danger. To Monsieur d'Ombré Angelot seemed like a spy in the camp. His son, however, knew better, and so

did the other two. Angelot's parentage was not in his favour, certainly, but they tried to take him at his uncle's valuation, and that was a high one. And Monsieur Joseph's judgment, though romantic, was seldom wrong.

Gigot, the dark-faced valet, having kicked off the sabots which covered his felt shoes, but still wearing his large apron, set open the door into the long narrow hall which ran through the back of the house, widening in the middle where the tower and staircase branched from it.

"Monsieur est servi!"

The hungry guests marched willingly to the dining-room, their heavy boots creaking, the noise of tread and voices echoing through the bare boarded house.

"You do not join us, mademoiselle?" said Monsieur des Barres, seeing that Henriette lingered behind in the drawing-room.

"No, monsieur," the child answered. "My father thinks I am too young to listen. Besides, I am the *guetteuse*. It is our business to watch—the dogs and I."

"Indeed! Is that how you spend your life? A curious employment for a young lady!"

"When there is danger abroad, I am more to be trusted than any one else."

"I quite believe it. You know, then, that our visit to-day is not entirely one of pleasure? Monsieur your father has taken you so far into his confidence, though you are too young to listen?"

"I know everything, monsieur," said Henriette.

"Then we may eat in peace. We are safe in your care. That is charming, mademoiselle."

"Yes, monsieur. I will let you know at once, if Monsieur le Préfet and his gendarmes are riding down the lane."

"Good heavens, what an idea! I have not the smallest wish to meet Monsieur le Préfet. I believe that gentleman keeps a black book, in which I am quite sure my name is written. Yes indeed, mademoiselle, if he should happen to pass, send him a little farther. Tell him he will find a nest of Chouans at Vaujour, or anywhere else your fancy suggests."

Henriette laughed and nodded. "Trust me, monsieur," she said.

"Your little cousin is charming," said Monsieur des Barres to Angelot, who was politely waiting for him in the hall.

The six men were soon sitting at Monsieur Joseph's hospitable round table. As they dispatched their plates of steaming soup they saw the slim blue figure of Henriette, with two dogs at her heels, flit past the window in the direction of the steep lane down which Angelot had come not very long before. This lane led not only to the *landes*, but by other lanes to one of the rare high roads of the country, and on to the chief town of the department. It was partly for this reason that Monsieur Joseph, who valued privacy and independence, left it in its present break-neck condition, more like the dry course of a torrent than a civilised road.

A large dish of eggs followed the soup. But only half the guests had been helped, when all the dogs about the place began to bark savagely. And then, out of the shadow of the wood, darting down past the back of the kitchen, Henriette came flying to the dining-room window, almost upsetting Gigot and his dish as she sprang over the step.

"Papa, papa, there is a party riding down the lane. I believe it is Monsieur le Préfet and an officer with him, and three servants. I ran up the wood. They had only just turned into the lane, and they are coming down very slowly; their horses don't like it."

Monsieur Joseph rapped out a tremendous oath, and looked round at his guests, whose faces were a study.

"The Prefect and the General!" he said. "Now is your moment, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER III
"JE SUIS LE GÉNÉRAL BIM-BAM-BOUM!"

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All the men rose to their feet, except the elder d'Ombré, who had taken a very long draught of his host's good wine, and now stared stupidly at the others. César d'Ombré's eyes flamed with excitement. He seized the arm of Angelot, who was next to him, in such a grip that the young fellow flinched and frowned.

"It is our moment!" he cried. "Six to two"—then savagely, and tightening his grasp—"unless we are betrayed—"

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Angelot, his uncle, and Monsieur de Bourmont, all in a breath.

Monsieur des Barres laughed as he looked at Henriette.

"The idea is absurd," he said—"and yet," in a lower tone—"mademoiselle has proved herself an amazingly true prophetess. However, it is absurd—"

There was a moment or two of uproar. Angelot, having impatiently shaken off the Baron's hand, was demanding that he should withdraw his words. He, having apparently at once forgotten them, was insisting that now indeed was the time to prove a man's loyalty, that they must stand all together and dare all things, that the Prefect and the General, once at Les Chouettes, must never leave it but as prisoners, that the Government would be instantly demoralised, and the insurrection would catch and flame like a fire in dry grass—

"And be put out as easily," shouted Monsieur de Bourmont. "Madness, madness! Mere midsummer foolery. Go and hide yourself, firebrand!"

"Shoot them on the spot! Where are my pistols?" stammered the old Comte, beginning to understand the situation.

Monsieur des Barres laughed till he held his sides. Henriette gave him one or two angry and scornful glances, while Gigot, under her orders, whisked glasses and plates and dishes into a cupboard, pushed back chairs against the wall, took away every sign of the good meal just begun. In the midst of all this clatter Monsieur Joseph said a few words with eager nods and signs to Monsieur de Bourmont, and they two, taking the old man by each arm, led him forcibly out towards the west side of the house.

"Bring the others!" said Monsieur Joseph to his nephew, who was listening as if fascinated to César d'Ombré's ravings.

The little uncle was angry, Angelot perceived. He stamped his foot, as if he meant to be obeyed. Angelot had never seen him in such a state of anxiety and excitement, or heard such words as his sincerely pious mouth had let fall two minutes before—in Riette's presence, too! Old Joubard was wrong: these plots were not exactly to be laughed at. Angelot, realising that the Prefect and the General were really in danger of their lives from men like the Messieurs d'Ombré, thought rather seriously of his own father. At the same time, he longed to punish César for what he had dared to say about betrayal. Yes, he was his father's son; and so the sight of him was enough to make these wild Chouans suspect far better Royalists than themselves. There was an account to settle with Monsieur des Barres, too. His polite manners were all very well, but his words to Henriette just

now were insulting. Angelot was angry with his uncle's guests, and not particularly inclined to help them out of their present predicament. He stood gloomily, without attempting to obey his uncle, till Henriette came up to him suddenly.

"Ange—the horses into the hiding-place! Do you hear—quick, quick!"

It might be possible to hesitate in obeying Uncle Joseph, but Cousin Henriette was a far more autocratic person. And then her good sense never failed, and was always convincing; she was never in doubt as to her own right course or other people's: and Angelot, who had no sisters, loved her like a little sister, and accepted her tyrannous ways joyfully.

She had hardly spoken when he was out of the window, and with a few strides across the sunshine had disappeared into the dark and cavernous archway of the stables.

Henriette turned to the two remaining guests, César d'Ombré still arguing in favour of instant action with Monsieur des Barres, who looked serious enough now, and stood shrugging his shoulders.

"Follow me, gentlemen," said the child. "I know where my papa is waiting for you."

"Mademoiselle, we are in your hands," said the Vicomte, bowing. "We have never for an instant lost confidence in you."

She bent her head, with the air and smile of a woman who rather scornfully accepts an apology. She went out of the dining-room and along the hall, the two men following her. César d'Ombré lingered as far as he dared, and grumbled between his teeth.

At that very moment the Prefect of the department, with the newly appointed General in command of the troops

stationed there, only escorted by three men in the dress of gendarmes, rode slowly and gently round the back of the kitchen into the sandy courtyard of Les Chouettes.

"Monsieur de la Marinière's hermitage," said the Prefect to his companion.

"It looks like one, sapristi!" said the General.

Nothing could seem stiller, more fast asleep, than Les Chouettes in the approaching noon of that hot September day. The dogs barked and growled, it was true, but only one of them, the youngest, troubled himself to get up from where he lay in the warm sand. No human creature was to be seen about the house or buildings; the silence of the woods lay all around; the dry air smelt delicately of wood smoke and fir trees; the shadows were very deep, cutting across the broad belts of glowing sunshine.

"Every one is asleep," said the Prefect. "I am afraid breakfast is over; we ought to have arrived an hour ago."

"Caught them napping!" chuckled the General.

The voices, and the clinking of bridles, as the little cavalcade passed towards the house at a walking pace, brought the cook to the kitchen door. She stared in consternation. She was a pretty woman, Gigot's wife, with a pale complexion and black hair; her provincial cap was very becoming. But she now turned as red as a turkey-cock and her jaw dropped, as she stared after the horsemen. No one had warned her: there had not been time or opportunity. She was just dishing up the roast meat for the hungry appetites of Messieurs les Chouans, when behold, the gendarmes! Who the gentlemen were, she did not know; but imperial gendarmes were never a welcome sight to Monsieur Joseph's household.

"The place is like a city of the dead," said the Prefect, drawing rein in front of the salon windows. "See if you can

find any one, Simon, and ask for Monsieur de la Marinière."

One of the gendarmes dismounted. Wearing the ordinary dress of these civil soldiers, he yet differed in some indefinable way from his two companions. He had the keen and wary look of a clever dog; his eyes were everywhere.

"City of the dead, eh! Plenty of footprints of the living!" he muttered, as he turned back towards the outbuildings and noticed the trampled sand.

Marie Gigot saw him coming, and dived back into her kitchen.

"Ah! it is that demon!" she said to herself. "Holy Virgin, defend us! I thought that wretch was gone. All of them in the dining-room—the stable full of their horses, and no one there but that ignorant Tobie! We are done for at last, that's sure. Eh! there's Monsieur Angelot talking to him. But of course it is hopeless. That must be the Prefect. To be sure they say he is better than the last—and it may be only a friendly visit—and why should not my master have his friends to breakfast? But then, again, what brings that Simon, that Chouan-catcher, as they call him! Why, Gigot told me of half-a-dozen fellows who had sworn to shoot him, and not a hundred miles from here."

She ran to the door again and looked out. Angelot, cool and quiet, had come out of the stable and met the gendarme face to face, returning his salutation with indifference.

"It is Monsieur le Préfet? Certainly, my uncle is at home," he said. "I am not sure that he is in the house," and he walked on towards the group of horsemen.

"Not in the house!" breathed the cook. "They are hiding, then! They must have heard or seen them coming—ah, how stupid I am! I saw mademoiselle run past the window."