

***G. LENOTRE***



***THE HOUSE  
OF THE COMBRAYS***

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# **The House of the Combrays**

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# PREFACE

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## AN OLD TOWER

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One evening in the winter of 1868 or 1869, my father-in-law, Moisson, with whom I was chatting after dinner, took up a book that was lying on the table, open at the page where I had stopped reading, and said:

"Ah! you are reading Mme. de la Chanterie?"

"Yes," I replied. "A fine book; do you know it?"

"Of course! I even know the heroine."

"Mme. de la Chanterie!"

"— By her real name Mme. de Combray. I lived three months in her house."

"Rue Chanoinesse?"

"No, not in the Rue Chanoinesse, where she did not live, any more than she was the saintly woman of Balzac's novel; —but at her Château of Tournebut d'Aubevoye near Gaillon!"

"Gracious, Moisson, tell me about it;" and without further solicitation, Moisson told me the following story:

"My mother was a Brécourt, whose ancestor was a bastard of Gaston d'Orleans, and she was on this account a royalist, and very proud of her nobility. The Brécourts, who were fighting people, had never become rich, and the Revolution ruined them completely. During the Terror my mother married Moisson, my father, a painter and engraver, a plebeian but also an ardent royalist, participating in all the plots for the deliverance of the royal family. This explains

the mésalliance. She hoped, besides, that the monarchy, of whose reestablishment she had no doubt, would recognise my father's services by ennobling him and reviving the name of Brécourt, which was now represented only in the female line. She always called herself Moisson de Brécourt, and bore me a grudge for using only my father's name.

"In 1804, when I was eight years old, we were living on the island of Saint-Louis, and I remember very well the excitement in the quarter, and above all in our house, caused by the arrest of Georges Cadoudal. I can see my mother anxiously sending our faithful servant for news; my father came home less and less often; and at last, one night, he woke me up suddenly, kissed me, kissed my mother hastily, and I can still hear the noise of the street door closing behind him. We never saw him again!"

"Arrested?"

"No, we should have known that, but probably killed in flight, or dead of fatigue and want, or drowned in crossing some river—like many other fugitives, whose names I used to know. He was to have sent us news as soon as he was in safety. After a month's waiting, my mother's despair became alarming. She seemed mad, committed the most compromising acts, spoke aloud and with so little reserve about Bonaparte, that each time the bell rang, our servant and I expected to see the police.

"A very different kind of visitor appeared one fine morning. He was, he said, the business man of Mme. de Combray, a worthy woman who lived in her Château of Tournebut d'Aubevoye near Gaillon. She was a fervent royalist, and had heard through common friends of my

father's disappearance, and compassionating our misfortune placed a house near her own at the disposal of my mother, who would there find the safety and peace that she needed, after her cruel sorrows. As my mother hesitated, Mme. de Combray's messenger urged the benefit to my health, the exercise and the good air indispensable at my age, and finally she consented. Having obtained all necessary information, my mother, the servant and I took the boat two days after, at Saint-Germain, and arrived by sunset the same evening at Roule, near Aubevoye. A gardener was waiting with a cart for us and our luggage. A few moments later we entered the court of the château.

"Mme. de Combray received us in a large room overlooking the Seine. She had one of her sons with her, and two intimate friends, who welcomed my mother with the consideration due to the widow of one who had served the good cause. Supper was served; I was drooping with sleep, and the only remembrance I have of this meal is the voice of my mother, passionate and excitable as ever. Next morning, after breakfast, the gardener appeared with his cart, to take us to the house we were to occupy; the road was so steep and rough that my mother preferred to go on foot, leading her horse by the bridle. We were in a thick wood, climbing all the time, and surprised at having to go so far and so high to reach the habitation that had been offered to us near the château. We came to a clearing in the wood, and the gardener cried, 'Here we are!' and pointed to our dwelling. 'Oh!' cried my mother, 'it is a donjon!' It was an old round tower, surmounted by a platform and with no

opening but the door and some loop-holes that served as windows.

"The situation itself was not displeasing. A plateau cleared in the woods, surrounded by large trees with a vista towards the Seine, and a fine view extending some distance. The gardener had a little hut near by, and there was a small kitchen-garden for our use. In fact one would have been easily satisfied with this solitude, after the misfortunes of the Isle Saint-Louis, if the tower had been less forbidding. To enter it one had to cross a little moat, over which were thrown two planks, which served as a bridge. By means of a cord and pulley this could be drawn up from the inside, against the entrance door, thus making it doubly secure. 'And this is the drawbridge!' said my mother, mockingly.

"The ground floor consisted of a circular chamber, with a table, chairs, a sideboard, etc. Opposite the door, in an embrasure of the wall, about two yards in thickness, a barred window lighted this room, which was to serve as sitting-room, kitchen and dining-room at the same time; but lighted it so imperfectly that to see plainly even in the daytime one had to leave the door open. On one side was the fireplace, and on the other the wooden staircase that led to the upper floors; under the staircase was a trap-door firmly closed by a large lock.

"'It is the cellar,' said the gardener, 'but it is dangerous, as it is full of rubbish. I have a place where you can keep your drink.' 'And our food?' said the servant.

"The gardener explained that he often went down to the château in his cart and that the cook would have every

facility for doing her marketing at Aubevoye. As for my mother, Mme. de Combray, thinking that the journey up and down hill would be too much for her, would send a donkey which would do for her to ride when we went to the château in the afternoon or evening. On the first floor were two rooms separated by a partition; one for my mother and me, the other for the servant, both lighted only by loop-holes. It was cold and sinister.

"'This is a prison!' cried my mother.

"The gardener remarked that we should only sleep there; and seeing my mother about to go up to the next floor, he stopped her, indicating the dilapidated condition of the stairs. 'This floor is abandoned,' he said; 'the platform above is in a very bad state, and the staircase impracticable and dangerous. Mme. de Combray begs that you will never go above the first landing, for fear of an accident.' After which he went to get our luggage.

"My mother then gave way to her feelings. It was a mockery to lodge us in this rat-hole. She talked of going straight back to Paris; but our servant was so happy at having no longer to fear the police; I had found so much pleasure gathering flowers in the wood and running after butterflies; my mother herself enjoyed the great calm and silence so much that the decision was put off till the next day. And the next day we renounced all idea of going.

"Our life for the next two months was untroubled. We were at the longest days of the year. Once a week we were invited to supper at the château, and we came home through the woods at night in perfect security. Sometimes in the afternoon my mother went to visit Mme. de Combray,



and always found her playing at cards or tric-trac with friends staying at the château or passing through, but oftenest with a stout man, her lawyer. No existence could be more commonplace or peaceful. Although they talked politics freely (but with more restraint than my mother), she told me later that she never for one moment suspected that she was in a nest of conspirators. Once or twice only Mme. de Combray, touched by the sincerity and ardour of her loyalty, seemed to be on the point of confiding in her. She even forgot herself so far as to say:—'Oh! if you were not so hot-headed, one would tell you certain things!'—but as if already regretting that she had said so much, she stopped abruptly.

"One night, when my mother could not sleep, her attention was attracted by a dull noise down-stairs, as if some one were shutting a trap-door clumsily. She lay awake all night uneasily, listening, but in vain. Next morning we found the room down-stairs in its usual condition; but my mother would not admit that she had been dreaming, and the same day spoke to Mme. de Combray, who joked her about it, and sent her to the gardener. The latter said he had made the noise. Passing the tower he had imagined that the door was not firmly closed, and had pushed against it to make sure. The incident did not occur again; but several days later there was a new, and this time more serious, alarm.

"I had noticed on top of the tower a blackbird's nest, which could easily be reached from the platform, but, faithful to orders, I had never gone up there. This time, however, the temptation was too strong. I watched until my

mother and the servant were in our little garden, and then climbed nimbly up to take the nest. On the landing of the second floor, curious to get a peep at the uninhabited rooms, I pushed open the door, and saw distinctly behind the glass door in the partition that separated the two rooms, a green curtain drawn quickly. In a great fright I rushed down-stairs head over heels, and ran into the garden, calling my mother and shouting, 'There is some one up-stairs in the room!' She did not believe it and scolded me. As I insisted she followed me up-stairs with the servant. From the landing my mother cried, 'Is any one there?' Silence. She pushed open the glass door. No one to be seen—only a folding-bed, unmade. She touched it; it was warm! Some one had been there, asleep,—dressed, no doubt. Where was he? On the platform? We went up. No one was there! He had no doubt escaped when I ran to the garden!

"We went down again quickly and our servant called the gardener. He had disappeared. We saddled the donkey, and my mother went hurry-scurry to the château. She found the lawyer at the eternal tric-trac with Mme. de Combray, who frowned at the first word, not even interrupting her game.

"'More dreams! The room is unoccupied! No one sleeps there!'

"'But the curtain!'

"'Well, what of the curtain? Your child made a draught by opening the door, and the curtain swung.'

"'But the bed, still warm!'

"'The gardener has some cats that must have been lying there, and ran away when the door was opened, and that's all about it!'

"'And yet—'

"'Well, have you found this ghost?'

"'No.'

"'Well then?' And she shook her dice rather roughly without paying any more attention to my mother, who after exchanging a curt good-night with the Marquise, returned to the tower, so little convinced of the presence of the cats that she took two screw-rings from one of our boxes, fixed them on to the trap-door, closed them with a padlock, took the key and said, 'Now we will see if any one comes in that way.' And for greater security she decided to lift the drawbridge after supper. We all three took hold of the rope that moved with difficulty on the rusty pulley. It was hard; we made three attempts. At last it moved, the bridge shook, lifted, came right up. It was done! And that evening, beside my bed, my mother said:

"'We will not grow old in her Bastille!'

"Which was true, for eight days later we were awakened in the middle of the night by a terrible hubbub on the ground floor. From our landing we heard several voices, swearing and raging under the trap-door which they were trying to raise, to which the padlock offered but feeble resistance, for a strong push broke it off and the door opened with a great noise. My mother and the servant rushed to the bureau, pushed and dragged it to the door, whilst some men came out of the cellar, walked to the door, grumbling, opened it, saw the drawbridge up, unfastened the rope and let it fall down with a loud bang, and then the voices grew fainter till they disappeared in the wood. But go

to sleep after all that! We stayed there waiting for the dawn, and though all danger was over, not daring to speak aloud!

"At last the day broke. We moved the bureau, and my mother, brave as ever, went down first, carrying a candle. The yawning trap-door exposed the black hole of a cellar, the entrance door was wide open and the bridge down. We called the gardener, who did not answer, and whose hut was empty. My mother did not wait till afternoon this time, but jumped on her donkey and went down to the château.

"Mme. de Combray was dressing. She expected my mother and knew her object in coming so well that without waiting for her to tell her story, she flew out like most people, who, having no good reason to give, resort to angry words, and cried as soon as she entered the room:

"'You are mad; mad enough to be shut up! You take my house for a resort of bandits and counterfeiters! I am sorry enough that I ever brought you here!'

"'And I that I ever came!'

"'Very well, then—go!'

"'I am going to-morrow. I came to tell you so.'

"'A safe return to you!' On which Mme. de Combray turned her back, and my mother retraced her steps to the tower in a state of exasperation, fully determined to take the boat for Paris without further delay.

"Early next morning we made ready. The gardener was at the door with his cart, coming and going for our luggage, while the servant put the soup on the table. My mother took only two or three spoonfuls and I did the same, as I hate soup. The servant alone emptied her plate! We went down to Roule where the gardener had scarcely left us when the

servant was seized with frightful vomiting. My mother and I were also slightly nauseated, but the poor girl retained nothing, happily for her, for we returned to Paris convinced that the gardener, being left alone for a moment, had thrown some poison into the soup."

"And did nothing happen afterwards?"

"Nothing."

"And you heard nothing more from Tournebut?"

"Nothing, until 1808, when we learned that the mail had been attacked and robbed near Falaise by a band of armed men commanded by Mme. de Combray's daughter, Mme. Acquet de Férolles, disguised as a hussar! Then, that Mme. Acquet had been arrested as well as her lover (Le Chevalier), her husband, her mother, her lawyer and servants and those of Mme. de Combray at Tournebut; and finally that Mme. de Combray had been condemned to imprisonment and the pillory, Mme. Acquet, her lover, the lawyer (Lefebvre) and several others, to death."

"And the husband?"

"Released; he was a spy."

"Was your mother called as a witness?"

"No, happily, they knew nothing about us. Besides, what would she have said?"

"Nothing, except that the people who frightened you so much, must surely have belonged to the band; that they had forced the trap-door, after a nocturnal expedition, on which they had been pursued as far as a subterranean entrance, which without doubt led to the cellar."

After we had chatted a while on this subject Moisson wished me good-night, and I took up Balzac's chef d'œuvre

and resumed my reading. But I only read a few lines; my imagination was wandering elsewhere. It was a long distance from Balzac's idealism to the realism of Moisson, which awakened in me memories of the stories and melodramas of Ducray-Duminil, of Guilbert de Pixérecourt—"Alexis, ou la Maisonette dans les Bois," "Victor, ou l'Enfant de la Forêt,"—and many others of the same date and style so much discredited nowadays. And I thought that what caused the discredit now, accounted for their vogue formerly; that they had a substratum of truth under a mass of absurdity; that these stories of brigands in their traditional haunts, forests, caverns and subterranean passages, charmed by their likelihood the readers of those times to whom an attack on a coach by highwaymen with blackened faces was as natural an occurrence as a railway accident is to us, and that in what seems pure extravaganza to us they only saw a scarcely exaggerated picture of things that were continually happening under their eyes. In the reports published by M. Félix Rocquain we can learn the state of France during the Directory and the early years of the Commune. The roads, abandoned since 1792, were worn into such deep ruts, that to avoid them the waggoners made long circuits in ploughed land, and the post-chaises would slip and sink into the muddy bogs from which it was impossible to drag them except with oxen. At every step through the country one came to a deserted hamlet, a roofless house, a burned farm, a château in ruins. Under the indifferent eyes of a police that cared only for politics, and of gendarmes recruited in such a fashion that a criminal often recognised an old comrade in the one who arrested

him, bands of vagabonds and scamps of all kinds had been formed; deserters, refractories, fugitives from the pretended revolutionary army, and terrorists without employment, "the scum," said François de Nantes, "of the Revolution and the war; 'lanterneurs' of '91, 'guillotineurs' of '93, 'sabreurs' of the year III, 'assommeurs' of the year IV, 'fusilleurs' of the year V." All this canaille lived only by rapine and murder, camped in the forests, ruins and deserted quarries like that at Gueudreville, an underground passage one hundred feet long by thirty broad, the headquarters of the band of Orgères, a thoroughly organised company of bandits—chiefs, subchiefs, storekeepers, spies, couriers, barbers, surgeons, dressmakers, cooks, preceptors for the "gosses," and curé!

And this brigandage was rampant everywhere. There was so little safety in the Midi from Marseilles to Toulon and Toulouse that one could not travel without an escort. In the Var, the Bouches-du-Rhône, Vaucluse, from Digne and Draguignan, to Avignon and Aix, one had to pay ransom. A placard placed along the roads informed the traveller that unless he paid a hundred francs in advance, he risked being killed. The receipt given to the driver served as a passport. Theft by violence was so much the custom that certain villages in the Lower Alps were openly known as the abode of those who had no other occupation. On the banks of the Rhône travellers were charitably warned not to put up at certain solitary inns for fear of not reappearing therefrom. On the Italian frontier they were the "barbets"; in the North the "garroteurs"; in the Ardèche the "bande noire"; in the Centre the "Chiffoniers"; in Artois, Picardie, the Somme,

Seine-Inférieure, the Chartrain country, the Orléanais, Loire-Inférieure, Orne, Sarthe, Mayenne, Ille-et-Vilaine, etc., and Ile-de-France to the very gates of Paris, but above all in Calvados, Finistère and La Manche where royalism served as their flag, the "chauffeurs" and the bands of "Grands Gars" and "Coupe et Tranche," which under pretence of being Chouans attacked farms or isolated dwellings, and inspired such terror that if one of them were arrested neither witness nor jury could be found to condemn him. Politics evidently had nothing to do with these exploits; it was a private war. And the Chouans professed to wage it only against the government. So long as they limited themselves to fighting the gendarmes or national guards in bands of five or six hundred, to invading defenceless places in order to cut down the trees of liberty, burn the municipal papers, and pillage the coffers of the receivers and school-teachers—(the State funds having the right to return to their legitimate owner, the King), they could be distinguished from professional malefactors. But when they stopped coaches, extorted ransom from travellers and shot constitutional priests and purchasers of the national property, the distinction became too subtle. There was no longer any room for it in the year VIII and IX when, vigorous measures having almost cleared the country of the bands of "chauffeurs" and other bandits who infested it, the greater number of those who had escaped being shot or guillotined joined what remained of the royalist army, last refuge of brigandage.

In such a time Moisson's adventure was not at all extraordinary. We can only accuse it of being too simple. It



was the mildest scene of a huge melodrama in which he and his mother had played the part of supers. But slight as was the episode, it had all the attraction of the unknown for me. Of Tournebut and its owners I knew nothing. Who, in reality, was this Mme. de Combray, sanctified by Balzac? A fanatic, or an intriguer?—And her daughter Mme. Acquet? A heroine or a lunatic?—and the lover? A hero or an adventurer?—And the husband, the lawyer and the friends of the house? Mme. Acquet more than all piqued my curiosity. The daughter of a good house disguised as a hussar to stop the mail like Choppart! This was not at all commonplace! Was she young and pretty? Moisson knew nothing about it; he had never seen her or her lover or husband, Mme. de Combray having quarrelled with all of them.

I was most anxious to learn more, but to do that it would be necessary to consult the report of the trial in the record office at Rouen. I never had time. I mentioned it to M. Gustave Bord, to Frédéric Masson and M. de la Sicotière, and thought no more about it even after the interesting article published in the *Temps*, by M. Ernest Daudet, until walking one day with Lenôtre in the little that is left of old Paris of the Cité, the house in the Rue Chanoinesse, where Balzac lodged Mme. de la Chanterie, reminded me of Moisson, whose adventure I narrated to Lenôtre, at that time finishing his "Conspiration de la Rouërie." That was sufficient to give him the idea of studying the records of the affair of 1807, which no one had consulted before him. A short time after he told me that the tower of Tournebut was still in existence, and that he was anxious for us to visit it, the son-in-law of

the owner of the Château of Aubevoye, M. Constantin, having kindly offered to conduct us.

On a fine autumn morning the train left us at the station that served the little village of Aubevoye, whose name has twice been heard in the Courts of Justice, once in the trial of Mme. de Combray and once in that of Mme. de Jeufosse. Those who have no taste for these sorts of excursions cannot understand their charm. Whether it be a little historical question to be solved, an unknown or badly authenticated fact to be elucidated, this document hunt with its deceptions and surprises is the most amusing kind of chase, especially in company with a delver like Lenôtre, endowed with an admirable *flair* that always puts him on the right track. There was, moreover, a particular attraction in this old forgotten tower, in which we alone were interested, and in examining into Moisson's story!

Of the château that had been built by the Marechal de Marillac, and considerably enlarged by Mme. de Combray, nothing, unhappily, remains but the out-buildings, a terrace overlooking the Seine, the court of honour turned into a lawn, an avenue of old limes and the ancient fence. A new building replaced the old one fifty years ago. The little château, "Gros-Mesnil," near the large one has recently been restored.

But the general effect is the same as in 1804. Seeing the great woods that hug the outer wall so closely, one realises how well they lent themselves to the mysterious comings and goings, to the secret councils, to the rôle destined for it by Mme. de Combray, preparing the finest room for the arrival of the King or the Comte d'Artois, and in both the

great and little château, arranging hiding-places, one of which alone could accommodate forty armed men.

The tower is still there, far from the château, at the summit of a wooded hill in the centre of a clearing, which commands the river valley. It is a squat, massive construction, of forbidding aspect, such as Moisson described, with thick walls, and windows so narrow that they look more like loopholes. It seems as if it might originally have been one of the guard-houses or watch-towers erected on the heights from Nantes to Paris, like the tower of Montjoye whose ditch is recognisable in the Forest of Marly, or those of Montaigu and Hennemont, whose ruins were still visible in the last century. Some of these towers were converted into mills or pigeon-houses. Ours, whose upper story and pointed roof had been demolished and replaced by a platform at an uncertain date, was flanked by a wooden mill, burnt before the Revolution, for it is not to be found in Cassini's chart which shows all in the region. The tower and its approaches are still known as the "burnt mill."

There remains no trace of the excavation which was in front of the entrance in 1804, and which must have been the last vestige of an old moat. The threshold crossed, we are in the circular chamber; at the end facing the door is the window, the bars of which have been taken down; on the left a modern chimneypiece replaces the old one, and on the right is the staircase, in good condition. The trap-door has disappeared from under it, the cellar being abandoned as useless. On the first floor as on the second, where the partitions have been removed, there are still traces of them, with fragments of wall-paper. The very little daylight that

filters through the windows justifies Mme. Moisson's exclamation, "It is a prison!" The platform, from which the view is very fine, has been renewed, like the staircase. But from top to bottom all corresponds with Moisson's description.

All that remained now was to find out how one could get into the cellar from outside. We had two excellent guides; our kind host, M. Constantin, and M. l'Abbé Drouin, the curé of Aubevoye, who knew all the local traditions. They mentioned the "Grotto of the Hermit!" O Ducray-Duminil!—Thou again!

The grotto is an old quarry in the side of the hill towards the Seine, below the tower and having no apparent communication with it, but so situated that an underground passage of a few yards would unite them. The grotto being now almost filled up, the entrance to this passage has disappeared. Looking at it, so innocent in appearance now under the brush and brambles, I seemed to see some Chouan by star-light, eye and ear alert, throw himself into it like a rabbit into its hole, and creep through to the tower, to sleep fully dressed on the pallet on the second floor. Evidently this tower, planned as were all Mme. de Combray's abodes, was one of the many refuges arranged by the Chouans from the coast of Normandy to Paris and known only to themselves.

But why was Mme. Moisson accommodated there without being taken into her hostess's confidence? If Mme. de Combray wished to avert suspicion by having two women and a child there, she might have told them so; and if she thought Mme. Moisson too excitable to hear such a

confession, she should not have exposed her to nocturnal mysteries that could only tend to increase her excitement! When Phélippeaux was questioned, during the trial of Georges Cadoudal, about Moisson's father, who had disappeared, he replied that he lived in the street and island of Saint-Louis near the new bridge; that he was an engraver and manager of a button factory; that Mme. Moisson had a servant named R. Petit-Jean, married to a municipal guard. Was it through fear of this woman's writing indiscreetly to her husband that Mme. de Combray remained silent? But in any case, why the tower?

However this may be, the exactness of Moisson's reminiscences was proved. But the trap-door had not been forced, as he believed, by Chouans fleeing after some nocturnal expedition. This point was already decided by the first documents that Lenôtre had collected for this present work. There was no expedition of the sort in the neighbourhood of Tournebut during the summer of 1804. They would not have risked attracting attention to the château where was hidden the only man whom the Chouans of Normandy judged capable of succeeding Georges, and whom they called "Le Grand Alexandre"—the Vicomte Robert d'Aché. Hunted through Paris like all the royalists denounced by Querelle, he had managed to escape the searchers, to go out in one of his habitual disguises when the gates were reopened, to get to Normandy by the left bank of the Seine and take refuge with his old friend at Tournebut, where he lived for fourteen months under the name of Deslorières, his presence there never being suspected by the police.

He was certainly, as well as Bonnœil, Mme. de Combray's eldest son, one of the three guests with whom Moisson took supper on the evening of his arrival. The one who was always playing cards or tric-trac with the Marquise, and whom she called her lawyer, might well have been d'Aché himself. As to the stealthy visitors at the tower, given the presence of d'Aché at Tournebut, it is highly probable that they were only passing by there to confer with him, taking his orders secretly in the woods without even appearing at the château, and then disappearing as mysteriously as they had come.

For d'Aché in his retreat still plotted and made an effort to resume, with the English minister, the intrigue that had just failed so miserably, Moreau having withdrawn at the last minute. The royalist party was less intimidated than exasperated at the deaths of the Duke d'Enghien, Georges and Pichegru, and did not consider itself beaten even by the proclamation of the Empire, which had not excited in the provinces—above all in the country—the enthusiasm announced in the official reports.

In reality it had been accepted by the majority of the population as a government of expediency, which would provisionally secure threatened interests, but whose duration was anything but certain. It was too evident that the Empire was Napoleon, as the Consulate had been Bonaparte—that everything rested on the head of one man. If an infernal machine removed him, royalty would have a good opportunity. His life was not the only stake; his luck itself was very hazardous. Founded on victory, the Empire was condemned to be always victorious. War could undo

what war had done. And this uneasiness is manifest in contemporary memoirs and correspondence. More of the courtiers of the new régime than one imagines were as sceptical as Mme. Mère, economising her revenues and saying to her mocking daughters, "You will perhaps be very glad of them, some day!" In view of a possible catastrophe many of these kept open a door for retreat towards the Bourbons, and vaguely encouraged hopes of assistance that could only be depended on in case of their success, but which the royalists believed in as positive and immediate. As to the disaster which might bring it about, they hoped for its early coming, and promised it to the impatient Chouans—the disembarkation of an Anglo-Russian army—the rising of the West—the entrance of Louis XVIII into his good town of Paris—and the return of the Corsican to his island! Predictions that were not so wild after all. Ten years later it was an accomplished fact in almost all its details. And what are ten years in politics? Frotté, Georges, Pichegru, d'Aché, would only have had to fold their arms. They would have seen the Empire crumble by its own weight.

We made these reflections on returning to the château while looking at the terrace in the setting sun, at the peaceful winding of the Seine and the lovely autumn landscape that Mme. de Combray and d'Aché had so often looked at, at the same place and hour, little foreseeing the sad fate the future had in store for them.

The misfortunes of the unhappy woman—the deplorable affair of Quesnay where the coach with state funds was attacked by Mme. Acquet's men, for the profit of the royalist exchequer and of Le Chevalier; the assassination of d'Aché,

sold to the imperial police by La Vaubadon, his mistress, and the cowardly Doulcet de Pontécoulant, who does not boast of it in his "Mémoires,"—have been the themes of several tales, romances and novels, wherein fancy plays too great a part, and whose misinformed authors, Hippolyte Bonnelier, Comtesse de Mirabeau, Chennevières, etc., have taken great advantage of the liberty used in works of imagination. There is only one reproach to be made—that they did not have the genius of Balzac. But we may criticise more severely the so-called historical writings about Mme. de Combray, her family and residences, and the Château of Tournebut which M. Homberg shows us flanked by four feudal towers, and which MM. Le Prévost and Bourdon say was demolished in 1807.

Mme. d'Abrantès, with her usual veracity, describes the luxurious furniture and huge lamps in the "labyrinths of Tournebut, of which one must, as it were, have a plan, so as not to lose one's way." She shows us Le Chevalier, crucifix in hand, haranguing the assailants in the wood of Quesnay (although he was in Paris that day to prove an alibi), and gravely adds, "I know some one who was in the coach and who alone survived, the seven other travellers having been massacred and their bodies left on the road." Now there was neither coach nor travellers, and no one was killed!

M. de la Sicotière's mistakes are still stranger. At the time that he was preparing his great work on "Frotté and the Norman Insurrections," he learned from M. Gustave Bord that I had some special facts concerning Mme. de Combray, and wrote to ask me about them. I sent him a résumé of



Moisson's story, and asked him to verify its correctness. And on that he went finely astray.

Mme. de Combray had two residences besides her house at Rouen; one at Aubevoye, where she had lived for a long while, the other thirty leagues away, at Donnay, in the department of Orne, where she no longer went, as her son-in-law had settled himself there. Two towers have the same name of Tournebut; the one at Aubevoye is ours; the other, some distance from Donnay, did not belong to Mme. de Combray.

Convinced solely by the assertions of MM. Le Prévost and Bourdon that in 1804 the Château of Aubevoye and its tower no longer existed, and that Mme. de Combray occupied Donnay at that date, M. de la Sicotière naturally mistook one Tournebut for the other, did not understand a single word of Moisson's story, which he treated as a chimera, and in his book acknowledges my communications in this disdainful note:

"Confusion has arisen in many minds between the two Tournebutts, so different, however, and at such a distance from each other, and has given birth to many strange and romantic legends; inaccessible retreats arranged for outlaws and bandits in the old tower, nocturnal apparitions, innocent victims paying with their lives the misfortune of having surprised the secrets of these terrible guests...."

It is pleasant to see M. de la Sicotière point out the confusion he alone experienced. But there is better to come! Here is a writer who gives us in two large volumes the history of Norman Chouannerie. There is little else

spoken of in his book than disguises, false names, false papers, ambushes, kidnappings, attacks on coaches, subterranean passages, prisons, escapes, child spies and female captains! He states himself that the affair of the Forest of Quesnay was "tragic, strange and mysterious!" And at the same time he condemns as "strange" and "romantic" the simplest of all these adventures—that of Moisson! He scoffs at his hiding-places in the roofs of the old château, and it is precisely in the roofs of the old château that the police found the famous refuge which could hold forty men with ease. He calls the retreats arranged for the outlaws and bandits "legendary," at the same time that he gives two pages to the enumeration of the holes, vaults, wells, pits, grottoes and caverns in which these same bandits and outlaws found safety! So that M. de la Sicotière seems to be laughing at himself!

I should reproach myself if I did not mention, as a curiosity, the biography of M. and Mme. de Combray, united in one person in the "Dictionnaire Historique" (!!!) of Larousse. It is unique of its kind. Names, places and facts are all wrong. And the crowning absurdity is that, borne out by these fancies, fragments are given of the supposed Mémoires that Félicie (!) de Combray wrote after the Restoration—forgetting that she was guillotined under the Empire!

With M. Ernest Daudet we return to history. No one had seriously studied the crime of Quesnay before him. Some years ago he gave the correct story of it in *Le Temps* and we could not complain of its being only what he meant it to be—a faithful and rapid résumé. Besides, M. Daudet had only

at his disposal the portfolios 8,170, 8,171, and 8,172 of the Series F7 of the National Archives, and the reports sent to Réal by Savoye-Rollin and Licquet, this cunning detective beside whom Balzac's Corentin seems a mere schoolboy. Consequently the family drama escapes M. Daudet, who, for that matter, did not have to concern himself with it. It would not have been possible to do better than he did with the documents within his reach.

Lenôtre has pushed his researches further. He has not limited himself to studying, bit by bit, the voluminous report of the trial of 1808, which fills a whole cupboard; to comparing and opposing the testimony of the witnesses one against the other, examining the reports and enquiries, disentangling the real names from the false, truth from error—in a word, investigating the whole affair, a formidable task of which he only gives us the substance here. Aided by his wonderful instinct and the persistency of the investigator, he has managed to obtain access to family papers, some of which were buried in old trunks relegated to the attics, and in these papers has found precious documents which clear up the depths of this affair of Quesnay where the mad passion of one poor woman plays the greatest part.

And let no one imagine that he is going to read a romance in these pages. It is an *historical* study in the severest meaning of the word. Lenôtre mentions no fact that he cannot prove. He risks no hypothesis without giving it as such, and admits no fancy in the slightest detail. If he describes one of Mme. Acquet's toilettes, it is because it is given in some interrogation. I have seen him so scrupulous on this point, as to suppress all picturesqueness that could

be put down to his imagination. In no *cause célèbre* has justice shown more exactitude in exposing the facts. In short, here will be found all the qualities that ensured the success of his "Conspiration de la Rouërie," the chivalrous beginning of the Chouannerie that he now shows us in its decline, reduced to highway robbery!

As for me, if I have lingered too long by this old tower, it is because it suggested this book; and we owe some gratitude to these mute witnesses of a past which they keep in our remembrance.

VICTORIEN SARDOU.

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# **The House of the Combrays**

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# CHAPTER I

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## THE TREACHERY OF JEAN-PIERRE QUERELLE

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Late at night on January the 25th, 1804, the First Consul, who, as it often happened, had arisen in order to work till daylight, was looking over the latest police reports that had been placed on his desk.

His death was talked of everywhere. It had already been announced positively in London, Germany and Holland. "To assassinate Bonaparte" was a sort of game, in which the English were specially active. From their shores, well-equipped and plentifully supplied with money, sailed many who were desirous of gaining the great stake,—obdurate Chouans and fanatical royalists who regarded as an act of piety the crime that would rid France of the usurper. What gave most cause for alarm in these reports, usually unworthy of much attention, was the fact that all of them were agreed on one point—Georges Cadoudal had disappeared. Since this man, formidable by reason of his courage and tenacity of purpose, had declared war without mercy on the First Consul, the police had never lost sight of him. It was known that he was staying in England, and he was under surveillance there; but if it was true that he had escaped this espionage, the danger was imminent, and the predicted "earthquake" at hand.

Bonaparte, more irritated than uneasy at these tales, wished to remove all doubt about the matter. He mistrusted Fouché, whose devotion he had reason to suspect, and who besides had not at this time—officially at least—the superintendence of the police; and he had attached to himself a dangerous spy, the Belgian Réal. It was on this man that Bonaparte, on certain occasions, preferred to rely. Réal was a typical detective. The friend of Danton, he had in former days, organised the great popular manifestations that were to intimidate the Convention. He had penetrated the terrible depths of the Revolutionary Tribunal, and the Committee of Public Safety. He knew and understood how to make use of what remained of the old committees of sections, of "septembriseurs" without occupation, lacqueys, perfumers, dentists, dancing masters without pupils, all the refuse of the revolution, the women of the Palais-Royal: such was the army he commanded, having as his lieutenants Desmarets, an unfrocked priest, and Veyrat, formerly a Genevese convict, who had been branded and whipped by the public executioner. Réal and these two subalterns were the principal actors in the drama that we are about to relate.

On this night Bonaparte sent in haste for Réal. In his usual manner, by brief questions he soon learned the number of royalists confined in the tower of the Temple or at Bicêtre, their names, and on what suspicions they had been arrested. Quickly satisfied on all these points he ordered that before daylight four of the most deeply implicated of the prisoners should be taken before a military commission; if they revealed nothing they were to be shot in twenty-four