

THE LYNX

PART ONE

I

In the clear night, Gabriel Mirande made out the white walls of the village and, above the foliage of the square, the brown silhouette of the church and the bell-tower. The young scientist was alone, absolutely alone, on the road that traversed the fields, linking the railway station to Chaligny. Nothing was alive, nothing was moving in the nocturnal countryside save for the scintillating stars swarming in the summer sky.

Sometimes, a perfume passed through the calm air, the odors of ripe crops, trodden grass and warm earth; and Mirande shivered as if it were a caress. Since his departure from Paris his senses seemed to have been refined and sharpened under the empire of an abnormal nervous tension. Perhaps he owed that to the excessive emotions that had assailed him recently, perhaps to the stimulant injection that his master, Brion, had given him in advance.

He penetrated into the village, where his footsteps resonated between the closed facades. Everyone was asleep. Only one window remained illuminated, on the first floor of the inn. From time to time, as he passed by, a dog barked in a courtyard; and, incapable of mastering his nervousness, he started every time, his spine chilled by a frisson, although all the houses were familiar to him in the village where he had been born.

Mirande passed under the linden trees of the square, whose flowers embalmed the night. Then he pushed a gate, which grated sadly. He was in the cemetery, whose graves were grouped together, in accordance with the ancient custom, around the church.

That path was very familiar to him, alas. He and his sister Jeanne had still been children when they had escorted their father and their mother, at a short interval, to that nearby mound, shaded by yews and florid with roses. The names on the crosses, already half-effaced by time, and the steles reminded him of the faces of friends...

This time, however, it was before a freshly-filled grave that he intended to meditate first. Three days...for three days Simone Castellan had been buried in Chaligny cemetery. He knew the family tomb well, a large and heavy stone almost level with the ground, in a quiet corner, under large aspens. In the shadow increased by the screen of foliage he made out the bouquets, wreaths and sprays that strewed the stone, whose flowers, still fresh, were shining, as if they had retained the light in their corollas.

Standing there, head bowed, he sank into a dolorous meditation. He wept for the adored friend of his childhood and youth, for all the love and all the poetry of his life.

How he had loved her! She had always appeared to him prestigious, distant, almost divine. Already, when he was no more than a village schoolboy, a little peasant, thin and timid, he had contemplated her with a kind of veneration through the railings of the noble estate where she lived on the bank of the Yonne. And later, when a tutelary hand had raised him above his condition, when he returned to Chatigny on leave in the tunic of a collegian, he had experienced, in crossing Simone's path, in going past her dwelling, the same religious hesitation.

Perhaps he would never have addressed a word to her without his sister Jeanne, whose hard life under the patronage of Sens had not eroded either her valor or her enthusiasm. The two girls, doubtless

seduced by the contrast in their nature, had acquired a mutual amity. Simone's parents, who were reputed in the village to be proud, dared not deprive their daughter of that playmate, and the beautiful domain had been opened to the ecstatic little Mirande.

Those vacations... they remained for him the intervals of light, the blue gaps in the somber wall of the boarding-school. Innocent days, fishing expeditions, picnics on the grass, escapes into the woods, in which his timidity melted, in which Jeanne's laughter rang out, and the well-behaved and careful Simone became animated.

The years at the lycée had gone by, gray and similar, but crowned by those sunlit vacations. And it was during one of those returns to the village that he had found, instead of an indecisive adolescent, a complete young woman that he hesitated to recognize. He had just entered Brion's laboratory as an assistant. Henceforth, their childish camaraderie was over, Mirande no longer dared go into the beautiful domain. Before Simone, his hands clenched, his gait stiffened; he lost his ease and his simplicity; he had become conscious of loving her.

For nothing in the world, however, would he have risked the confession, so afraid was he of appearing to covet the young woman's fortune. Rich at present, she would become even more so in future. He possessed nothing. And even if he had unmasked himself, even if she had loved him, she was too submissive to tradition, to obedient to her family, to rebel without suffering.

Unaware even whether she retained her tender childhood amity, therefore, he had nourished a secret and desperate passion for her until the day when she had married, in accordance with the rules of society. She had married Doctor Castillan.

Who can tell whether his chagrin was not more bitter than day, on learning of Simone's marriage, than a year later, on learning of her death? The noblest love has terrible undercurrents of egotism. Who can tell whether it had been less cruel for him to know that she was lost to everyone than lost to him alone?

No more than he had had the courage to follow the nuptial cortege, had he had the courage to go to the funeral. When the ceremony was over, however, he took the first opportunity to go to Chatigny, where Simone had wanted to be buried.

A letter that he had received one morning from his notary had furnished him with a pretext for his departure. The same evening, when his work at the laboratory had finished, he had thrown himself into a train, even though the state of fever and weakness in which he had left his master, Brion, had caused him some anxiety.

In any case, trials appear to come in clusters to fall upon the prey they have chosen. At the moment when the health of his benefactor preoccupied him, when the death of Simone Castillan revived in him the melancholy of the past, Mirande was still under the influence of an implausible nightmare: his best friend, Henri Lacaze, his sister's fiancé, had been accused—and then, alas, convicted—of a crime of blood and money. The judgment that condemned him to forced labor for life had been pronounced only a few days before, Mirande could still hear his howls of innocence, and he could still see the gesture of savage violence with which he had threatened the tribunal and the jury.

But he reproached himself for an impiety for evoking before the dead woman memories that did not animate her. He would have liked to talk to her, to murmur all the words that he had not dared to pronounce to her. Now, she no longer belonged to anyone, either to her proud parents or to a husband. She had been returned to herself. He could allow his heart to expand.

Obedient less to the ritual custom than an instinctive need to draw nearer to the tomb, to incline even more deeply before her, he knelt down. His eyes closed and his head leaned forward, he savored the bitter sweetness of evoking and seeing again all those faces, all those Simones, all those portraits that his memory had made and fixed in the great light of childhood.

Suddenly, he raised his head again, his hands at his temples. Was it the night, the lugubrious location or the dolorous evocation? It seemed to him that he had heard someone speak.

Evidently, he had only been the victim of a hallucination, inasmuch as the voice had appeared somehow immaterial, as if it had been addressed directly to his mind, without striking his ear first.

Again, however, he perceived the subtle murmur...

Oh, this time he was certain of not being mistaken. He had heard the words distinctly: “I can’t... where am I?”

For one second more he hesitated, refusing to formulate the thought. Then the truth dazzled him. It was her! She was not dead...

He leaned over, his forehead against the stone. Plaints reached him, in a neutral, distant tone, devoid of emphasis: “I’m stifling... where am I? Wait... I can’t move... oh! That veil over my face...”

How, through so many obstacles, could he perceive those faint moans? He did not dwell on that. She was alive! She was alive...

She must have emerged a short while ago from a lethargic state. She was about to suffer the most atrocious martyrdom. But an attempt could still be made to snatch her from the torture before she succumbed to it. He would save her. He had no other goal henceforth, no other reason for being.

Springing to his feet, leaping over the mounds and the stones in order to take the shortest route, he reached the gate. In the square, the window of the inn was still illuminated. He ran to the door and found it locked. He attacked it with furious blows of his fist and his foot.

Finally, the casement opened. A shadow leaned out, grumbling.

Breathless, Mirande shouted: “Madame Castellan isn’t dead. Come down quickly. I’ll meet you in the cemetery.”

For he had run toward the nearest aid, and the most prompt—but he needed other collaborators. Fortunately, he was guided by the extreme lucidity that reveals itself in certain people at critical moments. In his mind, a list was established, an itinerary drawn up. It was necessary to alert the mason, the gravedigger, the physician and the gamekeeper. Fortunately once again, he knew all the inhabitants of Chatigny and all the doors.

Alas, he ran into the torpor of the first sleep everywhere. It seems that a leaden air weighs upon sleeping villages. Here, no one responded to his appeals; there, he collected only surly grunts, a suspicious interrogation. But that mild, discreet, reserved man would have battered down walls that night, violated dwellings, and woken an entire town. He named himself, shouted the news, howled as if to tear his throat, doubled his blows upon the doors until his fists were bleeding.

His vehemence ended up prevailing. Before every house, listening at the closed shutters, he waited for the sound of heavy footsteps and the buzz of voices. And his attention was so prodigiously extended that he thought he could divine the meaning of the distant words. Here the annoyance of an abrupt awakening was brutally revealed, elsewhere the curiosity of such a rare event; on the one hand incredulity, or the hope and calculation of an unexpected gain—and also joy, the beautiful human joy of being able to snatch one of their fellows from death.

Having alerted all those aides, Mirande, without waiting for them, ran back to the cemetery. He wanted to counter the waiting by movement, by action, by thought, forget the flight of time, the precious minutes lost.

Oh, what if the help arrived too late...! What if the spark of life reanimated in that tomb were extinguished forever...

Simon must be suffering an abominable torture, since she had recovered consciousness. To be buried alive...who can tell whether the circumstance might not be more frequent than is generally believed? He recalled the audacious theories of Doisteau, a young surgeon he had known during a residency at the Brion laboratory. According to Doisteau, death was often only apparent. An organism ought only to perish by falling apart. In many accidents, life was merely suspended. If it were definitively avoided, it was due to skillful intervention or fortunate hazard that it resumed its course. It was like an automobile stopped by the roadside; if one can find the source of the trouble and remedy it, it sets off again immediately—but if it is abandoned to itself, it degenerates, and soon falls into veritable death...

Gradually, however, the village was animated. From here and there, the click of a door and a heavy tread resounded.

Soon, a small squadron was gathered around the tomb. But what slowness, what laxity there still was in the work...

As time went by, Mirande lost his lucid calm. Feverishly, it seemed to him that he could still hear, in a kind of vertigo, the reflections that he had surprised among those men behind their closed shutters.

He could not stay inactive any longer, his hands inert, Perhaps his aid might not be useless. He took possession of a pickax and braced himself with the others to shift the massive stone.

Suddenly, while they were all uniting their efforts Mirande heard Simone again. She had recognized the horror of her situation.

“Buried...since when? Days? Hours? It’s frightful...I’m doomed...help!”

He did not want to interrupt the labor of his companions, but, overwhelmed by horror and hope, to stimulate their zeal, he said: “She’s speaking, She’s alive. Come on, courage! Quickly, quickly...”

The innkeeper was there, the mason, the gamekeeper and the bellringer who served as the village gravedigger. The four men, while continuing to weigh in, cocked their ears. But soon they testified by their mime that they could not hear anything. Mirande shrugged his shoulders. Evidently, their senses were too crude and coarse to perceive that distant voice.

At that moment, the physician joined them. He was a corpulent old man, vigorous and jovial, whose experience and method Mirande appreciated, Out of breath from running, he demanded, in a tone that betrayed his incredulity: “Well, do you still believe you can hear something?”

Irritated by that secret resistance, Mirande replied, sharply: “Listen yourself!”

The doctor knelt down on the ground and auscultated the stone. Then he stood up.

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And yet, I have good hearing.”

This time, Mirande was afraid. Was he really the victim of a hallucination? He would soon know. In fact, the stone, hoisted up wooden levers, finally gave way. It uncovered an obscure excavation, into which the mason lowered his lantern. A second stone, fitted with a ring and sealed around its perimeter, formed its bottom.

Mirande leaned over the opening, from which a cold draught emerged. He could still perceive the plaintive murmur, but with increasing difficulty. The voice seemed to be sinking into the earthy. It was weakening incessantly. Soon it faded away...

Had the unfortunate woman been resuscitated only to die? Or had she simply lost consciousness? Weak with impatience, Mirande urged the workers to hurry up. Fragments of stone flew away under the blows of the chisel, but now it seemed to him that even the zeal would remain futile, that the sepulcher would never be opened in time...

He sensed the effect of a sudden depression, doubtless provoked by anguish, fatigue, the troubled and cold hour that precedes dawn. Those men, whose most tenuous reflections he had penetrated a short while before, now seemed strange and distant to him.

A few early risers, alerted to the event, had joined the group of laborers. Some offered their services. Others, their hands behind their backs, looked on curiously. Mirande suffered from their presence. He would have liked to be able to finish the work on his own, far from those profane, almost hostile eyes.

Finally, the second stone was lifted. In the gray light of the imminent dawn, the coffin appeared. It was laid down on the grass. While agitated hands unscrewed the lid, Mirande stuck his ear to it.

No sound. Nothing. However, he was not mistaken; he really had heard plaints. Oh, the interminable seconds...! His own life could have been at stake and he would have been less anxious.

Lamentably, he pleaded: “Get ready, doctor. As soon as you can listen to her heart...”

The doctor acquiesced with a gesture, and got down on his knees. As soon as the shroud was uncovered he moved it out of the way over the breast and leaned over.

Almost immediately, he stood up again, his face brightening.

“She’s alive.”

Thus, in spite of the old physician’s anticipations, the miracle had been realized. But the physician was too glad to have been mistaken to retain any resentment.

As for Mirande, he was dizzy with joy. But the excess of happiness rendered him his clarity of decision. The young woman’s face retained all the appearances of death. It was important, above all not to allow that fragile flame to be extinguished, to reanimate it, and to transport the invalid to her home as quickly as possible.

Aided by the physician, he raised the poor inert head, and poured a few drops of cordial between the bloodless lips. Then, preceding the little group of porters, he ran to Simone's house. In the absence of their masters, the gardener and his wife were the only residents. For it was in Paris, where Monsieur Castillan was retained well before the season, that his young wife had almost died.

He found the two guardians awake, informed them of the prodigious adventure and the imminent arrival of their mistress, shook off their stupor and directed them. He anticipated the most scrupulous cares, going into the most minute detail, entirely absorbed by the work of salvation.

But a moment came when, in her brightly-lit bedroom, in the warmth and comfort of the bed, Simone, uttering a profound sigh, finally opened her eyes—and it was only at that moment that Gabriel Mirande became conscious of being a stranger in the house.

Simone was married...

Now, he had completed his task. He had returned his wife to Castillan. Nothing remained for him to do but cede his pace to that man. A flood of bitterness rose up against fate. What irony! To have saved her only to lose her again...

The best thing to do was to leave immediately. Simone, when she had come round completely, might perhaps be offended, by an instinct of modesty, to find him at her bedside. If he explained, how would he justify his presence at her tomb, during the night? Finally, what point was there in hearing words of gratitude, of mutual tenderness, since he was still bound to flee?

He took the physician to one side.

"She's saved, isn't she?"

"Certainly. It's evidently a case of catalepsy. She must have woken up at the moment when you heard her. Then she fainted again. But no organ is damaged."

"So you'll answer for her?" Mirande insisted.

"Yes, but why?"

"I'm leaving for Paris. I left Brion with a high temperature, very feverish. I'm anxious about his condition. I'm in a hurry to get back to him."

The old practitioner let a profound gaze fall upon Mirande. He was aware of the tender amity that united the two young people. Undoubtedly he was measuring the violence of an amour so umbrageous as to hide itself even from gratitude. But he did not betray his thought. He took the hands that were extended to him and shook them warmly.

"Go, then," he said. "Count on me."

Mirande contemplated one last time the sweet visage that was already tinted by the colors of life, amid the gilded hair spreading out over the pillow. Then he left.

Outside, he found one of those blue summer mornings, scintillating and pure, in which one would like to drink the fresh air like a liqueur. He went through the garden, which, from every path, behind every bench, in the midst of the hedges, the invisible statue of a memory loomed up for him.

Having reached the outbuildings, he went into the gardener's cottage.

"As soon as the post office opens, telephone Monsieur Castillan. I don't have time to wait. I'm catching the train."

He headed for the station along the bank of the Yonne, as much to cut the journey short as to avoid passing the cemetery. His haste to flee, to get away from the temptation of seeing Simone again, was so urgent that he neglected the ostensible purpose of his journey, his visit to the notary. The office would not be open yet, He would settle or having the money that was due to him sent the same day—a very small sum, alas: all that his sister and he had been able to procure by mortgaging the cottage and field that their parents had left them. It had cost them to borrow on their poor heritage, but the sacrifice was necessary. Incapable of believing, in spite of the evidence, in Lacaze's culpability, they had wanted to set forth in search of the truth. At the first step, they had perceived that, without the lever of money, all their efforts would be in vain. Without the few banknotes that he was about to receive, they would not even be able to remunerate the private detective they had charged with checking the work of the police.

On the platform of the station, where a bell was ringing, he sat down on a bench. He felt himself invaded by the great lassitude that had already descended upon him at the moment when he had ceased to hear Simone's plaints. He relived that prodigious night.

Now that he reviewed the events in their ensemble, one point seemed inexplicable to him. How, through so many obstacles, had he been able to perceive Simone's faint voice, when his companions could not hear it? Had the stimulant serum with which Brion had injected him the previous evening developed the acuity of his senses?

That mystery, his old master would surely be able to penetrate. His impatience to see him again increased. He decided to go to the laboratory as soon as he jumped down from the train. With a telegram sent on the way, he would inform Jeanne of the resurrection of her friend.

The memory of the singular events he had just traversed, and the apprehension of those that awaited him, whirled in his fatigued brain. And it was an impression of deliverance for him, as soon as he had thrown himself on to the banquette, to feel himself sinking into sleep.