

V. The Apparition

Etienne continued listening, although his ear could not detect any further sound—but he thought that he saw a vague shape in the distance, gliding over the heather as if borne by the storm-wind. Then he wiped the sweat from his forehead and put his hand to his heart, which was beating in his breast as if it might burst. Nature got the better of him; tears streamed from his eyes, and the frenetic exaltation that had sustained him a little while ago was replaced by a profound misery.

Filhol de Treguern was dead—Filhol, whom he loved as others loved their brothers and sisters, their father and their mother! Etienne had no family, save for his sister Marion, who had married long ago and had soon been widowed; his real family was Filhol, his master and his friend.

Once, the sentiment that is in the heart of every young man had drawn Etienne to think of marriage, and because he had a faithful heart his tender feelings had been sincere and profound. She was so beautiful, the blonde Geneviève, whom he had seen smiling at God among the flowers that surrounded the image of the Virgin Mary in Orlan's church! She was so pure, so good, so pious, and the man destined to be her spouse would have the sweetest heaven on Earth! Ah well! To the blonde Geneviève, who had had the best of his heart and was the hope of his life, Etienne had bid adieu, without complaint, because his rival was Filhol de Treguern. He had not hesitated for an instant; the thought had not even crossed his mind that he might do anything other than give Filhol seven years of liberty, while he sacrificed the happiness of his entire life!

And now, Filhol de Treguern was dead—dead at 21, leaving Geneviève a widow in charge of a meager crib.

Etienne protested as hard as he could, but he had, in the end, to accept it. Sobs tore at his bosom, and who can tell what glimmer of light shone amid his tears when a temptress voice whispered in his ear: *Widowed and free!* It was the image of Geneviève that passed before his eyes. He was horrified at himself.

"Hey, Mathurin!" he cried, shaking his rain-soaked hair—for the storm had finally burst, and the clouds were pouring their torrents upon the heath.

Mathurin was still there, stretched out like a lumpen mass, half-drowned in the mud. Etienne drew him to his feet, and the poor devil finally opened his eyes. He had no memory of what had happened, but when he saw, by a flicker of lightning, the pale and ravaged face of his companion, instinct set him trembling.

"Where are we?" he murmured, dazedly.

"On the road home," Etienne replied, with a bitter laugh. "And there's no more joyous hour than the one in which one returns to one's homeland."

"Yes," Mathurin stammered, patting himself as he began to feel the chill in his damp clothes. "That's a joyous hour! But why are we in this place?"

"Pass me the waterskin," Etienne said.

Mathurin obeyed. Etienne tested the weight of the vessel to gauge its contents, then gave it back to Mathurin, saying: "You can drink."

The waterskin was large, and it was still three-quarters full. Mathurin drank. Every time he stopped, Etienne said "Again! Again!"—to such effect that the gourd was soon only half-full. Etienne took a single draught then—but when he returned it to Mathurin, it was empty.

"Oh!" said Mathurin—whose last libation, coming directly after a fainting fit, had rendered him drunk—"you've had a good mouthful!"

Etienne brandished his stick above his head; his brain was on fire. "Can you feel the coolness of the good Lord's deluge on your forehead?" he cried. "Let's go! Those who love us await us!"

"Let's go!" Mathurin repeated.

"A song!" Etienne continued. "So that people can hear us coming from a long way off, and no one can say that soldiers like us are afraid of thunder!"

Mathurin, being in no condition to detect the cruel misery in his comrade's gaiety, immediately launched into the chorus of a song, rendering it at the top of his voice:

*If you want a drink, I've Adam's ale,
My bucket's full and so's my pail,
Jean, my poor old duckie;*

Dum-de-dum and dum-de-doo!
I've got no water, good cider for you
My pail's full, and so's my bucket! ⁶

"Come on, Etienne," he added. "Let it rip, man, let it rip!"

They marched off through the battering rain, along a path that had become a torrent, and they sang.

As Etienne had said, someone heard them coming. As they reached the chorus again, after one last verse, they saw the great sails of Guillaume Féru's windmill, turning with mad swiftness in the wind. The heath had been crossed, and Mathurin felt so brave now that he took the path that led to his mother's house of his own accord. Etienne went on by himself towards the mill.

As he knocked on the door, the tall and lean figure of Dowager Le Brec appeared in silhouette in front of the lighted widow.

"Greetings, soldier," she said. "You arrive singing, and that's all right. You weren't at the funeral, but you'll be at the baptism."

Etienne made no reply. He asked himself why the old woman was there, in a great storm, at this hour of the night. He thought—because, despite his intrepid courage, there was a corner of his heart open to superstition—that this encounter was a bad omen.

The first person he had seen on arriving in the district was the *cloarec* Gabriel, his mysterious enemy. The second was Dowager Le Brec, whose violent and implacable hatred was a mystery to no one. What was this talk of funerals and baptisms?

"You'll lose time, Sergeant Etienne," Dowager Le Brec went on, "if you intend to go in to that house. Continue on your way, and go to the one who's waiting for you."

"The one who's waiting for me?" the young sergeant repeated.

The old woman let loose a dry and mocking laugh. "The brambles of the *Croix-qui-Marche* have ears," she murmured. "If the dead can waste time, Filhol de Treguern must have wasted some of yours since the hour of his demise."

At that moment, in the midst of the racket that the windmill was making, voices became audible. Etienne, who was already drawing away, came to a halt. "I want to know what's going on in there," he said.

When Dowager Le Brec had told him that he ought not to go into the mill, she had positioned herself in front of the door, her white staff in her hand, as if she intended to prevent his passing by force—but she seemed to think better of it.

"You're not just anyone," she said, sarcastically. "You're family. Go in if you want to."

Etienne did not go in. A hand of iron gripped his heart within his breast. He thought that he had recognized one of the voices that had spoken a moment earlier, and the name of Geneviève sprang to his lips.

"Well?" said Dowager Le Brec, standing aside to let him pass.

Etienne went away, his head bowed, without making any reply. As he went down the path that led to the *Pierre-des-Païens*, he was able to hear the old woman repeat, along with her strident laugh: "You weren't at the funeral, but you'll be at the baptism!"

Geneviève! Geneviève! thought Etienne, whose heart was breaking.

While he was going slowly down the path, the wind had swept away the last clouds. The rain was still streaming from the foliage to either side of the path, but the dark blue of the sky was sparkling with a thousand fires. The stars had the diamantine sharpness that they take on after a storm. When Etienne arrived at the *Pierre-des-Païens*, the purified sky displayed the prodigious marvels of the landscape's magnificence. The dewy heath released its stringent perfumes into the night, and the little torrents left on the weary slopes by the tempest were the only audible sound.

Etienne was not the first to reach the rendezvous. He recognized Filhol de Treguern from a distance, standing in the midst of the furze-bushes, resting his elbow on the stone table.

Treguern did not have the appearance that might be expected of one returned from the other world. True, the darkness was too profound to allow Etienne to make out his facial features, but the attitude of his body retained the youthful grace that had distinguished him previously. His fine blond hair hung down to his shoulders, his head cupped in his hand.

The young sergeant was overflowing with emotion. Perhaps he would have been more able to bear the sight of one of those funereal apparitions that strike the imagination more than the heart: a long pale form, dressed in the shroud that the dead carry with them. On the contrary, though; he saw Filhol just as he had left him before his departure.

That which the night hid might be horrible; that which the night allowed to be seen was entirely graceful and youthful.

The idea of death vanished from Etienne's mind; consciousness of elapsed time also disappeared. He wondered whether he might have had a cruel dream, and whether this might be the eve on which he had last embraced his brother Filhol. He experienced the joy of people who awake and dismiss a vanquished nightmare.

He threw himself forward, transported by his impulse, and plunged into the thicket, eager to clasp Treguern to his bosom.

"Stay there!" said the apparition, simultaneously gesturing with his hand.

Etienne came to an abrupt halt. Treguern had struck a commanding attitude; Etienne felt a chill extending to the marrow of his bones, because his eyes, accustomed to the gloom, made out something vague and dark beneath his brother's blond hair that was no longer a face. Poignant reality took hold of him again.

"Are you suffering, Filhol, my brother?" he asked, with tears in his eyes.

"Yes," Treguern replied, "and I deserve it."

"I've come back as poor as I left," cried the young sergeant, "and I have but one arm—but if this arm can still work, you shall have the measure of your prayers. Filhol, my poor Filhol!"

The apparition put his head in his hand again and Etienne received no reply. "Have you something to demand of me?" he said, after a pause. "Dead or alive, Treguern is my master, and I shall obey him."

The apparition shook its head, equivocally, and the young sergeant thought he heard him murmur: "Perhaps."

There was a second pause; then the specter continued, in a slow voice laden with sadness: "Do you remember, Etienne, the eve of your departure? We went together to Orlan's church. We knelt down before the great tomb of Tanneguy, which speaks so loudly of the power of my ancestors, and we prayed. And thus we went from tomb to tomb, wherever the name of Treguern was inscribed, kneeling and praying."

"I remember," Etienne said.

"I said to you," Filhol went on, "because my heart was distressed by my family's decline, while following the course of the ever-diminishing sepulchres: It's like a staircase whose topmost step, wrought in marble, supports the colonnades of a portico, while the last, broken by the feet of passers-by, has vanished in the mire. I said that, while looking at my father's grave, on which we could only set a humble wooden cross. Do you remember, Etienne?"

"I remember."

"Good! Beneath that last step, miry and mutilated, there is one more. After my father's grave, there is one more, even poorer—and that is mine."

"On my salvation, Filhol," cried Etienne, sobbing, "If I have to beg in the streets, you shall have a marble tablet appropriate to your birth: a tablet with your name, your titles and your coat-of-arms!"

Filhol shook his head. Etienne thought he could make out something like a smile beneath the curls of blond hair that inundated his face. When Filhol spoke again, his voice had changed.

"What is required," he said, in a curt and imperious tone, "is not a tomb for a dead Treguern but a palace for a living Treguern!"

"A living Treguern!" Etienne repeated, prompted to hope.

The specter interrupted him. "Time is passing, and the minutes are strictly rationed. I must question you. Tell me: what have you seen tonight on the Redon road?"

"Three men on horseback," Etienne replied.

"Who were?"

"Your new friend, Filhol: Gabriel..."

"Next!" said the apparition. "That one could not help but come."

"Your uncle, Commander Malo..."

"Next! He is, it's said, the kind of bird that only quits its nest in a storm. The third?"

"A foreigner."

"An Englishman?"

"So I was told."

A long sigh escaped Treguern's breast. Was it misery or joy?

The specter went on: "You passed close by Guillaume's mill. Did you see or hear anything?"

"I heard voices. I saw a lighted window, with Dowager Le Brec in front of it."

The apparition shivered at that name. "The day is coming," he said, "when all will be recompensed, according to their works. A woman with the name of Treguern has been deceived by those who should have given her aid and assistance. May her seducer be accursed!"

"Say the word," Etienne cried, "and whoever has done wrong to Geneviève..."

"I'm not talking about Geneviève," the specter put in, emotionlessly. "I'm talking about my half-sister Marianne. I told you not to believe anything against Geneviève."

"Pardon me," said Etienne. "I was mistaken."

Filhol continued in a calm and serious tone. "The poor grave that comes after my father's—my own tomb—was dug, as you were told, a year ago. Even so, my wife Geneviève has given me a son. Don't interrupt me—time is pressing. The child is legitimate, and it's through him that the name of Treguern will be revived. You shall be his godfather, and you shall carry him to his baptism tomorrow, despite the protests of the parishioners. You will name him Tanneguy, as my father was named, as all our great ancestors were named, and as I am named myself. After the baptism, the child will have no further need of you. Someone will watch over him, and his mother too. Now, adieu, Etienne my brother."

The young sergeant seemed to be about to ask a question when a faint noise sounded behind him. He turned round swiftly. The tall figure of Dowager Le Brec appeared in the middle of the road.

"What did I tell you, soldier Etienne?" she muttered, with a derisive laugh. "You weren't at the funeral, but you'll be at the baptism!"

Etienne turned his gaze back to the *Pierre-des-Paiens*, but Filhol's specter was no longer there—except that he heard, from very close by in the thicket, a faint murmur, which said once more; "Adieu, my brother. Pray for me!"

Then a few more words reached him, vaguely: "Don't go near Treguern Manor tonight—I forbid it!"