

THE WHITE WOLF

CHAPTER I *The Lament*

Not so long ago, a traveler journeying from Paris to Brest—from the capital of France to one of its chief sea-ports—would fall twice into the arms of balmy sleep, rocked by the cumbersome stagecoach, and awoken twice, before he would behold the scanty harvests, the thickly-planted orchards, and sturdy gnarled oaks of impoverished Brittany. He would first awake in the fertile plains of the Perche, near the Beauce, that paradise of traders in corn and other cereals; and then, he would fall asleep, lulled by the bittersweet smells of cider from the Orne and the nasal strains of the maids of Lower Normandy. The morrow's sun would bring him to ancient Vitré, a gothic town with its dark houses and the ivy-covered ruins of a lordly castle, tottering upon the summit of a steep hill; in the distance our traveler would perceive the meandering Vilaine, with its silvery thread softly flowing with a thousand undulations through a chessboard of verdant meadows, studded with graceful willows, and dotted with innumerable waving beds of rushes. At close of day, the sky would start to lose its azure hue and turn to slate grey; the horizon would diminish and the air would become impregnated with saline humidity; far off to the right, our traveler would at last see a dark outline standing out in bold relief against ranges of small, sandy hillocks crowned with flowers of purple heath and golden broom. It was what had once been the great Forest of Rennes.

Nowadays, that forest has fallen from its former high estate, for the majority of its massive trees have since felt the dreadful edge of the woodman's axe, due to the voracious demands of the new industries.

Messieurs de Rohan, de Montbourcher and de Castlebriand once hunted the red deer in its shade, accompanied by the Seigneurs de Laval, expressly invited, and the Royal Intendant, whose presence was usually not welcomed. Now, it was with the greatest difficulty that the ruddy employees of the new Forge Masters might kill a miserable hare, or a lean fallow-deer, scarcely worth powder and shot.

The once verdant glades no longer ring with the baying of noble hounds, the shrill echoes of the cheerful horn, the tramp of fiery coursers, champing on their bits, impatient till the game should be afoot; the cries of the joyous cavalcades are no longer heard, having been replaced by the monotonous sound of steel hammers and steam pumps, breaking dully on the ear.

The utilitarian might say, rubbing his hands, that this result is far better for society, that old castles never did anyone any good, while factories produce bowls, nails and other useful domestic utensils; for my part, gentle readers, I have my own opinions on the matter, but I shall wait for a more suitable opportunity to express them.

However, it is enough to state that, about one hundred and fifty years ago, instead of a few measly patches of trees, which gradually grow fewer and farther between, the Forest of Rennes boasted a surface of eleven leagues of land, and its trees were so tall and leafy, and its underwood so thick, that even the gamekeepers occasionally lost themselves in it.

Instead of the modern factories, which now clutter the site, one would have found artisanal shops making the wooden shoes called *sabots*; and also, amongst the chestnut groves, a few huts where men cut hoops for hogsheads and other barrels. In the center, there was a clearing where ten or twelve huts lay embosomed, the residences of the charcoal-burners; taken altogether, the population of the forest was said to amount to four or five thousand inhabitants.

They were almost a race apart from their fellow men, half savage and warlike, the born enemies of all innovation, and detesting, from instinct and usage immemorial, every law but that of ancient custom which gave them a prescriptive right over all that the vast forest produced, except the game, which belonged exclusively to the superior lords of the soil.

Since long gone times, the shoemakers, the coopers, and the charcoal-burners, had not only rejected every attempt to limit their rights, but they appropriated for themselves the materials necessary for their respective trades, in the full belief that the forest was their hereditary patrimony, to which they had been born, and in which, without let or hindrance, they proposed to live and die. Whoever was bold enough to contest that right became, in their eyes, an oppressor.

And they were not of the type disposed to be trodden upon, without the most determined and desperate resistance.

When our curtain rises, Louis XIV was no more, and Philippe d'Orléans, despite the testamentary dispositions of the Sun King, had become Regent of France. This Prince, whom history has censured so severely and yet so justly, had instantly abrogated all the regulations for the internal government of the kingdom made by his predecessor. Yet, those regulations generally withstood the test and continued, at least everywhere clumsy or perfidious hands did not try to undermine them.

In Brittany, the long and valiant resistance of the "States" had long ended.

An Intendant appointed to collect royal taxes had been installed in Rennes; the "Edict of Union," broken in its most important stipulations, was virtually a dead letter; Brittany was entirely subdued; and the province had now become, to all intents and purposes, an integral part of France.

But passing a publicly distasteful measure in a Parliamentary assembly was a very different thing from thrusting it upon a proverbially stubborn and courageous population; and although Monsieur de Pontchartrain, the new Royal Intendant, had taken up his permanent abode in Rennes, he found the execution of his odious functions attended with the greatest of difficulty and danger.

Resistance to the collection of the newly-imposed taxes sprung up in every nook and corner of the ancient Duchy; the "States" were accused of intimate connivance with the rebels.

During the Cellamare conspiracy,¹ it was amongst Bretons that the Duchesse du Maine found her most ardent defenders. The *Kights of the Honey Fly*, who also called themselves the *Breton Brothers*, made up a veritable secret army, the leaders of which, Messieurs de Pontcallec, de Talhoët, de Rohan-Polduc and a few others, were beheaded in Nantes in 1718.

It was a rude blow and the organization seemingly disbanded.

But the League of the Breton Brothers, which had predated the Conspiracy, even though it had lost its political purpose, still carried on its secret operations.

It is in the nature of such secret organizations to thrive underground. The Breton Brothers first refused to pay taxes, taking up arms, then ostensibly laying them down. But while they lived, they continued plotting.

Twenty years after the events we are about to recount, and which form the prologue to our story, we shall find traces of their on-going secret existence, for mystery is the very essence of man, and secret societies die a hundred times, only to be reborn anew.

In the year 1719, almost all the nobility had withdrawn openly from the association; but the principles of the Brotherhood still existed, indestructible, in full vigor amongst the citizens of the towns and the sturdy peasants of the forests.

The noble *Brothers* who remained were icons.

¹ The Cellamare conspiracy of 1718 was a conspiracy against the then Regent, Philippe d'Orléans (1674–1723). Concocted in Spain, the plot was the brainchild of Antonio del Giudice, Prince of Cellamare. The plan was strongly supported by some of Philippe d'Orléans' most notorious enemies, namely the duke and duchess du Maine, Louis Auguste de Bourbon and his wife, Louise Bénédicte de Bourbon, who had entered into correspondence with the Spanish Prime Minister Giulio Alberoni. The correspondence between the duchess of Maine and Alberoni was intercepted by the police and thus reported to the Regent, who acted swiftly; on 9 December, the Prince of Cellamare was arrested and sent back to Spain; Alberoni was arrested on 5 December 1718 at Poitiers; the duchess was exiled to Dijon, while her husband was imprisoned in the fortress of Doullens in Picardy.

The castles of these redoubtable champions of independence became sacred altars around which the grievances of the oppressed were grimly muttered. A tacit but powerless resistance was organized, incapable of acting on a larger scale, but able to protest in all impunity.

It would have cost a sea of blood to suppress them, so many were their family connections throughout the region.

After what we have said about the Forest of Rennes, one might be justified in thinking that it was the very hotbed of this stern opposition; for its population consisted, without exception, of hardy, uncultivated men, accustomed to dangers and privations of every kind, and therefore singularly fitted for resistance to the royal will, inspired by powerful combined feelings of negativity and inertia. Sufficiently numerous to fight, if it should become necessary to have recourse to arms, the sons of the forest, at first, simply refused to comply with the mandates of the Intendant, confident in the inaccessible retreats the landscape afforded them, and relying upon their knowledge of its labyrinths, its gloomy coverts which bordered the meadows about Rennes, and extended almost to the suburbs of Vitré and Fougères.

They had many staunch adherents in these three towns; the first musket-shot fired, or the first saber that drank blood, would have called forth numbers of stout citizens of Rennes, the plebeians of Vitré—who still wore hauberks, brassards, iron head-pieces, and cuisses like men-at-arms of the 15th century—and the rough predatory legions of poachers of Fougères. With such resistance, one could reasonably hope that the troops dispatched by Monsieur de Pontchartrain might not find their task an easy one.

At the time of our tale, there was a gentleman in Brittany to whom the remnants of the old party looked up with the greatest veneration; so much so that if he had said, “pay your taxes to the King of France,” they might have done so.

But that man was unlikely to issue such a proclamation, for he was one of the noblest-born, and the most determined of the Breton brotherhood.

Ever since its disbanding, he had never ceased to raise his voice in the Hall of the Estates, to protest against the invasion of the ancient lands of the Dukes by the armed men of the King of France.

This gentleman was Nicolas Treml de La Tremlays, Seigneur of Boüëxis-in-the-forest, who possessed in the neighborhood of the small town of Liffré, a domain of such an extent that it made him lord paramount of the region.

His castle of La Tremlays was one of the most ancient and most striking in Upper Brittany, and his manor-house at Boüëxis-in-the-Forest was no less magnificent; indeed, it took two hours to ride from one residence to the other, and during the transit, the cavalier never left the estates of Treml.

Monsieur Nicolas, as he was called, was a man of great stature and austere visage. His long white locks fell in thick clusters upon his well-worn, stained buff-coat; the snows of many winters had not sufficed to tame the heady current of his blood; and whilst his gallant war-horse bore him lightly through the forest, seated like a statue in his saddle, the peasants would doff their hats to the stern old man, and, turning to each other, say:

“So long as the brave old lord is still with us, there will be a true Breton left, and let the French bloodsuckers beware!”

And they spoke truly. The love of Nicolas Treml for his country was invincible. The gradual falling-off of the members of the independent party, instead of being a lesson to him, had only confirmed his obstinacy. Year after year, his colleagues in the Estates listened to his energetic protestations with less patience; but he continued, and, with his hand upon the cross of his good sword, he never ceased to fulminate his denunciations against the representatives of the King of France.

One day, as he was declaiming, as usual, in the Hall of the Estates, some members burst into fits of laughter, and others observed audibly that Monsieur Treml de La Tremlays must have lost his wits.

On which the brave old man stopped suddenly in his harangue; a deathly pallor overspread his face, and his eyes flashed fire as he took up his ample hat and stalked majestically to the door.

Arrived at the entrance of the Hall, he turned slowly round, crossed his arms upon his breast, and threw a look of withering contempt upon his fellows on the benches, as he emphatically said, in a heavily accented voice that rang loudly throughout the Hall:

“I thank God, Messieurs, that I have only lost my wits, when I see that you have lost your hearts.”

In an instant, the noblemen sprang furiously from their seats, and twenty rapiers glittered before the eyes of Nicolas Treml, who stood unmoved.

"Sheathe your swords," he said. "It is I who am insulted, but the blood of a Breton will not appease my wrath. Fare ye well, gentlemen. I trust your children may someday forget their fathers, and think only of the brave deeds of their noble ancestors. I renounce you, and I quit you, now and forever. You have helped to place poor Brittany in her grave, but I will not leave its tomb unbloodied. The time for fighting for our rights and liberties is now past, but vengeance will yet come—and yes, death."

Nicolas Treml left his comrades abashed and astounded, mounted his fine horse, and directed his steps towards his castle.

Those who passed him on the road that day could not guess the turmoil that occupied his mind. Tough of body and soul, he knew how to repress his rightful wrath. His brow remained uncreased and his eyes passed indifferently over the flat countryside of the neighborhood of Rennes.

As he entered the outskirts of the forest, the sun was setting upon the horizon. Monsieur Treml de La Tremlays scanned with a practiced military eye, the natural entrenchments and admirable defensive positions of the land, and involuntarily counted up the numbers of hardy, daring men who would shed their heart's blood for his banner, should it once again float in the air.

He reined in his horse, and a smile lit up his features as he thought:

In such a country and with such soldiers, war would indeed be glorious!

Then a sudden idea seemed to flit across his mind. He drew himself up in the saddle, his lip curled and his eye sparkled as the exclamation involuntarily broke from him:

"No! Not a war! A single combat on my good horse, and with my faithful sword in my hand. One blow well struck, and one death will suffice!"

Having uttered these ominous words, Nicolas Treml put spurs to his steed, and, as he galloped along the woodland road, concocted a scheme at once madly audacious and chivalrous, but impossible; an idea which could only have sprung from the brain of an old world, country nobleman, profoundly ignorant of the manners of the day, and gauging the feelings of the present age by those which had forever flown hither.

But although the scheme of Nicolas Treml exceeded the bounds of possibility, it must not be supposed that he had become mad, and was not aware of the danger the attempt, and its execution, would involve. The excess of his enthusiasm did not conceal from him the depth of the abyss before him.

Yet, the gaping chasm would not deter him from plunging into it, if by so doing he thought he should preserve his native land.

One circumstance alone tended to shake his proud determination; and that was that the house of La Tremlays now had only one direct heir, Georges Treml, a child, five years-old, the grandson of the noble old man. What would become of young Georges, without a natural supporter, if his grandfather was struck dead? Nicolas Treml could scarcely brook that this obstacle should interfere with the execution of his plan.

"Should I succeed," he murmured, "I shall leave the boy a rich heritage of glory. If I fail, my cousin De Vaunoy will guard his patrimony. Yes: it shall be so—Monsieur de Vaunoy is a good Christian and an honorable man!"

The words had hardly issued from his lips, when he was surprised to hear a harsh voice near him singing a song common to that portion of the kingdom; a slow, melancholy, wailing lament, upon the piteous fate of young Arthur of Brittany, foully done to death by his cruel uncle, John Lackland, the recreant King of England.

Monsieur Treml de La Tremlays shuddered as a terrible idea rushed into his thoughts.

"Impossible!" he cried. "De Vaunoy could not be such a villain!"

Still the harsh croak of the voice came nearer, and seemed, in Nicolas's excited state, to take on a tone of irony.

"No, no!" he said, "it must be done, come of it what may. My little Georges is a Breton, and if necessary, his happiness, like his blood, belongs to Brittany!"

For a few seconds, the mysterious voice was hushed, and then it broke out vigorously, immediately above Nicolas Trembl's head. Bringing his horse to a dead stand, Nicolas looked up in amazement, and beheld in the foliage of a tall chestnut tree, whose head was brightly tinged by the beams of the setting sun, a being of savage, strange, uncouth, and almost diabolical appearance, his features of ashy hue, clothed in white skins, and jumping with marvelous agility from branch to branch. If an explorer had met him in the forests of the New World, he certainly would not have labeled him "human," and Monsieur de Buffon's volume on Natural History² would contain one more creature: the white baboon; for the character indeed resembled a large white monkey, jumping from branch to branch with wonderful agility, and with each jump, dropping a small bunch of reeds.

His song continued undisturbed.

Indeed, this was not the first time Monsieur Trembl de La Tremblays had seen the creature; for on his whistling—as a sportsman calls his dog—the song ceased.

The creature swung itself from branch to branch of the tree, until, when he was only a few feet from the ground, he dropped lightly down, and with an amicable gesture, threw himself respectfully upon one knee before the horse.

The appearance of this man—for such he was—was more extraordinary when viewed near than from afar. His long, bare, sinewy legs, covered with white hair, supported a muscular, deformed, short body, his brawny neck served as a pedestal to a face with high-boned cheeks, covered with a white substance nearly allied to down; his eyebrows, hair, and nascent beard, were like the driven snow; and his whole countenance was not at all embellished by a pair of fiery-red eyes.

There was no appearance in his person that could precisely indicate his age.

Perhaps he might be young, or middle-aged, or old.

But the dexterity he evidenced in descending from the tree, gave lie to the two latter suppositions.

Youth alone could inhabit this unnatural exterior.

His lowly reverence being made, the Albino raised himself with one bound, and stood firmly before Nicolas, in the middle of the road.

"How goes it with your father, Jean Blanc?" Monsieur Trembl de La Tremblays inquired, in a kindly tone.

"How goes it with your son, Nicolas Trembl?" the Albino replied, cutting a fantastic cabriole.

A black cloud lowered upon the Baron's brow; for the abrupt question corresponded in a singular manner with the subject of his reverie.

"You become insolent, lad," he answered. "I am too complaisant towards you, woodsmen, and you abuse my kindness. Get out my way, varlet, and let me not hear you speak in that impudent tone again."

Far from obeying this peremptory command, Jean Blanc seized the bridle of the nobleman's horse, and smiled as he said:

"You are deceived, Monsieur Nicolas. It is not to us poor folks that you are too good; but to others whom you love, but who despise you."

"Let go of the bridle, you fool!" Monsieur Trembl de La Tremblays shouted.

But the Albino kept his hold, and continued:

"Jean Blanc's father goes on bravely. Jean Blanc watched over him last night, and will watch over him to-morrow; but who will watch over Georges Trembl? Will you do so tomorrow, Monsieur Nicolas?"

"What do you mean?"

"There is an old song about young Arthur of Brittany. Listen: I can glide through a covert as well as climb the chestnuts and the elms. I watched your steps as you came through the forest; you were talking with your conscience. I heard you, and so I sang the *Lament for Arthur*."

"What!" cried Monsieur Trembl de La Tremblays. "You heard me? You know all?"

² Buffon's *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière* (1749–1788: in 36 volumes; an additional volume based on his notes appeared in 1789) was originally intended to cover all three "kingdoms" of nature, but the *Histoire naturelle* ended up being limited to the animal and mineral kingdoms, and the animals covered were only the birds and quadrupeds. Written in a brilliant style, this work was read by every educated person in Europe.

“No, not all; you said too much, and spoke too low for me to hear all. But, believe me, do not leave young Georges to the mercy of his cousin. If you are going on a journey far away, take him on the saddle with you; if you cannot, then kill him at once; but do not abandon him. And now, I must away and cut some wood for hoops. May God forever bless you, Monsieur Nicolas!”

So saying, the extraordinary creature dropped the bridle, sprang across the road, and climbed a chestnut tree with the speed and fearlessness of a wild cat, as his dress of white rabbit-skins glimmered palely in the increasing darkness of the night.

Silently and thoughtfully, Monsieur Treml de La Tremlays resumed his route, pondering over the words Jean Blanc had uttered.

“Bah! He’s nothing but a half-wit!” he said to himself.

But his heart sank within his breast, and as the mournful notes of the *Lament* were wafted to his ears by the breeze, the stout-hearted noble trembled, and the name of his beloved grandson issued slowly from his lips.