

Gabriel's Marriage

By Wilkie Collins

I

One night, during the period of the first French Revolution, the family of François Sarzeau, a fisherman of Brittany, were all waking and watching at a late hour in their cottage on the peninsula of Quiberon. François had gone out in his boat that evening, as usual, to fish. Shortly after his departure, the wind had risen, the clouds had gathered; and the storm, which had been threatening at intervals throughout the whole day, burst forth furiously about nine o'clock. It was now eleven; and the raging of the wind over the barren, heathy peninsula still seemed to increase with each fresh blast that tore its way out upon the open sea; the crashing of the waves on the beach was awful to hear; the dreary blackness of the sky terrible to behold. The longer they listened to the storm, the oftener they looked out at it, the fainter grew the hopes which the fisherman's family still strove to cherish for the safety of François Sarzeau and of his younger son who had gone with him in the boat.

There was something impressive in the simplicity of the scene that was now passing within the cottage.

On one side of the great rugged black fireplace crouched two little girls; the younger half asleep, with her head in her sister's lap. These were the daughters of the fisherman; and opposite to them sat their eldest brother Gabriel. His right arm had been badly wounded in a recent encounter at the national game of the Soule, a sport resembling our English football; but played on both sides in such savage earnest by the people of Brittany as to end always in bloodshed, often in mutilation, sometimes even in loss of life. On the same bench with Gabriel sat his betrothed wife—a girl of eighteen—clothed in the plain, almost monastic black and white costume of her native district. She was the daughter of a small farmer living at some little distance from the coast. Between the groups formed on either side of the fireplace, the vacant space was occupied by the foot of a truckle bed. In this bed lay a very old man, the father of François Sarzeau. His haggard face was covered with deep wrinkles; his long white hair flowed over the coarse lump of sacking which served him for a pillow, and his light grey eyes wandered incessantly, with a strange expression of terror and suspicion, from person to person, and from object to object, in all parts of the room. Whenever the wind and sea whistled and roared at their loudest, he muttered to himself and tossed his hands fretfully on his wretched coverlid. On these occasions his eyes always fixed themselves intently on a little delft image of the Virgin placed in a niche over the fireplace. Every time they saw him look in this direction Gabriel and the young girls shuddered and crossed themselves; and even the child, who still kept awake, imitated their example. There was one bond of feeling at least between the old man and his grandchildren, which connected his age and their youth unnaturally and closely together. This feeling was reverence for the superstitions which had been handed down to them by their ancestors from centuries and centuries back, as far even as the age of the Druids. The spirit-warnings of disaster and death which the old man heard in the wailing of the wind, in the crashing of the waves, in

the dreary monotonous rattling of the casement, the young man and his affianced wife and the little child who cowered by the fireside, heard too. All differences in sex, in temperament, in years, Superstition was strong enough to strike down to its own dread level, in the fisherman's cottage, on that stormy night.

Besides the benches by the fireside and the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room was a coarse wooden table, with a loaf of black bread, a knife, and a pitcher of cider placed on it. Old nets, coils of rope, tattered sails, hung about the walls and over the wooden partition which separated the room into two compartments. Wisps of straw and ears of barley drooped down through the rotten rafters and gaping boards that made the floor of the granary above.

These different objects, and the persons in the cottage, who composed the only surviving members of the fisherman's family, were strangely and wildly lit up by the blaze of the fire and by the still brighter glare of a resin torch stuck into a block of wood in the chimney-corner. The red and yellow light played full on the weird face of the old man as he lay opposite to it, and glanced fitfully on the figures of the young girl, Gabriel, and the two children; the great gloomy shadows rose and fell, and grew and lessened in bulk about the walls like visions of darkness, animated by a supernatural spectre-life, while the dense obscurity outside spreading before the curtainless window seemed as a wall of solid darkness that had closed in for ever around the fisherman's house. The night-scene within the cottage was almost as wild and as dreary to look upon as the night-scene without.

For a long time the different persons in the room sat together without speaking, even without looking at each other. At last, the girl turned and whispered something into Gabriel's ear.

'Perrine, what were you saying to Gabriel?' asked the child opposite, seizing the first opportunity of breaking the desolate silence—doubly desolate at her age—which was preserved by all around her.

'I was telling him,' answered Perrine simply, 'that it was time to change the bandages on his arm; and I also said to him, what I have often said before, that he must never play at that terrible game of the Soule again.'

The old man had been looking intently at Perrine and his grandchild as they spoke. His harsh, hollow voice mingled with the last soft tones of the young girl, repeating over and over again the same terrible words: 'Drowned! drowned! Son and grandson, both drowned! both drowned!'

'Hush! grandfather,' said Gabriel, 'we must not lose all hope for them yet. God and the Blessed Virgin protect them!' He looked at the little delft image, and crossed himself the others imitated him, except the old man. He still tossed his hands over the coverlid, and still repeated 'Drowned! drowned!'

'Oh that accursed *Soule*!' groaned the young man. 'But for this wound I should have been with my father. The poor boy's life might at least have been saved; for we should then have left him here.'

'Silence!' exclaimed the harsh voice from the bed. 'The wail of dying men rises louder than the loud sea; the devil's psalm-singing roars higher than the roaring wind! Be silent, and listen! Francois drowned! Pierre drowned! Hark! Hark!'

A terrific blast of wind burst over the house as he spoke, shaking it to its centre, overpowering all other sounds, even to the deafening crash of the waves. The slumbering

child awoke, and uttered a scream of fear. Perrine, who had been kneeling before her lover binding the fresh bandages on his wounded arm, aused in her occupation, trembling from head to foot. Gabriel looked towards ie window: his experience told him what must be the hurricane fury of that blast of wind out at sea, and he sighed bitterly as he murmured to himself, 'God help them both—man's help will be as nothing to them now!'

'Gabriel!' cried the voice from the bed in altered tones—very faint and trembling.

He did not hear, or did not attend to the old man. He was trying to soothe and encourage the young girl at his feet.

'Don't be frightened, love,' he said, kissing her very gently and tenderly on the forehead. 'You are as safe here as anywhere. Was I not right in saying that it would be madness to attempt taking you back to the farm-house this evening? You can sleep in that room, Perrine, when you are tired—you can sleep with the two girls.'

'Gabriel! brother Gabriel!' cried one of the children. 'O! look at grandfather!'

Gabriel ran to the bedside. The old man had raised himself into a sitting position; his eyes were dilated, his whole face was rigid with terror, his hands were stretched out convulsively towards his grandson. 'The White Women!' he screamed. 'The White Women! the grave-diggers of the drowned are out on the sea!'

The children, with cries of terror, flung themselves into Perrine's arms; even Gabriel uttered an exclamation of horror, and started back from the bedside.

Still the old man reiterated, 'The White Women! The White Women! Open the door, Gabriel! look out westward, where the ebb-tide has left the sand dry. You'll see them bright as lightning in the darkness, mighty as the angels in stature, sweeping like the wind over the sea, in their long white garments, with their white hair trailing far behind them! Open the door, Gabriel! You'll see them stop and hover over the place where your father and your brother have been drowned; you'll see them come on till they reach the sand; you'll see them dig in it with their naked feet, and beckon awfully to the raging sea to give up its dead. Open the door, Gabriel—or, though it should be the death of me, I will get up and open it myself!'

Gabriel's face whitened even to his lips, but he made a sign that he would obey. It required the exertion of his whole strength to keep the door open against the wind while he looked out.

'Do you see them, grandson Gabriel? Speak the truth, and tell me if you see them,' cried the old man.

'I see nothing but darkness—pitch darkness,' answered Gabriel, letting the door close again.

'Ah! Woe! Woe!' groaned his grandfather, sinking back exhausted on the pillow. 'Darkness toyou; but bright as lightning to the eyes that are allowed to see them. Drowned! drowned! Pray for their souls, Gabriel—I see the White Women even where I lie, and dare not pray for them. Son and grandson drowned! both drowned!'

The young man went back to Perrine and the children.

'Grandfather is very ill to-night,' he whispered.

'You had better all go into the bedroom, and leave me alone to watch by him.'

They rose as he spoke, crossed themselves before the image of the Virgin, kissed him one by one, and, without uttering a word, softly entered the little room on the other side of the partition. Gabriel looked at his grandfather, and saw that he lay quiet now, with his

eyes closed as if he were already dropping asleep. The young man then heaped some fresh logs on the fire, and sat down by it to watch till morning.

Very dreary was the moaning of the night-storm; but it was not more dreary than the thoughts which now occupied him in his solitude—thoughts darkened and distorted by the terrible superstitions of his country and his race. Ever since the period of his mother's death he had been oppressed by the conviction that some curse hung over the family. At first they had been prosperous, they had got money, a little legacy had been left them. But this good fortune had availed only for a time; disaster on disaster strangely and suddenly succeeded. Losses, misfortunes, poverty, want itself had overwhelmed them; his father's temper had become so soured, that the oldest friends of Francois Sarzeau declared he was changed beyond recognition. And now, all this past misfortune—the steady, withering, household blight of many years—had ended in the last worst misery of all—in death. The fate of his father and his brother admitted no longer of a doubt—he knew it, as he listened to the storm, as he reflected on his grandfather's words, as he called to mind his own experience of the perils of the sea. And this double bereavement had fallen on him just as the time was approaching for his marriage with Perrine; just when misfortune was most ominous of evil, just when it was hardest to bear! Forebodings which he dared not realize began now to mingle with the bitterness of his grief, whenever his thoughts wandered from the present to the future; and as he sat by the lonely fireside, murmuring from time to time the Church prayer for the repose of the dead, he almost involuntarily mingled with it another prayer, expressed only in his own simple words, for the safety of the living—for the young girl whose love was his sole earthly treasure; for the motherless children who must now look for protection to him alone.

He had sat by the hearth a long, long time, absorbed in his thoughts, not once looking round towards the bed, when he was startled by hearing the sound of his grandfather's voice once more.

'Gabriel,' whispered the old man, trembling and shrinking as he spoke, 'Gabriel, do you hear a dripping of water—now slow, now quick again—on the floor at the foot of my bed?'

'I hear nothing, grandfather, but the crackling of the fire, and the roaring of the storm outside.'

'Drip, drip, drip! Faster and faster; plainer and plainer. Take the torch, Gabriel; look down on the floor—look with all your eyes. Is the place wet there? Is it the rain from heaven that is dropping through the roof?'

Gabriel took the torch with trembling fingers, and knelt down on the floor to examine it closely. He started back from the place, as he saw that it was quite dry—the torch dropped upon the hearth—he fell on his knees before the statue of the Virgin and hid his face.

'Is the floor wet? Answer me, I command you—Is the floor wet?—'asked the old man quickly and breathlessly.

Gabriel rose, went back to the bedside, and whispered to him that no drop of rain had fallen inside the cottage. As he spoke the words, he saw a change pass over his grandfather's face—the sharp features seemed to wither up on a sudden; the eager expression to grow vacant and death-like in an instant. The voice too altered; it was harsh and querulous no more; its tones became strangely soft, slow, and solemn, when the old man spoke again.

‘I hear it still,’ he said, ‘drip! drip! faster and plainer than ever. That ghostly dropping of water is the last and the surest of the fatal signs which have told of your father’s and your brother’s deaths to-night, and I know from the place where I hear it—the foot of the bed I lie on—that it is a warning to me of my own approaching end. I am called where my son and my grandson have gone before me: my weary time in this world is over at last. Don’t let Perrine and the children come in here, if they should awake—they are too young to look at death.’

Gabriel’s blood curdled, when he heard these words—when he touched his grandfather’s hand, and felt the chill that it struck to his own—when he listened to the raging wind, and knew that all help was miles and miles away from the cottage. Still, in spite of the storm, the darkness, and the distance, he thought not for a moment of neglecting the duty that had been taught him from his childhood—the duty of summoning the priest to the bedside of the dying. ‘I must call Perrine,’ he said, ‘to watch by you while I am away.’

‘Stop!’ cried the old man, ‘Stop, Gabriel; I implore, I command you not to leave me!’

‘The priest, grandfather—your confession—’

‘It must be made to you. In this darkness and this hurricane no man can keep the path across the heath. Gabriel! I am dying—I should be dead before you got back, Gabriel! For the love of the Blessed Virgin, stop here with me till I die—my time is short—I have a terrible secret that I must tell to somebody before I draw my last breath! Your ear to my mouth—quick! quick!’

As he spoke the last words, a slight noise was audible on the other side of the partition, the door half opened, and Perrine appeared at it, looking affrightedly into the room. The vigilant eyes of the old man—suspicious even in death—caught sight of her directly.

‘Go back!’ he exclaimed faintly, before she could utter a word, ‘go back—push her back, Gabriel, and nail down the latch in the door, if she won’t shut it of herself!’

‘Dear Perrine! go in again,’ implored Gabriel. ‘Go in and keep the children from disturbing us. You will only make him worse—you can be of no use here!’

She obeyed without speaking, and shut the door again.

While the old man clutched him by the arm, and repeated, ‘Quick! quick!—your ear close to my mouth,’ Gabriel heard her say to the children (who were both awake), ‘Let us pray for grandfather.’ And as he knelt down by the bedside, there stole on his ear the sweet, childish tones of his little sisters, and the soft, subdued voice of the young girl who was teaching them the prayer, mingling divinely with the solemn wailing of wind and sea, rising in a still and awful purity over the hoarse, gasping whispers of the dying man.

‘I took an oath not to tell it, Gabriel—lean down closer! I’m weak, and they mustn’t hear a word in that room—I took an oath not to tell it; but death is a warrant to all men for breaking such an oath as that. Listen; don’t lose a word I’m saying! Don’t look away into the room: the stain of blood-guilt has defiled it for ever!—Hush! Hush! Hush! Let me speak. Now your father’s dead, I can’t carry the horrid secret with me into the grave. Just remember, Gabriel—try if you can’t remember the time before I was bedridden—ten years ago and more—it was about six weeks, you know, before your mother’s death; you can remember it by that. You and all the children were in that room with your mother; you were all asleep, I think; it was night, not very late—only nine o’clock. Your father and I were standing at the door, looking out at the heath in the moonlight. He was so poor at that time, he had been obliged to sell his own boat, and none of the neighbours would

take him out fishing with them—your father wasn't liked by any of the neighbours. Well; we saw a stranger coming towards us; a very young man, with a knapsack on his back. He looked like a gentleman, though he was but poorly dressed. He came up, and told us he was dead tired, and didn't think he could reach the town that night, and asked if we would give him shelter till morning. And your father said yes, if he would make no noise, because the wife was ill, and the children were asleep. So he said all he wanted was to go to sleep himself before the fire. We had nothing to give him but black bread. He had better food with him than that, and undid his knapsack to get at it—and—and Gabriel! I'm sinking—drink! something to drink—I'm parched with thirst.'

Silent and deadly pale, Gabriel poured some of the cider from the pitcher on the table into a drinking-cup, and gave it to the old man. Slight as the stimulant was, its effect on him was almost instantaneous. His dull eyes brightened a little, and he went on in the same whispering tones as before.

'He pulled the food out of his knapsack rather in a hurry, so that some of the other small things in it fell on the floor. Among these was a pocket-book, which your father picked up and gave him back; and he put it in his coat-pocket—there was a tear in one of the sides of the book, and through the hole some bank-notes bulged out. I saw them, and so did your father (don't move away, Gabriel; keep close, there's nothing in me to shrink from). Well, he shared his food, like an honest fellow, with us; and then put his hand in his pocket, and gave me four or five livres, and then lay down before the fire to go to sleep. As he shut his eyes, your father looked at me in a way I didn't like. He'd been behaving very bitterly and desperately towards us for some time past; being soured about poverty, and your mother's illness, and the constant crying out of you children for more to eat. So when he told me to go and buy some wood, some bread, and some wine with the money I had got, I didn't like, somehow, to leave him alone with the stranger; and so made excuses, saying (which was true) that it was too late to buy things in the village that night. But he told me in a rage to go and do as he bid me, and knock the people up if the shop was shut. So I went out, being dreadfully afraid of your father—as indeed we all were at that time—but I couldn't make up my mind to go far from the house: I was afraid of something happening, though I didn't dare to think what. I don't know how it was; but I stole back in about ten minutes on tip-toe to the cottage; and looked in at the window; and saw—O! God forgive him! O, God forgive me!—I saw—I—more to drink, Gabriel! I can't speak again—more to drink!'

The voices in the next room had ceased; but in the minute of silence which flow ensued, Gabriel heard his sisters kissing Perrine, and wishing her good night. They were all three trying to go to sleep again.

'Gabriel, pray yourself, and teach your children after you to pray, that your father may find forgiveness where he is now gone. I saw him as plainly as I now see you, kneeling with his knife in one hand over the sleeping man. He was taking the little book with the notes in it out of the stranger's pocket. He got the book into his possession, and held it quite still in his hand for an instant, thinking. I believe—oh, no! no!—I'm sure he was repenting; I'm sure he was going to put the book back; but just at that moment the stranger moved, and raised one of his arms, as if he was waking up. Then, the temptation of the devil grew too strong for your father—I saw him lift the hand with the knife in it—but saw nothing more. I couldn't look in at the window—I couldn't move away—I couldn't cry out; I stood with my back turned towards the house, shivering all over,

though it was a warm summer-time, and hearing no cries, no noises at all, from the room behind me. I was too frightened to know how long it was before the opening of the cottage-door made me turn round; but when I did, I saw your father standing before me in the yellow moonlight, carrying in his arms the bleeding body of the poor lad who had shared his food with us and slept on our hearth. Hush! hush! Don't groan and sob in that way! Stifle it with the bed-clothes. Hush! you'll wake them in the next room!

'Gabriel—Gabriel!' exclaimed a voice from behind the partition. 'What has happened? Gabriel! let me come out and be with you?'

'No! no!' cried the old man, collecting the last remains of his strength in the attempt to speak above the wind, which was just then howling at the loudest; 'stay where you are—don't speak—don't come out, I command you!—Gabriel' (his voice dropped to a faint whisper), 'raise me up in bed—you must hear the whole of it, now—raise me; I'm choking so that I can hardly speak. Keep close and listen—I can't say much more. Where was I?—Ah, your father! He threatened to kill me if I didn't swear to keep it secret; and in terror of my life I swore. He made me help him to carry the body—we took it all across the heath—oh! horrible, horrible, under the bright moon—(lift me higher, Gabriel). You know the great stones yonder, set up by the heathens; you know the hollow place under the stones they call "The Merchant's Table"—we had plenty of room to lay him in that, and hide him so; and then we ran back to the cottage. I never dared go near the place afterwards; no, nor your father either! (Higher, Gabriel! I'm choking again.) We burnt the pocket-book and the knapsack—never knew his name—we kept the money to spend. (You're not lifting me! you're not listening close enough!) Your father said it was a legacy, when you and your mother asked about the money. (You hurt me, you shake me to pieces, Gabriel, when you sob like that.) It brought a curse on us, the money; the curse has drowned your father and your brother; the curse is killing me; but I've confessed—tell the priest I confessed before I died. Stop her; stop Perrine! I hear her getting up. Take his bones away from The Merchant's Table, and bury them for the love of God!—and tell the priest—(lift me higher: lift me till I'm on my knees)—if your father was alive, he'd murder me—but tell the priest—because of my guilty soul—to pray—and—remember The Merchant's Table—to bury, and to pray—to pray always for—'

As long as Perrine heard faintly the whispering of the old man—though no word that he said reached her ear—she shrank from opening the door in the partition. But, when the whispering sounds—which terrified her she knew not how or why—first faltered, then ceased altogether; when she heard the sobs that followed them; and when her heart told her who was weeping in the next room—then, she began to be influenced by a new feeling which was stronger than the strongest fear, and she opened the door without hesitating—almost without trembling.

The coverlid was drawn up over the old man; Gabriel was kneeling by the bedside, with his face hidden. When she spoke to him, he neither answered nor looked at her. After a while, the sobs that shook him ceased; but still he never moved—except once when she touched him, and then he shuddered—shuddered under her hand! She called in his little sisters, and they spoke to him, and still he uttered no word in reply. They wept. One by one, often and often, they entreated him with loving words; but the stupor of grief which held him speechless and motionless was beyond the power of human tears, stronger even than the strength of human love.

It was near daybreak, and the storm was lulling—but still no change occurred at the bedside. Once or twice, as Perrine knelt near Gabriel, still vainly endeavouring to arouse him to a sense of her presence, she thought she heard the old man breathing feebly, and stretched out her hand towards the coverlid; but she could not summon courage to touch him or to look at him. This was the first time she had ever been present at a deathbed; the stillness in the room, the stupor of despair that had seized on Gabriel, so horrified her, that she was almost as helpless as the two children by her side. It was not till the dawn looked in at the cottage-window—so coldly, so drearily, and yet so reassuringly—that she began to recover her self-possession at all. Then she knew that her best resource would be to summon assistance immediately from the nearest house. While she was trying to persuade the two children to remain alone in the cottage with Gabriel during her temporary absence, she was startled by the sound of footsteps outside the door. It opened; and a man appeared on the threshold, standing still there for a moment in the dim uncertain light.

She looked closer—looked intently at him. It was Francois Sarzeau himself!

II

The fisherman was dripping with wet; but his face—always pale and inflexible—seemed to be but little altered in expression by the perils through which he must have passed during the night. Young Pierre lay almost insensible in his arms. In the astonishment and fright of the first moment, Perrine screamed as she recognised him.

‘There! there! there!’ he said, peevishly, advancing straight to the hearth with his burden; ‘don’t make a noise. You never expected to see us alive again, I dare say. We gave ourselves up as lost, and only escaped after all by a miracle.’

He laid the boy down where he could get the full warmth of the fire; and then, turning round, took a wicker-covered bottle from his pocket, and said, ‘If it hadn’t been for the brandy!’—‘He stopped suddenly—started—put down the bottle on the bench near him—and advanced quickly to the bedside.

Perrine looked after him as he went; and saw Gabriel, who had risen when the door was opened, moving back from the bed as François approached. The young man’s face seemed to have been suddenly struck to stone—its blank ghastly whiteness was awful to look at. He moved slowly backward and backward till he came to the cottage-wall—then stood quite still, staring on his father with wild vacant eyes, moving his hands to and fro before him, muttering, but never pronouncing one audible word.

Francois did not appear to notice his son; he had the coverlid of the bed in his hand.

‘Anything the matter here?’ he asked, as he drew it down.

Still Gabriel could not speak. Perrine saw it, and answered for him.

‘Gabriel is afraid that his poor grandfather is dead,’ she whispered nervously.

‘Dead!’ There was no sorrow in the tone as he echoed the word. ‘Was he very bad in the night before his death happened? Did he wander in his mind? He has been rather light-headed lately.’

‘He was very restless, and spoke of the ghostly warnings that we all know of: he said he saw and heard many things which told him from the other world that you and Pierre—Gabriel!’ she screamed, suddenly interrupting herself. ‘Look at him! Look at his face! Your grandfather is not dead!’

At that moment, François was raising his father's head to look closely at him. A faint spasm had indeed passed over the deathly face; the lips quivered, the jaw dropped. François shuddered as he looked, and moved away hastily from the bed. At the same instant Gabriel started from the wall: his expression altered, his pale cheeks flushed suddenly, as he snatched up the wicker-cased bottle, and poured all the little brandy that was left in it down his grandfather's throat.

The effect was nearly instantaneous; the sinking vital forces rallied desperately. The old man's eyes opened again, wandered round the room, then fixed themselves intently on François, as he stood near the fire. Trying and terrible as his position was at that moment, Gabriel still retained self-possession enough to whisper a few words in Perrine's ear. 'Go back again into the bedroom, and take the children with you,' he said. 'We may have something to speak about which you had better not hear.'

'Son Gabriel, your grandfather is trembling all over,' said François. 'If he is dying at all, he is dying of cold: help me to lift him, bed and all, to the hearth.'

'No, no! don't let him touch me!' gasped the old man. 'Don't let him look at me in that way! Don't let him come near me, Gabriel! Is it his ghost? or is it himself?'

As Gabriel answered, he heard a knocking at the door. His father opened it; and disclosed to view some people from the neighbouring fishing-village, who had come—more out of curiosity than sympathy—to inquire whether François and the boy Pierre had survived the night. Without asking any one to enter, the fisherman surlily and shortly answered the various questions addressed to him, standing in his own doorway. While he was thus engaged, Gabriel heard his grandfather muttering vacantly to himself—'Last night—how about last night, grandson? What was I talking about last night? Did I say your father was drowned? Very foolish to say he was drowned, and then see him come back alive again! But it wasn't that—I'm so weak in my head, I can't remember! What was it, Gabriel? Something too horrible to speak of? Is that what you're whispering and trembling about? I said nothing horrible. A crime? Bloodshed? I know nothing of any crime or bloodshed here—I must have been frightened out of my wits to talk in that way! The Merchant's Table? Only a big heap of old stones! What with the storm, and thinking I was going to die, and being afraid about your father, I must have been light-headed. Don't give another thought to that nonsense, Gabriel! I'm better now. We shall all live to laugh at poor grandfather for talking nonsense about crime and bloodshed in his sleep. Ah! poor old man—last night—light-headed—fancies and nonsense of an old man—why don't you laugh at it? I'm laughing—so light-headed—so light—!'

He stopped suddenly. A low cry, partly of terror and partly of pain, escaped him; the look of pining anxiety and imbecile cunning which had distorted his face while he had been speaking, faded from it for ever. He shivered a little—breathed heavily once or twice—then became quite still.

Had he died with a falsehood on his lips?

Gabriel looked round and saw that the cottage-door was closed, and that his father was standing against it. How long he had occupied that position, how many of the old man's last words he had heard, it was impossible to conjecture, but there was a lowering suspicion in his harsh face as he now looked away from the corpse to his son, which made Gabriel shudder; and the first question that he asked, on once more approaching the bedside, was expressed in tones which, quiet as they were, had a fearful meaning in them.

'What did your grandfather talk about last night?' he asked.

Gabriel did not answer. All that he had heard, all that he had seen, all the misery and horror that might yet be to come, had stunned his mind. The unspeakable dangers of his present position were too tremendous to be realized. He could only feel them vaguely in the weary torpor that oppressed his heart: while in every other direction the use of his faculties, physical and mental, seemed to have suddenly and totally abandoned him.

‘Is your tongue wounded, son Gabriel, as well as your arm?’ his father went on with a bitter laugh. ‘I come back to you, saved by a miracle; and you never speak to me. Would you rather I had died than the old man there? He can’t hear you now—why shouldn’t you tell me what nonsense he was talking last night?—You won’t? I say you shall!’ (He crossed the room and put his back to the door.) ‘Before either of us leave this place, you shall confess it! You know that my duty to the Church bids me to go at once and tell the priest of your grandfather’s death. If I leave that duty unfulfilled, remember it is through your fault! You keep me here—for here I stop till I am obeyed. Do you hear that, idiot? Speak! Speak instantly, or you shall repent it to the day of your death! I ask again—what did your grandfather say to you when he was wandering in his mind, last night?’

‘He spoke of a crime, committed by another, and guiltily kept secret by him,’ answered Gabriel slowly and sternly. ‘And this morning he denied his own words with his last living breath. But last night, if he spoke the truth—’

‘The truth!’ echoed François. ‘What truth?’

He stopped, his eyes fell, then turned towards the corpse. For a few minutes he stood steadily contemplating it; breathing quickly, and drawing his hand several times across his forehead. Then he faced his son once more. In that short interval he had become in outward appearance a changed man: expression, voice, and manner, all were altered.

‘Heaven forgive me!’ he went on, ‘but I could almost laugh at myself, at this solemn moment, for having spoken and acted just now so much like a fool! Denied his words, did he? Poor old man! they say sense often comes back to light-headed people just before death; and he is a proof of it. The fact is, Gabriel, my own wits must have been a little shaken—and no wonder—by what I went through last night and what I have come home to this morning. As if you, or anybody, could ever really give serious credit to the wandering speeches of a dying old man! (Where is Perrine? Why did you send her away?) I don’t wonder at your still looking a little startled, and feeling low in your mind, and all that—for you’ve had a trying night of it; trying in every way. He must have been a good deal shaken in his wits last night, between fears about himself and fears about me. (To think of my being angry with you, Gabriel, for being a little alarmed—very naturally—by an old man’s queer fancies!) Come out, Perrine—come out of the bedroom whenever you are tired of it: you must learn sooner or later to look at death calmly. Shake hands, Gabriel; and let us make it up, and say no more about what has passed. You won’t? Still angry with me for what I said to you just now?—Ah! you’ll think better about it by the time I return. Come out, Perrine, we’ve no secrets here.’

‘Where are you going to?’ asked Gabriel, as he saw his father hastily open the door.

‘To tell the priest that one of his congregation is dead, and to have the death registered,’ answered François. ‘These are my duties, and must be performed before I take any rest.’

He went out hurriedly as he said these words. Gabriel almost trembled at himself, when he found that he breathed more freely, that he felt less horribly oppressed both in mind and body, the moment his father’s back was turned. Fearful as thought was now, it was still a change for the better to be capable of thinking at all. Was the behaviour of his

father compatible with innocence? Could the old man's confused denial of his own words in the morning and in the presence of his son, be set for one instant against the circumstantial confession that he had made during the night alone with his grandson? These were the terrible questions which Gabriel now asked himself; and which he shrank involuntarily from answering. And yet that doubt, the solution of which would one way or the other irrevocably affect the whole future of his life, must sooner or later be solved at any hazard!

Was there any way of setting it at rest? Yes, one way: to go instantly while his father was absent, and examine the hollow place under the Merchant's Table. If his grandfather's confession had really been made while he was in possession of his senses, this place (which Gabriel knew to be covered in from wind and weather) had never been visited since the commission of the crime by the perpetrator, or by his unwilling accomplice: though time had destroyed all besides, the hair and the bones of the victim would still be left to bear witness to the truth—if truth had indeed been spoken. As this conviction grew on him, the young man's cheek paled; and he stopped irresolute half-way between the hearth and the door. Then he looked down doubtfully at the corpse on the bed; and then there came upon him suddenly a revulsion of feeling. A wild feverish impatience to know the worst without another instant of delay possessed him. Only telling Perrine that he should be back soon, and that she must watch by the dead in his absence, he left the cottage at once, without waiting to hear her reply, even without looking back as he closed the door behind him.

There were two tracks to the Merchant's Table. One, the longer of the two, by the coast cliffs; the other across the heath. But this latter path was also, for some little distance, the path which led to the village and the church. He was afraid of attracting his father's attention here, so he took the direction of the coast. At one spot the track trended inland, winding round some of the many Druid monuments scattered over the country. This place was on high ground, and commanded a view, at no great distance, of the path leading to the village, just where it branched off from the heathy ridge which ran in the direction of the Merchant's Table. Here Gabriel descried the figure of a man standing with his back towards the coast.

This figure was too far off to be identified with absolute certainty, but it looked like, and might well be, Francois Sarzeau. Whoever he was, the man was evidently uncertain which way he should proceed. When he moved forward, it was first to advance several paces towards the Merchant's Table—then he went back again towards the distant cottages and the church. Twice he hesitated thus: the second time pausing long before he appeared finally to take the way that led to the village.

Leaving the post of observation among the stones, at which he had instinctively halted for some minutes past, Gabriel now proceeded on his own path. Could this man really be his father? And if it were so, why did Francois Sarzeau only determine to go to the village where his business lay, after having twice vainly attempted to persevere in taking the exactly opposite direction of the Merchant's Table? Did he really desire to go there? Had he heard the name mentioned, when the old man referred to it in his dying words? And had he failed to summon courage enough to make all safe by removing—? This last question was too horrible to be pursued: Gabriel stifled it affrightedly in his own heart as he went on.

He reached the great Druid monument without meeting a living soul on his way. The sun was rising, and the mighty storm-clouds of the night were parting asunder wildly over the whole eastward horizon. The waves still leapt and foamed gloriously: but the gale had sunk to a keen fresh breeze. As Gabriel looked up, and saw how brightly the promise of a lovely day was written in the heavens, he trembled as he thought of the search which he was now about to make. The sight of the fair fresh sunrise jarred horribly with the suspicions of committed murder that were rankling foully in his heart. But he knew that his errand must be performed, and he nerved himself to go through with it; for he dared not return to the cottage until the mystery had been cleared up at once and for ever.

The Merchant's Table was formed by two huge stones resting horizontally on three others. In the troubled times of more than half a century ago, regular tourists were unknown among the Druid monuments of Brittany; and the entrance to the hollow place under the stones—since often visited by strangers—was at this time nearly choked up by brambles and weeds. Gabriel's first look at this tangled nook of briars convinced him that the place had not been entered—perhaps for years—by any living being. Without allowing himself to hesitate (for he felt that the slightest delay might be fatal to his resolution), he passed as gently as possible through the brambles, and knelt down at the low, dusky, irregular entrance of the hollow place under the stones.

His heart throbbed violently, his breath almost failed him; but he forced himself to crawl a few feet into the cavity, and then groped with his hand on the ground about him.

He touched something! Something which it made his flesh creep to handle; Something which he would fain have dropped, but which he grasped tight in spite of himself. He drew back into the outer air and sunshine. Was it a human bone? No! he had been the dupe of his own morbid terror—he had only taken up a fragment of dried wood!

Feeling shame at such self-deception as this, he was about to throw the wood from him before he re-entered the place, when another idea occurred to him.

Though it was dimly lighted through one or two chinks in the stones, the far part of the interior of the cavity was still too dusky to admit of perfect examination by the eye, even on a bright sunshiny morning. Observing this, he took out the tinderbox and matches, which—like the other inhabitants of the district—he always carried about with him for the purpose of lighting his pipe, determining to use the piece of wood as a torch which might illuminate the darkest corner of the place when he next entered it. Fortunately the wood had remained so long and had been preserved so dry in its sheltered position, that it caught fire almost as easily as a piece of paper. The moment it was fairly aflame Gabriel went into the cavity—penetrating at once—this time—to its farthest extremity.

He remained among the stones long enough for the wood to burn down nearly to his hand. When he came out, and flung the burning fragment from him, his face was flushed deeply, his eyes sparkled. He leaped carelessly on to the heath, over the bushes through which he had threaded his way so warily but a few minutes before, exclaiming, 'I may marry Perrine with a clear conscience now—I am the son of as honest a man as there is in Brittany!'

He had closely examined the cavity in every corner, and not the slightest sign that any dead body had ever been laid there was visible in the hollow place under the Merchant's Table.

III

‘I may marry Perrine with a clear conscience now!’

There are some parts of the world where it would be drawing no natural picture of human nature to represent a son as believing conscientiously that an offence against life and the laws of hospitality, secretly committed by his father, rendered him, though innocent of all participation in it, unworthy to fulfil his engagement with his affianced wife. Among the simple inhabitants of Gabriel’s province, however, such acuteness of conscientious sensibility as this was no extraordinary exception to all general rules. Ignorant and superstitious as they might be, the people of Brittany practised the duties of hospitality as devoutly as they practised the duties of the national religion. The presence of the stranger-guest, rich or poor, was a sacred presence at their hearths. His safety was their especial charge—his property their especial responsibility. They might be half-starved, but they were ready to share the last crust with him nevertheless, as they would share it with their own children.

Any outrage on the virtue of hospitality, thus born and bred in the people, was viewed by them with universal disgust, and punished with universal execration. This ignominy was uppermost in Gabriel’s thoughts by the side of his grandfather’s bed; the dread of this worst dishonour, which there was no wiping out, held him speechless before Perrine, shamed and horrified him so that he felt unworthy to look her in the face; and when the result of his search at the Merchant’s Table proved the absence there of all evidence of the crime spoken of by the old man, the blessed relief, the absorbing triumph of that discovery, was expressed entirely in the one thought which had prompted his first joyful words: He could marry Perrine with a clear conscience, for he was the son of an honest man!

When he returned to the cottage, Francois had not come back. Perrine was astonished at the change in Gabriel’s manner; even Pierre and the children remarked it. Rest and warmth had by this time so far recovered the younger brother, that he was able to give some account of the perilous adventures of the night at sea. They were still listening to the boy’s narrative when François at last returned. It was now Gabriel who held out his hand, and made the first advances towards reconciliation.

To his utter amazement, his father recoiled from him. The variable temper of Francois had evidently changed completely during his absence at the village. A settled scowl of distrust darkened his face as he looked at his son.

‘I never shake hands with people who have once doubted me,’ he exclaimed loudly and irritably; ‘for I always doubt them for ever after. You are a bad son! You have suspected your father of some infamy that you dare not openly charge him with, on no other testimony than the rambling nonsense of a half-witted, dying old man. Don’t speak to me! I won’t hear you! An innocent man and a spy are bad company. Go and denounce me, you Judas in disguise! I don’t care for your secret or for you. What’s that girl Perrine doing here still? Why hasn’t she gone home long ago? The priest’s coming; we don’t want strangers in the house of death. Take her back to the farm-house, and stop there with her, if you like: nobody wants you here!’

There was something in the manner and look of the speaker as he uttered these words, so strange, so sinister, so indescribably suggestive of his meaning much more than he said, that Gabriel felt his heart sink within him instantly; and almost at the same moment

this fearful question forced itself irresistibly on his mind—might not his father have followed him to the Merchant's Table?

Even if he had been desired to speak, he could not have spoken now, while that question and the suspicion that it brought with it were utterly destroying all the reassuring hopes and convictions of the morning. The mental suffering produced by the sudden change from pleasure to pain in all his thoughts, reacted on him physically. He felt as if he were stifling in the air of the cottage, in the presence of his father; and when Perrine hurried on her walking attire, and with a face which alternately flushed and turned pale with every moment, approached the door, he went out with her as hastily as if he had been flying from his home. Never had the fresh air and the free daylight felt like heavenly and guardian influences to him until now!

He could comfort Perrine under his father's harshness, he could assure her of his own affection which no earthly influence could change, while they walked together towards the farm-house; but he could do no more. He durst not confide to her the subject that was uppermost in his mind: of all human beings she was the last to whom he could reveal the terrible secret that was festering at his heart. As soon as they got within sight of the farm-house, Gabriel stopped; and, promising to see her again soon, took leave of Perrine with assumed ease in his manner and with real despair in his heart. Whatever the poor girl might think of it, he felt, at that moment, that he had not courage to face her father, and hear him talk happily and pleasantly, as his custom was, of Perrine's approaching marriage.

Left to himself, Gabriel wandered hither and thither over the open heath, neither knowing nor caring in what direction he turned his steps. The doubts about his father's innocence which had been dissipated by his visit to the Merchant's Table, that father's own language and manner had now revived—had even confirmed, though he dared not yet acknowledge so much to himself. It was terrible enough to be obliged to admit that the result of his morning's search was, after all, not conclusive—that the mystery was in very truth not yet cleared up. The violence of his father's last words of distrust; the extraordinary and indescribable changes in his father's manner while uttering them—what did these things mean? Guilt or innocence? Again, was it any longer reasonable to doubt the deathbed confession made by his grandfather? Was it not, on the contrary, far more probable that the old man's denial in the morning of his own words at night had been made under the influence of a panic terror, when his moral consciousness was bewildered, and his intellectual faculties were sinking?—The longer Gabriel thought of these questions, the less competent—possibly also the less willing—he felt to answer them. Should he seek advice from others wiser than he? No: not while the thousandth part of a chance remained that his father was innocent.

This thought was still in his mind, when he found himself once more in sight of his home. He was still hesitating near the door, when he saw it opened cautiously. His brother Pierre looked out, and then came running towards him. 'Come in, Gabriel; oh, do come in!' said the boy earnestly. 'We are afraid to be alone with father. He's been beating us for talking of you.'

Gabriel went in. His father looked up from the hearth where he was sitting, muttered the word 'Spy!' and made a gesture of contempt—but did not address a word directly to his son. The hours passed on in silence; afternoon waned into evening, and evening into night; and still he never spoke to any of his children. Soon after it was dark, he went out,

and took his net with him—saying that it was better to be alone on the sea than in the house with a spy.

When he returned the next morning, there was no change in him. Days passed—weeks, months even elapsed, and still, though his manner insensibly became what it used to be towards his other children, it never altered towards his eldest son. At the rare periods when they now met, except when absolutely obliged to speak, he preserved total silence in his intercourse with Gabriel. He would never take Gabriel out with him in the boat; he would never sit alone with Gabriel in the house; he would never eat a meal with Gabriel; he would never let the other children talk to him about Gabriel; and he would never hear a word in expostulation, a word in reference to anything his dead father had said or done on the night of the storm, from Gabriel himself.

The young man pined and changed so that even Perrine hardly knew him again, under this cruel system of domestic excommunication; under the wearing influence of the one unchanging doubt which never left him; and, more than all, under the incessant reproaches of his own conscience, aroused by the sense that he was evading a responsibility which it was his solemn, his immediate duty to undertake. But no sting of conscience, no ill-treatment at home, and no self-reproaches for failing in his duty of confession as a good Catholic, were powerful enough in their influence over Gabriel to make him disclose the secret, under the oppression of which his very life was wasting away. He knew that if he once revealed it, whether his father was ultimately proved to be guilty or innocent, there would remain a slur and a suspicion on the family, and on Perrine besides, from her approaching connexion with it, which in their time and in their generation could never be removed. The reproach of the world is terrible even in the crowded city, where many of the dwellers in our abiding-place are strangers to us—but it is far more terrible in the country, where none near us are strangers, where all talk of us and know of us, where nothing intervenes between us and the tyranny of the evil tongue. Gabriel had not courage to face this, and dare the fearful chance of lifelong ignominy—no, not even to serve the sacred interests of justice, of atonement, and of truth.

IV

While Gabriel still remained prostrated under the affliction that was wasting his energies of body and mind, Brittany was visited by a great public calamity, in which all private misfortunes were overwhelmed for a while.

It was now the time when the ever-gathering storm of the French Revolution had risen to its hurricane climax. Those chiefs of the new republic were in power, whose last, worst madness it was to decree the extinction of religion and the overthrow of everything that outwardly symbolized it throughout the whole of the country that they governed. Already this decree had been executed to the letter in and around Paris; and now the soldiers of the republic were on their way to Brittany, headed by commanders whose commission was to root out the Christian religion in the last and the surest of the strongholds still left to it in France.

These men began their work in a spirit worthy of the worst of their superiors who had sent them to do it. They gutted churches, they demolished chapels, they overthrew roadside crosses wherever they found them. The terrible guillotine devoured human lives in the villages of Brittany, as it had devoured them in the streets of Paris; the musket and

the sword, in highway and byway, wreaked havoc on the people—even on women and children kneeling in the act of prayer; the priests were tracked night and day from one hiding-place where they still offered up worship to another, and were killed as soon as overtaken—every atrocity was committed in every district; but the Christian religion still spread wider than the widest bloodshed; still sprang up with ever-renewed vitality from under the very feet of the men whose vain fury was powerless to trample it down. Everywhere the people remained true to their Faith; everywhere the priests stood firm by them in their sorest need. The executioners of the republic had been sent to make Brittany a country of apostates: they did their worst, and left it a country of martyrs.

One evening while this frightful persecution was still raging, Gabriel happened to be detained unusually late at the cottage of Perrine's father. He had lately spent much of his time at the farm-house: it was his only refuge from that place of suffering, of silence, and of secret shame, which he had once called home! Just as he had taken leave of Perrine for the night, and was about to open the farm-house door, her father stopped him, and pointed to a chair in the chimney-corner. 'Leave us alone, my dear,' said the old man to his daughter; 'I want to speak to Gabriel. You can go to your mother in the next room.'

The words which Père Bonan—as he was called by the neighbours—had now to say in private, were destined to lead to very unexpected events. After referring to the alteration which had appeared of late in Gabriel's manner, the old man began by asking him, sorrowfully but not suspiciously, whether he still preserved his old affection for Perrine. On receiving an eager answer in the affirmative, Père Bonan then referred to the persecution still raging through the country, and to the consequent possibility that he, like others of his countrymen, might yet be called to suffer and perhaps to die for the cause of his religion. If this last act of self-sacrifice were required of him, Perrine would be left unprotected, unless her affianced husband performed his promise to her, and assumed, without delay, the position of her lawful guardian. 'Let me know that you will do this,' concluded the old man. 'I shall be resigned to all that may be required of me, if I can only know that I shall not die leaving Perrine unprotected.' Gabriel gave the promise—gave it with his whole heart. As he took leave of Père Bonan, the old man said to him:

'Come here to-morrow; I shall know more then than I know now—I shall be able to fix with certainty the day for the fulfilment of your engagement with Perrine.'

Why did Gabriel hesitate at the farm-house door, looking back on Père Bonan as though he would fain say something, and yet not speaking a word? Why, after he had gone out and had walked onward several paces, did he suddenly stop, return quickly to the farm-house, stand irresolute before the gate, and then retrace his steps sighing heavily as he went, but never pausing again on his homeward way? Because the torment of his horrible secret had grown harder to bear than ever, since he had given the promise that had been required of him. Because, while a strong impulse moved him frankly to lay bare his hidden dread and doubt to the father whose beloved daughter was soon to be his wife, there was a yet stronger passive influence which paralyzed on his lips the terrible confession that he knew not whether he was the son of an honest man, or the son of an assassin and a robber. Made desperate by his situation, he determined, while he hastened homeward, to risk the worst and ask that fatal question of his father in plain words. But this supreme trial for parent and child was not to be. When he entered the cottage,

Francois was absent. He had told the younger children that he should not be home again before noon on the next day.

Early in the morning Gabriel repaired to the farm-house, as he had been bidden. Influenced by his love for Perrine, blindly confiding in the faint hope (which in despite of heart and conscience he still forced himself to cherish) that his father might be innocent, he now preserved the appearance at least of perfect calmness. 'If I tell my secret to Perrine's father, I risk disturbing in him that confidence in the future safety of his child, for which I am his present and only warrant'—Something like this thought was in Gabriel's mind, as he took the hand of Père Bonan and waited anxiously to hear what was required of him on that day.

'We have a short respite from danger, Gabriel,' said the old man. 'News has come to me that the spoilers of our churches and the murderers of our congregations, have been stopped on their way hitherward by tidings which have reached them from another district. This interval of peace and safety will be a short one—we must take advantage of it while it is yet ours. My name is among the names on the list of the denounced. If the soldiers of the Republic find me here!—but we will say nothing more of this: it is of Perrine and of you that I must now speak. On this very evening, your marriage may be solemnized with all the wonted rites of our holy religion, and the blessing may be pronounced over you by the lips of a priest. This evening, therefore, Gabriel, you must become the husband and the protector of Perrine. Listen to me attentively, and I will tell you how.'

This was the substance of what Gabriel now heard from Père Bonan:

Not very long before the persecutions broke out in Brittany, a priest, known generally by the name of Father Paul, was appointed to a curacy in one of the northern districts of the province. He fulfilled all the duties of his station in such a manner as to win the confidence and affection of every member of his congregation, and was often spoken of with respect, even in parts of the country distant from the scene of his labours. It was not, however, until the troubles broke out, and the destruction and bloodshed began, that he became renowned far and wide, from one end of Brittany to another. From the date of the very first persecutions the name of Father Paul was a rallying cry of the hunted peasantry; he was their great encouragement under oppression, their example in danger, their last and only consoler in the hour of death. Wherever havoc and ruin raged most fiercely, wherever the pursuit was hottest and the slaughter most cruel, there the intrepid priest was sure to be seen pursuing his sacred duties in defiance of every peril. His hairbreadth escapes from death; his extraordinary re-appearances in parts of the country where no one ever expected to see him again, were regarded by the poorer classes with superstitious awe. Wherever Father Paul appeared, with his black dress, his calm face, and the ivory crucifix which he always carried in his hand, the people revered him as more than mortal; and grew at last to believe that, single-handed, he would successfully defend his religion against the armies of the republic. But their simple confidence in his powers of resistance was soon destined to be shaken. Fresh reinforcements arrived in Brittany, and overran the whole province from one end to the other. One morning, after celebrating service in a dismantled church, and after narrowly escaping with his life from those who pursued him, the priest disappeared. Secret inquiries were made after him in all directions; but he was heard of no more.

Many weary days had passed, and the dispirited peasantry had already mourned him as dead, when some fishermen on the northern coast observed a ship of light burden in the offing, making signals to the shore. They put off to her in their boats; and on reaching the deck saw standing before them the well-remembered figure of Father Paul.

The priest had returned to his congregations; and had founded the new altar that they were to worship at on the deck of a ship! Razed from the face of the earth, their church had not been destroyed—for Father Paul and the priests who acted with him had given that church a refuge on the sea. Henceforth, their children could still be baptized, their sons and daughters could still be married, the burial of their dead could still be solemnized, under the sanction of the old religion for which, not vainly, they had suffered so patiently and so long.

Throughout the remaining time of trouble, the services were uninterrupted on board the ship. A code of signals was established by which those on shore were always enabled to direct their brethren at sea towards such parts of the coast as happened to be uninfested by the enemies of their worship. On the morning of Gabriel's visit to the farmhouse, these signals had shaped the course of the ship towards the extremity of the peninsula of Quiberon. The people of the district were all prepared to expect the appearance of the vessel some time in the evening, and had their boats ready at a moment's notice to put off and attend the service. At the conclusion of this service Père Bonan had arranged that the marriage of his daughter and Gabriel was to take place.

They waited for evening at the farm-house. A little before sunset the ship was signalled as in sight; and then Père Bonan and his wife, followed by Gabriel and Perrine, set forth over the heath to the beach. With the solitary exception of François Sarzeau, the whole population of the neighbourhood was already assembled there; Gabriel's brother and sisters being among the number.

It was the calmest evening that had been known for months. There was not a cloud in the lustrous sky—not a ripple on the still surface of the sea. The smallest children were suffered by their mothers to stray down on the beach as they pleased; for the waves of the great ocean slept as tenderly and noiselessly on their sandy bed, as if they had been changed into the waters of an inland lake. Slow, almost imperceptible, was the approach of the ship—there was hardly a breath of wind to carry her on—she was just drifting gently with the landward set of the tide at that hour, while her sails hung idly against the masts. Long after the sun had gone down, the congregation still waited and watched on the beach. The moon and stars were arrayed in their glory of the night, before the ship dropped anchor. Then the muffled tolling of a bell came solemnly across the quiet waters; and then, from every creek along the shore, as far as the eye could reach, the black forms of the fishermen's boats shot out swift and stealthy into the shining sea.

By the time the boats had arrived alongside of the ship, the lamp had been kindled before the altar, and its flame was gleaming red and dull in the radiant moonlight. Two of the priests on board were clothed in their robes of office, and were waiting in their appointed places to begin the service. But there was a third, dressed only in the ordinary attire of his calling, who mingled with the congregation, and spoke a few words to each of the persons composing it, as, one by one, they mounted the sides of the ship. Those who had never seen him before knew by the famous ivory crucifix in his hand that the priest who received them was Father Paul. Gabriel looked at this man, whom he now beheld for the first time, with a mixture of astonishment and awe; for he saw that the renowned chief of the Christians of Brittany was, to all appearance, but little older than himself.

The expression on the pale calm face of the priest was so gentle and kind, that children just able to walk tottered up to him, and held familiarly by the skirts of his black gown, whenever his clear blue eyes rested on theirs, while he beckoned them to his side. No one would ever have guessed from the countenance of Father Paul what deadly perils he had

confronted, but for the scar of a sabre-wound, as yet hardly healed, which ran across his forehead. That wound had been dealt while he was kneeling before the altar, in the last church in Brittany which had escaped spoliation. He would have died where he knelt, but for the peasants who were praying with him, and who, unarmed as they were, threw themselves like tigers on the soldiery, and at awful sacrifice of their own lives saved the life of their priest. There was not a man now on board the ship who would have hesitated, had the occasion called for it again, to have rescued him in the same way.

The service began. Since the days when the primitive Christians worshipped amid the caverns of the earth, can any service be imagined nobler in itself or sublimer in the circumstances surrounding it, than that which was now offered up? Here was no artificial pomp, no gaudy profusion of ornament, no attendant grandeur of man's creation. All around this church spread the hushed and awful majesty of the tranquil sea. The roof of this cathedral was the immeasurable heaven, the pure moon its one great light, the countless glories of the stars its only adornment. Here were no hired singers or rich priest-princes; no curious sight-seers, or careless lovers of sweet sounds. This congregation and they who had gathered it together, were all poor alike, all persecuted alike, all worshipping alike, to the overthrow of their worldly interests, and at the imminent peril of their lives. How brightly and tenderly the moonlight shone upon the altar and the people before it!—how solemnly and divinely the deep harmonies, as they chanted the penitential Psalms, mingled with the hoarse singing of the freshening night-breeze in the rigging of the ship!—how sweetly the still rushing murmur of many voices, as they uttered the responses together, now died away and now rose again softly into the mysterious night!

Of all the members of the congregation—young or old—there was but one over whom that impressive service exercised no influence of consolation or of peace: that one was Gabriel. Often, throughout the day, his reproaching conscience had spoken within him again and again. Often, when he joined the little assembly on the beach, he turned away his face in secret shame and apprehension from Perrine and her father. Vainly, after gaining the deck of the ship, did he try to meet the eye of Father Paul as frankly, as readily, and as affectionately as others met it. The burden of concealment seemed too heavy to be borne in the presence of the priest—and yet, torment as it was, he still bore it! But when he knelt with the rest of the congregation and saw Perrine kneeling by his side—when he felt the calmness of the solemn night and the still sea filling his heart—when the sounds of the first prayers spoke with a dread spiritual language of their own to his soul—then, the remembrance of the confession which he had neglected, and the terror of receiving unprepared the sacrament which he knew would be offered to him—grew too vivid to be endured: the sense that he merited no longer, though once worthy of it, the confidence in his perfect truth and candour placed in him by the woman with whom he was soon to stand before the altar, overwhelmed him with shame: the mere act of kneeling among that congregation, the passive accomplice by his silence and secrecy, for aught he knew to the contrary, of a crime which it was his bounden duty to denounce, appalled him as if he had already committed sacrilege that could never be forgiven. Tears flowed down his cheeks, though he strove to repress them: sobs burst from him, though he tried to stifle them. He knew that others besides Perrine were looking at him in astonishment and alarm; but he could neither control himself, nor move to leave his place, nor raise his eyes even—until suddenly he felt a hand laid on his shoulder. That

touch, slight as it was, ran through him instantly. He looked up, and saw Father Paul standing by his side.

Beckoning him to follow, and signing to the congregation not to suspend their devotions, he led Gabriel out of the assembly—then paused for a moment, reflecting—then beckoning again, took him into the cabin of the ship, and closed the door carefully.

‘You have something on your mind,’ he said, simply and quietly, taking the young man by the hand. ‘I may be able to relieve you, if you tell me what it is.’

As Gabriel heard these gentle words, and saw, by the light of a lamp which burned before a cross fixed against the wall, the sad kindness of expression with which the priest was regarding him, the oppression that had lain so long on his heart seemed to leave it in an instant. The haunting fear of ever divulging his fatal suspicions and his fatal secret had vanished, as it were, at the touch of Father Paul’s hand. For the first time, he now repeated to another ear—the sounds of prayer and praise rising grandly the while from the congregation above—his grandfather’s death-bed confession, word for word almost, as he had heard it in the cottage on the night of the storm.

Once, and once only, did Father Paul interrupt the narrative, which in whispers was addressed to him. Gabriel had hardly repeated the first two or three sentences of his grandfather’s confession, when the priest, in quick altered tones, abruptly asked him his name and place of abode.

As the question was answered, Father Paul’s calm face became suddenly agitated; but the next moment, resolutely resuming his self-possession, he bowed his head, as a sign that Gabriel was to continue; clasped his trembling hands, and raising them as if in silent prayer, fixed his eyes intently on the cross. He never looked away from it while the terrible narrative proceeded. But when Gabriel described his search at the Merchant’s Table; and, referring to his father’s behaviour since that time, appealed to the priest to know whether he might, even yet, in defiance of appearances, be still filially justified in doubting whether the crime had been really perpetrated—then Father Paul moved near to him once more, and spoke again.

‘Compose yourself, and look at me,’ he said with his former sad kindness of voice and manner. ‘I can end your doubts for ever. Gabriel, your father was guilty in intention and in act; but the victim of his crime still lives. I can prove it.’

Gabriel’s heart beat wildly; a deadly coldness crept over him, as he saw Father Paul loosen the fastening of his cassock round the throat.

At that instant the chanting of the congregation above ceased; and then, the sudden and awful stillness was deepened rather than interrupted by the faint sound of one voice praying. Slowly and with trembling fingers the priest removed the band round his neck—paused a little—sighed heavily—and pointed to a scar which was now plainly visible on one side of his throat. He said something at the same time; but the bell above tolled while he spoke. It was the signal of the elevation of the Host. Gabriel felt an arm passed round him, guiding him to his knees, and sustaining him from sinking to the floor. For one moment longer he was conscious that the bell had stopped, that there was dead silence, that Father Paul was kneeling by him beneath the cross, with bowed head—then all objects around vanished; and he saw and knew nothing more.

When he recovered his senses, he was still in the cabin—the man whose life his father had attempted was bending over him, and sprinkling water on his face—and the clear voices of the women and children

of the congregation were joining the voices of the men in singing the *Agnus Dei*.

'Look up at me without fear, Gabriel,' said the priest. 'I desire not to avenge injuries: I visit not the sins of the father on the child. Look up, and listen! I have strange things to speak of; and I have a sacred mission to fulfil before the morning, in which you must be my guide.'

Gabriel attempted to kneel and kiss his hand, but Father Paul stopped him, and said, pointing to the cross: 'Kneel to that—not to me: not to your fellow-mortal, and your friend—for I will be your friend, Gabriel; believing that God's mercy has ordered it so. And now listen to me,' he proceeded, with a brotherly tenderness in his manner which went to Gabriel's heart. 'The service is nearly ended. What I have to tell you must be told at once; the errand on which you will guide me must be performed before to-morrow dawns. Sit here near me; and attend to what I now say!'

Gabriel obeyed: Father Paul then proceeded thus:

'I believe the confession made to you by your grandfather to have been true in every particular. On the evening to which he referred you, I approached your cottage, as he said, for the purpose of asking shelter for the night. At that period I had been studying hard to qualify myself for the holy calling which I now pursue; and, on the completion of my studies, had indulged in the recreation of a tour on foot through Brittany, by way of innocently and agreeably occupying the leisure time then at my disposal, before I entered the priesthood. When I accosted your father I had lost my way, had been walking for many hours, and was glad of any rest that I could get for the night. It is unnecessary to pain you now, by reference to the events which followed my entrance under your father's roof. I remember nothing that happened from the time when I lay down to sleep before the fire, until the time when I recovered my senses at the place which you call the Merchant's Table. My first sensation was that of being moved into the cold air: when I opened my eyes I saw the great Druid stones rising close above me, and two men on either side of me rifling my pockets. They found nothing valuable there, and were about to leave me where I lay, when I gathered strength enough to appeal to their mercy through their cupidity. Money was not scarce with me then, and I was able to offer them a rich reward (which they ultimately received as I had promised) if they would take me to any place where I could get shelter and medical help. I suppose they inferred by my language and accent—perhaps also by the linen I wore, which they examined closely—that I belonged to the higher ranks of the community, in spite of the plainness of my outer garments; and might therefore be in a position to make good my promise to them. I heard one say to the other, "Let us risk it;" and then they took me in their arms, carried me down to a boat on the beach, and rowed to a vessel in the offing. The next day they disembarked me at Paimboeuf, where I got the assistance which I so much needed. I learnt through the confidence they were obliged to place in me, in order to give me the means of sending them their promised reward, that these men were smugglers, and that they were in the habit of using the cavity in which I had been laid, as a place of concealment for goods, and for letters of advice to their accomplices. This accounted for their finding me. As to my wound, I was informed by the surgeon who attended me, that it had being inflicted in a mortal part by less than a quarter of an inch, and that, as it was, nothing but the action of the night air in coagulating the blood over the place had, in the first instance, saved my life. To be brief, I recovered after a long illness, returned to Paris, and was called to the priesthood. The will of my superiors obliged me to perform the first

duties of my vocation in the great city; but my own wish was to be appointed to a cure of souls in your province, Gabriel. Can you imagine why?’

The answer to this question was in Gabriel’s heart; but he was still too deeply awed and affected by what he had heard to give it utterance.

‘I must tell you then what my motive was,’ said Father Paul. ‘You must know first that I uniformly abstained from disclosing to any one where and by whom my life had been attempted. I kept this a secret from the men who rescued me—from the surgeon—from my own friends even. My reason for such a proceeding was, I would fain believe, a Christian reason. I hope I had always felt a sincere and humble desire to prove myself, by the help of God, worthy of the sacred vocation to which I was destined. But my miraculous escape from death made an impression on my mind, which gave me another and an infinitely higher view of this vocation—the view which I have since striven, and shall always strive for the future, to maintain. As I lay, during the first days of my recovery, examining my own heart, and considering in what manner it would be my duty to act towards your father when I was restored to health, a thought came into my mind which calmed, comforted, and resolved all my doubts. I said within myself—“In a few months more I shall be called to be one of the chosen ministers of God. If I am worthy of my vocation, my first desire towards this man who has attempted to take my life, should be, not to know that human justice has overtaken him, but to know that he has truly and religiously repented and made atonement for his guilt. To such repentance and atonement let it be my duty to call him; if he reject that appeal, and be hardened only the more against me because I have forgiven him my injuries, then it will be time enough to denounce him for his crimes to his fellow-men. Surely it must be well for me here and hereafter, if I begin my career in the holy priesthood by helping to save from hell the soul of the man who, of all others, has most cruelly wronged me.” It was for this reason, Gabriel—it was because I desired to go straightway to your father’s cottage, and reclaim him after he had believed me to be dead—that I kept the secret and entreated of my superiors that I might be sent to Brittany. But this, as I have said, was not to be at first, and when my desire was granted, my place was assigned me in a far district. The persecution under which we still suffer broke out; the designs of my life were changed; my own will became no longer mine to guide me. But, through sorrow and suffering, and danger and bloodshed, I am now led after many days to the execution of that first purpose which I formed on entering the priesthood. Gabriel! when the service is over, and the congregation are dispersed, you must guide me to the door of your father’s cottage.’

He held up his hand, in sign of silence, as Gabriel was about to answer. Just then, the officiating priests above were pronouncing the final benediction. When it was over, Father Paul opened the cabin-door. As he ascended the steps, followed by Gabriel, Père Bonan met them. The old man looked doubtfully and searchingly on his future son-in-law, as he respectfully whispered a few words in the ear of the priest. Father Paul listened attentively, answered in a whisper, and then turned to Gabriel, first begging the few people near them to withdraw a little.

‘I have been asked whether there is any impediment to your marriage,’ he said, ‘and have answered that there is none. What you have said to me has been said in confession, and is a secret between us two. Remember that; and forget not, at the same time, the service which I shall require of you to-night, after the marriage ceremony is over. Where is Perrine Bonan?’ he added aloud, looking round him. Perrine came forward. Father Paul

took her hand, and placed it in Gabriel's. 'Lead her to the altar steps,' he said, 'and wait there for me.'

It was more than an hour later; the boats had left the ship's side; the congregation had dispersed over the face of the country—but still the vessel remained at anchor. Those who were left in her watched the land more anxiously than usual; for they knew that Father Paul had risked meeting the soldiers of the republic by trusting himself on shore. A boat was awaiting his return on the beach; half of the crew, armed, being posted as scouts in various directions on the high land of the heath. They would have followed and guarded the priest to the place of his destination; but he forbade it; and, leaving them abruptly, walked swiftly onward with one young man only for his companion.

Gabriel had committed his brother and his sisters to the charge of Perrine. They were to go to the farm-house that night with his newly married wife and her father and mother. Father Paul had desired that this might be done. When Gabriel and he were left alone to follow the path which led to the fisherman's cottage, the priest never spoke while they walked on—never looked aside either to the right or the left—always held his ivory crucifix clasped to his breast. They arrived at the door.

'Knock,' whispered Father Paul to Gabriel, 'and then wait here with me.' The door was opened. On a lovely moonlight night François Sarzeau had stood on that threshold, years since, with a bleeding body in his arms. On a lovely moonlight night, he now stood there again, confronting the very man whose life he had attempted, and knowing him not.

Father Paul advanced a few paces, so that the moonlight fell fuller on his features, and removed his hat.

François Sarzeau looked, started, moved one step back, then stood motionless and perfectly silent, while all traces of expression of any kind suddenly vanished from his face. Then the calm, clear tones of the priest stole gently on the dead silence. 'I bring a message of peace and forgiveness from a guest of former years,' he said; and pointed, as he spoke, to the place where he had been wounded in the neck.

For one moment, Gabriel saw his father trembling violently from head to foot—then his limbs steadied again—stiffened suddenly, as if struck by catalepsy. His lips parted, but without quivering; his eyes glared, but without moving in their orbits. The lovely moonlight itself looked ghastly and horrible, shining on the supernatural panic-deformity of that face! Gabriel turned away his head in terror. He heard the voice of Father Paul saying to him: 'Wait here till I come back,'—then, there was an instant of silence again—then a low groaning sound, that seemed to articulate the name of God; a sound unlike his father's voice, Unlike any human voice he had ever heard—and then the noise of a closing door. He looked up, and saw that he was standing alone before the cottage.

Once, after an interval, he approached the window.

He just saw through it the hand of the priest holding on high the ivory crucifix; but stopped not to see more, for he heard such words, such sounds, as drove him back to his former place. There he stayed, until the noise of something falling heavily within the cottage, struck on his ear. Again he advanced towards the door; heard Father Paul praying; listened for several minutes; then heard a moaning voice, now joining itself to the voice of the priest, now choked in sobs and bitter wailing. Once more he went back out of hearing, and stirred not again from his place. He waited a long and a weary time there—so long that one of the scouts on the look-out came towards him, evidently suspicious of the delay in the priest's return. He waved the man back, and then looked

again towards the door. At last, he saw it open—saw Father Paul approach him, leading Francois Sarzeau by the hand.

The fisherman never raised his downcast eyes to his son's face; tears trickled silently over his cheeks; he followed the hand that led him, as a little child might have followed it, listening anxiously and humbly at the priest's side to every word that he spoke.

'Gabriel,' said Father Paul, in a voice which trembled a little for the first time that night—'Gabriel, it has pleased God to grant the perfect fulfilment of the purpose which brought me to this place; I tell you this, as all that you need—as all, I believe, that you would wish—to know of what has passed while you have been left waiting for me here. Such words as I have now to speak to you, are spoken by your father's earnest desire. It is his own wish that I should communicate to you his confession of having secretly followed you to the Merchant's Table, and of having discovered (as you discovered) that no evidence of his guilt remained there. This admission he thinks will be enough to account for his conduct towards yourself from that time to this. I have next to tell you (also at your father's desire) that he has promised in my presence, and now promises again in yours, sincerity of repentance in this manner: When the persecution of our religion has ceased—as cease it will, and that speedily, be assured of it!—he solemnly pledges himself henceforth to devote his life, his strength, and what worldly possessions he may have, or may acquire, to the task of re-erecting and restoring the roadside crosses which have been sacrilegiously overthrown and destroyed in his native province, and to doing good, good where he may. I have now said all that is required of me, and may bid you farewell—bearing with me the happy remembrance that I have left a father and son reconciled and restored to each other. May God bless and prosper you, and those dear to you, Gabriel! May God accept your father's repentance, and bless him also throughout his future life!'

He took their hands, pressed them long and warmly, then turned and walked quickly down the path which led to the beach. Gabriel dared not trust himself yet to speak; but he raised his arm, and put it gently round his father's neck. The two stood together so, looking out dimly through the tears that filled their eyes, to the sea. They saw the boat put off in the bright track of the moonlight, and reach the vessel's side; they watched the spreading of the sails, and followed the slow course of the ship till she disappeared past a distant headland from sight.

After that, they went into the cottage together. They knew it not then, but they had seen the last, in this world, of Father Paul.

V

The events foretold by the good priest happened sooner even than he had anticipated. A new government ruled the destinies of France, and the persecution ceased in Brittany.

Among other propositions which were then submitted to the parliament, was one advocating the restoration of the roadside crosses throughout the province. It was found, however, on inquiry, that these crosses were to be counted by thousands, and that the mere cost of the wood required to re-erect them necessitated an expenditure of money which the bankrupt nation could ill afford to spare. While this project was under discussion, and before it was finally rejected, one man had undertaken the task which the government shrank from attempting. When Gabriel left the cottage, taking his brother and

sisters to live with his wife and himself at the farm-house, Francois Sarzeau left it also, to perform in highway and byway his promise to Father Paul. For months and months he laboured without intermission at his task; still, always doing good, and rendering help and kindness and true charity to all whom he could serve. He walked many a weary mile, toiled through many a hard day's work, humbled himself even to beg of others, to get wood enough to restore a single cross. No one ever heard him complain, ever saw him impatient, ever detected him in faltering at his task. The shelter in an outhouse, the crust of bread and drink of water, which he could always get from the peasantry, seemed to suffice him. Among the people who watched his perseverance, a belief began to gain ground that his life would be miraculously prolonged until he had completed his undertaking from one end of Brittany to the other. But this was not to be.

He was seen one cold autumn evening, silently and steadily at work as usual, setting up a new cross on the site of one which had been shattered to splinters in the troubled times. In the morning he was found lying dead beneath the sacred symbol which his own hands had completed and erected in its place during the night. They buried him where he lay; and the priest who consecrated the ground allowed Gabriel to engrave his father's epitaph in the wood of the cross. It was simply the initial letters of the dead man's name, followed by this inscription: 'Pray for the repose of his soul: he died penitent, and the doer of good works.'

Once, and once only, did Gabriel hear anything of Father Paul. The good priest showed, by writing to the farm-house, that he had not forgotten the family so largely indebted to him for their happiness. The letter was dated 'Rome.' Father Paul said, that such services as he had been permitted to render to the Church in Brittany, had obtained for him a new and a far more glorious trust than any he had yet held. He had been recalled from his curacy, and appointed to be at the head of a mission which was shortly to be despatched to convert the inhabitants of a savage and a far distant land to the Christian faith. He now wrote, as his brethren with him were writing, take leave of all friends for ever in this world, before setting out—for it was well known to the chosen persons intrusted with the new mission, that they could only hope to advance its object by cheerfully risking their own lives for the sake of their religion. He gave his blessing to Francois Sarzeau, to Gabriel, and to his family; and bade them affectionately farewell for the last time.

There was a postscript to the letter, which was addressed to Perrine, and which she often read afterwards with tearful eyes. The writer begged that, if she should have any children, she would show her friendly and Christian remembrance of him by teaching them to pray (as he hoped she herself would pray) that a blessing might attend Father Paul's labours in the distant land.

The priest's loving petition was never forgotten. When Perrine taught its first prayer to her first child, the little creature was instructed to end the few simple words pronounced at its mother's knees, with: 'God bless Father Paul.'

In those words the nun concluded her narrative. After it was ended, she pointed to the old wooden cross, and said to me:

'That was one of the many that he made. It was found, a few years since, to have suffered so much from exposure to the weather, that it was unfit to remain any longer in its old place. A priest in Brittany gave it to one of the nuns in this convent. Do you wonder now that the Mother-Superior always calls it a Relic?'

‘No,’ I answered. ‘And I should have small respect indeed for the religious convictions of any one who could hear the story of that wooden cross, and not feel that the Mother-Superior’s name for it is the very best that could have been chosen.’