

Guy de Maupassant

THE DIARY OF A MADMAN

He was dead—the head of a high tribunal, the upright magistrate whose irreproachable life was a proverb in all the courts of France. Advocates, young counsellors, judges had greeted him at sight of his large, thin, pale face lighted up by two sparkling deep-set eyes, bowing low in token of respect.

He had passed his life in pursuing crime and in protecting the weak. Swindlers and murderers had no more redoubtable enemy, for he seemed to read the most secret thoughts of their minds.

He was dead, now, at the age of eighty-two, honored by the homage and followed by the regrets of a whole people. Soldiers in red trousers had escorted him to the tomb and men in white cravats had spoken words and shed tears that seemed to be sincere beside his grave.

But here is the strange paper found by the dismayed notary in the desk where he had kept the records of great criminals! It was entitled: WHY?

20th June, 1851. I have just left court. I have condemned Blondel to death! Now, why did this man kill his five children? Frequently one meets with people to whom the destruction of life is a pleasure. Yes, yes, it should be a pleasure, the greatest of all, perhaps, for is not killing the next thing to creating? To make and to destroy! These two words contain the history of the universe, all the history of worlds, all that is, all! Why is it not intoxicating to kill?

25th June. To think that a being is there who lives, who walks, who runs. A being? What is a being? That animated thing, that bears in it the principle of motion and a will ruling that motion. It is attached to nothing, this thing. Its feet do not belong to the ground. It is a grain of life that moves on the earth, and this grain of life, coming I know not whence, one can destroy at one's will. Then nothing—nothing more. It perishes, it is finished.

26th June. Why then is it a crime to kill? Yes, why? On the contrary, it is the law of nature. The mission of every being is to kill; he kills to live, and he kills to kill. The beast kills without ceasing, all day, every instant of his existence. Man kills without ceasing, to nourish himself; but since he needs, besides, to kill for pleasure, he has invented hunting! The child kills the insects he finds, the little birds, all the little animals that come in his way. But this does not suffice for the irresistible need to massacre that is in us. It is not enough to kill beasts; we must kill man too. Long ago this need was satisfied by human sacrifices. Now the requirements of social life have made murder a crime. We condemn and punish the assassin! But as we cannot live without yielding to this natural and imperious instinct of death, we relieve ourselves, from time to time, by wars. Then a whole nation slaughters another nation. It is a feast of blood, a feast that maddens armies and that intoxicates civilians, women and children, who read, by lamplight at night, the feverish story of massacre.

One might suppose that those destined to accomplish these butcheries of men would be despised! No, they are loaded with honors. They are clad in gold and in resplendent garments; they wear plumes on their heads and ornaments on their breasts, and they are given crosses, rewards, titles of every kind. They are proud, respected, loved by women, cheered by the crowd, solely because their mission is to shed human blood; They drag through the streets their instruments of death, that the passer-by, clad in black, looks on with envy. For to kill is the great law set by nature in the heart of existence! There is nothing more beautiful and honorable than killing!

30th June. To kill is the law, because nature loves eternal youth. She seems to cry in all her unconscious acts: "Quick! quick! quick!" The more she destroys, the more she renews herself.

2d July. A human being—what is a human being? Through thought it is a reflection of all that is; through memory and science it is an abridged edition of the universe whose history it represents, a mirror of things and of nations, each human being becomes a microcosm in the macrocosm.

3d July. It must be a pleasure, unique and full of zest, to kill; to have there before one the living, thinking being; to make therein a little hole, nothing but a little hole, to see that red thing flow which is the blood, which makes life; and to have before one only a heap of limp flesh, cold, inert, void of thought!

5th August. I, who have passed my life in judging, condemning, killing by the spoken word, killing by the guillotine those who had killed by the knife, I, I, if I should do as all the assassins have done whom I have smitten, I—I—who would know it?

10th August. Who would ever know? Who would ever suspect me, me, me, especially if I should choose a being I had no interest in doing away with?

15th August. The temptation has come to me. It pervades my whole being; my hands tremble with the desire to kill.

22d August. I could resist no longer. I killed a little creature as an experiment, for a beginning. Jean, my servant, had a goldfinch in a cage hung in the office window. I sent him on an errand, and I took the little bird in my hand, in my hand where I felt its heart beat. It was warm. I went up to my room. From time to time I squeezed it tighter; its heart beat faster; this was atrocious and delicious. I was near choking it. But I could not see the blood.

Then I took scissors, short-nail scissors, and I cut its throat with three slits, quite gently. It opened its bill, it struggled to escape me, but I held it, oh! I held it—I could have held a mad dog—and I saw the blood trickle.

And then I did as assassins do—real ones. I washed the scissors, I washed my hands. I sprinkled water and took the body, the corpse, to the garden to hide it. I buried it under a strawberry-plant. It will never be found. Every day I shall eat a strawberry from that plant. How one can enjoy life when one knows how!

My servant cried; he thought his bird flown. How could he suspect me? Ah! ah!

25th August. I must kill a man! I must—

30th August. It is done. But what a little thing! I had gone for a walk in the forest of Vernes. I was thinking of nothing, literally nothing. A child was in the road, a little child eating a slice of bread and butter.

He stops to see me pass and says, "Good-day, Mr. President."

And the thought enters my head, "Shall I kill him?"

I answer: "You are alone, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"All alone in the wood?"

"Yes, sir."

The wish to kill him intoxicated me like wine. I approached him quite softly, persuaded that he was going to run away. And, suddenly, I seized him by the throat. He looked at me with terror in his eyes—such eyes! He held my wrists in his little hands and his body writhed like a feather over the fire. Then he moved no more. I threw the body in the ditch, and some weeds on top of it. I returned home, and dined well. What a little thing it was! In the evening I was very gay, light, rejuvenated; I passed the evening at the Prefect's. They found me witty. But I have not seen blood! I am tranquil.

31st August. The body has been discovered. They are hunting for the assassin. Ah! ah!

1st September. Two tramps have been arrested. Proofs are lacking.

2d September. The parents have been to see me. They wept! Ah! ah!

6th October. Nothing has been discovered. Some strolling vagabond must have done the deed. Ah! ah! If I had seen the blood flow, it seems to me I should be tranquil now! The desire to kill is in my blood; it is like the passion of youth at twenty.

20th October. Yet another. I was walking by the river, after breakfast. And I saw, under a willow, a fisherman asleep. It was noon. A spade was standing in a potato-field near by, as if expressly, for me.

I took it. I returned; I raised it like a club, and with one blow of the edge I cleft the fisherman's head. Oh! he bled, this one! Rose-colored blood. It flowed into the water, quite gently. And I went away with a grave step. If I had been seen! Ah! ah! I should have made an excellent assassin.

25th October. The affair of the fisherman makes a great stir. His nephew, who fished with him, is charged with the murder.

26th October. The examining magistrate affirms that the nephew is guilty. Everybody in town believes it. Ah! ah!

27th October. The nephew makes a very poor witness. He had gone to the village to buy bread and cheese, he declared. He swore that his uncle had been killed in his absence! Who would believe him?

28th October. The nephew has all but confessed, they have badgered him so. Ah! ah! justice!

15th November. There are overwhelming proofs against the nephew, who was his uncle's heir. I shall preside at the sessions.

25th January. To death! to death! to death! I have had him condemned to death! Ah! ah! The advocate-general spoke like an angel! Ah! ah! Yet another! I shall go to see him executed!

10th March. It is done. They guillotined him this morning. He died very well! very well! That gave me pleasure! How fine it is to see a man's head cut off!

Now, I shall wait, I can wait. It would take such a little thing to let myself be caught.

The manuscript contained yet other pages, but without relating any new crime.

Alienist physicians to whom the awful story has been submitted declare that there are in the world many undiscovered madmen as adroit and as much to be feared as this monstrous lunatic.

BELHOMME'S BEAST

The coach for Havre was ready to leave Criquetot, and all the passengers were waiting for their names to be called out, in the courtyard of the Commercial Hotel kept by Monsieur Malandain, Jr.

It was a yellow wagon, mounted on wheels which had once been yellow, but were now almost gray through the accumulation of mud. The front wheels were very small, the back ones, high and fragile, carried the large body of the vehicle, which was swollen like the belly of an animal. Three white horses, with enormous heads and great round knees, were the first things one noticed. They were harnessed ready to draw this coach, which had something of the appearance of a monster in its massive structure. The horses seemed already asleep in front of the strange vehicle.

The driver, Cesaire Horlaville, a little man with a big paunch, supple nevertheless, through his constant habit of climbing over the wheels to the top of the wagon, his face all aglow from exposure to the brisk air of the plains, to rain and storms, and also from the use of brandy, his eyes twitching from the effect of constant contact with wind and hail, appeared in the doorway of the hotel, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. Large round baskets, full of frightened poultry, were standing in front of the peasant women. Cesaire Horlaville took them one after the other and packed them on the top of his coach; then more gently, he loaded on those containing eggs; finally he tossed up from below several little bags of grain, small packages wrapped in handkerchiefs, pieces of cloth, or paper. Then he opened the back door, and drawing a list from his pocket he called:

“Monsieur le cure de Gorgeville.”

The priest advanced. He was a large, powerful, robust man with a red face and a genial expression. He hitched up his cassock to lift his foot, just as the women hold up their skirts, and climbed into the coach.

“The schoolmaster of Rollebose-les-Grinets.”

The man hastened forward, tall, timid, wearing a long frock coat which fell to his knees, and he in turn disappeared through the open door.

“Maitre Poiret, two seats.”

Poiret approached, a tall, round-shouldered man, bent by the plow, emaciated through abstinence, bony, with a skin dried by a sparing use of water. His wife followed him, small and thin, like a tired animal, carrying a large green umbrella in her hands.

“Maitre Rabot, two seats.”

Rabot hesitated, being of an undecided nature. He asked:

“You mean me?”

The driver was going to answer with a jest, when Rabot dived head first towards the door, pushed forward by a vigorous shove from his wife, a tall, square woman with a large, round stomach like a barrel, and hands as large as hams.

Rabot slipped into the wagon like a rat entering a hole.

“Maitre Caniveau.”

A large peasant, heavier than an ox, made the springs bend, and was in turn engulfed in the interior of the yellow chest.

“Maitre Belhomme.”

Belhomme, tall and thin, came forward, his neck bent, his head hanging, a handkerchief held to his ear as if he were suffering from a terrible toothache.

All these people wore the blue blouse over quaint and antique coats of a black or greenish cloth, Sunday clothes which they would only uncover in the streets of Havre. Their heads were covered by silk caps as high as towers, the emblem of supreme elegance in the small villages of Normandy.

Cesaire Horlville closed the door, climbed up on his box and snapped his whip.

The three horses awoke and, tossing their heads, shook their bells.

The driver then yelling “Get up!” as loud as he could, whipped up his horses. They shook themselves, and, with an effort, started off at a slow, halting gait. And behind them came the coach, rattling its shaky windows and iron springs, making a terrible clatter of hardware and glass, while the passengers were tossed hither and thither like so many rubber balls.

At first all kept silent out of respect for the priest, that they might not shock him. Being of a loquacious and genial disposition, he started the conversation.

“Well, Maitre Caniveau,” said he, “how are you getting along?”

The enormous farmer who, on account of his size, girth and stomach, felt a bond of sympathy for the representative of the Church, answered with a smile:

“Pretty well, Monsieur le cure, pretty well. And how are you?”

“Oh! I’m always well and healthy.”

“And you, Maitre Poiret?” asked the abbe.

“Oh! I’d be all right only the colzas ain’t a-goin’ to give much this year, and times are so hard that they are the only things worth while raisin’.”

“Well, what can you expect? Times are hard.”

“Hub! I should say they were hard,” sounded the rather virile voice of Rabot’s big consort.

As she was from a neighboring village, the priest only knew her by name.

“Is that you, Blondel?” he said.

“Yes, I’m the one that married Rabot.”

Rabot, slender, timid, and self-satisfied, bowed smilingly, bending his head forward as though to say: “Yes, I’m the Rabot whom Blondel married.”

Suddenly Maitre Belhomme, still holding his handkerchief to his ear, began groaning in a pitiful fashion. He was going “Oh-oh-oh!” and stamping his foot in order to show his terrible suffering.

“You must have an awful toothache,” said the priest.

The peasant stopped moaning for a minute and answered:

“No, Monsieur le cure, it is not the teeth. It’s my ear-away down at the bottom of my ear.”

“Well, what have you got in your ear? A lump of wax?”

“I don’t know whether it’s wax; but I know that it is a bug, a big bug, that crawled in while I was asleep in the haystack.”

“A bug! Are you sure?”

“Am I sure? As sure as I am of heaven, Monsieur le cure! I can feel it gnawing at the bottom of my ear! It’s eating my head for sure! It’s eating my head! Oh-oh-oh!” And he began to stamp his foot again.

Great interest had been aroused among the spectators. Each one gave his bit of advice. Poiret claimed that it was a spider, the teacher, thought it might be a caterpillar. He had already seen such a thing once, at Campemuret, in Orne, where he had been for six years. In this case the caterpillar had gone through the head and out at the nose. But the man remained deaf in that ear ever after, the drum having been pierced.

“It’s more likely to be a worm,” said the priest.

Maitre Belhomme, his head resting against the door, for he had been the last one to enter, was still moaning.

“Oh—oh—oh! I think it must be an ant, a big ant—there it is biting again. Oh, Monsieur le cure, how it hurts! how it hurts!”

“Have you seen the doctor?” asked Caniveau.

“I should say not!”

“Why?”

The fear of the doctor seemed to cure Belhomme. He straightened up without, however, dropping his handkerchief.

“What! You have money for them, for those loafers? He would have come once, twice, three times, four times, five times! That means two five-franc pieces, two five-franc pieces, for sure. And what would he have done, the loafer, tell me, what would he have done? Can you tell me?”

Caniveau was laughing.

“No, I don’t know. Where are you going?”

“I am going to Havre, to see Chambrelan.”

“Who is Chambrelan?”

“The healer, of course.”

“What healer?”

“The healer who cured my father.”

“Your father?”

“Yes, the healer who cured my father years ago.”

“What was the matter with your father?”

“A draught caught him in the back, so that he couldn’t move hand or foot.”

“Well, what did your friend Chambrelan do to him?”

“He kneaded his back with both hands as though he were making bread! And he was all right in a couple of hours!”

Belhomme thought that Chambrelan must also have used some charm, but he did not dare say so before the priest. Caniveau replied, laughing:

“Are you sure it isn’t a rabbit that you have in your ear? He might have taken that hole for his home. Wait, I’ll make him run away.”

Whereupon Caniveau, making a megaphone of his hands, began to mimic the barking of hounds. He snapped, howled, growled, barked. And everybody in the carriage began to roar, even the schoolmaster, who, as a rule, never ever smiled.

However, as Belhomme seemed angry at their making fun of him, the priest changed the conversation and turning to Rabot’s big wife, said:

“You have a large family, haven’t you?”

“Oh, yes, Monsieur le cure—and it’s a pretty hard matter to bring them up!”

Rabot agreed, nodding his head as though to say: “Oh, yes, it’s a hard thing to bring up!”

“How many children?”

She replied authoritatively in a strong, clear voice:

“Sixteen children, Monsieur le cure, fifteen of them by my husband!”

And Rabot smiled broadly, nodding his head. He was responsible for fifteen, he alone, Rabot! His wife said so! Therefore there could be no doubt about it. And he was proud!

And whose was the sixteenth? She didn’t tell. It was doubtless the first. Perhaps everybody knew, for no one was surprised. Even Caniveau kept mum.

But Belhomme began to moan again:

“Oh-oh-oh! It’s scratching about in the bottom of my ear! Oh, dear, oh, dear!”

The coach just then stopped at the Cafe Polyto. The priest said:

“If someone were to pour a little water into your ear, it might perhaps drive it out. Do you want to try?”

“Sure! I am willing.”

And everybody got out in order to witness the operation. The priest asked for a bowl, a napkin and a glass of water, then he told the teacher to hold the patient’s head over on one side, and, as soon as the liquid should have entered the ear, to turn his head over suddenly on the other side.

But Caniveau, who was already peering into Belhomme’s ear to see if he couldn’t discover the beast, shouted:

“Gosh! What a mess! You’ll have to clear that out, old man. Your rabbit could never get through that; his feet would stick.”

The priest in turn examined the passage and saw that it was too narrow and too congested for him to attempt to expel the animal. It was the teacher who cleared out this passage by means of a match and a bit of cloth. Then, in the midst of the general excitement, the priest poured into the passage half a glass of water, which trickled over the face through the hair and down the neck of the patient. Then the schoolmaster

quickly twisted the head round over the bowl, as though he were trying to unscrew it. A couple of drops dripped into the white bowl. All the passengers rushed forward. No insect had come out.

However, Belhomme exclaimed: "I don't feel anything any more." The priest triumphantly exclaimed: "Certainly it has been drowned." Everybody was happy and got back into the coach.

But hardly had they started when Belhomme began to cry out again. The bug had aroused itself and had become furious. He even declared that it had now entered his head and was eating his brain. He was howling with such contortions that Poirat's wife, thinking him possessed by the devil, began to cry and to cross herself. Then, the pain abating a little, the sick man began to tell how it was running round in his ear. With his finger he imitated the movements of the body, seeming to see it, to follow it with his eyes: "There it goes up again! Oh—oh—oh—what torture!"

Caniveau was getting impatient. "It's the water that is making the bug angry. It is probably more accustomed to wine."

Everybody laughed, and he continued: "When we get to the Cafe Bourbeux, give it some brandy, and it won't bother you any more, I wager."

But Belhomme could contain himself no longer; he began howling as though his soul were being torn from his body. The priest was obliged to hold his head for him. They asked Cesaire Horlville to stop at the nearest house. It was a farmhouse at the side of the road. Belhomme was carried into it and laid on the kitchen table in order to repeat the operation. Caniveau advised mixing brandy and water in order to benumb and perhaps kill the insect. But the priest preferred vinegar.

They poured the liquid in drop by drop this time, that it might penetrate down to the bottom, and they left it several minutes in the organ that the beast had chosen for its home.

A bowl had once more been brought; Belhomme was turned over bodily by the priest and Caniveau, while the schoolmaster was tapping on the healthy ear in order to empty the other.

Cesaire Horlville himself, whip in hand, had come in to observe the proceedings.

Suddenly, at the bottom of the bowl appeared a little brown spot, no bigger than a tiny seed. However, it was moving. It was a flea! First there were cries of astonishment and then shouts of laughter. A flea! Well, that was a good joke, a mighty good one! Caniveau was slapping his thigh, Cesaire Horlville snapped his whip, the priest laughed like a braying donkey, the teacher cackled as though he were sneezing, and the two women were giving little screams of joy, like the clucking of hens.

Belhomme had seated himself on the table and had taken the bowl between his knees; he was observing, with serious attention and a vengeful anger in his eye, the conquered insect which was twisting round in the water. He grunted, "You rotten little beast!" and he spat on it.

The driver, wild with joy, kept repeating: "A flea, a flea, ah! there you are, damned little flea, damned little flea, damned little flea!" Then having calmed down a little, he cried: "Well, back to the coach! We've lost enough time."

MOTHER SAUVAGE

Fifteen years had passed since I was at Virelogne. I returned there in the autumn to shoot with my friend Serval, who had at last rebuilt his chateau, which the Prussians had destroyed.

I loved that district. It is one of those delightful spots which have a sensuous charm for the eyes. You love it with a physical love. We, whom the country enchants, keep tender memories of certain springs, certain woods, certain pools, certain hills seen very often which have stirred us like joyful events. Sometimes our thoughts turn back to a corner in a forest, or the end of a bank, or an orchard filled with flowers, seen but a single time on some bright day, yet remaining in our hearts like the image of certain women met in the street on a spring morning in their light, gauzy dresses, leaving in soul and body an unsatisfied desire which is not to be forgotten, a feeling that you have just passed by happiness.

At Virelogne I loved the whole countryside, dotted with little woods and crossed by brooks which sparkled in the sun and looked like veins carrying blood to the earth. You fished in them for crawfish, trout and eels. Divine happiness! You could bathe in places and you often found snipe among the high grass which grew along the borders of these small water courses.

I was stepping along light as a goat, watching my two dogs running ahead of me, Serval, a hundred metres to my right, was beating a field of lucerne. I turned round by the thicket which forms the boundary of the wood of Sandres and I saw a cottage in ruins.

Suddenly I remembered it as I had seen it the last time, in 1869, neat, covered with vines, with chickens before the door. What is sadder than a dead house, with its skeleton standing bare and sinister?

I also recalled that inside its doors, after a very tiring day, the good woman had given me a glass of wine to drink and that Serval had told me the history of its people. The father, an old poacher, had been killed by the gendarmes. The son, whom I had once seen, was a tall, dry fellow who also passed for a fierce slayer of game. People called them "Les Sauvage."

Was that a name or a nickname?

I called to Serval. He came up with his long strides like a crane.

I asked him:

"What's become of those people?"

This was his story:

When war was declared the son Sauvage, who was then thirty-three years old, enlisted, leaving his mother alone in the house. People did not pity the old woman very much because she had money; they knew it.

She remained entirely alone in that isolated dwelling, so far from the village, on the edge of the wood. She was not afraid, however, being of the same strain as the men folk—a hardy old woman, tall and thin, who seldom laughed and with whom one never jested. The women of the fields laugh but little in any case, that is men's business. But they themselves have sad and narrowed hearts, leading a melancholy, gloomy life. The

peasants imbibe a little noisy merriment at the tavern, but their helpmates always have grave, stern countenances. The muscles of their faces have never learned the motions of laughter.

Mother Sauvage continued her ordinary existence in her cottage, which was soon covered by the snows. She came to the village once a week to get bread and a little meat. Then she returned to her house. As there was talk of wolves, she went out with a gun upon her shoulder—her son's gun, rusty and with the butt worn by the rubbing of the hand—and she was a strange sight, the tall "Sauvage," a little bent, going with slow strides over the snow, the muzzle of the piece extending beyond the black headdress, which confined her head and imprisoned her white hair, which no one had ever seen.

One day a Prussian force arrived. It was billeted upon the inhabitants, according to the property and resources of each. Four were allotted to the old woman, who was known to be rich.

They were four great fellows with fair complexion, blond beards and blue eyes, who had not grown thin in spite of the fatigue which they had endured already and who also, though in a conquered country, had remained kind and gentle. Alone with this aged woman, they showed themselves full of consideration, sparing her, as much as they could, all expense and fatigue. They could be seen, all four of them, making their toilet at the well in their shirt-sleeves in the gray dawn, splashing with great swishes of water their pink-white northern skin, while La Mere Sauvage went and came, preparing their soup. They would be seen cleaning the kitchen, rubbing the tiles, splitting wood, peeling potatoes, doing up all the housework like four good sons around their mother.

But the old woman thought always of her own son, so tall and thin, with his hooked nose and his brown eyes and his heavy mustache which made a roll of black hair upon his lip. She asked every day of each of the soldiers who were installed beside her hearth: "Do you know where the French marching regiment, No. 23, was sent? My boy is in it."

They invariably answered, "No, we don't know, don't know a thing at all." And, understanding her pain and her uneasiness—they who had mothers, too, there at home—they rendered her a thousand little services. She loved them well, moreover, her four enemies, since the peasantry have no patriotic hatred; that belongs to the upper class alone. The humble, those who pay the most because they are poor and because every new burden crushes them down; those who are killed in masses, who make the true cannon's prey because they are so many; those, in fine, who suffer most cruelly the atrocious miseries of war because they are the feeblest and offer least resistance—they hardly understand at all those bellicose ardors, that excitable sense of honor or those pretended political combinations which in six months exhaust two nations, the conqueror with the conquered.

They said in the district, in speaking of the Germans of La Mere Sauvage:

"There are four who have found a soft place."

Now, one morning, when the old woman was alone in the house, she observed, far off on the plain, a man coming toward her dwelling. Soon she recognized him; it was the postman to distribute the letters. He gave her a folded paper and she drew out of her case the spectacles which she used for sewing. Then she read:

MADAME SAUVAGE: This letter is to tell you sad news. Your boy Victor was killed yesterday by a shell which almost cut him in two.

I was near by, as we stood next each other in the company, and he told me about you and asked me to let you know on the same day if anything happened to him.

I took his watch, which was in his pocket, to bring it back to you when the war is done.

CESAIRE RIVOT,

Soldier of the 2d class, March. Reg. No. 23.

The letter was dated three weeks back.

She did not cry at all. She remained motionless, so overcome and stupefied that she did not even suffer as yet. She thought: "There's Victor killed now." Then little by little the tears came to her eyes and the sorrow filled her heart. Her thoughts came, one by one, dreadful, torturing. She would never kiss him again, her child, her big boy, never again! The gendarmes had killed the father, the Prussians had killed the son. He had been cut in two by a cannon-ball. She seemed to see the thing, the horrible thing: the head falling, the eyes open, while he chewed the corner of his big mustache as he always did in moments of anger.

What had they done with his body afterward? If they had only let her have her boy back as they had brought back her husband—with the bullet in the middle of the forehead!

But she heard a noise of voices. It was the Prussians returning from the village. She hid her letter very quickly in her pocket, and she received them quietly, with her ordinary face, having had time to wipe her eyes.

They were laughing, all four, delighted, for they brought with them a fine rabbit—stolen, doubtless—and they made signs to the old woman that there was to be something good to eat.

She set herself to work at once to prepare breakfast, but when it came to killing the rabbit, her heart failed her. And yet it was not the first. One of the soldiers struck it down with a blow of his fist behind the ears.

The beast once dead, she skinned the red body, but the sight of the blood which she was touching, and which covered her hands, and which she felt cooling and coagulating, made her tremble from head to foot, and she kept seeing her big boy cut in two, bloody, like this still palpitating animal.

She sat down at table with the Prussians, but she could not eat, not even a mouthful. They devoured the rabbit without bothering themselves about her. She looked at them sideways, without speaking, her face so impassive that they perceived nothing.

All of a sudden she said: "I don't even know your names, and here's a whole month that we've been together." They understood, not without difficulty, what she wanted, and told their names.

That was not sufficient; she had them written for her on a paper, with the addresses of their families, and, resting her spectacles on her great nose, she contemplated that strange handwriting, then folded the sheet and put it in her pocket, on top of the letter which told her of the death of her son.

When the meal was ended she said to the men:

“I am going to work for you.”

And she began to carry up hay into the loft where they slept.

They were astonished at her taking all this trouble; she explained to them that thus they would not be so cold; and they helped her. They heaped the stacks of hay as high as the straw roof, and in that manner they made a sort of great chamber with four walls of fodder, warm and perfumed, where they should sleep splendidly.

At dinner one of them was worried to see that La Mere Sauvage still ate nothing. She told him that she had pains in her stomach. Then she kindled a good fire to warm herself, and the four Germans ascended to their lodging-place by the ladder which served them every night for this purpose.

As soon as they closed the trapdoor the old woman removed the ladder, then opened the outside door noiselessly and went back to look for more bundles of straw, with which she filled her kitchen. She went barefoot in the snow, so softly that no sound was heard. From time to time she listened to the sonorous and unequal snoring of the four soldiers who were fast asleep.

When she judged her preparations to be sufficient, she threw one of the bundles into the fireplace, and when it was alight she scattered it over all the others. Then she went outside again and looked.

In a few seconds the whole interior of the cottage was illumined with a brilliant light and became a frightful brasier, a gigantic fiery furnace, whose glare streamed out of the narrow window and threw a glittering beam upon the snow.

Then a great cry issued from the top of the house; it was a clamor of men shouting heartrending calls of anguish and of terror. Finally the trapdoor having given way, a whirlwind of fire shot up into the loft, pierced the straw roof, rose to the sky like the immense flame of a torch, and all the cottage flared.

Nothing more was heard therein but the crackling of the fire, the cracking of the walls, the falling of the rafters. Suddenly the roof fell in and the burning carcass of the dwelling hurled a great plume of sparks into the air, amid a cloud of smoke.

The country, all white, lit up by the fire, shone like a cloth of silver tinted with red.

A bell, far off, began to toll.

The old “Sauvage” stood before her ruined dwelling, armed with her gun, her son’s gun, for fear one of those men might escape.

When she saw that it was ended, she threw her weapon into the brasier. A loud report followed.

People were coming, the peasants, the Prussians.

They found the woman seated on the trunk of a tree, calm and satisfied.

A German officer, but speaking French like a son of France, demanded:

“Where are your soldiers?”

She reached her bony arm toward the red heap of fire which was almost out and answered with a strong voice:

“There!”

They crowded round her. The Prussian asked:

“How did it take fire?”

“It was I who set it on fire.”

They did not believe her, they thought that the sudden disaster had made her crazy. While all pressed round and listened, she told the story from beginning to end, from the arrival of the letter to the last shriek of the men who were burned with her house, and never omitted a detail.

When she had finished, she drew two pieces of paper from her pocket, and, in order to distinguish them by the last gleams of the fire, she again adjusted her spectacles. Then she said, showing one:

“That, that is the death of Victor.” Showing the other, she added, indicating the red ruins with a bend of the head: “Here are their names, so that you can write home.” She quietly held a sheet of paper out to the officer, who held her by the shoulders, and she continued:

“You must write how it happened, and you must say to their mothers that it was I who did that, Victoire Simon, la Sauvage! Do not forget.”

The officer shouted some orders in German. They seized her, they threw her against the walls of her house, still hot. Then twelve men drew quickly up before her, at twenty paces. She did not move. She had understood; she waited.

An order rang out, followed instantly by a long report. A belated shot went off by itself, after the others.

The old woman did not fall. She sank as though they had cut off her legs.

The Prussian officer approached. She was almost cut in two, and in her withered hand she held her letter bathed with blood.

My friend Serval added:

“It was by way of reprisal that the Germans destroyed the chateau of the district, which belonged to me.”

I thought of the mothers of those four fine fellows burned in that house and of the horrible heroism of that other mother shot against the wall.

And I picked up a little stone, still blackened by the flames.