

## THE SHE-WOLF

### PROLOGUE

#### *I. The Apparition*

The sun was already brightening the pieces of greenery spread out over the sides of the hill: charming deformed and gnarled old tree trunks, tall and slim silver birches standing boldly, wearing with pride their trembling crown of leaves, robust oak trees, and chestnut trees raising their dense branches like a roof. Above the thick and solid covering, there rose little columns of smoke that twisted in light spirals, burned blue by the sun. It wasn't the opaque and thick vapor that the smoke stacks our factories now put out. It was the timid breath of the industry at a young age. Each little column of smoke marked the location of a thatched cottage, the humble factory of those rosy wooden shoes, curved in the Chinese fashion, pot-bellied like some tall ships, that are the glory of the Rennes Forest.

Count Rohan-Polduc,<sup>1</sup> our *Monsieur*, as they called him in the thatched cottages, said that his manor house had been built by Saint Guéhéneue. He was a younger member of the Ducal house of Brittany, Count of Porhoët, Viscount of Rennes, and first bearer of the proud Rohan name, in the 9th century of the Christian era. If the good gentleman was mistaken, it wasn't by very much, because the manor house seemed as old as the world, with its narrow turrets piled haphazardly, its little donjon covered by vegetation and its roofs pointed like magicians' bonnets. The slates of the roofs, white with lichen, let joubarbe and moss, resembling long hair, grow everywhere. The walls, composed of blocks of granite, were still strong, but under the black mantle of ivy which enveloped them, there could be seen the wrinkles of old age and the wounds of the soldier. The crevasses, the injuries of time, the breeches, were glorious scars of the sape and the mine.

The large moat, which must have been deep at the time the manor kept up its pretensions to the title of fortress, circled the manor house. It had kept just enough water to be used as a playground for a large gaggle of geese and ducks. However, the portion of the moat facing the avenue situated in front of the moat had been kept full so that the masters, the servants, and the cattle and sheep herds could enter at street level. The moat itself was crossed by a little rustic bridge which ended at a large breach made in the rampart. That breach had its history.

In 1670, when Louis XIV and the Count Rohan Polduc were both young, the Breton gentleman took a fancy to make war against the most powerful monarch in Europe. Rohan was a Protestant, like all those of his race; ducal blood ran in his veins and his genealogy contained more old parchment than was needed to establish his right to the throne of Brittany. But Louis XIV had enough, and more than enough, Rohans at his Court at Paris already: Rohan-Soubise, Rohan-Guéméné, Rohan-Rochefort, as well as the Rohan-Chabots whose comic lives lent themselves so well to the gazetteers of the 17th century. Louis XIV perhaps never suspected that, in the depths of the Rennes forest, there was a deposed prince who claimed to dispute with him a portion of his kingdom. That was the time when Madame the Marquise de Sévigné,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also called Rohan-Pouldu. This little-known branch is a junior branch of the Rohan-Gué-de-l'Isle branch and appeared around 1500. It was named after the estate of Pouldu near Pontivy (nowadays Saint-Jean-Brévelay). Its best-known member is Emmanuel de Rohan-Polduc, Magister Magnus of the Knights Hospitaller from 1775 to 1797. The branch became extinct in 1800.

<sup>2</sup> Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné (1626-1696), French aristocrat, remembered for her letter-writing.

the charming Breton woman with so much wit and so little patriotism, scoffed at the poor, savage Bretons. Proud bursts of laughter would have been heard at Versailles if some prophet had predicted that the first thunder clap announcing the Revolution yet to come was already brewing in the distance of that cloudy sky, and that the first cry of “liberty!” would be shouted by those gentlemen with unkempt hair and calloused hands, as good with the plow as with the sword, for whom the very amiable Marquise kept her most disdainful smiles.

But it was still a long way away, the French Revolution. Honoré d’Albert, Duke of Chaulnes,<sup>3</sup> younger brother of the Connétable of Luynes, Governor of the province of Brittany, and the biggest man of his century, sent two companies of soldiers against the Polduc peasants who were entrenched in the moors of d’Auray. There was a battle and Rohan was beaten. The Duke of Chaulnes, taking advantage of that opportunity, confiscated the immense Polduc domain and the Bishops’ palace of Tréguier. He set aside that ancient Rohan manor house, whose walls had been breached by the King, as a retreat for the great-nephew of Queen Anne.

But these things had happened a long time ago. That was now 1705; the great Sun King was sixty-seven years-old. The Duke of Chaulnes was dead, and his successor as well, and His Serene Highness, the Count of Toulouse, the second legitimate son of Louis XIV,<sup>4</sup> was now Governor of the Province of Brittany. Rohan-Polduc, grown inactive because of age, kept himself aloof in his diminished household. He lived near his daughter, an angel of beauty, the sight of whom very likely inspired him with thoughts of resignation and peace.

To the right of the rustic bridge, the rampart turned toward the west and enveloped some abandoned buildings that flanked a balcony in the form of a turret. There was a legend of love about that balcony. That part of the chateau had a melancholy and a more solitary aspect. Since César de Rohan, the only son of the old Count, had died, no one had gone over the threshold of his living quarters; nevertheless, behind the curtains that the wind moved about, through the holes in the frame, there was very often a light shining all night, a pale light that sometimes showed two shadows on the moving curtains.

The lark awakens from the depth of the shadows of that dark Breton forest just as under the shades of Italy. On awakening, the Breton lark chirps the eternal, sad song which greeted the farewells of Romeo and Juliet. Toward daybreak, a window opened softly. Two human forms appeared on the massive overhang of the balcony. The breeze carried the sound of a kiss. Then the light was extinguished.

Everything was still asleep in the manor house. There was a thick haze over the moats, which had been changed into a marsh. The ramparts and the group of lodgings remained drowned in that darkness, while the fantastic remains of the highest weathervanes were already becoming damp in the pale light that came from the west. That strange beam of sharp keeps, of gables, of gothic turrets, seemed to come out of the night, as in the past Saint Guéhéneue had made them come out of the earth. Usually, at that morning hour, when Rohan Polduc did not unleash his hunting dogs, everything was solitude and silence around his house. But today, the main road and the paths were filled as if it were a festival like the one held at Bouëxis-en-Forêt. There was laughter and chatting under the grove. There were people on foot, a holly stick in their hands, carrying full sacks on their shoulders. Others were on horseback, on small horses used for everything, that ambled along, their head lowered, walking in the dust, and letting their riders’ wooden shoes trail in the dust on the ground. Others nudged their lazy oxen pulling their carts filled with bundles of hay. All of that moved along in the wide paths between the black hedgerows and the dark thorn bushes where the genet slipped in its golden pods here and there. This was the 25<sup>th</sup> of June, the day

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<sup>3</sup> In actual fact, it was Charles d’Albert d’Ailly (1625-1698), third son of Honoré d’Albert, third Duke of Chaulnes, who could not stem the tide of a peasant revolt in Brittany 1675. He demanded intervention from the royal armies and his violence towards the rebels alienated him from his Breton noble allies and gained him the public nickname of “fat pig.” He remained in command until 1689.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Alexandre de Bourbon, Comte de Toulouse (1678-1737), a legitimated prince of the blood royal, son of Louis XIV and his mistress Françoise-Athénaïs, Marquise de Montespan, appointed Governor of Brittany in 1695.

prior to Saint John's day, and the *tenants*<sup>5</sup> of the Rennes country had kept the custom of paying their rent at that time.

People walking, people on horseback, and the rich in carts, met each other in front of the moat, and went together into the open lawn which ended at the breach. No one thought of lifting the door knocker with the head of a ram, suspended on the right panel of the door. They waited. The little girls, who were carrying bouquets of hawthorn, sat down informally on the wet grass beside their flowers made into bundles. The unharnessed carts were arranged in order, while the thin, puny-looking oxen grazed on the lawn, many times cropped already by Rohan's herds. Boys and tenant farmers lit their pipes and gathered in an *idle circle*, as it's called over there, their big hats on their head, their sticks attached to their boutonnières, serious, taciturn and letting no sign of impatience show. While the female tenants knitted heavy wool, the young girls chatted, looking out of the corner of their eye at the western part of the rampart, around which the haze seemed to be condensed to give a final battle to the sun's vanquishing rays. They pointed with their finger at the heavy granite balcony, which extended beyond the walls, and very low. They said, shivering:

"That's where it was!"

In the distance, there was the sound of a hunting horn in the forest. The men listened.

"Steward Feydeau got up early this morning," said Jouachin, a tenant with a gray beard, who added, shaking his head with a sad expression: "I have seen the time when the Rohan domain was so long and so large, that, from here where we stand, the Rohan fanfare could never be heard."

A second, closer sound of the hunting horn came from toward the south. The visage of Jouachin became flushed and there was no boy around him who didn't close his fists, frowning.

"Rohan is asleep," the good man slowly pronounced. "The people of France would do much if Rohan awakened."

The little girls were interested in nothing but the mysterious balcony.

"It's there! It's there!" they repeated, "that a woman in white and a dark horseman... Every day that God gives!"

And those who passed from the other side of the moat heard a horse trot from the depth of the moats.

"The horseman is César de Rohan, the poor deceased young monsieur; that's what's sure! And the woman in white is Jeanne, the beautiful Jeanne de Combourg, his fiancée, dead at twenty."

"And the window which opens by itself?" asked some timidly skeptical voice. "And the horse that trots in the forest?"

"Ah! Lord Jesus! Does anyone know how to explain those things from the other world?"

"The first blast of the trumpet, however," Jouachin said, "came up from the depths of the Sangle. The second came from the Wolf's Den.<sup>6</sup> And I would certainly recognize the sound of the horn of Steward Feydeau. That's not him who is hunting at the Sangle."

"He, or someone else," said a somewhat sharp voice that came out of the fog. "The people of France amuse themselves where they wish and when they wish!"

"Yaumi! Cousin Yaumi!"<sup>7</sup> all the tenants of Rohan shouted at one time. "The handsome cobbler."

Cousin Yaumi, hidden by the fog where every night the phantom horse trotted, could not yet be seen. He finally showed himself on the other side of the moat, which he walked along side. Cousin Yaumi wasn't very tall, but his vest of felt cloth covered large shoulders. A wool cap was pulled down right to his little sleepy and cunning eyes. He had neither a horse nor a cart, and the flat bag that he carried in his hand would have fit in the pocket of his vest. Yaumi, the good-natured Cobbler, went across the lawn, balancing himself on his knotty legs and went right into the middle of the circle. His pipe was out of tobacco. He first lit it, and then said good morning politely to Cousin Jouachin, to Cousin Josais, to

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<sup>5</sup> Term used for those who held their land under various forms of land tenure as opposed to those who held it directly from the King or from another nobleman or senior member of the clergy.

<sup>6</sup> See *The White Wolf*.

<sup>7</sup> There is a Yaumi in *The White Wolf* who or may not be the same character.

Cousin Mathelin, to Cousin Julot, as well as to a half-dozen other cousins whose names haven't come down to us.

He made a protective gesture to young and old, male and female cousins, and gave the closed chateau door a sly look. In another land, that look would have been followed by a question, but the countryman of Northern Brittany is prudent like the Normand, his neighbor. He hardly knows how to speak straightforwardly, nor, ordinarily, how to look you in the face. On important occasions, when once his hat has passed beyond the mills, you'd have to crack his head open right down to his teeth to force him to lower his eyes or to make him be silent.

"You're coming like this from the depths of the Sangle?" Jouachin asked.

"Yes, yes," the friendly maker of wooden shoes answered. "And isn't that a fog that has chosen its place? On the other side of the moats, you can't even see the end of your nose; over here, the weather is as clear as water running over rocks. All that, you see, it's frost for Saint-Peter's day, and that harms the buckwheat!"

"And the broad beans too," added Mathelin, "that's for sure!"

"Here's what's happening," interrupted old Jouachin. "Don't make us wait. Someone is hunting over there, according to you, in the depth of the Sangle?"

"The Count of Toulouse, our governor, is a handsome young prince," answered Yaumi, who looked around with a cunning glance.

Young girls and peasants had stood up so as to hear better, and the Rohan farmers had instinctively tightened their circle.

"That's the least way that these handsome young princes amuse themselves," Yaumi answered. "It amuses him to hunt, the Count of Toulouse! It's not his fault if he finds the Rohan domain in his path..."

"Then it is the Count of Toulouse who is hunting over there?"

Yaumi's voice became muffled and his eyes turned toward the granite balcony, where the sun, piercing the fog, made reddish reflections.

"There are hunts and hunts," he grumbled. "Hunts in the daytime and hunts at night... Hunts in the forest, hunts in the house... Pray God that the Count of Toulouse limits himself to hunting in the underbrush of Rohan!"

For several minutes a vague and constantly increasing murmur was heard inside the chateau. It was like the awakening of the old manor house. Voices called to each other and answered each other. The paving of the courtyard resounded with the shock of heavy wooden shoes filled with straw. The dogs in the kennel were barking and the Rohan horses, which smelled the little Breton mares, dispersed on the lawn, whinnied at the depth of the stables.

Just at the moment when every mouth opened to ask for an explanation of the enigmatic words of Yaumi, a key was inserted in the lock, then the heavy wooden bar slid outside the notch made into the wall. The right side of the door with the five wolf heads on it rolled slowly on its hinges. A woman about fifty years-old, wearing a round tight bonnet made of black wool, from which there escaped thick strands of her hair already becoming gray, appeared on the threshold and seemed to count the crowd of tenants with a look. There was no tenant who didn't remove his hat, even if it was very little. Tenant farmers and young girls also made the same reverence. And everyone pronounced with one voice this solemn greeting:

"Good Morning to you, Dame Michou Guitan!"

Dame Michou Guitan wore her distaff on one side like a valiant soldier who never took off his sword. She had a camisole worn right up to her chin and to which she had attached an apron of blue material. A skirt with red and black stripes revealed her knitted undergarments, lost in the immense rose wooden shoes lined with sheep skin. She was a beautiful country woman in every sense of the word. Her demeanor was serious and gentle. She had a little beard on her chin and the beginning of a moustache. When she smiled, which often happened despite her importance, on both sides of her mouth, two round gaps appeared which seemed made in her teeth with a gimlet. To know the true origin of these gaps, it was enough to look at the belt of Dame Michou Guitan's apron, where a short and venerably blackened

pipe had been hung. Against the ball of that pipe the copper seeds of a long piece of willow branch suspended from her shoulder, and produced very audible music when she walked.

“Good day to you!” she said, bowing her head gravely. “A good Saint-Jean’s day to you and for your harvests! Is my boy Josselin with you?”

“We haven’t seen him, Dame Guitan,” Jouachin answered.

“As to that,” said Yaumi with an innocent expression, “it would mean that your boy may have spent the night out, since the door opened only a minute ago.”

“I know very well,” he said to one side, throwing a rapid glance toward the western rampart, “I know very well that there is a little door that opens onto the willow trees at the end of the moat.”

Cousin Yaumi saw nothing but the fog that extended like an opaque tablecloth over that part of the landscape. However, it lifted little by little, and the highest limbs of the willow trees which were swaying in the breeze could be seen. Those trunks came from a piece of land forming the extension of the former pits, turning to the west of the manor and going to disappear behind the ramparts, passing precisely under the famous balcony. The willow trees were separated from the lawn by a hedge of badly tended thorns. It extended for a distance of twenty or thirty feet, bordered by the public enclosure under which the vestiges of masonry could be seen. Then the ground dropped away in an abrupt descent to the bottom of the valley. A hardly visible path ran the length of the moat and followed the slope of the hill through the tufts of brambles.

Dame Michou Guitan, instead of standing aside to allow a passageway for the Rohan tenant farmers, remained on the threshold, unmoving and completely lost in thought. She put her hand over her eyes, and her gaze, passing over the heads of the crowd searched the edge of the forest. Just then, a noise was heard at the side of the moat; it was like a door slowly opened, creaking on its rusty hinges. The high branches of the willow trees were moving about. Everyone saw and heard that. Dame Michou Guitan trembled. No one budged however except the personable Yaumi, who ran behind the carts right up to the hedge of thorns.

“Come in, good people; come in,” said the Dame quickly, with a trembling voice. “Rohan would reproach me if he knew that his farmers were waiting at the door of his house.”

It was evident that she was trying to divert the curiosity already aroused. But she was too late. There could be seen, passing through the fog that had lifted, a human form enveloped in a long veil. The apparition drifted beyond the willow trees, and it seemed that the breeze carried it to the mountain slopes. At the same time, the gallop of a horse was muffled by the thick grass. It happened as quickly as a thought. Rohan’s tenant farmers remained there, their mouths wide open, and the little girls were wondering if it wasn’t a dream. But they saw Dame Michou Guitan, very pale, surreptitiously kiss the cross on her rosary. The good woman motioned to the farmers to come in; it seemed she had lost the power of speech. The farmers silently obeyed; each one thinking: *Cousin Yaumi will tell us what it’s about!*

What was it? A postern opening from the other side of the rampart? The passage of a human being across the willow trees? The gallop of an invisible horse? But, finally and strangest of all, was Dame Michou Guitan’s emotion; that was more than was needed to start conversations. Despite the fog, more impenetrable than even the night, housewives, and little girls, boys and tenant farmers, calculated that the apparition had to have passed ten feet from them, at the most.

When everyone had crossed the threshold of the main door, the closing noise following Dame Michou Guitan, Yaumi rubbed his hands together and began to laugh very softly.

“Yes, good! Very good!” he said, scratching his head under his wool cap. “Master Alain will give me something for that!”

He was very strong, the handsome wooden shoe-maker, and he would certainly have sworn by his great gods that there was no one there to see him or to hear him. So, he let out a frightened cry when he felt himself held back just as he was going to leave his observation post. He turned around quickly. A tall young man, with a pale and intelligent face crowned with long black hair, had stood up to face him from the other side of the hedge.

“Ah! Ah!” said Yaumi, who tried to smile. “Is that you, Master Josselin?”

The young man wore a jacket cut in the fashion of the Rennes forest country people, but made of good black cloth. His breeches were of velvet. He jumped across the hedge and put both his hands on Yaumi's shoulders.

"The good Dame Michou asked about you nearly an hour ago," continued Yaumi, who was trying to compose his facial expression.

Josselin looked straight at him.

"The good Dame Michou was asking about you a while ago," repeated Yaumi, who didn't know what else to say.

"Listen to me well," interrupted Josselin. "I need to talk to you!"

There was nothing at all in those words, but the tone of the young man contained such apparent menace that Yaumi, robust and accustomed to country fights, considered himself warned.

"I'm listening," he said, flexing his muscles and already bending his knees.

"I want to tell you," continued Josselin, "that you are wasting your time coming to spy on this side here. You saw nothing!"

"Thank God!" grumbled the handsome shoe-maker. "I am not blind however!"

"You saw nothing!" repeated the young man, who was frowning.

"I'll say what I saw, young Master," shouted Yaumi. "You don't yet have a fist strong enough to scare me. I saw and recognized the girl."

Josselin's eyes lit up; his cheeks remained pale; his left hand left Yaumi's shoulder to grab him violently by the throat. At the same time, his right hand reached inside his jacket, from which he drew a hunting knife, the blade shining and freshly sharpened.

Cousin Yaumi dropped to his knees.

"You saw nothing!" Josselin repeated for the third time.

"That's God's truth!" repeated the handsome shoe-maker, more dead than alive. "I saw nothing at all! Nothing at all!"

Josselin pushed him away with his foot and slowly walked down the road to the main door.