

CHAPTER I

The Abandoned Shack

One sunny May morning, the picturesque village of Le Faouët, located in the very heart of Brittany, saw the arrival of a woman whose grey cloak and thick veil failed to hide her remarkable beauty and perfect, graceful figure.

The woman, whose name was Véronique, took a hurried lunch at the local inn. Then, just before noon, she begged the owner to look after her bag, asked a few questions about the surrounding countryside, and walked off.

Just outside the village, the main road branched into two directions, one leading to Quimper, the other to Quimperlé. Choosing the former, the woman walked down into a hollow, climbed out, and saw, to her right, another, smaller road with a post bearing the inscription: *Locriff, 3 kilometers.*

“This is the place,” she muttered to herself.

Yet, after glancing around, she was surprised she didn’t see what she was looking for, and wondered if she had misunderstood the instructions.

There was no one near her, or even in sight, as far as the eye could see—only the quiet Breton countryside, with its tree-lined meadows and undulating hills. Not far from the village, rising amidst the budding greenery of spring, was a small country house, with a grey facade and all its shutters closed. At noon precisely, the angelus bells pealed, followed by complete peace and silence.

Véronique sat down on the short grass, took a letter from her pocket and smoothed out the many sheets, one by one. The first page was headed:

AGENCE DUTREILLIS *Private Inquiries. Discretion Guaranteed.*

Next was her address: *Madame Véronique, Dressmaker, Besançon.*

The letter itself read:

Dear Madame:

It is with great pleasure that I am able to tell you that I have fulfilled the two commissions you were kind enough to entrust to me. I have never forgotten the conditions under which I was first able, fourteen years ago, to lend you my assistance, at a time when your life had been darkened by the tragic events you surely recall. It was I who gathered all the facts pertaining to the death of your father, M. Antoine d’Hergemont, and your beloved son, François. This was my first success in a career which has since afforded me many others.

It was I who, at your request, took the necessary steps to protect you from your husband’s hatred and, if I may say so, his passion, by securing your admission to a Carmelite convent. Lastly, it was also I who, when you became convinced that a life of retirement and prayers was no longer in your best interests, found you a modest occupation as a dressmaker in Besançon, far from where you had spent your childhood and the few months of your married life. You had the inclination and the need to work in order to move on and to forget. You were bound to succeed; and you have, indeed, done so.

Now, to address the matter—the two matters—that you asked me to investigate.

First, what became of your husband, Alexis Vorski, Polish by birth, according to his official birth certificate, and son of a king, according to his own declarations? I will be brief. Suspected of being a spy at start of the war, he was imprisoned in a camp near Carpentras. He subsequently managed to escape, fled to Switzerland, returned to France, was arrested again, and, this time, formally charged with spying for Germany. It seemed inevitable that he would be sentenced to death, but he managed to escape once

more, finding refuge in the Forest of Fontainebleau. Police reports state that he was eventually stabbed to death by person or persons unknown.

I am reporting the unvarnished truth, Dear Madame, knowing your contempt for this man, who so abominably deceived you. I also suspect that you already know most of these facts from the newspapers, but were unable to verify their authenticity.

I can now set your mind at rest: I have seen the death certificate. There is no doubt that Alexis Vorski lies buried in Fontainebleau.

Permit me, Dear Madame, to comment in passing upon the circumstances of his death. You will no doubt remember that your late husband was obsessed with a strange prophecy that you quoted to me on several occasions. Vorski was unquestionably gifted with a superior intelligence and exceptional energy, but cursed with a savage and superstitious mind, easy prey to a host of phantasms and fears; among these was the prophecy in question, which he had heard from a person allegedly well versed in the Occult and which was supposed to control his fate:

“Vorski, son of a king, you will die by the hand of a friend and your wife will be crucified!”

I can't help but chuckle, Dear Madame, as I write these words. Crucified indeed! Crucifixion has been out of fashion for well over a thousand years, so I don't think you have anything to fear—but what of the dagger that ended your husband's life? Was it held by “the hand of a friend” as the prophecy foretold? I suppose we will never know for certain...

Véronique dropped the letter for a moment. She found M. Dutreillis' pretentious style and familiar pleasantries rather irritating. Also, Vorski's tragic image continued to haunt her. She experienced a brief shiver of fear at the hideous memory of the man, but she composed herself, and read on:

I now come to my other commission, the more important of the two, because it is about the present when the first concerned only the past.

May I first summarize the facts as you reported them to me? Three weeks ago, on a Thursday evening, on one of those rare occasions when you take a break from the tiresome, yet praiseworthy monotony of your life, you took your employees to the local cinema. The film showing that night was A Breton Legend, and during it, you were struck by a puzzling detail. During a scene showing a band of pilgrims traveling on foot along a small, deserted country road, you saw a shack in the background. It had nothing to do with the action and was obviously there purely by accident, but something extraordinary caught your attention. On the tarred boards of the old door were three letters, drawn in chalk by hand: V. d'H.—the very same three letters which you used to sign your most intimate correspondence before your marriage, and which you have not used once in the last fourteen years! Véronique d'Hergemont! There was no mistake possible. Two capitals separated by the small “d” and the apostrophe. And, even more puzzling, the bar of the H was extended as a flourish under the first two letters, just as you used to write it!

It was the stupefaction caused by this surprising coincidence that convinced you, Dear Madame, to contact me and retain my services. They were, of course, yours for the asking, and you must have known that I would be just as effective today as I was in the past. And I have indeed succeeded in finding the answer to your question.

What you must do, Dear Madame, is take the night train from Paris to Quimperlé. From there, rent a car and drive to the village of Le Faouët. If you have time, you may stop to visit the beautiful Chapel of St. Barbe, which stands perched on the most incredible site, and inspired the Breton Legend film. At Le Faouët, take the Quimper road on foot. At the top of the first hill, just before the path to Locriff, inside a semicircular area surrounded by trees, you will find the shack in question, with the inscription that you saw in the movie. There is nothing distinctive about it. It is empty. There is a half-rotten plank inside that serves as a bench. The roof consists of a worm-eaten framework, which lets the rain inside. There isn't even a floor! It's clear that it was purely by accident that it appeared in that scene in the movie. I will end my report by mentioning that A Breton Legend was shot last September, which means that the inscription is at least eight months old.

That is all, Dear Madame. My two commissions have now been fulfilled. I am too modest to describe the efforts and means I employed to accomplish them in so short a time, but for which you will certainly believe that the sum of 500 francs, which is all that I propose to charge you, is of little significance.

I beg to remain, Dear Madam, etc.

Véronique refolded the letter and sat for a few minutes, pondering the emotions which it aroused in her, painful ones like all those connected with her awful marriage. One, in particular, had survived, and was still as powerful as when she had tried to escape it by taking refuge in a gloomy convent. It was the certainty she felt, that all her misfortunes, the deaths of her father and of her son, were the result of the sin she had committed by falling in love with Vorski in the first place. True, she had later fought against that mad passion, and had not married him until she had been forced to, to protect her father from her fiancé's merciless vengeance. Nevertheless, she had once loved Vorski, even if briefly. She had succumbed to his brutal entreaties, and this, which now seemed an unforgivable weakness, had left her with a remorse that time had failed to dampen.

"Enough musing," she finally said. "I have not come here to shed tears over the past."

The desire for information, which had brought her all the way from Besançon, restored her strength, and she rose even more resolved to act.

"*Just before the path to Locriff... Inside a semicircular area surrounded by trees,*" Dutreillis' letter had said. She must have passed the shack without even noticing it. She quickly retraced her steps and, almost immediately, she saw, to her right, the clump of trees which had previously hidden it from her view.

As she approached, Véronique saw that it was an old shepherd's or laborer's hut, crumbling and falling to pieces from the weather. She went up to it and saw the inscription. Washed by the rain and worn by the sun, it was much less clear than it had been in the film. But the three letters, *V d'H*, were still visible, as was the flourish. She even noticed, underneath, something which M. Dutreillis had not mentioned: an arrow and a number: 9.

She became more agitated. Though no attempt had been made to imitate her actual handwriting, it certainly was her signature. But who could have drawn it there, on a deserted shack, in this part of Brittany where she had never before been?

Véronique no longer had a single friend in the world. Thanks to a series of unhappy circumstances, her entire past had vanished with the deaths of all those whom she had known and loved. How, then, was it possible for her signature to have survived? Above all, why was it here, on this deserted building? What did it mean?

Véronique slowly walked around the shack. There were no other visible marks there, or on the surrounding trees. She remembered that M. Dutreillis had opened the door and found nothing inside. She determined to make certain that she, too, would leave no stone unturned.

The door was closed with a simple wooden latch, attached by a couple of screws. She lifted it. Strangely, she noticed that it required no effort on her part—neither physical, nor mental—to pull the door towards her. Yet, she felt that this seemingly inconsequential gesture was about to usher her into a world which she already dreaded.

"Don't be silly," she said. "What's stopping me?"

She pulled sharply.

A cry of horror escaped her. There was a man's dead body inside the shack! At the very moment she saw it, she also noticed something very peculiar: one of the dead man's hands was missing!

It was an old man, with a long, grey beard and long white hair falling around his neck. The blackened lips and the color of his swollen skin suggested that he might have been poisoned. There were no traces of injury on the body, except for the missing hand, which had been cleanly severed above the wrist, some days before. His clothes were those of a Breton peasant, clean, but threadbare. The corpse was seated on the ground, the head resting against the bench, the legs drawn up.

Véronique noted all these things in a semi-aware fashion. They would later resurface in her memory, but, for the moment, she only stood there, trembling, her eyes staring before her, stammering:

“A body! A dead body!” she whispered.

Suddenly, she wondered if, perhaps, the man was not quite dead. But, touching his forehead, she shuddered at the contact of his icy skin.

Still, this action roused her from her torpor. She resolved to return at once to Le Faouët to report her discovery to the authorities. But first, she decided to examine the corpse, looking for clues to its identity.

The man’s pockets were empty. There were no labels on his clothes. When she shifted the body in order to complete her search, the head dropped forward, dragging the rest of the corpse with it, uncovering the underside of the bench.

There, she saw a sheet of rolled up paper. She picked it up and unfolded it. Before she could finish doing so, what she saw caused her to shake.

“Oh, My God! Oh, my God!” she stammered.

She summoned all her strength to calm herself and look at the paper with eyes that could see and a brain that could understand.

Still, the most that she could achieve was to stand there, deadly still. During those few seconds, through the ever-thickening red mist that seemed to shroud her vision, she was able to make out a drawing in blood-red ink, representing four women crucified on four trees.

In the foreground, the first crucified woman, the central figure, her body stark under its threadbare clothing, her features distorted with the most dreadful pain imaginable, but still recognizable—was herself! Without a shadow of a doubt, it was she—Véronique d’Hergemont!

Above her head, the top of the cross bore, after the ancient custom, a scroll with a plainly legible inscription: the same three initials, underlined with the flourish: *V. d’H. Véronique d’Hergemont!*

A spasm ran through her from head to foot. She drew herself up, turned on her heel and, stumbling from the shack, fell onto the grass in a dead faint.

Véronique was an energetic, healthy woman, with a well balanced mind. No trial, not even her marriage or the deaths of her father and her son, had ever affected her mental and physical harmony to the extent that the drawing in blood-red ink had done. It required exceptional, unforeseen circumstances, combined with the fatigue of two nights spent traveling by train, to cause her to so completely lose her nerve.

Still, her panic lasted no more than two or three minutes, at the end of which her mind once more was lucid and brave. She stood up, went back inside the shack, picked up the roll of paper and, with unspeakable anguish, but eyes that saw and a brain that understood, looked at it again.

She first examined the details, the significance of which had escaped her at first. On the left was what looked like a poem of fifteen lines, composed of block letters, clumsily written.

Some of the writing had been erased or washed away by the water, but a few words were still visible. She read:

“Four women crucified.

“Thirty coffins.

And at the bottom:

“The God-Stone which gives life or death.”

The poem was surrounded by a frame consisting of two perfectly straight lines, one in black, the other in red ink; above it, there was, also in red, a sketch of two sickles fastened together with a sprig of mistletoe under the outline of a coffin.

The right-hand side, by far the more important, was filled with the drawing of the four crucified women, which gave the sheet, with its adjacent column of text, the appearance of a page, or rather the copy of a page, from some medieval grimoir, in which the subjects were drawn in a rather primitive style, ignoring the basic rules of anatomy and perspective.

The other three crucified women were shown in diminishing sizes against the horizon. They wore traditional Breton costume and headgear, not unlike those of the Alsatian women, consisting of a large black bow, the two wings of which stood out on the sides. In the middle was the dreadful illustration from

which Véronique could not remove her terrified gaze. It was the main cross, the trunk of a tree stripped of its lower branches, with the woman's two arms stretched to the right and left of it.

Her hands and feet were not nailed, but fastened by cords wound as far as the shoulders and the thighs. Instead of the Breton costume, the woman purporting to be her wore a sheet which fell to the ground, lengthening the slender outline of a body already emaciated and in pain.

The expression on her face was harrowing; an expression of resigned martyrdom and melancholy grace. It certainly looked like her face as it had been when she was twenty. Véronique remembered it well from all the gloomy hours she had spent gazing in a mirror at her hopeless eyes and overflowing tears.

About her head was the very same wave of thick hair, flowing to the waist in symmetrical curves: And above it was the accursed inscription: *V. d'H.*

Véronique spent a long time thinking, questioning the past, and gazing into the darkness, in order to find some kind of connection between what she had just seen and any event buried in the memory of her youth. But her mind remained desperately dark, without a glimmer of light. Of the words she had read, of the drawing she had seen, nothing whatsoever meant anything to her, or seemed the least comprehensible.

She examined the rolled sheet of paper again and again. Then, slowly, she tore it into tiny pieces and threw them to the wind. When the last scrap had been carried away, her mind was made up. She pushed the body back inside the shack, closed the door and walked quickly back towards the village, in order to report the incident, as was her legal duty.

But, when she returned an hour later with the mayor of Le Faouët, the local gendarme, and a large group of sightseers attracted by her statements, the shack was empty.

The body had disappeared!

Véronique felt so shocked that it was impossible for her to answer questions, or to dispel suspicion and doubt, so she did not even try. The inn-keeper was there. She asked him which was the nearest village that she could reach if she followed the same road, and if, by doing so, she would come to a train station that would enable her to return to Paris?

She was given the names of two villages: Scaër and Rosporden. She ordered a carriage to bring her bag and overtake her on the road, then set off alone, on foot, protected against any ill feelings only by her natural elegance and grave beauty.

The road was long—miles and miles long. But such was her haste to be done with these incomprehensible events, to recover her tranquility, and to forget what had happened, that she walked with great strides, quite oblivious to the fact that this wearisome exertion was unnecessary, since she had a carriage following her.

She went up hill and down dale, and hardly thought at all, refusing to look for a solution to all the riddles that had just been laid before her. She was vaguely aware that it was the past that was resurfacing into her life, and she was horribly afraid of it. To her, the past included her abduction by Vorski and the deaths of her father and her child. She wanted nothing to do with it. She only sought to return to the simple, humble life which had been hers in Besançon. There were no sorrows there, no dreams, no memories to haunt her; she did not doubt that, amidst the small daily habits which enfolded her, she would soon forget the deserted shack, the mutilated body of the man, and the dreadful drawing with its mysterious poem.

But, a little while before she came to the market-town of Scaër, as she heard the sound of a horse trotting behind her, she saw, at the junction of the road that led to Rosporden, a broken wall, one of the remnants of a dilapidated house.

And on this wall, above an arrow and the number *10*, she again saw the fateful inscription: *V. d'H.*