

VI

The Black Huntsman—for it was certainly him, to judge by appearances, so that is what we shall call him—remained motionless in the middle of the road, like some colossal guardian spirit set to defend the entrance to the black and mysterious valley against mere mortals.

He was, indeed, of truly gigantic stature, of a sort one no longer finds in Northern Germany. His horse, which was as black as he was, appeared to the Baron to be larger and stronger than other animals of its species. But if Monsieur de Nossac's first reflexive moment was fearful, he was brave enough to master his terror and emotion completely within the space of a few seconds. The time it took him to reach the Huntsman at the gallop, brief as it was, sufficed for him to recover all his composure. When he found himself no more than 20 paces away, he brought his mount to an abrupt halt and called out to the strange horseman: "Hey, master—give way, if you please."

The Huntsman did not reply, but he urged his horse forward in his turn and came to meet the Baron.

A second flash of lightning ploughed through the clouds, briefly illuminating the two horsemen as they came face to face, permitting them to look at one another.

"Well?" demanded Monsieur de Nossac, in a tone that was courteous but firm and frosty. "Will Your Infernal Lordship let me pass?"

"Ah!" said the Huntsman, with a mocking laugh. "Do you believe that you have recognized me, Milord?"

"By damn!" said the Baron. "I've heard the beginning of your story, and you've just told me the end, all in a prettily-rhymed ballad. You're the Black Huntsman."

"Just as you're the Baron de Nossac."

The Baron started with surprise and alarm on hearing his name pronounced. "Bah!" he said, immediately composing himself. "It's entirely natural that a son of the Devil should know the Grand Armorial of France by heart."

"And you have a fine enough place therein, Monsieur, if I remember rightly. It dates from the Crusades, I believe?"

"Indeed. Would it be inconvenient to Your Lordship if I continued on my way?"

"My dear Baron," the Huntsman replied, in a familiar tone. "You're at the edge of my domain; I own this valley and 20 leagues of forest to either side. I also have a rather fine castle ten leagues from here. You see that I'm a perfectly presentable lord, who would not cut a paltry figure at the court of any sovereign, be it my cousin in Russia or my cousin in Prussia."

"I congratulate you," said the Baron politely. "You have superb estates. Except that, if you would allow me to give you some advice..."

"Oh, don't apologize. I know by heart the work of one of your poets of the last century, Nicolas Boileau—a clever man, Baron, whom, I foresee, will be very badly mistreated 150 years hence by a school of Romantics who will have the defect of possessing more genius than sense.ⁱ I remember one rather remarkable verse: *Be grateful for the advice that is given to you*, and so on."

"Then I shall permit myself to suggest to you, Milord, that you light the roads of your domain a little better. It's as dark hereabouts as a Jansenist's soul."ⁱⁱ

"You think so?" the Black Huntsman asked, earnestly.

"And I suppose that it would be easy enough to abstract a few of the brands from the stove at which His Majesty your father warms himself, since he grew tired of freezing in Heaven."

"My father is always cold," the Huntsman said, dryly. "But then again, his guests are so numerous that he could not frustrate them in that manner." He paused to laugh mockingly, then resumed: "However, Baron, if, when you are one of them, you would care to make me a gift of your portion of the fire to serve me as street-lights and lanterns, I shall accept the gift with great pleasure!"

"My regret has no bounds that it cannot be immediate," the Baron replied, in the same bantering tone, "for I dread that my guide might break his neck before much longer, he is so fearful already..."

"Your guide, Baron, is by the fireside at this very moment."

"What do you mean?"

"Look."

A third lightning-flash seemed to obey the Black Huntsman's mental command, and made the tortured rocks and dark thickets of the gorge resplendent within the radius of a quarter of a league. The Huntsman

extended his hand; the Baron turned around. He explored and examined the road, searching... and saw nothing. The *znapan* had vanished.

The Baron exclaimed in surprise. "What has happened, then?"

"He's beside the fire you wanted to impoverish just now, in order to light my domains. He's an imp, whom my father lends me from time to time."

"Well," murmured the Baron, "I'm in a fine mess now."

"I shall serve as your guide, my dear fellow."

"Will you let me pass, then?"

"That depends. Yes, if it's to come to my home; no, if you wish to continue on your way."

"My dear infernal sir," the Baron said, phlegmatically, "either you're a tasteful trickster, whereupon I shall ask your permission to assure myself whether my sword is the same length as your hunting-knife..."

"Ah!"

"...Or you really are the son, the nephew or some other relative of the Devil, in which case..."

"In which case, Baron...?"

"Here's a weapon which might perhaps deliver me from you." And the Baron placed his hand on his forehead, ready to make the sign of the cross.

The Huntsman burst out laughing. "My dear Baron," he said, "I have Satan for a father, but my mother was a maiden of noble birth and a good Catholic. I was baptized 917 years ago, during the reign of Charlemagne, in the Cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, so you may sheathe your sign of the cross."

The Baron's hand fell back. "On what condition will your lordship condescend to let me pass?" he asked.

"I've just told you that I'm 917 years old—a fine and youthful old age, as you see, but I'm prodigiously bored. You're the wittiest gentleman in the French court, and I've sworn to have you under my roof for a few days. Can you refuse an old man that?"

"Have you drinkable wine?" Nossac asked, with superb calmness.

"I've a 1500 Chambertin, a 1630 Aï, a 1463 Johannisberg, and..."ⁱⁱⁱ

"Enough, Milord! I'm yours."

"Very well," said the Black Huntsman, "let's be on our way then! And while Satan, my father, refuses me a firebrand, we'll have torches!"

The Black Huntsman put his horn to his mouth, and brought forth a powerful and raucous melody, which rather resembled one of those storm-winds that bend the crowns of an entire forest beneath their forceful flight. Immediately, the surrounding thickets lit up, and a dozen horsemen, as red as their master was black, surged forth, with blazing resin torches in their hands.

Decidedly, the Baron thought, I really am dealing with the Devil.

VII

The torch-bearers were uniformly dressed in red cassocks and culottes; their faces, masked like their master's, were concealed beneath red velvet.

Behind one of these masks the Baron thought he could see embers sparkling that were adequate replacements for eyes. *Ah!* he thought, *the Black Huntsman lied—there's an atom of the paternal stove there.* The stare seemed truly infernal, moreover, and the French gentleman required all his bravery to resist being frightened by the sight of this black colossus surrounded by these red phantoms, all lit by the flickering and sinister light of the resin torches. The Baron's heart did not beat any more rapidly, though, and his forehead remained smooth and calm.

"My dear future host," he said to the Black Huntsman, "I see that you have an impressive household, and I wish that I were already in the manor to appreciate the rest."

"We cannot get there before this evening."

"Bah! When one has the Devil for a father, one ought to be able to cover 18 leagues in two hours."

"Doubtless—but my name is sufficient indication that I hunt every day, and I intend to hunt today."

"Ah!"

"I take your skill as a hunter on trust, Baron..."

"You're a thousand times too kind."

"My sons are scouting the woods. I'll call them."

"You have sons, then?"

"Four, Baron."

"I thought you were celibate, Milord."

"You haven't heard the final verse of my ballad, then?"

And the Black Huntsman's resounding voice intoned the last lines of the strange song that had apprised the Baron of his existence and presence:

*But that's not so, for the great Black Huntsman
Came howling about the manor a while ago
He said to the lord: "Tonight I want
To lie with your daughter all night long."*

"Of course," said the Baron, laughing. "But that doesn't tell us anything."

"Wait," said the diabolical hunter. "Listen." And he resumed, with a note of ardent joy in his voice:

*The old castellan has died of sorrow,
Found rigid, with his hand on his heart,
While the monks in the cloister sang matins;
But his daughter and the Black Huntsman
Have already fled far from the manor;
They're in love, it's said—and when silver bells
Resound in the distance of the evening,
Singing is heard in the deep of the woods,
A voice that is powerful, a voice that is loud,
Makes the mountains tremble and the plain shake,
A voice which says: From the chatelaine's
Three confinements, four black hunters are born.*

"So your lordship has four sons?" said the Baron, quite phlegmatically.^{iv}

"And a daughter, my dear gentleman."

"God!" cried Monsieur de Nossac, gaily. "I'm reassured. I have such little fondness for drinking without female company that I would have hesitated to swill your marvelous vintages while faced by your bearded and masculine visages."

"You shall have a woman at your right hand, Baron."

"Your lordship's daughter?"

"Yes, Baron."

"All right! Is she as black as you?"

"Not at all; she's white."

"So much the better!"

"She has an immense dowry."

"So she's to be married, then?"

"Undoubtedly; I've committed her to you."

"To me?"

"To you, my dear gentleman."

"Of course!" cried the Baron. "Better her than another—and my friends at Versailles will be amused to see me as the prospective son-in-law of the Devil's son."

"It was for that reason, Baron, that I sent you the subaltern imp who led you here."

"So it was a trap?"

"Not at all. To prove it, if you refuse to become my son-in-law, there's still time for you to retrace your steps. I'll take you back to Marienwerder and I shall hunt alone."

The Baron hesitated for a minute. "What if your daughter is ugly?" he said.

"If you find her so, you may refuse."

"By my faith!" Nossac said, cheerfully. "1500 Chambertin, 1463 Johannisberg and a pretty girl is well worth the trouble of an adventure. I'll follow it to its end! Whether they lead to the Devil or to God, to Paradise or the Inferno, vintage wine and beautiful women deserve no less."

The Black Huntsman put his horn to his lips and blew a fanfare so loud and powerful that the thickets and crags trembled, and the echoes, near or distant, multiplied in a howling chorus.

As the last echo died away, the same fanfare began again, simultaneously and with similar vigor, from four different directions in the surrounding woods. Almost immediately, four horsemen, as black as the Huntsman and similarly masked, with similar horns to their lips, appeared in the south and north, the sunrise and the sunset. Their eyes of flame shone from behind their masks.

"These are my sons," said the Huntsman.

Two of them were as big as their father, as well-built and as tall as he, but beneath the mask of one of them a beard protruded that was already grey, while the other had one that was uniformly black and sleek, testifying to his youth. The first might have been 20 years older than the second.

The two others, less tall and less strongly-built, were exactly the same height, and they both had blond beards. They were twins.

They approached their father one after the other, bowing to the Baron and speaking to the Black Huntsman in an unknown language that resembled neither German, nor Slavonic, nor Russian—a language entirely different from those employed by mere mortals of either hemisphere.

"North Wind," said the Huntsman to the eldest, "what spoor have you found?"

"A buffalo, father."

"And you, South Wind?" he said, addressing the second.

"A bear, father."

"And you, Winter Wind?" the Huntsman went on, addressing one of the twins.

"A wild boar," replied Winter Wind.

"And you, Night Breeze?"

"An elk."

Oh! thought the Baron, *here are four hunters who have singular names.*

"You think so?" said the Huntsman, replying to the Baron's thought. "It's perfectly simple, though. I called the first North Wind because he scouts the forest to the north, the second South Wind because he comes from the south, the third Winter Wind because the winter wind hereabouts blows from the west, and the fourth Night Breeze because the nocturnal exhalation that stirs the thickets arrives from the Orient and carries the scent of the eastern forest."

"That's quite ingenious," murmured Monsieur de Nossac.

"Each of them," the Huntsman continued, "has another name, but that is a saint's name that my wife gave them, which they only bore when the priest baptized them."

"Ah!"

"Now I cannot find another," the Huntsman said. "All the men who see me have a habit of dying of fright."

"Am I so very brave, then?" said the Baron

"So brave," replied the Black Huntsman, "that I believe I have finally found a son-in-law. I've been searching for ten years."

"Indeed?" said the Baron, disquieted. "How old is your daughter, then?"

"Twenty-five years of age."

"No more?"

"That's quite enough."

"And she's mortal, is she?" the Baron continued.

"Alas!"

"Ah—so much the better," he murmured, relieved.

"Why so much the better?"

"Because a wife sometimes becomes rather tedious after eight or ten years, and might become unbearable were she eternal."

"Be tranquil," said the Black Huntsman, sadly. "I alone am immortal; my children are subject to the common law. For proof, look at North Wind's grey beard. He's 50. South Wind is only 30, and his beard is black. Night Breeze and Winter Wind are scarcely 18, and theirs are blond."

"Very well—I'm reassured."

"Now, Baron," the Black Huntsman continued, "it's time to hunt. Choose—what do you fancy today: a bear, a buffalo, an elk or a boar?"

The Baron reflected. "A bear or an elk—both are pleasant prospects."

"In that case, it shall be both."

“In one day?”

“Why,” said the Huntsman, pointing towards the east, which was lightly tinted by a mixture of white and opal, “it’s scarcely four o’clock, and it isn’t raining. The conditions are right.”

The Baron raised his eyes to the sky in his turn. The leaden vault of dark clouds that had earlier been opaque and heavy had broken in a thousand places, allowing the appearance of patches of ash-blue sky, and the lightning-flashes that had ploughed through them incessantly were dying away one by one, like lamps running out of fuel. His son’s torches had doubtless prompted Satan to make economies in his lighting.

“Right, then!” cried Monsieur de Nossac. “Until now, my dear host, in spite of everything marvelous that had occurred around me, I was unable to believe in this role of the Devil’s son that you play so well, but I am now constrained to admit that you must certainly be a supernatural being. When someone commands the storm and disperses the clouds in the sky within a few seconds...”

“He must be the Devil, or at least his son, must he not?”

“Exactly.”

“Since you require the supernatural to convince you, Baron, I shall provide it for you. We have plenty of horses and hunters here, but we lack hounds. Well, you shall see them.”

The Black Huntsman brought his terrible horn to his lips, and began his fanfare again.

As soon as the first notes sounded, an unparalleled storm rose up in the neighboring thickets: an infernal concert of baying, a gigantic chorus of deep and high-pitched voices. The stunned Baron put both his hands to his ears, and cried: “Do you have 10,000 dogs, then?”

“Not 10,000, but 500 or 600. See for yourself.”

As he had shielded his ears, the Baron had instinctively closed his eyes; when he opened them, he perceived that the valley, half-lit by the torches and half by the first rays of dawn, was entirely covered in dogs, all linked together, divided into four packs and respectfully held by grooms entirely dressed in white, as the huntsmen were in black and the torch-bearers in red.

The first pack consisted of a 120 Finnish mastiffs, striped in black and fawn, as big as donkeys, with square heads, teeth as long as thumbs, and eyes that were bloodshot and inflamed. This was the bear-hunting pack. The second, for buffalo, had an equal number of Cape hunting-dogs, equally fiery and just as large, but slimmer and less shaggy than the mastiffs. The third, for wild boar, had been recruited from the magnificent C ris dogs of Saintonge, one of the most handsome breeds of large Western dogs.^{vi} The fourth, finally, which was for elk, was even more handsome. It was composed of 80 harriers, all black, of that fine Breton breed—almost extinct today—as tall as Corsican horses, with heads as long as a king’s foot and claws hooked like a cat’s, which the Barons of the Middle Ages employed to hunt peasants who had taken refuge in the woods, refusing to submit to the *glebe* and the *corv e*.^{vii}

The Black Huntsman threw his horn over his shoulder again, and the dogs abruptly fell silent.

The Baron studied them admiringly. “My splendid host,” he said to the Black Huntsman, “won’t you include a few of these superb animals in your daughter’s dowry?”

“All of them, if you wish, Baron.”

“By God!” exclaimed Monsieur de Nossac, “I’d be content with a dowry like that. The King of France would give me five or six of his provinces for them.”

“To the hunt, Baron! To the hunt! Here’s daylight coming, and I cannot see the Sun.”

“Why is that?”

“Because we’re on bad terms, that’s all.”

“But if you hunt every day?”

“My forests are too dark for its light to penetrate them. To the hunt!”

He took up his horn again and made as if to sound the departure, but he paused. “Baron,” he said, “your horse is worn out. Dismount—here’s another.”

The Baron looked up and saw a magnificent stallion, as white as snow, richly caparisoned, held by the bridle by one of the torch-bearers. He did not wait for the injunction to be repeated, and leapt from one saddle to the other without touching the ground. Immediately, it seemed to him that an unknown and unparalleled force screwed him to the saddle of his new mount, and that the stirrups gripped him like a vice, clamping his feet in place.

Was that illusion or reality?

The fanfare resounded—that colossal fanfare which resembled an earthquake. The dogs were released, to hurtle into the forest, and the horsemen bounded after them. The Baron was seized by vertigo. He shivered yet again as he felt himself transported by a horse whose hooves seemed not to touch the ground,

so rapid and hectic was its course. He saw the Black Huntsman galloping at his side, conversing with his four sons in their unknown language.

The Black Huntsman had told the truth; his forests were dark, and the red light of the torches, which ran through the trees in every sense of the term, like a frenzied dance of phantoms and will-o'-the-wisps, was scarcely sufficient to bring an imperfect illumination to the profound darkness. The dogs set an infernal pace, and seemed now to have but one formidable voice as they gave forth together. From time to time, the Baron saw them appearing and disappearing in the distance—followed close behind by the red-clad horsemen, their torches held in their fists like pikes or blunderbusses—hot on the heels of a gigantic bear, which sometimes turned round, mingling its terrible and heavy roars with their howling harmony. At the same time, the five hunters, with their horns in their mouths, sounded a signal no less resonant than their famous fanfare.

Then the noise of the hunters' horns, united with the baying of the pack, became so loud that a delirium soon took hold of Monsieur de Nossac. He thought he was having a long and painful dream.

He witnessed the death of the bear, then heard the call and set off after the elk without being fully conscious of what he was doing, what he heard of what he saw...

Finally, after ten hours of that infernal race, he suddenly saw the torches go out, disappear and vanish along with the red-clad horsemen who carried them. When the dark vault of foliage under which he had been running since morning was succeeded by the starry vault of the sky, brightly lit by the rays of the Moon, he thought he was emerging from a burdensome nightmare, and that he had slept for a century. He had passed from one night to the next without having seen the daylight that separated them.

In the distance, on a precipitous crag overhanging a torrent, was a gigantic and somber mass, dappled here and there with points of luminosity. "There's my castle," said the Black Huntsman, extending his hand. "The lamps are lit, and we're expected."

VIII

The Baron followed the direction of the Black Huntsman's hand with his eyes, examined the castle rapidly, and then turned round.

The dogs, grooms and torch-bearers had all disappeared.

The Huntsman's four sons were galloping to either side, while the Devil's son took the lead.

What had become of that strange crowd, that nameless admixture of men, horses and dogs?

The sudden solitude and instantaneous silence, succeeding the tumultuous hurly-burly that had surrounded them shortly before in a matter of seconds, had a sobering effect on the Baron, and he recovered all his composure.

Well, he thought, I'm definitely dealing with the Devil; there's no longer any doubt of that. What has happened to me is more than supernatural.

Despite their ten hours of steeplechasing, the horses did not seem to be out of breath. They were still galloping with fantastic speed. They crossed the interval of a league that separated the castle from the edge of the forest in 18 minutes or thereabouts, and soon paused at the edge of the torrent, which eroded and polished the crag on which it was proudly established. The torrent was copious and deep; it made a lugubrious noise as it ran.

The Baron could not see any bridge at first, but when he looked more attentively he noticed the trunk of a fir-tree extended across it, joining the two banks by means of its narrow surface.

"Are we to pass over that?" he asked, with a certain anxiety—for the water was roaring dully two fathoms below, in a fashion to chill the boldest of men with fear.

"Of course!" replied the Black Huntsman, vigorously urging his horse forward. It placed an assured foot on the narrow platform and set off across it at a trot. The four sons set off after their father. The Baron did not hesitate any longer. He spurred his mount, which also crossed at a rapid trot, without flinching over the abyss.

When all five of them had reached the other bank, the Black Huntsman turned around. Without quitting his saddle, he lowered himself to the ground like one of those circus riders who pick up a staff in the arena, at the gallop and without pause. Bracing himself with one hand on the pommel of his saddle, he seized the end of the fir-trunk, lifted it up despite its enormous weight, swung it momentarily into empty

space, then threw it down into the abyss, where it described a frightful somersault and plunged into the water with a loud splash.

"Here we are, at home," said the Black Huntsman, tranquilly.

The Baron shivered, marveling at that Herculean strength, then looked ahead. He was on a kind of terrace about eight feet wide, at the foot of a rocky peak supporting the imposing mass of the castle.

Unless these infernal horses have wings, Monsieur de Nossac thought, the ascent will be difficult.

The Black Huntsman resumed the head of the procession, and ten paces to the left brought him to the entrance of a sort of narrow, almost perpendicular stairway, which no pedestrian would have climbed without signing himself reverently several times over. Even so, the Devil's son's horse resolutely placed its feet on the first step, and commenced climbing at a rapid pace, striking myriad sparks from the polished rock, without ever flinching, as if steel crampons had suddenly sprouted from its iron shoes.

Good! thought the Baron, who was becoming accustomed to this succession of prodigies. *It appears that my host draws his horses from his father's stables. Only the inferno could produce their equals.*

This time, instead of bringing up the rear of the cortège, he moved ahead of the four sons and followed the Huntsman to the first step of the narrow stairway. The horse went up without any hesitation.

He's used to it, Monsieur de Nossac said to himself.

The stairway had 297 steps. The horses climbed them in ten minutes. The Baron and his hosts found themselves on a second platform, from which the walls of the castle rose up. It was a Gothic manor, with deep ditches cut out of the living rock, slender and pointed turrets, slim spires, sinewy and narrow arches, dull black loopholes, a gigantic belfry, a mossy roof, thick walls, formidable machicolations, rusty weathervanes groaning and screeching under the brutal caresses of the nocturnal wind, a coat-of-arms engraved on the main door, and subterranean passages a league in extent, hollowed out in the rock and corresponding mysteriously with the surrounding forests and plains.

The Baron, who was an amateur archaeologist, examined the castle attentively and found its style quite pure, with the exception of a few slight anachronisms that blended in quite well with the whole ensemble. Numerous lights were burning behind the colored panes of the arched windows. Opaque and semi-translucent shadows passed rapidly back and forth behind these same window-panes, but there was no noise—not a word nor a breath—to advertise the interior life and movement. The castle was as silent as the tomb.

The Black Huntsman halted in front of the drawbridge, which was raised, put his horn to his lips, and sounded the three blasts employed in the Middle Ages by knights errant asking for hospitality at an advanced hour of the night. The drawbridge was lowered, creakily, and the huntsmen passed over it. All five of them arrived in the courtyard of the manor, which was deserted. The Huntsman dismounted; his sons did likewise, and so did the Baron.

"Come, Baron," the Huntsman said, taking him by the arm. "I'm dying of hunger."

It seemed to the Baron that the Huntsman's hand was burning, and that it gripped him like a vice. He allowed himself to be drawn, and they climbed the steps of the *perron* side by side. The other four hunters came up behind them.

"What about the horses?" the Baron suddenly asked, turning round.

The horses had disappeared, without any stable-hand leading them away.

Damn! thought Monsieur de Nossac. *My adventure is assuming such proportions that if I were ever to tell the tale at Versailles, Richelieu himself would not be able to believe it.*

The door of the manor opened slowly, just as the drawbridge had been lowered, without anyone appearing. The Black Huntsman crossed the threshold, still holding the Baron by the arm. They came into a vast hallway lit by four torches fixed to the wall. There was a large staircase in the middle, with steps of black marble sewn with white tears, like the design on the coat-of-arms.

The Black Huntsman and his guest climbed the staircase, turned right on the first landing, and went into a room no less vast than the vestibule, similarly lit. Its black walls were speckled with silver tears. They went through this room, then another and another, all decked out in the same colors, and arrived in this manner at the manor's dining-room. In stark contrast to the others, this room was decked out in white, with black tears.

"I approve of the lachrymal variety," the Baron murmured.

In the middle of this room stood a sumptuously-furnished table, on which the most exquisite dishes were steaming, mirrored by wines so clear and so brilliantly colored that it was easy to see that the lord of the manor had not lied about their vintage.

No servants were present; the room was deserted—except that, in a corner, on a rostrum covered in black velvet, there was a coffin. At the sight of it, the Baron took a step back, and shuddered.

“That’s my wife’s coffin,” the Black Huntsman said, coldly.

“She’s dead, then?”

“For ten years.”

“And... she’s there?”

“Yes, of course. Look.”

The Huntsman drew the Baron forward; he followed without resistance. The Devil’s son led him to the coffin and lifted the mortuary drape.

A woman was lying cold and motionless within. She was young, to judge by the ebon color of her hair, whose curls streamed upon the snowy shroud; she was beautiful, if one studied the lower part of the face—for a mask like those worn by the hunters covered the upper part.

One might have thought that she was asleep, so well had her arms conserved the gentle suppleness of their joints, and so clearly visible were the blue veins beneath her translucent skin, which still appeared to enclose blood in full circulation.

“But she can’t be dead! It’s impossible!” the Baron exclaimed.

“She died ten years ago.”

“Ten years. And she’s conserved in this state?”

“It was my father who embalmed her.”

“But what age was she?”

“Sixty-nine.”

“One would have thought her scarcely 30!”

“My father returned her to this state in embalming her. He was in a good humor that day.”

“And you leave her here? You haven’t buried her?”

“No,” said the Huntsman, “for it requires the hand of a Christian to bear her into the ground.”

“You’re one, it seems to me.”

“Half only. It requires a pure Christian—I thought of you.”

Nossac shivered, and looked at himself in a Venetian glass that was facing him. He was very pale and his lips were quivering.

“To the table, Baron,” said the Black Huntsman. “I’m hungry.”

Nossac went to the place indicated by his host. The four sons placed themselves one beside another. Then the Baron observed that one empty place remained next to his and another next to the Huntsman. The door opened at that moment, and a woman came in.

It was a young woman of 24 or 25, blonde and dazzlingly beautiful. She had large blue eyes full of a vague and suave languor, a delicate pearly-pink mouth, small, slender diaphanous hands with tapering fingers, fairy-like feet that scarcely brushed the ground, and a supple, svelte figure replete with amorous undulations.

At the sight of her, the Baron released an exclamation of admiration. He forgot the terrors of his journey, the Black Huntsman, his silent and dejected sons, and the coffin set facing the table as if to diminish their appetite and forbid them any joy. He no longer saw or heard anything but the young woman, who made a circuit of the table, placing her rosy lips upon her father’s ebon forehead while saying to him: “Good day, dear Black Huntsman, my father,” and then going to each of her four brothers, kissing each of them on the forehead and greeting them by name. Then, she bowed deeply to the Baron, and came back to sit down to her father’s right.

“Here is your wife,” said the Black Huntsman.

The Baron thought that he could see, in the midst of these infernal hosts, Heaven opening up before him—but his intoxication was chilled and suddenly repressed to the utmost depths of his heart by a voice that resounded at the far end of the room, fresh and sonorous, but full of mockery.

The startled Baron raised his eyes, and saw the mortuary drape that covered the coffin rise as the corpse sat up.

“Baron de Nossac,” the dead woman said, “since you must bear me into the ground, you cannot refuse to serve as my cavalier this evening and escort me to the table. Come give me your hand.”

The Baron felt his hair bristle, while a cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He summoned his presence of mind and self-assurance to his aid in vain, and he would surely have fallen backwards if his bewildered eyes had not encountered the hypnotic, celestial and supplicant eyes of the young woman, which seemed to be saying to him: “Obey!”

He felt his fear ebb away then. He got up and marched resolutely towards the dead woman, who got down stiffly and impassively from her coffin, and he bowed to her with a courtesy redolent of the heyday of Versailles.

“Thank you,” said the dead woman, placing her icy hand in the Baron’s—who prickled and shuddered anew at that contact.

ⁱ Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711) was a poet, satirist and critic who termed himself (ironically) the *Régent de Parnasse*, thus entitling himself, rather perversely, to be reviled as the rule-maker of French Classicism—the school to which the Romantic Movement opposed itself. He was really nothing of the sort, although he formed a significant bridge between the contrasted work of the friend of his youth, Molière (who allegedly based the central character of *Le misanthrope* on him), and the friend of his later years, Racine. Boileau was always insistent that as a satirist—and, to the extent that he attempted to be one, a rule-maker—his sole objective was to be the scourge of bad writing. Ponson was perfectly well aware that Boileau would have considered him a bad writer, but it did not prey overmuch on his conscience.

ⁱⁱ The term “Jansenist” was often used as a label for any kind of heretic, and is used as a synonym of “Satanist” in the Paul Féval novel translated in a Black Coat Press edition as *Revenants* (see Note 5), which was probably one of the works that motivated Ponson to write *La baronne trépassée*. Nicolas Boileau had, however, been a Jansenist in the strict sense—his alleged misanthropism provided a model of the sect’s gloomy philosophy—and undoubtedly considered it to be a form of Christianity preferable to orthodox Catholicism.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chambertin is one of the finest French vintages, Johannisberg one of the most famous Rhenish wines.

^{iv} In the text, the Baron concludes at this point that the Black Huntsman has three sons rather than four; perhaps the mistake is his rather than Ponson’s, but there seems little point in leaving the error unaltered—the huntsman has said quite plainly that he has four sons.

^v There is some peculiar wordplay in this section, in which the remarkably-named sons report traces of some implausible quarries. *Brisée* [spoor] is phonetically reminiscent of *brise* [breeze]—a theme continued by *buffle* [buffalo], which recalls *bouffée* [gust] and perhaps by *ours* [bear], which might suggestive of *ouragan* [storm-wind]. The twins’ names are more similar in French than English, but not quite symmetrical; the former is called *Bise-d’hiver* and the latter *Brise-de-nuit*. *Elan* [elk] is much more familiar as a term for a bound of enthusiasm or a spirited temperament.

^{vi} Chiens Cérés were a breed of hunting-dog ancestral to the modern Poitevin breed. Saintonge was an ancient French province whose capital was Saintes; it is now part of the département of Charente-Inférieure.

^{vii} The *glebe* and the *corvée* were two of the more burdensome institutions of Feudalism. The former term refers to a plot of land which peasants had to work on behalf of the Church, the latter to labor on roads and other estate fixtures undertaken (without salary) on behalf of a liege-lord.