

Chapter I

One of Archbishop de Quélen's Soirées

Dinner had been taken at the Château de Conflans, the home of His Grace the Archbishop of Paris. It was not merely a priests' banquet; there were women present. Along the river bank on the road to Charenton, white dresses could be seen among the green lawns.

I don't know why that part of the Parisian countryside seems so sad. Are they not charming, those meadows where the Marne arrives to marry its waters with those of the Seine? Wine is gaiety, it is said; how is it that the ocean of wine that floods the town of Bercy does not enliven those heart-rending pastures in the slightest? Bacchus, whose praises are sung by our drunken poets, is there—can he not brighten up those mournful horizons? The Seine cannot contrive a smile while passing between them; the very trees seem sad. Ivry is sullen and sulky on one bank; on the other the park—which is so beautiful, in spite of the dismal pleasure-gardens on its edge, that its lawns should extend gloriously in the sunlight—is sulky and sullen behind its grey walls, at whose gate two sickly lions devoid of spirit or courage wrestle two boars which yawn as they defend themselves.

It is an exit. Parisian storytellers and chroniclers find the melancholy zone which starts at Charenton and extends as far as Bicêtre an ideal setting for their werewolves, brigands and phantoms. That flat country was a little less ugly in the past than it is today but it had a worse reputation in those days. As your aged uncles will tell you, nights thereabouts were full of horrors. Sabbaths were held—big ones—not far from the present site of Ivry railway station; the cemetery of the same name had not a single grave whose stone could keep it sealed, whether it was made of modern plaster or ancient cement. All the marble tombstones would raise themselves up at midnight, and whenever the darkness was briefly penetrated by the faint rays of the veiled moon, a long procession of the emergent dead could be seen to move slowly and silently upriver towards the monasteries of Vitry.

Archbishop de Quélen, as everyone knows, was not only a very eminent prelate but a perfect gentleman. His generosity towards the poor, an established historical fact, restrained his taste for luxurious and grandiose display, but his aristocratic heritage would not permit him to shut himself off from society. His receptions were carefully planned, especially those involving his closest friends. All shades of Royalist opinion would find an open and level field there, providing a lively opposition to the Restoration government in the very bosom of the House of Lords.

The events of our story took place in 1825; the Archbishop was then in his late forties, at the very height of his power as a primate of the Church of France and as a politician. In order that the glory surrounding him should lack for nothing, the Academy had also opened its doors to him.

This prelate—whose home some miserable wretches, who insulted the genuine people in taking the name of “the people,” came to burn the day after the Revolution of July 1830—followed a well-known custom. He had made it a rule that after each of his receptions he would distribute to the poor a sum equal to the cost of his feast. I have heard it said by men who have never given anything to anyone that he would have done better to give twice as much and not receive visitors at all—well, perhaps. It would be necessary, in order to put together a jury capable of judging these good souls, to take immediate exception to all incapacity, all envy and all hatred. That would be hard work, and the preliminary hearing for the selection of the jury could take a long time. I said “perhaps” because although it is good to give, to do good is often better, because the eventual result is greater. The Lord Bishop de Quélen's feasts were productive, from the viewpoint of his

benevolence. They rarely ended without misfortune having deducted its title from their serious and noble pleasures.

That was not all, however; Archbishop de Quélen also had another custom of which the Faubourg Saint-Germain and the court sometimes complained bitterly. He was a committed patron, always surrounded by an army of protégés, and he fought for these protégés with a courage that was as meritorious as it was redoubtable. His banquets were the peaceful tournaments where he broke lances on behalf of youth ardent to succeed, or old age eager to return after injury to the battle of life. I could name men in the highest places who would have good cause to remember the feasts of the Lord Bishop de Quélen.

It was an evening in September, in the same year that had seen the coronation of Charles X and the prodigious enthusiasm of Paris for the prince that Paris would, so soon afterwards, condemn to death in his absence. The weather was stormy and oppressively warm. Although night had begun to fall—dinner had been served at three o'clock, as was the fashion of the time—one thought of going back indoors. The park was a welcome refuge from the torrid heat. The shade of the tall trees was fairly cool, and a light breeze blew fitfully from the low and ponderous river, trying to stir their leaves. The majority of the guests had come together again in the vast hall of verdure that was then the pride of the district, although the railway line to Lyon has since destroyed it. The Archbishop, who was by birth the Comte de Quélen, was originally of Breton descent; he belonged to the family that descended from the ducal houses of Aiguillon, Chaulnes and La Vauguyon; he was related to the Chateaubriants, the Rohans, the Dreuxes, the Guébriants, the La Bourdonnays, the Coislins and the Goulaines. The gathering of all these names at the château, that evening, might have been a reunion of the general staff of François de Bretagne, or the court of Duchess Anneⁱ.

Such is the mysterious power of certain places that within that brilliant circle, in the glades where important theological questions had been debated from the days of François de Harlay, founder of the Château de Conflans, to those of the His Lordship de Talleyrand-Périgordⁱⁱ, the predecessor of the present archbishop, the talk was all of brigands, werewolves and phantoms. To the great amusement of the women—and of the men too—marvellous tales of revenants were told, in the spirit of pure theatre. On the stage where the audience had reassembled, the narrators turned their tricks, as comedians say, pointing their fingers this way and that at the very fields that had served as scenery for their supernatural dramas.

The crowd, as always, included both believers and skeptics. Under the Restoration, the Faubourg Saint-Germain had its little philosophical corner, and we know of more than one marquis of that era whose life was spent in imitation of Monsieur de Voltaire. In the matter of werewolves, incredulity is understandable, as it is with regard to phantoms, but brigands! That requires explanation. The skeptics on the subject of *brigandage* took refuge in a question of chronology. According to them, the day of the authentic brigand—the romanesque, picturesque, dramatic brigand—was done. The present era only had mere thieves—by way of recompense, however, the same skeptics contended that it did have a truly remarkable quantity of them.

Now, I defy you to take a ring of secular trees, about two or three hundred yards from an old château, and to place thereabouts, on a dark and stormy night, an assembly of thirty people discussing horrific or mystical subjects, without a kind of vague fear leaching into the conversational mix. I shall make a significant concession, granting you two levels of incredulity—indeed, I will go even further, if you wish and grant you unanimity of skepticism, including the narrator himself, provided that he is skilful, and I will still bet against you, so certain am I of what I say: the *frisson* of fear will arrive.

The *frisson* always arrives. It is not necessary, in the final analysis, for anyone in a circle affected by such a spirit to be a believer or victim of superstition. The *frisson* requires nothing but a powerful imagination. At the appointed moment, while the ordinarily timid restrain a tremor,

ⁱ (see Notes page 169.)

the strongly imaginative suffer nervous attacks and become faint. The “strongly imaginative” are typified by the brave boy who sings at the top of his voice in the darkness in order to allay his fears.

Among the more strongly imaginative members of the party on that evening at the Château de Conflans was a beautiful woman, very spiritual and very eloquent, whom we shall call the Princess de Montfort (because the actual names and titles of the persons in question must be protected; the Princess, having a leading role in our play, must be given the benefit of appearing incognito). She was there with her younger son, the Marquis de Lorgères, a tall, pale and handsome adolescent, who had been destined for the Church but had hesitated over his vocation. The Princess, who adored her younger son, affected a certain severity in her treatment of him, concealing her approval of the new route that he wished to take: the young marquis was ambitious to become a diplomat. The Princess was a slightly eccentric woman, but she was blessed with great intelligence and a good heart.

His Grace the Archbishop expressed no opinion on the matter of the supernatural or the persistence of *brigandage*, and seemed preoccupied with other matters. There were fors and againsts. His Lordship the Bishop Frayssinous of Hermopolis, who was then the Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, was an enthusiastic believer in the supernatural and had already recounted some fine tales. He was just beginning another when the Princess interrupted:

“It’s becoming cold. Shouldn’t we go back indoors?”

It would be inaccurate to speak of laughter bursting out. Laughter, especially of a mocking kind, does not “burst out” above a certain social level—but the Devil is everywhere and he never loses an opportunity. There was, in response to the words “it’s becoming cold,” a gentle murmur which tickled the ears of the Princess sufficiently to compel her to cry out: “Don’t think that I’m afraid! Let’s go!” The young and beautiful Comtesse de Maillé got up and came to drape a summer cloak over her aunt’s shoulders.

“Auntie,” she said, “let’s tremble for a little longer—it’s so nice!”

And everyone, in unison, cried: “Yes! Your story, My Lord Bishop!”

Instead of answering the general plea, the Bishop of Hermopolis remained silent for a moment. Then, in a restrained voice whose altered tone caused more than one heart to beat faster, he asked abruptly: “Are you not here, Monsieur von Altenheimer?”

There was another moment of silence. The moon displayed half her face between two storm-clouds that were as solid and heavy as slugs of lead. The Princess called her son to her side.

“Indeed I am,” a deep baritone voice replied, profound and full of metallic vibrations. “I am here, My Lord.”

The person who had spoken was unseen. His voice seemed to come from the trunk of a huge dead elm whose leafless branches took fantastic form in the sudden moonlight.

“Come closer, Baron, I beg you,” the Bishop replied, “and relate to us, according to the Galland formula, one of those tales that you tell so well.”

A man of tall and slender stature immediately moved into the middle of the circle. It seemed to the Princess, in the grip of her powerful imagination, that he had sprung from the earth, so sudden was his appearance. Nothing in the world could have renewed her determination to retreat to the château.

The light of the moon fell directly upon the newcomer, and it is a fact that everyone saw something extraordinary in him. That may also have been a result of the general predisposition. No one knew him; no one had seen him at dinner. He was doubtless one of those who had been invited purely for the after-dinner discussion; several other members of the audience were in the same situation. His costume, which was black from top to toe, was very formal, resembling that of the other laymen present. Why, then, use the word extraordinary? It was a mystery, quite inexplicable. Save for the pallor of his long Teutonic features, he was like all those who surrounded him, and yet the word was appropriate. The company was dumbstruck, as if a

trapdoor had opened to allow the passage of a fantastic individual. The moon scarcely had time to illuminate him before it was hidden by a large cloud and obscurity enveloped him again.

“I am at His Lordship’s disposal,” said the baritone voice.

“That is most kind,” replied the Bishop of Hermopolis, adding as he took the newcomer’s hand: “Ladies, I have the honor of presenting to you the privy councilor Baron von Altenheimer, director general of the police of His Majesty the King of Wurtemberg...”ⁱⁱⁱ The privy councilor must have bowed, I suppose, but no one saw it.

“...And elder brother,” the illustrious Bishop continued, “of Monsignor von Altenheimer, prelate of Rome, Chamberlain to Our Holy Father...”

“Here present,” put in a tenor voice, as soft as a note from a flute. That tenor voice reassured the beautiful women a little.

“What kind of story does My Lord Bishop desire?” the baritone voice asked. “Phantoms or brigands? We have both of them in the Black Forest.”

“Phantoms!” half the circle voted.

“Brigands!” opined the Princess, under the influence of her strong imagination.

The fearful, on the other hand, eager for a fine time of mortification by terror, demanded: “Vampires!”

Whereupon His Grace the Archbishop de Quélen, with a mildness in which a light note of irony was perceptible, said: “One could make an agreeable mixture out of all these good things.”

“That’s it! That’s it!” cried the Bishop of Hermopolis, in the voice of a man who is certain of the virtue of what he has produced. “Baron, these ladies desire a tale to make their hair stand on end, in which there is a phantom, a brigand and a vampire all at the same time!”

“Hilarious,” said the soft tenor voice, “The tale of the brothers Ténèbre is precisely that.”

“Yes,” the baritone replied, at the utmost depth of its range, “you’re right, Benedict: the tale of the Ténèbre brothers!”

“The name is well-chosen!” murmured the Princess, suppressing a giggle while her hand closed convulsively upon the arm of her son, the Marquis de Lorgères.

“The name is not chosen at all!” replied the Monsignor, his tone a trifle piqued. “Everyone in Germany has heard of the Ténèbre brothers.”

“And everyone in Paris will have heard of them soon,” said the privy councilor quietly, as if he were speaking in spite of himself.

Even if the name had not been chosen for effect, one could nevertheless say that it was as appropriate as any that might have been invented. The circle drew closer. This was not included in the program of the soirée, which would culminate in a benefit concert, but it was worth ten times as much as the entire banquet. Chance gave to His Lordship’s guests an unexpected performance, a delightful surprise—and, although no one could explain exactly why, it is certain that the hearts of our beautiful ladies were considerably stirred by emotion and alarm.

Baron von Altenheimer resumed an oratorical tone that served to emphasize his German accent. “Your excellencies, and most illustrious persons, my brother and I are strangers in the capital of France, and we are both charged with a difficult mission. We desire to be worthy of the generous welcome that has been extended to us, and of the protection that we have been promised. My brother Benedict will sing some traditional Westphalian songs for you this evening, and a few original Christmas ballads. I have a voice that is good enough for the chorus but not for solo performance, so I am glad to have found an opportunity to make myself equally agreeable. Historical legends and other traditional tales featuring the supernatural are so very abundant in our homeland that I would have had a thousand to choose from in attempting to satisfy your curiosity. I prefer, however, to set aside our popular tales and tell you a true story of the same kind, based on my personal experience and that of my brother. Here, a little while ago, I heard some very powerful people of both sexes discussing age-old controversies say: There are no more specters. A very illustrious lady exclaimed: There are no more authentic brigands; the times of Rob Roy, Schinderhannes, Zawn, Schubry, Mandrin and even Cartouche are gone. We

no longer have anything but thieves ^{iv}! I admit that we have an enormous number of thieves, but I am compelled to affirm that we also have brigands. Leaving aside the successors of Fra Diavolo ^v in southern Italy, Hungary, Bohemia and the southern provinces of Austria still produce bandits fully worthy of that name. On the other hand, specters continue to lift up the stones of their graves just as they did in the past: nothing changes in that sphere. I have seen vampires in the region of Belgrade and phantoms in our own cemetery at Tübingen.”

We are relying here upon our memory, and we have made every effort to reproduce Baron von Altenheimer’s preamble word for word. The manner of his delivery was remarkably well-suited to his style. To begin with, there was in both a depth of *naiveté*, which imparted an emphasis to certain expressions. On the surface, there were unequivocal signs of knowledge: a literary mixture of the philosophical and the scientific; the overall impression, however, was one of oratory pretension, with a distinct whiff of charlatanry, as serious as the black robe of a professor.

His Lordship the Bishop de Quélen leant towards the ear of his neighbor and said to him: “That’s Germany ^{vi}.”

The judgement is not without profundity. That is Germany, indeed: that old wives’ wisdom; that bourgeois philosophy; that naive predisposition to make a discourse of what Paillasse ^{vii} called patter; all of it accompanied, supported and perhaps saved by a sort of nobility, which may deserve the name of truth. The ladies would not have made any such analysis, but the Baron’s preface pleased them regardless. The session turned into a public lecture in the German manner, concerning phantoms and brigands—the two most frightful and interesting things in the world.

The propitious moon, as if to join the party, emerged in full from behind its cloud to muffle the dread that might have prevented us from paying full attention. The illuminated glade gained a sort of gaiety without losing its poetry.

The tall, black-clad German could be seen distinctly now, his two wide eyes shining in his long pale face. His younger brother, the monsignor, stood beside him; he was shorter and plumper, wearing a garment that was not quite a frock-coat and not quite a cassock, after the fashion of the priests of Rome.

The elder brother wore a badge of office as florid as that of any privy councilor in the tales of Hoffmann ^{viii}. The younger wore no decoration at all, save for a long chain of polished steel, which passed around his neck above the dark collar of his coat and dangled by his right side. On the end of the chain was a rectangular object, also of polished steel, which seemed to contain a breviary or a missal.

All around them, the circle of listeners emerged from the shadows: heads handsome or venerable, foreheads furrowed, blonde tresses, avid eyes, mouths agape...

“Most illustrious friends,” Baron von Altenheimer continued...

ⁱ Like the other ancestral lists with which the novella is peppered, this one serves to emphasize the continuity between the aristocratic society of the early 19th century and the persons and events which had shaped European history during the preceding centuries. Féval, a Breton himself, had a particular fondness for the great families of that region. The list ends with the names of the last king of Brittany, François II (1435-1488) and his daughter Anne, who enjoyed a brief rule before the duchy was more fully absorbed into the rapidly-evolving French nation.

ⁱⁱ François de Harlay de Champvallon (1625-1695) became Archbishop of Paris in 1671. Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord (1754-1838) was one of the foremost and most versatile Frenchmen of his era: a Churchman, a statesman and a diplomat. He was a leading figure in the Revolution before helping Napoleon take power, but subsequently fell out with the Emperor and

took a prominent part in the Bourbon Restoration before also taking a hand in the Revolution of 1830.

ⁱⁱⁱ Wurtemberg became a major European state in 1495, when the duchy was established, but it only became a kingdom after its conquest by Napoleon and it was gradually absorbed into the evolving German nation during the 19th century, exemplifying one aspect of the pattern of historical change to which Féval is calling attention.

^{iv} Rob Roy was a famous Scottish outlaw of the early 18th century, immortalized by Sir Walter Scott's eponymous novel. Schinderhannes was the alias of the German brigand Johann Bückler, who was hanged at Mainz in 1803. Louis Mandrin was an 18th-century French brigand whose campaign against tax-collectors made him a folk hero; his name was often coupled with that of Louis Dominique Cartouche, the leader of another famous robber band; both were eventually captured and broken on the wheel. According to Charles Mackay's essay on "Popular Admiration of Great Thieves" in *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (1852)—which Féval might have read and from which he might have taken some inspiration, Schubry was a Hungarian brigand, but Zawn is not mentioned there and I can find no other reference to him.

^v Fra Diavolo was the nickname of Michele Pezza, or Pozzo, an Italian robber turned Bourbon partisan, who was hanged in Naples in 1806 by General Hugo. Paul Féval gave the character a starring role in *Les Habits Noirs*.

^{vi} This translation is taken from the Marabout paperback edition of 1972, which reprinted the text of the 1875 book. I do not know whether, or to what extent, that version varies from the original serial version of 1860, but it might be worth noting that the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 (in which Wurtemberg sided with Prussia) occurred in the interim. It would not be surprising if Féval had taken the opportunity to import a little extra anti-German sentiment into the book version, but neither would it have been unusual to find this kind of stereotyping in a French popular magazine in 1860.

^{vii} Paillasse is the French version of the Italian Pagliacci: the epitome of the sad clown.

^{viii} The German writer Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann (1776-1822) was the most significant pioneer of modern horror fiction, usually keeping a fine balance between psychological and supernatural interpretations of the grotesqueries featured in his tales.