

The Sign

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Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPCS6007 - Representations of Brittany

Teitl: Cruel tales

Enw'r Awdur: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Auguste de

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Course of Study: HPCS6007 - Representations of Brittany

Title: Cruel tales

Name of Author: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Auguste de

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THE SIGN*

*For Monsieur l'Abbé Victor de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam**

Attende, homo, quid fuisti ante ortum et quod eris usque ud occasum. Profectò fuit quod non eras. Postea, de vili materia factus, in utero matris de sanguine menstruali nutritus, tunica tua fuit pellis secundina. Deindè, in vilissimo panno involutus, progressus es ad nos,—sic indutus et ornatus! Et non memor es quæ sit origo tua. Nihil est aliud homo quam sperma fœtidum, saccus stercorum, cibus vermium. Scientia, sapientia, ratio, sine Deo sicut nubes transeunt.

Post hominem vermis: post vermem fœtor et horror;
Sic, in non hominem, vertitur omnis homo.

Cur carnem tuam adornas et impinguas, quam, post paucos dies, vermes devoraturi sunt in sepulchro, animam, vero, tuam non adornas,—quæ Deo et Angelis ejus præsentenda est in cœlis!

SAINT BERNARD: *Meditations*

THE BOLLANDISTS: *Preparation for the Last Judgement**

ONE winter evening when a few of us writers were drinking tea around a good fire, at the house of a friend of ours, Baron Xavier de la V—— (a pale young man whom prolonged military toils, endured at an early age in Africa, had made physically weak and unusually unsociable), the conversation turned to an extremely gloomy subject: the nature of those extraordinary, amazing, mysterious coincidences which occur in some people's lives.

‘Here is a story’, he said to us, ‘which I won’t burden with any commentary. It is a true story. You may find it impressive.’

We lit our cigarettes and listened to the following tale:

‘In 1876, at the autumn solstice,* about that time when the ever-increasing number of burials performed without due consideration—in too much of a hurry, in fact—was beginning to upset the Parisian middle classes and plunge them into alarm,* at eight o’clock one evening, coming away from an extremely curious spiritualist seance, I felt, as I reached home, under the influence of that hereditary spleen whose black obsession frustrates and reduces to naught the efforts of the medical Faculty.*

‘It is in vain that, at the instigation of the doctors, I have intoxicated myself with Avicenna’s beverage;* that I have assimilated hundredweights of iron in accordance with all sorts of formulas; and that, like a latter-day Robert d’Arbrissel,* I have reduced the quicksilver of my burning passions to the temperature of the Samoyeds,* nothing has proved of any avail. I have to resign myself to the fact that I am a morose, taciturn creature. But beneath a nervous exterior, I must have what they call an iron constitution, to be still capable, after so much medical attention, of gazing at the stars.

‘That evening, then, once I was in my bedroom, lighting a cigar from the candles around the looking-glass, I noticed that I was deathly pale, and I slumped into a roomy arm-chair, an old piece of furniture upholstered in garnet-red velvet, in which the flight of the hours, during my long reveries, strikes me as less tedious than usual. My depression was becoming so severe that I felt ill, even desperate. So, deeming it impossible to shake off this gloom by means of any kind of social distraction—especially in the midst of the horrible cares of the capital—I decided, as an experiment, to leave Paris, to go and take a nature cure far away, and to indulge in some violent exercise, a few healthy shooting parties for instance, in order to introduce a little variety into my life.

‘This idea had scarcely occurred to me when, at *the very moment* that I decided on this course of action, the

name of an old friend, forgotten years before, the Abbé Maucombe, entered my mind.

“‘The Abbé Maucombe!’ I said under my breath.

‘My last meeting with the learned priest dated back to the time of his departure for a long pilgrimage to Palestine.* The news of his return had reached me since. He lived in the humble presbytery of a little village in Lower Brittany.

‘Maucombe was bound to have some sort of bedroom or attic available there.* No doubt, in the course of his travels, he had collected a few old books and some curiosities from the Lebanon. And the odds were that the ponds close to the nearby manor-houses harboured some wild duck. What could be more convenient? And if, before the cold weather set in, I wanted to enjoy the latter fortnight of the enchanted month of October among the red rocks, if I wished to see once again the splendour of the long autumn evenings over the wooded heights, I would have to make haste.

‘The clock struck nine.

‘I stood up; I shook off the ash of my cigar. Then, as a man of decision, I put on my hat, my greatcoat, and my gloves; I took my suitcase and my gun; I blew out the candles and I went out, carefully turning the key three times in the secret lock which is the pride of my door.*

‘Three quarters of an hour later, the Brittany train was carrying me towards the little village of Saint-Maur* which was in the Abbé Maucombe’s spiritual care; I had even found time, at the station, to send off a hurried note in pencil in which I informed my father of my departure.

‘The next morning I was at R—*, which is only about five miles from Saint-Maur.

‘Wanting to have a good night’s sleep—in order to be able to go out shooting at dawn the following day*—and deciding that a nap after lunch might well impair the perfection of that sleep, I devoted my day, so as to stay awake in spite of my fatigue, to several calls on old

school friends. About five o'clock in the afternoon, having carried out these duties, I had a horse saddled at the Golden Sun, where I had taken a room, and, in the light of the setting sun, I found myself in sight of a hamlet.

'On the way I had recalled to mind the priest at whose house I hoped to spend a few days. The time which had elapsed since our last meeting, visits to parishioners, intervening events, and the habits of solitude must have modified his character and personality. I was going to find him grey-haired. But I was familiar with the learned priest's fortifying conversation, and I was looking forward to the evenings we were going to spend together.

"The Abbé Maucombe!" I kept saying to myself. "What a splendid ideal!"

'Asking the old people who were grazing cattle alongside the ditches the way to his house, I discovered that the priest—as a worthy representative of a God of mercy—had acquired the sincere affection of his flock;* and, after being told how to reach the presbytery, which is some distance from the huddle of cottages and hovels which constitute the village of Saint-Maur, I set off in that direction.

'I arrived.

'The rustic appearance of the house, the windows with their green blinds, the three sandstone steps, the ivy, the clematis, the tea-roses clambering up the walls as far as the roof, where a little cloud of smoke was rising from a revolving chimney-cowl, filled one with ideas of meditation, health, and profound peace. The trees of a nearby orchard showed, through a trellis fence, their leaves rusted by the enervating season. The two windows of the single upper storey shone with the fires of the setting sun; a niche containing the statue of a saint had been hollowed out between them. I dismounted silently, tied the horse to the shutter, and raised the door-knocker, casting a traveller's glance at the horizon far behind me.*

'But the horizon was shining so brightly above the

forests of far-off oaks and wild pines where the last birds were flying away into the evening; the waters of a reed-covered pond in the distance were reflecting the sky so solemnly; and Nature was so beautiful, in the midst of that calm air, in that deserted countryside, at that moment when silence falls, that, without letting go of the knocker, I stood there wordless.

‘You, I thought to myself, who lack the refuge of your dreams, and for whom the land of Canaan, with its palm-trees and its living waters, does not appear in the dawn after you have walked so far beneath the hard stars; traveller so joyful when you set off and now so gloomy; heart made for other exiles than those whose bitterness you now share with evil brethren—behold! Here you can sit on the stone of melancholy! Here dead dreams revive, anticipating the moment of the grave! If you wish to feel a real longing for death, approach: here the sight of the sky thrills to the point of forgetfulness.

‘I was in that state of lassitude in which the sensitized nerves vibrate at the slightest excitement. A leaf fell near me; its furtive rustle made me start. And the magical horizon of that region entered into my eyes. I sat by myself in front of the door.

‘A few moments later, as the evening air was beginning to turn cool, I returned to an awareness of reality. I jumped to my feet and took hold of the door-knocker again, looking at the cheerful house.

‘But I had scarcely given it a casual glance when I was forced to stop once more, asking myself this time if I was not the victim of an hallucination.

‘Was this really the house I had just seen? What antiquity was revealed to me *now* by the long cracks between the pale leaves? This building had an unfamiliar look; the window-panes lit up by the dying rays of the evening were burning with a fierce glow; the hospitable door seemed to be welcoming me, with its three steps; but, fixing my attention on those grey flagstones, I saw

that they had just been polished and that the trace of carved lettering remained on them; and I realized that they came from the nearby graveyard, whose black crosses now appeared to be very close, a hundred yards away. The house now struck me as having been invested with some bloodchilling quality, and the dismal sound of the knocker, which I dropped in **my agitation**, echoed through the house like the vibrations of **a mourning-bell**.*

‘That sort of impression, being moral rather than physical, fades rapidly. I did not doubt for a moment that I was a prey to that intellectual depression which I have mentioned. Eager to see a face which would help me, by its human nature, to banish the recollection of it, I lifted the latch, without waiting any longer. I went in.

‘The door, moved by a clock weight, closed by itself behind me.

‘I found myself in a long corridor at the end of which Nanon, the cheerful old housekeeper,* was coming down the stairs, holding a candle in one hand.

“‘Monsieur Xavier!’ she exclaimed delightedly when she recognized me.

“‘Good evening, Nanon, dear!’ I replied, hurriedly handing her my suitcase and my gun. (I had left my great-coat behind at the Golden Sun.)

‘I went upstairs. A minute later I clasped my old friend in my arms.

‘The tender emotion of our first words and the feeling of the melancholy of the past overwhelmed us, the Abbé and myself, for a little while. Then Nanon came in to bring us the lamp and tell us that supper was ready.

“‘My dear Maucombe,’ I said to him, tucking my arm into his to go downstairs, “‘intellectual friendship is something eternal, and I see that we are both of this opinion.’”

“‘There are Christian minds which enjoy a close divine relationship’, he replied. “‘Yes. The world has less ‘rational’ beliefs for which their supporters sacrifice their

blood, their happiness, their duty. They are fanatics!" he concluded with a smile. "Let us choose, for our faith, the most useful, since we are free and we become what we believe."

"The fact is", I answered, "that it is already extremely mysterious that two and two should make four."

'We went into the dining-room. During the meal, the Abbé, after gently scolding me for leaving him without news of me for so long, acquainted me with the spirit of the village.

'He spoke to me about the district, and told me two or three anecdotes concerning the local gentry.

'He recounted his own shooting exploits and fishing triumphs; in short, he displayed the most delightful gaiety and affability.

'Nanon, a fleet-footed messenger, bustled around us, her huge coif flapping like a pair of wings.

'Seeing me roll a cigarette to smoke with my coffee, Maucombe, who was a former officer of the dragoons*, followed my example; the silence of our first puffs interrupted our train of thought, and I began to look closely at my host.

'This priest was a tall man of about forty-five.* Long grey hair framed within its curls his thin, strong face. His eyes shone with mystical intelligence. His features were regular and austere; his slim figure had resisted the pressure of the years: he wore his long cassock with an air.* His words, full of knowledge and gentleness, were uttered in a sonorous voice which came from excellent lungs. Altogether he struck me as being in the best of health: the years had had little effect on him.

'He took me into his little library-cum-drawing-room.

'Lack of sleep on a journey makes one susceptible to the cold; there was a chill in the air, foreshadowing the winter. Consequently, when an armful of twigs blazed up before my knees, between two or three logs, I felt better.

‘Ensnconced in our brown leather arm-chairs, with our feet on the fire-dogs, we naturally started talking about God.

‘I was tired: I listened without replying.

‘“To sum up,” Maucombe said to me, standing up, “we are here to show—by our works, our thoughts, our words, and our fight against Nature—*whether we carry the necessary weight.*”

‘And he concluded with a quotation from Joseph de Maistre: “Between Man and God there is nothing but Pride.”*

‘“All the same,” I said to him, “we, the spoilt children of Nature, have the honour of living in an age of light.”

‘“Let us choose rather the Light of the ages”, he replied with a smile.

‘We had reached the landing, with our candles in our hands.

‘A long corridor, parallel to the one downstairs, separated my host’s bedroom from the one which had been prepared for me, and which he insisted on showing me himself. We went into it; he looked around to see if I was short of anything, and as we shook hands and wished each other good night, a bright gleam from my candle lit up his face. This time I gave a start!

‘Was it a dying man standing there beside that bed? The face before me was not, could not be, the same that I had seen over supper! Or at least, if I vaguely recognized it, it seemed to me that I had not really seen it until that moment. A single reflection will explain what I mean: the Abbé gave me, humanly speaking, the *second* feeling which, by some mysterious affinity, his house had caused me to experience.

‘The face at which I was gazing was solemn and deathly pale, and the eyelids were lowered. Had he forgotten that I was there? Was he praying? Why was he standing like that? His whole person had acquired such a sudden gravity that I closed my eyes. When I opened them again

a second later, the good Abbé was still there—but now I recognized him. It was all right! His friendly smile dispelled all my anxiety. The impression had not lasted long enough to allow me to ask a question. It had been a shock, a sort of hallucination.

‘Maucombe wished me good night a second time and retired.

“‘What I need is a good night’s sleep!’” I said to myself, once I was on my own.

‘Straight away the thought of Death occurred to me; I lifted up my soul to God and I got into bed.

‘One of the odd things about extreme fatigue is that it makes it impossible to go straight to sleep. All sportsmen have had this experience. It is a matter of common knowledge.

‘I expected to fall quickly into a deep sleep. I had built great hopes on a good night. But after ten minutes I had to admit that this nervous agitation showed no signs of abating. I heard ticking sounds and sharp creaks in the woodwork and the walls: presumably death-watch beetles. Each of the almost imperceptible noises of the night was followed by a sort of electric shock passing through the whole of my body.

‘The black branches brushed together in the wind, outside in the garden. Every few moments ivy rustled against my window. My hearing had become as keen as that of people dying from hunger.

“‘I had two cups of coffee’, I thought. “It must be that!’”

‘And propping myself up on one elbow on the pillow, I started staring at the light of the candle on the table beside me. I gazed hard at it, between my lashes, with that fixed attention which the complete absence of thought gives to the eyes.

‘A little holy-water stoup in coloured porcelain, with its twig of box, hung by the head of my bed. I suddenly moistened my eyelids with some of the water, to refresh

them; then I blew out the candle and shut my eyes. Sleep approached; the fever abated.

‘I was about to fall asleep.

‘Three sharp, imperious little knocks were given at my door.*

‘“What’s that?” I said to myself, sitting up with a start.

‘Then I noticed that I had already dozed off. I did not know where I was. I thought I was in Paris. Certain forms of rest produce this sort of ridiculous forgetfulness. Having even lost from sight, almost immediately, the principal cause of my awakening, I stretched myself luxuriously, completely oblivious of the situation.

‘“By the way,” I said to myself all of a sudden, “wasn’t somebody knocking just then? Who could possibly be. . . ?”

‘At this point in my sentence, a vague, confused notion that I was no longer in Paris, but in a Breton presbytery, the Abbé Maucombe’s house, entered my mind.

‘In a flash I was in the middle of the room.

‘My first impression, combined with the feeling that my feet were cold, was of a bright light. The full moon was shining opposite the window, above the church, and, through the white curtains, was casting its pale, cold flame on to the floor.

‘It was about midnight.

‘Morbid ideas occurred to me. What was happening? The darkness had an extraordinary quality.

‘As I was approaching the door, a patch of light, coming from the keyhole, started moving over my hand and my sleeve.

‘There was somebody outside the door: there really had been someone knocking.

‘Yet, a few feet away from the latch, I stopped short.

‘Something had struck me as surprising: the *nature* of the spot wandering over my hand. It was an icy, blood-

red glow, giving off no light. Moreover, how was it that I could see no line of light under the door, from the corridor outside? To tell the truth, what was coming through the keyhole gave me the impression of the phosphorescent gaze of an owl.

‘At that moment the church clock struck the hour, outside in the windy night.

“‘Who’s there?’” I asked in a low voice.

‘The light went out. I was about to move forward when . . .

‘The door swung wide open, slowly, silently.

‘In front of me, in the corridor, stood a tall, dark figure: a priest, wearing the three-cornered clerical hat. He was clearly visible in the moonlight, except for his face: all I could see of that was the fire in his two eyes, which were gazing at me with solemn intentness.

‘An otherworldly atmosphere surrounded this visitor; his attitude filled me with foreboding. Paralysed by a fear which instantly assumed the proportions of terror, I looked at the sinister figure in silence.

‘All of a sudden the priest slowly raised one arm towards me. He was showing me something vague and heavy. It was a cloak. A big black cloak, a travelling cloak. He was holding it out to me, as if he wanted me to take it!

‘I shut my eyes so as not to see it. I did not want to see it. But a bird of night, with a horrible cry, passed between us, and the wind of its wings, brushing against my eyes, made me open them again. I could tell that it was fluttering round the room.

‘Then—with a choking gasp of fear, for I could not summon up the strength to cry out—I slammed the door shut with my two clenched, outstretched hands, and frantically turned the key in the lock, my hair standing on end.

‘Strangely enough, it seemed to me that all this happened without any noise.

‘It was more than my constitution could stand. I awoke. I was sitting up in bed, my arms stretched out in front of me; I was icy cold; my forehead was bathed in sweat; my heart was pounding grimly against the walls of my chest.

“‘Ah!’” I said to myself. “‘What a horrible dream!’”

‘All the same, my insurmountable anxiety remained. It took me over a minute before I *dared* to move my arm to reach for the matches: I was afraid of feeling a cold hand seize mine in the darkness and give it a friendly squeeze.

‘I started as I heard the sound of the matches rolling about under my fingers in the candleholder. I lit the candle again.

‘I promptly felt much better: light, that divine vibration, brings variety to dismal surroundings and comforts the worst fears.

‘I decided to drink a glass of cold water to revive my spirits completely, and I got out of bed.

‘Passing in front of the window, I noticed that the moon was exactly like the moon in my dream, although I had not seen it before going to bed; and, going with my candle in my hand to examine the lock of the door, I found that the key had been turned *from inside*, something which I had definitely not done before falling asleep.

‘After making these discoveries I glanced around me. I began to think that the whole affair was very strange. I went back to bed, propped myself up on my elbow, and tried to reason with myself, to prove to myself that all this was just a case of clairvoyance; but I succeeded less and less in reassuring myself. However, fatigue swept over me like a wave, soothed my gloomy thoughts, and suddenly sent me to sleep in my fear.

‘When I awoke, the room was full of cheerful sunshine.

‘It was a beautiful morning. My watch, which I had hung on the head of my bed, told me that it was ten o’clock.

To revive one's spirits, what can compare with daylight and radiant sunshine? Especially when there is a sweet smell in the air, and a fresh breeze blowing through the trees, the spiky thickets, and the flower-covered ditches wet with the dawn!

'I dressed hurriedly, utterly oblivious of the sinister start to my night's sleep.

'Completely revived by repeated ablutions of cold water, I went downstairs.

'The Abbé Maucombe was in the dining-room, sitting at the breakfast-table, reading a newspaper while waiting for me.

'We shook hands.

'“Did you have a good night, my dear Xavier?” he asked me.

'“Splendid!” I replied absent-mindedly (out of force of habit and without paying the slightest attention to what I was saying).

'The fact is that I was hungry: that was all.

'Nanon intervened, bringing us our breakfast.

'During the meal our conversation was at once quiet and gay; only the man who lives a holy life knows what joy is and how to communicate it.

'All of a sudden I remembered my dream.

'“By the way, my dear Abbé,” I exclaimed, “I remember now that I had a peculiar dream last night, a dream which was—how shall I put it?—striking? astounding? terrifying? take your choice! Judge for yourself.”

'And while peeling an apple, I started to give him a detailed account of the grim hallucination which had disturbed my first sleep.

'Just as I came to the gesture of the priest offering me his cloak, and *before I had embarked on that sentence*,* the door of the dining-room opened. Nanon, with that familiarity peculiar to the housekeepers of parish priests, came in, in a ray of sunshine, right in the middle of our

conversation, and, interrupting me, handed me a sheet of paper.

"Here's a letter marked 'urgent' that the postman has just brought, this very moment, for Monsieur."

"A letter! Already?" I exclaimed, forgetting my story. "It's from my father. My dear Abbé, you won't mind if I read it now, will you?"

"Of course not!" said the Abbé Maucombe, likewise losing sight of the story and becoming infected with my interest in the letter. "Of course not!"

I unsealed the letter.

In this way Nanon's arrival had distracted our attention by its suddenness.

"My good host," I said, "this is extremely vexatious: I have scarcely arrived, and I find myself obliged to leave."

"But why?" asked the Abbé Maucombe, putting his cup down without drinking.

"This letter asks me to return with all haste, in connexion with a lawsuit of the greatest importance. I was expecting that it would not be heard until December; but now I am told that it is due to come up within the next fortnight, and as I am the only person able to put in order the last documents we need to win our case, I must go back! What a nuisance!"*

"That really is annoying!" said the Abbé. "Most annoying! . . . At least promise me that as soon as it is over. . . . The great thing is salvation: I was hoping to be able to do something to achieve yours—and here you are slipping out of my grasp! I was already convinced that God had sent you to me. . . ."

"My dear Abbé," I exclaimed, "I shall leave my gun with you. Before three weeks are out, I shall be back, and this time for a few weeks, if you wish."

"Then go in peace", said the Abbé Maucombe.

"You see, nearly the whole of my fortune is at stake", I murmured.

"A man's fortune is God!" Maucombe said simply.

"And tomorrow, how should I live if . . ."

"Tomorrow, one stops living", he replied.

'Soon we left the table, finding some consolation for our parting in this formal promise to return.

'We went for a stroll in the orchard and looked round the dependencies of the presbytery.

'All day long the Abbé showed, not without a certain pride, his poor rustic treasures. Then, while he read his breviary, I walked round the neighbourhood alone, delightedly breathing in the pure, refreshing air. On his return Maucombe talked for a while about his travels in the Holy Land; all this brought us to sunset.

'Evening came. After a frugal supper, I said to the Abbé Maucombe:

"The express coach leaves at nine o'clock sharp. From here to R—— will take me about an hour and a half. I need half an hour to pay my bill at the inn when I return the horse: a total of two hours. It is seven o'clock now: I must leave you straight away."

"I will come part of the way with you", said the priest. "The walk will *do me good*."

"By the way," I went on, preoccupied with my own thoughts, "here is my father's address, where I stay in Paris, in case you need to write to me."

'Nanon took the card and slipped it into the frame of the mirror.

'Three minutes later, the Abbé and I had left the presbytery and were making our way along the highroad. I was naturally holding my horse by the bridle.

'We had already become a couple of shadows.

'Five minutes after our departure a penetrating drizzle of thin, icy rain, driven by a horrible gust of wind, started lashing our hands and faces.

'I stopped short.

"My dear old friend," I said to the Abbé, "I really cannot allow this. Your life is precious and this icy

shower is anything but healthy. Go back home. Once again, this rain could give you a dangerous soaking. Do go back, I beg you."

"After a moment's thought, the Abbé, thinking of his faithful, gave in to my reasons.

"I have your promise, my dear friend, haven't I?" he said. And, as I held out my hand to him, he added:

"Just a moment! You have quite a way to go, and this drizzle, as you say, is penetrating."

He gave a shudder. We were close to one another, motionless, looking hard at each other like two travellers in a hurry.

"At that moment the moon rose over the firs, behind the hills, lighting up the moors and the woods on the horizon. It bathed us in its dismal, livid light, its pale, empty flame. Our shadows and that of the horse were silhouetted hugely on the roadway. And in the direction of the dilapidated old stone crosses which, in that Breton village, stand in the thickets in which perch the birds of evil omen from Dead Men's Wood, I heard, in the distance, a horrible cry, the shrill, terrifying falsetto of the Rookery. A screech-owl with phosphorescent eyes, the glow of which was flickering above the great arm of the holly-oak, took flight and passed between us, prolonging that cry.

"Come now!" the Abbé Maucombe went on. "I shall be home in a minute, so take . . . take this cloak! I insist!" he added in an unforgettable voice. "I insist! You can send it back to me by the waiter at the inn, who comes to the village every day . . . *I beg you to take it.*"

"Uttering these words the Abbé held out his black cloak to me. I could not see his face, on account of the shadow cast by his broad three-cornered hat; but I could see his eyes *which were gazing at me with solemn intentness.*

"He threw the cloak around my shoulders and fastened the clasp with affectionate concern, while I, drained of strength, closed my eyes. And taking advantage of my

silence, he hurried off towards his presbytery. At the bend in the road he disappeared from sight.

‘Out of presence of mind—and also partly without thinking—I vaulted on to my horse. Then I sat motionless.

‘Now I was alone on the highroad. I could hear the countless noises of the countryside. Opening my eyes, I could see the desolate spectacle of the huge, pale sky, across which dull clouds were scurrying, hiding the moon. In the meantime I sat still and erect, although I must have been as white as a sheet.

“‘Come now,” I said to myself, “take it easy. I have a touch of fever and I walk in my sleep. That’s all.”

‘I tried to shrug my shoulders: a mysterious weight prevented me.

‘And then, coming from the far horizon, from the depths of the woods, a flock of ospreys passed over my head with a great noise of wings, crying horribly mysterious syllables. They went and settled on the roof of the presbytery and the steeple in the distance; and the wind carried mournful cries to my ears. Upon my word, I felt frightened. Why? Who will ever be able to tell me? I have seen action; I have crossed swords several times; my nerves are steadier than most; and yet I maintain, very humbly, that I was frightened here—and in earnest. I even felt a certain intellectual esteem for myself. Not everybody can be frightened of these things.

‘I therefore silently pressed my spurs into the poor horse’s sides, and, my eyes shut, the reins hanging loose, my fingers clutching the mane, and the cloak floating behind me, I could feel that my horse was galloping as fast as it could; every now and then my quiet muttering in its ear must have imparted to it, instinctively, the superstitious horror with which I was trembling in spite of myself. The result was that we arrived in less than half an hour. The noise of the paving-stones in the suburbs made me raise my head—and give a sigh of relief.

‘At last! I could see houses, lighted shops, the faces of fellow human beings behind the window-panes! I could see passers-by! I had left the realm of nightmares!’

‘At the inn, I settled down in front of the blazing fire. The conversation of the carriers put me in a condition not far removed from ecstasy. I had left Death behind. I looked at the flame between my fingers. I drank a glass of rum. I finally regained control of my faculties.

‘I felt that I had returned to real life.

‘I was even—I must admit it—a little ashamed of my panic.

‘And how calm I felt when I carried out the Abbé Maucombe’s commission! What a supercilious smile I gave as I examined the black cloak when I handed it over to the innkeeper! The hallucination had dissipated. I would willingly have played, in Rabelais’s words, “the boon companion”.*

‘The cloak in question struck me as having nothing extraordinary or even special about it—apart from the fact that it was very old and even patched, darned, and mended with a sort of strange tenderness. No doubt a profound sense of charity led the Abbé Maucombe to give away as alms the price of a new cloak: at least that was how I explained it.

“‘You couldn’t have picked a better time”, said the innkeeper. “The waiter’s due to go to the village about now. He’ll be off any minute. He’ll take the cloak back to Monsieur Maucombe on the way, before ten o’clock.”

‘An hour later, in my compartment, with my feet on the footwarmer, wrapped in the greatcoat of which I had regained possession, I said to myself, lighting a good cigar and listening to the whistle of the train:

“‘There’s no doubt about it, I prefer that noise to the hooting of the owls.”

‘I must admit that I rather regretted having promised to return.

‘At that point I fell at long last into a deep sleep, completely forgetting what I would henceforth dismiss as an insignificant coincidence.

‘I had to stay at Chartres for six days, to collect some documents which later on brought about a favourable conclusion to our lawsuit.*

‘Finally, with my mind full of ideas of papers and pettifoggery, and in the grip of my sickly boredom, I returned to Paris on the evening of the seventh day after my departure from the presbytery.

‘I went straight home, arriving on the stroke of nine o’clock. I went upstairs and found my father in the drawing-room. He was sitting next to a little table, in the light of a lamp, and he was holding an open letter in his hand.

‘After a few words he said to me:

“‘I’m sure you don’t know the news this letter brings me: our dear old friend the Abbé Maucombe has died since you left him.’”

‘These words gave me a profound shock.

“‘Yes, he died the day before yesterday, about midnight—three days after you left his presbytery*—from a chill caught on the highroad. This letter is from old Nanon. The poor woman seems to be so distracted that she repeats twice over an odd phrase . . . about a cloak. . . . But read it for yourself!’”

‘He held out to me the letter in which the saintly priest’s death was announced to us—and in which I read these simple lines:

“‘He was very happy—so he told us in his last words—to draw his last breath and be buried in the cloak which he had brought back from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, *and which had touched The Sepulchre.*’”*