



# **THE WHITE FEATHER**

Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely  
France - XVI century

# The White Feather

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# INDEX

<i>CHAPTER</i>	<i>PAGE</i>
Introduction	4
1. The Huguenots	5
2. The Commission	10
3. The Banquet	17
4. Monsieur Dabblon	22
5. Nicole	29
6. Intelligence	35
7. Prey	42
8. Prey?	49
9. Doubt	58
10. The Fisherman's Net	65
11. Monsieur Raffin	72
12. A New Creature	78
13. A Blow is Struck	86
14. Adieu	59
15. The Cocoon of Monsieur Dabblon	99
16. Cat and Mouse	104
17. Sentiments Revealed	110
18. True Abandonment	116
19. Despair	122
20. The Net Closes	128
21. The White Feather	136
22. Clarice Saint-Ghyslain	144
Epilogue	156

# Introduction

***“All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*** These words, so eloquently expressed by Lord Acton in 1887, could not have more accurately described the condition of the nation of France—and most of Europe for that matter—two centuries earlier. With Church and State joined as one, united in purpose and aim, such an absolute corruption was fully achieved.

## Chapter 1: The Huguenots

A young man opened his eyes, and his countenance, which bore all the marks of recent slumber, gazed into the night sky, studded by stars. Glancing about, and realizing that he was lying on the bare ground, he recalled the purpose for which he and his three subordinates had been commanded to remain upon the road leading to that city Mary Tudor of England so famously claimed to be inscribed upon her heart—Calais.

Sitting up, and brushing off leaves and dirt that had clung to his doublet, he peered down the road toward Paris, searching for signs of life, but glimpsed nothing. He gazed toward the sky once more, and noted with a certain satisfaction that the moon was entirely concealed by clouds, an ideal condition for the deed which he and his companions had been commissioned to accomplish. After reassuring himself yet again through the aid of his eyes and ears that the road was quite deserted, he returned to his three sleeping companions, who were sleeping in the underbrush by the side of the road.

It was at this moment, just as he bent to awaken them, that he felt a drop of rain upon his brow. He looked up again, and another drop of rain fell, this time directly in his eye. Within moments he was pelted by several more drops, and correctly concluded that a storm was brewing.

The three guardsmen awoke from their fitful sleep and began to search for ways of taking shelter from the storm. However, their senses were not yet fully keen and they only succeeded in stumbling about, besmirching their uniforms in the mud.

“Come now, fools!” the youthful commander called out to them disdainfully. “Cast off the drowsiness of slumber, and arm yourselves. I will tolerate no error!”

Each man, having found a tree or other patch of underbrush where he might remain concealed, had nothing to do but wait. Thus they lingered. The rain gradually abated, and the moon emerged from behind the clouds, casting its orange glow upon the landscape, much to the chagrin of the young officer whom I shall now introduce as Armand.

Still, no one appeared. Finally, the ears of the anxious Armand,

who stood behind a large oak, detected the sound of rattling pebbles.

Presently a wagon came into view far down the road, occupied by two men who, even from a distance, appeared quite sodden. One of these individuals was driving two shaggy mules, and the other attempting to provide shelter for them both by holding a large cloth above them. As they drew closer, the trained eye of Armand noted that the driver of the wagon was the elder of the two, while the other looked no older than Armand himself. He waited a few moments for the wagon to slow due to a bend in the road, crossed himself, and gave the signal to his men.

At once the small wagon and its two unsuspecting occupants were surrounded by the soldiers, each holding his weapon menacingly before him. The light from their hastily lit torches only partially illuminated their faces, yet was sufficient to reveal uncouth complexions and brutal appearances. Their commander appeared from behind his tree walking slowly, almost casually. Grasping a torch given him by one of his men, he strolled over to the wagon and held the flickering flame only inches from the elder man's face, singeing his eyebrows and eyelashes.

Though his stare was hard and spiteful, the soft, brown eyes that returned his look emanated a peace that surpassed human capability. Although naturally surprised by this sudden attack, he was able to quietly ask, "What do you want with me?"

Ignoring these words, Armand grabbed the elderly wagon driver from his place and threw him roughly to the ground. When the younger man, presumably his son, attempted to resist this action, the handle of a pistol was promptly hammered into the back of his head, and he was sent sprawling on the road, unconscious.

The commander then turned to the father and sneered.

"I have always enjoyed the sight of a traitor's death."

He then nodded to one of the guards who drew a small dagger and placed it at the old man's throat.

The latter, sensing that his time had come, closed his eyes with a sense of resignation and uttered a few words.

"Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit."

No sooner had the last word issued from his mouth, when the soldier tightened his grip on the dagger's handle, pressed it deeper and with a deft movement, sliced open the throat of his helpless victim.

After throwing the lifeless body into a nearby ditch and loading the unconscious son into the back of the wagon, Armand and two others galloped toward Paris, while another took charge of the wagon.

The rain had abated, and the sun's rays were beginning to warm the horizon.

\* \* \*

Brilliant rays filtered through the latticed window of Nicole's bedroom, stirring her from her sleep. As she opened her eyes and beheld the morning dawn, she stretched, sat up and said her morning prayers. Having finished them, she placed her small feet on her bedroom floor and stood up. As she allowed her sleeping garments to slide off her slender form, she pondered the life that she and many others in France had now embraced.

She was Nicole d'Arnae, the daughter of M. d'Arnae, a sufficiently wealthy merchant who had settled to an easy life in Paris. The year was 1574. They were five siblings, of whom, from the height of her 18 years, she was the second oldest. Although she found a measure of contentment and joy in her life, she often felt overly sheltered, almost as if she was cloistered; and she oft wished for a different life, one of excitement and danger.

She knew her mother would be up by this hour, reading and praying. Her father and older brother, Fabrice, had been gone on a trip for two days now. Where they'd gone, she knew not, she knew only that the journey was in connection with their faith, and thus, required secrecy.

Although she had committed their wellbeing to Christ in prayer, she remained a little uneasy. Times were dangerous for all followers of the Protestant faith. King Charles IX was on the throne, but his mother, the redoubtable Catherine de Médicis, possessed much of the real power, and had assented to a campaign led by the Duke of Guise, the leader of the Catholic faction, of assassination, murder, and arrest of Protestant leaders. Such danger and uncertainty had caused many of the Huguenot leaders and teachers to go into hiding, and to continue to operate from a position of discretion.

Although Nicole's parents had been followers of this religion their entire lives, it did not seem to her that they were leaders or prominent members of Calvinism, thus she did not greatly fear that her family were in any real danger. Though they were Huguenots in name, they

did not hold to all the doctrines that had been held by John Calvin, and which were widely accepted as the fundamental building blocks of Calvinism. Rather they had chosen to consider Calvinist dogma superfluous to their own beliefs, which consisted of a great esteem for the love that Jesus had displayed in His ultimate sacrifice, and a conviction that all things done within the bounds of that love were justified.

Her mother, whom she met in the small stairway leading to the anteroom, asked Nicole to purchase their food from the market for breakfast. Exiting the house with a basket under her arm, she smelled the aroma of fresh bread from nearby stalls to her right, and proceeded in that direction.

As she passed certain neighbors, she greeted them cordially and passed without further conversation. Although Nicole was young, she had a certain confidence and poise about her which attracted the attention of others.

Her oval face was framed by long blonde hair which cascaded down her back, and which a single black ribbon fastened by a pin kept in place. Her neck was bare, and her sleeves ended halfway to her elbows. Her plain dress was tight at the waist, and then flowed down to her ankles. On her feet she wore only leather sandals.

Nicole loved the morning hours. The fresh, crisp smell of the air pervaded the outskirts of Paris, and the aroma of roses from the numerous villas surrounding the area refreshed the atmosphere.

As she went from stall to stall, purchasing, bargaining, and obtaining their morning victuals, she noticed that there were not many people out that morning. But because she was not generally on the streets at this hour, she dismissed that as a trifle, an issue irrelevant to her present well-being, and not to be concerned with.

Her chore was now done, and she sighed as she turned toward home, for she had taken great pleasure in this errand, and was now somewhat disappointed at having to return. However, as she rounded the bend in the road that led to her home, she quickly retreated into the alley from whence she had come and collapsed on the ground in shock.

She slowly and cautiously turned her head once more to see whether her eyes had not deceived her.

Indeed they had not, for as she gazed in disbelief, her mother and siblings were being herded out of the house, and into a waiting



wagon, by a small company of guards and their leader, a young man with an austere appearance.

Nicole's first impulse was to rush into the open and attempt a rescue of some kind, but realizing that this would be futile, she contented herself to stay put and hope to discover where they were being taken and why.

As she gaped in astonishment, her mother was dragged out of the villa by a scarlet-faced guardsman who swore profusely and kicked her repeatedly. But on her face was an evidence of serenity and peace, and a peaceful glow seemed to emanate from her being.

The children, too frightened to cry, and not fully comprehending the unfolding events, huddled in the prison wagon together and gazed around, the youngest calling "Mama" repeatedly until she was silenced by a slap from one of the guards.

This act of cruel brutality shot blood into Nicole's temples, and had she been a man, such behavior might have provoked her into an irrational outburst of anger and a desire to vent it upon that vicious guard who had dared to strike such a small child with such force.

But in truth, Nicole had not the strength or the energy to make a resistance of any sort, for the stark reality of what was occurring caused her senses to reel, and she felt that she could not move a muscle.

She peered toward the commander of the troops, and detected the hate and malice that was written all over his face, as he gave orders to search the villa.

Hot tears poured down her face, for at that moment she felt so helpless. To watch her entire family arrested in such a cruel fashion, and not able to assist them, left her in a state of misery and distress.

As her mother and siblings were taken away, she sank down behind the stone wall, and allowed the tears to flow. Her bread had been discarded on the ground, her apparel was soiled, and she was completely overcome by despair.

"Dearest Jesus, blessed Savior" she sobbed, "why have You allowed this to happen? Why now?"

## Chapter 2: The Commission

M. Saint-Ghyslain leaned back slightly in his chair and gazed out the window. His mind and eyes had been preoccupied for the last couple of hours with a stack of papers that lay upon a table before him, and he hoped to give them some reprieve by staring at the street below. He observed the general populace that bustled about the day's affairs, and noted that no one seemed to be in a particularly joyous mood that day. This likeness to his own present feelings comforted him somewhat, knowing that he was not the only one who suffered in melancholy.

His silent reverie was disrupted by a knock upon the door.

"Come in," he said with a sigh.

A page entered, bowed deeply, and said, "M. Le T line has requested an audience. He says that you have been expecting him."

Saint-Ghyslain looked up sharply when he heard that name, for he had indeed been waiting for this particular gentleman for quite some time now.

"Show him in!" he ordered without hesitation.

A young man entered. He was still in his riding attire, and had not removed his cloak.

"Armand, what news do you bring?"

"Monseigneur, today marks the termination of yet another set of traitors to the Church and the king. M. d'Arn e is dead and his family is in prison."

"All of his family?" Saint-Ghyslain questioned with a lift of his eyebrow.

"All but one, I believe, Monseigneur. His eldest daughter was not found at home when we made the arrests, but I have posted a guard inside the house lest she should return, which she most likely will. In fact, she may be in our custody even now."

"Excellent! Your dedication to your country and to the Church knows no bounds, Armand," said the elder man.

"It is my privilege to serve France in this fashion, Monsieur," returned Armand, affecting a humility that did not suit him well.

"Then you shall not object to being given a task more demanding, if it is God's will?"

"I view each task more difficult than the one previous as a greater

challenge, Monseigneur, and a test of my abilities.”

“I’m happy to hear that. Be seated and listen carefully to my words. As you know, there has been a problem throughout the nation with these accursed Huguenots corrupting people’s minds and perverting Christian doctrines. You have distinguished yourself by aiding in the riddance of some of these heretics. However, it appears that they continue to flourish, grow, and gain adherents by the day.

“Now, there is a certain heretic, whose name we know not. He is extremely loyal to his faith, and most daring. Very few know his true identity. To everyone else he is simply the White Feather.”

“The White Feather?” questioned Armand.

“The White Feather,” repeated Saint-Ghyslain. “He is considered a most dangerous man. He forms daring plans, and carries them out with the assistance of a few courageous followers. Just this morning a letter arrived from Bordeaux, where the consulate had jailed 12 Huguenots. Apparently, the bishop of that district, a certain de Santille came to begin the instruction of their cases, but after having had no success in persuading them to recant their false doctrines, he departed with his retinue of monks and inquisitors.

“But not a quarter of an hour had gone by when a dozen prison guards ran up to the warden breathlessly and asked if his eminence the bishop had left with his retinue?

“To this the warden replied that they had all left.

“Trembling, the guards responded that the bishop was in fact the White Feather, and that among his retinue were the twelve Huguenots who had been arrested. Immediately the troop of guards took off after the bishop’s party, but was unable to catch up with them.

“That evening however, the warden received a large envelope from a messenger. Much to his astonishment, he found it contained no letter, only one object.”

“And this object was...?” Armand asked curiously.

In response, Saint-Ghyslain reached for the cavalier’s hat that Armand had removed from his head upon entry and which he still held underneath his arm. He then examined the plumage issuing from the center and extracted a long white feather.

“This,” he said, twirling the object around in his fingers, “is what was contained in that envelope.”

A long paused ensued, while Saint-Ghyslain dramatically allowed

his words to sink in.

“You see, Armand,” he finally continued, “that devilish White Feather had entered the jail disguised as Bishop de Santille. Since none of the guards had ever come face to face with the newly appointed bishop, they had no way of knowing whether he was indeed him. “Furthermore, his face was lowered at all times, as if in prayer. When he and his retinue had entered the inquisition room, he bid the guards to wait for him outside.”

Armand nodded, and Saint-Ghyslain rose from his chair and paced the room until he approached the window, allowing his back to face Armand, while he went on with his explanation.

“Half of his retinue had been disguised as prison guards beneath their long dark robes and hoods, so that they dressed the prisoners in their own inquisitionist attire.

“The White Feather, too, disrobed himself of his bishop’s costume and remained behind with his men as a prison guard while another wore his clothing. Thus, half of his men, disguised as the bishop and his retinue left the prison with all twelve of the prisoners. Again, all the guards were bowed to the ground, and again the ‘bishop’ had his head bowed in prayer, so that no one noticed that it was not even the same man who had entered the prison. When they had departed, the White Feather and the other half of his followers mounted their horses ‘in pursuit,’ only to join up with their comrades later, from whence they scattered.”

Armand, who had been listening intently to M. Saint-Ghyslain’s account, could not help but admire the ingenuity of the plan, and he wondered at the daring of the White Feather.

“This is just one incident,” continued Saint-Ghyslain. “We have had many other reports and news about him. It seems that he himself operates within France, but there was an incident reported by the authorities in the Spanish Netherlands, where they too received a white feather after a Protestant leader mysteriously escaped from a prison.

“Another objective that is puzzling is the fact that he and those in league with him choose a white feather as their emblem or symbol. A white feather is commonly regarded as a mark of cowardice—but in the case of such a man, obviously brave and daring, one would not think a white feather befitting.

“Another puzzling issue that I recall is that not once in all of the

reports that I have received was there any mention of him or members of his league using violence or force to accomplish their purpose. It seems that every time the deed is done through wit and ingenuity. And then, these heretics find solace and rest in other Protestant bastions such as England or Geneva.

“But, Armand,” he said, turning around abruptly and dramatically, “it is now your commission to find and bring this heretic to justice, this ‘White Feather’ who dares to oppose the king and the Church. I have confidence in your abilities and admiration for your loyalty. You shall have access to anything you need to accomplish this task, and when you succeed, I shall see to it that you are given a commission in the king’s guard.”

“Very well.” stated Armand, “But cannot the warden, who spoke to the White Feather at least give a description of his face, that my task might be made easier?”

“We do not know if the guard that he spoke to was the White Feather himself,” returned Saint-Ghyslain. “We suspect only that he was *among* that troop of guards. Furthermore, the warden was primarily occupied with the escape of the prisoners, and as he did not in the least suspect these men, he had no reason to pay attention to their faces.”

The magnitude of his assignment was beginning to dawn on Armand and he sighed. To search for a man whose face was constantly hidden by disguises, and whose name was unknown, seemed impossible. But he, being young and full of self-confidence, was certain that with a little wit and brain, he would outsmart this imposter who had so far eluded capture.

“Well, Monsieur,” he said. “I hope I shall not fail my country and my God in this duty. I shall accomplish this mission you have given me.”

He rose, bowed, and had just turned to go, when he was called back.

“I have one more request to make of you, Armand. Tonight an English diplomat, Milord Donovan Hughes, is being received at my house for political discussions. That will be followed by dinner, and a grand banquet. A valet is waiting at your house with an invitation, but I wanted to let you know in advance. The king will be there, and it will be a good opportunity for you to establish yourself among the nobility and make yourself known, as well as keep your eye out for any signs of

the White Feather amongst them. I somehow feel that this fellow is someone with position and monetary support. For how else would he be able to obtain the resources that he has used for his daring plots, or inspire the loyalty and reckless pluck that he has among his cohorts?

“But tell no one of our conversation. Your commission should remain a closely guarded secret.”

“I am honored, and will gladly come, but I cannot imagine what conversation your Lordship refers to,” said Armand quietly.

Then he bowed once more, turned, and left the room.

M. Saint-Ghyslain smiled to himself, glad that Armand had gotten the point and had put it so well in his own words.

*If there is any man in France that is ruthless enough and capable of unmasking the White Feather, he thought, it is M. Le T line.*

Armand also smiled to himself as he left M. Saint-Ghyslain’s hotel and began making his way down the crowded streets toward his home. This opportunity which had so unexpectedly been presented to him was what he had awaited his entire life.

Being raised in the French countryside as the son of a well-to-do farmer, he had never really lacked, but as he grew older, he had longed to accomplish something grand and be somebody great. When he was 18, he had come to Paris and enlisted in an academy for the training of soldiers for France’s armies. As he progressed, his superiors noticed that he was a rank above the other students in wit and intellect. Thus he had been well-trained and given more responsibility. It was not long before he established a reputation as a loyal and devout soldier and had come to the attention of Henri Saint-Ghyslain. And now he had been given this new assignment. It was exactly what was required to give him that final push into the world of power and fame.

*And by God, I shall not fail!* he said resolutely to himself.

Upon entering his abode on rue de Charlemagne, he discovered Silvestre, his young manservant, comfortably sprawled in his seat, holding in his hand a woman’s kerchief. In a day when it was common for a woman to confer upon her lover her favored kerchief, it was no surprise that Silvestre possessed such an object. Though it was small, brown, and somewhat threadbare, indicating that the girl in question was a member of the lower class, the young man handled it as if it had belonged to a princess.

Armand, whose presence had not yet been detected by his indolent lackey, was half-hidden behind the anteroom doorpost, watching the scene with a great deal of amusement, as Silvestre stroked the kerchief, spoke to it, and at various intervals, placed his lips upon the initials that were sewn in one corner.

“My dearest Louise, you have no idea of the joy that has seized me as a result of this present you have made me! In return I pledge to be the most faithful lover a woman could desire! Infidelity shall never be among my vices—rather I shall seek only your approval in all I do. I shall defend your honor with my life! I shall slit the throat of any man who dares even cast a lustful look in your direction!” He sat up as he said this, clenching in his fist an iron poker.

He stood up, placed his feet further apart on the ground, and extended the arm that held the poker. He placed the other upon his hip, and attempting to discharge an air of a seasoned duelist, cried, “En garde!”

With that typical entrée the duel began. This fight was obviously in Silvestre’s mind as real and as grave as any.

“I shall cut him down with a sharp steel blade!” he cried as he parried, thrust and slashed wildly about the room. This spectacle grew in hilarity by the moment, but Armand, who did not wish to stun him so suddenly with his presence, stepped backwards a few paces and called.

“Silvestre, where are you?”

“Here, Monsieur!” responded a decidedly flustered voice.

When he entered the antechamber, he found Silvestre occupied in diligently wiping the legs of the divan with a cloth, and the poker hastily tossed into a corner.

“Silvestre, bring my best formal outfit.”

A look of relief crossed the face of Silvestre who was doubtless reassured that his daydreams had gone undetected by his master.

“Monsieur is going somewhere?”

“Yes, I must attend a banquet at my good friend Saint-Ghyslain’s hotel this very evening.”

“Very well, Monsieur. Shall I then prepare the carriage, or does Monsieur wish to go on horseback?”

“I had originally intended to go by coach, but since you obviously have important affairs which must be attended to, I shall cater to circumstances and take the horse instead.”

“I b-beg your pardon, Monsieur?” stuttered Silvestre.

“Oh, come now, Silvestre. Do not pretend that you do not understand me. Did not a certain individual threaten your Louise? That is a crime unforgivable, and you must teach him a lesson with that fine-looking sword you held earlier.” And here he indicated the poker with his finger.

“It really is most cowardly to lay aside your sword in the midst of a duel. I am surprised that he has not already thrust you through the back.”

“Who, Monsieur?” asked the servant, feigning shock, but coloring a red so violent that his face might have been mistaken for a rose.

“Why, the fierce opponent, the one whose idiocy prompted him to so blatantly lust after your fair lady.” As he was leaving, he turned and continued, as if struck by an afterthought. “Oh, and these days it is fashionable among gentlemen to grant quarter, should the request be made.” And with that, he pirouetted on his heels and left the room, leaving the now violet-faced Silvestre in utter mortification.



## Chapter 3: The Banquet

Armand arrived at Saint-Ghyslain's residence that evening arrayed in his finest apparel. The cavalier's hat, the red silk doublet, the tight-fitting breeches, the long scarlet cape, the leather boots, and the gilded rapier that hung by his side all combined to give him an immaculate appearance. He was clean shaven and his long blond hair—curled in ringlets as was the fashion of the times—had been carefully brushed by a decidedly discomfited Silvestre.

As he approached the entrance of the hall, he caught sight of M. Saint-Ghyslain greeting his guests as they entered. His daughter, Clarice, whose acquaintance Armand had yet to make, was standing by his side and being introduced to the more significant visitors. The meetings between Saint-Ghyslain and Sir Donovan Hughes had been conducted earlier in the day but had not gone as hoped, and Armand could tell as much from the strain that was evident on Saint-Ghyslain's face.

He strode confidently toward the entrance until he had been glimpsed by M. Saint-Ghyslain and then made his way toward him.

“Ah, Armand, you have arrived. My daughter, Clarice.”

Armand took Clarice's gloved hand, bowed low and kissed it. As he straightened himself, his eyes met her frame. Her lengthy, dark locks framed the upper half of her face and proceeded down her shoulders and back. A pair of teasing eyes, embedded beneath her eyebrows like black jewels set in marble, complimented her olive skin, which she had inherited from her Spanish mother. The lower half of her face was rather ordinary, though her playful and ever-present smile should be noted as well.

Besides all of this, she possessed a certain aura, which drew others toward her as though she were a magnet, and Armand was no exception.

“Well, Mademoiselle,” he said, “I had heard tales of your beauty, but never imagined that the woman of my dreams would appear as unattractive when compared with you.”

This produced a girlish giggle from Clarice who unabashedly returned the flattery with a remark of her own.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur, but if the woman of your

dreams is truly as unattractive as you say she is, you must be a man wholly lacking in taste.”

M. Saint-Ghyslain frowned slightly at this remark. His daughter was well-known throughout society for her wit, and though it was greatly admired and often the object of extensive praise, he had also chided her for employing it at the expense of his guests. Clarice had no idea how many apologies her father had been forced to make over the season on her behalf.

Armand too, had been somewhat ruffled by her remark. He was not used to being snubbed, albeit in jest, by members of that fair sex, and all he could mutter was a “Good evening, Mademoiselle,” before shuffling disconcertedly into the anteroom where many of the guests had already begun milling around.

After a few minutes of quietly observing the room’s occupants, wondering abstractly if any of these could be that White Feather, he noticed Saint-Ghyslain approaching him.

“Good evening, Armand. My apologies for my daughter’s discourtesy. So often I have instructed her to be less outspoken, but I fear that she has not taken heed as she should.”

“That’s quite alright, Monseigneur,” responded Armand, who had already shrugged off the incident. “I find witty and playful jests most charming qualities among women, and I am thoroughly amused at Clarice’s good-natured humor.”

“She really is a most accommodating hostess, and many have commented on her intellect, but I wish she would refrain from her facetious remarks!”

Whatever Armand was going to reply at that moment was interrupted by the sound of trumpets coming from the entrance hall, and a page announced, “His majesty the king!”

Saint-Ghyslain took Armand by the arm and led him in the direction of the door.

“Come, I will introduce you to our guests of honor.”

Armand followed Saint-Ghyslain outside, where they caught sight of Charles IX and Sir Donovan Hughes, who had also just arrived, ascending the short staircase to the entrance.

Armand observed the English envoy. Sir Donovan Hughes was neither old nor young, being perhaps in his early forties. He was smartly dressed in a black doublet, tight-fitting white pants, and black

riding boots. His brown hair had been tied into a ponytail at the nape of his neck and extended just past his shoulder line. His pleasant face bore no mustache or beard, and his brown eyes appeared sharp and alert. His black-handled rapier was buckled at his belt, and he carried himself with an air of poise and confidence.

Armand and Saint-Ghyslain bowed to the two distinguished guests, and Saint-Ghyslain quickly mastered the situation, as he was so accustomed to doing.

“God grant long life, prosperity, and good health to Your Majesty.”

Charles responded to the greeting with characteristic listlessness. “Yes, yes, and all the rest, I know. I was discussing the affairs of state with Sir Donovan, and it appears that we seem to be doing fairly well, as far as prospering is concerned. England too seems to be thriving—is that not so, Milord Donovan?”

“Ah, yes,” responded Sir Donovan in passable French, “under the guidance of Her Majesty, England is gaining new lands and wealth in the New World. While at home, the people are kept working hard as well.”

“And who is this young man?” asked the king, indicating Armand with his head.

“This is Armand Le T line, a devout Catholic, a good soldier, and an excellent leader. He has been quite successful in arresting and apprehending many enemies of the state—at least those who have not yet been snatched by the White Feather.”

“Ah, the White Feather,” Sir Donovan interjected.

“You know of him?” questioned Armand.

“But of course! Tales of his daring plots and audacious schemes have spread even to my country. And although you here view him as a threat, England Protestants salute a gallant defender of their faith. Why, it has even been rumored that he is English!”

At this last remark, the impulsive king turned to Sir Donovan and said, “Notwithstanding his nationality, my dear Milord, we would take great pleasure in executing him, if he were caught abetting France’s enemies.”

Saint-Ghyslain cringed at this lack of diplomacy, but there was no harm done, as Sir Donovan was a level-headed man, and decided it would be best to change the subject.

“Quite rightly too—but let us not waste hours in discourse out here, when Saint-Ghyslain has so graciously prepared a banquet in our honor.”

“Yes, let us go!” enjoined the king enthusiastically, and the four men entered into the main hall.

Armand spent the next portion of the evening in casual discussions with various guests and being introduced to the noblesse that made up the upper class of France. He did not desire to speak much with Clarice for the majority of dinner, although he found himself seated nearby her, as he feared that excessive conversation with her would prompt one of her witty sallies and humiliate him in front of the king and Sir Donovan.

But Clarice was as engaging and friendly as she was witty, and she soon made up for her previous comment by participating in an intellectual conversation with Armand and Sir Donovan Hughes about the requirements of a statesman and a diplomat.

The banquet was soon over, and it was announced that dancing would commence in the grand hall. Thus most of the guests turned in that direction, talking and laughing merrily amongst themselves.

The king settled for a game of whist\* in a nearby room, causing no small disappointment to those ladies who would have desired to dance with him. Sir Donovan on the other hand considered himself an avid dancer, and was quite enthusiastic to find himself the center of some attention, once the king had left. [\***whist**: a card game in which two pairs of people try to take a majority of the tricks and the trump suit is determined by the last card dealt. Whist is a forerunner of bridge]

Armand was swept onto the dance floor by Clarice, and was soon captivated by her charming nature. He became so enthralled in the dance that he forgot all about the White Feather, the Huguenots, his commission, and had eyes and thoughts only for her.

When the dancing had ended, Armand returned to his chair on the side to observe the assemblage from an observer’s position. A little while passed in this activity for him, but soon other women claimed him for the dancing and though he was courteous and polite, he regretted having to dance with others when he would rather have been watching Clarice, or better yet, dancing with her.

After an hour or so, many of the guests became fatigued with dancing and left the floor to engage in conversation on the sidelines.

As Armand too sat down to draw breath, he noticed that a small piece of white paper lay in the middle of the floor, where the dancing had been taking place. His curiosity aroused, he walked casually to the middle of the floor, bent down, picked it up, and looked quickly around to see if he had been noticed. But apparently no one had seen him, for all were busy speaking to one another and discussing a variety of topics. No one gave him any attention.

He entered the banquet room, which was presently empty, drew the paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and read.

*It will be on the 14<sup>th</sup>. You know where.  
We will make final plans at the banquet.*

And under these two lines, a small impression was visible. A small feather!

## Chapter 4: Monsieur Dabblon

The effect of this short note upon Armand was immediate. His face became flush with color, his hands trembled slightly, and his manner revealed shock and surprise. Was it really possible that only hours after he had been given his commission to find and ensnare the White Feather, he should already discover a clue to his identity? Was it really possible that that impudent character was to be found somewhere in that crowd of noblesse? And was it imaginable that the owner of this note had been so careless as to drop it on the floor?

Armand read the note over and over to ensure that his eyes were not fooling him, nor that he was engaging in some fond delusion. No, his eyes had not misled him. It was indeed a white feather. Every line and angle was perfect. It had obviously not been drawn, as it was much too minuscule to have been placed there by a quill. *It must have been etched on the paper by a seal on a ring*, Armand decided.

He folded up the letter and placed it in his doublet pocket. He returned to the hall, attempting to appear as unperturbed as possible. The second line of that note had especially struck him. *We shall make final plans at the banquet*. Surely it was referring to this present banquet. Of course it was! And to think that the White Feather was dancing there in that very room was an astonishing notion. And was he, perhaps, at this very moment, making final plans to liberate some incarcerated Huguenots? Armand's eyes flew from individual to individual in the room, all of whom were laughing, chatting in pairs or groups, and enjoying the evening.

Whoever had dropped the note had obviously done so unconsciously, and had not yet realized it, for no one appeared to be particularly concerned, or seemed to be searching for anything.

"One of these is the White Feather," he whispered, as if trying to convince himself.

The realization came to his young head that there being nearly two hundred persons at the banquet, it would be impossible to establish an identity as yet. But what then must he do? What action must he take?

After a few moments of rational thinking, he determined that it would be best to inform Saint-Ghyslain of his recent find, and see if he

had any instruction or counsel to recommend. If only he could find him alone. He left the room and entered the next one, where the king and a few others were occupied at whist. Sir Donovan Hughes had also joined in the game now that the dancing had ended, and was apparently engaged in a somewhat animated discourse with Charles.

But Saint-Ghyslain was not among that circle. He stood in another corner of the spacious room in hushed conversation with a man whose disposition immediately produced a negative effect upon Armand. This unknown personality was an individual of diminutive height, with very light brown hair, and skin of similar color, implying that, were he not a native of the Iberian peninsula, he might be from the south of France, Gascony perhaps. His clothes were a hue almost equivalent to his skin and hair, and his brown eyes always appeared to be squinting, as though he were constantly searching and quietly observing all that happened around him. To Armand, his appearance seemed to be that which would befit a moth, not only because his skin and clothes were both a delicate brown, but also because he appeared to be absolutely inconspicuous in all of his movements. He cut a very shrewd figure, and something about the way he carried himself told Armand that his self-esteem was very great, possibly bordering on arrogance.

As Armand approached the pair, Saint-Ghyslain caught sight of him and beckoned him to join them. This he did, but before he could utter a word concerning the valuable note he possessed, Saint-Ghyslain's voice spoke to him quickly and earnestly.

"Tensions at the border with Spain have risen. Ambassadors and diplomats have failed to broker reconciliation, and thus I must depart immediately for Madrid in an attempt to calm the situation before France has a war on her hands. I shall leave on the morrow, but before my departure, I should like you to meet one of my personal agents.

"This is M. Dabblon. He has been a faithful and devoted servant for the past twenty years, and because I shall not be here to supervise and organize the operation, you and he shall work together in tracking down the White Feather. He has invaluable experience and is tremendously intelligent. I judge that with both of you working to the same end, we shall be doubly sure of success. Armand shall retain command, but I expect you to listen to his opinions and give credence to his views as you would to mine. Remember that you labor for France

and for the Church, not for personal gain or fortune, although these too shall befall you both if you succeed in this affair.”

Armand, who had anticipated reaping all the credit for the apprehension of the White Feather, was somewhat dissatisfied that he should have to share the task and subsequent acclaim with this unattractive creature, however experienced he may be. Hence, when he turned to Dabblon, although the latter bowed in humility, which Armand instinctively felt was feigned, it was returned with only a curt nod. Then he turned once more to M. Saint-Ghyslain, drew the small note from his pocket and placed it in his hands.

“Read this, Monseigneur.”

Saint-Ghyslain immediately spotted the small impression at the bottom and turning to Armand questioned, “How have you obtained this?”

“I found it on the floor not a quarter of an hour ago. After discovering its contents, I brought it immediately to you.”

“So the White Feather *is* here!” said Saint-Ghyslain.

Armand nodded.

Saint-Ghyslain handed Dabblon the note. After studying it for a few moments, the fellow said, “This letter does not contain much information, apart from what it indirectly states, which is that he is in this house at the moment.”

Armand threw him a spiteful glance which appeared to say “Thank you, Monsieur, for stating that which is already obvious.”

“In any case,” continued M. Saint-Ghyslain, “it has confirmed my earlier suspicions of his being a member of society, and I have thought of a plan. I shall instruct my daughter to host many banquets in my absence and to make use of the guest list that was employed this evening. At these banquets you shall of course be present, and shall use whatever means possible to apprehend him and those of his league. In the event that you should capture him in my absence, keep him in prison until I return. Then we shall have a trial and a prompt execution.”

“Has it ever occurred to you, sir,” Armand enquired, “that Milord Donovan Hughes may be a prime suspect? For if some of these escaped Huguenots manage to find refuge in England, despite their queen Elizabeth’s aversion to them, could it not be possible that an Englishman guides them there? Furthermore, he is a diplomat and



often travels between our two nations, enabling him to smuggle with him a few of these heretics.”

“It is possible, and I would not rule him out,” returned Saint-Ghyslain, “but do not jump to premature conclusions. This matter can only be solved through patient efforts, and careful judgment. What you have brought in this letter is undoubtedly valuable, but take care to not be misled and fooled by its contents. Remember that this White Feather is abnormally intelligent. Do not assume that anything is what it appears to be, and weigh the consequences of each of your decisions carefully.”

And with that, he left Armand and Dabblon in the room, and moved toward the entrance where guests had already begun to depart.

But Armand had no specific desire to make conversation with his newly-appointed partner. The resentment he felt in his heart toward what he considered an intruder was still fresh, and he turned to Dabblon and said coldly,

“I beg your pardon if we cannot discuss this matter now, for I too must bid farewell to some of my acquaintances. However, if you allow me to convey you home this evening in my carriage, perhaps we can discuss the matter further then.”

And without waiting for a reply, Armand bowed, wheeled around, and headed in the same direction in which Saint-Ghyslain had gone.

\* \* \*

Armand allowed his eyes to open, despite the unwelcome sight of dawn’s rays streaming through the window, and gazed about him. As he made an attempt to raise his body from his bed, he felt a sharp pain through his head, and groaned inwardly. The throbbing caused him to collapse back onto his bed, as he recalled the events of the night before.

After he had snubbed Dabblon, he had gone and bid farewell to the king and Sir Donovan Hughes, although the latter was spoken to with considerably less affability, due to Armand’s newfound suspicion. In their conversation, he learned that the Englishman would be stationed in France for perhaps another year.

As he was descending the grand staircase, he had caught sight of Clarice. Once more he saw her beautiful face, and gazed at her, somewhat in a trance. For a moment, he seemed to forget everything—his commission, the scrap of paper, Dabblon. They all

seemed to fade into oblivion when his eyes focused upon her. There was definitely something about her that commanded his attention, or rather his fascination.

Armand was, and had always been, that specimen of individual who is unable to be moderate in anything. When he set his hands or his mind to a task, it was not without a significant amount of passion and enthusiasm. It was a family trait, inherited from his father, and had served his ambition well until now.

And now he found himself succumbing to what seemed to be the instigation of love, and not having ever been in love before, he knew not what to make of it. Observers might have said that he was simply a youth unacquainted with life, but because we know the folly of premature judgment, we shall save these assumptions of Armand's character for a later date.

After bidding his final farewells, Armand finally made his way to his personal carriage where Dabblon was awaiting with a look of particular indifference.

Armand, for his part, continued to sustain an air of proud reluctance.

"Give your address to my driver, Monsieur, and then join me in the carriage for a glass of wine."

He did so, and the carriage was soon traversing the roads of Paris with the two men inside sipping a Burgundy in silence.

After a while, Dabblon finally spoke.

"Before we begin to discuss the matter of which we have been assigned, allow me to clarify a small misunderstanding for you, Monsieur."

Armand nodded condescendingly.

"I understand that you were assigned the task of apprehending the White Feather several hours before I was admitted into the arrangement. What Saint-Ghyslain had in mind when assigning me to the same undertaking, I know not. Perhaps he understands that in anything, two are more likely to be successful than one. In any case, allow me to inform you that I have no special desire for fame, riches, or promotion. Should we succeed in this commission, and should those come to me in effect, I shall give them as much indifference as you, Monsieur, would give to a roadside beggar."

“And why is that, Monsieur?” asked Armand, still maintaining his insolent air. He tilted his head slightly back as if to point his chin at Dabblon, and twirled his glass of wine in his hands, indicating impatience.

“My only *raison d'être*\* in this affair is of a personal nature.”  
[\***raison d'être**: something that gives meaning or purpose]

Armand raised an eyebrow.

“I have a desire for revenge!”

“Revenge? And what has provoked this desire?”

“I shall come to that in just a moment, but in the meanwhile, be assured that I recognize the difficulties involved in sharing credit with another, and shall be more than content to allow you, Monsieur, to absorb the praise and commendation, while I shall simply fade away. In short, my reward shall be to see that traitor’s head on the chopping block.”

Though he did not show it, Dabblon’s words pleased Armand immensely. He appeared to be that species of individual who always deflected any applause, and was content to, as he put it, “fade away.” Armand now felt less repulsion at being partnered with Dabblon and could even manage somewhat of a smile. Dabblon’s viewpoint predestined that he would be hailed as the genius of the capture, while Dabblon would be seen as only an inferior accomplice.

“Now,” continued Dabblon, “allow me to state my motivation for revenge.

“In the service of M. Saint-Ghyslain, I have traveled extensively throughout France and even Europe. I was once on a mission in the Spanish Netherlands. It had been reported that the leader of these heretics, John Calvin, was staying with a friend in a city there. I had received instructions from M. Saint-Ghyslain to apprehend him. I enlisted a small band of spies to aid me in that task. After working arduously on the project for several months, I had finally succeeded in locating his dwelling. I gathered my small band of men, and had received all the official permission and military assistance from the authorities there. My plans were well-laid and should not have failed.

“On the evening of our intended capture, Calvin was at a meeting. My men and I surrounded the place silently and when the signal came, we entered to find that it was entirely deserted. A few tables and chairs were overturned in the room, indicating a hasty departure. Laying on

one of the tables was a large white feather. I haven't any idea how they came to know of our presence, but obviously the genius of the White Feather had outsmarted me.

"You must understand, Armand, that failure had been totally unknown to me until then. The word defeat had no definition in my mind. I was accustomed to being the champion, the conqueror. Before that incident I could rightly borrow the words of Julius Caesar when he said 'Veni, Vidi, Vici'! ..." Dabblon paused. His face was contorted with a mixture of rage and pain, and his complexion changed from a light brown to scarlet.

"That son of Lucifer had foiled my plans and had made me appear as a fool. From that moment on, I refrained from indulging in life's pleasures. Women, dancing, sport, and games have all been swept aside. Now I live and breathe only for the day that the White Feather and I shall meet again, and when I shall overcome him. By God and by all the holy angels, I swear to bring the White Feather and all those who enroll themselves under his banner to justice!"

The hate and malice that was evident in Dabblon's demeanor shocked Armand. There was an odious gleam in his eyes which spoke volumes about his feelings, and which frightened Armand somewhat. While he himself had agreed to hunt the White Feather for the country and also for his personal benefit, he certainly did not carry the same hatred that Dabblon displayed.

*But so much the better for me,* he thought to himself. *With a partner such as Dabblon, I can be almost certain that triumph will be ours.*

"Well then," he said, "perhaps it would be beneficial for both of us to retire for the night, and think on the matter further on the morrow. For now, Monsieur, receive my hand in friendship, and know that I look forward to our success no less than you do. Good night!"

\* \* \*

Armand meditated on all this on his bed while waiting for the pain caused by his hangover to cease. After several hours of aching, and after breaking in frustration the empty bottle that sat on his bedside, he dressed himself, and called for Silvestre.

"Prepare the carriage!" he commanded. He wished to call on Clarice, for once more the vision of her face was present in his mind. In spite of having only known her for one evening, he felt a strong

attraction to her, and wished to make her a closer and more personal acquaintance of his.

## **Chapter 5: Nicole**

Nicole walked across the small kitchen to where the apron hung on a peg on the wall. She took it from its lofty position, hooked it around her neck, and tied the strings behind her back. Then she crossed the room and began kneading the large amount of dough which lay on the table.

As her hands worked the dough, she sighed and pondered the events of the last few days. She had been crushed by the sudden loss of her family and had been unable to think clearly or gather her wits for the remainder of the morning.

Finally, as the sun rose high in the sky, and perspiration began to moisten her frail face, she arose and assumed that the best course of action would be to enter her now deserted house (or so she thought), continue her life in as normal a way as was possible, and await her father and brother's return. But just as she was to exit the passageway, she had a premonition that all was not right. Her mother had told her of these feelings many times, and how they were often a warning from Christ, and His personal method of instruction and admonition to His beloved children.

Therefore, following her mother's wise counsel, and obeying this sudden forewarning, she waited in the alley until an idea came to her. Her mother and father had been personal friends of a Huguenot elder in Paris, Philippe Raffin, and he and his wife ran a small inn outside the capital known as "The Fisherman's Net." This name was taken from the scriptures when Christ had commanded Peter to follow Him and be made a fisher of men, and the inn was appropriately named, since Raffin and his wife were indelibly faithful to spread the good news of Christ's death and resurrection with all who came to its door.

Raffin had converted Nicole's parents, and had baptized them in the small lake behind the inn. Nicole too, had been baptized herself in that same lake as a 16-year-old, as the Huguenots did not believe in

infant baptism, and were baptized only at the free will of the believer. She and her family had visited with the Raffins frequently, and had received much direction and comfort in united reading of the scriptures, and strengthening of one another's faith through song.

Therefore, it was to them that Nicole turned in her hour of distress. After walking for many hours, she finally arrived at the inn and was taken pity on, and allowed to stay with them until such a time as her father and brother would return.

Mme Raffin, for her part, was childless, and was pleased to be able to bestow upon Nicole a mother's affection. She was also delighted to have her help with the kitchen duties and the upkeep of the inn, while her husband comforted her in the knowledge that God was in control and would reveal His plan in due time.

And indeed, God was in control, and in His infinite love and tender mercy, another tribulation was sent Nicole's way, not for the purpose of causing her despair or sadness, but to try her faith until it was more precious than gold.

It was the very next day that a miller brought some rather unpleasant news for her. He was also of the Huguenot faith, and had been scouting for any news of her mother and siblings while making his deliveries. He appeared at the inn with his sack of grain and spoke quietly to Raffin, and Nicole knew by the look on the latter's face that it was not to be pleasant.

Mme Raffin entered the kitchen and bade Nicole follow her outside, saying that her husband would tend to the bread while they spoke of an urgent matter.

To this Nicole acquiesced, though she was burning with apprehension, and they were soon strolling through the lush grass of the countryside.

"Nicole, I do not know how to put this, but the miller has brought some news which will be difficult for you to bear."

"Does it concern my family?" questioned Nicole, her lips quivering with uncertainty.

"Yes. But before I relate to you this information, I want to remind you that though what you will hear might seem unbearable for the moment, our Savior knows and understands when we suffer pain, and reaches down in tenderness and love to give us comfort."

"And ... the tidings of my family?" Nicole asked gingerly.

Mme Raffin breathed a deep breath and then began, faltering and hesitant, for she wished she did not have to be the bearer of such unpleasant tidings.

“Your father ... was found in a ditch on the side of the road from Paris to Calais. His throat had been cut, in all probability by the king’s men, for we have since learned that your family, including Fabrice, is being held at the Place de la Grève prison.”

At her first words, Nicole’s eyes began to moisten, and by the time she finished her account, a hot stream of tears ran down her cheeks.

Having lost her mother and siblings had been quite nearly unbearable, but she had counted on the loving comfort and strength of her father and brother upon their return. But now, on hearing that her father had been cruelly murdered, and that her brother shared the same fate as the remainder of her family, the despair that welled within her was impossible to describe. It was as if an abyss yawned beneath her, and threatened to engulf what remained of her faith. Her young and tender heart, which still bore the marks of a recent wound, was torn apart once more, and the grief that coursed through her frame was unspeakable.

For a while she allowed the tears to flow, trying to absorb the emotions of deep misery that threatened her.

“Why does Christ allow such suffering among the faithful?” she demanded mournfully at length. “Why does He not use His almighty power to crush those who touch His children, and rescue those whom He calls His Own?”

“Nicole,” replied Mme. Raffin, taking the girl in her arms. “I understand this question, for my life has not been devoid of trials and sufferings. But each time I was tempted to doubt my blessed Jesus on this matter, a thought would come to me. He has not promised us a life of ease or pleasure, but of sacrifice. He said that the servant is not greater than the master and that if He had been persecuted, so would we.

“In my times of trial and tribulation,” she continued, “I have always found solace and comfort in the holy Scriptures. I once spent three years in a dungeon—similar to the one which your family is being held in now—for my faith. Had I not had the scriptures which I had

previously committed to memory, I doubt that I would have endured through that time of suffering and agony.

“A scripture that I found myself repeating over and over was, ‘Every man that hath forsaken houses or brethren or sisters or father or mother, or husband or wife or children or lands for My name’s sake, shall receive an hundred fold and shall inherit everlasting life.’ For every trial, every heartache, every difficulty that you face, you shall be compensated a hundred times greater than you expected.”

“But what of my father? How can his death be compensated for?” Nicole said, sobbing.

“Nicole, though your father’s body has been killed, his spirit lives on. You shall one day join your father in Heaven where there shall be no more tears, nor death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. M. d’Arnae is released from the mortal frame that once encased his soul, and the happiness and joy that his spirit now experiences know no bounds. He has passed on to the land of eternal bliss, and awaits the day when you shall be reunited to him.

“So be heartened, for in that day God shall judge those who oppose Him, and due justice shall be meted to the wicked. But in the meantime, He has instructed us to love our enemies, to do good to them that hate us, and pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us. We are to bear our sufferings with patience, for though we are persecuted, we are not forsaken; though cast down, we are not destroyed; and though perplexed, we are not in despair.”

\* \* \*

Armand sat quite nervously on his chair, apparently deep in thought. His gloves were wet with the perspiration, and his stomach was in knots. His lips pressed tightly together as he mentally reviewed what he would say to Clarice on seeing her.

He had been met at the entrance by one of the servants whom he had recognized from the evening before. When he stated that he had come to meet with M. Saint-Ghyslain, he was informed that His Lordship had departed for Spain earlier that day, but that if it was of great urgency, he could speak with his daughter instead. Armand consented gladly to this suggestion, for this is what he had planned. It would have been difficult to conjure some excuse for calling directly on Clarice, especially in the absence of her father. Thus, this present arrangement had been adopted and was functioning satisfactorily. He



was shown into the antechamber of the great hall, and instructed to remain there.

His eyes studied the tapestries that hung majestically on the walls of the room. There were paintings on a variety of subjects, including a large portrait depicting some battle from the Hundred Years' War. There was also among this brilliant collection several of the Saint-Ghyslain family. As he studied a portrait of the threesome, Armand noted the striking similarity between Clarice and her mother, who had passed away previously. The same dark eyes, the similar oval faces, and the identical lips. He rose from his seat and meandered about the chamber, pausing every now and then to gaze at a portrait of particular interest, recognizing also the scrawls at the bottom of each image, bearing the names of renowned artists of the day who were the creators of each masterpiece.

At length his eyes settled on one painting exclusively of Clarice. She was depicted sitting on a field of grass dotted by heather, with rolling hills and serene-looking mountains serving as a background. A small mill was grinding near a river and here and there birds were shown, some flying through the air, and some sitting calmly on the grass. Armand's gaze then turned from the background of the portrait to its subject. Clarice's long dark locks were unbound and were flowing freely in a gentle wind. She was clad entirely in white, excepting a dark crimson shawl which was wrapped around her shoulders, and held together just below her neck by her left hand. Her gentle appearance, along with the serene calmness of her natural environment combined to create a gorgeous rendition of a human being corresponding peacefully with nature.

This image impressed Armand immensely so that he gazed at it for a long while, and gave it his full attention. So absorbed was he in Clarice's beautiful form, and enchanted by her exquisite loveliness, that he failed to notice the figure who had silently entered the anteroom a few seconds before, and who was now watching him, a bemused smile on her pretty face.

After a few moments, her amusement increasing by the second, she asked good-naturedly,

“I presume, Monsieur, that you retain a particular fondness for Rosteau's art?”

Barely had the first few words left her mouth, when Armand, hearing the voice, and quickly recognizing its owner, spun around, and found himself face-to-face with Mlle Saint-Ghyslain. Needless to say, he was mortified. He had predetermined in his mind that he would attempt to be as inconspicuous as possible concerning his nascent feelings for her until he'd discovered whether or not she reciprocated his regard. Furthermore, because of his haste he tripped, and his about-face was hardly as graceful as he would have liked. He stuttered an apology.

But Clarice, who saw his loss of composure and was instantly feeling sympathetic, attempted to pacify him.

“Oh, you need not explain yourself, Armand. I'm told you came to see my father, and I regret that he has just departed for Spain this morning.”

“Yes, they told me as much,” returned Armand. “And as I do not wish to impose upon you, I shall be leaving at once.”

“Oh, but do allow me to offer you some refreshments before you leave so quickly,” offered Clarice.

But Armand was still horrified at what had just taken place, and he was now no longer in the mood to carry on a conversation.

“I fear I cannot!” he said coldly. “I came only to see your father on urgent business, and being that he is unavailable, I have business elsewhere.”

And with that he bowed, and promptly departed.

## Chapter 6: Intelligence

Armand was still seething as he entered his carriage and gave instructions to be driven home. He was offended beyond measure, because in his mind, Clarice had not only been a witness to his humiliation, but had caused it. Her remark had stung Armand deeper than she knew, for being in love, he exaggerated her intentions in his mind, and he now supposed that her comment, which in reality was meant only as a droll witticism, was designed to scorn him.

Armand was proud, and had always been. His ambition and zeal had secured for him a position which earned the admiration and approbation of the female population, but because Clarice seemed to care nothing for his social status, this had offended his vanity, and in his conceit he had coldly snubbed her, departing with his nose turned upwards, an expression common to Frenchmen of that day, when it happened that they took offence.

Clarice, for her part, had not meant to scorn him, nor did she perceive that Armand regarded her as anything more than a recently made acquaintance. She had entered the room to find the cavalier engrossed in the portrait, and having found this peculiar in a comical sort of way, had made a jest. This was her nature, and she certainly did not mean ill-will toward him. It had seemed the most amusing thing to say, and her somewhat impulsive nature required that she say it.

Armand meanwhile, returned to his lodging. He meditated on the incident for the remainder of the day, and when his anger had subsided, he began to realize that he had acted not only rashly but also in a manner in which a woman, were she a scullery maid or a princess, ought never to be treated, and had, by this simple display of arrogance, perhaps lost all hope of obtaining her affection. But what must be done?

Gradually his anger returned, only this time it was directed at himself, and he paced up and down his chambers, cursing himself for his rudeness, and mentally berating a certain Armand Le T line, telling him that he ought really to have known better than to allow his pride to get the better of him.

After much thought, he decided that there was now only one option left to him, and that was to apologize. This was most

disagreeable to Armand, as he was not in the least accustomed to admitting his own error, but seeing the necessity of doing so, he settled upon writing a letter, imploring Clarice's forgiveness for his supercilious behavior. So difficult was this action for him that no sooner had Silvestre gone to deliver it that he began to regret having sent it, for recognizing his wrongs was difficult enough, but to admit them to another was doubly unpleasant for his conceited nature.

But that letter accomplished its purpose, for Clarice was not one to hold grudges unnecessarily, and she returned his letter with one of her own, readily excusing him and renewing her invitation to a tête-à-tête in the near future. Thus the relations between the two were repaired, although Armand had yet to discover in what exact view Clarice held him, or whether what he felt for her was in the slightest way mutual.

\* \* \*

A week passed after this incident, and Armand and Dabblon were working assiduously in an attempt to discover something concerning the White Feather. The note that Armand had found proved to be of little assistance, as it contained naught regarding his identity or any indication as to how he operated. It is true that they were aware of his presence at the banquet at which the letter was found, and that narrowed the search down to perhaps two hundred persons. However, all of these were nobles, and prying into their affairs was not a simple matter, and even if they could, the White Feather was unlikely to renew the mistake of leaving them clues.

In Armand's opinion, Sir Donovan Hughes was a prime suspect, if not as the White Feather himself, at least as a member of his intrepid league. Armand's two simple and quite logical reasons for this suspicion were that Sir Donovan was an ambassador of a Protestant state, and was doubtless sympathetic to the Huguenots, and that this same occupation allowed him to travel frequently across the Channel, making it ideal to smuggle with him a few Huguenots each time. So committed was Armand to this notion that he called on Sir Donovan on several occurrences, on the pretext of simply wishing to better make his acquaintance. During these visits, he would remain attentive and watchful, hoping to discover some clue as to his involvement, but as of yet had learned nothing. Therefore, the he and Dabblon continued to wait, hope, and work.

It so happened that something occurred, however, which immensely altered their modus operandi. Armand was at his apartments in discussion with Dabblon when Silvestre entered into the room and announced that a messenger had brought a letter from the Place de la Grève. Armand, recognizing the aforesaid as the prison which contained a number of those Huguenots whom he had arrested, became apprehensive, and opened the letter. It read as follows:

*I regret to inform you, M. Le Têline, that the prisoners whom you arrested in M. Saint-Ghyslain's name and placed in our custody, namely the d'Arnae family, have either escaped or been spirited. Last night about midnight, the alarm was raised by the guards, and I was informed that the entire family was absent from the cell in which they were quartered.*

*On the hook on the wall from which the cells keys are usually suspended, hung a large white feather instead. The offending guards are being disciplined and the city is being searched for traces of the fugitives. If they are found, I shall report immediately to you.*

*M. Florent Saville (chief warden)*

Armand crumpled the letter in his hand. Although he had always been considered a devout Catholic due to his diligence in apprehending and arresting numerous heretics, his motives were purely worldly. He craved power, glory, riches, and fame. So he had embarked on this mission with these thoughts in mind. But now it seemed that the White Feather had issued him a personal challenge by liberating those prisoners which he had arrested, and the anger that began to well up within him seemed to fuel his desire to uncover the White Feather's true identity.

Dabblon, who had watched all the proceedings with great interest, held out his hand, as though to ask if the contents of the letter might be available to him as well. In response, Armand despondently tossed him what was now a ball of crumpled paper. Dabblon opened it, smoothed out the creases, and read out loud what Armand already knew.

Then he looked up and said, "Now I believe you begin to understand a fraction of what I mean when I say that the White Feather shall be found or I shall cease to exist."

Armand sank into his chair and placed his head in his hands.

From that point on, he grew more resolute in his passion for triumph. Before this incident, the White Feather was merely an enemy of the state, a puzzle that required unscrambling, as well as fodder for his ambition. But now a more personal touch had been mixed into the affair, and he began to seek success with a greater ardor than he had in the past. While he had by no means come near to equaling Dabblon's fanatical quest for revenge, he was more vigilant, and labored with considerable diligence to find some information concerning his prospective prey.

But time and effort afforded him none, and he began to grow impatient. In certain moments of despair, he wondered if perhaps they would never unearth their enemy. Would he ever accomplish this task, or would he be left to the shame of failure, falling short in his duties? On very rare occasions, when he was particularly depressed, he would consider giving up the seemingly impossible task.

But when his dejected mood had passed, he would determine that the fire that burnt within him would not be quenched so easily, and both he and Dabblon now had double incentive to speedily discover the White Feather, and bring him to justice. So they continued to toil and labor.

\* \* \*

Notre Dame Cathedral's bells pealed out across Paris to announce the commencement of Sunday Mass. Dukes and duchesses, counts and countesses, and every Catholic of noble bearing in the vicinity entered the grand structure to openly display their faith.

Clarice had arrived with a small retinue of servants, and was being greeted with looks of admiration by many. She was a social character, eager to converse, well versed in various topics of discussion.

Sir Donovan Hughes, despite being a Protestant, was nevertheless attending Mass, and Armand had also just arrived, with Dabblon at his side. It had not been a fortnight since he had received that news which had wounded him so grievously, and his jaw was fixed. He continued to emit the air of a man determined to accomplish his

purpose, and his solemn bearing caused even Clarice to question what it was that troubled him.

Finally the outside doors of the Cathedral closed, leaving the servants, lackeys, footmen, maids-in-waiting, and escorts to pass the time however they pleased, provided they were present when the religious observance had concluded.

Silvestre, being inhibited and rather timid, usually kept to himself on these occasions. However, on seeing Gardière, Sir Donovan Hughes' French lackey, and recalling his master's admonition to keep a close eye on Sir Donovan's doings, he decided to attempt casual conversation with him. He approached him and found a ready listener and worthy conversationalist. Gardière was an animated character with a fine sense of humor and friendly bearing. He knew nothing of the suspicion that was directed at his master, and was glad to have a conversing partner. A measure of time passed in this pleasant activity until Gardière suddenly started.

"By God, I have forgotten my master's prayer book. He had instructed me to place it in his satchel, and his instruction escaped me completely. I must bring it to him before he notices its want."

And with that, he opened the carriage door, rummaged around through a small valise, and produced the book. Then he flew toward the cathedral at a maddening pace, but quickly checked his excitement before proceeding calmly through the grand entrance.

Silvestre was left standing next to the carriage, somewhat dazed at how quickly Gardière had reacted, and was awaiting his return, when he glimpsed a messenger riding down the road toward the cathedral. As the messenger drew closer, he dismounted, reached into his saddlebag, and produced a letter. He walked directly toward Silvestre, placed the letter in his hands, and said only three words.

"For your master!"

Silvestre, slightly puzzled, received the letter and stored it in his doublet pocket. The messenger remounted, placed a finger to his lips, and rode off in a cloud of dust, leaving Silvestre standing there, his previously dazed look now having turned to one of utter bewilderment. Gardière soon returned, but Silvestre found it difficult to concentrate on their discussion.

When Mass was over, Armand commanded to be driven home, and Silvestre waited until they had reached their destination to give his master the letter.

Armand opened it, and began to read. However the first words on the paper puzzled him immensely. He read them again out loud. "To Sir Donovan Hughes..."

"From where did you get this?" he questioned.

Silvestre answered that he had been given the note and instructed to transmit it to his master. Armand frowned, but returned to the letter, still rather bewildered.

*The fugitives have been successfully liberated, but I require your assistance to smuggle them from Paris. I have thought of a plan, but for obvious reasons dare not entrust such compromising information into a messenger's hands. Rather I shall deliver it personally to you at the banquet on the 29<sup>th</sup>. Be safe.*

And once more at the bottom of the paper was printed the very same white feather which Armand had seen on the previous letter that he had discovered at the banquet.

Wholly and completely stunned, he struggled to gather his thoughts. It first flew to his head that Silvestre, seeing his master's desperate struggle to uncover the White Feather, had perhaps forged this letter in an attempt to pacify his vehemence in his work, but he soon dismissed that absurd thought. Such a letter would only give him (Armand) a wrong lead, and would further complicate the issue, likely incurring his wrath more than anything.

But how on earth could a letter which was intended for Sir Donovan have been given to Silvestre? After a few minutes of careful contemplation, it began to dawn on him.

"Silvestre, where were you when the letter was given to you?"

"I was standing near to Milord Donovan's carriage in conversation with his servant. He entered the cathedral to deliver something to his master when the messenger rode up and gave me the letter."

"That's it then!" cried Armand, suddenly comprehending it all. "The messenger had instructions to give the letter to Milord Donovan's servant who would be standing near to his carriage. When the



messenger came, and found only you, he gave the letter to your hand, thinking that you were his servant. Oh, how the hand of God has finally intervened! Haste, Silvestre, run to Dabblon's residence and bid him come here immediately."

Silvestre promptly departed to do his master's bidding, and Armand was left to his joyful thoughts. His happiness was unspeakable, and the delight which seized his being was beyond description. He now had a definite lead on the White Feather, and might soon be able to identify him.

He knew also that Sir Donovan—although not the White Feather himself—was a member of the heretic's league, and could soon be apprehended. So his suspicions had been correct after all! That Englishman, while posing as a benign diplomat, was in reality a conspirator!

These thoughts engulfed him for about a quarter of an hour, until Dabblon arrived. When he'd been shown the letter however, Dabblon's reaction was considerably calmer—though he certainly was no less eager. The two resolved to come up with a workable plan.

It was clear that the first thing that must be done was to deliver the letter to Sir Donovan. Fortunately the seal did not bear a signet, and could easily be replaced. So it was that Silvestre soon set about finding a messenger to deliver it to the Englishman's abode.

The banquet on the 29<sup>th</sup> was just four days away, and Armand and Dabblon had not time to waste. The plan was to watch Sir Donovan Hughes at the banquet. The letter was clear that the White Feather would deliver the itinerary personally, so whoever would approach Sir Donovan at the party would become a prime suspect, particularly if he would be seen transmitting any kind of written information.

It was magnificent. The two of them could scarcely believe that chance had favored them, and had caused this fortunate turn of events to occur.

Dabblon was already contemplating his personal vengeance, and began to feel satisfied with himself.

Armand, for his part, began to dream of illustriousness and recognition. He imagined that his success might even elevate him in Clarice's esteem, and edge her toward those sentiments which he so desired her to feel. It had occurred to him that if successful he could well expect Saint-Ghyslain to give him his daughter's hand in marriage,

regardless of whether or not Clarice could find it within her to love him. But Armand did not wish for this. To force the issue by entreating her father to intervene would be to gain her as his wife, but never as his lover, and having pursued her acquaintance over the past fortnight, he had come to the conclusion that to obtain her love was what he desired most of life, even above success in his mission.

## Chapter 7: Prey

The carriage wheels spun wildly on the cobblestones of Paris, bearing their luxurious load rapidly through the darkening streets. The driver of the vehicle repeatedly cracked his riding whip at the horses, to urge them to greater speed, and the panting of the fatigued animals was drowned by the sound of their hooves pounding on the pavement. But contrary to the din outside, the inside of the vehicle was bathed in a blanket of silence.

Two men sat inside, their purpose clear. It had not been a month since they had commenced the search for the White Feather, and now, they were to discover his mysterious identity.

Armand sat pensively in his seat, his fingers clutching the front of his head beneath the brim of his cavalier's hat, contemplating the task which had been set for that evening. Dabblon, of whom Sir Donovan had yet to make an acquaintance, would be his shadow for the evening. According to the letter, the unwary Englishman would receive the plan of action directly from the White Feather, and in the process, would unwittingly betray his leader into the hands of his enemies. The White Feather, whom Armand had previously deemed quite nearly invincible, would, that very evening, be the leading actor in a play that was doomed to defeat, and perform the role of the unsuspecting prey of the falcon of authority.

Although the plan which he and Dabblon had laid was not by any means fool-proof, and could easily fall short, they reasoned that at least they knew that Sir Donovan Hughes was a member of the league of the White Feather, and if they did not lay their hands on their enemy tonight, vigilant watching and observance of all of Sir Donovan's

movements and doings would eventually reveal the secret. As for Sir Donovan Hughes, that meddlesome foreigner, Armand wondered how they would dispose of him. Because of his status as a diplomat, his arrest and subsequent execution would destroy any diplomatic ties which France maintained with England, ties already considerably thin.

*But, reflected Armand, that is really none of my concern. My job is merely to place him in the government's charge.*

And so he forced himself to focus on the evening's events and ensure that no mistakes were made. He had toiled with too great a sense of commitment over the past weeks to be denied success by some unforeseen interruption or unforced error, and could not let either of those occur.

Seated across from Armand sat Dabblon. The odious gleam which Armand had seen on occasion had returned to haunt his eyes, and Armand secretly wondered what took place in that bitter and inscrutable mind of his.

But Dabblon was by no means a revenge-crazed monster, wholly lacking in common sense. He possessed a distinct presence of mind, and he was perfectly aware that if he kept his eyes on Sir Donovan at all times that evening, and watched his every motion in minute detail, like an owl watches a mouse which he plans to make his dinner, he would be the first to set his beady, brown eyes on that enigmatic Feather who had foiled his plans and caused him to fail in his ambitious scheme.

Although he would have to wait a while until he was fully able to enjoy the sweet delights of vengeance, it would not be much farther until that same desire for revenge would be satisfied. He and Armand had agreed that, in the likely event of their identifying the White Feather that evening, the arrest was not to be made immediately. Rather, they were to shadow him until they could discover where he had hidden the fugitives spoken of in the letter. These fugitives were considered by the pair to be the d'Arnae family, given that their liberation and the discovering of the letter had occurred simultaneously. In short, they would kill two birds with one stone, or if one included the incarceration of Sir Donovan Hughes, three.

But the thoughts and reminiscences of the two plotters were jolted by the voice of Silvestre, seated above on the raised box, announcing their arrival at the palatial mansion of M. Saint-Ghyslain. The carriage slowed and gradually came to a stop in the center of the courtyard.

Both men gazed at each other, a determined look affixed in their solemn gazes. The die had been cast, and the time had been appointed. There would be no turning back. Whether the White Feather was discovered tonight, or later on, he would eventually be revealed.

The carriage door swung open on its hinges, the men stepped out, and were met by a scene of majestic brilliance. The sky was an indigo color, interrupted by streaks of orange and pink, and sporadically shaded by scarlet hues, indicating twilight. The white palace of M. Saint-Ghyslain stood out strongly against the dusk sky, and was still partially bathed in the orange glow of the fading sun.

The front gardens of the palace, where the carriage had just pulled up, were inhabited by birds of many distinctions and clear fountains of water, each paired with a marble statue, some depicting children playing happily, or animals frolicking, and even a cherub or two were counted among the collection. In the center of this glorious panorama, a small cobblestone path ran from the courtyard directly to the grand staircase of the great structure. At the height of these marble stairs stood the arched doorway, sandwiched by two spectacular marble pillars, each extending to the roof. Beyond the entrance lay a multitude of rooms and quarters, each doubtless furnished with no less taste and opulence than the exterior of M. Saint-Ghyslain's lavish abode.

The view which Armand beheld seemed almost etched on canvas, a painting of ethereal beauty, and portrayed magnificence, splendor, and a sense of radiant excellence, and he stood in awe at the brilliance of the scene, overcome by admiration, until he was interrupted by Silvestre, who came up behind and whispered in his ear.

“Monsieur, Milord Donovan Hughes' carriage is over there, on the far corner of the courtyard, and there he is, coming out from within the box.”

Armand whirled around in reply, and saw that Silvestre was right. Having just emerged from his carriage, and giving orders to Gardière, stood Sir Donovan Hughes, a diplomat of England, but also a daring plotter, in league with the nation's most wanted criminal.

His hands clenched tightly and his nails dug into his palms as he stared at his enemy. He pressed his lips together and squinted his eyes, watching every move of Sir Donovan.

He then turned back toward Dabblon and indicated Sir Donovan

with his head.

“Your charge, Monsieur.”

He received only a nod in return and the pair proceeded to make their way toward the entrance, where Armand could already make out the form of Clarice, standing at the top of the stairs, clad in an elaborate gown, and greeting her prominent guests with an air of ebullient hospitality.

As they drew closer and began to ascend the staircase, Armand was startled by the unmistakable voice of Sir Donovan Hughes behind him. Apparently, the Englishman had wasted no time in crossing the short distance from his carriage to the entrance, and had rapidly caught up with the pair, who had strolled somewhat slowly. On recognizing Armand from behind, he greeted him as one would an old acquaintance.

“Good evening, Armand,” he said in French. “I have not been honored by your company much of late.”

“Ah, Milord, good evening,” exclaimed Armand, affecting great affability. “You are indeed right, it has been awhile since I have called on you, but you’ve no idea how occupied I have been lately. M. Saint-Ghyslain’s absence has caused me to take charge of further duties for which I had not been responsible, and I scarcely have any time of my own. But it is good to see you. I imagine that you too have been busy.”

“That I have, young man, but let us not discuss these matters now, for tonight we may lay aside our cares and worries and enjoy the gracious hospitality of Mlle Saint-Ghyslain.”

“Indeed, but Milord, I should like you to meet a good friend of mine, M. Dabblon. He plies his trade as a merchant, a most successful one at that, and has just recently returned to Paris. He has been to England numerous times, and I think you would find him an enjoyable companion with whom to speak of your homeland.”

The two men bowed cordially to each other, and the threesome was soon busily engaged in conversation on the grand staircase. They would have forgotten where they were had it not been for a voice that interrupted them.

“Would you gentlemen care to come in, or is the cool night air so pleasant that it eclipses the warmth of our antechamber?”

All three whirled around to where Clarice stood atop the staircase,

an amused smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Armand scaled the staircase in several hasty strides, bent low, and kissed her hand, followed closely by his companions, who did likewise. The three entered and Sir Donovan excused himself, saying he would like to greet some of his acquaintances, while Armand and Dabblon retreated to a corner of the spacious room for a final tête-à-tête.

“From this moment, you must not lose sight of him!” whispered Armand. “Watch him from a safe distance, and pretend to be engaged in some other activity. Once all has been discovered, do not come to inform me; rather, I shall come and receive the knowledge from you, but until then, your eyes must not leave from his person.”

Dabblon nodded solemnly and the two separated, one to keep watch for the appearance of his vulnerable prey, and the other to await the outcome of the stakeout.

The evening passed by ever so slowly for Armand. At first he spoke to no one, and so anxious was he to discover the White Feather that he begun to wish that he was the one assigned to watch Sir Donovan, so that he would be the first to set eyes upon his mysterious opponent.

But his better judgment advised him to stay put, to await the outcome patiently, and so he waited, but he was not patient. He agonized over the prospects of that evening’s results, his stomach in knots, his breast heaving, and his legs quivering, not from fright, but from a mounting anticipation.

As the evening wore on, he was struck by doubts. Since the letter had been discovered, he had remained confident, but now, just at the moment of truth, he seemed to be overcome by uncertainty. Would he again be outwitted by the White Feather? Surely the head that had devised dozens of mysterious plots would not fall prey to the fowler’s net so easily. Were their schemes already doomed to defeat by the cunning of a genius? As he lingered, engulfed in his newfound skepticism, he was approached by Clarice, a look of concern evident on her face.

“Armand, your face is so pale. Are you ill?”

Armand straightened, attempting to gain control of his faculties, and appear congenial and relaxed despite his inward unrest.

“Why, uh ... No, I am quite alright. I am merely a little tired

perhaps, for I have been quite busy of late.”

Her gloved hand reached up to touch his cheek, and Armand could read genuine concern on her face.

“Yes, you must be,” agreed Clarice. “You have not called on me recently, and it has been awhile since we have spoken.”

“Oh, I fear I shall be forced to seek your pardon for my negligence, Mademoiselle, but I was occupied by other pressing matters. Chief among them is the threat of the Huguenots which weighs heavily upon my mind.”

“Yes, I understand what you mean. My father has exhausted himself over the past years trying to save the nation from this ever-increasing threat.”

“The Huguenots might be more easily eradicated, were it not for the White Feather!” said Armand bitterly, recalling the d’Arnae family in his mind.

“But at times I wonder,” said Clarice, more to herself than to Armand, “what is it that causes these Huguenots to be considered so dangerous?”

“Ah, but you forget the burned churches and convents, the riots, and the murders of priests, nuns, and ordinary Catholics throughout the country, as well as in other nations.”

“Surely not all of them are so excessive?” Clarisse mused.

“But they are all heretics.”

“That is true, I suppose. But in any case, I needn’t worry about it. At the moment, I have a roomful of hungry guests whose appetites I am neglecting. Come, Armand—let us proceed to the banquet hall.”

Armand extended his arm in reply. She curled her hand around it, and the pair proceeded toward the banquet hall, which was already bustling with a variety of that time’s aristocracy, all eager to begin the evening meal.

Clarice took her place at the head of the table, Armand was placed a few seats down, and the former made a simple speech, welcoming all those who had come, and bade them eat their fill and drink to their hearts content.

A murmur of collective approval arose from the guests, and the banquet soon commenced, served in sublime fashion by the servants and valets, and furnished by a multitude of delicious cuisine and appetizing victuals.

The mood at the supper table was brilliant. There were countless topics of discussion available to the diners, not the least of which centered on the White Feather, his latest exploits, speculation on the amount of time that would be required to successfully apprehend him, and often exaggerated tales of his daring pluck and genius.

One of the courtiers who sat near to Armand was giving his personal view of the White Feather. "I say, the White Feather is the Devil himself! I hear M. Saint-Ghyslain has labored tirelessly in numerous attempts to apprehend him and his cohorts. Why, it is even rumored that one man has been singled out, and selected for the colossal task of apprehending him, seeking him out, and bringing him to justice. It is unlikely that he would ever succeed, but if he did, I daresay that he would quite rapidly scale the ladder of success, fame, and position."

Armand smiled at this observation, which referred to him, but the smile swiftly vanished as the voice of Sir Donovan Hughes, who until now had remained silent, sounded through the assembly.

"Indeed, though many a man may scale the ladder of success, only to find that it leans against the wrong wall."

The audience gave forth varying reactions to this statement, delivered in a casual, almost careless manner. Some, who had drunken substantially of the fine wines, provided in sublime quantity, laughed raucously at the wit they detected in Sir Donovan's words. Others sat quietly, not certain what was meant by this statement, but lacking a desire to appear ignorant before all, nodded their heads in agreement, pretending to recognize some profound meaning in Sir Donovan's words.

But to Armand, there almost seemed a disguised challenge in those same words. Whether he spoke in reference to him, he did not know. Yet that remark gave the impression of a foreboding prophecy of doom. Had the shrewd Englishman gained the knowledge of the imminent danger surrounding his leader, and thus had responded with this direct assertion? Did he wish to outwardly display defiance toward Armand and reiterate before all that the White Feather would never be successfully apprehended? Surely that was his aim. Pangs of anger began to prick him, but if there was one thing he had learned from his occupation, it was when to disguise one's true feelings. Thus, he took hold of his goblet, brought it to his lips, returned it to its place, and



smiled in Sir Donovan's direction.

"And suppose the ladder does lean against the wrong wall. The wall crumbles, the ladder and the man fall. But if the wall stands firm, he reaches the top of the ladder, and reveling in his achievement, may say to himself 'It was worth the climb!'"

"Bravo!" cried Clarice. "Mesdames, Messires, we have before us a classic example of English wisdom, made practical by French insight. One without the other would not suffice, so we are fortunate to be graced by both on this evening." Then, she stood and raised her chalice.

"To Milord Donovan Hughes, Armand Le T line, the ladder of success, and the wall on which it leans. May it not crumble beneath us!"

## **Chapter 8: Prey?**

The remainder of the banquet went along quite splendidly. Clarice had taken Armand's side in the brief battle of words that had ensued so unexpectedly, but she had done so in such a way that Sir Donovan Hughes would not be inclined to take offense. Armand was glad of this, for her statement had restored goodwill at the table, and had transformed what might have been an explosive affair to one of general harmony.

In general, Sir Donovan Hughes was well liked by the French. While the relationship between the two nations was not exactly one of mutual fondness, Sir Donovan was by no means a typical reflection of the stuffy, old-fashioned country that existed across the Channel. He was witty, good natured, and generous. These were qualities which the French greatly respected and he was accepted and received well by them.

Indeed, Armand himself had greatly esteemed and admired the man, until it was discovered that he was in league with the White Feather, and now he could almost feel pity for the diplomat.

The numerous courses of the banquet were soon over, and as the hour was late, many of the guests wished to depart. Clarice, sensing this, stood and made another short speech, thanking all those who

came, and bidding them safety and godspeed as they journeyed to their respective homes.

Thus, the dinner ended in this pleasant manner, and Armand had only one focus. To find Dabblon and discover from him the identity of the White Feather. He found him in earnest parley with Sir Donovan Hughes. As Armand lingered nearby, awaiting the end of the conversation, Dabblon inadvertently looked up, and their eyes met. There was no need for words, for the whitish face of his companion said it all. Sir Donovan Hughes, the cleverly masked emissary, had his letter.

Armand discreetly motioned toward a side room and was given a nod in return, indicating that his cohort would be there as soon as was possible.

The young Frenchman entered the deserted room, where a small number of tables and chairs were placed, sat down at one table in a corner, and waited.

A few minutes passed. Armand began to grow impatient. His breathing was labored and his heart's pace quickened. Where was Dabblon, and most importantly, who was the White Feather?

Finally he heard the sound of boots on carpet just outside the door, and the slow, deliberate tread of Dabblon was clearly distinguishable.

*Here he is!* thought Armand.

The door opened, Dabblon came over to the table and sat down.

"Well?" inquired Armand, bracing himself for whatever name Dabblon would utter.

But instead, Dabblon took hold of the half-empty bottle of wine which stood on the table, poured himself a glass, and began to drink, leisurely, as though he were enjoying himself at a fine meal, instead of revealing the greatest kept secret in the nation.

Dabblon well-knew Armand's passion for success, and he did this to torment him, as though he wanted to him to beg and plead for the news which he had discovered. Oh, how Armand wished to strangle him for that!

"Well?" he repeated, attempting to control himself.

The older man managed a rare smile. "I shall tell you when I have emptied this glass of wine."

"Dabblon, I am in no mood for humor! Tell me, I implore you."

But Dabblon continued to sip his wine, carelessly, and Armand

saw that no amount of pleading, cajoling, threatening, or begging would force Dabblon to speak sooner, so he sat back in his chair, put a wholly unconcerned expression on his face, and began drumming his fingers on the table.

Gradually Dabblon finished, and he set his glass down.

“Milord Donovan has his letter.”

“And?”

Dabblon shrugged.

This action drove Armand wild. He stood up, seized Dabblon by the arm, drew him close, and spoke directly to his face.

“Who is the White Feather?!”

Then an amazing thing happened. The older and shorter man seized the hands which held his sleeve, and with one small shove, put a considerable distance between himself and the half-crazed Armand.

“Listen to me, and I shall tell you all. Sit!”

Armand, not quite comprehending what had just taken place, and not realizing the rudeness with which he had just been treated, sat down, his eyes focused on Dabblon, eager to hear the name of the man who had baffled him now for weeks.

“I shall commence my account of events from the moment when you and I parted. I observed Milord Donovan ever so meticulously, his every action, every person whom he set his eyes upon. After a brief while, he went and stood alone near a corner of the room, appearing to be waiting for something—or someone. Then, for no perceptible reason, he withdrew into an adjoining room, much like this one we presently occupy. Needless to say, I swiftly followed him, and when I entered, found him in an empty room, bent over one of the tables, thoroughly occupied with a letter he was reading.

“There was only one entrance to the room, and I assure you that nobody exited from there in the short time in between when he entered and when I followed. How and from whom he obtained his letter remains a mystery to me, but I assure you that it was the one spoken of by the White Feather, for he received no others this evening.

“Anyway, as I drew closer, he heard my footsteps, spun around, and caught sight of me. He quickly stuffed the letter into his doublet pocket, an action which I pretended not to detect and I initiated a conversation concerning the town of his birth, which happened to be York, where I spent four years as a spy for the French government,

though obviously, I did not mention this to him. He seemed astounded that I knew so much of his hometown, and we spent a lengthy amount of time recalling memories of that city, which I confess to you I found unendingly boring. I do not believe he suspected anything.”

For a few moments there was silence between the two men. Dabblon seemed to have related the tale in a very matter-of-fact manner, portraying logic throughout, and coming to a rational conclusion which accepted the events of that evening as a simple twist of fate, and conceded the setback, at least for the time being.

But that passionate and wild head of Armand would have none of it! Had they been finally outsmarted by the White Feather? Had all of their careful and meticulous planning been shattered by one stroke of his cunning? Had Dabblon taken his eyes off Sir Donovan for just one moment, one fatal moment in which Sir Donovan had inconspicuously received his letter?

All was not lost, true, for they might devise other methods of obtaining this priceless knowledge, but would they be forced to abide the cruel weight of uncertainty for yet more days and weeks to come? Oh, how he hated the White Feather for his elusiveness!

But he must think rationally now. Now was not the time for angry tantrums against an unknown enemy. Some backup plan must be formulated. It need not be substantial. Simply something to occupy their time, and set them on the White Feather’s track once more. He placed his head in his hands and tried to think, but all he could mutter was a woeful lament.

“Oh, the bitterness of defeat!”

“We have not been defeated, Armand. We have merely retreated, so that we may regroup.”

Armand spread apart the fingers on his face, in order to see Dabblon more clearly.

“What do you propose?” he asked.

“Nothing for the moment. I am not able to think clearly. But perhaps we should return to our homes and sleep the sleep of the just. Tomorrow we shall rejoin to chart a fresh course of action.”

“I agree with you on that,” said Armand, and they rose from their seats. “Though I doubt I shall sleep much tonight. In any case, we shall convene again on the morrow, and do as you have suggested.”

After having bid their fair hostess farewell, the pair made their

way outside the grand entrance door, and was walking through the gardens toward the courtyard, where Sir Donovan was sitting atop his carriage alongside Gardière, and bidding a young stable boy haste in harnessing the horses.

Finally the lad had finished. Sir Donovan threw him a coin, Gardière lashed the animals, and drove off in a fury of dust and clamor. But just as he departed, both Armand and Dabblon glimpsed a letter falling from where he sat on the box, unnoticed by the Englishman.

The lad quickly snatched it, and began to cry after Sir Donovan, entreating him to return. But the pace of the horses and carriage, and the din of the wheels on the cobblestones prevented Sir Donovan from hearing the young boy, and his cries were in vain.

Completely flabbergasted, and slightly dazed at what had just taken place, the duo of plotters hurried over to where the boy stood, a dejected look now come over his young face.

Armand spoke first.

“Well lad, it seems he has not heard you.”

“No, Monsieur. And he shall be very wroth with me if he finds that it is missing, for he shall think that I have stolen it.”

“Well, that is not to be feared, boy,” assured Dabblon. “This gentleman here happens to be a personal friend of Milord Donovan, and he is in fact, to meet with him on the morrow. I am quite sure he would be glad to deliver the lost letter.”

“Would you, Monsieur? Oh, thank you. I am so grateful to you.”

The boy seemed sincerely delighted, and he gladly gave the letter into the hands of Armand. He was about to scurry off, however, when Dabblon called him back.

“One more thing, lad. If anyone should come and enquire about the letter, tell them that you entrusted it into the hands of M. le Creux, who pledged to return it to its owner.”

“Yes Monsieur, I will, and thank you again.”

As the child scurried off, Armand and Dabblon made a hasty retreat toward the carriage that had brought them, and when they had gone inside, Armand, fingers trembling, straightened out the crumpled paper, and began to read aloud.

*Sir Donovan Hughes,*

*The refugees are safely quartered near my lodgings, but I am having difficulty in finding them safe passage to Geneva. Consequently, I have decided that it would be safer for you to transport them yourself. Meet me at the old villa behind rue de Martel No. 20 on the second. Have your carriage nearby, and enter the house close to midnight.*

*I shall drive up in a cart filled with hay, with the family hidden among the contents. From thence you shall drive swiftly and directly to Geneva. Do not attempt to contact me again, either by pen or in person, for suspicion is mounting. I shall assign you another letter containing further instructions when I have safely delivered the fugitives into your hand.*

*Until then, may God be with us both.*

"Triumph!" exclaimed Armand as his fist struck the low ceiling of the carriage. "Dabblon, do you realize what this means? Two days from now the White Feather and his chief cohort shall be at this very location with the entire d'Arnae family! We have succeeded! Our mission has neared completion! All we need do is be present on that evening and we shall have trapped the White Feather and Sir Donovan in the very act of treachery. Oh, it could not have been planned any better than this!"

"Indeed, but in all of your elation, Armand, you have forgotten one thing," came the cynical voice of Dabblon.

"And what is that?" questioned Armand, slightly perturbed that Dabblon should point out an obstacle.

"Sir Donovan has yet to learn of the absence of this precious letter from his person, and when he does, he shall undoubtedly return to search for it, whether on the road, or just outside M. Saint-Ghyslain's residence. As he will not find it, and will deduce that it might have fallen into unsavory hands, there will likely be a change of plans."

Armand's euphoria vanished as he came crashing back to earth, and the smile that had spread so eagerly across his face disappeared in a moment at this statement. For a moment, he was perplexed, totally lacking in ideas, the machinery in his head motionless, no longer churning out solutions as it had so often for the past weeks. But gradually after a few moments, the smile returned, slowly, for the cogs in his brain had begun again. Without another word, he folded the letter in half and tossed it outside the window, onto the cobblestone

road on which the carriage was driving at a maddening pace.

Dabblon sprang from his seat, seized Armand by the shoulders, and stared at him incredulously.

"What in God's name have you done!?"

Armand's smile altered to a smirk as he, shrugging off the hands that clutched his shoulders, casually poured himself a glass of wine, and holding the glass in his hand, looked straight into his colleague's eyes, and spoke.

"I shall tell you when I have emptied this glass of wine."

Dabblon understood that Armand had a very good reason for his action, else he would not jest so confidently. Hence, he sat down, and, as though to play along with Armand's rendition of past events, began drumming his fingers on the seat.

Armand broke out into fits of laughter at this reversal of roles, but Dabblon, who as he had pointed out earlier had put away such frivolous pastimes as laughing, sat quietly, awaiting Armand's explanation.

Gradually, his mirth subsided and Armand emptied his glass before he spoke.

"You have said just now that Sir Donovan, realizing the loss of his precious letter, will search for it on the road. You were wrong."

"How so?"

"I venture that he will do more than simply search for this letter personally. Indeed, he shall dispatch a score of servants, each bearing a torch, to scour the road for this priceless object."

"That is what I meant."

"Whether or not that is what you meant is of no consequence, Dabblon."

"Oh, but it is of great consequence. You charged me with error. I wish to be cleared of the charge."

"Oh very well," said Armand with an exasperated sigh. An ironical smile adorned his face while he spoke, all the while sustaining an air of mild ridicule.

"I, Armand Le T line, do hereby acquit M. Dabblon of all the charges brought against him, namely that which accuse him of being in error. He cannot err, for he is in fact, altogether perfect. This claim has come from his own infallible mouth, which, like his infallible mind, remains indelibly certain of his own flawlessness, a virtue we are coming to appreciate more and more as we become acquainted with

him.”

He then turned to Dabblon. “I presume that you found my acquittal satisfactory?”

“You mock me, Armand.”

"Do you wish for me to complete my explanation, or do you wish to sit here and play the injured animal as we quarrel over nonsensical trifles?"

"Very well, go on," sighed Dabblon.

"Many thanks. If I mistake not, we are not far from Milord Donovan's residence. Therefore, the letter will be easily found, lying where I cast it, and our dear Englishman will, in his unsuspecting inanity, simply assume that it was dropped and will be relieved to have retrieved it. Furthermore, even if the letter is not found, it stated clearly that Sir Donovan is not to attempt in any way to contact the White Feather, and therefore no change of plans can be made.”

Dabblon was silent for a moment, trying to decide whether to praise Armand's forethought or to find some loophole in the plan which he could scorn. Having found none, he chose the former.

"Very well, I acknowledge the wisdom of your action, but in the future, be sure to consult with me before acting on an impulse, regardless of how infallible it may seem. We are in this endeavor as partners, and we must act of one accord."

Armand made a sign which indicated concession.

At this point Silvestre pulled up at Dabblon's quarters and the latter bade Armand goodnight before departing from the carriage and retiring to his lodgings.

Armand continued on alone inside the vehicle and was soon engulfed in thought. Thrice now the White Feather had carelessly given away vital clues. The first had been in the form of a paper dropped on the carpet of the banquet floor. The second, also a letter, was a case of mistaken identities, the error of some messenger, and the third, why this was the most ludicrous of all. That letter, of such extreme importance, had been allowed, in all negligence, to fall from the person of Sir Donovan Hughes whilst he made haste to depart. And that letter contained the method in which he might be ensnared!

Perhaps this White Feather was really not so brilliant after all. Perhaps he was merely some Huguenot who had performed some daring liberations, and had been exalted to exaggerated measures by



the easily impressed populace. In no more than a month's time, he had effectively given away his identity to two men working together to no great effect. And now his glorious career as the champion of the heretics would come to a swift end. Self-destruction! How bitter an end for a man so glorified as invincible, but who in reality, was a fool. He would be present, on the 2<sup>nd</sup>, at the rue de Martel, No. 20, the old villa.

He must be sure to write it down, should he forget it. And he must instruct Silvestre on the morrow to search out the place, to see if there might be some ideal spots nearby where men could be hidden in the dark. A sigh of satisfaction escaped from his lips as he leaned further back in his seat and closed his eyes. Ah, the sweetness of triumph!

Just at this moment, as he began to feel a little drowsy, a single thought crept into his head. It was a thought that had not once occurred to him since he had received his commission, and why it ever came to him only heaven knows. What if he, in all his zeal and determination was wrong? Suppose the Church was wrong concerning the Huguenots? Would he, as the executioner of so many of them, have to answer to Christ? Bah! Surely not! The Church was God's instrument on earth, and he would surely be commended in the afterlife for his labor in Christ's name. Away with such a thought! Now was not the time for such a notion, no doubt sent by Satan to muddle his convictions.

The coach again came to a halt, this time in front of Armand's lodgings, and he sprang out without waiting for Silvestre to help him down, as was the servant's function. He knew that the excitement within him, the direct result of all that had passed that evening, would afford him no sleep, and so he called out to Silvestre.

"Silvestre, give me one of the animals! I wish to go for a ride in the country alone."

"A ride, Monsieur? But it is nearly midnight, and it could be dangerous to ride alone."

"I have naught to fear, for even if I am confronted by thieves, a few blows from my sword should suffice to send even a whole pack of them running."

Silvestre kept his doubts to himself and did as his master commanded. He did, however, strap to his saddle a small, loaded harquebus for double protection.

Armand saw the prudence in Silvestre's caution, and he tossed him a coin.

"Here, take this. You are a worthy servant, and I am pleased with your service."

"Thank you, Monsieur. Shall I wait up for you?"

"No, that is unnecessary. Light a candle in my room, and then you may retire."

"Yes, Monsieur, and do return unharmed."

"I have no doubt that I shall, but if I do not return before dawn, you may begin to search for my body."

And with that morbid thought resounding in his head, he set spurs to his horse's flesh and galloped into the darkness.

## Chapter 9: Doubt

Armand kept his horse's pace at a steady canter while he traversed the roads of Paris. One could not retain an excessive speed in the darkened streets of the well-populated capital. But as he left the city behind, and passed through the north gate, he lashed his animal into a mad gallop.

Ever since he was a child, riding had been Armand's favored pastime. Perhaps it was the sensation of being in the countryside, surrounded by nature's splendor. Or perhaps it was the swiftness and power of the spirited animal that aroused an ardor within. Perhaps it was a combination of these that had propelled him, in the past, to engage in this pleasure so frequently. As of late, his duties had caused him to neglect this diversion he loved, but now the passion that lay ever dormant within him was let loose as a bird freed from its cage.

He threw his head back, shut his eyelids, and allowed the wind to lash his face and hair with vehemence. There seemed to be a fire in those hands that held the reins of the stallion, and intensity in those spurs, generated by the mood of their owner.

\* \* \*

Finally, the steed could take no more of this excessive exertion on its part, and came to a sharp halt in the midst of its dash. Armand, carried on by momentum, was catapulted high above its head and fell

directly onto the road, stunned.

He lay there for a few moments, not fully comprehending what had just taken place. His fiery ecstasy had been abruptly and cruelly terminated. One moment he was atop the animal, his senses heightened by a feeling of weightless delight, another he was sprawled in the dust, propelled from his perch into reality.

At length, he turned over and struggled slowly to his feet. His horse wasted no time in fleeing the scene of its master's downfall, and Armand was not too severely afflicted by naiveté to know that any attempt at pursuit would be futile.

He was surprisingly unharmed, despite the rough landing, and as he fully regained his senses, the dilemma he now faced began to dawn on him. He had ridden for quite some time, and he had no way of knowing just how far he was from Paris. There seemed to be no form of shelter nearby, and Silvestre's warning of danger returned to haunt him. Could there be robbers looking in the shadows of the surrounding woods? Had his mount sensed their presence and halted suddenly out of fear? The harquebus which Silvestre had provided him with remained strapped to the animal, and he was left only with his sword for defense.

Despite his earlier assertion that he could easily turn to flight even a whole band of thieves, those words were only a youthful display of bravado, for in reality, how could one man, regardless of his skill and training, hold off ten or fifteen men at once in combat? The hairs on the back of his neck stood erect, and his hand subconsciously grasped the hilt of his rapier, prepared to unsheathe it at a moment's notice. He trudged along slowly, remaining in the center of the dirt road, so that no man could take him by surprise in the darkness.

Fully expecting an attack at any moment, he unsheathed his sword fully and grasped it in his hand, gritting his teeth in preparation for the encounter he anticipated. But as he ambled along, eyes shifting nervously from side to side, hands moist with perspiration, he gradually came upon a clearing along the side of the road, in which stood a structure, bearing every marking of an inn.

Its two-story frame was built entirely of oak wood, though it was partially concealed by the branches of trees. The dim light of a few candles emanated from within and cast an orange glow on the surrounding pine needles. Inside, hushed voices could be heard as well

as the sound of a lute being played softly. Above the door, and just below a lit lantern, hung a wooden sign, on which was carved the words, "The Fisherman's Net."

*How odd!* he mused. *One would think that such a name should belong to an inn on the coasts, not here, in the middle of the countryside.*

Nevertheless, this was a welcome sight to Armand, who was quite certain that an attack of brigands would come at any moment, and he felt relieved at the assurance of safety this structure emitted. With an air of authority afforded by his rank, he strode toward the door and rapped loudly upon its surface. The lute ceased to play upon such, and a voice called out, "Who goes there?"

To which Armand replied, "Monsieur Armand Le T line. I seek shelter for the night."

A shuffling of feet could be heard, presumably the owner of the voice making his way toward the door. A few latches and bolts were undone, and the oaken door swung slowly on its hinges.

Ignoring the older man who had allowed him entrance, Armand entered the sitting room and surveyed the scene before him. In the center stood a large, round, wooden table, surrounded by half a dozen individuals, all of whom glanced at him somewhat apprehensively. A fireplace stood behind them, empty and bare, its ashes still smoldering from a recent fire. Beside it sat a young woman, a lute in her hands, her eyes transfixed on him, her mouth slightly agape.

He turned to the elderly man who had just closed the door and bolted it behind him.

"I seek a room for the night."

"Have you no horse that I may tether in the stables?"

"None."

"And have you already dined?"

Armand made a sign in the affirmative.

"Then follow me, Monsieur," came the reply.

He retrieved one of the candles from the table and led the way up a small flight of old stairs and down a long hallway. As he followed, Armand studied the figure of the innkeeper. He was not exceptionally old, and was by no means decrepit, though he stooped slightly as he walked. His head was for the most part bald, though a few white hairs still clung to his cranium.

A drab-looking cloth was wrapped about his shoulders, and extended to his ankles. On his feet he wore leather sandals, which looked as though they had seen many years of use.

All in all, he emanated a sense of meekness and sobriety, and a sort of weariness, as though he had endured much during his lengthy lifespan.

Finally, they reached the very end of the hall, where he opened a door, and motioned for Armand to step inside.

“This is our best room, which I hope you will find satisfactory.”

Armand entered and glanced about the room. It was lavishly furnished, at least more so than he had expected. The feather bed, surrounded by scarlet drapes, the elaborate candelabra, perched on a small table, and the smooth rugs, spread tastefully on the floor, all combined to flaunt that this room was reserved for those owners of heavier purses who might chance upon this inn.

The innkeeper lit the candelabra and inquired if Armand should have need of anything.

“A bottle of wine,” he replied.

Monsieur Raffin nodded, bowed, and shuffled noiselessly out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Armand sighed as he squeezed the boots off his feet, and tossed them into a corner. He unbuckled his sword and placed his hat on the bedside table. Off came his leather doublet and jerkin, followed by his tight-fitting hose, until he was clothed only in his undergarments.

The wine was brought and he sat on the corner of his bed, the bottle in one hand, the goblet in the other, and began to drink. His thoughts drifted to Clarice, as he envisioned her in his mind’s eye. Her name and features were always near the forefront of his thoughts, and the radiance of her smile, the exquisiteness of her eyes, and the peal of her joyful laughter fascinated him. For all her wit and intellect, she seemed almost simple in a peculiar fashion that held Armand mesmerized.

Finally, he began to grow tired, and pleasantly aware that his visions of beauty would continue in his dreams, he laid aside the empty bottle. His head met the pillow, his eyelids grew heavy, and he succumbed to the sweet pleasures of sleep.

\* \* \*

Armand rubbed his eyes as he sat up, all sleep seeming to have

gone from him. He was not sure why he had awoken, for he judged by the length of the candles that he had slept for only an hour. Annoyed at being awoken from a peaceful sleep, he lay down again and shut his eyes. But sleep evaded him. He changed the position of his body, but to no avail.

Then he remembered the wine that stood by his bed. Surely that would aid him in his efforts to slumber. He reached for the bottle, but its lightness reminded him that he had already drained it of its contents previously.

“Oh, must I go and seek the innkeeper for a fresh bottle?” he groaned.

It then occurred to him that the innkeeper would likely be slumbering, but there was always a stable boy on duty to grant such a request. He clothed himself quickly, leaving only his leather doublet, and exited his room quietly.

With measured tread he advanced slowly, the unlit hallway not permitting him to see further than an arm’s length ahead. He felt his way toward the miniature staircase which would bring him level with the sitting room, and descended halfway, where the staircase made a complete turn in the opposite direction.

Before proceeding upon such, where he would be in plain sight of any who occupied the sitting room, his ears detected the same, somewhat hoarse, voice belonging to the innkeeper. It seemed that he spoke to a crowd, for his tone was abnormally loud, and his pronunciation slow and decisive. In addition, the flames of the candles etched human shadows on the wall, betraying the presence of at least a dozen individuals.

From his vantage point, Armand could not be seen, yet he could hear every word that was uttered. With a sly smile of satisfaction, he sat down on the stairwell, leaned his head against the banister, and listened, for this gathering bore all the marks of heresy.

“Now before we read on,” continued Monsieur Raffin “allow me to make a commentary to this passage in the Book of Acts, chapter 9. Paul was a sworn enemy of the faith, one who fanatically persecuted all followers of Christ’s teaching. He imprisoned and executed them. As we have already read, it was he who held the coats of the men who stoned Stephen. Yet Christ chose him as the man to spread the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire.

“The reason I tell you this is because we all have, at one time or another, been victims of the cruelty and oppression. Upstairs, occupying our best room is a man not unlike Paul was, before he saw the light of truth. As Nicole will testify, Armand Le T line was responsible for the murder of her father, as well as the arrest of the remainder of her family.”

Armand’s eyes grew wide at this statement, for he realized that this was the daughter of M. d’Arnae, who had previously escaped him, and his hands clenched with anger. Yet what he heard next both startled and perplexed him.

“—Yet despite this, she bears him no ill will, for she knows that he has been deceived by the teachings of his Church. His true redemption through Christ is foremost in her prayers, and she loves him as a brother. So in reading, let us be reminded of God’s infinite love for all mankind, even those who hate His children, and do wrong them. He will go to any lengths to save and redeem them with His mercy, and so must we.”

Armand’s brow furrowed, as his baffled thoughts began to churn out various attempts at a logical explanation for what he had just heard. But he could not produce such a justification, for there was none. Throughout his career as defender of the faith, he had always assumed that he was hated and reviled by the Huguenots. Natural reason seemed to dictate that if one suffered at the hands of another, regardless of the reason, that person had every right to detest the one who inflicted them with torment. Yet was it possible that Nicole d’Arnae prayed for him? Loved him as a brother? There seemed no sense in such a notion.

His thoughts were interrupted by the reading of scripture among the gathering. Until now, he had listened as an agent of the Church, as one who seeks informative evidence, but now his curiosity was piqued, and he listened as one who wished to understand, as a child would listen to a tale which he or she had never heard.

““And Saul, yet breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest.

““And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. ...”

As Armand listened carefully, he envisioned the proceedings in

his mind. He saw the distorted face of Saul, furious at discovering that some of the Christians had escaped to Damascus. He pictured him standing proudly before the high priest, angrily demanding letters of authority that he might carry out the campaign against the teachers of the false way. He saw that fanaticism, passion, and fiery zeal that he displayed. A defender of the truth, a guardian of the established church, ready to cut down all opposition with fervor. Yet, in every image, Armand saw also a depiction of himself. One could omit the name Saul from the passage, and replace it with that of Armand. This man's character seemed to perfectly match his own.

““And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven.””

Armand imagined the utter disbelief Paul must have felt as he was surrounded by a blinding, unearthly light, and catapulted from his horse, much like he had been thrown from his only hours earlier. He perceived how he must have quaked with fear as he heard the majestic, yet gentle, voice of Jesus speaking.

““Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?””

Then came Paul's response, uncertain and terrified.

““Who art thou, Lord?”

““I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.””

Then Paul, now realizing the dreadful error of judgment he had made against the Christians, and filled with apprehension at the woeful judgment which he felt certain awaited him, ventured cautiously.

““What wouldst thou have me do, Lord?”

““Arise, go into the city, and there it shall be told thee what thou must do.’

““And Saul arose from the earth; and when his eyes were opened, he saw no man; but they led him by the hand, and brought him into Damascus.””

How humiliated he must have felt as he stumbled along, utterly blind, being led by the hand as a child! How pitiful a scene he must have depicted as he lay on the bed in the house of Judas, afflicted by delirium! O, the anguish and torment he must have felt as he grappled for three days with guilt, condemnation, and the awareness that all he had ever been taught and all he ever stood for was shamefully amiss! How he must have cried out for mercy and forgiveness from an



almighty God Who had revealed to him His Son, the followers of Whom he had afflicted and persecuted!

Armand covered his face with his hands, he too afflicted. Was it possible that he had been deceived? Before, he would have never even considered such an outlandish possibility, but now he was so unsure.

As M. Raffin read on, Armand heard the next series of events in Paul's life. The willingness of Ananias to obey God's voice, the miraculous healing of Paul's eyes, and his commission to bear the name of Jesus to the Gentiles, and to the Children of Israel.

Was it fate that had dictated his presence in this room, at this hour? Was it chance that had caused his horse to halt suddenly for seemingly no reason, that he might have cause to seek shelter at this inn, and then mysteriously awake, that he might come down to seek some wine, and instead hear this tale? Or was it the hand of God that had engineered this unexpected series of events?

## **Chapter 10: The Fisherman's Net**

The hand of God? Did God become involved so directly in the life of one man such as himself? And if He truly had concern to the life of Armand Le T line, why? He had never been a devout religionist. In his ambitious mind, God and the non-secular affairs of the Church were only secondary to his lofty aims.

In all honesty, he had not initially hated or despised the Huguenots so greatly. He had only undertaken their eradication to gain for himself credit and position. And in each incident where he was unable to do so, his frustration turned to rage, a rage redirected toward the Huguenots and their religion. This had steadily built up within him an aggressive hate, a hate so altogether unfounded and lacking in base, that now he began to wonder how it was originally acquired.

He had been waging a holy war against the enemies of the Church, but had he, in his blind fanaticism, created a monster of himself? Had the name Armand Le T line become a synonym of cruelty, the epitome of brutality? For the first time in his life, Armand began to suspect that his zeal had, like a wild horse, borne him charging down

the wrong path, and for the first time, admitted to himself that he possessed certain qualities not dissimilar to those of a fool.

Yet his musings were broken up by the sound of Raffin closing the Bible he held, and summarizing the story of Paul the Apostle with a few words.

“So as we have seen, God retains the right to decide whom He chooses to carry out His will, and spread the message of His free remission of sins. It is not for us to hold prejudice against those who have been His aggressors, as though they were unworthy of His love. We have all sinned and come short of His glory, yet He has searched us out, lost sinners as we are, and returned us to the fold. He will not be satisfied until all one hundred are found, and until that last silver piece is recovered.

“Now, we shall sing a hymn before we adjourn our meeting. Remember that music is an expression of the love we hold for the One Whose love for us is incomprehensible, so let us now put aside any thoughts, cares, burdens, or worries that plague us, and let our hearts soar to the heavens as we revel in the tenderness of our loving Savior. Nicole?”

The sound of fingers plucking the lute could be heard, at first unsure and stumbling. Yet as they continued, the sounds became more definite, the strumming more confident, and a melody was soon formed. Then came the hum of voices singing, some low, some high, yet all sang softly, their voices combining to form an almost ethereal tone.

*Oh, Jesus Christ, in Heaven above  
I kneel before Thy majesty  
And ask for Thy unearthly love.  
To forgive all wrongs, this is my plea.  
Though I have suffered earthly pain,  
No trace of sorrow shall I wear.  
I count it joy to serve Thy Name  
That cross of Thine I love to bear.*

A pause in the singing was made after the first verse, while the sound of the lute grew slightly more forceful, indicating that the chorus was at hand. All the voices joined in as a more joyful tone echoed from

the assemblage.

*Let me praise throughout the struggle.  
Let me shout the victor's song.  
Let me sing though I am weary,  
Though the battle seems so long.  
For in my suffering I find gladness.  
In enduring I find peace.  
Though beset by Satan's madness,  
In Your arms I find release.*

The strumming then resumed its gentleness and the second verse was sung.

*When my strength is at its weakest,  
Let me lean upon Your Name.  
For in leaning I am strengthened.  
I find rest within Your frame.  
And 'till that day when Thou shall come  
To save those who are lost,  
Each race before me I shall run,  
Each Jordan I shall cross.*

The chorus was sung twice, and after a little plucking of the strings, the song ended.

Though the words of the hymn were simple, the love that seemed to emanate from each voice brought tears to the eyes of the guilty one that sat on those steps. He had never attended a Mass in which anyone expressed such sincerity and devotion to Christ. Though this meeting lacked pomp and ceremony, it possessed a unique sense of nearness to God, and Armand understood that the beliefs of those present could never be at odds with the commands of His Son.

At that moment, M. Raffin beckoned to all to bow their heads as he said the closing prayer.

“Our Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for bringing us all together on this evening, and that we have had this united reading of Thy holy Scriptures. Help us all to be not only hearers of Thy Word, but doers of it as well, that we may let our lights shine in this world of darkness and

turmoil. We thank Thee also that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us on that holy day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that You are Lord.

“We pray also for our brethren who suffer for their faith in a measure far greater than we. Continue to help them remain strong in their affliction, and to be an example of Thy love to all. We pray that Thou wouldst have Thy will concerning their release and safe return to us. Keep HM Charles safe from any harm and give him Thy anointing to be a wise and just ruler over us. Unite us all, Catholic and Huguenot, in Thy love and bring quickly the day when we may all once more live together without hate and malice.

“Bless those who have come here tonight, and keep them under the shelter of Thy wings as they journey to their respective homes at this late hour. May we not be weary in well-doing, and may we always keep the hope of Thy return foremost in our thoughts and anticipations!”

A wave of remorse swept over Armand, accompanied by a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach. The tears that poured down his face were not born of sadness, but of boundless shame. How much blame would he shoulder for the numerous ones he had slaughtered? What consequences would he suffer for each child whom his madness had created an orphan of?

As he silently rose from his position and slowly made his way back to his room, he wept bitterly. As he flung his tormented frame on his luxurious bed, he held his head between his fingers, vainly seeking to squelch memories that were beginning to flood his mind.

The faces of those he had killed flashed before him. Occasions where he displayed his cruel brutality returned to haunt him. He felt as though he were a criminal in a court of law, tried by his own memories, each one a portion of evidence to prove that he was a man whose actions were stamped by ruthlessness and malice. Each recollection seemed to blatantly point the accusing finger at him, the prisoner in the stand, and the voice of each tale seemed to lend credence to the judge’s verdict, accompanied by the decisive pounding of the gavel: “GUILTY AS CHARGED!”

How proudly he had ridden at the head of the troop of a dozen or so guards as they set out on their first mission. They had received a

report from one of the Church's numerous spies of a family of Huguenots, living in the slums of Paris.

As they approached the hovel, an elderly woman's figure emerged, her wrinkled face further contorted by the marks of alarm. His guards entered the house and produced an older man, his wife, and three children, two girls and one boy. They were all clothed in rags, their sweat-covered faces and dirty hands indicating that they were of the lowliest station in life.

"Load them into the wagon!" he had shouted. As the guardsmen were in the process of doing so, the boy, aged about ten years, managed to squirm free of their grasp and took off running toward one of the nearby alleys.

At Armand's command, one of the mounted soldiers followed in pursuit, and easily caught up with the running child. Several times he tried to grab the boy's arm, but on each occasion the boy evaded him. Finally, the enraged guard set full spurs to his horse, and rode over the youngster just as he entered the alley. The child's screams were drowned out by those of his family who watched the scene with unspeakable horror, but the guards spirited them away, leaving the boy to bleed to death in the squalor-filled streets. And he, after glancing casually over his shoulder at the wounded and writhing frame of the child, and not even feeling the slightest twinge of regret or pity, had cantered off, smiling smugly to himself at the commendation this capture would bring.

Again came the silent voice that echoed through his mind reproachfully: "GUILTY AS CHARGED!"

Then there were the horrifying events of St. Bartholomew's Day, August 24, 1572. Armand had been part of the group that had entered the mansion of Gaspard de Coligny, a respected Huguenot noble, and thrown him out of his room's window. From there, Armand had gone mad. With his small troop of guards they had run wild through the streets, summarily slaughtering Huguenot men, women, and children.

Within the next months, thousands of Huguenots were murdered, some battered and broken by stones, some thrown out of the windows of houses, while others were torn to shreds by farming implements.

Once more he heard that foreboding phrase resonated through his head, shattering any doubt in his mind that there remained for him any defense: "GUILTY AS CHARGED!"

Was there no reprieve for his wounded heart? Was there no mercy for a vile sinner? Had he, with the blood of others, earned for himself the everlasting fires of hell? Would he be cast into outer darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

He raised himself from off the bed, and grasped the hilt of his sword with both hands, as his eyes focused on the blade. That bit of steel had been an instrument of murder of the innocent. How many times had that sharpened edge thrust through the flesh of some individual whose only crime had been to believe that one could earn free remission of sins through Christ Jesus, and not through the Church's mediation?

Finally, he could endure the torment no longer. He raised his sword high above his head and brought the flat side down upon the floor, shattering it into many pieces. He was a man driven in desperation, guilt, and fear. He took the empty bottle that stood on the table and sent it flying across the room, smashing it against the wall, showering fragments of glass in all directions. His body shook with sobs, interspersed by a woeful lament that escaped from his lips.

“I have sinned. I have sinned against the Almighty.”

But the sound of breaking glass and flying steel had reached the congregation of Huguenots who feared that some thief had entered their lodge. Thus Raffin and a younger man, Louis, had come to investigate the sounds. They opened the door to find Armand pounding his head against the floor, prostrate before a crucifix that hung on the wall, moistening the rugs with his tears.

When Armand saw them, he crawled to where they stood, choking out words through his sobs.

“I have sinned! I have sinned against the Almighty and against you. I was sitting...on the stairs. I sat there while...you held your meeting. I-I heard of Paul...of the love that you professed...even toward...me. These hands of mine are...stained with the blood of your comrades. ... I beseech you—tell me what I must do to earn forgiveness. My sins...are many and vile. ... I am unworthy—a miserable wretch!” And here he broke off, for his body was wracked with turmoil, and he descended into uncontrollable weeping.

To the human eye, he looked a pitiful sight. Groveling on the floor, overcome with emotion, and shaking like a leaf, he portrayed misery, terror, and disgrace. But to the eyes of the Almighty, there existed only

a man who had seen his sins, and bent in humility, wished to repent. Those compassionate and ever-loving eyes saw only sorrow, brokenness, and a contrite spirit, one which He would not despise nor turn away.

M. Raffin looked on incredulously at the scene which was unfolding before his eyes. Here was a man who had been the most zealous hound in the hunt for Huguenots, now flattened on the floor, embracing his feet, weeping like a child, and admitting that he had erred and wished to atone! Was this some ploy, designed to procure information from them by causing them to believe that he wished to change his ways? Was there a more sinister design hidden behind this seeming display of remorse? He closed his eyes for a moment and offered a silent prayer.

“Oh, Jesus, I am a weak and fallible judge of human character. Give me Thy eyes, that I may see as You see. You alone know his mind, and can tell what are the thoughts and intents of his heart—therefore reveal to me, I beg You, how I must act and what I must say.”

At that moment he felt peace. He saw the sincerity in the prostrate figure before him and was at once overcome with compassion and the love of Christ. He knelt and grasped Armand’s quivering shoulders.

“You ask how you may repent and earn forgiveness. Christ asks only that we confess our sins, recognize our need for His salvation, and receive it freely. For by grace alone we are saved. Our works cannot save us. God does not condemn you for being misled by others. Although it grieves Him to see such, He is as a father weeping for his wayward children, ready and willing to open his arms to them in forgiveness, should they come to his fold. That is why He sent Jesus to this earth to call sinners to repentance.”

Armand shook his head. “There is no salvation for me. It is not possible.”

It was plain that this line of reasoning would not convince the young cavalier. He needed something more, something to truly convince him that despite his many ghastly misdeeds, there was forgiveness available for him. An example was needed to reinforce the truth in M. Raffin’s words.

“Armand,” M. Raffin’s voice was soft. “Though it may seem to you like there never could have lived a man more malevolent than

yourself, there are numerous examples throughout the Scriptures of ones who had committed worse sins than you, yet received a pardon directly from the hands of Jesus Christ.

“You say that you sat on the stairwell and partook of our meeting. Did you not then hear of Paul of Tarsus who, just like yourself had been beguiled by the religious leaders of his day into believing in the error of the followers of Jesus? Did you not hear how he too killed and imprisoned the Christians, yet upon recognizing his guilt, changed, and became one of the most passionate disciples, a man who was to spread the good news of Christ’s resurrection throughout Europe?”

Armand’s flow of tears had been somewhat stifled, and on his face was reflected a childlike wonderment as he absorbed all he heard. “Come. Let us go down downstairs. There I will explain to you more about God’s love and forgiveness, how it has affected my life, that of many others, and given us hope and faith.”

## **Chapter 11: Monsieur Raffin**

Armand sat nervously on his chair, his elbows coming to rest on the oaken table before which he sat. Across the table sat M. Raffin, his eyes closed, as though in prayer or in reverie, his folded hands partially covering his face. Between them stood two lighted candles, their flickering flames being the only illumination in the room.

The rest of the Huguenot party that had occupied the table for most of the evening had gone home, or in the case of Mme. Raffin and Nicole, had retired to their respective rooms for the night. As for M. Raffin, he understood that, despite his fatigue, he had a responsibility to this man who had so recently begun to open his heart to the true spirit of Christ’s teachings. He recalled how Christ had once questioned Peter thrice as to his love for Him, and admonished him as many times to feed His sheep. In his mind, Armand Le T line, the vicious aggressor, was one of those sheep, and he would not shun his duty to feed him.

He opened his eyes and paused a moment before he began. A glimmer of fatherly concern was evident in those hazel eyes as he sighed deeply.

“I do not know you well, Armand. But I do know that the paths



we separately tread upon this life have crossed for a reason. Why don't you acquaint me with the road you have traveled thus far?"

This caught Armand by surprise. Never had anyone shown interest in his personal history, and he struggled to remember some key events and accurately place them in chronological order.

"I was born in the village of Fontaine, just outside the city of Grenoble, on July 17<sup>th</sup> in the year 15—"—he performed a rapid calculation on his fingers to determine how long ago he had been born—"—50. My father, also Armand Le T line, was an impoverished nobleman. I had two sisters, one elder and one younger. As I grew older, my father sought to educate me in the art of raising crops, though I never warmed to the idea.

"I would frequent the taverns and quaff cheap ale until I lost consciousness. Frequently I would, in my drunken stupors, become involved in duels with older men, the results of which rarely saw me emerge victorious. More often than not I would stagger home grievously wounded, and had it not been for the competence of our family's physician, my idiocy would have dug my grave years ago.

"When I was eighteen, my father grew weary of my irresponsibility and disowned me. I was forced to leave home and seek a new life for myself. This situation forced me to rely on myself for my daily sustenance, and this coercion caused me to change my ways and assume responsibility for my life and actions. I came to Paris, and was eventually commissioned in the guards."

Here his teeth drew his lower lip into his mouth, as he strove to restrain teardrops that had begun once more to form on his eyelids.

"After a while, I proved myself worthy and was given a commission to search out, apprehend, and arrest or slaughter Huguenots. So devout and diligent was I that I soon came to the attention of M. Saint-Ghyslain, who promoted me. It has been I who has caused your friends such grief and suffering over these past years, and now the blood of the innocent cries out for vengeance." M. Raffin placed his hand on Armand's as the latter dissolved into sobs once more.

"No, Armand. Their blood cries out for your salvation. To know that their sacrifice has opened your eyes to the truth is doubtless a great joy to those who have already passed on to their heavenly reward."

“Passed on? Yes, they have passed on, but at my hand.”

“Yes, at your hand! Just as we all have transgressed, and have received atonement through Christ by faith alone. The magnitude of your wicked heart overwhelms you and the scope of your wretched sins grieve you, so much so that you consider yourself a rare case, one of the few who has ever committed vile crimes. Yet, I too lived in infamy before I came to know my Savior. Like Paul, I was of all men most wretched. You have freely acquainted me with your past, and I shall do no less for you, that you may see living proof that what I speak is the truth.

“I was the son of a merchant in Calais. I was an only child, and my greatest love was for the sea. There was a majesty in those graceful waves, and that vast stretch of indigo enchanted me and consumed my leisure hours. As a boy I would sit on the pier near my home and gaze at the ocean for hours. As I grew older, I became restless and curious. Beyond every horizon there seemed a land to be explored, beyond every cloud there existed a rainbow to be chased. And like a foolish and ignorant puppy I chased each one.” Here he leaned further back in his chair and his eyes took on a dreamy, faraway look.

“My father soon gave me the position of second mate on one of his merchant vessels. That was in 1532, when the New World had barely begun to be explored. The route I traveled, however, was simply from Calais to Dover and back. While I enjoyed the journeys, they were much too short for a man of my ambition, so I pleaded with my father to install me on one of his ships going to Spain, Portugal, or the Spanish Netherlands.

“He agreed to my request and gave me the captaincy of a ship traveling down the French Atlantic coast, around the Iberian Peninsula, into the Mediterranean, and docking in Marseilles, all the while stopping in ports along the way. For the first year at the helm I reveled in not only enjoying the sea, but commanding the vessel that bore me across it. That was living life to its fullest, or so I thought.

“An incident occurred, however, which was to shape the rest of my life. My ship got caught in a brutal storm off the coast of Portugal, and was thrown violently off course. When the tempest abated, I discovered that we were so far from the mainland that we would never make it back with the few rations we had left, most of which had been washed overboard by the mammoth waves.

“To make matters worse, my crew mutinied, set me adrift in only a rowboat, and placed my first mate in command!

“As captain, I had demanded respect and deference from my men, and this action infuriated me. For hours I stood in my tiny skiff, cursing and swearing profusely, flinging profanities at them and at God, charging Him with unjust cruelty for allowing me to be left there. Finally, my energy wore down and the stream of anger from my mouth grew weaker and weaker. Thinking I would surely die of starvation, I prepared to jump in the water and end my life then and there. Yet just as I stood to make the leap, I spotted a sail on the horizon. As it drew closer, I discovered that it was an English privateer.

“The pirates rescued me and told me I could join them on their way to the West Indies. Sadly, instead of gratefulness for allowing me to be saved, I offered only seething resentment toward God, and gladly joined them. From that day forth, my days were filled with theft, murder, rape, and every sort of crime and profligacy that existed. So bitter was I that I felt justified in each of my sins. With each offense, I would hurl defiance in the face of God, as if to flaunt that I would repay Him for how I had been humiliated by afflicting torment upon His creation. When I reflect back on it now, I was thoroughly embittered by this one event, which although could have ended disastrously for me, was really no great catastrophe. I was alone in my skiff for perhaps five or six hours before I was saved, so to become so passionately incensed over a comparatively minor incident was, in fact, quite irrational.

“Anyway, after subsisting in this way for a number of years, another incident occurred which was to convey me out of the sorry state I was in and cause the light of the Word to shine in my deteriorating life.

“We were returning to England to unload booty. We couldn’t dock in the big ports in Dover, Portsmouth, or Liverpool, lest we be arrested for we had no letters of marque. Instead we had a small haven near to Newcastle-upon-Tyne where we would store our riches in a maze of grottos and caverns. We had just rounded the southeastern tip of England when we spotted a German merchant vessel headed in our direction. We were out in the open seas, a considerable distance from the coast, so we promptly boarded the ship, summarily slaughtered the sailors and captain, and loaded its contents, which disappointingly turned out to be grain, onto our vessel. Then we burned the craft, and

continued along our merry way.

“A few of us went down to the hold to inspect the grain, and as I opened one of the sacks of barley, I found among its contents a book on which were engraved the words, in English, ‘Holy Bible.’ Thinking I could sell it in Newcastle, I stuffed the book into my knapsack, but after we’d unpacked the ship and divided the spoils, I rented a room at an inn, and while examining my knapsack, found the book.

“For lack of anything better to do, I began leafing through its pages, mostly to pass the time. My father, being an affluent merchant, had educated me well, thus I could read in French, Latin and English. I began in the book of Matthew, in the New Testament. I read of Christ’s lineage, His birth, and the brief period of His childhood where he taught the elders of the synagogue in Jerusalem. I read of His humility in allowing Himself to be baptized by John, and of His temptation in the wilderness. ...”

“Temptation in the wilderness?” Armand interrupted.

“Yes. Before Christ could begin His ministry, He was tempted of Satan in the wilderness, where though He was weak and weary, He stood firm, and soon commanded Lucifer to be gone.

“After His temptation, He began His ministry, His first miracle being that of transforming water into wine. This was followed by many other miracles which He performed, comprising of making the blind to see, the lame to walk, the deaf to hear, cleansing lepers, walking on water, casting out devils, and raising the dead to life.

“Yet even these spectacular demonstrations of His power were only secondary to the foremost reason He condescended to join us mortals on this earth. He spent time with harlots and tax collectors, speaking with them, understanding them, hearing their heart cries, and helping them to know that He loved them. When He was questioned about this by the haughty religious leaders of His day, He responded that He had not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

“As I read that phrase, something within me was shattered. The remorse that was buried somewhere deep in my heart, and which I had tried to smother by my heinous misdeeds, flooded to the fore. Here I was a sinner who had for so long tried to shun Christ’s presence in my life, and was sorely in need of forgiveness.

“I lay the book aside and fell asleep, vainly attempting to shake off the guilt that had begun to pound at my heart. That same night I

had a dream in which I beheld Christ on the cross, dying for my many sins. There was no anger, no stern countenance, only love. His eyes bore a look of pleading, as though He were calling me to put my past behind and receive His tenderness and pardon. And on His lips He wore the gentlest smile, one which I knew I did not deserve.

“Over the following days I continued to read from that book, much of which I did not fully understand. Yet I found in it a depth that far surpassed the doctrines and regulations of the Church.

“Then, as time drew near for me to depart once more for the Spanish colonies, I knew in my heart what I had to do. Rather than return to my old life, I decided I must speak with some of my shipmates, and help them to see that through Christ we could find redemption and happiness. Though I knew little of such matters myself, I had read in the book of Matthew that I could not hide my light under a bushel. So I pleaded earnestly with them, attempting to help them to see the truth that had come into my life.

“At first they laughed at me, calling me a pious fool for giving attention to such spiritual matters. Yet as I persisted, their amusement turned to irritation, then to hate. The captain came to me finally and told me in no uncertain terms that if I chose to continue to spread such nonsense, I would meet the same fate as those whose blood my hands had shed. Thus it was with a heavy heart that I fled, leaving my mates behind. My heart ached, not because I had given up my life as I knew it, but because I was unable to convince my comrades that there lay a better life for them as well.

“Having no future in England, I returned to France where I learned that by grace alone are we saved and not by penance or works, as the Church had so falsely asserted for so many years. I was baptized, and since have committed myself to living my life in helping others to leave behind the darkness of the Church’s deceit, receive the comfort of Christ’s forgiveness of sins, and live their lives by His simple law of love.

“Over the years I have been persecuted, but not forsaken, cast down, but not destroyed, at times perplexed, yet not once in despair. I was jailed on one occasion for my beliefs, and for two years I suffered in a putrid dungeon. When I was released, I continued to spread the news of free remission of sins through Jesus Christ, and I have strived to be an obedient servant to His Word. I cling dearly to His last words

on this earth.”

And here he cracked open his Bible to a well-worn page and read, “Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”

Armand had listened intently, and had been dumbfounded by what he heard.

“So you were a murderer, just as I am, and yet Christ forgave you?”

“Yes, He forgave me, and opened His arms of love to me, just as He had done for the thief who was crucified alongside Him. He took him to paradise, and I am of the firm belief, that despite my many sins, when it comes my time to leave this earth, I will be at His side in Heaven, together with all those who are willing to receive His free gift of eternal salvation.”

## **Chapter 12: A New Creature**

The panting of the horse grew more frequent as its hooves thundered along the pavement at lightning pace. The rider was frantic; beads of sweat formed on his young face. Oh, why had his master chosen to go for a ride at night, alone? Why had he engaged in such an imprudent and dangerous activity? He had tried to warn him, but he would not listen. Instead he had chosen to disregard the counsel of his well-meaning servant, and had ridden off in a blaze of enthusiasm, unconcerned by the possible repercussions of his folly.

And when he, the fearful servant had awoken at dawn, he had gone straight to his master’s bedroom, and having not found either him or a bed that gave evidence of being used the night before, he had assumed the worst.

He had mounted a horse, and had headed north, searching for some sign or clue as to what happened to him. It had occurred to him to procure the help of Dabblon, but had eventually settled on conducting the search alone.

Finally, he came upon The Fisherman's Net, and decided to dismount and inquire of the innkeeper whether his master had chanced upon the lodging. As he opened the front door, he was greatly astounded to see Armand sitting at the table and eating from a bowl of porridge. Below his eyes hung large dark rings, indicating that he had not slept that night, but though his face looked tired and haggard, he appeared surprisingly refreshed.

Nearly as surprised to see his servant as the latter was to see him, Armand left his meal and rose to greet the stunned Silvestre.

"Ah, what a good and faithful servant you are, Silvestre! Come, sit down and enjoy a hearty breakfast."

What a change had come over him! It was almost as though he were transformed into a different individual. The proud glint that had been ever so present in his eyes was gone, and had been replaced by a softness and humility that Silvestre hadn't ever seen in his master.

"Master, are you ill?" he questioned.

This prompted a laugh from the lips of Armand. "Nay Silvestre, I am anything but ill, I assure you. A little tired perhaps, but ill I am not!"

Unbeknownst to the puzzled servant, Armand had been up all night with M. Raffin. Together they had gone through scripture after scripture, passage after passage, one reading and explaining, the other attentively listening, questioning, and devouring all he heard. Just as the sun had begun to lift its face over the horizon, Armand was finally convinced that by grace alone could he be saved, and had consented to being baptized.

M. Raffin, who by then was about to collapse from exhaustion, had gone up to his room to slumber, explaining to Armand that the baptism would take place later that day, and informed Mme. Raffin of all that had occurred that night. This so thrilled the woman that she instantly went and divulged all she had been told to Nicole, who, though at first she felt a slight twinge of suspicion, trusted the judgment of M. Raffin, and in her heart tried to rejoice that another lost soul had been saved.

But when she had set the bowl of porridge before Armand his behavior served to convince her that God had wrought a miracle in the life of this once archenemy of their faith. Not knowing what to say to him, and still nursing resentment, she had avoided eye contact, and had just turned to leave when his hand grasped hers softly.

“Please do not be alarmed,” he said, his voice choked somewhat by the tears he was straining to hold back. “I wish only to beg a boon of you. Though I hear that you bear me no malice for what I have done to your family, you would be right to wish for my death, just as I was the cause of your father’s. Last night I sat on the stairwell and heard your meeting. I heard of the love you professed for one such as me. I witnessed the sincerity in your words, and for the first time in my life acknowledged that I was a cruel and vile monster for what I’ve done to people as righteous as you. I thought surely the fires and torments of hell awaited me for my crimes, yet M. Raffin has patiently explained to me that Christ Jesus is a God of love and forgiveness. He shared with me an account of his life, how he too was a sinner of the worst specimen before he saw the light of Christ, and I am now thoroughly convinced that though I have erred and am unworthy, Christ loves and forgives me.

“I do not ask for your forgiveness, for I am undeserving of such, yet I wish for you to hear from my lips that I am repentant and regret the death of your father and imprisonment of your family. I would kiss the tips of your toes in penance for what you have suffered, for you are as a saint compared to the wretched man that I am. I am forever in your debt, and will be at your bidding for the rest of my life if you so desire. I know there is no way that I can atone, yet know that within me beats a heart of eternal gratefulness to you.”

Without responding to Armand, Nicole spun around and hastened to the kitchen where she leaned her forehead upon the wall and allowed the tears to flow. How could she, who was still mourning the loss of her family and yet enduring a complete upheaval in her life, truly forgive this man who had been the cause of all her sorrows? Though the evening before, M. Raffin had publicly declared that she bore him no ill will, and indeed, outwardly, she displayed all evidences of having forgiven him, she just could not find it within herself to let go of all the bitterness and hatred that consumed her heart whenever the name Armand Le T line was pronounced. Surely she retained the right to bear him a little malice; surely Christ would understand the emotions that she was experiencing as a result of his ruthlessness; surely her human and fallible frame could not be expected to extend to him the love and friendship of a brother-in-Christ. She cried out to the One Whom she had grown so close in the past days.



“Blessed Jesus, I need You in this trying moment. While in theory I wholeheartedly wave the banner of Your unearthly love, I find it nigh impossible to truly say without reservation that I forgive Armand Le T line. Yes, his sincerity is apparent, and yes, I already detect in his eyes and countenance a complete transformation from his old ways, but for me that does not alter the fact that he has been the origin of my pain and the cause of my hardship. You said that Your yoke was easy and Your burden light, yet why do I find this yoke so heavy and this burden so intense? Please take this load from my shoulders and ease the violence of this trial, for at this moment I am plagued by a severe dislike for him, and I am in need of Your strength and grace to help me endure.”

In that instant, as Nicole cried out to Jesus for strength and pleaded with Him for reprieve, she could almost feel His presence with her in the room. An aura of comfort replaced her turmoil, and in her mind she could hear His voice softly speaking to her heart.

*My dearest Nicole, this unearthly love which I can give requires surrender. You sing of My love, you proclaim it to others in your speech, and you herald the sacrifice I made, yet when it is necessary to put it into practice, will you shun it as though it meant nothing to you? Will it be only an empty religion of words if you speak of it but fail to apply it, even in the most trying circumstances? Is My example on Calvary, when I forgave those who crucified Me, not enough to constrain you to love as I did?*

*Do not think I am calloused and indifferent to your suffering. I understand all that you are going through at this time, for I too was once encased in human frame and afflicted by human nature. But I promise you that in forgiveness and love you will find the happiness and contentment that you seek. In extending My hand of mercy to Armand, you will wipe away all traces of the misery and despair you now feel, which will be replaced by My joy and happiness. Go now, and speak to him what I shall show you.*

Nicole was comforted by the words of her Savior and Friend, and she dried her eyes before returning to the dining room, where Armand sat, confused and ashamed.

“Armand,” she said. “I shall not pretend to be a saint. I cannot truly say that I held no resentment in my heart, for yes, there did lay within me pain that is difficult to bear. There is nothing, however, that

gives me greater delight than to see a different Armand than the one who existed yesterday. It was a man of the past who murdered my father and imprisoned my family, but the one who sits before me now is only a brother in Christ, one who seeks my forgiveness in humility. Yes, a thousand times, yes! All the past is forgiven and forgotten, my friend, and not because my faith demands it, but because I truly feel that way, because you have opened your eyes to the truth and nothing else could atone like this has.”

Having said thus, she threw her arms around him and from her eyes poured forth tears, the cause of which were mixed. On one hand she experienced freedom from the resentment that, despite her outward displays of Christian love, had been buried deep down in her heart. That was reinforced by the elation of knowing that she had been a part of Armand’s transformation. From these emotions sprung tears of happiness and gratitude. She planted a soft kiss on his cheek before she rose to be about her duties, leaving the astonished Armand to finish his meal. He fingered the spot on his face that had been moistened by her lips, wholly and completely speechless at what had just taken place, and still in wonderment that she had truly and sincerely forgiven him.

It was at this point that Silvestre entered the scene, and he too was soon eagerly devouring the porridge which Nicole had set before him. When he had finished, Armand spoke to him softly, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Silvestre, I thank you for the concern that prompted you to ride all this distance, but I would like to remain here for a couple of days more. I am in need of some rest and peace. I want you to ride up the road for another hour, and see if you can find my stallion which I lost. If you cannot find it, return home and do as you please. Tell no one of my presence here, especially not Dabblon, for I do not wish to be bothered by other matters for the time being.”

Silvestre rose, bowed, and was about to depart when Armand called him back.

“Silvestre, from this moment forth, I have doubled your wages, for apart from your loyal service, you have always been a good and faithful friend.”

“Yes, Monsieur. Thank you, Monsieur,” responded Silvestre, trying to disguise his too great delight as he bounded out of the room in an almost childish display of glee.

\* \* \*

The small crowd that now assembled in the anteroom had been summoned to the inn by M. Raffin. While Armand had gone up to slumber, the excited innkeeper had explained to them in thorough detail the events leading up to this sudden convention, and requested that they attend the baptism. This provoked no small commotion among members of the group, some of whom feared that the entire incident was a sham.

Another portion proposed that even if Armand had really been converted in such a short space of time, it was far too soon for him to be baptized. He didn't understand fully what becoming a member of their faith entailed, they reasoned, and doubted M. Raffin's discernment on the matter. So vocal was this party, that for a moment it seemed there would be no baptism that day.

They had not, however, counted on Nicole, who stepped forward boldly to address the small crowd. "Brothers and sisters, this man, Armand Le T line, cruelly murdered my father, and hauled off my family to the dungeons for torture. If any among us should be justified in distrusting the validity of his transformation, do you not agree that it should be I? Why then do I not join you in condemning his fidelity? Because I have seen him and have spoken with him. I have oft seen the radiance on the faces of those who are made new in Jesus, and I assure you that never have I seen it as evident as I witnessed in him this morning.

"Did not Christ say that if any man would come to Him, He would in no wise cast him out? Has Armand Le T line consented to put his entire life behind him, all he has ever known, in exchange for one where he is greeted by prejudice and suspicion? Are we to kick him aside as a troublesome lap dog simply because we do not consider him worthy of Christ? Would we be able to live with ourselves if he, just as he is beginning to open his heart to the truth, sees that the truth rejects him, and is stumbled as a result? Can we, in all good faith, cast the first stone?"

Silence reigned in the room. Some of the more outspoken ones hung their heads slightly, while others nodded in assent. Nicole, satisfied that she had said her piece, stepped back into the crowd, leaving whatever would follow in the hands of M. Raffin.

"All of you who wish to leave may do so," he said quietly. "But the

baptism shall take place whether you choose to participate or not.”

“Nicole is right,” said a muscular, bearded fellow. “We will remain and give glory to God for the miracle He has wrought this day.”

\* \* \*

A lazy breeze danced over the landscape, creating copious ripples in the small lake and causing the pine needles to sway to and fro reluctantly. The rapidly-disappearing sun, meekly lowering its face behind the adjacent hills, cast partial shadows over the two dozen who had gathered on the banks to witness this occasion. Armand stood to one side of the bank, covered only by a simple white tunic, awaiting the start of the ceremony, while the others eyed him with amazement.

Nicole traced his muscular silhouette with her eyes, admiring the way his hair had been blown out of his face by the wind, wondering to herself at how quickly events had progressed. Just the day before, he had been a staunch oppressor of the Huguenots, and now there he stood, consenting to be baptized by those whom he had thought enemies all his life. She knew that such an instant change was not possible—that is, if one had not been subjected to the awesome power of God almighty.

M. Raffin emerged slowly from the back door of the inn, attired completely in white. As he drew near to the standing Armand, he placed an encouraging hand on his shoulder, and led him toward the water. As they passed the group of onlookers, hands reached out to grasp his, and words of encouragement were spoken to him.

The pair moved solemnly into the lake, and M. Raffin bade the younger man kneel in the chilly water. As he sank in up to his chest, he closed his eyes to revel in the moment. Raffin turned to face the crowd on the shoreline.

“Armand Le T line was a man whose life was lived in shadows!” His voice seemed to have lost its hoarseness, and rang out loud and clear. “Like a blind man, he stumbled along in darkness!”

“Darkness!” he repeated.

Those on the shore inched forward with rapturous looks.

“Darkness!” he repeated again.

Now the crowd stood in a circle, surrounding M. Raffin and the kneeling Armand. A moment of silence occurred, before M. Raffin’s voice resounded piercingly once more across the landscape.

“But God said, ‘Let there be LIGHT!’”

Armand opened his eyes to behold himself surrounded by the brilliance of two dozen flaming torches held high above each head.

“Jesus said ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father but by Me!’”

“Amen!” chorused the group with great enthusiasm.

“If any man be in Christ, he is a *new* creature!”

“Amen!” they all shouted again.

“Old things are passed away!”

“Amen!”

“Behold, all things are become new!”

“Amen!”

“The Armand who has entered the water shall not reemerge!”

“Amen!”

“The man who comes out of the water shall be a new creature, beginning a new life in Jesus the Savior.”

“Amen!”

He grasped Armand’s hand with his, and placed the other behind his neck.

“Armand Le T line, I baptize you. Be filled with the Spirit of the Lord!”

Then he slowly lowered him backwards into the water until he was completely submerged. Though the water was cold and biting, Armand reveled in the ecstasy of the moment. It was an emotion so much more powerful than anything he, a man of passion, had ever experienced. He felt as though he had really come clean and could begin anew. He had been renewed by the grace and mercy of God, and there was no denying that this was the Armand Le T line that was meant to be. Dripping wet as he was, he embraced Raffin, the tears streaming from his eyes mingling with the water on his face. But these tears, so unlike those of the night before which were borne of remorse, were the product of bliss and wonder.

Then the ecstatic innkeeper, taking the younger man’s hand in his, raised it high in a triumphant gesture and bellowed.

“PRAISE BE TO GOD WHICH GIVETH US THE VICTORY!”

“PRAISE BE TO GOD WHICH GIVETH US THE VICTORY!” the congregation chorused.

During the evening a meal was served and each individual presented themselves to Armand, and welcomed him to their circle of

friendship. When all had eaten their fill, instruments were drawn out and further tunes echoed from their strings, tunes of love, devotion, and commitment. Then as the bars of the final melody drew quiet, M. Raffin bid all turn their gaze heavenward.

“See the stars twinkle so serenely in the night sky. God once made a promise to Abraham that he would make the number of his children as innumerable as the stars.” Then he turned to Armand and clasped his shoulder. “I do believe that another star has been added to that promise.”

That it had! And though Armand felt so unworthy of a place in that galaxy, he could only revel in the fortitude and power that coursed through his veins. His old life was now in the past, a dream, all gone from memory, and he felt prepared to enter a new one, bolstered by the Rock, his newfound Anchor, Jesus.

## **Chapter 13: A Blow is Struck**

After saying grace at the following morning’s breakfast, the hungry mouths began to attack and then fervently devour the Brie, rye bread and milk Mme. Raffin’s industriousness had set before them.

“I presume that the inn is at present unoccupied,” remarked Armand between mouthfuls.

“Yes,” she responded. “We have been empty for the past few days now. Perhaps God has willed it so that we were able to attend fully to you when you came, and not be occupied by other guests.”

“Perhaps.”

Then, after a moment’s silence, he turned to his host. “Monsieur, may I ask you a question?”

“Certainly!”

“When you related to me the tale of your life, you mentioned that after your conversion you felt duty bound to inform your fellow thugs of the change that had been brought about in you, and try to help them change as well. You mentioned that in the book of Matthew, Christ commanded that we not hide our lights beneath a bushel.”

“That is so.”

“In an effort to obey that command, am I to return to the society in which I previously existed—and I say ‘existed,’ for I cannot describe such a life as being lived—and share with them the good news?”

M. Raffin paused for a moment. His mouth was occupied in chewing a morsel of bread and cheese, and he pondered the question until the lump in his cheeks disappeared. His tongue brushed across the surface of his molars while his eyes stared into the distance, his mind doubtless seeking an answer from the Almighty. At length he said,

“It seems to me that your present situation now differs somewhat from my past one. In my case, the men with whom I lived were uneducated, simple men who had been farmers or craftsmen before embracing the life of crime. For the most part, they had not heard of the truth. However, the lot with which you are connected consists of bishops, dukes, counts, and courtiers, most of whom have a fair notion of the Huguenots’ stance. They have conducted numerous trials and inquisitions, and witnessed the deaths of many of our comrades. They have been presented with the books of dozens of writers, all reinforcing the same message we share and have burned the volumes and outlawed their authors. They possess the exact same copies of the Scriptures that we possess, and yet they persist in believing that which is false. In short, they have seen and heard the truth and have chosen to reject it.”

“But Monsieur, perhaps if they saw me proclaiming that by grace are we saved, they would take notice, perhaps even reconsider their ways.”

“Your fervor for the faith is admirable, Armand, and I have no wish to quench your flame, but Christ once said that there are none so blind as those who will not see. Were Jesus Himself to speak to them and present the facts before their faces, many would still not believe. They are much like the Scribes and Pharisees, all of whom knew well the Scriptures and knew that Christ Jesus was in fact the Son of God. They were not confused, they were not deceived, nor were they unaware of what they were doing. They had the brazen audacity to crucify the Son of God, the Creator of Heaven and earth, and by their actions brought about judgment on the nation of Israel. They were scattered throughout the earth as a result of their rejection. Now the Church follows in their footsteps, willfully ignorant, deceivers of themselves and others.”

“Are you then stating that I should not endeavor to divulge my faith among the nobility?” queried Armand.

“By no means! But I do say that to exercise caution and prudence would be wise. Doubtless there are some who will listen to you, and perhaps even agree, but they will be few. It seems to me that at the moment, you should remain here and be strengthened by God’s Word. This will cause you to grow in faith and have more confidence when He reveals to you His will for the future.”

“How will I know when He does? Will I receive a sign?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps He will orchestrate situations and circumstances which will clearly indicate His will. At times I have found myself waiting on God for a sign of some sort, when all the while it was clear what I was meant to do. He does not always directly inform us of His will. He oft wishes for us to exercise a little common sense, as well as faith and trust in Him, knowing that all things will work together for our good.”

Armand opened his mouth slightly, as though to put forth another question, but was interrupted by the sound of horses’ hooves on cobblestones not far down the road. As they drew nearer, the clattering slowed and seemed to turn onto the pathway leading directly to the inn. Thinking it was perhaps some wayfarer stopping by for breakfast, Nicole peered out the window and reported that Silvestre was approaching the inn.

As he dismounted, the door was readily opened and upon seeing his master, Silvestre bowed and produced from a leather pouch a sealed letter, while explaining the reason for his sudden appearance.

“I understand that Monsieur instructed me to remain in Paris, but I entreat your patience for just a moment while I explain. I bring both good news and bad. First, let me report that I found Monsieur’s horse further down the road. He was devouring some hay from a farmer’s barn, and had it not been for my unexpected arrival, I fear they would have kept him as their own. The bad news is that upon bringing the animal home, I encountered M. Dabblon at Monsieur’s lodgings. He seemed somewhat perturbed and quite adamant that he must speak with Monsieur immediately. You instructed me not to divulge your present whereabouts, and I did not. I merely informed him that Monsieur had departed from the domicile unexplainably, and had not revealed when he would return.



“Upon hearing this, he grew quite agitated and insisted that he be summoned the moment that Monsieur should come again. However, upon departure, he seemed to have a change of mind and wrote this note to give to you on the next occasion I met you. I have brought you this note.”

Armand took the letter from his servant’s outstretched hand and tore off the seal. Before reading it, he looked apprehensively into the three questioning faces at the table. The note read as follows:

*M. Le Têline,*

*I was present at your lodgings this morning, and was disappointed to find you not at home. I have taken the liberty of visiting the old villa on rue de Martel No. 20. It is in fact a dilapidated mansion that does not appear to have been inhabited for a good while and its surroundings could not have been pronounced more conducive to our intentions. There are numerous patches of underbrush, uncut bushes, and crumbling buildings in the vicinity where scores of men could be hidden in the dark. Regarding that subject, I also procured for us a band of two dozen to act as our guardsmen, for though your head and mine were resourceful enough to concoct this operation, every head requires limbs to enact the signals it sends through the body. The limbs in this case will be this daring militia. Their devotion is only to gold, and having received a generous amount from my hand, they shall be present at my quarters an hour before dusk.*

*I urge you to follow their example, but if for some reason fate should dictate otherwise, than proceed cautiously to the above address. We shall be hidden in strategic locations, in such a way that we surround the house, and no sooner shall the White Feather set foot in that vicinity, than he shall find our band yapping at his heels.*

*Anticipation prevents me from writing further, but I shall meet you this evening at my lodgings, or if circumstances forbid such, at the site. Until then.*

*Dabblon*

The quivering hands of Armand slowly folded the letter in half, then in fourths. His mind was racing. How on earth could he have forgotten so completely about this little venture? How could it have

slipped his mind? In all the excitement of his conversion and the enthusiasm he felt at the prospect of beginning his life anew, the events of the few previous days had been totally and completely clouded from his mind. He had so foolishly assumed that his old life being a past event, he would no longer have to deal with it. But just as he wished to forget it all, it returned to haunt him. Just like a jealous mistress, the past wished to torment him and his newfound love with cruel reminders of her existence.

With a slight tremor in his voice, he addressed Silvestre.

“I shall do my utmost. That is all.”

“Yes, Monsieur. And if Dabblon should return, seeking to know your answer...?”

“I shall do my utmost!” he repeated.

At this, the bewildered servant bowed, turned on his heels, and departed.

After the clattering of his animal’s hooves had faded, Armand turned to answer the apprehensive gazes of his associates, all still sitting around the table. A thick, tense silence forced him to speak as he too seated himself, slightly dazed.

“You all know of the White Feather?” he sighed.

He received short, cursory nods in response.

“I was commissioned nearly two fortnights ago to seek out his identity and bring him to trial. Following various failures and false starts, a certain Dabblon, my partner in the undertaking, and I were able to discover the means of trapping him in the midst of his intrigues. We were able to obtain a letter written by the White Feather. The letter outlines the details of an arrangement to transport the recently liberated d’Arnae family to Geneva.”

Nicole’s eyes widened at this mention of her family’s involvement, and she turned to M. Raffin questioningly, as though to ask how such a thing could be happening.

Armand continued on. “The White Feather will deliver the entire family at an old mansion on the rue de Martel tonight. We had made plans a few days previous to capture all the participants on location, and the letter I received just now was penned by Dabblon, informing me of the final touches to the plan and urging me to be present also. In the last two days I have failed to dwell on it even once, so unexplainably did it vanish from my thoughts.”

He said this with a certain air of resignation, a fatalistic tone of total acceptance. His voice did not rise or fall with emotion as it so often had in the past; rather its monotone firmness betrayed his complete and utter shock at the sudden appearance of these ominous circumstances.

But in the trusting mind of Nicole, there had to be some method by which the inevitable could be stopped. She turned to the troubled Armand, a tone of pleading in her voice.

“What then is to be done? Am I to believe that you will stand by while such a brave man goes to his death, and my family is once more captured and subjected to further torture and cruelty? Are we to accept that God would allow my family to be rescued by the White Feather, only to experience a delusion of freedom as they are returned to whence they came, and worse for the knowledge that they had a hand in bringing about the end of a brave hero?”

“I and I alone am responsible for the danger that surrounds the White Feather!” Armand burst out. “But alas! It is too late.” He lowered his eyes. “Perhaps this too is a measure of my punishment, to witness the results of my deeds even after I sought to leave them behind. The number of innocent lives I am accountable for continues to grow even since I’ve repented of my ways. And now the damage I have inflicted spreads like the plague until it will consume all Huguenots, while there is nothing left for me but tears, sorrow, and remorse.”

“Armand.” M. Raffin came over and grasped his shoulders in a fatherly manner. “I do not and cannot believe that this state of affairs was orchestrated as a form of chastisement for your wrongs. In our discourse just now, did we not converse touching the will of God, and how oft it is put forth to us through the development of circumstances? Could He have organized events to play out in this manner to give you the opportunity to redeem yourself? If the past so castigates you, could you not appease its accusing voice by at the very least endeavoring to foil those who would extinguish further flames of truth? If tonight’s itinerary is, as you say, known to you, then is there not some means by which you may delay, hinder or even prevent this cruel turn of events?”

“There may be, but I am at a loss as to how.”

“Then calm yourself and reflect for just a moment. Are the fugitives to be executed immediately after capture?”

“The White Feather will be held until the return of M. Saint-Ghyslain from Spain. As to the d’Arnae family, they will in all probability be returned to the dungeons from whence they escaped.”

“Well, indeed! All hope has not then fled from us. Surely if you return to Paris, join your collaborator, and participate in the arrest, then perhaps you could arrange for the d’Arnae family to also be detained alongside their would-be liberators. Then perhaps, at a later date, you could release them in secret and aid them in escaping.”

“Very well, I shall go,” he said at length, a note of determination rising in his voice. “But if I am unable to prevent their deaths, I shall not return. If I fail, I shall allow myself to be seized, confess to being a coconspirator of the White Feather, and be judged alongside him. By such, I will have ended my life with purpose, contrarily to how it was lived.”

And with a dramatic bow, he turned and climbed the stairs to his room.

## Chapter 14: Adieu

It was nearly midday by the time Armand bid adieu to those he had recently come to call his friends. Armand buckled on his boots while M. Raffin obtained for him a horse from the stables. While the innkeeper was thus occupied, Armand turned to the women whom he had grown so fond of in such a short period of time. He spoke first to Mme. Raffin.

“Madame, though I have known you only a day and a half, I feel for you the love that a son feels for his mother. You have been compassionate, and have accepted me as a son in Christ. For this I thank you from the depths of my soul.” And he bent low as though to kiss her hand, but she seized him and drew him to her in an embrace.

“Armand, God has not seen fit to bequeath upon me the blessings of childbearing, yet in the last fortnight he has graciously presented me with a daughter in Nicole, and a son in you. Though we now part, and may never meet again on this decadent earth, we shall be reunited in paradise, where we shall have all of eternity to fortify the sentiments maintained by mother and son. But I shall intercede in prayer for your safety and triumph in tonight’s endeavor. May God go with you.” Fresh tears stung her eyelids, but Armand, who perceived that he had produced more tears in the last few days than in his entire life, strove to check his own—albeit unsuccessfully.

Gradually, the fond embrace ended and Armand turned to Nicole, who stood to the side, her hands clasped in front of her, her cheeks pale, her eyes cast down. Armand took her hands in his.

“Nicole,” he said, but she did not respond. He could almost read the torment of her mind on her delicate face. Her family exposed to imminent peril, and the man whom she had come to know as a friend off to their rescue. She stood to gain all, or lose all, depending on the outcome of tonight’s events. The torment that he himself was experiencing allowed him to comprehend the mental anguish she would endure were she to discover that all of his best efforts had been to no avail, and that her family had been returned to the dungeons. Thus she spoke pleadingly with him.

“Armand, I too shall occupy myself in prayer and supplication in your absence, but we know not what His will may be. It is quite possible that you will be unable to save the White Feather, and my family. Yet even if such is so, I entreat you, do not let harm come to you unnecessarily. Perhaps Christ’s will does not include your martyrdom, at least not so soon. There is so much fire within you, so much enthusiasm that could be harnessed for a witness to His name. It seems unfair that you should enforce upon yourself this terrible either-or choice, and leave so little room for Christ to intercede on your behalf.”

“Nicole, you do not understand what is going through my head at this moment. You have lived a life of faith and righteousness, and so it is easy for you to speak thus, but I was a vile man, entrenched in wickedness, and though I know that Christ has made me clean and washed away my past, I cannot forgive myself. As of yesterday I thought I had been convinced that every part the life I lived had disappeared, but the reappearance of my past existence has proved to me that what I have done in the past remains to haunt me in the present. I cannot truly be released from its clutches until I have righted this wrong, and if I fail to accomplish that, then my life’s pages will be far too tainted with the blood of the innocent for me to continue to write in them. In short, I must conquer or die.” All this he uttered with the utmost softness, despite the dreadful reality of his words.

He then planted a soft kiss on her brow. “But do not despair, for did you not say that Christ would aid me?”

This he said only to put Nicole at peace, for truly he had begun to surmise that he was already a dead man.

“My thoughts and prayers go with you,” said she.

“Adieu!” he replied. And they parted. As he opened the door to depart, he turned to gaze one last time at the two women. Mme. Raffin clutched a kerchief to her face and Nicole raised her hand as though to say farewell. With this somber portrait etched in his mind, he swung the heavy, oaken door closed behind him.

Just as he did so, he caught sight of M. Raffin coming around the corner of the stables, leading a saddled and bridled gelding. He handed the reins to Armand.

“Armand, I greatly admire you for the courage you exhibit in this undertaking. I understand the fears that may begin to gnaw at you as

you ride toward the capital. Fears of failure, fears of error, and even fears of guilt and condemnation will undoubtedly plague you. Satan has always employed fear as a means to strike at those who would give their lives to God. He may cause you to doubt the power of Jesus' forgiveness, and he may tempt you to give up this mission before you even begin. But I am convinced that Christ will use this unfortunate situation to strengthen your faith in Him and His power to save. I shall personally lend a hand to tonight's outcome through my prayers, for prayer is the most formidable power on earth, mightier than the fleur-de-lis and all the swords of France combined."

Raffin took the hand of Armand in both of his, and uttered the following: "Go in the strength of the Lord God. It is only through His mercy that all will be well, so put your trust entirely in Him. And remember the words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He pleaded with His Father to let the cup of crucifixion and torture pass from Him. He said, 'Father, not My will, but Thine be done.' This example of perfect submission to God should serve as a model for our own compliance to His will.

"Yet, bear in mind that all things will work together for good to them who love God, and however the events play out He is in control and has a perfect reason for the end result. And if perchance this should be the last time that we set eyes on one another, adieu."

"I thank you for restoring blood to my veins and purpose to my existence. Farewell for the moment, and perhaps for a while." He mounted the steed, raised his right hand, clapped his spurs against the animal's sides, and was off. M. Raffin's eyes followed him down the road until he disappeared from sight. Uttering a sigh, he turned around and returned to the inn.

For the remainder of the afternoon, the threesome knelt in prayer, pouring out their hearts before the throne of God, their words ascending to the heavens like the scent of roses, the aroma of perfume in the nose of Jesus. When they rose, peace shone from each of their faces, and they were confident that no matter what happened, or what the outcome of the night's events, Armand was safe in the arms of Jesus.

\* \* \*

Armand's fingers curled tensely around the reins of his horse, and his lips were pressed tightly against each other. He was immersed

in thought. The subject of these thoughts was the future, or more particularly, the measures of that night. He had perhaps four or five hours before sundown, and yet a few tasks to accomplish in Paris before he could join Dabblon and his posse of thugs.

Principally among these, he must make his way to his quarters and obtain a sword and pistol from his collection. He also needed to put his will down in writing and make a few other necessary arrangements in case of his arrest and subsequent execution. Then he would walk the short distance to the apartments of Dabblon, and assume an air of great enthusiasm at the prospect of the demise of the White Feather. He would converse with Dabblon touching the final arrangement, and in the course of their tête-à-tête, he hoped to discover some point where he could interject with an idea of his own.

His idea, of course, would be constructed so that he could prey on its fallibility to attempt a rescue of some sort. It would be designed to create some junction where he could install a daring attempt to liberate his newfound coreligionists.

Earlier in the morning, Raffin had put forth the possibility of allowing the whole lot to be seized, and then devising some means to liberate them. However, he was speaking from ignorance on this particular matter. If only he knew how well-fortified the French fortresses were, with drawbridges, moats, spikes, watchtowers, portcullises, and sentinels, to guarantee that all prisoners remained within their dark walls, he would not have mentioned such a possibility. No, if he wished to attempt a rescue, it must be done before they were imprisoned.

Or if a rescue was not at all possible, perhaps there was some way he could fire a warning shot in the air, just as he heard the rumble of the plotter's hay wagon. Yes, that was a definite possibility! He would fire his pistol in the air, and scream out a warning of some sort. Surely the White Feather's perceptiveness would hear him and induce him to beat a hasty retreat. Of course, needless to say, he would be instantaneously cut down by Dabblon, but at least he would have succeeded in warning the White Feather of the imminent danger.

As far as he was concerned, his own life was no longer of importance to him. He had only one objective in mind: to prevent the incarceration of the three parties who were to be present that evening—Sir Donovan Hughes, The White Feather, and the d'Arnae



family. Rather than sacrificing the lives of the Huguenots to further his own ambitions, as had been the case so often in the past, he would give up his own life so that theirs could be saved.

But what on earth was he thinking? Dabblon and his mercenaries were all likely to have horses nearby, and after disabling him, they would simply pursue the White Feather and easily overtake the slow wagon, weighted down by the entire d'Arnae family and the hay. And what of Sir Donovan Hughes? He would be nonchalantly waiting in the old manor and would also hear the warning cry. But being surrounded by mercenaries, he would be unable to flee. He too would be seized and the entire attempt would be a dismal fiasco. No, no, the scheme must be abandoned.

Perhaps if he waited until everyone was present and all had entered the abode? Then just as Dabblon gave the signal to the men to enter and arrest all the occupants, he would seize him by the throat and hold the pistol to his head. Then he would threaten to deposit a bullet in his brains if he did not call off the mercenaries. The unsuspecting Dabblon would be so stupefied by the unexpected turn of events that he would command the mercenaries to remain where they were. The group of fugitives would hear the commotion and think that all was lost, but he would haul Dabblon into the villa and elucidate the whole affair to the White Feather and request permission to escape to Geneva with them. Then, somewhere along the road, in some desolate quarter, he would liberate Dabblon and continue on his way.

There would be no bloodshed and all would make good their escape including he. Yes, that was a much improved course of action, there could be no doubt about it.

He relaxed a little in the saddle, and his hands loosened on the reins. He had come up with a strategy, which although dangerous, bore a fair chance of success. Now, there was by no means an assurance that all would go as planned, but if it did, then there was atonement for him. In short, he retained hope, which spurred him onwards and bolstered his spirits.

Now that he had put his mind to rest on the matter of a concrete stratagem, his thoughts wandered this way and that for a few moments, and finally came to rest on The Fisherman's Net and its present occupants. He could picture in his mind the threesome kneeling in prayer for the will of the Almighty to be done. This comforted him

somewhat, to know that these people of faith were at that very moment bringing before God a petition on his behalf. But he also sensed that if this battle were to be won, it could not be won only through the prayers and desperation of others, but of himself as well. And so, at that moment, the young cavalier uttered a prayer.

“Heavenly Father,” he began slowly and with as much reverence as he could. “I understand that I have not known You long, nor have I given much thought to You in my life, yet my eyes have recently beheld the truth. I am about to attempt to undo one of my many wrongs and make it right. I know that I am by no means in the position to request favors of You, yet I do not ask for my sake, but for the sake of Your children who have already suffered much on my account. I ask that You intervene on the behalf of those who love and serve You. I recognize that I am unworthy to be used of You, yet I ask You to come to my aid this evening. And if You are willing that I should die as a martyr in Your name, gladly will I do so. Above all, allow Your perfect will to be accomplished on earth as it is in Heaven. Amen.”

The Psalmist once wrote “The Lord is nigh unto them that be of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.” In that moment, as Armand, once proud and haughty, now broken and wounded in spirit, cried aloud to the Lord, he received a balm of peace. He had allowed Christ to take full control, much as though he had let go of the reins on a horse and said “bear me where you will!”

In the last few days, the emotions of the young man had gone askew, ranging from supreme delight to extreme misery, but he had obtained something that was far more precious than gold, a power greater than himself, which he could depend and lean on.

## Chapter 15: The Cocoon of Monsieur Dabblon

The imposing walls of the city of Paris jutted from the even landscape surrounding its outskirts. Gleaming proudly in the afternoon sun, they seemed to stand in arrogant defiance to the lone rider who had reigned in his horse about a quarter of a league away from where they stood in such seeming insolence. Armand gritted his teeth, dug in his spurs, and set the mount into a mad gallop toward Paris, a pace quite unnecessary for something as commonplace as entering the open gates of a city.

Upon reaching the metropolis, and noting the raised eyebrows of the guards on duty—doubtless muttering to themselves about the fool who had just entered—he reigned in his horse and forced it to canter along the crowded marketplace, bustling with the farmers and vegetable sellers peddling their goods and calling out to him to come and inspect their merchandise. Ignoring these calls, he proceeded directly to the rue de Charlemagne where he was presently quartered.

Half-expecting to find Silvestre once more engaged in defending the honor of his lady friend, he instead found him sleeping soundly. After being nudged several times, the servant awoke, and upon seeing his master, quite nearly leapt from the divan and stuttered a greeting, thoroughly mortified at having been found slumbering. But Armand's mind was on the grave matter at hand, and he declined to chastise his lackey for his indolence.

“Monsieur!” said the astonished servant, shock still etched on his young face. “You have returned!”

“Yes, Silvestre, is it so surprising to you that a man should return to his own home?”

“No, but I assumed that Monsieur would...”

“I said that I would do my utmost, Silvestre. I have done as I said, and I am here. Now, Haste! I am in need of a sword and a pistol. Fetch me these items from my collection.”

“What? Monsieur is leaving again?”

“I am,” he replied calmly.

“Where?”

“I shall join M. Dabblon tonight in capturing the White Feather.”

Silvestre, recognizing that he had pushed the envelope of a valet's propriety by questioning his master excessively, colored, muttered an unintelligible apology of some sort and hastened to carry out his instructions.

In the meantime, Armand sat down to put to writing his will, and instructed that in the event of his death, all his material possessions would be inherited by the innkeeper.

This task did not take long, and he soon had before him a document which clearly stated his will and appointed Silvestre as the executor of his intent. This manuscript he sealed in an envelope and placed on the desk in front of him. As he did so, he pondered the possibility of informing Silvestre of his conversion and requesting that he accompany him. He might be needed if Dabblon put up a significant struggle. Besides, it is, in all things, better to be two rather than one, a logic he had heard presented time and again.

But no, it was better not to involve the young man in his own affairs, for to do so would jeopardize his safety unfairly. Besides which, this was a mission which he felt must remain between him and the Almighty, a struggle for his future that must be accomplished alone, and without the aid of a man whose only purpose would be obedience to his master, rather than a do-or-die assault on his past.

At this moment in his cogitations, Silvestre placed on the desk in front of him a rapier and a matchlock pistol.

"Very good, man," Armand congratulated him. "Now, carry the weapons into my chambers." The attendant followed his master into the bedroom where the latter scrutinized his garments in the full-length mirror. The banquet outfit that he still wore from two nights earlier—and which had been his only option at the inn—was now tousled and frumpy. It was obvious that it would not do for tonight's occasion.

"I shall require a change of attire. Bring me something light, something without these supremely annoying lace frills," he said, tugging at the lace on his cuffs. "And fetch also my dagger belt!" he called out as Silvestre scurried off to do his bidding.

This item which he last requested was a leather strap which was worn around the torso, beneath the jerkin but over the chemise, and which contained a sheath for a specially constructed poniard, particularly thin and light, though nearly a foot long. It was designed to

serve the purpose of a concealed weapon, and could be drawn at a moment's notice by those who were acquainted with its use. When sheathed, it was impossible to detect through one's clothing, and when drawn, was deadly in the hands of a connoisseur.

\* \* \*

The rapidly darkening rue de Charlemagne was nearly uninhabited at this hour. An occasional vegetable wagon, driven by some farmer, traversed its cobblestones, but for the most part, Armand found himself in solitary movement along the roadside gutters. His shadow, which appeared to be that of a giant, walked neither fast nor slow. Its owner, however, felt his knees tremble, his heart pound with anxiety, his hands moist with perspiration. He grasped his pistol once more, as though to reassure himself that it had not been removed from its holster.

It would be necessary to affect an expression of anticipation and glee from the moment that he joined Dabblon, else the latter might suspect that all was not as it seemed. And he must not allow any uncertainties to be entertained, for he must hold in his hand the complete trust of the man whom it would be necessary to threaten with the barrel of his weapon. Yes, complete trust was quite necessary. And why should it be too difficult? Dabblon should have no legitimate reason to suspect the most ambitious young man in Paris of being a Huguenot. Even were he to be told by someone that his accomplice had, in the brief period of two days, been transformed into such, he would find the information so ludicrous that he might be persuaded to recant for a moment his vows of solemnity and laugh aloud.

He had now arrived abruptly at the domicile of Dabblon. He had proceeded cautiously, his mind occupied by soon-to-come events, oblivious to where he was going, but habit led directly toward his destination, and the result was that he now stood before a wooden door, which once entered, would mark the start of perhaps the most agonizing night he had endured in his life. He lifted his right hand, formed it into a fist and paused. After squaring his shoulders and lifting his chin, he rapped thrice upon the wooden surface. The door was, after a silence of about half a minute, opened to reveal the antechamber of Dabblon.

The room was fairly large, though not excessively so. Against the wall, a small fire, lashing its orange tongues about, was enclosed by a

brick fireplace and grating. This provided both light and warmth. The room was for the most part bare, giving evidence to Dabblon's dislike for merriment, and it was the room's occupants that retained Armand's stare.

These were a dozen in number. When the door had first been opened, they had been engaged in subtle conversation in pairs of two or three, but had all stopped to gape in his direction. Every stare that was aimed at his frame bore a mixture of scrutiny, mistrust, and anxiety. These faces, some of which bore scars as evidences of past skirmishes, revealed their uncouth natures, and their eyes seemed to gleam with the same intensity as the blaze that flickered in the hearth. As a group, they were a force to be reckoned with, but as individuals, Armand surmised that none could be his peer. None, that is, except for one.

This appeared to be the chief of the group, who drew from the gaze of Armand the greatest interest. He stood a head and shoulders above the rest, and his bald cranium was short of the ceiling by only a few inches. His eyes portrayed intelligence superior to that of his companions, though his air was as hard as theirs was. Armand perceived that if this giant wished to disable any man, he undoubtedly needed no weapons. His hands would bear the same inertia and force as a mace, and one blow to the head would most surely render Armand, for example, unconscious.

It was this figure to whom Armand addressed his question.

“Is M. Dabblon present?”

The stranger did not reply, but rather lumbered over to another door, and opened it without knocking. He then stood to the side to reveal the master of the house sitting at a desk on which he was engaged in the perusal of a manuscript. Armand strode confidently past the group of mercenaries and entered this room, shutting the door in the face of the man who had opened it. His confidence, so absent as he traversed the distance from his own lodgings to Dabblon's, had been renewed by the sight of an opposing force.

Dabblon appeared pleased to see him.

“Armand,” he called, looking up just as the door was closed. “I was about to give the order to depart. It really would have been a shame had you been absent from the event in which you expended so much time and energy!”

“I am perhaps somewhat tardy, and for that I apologize,” returned Armand with a bow, “but know that not once did it even cross my mind to be absent from this occasion. There has been a death in my family this night, and I have just arrived from Orleans. Are we to depart for rue de Martel now?”

“Not just yet. Now that you have arrived, we must examine the final plan together and attach to it the necessary details.”

Armand was delighted to hear this, for this was what he desired most.

Dabblon led him to the table and pointed to the manuscript he had been analyzing.

“See, here is a sketch, which I drew as accurately as possible, from my visit to the old villa yesterday. You’ve received my note pertaining to this affair, I presume?”

“Yes, I did. Silvestre presented it to me upon my arrival at my apartments.”

“Good, now look carefully. Here is the old villa in the center of the drawing. Surrounding it are three points which I have determined would be the most conducive to concealing our men. The first is a tall hedge, the second refers to a clump of trees, and the third is an old shack which is also deserted.

“Here is the road from which the White Feather shall enter the vicinity, as there is only one road, and a wagon could not possibly come another way. After the White Feather passes this road, and stops at the old mansion, the men who will be stationed in the cabin will block it off, while the others shall surround and enter the mansion, and arrest all the occupants.”

## Chapter 16: Cat and Mouse

Armand examined the map meticulously. The three spots that the fingers of Dabblon had indicated formed a triangle surrounding the building, and Armand was struck by the perfect positioning that had been plotted on the paper.

It was almost as though the three sites had been facilitated expressly for the purpose of secreting those surrounding this structure. Furthermore, the objective was straightforward and, as far as could be told, contained no frailties that could be seized upon to his advantage. The White Feather would walk directly into the midst of a secure, well-laid trap, and if perchance Armand was rendered powerless to intervene on his behalf, there was no means on earth by which he might elude his captors.

“This is undoubtedly a superbly plotted arrangement,” said he, turning to Dabblon. “But did not the letter state that Sir Donovan was to be present at the villa beforehand, and bring with him a carriage?”

“It did.”

“Then he may have arrived there even now!” he cried, feigning alarm.

“And what is to be made of that?” returned Dabblon, as calm and poised as Armand seemed disquieted.

“Then he shall possess a perfect view of our arrival and concealment from within the villa!”

“Not so. In the first place, the letter stated that Sir Donovan Hughes was to enter the scene just before the clock strikes twelve. As I heard it toll only eight not long ago, we have before us the luxury of time. In the second place, as we near number 20 on rue de Martel, we shall dispatch a scout to ascertain whether or not there be a coach parked in the vicinity. If such is the case, we will proceed with utter noiselessness to our positions. And in the event that we should be spotted by the Englishman, despite our precautions, I ask you, what harm would be done? If he attempts to escape, he will find himself surrounded and unable to flee. Likewise, if he wishes to warn the White Feather of our presence...”

Armand listened to these words, and realized that all spheres and facets of the operation had been combed through with a relentless



amount of thought and precision. It was evident that his only chance was the preconceived option of grasping in the palm of his hand the life of Dabblon and then to offer it to him in return for the life of the White Feather.

“And how many are we in number?” he questioned, trying to sound as though he was greatly interested in every minor detail of the venture.

“As I said in my letter, we have two dozen men. I shall take command of a third, and we shall post ourselves behind the hedge. You shall direct another third toward the clump of forestry, and Montcleur shall take the remaining third to the shack.”

“Montcleur?” inquired Armand, raising his eyebrows.

“The man who admitted you into my presence,” clarified Dabblon. “The tall one.”

“I should say your evaluation of him falls short, Dabblon. ‘Tall’ does not sufficiently describe the enormity of his stature. I am tall. He is ... immense!”

“Yes, isn’t it extraordinary how in the course of human reproduction we encounter those who retain the height of a child, while to peer directly into the eyes of others, we must scale the third rung of a ladder?”

“I have never thought of you as a man who possesses philosophical tendencies, Dabblon,” said Armand with a measure of unfeigned surprise. “Yet now you so nonchalantly postulate the peculiarities of human height. And at such a moment as this! That is unlike you!”

“Bah! An agent of the government must at all times be prepared to form a hypothesis on any given situation, and in order to do so in a coherent manner, one must be capable of inducing a little philosophy. Besides possessing the height of Goliath, Montcleur is definitely also a man of superior intelligence. I have employed him on various occasions in the past, and though his appearance lends evidence to his martial aptitude, he is in fact an exceedingly crafty individual, perfectly suited to the mission on which we now embark.”

This last statement caused a shiver to travel down Armand’s spine.

“But come, we speak so much of this man, while you have not had the opportunity to meet him. I shall call him to enter, but first,

allow me to present one word of caution. He is a proud man, and if he detects in your demeanor any form of disdain, he will easily become annoyed. He is not intimidated in the least by the presence of distinguished individuals such as ourselves, and may, at any moment, decide to withdraw his troop, and return to us the gold I paid him—or just as easily, keep it for himself. So exercise sufficient propriety, and refer to him as ‘Monsieur,’ though his social status does not merit such a title.”

And here he called out “M. Montcleur!”

The door was soon opened and the mammoth form occupied its frame.

“Monsieur,” said Dabblon, “allow me to present M. Le T line, the senior figure in this operation, and the man of whom I spoke to you previously.”

M. Montcleur bowed stiffly.

“I have been in earnest discourse with M. Dabblon,” said Armand, “and he assures me that there is no man better suited to our task than yourself. I look forward to participating in this endeavor alongside a man whose talent is as renowned as your own.”

“Ah, Monsieur flatters!” returned Montcleur.

“You will remember, my dear M. Montcleur, that I explained to you how essential it is that any impediments or obstacles to this venture should be removed. Do you not agree, Armand?”

“B-but of course,” he stammered.

“Splendid! Then you will understand why, in the name of M. Saint-Ghyslain, I now place you under arrest.” This was delivered with a tone of indescribable coolness and a look of triumphant delight.

“Arrest?”

“Indeed!”

The features of Armand turned quite pale, for he understood that all was known to M. Dabblon, and that all he’d wished to conceal had been discovered. Dabblon had been toying with him since the moment he’d entered, much like a cat toys with a mouse, but this cat’s appetite had begun to afflict him, and so with no warning, he had seized upon the mouse.

Montcleur advanced menacingly and rapidly toward him, now clenching in his fist the saber that had been previously at his belt. Instinctively his own hand flew to the handle of his sword, for the pistol,

being of the matchlock class, required that the wick be lighted in order for it to be discharged.

This action, however, did not curb Montcleur's progress, who continued toward Armand. With lightning speed, he drew his sword back and then, with a force so magnificent, brought it toward the person of the young cavalier.

But as the latter deftly parried the blow, he perceived that his attacker's intent did not extend to striking him, but rather to forcing from his hand his sword, for his blows were not aimed at any part of his body, but were brought down with brute force upon his steel blade.

After their blades had met in this manner four or five times, Armand elected to launch a bold counterattack on his aggressor. He adroitly sidestepped a well-swung blow from the bigger man, and thrust toward his chest. He had not, however, counted on the swiftness of Montcleur, whose bulk gave him the appearance of being slow of reflex, and just as the tip of his rapier was about to enter Montcleur's torso, the latter, with a move so rapid that it was nearly undetectable, forced away the fist holding the sword.

Montcleur's elbow pounded into his brow with the force of a battering ram, and sent him crumpling to the ground, his sword flying from his hand. Wishing to retrieve it, he made an effort to rise, but the giant's fist was brought down powerfully on his back, and his body was once more flattened on the ground, secured in this position by the point of a saber blade at his neck. Realizing that to offer any further resistance would not only be futile, but quite possibly fatal, he relaxed his tensed muscles and contented himself to remain in this horizontal position to await the outcome of events.

Dabblon had watched the scene with a measure of indifference, indicating that he anticipated an easy victory for his acolyte\*. The remainder of the mercenaries also retained a perfect view of the short combat through the open door, and their crestfallen faces revealed their dissatisfaction that the short exchange of blows had been so predictable. They had wished to see, as human nature so often does, the underdog able to hold his own for at least a small measure of time, but the occasion had not afforded them this pleasure. [\***acolyte**: a follower or assistant]

Now, two of them rushed in bearing rope. Dragging Armand over to a corner, they sat him up against the wall, secured his hands behind

his back and tied them tightly together. Doing likewise with his feet, they then retired from the room as abruptly as they came. Claude Montclair also retreated from the room, though not before removing the pistol that remained fixed in the belt of the prisoner, and placing it on the table before Dabblon.

When the door closed behind the departing figure, Dabblon retrieved from the floor the sword of Armand and placed it on the desk alongside the pistol, allowing a sigh of sardonic disappointment to escape his lips as he did so. Then, bringing with him a stool, he came and sat before the stunned Armand, who had, in one brief period of time, been transformed from fellow accomplice of the conspirators to their captive.

“I sincerely regret, Monsieur, that this unfortunate turn of events was forced upon us, but seeing as you wholeheartedly concurred that any hindrances to tonight’s victory must be removed, you will undoubtedly appreciate the necessity of your seizure.”

Armand remained silent, though his breathing was intense, and his heart pounded furiously within his chest.

“But I am not so cruel,” continued Dabblon in his mordant tone, “as to remove from you the triumph which you would undoubtedly feel at observing the downfall of the White Feather, against whom you’ve toiled so arduously.” And an ironic laugh proceeded from his lips. “So, as an exception to proper procedure, I shall delay your incarceration, and grant you the privilege of being present for tonight’s affair.”

Armand’s astonishment was such that he was prevented from responding.

“But before we depart,” questioned Dabblon, as if yielding to an afterthought, “and in exchange for this favor, may I pose to you two questions?”

Receiving no answer, he continued.

“The first is this. Why, in choosing to so candidly utter a falsehood concerning your absence from Paris by attributing it to a death of a relative, did you not reinforce the lie by at least wearing the colors of mourning? Why do you appear in the plumage of a bird who is courting a mate, and hope that I would believe your ludicrous tale?”

Armand gazed at his attire and saw that Dabblon was quite right. He had overlooked this detail which conflicted directly with his story. Not knowing how to respond, he remained silent.

“The second,” Dabblon continued, “—Is it possible that, in coming to learn of the peril threatening the White Feather, you truly believed that you could exceed the efforts of twenty-five men single-handedly and save him? Were you really so irrational as to believe that you could avert what God has predestined?”

To this Armand was compelled to respond.

“If God has predestined that wickedness should prevail, His will be done. However, if He wills that your carefully laid plans should emerge flouted, then it is you who oppose Him who would be considered irrational.”

These words fell on deaf ears, for the features of Dabblon remained quite impassive, unaffected by the retorts of his prisoner.

“Hold for a moment. Just days ago, as we sat together in your carriage, you seemed certain that God was on our side. But tonight, you are found abetting those who, when I was last in your presence, you so fervently opposed. Then you so candidly attach the Name of God to your newfound cause, as though He were a brooch that could be removed from one breast and placed upon another. Truly, Armand, I did not think it possible that a man could go mad in a few days’ time. I perceived you to be a conventional young man, ambitious and passionate, yet still somewhat reasonable.

“However, when I observed a baptism taking place, and in the water your form ... I was aghast! Not wishing to judge prematurely, I thought that perhaps this was some ruse of yours, employed to gain the confidence of the Huguenots, and determine who the leaders were, but when I saw you with my own eyes dancing violently on shore, flailing your arms about like a madman...”

“It was naught compared to the manner in which you will flail as you endure the flames of hell!” snapped Armand.

Dabblon ignored this remark. “As I was saying, it was then that I became aware that not only had you gone quite mad, but were in definite league with the Huguenots—the both being, after all, more or less the same.”

“How very perceptive you are, Monsieur!” Armand rejoined mockingly. “Tell me, was this a result of your philosophical tendencies? If so, your insight must be congratulated, for I know few men whose intellects would deduce that a man seen being baptized by Huguenots,

might, in fact, be a member of their faith. What incredible genius you possess!”

“Many thanks,” retorted Dabblon. “And may I remind you that it is this same genius that will tonight intern the White Feather.”

“Ma foi! Do not pretend to be anticipating the applause of success, Dabblon. You told me yourself that you cared not for such.”

“I did indeed! And just like a naïve little puppy, you believed me. How obtuse of you to assume that ambition, which is a stimulus that pervades all of mankind, should be so absent in me! You shall not assume such a sardonic tone then, for he laughs best who laughs last.”

## **Chapter 17: Sentiments Revealed**

Dabblon, however, being the type of individual who prided himself in his ability to perforate the emotions of his adversaries with a few glibly-chosen phrases, and noting that not one of his words produced upon his young captive the desired effect, was, by this time, livid.

“Dost know that I detested you long before I discovered your heresy. The task of capturing the White Feather should never have been given to an inexperienced madcap like yourself. The very day I arrived in Paris, and presented myself before M. Saint-Ghyslain, I learned from his lips that I was to be employed in a concerted strike on the identity of the man I despised more than anything or anyone in this world. Hearing this, my heart leapt with delight. Yet it plummeted back to earth like a gazelle that has been wounded by the hunter’s arrow, when I learned that I was to labor as an inferior accomplice to an upstart such as yourself! So colossal was my discontent, and so furious was I at being debased in this manner that I abhorred you nearly as much as I did the White Feather. Here was I, an agent with twenty years of experience, being forced to subordinate myself to a cocky young idiot!

“On that day, I swore a great and terrible oath to have your head, and I engaged the services of M. Montclair to act as your shadow. I

focused on two objectives. The first and foremost was to eliminate from the earth every trace of the White Feather and his band. The second, to ensure that no credit which might be bestowed upon me for this achievement should fall to you. Consequently, I determined to have you exterminated at the same moment that the White Feather should be apprehended, therefore allowing me to cast all the blame for your death on the White Feather, and attribute it to his fierce resistance upon capture.

“On the evening of the recent banquet when we were fortunate enough to obtain the letter that had been released from the pocket of Milord Donovan Hughes, I perceived that victory was well within my grasp and felt it necessary to once more modify my scheme. I therefore authorized Claude to do away with you at the next moment that he should be fortunate enough to find you alone. Yesterday morning, however, he came to me in a great state of perplexity and informed me that, in seeking your person, he had followed your servant to a location beyond the city, until he came to an inn known as the Fisherman’s Net, where you were a guest.

“Puzzled and mystified, I hastened to the place of which he spoke, and arrived in time to be an eyewitness of your heresy. I personally beheld substantial evidence, evidence that demanded a verdict!”

Here, the distraught Dabblon paused once more, and walking toward the window, gazed into the night sky. Armand beheld his breast heaving violently beneath his doublet, while his eyes fixed themselves far off in the distance, as far from the present as his mind was at that moment. He had been plagued by an obsession, possessed by a dream, and now, when that dream was on the verge of realization, he could not deal with the impression it created in his emotions. When he had calmed himself sufficiently as to speak, he turned once more to gaze on Armand.

“From thence I returned to Paris, and on the following morning, sought you at your residence, hoping that you had, by then, returned to your domicile. Upon finding it empty, save, of course, your servant, I deduced that you had remained with your fellow swine at the inn. Hence, I dictated a letter to the young Silvestre, and from that moment forth, you know what events occurred, resulting in your presence here as my hostage. I have thus been able to accomplish my second

objective, and am well nigh to adding the first to my roll of achievements.”

An odious thought seemed to have burst upon his tortured mind, for his eyes, now the size of musket balls, focused viciously upon Armand.

Then, he called once more for Montcleur, who entered promptly, though now disguised in the blue uniform of a Parisian guardsman.

“Monsieur, it appears that the time has come for our departure,” he said, not for a moment removing his pupils from the person of Armand. “Are the men prepared?”

“In every way, Monsieur.”

“Superb! Then it is now necessary to prepare this defector for his role as well. Will you do the honors?”

“Gladly, Monsieur.”

Having said thus, Montcleur retreated once more into the antechamber, and returned, bearing in his right hand a wooden cudgel. At this sight, a deathly pallor filled the face of Armand, as he attempted to swallow the lump that had formed in his throat, for he instinctively knew what was to follow.

With no great ceremony, Montcleur ambled over to where Armand sat restrained, and fingered the baton, allowing the tension to build in the nerves of the man who was to be the recipient of its use. Then with no warning, he elevated it and brought it down upon the skull of our hero. This action, which was executed so nonchalantly by Montcleur, must be described as a tap, rather than a blow—for not only would the latter be an exaggeration, but due to the size and strength of its administrator, such a blow might have done more damage to the cranium of Armand than was absolutely necessary for the villain’s purpose.

Montcleur called for the same two men who had previously bound the young prisoner to enter. They did so, and at the command of their superior, hoisted Armand onto their shoulders and bore him into the antechamber.

\* \* \*

The Paris of the day was not the city that now boasts such landmarks as the Eiffel tower and the Arc de Triomphe. During the period in which our story takes place, the city was divided in half, separated by the river that thrust through the heart of its center and



curved along the countryside, before emptying into the English Channel to the North. It served to keep on one side the Montmartre, Belleville, and Passy districts, which is to say, the side inhabited by the rich and upper class, and on its southern shores existed the districts of Montparnasse and Grenelle, where the hovels and homes of the destitute were present.

It was in the district of Montmartre that the Boulevard de la Chapelle extended from the Place de Clichy to the rue de Flandre. This boulevard, while being traversed regularly throughout the day by the coaches of the noblesse, was at night quite deserted. A few houses were sprinkled here and there along its span, but in reality, it was too near the Montmartre cemetery for any but those who had no other option for a place of residence.

It was upon these same cobblestones that an extraordinary sight was to be seen. A group of guardsmen, their customarily blue uniforms assuming a gray hue in the pale luminescence of the moon, were advancing toward the Boulevard de la Villette, the opposite end of which linked to the rue de Martel in the northeastern sector of the city. Their number was remarkable, for the guardsmen usually assumed patrol of the streets in pairs of two, or on occasion, groups of three or four. What is more, two of the guardsman drove a hearse, out of which hung two limp arms, giving the impression that a deceased individual was being transported to the cemetery.

Yet despite all appearances, the owner of this pair of arms was, to borrow the words of the blessed Savior, not dead—only sleeping. A scrutiny of this young man's features would reveal a pale face, narrow, determined eyes, a slightly protruding nose succeeded by two dogged lips, and a resolute chin. Our readers will have recognized Armand.

The jolting of the hearse's wheels on cobblestones had begun to revive him, and his eyes fluttered for a few moments, before reluctantly allowing themselves to be opened. Unfortunately for him, though his eyes had begun to function once more, his limbs did not enjoy that luxury, and it seemed to him that his body was being assailed by thousands of pins and needles, which lunged at his skin briefly before retracting their thrusts, and repeating the aggravating process again and again. After a few moments of mental confusion, the events of the past hour surged once more into the mind of Armand, and his lips would have uttered a groan, had they been capable of such, for he was

quite aware of the predicament he found himself in. He perceived that the hearse was bearing him toward that fateful address on rue de Martel, where the final offensive on the White Feather would take place.

He assumed, by the enormity of his size, that the driver of the hearse was M. Montcleur, while the figure that sat alongside him, dwarfed by his companion, seemed to be that of Dabblon.

He opted not to begin shifting about, for such motion might draw the attention of his escort, and stimulate the necessity that his hands be bound once more, to ensure that he remained in his present position. This precaution, however, did not prevent his brain from being quite active, as he began to contemplate the possibility of an escape. His hands were at liberty, and he observed that the mercenaries, masquerading as guardsmen, did not walk alongside the hearse; rather there were those up front, and those who took up the rear. Secondly, though his feet remained bound by ropes, these could easily be severed, for he retained possession of the dagger that he had hidden in his breast, and which the mercenaries, when relieving him of his weapons, had failed to discover.

Thus, he began to construct, event by event, his means of liberation. He would await an opportune moment, and seize his dagger. Then, with a speed made necessary by circumstances, he would cut the ropes that bound his feet, leap from the wagon, and dash down the road. All this would need to be executed with the utmost rapidity, for as he had witnessed previously in his short encounter with Montcleur, these mercenaries possessed sharp reflexes. There seemed a reasonable chance that his movement would be prohibited before he could even begin to run, yet the only other alternative seemed to be that he remain in the hearse, witness the downfall of the White Feather, and then go to his own death, an alternative he considered most disagreeable. How he would attempt to aid the White Feather he knew not, nor did he know in what direction he would proceed, once he had escaped. Yet a desperate man will attempt even the most foolhardy things in order to be free, and Armand had passed the point of desperation.

He slipped his hand stealthily and silently into his doublet, and grasped the handle of the dagger, prepared to unsheathe it when the first opportunity should present itself. This motion had gone

unobserved by those who ambled behind the wagon for two reasons. The first was that the night was a dark one, the moon and stars being eclipsed by clouds. The second was that one unconscious individual, whose feet are bound besides, does not excite the vigilance of twelve armed men. Their thoughts were otherwise focused, and as their duty did not extend to observing any change in the body positions of Armand, his movements went undetected.

He lay motionless, his eyes shifting from one position to another, while adrenaline raced through his body, preparing him for the moment when he would surprise the entire band with a sudden resurrection of his sleeping form. Patience was a virtue that had never been included in the collection of traits belonging to Armand, and with each passing moment he grew increasingly anxious to accomplish his intent. Any moment would suffice now, as the pins and needles had retreated, the blood flowed freely through his limbs, and even more freely through his head.

At length, it seemed the ideal moment had arrived. The Boulevard de la Villette intersection had been reached, and the hearse slackened its pace to make the turn. Suddenly, without warning, the torso of Armand sprung up, the moon gleaming off the blade of his dagger and accentuating its presence in the eyes of those around him. With one deft stroke, he cut the bonds that bound his ankles together, and exercising the agility of a cat, launched himself over the side of the cart.

For a fraction of a moment, the startled mercenaries remained firmly rooted to the ground, taken quite by surprise. They did not, however, remain in this position for very long, as the example of Montclair, who straightaway leapt off his perch and bounded after the running figure, rallied their own senses, and they too followed in hot pursuit.

The rapid strides of Armand gave him an early lead on his pursuers, and he held one profit over them, namely that his belt was not weighted by weaponry, and thus he ran more lightly. However, this disadvantage on the part of those who gave chase was cancelled by their agile bodies, far superior to that of Armand, who would struggle to recall the last occasion on which he was forced to dash about on foot. In fact, the distance between them neither increased nor decreased.

Dabblon, like his companions, had given chase, yet like Armand, he too was unaccustomed to the rigors of such exertion, and thus the expanse between his little army and himself gradually increased so as to force him to quit the pursuit. His lips quivered, not with fear, but with untold rage.

## **Chapter 18: True Abandonment**

Had this extraordinary spectacle occurred at midday, it would have doubtless lured a crowd of idlers, some of whom, always eager to participate in a commotion of any sort, would have joined sides with either party, while others might content themselves to merely observe the scene from a bystander's position and be amused.

At this late hour, however, the streets were utterly deserted. One might say that it was a play being performed in an empty theater, or more appropriately, a circus featuring in an empty pavilion.

Yet despite this condition, the circus animals' fervor was not dampened in the slightest, for their mania grew more potent with each passing moment, and had an observer been present, he or she would have construed that a climax to the scene was fast approaching.

In this presumption they would not have been incorrect, for the legs of Armand began to grow heavy, his breast began to heave violently and he recognized that he could not maintain his exertions much longer. The stamina of his pursuers far surpassed his own, and it would be only a matter of time before he would be overtaken and once more apprehended. This condition persuaded him to logically conclude that, rather than flee, he must attempt to conceal himself. But where could he seek a place of refuge? Perhaps if he could reach the crossroads that loomed ahead, he could dash into one of the nearby alleys and hope to become lost from the eyes of the mercenaries in its many twists and turns. This seemed to be his only option, and so, casting all remnants of his energy into his legs, he redoubled his pace and scurried into the center of the crossroads, setting his sights on the entrance of an alley just beyond its fork.

As this scene had been unfolding, however, a carriage belonging to some wealthy personage, and being drawn by four spirited horses,

was advancing toward the same intersection, coming from another direction. It arrived at the crossroads at the exact same moment as Armand, and had the reflexes of the driver not persuaded him to rein in the mounts at that precise instant, Armand would undoubtedly have passed on to his heavenly reward earlier than he would have anticipated.

With considerable dexterity, the footman drew the frightened animals backwards a couple of paces to reveal the prostrate form of Armand, who had also endeavored to halt suddenly, but in doing so, had been influenced by inertia, and fell violently to the cobblestones, his head separated from the hooves of the rearing animals by only inches.

He lay there for a few moments, stunned. So carelessly had he dashed into the crossroads, and so unexpectedly had this coach appeared, that he required a few moments to mentally review what had just occurred. After this was accomplished, he was reminded that, before this unfortunate incident, he had been fleeing pursuit, and that those who gave chase would be considerably nearer by now.

At once he leapt from his position, endeavoring to resume his flight, but he instantly collided directly with the massive form of Claude Montclair, who had by now overtaken him and was towering above, a triumphant grin extending across the expanse of his jaw. The force with which he had unintentionally hurtled his body into that of the giant might have sent a slighter man sprawling to the ground, but this was not the case with Montclair. Armand had ricocheted off of his frame like a rubber ball and fallen squarely into the arms of two mercenaries, who wasted no time in pinning him to the ground. Montclair gave the order for the men to withdraw, and himself seized Armand by the collar, drawing him up to stand on his own feet.

A voice came from the carriage. "What in the name of the holy Virgin is all this commotion about?"

Instantly Armand believed he recognized that voice, and he raised his head to look into the enchanting features of Clarice Saint-Ghyslain, who had emerged from the carriage and now stood before them, looking resplendent in the magnificent banquet dress that enveloped her figure, but which stood quite in contrast to the brow that was furrowed in agitation.

Montcleur, who as Dabblon stated earlier, was not easily unsettled by the presence of those members of the class of noblesse, cast Armand to the ground, and made a slight obeisance, assuming an almost condescending tone.

“I pray you, good lady. Do not be alarmed by the events that take place here, for you shall soon perceive that all has been done under the strict banner of necessity.”

“And who are you?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

“I am Claude Montcleur, associate of M. Dabblon. Do forgive this sudden impediment to your journey. We were merely giving chase to this Huguenot, and we shall have him bound and removed from the road, so as to allow you to continue on your way.”

It was evident that Mlle Saint-Ghyslain had not yet recognized Armand in the figure who was raised from the ground on one elbow, for his face was in the shadows. Only when she came a little closer did she distinguish his features, and seeing the blood streaming from his nose, let out a cry.

“Armand!”

She placed her hand upon his inflamed cheek, and the pain that throbbed through his nerves seemed to vanish. The warm touch of her fingers, gloved though they were, and the compassion that was evident on her face, now only inches from his own, stirred within him a sensation that eclipsed such comparatively trivial elements as physical pain. His labored breathing, which served as a testimony to his recent struggle, did not permit him to speak just yet, but with his eyes he expressed all the adoration that swelled within his heart at that moment, and for which he would have given anything to retain eternally.

As for Clarice, the sight of Armand being mistreated in such a manner evoked in her an indignation bordering on fury, and she turned haughtily to M. Montcleur.

“Sir, you are gravely mistaken. This man is a personal acquaintance of mine, and I shall be the first to vouch for his innocence. To even suspect that he is a member of the Huguenot faith is not only most absurd but also indicates a severe irrationality on your part. Quite to the contrary of such, he is an intimate of M. Saint-Ghyslain, my father, and when you accuse him of heresy, you stand on dangerous ground.”

At this Montcleur faltered, but he looked up and saw Dabblon himself approaching.

“Mlle Saint-Ghyslain,” the fellow began with some annoyance that this particular woman should appear right at that moment. “How fortunate we are to meet once again. I apologize if our presence has inconvenienced you in any way.” And he bent as though to kiss her hand, but before he could grasp it, she withdrew it coldly.

“Before you deign to place on my hand the kiss of a gentleman, pray answer, Monsieur, why M. Le T line, an immediate subordinate of my father’s, is being regarded as though he were a common criminal.”

“Alas, Mademoiselle,” replied Dabblon, emitting a heartrending sigh, “we were all misled by this man. I greatly admired him, your father trusted him, and you held him in your heart as a good friend and associate. And we all believed that our esteem, trust, and affection were reciprocated—yet how wrong we were! Just a few days ago, he was found to be in league with the Huguenots, having been baptized by them and accepted into their heretical fellowship. Ludicrous as it might sound, Mademoiselle, this state of affairs is as sure as”—he waved his hand, searching for an appropriate metaphor—“Mademoiselle’s beauty and intellect.”

Clarice’s brow wrinkled even further. “Your flattery does not compensate for your mendacity, Monsieur.”

“Does Mademoiselle call me a liar?” Dabblon asked, feeling pangs of anger.

“By no means, Monsieur. The title of dimwit suits your disposition far better!”

Dabblon grew quite enraged at this last remark, but seeing as he was in the presence of the daughter of the man whose power exceeded even that of the king, he harnessed his fury somewhat.

“If Mademoiselle will not then believe this dimwit, she will, perhaps, believe another whom I shall indicate presently.”

“I sincerely hope you do not refer to that rogue, Montcleur.”

“No, Mademoiselle, rather I refer you to M. Le T line himself. Question him as to the veracity of my words and see if all I have said is not true.”

“Very well,” she agreed. “Come then, Armand, denounce this absurdity before us all. Put forth one word that contradicts the accusations aimed at you, and I shall wholeheartedly endorse your

innocence. Moreover, I shall speak to my father of the treatment you have been subjected to, and insist that your accusers be punished.” And here she cast a spiteful glance at Dabblon.

But the only answer she received was silence, as Armand hung his head, not in shame, but rather in uncertainty as to how he should reply.

“Come now, Armand. Speak! Will you not vilify your accusers?”

But she was once again answered only by silence, a silence that seemed to support the validity of Dabblon’s allegations. Seeing this, her countenance distorted with disbelief, realizing that there might just be some truth to Dabblon’s words.

She paused for a moment, awaiting an answer, hoping against hope that Armand would speak up and acquit himself. But he did not. Seeing this, she burst out in an impassioned diatribe.

“Oh, tell me this is some cruel prank, some grave error—something to assure me that the man I had begun to love has not become a heretic. Tell me that every dream and ambition that I read in you has not given way to some ridiculous notion of heresy, implanted by the accursed Huguenots.”

Each of these words, pouring forth so persuasively off the tongue of Clarice, was as a sword being run through the heart of Armand. Ever since he had met Mlle Saint-Ghyslain, he had agonized over his affection for her. How many long nights he had spent recalling her lovely face, his ears resounding with her youthful laughter, while he recollected specifically each word her lips had uttered to him, trying to detect in them any indication or sign that his love was reciprocated! How oft he had longed for this moment, when he would no longer be in doubt as to her affection!

For a moment the pull of love tugged so strongly at his heart that he felt as though something within him would give in, that he would yield to the effects of its influence, and deny the existence of the past few days to Clarice, call Dabblon a liar, and be vindicated before all. Let him forget the White Feather, the Huguenots and once more return to the life he had known, bolstered by the love of his woman. Let him enjoy in bliss and wonder the love of Clarice and later reflect upon his actions.

But no, he must not allow himself to think thus. Had not M. Raffin warned him of the wiles of Satan? Would he yield to the influence of



human frailties and turn his back on his Savior? In the past few days he had rediscovered the meaning of life itself, and been renewed by the blood of Christ Jesus. Would he scorn the abundant, everlasting love of his Savior in exchange for a human love that was frail and uncertain by comparison? In his mind's eye he could see M. Raffin's tearstained and disappointed face upon learning that Armand's conversion had indeed been nothing but a momentary surge of religious piety, rather than a lasting commitment to the faith. He could imagine the shock on the face of Nicole, as she lamented his return to his waywardness.

Could he stand before Christ at the end of his life and confess that he had been presented with the gifts of mercy and pardon, yet after receiving them, had sneered at their value and returned to vice and profligacy, and all the more accountable for his knowledge of the truth? No! A thousand times, no! No. No, he could not go back on his word of honor to his Lord, nor did he wish to.

"Clarice," he said, his voice choked by emotion. "I understand that you will not comprehend what I am about to say, yet allow me to declare that all my life I lived in blind devotion, not to the Church, nor to M. Saint-Ghyslain, but to myself, my ambitions, and my lusts. I became a slave to my aspirations, serving willingly, obeying every command that they dictated to me, so much so that I became a monster, hard and calloused to human suffering, considering the life of the Huguenots as fodder for my ignoble ambitions.

"Yet in the past few days my eyes have beheld the light of truth, and unworthy as I am, I have received the forgiveness of Jesus. How could I ever betray such an unearthly love? Know that though my love toward you is beyond description, I cannot turn my back on Him Who first loved me, Who shed His blood for my redemption, and in Whose name I now live."

While he spoke thus, the countenance of Clarice displayed utter disbelief mingled with a measure of resentment. Her eyes no longer bore pity, but a disappointed sorrow, and she rose before him and spoke, each word accompanied by an infinite despair.

"Then let it be so. I vainly presumed that you and I were predestined to sojourn along life's road together. How wrong I was! You have chosen for yourself a path that I cannot travel, and so I take my leave of you now, though my heart breaks."

Then, without another word, she turned her back on him and reentered her carriage, giving instructions to the driver to proceed immediately.

When she had gone, Armand released the dam that had thus far restrained his tears and allowed them to flow. He did not feel the rough hands that once more bound his limbs, nor did he hear the insults that were hurled at him by Dabblon, for he was in a daze, unconscious of reality. His heart was torn between the retreating figure of his beloved, and the allegiance he owed to the Supreme Being of the universe.

When he had first been baptized, it had not occurred to him what a being a follower of Christ truly meant, but now as it was transformed into reality before his eyes. He began to understand what was truly meant when Christ commanded His disciples to forsake all and follow Him.

## **Chapter 19: Despair**

The city's bell pealed through the sleeping city, shattering the serenity that seemed to pervade over it like a blanket of silence. Each of its ten gongs resounded monotonously throughout the homes of its slumbering inhabitants, causing the flames of any candles that were left alight to tremble and quiver in accordance with each strike of the bell.

But for Armand it was a foreboding message, heralding the eerie nearness of the midnight hour, the hour when he would ascertain the identity of the man who, though having never been known to him personally, might be called a brother in Christ, a brother whom he had betrayed.

Finding himself once more a component of the hearse-wagon's cargo, though this time fully conscious and perfectly aware of his surroundings, the thus far courageous cavalier, whose resolve and determination had remained firm and unwavering throughout the traumatic events of the last several hours, at long last surrendered all remnants of the hope that had spurred him on thus far.

His attempted flight had been a precarious venture, born of desperation, and had never been likely to succeed, yet he could not help but speculate on what would have happened had the carriage of Clarice Saint-Ghyslain not appeared when it had. Its unexpected arrival seemed to have been a strike against him by the hand of Providence, timed so perfectly as to cross paths with him as he ran. Had he been able to enter the alley, he might have fled from his pursuers, but no, it was predestined that his flight should be thus cruelly terminated.

Twice now he had ventured to escape. Vainly he had endeavored to defend himself from the fierce blows of M. Montcleur, vainly had he sought to flee on foot from the mercenaries that pursued him. Yet on both occasions he had been trounced, ruthlessly crushed, once by the mortal superiority of Montcleur's brawn, and another by celestial interference, conveyed to him by the presence of Mlle Saint-Ghyslain, who though at first defended him, cruelly turned her back upon him when she heard from his own lips a profession of his newfound faith.

"Oh, almighty God, where are You now?" he screamed to the night sky, in a voice that originated in the depths of his soul. "Why do You not come to my aid, as M. Raffin said You surely would? Where is Your hand of vengeance now?"

"Silence!" shouted Dabblon, as he leaned backwards and swiped the tear-stained face of Armand with the back of his hand.

"You think God has forsaken you? Do you only realize that now? Has He ever abetted the cause of heresy? Has He ever seen fit to lend the power of His hand to those who disregard the voice of His Church?"

Then staring hard at the young man, he spoke to Montcleur. "Monsieur, I believe it is necessary for Armand to join us here."

The thug hauled up Armand, bound as he was and sat him on the bench of the hearse, between himself and Dabblon.

"Now, Monsieur," said Dabblon, once more his calm self, "prepare yourself for a fresh bit of news that shall render you quite senseless."

Armand, detecting the satisfied gloating tone of Dabblon, turned quite pale, fearing that what he was about to utter would be most terrible.

"As I have already informed you," began Dabblon, discharging that tone which indicates one's presence at a social gathering, rather than a conversation with one's mortal enemy, "I always resented the

role you played in the unmasking of the White Feather, perceiving your involvement to be not merely unnecessary, but also undesirable. I proved to be right on both accounts.”

“How so?” asked Armand, his lips quivering with uncertainty.

“Your presence was undesirable, because you later turned traitor to the cause, and it was unnecessary because your labors were not required to bring us to the point that we are presently at.”

“Quite to the contrary!” said Armand in a lamenting tone. “Was it not my servant who received the compromising letter whilst he stood next to the carriage of Sir Donovan Hughes? And was it not I who pieced together the resulting misunderstanding, and who comprehended the events which led up to that letter falling into our hands?”

“Oh, do not castigate yourself, my son,” said Dabblon, sardonically attempting to imitate a priest hearing a confession. “You ride in this wagon, being driven to the rue de Martel, whence you shall discover the identity of the White Feather. In short, it is not yet known to *you*. I go there expecting not ‘the White Feather,’ but a specific person.”

Armand shrank back in horror. “You then know the identity of the man who will be apprehended this night.”

“No,” came the casual reply.

“But...”

“But I am privy to the identity of the *woman* who will drive the wagon and transfer the care of the prisoners to the good Milord Donovan Hughes.”

“A woman?” muttered Armand. “And her name?”

Here Dabblon turned his face, which thus far had been focused on the road ahead, upon Armand, his eyes gleaming with delight. “Ah, the name ... You seek to know her name, you say, yet it is already known to you. She is more a girl than a woman, really. A member of the noblesse, renowned for her wit, humor, and intellect. I’m told she has recently captured the heart of a young cavalier.” And here he paused to revel in the almost inhumanly pale face of Armand, and the incontrollable quivering of his lips. “Need I say the words, Armand? Need I utter the name which until only a few moments ago would have set bells of delight ringing in your soul? Need I call to your mind the name of Clarice Saint-Ghyslain?”

Armand finally found his voice and mumbled, “I do not believe you.”

At this a roar of laughter exuded from the throat of Dabblon, and his head was cast backwards. It seemed that now that his ambitions were about to become reality, he abandoned any oath of solemnity that he had previously taken.

“Come now, Armand. Upon hearing that your beloved is guilty of heresy, you recoil in horror, and then you turn to me so candidly and say, ‘I do not believe you’? Your self-contradiction makes for a truly admirable spectacle.”

“Nay, Dabblon. *Your* self-contradiction makes for a greater spectacle. Just moments ago, you were in her presence. She mocked you in a most spiteful manner. If she was truly the devious, cunning White Feather, than you would have arrested her on the spot to ensure that she does not, through other means, outwit you. If she was truly guilty of this crime you charge her with, why does she not now accompany me in the throes of capture, bound hand and foot, and closely guarded?”

“Armand, again I must reproach your dimwitted reasoning. Imagine for a moment that you are M. Saint-Ghyslain. You have occupied yourself for a series of weeks in the pursuit of peace. You have met with numerous Spanish noblemen and diplomats, and even the king himself, all in an attempt to keep the nation out of war. You have made promises, given speeches, written letters, resolved differences, and compromised numerous stances all in this objective. In short you are exhausted. You are returning to Paris, doubtless to be encumbered by numerous other problems and difficulties which have collected in your absence. Yet before you must attend to these, you are desirous to speak with your daughter, to inquire as to her health, wellbeing, and safety.

“However, upon reaching the capital, you are informed that she is being detained and is accused of being a Huguenot—still worse, charged with the identity of the most feared conspirator in the nation. She has been incarcerated by the junior partner of a duo whom you commissioned prior to your departure to seek out the identity of the White Feather. The senior member of this pair has also turned traitor and is also incarcerated. When you seek evidence, proofs of their guilt, you are met with the vague convictions of a man who for some time has

been absent from Paris, and who might easily be suspected of conspiracy. Nay, Armand. A coherent intrigue must be presented to him as explanation. He will require proof, evidence, verification of her guilt..”

“Precisely so!” interrupted Armand. “If you cannot at this moment convince another that she is the White Feather, if you have no proof to this end, then how can you yourself be convinced?”

“As I was saying before you interrupted me, how better to furnish M. Saint-Ghyslain with all the proof he needs than to seize her while she is in the very act of treachery? As to your question, rest quite assured on the account of my convictions, for my eyes have convinced me of her guilt, and when my eyes work in conjunction with my head, the two make for an invincible pair.”

For a few moments, there was silence between them. Armand contemplated the veracity of Dabblon’s confident assertion, while the latter pondered whether or not he should reveal all he knew to Armand. Finally, he spoke.

“Armand, for twenty years I have been employed abroad as a spy for the nation. I have involved myself in court intrigues throughout Europe. England, Portugal, Spain, the Spanish Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy. I have infiltrated the governments of these many different nations, and pushed the interests of the French nation. Having been a member of this elite, dost think that the task of capturing the nation’s most dangerous enemy would have been too complex a matter for me? How I discovered that Mlle Saint-Ghyslain was in reality the White Feather was a simple matter. I observed what you only saw.”

“Of what do you speak?” asked Armand.

“On the night that I was assigned to watch Milord Donovan Hughes, he did in reality receive a letter from her hand.”

“And you saw this?”

“You too saw it, only, as I have already stated, you did not observe it.”

“How so?”

“Recall to your mind that same night, and see if you do not picture Milord Donovan Hughes, yourself, and I engaged in discourse on the entrance steps, before the entrée of the banquet.”

“I remember it.”

“Than you will also remember that Mlle Saint-Ghyslain entreated us to enter. You, being the most enthused at the sight of her, ran quickly to where she stood and placed a kiss upon her hand. I followed suit, and in turn was imitated by Milord Donovan Hughes. However, what you failed to notice is that, rather than kiss her right hand, as is customary, and as you and I did, he seized her left, and ever so leisurely placed a kiss upon her fingers. Now tell me, would it not be easy to conceal in your hand a small piece of paper and transfer it to the hand of the other while in the process of receiving his kiss?”

“And you perceived this?” questioned Armand, beginning to tremble once more.

“I did not see the paper being transferred, yet as I watched him that evening, he received nothing from the hands of any other. Nevertheless, as you also know, when the evening drew to a close, he was in possession of the letter and so it was that logic forced me to conclude that Mlle Saint-Ghyslain had given him the note, though of course I did not inform you of this.

“After reading the note, I engaged M. Montcleur to do away with you. From that point onwards, you know what events took place, and now, here we sit, not an hour from having the White Feather in chains, all thanks to my brilliance and genius.” And here an evil laugh escaped his lips. “But have no fear, for I shall be sure to inform her that you played a vital role in her downfall.”

At this last remark, Armand uttered a groan of despair. His mind still reeled from this fresh discovery, which he was now quite convinced of himself. This blow was almost too much for him to bear.

Oh, the guilt that had plagued him just that morning when it dawned upon him that he would be to blame for the detention of the White Feather was nothing compared to the agony of heart which he experienced at this moment! Had he unwittingly betrayed his beloved? Would he truly be the cause of her downfall?

Dabblon, seeing his misery, and wishing to compound it, said, “And so this is how the events shall play out. In a few moments, all will be accomplished, and in one deft stroke, I shall have taken the White Feather, Milord Donovan Hughes, the d’Arnae family, and you. Quite a catch, if I might say so myself.”

In Armand’s mind, he alone was responsible for the capture and subsequent execution of his beloved Clarice. The woman who first

captured his heart with her charm and her beauty, would in return be met with cruel savagery, the hand of which had been guided to her identity by Armand, the man she had condescended to love, but from whom in return she had received only treachery.

At a nod from Dabblon, the fist of Montcleur, with which Armand had become so well acquainted in the past hours, was once more rammed into his head, indicating that the tête-à-tête was over, and sending him flying backwards into the hearse. Though the blow was a hard one, he did not feel it. Though he struck the bottom of the wagon with a loud thud, not a cry escaped his lips, for any mortal pain he might have felt was completely eclipsed by the torture of mind and heart that coursed through his beleaguered frame.



## Chapter 20: The Net Closes

The glow of the full moon cast a pale wave of light over the streets of Paris, barely illuminating a party of men who were gathered at the entrance of a small alley on the rue de Martel. The apparent leader of this party stood in conversation with another man, dressed in the black garb of a magistrate, at the opening of the alley, their voices hushed to whispers, so as to ensure that the remainder of the men were not privy to the details of their conversation.

“Here we stand, M. Renoir,” the guardsman was saying, “awaiting the appearance of our comrades. They promised to be here just after the bell struck ten, and yet I heard it do so a while ago. What can be keeping them?”

“Why do you put forth that question to me, d’Elanoir, when you and I have stood here for the past hour and in that time you have not once paused in your words of praise concerning the exactitude of your superior?”

“Ah, Monsieur, it is not his exactitude which I doubt, but rather that some unforeseen circumstance has hindered them. Suppose they were unable to lay hands on the traitor. Suppose that the White Feather has been forewarned and a sudden change of plans was required.”

At this the man who was called M. Renoir shrugged his shoulders as if to indicate that he did not care.

“I know nothing of these things. For ten years I have been an assistant to M. d’Habinge, the magistrate accountable for the Montmartre district, and this morning I received a letter from an old acquaintance, Dabblon by name, entreating me to be present at an affair that might require a witness of the law. He did not furnish me with further information, but asked only that I remain here with you, and await his presence. If midnight comes, and he is still not here, I shall return to my abode, and be content to dismiss the incident from my thoughts.” And here he leaned squarely upon the wall and shrugged once more, indicating that he wished to say or hear no more on the matter.

The fellow whom he referred to as d’Elanoir watched him curiously for a few moments, and then, motivated by the example he saw, also leaned against the wall, attempting to appear as resigned as

his companion. A measure of time passed in this lack of activity, which the magistrate's assistant bore with unperturbed coolness, but which was reviled by the disguised mercenary, who soon tired of receiving support of the wall, and began to pace back and forth in the alley, muttering to himself impatiently.

“Oh, I am sure of it! They have been delayed, or worse yet, stopped. Montcleur shall not be in an agreeable mood if this falls through, for with it would fall our 200 crowns. How typical! Just when we are on the verge of our best pay, things go awry. When have we had difficulty performing that which we have been commanded? Never! Only when we are promised 200 crowns in exchange for success does happenstance intervene and mess up the affair. Curses!”

The fellow's diatribe was cut short by the distant sound of a wagon's wheels rolling on the cobblestones, accompanied by the dull tread of marching feet.

“Ah, they have arrived at last! What in infinity could have taken them so long?”

At this statement, the magistrate's assistant chuckled, and then threw a glance at him which seemed to say, “Poor impatient soul!”

Gradually the sound grew closer and the troop of guards, whose forms had been cast here and there, all stood and straightened their attire.

M. Renoir seemed poised to walk out onto the main road, but was prevented by the hand of d'Elanoir which seized him by the shoulder.

“Not yet, Monsieur. We must await the signal.”

A few moments passed before a fresh cough was heard, immediately after which all those in the alley emerged and joined their comrades behind the wagon, though the latter continued on as though its drivers were unaware of the presence of this new regiment.

The convoy continued along in this manner, the hearse coming first like in a funeral procession. As they drew nearer to the appointed destination, Dabblon counted the numbers, 9 ... 10 ... 11 ... 12 ... at this number he laid his hand upon the shoulder of Montcleur, indicating that he should halt the wagon, for under the signpost for No. 12, a figure sat slouched, also attired in the garb of a guardsman.

“You there!” he called out to the figure.

In response, the guardsman lazily lifted his head.

“You are a guardsman, are you not?”

The figure nodded his head suspiciously.

“Then join the line. We are on a mission and shall require all the assistance that can be obtained.”

“I am under strict orders to remain here,” called out the guardsman in response. “This is my post, and I am not permitted to leave it.”

“What is your name?”

“I am called Jean Latouf.”

“Well, then, Jean Latouf, I shall be forced to relay a message to M. la Nousche,” who was the commander-in-chief of the regiment of Parisian guardsmen, and by all accounts, a most severe one at that.

“And what message will that be?”

“That though all guardsmen who were called followed willingly, a certain Jean Latouf refused.”

“Then this order proceeds from the commander?”

“That I leave for you to decide for yourself, but do you not see the group that is gathered here?”

The unwilling guardsman nodded.

“Would they follow so willingly if they were not guided by superior command?”

At the seeming logic in this argument, Jean Latouf appeared convinced, and reluctantly shuffled into the line with his comrades.

“Monsieur,” whispered Montcleur, “why do you seek to add to our number of men? Are not the two dozen we have sufficient? In truth, I would rather be surrounded by fewer men, whose loyalty could be ascertained, than to have a host of men whose loyalty is in doubt.”

“It is not that I wish to increase our number, rather it is a matter of precaution. The White Feather will travel this same road in but an hour, and I wish for it to be quite deserted. If some overly zealous guardsman questions her or prevents her progress, then our plan is in danger of failing.”

Montcleur nodded in assent, and the file continued along the road, until they came to number 15. Here they stopped.

“Now, M. Montcleur,” said Dabblon, “select one of your men and give him instructions to make for number 20 and ascertain whether there be a carriage in the vicinity. Then have him return to us with the news.”

Montcleur nodded his head and soon chose out the smallest fellow of his number whose tread seemed completely devoid of any sound. Upon receiving his orders, the diminutive mercenary scurried off down the road with all the noiselessness of a cat.

He soon returned with the tidings that just outside the old villa was parked a large carriage, harnessed and ready to go, though its lead horse was tied to a nearby post.

When they questioned him as to any other indications of Sir Donovan Hughes' presence, he reported that had it not been for the carriage, there would be no other reason to suppose that an individual waited inside, for not even the light of a candle emanated from the windows of the structure.

"Very well, then," said Dabblon, turning to address all the men. "The Englishman waits in the dark, and so it shall be easier for him to perceive our presence from where he sits, for the light of the moon shines on the outside, while the inside is bathed in utter darkness.

"This circumstance forces us to make our way to our positions with the utmost caution and quietness. The slightest noise may draw his attention, and while this would not greatly hinder our objective, it is better to leave him unaware of our presence. We shall leave the wagon here. Armand will walk alongside us, and I daresay there shall not be another attempt to escape, for this would not be altogether conducive to his continued existence." He toyed with the handle of his rapier, while casting a threatening look upon the young cavalier.

"Monsieur," said Montcleur, "allow me to gag the prisoner, for we know not at what moment he might bellow loudly and warn Milord Donovan Hughes of our presence."

Dabblon nodded. "Very well, and remove the binds from his feet, for he shall be required to walk. They can be replaced by fetters, and join the fetters with a short chain, so that he is unable to run."

Montcleur proceeded to carry out this bidding, to which Armand made no resistance. His resolve had been broken, and he made no attempt to prevent the presence of the large stone that was placed in his mouth and the cloth which was wrapped around his head, covering his lips. The ropes around his ankles were removed, and replaced by iron fetters. Then Montcleur hoisted him up as one does with a child, and placed him upon his feet. He fell into a line behind Dabblon who stood in conversation with Renoir, the magistrate's assistant.

Had one gazed into the face of Armand at that moment, he might be reminded of a horse which had just been broken-in. His shattered will carried no resolve, his broken heart carried no fancy, and his dejected mind carried no objective. He had yielded to his role as a spectator of the events which were soon to take place, and though deep down in his heart, there lay a faction that might stir him to interfere were he able to, his tortured being subordinated itself to the cruel hand of fate.

He pictured in his mind what Clarice was engaged in at that moment. She had just discovered that the man she loved was a Huguenot. What thoughts of fondness might occupy her mind as she prepared her disguise for the soon-coming venture? What plans was she making at that moment to liberate him?

But for her there would be no morrow, nor the day after, for when tonight's events had been accomplished, she too would be in chains, privy to the knowledge that Armand had been a factor in her defeat. Oh, how she would detest him then! She might forgive him as a brother in Christ, yet there would be no sympathy or love in her heart for the man who had shattered her dreams and ended her life.

He followed behind, walking morosely, with the appearance of being drunk, for he paid no heed to small stones that were in his way, and he carelessly stumbled over them upon various occasions, forcing himself back up far too leisurely for Dabblon's taste.

Gradually they came upon an open expanse, littered by trees, old buildings, and which gave all appearances of being an abandoned section of the city, uninhabited by life of any sort. At the center of this desolation stood the old villa, in front of which was parked the carriage of Sir Donovan Hughes, harnessed to four horses who stood there quietly, heads bent low, as if they understood the danger that their master was in, and were feeling remorseful at being unable to speak to him of it. He was hustled along behind Dabblon, until they came to a hedge, where he was promptly tied to a tree by Dabblon himself.

After doing so, the latter knelt before him and said to him these words:

“Now we wait, Armand. The moment of truth is almost upon us. You shall see for yourself that I am the conqueror.”

Then he rose and bid those who were with him, namely M. Renoir, the disguised guardsmen, and the reluctant Jean Latouf, to take up

positions behind the hedge, and there to remain until he should give the signal.

The hedge was by no means amply supplied with foliage; in fact it was rather forlorn-looking, and from his position Armand could clearly see through its leaves, and could gaze directly at the old villa, the carriage, and the mouth of the alley from which the wagon, driven by Mlle Saint-Ghyslain in disguise, would emerge.

His reverie was interrupted by the voice of the young Latouf, who put forth a question to Dabblon.

“Monsieur, whom are we waiting for?”

“A very dangerous enemy, the enemy of all the good people of France.”

“And who might that be?”

“Have you not heard of the White Feather?”

“The White Feather?” he asked with horror.

“The same.”

“I-I am not going near him!”

“Coward! Why not?”

“They say that he is a sorcerer, that he possesses magical powers, and that he casts a spell upon all who come near him.”

“Aha! It becomes apparent that you spend more time listening to the old women gossip than you spend on patrol, young man, for such stories circulate only among the local rabble who do not engage in honest work.”

“But I tell you, Monsieur, it is true. They say that the man...”

At this a condescending chuckle issued from the lips of Dabblon.

“In the first place, the White Feather is not a man but a woman...”

“A woman?!”

“In the second place, I am a personal acquaintance of hers, and I assure you, she possesses no such powers.”

“But Monsieur...”

“At any rate it doesn’t matter. You will be needed to guard the prisoner while we make the arrest. Now return to your position and do not stir until I give the command to do so.”

At the mention of Armand, the young guardsman cast a fearful glance in his direction and then returned to his position behind the hedge, muttering to himself, apparently only half-satisfied with not

being forced to come close to the White Feather, but still afraid that he would be in the same vicinity of the man whose sorcery he so greatly feared.

Meanwhile, the events of the immediate future had begun to play out in Armand's mind. He would soon see the cart making its way down the road, the back stacked with hay, and driven by some "plebian farmer." This farmer would reach the door of the villa, and knock upon it. Sir Donovan Hughes would open and bid him enter. It would be at that very moment that Dabblon would give that fatal signal, the cue to enter and seize them all, and from three sides would come pouring the guardsman, swords and pistols drawn. The twosome would be immediately seized and the hay would be delved into, revealing Mme. d'Arnae, Fabrice, and the rest of the children.

Dabblon would be triumphant. He could see him pacing back and forth before Clarice, much as he'd done with Armand, gloating over his triumph, thrilled at the completion of his success. He imagined the look on her face when Dabblon told her that Armand, whom she loved, was involved in her incarceration. It would be a look wholly indescribable, utterly astonished, and creased by pain and disbelief.

So this was truly the end. There he sat, gagged, bound to a tree, completely helpless, forlorn, a picture of misery. His only hope now lay in being able to die triumphantly, as a martyr for the truth, and if he had the privilege to die alongside Clarice, than he would beg her forgiveness. With his last breath he would plead with her to forgive him his past wrongs, to consider him at least as a brother in Christ, who, though his life was spent in vile wickedness, had seen his error and repented of it. He would pour forth his heart before her, and hope that she would grant him the forgiveness he sought. If she did, then could he die peacefully, knowing that his struggles had not all been in vain, and that though he had not earned her freedom, at least he had earned her forgiveness.

## Chapter 21: The White Feather

The hour crept along slowly. Every slight noise caused by the wind, every distant neigh of a horse thrust into Armand's mind the fear that the time had come, that the dreaded hour was upon him, the hour in which he would witness the downfall of the most courageous woman whose acquaintance he had ever made.

Finally, the bell tolled. Armand counted each strike of its gong which vibrated throughout his body, causing his bones to quiver and rattle within him. 1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 4 ... 5 ... 6 ... 7 ... 8 ... 9 ... 10 ... 11 ... 12. Midnight had arrived, and the moment of revelation was at hand. He scrutinized the forms of his captors, all of whom were crouched low, concealed behind the shrubbery of the hedge.

All, that is, except for Dabblon. He stood in his position, his left fist resting proudly upon his hip, his right grasping the hilt of his sword, his head tilted slightly backwards, allowing his chin to point out, assuming an air of proud defiance.

He unsheathed his rapier fully and placed a kiss upon the cross that was formed by the handle and the blade. There was now complete silence. The moon's face was hidden behind the clouds, as though it cowered in revulsion at the vile deed that was to take place.

The minutes continued to go by. Perspiration poured from the brow of Armand, born of fear and dread. He began to wish that the moment of terror would come quickly, so that it could end quickly, and thus terminate his uncertainty. All of a sudden the admonition of M. Raffin returned to his mind, and he closed his eyes and beamed a short prayer toward the heavenlies.

Just as the last of these words was uttered in his mind, the rumble of a wagon's wheels began to be heard, ever so faintly, ever so distantly. But gradually, slowly, they drew nearer, they became louder, and soon, the shadow preceding the wagon could be seen at the mouth of the alley, and the distant form of the White Feather soon came into view, driving a wagon loaded to overflowing with straw.

Dabblon grasped his sword still tighter, clenching it fiercely with both hands, his eyes like those of a hawk, fixed on the wagon which had now completely emerged from the alley and was making its way toward the villa.



Finally it reached its destination in the center, and its driver, who from the vantage point Armand possessed, seemed to be an elderly man, brought the mules to a halt. Then he clambered from his seat and walked toward the door. After a moment's pause, he knocked thrice upon its surface. The door opened, he entered, and it was closed behind him.

Armand glanced toward Dabblon, for he knew that any time now the signal would issue from his lips. Just as he expected, Dabblon raised his sword in the air and shouted in a loud voice, "Forward!"

At this command all those who were with him, save Jean Latouf, followed him in his confident swagger toward the villa, whence the White Feather had just entered.

Once all had departed, Armand was left alone with the guardsman, who seemed to be eyeing him cautiously, probably uncertain of what sort of character he was given charge of. Then, with no warning he drew from his belt a poniard and brought it to Armand's neck.

Had the presence of his gag not hindered him, he would have questioned the guardsman vehemently as to his apparent evil intentions. He cast upon the dagger-wielding man a look so pleading which seemed to say, "What do you want with me?"

With a swift movement of his hand, his apparent assailant moved the knife upwards, slicing the cloth that bound his mouth. When this was removed, Armand, now shrouded in utter bewilderment, opened his mouth and allowed the distasteful stone, which had been the companion of his tongue for the past few hours, to fall to the ground.

The guardsman then proceeded to cut the ropes that bound his wrists, and with a key that he drew from his pocket, unlocked the fetters that joined his ankles. Armand only stood there like a statue of marble, immovable, wholly stunned.

"Come," the guardsman said. "The White Feather has commanded me to set you at liberty. Let us go."

"Then ... you are in league with the White Feather?"

"I am."

"And she commanded you to set me free even while she herself is suffering the anguish of capture?"

He nodded solemnly.

“Never!” cried Armand suddenly, bursting forth with a mixture of passion and rage. Seizing the sword of his liberator from its sheath, he prepared to dash toward the villa, but was halted by the hand of the guardsman which had seized him by the collar.

“What in the name of God Almighty are you doing?”

“I must save her. I cannot allow myself to escape, having not even tried to prevent her arrest.”

And he turned again to dash toward the villa, but was checked once more by the hand of Jean Latouf, which this time clutched his cape.

“Armand, use the head that God has given you!” he remonstrated sternly. “There are two dozen of them and you are alone. What could you possibly hope to accomplish by rushing madly in there like a wild bull?”

“I know not what I may accomplish. I know only that I must endeavor to aid the quest of her liberation.”

And for a third time he turned toward the old villa. Again he was seized by the hand of the guardsman.

“O, blind and impassioned man! Turn once more and fix your eyes upon my countenance!”

At the sound of the voice that had uttered this last phrase, the frame of Armand was enveloped in stupefaction, for that voice did not belong to Jean Latouf. It carried not the deep vibrato of the guardsman with whom he had just spoken. Rather it was the soft, feminine voice, choked by emotion, of the woman for whom he had just proclaimed his deepest affection.

He turned to behold the vision he expected. The wide-brimmed cavalier’s hat had been removed, a pin had been detached, and the soft, dark hair of Clairice Saint-Ghyslain cascaded down her shoulders and back.

She remained stunningly radiant, even in the sparing glow of the moon. A spark was still present in those two black rubies which were her eyes, and which held Armand as captivated now as they had done so effectively in the past. In all, she portrayed a picture of magnificent beauty, and Armand sank onto one knee, overcome with an indescribable delight, a joy unfathomable. Then, he seized her hand, and placed upon it the most tender kiss that his lips had ever bestowed upon the fingers of a woman.

Rising from the ground, he said, "But what of...?"

She cut him short. "I shall explain all to you later. Our only concern at the moment is our escape. Come." She turned as though she wished to depart, but she quickly reversed that motion, giving all evidence that she had forgotten something. She drew from her jerkin a large white feather and placed it upon the pile of chains and ropes that had been used to attach the person of Armand to the tree. Then she led him by the hand back toward the alley. He, yielding to that power which a woman subconsciously exercises over the man who loves her, followed obediently.

They scurried noiselessly through the alley, coming through to the other end, where a horse stood waiting. At the sight of this animal, Armand took charge, as he swung his body into the saddle and then gently hoisted Clarice up, and sat her before him. He curled his arms around her body, grasped the reins, and gave the horse a sturdy kick in the side. With a neigh, it reared up and took off.

\* \* \*

We now take the reader backwards in time to witness the events that had taken place at the villa only a few moments earlier.

When Dabblon and his retinue had so confidently strode toward the house with the purpose of arresting its occupants, his example had been followed by Montcleur and d'Habinge, that is to say, the commanders of the other two regiments. They had all gone charging madly toward the villa, but not all were to enter. When they reached its threshold, Dabblon called out.

"The regiment of Montcleur follows me. D'Habinge, surround the house and keep guard."

And so it was that Dabblon and his sixteen men entered the house, all thoroughly anticipating the climax of the evening, expecting to find Sir Donovan Hughes in deep conversation with Mlle Saint-Ghyslain. It happened, however, that when they entered, they found only two elderly gentlemen sitting at an old table, sharing a bottle of wine. Upon witnessing the unexpected display of military force that entered the room, they both assumed an expression of infinite stupefaction.

Dabblon immediately commanded them to be seized, whilst others were given orders to search the house. His brow was slightly wrinkled in puzzlement, but he had seen the figure clamber from the

wagon and enter the dwelling, and to even consider the possibility that that figure was not the personage of the White Feather was a disagreeable notion to him, one which was not to be entertained prematurely.

His stance was quite rapidly altered, however, when Montcleur returned to the antechamber and reported that though the house had been searched, its only occupants were the two gentlemen who sat at the table.

Had one thoroughly scrutinized the countenance of Dabblon in that moment, they would have read a mixture of rage and utter bewilderment, as he held menacingly his sword, his face quite purple, and his lips pressed together with untold fury. All present stood silently, awaiting his verdict.

Finally he lowered his sword and brought it to the neck of one of the men, whose arms were twisted behind his back by the guards which held them.

“Explain yourself. Who are you? Why are you here, and what do you know of the White Feather? Speak, or I shall slit your throat as you stand.”

The recipient of this barrage of questions seemed thoroughly calm and aloof to the present events, and he replied coolly.

“A little patience, I entreat you, worthy Monsieur, and I shall reveal all I know.”

“Speak!” thundered Dabblon once more.

“Gladly, Monsieur,” he replied. “My name is Pierre Gidilon, and this is my brother, Sylvain. We are bakers by trade.”

“And why are you here, in this desolate quarter, at this ungodly hour, driving a wagon loaded with hay? By God, the wagon! Montcleur, search the wagon immediately!”

Montcleur immediately departed from the room, and the sounds of several men grunting angrily as they stabbed through the bales of hay could be heard.

Presently Montcleur returned.

“Well?”

“Empty, save the straw.”

“What is the meaning of this?” inquired Dabblon, turning to the brothers.

“Why, it is as mysterious to me as it will seem to you, Monsieur...?”

“At the moment, ALL IS A MYSTERY TO ME!” Dabblon bellowed in his face, growing visibly enraged.

“Yes, Monsieur, and you will soon see that we share your confusion. This morning, we received an unsigned letter”—he produced the letter from his coat pocket—“bidding us...”

“Silence!” snapped Dabblon, snatching the letter. “I shall read it for myself.”

He tore open the seal of the envelope and drew the letter from inside.

*To the brothers Gidilon,  
Greetings from the goddess of fortune, who has seen fit to smile upon you. This letter is the bearer of glad tidings, for it outlines for you a simple means whereby you may add to your coffers 500 crowns. All you need do is be present at the Rue de Martel, No. 20, tonight.*

*One of you shall enter the address before midnight, and the other follow shortly afterwards, driving a wagon filled with hay. If you do this, a messenger will deliver to your abode the promised sum three days from now. You may choose to take or leave this offer, but he who pens this letter shall know how you have acted, and will reward or withhold accordingly. Adieu.*

*Postscript: A carriage will be present at the address tonight. Pay its presence no heed, but do as you have been instructed and all will be well.*

Dabblon crumpled the letter in his hand, which quivered almost uncontrollably. Where had he erred? Where had his eyes and his head, a duo of which he had boasted so proudly previously, gone wrong? Where was Mlle Saint-Ghyslain at that moment? Was she among his retinue? He quickly turned and examined all the faces of those guardsmen who surrounded him, expecting to detect in one of their features those of the White Feather. But this scrutiny afforded him no satisfaction, for he found her not among his troop of mercenaries.

“No matter,” he muttered to himself. “I shall exercise my revenge on Armand!”

Then turning toward the brothers Gidilon, he said, “Be gone from this place then, for your presence is to me severely repulsive. And when you return home, offer to God a prayer of thankfulness that your lives have been spared, for I could easily have thrust you both through with my sword. Now depart!”

Seeing that he was quite stern, and fearing that he might be affected by a sudden change of heart, the two old men scurried from the room, bowing to M. Dabblon as they went.

“Now, gentlemen,” said Dabblon vehemently, when they were alone, “the White Feather has escaped us, but Armand shall certainly not share in her fortune!”

And he stormed from the villa, followed by his entire party, all of whom wondered at the intensity reflected by his person.

They made their way toward the hedge, expecting to find the form of Armand tied to the tree, and Jean Latouf guarding him vigilantly, but were greeted only by the pile of rope, which had been used to fasten Armand to the oak, and which was crowned by the large white feather that Clarice had been so kind as to leave as an indication that she had been present.

At the sight of this, Dabblon threw himself forward toward the pile, screaming furiously like a madman.

“No! It is not possible! Search the vicinity; they cannot have gone far! Pursue them, all of you. Search diligently. A thousand crowns to the man who brings them back, dead or alive! Go! All of you!”

The mercenaries were more than glad to part with their erstwhile employer, whose fury in that moment seemed boundless. He drew the rope from the ground and threw it into the hedge like a child throwing a tantrum. He grasped the fetters and swung them wildly at a tree, seeming to find delight in thrashing something as dead as a rotten bark. When he tired of this, he picked up the white feather and bent it with both hands, wishing to break it, but its flexibility did not afford him this pleasure, and his inability to sever it reminded him of his failure to capture the White Feather. He pulled at his hair fiercely and let out a cry of rage, as he cast his tortured frame upon the ground.

He remained in this position for a long while, vainly seeking to squelch the emotions that had begun to surge into his mind once more,

emotions which he relived from that fateful night when he had been outwitted by the genius of the White Feather. How cruelly his plots of revenge had failed, how easily the White Feather had evaded his net of capture, how cunningly she had avoided the snare he had so meticulously set for her. He had not the spirit or the mind to face his own failure—a failure that he met not once, but twice.

Suddenly the light of torches shone around him. It was the mercenaries who had returned from the search. Dabblon looked up, fixing a glassy stare upon Montcleur.

“We have swarmed through the area, but they are not to be found. Do you wish for us to extend our efforts beyond the immediate vicinity?”

In response he received only the blank, bleak countenance of Dabblon.

“Monsieur, what do you wish for us to do? We are at your command.”

Again he was met by silence, but this time a wild-eyed look of confusion crossed Dabblon’s face.

“Monsieur?” Montcleur inquired again.

“Huh?” Dabblon at last replied as he looked up at Montcleur with big, empty—and almost childlike—eyes. “Not to be found? You say that it is not to be found! I say it is my search and I shall find it. Yes, I shall! Do not be looking here nor stepping here, where I am searching. Shoo! Shoo!” As he said this, Dabblon staggered to his feet and shooed the mercenaries away with his hands as if holding an invisible broom.

Dabblon, in crazed oblivion, walked around the tree where Armand had been tied, muttering to himself, “Is it here? No, not so, my boy. Is it there? Now, we shall find it yet.”

Montcleur stared at Dabblon in shocked silence.

“He’s lost his mind!” One of the mercenaries whispered incredulously.

“No,” Montcleur affirmed. “It is simply the initial reaction to defeat. It will surely pass.” At this he walked up to Dabblon and took him by the shoulders. “Dabblon, snap out of this. We will yet find them, and you will be triumphant. You *will* find this White Feather, you hear me?” At this he shook Dabblon roughly, but Dabblon let out such a shriek of horror that Montcleur instinctively jumped back.

“NO!” Dabblon cried. “You wish to take it from me! You will not find it! Leave me alone! I shall find it and I shall have it!” Uttering hysterical sobs, Dabblon turned on his heel and ran feverishly toward the woods.

“I do not believe my eyes,” Montcleur said. “He is a madman!”  
And then, pulling himself together, he handed the men their wages for the evening, and signaled that the mission was over.

## **Chapter 22: Clarice Saint-Ghyslain**

The scene portrayed in *The Fisherman’s Net* was almost illusory. Around the large oaken table sat M. and Mme. Raffin, an elated-beyond-measure Nicole, Clarice Saint-Ghyslain, and Armand Le T line.

He remained somewhat in a half-daze, completely bewildered that, having been a prisoner only two hours earlier, submitted to the bleakness of his circumstances, he was now at liberty, a liberty that was the direct result of the genius of the White Feather, now known to him as his dearest Clarice.

How on earth had she discovered that she was being hounded? How did she construe that a trap had been laid for her? How did she manage once more to elude those who sought her head? These and a thousand other questions plagued him, and he wished to press Clarice for the answers he sought, but he understood, with all the consideration of he who loves, that she would reveal all to him in due time, if only he was patient.

When they had ridden away from the scene of Dabblon’s demise, Armand had directed the steed toward *The Fisherman’s Net*. They had not spoken at all during the ride. Armand was reveling in the sensation of being able to hold in his arms for the first time his beloved Clarice.

Soon the dim lights of *The Fisherman’s Net* could be seen, and when they had galloped toward its oaken structure, they were greeted by the anxious faces of the Raffins and Nicole, all of whom stood on the terrace, for they had heard the sound of the animal’s hooves from a



distance, and had rushed out of the inn to see if the rider might perchance be Armand.

Taking Clarisse by the hand and leading her toward where they stood in dumbfounded astonishment, Armand bowed and said:

“M. Raffin, may I present to you”—he turned to receive a nod of approval from Clarice—“the enigmatic, elusive, mysterious, baffling, White Feather.”

“May Heaven reward the selflessness you display, Mademoiselle, as you risk your life to save those of others!”

“Oh, but Madame,” responded Clarice, “I am fully recompensed already. To witness the delight on the faces of those whom God has helped me to set at liberty, is a reward so great it cannot be fathomed.”

“Indeed,” interjected M. Raffin, puzzlement still etched all over his face. “I-I must admit that I had always thought the White Feather was a man.”

“And that, sir,” said Clarice, “is wherein my greatest means of concealment lies. People hear great tales of the daring and bravery of the White Feather, and as those qualities are particularly becoming to a man, the possibility of a woman performing such feats does not even enter their minds.”

“Indeed,” replied M. Raffin, still thoroughly engrossed in trying to process the recent information that had just been fed to his brain. “But, do come in. I have reserved a supper for you, for we were all eagerly awaiting Armand’s return, although we must confess that we expected a larger party.”

“Have no fear, Monsieur,” Clarice reassured him. “If you refer to Milord Donovan Hughes and the d’Arnae family, they are well and safe.”

At this, Nicole, who had been relieved to see Armand, but apprehensive as to the absence of her family, uttered a sigh of relief.

Clarice, detecting this, came forward and placed kisses on both of her cheeks.

“You must be Nicole d’Arnae. Your mother has spoken much to me about you, and tomorrow you shall have the pleasure of being rejoined with her, as well as the remainder of your family.”

Armand meanwhile, had embraced M. and Mme. Raffin, the latter shedding tears of joy at once more finding him alive and well, the likelihood of which she was so uncertain earlier in the day.

“So, Armand,” said M. Raffin. “You have succeeded, have you not? You have, with the help of God, procured the safety of the White Feather. Did I not tell you that you would triumph?”

Upon hearing this, a thoroughly amused smile widened the lips of Clarice.

“Ah, Monsieur,” said Armand, proud to bestow credit to whom credit was due, “while I attribute my safety and that of Clarice to God, it was not I who was His instrument, but rather Clarice.”

“Indeed?”

“Yes. Had it not been for her, I would presently be quartered in some fortress—or worse.”

“Come inside, both of you,” said Mme. Raffin. “Let us all enjoy our long-awaited supper.”

“Really, Monsieur,” asked Armand, “how is it that you have not yet dined?”

“Why, because we were awaiting your presence!”

“My presence?”

“Certainly.”

“And what was it that caused you to assume that I would be present for dinner when I set out on a mission so unlikely to succeed?”

“Bah! Armand, as I said before, true faith does not merely hope—it *expects*. After interceding on your behalf in prayer, the women and I received reassurance that all would be well, and that you would return safely to us.”

To this response Armand could only smile in wonderment.

It was then that all sat around the table and partook of the soup and bread that Mme. Raffin had previously concocted. To describe the dinner as a happy affair would be a severe understatement. There was present an atmosphere of profound joy among those who’d gathered in The Fisherman’s Net.

The Raffins related to Clarice the circumstances surrounding Armand’s conversion, and she in return related to them the events contiguous to his extraction from the grip of M. Dabblon.

It was by now quite late. The pot of soup and bottles of wine had been successfully emptied, and the eyes of M. Raffin, his wife, and their young protégé began to grow heavy.

As to Armand and Clarice, there remained between them numerous unanswered questions; thus, while the others prepared

themselves for sleep, the pair stole outside toward the lake in which Armand had been baptized just the previous day.

Walking along its shores and finally coming to sit along its bank, they first engaged in small, inconsequential chatter, while both of them hoped and waited for the other to bring up the topics which inundated both of their minds. After various awkward silences ensued, Armand finally spoke.

“Clarice,” he said, his voice taking on an earnest, pleading tone. “Surely you can detect the struggle that rages within me. Surely you can see the questions that form in my mind, without it being necessary for them to roll off my tongue. I must know all. How did you become aware of the plot that surrounded you? How did you conceal for so long your true identity from your own father? How did you baffle for months an army of spies, and then give away your identity so easily in a few weeks to two men?”

“You put to me three questions, Armand,” Clarice responded, her somber face suddenly taking on a teasing expression. “Which do you wish me to answer first?”

“Oh, I care not. Only tell me all.”

“Very well, I shall start from the beginning. As you know, I have been for nearly a year now the infamous White Feather, the dangerous Huguenot who has made it her duty to retrieve those who have been jailed by men like you.

“Though many have tried to ensnare me, they have always failed, not because I possess any great measure of intellect or genius, but because, in each and every endeavor, I do not walk alone. Beside me walks my blessed Savior, and He never fails to lead and guide me in all my ways.

“I first made your acquaintance on that night when my father hosted a banquet and you were introduced as a promising officer of his acquaintance. I immediately felt an aversion, not for you, but rather your position. I was the White Feather, whose function was to liberate the Huguenots, while yours was to imprison them.

“My father had informed me earlier in that day that you had been commissioned to search out the identity of the White Feather, and so I observed you carefully and suspiciously while sustaining an amiable air. Milord Donovan Hughes, who has always been my partner in these

ventures, spoke with me that night and together we concocted a plan to mislead you.

“We determined that if we were to remain successful in our quest of liberty for the Huguenots, and continue to free those who had been unjustly imprisoned by the church, any company formed to seek out our identities must be held in delusion.

“It was at that moment that we devised a plan to send you sniffing down the wrong scent. I penned a letter, a short, abstract letter, and then purposely dropped it on the floor, though I did so with the utmost prudence, so as to render this action undetected by those around me. That letter said nothing and gave no evidence of anything of importance—its chief function was to see how easily you could be baited.

“That night my father came to me before he departed for Spain and informed me that a letter concerning the White Feather had been found. He said that the search had been narrowed down to one of the two hundred persons who were present at the banquet, and that I was to organize numerous similar banquets in his absence, thus allowing you and your newfound partner, a certain M. Dabblon, to keep a close eye on any other goings-on.”

“I find it incredible that your father trusted you with all this information,” interjected Armand here. “He seemed adamant that the whole affair remain a closely guarded secret.”

“Why should he have reason to distrust me? I faithfully attended Mass, said my prayers in the Catholic manner, confessed regularly—and perhaps even more convincing than all these, was engaging, witty, and charming on social occasions, certainly not the picture of sobriety that was painted in the mind of my father when he thought of Huguenots.

“Thus began a series of letters which were conveniently dropped or mistakenly delivered to the wrong individual.”

“So every letter that fell to our possession was intended to do so?” asked Armand with incredulity.

“Not all. The letter that was mistakenly given to your servant instead of that of Sir Donovan Hughes was a genuine error, the error of the messenger. When Sir Donovan told me he had received the letter, but that his servant had not given it to him, and when we questioned Gardière as to the circumstances surrounding the mystery, we divined

the matter. Not only had that letter fallen into the wrong hands, but it also compromised Sir Donovan Hughes. Something had to be done.

“At the banquet on the 29<sup>th</sup>, knowing full well that Sir Donovan Hughes was compromised, and wishing to turn you off of our trail, we conferred beforehand that Sir Donovan should drop a note at some convenient junction, a note which would give you clear-cut evidence of an intrigue that was never to be. He did so, and you flew for the bait at the end of the hook.

“The rue de Martel, would, of course, be empty, and we hoped, by thus raising your expectations so high, and then by our absence sending them plummeting down once more, to cause you to admit defeat in despair and abandon the search for our identities.

“Of course, neither Milord Donovan nor I intended to be present at the old villa tonight, but that changed unexpectedly when my carriage nearly ran over you and I heard from your own mouth that you had changed. I could see it in your person, in your eyes. Though I pretended to be furious at you for betraying a love I proclaimed, I was struck by turmoil. I suspected that you were being brought to the rue de Martel to witness my downfall, and I knew that when they found nothing, their anger would be aimed at you.

“Thus, after leaving you in the hands of your enemies, but determined at all costs to prevent your incarceration, I gave orders to my footman to follow you and determine for certain where you were being taken. When he reported that you went in the direction of the Rue de Martel, I instructed him to drive me toward No. 20, but to do so by a different route. My lackey had informed me that you were being transported in a wagon and I knew that I had before me the luxury of sufficient time to develop a plan.

“Near to the Rue de Martel live two Huguenots, brothers who, though they are old, retain a sincere love for God and serve Him faithfully. I had the privilege of liberating them from prison several months ago, and since then they have always pleaded with me to be allowed to take part in any of my ventures, though I told them that this was impossible.

“On this occasion, however, I went to them, and informed them that if they still wished to be of service to me, there might be a way. I instructed them to ride to the address at midnight in a wagon loaded to overflowing with hay. Thankfully they were in possession of such an

item and were more than enthused at being allowed to participate in an intrigue conducted by the White Feather. Though I told them of the dangers involved in this mission, and that they might very well be captured or killed, they still insisted on doing as I requested, regardless of the consequences. Thus I wrote for them a letter..."

And here she fumbled around in the pocket of the guardsman's doublet she still wore and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

"I wrote this note, but just as I was about to seal it, my hand unintentionally struck the ink bottle and it spilled on the note. Thus I was forced to write for them another just like it. Here, I have preserved the old note in my pocket. Fortunately, the ink has not covered the writing. Read the note for yourself and you will understand the excuse they retained for being at such a place at such an hour."

Armand took the paper from the hand of Clarice and read that note which had been presented to M. Dabblon not many hours earlier.

"I understand," said he at length. "So, disguised as a guardsman, you sat under the post and awaited our arrival. How did you manage to be present before we were?"

"It is simple. You drove a wagon, while I was conveyed, albeit by a different route, to the location by four powerful horses. I instructed my footman to park the carriage near to the old villa, and then to return immediately home."

"And then you sat beneath the signpost of No. 15, and awaited our appearance," said Armand, suddenly comprehending it all.

"Precisely," she said. "And, in order to turn away suspicion, I was forced to appear reluctant to join the party, though that was exactly what I wished."

"And suppose Dabblon had not invited you to join the party," inquired Armand. "What would you have done then?"

"I would have followed you from a distance, and taken advantage of the confusion that I knew would ensue to liberate you."

"Great God! And how on earth did you assume so perfectly the voice of a man?"

Clarice sighed. "That was the product of many hours of practice. Milord Donovan assured me of its necessity if I wished to continue to be personally involved in each venture we undertook."

"Then you are personally involved in all the exploits in which there is left a white feather?"

“Those in Paris, mainly,” responded Clarice. “Those which occur in the provinces, or on very rare occasion, abroad, are supervised and masterminded by Milord Donovan Hughes.”

“Ah, I see. But tell me, why was it that you chose a white feather as your symbol or emblem? Is it not an icon of cowardice?”

“It is, but that is not why I chose it, for have you ever heard the name coward pinned to an account of the White Feather?”

“Never!” said Armand, laughing as he did so.

“And tell me, what is it that comes to mind when a portrait of a dove is painted in your head?”

“A dove?”

“Yes, a dove.”

“Uh ... Peace?” ventured Armand.

“Precisely. The dove of peace,” Clarice said simply. “Our white feather is that of a dove, for doubtless you perceive that we abhor the use of violence in all our undertakings.”

“Then why did you not select an olive branch as your symbol? Methinks that indicates peace much better than a dove’s feather.”

“Because, my dear Armand, the meaning of the white feather is twofold.”

“It is?”

“Yes. Do you not recall the baptism of Jesus, recounted in the Gospels?”

“Vaguely,” responded Armand.

“Well then, do you not recall that, after He rose from the water, a dove flew down and rested upon Him?”

“I believe such was the case, yes.”

“That dove was symbolic of the Holy Spirit which came to rest upon Jesus. This is known as an infilling of the Holy Spirit. Though the d’Arnae family has suffered much for Christ’s sake, their eyes still sparkle with this ethereal light.”

“And what of the d’Arnae family?” asked Armand. “Are they truly safe?”

Clarice started in surprise. “Why, of course. Did you think I would so candidly utter a falsehood to Nicole concerning something of such grave consequence? Milord Donovan Hughes has personal charge of them for the moment, and will bring them here on the morrow.”

“But Clarice,” Armand said, his face suddenly becoming serious, “you take this affair so lightly, when your whole life will be altered because of it.”

“How so?” she asked, a question mark painted in the creases of her brow.

“You are compromised. Dabblon, as well as others, know who you are.”

“Impossible!”

“It is true, I tell you. For he told me so himself while we carted toward the rue de Martel.”

“And what did he say was his reasoning?”

“He said that on the night of the banquet, it was you who gave the note into the hand of Dabblon.”

“But that is impossible, for the note which he was instructed to let fall to the ground was given to him long before then.”

“Why then did Sir Donovan kiss your left hand instead of your right?”

“I’ve no idea!”

“Then why did M. Dabblon assume that you had transferred the note in that moment?”

“I cannot fathom it.”

“Then he deduced falsely that you gave him the note, but deduced correctly that you were the White Feather?”

“Indeed, it would appear to be.”

“So now, both you and Milord Donovan are compromised,” said Armand earnestly. “What do you plan to do about it?”

Clarice remained silent for a moment.

“I do not yet know. I must discuss the issue with Milord Donovan Hughes. It is likely that I shall have to operate as a fugitive from justice.”

“Yes, Clarice,” said Armand, his eyes radiant with happiness. “Surely this is what God has intended. Allow me to join the league of the White Feather and together we shall continue to do what you have done so long. We shall go into hiding and yet we shall subtly and furtively continue with this quest upon which you have embarked, while we shall revel in the love that God has placed in our hearts for one another.”



Clarice, who had listened attentively thus far, looked down and remained in that position awhile before she spoke.

“Armand, when I first made your acquaintance, I thought nothing of you. To me you were merely an enemy of my faith. However, as I came to know you, I saw a certain softness within you. Beneath your hardened exterior, beneath all your ambition and selfishness, I knew there existed gentleness within your frame, and while Sir Donovan and I continued to plot your demise, I prayed to the Savior that someday you would come to know the truth.

“It was not love that existed in my heart, but rather a deep concern and empathy. After a while, I began to notice that what you exhibited to me was more than the mere kind attentions of a gentleman, and I became aware that you loved me. But being as you did not really know who I was, the dangerous White Feather you so fervently opposed, I dismissed it from my thoughts.

“Then, when I heard from your own lips that you had become a Huguenot, I was speechless. I could not believe it, and I knew that there was only one way to ascertain its veracity. That was to play upon the love that I knew existed in your heart toward me. I told you that I could only find it within me to love you if you denied that you were a Huguenot, knowing that if you had truly been converted and made new, you would hold the love of Jesus as far superior to any mortal love that might exist in your heart.

“And then when I heard from your tormented lips that you loved me, but held your newfound faith in greater esteem, I inwardly rejoiced, for I knew that it was true, you had really opened your heart to the forgiveness of Jesus. Though I affected great reproach in front of Dabblon, I was delighted to know that my prayers had been answered, and I hastened to rescue you as I would any other brother in Christ.”

“Then, you love me only as ... a *brother*?” said Armand, his face aghast.

“I am at the moment uncertain.”

“Uncertain?”

“I do not deny that there are concealed within my heart definite emotions for you, but I shall require some time to ascertain for myself whether it is a love of a woman for a man that I feel, or a love of a sister for her brother.”

To another man, this statement would have caused disappointment, but to Armand, this simple declaration was more than sufficient. Merely the fact that she did not deny her love for him seemed to indicate that there existed a ray of hope.

He who had endured so many long nights accompanied by the vision of her face, the beauty of her eyes, the light of her smile, the joyful peal of her laughter, was seized in that moment by a sheer delight.

Taking Clarice's hands in his, he said, "Clarice, I shall wait as long as is necessary. And should you take ten or twenty years to ascertain what is in your heart, I should continue to wait, content in the hope that I shall one day be deserving of your love."

In that moment, the two shared a fond embrace. There was between them an understanding of friendship, and though Clarice had not determined in that moment either to return his love or not, she was subconsciously aware that in her heart would grow toward Armand the deepest affection, planted there by the One to Whom she owed all that she had ever been, and would ever be.

\* \* \*

The next day's reunion just outside The Fisherman's Net was one of absolute euphoria. Amidst hugs, kisses, tears, laughter, and joyful exclamations, Nicole d'Arnae was reunited with her family. Sir Donovan Hughes had driven up in his carriage, loaded with the six individuals who bore the name d'Arnae, and had presented them to Nicole. The elation that was evident on her face at once more seeing her mother and siblings was compounded by the tears of joy that were cried by all.

After receiving the profuse thanks of the family, Clarice bade Armand and Sir Donovan follow her into the inn, where she communicated to the Englishman all that had happened the previous night.

This caused no moderate alterations to the countenance of Sir Donovan, who sat in complete wonderment at all that had taken place. He was not, however, excessively overcome, for in his occupation as chief assistant to the White Feather, he had learned to expect the impossible, and he graciously welcomed Armand as a brother in Christ.

After Clarice had informed him of the predicament surrounding her now-compromised identity, the threesome engaged in sufficient dialogue to form an arrangement that was both agreeable and prudent.

It was decided that Sir Donovan should be personally responsible to convey the d'Arnae family to Geneva, and to perhaps spend a few weeks in supporting their bid to start a new life, that is to say, a life devoid of the support of a father.

It was also concluded that Armand should become a chief member of the league of the White Feather, and join Clarice in a hideout which Sir Donovan possessed in Picardy. From there, they would continue with the mission upon which she had embarked more than a year ago, and upon Sir Donovan's return, he would join them in their obscurity.

Thus, after this tête-à-tête, they made their way outside, Sir Donovan to mount the box upon which he would drive for the next many days, and Clarice and Armand to bid their final farewells to the d'Arnae family.

Armand began by asking for the forgiveness of Mme. d'Arnae for his mistreatment of her, a forgiveness which was readily granted without the least difficulty.

He then turned to Nicole.

“Nicole, I know not how to thank you. Were it not for your Christian grace and love, I think it very unlikely that I should ever have come to embrace the life I now begin to lead. Much gratitude to you from the very depths of my soul.”

They embraced fondly, Nicole declining to speak, for she was overcome with joy and unable to express the sentiments that coursed through her veins.

Gradually they separated, and after many more words of adieu, Sir Donovan, accompanied on the box by Fabrice, cracked his whip, and the carriage pulled away from the inn.

As they departed, waving their hands in fond gestures of valediction, Armand was reminded of a scripture that he had heard so often, but never really understood.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?”

Now he understood better than many the depths and heights of the love of Jesus, a love that would never leave nor forsake him, a love that was constant, sure, and as unchanging as the fact that he had

been conveyed that very love in the forms of M. and Mme. Raffin, Nicole d'Arnae, and above all ... the White Feather!

## Epilogue

One should not have read thus far and be left hanging in uncertainty. Here in succinct form, therefore, are the immediate futures of those who made their appearance in this tale.

Let us begin with M. Saint-Ghyslain. He, returning from his triumph in Spain, was of the utmost bewilderment to find that his daughter could not be found anywhere. Finally, a letter was delivered to M. Saint-Ghyslain while he was in his study one day. He opened the seal on the envelope and discovered that the letter was from none other than his beloved daughter. Because of its lack of brevity, we shall not include the letter here, but suffice it to say that the letter revealed most of what has happened in this account, albeit a severely abridged version. At the conclusion of this letter, Clarice reminded her father that she still retained for him a daughter's love and respect, and begged of him to at least consider that she was happy with the life she led.

At the information contained in this letter M. Saint-Ghyslain became first enraged, then thoughtful, and then melancholy. He issued a proclamation that Clarice's body had been found, murdered by the Huguenots, and lent toward his persecution of them a greater vehemence than he had ever before displayed.

M. Claude Montcleur continued on with his life of robbing and thievery until he perished ten years after this narrative took place. Stories circulated for awhile that he died from wounds received in a duel with a man who was only half his height.

Silvestre, finding himself mystified at the sudden disappearance of his master, was disposed to find employment elsewhere and soon found a position as footman in the royal household of the Duc d'Anjou.

Sir Donovan Hughes safely delivered his charges to safe areas abroad. We must not neglect to add that Nicole soon found a most handsome husband, and Fabrice a very agreeable wife, both of whom were of the Huguenot faith.

M. and Mme. Raffin lived out what remained of their lives continuing to do what as a couple they had always done—shine the light of the world in the lives of those whom they came into contact with. Armand and Clarice attended their funeral.

Concerning these two, it must be related (for some female readers might consider the tale incomplete without this information) that before many months had passed Clarice did, in fact, reveal to Armand all the love that was contained in her heart for him, and expressed it in ways both verbal and physical, resulting in the birth of a male child, who bore a striking resemblance to his father.

Adieu for the moment, dear readers, for there is nothing more that remains to be said. Let us strive to live our lives by that law which destroyed, or rather fulfilled, the laws of Moses—the Law of Love, the same love that first attracted Armand to those whom he called his enemies, and that is the love that constrains us to serve our Master with a vehemence and passion worthy of His service. Amen.

*THE END*