

THE AVENGERS OF THE KING

By
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Translated from the French by
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Part One:
The Two Faces

Chapter 1

What Reaper? What Harvest?

THEY WERE NUMEROUS in Paris, the houses where on the night of January 20-21, 1793, they prayed for the soul of the king, who was soon to die.

Doors closed and shutters shut, so that the Convention's spies might not see the lights nor hear the whisperings of the prayers for the dying, the noble family in its old mansion, the bourgeois family in its home, the artisan family in its modest lodging, as well as the poor in their hovels, offered up to heaven a myriad of ardent prayers for the soul of Louis XVI, and beseeched God to work a miracle to save the King of France during those final hours separating him from the scaffold.

Despite all the lies amassed by the propagandists of the Revolution, never was Paris or France so royalist as on that night. And this moral atmosphere especially weighed heavy on the executioners. This was evident hours later in the considerable precautions they took to transport the king from Temple Prison to Revolution Square.

If it truly had been about executing a traitor whose death all the people demanded, why were there so many cannons and cavalymen? And why so many guards marching about or standing in formation?

In an old mansion on quiet Rue de Savoie, parallel to the Seine, on the river's left bank, a family, gathered in the main drawing room with its faded wallpaper and its high windows hermetically hung with old curtains, was kneeling before a crucifix placed on a table.

On the ebony cross, an old ivory Christ with patinated tones stood out plainly and clearly. The holy image reflected the light of two candles on either side, which were planted in heavy candlesticks of chiseled copper.

A priest was there saying the prayers for the dying, and responding to them was a lady in mourning, three men, one of them aged and seemingly the father of the other two, and two young women, one wearing a black silk dress and one of those twilled fichus that would later be called a Charlotte Corday. The other wore a simple dress and white bonnet typical of women laborers of the time.

Everyone, prostrate and pleading before the Man-God, seemed drowned in sorrow. Though they uttered the responses so softly, and though the murmuring of their voices reciting the Latin verses was so discreet, fervor pierced their intonations. The utterances broke through the silence, sonorous and firm. They came from the heart, and a kind of fever made them resound. With each moment, the supplications grew so ardent, and the voices seemed to want to rise so high, as to better reach God and do Him violence, that the priest interrupted to say, "Not so loud, brethren! They might hear us outside! Let us be resigned and hide our hope to see our unfortunate prince saved! Let us remember that nothing happens except by the will of the Almighty, and let us pray for the son of St. Louis as if his destiny had already been fulfilled! May God henceforth have mercy on his soul! He will save him if such is His will. And His will be done!"

He resumed reciting the office of the dead. And the voices responded to him, as though appeased.

The individuals who prayed thus in the old ancestral mansion almost all belonged to the de Lézardière family.

The lady in mourning was Baroness de Lézardière. She halfway hid her black locks, barely streaked with some white hairs, beneath a widow's bonnet. The aged man was the baron. He was dressed in a black velvet suit and wore a powdered peruke, the queue of which was tied with a black ribbon.

The two young men were their sons, Paul and Sylvestre de Lézardière.

The young girl in the black silk dress and Charlotte Corday fichu was Mademoiselle de Sainte-Pazanne, one of their cousins, aged seventeen, and the only survivor of a family that six months earlier had provided the first victims to the Revolution's so-called "excesses," for one absolved the Revolution of everything! Its normal practices and policies of stealing and bloodshed were simply termed "excesses."

The Count and Countess de Sainte-Pazanne had been besieged in their château in the outskirts of Nantes by some of the city's sans-culottes. An area poacher, who had previously run into some trouble with one of the de Sainte-Pazannes' gamekeepers, led them there. The guardsmen and servants had offered resistance and were massacred.

The count had stood his ground and, shutting himself inside a tower, used up all his ammunition against the assailants. He was ultimately taken and speared to death in front of his wife, who, half-mad, perished in turn in the burning château. Around the château, the assassins, after having inebriated themselves, danced a diabolical saraband, as around a bonfire, driving back into the inferno all those who had escaped the massacre.

Adèle de Sainte-Pazanne was then in Paris at the home of her mother's elder sister, Baroness de Lézardière, who herself driven away with her husband and sons from her château in the outskirts of La Roche-sur-Yon, by the threats of sans-culottes, had come to take refuge in the old Parisian mansion that one of her uncles had bequeathed to her long ago.

The young girl had only found the strength to survive the horrible event that orphaned her in the care and consolation of her uncle and aunt, and let us say right away, in a more tender sentiment she experienced for the elder of her cousins, Paul de Lézardière, a sentiment she believed mutual.

This had started out as one of those holiday flings, as sometimes takes shape between cousins. A lasting affection followed from it. The parents had allowed it to develop. Though no promises had been made by either, they were considered engaged.

Tall, slender, and blonde, Adèle de Sainte-Pazanne, beneath her somewhat haughty exterior, possessed a soul that was loyal, spontaneous, kind, and good. A prodigious energy could be perceived beneath her elegant, refined, socialite exterior and her sweetest blue eyes.

The other young woman was named Cécile Renault. She was a humble day-laboring seamstress whose name history would one day record.

She was at this moment aged nineteen, of rather insignificant appearance, nice rather than pretty, and her comportment manifesting an evident tendency to coquetry. Daughter of a small-scale papermaker named Antoine Renault, whose shop was situated at the corner of Rue de la Lanterne and Rue des Marmousets, a stone's throw from the Palais de Justice, Cécile had lost her mother when she was very little. There remained as family, besides her father, three brothers and one aunt.

One of the brothers, Jacques, tended to the modest papermaking business. The two others had been soldiers for two years. The aunt of Cécile, who was her father's elder sister, was a nun living in seclusion on Rue de Babylone.

The Renaults were taciturn, quiet, orderly, and frugal people, devoid of ambition. They were present for most of the drama of the Revolution, not understanding much of it, like almost all Parisians, and firmly resolved not to get themselves mixed up in all the trouble. We are speaking for the two men, for Cécile was to get mixed up in it, and drag them in behind her. They missed the old regime, during which the atmosphere was peaceful, one was happy, business went well, and one could go to Mass without being looked upon with suspicion. But they kept this sentiment to themselves, without manifesting it in a way that was inopportune or threatening to their safety.

They were fairly well-off. While his son tended to the paper business, the Renault father, as the principal tenant of the building in which he lived, showed apartments, gave and received leave notices, declined repairs, or discussed with people in the building whether it was necessary to redo a fireplace or to rehang wallpaper.

Cécile could have lived without working. If she was a day-laboring seamstress, it was out of a need for change, to see new faces, and to replenish her personal nest egg which was always tapped into for outfits, trinkets, fineries, and so-called “frivolities.” It was also, as we shall see, for a more serious motive.

It remains for us to say who the priest was. He was Father Edgeworth de Firmont, a friend of the de Lézardière family, the very one who, a few hours later, was to accompany Louis XVI to his death and help him complete his Calvary.

The room’s gilded clock tolled two in the morning. In the fireplace, a half-consumed firebrand rolled out of place. Cécile placed it back over the dying fire with the tongs.

Outside, the January north wind was blowing, cutting and nasty, chilling both soul and bone, shaking the windows, and descending through the chimney to redden the embers and scatter the ashes.

Everyone was quiet, lost in their thoughts, in dismay at the hour that was approaching.

Cadenced steps sounded from afar on the pavement, disrupting the street’s tragic silence. They came nearer.

The baroness raised her head, placed her hand on her heart, and her features, so pure and so beautiful, became marred by a kind of nervous tension.

The baron went to cautiously lift the corner of one of the curtains that was sealing off the windows.

“Patrolmen!” he whispered. “They are passing by.”

“They are crisscrossing all over Paris!” said Sylvestre de Lézardière.

The baroness had sat down. Adèle de Sainte-Pazanne offered her a glass of mint water, saying, “Drink, Aunt. It will go away.”

“Thank you,” she said, pushing away the glass. “It’s passed. But this accursed heart will no longer allow me any rest. At the least noise, it leaps in my breast and pounds on it... I will die from it!... It’s been this way ever since the horrible death of my poor little priest, at Les Carmes.”

The eldest son of Baron and Baroness de Lézardière, a deacon at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice, had, in fact, been massacred at Les Carmes Prison the preceding September. His mother had nearly died from the trauma. She had contracted a heart illness that the emotions of this terrible period did not help mitigate.

Father de Firmont, after a large sign of the cross, stood up. He said, "Madame, you are overexerting yourself, as sick as you are! Take a little bit of rest, at least. I must go to the Temple to say the last Mass that His Majesty will hear, and I must remain fasting. But you, my friends: Drink! Eat! Strengthen yourselves!"

In a hushed voice, addressing the baron, he added: "If my duty is to be painful, your own work will be very hard!"

"For my two sons, yes!" said the baron. "For me, no!" He then added with a certain bitterness, "*He* has not deigned to summon me!"

"*He* only wants young people, who are supple, deft, intrepid!" answered the priest. "*He* is perhaps reserving for you other tasks for which not only courage is required, but also the prudence and judgment of ripe age!"

"Perhaps!"

Cécile opened a door connecting to the baroness's room. The baroness, leaning on the laborer's arm, withdrew. Adèle opened another door connecting to the mansion's dining room.

In this latter room, on a table lit with two candles, were bottles, carafes, and leftovers from a roasted chicken served at the previous evening's supper, next to a stack of plates. An old servant, who was not in livery, was setting the table in summary fashion.

Adèle, having gone to help Cécile put the baroness to bed, returned to the drawing room, then drew her cousin Paul with her to the far end of the dining room before any of the others had yet entered. Her blue eyes projected strange gleams, and her beautiful face appeared animated with extraordinary emotion. It seemed the face of a queen in fury.

Paul, a young cavalryman, nicely dressed in his formal suit, his hair unpowdered according to the new fashion, and his face

young and fresh, accented with a thin, nascent mustache, seemed at this moment like a schoolboy caught out by his teacher.

But before elaborating on what took place between these two young people whom their family considered engaged, we must return to the baroness's room, where the outside noises were more muffled than in the drawing room, where the windows were draughtproofed by taffeta curtains of faded crimson hues, where the wood fire burning in the fireplace only emitted subdued light, owing to a screen of coated wood decorated with a taffeta sheet of the same shade, which obscured the brightness of the crackling fire.

A single candlestick holding a wax candle stood on a tiny antique three-legged table, close to a large white-lacquered Louis XVI bed. The small flame was reflected from afar in the trumeau mirror above the fireplace. This discreet light was enough for Cécile to assist the sick one, who was sitting up, to take in a cup of warm bouillon.

In a low voice, the baroness told her, "They are going to worry about you at home for not being back yet, my little one."

"No, Madame Baroness. My father and brother know that I am with you; they aren't worried. I couldn't have left you today! And on Rue de la Lanterne, I wouldn't have slept a wink! Staying awake here to keep watch, as much as... Unless I am bothering you?"

"Poor Cécile! Bothering us?... I love you like one of my own children! And what is more, I don't know why!... You radiate sympathy."

"Madame Baroness is very kind!... I also have much affection for Madame Baroness... And I would die for her, as I would be happy to die this morning for the king, if I were a man!"

She became excited as she spoke. The insignificant grisette had gradually transformed into a kind of inspired being. As if she had been ashamed to expose her interior sentiments, always hidden beneath her little cover of indifference and frivolity, she quickly smiled and said, "But Madame Baroness will find that I don't carry myself in a way that is appropriate for my condition?"

“What are you saying, my child?” replied Madame de Lézardière. “On the contrary, you just betrayed and revealed sentiments that unite us and have created for us, without our realizing it, a common atmosphere. But something surprises me...” She hesitated, and then said in a lower voice, “You know then that they are to attempt something to save the king?”

“I know it, yes, Madame!”

“And how do you know it? Is it a secret that you overheard by chance, in which case I would worry for my husband, my sons, and my friends, as that would mean this secret has been poorly kept... Or rather, *are you involved in it?*”

“I *am*, Madame! And this secret is well-kept. One thing will tell you everything: I often go on workdays to the home of Marie Grandmaison, on Rue Ménars, the housekeeper of...”

“Shh!” said the baroness, placing her finger over her lips.

“Of the one whose name we must not even mention among us, for fear a strange ear might hear it. I know this also, Madame... What is more, if you had wanted to know sooner what I am going to tell you, you needed only to have let casually escape from your lips, without even looking at me, this question that is no doubt of quite little importance: ‘Will the reaper come?’”

“Indeed!” said the baroness intently. “And how would you then answer?”

“If I didn’t answer, you would say, ‘She isn’t in on it.’ But you would immediately be edified if I were to answer, ‘When the harvest is ripe!’”

“Oh, dear little one!” said the baroness, pulling her close to her heart. “This man, this friend of the king’s, has known then how to draw so many hearts to him, even among the people!”

“Especially among the people, Madame! And you will see so!”

“Then I have confidence! Oh, if it pleases God to permit his rescue! Leave me to pray, my little one! To pray for the king, for him, for this man of courage and sacrifice, for my two sons who will perhaps be slain alongside him in a little while... Oh, good

God, have mercy! Have mercy on us all! One of my sons has already died for remaining faithful to Your law! May his death ransom us all! May his blood prevent the shedding of other innocent blood! Have mercy! Have mercy!”

“Amen!” said Cécile quietly.

And leaving the baroness to her ardent prayer which softly continued, the young seamstress left the room, whose door she silently closed, and found herself in the dining room without Paul de Lézardière or his cousin hearing her enter. The old servant had withdrawn. The two young people believed themselves alone.