

THE MASS OF SAINT SECAIRE
From the French of Barbey de Rochehouart
Translated by Mark Wells

Outside the village inn at Arques-le-Roi in Gascony sat Captain Pierre Larue, leaning on his crutch and chatting to the local doctor over a bottle of Burgundy. "Another week, and you may burn that for firewood," said the doctor, pointing to the crutch; "but, as I told you, no more active service."

"I have something better than that," replied the soldier. "As you know, I care for adventure, and for adventure only. When I heard your opinion, there was only one thing for me to do; I wrote to cousin Henri in Paris, and he has got me a position I would rather hold than take out of my knapsack that field-marshal's baton that they told me hid there!"

"And what is that?" asked the doctor.

"I am to go with du Chaillu to the Gold Coast — with du Chaillu, the greatest of all our explorers! Think of that! New country, never seen by man, great forests, each one as large as Gascony, rivers to which the Rhone is but a mountain stream, strange flowers and fruits, wild men, wild beasts — ah! my friend, the greatest of all the wonders of the world is there — the ape-man, twice a man's height, so strong that he can twist a rifle-barrel as I twist this piece of cord — and we are going after him: we shall catch him, and cage him, and bring him back to France!"

"And what of little Félise while you are catching the ape-man? Hadn't you better catch her first?"

"Ah no! I trust her. And she is better with her people for a year or two. She is very young yet to marry. And they will never let her marry any one else; there are family reasons, too, you know. Besides, she loves me. Ah! *bonjour*, Monsieur le Curé," he broke off, rising on his crutch and bowing. The doctor rose, too, but his bow was painfully formal. The priest gave them his greeting, and passed on.

He was an extraordinary type, strong and long, but so lean that he enjoyed the reputation of the most stern asceticism. His face was in contradiction, for it was haughty, passionate, ambitious, and overwhelmingly sensual, with an expression of avid and insatiable desire. His eyes were dead, lack-lustre wells of quenchless passion. He was either a very good or a very bad man.

"You do not like Father de Choisy," said Larue.

The doctor was silent a moment. "Why should a man of his noble family and his amazing ability be lost in this desert?" he said at last. "He ought to be a bishop, by now, and here he is in Arques-le-Roi. Oh well! we know what we know. We have seen what we have seen." The soldier's frankness took some offence. "I cannot hear you speak evil of my priest," said he.

"I was wrong," replied the doctor, crossing himself, "and may God pardon me! I had better stick to my bistoury. Here's your hated rival, by the way. A surly fellow swaggered towards them and, sitting down at a table on the other side of the doorway, called for brandy. He was already partly drunk, and his nod to the others barely civil; his greeting an unintelligible grunt. When the patron of the inn came out with the brandy, he invited him to take a *"petit verre."* The good man complied.

"Should I fear a drunken lout of that type for a rival?" said the soldier aside to his medical friend.

The young man, whose name was Dufour, cast a hostile glance at the Captain, and, touching his glass to the innkeeper's, proposed "The fairest eyes, and the truest heart in Arques!" The good man drank willingly; he did not guess that all this would lead up to a brawl. Dufour's next toast was more provocative. "Drink to my love, the fair Félise!" he cried. Captain Larue made no movement; 'Félise' was non-committal, though he knew that insult was intended.

"I am a lucky man, patron," the boor went on; "she loves me so, Félise! Every night we have a stolen meeting in the wood behind the château. The old man suspects nothing, or the dragon on guard either. Ah, but she is sweet, the little piece of mutton!"

This time the doctor spoke to his friend. "It is useless to have a row. Let us go down to your house together!" Larue nodded, and rose stiffly. "Bon soir, patron!" he said, and the old man rose politely and returned the salutation. But the youth was out for trouble, and filled his glass again.

"And here's luck to my Félise; and when I've done with her, may she marry some rotten old cripple!" Larue turned and faced him.

"Your conversation is interesting, sir; pardon me if I ask whether you are referring to me!" The sot replied with the one French monosyllable that cannot be construed as a compliment.

Larue turned and faced him. He clubbed his crutch, and struck the boor a swinging blow on the head. He dropped like a tree under the axe of the backwoodsman. The captain took no further notice; he walked home nonchalantly with the doctor. "If I were not a good Catholic," was the latter's only comment, "I could cry *Vive la Revolution Sociale!* To think that that swine should be the richest man in Arques!" Just then the door of a very smart little house opened, and a lady appeared. She was dressed in widow's weeds, very heavily and very quietly, and she had composed her face to melancholy. Sacred books were in her hand; she was evidently on her way to vespers. Her face belied the rest of her attire; for all its composure, it radiated some element of matured rottenness which would have better suited a woman of the Buttes Montmatre or the Halles. Evil, conscious, joyous evil, laughed behind her mask. The soldier could hardly refrain from a gesture of aversion as she passed. "I am not a good Catholic, my dear doctor," he replied, "for charity is above all the Catholic virtue; and when I see that woman I say 'There goes the devil to mass.'" "Shame!" cried the doctor, "the good Marquise! she is the model of all the virtues. I wonder what my hospital would do without her. Why, she offered to nurse your leg!" "I know, I'm a brute," answered the soldier, "and I've a silly way of trusting instinct instead of reason; if I must find you a reason, it's this; I notice that the children avoid her. Come in, and have a glass of wine before we part. Next week I'll be packing my kit, and off on the long trail again!" "Well," laughed the doctor, "with our funny likes and dislikes, you had better bring your ape-man back to Arques to teach us manners. I wish I had seen the world," he added wistfully; "here I am, a poor three-franc doctor in a lost little village in Gascony. I cannot even keep up with the progress of medi-