It was a lovely summer’s evening and old Merlier’s mill was in festive mood. In the courtyard three tables had been placed end to end, to await the guests. Everyone in the district knew that today Merlier’s daughter Françoise was to be betrothed to Dominique, a young man who, although often accused of being rather idle, was so good-looking that the eyes of all the women for miles around would light up each time they saw him.

Set in the very heart of Rocreuse, where the main road makes a bend, Merlier’s old mill was as blithe as a lark. The village consisted of the one street, lined on each side by a row of tumbledown cottages; but at the bend there were broad meadows and tall trees following the course of the Morelle and forming a magnificently shady corner at the head of the valley. There was no more charming beauty spot in the whole of Lorraine. On both sides of the valley there were dense woods of century-old forest giants sloping gently upwards to the skyline in a sea of greenery while towards the south the marvellously fertile plain, cut up into hedge-lined fields, stretched out as far as the eye could see. But, apart from its greenness, the great charm of Rocreuse lay in its refreshing coolness during the hottest days of July and August. As the Morelle came down from the Gagny woods it seemed to bring with it the chill of the leafy boughs beneath which it had flowed for mile after mile; and it brought with it, too, the rustle of forest glades. Nor was this the only source of coolness: all kinds of babbling brooks flowed gaily through the undergrowth and at every step you took a new stream seemed to be welling up. As you walked through the narrow paths you could feel underground lakes surfacing beneath the moss and taking advantage of every little gap at the roots of the trees or between rocks to gush out in streams of crystal-clear water; and so numerous and so loud were the whispering voices of these springs that they drowned the chirping of the bullfinches. It was like being in a magic park surrounded by hundreds of tiny waterfalls.

Down below there were water-meadows on which the tall sweet chestnut trees cast their giant shadows and along which long rows of poplars formed their rustling screens. An avenue of enormous plane trees led up through the fields to the old ruined castle of Gagny. In this perpetually well-watered spot, grasses of all sorts shot up to astounding heights. Between the wooded slopes, it was like a park in which the meadows were the lawns and the giant trees formed colossal round flowerbeds. When the midday sun was at its height the shadows took on a bluish
tinge, and the grass lay drowsing in the scorching summer heat; but a cold shiver still ran through the undergrowth.

And in the heart of this lush greenery there could be heard the cheerful clatter of old Merlier’s mill. Half sunk in the Morelle which at this point formed a limpid pool, the old building, made of wood and plaster, seemed to date from the beginning of time. There was a small mill-race and the water fell several yards down on to the mill-wheel which creaked as it turned, wheezing like an asthmatic old servant who has grown old in her faithful service to the family. When people advised old Merlier to get a new one, he would shake his head and say that a younger wheel would be lazier and wouldn’t know the work so well; and he would repair the old one with any makeshift materials he could lay hands on, staves of wine-barrels, pieces of rusty iron and odd bits of lead or zinc. This treatment made the wheel, in fact, look all the more cheerful, with its new queer shape and its plumes of grass and moss. When the silvery water cascaded down on to it, it seemed to be covered in sparkling jewels and its quaint old framework spun round under a glittering string of pearls.

The part of the mill which stood half sunk in the Morelle had the look of some primitive ark left stranded by the passage of time. More than half of the ramshackle old building was supported on piles. The water came in under the floor and there were deep pools in the river, well known throughout the district for the eels and crayfish that could be caught there. Underneath the fall, the mill-pond was as limpid as a sheet of glass and when the wheel was not stirring it up into foam, you could see shoals of big fish swimming slowly round like squads of manoeuvring soldiers. A broken-down staircase led down to a boat moored to a pile in the river; a wooden gallery with irregular window-openings spanned the space above the mill-wheel. The building was, in fact, a conglomeration of tiny recesses, low walls, beams and roofs built on as afterthoughts, creating the impression of some old dismantled citadel. But ivy had grown up and all sorts of climbing plants had covered over the larger cracks in the old house with a green mantle. Young ladies would always stop to sketch old Merlier’s mill.

On the side facing the road, the building was much more solid. A stone gateway led into the main courtyard, with stables and sheds on either side. Next to a well there stood an enormous elm, shading half the yard. At the far end you could see the four first-floor windows of the house, with a dovecote above. Old Merlier’s only concession to public opinion was to have the front of the house whitewashed every ten years; this had just been done and in the light of the midday sun, the villagers were quite dazzled by its whiteness.

Old Merlier had been mayor of Rocreuse for the last twenty years. People admired him for the way in which he had become so rich: he had built up his wealth sou by sou and it was now thought to amount to some eighty thousand francs. When he had married Madeleine Guillard, with the mill as her dowry, he had himself possessed not much more than his two strong arms. But Madeleine had never regretted her choice. Now his wife was dead and he had been left a
THE ATTACK ON THE MILL

widower with a daughter, Françoise. Doubtless he could by this time have relaxed and let the mill-wheel drift round clogged with moss; but he would have been bored and the old house would have seemed dead, so he still kept on working, for pleasure. Merlier was now an old man, tall, with a long taciturn face, who never laughed but who seemed full of an inner joy. He had been elected mayor because of his money and also because he was superb at officiating at weddings.

Françoise had just celebrated her eighteenth birthday. She was considered as one of the local beauties because she was delicate. Until the age of fifteen she had even been thought ugly and the villagers could never understand how such a sturdy couple as the Merliers could possibly have produced such a weakling of a daughter. However, at the age of fifteen, while still remaining delicate she had suddenly blossomed out and her tiny face was as pretty as a picture. Her hair was black and she had dark eyes, but with a peaches-and-cream complexion, lips that were always laughing, dimpled cheeks and a white forehead that looked like a halo of sunshine. Although hardly plump by country standards, she was not thin either, far from it; people merely thought that she could not have managed to lift a bag of flour; but as she grew older, she became rounder and she had ended up as plump and juicy as a young partridge. However, her father’s dourness had made her from an early age into a sensible, self-reliant girl. If she was always laughing, it was in order to please other people; at heart, she was rather an earnest sort of girl. She was, of course, much courted in the district, even more for her money than for her pleasant nature. Her final choice had recently scandalized everyone. On the other side of the Morelle, there lived a tall young man called Dominique Penquet. He was not from Rocreuse; ten years before, he had come down from Belgium, having inherited a small property from an uncle, situated right on the edge of the forest of Gagny, exactly opposite the mill and only a few gunshots away. He said that he was intending to sell up the property and go back home. However, it would seem that he had found the district to his liking for he stayed on. He farmed his little plot, grew a few vegetables for his own table and went fishing and shooting. On a number of occasions he was nearly caught by gamekeepers and sent up before the magistrates. Such an independent way of life, from sources which the locals found a trifle mysterious, finally brought him a bad reputation. People referred to him as something of a poacher. Be that as it might, he was certainly lazy, for he would be found sleeping in the grass at times when he should have been working. He lived in a sort of a shack tucked away amongst the last trees at the edge of the wood and this hardly seemed a proper place for a respectable young man to live. The old women of the village would not have been surprised to learn that he had dealings with the wolves which prowled round the ruins of the old castle. But the girls would sometimes venture to spring to his defense because this young man was a superb specimen of manhood, tall and athletic, very white-skinned, with blond hair and beard that gleamed like gold in the sunshine. And then, one fine day, Françoise had told old Merlier that she loved Dominique and would never marry anyone else.
THE ATTACK ON THE MILL

You can imagine that old Merlier felt that he’d been pole-axed. However, as was his wont, he said nothing. He looked thoughtful and his eyes had lost their normal cheerful glint. For a whole week, they sulked; she too had a solemn look on her face and old Merlier was plagued by a disturbing thought: how on earth had this rogue of a poacher managed to cast his spell over his daughter? Dominique had never visited the mill. The miller kept his eyes open and caught a glimpse of the young swain lying in the grass on the opposite bank of the Morelle, pretending to be asleep. Françoise could have seen him from her window. The conclusion was obvious: they must have fallen in love while making sheeps’ eyes at each other across the mill-wheel.

Meanwhile, another week went by. Françoise was looking more and more solemn. Old Merlier was as tight-lipped as ever. Then one evening, without saying a word, Merlier himself brought Dominique into the room where Françoise was just laying the table. She showed no surprise and merely laid another place; but the little dimples in her face had reappeared and her laughter as well. That morning, old Merlier had gone off to Dominique’s shack on the edge of the forest and the two men had spent three hours talking behind closed doors and windows. Nobody ever found out what they might have said to each other. The only certainty was that when old Merlier came out he was already treating Dominique as his son. No doubt, in this idle young fellow-me-lad who would lie in the grass making girls fall in love with him, the old man had found what he had been looking for: a decent young man.

There was much tongue wagging in Rocreuse. The old women talked at length on their doorsteps of old Merlier’s madness in introducing this ne’er-do-well into his house like that; but he let them talk. Perhaps he’d remembered his own marriage. When he’d wedded Madeleine and her mill, he himself hadn’t had two pennies to rub together either; but that hadn’t prevented him from being a good husband. Moreover, Dominique put a stop to all the gossip by buckling down to work with an energy that astounded everyone. It so happened that the mill-hand had just been called up for military service and Dominique refused to listen to any suggestion that Merlier should take on another one. He carried the sacks, drove the cart and struggled with the old mill-wheel when it showed signs of giving up the ghost, and all with such vim and vigor that it was a pleasure to come and watch him. Old Merlier chuckled to himself. He was very proud at having detected this young man’s hidden qualities. And there’s nothing like love to give young men a boost.

Amidst all this hard work, Dominique and Françoise walked about idolizing each other. They might not have said very much but all the time they kept exchanging fond smiles. Till now, Merlier had made no mention of marriage and they both respected his silence and awaited the old man’s decision. Finally, one day towards the middle of July, he had three tables set up in the courtyard under the old elm tree and invited his friends in Rocreuse to come and have a drink with him.
that evening. When the yard was full of people with their glasses in their hands, old Merlier raised his own and said:

“I’ve great pleasure in announcing that Françoise will be marrying this young fellow here in one month’s time, on the feast of St Louis.”

Everyone enthusiastically drank the young couple’s health; they were all laughing and smiling. Then old Merlier raised his voice and spoke again:

“Now kiss the bride, Dominique, that’s what you’ve got to do!”

And so they kissed each other, all red in the face, while everyone laughed even more loudly. It was a real celebration and a whole barrel of wine was drunk. Then, when only the close friends were left behind, they all chatted together more quietly. Night had fallen, clear and full of stars. Dominique and Françoise sat silently side by side on a bench while one old peasant started talking about the war which the Emperor had just declared on the Prussians. All the lads of the village had already been called up. Troops had still been going through Rocreuse the day before. Hard knocks were going to be exchanged.

“Ah well,” said old Merlier with the selfishness of any happy man, “Dominique’s a foreigner, he won’t have to fight . . . And if the Prussians ever get as far as here, he’ll be on the spot to defend his wife.”

The idea that the Prussians could possibly come to Rocreuse seemed nothing more than a joke. The French were going to give them a thrashing and it would all be over in next to no time.

“I’ve already seen them,” said the old peasant in a hollow voice, “I’ve already seen them.”

Nobody spoke. Then they all clinked glasses and drank again. Françoise and Dominique had not heard a single word; they had gently caught hold of each other’s hands, behind the bench so that no one could see, and it seemed such a nice thing to do that they just sat there gazing blankly into the darkness.

What a lovely warm night it was! In their houses on both sides of the road the villagers were quietly dropping off to sleep like children. The only sound was the crowing of some cock who had woken up too soon. The cooler air was drifting gently down from the thick woods nearby, caressing the roofs of the cottages as it passed slowly over the village. The dark pensive shadows on the meadows assumed majestic and mysterious proportions while the cool brooks and springs gushing in the gloom seemed like the rhythmic breathing of the drowsing countryside. Every so often the sleepy old mill-wheel seemed to rouse itself from its dreams like a sleeping watchdog barking as it stirs; then there were creakings and clatterings as it communed with itself, lulled by the rippling Morelle which spread out and murmured like soft organ music. Never had so charming a little beauty spot bathed so happily in the peace of nature.
One month later to the day, in fact on the eve of the festival of St. Louis, Rocreuse was living in the shadow of terror. The Prussians had defeated the Emperor and, in forced marches, were rapidly advancing towards the village. For the past week, the people passing through along the main road had been warning of their progress: “They’ve reached Lormière; they’ve reached Novelles”; and when they were told how swift their advance was, the villagers of Rocreuse expected to see the Prussians sweeping down from the Gagny woods and when they did not appear, it was even more frightening. They would swoop down on the village in the night and slit everyone’s throat.

The previous night, shortly before dawn, there had been an alert. The inhabitants had been woken up by a great noise of men on the road. The women were already flinging themselves on their knees and making the sign of the cross when, as they peered cautiously out of their windows, the villagers recognized the red trousers of a detachment of French soldiers. The captain commanding them had immediately asked to see the mayor and, after a word with old Merlier, he had decided to remain down at the mill.

Day dawned bright and clear; by noon it would be hot. The woods were bathed in a golden light and in the distance a pale haze drifted up from the meadows. The neat little village awoke, cool and pretty, and with its streams and springs the whole countryside looked like a dainty bunch of flowers sparkling in the dew. But this lovely day brought no answering smile to the villagers’ lips. They had just seen the captain walking round the mill, looking at the nearby houses, crossing over to the other bank of the Morelle and studying the lie of the land through his field-glasses; old Merlier, who was accompanying him, seemed to be supplying him with information. Then the captain had posted soldiers behind walls and trees and down in hollows. The main body of troops were bivouacking in the courtyard of the mill. Would there be fighting? When old Merlier came back, they questioned him. He nodded without speaking: yes, they were going to fight.

Françoise and Dominique were in the courtyard watching him. Finally he took his pipe out of his mouth and said simply:

“It’s a sad day for you, my loves. There’ll be no wedding for you tomorrow!”

Dominique sat scowling with clenched lips, occasionally springing to his feet to peer up towards the Gagny woods, as though trying to see the Prussians arriving. Looking pale and solemn, Françoise was going to and fro, supplying the soldiers with the things they needed. They had set up a makeshift field-kitchen in a corner of the courtyard and were joking as they waited to eat.

Meanwhile the captain seemed delighted. He had visited the bedrooms and the large main room of the mill overlooking the river. Now he sat chatting to Merlier beside the well.

“You’ve got a real fortress here,” he said. “We can certainly hold out until this evening. Those rogues are behind time. . . They should have been here by now.”
The miller looked grim: he could see his mill going up in flames. But he made no comment, considering that it was pointless to do so. When he eventually spoke, it was merely to say:

“You ought to hide the boat behind the mill-wheel. There’s a small space for it there. It may come in useful.”

The captain gave an order. He was a good-looking man of about forty, tall, with a pleasant expression. The sight of Françoise and Dominique seemed to give him pleasure. He now turned his attention towards them, as if he had forgotten the impending fight. His eyes kept following Françoise and it was plain that he found her attractive. Then he turned to Dominique and said sharply:

“So you’re not in the army, young man?”

“I’m not French,” Dominique replied.

This explanation did not seem to meet with the captain’s full approval. He gave a wink and half-smiled: Françoise was more agreeable company than a gun-barrel. Seeing his grin, the young man added:

“I’m not French but I can put a bullet into a man at five hundred yards. . . Take a look at my gun over there, behind you.”

“You may find some use for it,” the captain replied simply.

Françoise came up to Dominique, trembling slightly, and held out her hands to him, as if seeking his protection, whereupon, without paying any attention to the people around them, he reached out and gripped them tightly. The captain gave another smile but said nothing. He remained sitting with his sword between his legs, gazing into the distance, seemingly occupied with his own thoughts.

It was now already ten o’clock and beginning to be very hot and sultry. Nothing was stirring. In the courtyard the soldiers had started eating. Not a sound came from the village, where the inhabitants had all barricaded their house doors and windows. In the street, a solitary dog stood howling. From the neighboring woods and meadows, overcome by the heat, an endless distant murmur came wafting in on the stifling air. A cuckoo called to its mate. Then once more deep silence reigned.

Suddenly, in the drowsy air, a shot rang out. The captain sprang to his feet, the soldiers dropped their half-empty bowls and in a few seconds everyone was at his post and the mill was manned on every floor. Meanwhile the captain had run out on to the road but was unable to see anything; it stretched out, white and deserted in both directions. A second shot rang out and still there was nothing to see, not even a shadow. The captain swung round and looked up towards Gagny. He was at last rewarded by the sight of a little puff of smoke drifting up, like gossamer, between a couple of trees. The wood itself was still dark and quiet.

“The scoundrels have taken to the forest,” he muttered to himself. “They must know we’re here.”

The shooting continued more heavily between the French soldiers posted round the mill and the Prussians concealed in the wood. The bullets kept whistling over the Morelle but without causing any casualties to either side. The firing became
sporadic; soldiers were shooting from behind every bush but still there was nothing
to be seen except little puffs of smoke drifting lazily in the air. This went on for a
couple of hours. The captain was humming nonchalantly to himself. Françoise and
Dominique had remained in the courtyard and were standing on tiptoe peering
over a low wall. In particular they were watching a little soldier who had been
stationed on the bank of the Morelle. Lying on his stomach behind the hulk of an
old boat, he would take a quick look, fire and then crawl into a trench a little
further back to reload. His movements were so precise and quick and looked so
comical that they found themselves smiling as they watched. He must have caught
a glimpse of the head of one of the enemy because he jumped to his feet and took
aim; but before he could pull the trigger, he uttered a cry, spun round and dropped
back into the trench where for a brief moment his legs jerked convulsively like
those of a chicken whose head has been chopped off. He had been struck by a
bullet full in the chest. It was the first casualty. Instinctively, Françoise reached out
and nervously gripped Dominique’s hand.

“Don’t stand there,” called the captain, “they’re shooting this way.”

And indeed at that moment a sharp crack came from the direction of the old elm
and a piece of branch came twirling down. However, in their anxiety to see what
was happening, the couple were unable to tear themselves away. Suddenly, at the
edge of the forest, a Prussian soldier appeared from behind a tree, as though from
the wings of a stage, flailing the air with his arms as he fell on his back. And then
once again nothing stirred; the two dead men seemed to be lying asleep in the
bright sunshine and the landscape still slumbered on, deserted. Even the crackle of
gunfire had ceased. Only the Morelle went babbling gently on.

Old Merlier looked at the captain in surprise, as though enquiring if it was all
over.

“Here comes the big push,” the latter said in a low voice. “Look out and keep
out of the way.”

Before he had finished speaking, there was a terrifying burst of gunfire. The old
elm seemed on the point of toppling over as a shower of leaves swirled down into
the courtyard: the Prussians had aimed too high. Dominique dragged Françoise
away, almost carrying her in his arms, while Merlier followed, shouting:

“Go down to the small cellar, it’s got very thick walls.”

But they did not heed him and went instead into the main room where a dozen
soldiers were waiting silently, peering through the gaps in the closed shutters. The
captain had remained alone in the courtyard, crouching down behind the low wall
while the bursts of firing continued unabated. The soldiers whom he had posted
outside were giving ground very slowly but as the enemy forced them from their
cover, they crawled back one by one into the mill: their orders were to gain time
and not expose themselves, so that the Prussians should not discover the size of the
force opposing them. Another hour went by and when a sergeant came in and
announced that there were only two or three men left outside, the officer pulled
out his watch and muttered:
“Half-past two... Well, we must hang on for four hours longer.”

He ordered the main gate of the courtyard to be closed and everything was made ready for a determined resistance. As the Prussians were on the opposite bank of the Morelle, there was no immediate danger of attack. In fact, there was a bridge about a mile away but they were no doubt ignorant of its existence and it was hardly likely that they would attempt to ford the river. So the captain merely ordered a careful watch to be kept on the road: the Prussians’ main effort would come from the woods across the river.

Once more the firing had died down. In the bright sunshine the mill seemed dead. The shutters were all closed and not a sound came from inside. However, the Prussians were gradually beginning to show themselves at the edge of the Gagny woods, poking their heads out and growing bolder. In the mill, as a number of soldiers were taking aim, the captain shouted:

“No, don’t fire yet. Wait till they’re closer.”

The Prussians were moving forward very cautiously, keeping a wary eye on the mill. This silent, gloomy, ivy-covered building made them uneasy. However, they still kept coming on. When there were about fifty of them in the meadow opposite, the officer shouted one word:

“Fire!”

There was an earsplitting volley of gunfire, followed by isolated shots. Françoise started trembling and involuntarily put her hands to her ears. Dominique was standing watching behind the soldiers and when the smoke had partly cleared he could see three Prussians lying on their backs in the middle of the meadow. The others quickly flung themselves behind the willows and poplars. The siege began.

For more than an hour the old mill was riddled by a hail of bullets. When they hit stonework, they were flattened and fell back into the water, but they buried themselves in the woodwork with a dull thud. Now and again a creaking sound showed that the mill-wheel had been hit. The soldiers inside the mill were husbanding their ammunition and firing only when they had a target. The captain kept consulting his watch and as a bullet came through one of the shutters and lodged itself in the ceiling, he muttered:

“Four o’clock. We’ll never be able to hold out.”

And indeed, under the extremely heavy fire, the old mill was gradually being shot to pieces. One of the shutters fell off into the water and had to be replaced by a mattress. Old Merlier kept continually exposing himself to see what damage was being inflicted on his mill-wheel, whose creaks and groans were going straight to his heart. The poor old wheel was finished; it could never be repaired again now. Dominique had begged Françoise to take shelter but she insisted on staying with him and had sat down behind a large oak cupboard for protection. But then a bullet struck the cupboard with a resounding thud and Dominique placed himself in front of her. Although he had not yet fired a shot, he was holding his gun in his hand; he could not get to the window because the space was completely occupied by soldiers. At every shot, the floor quivered.
“Look out! Look out!” the captain yelled suddenly.

He had just glimpsed a dark mass of Prussian soldiers debouching from the woods. They immediately opened up heavy and sustained fire: it was as if a whirlwind had struck the mill. Another shutter fell off and bullets came shooting through the gaping hole. Two soldiers tumbled to the floor. One of them did not move; he was bundled into a corner out of the way. The other one was writhing in agony and begging someone to put him out of his misery; nobody paid any attention to him, for the hail of bullets was still continuing and everyone was trying to take cover and find a loophole to return the fire. A third soldier was wounded; he did not say anything but slipped down beside a table, with wild, staring eyes. Shocked and horrified at the sight of these dead men, Françoise had automatically pushed her chair away and sat down on the floor where she felt she would be safer. Meanwhile they had brought along every mattress in the house and succeeded in half-blocking the window again. The room was becoming littered with wreckage, broken weapons and shattered pieces of furniture.

“Five o’clock,” said the captain. “Hang on, men. They’ll be trying to get across the river.”

At that moment, Françoise uttered a cry. A ricocheting bullet had just grazed her forehead and a few drops of blood were trickling down her face. Dominique looked across at her; then, walking over to the window, he fired his first shot and kept on firing. He loaded and fired, loaded and fired, paying not the slightest attention to what was taking place around him, although now and again he would glance over towards Françoise. He was not firing hurriedly, however; he was taking very deliberate aim. The Prussians were now creeping along through the poplars in an attempt to cross the Morelle, as the captain had predicted; but as soon as one of them ventured into the open, he would fall to the ground with a bullet from Dominique’s gun in his skull. The captain was amazed at the young man’s prowess and complimented him on it, saying that he would be delighted to have many more marksmen like him in his company. Dominique did not hear him. A bullet grazed his shoulder; another one scratched his arm. He still went on firing.

Two more French soldiers were dead. The mattresses had been cut into shreds and were no longer of any use to block the windows. It seemed as if one final burst of gunfire would enable the Prussians to capture the mill. The position was no longer tenable. However, the captain kept saying:

“Hold on. . . Just half an hour more.”

Now he was counting the minutes; having promised his superiors to hold the enemy up until evening, he was not prepared to give one inch of territory before the time when he had decided to withdraw. He had still retained his affability, continually reassuring Françoise with a smile. He had picked up one of his dead soldiers’ rifles and was firing himself.

Only four French soldiers were left in the room. The Prussians were massing on the opposite bank of the Morelle and it was plain that they were on the point of
crossing the river. A few more minutes went by. The captain was still doggedly refusing to order the retreat when the sergeant ran in shouting:

“They’re coming up the road! They’re going to take us in the rear!”

The Prussians must have discovered the bridge. The captain pulled out his watch.

“Just five minutes more,” he said. “They’ll take at least five minutes to get here.”

And at six o’clock precisely he finally gave the order for his men to withdraw through a little door opening on to a side lane. There they jumped into a ditch and made off in the direction of the forest of Sauval. As he was leaving the captain saluted old Merlier very politely, offered his apologies and even added:

“Keep them in play. We’ll be back.”

Meanwhile Dominique was left all alone in the room. Oblivious to everything, he still kept firing, with no idea of what had happened. All he knew was that he must defend Françoise; he had not noticed the departure of the French soldiers, so he kept on aiming and reloading, bringing down his man every time he fired. Suddenly there was a loud noise: the Prussians had forced their way into the courtyard from the rear. He fired his last shot and then they were on him; smoke was still coming from the barrel of his gun.

Four men seized hold of him and he was surrounded by others, all shouting in their harsh, ugly language. They nearly slit his throat on the spot; Françoise leapt forward, begging them to spare him, but at that moment an officer came in and ordered them to hand their prisoner over. After exchanging a few words in German with his men, he turned towards Dominique and said roughly, in very good French:

“You’ll be shot in two hours’ time.”

It had been laid down by the German general staff that any Frenchman not in the regular armed forces who was caught bearing arms would be shot. Even the civilian militia were not recognized as belligerents. By making such a terrible example of the peasants defending their homes, the Germans wanted to prevent the mass uprising that they feared.

The commanding officer, a tall gaunt man of about fifty, started briefly to interrogate Dominique. Although he spoke excellent French, his rigid, uncompromising manner was completely Prussian.

“Are you French?”
"No, I’m Belgian."
"Why were you bearing arms? This war doesn’t concern you."
Dominique made no reply. At that moment, the officer caught sight of Françoise who was standing listening, pale as a ghost; her white forehead was streaked with blood from her graze. He looked from one to the other of the young couple, apparently realizing the situation, and then merely added:
"You don’t deny that you were shooting?"
"I was shooting as long as I could," Dominique replied quietly.
This confession was pointless for he was blackened with gunpowder, covered in sweat and stained with drops of blood from the wound on his shoulder.
"Very well," the officer said. "You’ll be shot in two hours’ time."
Françoise did not cry out but clasped her hands and raised them in a silent despairing gesture which the officer did not fail to notice. Two soldiers led Dominique away into an adjoining room where he was to be held under close guard. The girl’s legs collapsed under her and she fell into a chair, too overcome by emotion to shed any tears. Meanwhile the officer kept watching her closely and finally spoke to her.
"Is that your brother?" he enquired.
She shook her head. He remained as unsmiling and unbending as ever. After a pause, he asked:
"Has he been living in the district long?"
She nodded.
"Then he must know the woods round here very well?"
This time she spoke, looking at him with some surprise:
"Yes, sir."
He said no more and, turning on his heels, he asked to see the mayor of the village. Françoise stood up. Some of the color had now returned to her cheeks, for she thought she had understood the drift of the officer’s questions and her hopes were reviving. She ran to fetch her father herself.
As soon as the firing had stopped, old Merlier had hurried down to the wooden gallery to examine his mill-wheel. While he adored his daughter and felt a strong affection for his future son-in-law, his mill-wheel also had a large claim on his heart. Now that his two children, as he called them, had come through the fighting relatively unscathed, his thoughts had turned to the other object of his affections. It had certainly suffered a great deal of damage. He leaned over the large wooden structure and studied its wounds with a woebegone expression. Five of the blades had been shot to pieces and the main framework was riddled with bullets. He poked his finger into the bullet holes to discover how deep they were; he was thinking of possible ways of mending all this damage. When Françoise came down to fetch him, he was already plugging some of the holes with bits of wood and moss.
"They want to see you, Father."
And at last her tears welled up as she told her father what she had just heard. Old Merlier shook his head: you couldn’t shoot people like that; he’d have to see. And he went back into the mill as unperturbed and taciturn as ever. When the Prussian officer asked for victuals for his men, he replied that the inhabitants of Rocreuse were not in the habit of being bullied and that you wouldn’t get far with them by threatening violence. He would undertake to take care of everything but only on condition that he was left to do things his own way. At first the officer seemed annoyed at his calm manner but then, impressed by the old man’s plain speaking, he agreed. He even called him back with a further query:

“What’s the name of those woods over there?”
“The Sauval woods.”
“How far do they extend?”
The miller gave him a blank look.
“I don’t know,” he replied and walked away.

An hour later, all the food and money requested by the officer had appeared in the mill courtyard. Night was now falling and Françoise was anxiously watching the soldiers’ movements. She did not move far away from the room in which Dominique was being held. At about seven o’clock, her heart started pounding as she saw the officer go in to speak to his prisoner and for the next quarter of an hour she could hear the sound of raised voices. At one moment, the officer came to the doorway and gave an order in German which she did not understand; but when she saw twelve men carrying rifles line up in the courtyard, she was seized by a violent trembling, so violent that she felt she might die. This was the end: they were going to execute him. The twelve men stood there for ten minutes and Dominique’s voice could be heard still vigorously refusing to give any information. Finally the officer came out again and, slamming the door violently behind him, said:

“Very well, you can think it over . . . You’ve got till tomorrow morning.”

And he motioned to the twelve men to dismiss. Françoise was in a terrible state of shock but old Merlier had merely continued calmly smoking his pipe and watching the firing squad with curiosity. Now he came over and, taking his daughter’s arm, said in his gentle fatherly way:

“Now calm down, my darling. You must try to sleep. Tomorrow there’s another day and we shall see what happens.”

He led her away to her room, locking the door behind him as he left her. In his view, women were rather useless creatures. If there was anything important to do, they’d be sure to make a mess of it. . . However, Françoise did not go to bed but stayed sitting on it for a long time, listening to the noises in the house. The Prussian soldiers camping in the courtyard were laughing and singing; they must have gone on eating and drinking until eleven o’clock, for the din seemed endless. In the mill itself, she could hear the occasional heavy tramp of feet; no doubt sentries were being relieved. But what interested her most were the sounds coming from the room immediately underneath her own, which was the room in which
Dominique was being held. Several times she lay down and put her ear to the floor. Dominique must have been walking to and fro from the wall to the window, for she could hear the regular sound of his steps. Then there was silence; he must have sat down. Meanwhile, all the various other noises were dying down too and eventually the whole house settled down to rest. When everything seemed quiet, she opened her window as gently as possible and leaned out.

Outside, the night was warm and still. The courtyard was lit only by a sliver of moon which was on the point of sinking behind the Sauval woods. The long dark shadows of the trees were cutting the meadows into strips while in the moonlight the grass looked like a carpet of soft green velvet. But Françoise did not linger to enjoy the charm of the mysterious night landscape. She was examining the area immediately around the mill to discover where the Germans had posted their sentries; their shadows could clearly be seen stretching out along the Morelle. In front of the mill, there was only one, on the far bank of the river beside a willow whose branches were dipping into the water. Françoise could see him plainly: a tall young man standing quite still and looking up at the sky, like a pensive shepherd.

Having carefully inspected the surrounding countryside, Françoise went back and sat down on her bed, where she remained for a whole hour, lost in thought. Then she listened again: everything was deathly still. She went back to the window and again looked. She must have been concerned that one of the moon’s horns had still not completely disappeared behind the trees, for she went back to her vigil. At last the time she was waiting for seemed to have come: the night was pitch black; she could no longer see the sentry opposite and the countryside stretched out all around like a pool of ink. She listened for a second and then decided to act.

Running down beside her window was a ladder consisting of iron bars fixed into the wall. This ladder led up from the mill-wheel to the loft; it had formerly been used by the millers to inspect certain pieces of machinery and later on, when the machinery had long since been changed, it had become overgrown by ivy which covered the whole of this side of the mill.

Boldly, Françoise clambered out over the window sill, caught hold of one of the rungs and hung suspended in space. She then began to climb down, greatly hindered by her petticoats. Suddenly a piece of stone came loose and fell with a loud splash into the Morelle. She stopped, frozen with fright; then, realizing that the constant rush of water over the mill-race made it impossible for any sound she might make to be heard in the distance, she continued climbing down more confidently, feeling for the rungs under the ivy with her feet. When she was level with the room in which Dominique was held, she stopped; the window of this lower room was not exactly below her bedroom window and when she reached out sideways from the ladder, her hand could feel only the wall. This unexpected snag almost dashed her hopes: would she have to climb back to her room, leaving her scheme uncompleted? Her arms were tiring and the gentle murmur of the Morelle directly below her was starting to make her feel dizzy. Quickly she began to pull off tiny pieces of plaster from the wall and fling them against Dominique’s
window. There was no response: perhaps he was asleep? She prised off more pieces, scraping the skin off her fingers in doing so. And her grip was starting to weaken. She was on the point of falling backwards off the ladder when Dominique gently opened his window.

“It’s me,” she whispered. “Catch hold of me, darling, I’m falling off.”

Never before had she spoken to him so endearingly. He leaned out of the window, caught hold of her and dragged her into the room. Once there, she burst into hysterical tears, doing her best to fight back her sobs so that the guards should not hear. Finally, with a supreme effort, she regained her composure.

“What about the guards?” she enquired.

Still bewildered at her unexpected appearance, Dominique merely pointed towards the door. From the other side, there came the sound of snoring; overcome by fatigue, the guard had lain down to sleep on the floor, reasoning that by blocking the doorway he would ensure that his prisoner would not be able to go far away.

“You must get away,” she said urgently. “I’ve come here because I want you to escape and to say goodbye to you.”

He did not seem to be listening but merely kept saying:

“It’s you, it’s you. . . My goodness, how you scared me! You might have killed yourself!”

He caught hold of her hands and kissed them.

“Oh Françoise, I do love you so. . . You’re brave and kind. The only thing I was afraid of was dying before seeing you for the last time. . . But now you’ve come they can shoot me. Just a quarter of an hour together and then I’ll be ready.”

He had gradually drawn her into his arms and her head was resting on his shoulder. Danger had brought them closer together and clasped in each other’s arms they could think only of their love.

“Françoise darling,” said Dominique fondly, “it’s St. Louis’s day today, our wedding-day, the day we’ve been looking forward to for so long. You see, nothing has been able to keep us apart, because here we are together, alone, just as we’d planned. That’s right, isn’t it? It’s our wedding morning.”

“Yes,” she replied, “yes, it’s our wedding morning.”

Trembling, they exchanged a kiss. . . But all at once, Françoise broke free as the dreadful reality of their situation suddenly came back to her.

“You must escape,” she gasped. “You must get away, there’s not a moment to lose.”

And as he reached out in the dark to take her in his arms once more, she said with the same tenderness she had shown on first seeing him:

“Oh my dearest, please, you must listen to me. . . If you die I shan’t be able to go on living either. In an hour’s time it’ll be light. I want you to go at once.”

She rapidly outlined her plan. The ladder went down to the mill-wheel; once there, he could scramble over the blades into the boat moored beside it and then easily reach the far bank of the river and make his escape.
“But they must have posted sentries,” he objected.
“Only one, right opposite the mill, by the first willow.”
“But supposing he sees me and gives the alarm?”
Françoise shuddered and pressed into his hand a knife which she had brought down with her. Neither said a word.
“But how about your father and you?” Dominique said after a pause. “You see, I can’t run away. When the Prussians find I’m not here, they’ll shoot you on the spot. . . You don’t know what they’re like, they were offering to let me go free if I agreed to show them the way through the Sauval woods. Once they discover I’m gone, they’re capable of anything.”
Françoise refused to waste time arguing. To all his protests she merely replied:
“You’ve got to escape for my sake. . . If you really love me, Dominique, you won’t wait a second longer.”
She promised to climb back into her room. Nobody would know that she had helped him. Again she flung herself into his arms and held him tight, kissing him passionately to convince him; but before agreeing he asked her one last question:
“Do you swear that your father knows what you’re doing and wants me to try and escape?”
“It was my father who sent me,” replied Françoise resolutely.
This was not the truth; but at that moment she had only one thought in her mind; she wanted desperately for him to be safe, for she could not bear the realization that the coming dawn would be the signal for his execution. Once he was far away, all sorts of disasters might fall on her head but she was prepared to accept them gladly as long as her lover survived. In her single-minded devotion, she wanted one thing above all else: he must not die.
“All right,” said Dominique, “I’ll do what you say.”
Nothing further was said. Dominique went over to open the window again, but a sudden noise halted them in their tracks. The door had rattled and they thought it was being opened. Had a patrol heard them talking? They stood clasped in each other’s arms, petrified with fear. Once again the door shook; but it did not open. They both gave a sigh of relief; it was the soldier lying across the doorway who had turned over. Complete silence ensued; and then the snoring began once more.
Dominique insisted that Françoise should first climb up to her bedroom. He took her in his arms and silently they bade each other farewell. He helped her to grasp the ladder and then caught hold of it himself, but refused to go down a single rung before he was sure that she was safe. When Françoise had clambered back into her bedroom, she whispered softly down to him:
“Goodbye for now, darling. I love you!”
She stayed looking out of her window trying to follow Dominique’s movements. It was still pitch dark. She looked for the sentry but could not see him; there was only the willow gleaming pale in the shadows. For a second or two she could hear the rustling sound of Dominique’s body against the ivy. Then she heard the mill-wheel creak and a slight splash which told her that he had found the boat. A
moment later she was even able to pick out the dark shape of the boat against the gray surface of the Morelle. Once more an agonizing fear gripped her by the throat. Every second she imagined that she could hear the sentry giving the alarm and any little random sound seemed in the dark to be the noise of soldiers running, of weapons clattering against each other, of rifles being cocked. However, the seconds ticked by and the solemn silence of the countryside remained unbroken.

Dominique must surely be approaching the opposite bank now but Françoise could no longer see anything at all. Not a sound was to be heard. Then, suddenly, there was a trampling of feet, a hoarse cry and the thud of a body falling to the ground, followed by an even deeper silence. And then, as though sensing the hand of Death passing close by as she peered out into the gloom, Françoise felt a sudden icy shudder run through her whole body.

4

As dawn was breaking, the mill suddenly reverberated with loud shouting. Old Merlier came up to unlock Françoise’s door and she went down into the courtyard, very pale but composed. When she arrived there, however, she was unable to suppress a shudder when she saw the dead body of a Prussian soldier lying next to the well on an outspread greatcoat... Other soldiers were gathered round the corpse, gesticulating and shouting angrily. Some of them were shaking their fists in the direction of the village. Meanwhile the commanding officer had summoned old Merlier as mayor of the commune.

“Take a look at that,” he said in a voice trembling with rage. “One of my men has been found murdered by the side of the river. We must bring the murderer to book and punish him in such a way that no one else will be tempted to follow his example. I shall rely on your full cooperation.”

“Anything you like,” the miller said, as phlegmatic as ever. “But it’s not going to be easy.”

The officer bent down and pulled aside part of the coat hiding the dead man’s face. He had received a horrible wound: he had been stabbed in the throat and the weapon, a black-handled kitchen knife, was still protruding from it.

“Look at that knife,” the officer said to old Merlier. “It may help our investigations.”

The old man gave a start but immediately recovered himself and without a flicker of emotion replied:
“Everybody round here has got a knife like that. Perhaps your man was tired of having to fight and decided to put an end to himself... That sort of thing does happen.”

“Hold your tongue!” the officer shouted in a fury. “I don’t know what’s stopping me from burning the whole village down.”

Fortunately he was too angry to notice the change in the expression on Françoise’s face. She had had to sit down on the stone bench beside the well. In spite of herself, she found it impossible to take her eyes off the corpse lying on the ground almost at her feet. He was a tall, handsome young man, looking somewhat like Dominique, with fair hair and blue eyes, and this resemblance had suddenly sickened her. She was thinking that perhaps the dead boy had left a sweetheart behind in Germany who would weep bitter tears on learning of his death. And it was her knife sticking in the dead man’s throat. She had killed him.

Meanwhile the officer was still talking of the dire penalties that he would inflict on Rocreuse when some Prussian soldiers came running up. They had just discovered Dominique’s escape. Turmoil ensued. The officer rushed up to the room, saw the open window, realized what had happened and came back fuming with rage.

Old Merlier was extremely put out by Dominique’s escape.

“The idiot!” he muttered. “He’s ruining everything.”

When Françoise heard this comment, she felt a stab of fear. However, her father had no suspicion that she was involved. He shook his head and said to her in an undertone:

“Well, we really are in the soup now!”

“It was that scoundrel!” the officer shouted. “It was that scoundrel and he’ll have reached the woods by now... Well, he’s got to be caught or else the whole village will pay the penalty!”

He turned to the miller:

“Look here, you must know where he’s hiding?”

Old Merlier chuckled to himself as he waved a hand towards the wide expanse of wooded hillside.

“How on earth can you set about finding a man in there?” he said.

“Oh, there must be hideouts that you know about. I’ll give you ten men and you can act as guide.”

“All right. But it’ll take a week to beat through all the woods in the district.”

The studied calmness of the old man’s replies further infuriated the officer. He realized, in fact, how ridiculous such an operation would be. At that moment he caught sight of Françoise sitting pale and trembling on the bench. Struck by the girl’s anxious attitude, he stood looking closely from one to the other for a moment without speaking. Then he asked roughly:

“Isn’t that man your daughter’s lover?”
Old Merlier went pale with anger and for a second seemed as if he would fling himself at the officer’s throat. He drew himself stiffly up and made no reply. Françoise put her head between her hands.

“Yes, that’s the answer,” the officer went on. “You or your daughter helped him to escape. You’re his accomplices. . . Now, for the last time, will you hand him over?”

The miller made no reply. He had turned away and was gazing into the distance with an air of indifference, as if the officer were not addressing him. For the Prussian, this was the last straw.

“Very well,” he snarled, “we’ll shoot you on the spot.”

And once again, he called out the firing squad. Old Merlier remained as phlegmatic as ever. He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders: all this fuss seemed rather tasteless. No doubt he found it difficult to believe that it was so easy to have anyone shot like that. Then, when the firing squad had lined up, he said gravely:

“So you really mean it? All right then, if you absolutely must have someone, it might as well be me.”

But at this moment, Françoise jumped wildly to her feet and said breathlessly:

“Please sir, I beg you, please don’t do anything to my father. Shoot me instead, I was the one who helped Dominique escape. It’s all my fault.”

“No, I’m not lying,” the girl went on passionately. “I climbed out of the window and talked him into escaping. That’s the truth, the real truth!”

The old man went as white as a sheet. He could see in her eyes that she was telling the truth and he was appalled. Oh, those silly children who acted only as their hearts dictated! What a mess they made of everything!

“She’s mad,” he burst out angrily, “you mustn’t listen to her. She’s just making up stupid stories. . . Come on, let’s get it over with!”

She still tried to protest. Flinging herself on her knees, she clasped her hands begging for mercy from the officer who stood calmly watching this touching conflict between father and daughter.

“So that’s how it is!” he said eventually. “Well, I shall hold your father because the other man’s got away. Try and get him back for me and your father can go free.”

For a moment she stared at him wide-eyed, appalled at his dreadful proposal.

“But that’s horrible,” she whispered. “Where can I possibly find Dominique now? He’s gone and I’ve no idea where he is.”

“Well, it’s your choice. Him or your father.”

“Oh God, how can I choose? Even if I knew where Dominique was, I shouldn’t be able to choose! . . . You’re cutting my heart in two. . . I’d sooner die myself, straightaway. Oh please, please kill me!”

The sight of her tears and her despair finally exhausted the officer’s patience.
“That’s enough!” he exclaimed sharply. “I’m prepared to be lenient, I’ll give you two hours. If your sweetheart isn’t here by then, your father will pay the penalty for him instead!”

He ordered old Merlier to be taken away and shut up in the same room as Dominique had been held in. The old man asked for some tobacco and started to smoke. His stolid face showed no sign of emotion. But once he was alone, as he smoked, two large tears welled up into his eyes and trickled slowly down his cheeks: how his poor darling daughter must be suffering!

Françoise had remained behind in the middle of the courtyard. Soldiers were coming and going, laughing and making remarks, jokes that she could not understand. She stood watching the doorway through which her father had just been taken away and slowly put her hand to her forehead as if her skull were splitting open.

The officer turned on his heels, saying once more:

“You’ve got two hours. Try and make good use of them!”

She had two hours! The words went buzzing round her head. Without thinking, she left the courtyard and walked away straight ahead. Where should she go? She was making no attempt to decide what to do because she realized how pointless it would be. All the same, she would have liked to see Dominique. They could have come to some agreement and perhaps found some way out of their dilemma. Still dazed and bewildered, she walked down to the bank of the Morelle, crossed over below the weir on some large stepping-stones and automatically made her way towards the first willow in the corner of the meadow. When she reached it, she bent down and saw a pool of blood. Her face went pale: so that was where it had happened. She followed Dominique’s footsteps in the trampled grass. He must have been running, for they were spaced wide apart, cutting diagonally across the field. Then she lost track of him; but in the next meadow she thought she had picked it up again. The tracks led to the edge of the forest and here all trace of steps was obliterated. Nevertheless, Françoise plunged into the wood: she felt relieved at being alone. She sat down for a while but then, realizing that the minutes were ticking by, she leapt to her feet. How long was it since she had left the mill? Five minutes? Half an hour? She had lost all sense of time. Perhaps Dominique had gone to ground in a thicket she knew, where they had eaten hazelnuts together one afternoon. She went to the thicket and peered into it. A solitary blackbird flew away, singing its soft, wistful call. Then the thought occurred to her that he might have hidden in a cleft in a rock where he would sometimes lie in wait when out shooting; but the cleft was empty. What was the point of looking for him? She felt sure that she wouldn’t find him, yet she was slowly becoming more and more anxious to do so. She started walking faster. Suddenly, the thought came to her that he must have clambered up a tree, so she began to look upwards and call out his name every fifteen or twenty steps, to tell him that she was near. Her call was answered by a cuckoo. A breeze rustling in the branches made her think that he was climbing down from a tree. On one occasion
she even imagined that she saw him and she stopped and caught her breath, almost
tempted to run away. What would she say to him? Was she going to fetch him
back so that he’d be shot? No, she’d not mention anything like that, she’d warm
him to go away at once and not stay in the neighborhood. Then the thought of her
father waiting for her return caused her a sudden pang of distress; she collapsed in
tears on the grass, crying out loud:
“Oh God, oh God, what am I doing here?”
She was mad to have come. And seized with panic, she set off at a run to find
her way out of the forest. Three times she took the wrong track but just as she was
beginning to think that she would never succeed in getting back to the mill, she
came out into the meadow opposite Rocreuse. As soon as she saw the village, she
halted: was she going to go back alone?
She was still standing there when she heard a voice calling softly:
“Françoise! Françoise!”
She saw Dominique’s head peeping out of a ditch. Merciful heavens! She’d
found him! Did God wish him to die? She stifled a cry and slipped down into the
ditch beside him.
“Were you looking for me?” he asked.
“Yes,” she replied. Her head was spinning and she hardly knew what she was
saying.
“What’s been happening?”
She looked down and said hesitantly:
“Nothing very much, I was just anxious and wanted to try and see you.”
He was reassured and went on to explain that he hadn’t wanted to go too far
away as he was afraid for their sakes: those Prussian blackguards were capable of
taking their revenge on women and old men. Anyway, all was well and he added
with a laugh:
“We’ll just have to put off our wedding for a week, that’s all!”
Then, as she still looked upset, he became serious:
“What’s the matter? You’re hiding something from me!”
“No, I promise I’m not, it’s just that I’m out of breath from running.”
He kissed her and said it was not wise for them to go on talking any longer. He
was about to make his way back along the ditch into the forest when she stopped
him. She was trembling.
“Look, it might be just as well to stay here. There’s nobody searching for you so
there’s no danger.”
“You’re hiding something from me, Françoise,” he said again.
Once more she swore that she was not hiding anything. Her only reason was
that she preferred to know that he was close at hand; and she mumbled a few other
explanations which seemed so strange that by now he himself would not have
agreed to go away. In any case, he firmly believed that the French would soon be
back: he’d seen troops in the direction of Sauval.
“Oh, I do hope they hurry up and get here as soon as possible,” she murmured eagerly.

At that moment, the clock in the Rocreuse church tower struck eleven; the chimes came clearly and distinctly over the meadows. Panic-stricken, she sprang to her feet: she had left the mill two hours ago.

“I tell you what,” she said quickly, “if we need you, I'll go up to my bedroom and wave a handkerchief out of the window.”

And she ran off while a very anxious Dominique lay down at the edge of the ditch to keep watch on the mill. As she came into Rocreuse, Françoise met old Bontemps, a tramp who knew every inch of the district like the palm of his hand. He wished her good morning. He had just seen the miller surrounded by Prussian soldiers, he said. And he went on his way mumbling incoherently and making many signs of the cross.

“The two hours are up,” said the officer when Françoise appeared.

Old Merlier was sitting on the bench next to the well, still smoking his pipe. Once again, the girl fell on her knees in tears appealing for mercy for her father. She was playing for time, for her hopes of seeing the French return were rising. She thought that she could almost hear the tramp of their boots as she knelt moaning at the officer’s feet. If only they could arrive and liberate them in time!

“Please, just one hour more, only an hour. Surely you can give us one hour longer!”

The officer was unmoved. He ordered two men to seize hold of her and take her away so that they could proceed with the execution undisturbed. Françoise was in a torment: she couldn’t let her father be murdered like this; no, she’d sooner die with Dominique. And then, just as she was about to run up to her room, Dominique himself came into the courtyard.

The officer and his men gave a roar of triumph; but Dominique himself walked over to Françoise as if there was nobody else present and said to her, quietly and a trifle sternly:

“That was wrong of you, Françoise. Why didn’t you take me back with you? I've only just learnt from old Bontemps what’s been happening. . . Anyway, here I am!”
It was three o’clock in the afternoon. Large black clouds had gradually been massing until they had covered the whole sky, the tail-end of a local storm. The livid sky and ragged copper-colored clouds had turned the valley, so cheerful in the sunshine, into a gloomy, sinister-looking death-trap. The Prussian officer had been content merely to shut Dominique up again in a room without giving any indication of how he was going to treat him. Ever since midday, Françoise had been in an agony of distress. Despite her father’s attempts to persuade her, she had refused to leave the courtyard. She was waiting for the French to return. But the hours were slipping by, night was approaching and her sufferings were increased by the thought that any time gained would be unlikely to change the dreaded outcome.

However, at about three o’clock, the Prussians started making preparations to leave. As on the previous day, the officer had been closeted for some time with Dominique. Françoise realized that her sweetheart’s fate was being decided. She clasped her hands and prayed. Her father was sitting beside her still wearing the phlegmatic, dogged expression of an old peasant who never tries to struggle against the inevitable.

“Oh dear God, dear God!” Françoise said brokenly. “They’re going to kill him!”

The miller put his arm round her and lifted her on to his knee like a child.

At that moment the officer came out, followed by Dominique escorted by two soldiers.

“Never!” Dominique was shouting. “I’d sooner die!”

“Think carefully, young man,” the officer said. “If you won’t help us, someone else will. I’m making you a generous offer. If you show us the way to Montredon through the woods, I’ll let you go. There must be paths you know.”

Dominique said nothing.

“So you still refuse?”

“Shoot me and be done with it,” Dominique replied.

From where she was sitting, Françoise was appealing to him with clasped hands. She had only one thought in her mind: she was urging him to be a coward. But old Merlier caught hold of her hands so that the Prussians would not see the distraught girl’s gesture.

“He’s right,” he said softly. “It’s better to die.”

The firing squad was lined up. The officer was watching for a sign of weakness from Dominique, still hoping to persuade him. Silence fell; in the distance, violent claps of thunder were heard. The whole countryside was sweltering in the sultry heat. Then, suddenly, the silence was broken by a shout:

“The French are here!”
And so they were. On the Sauval road, the red line of trousers could be seen at the edge of the wood. In the mill, pandemonium broke loose as the Prussians scuttled to and fro, although no shots had yet been fired.

“It’s the French!” cried Françoise, clapping her hands.

She went berserk. Springing up from her father’s lap, she stood laughing and waving her arms about in the air. At last they’d come and they’d come in time because Dominique was still standing there alive!

She was deafened by a burst of gunfire, like a shattering thunderclap. She spun round. Muttering: “Well, at least we’ll settle this matter first,” the officer had himself pushed Dominique up against the wall of a shed and given the order to fire. When Françoise looked round, Dominique was lying on the ground with a dozen bullets through his chest. She was completely dazed; no tears came to her eyes as with a glazed expression she went over and sat down on the ground beside the shed, a few feet away from the body. She looked at it, making an occasional vague, childish gesture with her hand. The Prussians had taken old Merlier hostage.

It was a splendid fight. The Prussian officer had swiftly ordered his men to battle stations, realizing that should they try to retreat they would quickly be smashed. They might as well sell their lives as dearly as possible. It was now the turn of the Prussians to be defending the mill and of the French to do the attacking. Firing began with earsplitting violence and persisted for a good half hour. Then there was a dull explosion and a cannon ball broke off a main branch of the ancient elm. The French had brought up their artillery and a gun battery, set up directly above the ditch in which Dominique had been hiding, now commanded the whole length of the main street of Rocreuse. The outcome would not be long delayed.

Poor old mill! Cannon balls were smashing their way through it; half of its roof was shot off; two of its walls collapsed. But the most distressing sight was the damage inflicted on the side overlooking the Morelle. Torn from its shattered walls, the ivy was hanging down in shreds; the river was carrying away vast quantities of wreckage and through a breach in the wall Françoise’s bedroom could be seen, her bed still with its white curtains carefully drawn. The old mill-wheel received two direct hits in quick succession: it groaned in its death throes, its blades were carried off by the current and its frame collapsed. The cheerful old mill was giving up the ghost. . .

Then the French launched their attack. There was a fierce hand-to-hand struggle. Under the rust-colored sky, the death trap of Rocreuse was filling up with dead bodies. The tall isolated trees and the screens of poplars cast grim dark shadows over the broad meadows. To left and right, the woods were like the walls of an arena enclosing the fighters while the gurgling springs and streams and water-courses filled the panic-stricken landscape with the sound of their sobbing.

Still crouching down beside Dominique’s body, Françoise had not moved out of the shadow of the shed. Old Merlier had been killed on the spot by a stray bullet. Then, after the Prussians had all been wiped out and the mill was in flames, the first person to come into the courtyard was the French captain. This was his only
successful engagement since the beginning of the campaign and, bursting with pride, with his head held high, he came prancing in, every inch the dashing and debonair young officer. Seeing Françoise crouching, crazed with grief, between the dead bodies of her sweetheart and her father amidst the smoking ruins of her beloved mill, he gallantly waved his sword towards her, shouting gleefully:

“We’ve won! We’ve won!”