

# PIERRE ROCQUES

[A Fragment from the French of Theos Jongers]

Translated by SIR ANDREW MACPHAIL

[Pierre Rocques, a rich farmer, found himself alone; his son had left him in hatred; his wife, in despair; he was forsaken by his mistress, despised by his neighbours, and insulted by the young.]

**H**E took down a lantern that always hung by his bed; he lit the lantern, and went down stairs. As soon as he appeared in the farmyard, Moustache, the guardian of the night, leaped up with barks of welcome.

“Go, and lie down,” the farmer said in a harsh voice. Then, with a sudden change of mind, he continued in a tone that was almost a caress, “Very well; let us go and make our rounds for the last time.”

Every night for thirty years, Pierre Rocques with a lantern in his hand made a general inspection of the farm buildings; and during those years the dog that followed him had changed four or five times.

This one, Moustache, a big, gray, rough-haired drover’s dog, was young and eager for the work he knew so well, and remembered to the least detail. After the rather rough welcome of his master, the dog ran ahead straight to the cow-stable, where he awaited the farmer, and wagged his stump of a tail. As soon as the door was opened, he hurled himself like a bomb to the farthest end.

The cows were accustomed to these nightly visits, and lying at ease on their flat beds went on chewing their cud without the least emotion.

In the breeding-stable, and in the stable where the bulls were kept, the farmer and his dog were received with the same calm; it was only from the pig-pen that a few ill-humoured grunts were heard.

In passing before the barn, Pierre raised his lantern to see if anything unusual was going on, and Moustache leapt into the straw, always hoping to surprise a conference of cats.

At the hen-house the man merely paused, but the dog sniffed the air minutely, for he knew very well that the enemies which sought that place were the most to be feared—they are so small and so patient.

Upon the sheep-fold a passing glance was enough; the shepherd and his dogs were lying there, and nothing was to be suspected in that quarter.

The horse-stable, the last station, demanded careful scrutiny, for horses are the most expensive of animals; they are nervous, and accidents to them are the most frequent.

When Pierre Rocques had come to the end of his round, he tied up Moustache who usually spent the night in freedom, and went into the wagon-shed. Very soon he returned, carrying a packing case and a length of rope.

"That is all I need," he said, as he went into the horse-stable again; "and if the iron hook holds fast, that will soon be the end."

In front of an empty stall he set down the lantern; then climbing on the box, he unhooked one of the breechings, and fastened the rope securely to the empty hook.

"This ought to bear at least ten times my weight," he said, as he tested the rope for a moment. "Ah, well; when I put on this noose, I shall have nothing to do but lean to one side, and shove the box away."

At that very moment, one of the horses began to whinny, and paw nervously on the floor.

"Whoa there, you beast!" the farmer, overcome by instinct, could not help crying out, in spite of his ominous preparations; and casting his eye on the two rows of horses, he saw twenty pairs of eyes levelled upon him.

"Bon sang de bon Dieu" he swore, as he clambered down quickly from the box. "If I do not hide the lantern, they will not let me hang in peace."

But he did nothing to the light; he let himself fall on a pile of straw; for a long time he remained motionless, his head supported on his hands.

"I have not yet lost my sense," he muttered. "One would think they knew. From the first, the cows looked at me like that; and the dog too, when I tied him up; and it is not only the animals that seem to understand, but the whole farm, the doors, the windows, the platforms, the tools, and even the manure. Is it perhaps because I was afraid, that such an idea came into my mind? No, I am not afraid. When then? It is hard to do this thing here, where so many of the old Rocques toiled. What an end for the Rocques! But now that I have considered the matter, I do not like them to see me in the morning with my tongue out, hanging at the end of a rope, in this very stable where my forbears knew every stone. After all, since I have decided to put an end to myself, I can well afford to wait one day more."

Having arrived at this decision, Maitre Rocques got up, put away the box, untied Moustache, and went to bed.