CHAPTER II

Our Lady's Church

Like a ship for ever asail in the distance, thought the child, everywhere the great church of Chartres was visible, with the passing light or shadow upon its grey, weather-beaten surfaces. The people of La Beauce were proud, and would talk often of its rich store of sacred furniture, the wonder-working relics of "Our Lady under the Earth," and her sacred veil or shift—sacra camisia—which kings and princes came to visit, returning with a likeness thereof, replete in miraculous virtue, for their own wearing. The busy fancy of Gaston, multiplying this chance hearsay, had set the whole interior in array—a dim, spacious, fragrant place, afloat with golden lights. Lit up over the autumn fields at evening, the distant spires suggested the splendour within, with so strong an imaginative effect that he seemed scarcely to know whether it was through the mental or bodily eye that he beheld. When he came thither at last, like many another well-born youth, to join the episcopal household as a kind of half-clerical page, he found (as happens in the actual testing of our ideals) at once more and less than he had supposed; and could never precisely detach his earlier vision from the supervening reality. What he saw, certainly, was greater far in mere physical proportion, and incommensurable at first by anything he knew—the volume of the wrought detail, the mass of the component members, the bigness of the actual stones of the masonry, contrary to the usual Gothic manner, and as if in reminiscence of those old Druidic piles amid which the Virgin of Chartres had been adored, long before the birth of Christ, by a mystic race, possessed of some prophetic sense of the grace in store for her. And through repeated dangers good fortune has saved that unrivalled treasure of stained glass. Now and then the word "awful," so often applied to Gothic aisles, is here for once really applicable. You enter, looking perhaps for a few minutes' cool shelter
from the summer noonday; and the placid sunshine of La Beauce seems to 
have been transformed in a moment into imperious, angry fire.

It was not in summer, however, that Gaston first set foot there: he saw the 
beautiful city for the first time as if sheathed austerely in repellent armour. In 
his most genial subsequent impressions of the place there was always a 
lingering trace of that famous frost through which he made his way, wary of 
petrifying contact against things without, to the great Western portal, on 
Candlemas morning. The sad, patient images by the doorways of the crowded 
church seemed suffering now chiefly from the cold. It was almost like a 
funeral—the penitential violet, the wandering taper-light, of this half-lenten 
feast of Purification. His new companions, at the head and in the rear of the 
long procession, forced every one, even the Lord Bishop himself, to move 
apace, bustling along, in their odd little copes, out of the bitter air, which 
made the jolly life Gaston now entered on, around the great fire of their hall 
in the episcopal palace, seem all the more winsome.

Notre-Dame de Chartres!—It was a world to explore, as if one explored the 
entire Middle Age: it was also an unending, elaborate, religious function, a 
life, or a continuous drama, to take one's part in. Dependent on its structural 
completeness, on its wealth of well-preserved ornament, on its unity in 
variety, perhaps on some undefinable operation of genius, beyond, but 
concurrent with, all these, the church of Chartres has still the gift of a 
unique power of impressing. In comparison, the other famous churches of 
France, at Amiens, for instance, at Rheims or Beauvais, may seem but formal, 
and to a large extent reproducible effects of mere architectural rule on a 
gigantic scale. The somewhat Gothic soul of Gaston relished there something 
strange, or even bizarre, in the very manner in which the building set itself, 
so broadly couchant, upon the earth; in the natural richness of tone on the 
masonry within; in the vast echoing roof of timber, the “forest,” as it was 
called; in the mysterious maze traced upon its pavement; its maze-like crypt, 
centering in the shrine of the sibylline Notre-Dame, itself a natural or very 
primitive grotto or cave. A few years were still to pass ere sacrilegious hands 
despoiled it on a religious pretext:—the catholic church must pay, even with 
the molten gold of her sanctuaries, the price of her defence in the civil war. 
At present, it was such a treasure-house of medieval jewellery as we have to 
make a systematic effort even to imagine. The still extant register of its 
furniture and sacred apparel leaves the soul of the ecclesiologist athirst.

And it had another remarkable difference from almost all Gothic churches. 
There were no graves there. Its emptiness in this respect being due to no 
Huguenot or revolutionary desecration. Once indeed, about this very time, a
popular military leader had been interred with honour within the precinct of the high altar itself. But not long afterwards, said the reverend canons, resenting on the part of their immaculate patroness this intrusion, the corpse itself, ill at ease, had protested, lifting up its hands above the surface of the pavement, as if to beg interment elsewhere. Gaston could remember assisting, awakened suddenly one night, at the removal of the remains to a more ordinary place of sepulture.

And yet that lavish display of jewellers' work on the altars, in the chapels, the sacristies, of Our Lady's Church, was but a framing for little else than dead people's bones. To Gaston, a piteous soul with a touch also of that grim humour which, as we know, holds of pity, relic-worship came naturally. At Deux-manoirs too there had been relics, including certain broken children's toys and some rude childish drawings, taken forth now and then with almost religious veneration, with trembling hands and renewal of old grief, to his wondering awe at the greatness of men's sorrows. Yes! the pavement under one's feet had been, might become again for him, molten lava. The look, the manner of those who exposed these things, had been a revelation. The abundant relics of the church of Chartres were for the most part perished remnants of the poor human body itself. Appertaining however to persons long ago and of a far-off, immeasurable kind of sanctity, they stimulated a more indifferent kind of curiosity, though seeming to bring the distant, the impossible, as with tangible evidence of fact, close to one's side. It was in one's hand,—the finger of an Evangelist! The crowned head of Saint Lubin, Bishop of Chartres, long centuries since, but still able to preserve its wheat-stacks from fire; bones of the "Maries," with some of the earth from their grave: these, and the like of these, were what the curious eye discerned in the recesses of those variously contrived reliquaries, great and small, glittering so profusely about the dusky church. Yet its very shadows ministered to a certain appetite in the soul of Gaston for dimness—for a dim place like this—such as he had often prefigured to himself, albeit with some suspicion of what might seem a preference for darkness. Physical twilight we most of us love, in its season. To him, that perpetual twilight came in close identity with its moral or intellectual counterpart, as the welcome requisite for that part of the soul which loves twilight, and is, in truth, never quite at rest out of it, through some congenital distress or uneasiness, perhaps, in its processes of vision.

As complex, yet not less perfectly united under a single leading motive, its sister volume, was the ritual order of Notre-Dame de Chartres, a year-long dramatic action, in which every one had, and knew, his part—the drama or "mystery" of Redemption, to the necessities of which the great church had
shaped itself. All those various "offices" which, in Pontifical, Missal and Breviary, devout imagination had elaborated, from age to age, with such a range of spiritual colour and light and shade, with so much poetic tact in quotation, such a depth of insight into the Christian soul, had joined themselves harmoniously together, one office ending only where another began, in the perpetual worship of this mother of churches, which had also its own picturesque peculiarities of "use," proud of its maternal privilege therein. And the music rose—warmed, expanded, or fell silent altogether—as the order of the year, the colours, the whole expression of things changed, gathering around the full mystic effulgence of the pontiff in his own person, while the sacred theme deepened at the great ecclesiastical seasons. Then the aisles overflowed with a vast multitude, and like a court, combed, starched, rustling around him, Gaston and his fellows "served" Monseigneur—they, zealous, ubiquitous, more prominent than ever, though for the most profoundly irreverent, but notwithstanding this, one and all, with what disdain for the un-tonsured laity!

Well! what was of the past there—the actual stones of the building and that sacred liturgical order—entered readily enough into Gaston's mental kingdom, filling places prepared by the anticipations of his tranquil, dream-struck youth. It was the present, the uncalculated present, that now disturbed the complacent habit of his thoughts. Alien at a thousand points from his pre-conceptions of life, it presented itself, in the living forms of his immediate companions, in the great clerical body of which he was become a part, in the people of Chartres itself (none the less animated because provincial) as a thing to be judged by him, to be rejected or located within. How vivid, how delightful, they were!—the other forty-nine of the fifty lads who had come hither, after the old-fashioned way, to serve in the household of Monseigneur, by way of an "institution" in learning and good manners. And how becomingly that clerical pride, that self-respecting quiet, sat upon their high-bred figures, their angelic, unspoiled faces, saddened transiently as they came under the religious spell for a moment. As for Gaston, they welcomed him with a perfect friendliness, kept their best side foremost for an hour, and would not leave his very dreams. In absolute unconsciousness, they had brought from their remote old homes all varieties of hereditary gifts, vices, distinctions, dark fates, mercy, cruelty, madness. Appetite and vanity abounded, but with an abundant superficial grace, befitting a generation which, as by some aesthetic sense in the air, made the most of the pleasant outsides of life. All the various traits of the dying Middle Age were still in evidence among them, in all their crude effectiveness, only, blent, like rusty
old armour wreathed in flowers, with the peculiar fopperies of the time, shrewdly divined from a distance, as happens with competent youth. To be in Paris itself, amid the full delightful fragrance of those dainty visible things which Huguenots despised—that, surely, were the sum of good fortune! Half-clerical, they loved nevertheless the touch of steel; had a laughing joy in trifling with its latent soul of destruction. In mimicry of the great world, they had their leaders, so inscrutably self-imposed: instinctively, they felt and underwent the mystery of leadership, with its consequent heats of spirit, its tides and changes of influence.

On the other hand also, to Gaston, dreamily observant, the way they had of reproducing, unsuspectingly, the humours of animal nature was quaint, likeable. Does not the anthropologist tell us of a heraldry, with a large assortment of heraldic beasts, to be found among savage or half-savage peoples, as the “survival” of a period when men were nearer than they are, or seem to be now, to the irrational world? Throughout the sprightly movement of the lads’ daily life it was as if their “tribal” pets or monsters were with or within them. Tall Exmes, lithe and cruel like a tiger—it was pleasant to stroke him. The tiger was there, the parrot, the hare, the goat of course, and certainly much apishness. And, one and all, they were like the creatures in their vagrant, short memories, alert perpetually on the topmost crest of the day and hour, transferred so heartlessly, so entirely, from yesterday to to-day. Yet out of them, sure of some response, human heart would break: in and around Camille Pontdormi, for instance, brilliant and ambitious, yet so sensitive about his threadbare home, concerning which however he had made the whole company, one by one, his confidants—so loyal to the people there, bursting into wild tears over the letter which brought the news of his younger brother’s death, visibly fretting over it long afterwards. Still, for the most part, in their perfect health, nothing seemed to reach them but their own boyish ordinances, their own arbitrary “form.” Theirs was an absolute indifference, most striking when they lifted their well-trained voices to sing in choir, vacant as the sparrows, while the eloquent, far-reaching, aspiring words floated melodiously from them, and sometimes, with a truly medieval license, singing to the sacred music those songs from the streets (no one cared to detect) which were really in their hearts. A world of vanity and appetite, yet after all of honesty with itself! Like grown people, they were but playing a game, and meant to observe its rules.—Say, rather, a world of honesty and courage. They, at least, were not pre-occupied all day long, and, if they woke in the night, with the fear of death.
It was part of their precocious worldliness to recognise, to feel a little afraid of their new companion's intellectual power. Those obviously meditative souls, which seem “not to sleep o' nights,” seldom fail to put others on their guard. Who can tell what they may be judging, planning in silence, so near to one? Looking back long afterwards across the dark period that had intervened, Gaston could trace their ways through the world. Not many of them had survived to his own middle life. Reappearing from point to point, they connected themselves with the great crimes, the great tragedies of the time, as so many bright-coloured threads in that sombre tapestry of human passion. To recall in the obtuse, marred, grieved faces of uninteresting men or women, the disappointments, the sorrows, the tragic mistakes, of the children they were long ago is a good trick for taking our own sympathy by surprise, which Gaston practised when he saw the last or almost the last, of some of them, and felt a great pity, a great indulgence.

Here and now, at all events, carrying their cheerful tumult through those quiet ecclesiastical places—the bishop's garden, the great sacristy, neat and clean in its brown, pensive lights, they seemed of a piece with the bright, simple, inanimate things, the toys, of nature. They made one lively picture with the fruit and wine they loved, the birds they captured, the buckets of clear water drawn for pastime from the great well, and Jean Sémur's painted conjuring book stolen from the old sorceress, his grandmother, out of which he told their fortunes; with the musical instruments of others; with their carefully hidden dice and playing cards, worn or soiled by the fingers of older gamesters who had discarded them. Like their elders, they read eagerly, in racy new translations, old Greek and Latin books, with a delightful shudder at the wanton paganism. It was a new element of confusion in the presentation of that miniature world. The classical enthusiasm laid hold on Gaston too, but essayed in vain to thrust out of him the medieval character of his experience, or put on quite a new face, insinuating itself rather under cover of the Middle Age, still in occupation all around him. Venus, Mars, Aeneas, haunted, in contemporary shape, like ghosts of folk one had known, the places with which he was familiar. Latin might still seem the fittest language for oratory, sixteen hundred years after Cicero was dead; those old Roman pontiffs, draped grandly, sat in the stalls of the choir; Propertius made love to Cynthia in the raiment of the foppish Amadée; they played Terence, and it was but a play within a play. Above all, in natural, heart-felt kinship with their own violent though refined and cunning time, they loved every incident of soldiering; while the changes of the year, the lights, the shadows, the flickering fires of winter, with which Gaston had first associated his
companions, added themselves pleasantly, by way of shifting background, to the spectacular effect.

It was the brilliant surface with which the untried world confronted him. Touch it where you might, you felt the resistant force of the solid matter of human experience: of human experience in its strange mixture of beauty and evil, its sorrow, its ill-assorted fates, its pathetic acquiescence; above all, in its overpowering certainty, over against his own world of echoes and shadows, which perhaps only seemed to be so much as echoes and shadows. A nature with the capacity of worship, he was straightway challenged, as by a rival new religion claiming to supersede the religion he knew, to identify himself conclusively with this so tangible world, its suppositions, its issues, its risks. Here was a world, certainly, which did not halt in meditation, but prompted one to make actual trial of it, with a liberty of heart which might likely enough traverse this or that precept (if it were not rather a mere scruple) of his earlier conscience. These its children, at all events, were, as he felt, in instinctive sympathy with its motions; had shrewd divinations of the things men really valued, and waited on them with unquestioning docility. Two worlds, two antagonistic ideals, were in evidence before him. Could a third condition supervene, to mend their discord, or only vex him perhaps from time to time with efforts towards an impossible adjustment?

At a later date Monseigneur Charles Guillard, then Bishop of Chartres, became something like a Huguenot, and, with the concurrence of ecclesiastical authority, ceased from his high functions. Even now in his relations to a more than suspicious Pope he was but the protégé of King Charles. A rumour of the fact, reaching those brisk young ears, had already set Gaston's mind in action, tremblingly, as to those small degrees, scarcely realisable perhaps one by one, though so immeasurable in their joint result, by which one might part from the "living vine." At times he started back, as if he saw his own benighted footsteps pacing lightly towards an awful precipice. At present indeed the assumption that there was sanctity in everything the kindly prelate touched, was part of the well maintained etiquette of the little ecclesiastical court. But, as you meet in the street faces that are like a sacrament, so there are faces, looks, tones of voice, among dignified priests, as among other people, to hear or look upon which is to feel the hypothesis of an unseen world impossible. As he smiled amiably out of the midst of his pontifical array on Gaston's scrupulous devotion, it was as if the old Roman augur smiled not only to his fellow augur but to the entire assistant world. In after years Gaston seemed to understand, and, as a consequence of understanding, to judge his old patron equitably:—the religious sense too had its various species. With
a real sense of the divine world, but as something immeasurably distant, Monseigneur Guillard, as the nephew of his predecessor in the see, had been brought by maladroit worldly good luck a little too close to its immediate and visible embodiments. From afar you might recognise a divine agency at its work. But to touch its very instruments, to handle them with these fleshly hands:—well! for Monseigneur, that was by no means to believe because the thing was "incredible or absurd." He had smiled, not, certainly, from irreverence, nor (a prelate for half his life) in conscious incredulity, but only in mute surprise, at the thought of an administration of divine graces—this administration in which he was a high priest—in itself, to his quite honest thinking, so unfitting, so improbable. And was it that Gaston was a less independent ruler of his own mental world than he had fancied, that he derived his impressions of things not directly from them, but mediatly from other people's impressions about them that he needed the pledge of their assents to ratify his own? He asked himself at all events, from time to time, could that be after all a real sun at which other people's faces were not irradiated? And sometimes it seemed, with a riotous swelling of the heart, as if his own wondrous appetite in these matters had been deadened by surfeit, and there would be a pleasant sense of liberty, of escape out-of-doors, could he be as little touched as almost all other people by Our Lady's Church, and old associations, and all those relics, and those dark, close, fragrant aisles.

At such times, to recall the winged visitant, gentle, yet withal sensitive to offence, which had settled on his youth with so deep a sense of assurance, he would climb the tower of Jean de Beauce, then fresh in all its array of airy staircase and pierced traceries, and great uncovered timbers, like some gigantic birdnest amid the stones, whence the large, quiet, country spaces became his own again, and the curious eye at least went home. He was become well aware of the power of those familiar influences in restoring equanimity, as he might have used a medicine or a wine. At each ascending storey, as the flight of the birds, the scent of the fields, swept past him, till he stood at last amid the unimpeded light and air of the watch-chamber above the great bells, some coil of perplexity, of unassimilable thought or fact, fell away from him. He saw the distant paths, and seemed to hear the breeze piping suddenly upon them under the cloudless sky, on its unseen, capricious way through those vast reaches of atmosphere. At this height, the low ring of blue hills was visible, with suggestions of that south-west country of peach-blossom and wine which had sometimes decoyed his thoughts towards the sea, and beyond it to "that new world of the Indies," which was held to explain a certain softness in the air from that quarter, even in the most
vehement weather. Amid those vagrant shadows and shafts of light must be Deux-manoirs, the deserted rooms, the gardens, the graves. In mid-distance, even then a funeral procession was on its way humbly to one of the deserted churchyards. He seemed almost to hear the words across the stillness.

Those words identified themselves, as with his own earliest prepossessions, so also with what was apt to impress him as the common human prepossession—a certain finally authoritative common sense of the quiet experience of things—the oldest, the most authentic, of all voices, audible always if one stepped aside for a moment and got one's ears into what might after all be their normal condition. It might be heard, it would seem, in proportion as men were in touch with the earth itself, in country life, in manual work upon it, above all by the open grave, as if, reminiscent of some older, deeper, more permanent ground of fact, it whispered then oracularly its secret to those who came into such close contact with it. Persistent after-thought! Would it survive always, amid the indifference of others, amid the verdicts of the world, amid a thousand doubts? It seemed to have reached, and filled to overflowing, the soul of one amiable little child who had a kind of genius for tranquillity, and on his first coming here had led Gaston to what he held to be the pleasantest places, as being impregnable by noise. In his small stock of knowledge, he knew, like all around him, that he was going to die, and took kindly to the thought of a small grave in the little green close, as to a natural sleeping-place, in which he would be at home beforehand. Descending from the tower, Gaston knew he should find the child seated alone, enjoying the perfect quiet of the warm afternoon, for all the world was absent—gone forth to receive or gaze at a company of distinguished pilgrims.

Coming, sometimes with immense prelude and preparation, as when King Charles himself arrived to replace an image disfigured by profane Huguenots, sometimes with the secrecy and suddenness of an apparition vanished before the public was aware, the pilgrims to "Our Lady under the Earth" were the standing resource of those (such there were at Chartres as everywhere else) who must needs depend for the interest of their existence on the doings of their neighbours. A motley host, only needing their Chaucer to figure as a looking-glass of life, type against type, they brought with them, on the one hand, the very presence and perfume of Paris, the centre of courtly propriety and fashion, on the other, with faces which seemed to belong to another age, curiosities of existence from remote provinces of France, or Europe, from distant, half-fabulous lands remoter still. Jules Damville, who would have liked best to be a sailor, to command, not in any spiritual ark, but in the French fleet (should half-ruined France ever come to have one) led his
companions one evening to inspect a strange maritime personage, stout and square, returned, contrary to all expectation, after ten years’ captivity among the savages of Florida. There he knelt among the lights at the shrine, with the frankness of a good child, his hair like a mat, his hands tattooed, his mahogany face seamed with a thousand weather-wrinklings, his outlandish offerings lying displayed around him.

Looking, listening, as they served them in the episcopal guest-chamber, those young clerks made wonderful leaps, from time to time, in manly knowledge. With what eager shrewdness they noted, discussed, reproduced, the manners and attire of their pilgrim guests, sporting what was to their liking therein in the streets of Chartres. The more cynical or supercilious pilgrim would sometimes present himself—a personage oftenest of high ecclesiastical station, like the eminent translator of Plutarch, Amyot, afterwards Bishop of Auxerre, who seemed to care little for shrine or relic, but lingered over certain dim manuscripts in the canonical library, where our scholarly Gaston was of service, helping him promptly to what he desired to see. And one morning early, visible at a distance to all the world, risen betimes to gaze, the Queen-mother and her three sons were kneeling there—yearning, greedy, as ever, for a hundred diverse, perhaps incompatible, things. It was at the beginning of that winter of the great siege of Chartres, and on that same morning the child Guy Debreschescourt died in his sleep. His tiny body with the placid, massive, baby head still one broad smile, the rest of him wrapped round together like a chrysalis, was put to rest finally in a fold of the winding-sheet of a very aged person, deceased about the same hour.

For a hard winter, like that famous winter of 1567, the hardest that had been known for fifty years, makes an end of the weak—the aged, the very young. To the robust how pleasant had the preparation for it seemed—the scent of the first wood-fire upon the keen October air; the earth turning from grey to black under the plough; the great stacks of fuel, brought down lazily from the woods of Le Perche, along the winding Eure; its wholesome perfume, the long, soothing nights, and early twilight. The mind of Gaston, for one, was touched by the sense of some remote and delicate beauty in these things, like an effect of magic as being won from unsuspected sources.

What winter really brought however was the danger and vexation of a great siege. The householders of catholic Chartres had watched the forces of their Huguenot enemies gathering from this side and that; and at last the dreaded circle was complete. They were prisoners like the rest, Gaston and the grandparents, shut up in their little hotel; and Gaston, face to face with it,
understood at last what war really means. After all, it took them by surprise. It was early in the day. A crowd of worshippers filled the church of Sainte-Foy, built partly on the ramparts; and at the conclusion of the Mass, the Sacrament was to be carried to a sick person. Touched by unusual devotion at this perilous time, the whole assembly rose to escort the procession on its way, passing out slowly, group after group, as if by mechanical instinct, the more reluctant led on by the general consent. Gaston, the last lingerer, halting to let others proceed quietly before him, turns himself about to gaze upon the deserted church, is half tempted to remain, ere he too steps forth lightly and leisurely, when under a shower of massy stones from the coulevrines or great cannon of the besiegers, the entire roof of the place sank into the empty space behind him. But it was otherwise in a neighbouring church, crushed in a similar way with all its good people, not long afterwards.

And in the midst of the siege, with all its tumult about her, the old grandmother died, to the undissembled sorrow of Gaston, bereft, unexpectedly as it seemed, of the gentle creature to whom he had always turned for an affection that had been as no other in its absolute incapacity for offence. A tear upon a cheek, like the bark of a tree, testified to some unfulfilled hope, something greatly desired but not to be, which left resignation, by nature or grace, still imperfect, and made death at four score years and ten seem after all like a premature summons in the midst of one's days. For a few hours the peace which followed it brought back to the face a protesting gleam of youth, far antecedent to anything Gaston could possibly have remembered there, moving him to a pity, a peculiar sense of pleading helplessness, which to the end of his life was apt to revive at the sight (it might be in an animal) of what must perforce remember that it had been young but was old.

That broken link with life seemed to end some other things for him. As one puts away the toys of childhood, so now he seemed to discard what had been the central influence of his earlier youth, what more than anything else had stirred imagination and brought the consciousness of his own life warm and full. Gazing now upon the "holy and beautiful place," as he had gazed on the dead face, for a moment he seemed to anticipate the indifference of age. And when not long after the rude hands of catholics themselves, at their wits' end for the maintenance of the "religious war," spoiled it of the accumulated treasure of centuries, leaving Notre-Dame de Chartres in the bareness with which we see it to-day, he had no keen sense of personal loss.