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THE RED
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THE RED NEIGHBOUR

BY

W. J. ECCOTT

AUTHOR OF

'HIS INDOLENCE OF ARRAS,' 'FORTUNE'S CASTAWAY,'
'THE HEARTH OF HUTTON'

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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The Portrait of The Red Neighbour
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THE RED NEIGHBOUR.

CHAPTER I.

FOR A LOVE-PHILTRE.

GASTON, Marquis de Polignac, was still asleep. But for the wooden blinds, all but closed at the casements, the bedroom had been flooded with the light of a Paris summer morning. The Marquise, Marie Gabrielle, in her white night-robe, moved with noiseless step to interpose a screen between the sleeper and the windows, and then sat down upon the bedstep, one arm half-encircling his pillow, to gaze upon his face with tender solicitude. In the half-lights it acquired a pallor and the hollows below his eyes a purple tint, indicative of strenuous days and arduous nights spent in too rigid succession in the service of the War Department of his Majesty, Louis Quatorze.

For the many life is played out before a very few set scenes of furniture and trappings, which will, in various new conjunctions, form, the present liferenters gone, backgrounds for other lives, figuring the whiles between in the terse and sordid descriptive phrases of an auctioneer's catalogue. Yet how exactly our material environment reflects our fashion of mind, as it does the condition of our purse! And how that environment controls and modifies our words, our actions, and the thoughts that precede all!

The Red Neighbour.

There were many objects of great price in the noble bedchamber of the Polignacs, but none more costly than the great bed itself, of some rare foreign wood inlaid with ivory, hung with two great curtains of silver moire, and two head curtains, which for a century or more we have called *bonnes grâces*, of the same delicately rich fabric, all lined with pale blue taffetas. Even the valances were of silver moire garnished with fringes of gold and silver thread, and at the back of the bed gleamed from its pale-blue ground the arms of Polignac embroidered in gold.

Against the blue and silvery dove colours of the curtains the face of the Marquise, with its exquisite rosy pinkness, poised on the slender neck which emerged from triple filmy folds of Point de Venise, might have suggested a perfect Malmaison carnation in a slender vase of white porcelain, to which idea the very nostrils of the imaginary visitant would have contributed, for the fragrance of those flowers filled the chamber, wafted by the morning breeze from the balcony without the casements.

One would like to think that goodness alone was the true beautifier of woman, and the true anodyne to Time, if it were not as partially true that mere naughtiness keeps others youthful. The Marquise was thirty-two as the calendar counts age. More, she was mother to a tall girl who was verging on fourteen. But she looked, with her blonde hair and her rose-pink complexion, twenty-four at most. To her husband alone she unfolded the petals of her love. If she knew, as who could not in that gay court, of the intrigues and shamelessness of other ladies, she never spoke of them, and her own innocence of thought had led her along a blameless path.

She watched her husband with a trouble in her beautiful eyes that was no stranger to them. He slept soundly the sleep of the tired man who has done his best. Indeed of late she had slept the more lightly. In the night-watches one hears plain truths from the voice of conscience. Daylight and the round of pleasure tended to obscure the edges of the truths and make her

forget, or toss a rebellious head and say, "It is naught! What matter if I have not told him of it?"

The trouble in her eyes was not at the possession of her little secret. Nor did it spring from doubt of his loyalty to her, but from doubt of his love.

The world about her lived for pleasure. Why, then, was she so often alone at Versailles, at Fontainebleau, at Marly? Why was he so absent even in her company? The affairs of state! Affairs of state had sent Monsieur Fouquet, the Minister whose device was a squirrel and whose motto, "Whither may I not mount?" to Pignerol. Affairs of state were for old or crafty men, like Colbert or Louvois, who had no young wives to cosset.

Ambition in a soldier? Ah! That Marie Gabrielle, born a De Lusignan, could understand. But zeal for the king, expended in poring over lists of troops, bills of forage and munitions of war, was quite incomprehensible.

What thoughts then were those that lay so securely locked behind the massive frontlets of his brow, the creases in which were scarcely smoothed out by kindly sleep, only to reappear on waking?

What were his inmost thoughts, his actuating motives? Had his love in fact grown cold, and if so, for what reason?

Those questions she had asked herself so often. Had she but put them aside as unanswerable till time found answers to them, it had been well enough. But of patience, the great gift of heaven to woman, she had but a small store. Patience was for the bourgeoisie, and the commonalty. No one had ever said to Marie Gabrielle de Lusignan de Polignac—"Have patience!"

In the dressing-room adjoining the stir of the day had begun—for the servants. The Marquise had no difficulty in recognising the voices of Pierre, the valet, and Nanette her maid, wishing one another good-day as they prepared for their particular cares. "How their tongues run! One would wonder what they can find to say to one another," thought the Marquise. She added to herself—"What, indeed, shall I find to say to Gaston when he wakes?"

The folding-doors between chamber and chamber were so thin after all. What if they began to talk coarse scurrilities, such as Paris servants often did when they were by themselves? Pierre was an irreproachable valet in presence of his superiors, Nanette demure and modest as a mistress could desire, but what in effect were they, left to themselves?

The Marquise was on the point of giving them warning of her wakefulness when she heard something which stayed her movement.

"Last night?" Nanette asked.

"It is quite true! The archers arrested her, and she is now in the Conciergerie!"

"Ciel! For poisoning? She will be put to the Question? How horrible, . . . and a woman too!"

"It is the same thing, Nanette, man or woman, whoever does such things is worthy of the Question! She will be *red* enough before they finish with her!"

The Marquise sat upright and listened with both ears—"Red?" Why should Pierre so underline the word? Who was it that had been arrested and was called 'red'?"

"She has been too clever with her 'Inheritance Powder,'" Pierre went on.

"Bon Dieu! Inheritance Powder! What is that?"

"Nothing to do with you, Nanette. She has taught some of the ladies too much, it seems. It is not good for women to know too much!"

"All very fine, Monsieur Pierre! Do you think I am going to marry you if you have any secrets from me. You will get neither me nor my box of savings."

"Marriage, for example, marriage is quite another affair!" said Pierre, and the Marquise could picture Pierre's bland face and expressive grimace as he resumed his opening and shutting of drawers.

But Nanette was not to be put off with shrugs.

"A fig for your 'Inheritance Powder.' Whatever it was I warrant she made a lot of money out of it. Who will get that?"

"The archers or the provost!"

"And who sent her to the Conciergerie?"

"Some say it was Madame Dufresnoy!"

"That little shrew! The wife of a mere clerk!"

The Marquise pictured the expressive gesture of Nanette.

"It is," said the lofty Pierre, "that women know nothing, absolutely nothing."

The Marquise in her chamber heaved a sigh.

"It is," retorted Nanette, "because women do not steep themselves in nastiness like you others, the men!"

"Now you are talking nonsense, Nanette, and you had better go and fetch madame's hot water, or you will get into trouble!"

"Well! I shall ask madame!"

"What! Ask madame! She does not know Paris. Did she ever relate a scandalous tale or listen to one? No! I will tell you. The Dufresnoy is the friend, you understand, of Monsieur de Louvois, the great war minister. Last year there was a monstrous conspiracy formed against him. They hung De Traumont for it. But there was something beneath it all which they did not fathom. Monsieur de Louvois made Madame Dufresnoy a lady of the bedchamber; he gave her admission to the *grandes entrées*. Imagine if Louvois had died! It would have made a great difference!"

"Surely!"

"And Madame Dufresnoy heard of all the fine ladies in Paris going to the Red Neighbour!"

The Marquise Marie Gabrielle clenched her little hands tightly. "The Red Neighbour in the Conciergerie!" And she asked herself why.

Pierre went on. "And then she noticed—she is a clever woman if she is but a clerk's wife . . ."

"She noticed, my Pierre?" The wheedling Nanette!

"She noticed that things happened!"

"What, for example?"

"Some of the husbands died!"

"Ah! . . ." Nanette was filled with horror . . . and curiosity.

"They died of the 'Inheritance Powder.'"

"And they will put her to the Question?"

"Without doubt!"

"Gracious! Then she will tell all their names! Is it not so, Pierre?"

The Marquise's ears heard no more. Her brain was too busy. The Red Neighbour was in the Conciergerie. She would be put to the torture. She would confess the names of all her clients—all, and amongst them that of Marie Gabrielle, Marquise de Polignac—yes! The innocent would be confounded with the guilty in one odious list of the accused. Those who had gone to the Red Neighbour for a hair-wash, a cosmetic, for a simple horoscope, for a love-philtre, for the elixir of youth, would all be caught in the same net with those who had purchased the Inheritance Powders. No woman would dare to ask her dearest friend, for fear of hastening suspicion, if she also had been a customer of the Red Neighbour.

The sickness of dread smote the Marquise. Prouder than most of the great ladies, but not less curious, she too had been to consult the wise woman, impelled by her very love for her lord to seek in mystery the secret causes of his coldness. And for this she had imperilled for ever her good name, even in her husband's ears, and run the risk of being branded with the profligate and the guilty as *her* husband's would-be poisoner—poison. . . .

She swooned away in unmistakable fact, and slipped down by the bedside as her husband, dimly conscious of some stir, awoke.

Could she have seen the look of consternation and of self-reproach that came over the face of the Marquis, she would have had no doubts left as to the strength of his love, nor censured him for too great a restraint in its manifestation. As he lifted her, unconscious, on to the bed and deftly and tenderly applied simple remedies, he breathed her name in whispers of passionate devotion, and imprinted such kisses upon her lips as would almost have wooed back Eurydice from the house of Orcus.

It was not long before she came to, and, as her breath

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came in short gasps, it was Ga—Ga—Gaston that her lips first fashioned into utterance, but with complete recovery came back the haunting fear that had possessed her, and drove away from her lips the confession of simple folly, which would have brought immediate forgiveness and help from the beloved husband at her side. The proverbs of ten nations well with wisdom, showing how easy it is at the beginning to retrieve mistakes by a plain confession, but, if it were customary to rule one's conduct by them, there would be no proverbs. The Marquise contented herself with the heat of the morning for explanation, and wrapped herself in his caresses, while making up her mind to be ruled, not by the deepest rules of love, but by the mere index-finger of expediency, which more often than not points the wayfarer into the trackless wilderness of evasion and ruin.

CHAPTER II.

DOCTOR LEVANI SEEKS TO BUY A PRACTICE.

There is a little corner of old Paris, older than any one can tell. It lies between the Pont Neuf and the Rue de la Barillerie. It is bounded on the right by the Quai des Orfèvres and on the left by the Quai des Morfondus. It was here that Messieurs the Romans dug a great hole in the ground. They set strong walls about it. The French kings arose and made the walls stronger and built over the hole, built a palace beside it, and a great church. The hole, divided into many dungeons, torture-chambers, and other necessary aids to justice, came to be called the Conciergerie, the prison for debtors and for criminals, and it has never been empty. Its very mortar was mingled with the blood of slaves, its every stone exudes the stored-up tears of countless prisoners. Its

towers, its courtyard, the dark and noisome corridor by which they enter, carry to the soul sadness and affright.

Every generation from the days of the Romans, every order of society, every sect, has furnished its impost of indwellers. The great who aroused the enmity of princes, such as the Count de Montgomery, or the Maréchale d'Ancre, and those in whose breasts kings aroused enmity, like the assassin Ravailac, have entered its gate of despair to emerge only when the executioner's cart awaited them. Nameless multitudes of lowlier born or less notable unfortunates, rebellious peasants from the provinces, and street brigands of the Court of Miracles, have gone into it only to succumb to the attentions of Monsieur Peste de la Conciergerie, the son of Monsieur Filth and Madame Darkness. It is not good for our friends, the conquered on the battlefield of life.

A man stood at the gate of despair, talking in a matter-of-fact tone to the concierge, merely an under-strapper, you understand. The real "concierge," whose style was Concierge-Bailli, was an important functionary, and stood in lieu of the full-fledged governor that the Bastille and Vincennes possessed. But these places were almost residential in their character, dignified abodes, to which royalty sent its friends in its own carriage in fulfilment of its invitations, conveyed in the shape of a *lettre de cachet*. One never refused these invitations, and very seldom shortened one's stay, which was during his Majesty's pleasure, but one did not anticipate extreme rigour. On the contrary, one was sometimes very handsomely treated.

The man that stood without had a respectable but somewhat rusted appearance. He wore a black hat without a feather, a black but napless cloak, coat, vest, and breeches of brown velvet, much tarnished, black stockings of worsted, and stout buckled shoes. His head was adorned with a long flowing wig, and in his hand he carried a gold-headed cane. It was difficult to tell his age from his clean-shaven, sharp-featured face with its small ferrety eyes. But at a guess he was not over forty.

Dr Levani seeks to buy a Practice. 9

"It is impossible, Mr Doctor," the concierge, a heavily-built, beetle-browed personage was saying. "One can only visit a prisoner when one is armed with an order from the Minister."

"That is unfortunate, Mr Concierge. It is purely a matter of business. Any one might hear the conversation. It is not that I want to assist her to escape. On the contrary. Besides, with such keepers as you—why, I wager you are as strong as Samson!"

"Was he a concierge?"

"Not exactly. He is said to have lifted the town-gates from their sockets and carried them off, however."

"Parbleu! It would take a strong man to lift these!"

"It is a matter of business!" repeated the doctor, tapping his pocket significantly. "But if you say I can't, well I must try Monsieur Colbert. So adieu! Mr Concierge!"

"Stay a moment," said the other. "You are a doctor, you say?"

"Yes; Dr Levani!"

"Ah! One might say, for example, that we sent for you to cure the prisoner of a migraine, or ward off a fever?"

"Certainly!"

"But you must know, Mr Doctor, that there is an under-jailer. He would want a business persuasive also, no great matter, look you, and the head-jailer, without whom you could do nothing—the same thing,—you understand?" The concierge looked at the doctor attentively as if appraising his possibilities. Dr Levani's face was as immobile as brass. He looked gravely at the concierge as if he were listening to his symptoms.

"A question of crowns! Are there any others? I am not rich enough to buy the Conciergerie."

"There are others," said the concierge. "But it is not necessary to inform them."

"Come, then! Here is a crown for yourself. Now, introduce me to the under-jailer, and I will make shift to see the lady I want."

Dr Levani gathered his cloak about him and went in.

The under-jailer was an insignificant fellow and took a livre quite willingly. The head-jailer was a very different individual, and not easily won: but the impassive doctor had resort to another string of his lute.

"Good-morning, Mr Head-jailer. I am desirous of seeing one of your charges on a matter of business. How bad the light is here!"

"It is not good, certainly. Who are you, pray?"

"I am Dr Levani. Why, man alive! what a terrible colour you have: surely you are ill!"

"Living in this accursed hole does not make one look rosy!"

"But one moment, my dear sir. Allow me to feel your pulse. In a trice he had a fat watch out of his fob with one hand and the jailer's wrist between the fingers of the other. "Ah! it is as I thought, the chloroasteries of the spleen are at fault. My friend, I insist on your taking this pill. And here are three more. They are a wonderful empiric."

"It is bitter enough," said the jailer.

"Never mind, it is efficacious. I am so constituted that I no sooner see a fresh face than I begin to diagnose the symptoms I see in it. It is a wonderful gift the gift of diagnosis."

"Ah!" said the head-jailer, "I begin to feel better already. And now, sir, your business."

"A trifling matter. I had almost forgotten it. I wish to see the lady they call the Red Neighbour. It is about the purchase of some of her effects. Five minutes on the outside of the grille, and you are welcome to hear every word."

"You call that a trifling matter. Saints above! If the Concierge-Bailli heard of it I should lose my place."

"And what is that worth, may I ask, my dear sir?"

"Twenty livres a-month and board and lodgment."

"So little! and it is for this you immure yourself and your wife and children? . . . Why, I would willingly engage an intelligent fellow like you at twice the wages. Listen, my friend. The lady is naturally somewhat upset at her sudden arrest. You have called me in to

Dr Levani seeks to buy a Practice. 11

prescribe some of my excellent pills, which you have found so efficacious. I am giving you a small commission for the introduction. That is all. It is a matter of business."

"There can be no harm," said the head-jailer as he took the crown piece. "Follow me! She is in our best guest-chamber. I shall have to shut you in and stand outside myself to watch you through the little wicket."

The cell was above-ground: and a mere twilight proceeded from two narrow slits in the wall, out of reach, across both of which was a thick aggregation of cobwebs.

Dr Levani bowed politely to the figure of a woman which emerged from the perfect gloom at the other end of the cell into the semi-obscurity where he stood.

At all events one could easily divine why she was called "Red."

Her hair made a bright luminous spot in the general dulness, a vivid tawny red, in which one almost expected to find blue depths. The texture of it was coarse, the surface glossy but without a ripple, and the great coils of it about her head spoke eloquently of its length. Her complexion was clear but pallid with the pallor of one who lives almost entirely indoors, but her eyes, of a warm lively brown, had a certain arresting quality that lifted an otherwise coarsely handsome face above the mere buxomness of the Halles. Her person was scrupulously cared for and elegantly clothed, but no sumptuousness could disguise a squareness of shoulder, a breadth of chest and hips that bespoke great strength and a plebeian origin,—a suggestion borne out by the large fleshy though remarkably soft well-kept hands.

"The doctor to see you," said the jailer, and slammed the door and opened the wicket with mechanical expertness.

"I hope madame will forgive the intrusion," Dr Levani began. "I am Dr Levani."

"Quack!" said the Red Neighbour in a tone that did not belie her apparent origin.

"Madame,"—this in a tone of deprecation,—"merely

a humble brother of the craft of which you are so distinguished a practitioner."

"And you have come?"

"In one word, . . . to buy your practice!"

She came a step nearer with a movement that was almost a bound.

She was as vigorous as a young panther. Dr Levani did not move a muscle. He stood calm and brazen-faced.

She peered at him with her penetrating eyes, eyes that seemed to collect and radiate the light.

"You have been a lackey?"

"Madame has signal powers of observation," returned Levani, lowering his voice and rolling his eyes in the direction of the wicket.

"Which are not for sale, Mr Doctor Levani. But come, my good man, what is it you want? Old Beetle-brows over there will not let us talk all day."

Levani was quite cool, and saw that she saw it. The surroundings, the being shut in a cell in the Conciergerie with a female panther, were not conducive to coolness, except that the cell itself was chilly, bone-chilly.

"First," he said, "you are not likely to get out of here in a hurry!"

"You are consoling! Well?"

"Second, if anything is to get you out it is money!"

"Quite wrong! I shall go out when I like."

Dr Levani shrugged his shoulders. "You have a queer taste!" It was evident that he regarded this as bravado, for he went on, "Third, I am willing to find money—five hundred livres down, and another thousand in ten days."

"And I? What am I to do in return?"

"Give me your recipes!"

"What? A hair-wash or so, an eternal bloom of youth, a dentifrice? Pooh!"

"And the names of a few of your illustrious clients, wives of the farmers-general, and so forth!"

She took two or three panther strides and came back.

"You do not know the Red Neighbour! You think

to make the bird sing, as your friends say in the Court of Miracles. I should almost admire you for your impudence, if impudence were not so common. It was not a bad idea." She laughed a low taunting laugh. "But the Red Neighbour sell her clients' names! My faith! Faith of a poisoneress, as they call me! And for money? Pah, man! I am as rich as ever woman wished to be!"

"It is possible to be rich," replied the unperturbed doctor, "and not have five sous of small change. And it is as well to have an agent."

"Whom one would never see again once he had the trade secrets!"

"Suppose,—pardon the supposition, madame,—they put you to the Question!"

"Let them try," she said, planting her hands on her hips. "Do you think I have not room here for a few quarts of water? The expression would shock my illustrious clients, as you call them. You do not know the Red Neighbour! But suppose!"

"You might proclaim their names and get nothing but your pains for it. Whereas I offer you ready money, and a continuous supply of ready money."

"You are very good, little man," she said tauntingly. "You are good enough, doubtless, for the little bourgeoisie, but not for the great game. That takes a woman. Pouf! No! My recipes I have swallowed. My papers? I have none. My money is well bestowed and available at need. In short, how do you know I am not here of my own accord? What is your address, however? You are a sly-looking rascal. I might find use for you because you have not flattered me."

"Rue Christine, Number 3."

"Rue Christine, Number 3!" she repeated. "Sapristi! Our little doctor is ambitious, it seems."

"Time!" growled the head-jailer through the wicket, and threw open the door.

"What, already!" said Levani regretfully.

"Bring some one more amusing next time, Mr Jailer," she said. "Is my breakfast coming?"

"In two moments, madame," said the jailer as he conducted the doctor to the concierge.

"A most interesting patient," said the doctor as he reached the street once more. "How strong the light is! And how fresh the air! Mon Dieu! I should not care to be there all day."

But he did not extend his meditations to those who had been immured for weeks. Pity and meditation were not his strongest characteristics.

He took a turn or two in the street. There was plainly one thing to do, rely on human nature. Some of the illustrious clients would have heard by now the news of the internment of their "Red Neighbour." They would hear it from their maids when they brought the chocolate. They would become more and more nervous until the thought would strike them to buy her secrecy. They did not know what he knew, the curious kind of animal she was,—an animal that would not betray. They would come hovering about the Conciergerie, like spiders and moths about a lamp, in disguises, in their maid's best clothes. All he needed was a point of observation, a watch-tower. Then hey for the practice! It would be his without buying.

He took another turn of the street. An apartment to let—furnished. He spoke to the concierge of the house. It was on the first floor. Good! He could see it? "With pleasure!" A livre removed all traces of too much trouble. "So! Charming!" A window which commanded the street. "Dr Levani, No. 3 Rue Christine!" Should he pay the deposit now? No need! The *propriétaire* would be calling in two hours. He would take a survey of the apartment and see what more he needed. The concierge left him by himself.

Dr Levani opened the casement wide and sat down to watch. It was a beautiful morning. The outlook was a trifle grim, perhaps. Gate of despair! Grim pile the Conciergerie! *Tiens!* A moth! Dr Levani altered his position to suit, and followed her with his two ferrety eyes. Young! Beautiful! What shoes to walk in such a street! Dressed like a maid and

cloaked! Ah, yes, but what a carriage! Who could she be?

Dr Levani resumed hat and cane and, making his excuse to the concierge, who looked carefully over him to make sure he had taken nothing from a room where everything was heavy and large and old, went out into the street.

Dr Levani crossed the street boldly and as boldly accosted the unknown.

"Madame is evidently looking for some one? Can I assist you?"

The fair unknown stopped and vouchsafed a glance sufficiently haughty to proclaim rank. This was no wife of a farmer-general.

"I am looking for the Conciergerie!" she said.

"This is it, Madame la Marquise!" he replied with an assumption at a venture of an old man's manner of slightly overdone deference. "You wish to see some one—the Concierge-Bailli, perhaps?"

"Not precisely! I hardly know—is there a head-jailer?"

"Yes, Madame la Marquise. I have been speaking to him not an hour since. I am a doctor, and was called in to see a distinguished prisoner."

A slight tremor passed over the lady's face.

"Indeed, doctor"—she strove hard to preserve an aristocratic indifference.

"Yes, Madame la Marquise, no less than the lady known to all Paris as the Red Neighbour!"

The agitation became more pronounced.

"Why do you call me 'Madame la Marquise'? I have not the honour of your acquaintance, it seems."

"There are not so many ladies of the first rank that one does not soon learn to know them! I am your very humble servant, Dr Levani, of Milan, Professor of Therapeutics and the art physical. Permit me a moment." He looked straight at her with cold immutable gaze for the space of ten seconds. Then he went on—

"You seek an interview with the Red Neighbour. Is it not so?"

"Well?"

"You have had some correspondence with her, secrets of, shall we say . . . the toilette?"

The unknown lady made no sign.

"You learn of her arrest. You do not wish your illustrious name . . . I need not mention it aloud . . . besmirched by garrulous confessions of a desperate criminal. You come hither with a vague idea of seeing her, of buying her silence. Madame, in half an hour Paris will be doing the same thing. It is useless. Neither you nor they will be admitted."

The lady made a little movement of her gloved hands, a gesture of despair.

"How do you know this?"

"Madame la Marquise! It is from a study of human nature."

No one could have uttered this with greater professional assurance of profound knowledge, not unaccompanied by a certain sadness, which proclaimed how heavily the knowledge weighed upon its possessor.

There was a moment's pause. The lady was inclined to say "Thank you, doctor, and Good-morning!" which, sweetly and firmly enunciated by aristocratic lips, would have shaken off the attentions of this profound student. But she would have been no nearer to the object of her quest. Could she not buy this man's agency, this man who had an *entrée* into the very cell of the Red Neighbour?

"There is no time to lose, madame." He pulled out a large watch and consulted it attentively. "My patients await me. If you deign to accept my aid—good—I am at your service. If not—no matter. I am your ladyship's humble servant."

"You are evidently very discerning," she said pleasantly. "I do not want to see her myself. I want written assurance from her that my visits were of an innocent nature, signed in the presence of two witnesses—yourself and the head-jailer. You can manage that."

"It is a very difficult matter. But I will do it. In return you will introduce me into your salon as a physi-

cian in whom you will have confidence. It will expedite my ambitions."

"It would perhaps have been easier to offer you a more solid reward."

"Madame!" The virtue of Dr Levani was patent in every tone of reproach. "No! It is a service I am going to do you because I love to benefit mankind. I only ask a wider scope. That is all!"

"It is understood! You will wait till I invite you. Your address?"

"Dr Levani, No. 3 Rue Christine. Permit me to conduct you to a coach."

CHAPTER III

TOO OLD FOR DOLLS.

In the garden of the Hotel de Polignac, on a grass plot, lying prone, with her elbows on the marble edge of a fountain, watching the gold fish, was Mademoiselle Thérèse de Polignac. Nanette, madame's maid, stood by, quite happy to be doing nothing, thinking of nothing, ready to chatter.

"You are listless this morning, mademoiselle. Nothing amuses you."

"I am getting too old to be amused, Nanette," said the girl, drawing the tips of a long tress of hair through the water. "Nevertheless, it is a fine morning, and I am as lazy as Monsieur Speckle-back there. He is just like Monsieur Colbert. Look how slyly he sticks in the green shadow by the pipe!"

"The pipe, mademoiselle?"

"Yes. The pipe that goes up into the Triton and carries the water that he spouts."

"La! mademoiselle. Is that the way of it? How clever you are getting! It never entered my head."

Mademoiselle's expression was reflected brokenly in the water. "No? I am not surprised. All you have to do is to obey orders, not to think. It is we others who think. *We* cannot help thinking though we are lazy."

"Ah, they teach you fine things at Meudon! No wonder you do not play when you have a holiday."

"It is well enough at the convent. But one cannot stay there for ever."

It was on Nanette's lips to say something about marriage, the one eternal topic of the serving-maid who still has pretensions (and at what age does she finally give them up?). She remembered, however, in time that the Marquise had forbidden it, and instead said—

"You have not once asked for Louise and Victorine!"

"The dolls?" There was a world of something which was neither scorn—for Thérèse scorned nothing that was or had been hers,—the ægis was over them, whether dog, cat, doll, or human being, for ever—nor weariness, but more akin to the tired reflection that comes after an illness, on the infinite smallness of things. She knew that she was changing, had changed, but how or why were indefinable mysteries.

"The dolls?" she repeated, apparently to the goldfish, which darted away as she dipped her hand into the basin and drew it to and fro. And last holidays, she reflected, she had been busy with Nanette, making fresh dresses for their *première* communion. She had afterwards pretended to be Father Matthieu at the ceremony. "I think," she went on at length, "real people are much more interesting. They disagree so."

"Oh, mademoiselle, that is true! Pierre and I have all kinds of little disagreements, and we know it is all about nothing, and so we become friends again."

"Yes! And so do Sister Angélique and Sister Théodore, but it is always about nothing. They even like it. It is the only gratification they can have, for one does not count eating and sleeping."

("It is good to eat and drink all the same,") murmured Nanette, in parenthesis.

"But I mean real disagreements, such as *we* have when *we* are grown up. Nuns and servants never really grow up,—do they?"

"As to nuns, mademoiselle, probably not. But as to us, it is as Providence is good to us. As for me, for example, I am grown up, but as for Catherine the cook, who is twice my age, she is just a baby."

"She makes good fritters all the same, Nanette! That is what cooks are for, it seems to me. Now the Marquis, my father, has real disagreements with my mother. She is still very pretty, don't you think, Nanette?"

"Pretty! What a word! She is ravishing!"

"What a word, Nanette! You must have been reading! Oh, I must tell you this! Claire de Mirepoix brought a real romance with her to the convent this year, called *Lysander*, so cunningly hidden, Nanette! It was such fun. All the older girls who had left off dolls read it. Her nurse, who is devoted to her, had taken the book to pieces and sewn it up in the linings of her dress; and it was so exciting to read it, a sheet at a time, and pass it on. I forget who wrote it. One always forgets the authors, but it really doesn't matter. The story's the thing. *Lysander* came to a bad end at last, for Sister Angélique surprised Lucille de Pontchartrain with one of the parts, and we tore up all the rest of him into little pieces and swallowed them. They were not very nice to eat. It was lovely! I mean the whole affair. Sister Angélique read the piece she found, and gave Lucille an imposition. She had to write out a list of the principal saints and their dates. I remember nothing but that the heroine was always 'ravishing!' Yes, my mother is certainly very good-looking. She has the *grand air*."

Mademoiselle Thérèse got up and illustrated the *grand air* with the most graceful movements of which she was capable. They were a trifle stork-like, for her limbs were long, and the dancing-master had not yet finished with her. Nanette laughed, whereupon the performance ended abruptly in an indignant exclamation.

"How absurd of you, Nanette! I cannot do it"—she did not exactly say what *it* was—"like mamma, but I am sure there is no reason to laugh!"

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle! It was so like the Marquise! It was ravishing!"

This pleased Mademoiselle Thérèse. "Was I really? And these disagreements, you know, Nanette," said the girl, taking Nanette by the arm and walking up and down, "are very often about me. Papa thinks mamma spoils me; and mamma says, 'Gaston, how foolish you are! Besides, whom have I to spoil when Thérèse is at school? I scarcely ever have your company.' Then papa looks very grave and sighs, and goes away to the Ministry of War to manage our armies. And mamma sits down and sighs, and presently takes me out in the Cours de la Reine, and becomes quite gay when the cavaliers ride up to salute us, and the ladies pay her quite as many compliments as the men. But her gaiety is all pretence, just like the smiles we affect as we curtsey and perform all the movements the dancing-master teaches us, though we have a backache all the time. Nanette, what *is* this disagreement between my papa and mamma? It must be intensely interesting."

"Perhaps," said Nanette, "it is because the good saints have not sent them a son."

"But that is the fault of the holy saints, Nanette. No; it is not that, Nanette. It is that they do not understand one another. My papa is a great man. He is of the best family. There were always Polignacs, of course. But he has also the carriage, the command, the eye that goes through one, so that if one were inclined to tell ever so little a fib, one would stumble over it and spoil it. If Sister Angélique says, 'Mademoiselle de Mirepoix, are you talking?' or 'Mademoiselle de Polignac, was that you that laughed?' we say quite easily,

Oh no, Sister Angélique, and you would not believe how nice and sincere it sounds!"

"But it is very wicked, all the same!" said Nanette.

"That is true; but one confesses it to Père Matthieu, and he says, 'Three aves every evening, my daughter,'

and it is all forgiven. But papa's eyes are like those of Père Bourdaloue, whom I heard preach at Carême, three years ago, and I have never forgotten him."

"But you could not have understood, mademoiselle!"

"No! But I watched his wonderful eyes and listened to his great voice resounding, saw how he fixed all the ladies of the Court so that they forgot to look at one another, and some of them even wept, wept, Nanette, till the rouge ran down their cheeks! Ah! it was terrible. Papa could do that if he was moved to it. I do not believe the king's armies would ever win a victory if it were not for my papa and his great friend, Monsieur Turenne."

She paused a moment in her flood of talk, her large blue eyes glistening with her eagerness, then she went on—

"I believe papa loves Monsieur Turenne more than he loves mamma!"

"Mademoiselle! It is not to be believed!"

"It is true. And I can understand that. I can understand papa, though he calls me a spoilt child. I could love Monsieur Turenne, though he is quite old, and I adore—my papa—yes, Nanette, adore him! When he is cold and sombre I say to myself, 'How he suffers! He is wondering how he can send more troops to his friend, Monsieur Turenne. He is wondering how he can get what he wants done without quarrelling with that vain old Monsieur de Louvois.'"

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" Nanette exclaimed, looking round, "how you talk! If Monsieur de Louvois overheard you?"

"Suppose he did, Nanette?"

"We should both be sent to the Bastile!"

Mademoiselle laughed. "How timorous you are, Nanette. I should probably be sent back to the convent at Meudon, and you would get a scolding, or, at the worst, you could go to the Conciergerie."

"The Conciergerie, where the Red Neighbour is? God protect me!" said Nanette and crossed herself. It was an unfortunate slip of the tongue, and her prayer had a

very direct application. "Come, let us have a swing. I love a swing. We will get a gardener to come and swing us."

"It is too hot," returned Thérèse. "Who is the Red Neighbour? Did he fall among thieves?"

"It is a woman, not a man, and she is in the Conciergerie, where there are many thieves," said Nanette. "That is all I know," and pursed up her mouth.

The girl had her own opinion, but when Nanette pursed her mouth it was useless to tease her further. "Let us go and play tennis!"

"Tennis! I do not know anything about it," said Nanette. "Besides, if it is too hot to swing, when the gardener does the work, it is surely too hot to play tennis when we have to do it ourselves!"

"Come, Nanette. You are getting lazy. Tennis is good. It strengthens one, makes one agile. Papa plays tennis. It is his one recreation. How he makes the ball fly!"

"But you are a young lady!"

"What does it signify? I want to be like papa!"

"Well, if it pleases you, I suppose I must," said Nanette. "If it makes one agile . . . I have never seen Madame la Marquise playing tennis."

"No. But she does not enter into papa's pleasures any more than she does into his serious occupations. It is my intention to enter into both, to give him society. I should love to hear papa say, 'Come, camarade!' I would follow him to the ends of the earth."

Nanette had nothing to say in reply, but followed the straight-limbed, tall, young beauty, thinking of her own prematurely-wrinkled horny-handed father, who made shoes in the Carrefour de Richelieu in a cellar below the street, who wiped his mouth when he drank with the sleeve of his coat if he wore one, or on his bare brown arm if he did not. She questioned very much if she could truthfully say she would follow him if he said, "Come, camarade!"

CHAPTER IV.

MONSIEUR "FORAGE."

A *beau chevalier* in a resplendent uniform of the dragoons approached the Hotel de Polignac, where, it was evident, was being held a grand reception. The "Comte de Roubaix," as the bystanders whispered, passed between the gates of iron and copper, wrought in the days of Henri Quatre, gay and smiling, and crossed the courtyard to mount the noble curve of steps that led from left and right up to the lofty carved doorways. He chose the left for luck.

How beautiful the Hotel de Polignac was! What an epitome of the strength and wealth of the ancient noble families of France, which neither the wiles of Richelieu nor the banquets of Louis Quatorze had been able entirely to dissipate or destroy! What an epitome of the times of Le Roi Soleil was the Count, who, boasting as old a pedigree as the Polignacs, lived in a modest two-roomed apartment two streets off, and never missed the most Sardanapalian banquet that his Majesty gave!

Paris, whose business was and is to laugh and to forget, had forgotten a daring episode in a career full of episodes, which had coupled his name for a brief hour with that of his uncle, the late Cardinal Bishop of Arras. The outcome had cost his Eminence his life, by a fit of apoplexy, and procured the nephew a commission. He was now employed, while preserving his military rank, in a civil capacity in close contact with the Marquis de Polignac at the Ministry of War. Verging on thirty, the favourite of the women, a bold gambler, a master of the rapier, he made love and fought duels from sheer habit, and wedged in such a modicum of attention to his not very onerous duties as enabled him to draw his pay, in advance if possible, and enjoy every moment of life.

The Count stepped at once into the entrance-hall between two ranks of pages, behind whom on one side

was a great fireplace surmounted by a tapestry much worn, which represented the hunting of a stag, and on the other a similar piece displaying a boar-hunt. Two more doors, flung open at his approach, admitted him to the great dining-hall, at the end of which rose the grand staircase with its balustrades of twisted ironwork, lit at intervals by flambeaux of silver gilt. With careless leisurely swing he mounted between rows of footmen clad in the livery of the house, dove-colour and silver, and entered the suite of rooms where the real business of the reception was taking place.

The guests were numerous, but, with a few noticeable exceptions, they were people of the first rank. Paris had not arrived at her later dominant passion for multitude. She did not as yet by a system of patronage hire philosophers, poets, and actors to meet an indiscriminate rout of people of the second class.

The Count noted that to some extent the assemblage bore the stamp of the official world in which the Marquis spent so much of his life. It comprised men whom sheer capacity or usefulness had raised to positions of trust in the king's service and a few members of the great mercantile and banking community, which was beginning to knock with no hesitating hand at the door of rank. The Count understood perfectly. If one cannot make omelettes without breaking eggs, neither is it possible to make war without financiers or army contractors.

It was significant of the Count's recognition of the official aspect of the reception that he sought at first the Marquis rather than the Marquise. Her he reserved for a later hour, when the payers of homage should be fewer and there would be more space for his proper talents.

For his handsome person as for his rank Gaston de Polignac was only one among his peers, but for his thoughtful face and air of preoccupation, as he moved from group to group taking this one or that aside, he was as noticeable as a comet amid fixed stars. Men said that Monsieur de Louvois, the greatest Secretary of

War France had seen since Richelieu (the Marquis de Louvois would have ruled out the exception), would have been marvellously crippled but for his able Under-Secretary de Polignac, whose mastery of detail had gained him the nickname of the Marquis des Ressources.

It was not difficult for De Roubaix to put himself in his way.

"Ah! De Roubaix! Pleased to see you! Have you seen the Marquise yet? She is a trifle dull to-day. Try and brighten her a little. We look to you dragoons to do these services for us."

"Charmed! I am looking everywhere for her. Have you seen our friend 'Forage' yet?"

"Not to speak to. I have caught a glimpse of his big shoulders and his black mane somewhere. I would give a great sum to see into his deep skull. Turenne sends another despatch to-night complaining of the scarcity of supplies of cattle, of the quality of the hay, and heaven knows what else. Our friend 'Forage,' as you call him, could tell us, I warrant, the meaning of it all."

"You'll bring him to book, Marquis, one of these days!"

The Marquis let a weary look steal over his face. "It is not easy. One must be a rogue at heart to catch him. I have no sympathetic fibres in me to vibrate with warning when he sits down and pours out his ingenious explanations."

"We must call in the Red Neighbour!" laughed the Count. "Clap him in the Conciergerie along with her for twenty-four hours, and one would know something!"

"I leave him to you this evening. Silence as to the despatch, of course."

The Marquis hailed another guest and passed on.

The Count also passed on his way, exchanging greetings and making careful observation of the guests. "When one is not the spoiled child of fortune," he said to himself, "one must find means to butter one's bread. One must know one's world to make one's world do the buttering. Tiens! Who the devil is that little man in

the brown velvet? No clerk! his fingers are too well kept. No contractor! he is not plump enough. No gentleman of the robe! In short, no gentleman at all!"

It was Dr Levani, whom he observed accosting first one and then another of the guests with cool unshaken effrontery. The Count noted the polite rebuffs the stranger met with, and, at a discreet distance, dogged his steps till he sat down in a side room at an inlaid table, apparently waiting for some one, and in the meantime absorbed in contemplation of the lid of his snuff-box.

As there was no one else in the room, the Count entered, and in his suavest clearest tones pronounced—
"Lièvre!"

A palpable tremor shot through the doctor's frame. In common parlance the Count had made him jump. If the Count had said "Boh!" the effect might have been the same. But the Count had spoken as if he were calling gently to his lackey. The doctor, who called himself Levani, affected to pay no attention.

The Count was a man of the extremest fashion, but as, if one scratches a Russian one finds a Tartar, so beneath the fine gentleman, beneath the adroit swordsman, known to the world as the Comte de Roubaix, was hidden away the student of theology at Arras, who once played a sad prank upon the nuns of St Augustine, which is set forth at full length in the life of His Indolence of Arras by the pen of Nicholas de Blangy. The Count had an inextinguishable taste for a practical joke. It is comparatively easy to play such when one is also a good player with the foils.

He took two glances round, then two swift paces to the front, twitched the gentleman's wig from his head, and, holding it aloft, faced the justly indignant doctor, exclaiming, as the worthy owner of the ferret eyes sprang to attention—

"By the eleven thousand virgins! I thought as much." Then by a dexterous movement he clapped the wig on again.

Dr Levani pulled it straight and said, swallowing

first the outrage and then his very natural indignation—

"Dr Levani, my lord, at your service!"

"Cadedis! We have both risen in the world, it seems."

"With all deference, my lord, I have. You were once a Cardinal I seem to remember."

But the Count took the reminiscence quite good-humouredly and laughed pleasantly, repeating at intervals, "Cadedis!" . . . "Cadedis!" . . . the origin of which must be left to those fusty antiquarians who know most about the strange oaths of the Latins.

It was evidently a case of perfect mutual recognition, which might have resulted in a flow of reminiscences of a personal kind, and they could not have failed to be interesting. But at this very point the Marquise Marie Gabrielle de Polignac entered the chamber, filling it with her beauty and sweetness, and was saluted with a profound bow from both gentlemen; for the fact of sharing her hospitality filled up for the time being any gaps in a pedigree, or made up for the entire lack of one, and constituted indeed a new noblesse of guesthood. It is a delicate article in the social contract, which is oftener honoured in the breach than in the observance.

Of the two, Levani preserved his sangfroid, while the Count blushed to the tips of his filbert-shaped nails: a fact of which he was quite aware, and for which he was inclined to reproach himself. Later he considered it a master-stroke, such as one occasionally achieves at billiards without knowing how. For the Marquise could not have failed to notice it, and it is not easy to force a blush to one's face at thirty on the mere apparition of the feminine, however lovely.

"You have made the acquaintance of Dr Levani?" she said very sweetly to the Count. There was a reflection in her voice of some emotion which was less casual than the question. It was not lost upon the Count, who never lost anything that he could pick up.

"In fact," said the Count, "Dr Levani attended me some years ago. He has been abroad I fancy since."

"Improving my acquaintance, Madame la Marquise,

with the mysteries of the healing art in Milan!" the doctor rejoined. "You will excuse us a moment, my lord, her ladyship has been pleased to consult me . . ."

"With the greatest regret, Marquise, I efface myself. Later I hope to bask a little in the sunshine," said the Count, bowing himself out.

"Quo non ascendam!" he murmured to himself. "Whither may I not climb? It was the Foucquet's motto, the great Foucquet. But he made the mistake of rivalling his Majesty in magnificence, which was unwise, and in ideas, which was altogether too presumptuous. I wonder how he likes Pignerol for a residence? Let me, however, win you, adorable, unapproachable Marie Gabrielle, and I shall never envy man again! There are clouds gathering, it seems. I have but to rive them with the thunderbolts of Jove, and . . . What, Forage!" He had very nearly in his soliloquy run into a very solid-looking man, whose dark complexion, mane of black curly hair, tinged ever so slightly with grey, bespoke his origin from the Midi. "What! my Marshal of Army Contractors! By what title shall I presently be calling you?"

"A pity your lordship cannot remember a man's name," replied the other in a marked provincial accent. "I have one, if it does not happen to have a De before it."

"It is that the man is greater than his name, my dear Monsieur Bocal. Now in my case it is the reverse; my name overshadows all my efforts, and makes my humble successes incredible."

"When one can draw on one's bankers for a hundred thousand livres, one's name is worth something, it seems," grumbled Monsieur Bocal.

"Precisely one hundred thousand livres!" the Count replied in a tone that nettled the contractor, though he could not have told why.

"If that were all, I could not bring up my son as a gentleman."

"You have a son then, monsieur? I had not thought there was so much in army contracts. You form

alliances, you found families. My dear sir, if you only had a daughter there might be a possibility of my transmitting my name also."

"There would be two to that bargain as to every other, my lord. As it happens, I have no daughter. As for my son, I have no intention of perpetuating my name. The keg always smells of the herring."

"Profoundly true!" said the Count very respectfully.

"So I have had my son adopted by a noble family. He has had the best of tutors, he will take his degree in rhetoric at Rennes, in philosophy at Caen, and in the meantime he practises assiduously in the School of Arms, learns dancing, and already plays tennis like a cavalier."

"Parbleu! And what is he called, this young Achilles?"

"I never heard of Achilles," replied the army contractor. "But I would not tell you his name for a thousand pistoles. I do not want him corrupted."

"You are not complimentary this evening, Monsieur Bocal," the Count returned serenely.

"One is not complimentary in our business unless one wants something. What does Polignac want with me? I am invited to his hotel, which is very ancient and very grand, and not a bit like my humble apartment. He neither speaks to me, nor introduces me to Madame la Marquise, and his representative taunts me with my occupation. It is not amusing."

"It is too bad! He is so preoccupied with work," said the Count apologetically. "But it is to be remedied. Come along! let me introduce you to the Marquise, whom I see, and afterwards De Polignac will, I am sure, receive you with the politeness that is always his,—the politeness which you deserve. And pray excuse my banter. Come!"

The Count linked his arm in token of amity with that of Monsieur Bocal, and went in search of the Marquise, who was now comparatively disengaged.

Monsieur Bocal! The contractor thought his name had never sounded quite so well as it did when the

Marquise repeated it after the Count with the finest smile of welcome upon her lips. The wonderful candour of her widely-set, open blue eyes attracted the man at once. He was used to reading in the eyes of the few great ladies to whom he was introduced, a veiled laughter as they heard his name. It was not amusing, as he was accustomed to remark to himself. "I have had the greatest desire," she went on, "to see you, to know you, you whose affairs so interest my husband that I scarcely have a moment of his company. It is the war, it is Monsieur Bocal, it is Monsieur Bocal, it is the war. Tell me, are you the cause of the war?"

"Madame does me too great an honour. It is, however, true that at present France cannot carry on war without me."

There was no trace of vulgar bombast about this speech. He believed it. The sons of the Midi always believe that France cannot do without them, and it is in a measure true. Hot, eager, muscular, men of the big shoulders, big body, short-legged, perhaps, but undoubtedly of the big brains. They are the men to conceive, to act, untiring, robust, passionate. They are terrible, these men of the Midi.

He felt that those large blue wondering eyes were upon him. He wished that in some respects he had led a cleaner life. Some of his transactions, for instance, were not exactly such as would meet the approval of the Marquise de Polignac. As she looked, he moistened his lips under the heavy moustaches.

"It is a little incredible, nevertheless," she said. "One makes war with generals and men and muskets, with horses and artillery."

"And the men and the horses, madame? They must eat or they cannot march."

"But if they are near a town, Monsieur Bocal, they can buy food and forage."

"Forty thousand men, madame, will make bare every cellar and store and shop in ten towns such as we have in Lorraine or Franche Comté in three days.

It is not so that armies are fed. But Monsieur le Marquis is too careful. He is too much given to making inquiry into trifles. War is a great waster of men, of material, of horses, of food. You ask me where does it all go? Madame!" He threw out his great arms and hands, large, muscular, coarse hands, with broken finger-nails. "Men fall here and there, sick or wounded, there is no time. They die, or they get well and slink back to their homes. Straw is burned, hay is scattered or stolen, waggons of food are plundered by the peasants, horses die or are stolen. Of everything something passes, something is broken. It is the same when one bottles wine."

"How little one really knows in Paris," said the Marquise.

"It is not amusing, the country, all the same, madame. No theatres, no music, no pictures, no Cours la Reine, no really beautiful women such as you, Madame la Marquise. Speak, madame—show me some of your pictures; you cannot imagine how I thirst to hear your voice."

Decidedly there was something strong, commanding, original about this *roturier*, this man of the people without whom France could not carry on war. The Marquise had found something to interest her and take her thoughts off herself.

"Monsieur, Paris already begins to spoil you. Give me your arm and take me into the gallery. We have a few pictures, it is true, but of no great worth."

The Comte de Roubaix saw them go. There were people in the gallery as elsewhere.

"What beauty!" he said to himself. "She has captured old Forage with a single glance!" And as he sauntered after them and presently passed them he heard the contractor say—

"Hein! It must cost you dear lighting this gallery. Three thousand candles a-month!"

"He is always full of calculations," said De Roubaix. "As if that interested a marquise!"

But he did not hear the contractor's next speech.

"What a blue! It is like nothing I have seen, Madame la Marquise, except . . ."

"Except, Monsieur Bocal?"

"The blue of your lovely eyes!"

And the contractor turned his full, ardent, black eyes upon her, so that she could not mistake the passion she was arousing in this strange man from the other world, the world which was not peopled by the noblesse.

She made no reply, but began talking about the next picture, and seized an early opportunity to leave her "amorous bear," as she styled him to herself, with the Marquis, and entered into conversation with her other guests.

De Roubaix fluttered from one beauty to another, joining here and there in the talk. He was always anxious to know what the women were talking about. To-night it was everywhere the same, not of the war, nor of Turenne, nor of the king, but of the Red Neighbour. Was she to be put to the Question?

To some he replied with his usual confidence, "Assuredly! One must protect the husbands!" and smiled with meaning, noting the look of affright that stole into the pair of eyes that looked into his, although, woman-like, the owner covered her retreat with, "Let them commence by arresting you, Count, and the husbands will be safe enough!" Or again he would answer with equal assurance, "To what end? No! It is decided she will be hung without the Question"; and he saw the evident relief hidden under the exclamation of professed horror, "Hung! How frightful!"

Only a day or two ago these women had been recommending the Red Neighbour to one another as women do a favourite dressmaker, or as they make the fortune of a pastrycook. To-day she might tell tales. They had "heard her name mentioned." That was all. The Count could have compiled a black list in a quarter of an hour. But to what end? His code of honour did not countenance blackmail. He had received many valuable presents from ladies, but he did not have to wring them by threats. They were a willing tribute

to his noble qualities, or a golden chain of which it was permissible to sell all the links but one. The first thing to do was to get the address of Dr Levani, and he was waiting merely till his present lackey returned from dogging the footsteps of the old one.

CHAPTER V.

TWO OF A TRADE.

When the Comte de Roubaix mounted the ill-lit staircase of No. 3 Rue Christine, having first placed his lackey on guard at the foot with instructions to admit no one else, he anticipated a refusal to give him entrance.

What was his surprise to find that at his knock—an old knock which his ex-lackey remembered well enough—the door was opened by a good-looking Italian manservant, who ushered him into a comfortable room where supper was already laid for two.

“Come in and welcome, Count,” said Dr Levani. “I was sure you would follow me, and I have ordered accordingly.”

“The deuce you did, Doctor,” said the Count pleasantly. “We live in so marvellous a reign that we ought not to be surprised at anything.”

“Apropos, Count,” the Doctor went on, “it would be a pity to keep your man-servant standing down below. Permit me to call him up. He can sup with Pietro.”

“Call him up by all means, Doctor,” said the Count. “Pardieu! (Here he gave a rapid glance around.) You have indeed risen in the world. Our parting, ten years ago, was somewhat abrupt, if I remember.”

“Your lordship kicked me down the Cardinal’s stairs, I think,” returned the other. “You were quite right. I had been indiscreet, and a lackey who is indiscreet is

worse than useless. But we have all been indiscreet in our youth."

The Count knew not what to make of his reception, so he looked at the supper-table. The Doctor rang a bell, a mere tinkle, and Pietro and the Count's lackey brought in the supper and four bottles of Cante-Perdrix.

"Wine of the gods!" the Count exclaimed.

"Why of the gods?" asked the Doctor, as he stood waiting for the Count to seat himself.

"Because it is Cante-Perdrix that one sends to Rome for the mouth of his Holy Fatherhood."

"It is not a bad wine," said Levani, who, not quick to follow verbal subtleties, merely maintained a certain respectfulness of demeanour, not unmixed with a little show of being on his own territory. "Pray be seated."

They both set to with great appetite, and presently, the table being cleared, settled to the second bottle and to business. For neither was in the least deceived by the other's bonhomie. It was false money.

On the other hand, the Count had already learned by his reception that the soi-disant Dr Levani, though at bottom the same plausible rascal he had been in the days of his lackeyhood, had seen and learned much, had in fine acquired a greater capital, not so much in cash, albeit his purse appeared to be well filled, as in rascality. In the language of the markets, there was a greater variety in his goods, and he had doubtless learned how to sell them. There was still, however, a great disparity in rank, which admitted of a proportionate degree of condescension.

"Your cuisine is excellent! Your wine is also excellent, Doctor. I owe you an apology for my late practical joke, of which, however, I had taken good care that it should have no witnesses. Your supper is in itself a sign that you bear no ill-will?"

Dr Levani inclined his head in token of assent. The Count went on—

"I was not aware that you were on the visiting list of the Marquise. The course of my official duties leads me to most of her receptions, as well public as private.

Am I right in supposing that the acquaintance is quite recent, has scarcely, in fact, ripened into friendship?"

"Quite recent, my lord."

"The Marquise has her own physician. She would not, therefore, be consulting you as to the state of her health."

"In fact she has not done me that honour."

"Am I right in supposing that it is something in the way of horoscopes?"

"It is true that amongst my other professional attainments I can cast horoscopes, read hands, and so forth. It is not, however, to be expected that I should disclose the precise nature of my client's business."

"I applaud your discretion, Doctor. But suppose, for instance, that I were the lady's husband! What should you say then?"

"That I was not at liberty to reveal her confidence. As it happens, you are not . . ."

"And you would say, Doctor, if you were not so polite, what business is it of mine? Well, I happen to be on intimate terms with the Marquis, and, if I were to say to him, 'Monsieur, there is in Paris a certain Dr Levani, an Italian of unknown antecedents, one of the numerous dealers in astrology and other nonsense, who now throng the city, whom I have lately observed closeted with the Marquise. Every one who knows the Marquise knows that she is a lady of the most irreproachable way of life and as innocent of wiles as Noah's dove. Is it desirable that she should amuse herself by encouraging such people?' what would the Marquis do?"

"If I were the Marquis—pardon me, my lord, for so simple a suggestion, a natural one all the same—I should suspect you of taking too great an interest in my wife."

"You are become a man of great penetration! He might very naturally suspect me, but he would have you, as a measure of precaution, placed in security, say in the Conciergerie, for instance."

The Count lingered on the last three words, and looked straight at Levani, as if he were putting a poser.

"It seems to me, Monsieur le Comte that you are

using something like a threat. Believe me that I am not in the least affected by it."

"Which shows," said the Count, almost affectionately, "how much you misjudge me. I am so much more a man of action than of words. I love a pleasant argument, as I love your excellent wine. I love to turn things about for the pleasure of talking. It is a pastime. When I want anything, I take it. You, on the contrary, look for motives. Motives should precede action, not speech nor casuistry."

"Nevertheless, there is at least point in your speech," returned the other, looking steadily at the Count, who bowed his thanks, and went on—

"You have performed, nay, are about to perform, I should say, *have promised* to perform, a certain office for the Marquise; no matter what—we will suppose that you have agreed to compound her some concoction, a sleeping draught, or a new *rouge* (again a perceptible pause on the word *rouge*). You establish a base, as we say in the army, which you estimate in your own mind at some sum—say a hundred pistoles a-year; you hope that her ladyship's patronage may lead to others."

"Yes, I admit that," said Dr Levani. "It is very natural."

"Quite natural! Now what do you estimate to gain by this connection? It is a trifle inquisitive, but this time I have a motive."

"Twenty such patients at a hundred pistoles—two thousand pistoles a-year."

"Sapristi! You are modest in your estimates! Suppose, then, that I am willing to buy the strategic base from which you propose to assail the Marquise, on condition of introducing you to twenty other ladies, who will engage you to confer similar benefits upon them, without the least effort on your part to acquire the . . . how words repeat themselves . . . the connection."

"But, Monsieur le Comte, how could you, without a knowledge of the science pharmaceutical, perform for the Marquise what I have undertaken? I cannot afford to offend her, even if you sent me twenty patients

to-morrow. And why, then, do you wish me to be dismissed from my attendance upon her?"

"I offer you one hundred pistoles for the recipe!" said the Count, suddenly placing a heavy purse of gold upon the table, not out of reach, however, and looking straight into Levani's ferrety eyes.

"It is not enough!" said Levani, with a touch of scorn.

"One hundred pistoles and an introduction to twenty of the fair and rich, her *neighbours*, in fact, to-morrow! Think, Doctor!"

"There is no need. It is not enough! I can make more!"

The Count replaced the purse in his pocket with an expressive gesture, poured himself out another glass of wine, which he held up to the light, and appeared to take great pleasure in its beautiful colour and semi-transparency.

"You are then a rich man! I am not. But I have learned what I came to learn."

"What is that, Count?"

"Your trade."

"And what is it?" inquired Levani, now a little incensed by the insolence and the assurance conveyed in the tones of his former master.

"The old and beautiful trade of a rogue."

"Monsieur le Comte! Is it not purely a matter of degree? Is it not the burning desire of every one in the world to get something for less than it costs, or sell something for more than it costs? You are paid for your services to the king. Do you give a *quid pro quo*?"

"You are chopping logic, Doctor. Now I will tell you what you are selling to the Marquise."

"I shall be interested," said Levani, who in spite of himself began to be nervous, so much so that he was near to missing his hold upon the glass he was lifting. He spilt a drop or two. The Count would notice it, of course. The Count's nerves were perfect. By so much Levani admitted him to be a superior in the same trade.

“Good! You are listening! I need not speak loudly. The Red Neighbour, who is a kind of female practitioner of your order, is in the Conciergerie, charged with making a little mistake in her sleeping draughts. It might have happened to you, Doctor. Half the women in Paris have been to her. Heaven knows what for! And they are all frightened to death lest she should be put to the Question and their names should come out. *Ventrebleu!* What a *tintamare* there would be! The Marquise is one of them. You got to know it. I could tell you how too, but it will keep. You offered your services, professed to be able to secure the silence of the Red Neighbour, and said to yourself—I have only to go to and fro telling tarradiddles, and I have an income as sure as if I had an order on the king’s treasury, in fact a good deal more sure. And one thing will lead to another.”

Dr Levani followed this exposition without moving a muscle. In fact his self-control was so marvellous that the Count felt sure his guess was the right one.

“Is it not so?” said the Count.

“Monsieur le Comte!” said Levani, pushing back his chair, “you are wasting time, beating the air. I shall tell you nothing.”

“No, Doctor! Excuse me! I have been marking time. It is now,” he said, pulling out a jewelled watch—the gift, one need scarcely say, of a lady of his acquaintance,—“it is now half-past three. Precisely at a quarter to four the archers will be here and take you to the Conciergerie, unless I have your confession in writing and your undertaking not to molest the Marquise de Polignac further.”

Dr Levani rose to his feet and folded his arms. He regarded this announcement of the Count as an excellent piece of pretence well acted.

“I will wait,” he said with dignity.

The streets had become silent. The first streaks of dawn appeared in the sky and the birds in the gardens near began to twitter. The two men looked at one another. Suddenly out of nothing stole upon the ear

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the tramp of armed men. The Count looked at his watch again.

"They are five minutes before time!" he said.

Dr Levani shivered. One is not so brave as one might be at half-past three in the morning.

The footsteps came nearer. There was a halt called below the window.

Dr Levani ran to an *escritoire*, scribbled a few lines upon a piece of paper and signed it.

They were coming up the stair. He handed the paper to the Count, who glanced through it and placed it in his vest as the door opened.

It was a patrol of the archers and an officer at the head.

Dr Levani threw an imploring look at the Count, who remained as calm as usual.

"Count de Roubaix!" said the officer.

"Yes, officer! Your attendance is not required."

"Pardieu! You are under some mistake! It is the Count de Roubaix we have to arrest."

"At whose instance?"

"Carosse—tailor of the Rue Neuve des Petits Champs!"

The Count laughed joyously. "And you are taking me?"

"To the Conciergerie, Monsieur le Comte."

"A bientôt, Doctor. I leave you to deal with my other friends when they come!"

And summoning his valet the Count went out, leaving Dr Levani in a troubled state of mind.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GREATEST WAR MINISTER SAVE ONE.

The genius of Monsieur de Louvois has been so well known in the world that the man himself needs little introduction. The eldest son of old Michel le Tellier, Chancellor of France, of whose merits the renowned

preacher Bossuet has left us an incomparable list, he had been nominated successor to his father in the Secretaryship of State for War at the age of twenty-three, and four years afterwards had established such a reputation, and gained the esteem and particular confidence of Louis Quatorze in such a degree, that this prince conferred upon him the further charges of Superintendent-General of the Post, Grand Master of the Couriers of France and Foreign Countries, to which were added in later years those of Chancellor of his orders of knighthood, and Grand Master in particular of St Lazare and Notre Dame de Mont Carmel.

The editor of his political testament has well said that there was nothing that was not uncommon about him. His career, his favour, his maxims, his conduct and discretion, his prosperity, which lasted to his death, and perhaps in that particular will surpass that of his sovereign, all were rare and surprising.

The Marquis de Louvois was now thirty-five, and had been twelve years a Minister of State. If anything could have added to his glory at such an age, it was that a conspiracy had been formed to assassinate him,—a conspiracy which had happily been frustrated. One must be great to be “assassinated.” De Traumont had foolishly uttered the proposition—“Either Louvois dies or I!” He was counting too little on the Minister’s absurdly good fortune. It was De Traumont who died. That ended the matter as far as the Marquis de Louvois was concerned. Madame du Fresnoy, his intimate friend, the wife of one of his clerks (it was one of those *ménages à trois* so entirely without scandal) did not think so. She persisted in suspecting that some lady was at the bottom of it, and had said as much. So that, when the Red Neighbour found herself in the Conciergerie, she at first blamed Madame du Fresnoy, as did the rest of Paris. It is significant that Louvois’ Marquise, Anne de Souvrè de Courtenvaux, did not much concern herself. She was a lady of pious and resigned and rather placid temperament, a great patron of the arts, as she showed when she employed Girardon

to enrich the chapel in the Church of the Capucines, where the fortunate Marquis came to lie.

When one has been a Secretary of State for War for twelve years, enjoying all the privileges appertaining to the dignity, and the confidence of one's king, and that king our revered Louis Quatorze, one may be forgiven for having a firm confidence in one's own ability to conduct, from the steps of the fountain of power and honour, the very greatest campaigns, it being understood that the generals in the field show a becoming aptitude to carry out one's larger plans by supplying, out of their naturally less able, but still capable, heads, all the subsidiary strategies necessary to the great design.

"But what are we to do with these old generals?"

It was the heaven-born Minister of War, De Louvois, who addressed himself to his Under-Secretary, De Polignac, across the table in the innermost cabinet of the War Office.

"But, Monsieur!" replied the Marquis de Polignac, 'of what old generals is it a question?'

"Turenne, for instance!" said De Louvois in a tone that suggested a want of intelligence on the part of the other. De Louvois had been so long an official chief that he attributed to the junior official rank a junior order of intellect. Of course one had to respect the claims of a man like the Marquis de Polignac to a certain amount of deference. There had always been Polignacs, and, if there had always been Le Telliers (De Louvois' family name), they had not been considerable till the reign of Louis XIII., when they emerged from the chrysalis state of a family of the Robe to that of one that provided great officers of state. Monsieur Colbert, Marquis de Seignéai, who drove at once the three chariots of the Finances, the Marine, and Commerce, had also sprung from a family of "Robins" as the aristocracy dubbed them, and it was impossible not to remark that the two ablest men in France, the two pillars of the State, were both scions of new families.

Evidently De Polignac, with the intelligence of the junior order, did not quite understand.

The Marquis de Louvois therefore repeated—

“One can lay plans! But unless one has young generals one cannot expect them carried out.”

“But De Louvois! Turenne is only sixty-four! Montecuculli, who commands for the enemy, is sixty-nine. They are the ablest generals in the world!”

“It is the battles they have lost which have made their reputations!” returned the Minister drily.

“That is partly true of Turenne,” said Polignac thoughtfully. “Another, a less able general, would have been extinguished by the odds.”

In some such shape the discussion had taken place many times before. De Louvois did not like Turenne. In all his reports to his Majesty the War Minister had always belittled the great Marshal. When he was forced to chronicle his victories, they were due to his Majesty's good fortune and the fine quality of the troops, when a retreat, as from the projected attack on Amsterdam, it was the fault of the Marshal's timidity or of his well-concealed lack of fidelity. It was disagreeable that in the face of his reports Turenne's reputation persisted in growing at least as fast as his own, but, to do the War Minister justice, he was not given to praising his own sagacity. He remained content with his Majesty's long-continued favour.

De Polignac had long ago recognised this deplorable bias in the mind of his chief, and while always maintaining a firm front towards it, and steadfastly upholding the character of his great friend, contrived by the exercise of tact to avoid a rupture of relations with De Louvois, whose ability and conscientiousness he deeply respected.

“Turenne,” said the War Minister, “is clamouring for a better commissariat. We spend millions on his commissariat. Bocal brings in lists upon lists, all duly attested by Turenne's officers, of horses, forage, cattle, grain, which he has supplied. Heaven knows where he finds them! But he does. And yet—you have read this despatch—the old Marshal complains, complains. It is very wearisome!”

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"We trust too much to Bocal, it seems," said De Polignac, looking meaningly at his chief.

"I suppose you mean he cheats us! My friend, I have been twelve years Minister of War. I have seen and spoken with a regiment of contractors. They all cheat. But what can one do? Better to lose a few thousands to one big cheat, who understands his business, than millions to a hundred little rascals who do not. We have tried to create rivals. He has crushed them or bought them up. What do you suggest?"

"My suggestion, De Louvois, is that I should be allowed to go to the frontier."

"To the frontier!" The Minister of War was completely taken aback by this bold, this revolutionary suggestion.

"Why not? Let me go with full powers to confer with Turenne, and find out for myself and you what is really the explanation. At present no one need know but our two selves. I can easily furnish an excuse. My estate in Touraine, for example, requires my presence."

"But, my dear Polignac, reflect! You cannot discover much in twenty-four hours. You will require weeks."

"It is possible. The task demands patience. But it is worth it."

"And when you have discovered that Monsieur Bocal is in the wrong, has committed infinite peculations, and that all Monsieur Turenne's complaints are well-founded, what then?"

De Louvois sat back in his chair toying with his pen, and looked at his under-secretary as if he had put an unanswerable poser.

The Marquis de Polignac looked gravely across the table, and said very gently—

"I should hand over Monsieur Bocal to the common law."

"You think it would be an easy matter?"

"He would be an enemy of his country."

The great War Minister smiled, a sadly mirthful, superior smile—it was difficult to say whether the corners

of his long mouth or his really fine nostrils contributed the more to the effect.

"There was a certain Don Quixote who went a-tilting at windmills, was there not?"

"But in this case," said De Polignac, "it will be the whole force of the law supported by his Majesty which will do the tilting."

"You think so? My dear Polignac, I really value your help too much—you see how selfishly I put it!" De Louvois rather prided himself on the exhibition of his selfishness. It is not an uncommon pose, but it does not excuse selfishness any the more. He went on—

"I really value your help too much to allow you to place yourself in a false position."

"A false position?"

"You assume first that you would find out a great deal. Let it be so! Monsieur Bocal is as crafty as the proverbial serpent. We will assume that you do. You postulate in the second case that you would denounce him to the king in a formidable list of charges. I accept that. Your third postulate is that the king would place the engines of the law at your disposal to crush Bocal. He would be a fat morsel. What a confiscation to the Crown! Yes! It would be a great temptation. Yes! There is more perhaps in it than I thought. The prospect of a confiscation of a few millions" (he was going to say 'might even induce Louis to support the law,' but he disdained the reflection on his sovereign) . . . a few millions might even enlist the support of the Court. De Louvois still possessed a great deal of the contempt of the great new man for the mere aristocracy. "There is always a long list of people waiting to be pensioned."

"It was not in my mind, however," said De Polignac, "that any such motive could be needed, could be possible, to procure mere justice."

"When one has been Minister of War for twelve years," retorted the other, "one does not speak of justice, one speaks of the public interest, the necessities of the State, the will of our Sovereign Lord the King. They are at bottom the same thing. Abstract justice is for

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a discussion in the Sorbonne or some other academy. Suppose Monsieur Bocal had some powerful friends, friends sufficiently powerful to cause the intervention of "the public interest"?

The Marquis rose. His attitude was almost menacing in its strenuousness.

"I should say to his Majesty—Sire, in the face of these facts it is no longer possible for me to serve your Majesty as Under-Secretary of War."

"And Monsieur Bocal would be able to boast that he had driven you to resign. Believe me, the game is not worth the candle. No, my dear Polignac! Think better of it. Let Turenne grumble. We will remonstrate with Bocal, send Turenne what he wants, but you shall not, with my consent, depart on this uncertain, perilous, and of necessity futile adventure."

"It seems to me that you have some actual information of which I am ignorant that you speak with such earnestness."

The Minister's eyes for a moment gleamed ominously; then his face relaxed into a smile. After all, one could not be angry with Polignac, so quixotic, so earnest, so actuated by the purest patriotism.

"My father told me years ago, before I was Secretary of State, 'It is the business of a Minister to know and to adhere to principles, and to leave details to subordinates. It is over details that one burns one's fingers.' He also told me, 'The knowledge of particular Court intrigues is burdensome; to share in them is to court certain disaster.' These are wise sayings, if not so well expressed as Monsieur de la Rochefoucauld would have dressed them out. You may take it for granted that whenever Monsieur Bocal has made fifty thousand pistoles, some highly placed personage has borrowed—it is the phrase of the day—borrowed at least ten. You are proposing to fight Monsieur Bocal. I pay you a well-deserved compliment when I say—I believe you would win the battle. But you could not out-manceuvre his reserves, his invisible legions, those legions of pistoles."

"My mind is, however, made up," said the Marquis.

"If you do not give me permission, I must resign and pursue my adventure alone."

Monsieur de Louvois looked a trifle wearied by this display of dogged resolution.

"It is not to be done in that way. Without powers of some kind, some official sanction, your life would not be safe. There is no harm in your going to see Turenne to inquire into his grievances. But you must come straight back and report in confidence to me. As head of the department I must decide as to future action."

The Minister spoke in a cold determined tone, which he seldom if ever used in his communications with De Polignac. The latter, however, having gained his chief point, was not disposed to cavil at what was, after all, a matter of loyalty to his department. But he said to himself that if Monsieur Bocal crossed his path, with intention to obstruct, it would be so much the worse for him, legions or no legions.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COUNT PAYS HIS TAILOR'S BILL.

When the Count de Roubaix arrived at his unexpected hospice, the Conciergerie, without being able to extract any information from the officer in charge of the archers, he proceeded at the very Gate of Despair to give his valet some directions as to a change of linen, of clothes, and other necessaries.

"Excuse me," said the officer, "your valet is to accompany you!"

The Count laughed. "But my valet owes nothing to my tailor!"

"On the contrary," said the officer. "I have an arrest for him too."

The valet's face dropped.

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"I told him to charge it to his lordship," he stammered, covered with confusion. "It was a miserable suit for my brother."

The Count laughed again. "Come! You see what deceit leads to," he said. "I suppose one of your men will carry a message for a few sous," he added to the officer. "I cannot come out into the streets in broad daylight, as if I had come from a ball." He looked comically at his gala costume.

"I have no instructions," said the officer, "but I will see what can be done."

So the Count and his valet, being formally handed over to the head-jailer, the Count scribbled a note and gave it to the officer to convey to his landlord at the small but fashionably situated apartment in the Rue des Jésuites.

Then, being of an intensely practical disposition, he proceeded to bargain with the head-jailer for the best room in the place for himself and his valet.

"The Red Neighbour has the best already," growled the head-jailer. "She can afford it."

"I could not think of disturbing her for so short a time," said the Count meditatively. "The residents always have the choice, and very properly. But come—this room will do quite well. There is a couch in it. My valet will do well enough with a blanket and the floor.

"But, monsieur, this is my wife's salon! And, monsieur, it is what they all say, 'I shall be leaving tomorrow.'"

"The very thing," the Count went on, coolly making a little voyage round the room. "Now, Mr Head-jailer, a bottle of wine, two candles, a blanket, stay, two blankets, some pens, ink, and paper. Here are a couple of pistoles. Now, go away, there's a good man, lock the door, and don't trouble me with the usual protestation. I am as sleepy as an owl."

The head-jailer pocketed the pistoles and departed, to return in a few minutes with the necessaries.

"Now, Mr Head-jailer, I shall write two letters and

slip them under the door. You will see that they are delivered, and wake me at ten, not a moment before."

Once more the head-jailer withdrew, wishing he had a few more lodgers like the Count de Roubaix.

The Count was not easily cast down by a little contretemps like this. And had he not the declaration of Dr Levani in his pocket?

The first letter was addressed to the erring tailor, and, more in sorrow than in anger, though it contained some sufficiently strong language, bade him present himself at the Conciergerie at half-past ten to the minute.

The other was an epistle of a more piquant character, which is worth copying out.

The superscription it bore was Madame Sorel, Grocer, 17 Rue St Martin; but within this cover was another, addressed to Madame la Duchesse de ——. It is not fair to the lady in question to reveal a name which the Count was so studious to conceal:—

"ADORABLE ET CHARMANTE,—Love leads a man (even the best of us) into strange places. You will see by the address below, whither he has led me, at the instance of the very tailor that has so often abetted me in creating that perfect coxcomb, which so exactly represents me, and incidentally pleases your beautiful but partial eyes. If I languish for a sight of them it is that a mere veil of cloth of gold, five hundred pistoles in value, hangs between me and the privilege of gazing upon them and blotting out their light with kisses. It is for you, a mere but precious pastime, to lift the veil. Your little packet sent by a sure hand will find me at ten precisely, in my boudoir (the salon of the wife of the head-jailer) at the Conciergerie. I cover your hands with kisses.

"ALPHONSE (C. DE R.)."

Having indited these epistles and slipped them under the door, the Count threw himself upon the couch, bade his valet, who was already gently snoring, but had to awaken at his master's call, wrap the blanket about him, and at once fell asleep.

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At ten the jailer awakened him and handed him a small packet which had just arrived.

It contained a ring, a tiny jewel in itself, set with three brilliants of the first water. It also contained a note, which was short enough, but pleased the Count almost as much as the ring:—

“Monster of conceit and ingratitude. I hope you have learned a lesson. Don't expect me to receive you again.”

“And now for that rascal of a tailor!” . . . “Delightful and precious token,” he murmured, apostrophising the ring. “How willingly could I retain you, treasure you, for the sake of the giver! Three stones! Faith, Hope, and Charity! I wonder which is the greatest of the three on this occasion? Ah me! How symbolical are you, precious ring! You have already encircled how many fingers? And how many hearts have lain encircled by her Grace's love? Parbleu! It is a nuisance, but you must go to the king's jewellers for a rest, and then, who knows?”

At half-past ten the head-jailer ushered in Monsieur Carosse, the famous tailor, a round, short, clean-shaven man, very neatly dressed, carrying in his hand a measuring-tape and in the other his hat, with which he executed a low bow, almost but not quite touching the floor.

“Monsieur! Monsieur! Monseigneur!” he began, breathlessly.

“Oh! is that you, you diabolical engineer of midnight assassination?” said the Count, pretending to work himself up into a fury. “Is this the way you treat your best customers?” And so saying he flourished a copy of the arrest before the gaze of the protesting offender.

“But, monseigneur!” he began again.

“And you dare,” thundered the Count, “to throw me into the Conciergerie for a few hundred pistoles, because you have furnished me with a score or so of misfits!”

"Misfits! Me throw your lordship into the Conciergerie! There is some mistake, some unheard-of error!"

"But there is no mistake. Look at the arrest! Look at the copy of your account!"

"It is my account, my lord, it is in the handwriting of Jules my clerk. But the arrest, I swear before the holy angels that I know nothing of it!"

There was no doubting the honest wonderment of the tailor. It was then a plot. Had not the Duchess de — said something about "a lesson." The Count vowed to himself that there should be a counter-lesson, but he was not unwilling to make a little harvest while the sun shone.

"It is very inexplicable," said the Count, becoming mollified. "But I accept your assurance. Now sit down, knock off fifty pistoles from your exorbitant bill, and give me a quittance in full."

The tailor demurred.

"But, monseigneur! the account is correct. I never overcharge any one."

"All the same, I have only to show your arrest to a few of my friends and what will become of your shop?"

"But, monseigneur! it is not my arrest!"

"Come now, Carosse! Sign! I have a pressing engagement at the War Office at half-past eleven."

The tailor sighed; but, secretly glad at getting even so much of his bill, gave the necessary quittance and the Count produced the ring. "You will sell this for me at a good jeweller's and hand me the balance!"

At eleven o'clock the Count was on his way to his lodgings in the Rue des Jésuites. The adventure had turned out not so badly. He had paid his tailor and would have five hundred pistoles to the good, less a few for the prison fees which he had paid with ready money.

When he reached his rooms he found his landlord wringing his hands.

"Oh, my lord! What an inexpressible relief it is to see you again."

"Tut! tut! Monsieur Nappe. I have been the victim

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of a plot, that is all, but I have the clue. Never fear!"

"A plot! You do not know all! A plot indeed! Listen! I had no sooner departed with your lordship's clothes than a lady came and demanded entrance. My wife was gone to the Halles to make her marketings. The servant did not know what to do. The lady insisted, and mounted to your rooms, as she said, to write a note. I return. I find the room ransacked, and in what confusion your lordship sees. It is horrible! I cannot hold up my head again as a respectable letter of lodgings in the respectable Rue des Jésuites. What can I say, my lord?"

This time the Count was a little bit put out. A lady alone in his rooms!

"How long did she stay?"

"Fully half an hour, my lord. Look! She has ransacked every drawer, every receptacle, and has spared nothing."

The Count brushed past Monsieur Nappe. A veritable picture of topsy-turvy medley met his gaze. From his wardrobe suits had been taken and thrown down, doubtless after a brief search in all the pockets. Capes, breeches, vests, doublets of velvet, of silk, with lace, with gold braid, uniforms, shirts, were all strewn pell-mell.

The valet stood in amaze and began to pick up first one thing, then another, to shake and fold it. The Count went from place to place looking in the drawers, the locks of some of which had been forced, to see if anything had been stolen.

"My reputation is at stake as a gallant man," he said to the dismayed landlord. "First let me see what I have lost, and then I will examine your servant. In the meantime leave us, I pray."

The landlord bowed and went out, shutting the door carefully, and descended to give the poor servant another reprimand, and bid her not to stir out or breathe a word in the quarter. As for Madame Nappe, she could only sit nursing her market-basket, and fanning herself with a cabbage-leaf, exclaiming at intervals, "Mon Dieu!

What is to become of us?" for she regarded the Count de Roubaix as only second to the king himself.

The Count made a further exercise of his reasoning powers. "It is the duchess! A lesson—truly! It must have been she who picked my pocket of that cursed tailor's bill and got me arrested so as to come here and see whose love letters I hoarded. It is true she loves me to distraction, but what has she found? I must sit down and make a list. There is nothing like method."

The Count sat down and began idly brushing his moustache with the feather of the quill, while he thought, and presently he began to sniff. "Hold! There is certainly a strange perfume here!" He sniffed again. "By the eleven thousand virgins! it is not the duchess. She does not love me quite so much as I thought. But who is it? Decidedly I must make a list. One must be methodical."

The Count made out his list—mere initials. They were all Clarice, Fanchette, Ursule, or whatever their dear names were, to him. Their ranks troubled him not a whit. They were always of the best. For a man of his parts to cultivate amours in any but the best quarters was childish. Besides, as Monsieur Bocal would say, "It was not amusing." It was not a long list. Possibly there were six or seven, not more, of his reigning sultanas. Like another truly great man, he was amazed at his own moderation. Few as they were, the petals of their reputations must be scrupulously protected.

The Count went through to his bedchamber and took out his *escritoire*. One, two, three, four, five neat packets tied with ribands of various colours, and the knot sealed in each case just as he had left them.

"Confound it! The sixth packet! I remember it was not packed like the rest. It was wrapped in a yellow parchment and inscribed. What did I inscribe upon it—something fanciful? Ah! I remember. Poor Clotilde!—shut up in Meudon. 'My one indiscretion.' Yes, a very apt inscription. But why should the fair unknown take that?"

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This gave him something serious to think about. Poor Clotilde! A sweet girl, who had persisted in falling in love with him and sending him in exchange for a few easy compliments half a dozen charming confessions of her innocent admiration. It was his "one indiscretion," because he had even broached the subject of marriage to her parents and had been coldly refused. They had sent poor Clotilde to Meudon till her prayers, or their better fortune, should conjure up another and more desirable suitor.

There was the possible explanation that the plot originated with her parents, resolved to leave nothing in his hands which could compromise her. But this he dismissed as improbable. He, however, admitted to himself that he did not know what perfume her mother was in the habit of using.

He thought again. He reproduced in imagination the outward look of the packet, and he remembered that the parchment was in fact an old War Office document of no value, in which he had wrapped up the letters—an old plan of a fortified town, and bore neatly engrossed upon it "Plan de Nancy."

This gave his imagination another turn. He went hot and cold as he sat there with the *escritoire* on his knees. Then bidding his valet proceed, carried off the *escritoire* to the other room, locked both doors, and after moving a piece of furniture, opened with a small key a small concealed cupboard, a mere crevice eight inches or so each way, so closely fitted into the wall and so well covered by the leather on the wall as to be invisible to any eye but his own. There were a number of packets of memoranda, over which he hastily ran his eye. Yes, they were all there! The lady's search had been fruitless. He could breathe again. They were welcome to poor Clotilde's letters though he was sorry too. They were so refreshing. They reminded him, so he professed, of his first youth. He usually read them in the only time he found for reading, which was while his lackey buckled his shoes.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOVE'S SELFISHNESS.

The end of the Count's immediate troubles increased, if possible, the volume of the flow of his ardent spirits. His blood had been temporarily dammed up by the scare. Now he was more jubilant than if nothing had happened out of the ordinary. The relief from an imminent danger is a stronger feeling than the anticipation of a pleasure easily within reach.

His elation led him to search his pockets for the paper signed by the eminent Dr Levani, sometime valet to an equally eminent theological student of Arras. He found it, read it, and placed it in his pocket again very carefully.

"One should not waste too long in preliminaries!" he said. Then he released his valet, reassured his landlord, ordered his dinner, went out to play tennis and get the news of the courts, returned, dined, dressed in a more becoming suit, and set out to call at the Hotel de Polignac—upon its mistress.

And here we may venture upon an observation of life, not in the least new, which few good women will admit to be true, because it reflects upon their judgment, of which, as is well known, all good women possess a large stock. The larger the stock is, the larger are the possibilities of depreciation. It is this:—

Your philanderer, who plays most havoc among the hearts of the weaker sisterhood, is an equal favourite, despite his reputation, with the stronger sisterhood whose virtue is unassailable. They are prone to excuse his anti-social sins on the score of his social qualities.

The Marquise de Polignac, who listened to no scandal nor retailed such evidences of it as her own eyes might offer, had little or no knowledge of the Count's laxities. To her he was the amusing, nay, interesting officer, who was a sharer to some extent in her husband's work,

and for the rest formed an always notable figure at her own receptions,—a man who had an eye for stuffs as for pictures, for flowers as for a rare piece of jeweller's work,—a man who took an abiding interest in woman's trifles without being effeminate, a well-made man, whose manners were charmingly polished, and the possessor of an audacity of which in her presence he only displayed as much as he would have of his sword in a German quarrel.

"You are looking charmingly ill!" he said to the Marquise as he found her in the picture-gallery alone. The large windows which looked upon the garden were open, and pleasant odours of flowers came to them where she sat. There was some embroidery before her, for excuse rather than for amusement.

"I am quite well, Count," she said, with a faint blush startled from its nest by his sudden irruption into the grove of her solitary thoughts.

"There flies a little white fib, madame," he said, with a curious assumption of masterful interest not unmingled with tenderness. It aroused a haughty—

"Monsieur!"

"You were thinking of the Red Neighbour, Marquise! You have been perturbed ever since she was arrested. It is beginning to tell upon your eyes, upon your complexion, which are justly celebrated as the finest in Paris."

"I have never heard that before," she said, smiling. "But come! You were speaking of the Red Neighbour. Tell me about her. I hear so little."

Her tone was so completely guarded, there was not a breath of faltering over the name. He took his cue from it.

"The Red Neighbour is a woman who has worked herself into the confidence of many Parisian ladies. She has been suspected of assisting some of them to poison their lords, and been thrown into the Conciergerie. That is what is given out. Many ladies visited her on very harmless errands . . ." he paused, . . . "as you did, madame."

"I, Count? What a marvellous idea!"

"That was nothing, madame! But you made a terrible mistake of strategy."

The Marquise winced, but said nothing. The Count's tones became grave and low.

"You put yourself into the hands of a common rogue calling himself Dr Levani. . . . He was once my lackey!"

The Marquise sprang up and placed her hand upon the Count's as if to beseech him to keep her secret, but she said nothing. Her lips refused.

The Count went on. "Madame, I have preserved your honour from this scoundrel, whose single idea was to wring money from you. Look!" He placed the paper in her hands, and sauntered away to a window to inhale the perfumed air, and relish, if only for a moment, the exquisite flavour of his sensations. For the Comte de Roubaix was an artist in sensations. It is also true that he was eminently practical, knowing what were the ends he aimed at and approaching them by what he considered the shortest route; but, having selected the route, he was careful to enjoy every leaf and twig and tone of green or trill of bird, whereunder we image the intangible pleasures of the emotions and the intellect.

"Count!" she called in a low tone of her sweet voice, and looked towards him with eyes whose blue depths seemed still more limpid for the tears she had brushed away. "You have done for me an incalculable service, swiftly, generously."

"She is going to be grateful," said the Count to himself. "And that will never do. She will give me a new sword or a ring, or some other trash. One never gets the right sort of favours from a woman's gratitude." Swift as his thought he struck in—

"Madame la Marquise, I did it out of pure selfishness!"

"Oh! Count!"

"Yes! Because I love you, and love is a supreme selfishness. You are now as much in my hands as

you were in those of Levani, but mine are the hands of a gentleman."

The Marquise was shocked by his avowal, spoken with the voice of ardour and sincerity. With as perfect an ear for the finest inflections as the Count's command of them was perfect, she knew that no suggestion of hopelessness underlay the declaration. It is doubtless a gratifying thing to a woman to hear such an avowal, where love is impossible, when the professed lover recognises its hopelessness. It permits of a gracious tender reception, motherlike in quality, a pouring of the oil of sweet words into the wounded heart, and of reflections, after his gentle dismissal, tinged with a certain regret, which yet may be approved by conscience.

The Marquise was alarmed a little by his audacity, but hampered by her gratitude for his undoubted service.

At his first words, so unexpected, her pride had leaped to the walls, and the tips of the spears gleamed from the battlements of her brow. That any man should have dared to say as much to Marie Gabrielle de Polignac and not go out straightway from her presence, bowed to the dust, was an inconceivable thing. But here was the friend of her house, of her husband, who had stood in the very nick of time, her unknown confidant, between her and shame, between her and her husband's anger, which she dreaded almost as much as she yearned for his love. How was it possible to hurl arrows of scorn at the Count in the very moment of gratitude? She dropped her eyelids as she stood facing him. Then she said, not raising them as yet—

"I always liked you very much, ever since I knew you, and chiefly because you were my husband's friend. I have heard you spoken of as a gallant man. I shall believe you such when I feel that you have spoken as you did just now out of the excess of the fervour of your fidelity. In token of my trust in your generosity I give you back your rogue's renunciation. It is safest with you. I shall tell my husband of your goodness and of my own foolishness."

As she said the last words she looked up at him with so beautiful an expression of trustfulness and kindness in her pure eyes that the Count was more than half persuaded that his private code of morals was at fault somewhere, and fully persuaded that he really loved her more than ever.

"No!" he said, putting back the paper. "I might be tempted to use it. Perhaps I should not have said what I felt. You are not yet out of the original danger. The Red Neighbour has not yet been examined. I have yet to find out what is the precise charge against her, and whether she will really be put to the Question. I have my doubts about it. Is it worth while to say anything to the Marquis at present?"

The Count threw out his last remark with an air of idle speculation, satisfied that he had set the Marquise, thinking of himself, and was wondering by what channel he could best guide the interview to a properly rhythmical close, a soft cadence of emotion, when he heard the foot-fall of the Marquis himself. His sensitive faculties were promised another feast. But he would perforce have to postpone the cadence. The Marquis slipped the paper into the folds of her dress. To hand it back to the Count was too hazardous. The Count noticed this too, and said to himself, "she will not tell her husband."

The Marquise turned and hastened to meet her husband.

"So soon! Gaston. You have come to take me for a drive? The Count could not see her face, but he heard the affectionate glad tones, "So soon! Gaston."

The Marquis smiled a smile that seemed to begin with his brows, linger in his eyes, and alight upon his lips. Lit up by it his features assumed a benignity only possible to lofty courageous souls which have a double portion of the divine essence.

"If you would only smile more often!" she whispered, as she took him by the arm, delighted by his coming, as she had been at any time since her wedding-day.

The Count came to meet them.

"So this is where you spend your time instead of at

the War Office," said the Marquis, with a quizzical expression. He said it indulgently, as if he had added, "one must excuse the young."

"It is that I have had an adventure."

"Not unusual to the Count, Marie," said the Marquis, smiling again.

"It was an unusual adventure, all the same," the Count replied. "I was arrested last night at the instance of my tailor, who swears he had no hand in it, and when I arrived at my lodgings I found some one had taken advantage of my accident to ransack every drawer, my escritoire, my pockets,—in short, everything I have, and carried off a packet of letters of no interest to any one but myself."

"Are you sure," asked the Marquise, in a merry tone that only betrayed how happy she was when the sun shone for her in her husband's presence, "that they would interest no one else?"

She is even capable of laughing at me, thought the Count, this woman that I hold in the hollow of my hand. She will require a sharp lesson.

"I was wrong. It is possible they would have interested you, madame. For you," he bowed to the Marquis with a smile, and looked at the Marquise, "are still in love, and so was the writer of the letters. But *her* love was without hope."

"It must be investigated—this plot," said the Marquis. "And now, Count, will you go at once to the War Office? The Marquis de Louvois wishes to see you. You are, on my recommendation, to be entrusted with some important business. I will confer with you later."

The heart of the Marquise bounded. She was then going to hear something of moment. Her husband, so cold and reticent, had come to life again and confidence. How easy it would be, should be, to tell her little story and bid defiance to her cares! With what infinite wheedling of woman would she control her husband's mood and lead it to the judgment-seat, where, nestling at his knee, she would make her confession!

The Count immediately made his adieux, saluting the

hand of the Marquise with a reverential kiss, and saying, "Till our next meeting, madame! I will not fail to execute your little commission," as if it were an affair of ribands, and "many thanks, Marquis, for your good word."

He went off, elated by this testimony to his worth, which was chequered by the "on my recommendation" of the Marquis, a possible diminishing clause in the eyes of the Marquise, before whom he wished to preserve the air of the man of destinies. His star and not another's recommendation must advance him.

Directly he had gone the Marquise threw her arms about her husband's neck and looked up into his eyes with joy verging upon tears.

"I am so glad you have come to me this afternoon, Gaston."

"You are a loving little soul, Marie Gabrielle," he said, returning her caress with interest, holding her back a little space and feasting on her eyes, and then gently, leading her on to the balcony, closing the window behind them.

"You have something to tell me, Gaston," she said. "You cannot guess how I hunger for your confidences. They are too rare," she added wistfully. "But I am too glad to scold you. Come! Tell me."

"Well then, dearest, I am going a journey to visit Marshal Turenne, and find out why he does not get sufficient supplies."

"And you will take me with you, Gaston?"

"Alas! no. I shall go on horseback with a single man, travelling as a private gentleman. I carry the king's safe-conduct, of course, so that I run no risk; but it is a long journey, and I may be detained here or there on the road. There is no telling. I shall write to you as often as possible, but you are not to expect any letters for a week, for there are reasons . . ."

"There is some danger, Gaston? I feel that there is . . ."

"No! my Marie! It is that I do not wish to be forestalled. I hope to find out much. But if my

approach is trumpeted abroad, it is clear that I shall find out nothing."

"Gaston! You are a perfect knight-errant, and your mistress is France, not I! Why do they not send the Count de Roubaix, for instance? He has no wife. He loves adventures. He is a great swordsman!"

"My dearest! I am not going out to fight duels, at least not with a sword, but to confer with my old friend Turenne, to concert measures for the welfare of the army. The Count de Roubaix is not fitted for such duties. He is useful in his way, but this is a very delicate matter which I alone can handle, as I alone conceived it."

"Ah! vain Gaston! How your work has taken hold of you! Oh! Gaston, I wish you were not going. I shall feel so lonely in Paris."

"So lonely! with troops of friends and all the gaieties of the Court!"

"And no heart when you are gone, Gaston. Ah! you cannot tell what presentiments I have of impending danger. Dream, Gaston, that you were where I could not reach you, and I was in deadly peril!"

"But, my love, my heart, it is but a question of weeks. Put away your timidity. It was not in this way that your ancestresses sent their lords to the crusades—a serious affair. This is but a holiday jaunt—along the highway. I have to go to Châlons, say two days' journey, Bar le Duc, another two days or perhaps three, Nancy another two days. Two more days will bring me to the frontier, and I shall meet the Marshal. That is eleven days. I may be with him a week, and then come back. Four weeks in all."

"Four weeks, Gaston? We have never been parted so long since our marriage!"

"And you will have Thérèse," he said. "Everything will go on as usual."

"It is easy for you, Gaston! Besides, Thérèse will have to return to Meudon very soon. I shall be a prey to my own thoughts, my own fears!"

The Marquis made a little gesture of despair, smiling, however, upon her at the same time.

"But what can I do? I have arranged this with Louvois. It is a matter which deeply concerns the State. You wouldn't have me rust, Marie? Rust? That is what our nobles, our men of race are doing, and the Colberts and Le Telliers, the industrious men of no family, are gaining and keeping the power in their own hands. It is true we have a strong king—thank Heaven for that! But suppose that we come to have a weak king, and a nobility that has lost its muscle, its address, its brain, its courage! what will happen? The strong and vigorous bourgeoisie, the Bocals, will mount to power and trample us like unripe corn beneath their heels. I have but one life. I mean to lead it to the utmost stretch."

Insensibly the Marquis's tones had grown stern, tense, determined, and his eyes glowed with a heroic light. To the eyes of the Marquise he seemed to grow away from her into a being less human, unapproachable. She burst into tears, tears she had hitherto kept back. She leaned her arms upon the balustrade of the balcony and wept.

"The State! The State! Your life! The nobility!" she sobbed out at intervals. "What have I to do with these? I am your wife. I love you! I want all of you, not the dregs when the wine has been poured out of the flagon."

The Marquis took a few strides in perplexed silence. He saw that her appeal had the force of justice. Equally he saw the force of the eternal saying, "If a man toil not, neither shall he eat," albeit the peasants and the farmers on his estates would furnish him with meat and drink and noble raiment till his dying day, without any exertion on his part. His interpretation of the saying was a higher one. But could he make it clear to Marie Gabrielle, born De Lusignan, surrounded with wealth and ease since the day of her birth, sheltered from every wind of heaven, and from every jar and jostle of the denizens of earth?

Proud, of a proud race, lovely beyond the middle lot of woman, how was it possible to make her understand? If she had not loved him quite so much!

"Come!" he said, taking her by the shoulder, and she trembled as he touched her, so absorbed was she in her grief. "Come to your room. We can talk better there."

And she suffered him to lead her to the window of her chamber which looked out upon the same balcony, and set her down upon a great fauteuil, placing cushions for her head, and taking her hand, knelt beside her.

Little by little she quietened beneath his caresses. The violence of the storm was abated. Then, woman-like, she turned from reproaches to prayers for forgiveness.

"Forgive me, Gaston! I have been very stupid. Of course you must go. I am too selfish. No! You are going to say that it is you that are selfish. No! It is true. You must have your ambitions. I should not love you if you had not. And you will be back again as soon as possible, having removed the mountains—is it not so?" She was smiling now through the glistening of the tears.

"You are a brave little woman!" said the Marquis, radiant with pleasure at the turn things had taken. "And now, what is at the bottom of all this? You have some hidden trouble. I know you are jealous of the State. But why do you so much want me not to go?"

"Because—it will sound trivial to you—I was foolish enough to go to the Red Neighbour,—never mind what for. It was innocent enough. It was not for an Inheritance Powder! And I was afraid that if they put her to the Question my name might be divulged, and you would believe ill of me, and there would be a scandal . . ."

The face of the Marquis, the tone of his voice, both seemed to feel a cold shadow cross them. You have seen the sunbeams bathing a corner of the dismal street and making it lovely. You have seen them pick up

their long limbs and stride—whither? The street is cold and grey again. Just so was the effect on the Marquis.

“You also, Marie Gabrielle!”

There was a world of weight in the “also.” It seemed to place her in alignment with the other women. Like an arrow it sped through her brain, leaving a rankling track behind it. The Marquis had been momentarily off his guard, given way to an instant passing irritation, had meant to convey his disappointment at a single point of foolishness. She read it as a hurling from its pedestal of the statue he had prized as marble, because he found it but a copy in clay, forgetful that the true lover loves his mistress or his wife because she is human, and not otherwise. No man would for long love a goddess. But reading the phrase so, she locked up her treasure of confidences, and hiding the key in her heart, felt its cold dead weight pressing inward.

“I am very sorry,” she said. “I suppose I am like the other women, but I meant no harm. But you will see that our name is not dragged across the horrible records of the ‘Burning Chamber’?”

“It is not an easy thing, nor a dignified one,” said the Marquis slowly, and with more weariness in his tone than anger, “to stifle the mention of a name if they put her to the Question. If they do not torture her, I do not expect any revelation. The charge formulated against her may not be the real reason for which she is immured. It may be she is there for reasons of State. Do not ponder over possibilities too much. Do not seek to know what is going forward. It is the guilty only who need fear, and it was only your foolish fancy that made me speak coldly. I must make my preparations for the journey: but first let us drive in the Cours la Reine and then sup together, and part as we should, dearest, in perfect amity.”

“Oh, Gaston! I wish you were not going!” was her last word in this memorable interview.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MARQUIS DE POLIGNAC VISITS A PRISONER.

The woman who occupied the Conciergerie's best lodging, into which penetrated, when the door opened, the dank fetid air of the corridors, and, when the door was shut, the varying but always noxious odours of the prison yard (a coup for all manner of filth by day as well as by night, to lie and rot, and exhale pestilence), this woman, who had led a life of intense activity, was becoming almost as savage as a tigress under the restraint. She felt the splendid vigour of her body being slowly sapped. She was always thinking, thinking.

For what purpose had she been immured? At whose instigation? These were the first questions. She had to confess to herself that the answers were still to seek. Ostensibly she had been arrested on a charge of poisoning, or being accessory to poisoning, an old man who had a young wife. That was not the real reason she was sure. She knew too much of the intrigues of courts to believe in the figment called justice: too much to suppose that the Provost of Paris, or any other great functionary of that more tangible thing called law, had, out of his stern indignation at the death of one old man, laid hands upon her and encased her within these pestilential walls. It was too obvious an explanation to be the true one. To be frank, of which she had no intention, it would have been a welcome truth, for the chaplet of great names with which she could festoon the court of trial, and the fear of the swiftly following lampoons, would procure her a smothered but certain acquittal.

She knew that there were deeper possibilities, probings of another side of her life, a side wherein the real native vigour of her mind and her truest energies were employed. The life she led in Paris of potion-dealer, sorceress, fortune-teller, vendor of secrets of the toilette, was only the superficial outlet of her restless spirit, a

plaything to her, a terrible will-o'-the-wisp for the fools who came to play with her, or took her play for seriousness. To what extent that young wife had helped the old man's halting steps over the precipice which is called death, she knew not and cared not. She possessed the brutality of great statesmen, of great conquerors, the brutality which says, "That is their affair!" and feels no qualm.

If only some light were shed. It was suspense as much as anything that told upon her spirits. No one had come near her but "that fool Levani," as she styled him. She had been left alone. And if it be not good for man to be alone, neither is it for woman. She regarded that truce of the law as ominous. Of fussy interrogatories by minor officials to drag admissions out of her, of opportunities for exercising her woman's wit and double-edged tongue, which would have furnished salt to her savourless indolence, there had been none.

The turning of a key in the lock! The head-jailer's grim sallow visage! Behind him a tall, handsome, thoughtful gentleman.

"The Marquis de Polignac," recited the head-jailer.

"Bring candles!" was the brief order of the Marquis.

Candles were brought and two chairs. The deal table was drawn up between. It was to be a long affair. So let it be!

"So this is the husband whose coldness sent his Marquise whimpering to me for advice and remedies," was the Red Neighbour's caustic but silent commentary. How she despised women!

The Marquis drew his chair to the table, motioned to the prisoner to do the same, and spread out before her an order signed by the minister Colbert and countersigned by the Chief of the Police empowering him, the Marquis de Polignac, to put any interrogations he wished to the prisoner known as the "Red Neighbour." She inclined her head in token that she looked upon the Marquis as fully warranted.

"I am his Majesty's Under-Secretary of State for

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War, madame!" said the Marquis coldly, but with his usual perfect politeness.

The red masses of hair shone in the candle-light as she inclined her head again.

"You are a vendor of secrets of the toilette, of love-philtres, medicines, and so forth?"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Have you any skill in curing sick horses?"

"Why do you come to me with such a question?"

"Because a malady has broken out among the horses of the regiment of the Chevaux-Legers of the Guard. The farriers of the regiment are unable to deal with it. Several horses are already dead."

"Probably they have been fed on mouldy hay or been given too much water when they were hot."

"You have some understanding of them, then?"

"That is what every one knows. It is not skill. You are desirous of entrapping me. If I say that I know something of the poisoning of horses, it will be taken as evidence that I know how to poison people."

"On the contrary, I know nothing of the charges against you. I have not read the indictment. If you can render me assistance I shall see that you are removed to more wholesome quarters, and allowed some measure of liberty till your trial. It might tell in your favour."

At the words "measure of liberty" her eyes gleamed in the candle-light, but at the other words they reflected merely defiance.

"As to that, my lord, I have no fears. Let them bring me to trial and I will set all Paris ringing with lampoons. My clients have been numerous!"

She launched this at the Marquis with a certain meaning vindictiveness as who shall say, "You will be tarred amongst the rest!" But the Marquis showed no sign.

"But why do you come to me? I have skill with the ailments of ladies, it is true. But horses? Horses are so different."

"You were the daughter of a farrier," the Marquis said very quietly. I thought of you immediately."

A cold shiver passed through the body of the Red Neighbour, succeeded by a flush of heat. Her countenance showed merely the flush, but her teeth chattered ever so slightly.

"Decidedly these cells are very unwholesome!" said the Marquis gently.

"Is that a part of the indictment, my lord, that I am a farrier's daughter? That would add to the certainty of my release! Paris would laugh the more!"

"Perhaps!" said the Marquis with some dryness. "I do not know what is in the indictment. I happen to know that you were what I said just now, a farrier's daughter!"

At this moment the bell of the Conciergerie began to boom slowly, slowly. The noise came in through the slits in the wall, high up, that did duty for windows. A prisoner had died. That was all. There were few days when the bell did not toll.

The strong-framed woman shook her shoulders with a vigorous movement and clasped her strong hands on the edge of the table. Decidedly, as the Marquis had said, these cells were very unwholesome. But what did that polite, unmoved, thoughtful interrogator know? Was he merely anxious for the king's horses? Her fears and her quick wits told her "No." But she wished very much for the measure of liberty. It had never been measured to her before except by herself since—well never mind. The total deprivation of it for a week had been terrible. With a certain measure she might do much.

"It is true then, I was a farrier's daughter," she said defiantly. "What then?"

"And you have some skill with horses?"

"I am willing to try what I can do—on your terms. I rely on your word of honour."

"You may," said the Marquis.

"And when will you permit me to see these horses, Monsieur le Marquis?"

"To-morrow morning arrangements will be made."

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She expected to see the Marquis rise and go. Instead he snuffed the candles.

"It is a curious thing," said the Marquis, "that many horses fall ill immediately they arrive at the frontier, and are handed over to the officers of the cavalry and artillery with Marshal Turenne."

"It is perhaps the journey that upsets them!" the woman suggested.

"There is no room for sick horses in a camp," the Marquis went on. "One has to sell them to any one who will buy them. Have you ever heard of a Josef Kuhn?"

"Josef Kuhn?" she repeated with unaffected wonder. Was this bland questioner only asking questions for amusement? At what point should she begin to lie? She decided to begin now.

"No! I do not know Josef Kuhn."

"Then you do not know any of the horse-dealers who frequent Marshal Turenne's camp?"

"No! I live here in Paris. I gain my living as you know. I do not wish to be reminded of my obscure origin. I knew horse-dealers once. Now I know Marquises."

"You do not know Monsieur Bocal, for instance, the great contractor?"

"No! I have heard of him. He is a great rogue." This with much vehemence.

The Marquis made no comment.

"I see clearly what you want," she said in a business-like tone. "You want to trace the wastage in horses and material. I could tell you if I liked how it is all done, but I am not going to. I learned a good deal in my youth. It was a hard one. If you want to learn any more, you must go to Turenne's camp. That's my advice—it is worth something. Study the road to it. But you are a Marquis. You would not find out anything. You are too grand, and it is all dirty, dirty, this work."

"Madame! can you keep a secret?"

"Even if they put me to the Question!" she said with a cold haughtiness.

"I am going to Marshal Turenne's camp . . . and I am going to find the man you don't know . . . Josef Kuhn."

She met his gaze without finching. "Good! It is time to put the noose round Monsieur Bocal's neck. It is a strong one."

The Marquis smiled a very little. The Red Neighbour bit her lips for her admission.

"It is a thick neck! Yes! I have heard that much. At what hour to-morrow morning?"

"At six, madame."

CHAPTER X.

A SENSE OF CHIVALRY.

The affair of the king's horses, for the Red Neighbour no sooner cast her luminous brown eyes upon them than their cure or the staying of the distemper began, caused a great noise in Paris. The ingredients of the medicines she prepared were carefully noted, and a copy filed in the pigeon-holes of the War Office, Cavalry Section. The Marquis de Polignac arranged through the same channels as before for her removal to a more commodious, better-lighted prison, not less well-guarded, which had the advantage of a large garden in which she could take daily walks in the company of two soldiers, whose age and tried fidelity were proof against any blandishments. The Marquis had every desire to find her on his return still there, which he was unlikely to do if he left her in the pestiferous Conciergerie.

He had conceived the idea that madame of the red hair had something to do with the tap that, constantly running, was allowing the riches of France, instead of fertilising the fields of war, to flow into a mysterious duct that led no one knew whither. If he kept her in

prison for the space of his journey, he argued, there would be one agency the less to divert the current.

The great Louvois had been privy to the scheme, smiled at it with conscious superiority, and propitiated the other powers who controlled the police, so that they lent their formularies and machinery with polite indifference. It was true that an old man of some wealth had died leaving his young wife a large fortune, and the wife had been a client of the Red Neighbour. There was also a hungry tribe of the next-of-kin. The reason alleged for her imprisonment was sufficient.

But beyond De Louvois and his second, the Marquis de Polignac, no one knew why the Red Neighbour had been arrested.

Paris accepted the reason alleged, and promptly after her manner became two camps of hostile opinion.

The one was hot for the trial of the Red Neighbour, for the Question extraordinary, for her condemnation and the pleasing spectacle of her execution, with all the usual ferocious accompaniments, in the Place de Grève. The first two would be interesting enough in themselves, but merely preliminary to the chief tableau.

The other party, consisting among the noblesse and rich bourgeoisie of former clients of the accused, were just as anxious for her release without the preliminaries. They wished their names to be kept out of the mud that would flow first. As to her blood, they were in the main indifferent. They were finding other compounders of cosmetics who, so they vowed to one another, were every bit as clever. It is a callous world the world of fashion.

The shopkeepers and other common folk who made up the voice of Paris, though they bought no cosmetics or love-philtres, except perhaps in a surreptitious way of the cheap-jacks on the Pont Neuf, and then only spent a few sous, took sides from their abounding interest in whatever question came uppermost, and just then the "Red Neighbour" was uppermost.

Gaston de Polignac and a lackey who had been a dragoon had no sooner left Paris, on what the great

minister De Louvois considered was a quixotic quest, than the two Court parties came into conflict, more or less supported on either side by the public voice, which reached their noble ears by way of the Court jeweller, the Court dressmaker, perruquiers, valets, chambermaids, and other well-known avenues, by which the condescending rich come to know just as much as the complaisant and crafty humility of their lower world chooses to communicate.

De Louvois, like a wise man, said nothing, but went on writing memoranda and maxims for his sovereign lord to peruse, and despatches of great length to the various generals at the frontier. But the hungry next-of-kin were howling at the gates of the Palais de Justice, and a strong Court party was supporting the clamours of the next-of-kin (a few promises of a share in the plunder were doubtless in currency), so that the authorities of the Police and the great Colbert, whose office embraced all that no one else cared to look after, which was nearly everything outside the Department of War, began to say to Monsieur de Louvois in so many words—

“This is all very well, Monsieur le Marquis. We have no objection to a little finesse, and a good deal of delay on your account, so long as it is merely a question of putting a common adventuress to a little inconvenience; but figure to yourself, Monsieur, suppose Madame de Montespan stirs up the fire, and his Majesty asks us why we don't put the woman on her trial and end the matter out of hand, what are we to say? We have no objection to your drawing the poor emoluments of your noble office for ever, if Providence will be so good as to spare you to the honour of France so long, but we do most strenuously object to getting into disgrace, and possibly losing our own privileges and pensions.”

The noble Marquis at first replied that directly matters took an extreme turn he would himself explain to the king in a report, at once lucid and convincing, his official view of the affair.

He calculated, however, without Madame du Fresnoy, the little woman who was wife to one of his clerks, and, nevertheless, had the privilege of the *grandes entrées*, and was a lady of the bedchamber to boot.

Madame du Fresnoy was the most eager in the hunt. Her devotion to the real interests of the great Minister was immense as a force, and microscopic in its attention to detail. Ever since she had heard those memorable words of the late Monsieur de Traumont—"Either Louvois dies or I"—she had made up her mind that not only De Traumont, who had expiated his crime, but every other person involved in that sacrilegious attempt, should eventually share his fate. And by one of those intuitions, almost divine, that distinguish the lovelier sex, she had decided that in the Red Neighbour she had found the clue to the labyrinth. Besides, the Red Neighbour had sold her, through a discreet merchant's wife of her acquaintance, a pot of cream for the complexion, which had covered her face with red spots for the space of three days. It was no proof of guilt, of course, as she explained to one of the court ladies, but it did not encourage her to hope for the establishment of the Red Neighbour's innocence.

Madame du Fresnoy attacked the Marquis de Louvois in what has always been a vulnerable point in man, since a rib was taken out to make into a helpmeet, his flank. And great as was his appreciation of her devotion, he was far too prudent to explain to her that he was in any way responsible for the delay, or concerned in the fate of the unhappy vendor of cream-for-the-complexion.

His apparent want of concern made it all the easier for her to push her request that he would use his influence to urge a speedy trial (for who, indeed, was more interested than he was?), and so put to rest those torturing doubts that, arising from her generous interest in his destiny, would not be laid until every lawful means had been used to sift the mystery from which they arose.

De Louvois, freed from the immediate personal pres-

sure of the Marquis de Polignac (and he admitted that even persons of less luminous intellect than one's own, when driven by a fiery, if quixotic, energy and persistent belief in an idea, do exercise influence over one), began to vacillate in the direction of the new planet. His orbit of action, or inaction, began to suffer a change. He did not see Polignac's plan in entirety, for the good reason that Polignac, feeling his way, urged by a great desire and a strong faith based upon the direction of a few straws of fact, had been unable to outline a plan. The Minister, therefore, came to this reflection that, as the main ingredient in Polignac's plan was to keep the Red Neighbour out of any power of meddling with the affairs of the War Department, she would be just as well figuring as an oblation to the public demand, to the hungry next-of-kin, and to that dear importunate Madame du Fresnoy, as doing nothing. It might be argued from this that De Louvois was weak. The suggestion would be baseless. De Louvois had been too long the head of a department of state not to have assimilated the blessed doctrine of expediency. That was all. It was another's theory and not his own that was being sacrificed to that insatiable idol.

The Comte de Roubaix, whose new duties brought him into closer relations with the great Minister, was aware of the departure of the Marquis, and of the general object of his journey, so far as it was officially known. He was also aware that De Louvois was in a lukewarm way advising the trial of the Red Neighbour on the charge for which she was arrested. But he knew nothing of the reasons for which she was, in fact, in durance. He measured accurately the real strength of the party that clamoured for her trial, and foresaw plainly that the trial would become a fact.

It was time to pay a visit to the lonely Marquise. The fact of her husband being away for a lengthy period made no appeal to his sense of chivalry, which was impalpable. It seemed opportune. But husband or no husband, he would have paid the visit.

Would she deny herself to him? The Count's habitual

effrontery would have borne the denial unabashed. The brazen face of one man is the equivalent of the moral courage of another in the world's superficial currency.

She did not. The Count said to himself that the chase would be all the longer. It showed him that she believed in herself. As an artist in sensations he was glad. There would be more of them, and they would be more exquisite.

It was not so much that Marie Gabrielle de Polignac believed in herself, as that the Count's preliminary reconnaissance of the few days before had not made the impression on the fair enemy that he had expected. The love of the Marquise for her husband was so besetting that it permeated her intellect as well as her heart. She was so triply armed that the arrows of the Count, though her eyes told her they were being shot at her, made so little dint that she could not realise the earnestness of the attack. She received him in the Hotel de Polignac without a second thought, as one of her ancestors would in the fastness of his castle have let down his drawbridge and admitted a hostile knight who came craving his hospitality.

She was in the garden strolling in the shade of the trees, and as he approached he did not fail to notice how her rich colouring and ripe splendour of womanhood gained in emphasis by the sombre trunks, by the bright green at her feet, by the leafy moving canopy above, through which the sunlight pierced and moved in splashes about her hair, her face, and her apparel.

She turned at his footstep and smiled a serene friendly smile.

"It is true, then," said the Count. "The gods have not entirely left the earth since the Golden Age has still a dryad!"

"Do you know," she replied, "I always find compliments like that as tedious as our modern poetry with its unending Zephyrs and Cupids and . . ."

"I should leave it for lesser women! Yes, Marquise, you are right. They sound altogether trivial when applied to you."

"Then why scatter your cheap pearls?" she said with a little pout. "Tell me, how are things going in your . . . Department of War?"

The Count bowed, noting the curious association of ideas. The Marquise de Polignac had never before evinced the slightest interest in official matters.

"Faith! How it oppresses me! Monsieur de Louvois with his 'experience' and his 'precedents' and those interminable reports, which I have the honour of taking down at his dictation. By the way, Monsieur de Louvois is beginning to stir in the matter of the woman who was in the Conciergerie and now in . . ."

A tremor shot through the heart of the Marquise.

"Yes?" she said with indifference.

"They took her out to cure the king's horses of a distemper."

"The king's horses?"

"And she did it too. They rewarded her by a change to a better lodging."

"And De Louvois is going to release her?"

"Not he! He is exerting himself to have her tried!"

"They cannot keep her in suspense for long," said the Marquise, as if it were a question of public news.

"It is magnificent to have your conscience!" said the Count, stretching out his hand to remove a wayward branch.

"My errand was a perfectly innocent one!" This in a calm assured tone.

"It is a pity the Marquis should have chosen this time to be absent."

"Why? Gaston said there was nothing to fear."

"Then you have told him?"

"Monsieur le Comte! I fail to see how it concerns you what I tell my husband."

"Pardon my solicitude, madame. All that concerns you concerns me."

She would doubtless have made a crushing response but that she was anxious to learn more. Her fears were awakening again.

"You must learn to put a curb upon your concern,"

she said sweetly. "You did me a service. I am grateful. Be content."

"I shall be content only when I have done you another and a greater one!" he said, taking her hand and bowing over it. "Monsieur le Marquis is too absorbed in his work to weigh these things."

"What things?"

"The hubbub and the scandal that will rise like a cloud of dust when the trial begins. Figure to yourself this woman on trial for her life, asked this and that, a coarse strong woman. What an opportunity for revenge! She will pour out invective, names, ordures, little and great, betray secrets of the toilette and secrets of the family, secure in her position of the chief character in the drama, and always names. She will not be choice in her remembrances. Her desire will be to create scandal with the view to purchase her release or to glut her revenge upon her clients, who have scorned her while they fawned upon her and enriched her, and finished by putting her in the Conciergerie."

"They cannot permit her," said the Marquis with the concentrated pride of twenty generations of De Lusignans.

The Count shrugged his shoulders. "We shall see! You do not appreciate the delightful ferocity of our courtiers. You have lived, madame, in such real seclusion. Your rank, your beauty, your incomparable serenity of conscience, have been as convent walls about you. Formerly there were great families, knitted in close alliances, or at variance, but rich and powerful, with long trains of men-at-arms in their service. The king was only one among the great chieftains, king because he claimed the support of the greatest number of the strong. But the wars of the League, the schemes of Richelieu, the avarice of Mazarin, and finally, the masterfulness of his Majesty, have enlisted the men-at-arms in the king's armies, and left to the great families merely a crowd of idle valets; and one great family vies with another to secure his Majesty's favour and discredit its rival."

The Marquise was impatient at this pitiless exposition, the more so that she knew it to be true and yet refused to realise it. She was angry that it should have come from the mouth of De Roubaix and not from her husband. She had treated De Roubaix as a butterfly courtier. And behold he was a clear-sighted observer, who spoke as a man who has his own hand on the helm of his boat and means to steer it into harbour regardless of what others may do.

"We have indeed fallen on evil days, monsieur! And now for the moral of your sermon?"

"The hunters will not rest till they have driven their knives into the quarry!"

"Meaning the Red Neighbour?"

"No! Meaning every one they envy, . . . the Polignacs, for instance."

The Marquise sat down upon a seat and looked straight in front of her. The blue eyes became fixed and lifeless. The Count still stood and twisted the ends of his moustaches. She was trying to fortify herself against the rush of fears by thinking of her husband's looks and tones and words when she made her confession. She remembered the impression of coldness that had come over her.

"So you think," she said, still looking into her vision, "that our friends will take good care that our name is dragged through the mire of suspicion."

"And that the Marquis will never forgive you for being the cause of it."

"There is no way out?"

"If a real friend were to take the matter in hand, a friend who knew the ways . . ."

She looked up at the Count, who was gazing upon her with a fine assumption of nobility and so very open an admiration in his eyes that she blushed as she exclaimed with indignation—

"Another service? And to be content with gratitude?"

"No! It is not possible in your case to be content with gratitude. I will serve you—but it is in return for your love——"

There was no mistaking the meaning of his words, or the determination that sat upon his handsome features.

"It is true!" she said, rising and facing him in august anger, "as you said, the age of chivalry is dead. You dare to bargain!"

"It is, Marie Gabrielle, my well-beloved, each man for himself."

She swept past him to the house with a murmur of contemptuous wrath upon her lips.

The Count followed slowly, quoting to himself *La Rochefoucauld's* saying—

"When one's heart is still tossing on the spent waves of a passion, it is nearer to a new one than if it floated on calm water."

CHAPTER XI.

THE QUESTION EXTRAORDINARY.

The day of the public trial before the Parlement of Jeanne Chavigny, known as the Red Neighbour, for impious dealings, poisonings, artifices, evil contrivances, and conspiracy against the lives of his Majesty's subjects, and in particular against that of one Martin Ragonleau, formerly grocer, dawned with a dreadful tardiness for the Marquise de Polignac, with untimely haste for the accused.

The accused faced the formidable tribunal with the utmost calm. Her piercing brown eyes swept the court, the benches of the long robe, the ushers, clerks, and other officials, the outer parterre, where gathered a nondescript assemblage, the galleries where all feminine Paris was, in person or by deputy, that had influence enough to gain admission. There was a slight contemptuous smile as her eyes roving over the faces picked out client after client while the preambles to the proper

business were being read. Then she had no eyes but for the President, the advocates, and the witnesses.

It was a long day but a triumphant one, in the sense that justice—if by justice is meant the determined prejudice of a bench assured from the beginning of her criminality—justice was completely baffled.

No incriminating papers had been found at her residence, no poisons. There was no proof of her having sold any powder of inheritance, or indeed any other to the wife of the deceased. To all questions she maintained a steady front. The most skilled interrogators sprung their traps in vain. And the force of her incisive retorts made the questioners lose their tempers.

“You say that you have accomplices in your crimes?”

“I have never admitted crimes, Maître de Bussy.”

“What then?”

“In my follies.”

“Be it so! In your follies! Who are they, these accomplices?”

There was a manifest stir in the galleries. The ladies and their attendant cavaliers craned forward. Eyes glistened eagerly with hate, with curiosity, and the mouths of many became dry.

“Maître! They are there!” She pointed to the galleries. “They are all Paris!”

The auditory sat back again and essayed to look unconcerned.

The dry voice of the President went on:—

“You had a numerous *clientèle*. Let us hear who they were.”

This was the famous opportunity for this strong coarse woman who had baffled the best juridic talent of France for a whole long summer's day, till her pallid skin palpably glistened with the exudations from her pores, forced out by the long nervous strain. This was the moment the Comte de Roubaix had predicted.

Once more she wiped her lips with a beautiful lace handkerchief, and addressed the President.

“Monsieur le President, I have said they are the accomplices in my follies. It would be more exact to

say I have been the accomplice in theirs. I have grown rich upon their follies, but I have never earned a sous by their betrayal. I am the 'Red Neighbour' who does not tell tales. Their names are safe—here." She pointed with a dramatic gesture to her breast.

The galleries and parterre broke out into involuntary expressions of approval. She had chosen with a supreme common-sense. She had triumphed.

The Count de Roubaix felt extremely mortified. What were his weapons worth now?

Again when silence was restored came the dry tones of the President.

"Messieurs!" he said, looking at the thirty gentlemen-of-the-robe who assisted him in the capacity of judge, "it will be necessary to submit the prisoner to the Question."

There was a dead silence. Then the galleries broke out again into a murmur which the ushers had to quell.

The Count de Roubaix looked round in the direction of the Marquise de Polignac, who was there in company with some other ladies. He divined that she was about to swoon and went swiftly to her assistance, almost carrying her to her coach. As Pierre was close behind, there was no need to accompany her further. The Marquise thanked him with pale lips, trembling over the words. As he turned back again it was clear the court was over. Paris had enjoyed its day.

"It is infamous!" said some. "She'll talk fast enough when she gets the Question," said others.

It was a different thing the next day when the Red Neighbour was introduced into the torture-chamber of the Conciergerie, whither she was sent for the purposes of baffled justice. There was an absence of the stimulating crowd.

Instead of the indecipherable ring of faces that burst upon her in the daylight of the Palais de Justice, were the bare, damp, solidly-hewn squares of stone, half lit by the flambeaux that smoked in their sockets—stone, grey and black, for the floor, the walls, the low vaulted roof. Behind her was the darkness of the low archway by

which she had entered, already closed by a stout door studded with rusted iron points.

There was a wooden stool. There was a low trestle. There were other objects the use of which was not instantly apparent to the spectator. Before her at the other end of this chamber was a writing-table at which sat the clerk of the court, and on a raised dais sat two gentlemen-of-the-robe, who were doubtless to conduct the interrogatory. At the opposite end was a small group of men of malign aspect. A little picture of the Son of God hung upon the wall. It was prescribed by the same regulations that dictated the other furniture.

The smell of the smoky flambeaux and of the damp earthiness common to dungeons struck her senses more perhaps than the novelty of the scene.

She was not the same self-reliant, alert woman that had faced the court a whole long session the day before. The long nervous strain had told upon her. She had begun this day feeling the reaction. More, she had been subjected to a rough and not too delicate examination at the hands of two surgeons, with the amiable object, prescribed in the judiciary regulations, of ascertaining if her physical condition fitted her for the precise form of torture designed for her. Strong woman and coarse, as the Count de Roubaix had described her, she was all the same possessed of a full measure of woman's natural modesty, and the resentment she had felt at the indignity already suffered made her ill-steeled to bear what was to come.

The Reporter of the Process, as the presiding judge was styled, motioned her to the stool, where she sat crouched, her hands, large but well-kept, folded upon her knees, her hair, whether sharing in some mysterious way in her inward agitation, or because neglected, overflowed its knots and combs in vivid disorder, her face pallid, her eyes bright and restless and thrown into relief by blue hollows below, which had not been apparent yesterday.

"Do you still persist that you know nothing of the causes that led to the death of Martin Ragonleau?"

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"I know nothing of them, monsieur." There was a profound sincerity in her pleading tone that might have carried conviction to any but the engineers of baffled justice.

"Do you still persist that you have taken no part in any crimes such as are set forth in the indictment?"

"I do, monsieur."

"You were not privy to the attempt upon the life of Monsieur de Louvois by one De Traumont, now executed according to law?"

"I was not, monsieur."

"Do you refuse to make confession of the names of any person or persons concerned with you in any mysteries of sorcery, magic, or other diabolical arts, for which you have been notorious in Paris these two years?"

"I do."

"You are aware that because of your perversity you are about to be put to the Question by water?"

"Yes!"

"And you still swear by the person of Jesus Christ"—here the Reporter directed his eyes to the picture and crossed himself devoutly—"that you are entirely innocent?"

"That I swear!" she said, looking straight at the Reporter.

The Reporter whispered to the Counsellor who sat with him, and spoke to the clerk of the court. The clerk nodded towards the group at the other end.

Two fellows, trained assistants of the public executioner, seized her and began to undress her. There was no ceremony. But they reckoned without the Red Neighbour.

Acutely conscious that there was no other of her sex present, her naturally hot temper boiling over at the outrage, she gave one of the men a shrewd buffet with all her strength, which stretched him upon the ground, and caught the ear of the other fellow between her finger and thumb in a grip which might well have been the farrier's instead of only his daughter's.

"What are they going to do with me?" she cried hoarsely to the judges.

"To strip you except for your chemise, petticoat, and stockings!" said the clerk, reading from the regulations.

"Then I can do that for myself!" she said, panting and glaring at the executioner's aids.

In a twinkling her bodice, skirt, and other apparel were at her feet, and she stood there, with her shoulders broad and bare and white, displaying the splendid breadth of her chest, the massive curves of her fine hips, solid, magnificent, feminine, full of defiance, facing her tormentors.

The two agents of baffled justice were not insensible to the attitude, the strength, the coarse beauty of the prisoner. They would quite willingly have forgone any more of what promised to be a singularly painful ordeal.

The Reporter spoke:—

"Prisoner, it is our duty to put you to the Question by water. This is an operation sufficiently painful when quietly submitted to. Do not, I pray you, add to what you have to bear by any further exhibition of violence."

"I am ready!" she said. "What have I to do next?"

"Lie down on the trestle," said the clerk of the court. "The executioners will do the rest."

With considerable expertness her wrists were bound with ropes, which were hauled above her head through rings fixed in the wall. Similar ropes, fastened just above her ankles, were passed through rings fixed in the floor. All four were hauled tight, so that, though a part of the weight of her body was borne by the trestle, there was a terrible tension on the arms and legs. Into her mouth was placed a small horn funnel, and at the signal one of the sworn tormentors began to pour slowly from one of the measures of water.

As every mouthful passed through, the round white-throat gave sign by convulsive movements without of the torture that was felt within. At every few mouthfuls the Reporter of the Process asked one of his dull questions.

To each, while the defiant woman gulped down the

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water that was like lumps of lead, and felt the ropes tightening as her veins swelled, she made answer as she had before.

The first measure was down, a pint and a half of lumpy agony.

She braced herself to it. She would show these men, these butchers, torturers, vermin of the law, how she could endure.

The sworn tormentors had had women fine as a marquise, who had merely fainted away, and, brought to, fainted again. They had had women like the fish-wives and salad-sellers of the Halles, who had cursed until even the sworn tormentors were tired of it. But this woman who could endure; whose muscles of the forearm were like whipcord enclosed in silk; this woman who kept her head? They did not know what to make of her.

The second measure began to drip, drip its pitiless hammer-throbs on to the back of the tired throat.

To the questions of the judges she made no answer. It was a waste of time.

The drips went on. A groan escaped her now and again, wrung out of her by sheer bodily agony. But no word escaped her.

When the second measure had been emptied and wrists and ankles showed the ropes sunk in the ridges of unnaturally swollen flesh, she gasped out, "No more! What do you wish to know?"

"Of what did Monsieur Ragonleau die?"

"Of an apoplexy."

"What brought it on?"

"His son attempted to rob him. If I am released I can furnish the proof."

"You have been asked to give the names of any persons who came to you for preparations?"

"I can remember one, Madame du Fresnoy, who sent to me for a cream for her complexion."

The Reporter of the Process and the Counsellor whispered together.

"Any one else?"

"Madame de Montespan."

The two judges whispered again and then said—

"You are inventing calumnies. It is of no use."

At a nod the executioners went to work again. But at the half of the third measure she had lost consciousness, and the judges bade them cut her down and lay her on the mattress kept for the purpose.

Then the judges conferred together and agreed to adjourn the torture. It was clear that nothing was to be gained by the interrogatory.

Justice was baffled once more.

A strong detachment of archers stood without the Conciergerie. And it was well, for a grim array of the common people stood behind them packed tightly, many deep. The unshaven faces of poor unwashed men, the white caps of women who were certainly cleaner, but poor and pinched, all turned one way, were what one chiefly noticed. There were ballad-sellers, calling themselves hoarse, and there was a tall lean man in a mountebank garb, with a face that for the nonce had no jest in it.

"They are torturing our Red Neighbour!" Followed a string of coarse vile oaths that made even the nearest archers shrug their shoulders. "St Antoine and the Temple and the Court of Miracles are all here to-day," they said.

"What the devil do they all look so glum for?" said an archer. "These same people make holiday at an execution in the Place de Grève—yonder."

"She is a good friend to the poor!" said his fellow. "Diantre! If she has polished off an old man or two, she has saved many a poor devil when he was down with fever, or bought off the Jew when he was too hard upon him. She is the Red Neighbour of the poor as well as of the rich."

"Can't you sing us a song, Tintorin?" said some one.

"This is not a holiday!" said the tall mountebank, his eyes tearful and his voice choking. "Listen! They are undoing the bolts! Keep back now all of you!" And this time his voice rang like a clarion.

The mob, as the door opened, broke into a sullen roar. The whole swayed together. But in a great measure they obeyed the order. A coach was in waiting. Presently a file of archers came out carrying a mattress on which lay the unconscious woman, her clothes flung in a heap upon her. Tintorin burst through the archers, seized her hand and kissed it, looked at her a moment, then turned about and shouted with his great voice—

“She lives yet. Back all of you! Give place. There shall be no more torture.”

The crowd roared again with a great groaning roar like an assembly of wounded tigers. But they had faith in Tintorin.

“When you want us, Tintorin!” they shouted. “Long live our Red Neighbour!”

Very quickly the archers laid the mattress in the coach upon a bed of staves, and the carriage moved slowly back to the prison whence she came, archers on every side, a compact throng.

Then the people followed till they saw the doors close upon their idol. And Tintorin went back to the Pont Neuf pondering a new ballad.

CHAPTER XII.

IN PURSUIT OF AN IDEA.

The world might be divided into two classes of people, and one of the classes would be a very small one in comparison with the other: it might, not to consider too curiously, be divided into the people who seek for their ideal and those who, for lack of an ideal or for some other reason, do not. The larger class call themselves “the contented,” and doubtless receive a full portion of the blessing that the inspired wisdom of all ages and nations has promised them. It is the

smaller class who find their portion in the keenest sorrows and the most subtle and incommunicable joys,—sorrows and joys which assume no visible vesture of material woe or substantial weal.

The Marquis de Polignac followed the ideal of public duty. His wife followed another, not less difficult of attainment—the achievement of a perfect understanding and perfect interchange of love with the one man who in her eyes was likest God, her husband.

In pursuit of his ideal the Marquis de Polignac had taken the road that leads to the eastern frontier of France.

The Marquise, being accustomed to thought rather than to action, at first remained quiescent, living her life of lady of the first rank with as little immersion into the Court gaities as she could compass. Her mind lulled from turbulence to rest by her husband's evidently slight concern for the affair of the Red Neighbour, had after the lapse of a few days become agitated, as we have seen, by the interview in the garden that should have been the secure haven of her peace.

She realised that in Paris she was alone with the Comte de Roubaix. She could forbid him her doors. But he was astir without, an unscrupulous genie, not such an one as he of the Fisherman's Tale, who could be wheedled into a copper vessel and sealed with Solomon's seal, but one who against her will could project his spirit of unrest into her very heart. It was impossible to forget him, impossible not to forebode evil. Upon this agitated mind of hers had come the announcement of the coming trial of the woman whose name filled all Paris. She had fought against the temptation to go to the Palais de Justice. It was so directly contrary to her habitual lofty aloofness from the vulgar amusements of a world which, when it was not gratifying its bodily hunger and thirst, clamoured for low-rooted sensations. But the human call was too strong. She had found herself drawn into the curious drama that was unfolded by the dry processes of the law, and, though fully aware of the Count's presence and the

bearing of it, became too deeply absorbed in the extraordinary display of force by the leading actress to feel much beyond a slight disgust at his being there.

When, however, the decision of the judges to put the prisoner to the Question burst upon her ears and upon her mind, summoning from limbo all the ghosts of old fears, she had turned pale, and would have fallen but for the hateful hand of the very man whose predictions had been so completely falsified.

The night that followed the day of trial was one of long waking spells of terror. More than once did she go into her little oratory, and on her prie-dieu, kneeling before the Virgin and her Son, pray with the fervour and the faith that has always distinguished the best of the daughters of France, beseeching the mother's intervention between her and the ghostly dangers that menaced her on every side.

More than once her hand was upon the bell to summon Nanette with the excuse of ordering chocolate, and it was drawn back again. Where was her husband? At Meaux? At Chalons? At Vitry? At Bar-le-Duc? He could scarcely have reached Bar-le-Duc. Then her brain began to conjure up with a rapidity and intensity, which left her, as she resolutely threw them off, exhausted but not sleepy, visions of her husband in situations of peril and even of horror.

After one of these pauses wherein she regained clear vision and control of her thoughts, a definite determination began to shape itself to follow Gaston. Gaston had gone to seek his friend Turenne. She was jealous of Turenne. He more than De Louvois was to her the concrete embodiment of that hated War Department that ate up the kernel of her husband with malign fascination and left her nothing but the husks. He was a personality. He was a soldier. Ever since she could remember anything she remembered Turenne, the great honest captain of men, with the broad leonine brow and the shaggy hair falling over it, the strong, kindly, fleshy mouth, with its thick moustache and little tuft between

it and the curved strong chin. She pictured the very glint of his eyes as he stood talking the last time he was at the Hotel de Polignac. She pictured also the fine approving smile and rapt look of hero-worship on that far finer face, her husband's, and felt again the sting at her heart as she felt it then. How easy it was for Turenne to call out that smile, that look! How difficult for her!

Yes! She would drag him away from the very presence of the idol. And having done so, she would be so much nearer to her purpose, and her one excursion into the world of folly, with its attendant train of Levamis and De Roubaix, would be forgotten.

O blessed Hope that wilt not be altogether extinguished, but risest again from the ashes of thy predecessor hopes, real boon, when the solid good of yesterday has become the fancied evil of to-day! Ave! Ave! Ave! Imperator! Thrice hail!

The first thing to do was to send Thérèse back to Meudon.

Thérèse was not pleased at having her holidays shortened, and ventured to suggest that she might accompany her mother on what she naturally regarded as a long pleasant excursion through a part of France into which she had never yet travelled, for the family estates lay in Touraine, and her only long journeys had been made to the south. But the Marquise was quite firm. Thérèse must go back to the care of the good sisters at Meudon. The Marquise did not discuss these things. The province of girls was to obey. She told herself that the Marquis would not be gratified to be encumbered by his wife, his daughter, and a retinue of servants. If there was down in the depths a little lurking imp of jealousy of her daughter's position in her father's heart, it was a very little one, and one must not suppose that it swayed her judgment. In less than two years, according to the Customs of Paris, Thérèse would be of a legal age to hold property in her own right. There was no occasion to force the natural precocity of womanhood by over-indulgence.

So Thérèse, loaded with presents for the Sisters and *marrons-glacés* for any other strays of circumstance like herself, was taken back to Meudon.

The Marquise planned her own journey with the confidence born of the want of a traveller's experience. She decided to travel as far as Meaux in her own carriage with Pierre and Nanette, and after that to trust to post-horses, sending her own horses back with the coachman and footman. She was resolved on not having a retinue. She would imitate the Marquis in his simplicity when on the service of the State. Perhaps in that sweet woman's heart of hers was some vague feeling of making the journey as a suppliant, and a single carriage with post-horses, and two servants instead of twelve, stood in lieu of the sackcloth and ashes suitable to the character in some stations of life. She selected Pierre for his qualities as an indoor servant and because he would be company for Nanette. She gave no thought to the hundred exigencies of the road, which demanded a more bluff, outspoken, hardier varlet than this admirable town-bred lackey.

In proportion to the number of small dispositions she made for the journey and for the care of the Hotel de Polignac in her absence, her spirits rose with a buoyancy she had not felt for long enough. Was there after all in her the woman of action, long overlain and cramped by custom and the rigid methods of social observance as it was understood by the noblesse? The activity of the day seemed to give colour to it.

She did not once ask herself whether the Marquis would approve. She was acting on her own initiative in the fulfilment of her own purposes, which were for his ultimate good. How far she was acting under the influence of the shapes of evil conjured up by the Count de Roubaix she ceased to estimate.

The travelling carriage of the Marquise set out with little of its usual splendour from the hotel in the Faubourg St Germain, and advanced through narrow streets till it emerged into the full daylight and space of the Pont Neuf. It had to cross the Seine before it

could reach the Rue St Antoine, and making for the Bastille leave Paris by her eastward gate.

It was early in the day, but the Pont Neuf was astir betimes in its character as the chief sight of Paris. The stranger, ere yet the dust of travel was brushed off, was wont to make for the Pont Neuf. He who had seen it had seen Paris, and the citizens fondly believed that its glories resounded in the distant places of the earth. They boasted that from its centre was visible a panorama as wonderful as one saw at the entrance to the Golden Horn of Constantinople. And as few of their hearers could, or wished to, contradict them, its merits as a look-out tower, if one can so misname a bridge, remained unassailed.

But on this day, the day after they put the Red Neighbour to the Question, the Pont Neuf owed its real attraction, as it always had since its birth, to the throngs of passers-by, drawn from all parts of Paris and all parts of Europe. And if one of these passers-by, not being drawn thither by the mere current of his business, had been asked "What doest thou?" he would have said, "Sir, it is vastly diverting to see on the one side the many vendors of orvietan, and theriacum, and other quack specifics, the jugglers standing on their trestles, the merry-andrews mouthing at the mob, cheats at a sou a time of every variety." Or he might have said with equal truth, "Sir, I disdain buffoonery, but I am entertained by the mercers, the sellers of sweetmeats and pastry, the dealers in old clothes, old books,—in all, in short, that filleth the inner man, whether it be his head or his stomach, or arrayeth the outer. Its aspect is no two days the same, yet it is always the Pont Neuf."

All these things Pierre and Nanette saw from their perch behind the travelling carriage with accustomed eyes, as the coachman guided his horses carefully through the press of carts, and wains, and horses, and foot-passengers, Nanette casting a sharp eye upon the mercers' stalls, and Pierre a contemptuous glance at the dealers in old clothes, where he had driven many a fat

bargain. Tintorin, the ballad-maker and showman, was bawling out in a voice of brass his newest improvisation on the Red Neighbour, and apostrophising the Marquis de Paillasse, his assistant, who wore an astonishing livery of bed-tick, to look alive with the gathering in of the sous, for two of which the gapers could buy his doggerel. Even the Marquise de Polignac, hidden in the depths of her narrow-windowed coach, caught the giant Tintorin's hoarse syllables, and knew what they were—"The Ballad of the Red Neighbour"—and felt glad that she was crossing the Pont Neuf for the last time for weeks to come.

Now amidst the changeful medley of men and women and things, two fixed points of interest were always the same on the Pont Neuf, to which many people paid attention when they were tired of the hubbub—"The Bronze Horse," as they called the equestrian statue of the great king, Henri Quatre, forgetful of the kingly part of it, and "La Samaritaine."

"La Samaritaine" is, as you who know Paris know, a pumping-station to supply the fountains of the Louvre and of the Tuileries with water. It is also a great clock which has an immense face, surmounted by a carillon. The citizens set their watches by La Samaritaine, and the name is given to it from a sculptured group below the clock-face which depicts the Seigneur at the well in Samaria. So that with these three attractions, the pumps, the clock, and the carved stone, no wonder people come from all over Paris to look at it.

An old bent man took care of La Samaritaine. He had been there a long time, and people looked for him. They would have experienced a sense of disappointment if he had not appeared several times a-day. His duties were simple, and he had performed them so many times, that they had become purely mechanical. But it is not of them that there is question. It is enough to say that he was almost as much a fixture as the pumping-station. He had a companion in an old woman, who sat most of the day at the foot of the pedestal of the Bronze Horse, with her basket of needles and pins, and

other small merchandise. She had the brown pippin face, tinged with red streaks, of the peasantry. You could have sworn she was country-bred, and had lived in the country a great part of her life. But she also had been a fixture on the Pont Neuf since most of the *habitues* remembered it.

Between the old man and the old woman few people of note crossed the bridge, but one or both of them saw and marked their crossing. And it had grown up into a custom that the old woman before she took up her sitting hobbled across the bridge briskly enough to La Samaritaine, and said—

“Good day, Thomas! It is a fine morning,” or “It rains,” whichever was more appropriate; and when the old man replied, she would go on—

“Is La Samaritaine right?” (She meant the clock.)

“Quite right, Mère Michu!”

“Did you see the Marquis Such-an-one cross the bridge yesterday?”

“Yes; and the wife of So-and-so.”

They had usually both seen everybody.

And after this comparison of notes, Mère Michu always finished with this question, very timidly delivered, as if she was afraid even in asking it—

“Do you think it is time yet?”

And the old man always made answer—

“Not yet! One must put by a few more sous.”

People had heard the question and the reply, but had never guessed of what they spoke. It reminded them of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves in the story, but there was no clue. They would pass on, saying that the old couple would never die until this event, whatever it was, came to pass.

Both the old man and the old woman saw the Marquise de Polignac pass over the Pont Neuf in her travelling carriage with her maid and her man-servant, and both noted that she did not come back.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MILLS OF MEAUX.

It was market-day in the town of Meaux, and the sweet chimes of St Étienne had just announced that it was noon, when the Marquis and his servant Loches rode into full view of the broad Marne rushing beneath the mills that straddle it, lost sight of it again as they clattered up the cobble-stones of the Rue St Remy, and pulled up their horses at the Hotel des Trois Rois. They had ridden twelve leagues, and were ready for dinner.

The little market-place was littered with straw and piles of cheeses. And stretching down the Rue des Vieux Moutons was a long line of farmers' waggons, standing empty. There were still a few knots of men haggling over samples of grain, but for the most part the farmers had sought their accustomed inn, and only a few rough-looking, ill-clad labourers rested and ate black bread and onions, with a mouthful or two of the coarse Vin de Brie, which is a byword anywhere else than in the province where it is grown.

The host of the Three Kings bustled out to receive his guest, for he had only an hour before been lamenting that not a single seigneur dined at his house of market days. They were all wasting their substance in Paris. And the farmers were too poor to patronise him. They went to the obscurer inns for their soup.

Loches had the nose of an old campaigner, and after finding the stable he had no more difficulty in discovering the kitchen.

The host himself, a pleasant gossipy man with red cheeks and high shoulders, waited on the Marquis.

"What do they sell at Meaux?" asked the guest as he finished the first course.

"Grains of all sorts, monsieur, and cheese and wine, but the wine you are drinking is not of this country.

I know better than to offend your honourable palate with it. It is only fit for these yokels!"

He waved his hand expressively towards the market-place without.

"And the farmers? Are they prosperous?"

"Not they, monsieur; it is only the farmers-general who are prosperous." This was a favourite joke of his. "And their harvest is the taxes."

"Ah!" said the Marquis. "But with the war the prices are good. The king pays dearly for the corn!"

"That is true!" said the innkeeper. "If the farmers got the price—for example!"

"Who, then?"

"The grain-dealers, to be sure. They lend the farmers money to pay their taxes and buy their seed, and in return they charge them a great interest, and give them a poor price for their corn."

"Ah!" said the Marquis again. "But the grain-dealers must have grain, and they bid against one another!"

"It used to be so in my father's time," said the innkeeper, "but of late years there have been only two or three, and these not trading for themselves. They are merely agents."

"Agents?"

"Yes! They buy for a Monsieur Bocal who lives in Paris. And it is he who really lends the money. The country is in pawn to Monsieur Bocal. Do you know him?"

"I have heard of him!" said the Marquis. "And the cheese?"

"There is little of the cheese but the rind for the farmer to sell when it gets to market. The creamy inside has gone for taxes and rent, for rights of pasturage and water, and octroi, and a hundred other charges, but it is a good cheese. Our province of Brie has always produced good cheese."

It was but two steps to the Cathedral of St Etienne, where he offered up to Saint Antony of Padua a prayer for his beloved Marquise and his little daughter, and lit

a few candles at the foot of the saint's statue, giving the bedel twice the price he asked. The bedel said afterwards, "Any one could see he was a grand seigneur, and had gold in his pockets if he did not wear it on his clothes."

Two or three market-women, with empty baskets and clean folded cloths beside them, were offering up their weekly petitions to Our Lady. And in another corner of this lofty day-lit cathedral, near the tomb of that illustrious prince Philip of Castile, a man and a woman knelt side by side, poorly enough clad, with great clouted shoes, and the man's hair was grey and his back bent. A sound of stifled sobbing came from that retired nook of the sanctuary and swept into the heart of the Marquis.

A woman may cry, and one may feel a tender pity. There are many things to make a woman cry, and one does not wonder. But when a man cries he has suffered much before his suffering so shakes the firmament of his manhood. A wistfulness came over the face of the Marquis as he came nearer to them and saw that both were pouring out a mingled oblation of tears and prayers.

He stole out and waited in the shadow of the great tower (they are going to build the other one when they have money enough) that stretched like a broad black pathway down the street. He was set on knowing the cause of the man's grief.

Presently they came out and shaded their eyes from the broad glare of the sun, and the woman, making some excuse of an errand, departed showing her man a jolly smile, and saying, "Could we but know what the good God has in store for us!"

The Marquis knew by that it was for no child they had been grieving, but for some bitter grip of misfortune, and accosted him.

"You seem in some trouble, my man?"

The man started, doffed a floury cap, and said—

"Pardon, monsieur! We are in great trouble, for we have lost the Mills of Meaux."

"How is that?" asked the Marquis gravely. "What is your name, miller?"

"Jean Bonnechose, sir. I have been the miller of Meaux for twenty years, since my father died, and he was miller before me under the Lords of Brie. And it was a good living if a hard one. I paid the Lord of Brie so many sous for every bushel I ground, and paid myself so many sous. But now the Lord of Brie has sold his rights of multure to another for a great sum down, and this other has turned me out of the mill. I have offered half as much again, but it is of no avail. I have appealed to the Lord of Brie, but he can do nothing. I was not included in the bargain, it seems."

"And this other? Who is he?"

"It is Monsieur Bocal, who buys all the grain hereabouts, and he is having some of it ground into flour for the army!"

"But who manages the mill?"

"It is Monsieur Bocal's agent, and he has brought with him several strangers. My men are turned out also. What are we to do?"

The indignation of the Marquis waxed hot within him, but there was nothing that was unlawful in all this. It was only a great injustice.

"The mills I saw as I came in from the Paris road?"

"The same, sir! Let me take you to them!" The miller had done nothing but watch them since his misfortune.

Threading two or three little streets they crossed the bridge and came out upon the river-bank by a small house, which had a garden at the back. On the cobblestones in front, between the cottage and the river-wall, was a little pile of furniture, at sight of which the miller began to weep afresh.

"It is yours?" said the Marquis.

"Yes! The cottage goes with the mill. We have to seek another home. There can be no other. This is my home!"

The mills, for there were five buildings of several storeys each, stood on strong piles in the river-bed, with

great wheels beneath, through which the Marne, green and white, rushed and foamed. A heavy drawbridge stood upright, chained to two strong posts a little to one side of the cottage, just as the miller was accustomed to draw it up of nights, and the chain was secured with a great padlock.

"Let it down," said the Marquis. "I should like to see inside."

The Marquis was determined to see all of Monsieur Bocal's operations that he could.

"It is impossible! They have the key!"

"Fetch the man who has it," said the Marquis.

"But if he will not bring it?"

"Then bring the smith," said the Marquis in a tone of authority that convinced poor Bonnechose he had better obey, although he trembled for the success of his errand.

When poor Bonnechose found the agent who had the key, he found him drinking in the kitchen of the Trois Rois, and Loches sat on one side with his flagon before him talking to an ostler. Loches heard what was said.

"There is some great gentleman wants the key of the drawbridge," said Bonnechose to the agent.

"Tell him he cannot have it, then!"

"But I tell you he is some great lord, and he will have what he wants, whether you like it or not. He wants to see the mill."

The other showed his short strong teeth as he said—

"Does he? I let no one into the mill. Just tell him that—or stay, tell him to come and fetch the key himself."

Loches was well inclined to take a hand, but not being sure that it was the Marquis or how far his own instructions would carry him, got up and strode out without taking notice of either. However, as Bonnechose went out in search of the smith, he followed him, and having learned from him all he wanted to know, made his own way to the drawbridge.

"Are the horses fed?" was the greeting of the Marquis.

"The king himself doesn't eat better corn, my lord!" said Loches.

Presently Bonnechose arrived with the smith.

The Marquis directed him to force the padlock and free the chains of the drawbridge.

The smith was just such an honest-looking fellow as Bonnechose, and looking confused enough, asked—

“Pardon, monsieur! Who are you?”

“I am an agent of Monsieur de Louvois, the Minister for War!”

The smith pulled his forelock and said—

“I am very sorry. But if you were even Monsieur de Louvois I dare not touch this drawbridge without the orders of Monsieur Bocal.”

“So? And why, pray?”

“Because I have the shoeing of all Monsieur Bocal’s horses that come through Meaux, and I cannot afford to lose his custom. I also have a wife and children like Bonnechose here.”

It was a good reason. The man uttered it in tones of the greatest respect. But it was evident he was bound hand and foot in the unseen bonds of Monsieur Bocal.

“Marie!” said the smith to Bonnechose, “I am sorry for you, but it is not yet time. One must take care of the sous.”

The Marquis de Polignac was not one who brooked opposition from any one but Monsieur de Louvois.

“Loches! I want this drawbridge let down!”

“Yes, my lord!” It was with the same plain directness that he had been used to say, “Yes, my captain!” when he was a dragoon. He had been troop-marshal in his day, and always carried a few implements in his holsters. So he ran back to the inn, got a file and a hammer, and returned in a very short space of time.

The smith stayed long enough to see that Loches knew how to use his tools, and, giving a sagacious nod, went off to his forge. There was going to be trouble in Meaux before the day was out. Hitherto Monsieur Bocal was the king, the king was Monsieur Bocal. But now here was some one who called himself a servant of the king who was not afraid of Monsieur Bocal. Was the “time” of which he spoke coming sooner than he had expected?

The agent with the short teeth who sat over his wine in the kitchen of the Trois Rois became uneasy. Who was this intruder?

"I should like to see the man who will interfere with my drawbridge," he said to the tapster fellow who looked after the wants of the kitchen.

"Then why don't you go and see him?" said the tapster, who had no liking for this strange bully who had come amongst the decent folk of Meaux.

"Because he can come to me if he wants me!" said the other.

"But it is plain that he doesn't!" returned the tapster.

"A plague on him!" growled the other between his short teeth.

Loches was a strong man and the padlock was a strong padlock, and one cannot file and hammer a padlock without noise. It was not long, therefore, before the bruit of what was going on floated on the lips of children to the kitchen of the Hotel des Trois Rois. The agent got up and, throwing a livre or so to the tapster, clapped on his hat and strode to the mills of Meaux, a string of children at his heels, whom, however, he dispersed with a wave of his stick and a few round curses. The children spread the news further still.

As soon as he cast his eyes upon Loches his anger knew no bounds. But to accost Loches he had to pass the Marquis, and, although he knew not with whom he had to deal, he saw very well that it was with no ordinary person of his own rank.

"By what right do you presume to touch my drawbridge?" he said to the Marquis.

"By the right of the king, fellow!" said the Marquis.

"The king has no rights here!" said the other. "Show me an order from Monsieur Bocal and I stand aside."

"Have you nearly finished, Loches?" said the Marquis, turning from him.

For answer Loches gave the ring of the padlock, which was nearly filed through in two places, a tremendous blow with his hammer and the piece fell out. The drawbridge was free, and in a moment or two, during

which it seemed to waver, the chains began to run through the pulleys and it sank athwart the stream to rest on the landing outside the door of the mill.

The agent rushed past the Marquis to dispute the passage, only to encounter a buffet from the fist of Loches that sent him staggering to the ground.

The Marquis motioned to Bonnechose to go first. He himself followed. Loches remained on the bank. "It was the only way," he said sympathetically, as the agent picked himself up, ground out a string of curses, and went away. His heart was swelling with the desire for vengeance. Single-handed he felt impotent.

Bonnechose and the Marquis entering the mill, were on the floor of the loft where the grain was stored before it was despatched on its way to the ravening stones below, which were then at rest. The Marquis plunged his hand into the mouth of a sack and brought out a handful of grain. It was wheat.

"What do you think of that, miller?"

Bonnechose spread it out in his own hand and looked it over with the eye of twenty years' experience.

"Wheat, monsieur, of poor quality. But wheat! Oh, yes!"

"And this?" The Marquis plunged his hand into another sack.

"Rye! Two-thirds wheat and one-third rye, to make flour for the king's armies!"

"That is right," said the Marquis. "Let us try them all." Together they went through sack after sack.

"Monsieur, monsieur! There is something else than grain here!"

The Marquis looked. Bonnechose held in his hands some whitish lumps.

"What is it?"

For answer Bonnechose tilted the sack and shot the contents on the floor.

"Chalk!"

The Marquis said nothing more but "Let us descend!" Bonnechose led the way.

On the lower floor stood fifty sacks in rows of five, filled with flour for the king's army.

Bonnechose untied the mouth of a sack and put his hand in, stirring the contents round and round. He drew forth a small handful and took it to the light, such light as there was in this cobweb-hung storey. He spread it out with his finger on his broad palm.

"This is the flour of wheat," he said, "and this the flour of rye; but this, so help me God! is neither honest wheat nor rye: it is chalk from the caves of Epernay. Monsieur! that Bocal is a cursed rascal!"

"If I live," said the Marquis, "he shall pay the penalty of his knavery!"

There was a great outcry! In a flash he remembered Loches and ran up the stairs again, followed closely by Bonnechose. They reached the door to find the drawbridge rising from the landing, Loches in the middle of the bridge, sword in hand, and a crowd of yelling peasants from the country round, headed by the infuriated agent, who had dragged them from their inns, hauling at the chains. With a bound the Marquis gained the bridge and brought it down again with his weight. Loches ran back to his master, and Bonnechose, more cunning than they would have thought, ran back into the mill, and bringing out a sack of grain which he handled with the strength and knack of a miller, dumped it on the end of the bridge, and then another and another, so that twice the number of men at the other end could not have lifted it.

The mob surged forward to cross the drawbridge, which was but three planks' width, but the Marquis, standing in front of Loches with his drawn sword, waved them back.

"This mill and all it contains," he said in a loud clear voice, "is forfeit to the king, whose officer I am. Go to your homes or it will be the worse for you. I will deal with Monsieur Bocal."

An ill-looking ruffian sprang on the bridge notwithstanding and advanced.

"At your peril," said the Marquis, and with a thrust

of his sword ran him through the throat. The man caught at the air with his hands and fell down into the river below, reddening the current with his blood. There was a silence.

"Thus will I serve all traitors," said the Marquis. "Who is this Bocal that you should shed your blood for him? Has he lent you money? I see he has! Has he exacted interest? Every penny! I see he has! Has he given you a good honest price for your corn, for your rye, . . . for your chalk . . .? You owe him gratitude? Away with you! A pretty set of fools! Go!"

The crowd of blue and brown smocks began to clatter off in their wooden shoes, and the agent vainly endeavoured to restrain them by threats of immediate ruin. But the dead man down in the river, whose body had caught against an angle of the river's wall, was staring up at them with eyes wide open. They had no stomach for a fight. And seeing there was no hope the agent also took to his heels and, finding his horse, rode at a gallop out of the town.

The Marquis, leaving Loches and the miller on guard, departed to find the mayor of the town, and persuaded him with much difficulty to come and see for himself what they had discovered in the mill. With due solemnity that dignitary and the town-clerk came and expressed their official horror at the enormities which were being practised at the king's expense under their very noses, sealed up all the sacks and the door of the mill, and finally the drawbridge. Never was such a sealing in the town of Meaux. Then a long report was drawn up, a copy of which was transmitted to Monsieur de Louvois by the Marquis, and it was nightfall by the time these things were accomplished. Two of the town watch were set to guard the drawbridge in case the official seals should prove insufficient, and the Marquis, well satisfied with his first discoveries, decided to continue his journey the next day.

His rest was, however, destined to be broken, for in the middle of the night—and Meaux betook itself to bed

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at nine o'clock—a dishevelled figure, in whom he recognised Bonnechose, burst along with Loches into his bed-chamber and cried out, “Monsieur! Monsieur! The mill is on fire!”

The Marquis was but a few minutes before he stood once again on the bank of the Marne in time to see the roof fall in, and the last of the king's flour disappearing in smoke and flame or mingled with the whitening current wending its own way to Paris.

“Monsieur Bocal is well served, it seems! What is the matter, my good miller?”

“My furniture is burned also, Monsieur le Marquis. Truly we do not know what the good God has yet in store for us—as my wife said.”

CHAPTER XIV.

AN AMBUSCADE AT MONTMIRAIL.

Loches had the horses saddled in good time for the second day's journey. As he stood there with his own reins in his hand, leaving the ostler to earn a *pourboire* by holding his master's, the Marquis could not but notice how smart and well-trimmed the big ex-dragoon looked, despite the fact that he wore only a very plain riding-suit and a hat whose sole ornament was a livery button. He made up for the lack of a uniform, however, by his great riding-boots and military spurs, by a moustache that stuck out fiercely from his upper lip, by his square shoulders, and his sword. The Marquis was at once pleased with his servant's appearance and with his behaviour of the day before. He was one of those persons who if he had good wine did not care for it in an uncouth flagon.

It must not be supposed that Loches was the regular riding lackey of the Marquis. Travelling seldom, it had

been a matter of indifference to him which of his grooms his chief equerry selected. But now that the journey promised to be an adventurous one, he was interested in knowing what he had to rely upon beside his own sword and his own wit.

"Horses sound and well-shod, Loches?"

"Yes, my lord, every hoof. I have been over them this morning. I am an old dragoon!"

"Good! Ask if the road is clear to La Ferté!"

"I am sure of it, my lord. I have climbed the tower of St Etienne, and taken a good look at the country.

"Good! You learned to take these precautions in the dragons?"

"Yes, my lord."

Many servants would have seized the opportunity to enter on a garrulous trumpeting of their own carefulness, but not Loches. Loches also knew that the road divided at La Ferté, one branch leading to Nogent and Chateau Thierry, the other to Montmirail. He did not ask which they were going to take. "Neither talkative nor curious," the Marquis thought, and then said aloud—

"You behaved yourself very well yesterday, Loches. You were in danger of being thrown off the drawbridge. If we had been too late, what then?"

"I should have leaped into the midst of the rascals!"

"And perhaps broken your leg, or spitted yourself on a stable fork?"

"That is true; but some one would have had the point of my sword through him."

"But still you were engaged to act as a groom?"

"I am sorry, my lord. One finds it difficult to forget one has been a soldier."

"But why should you endanger your life on my account?"

"Because, my lord, there is only one religion for a soldier, fidelity to one's captain; and I knew you were journeying to see Marshal Turenne. Think if Marshal Turenne had said, 'What do I hear? Loches betrayed you?' I would rather throw myself over a precipice,

my lord; but hark! Some one is following us, a single horseman," and without order from the Marquis he turned and halted his horse across the road.

"Why do you do that?" said the Marquis, "on a peaceable journey?"

"Because, my lord, on a journey which has begun like ours, it is necessary to know why one follows us, if he is following, and whither one rides, if he is to pass us!"

The Marquis halted also.

The new-comer was evidently in haste. His horse was covered with dust and sweat, and could hardly put one leg before the other, or so it seemed, when he came to a standstill.

"The Marquis de Polignac!" said the messenger, in tones that were so absurdly loud that Loches exclaimed—

"We are not on the Pont Neuf at midday, my friend!"

The new-comer, a tall thin man, with a lean comical face, looked, pursing up his eyes in a curious way, at Loches, but judging that the remark was quite innocent, turned to the Marquis and said, in what was evidently an endeavour to moderate his naturally robust voice—

"A message from the Red Neighbour, my lord. Beware how you go to Montmirail!"

"Is that all your message?" the Marquis asked.

"That is all, my lord. I have ridden from Paris since four this morning to give it you."

"You will want some food, and your horse a rest, before you set out on the journey back? Here are a couple of pistoles! My reply is 'Thanks!'"

"That is better than two sous, my lord!" said the stranger, looking fondly at the two pistoles. "As the old poet said truly, 'Money does everything.'" Then, as the Marquis merely said, "You are welcome!" he murmured, as he doffed his hat and dismounted, "Behold! This it is to be a great wit. I ride a dozen leagues out of Paris, and two Parisians fail to recognise me. Men are indeed fools, beginning with the wise ones!"

Then he led his horse to the roadside, where he pro-

ceeded to take his saddle off. As Loches bade him a civil "Good-bye, comrade!" the other laughed a whimsical guttural laugh, and said, "You're not so far away from the Pont Neuf as you think!"

The Marquis had ridden onward, wondering how on all the earth the Red Neighbour knew he was going to Montmirail, and why she should have, and more, how she could have, sent him this warning. But go to Montmirail he would, for Monsieur de Louvois was rebuilding his castle there, and had asked him as a favour to call, and, while commanding the hospitality of the steward, convey to him certain instructions, and send word how things were going.

"Beware how you go to Montmirail!" The strange woman, who had been a farrier's daughter, and whom half Paris regarded as a sorceress, knew of his purpose to go by Montmirail—more, knew of hidden dangers in the path. And then he thought of the many years during which the armies of France had trodden the great highways to the eastward, and of the many years during which Monsieur Bocal had used these same highways, traversing them to and fro with his horses and waggons and men, building up slowly and surely his influence in every village, town, and city from Paris to the frontier,—perfecting a system of intelligence, enrolling innkeepers and smiths, dealers of all kinds, ostlers, post-boys, and nondescripts in his service. The danger threatened to come from the agents of Monsieur Bocal; but what it was to be, who could tell? The burning of the Mill of Meaux showed how far those agents would go. Of the direct evidence of Bocal's chicanery at Meaux nothing remained. There was the official record. But what of that? The Marquis de Polignac felt that he was in presence of a task which the army contractor was not going to allow to be a light one. But why did the Red Neighbour intervene? If Bocal was the angel of darkness, what was she? And why did the one array herself against the other?

At La Ferté, where they make mill-stones, they met the river again, for La Ferté, while its comrade Jouarre

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like a sentinel stands upon a hill, lies in the valley of the Marne,—a fertile valley whose hillsides are clad with woods and vineyards, and parted with it as they passed out by the gate leading to Montmirail. They plunged into another country. For the long level road of the Marne valley they got in exchange a mere track that led over hills or through glens between the hillsides that approached one another in quite a neighbourly fashion. There were labourers in the field making hay. There was a peaceful air about all the Marquis saw that spoke little of chicanery or of violence. But he rode warily enough all the same, and so did Loches, sometimes in front of his master, sometimes behind.

It was past midday when they espied the towers of Montmirail pointing to the sky from the top of a little hill, and the silver sinuous line of the Petit Morin which flows at its foot.

Down the hill they rode, past a little hamlet church, past the farmsteading with its great stone gateway, over the bridge, on whose low wall sat aged men watching the waters of the Little Morin as they ran towards the mill, sweetly gossiping maiden nothings between green rows of poplars, from amongst whose boles peeped kneeling women beating their linen on their washing-boards.

Then they began to mount the hillside, where straight before them stood, stark and lofty, the church of Montmirail, uplifted from the clustering red-roofed houses, and to the right peered from the tree-tops of a noble park the roof of the chateau which the great War Minister was building.

Halfway up the hill the Marquis turned his horse's head to the right, and, where he knew to look for it, found the lesser gate of the park, for the great gates face the church, and he desired no bruit of his arrival.

It was a great park of noble trees and green lush glades in which cattle browsed and horses munched or frolicked in droves with the air of absurd irresponsibility that horses wear when not in harness. Loches's eye roved lovingly over such of them as came near the

roadway. And what he saw he noted. This one's neck was worn by the collar, another's back chafed by the saddle. The legs of one, the pasterns, the shoulders of others,—all told some tale to this old dragoon who had been troop-marshal. Along with the horses, who were merely off duty, were long strings of colts woolly and ragged, all legs, running and galloping and rolling after their manner, three- and four-year-olds ready for breaking in, infecting some of the older ones with their gaiety.

A question or two to Loches opened his horse-loving heart and set him talking, and much that he said about these horses, coming from this man who had lived among horses from boyhood, gave the Marquis plenty to think about till they arrived at the castle.

One wing, which represented all that was left intact of an older castle, was inhabited. The rest was slowly rising from the ground under the magic of the masons. Great heaps of unhewn stones lay here and there. And from some of them the masons were selecting blocks to shape to their desires. A goodly band of artificers was there under the eyes of masters of their crafts, joiners and masons, and mere labourers and hodmen. It was a pleasant sight this as they wrought in the sunshine. All honest fellows these, there could be no doubt. Whence then was to come the threatened ambush?

The Marquis de Polignac no sooner announced his name than the steward came out to receive him with much bowing and obsequiousness.

“If your lordship had but sent an *avant-courier*, a dinner worthy of your lordship would have been prepared. As it is, if your lordship and his groom will condescend to dismount, a flagon of wine now to allay the dust of the journey, and as soon as ever it can be prepared, a humble omelette and a trifle of a pullet or so, shall hasten to meet your lordship's appetite.”

A couple of grooms came out at his bidding, and the steward ushered the Marquis in to the entrance-hall, while Loches, careful Loches, accompanied the horses and grooms to the stables to see the good beasts bestowed.

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Water which exhaled the perfume of rose-leaves, and soft white linen, were brought to the chamber which the great War Minister himself used on his few flying visits, and when the Marquis had removed some of the traces of travel from hands and face and clothes, and had tasted a cup of wine in his sparing way, he strolled about in the shade of the castle and of the nearest trees, till the pleasing bustle showed him that the preparation of the meal had proceeded faster than he could have imagined.

The obsequious steward was most assiduous in his attendance, waiting on him at a dinner which was, for so short a notice, a wonderful credit to a country cook. It was served in a small low-ceiled room, restful to the eye and cool, whose greatest charm was its large low oriel window which commanded a view of the Italian garden and the park beyond.

The repast finished, the Marquis sent for Loches, and, telling him to be ready to start as soon as the evening breeze set in after the heat of the afternoon, threw himself on the soft cushions of the window-seat beneath the casements, through which came the hum of bees from a grove of lime-trees, and went to sleep. The long rides of yesterday and to-day were making his unaccustomed frame call for repose. A few more days, and he knew that his old vigour would come back, for he was a man who had learned to endure in his youth, and could yet, if his muscles were not asked to undergo too great a strain at first after disuse. Loches, seeing that his master was falling asleep, deemed it his duty to keep very wide awake, and, while it was unlikely that any harm could come to the Marquis under the very roof of De Louvois, he decided to wander off on a tour of inspection on his own account. It took no little strategy to escape the good-natured solicitations of the grooms and the laughing espionage of the maids, always glad of the advent of a soldierly stranger who could tell them about Paris and its doings, but by slow degrees he managed to throw them off and gain the park. Once a few trees were between him and the castle he could return to a more

careful examination of the horses he had seen on the road up to the castle.

As Loches had left the castle in an entirely different direction to that in which he had come to it, he was forced to make a roundabout journey to reach his goal, and in doing this, always keeping a wary eye to make sure he was not followed, he came across another less used but well-made drive, which from recent marks of wheels seemed to come from another entrance to the park. He had hardly set foot upon it when his quick ear caught the clink of a bit, and looking about him through the tree-trunks, he saw a light carriage with two horses drawn up in a leafy glade a hundred yards away. A further reconnaissance discovered a coachman and groom, with hats tilted over their eyes, enjoying an honest snore as they sat with their backs to a stout trunk.

Where was the master? Loches was not long in discovering a little wooden pavilion, and approaching it in the rear, he heard voices within, and one was the voice of an angry man—

“I tell you, Mister Steward, you may rob your master as much as you like, but not me. It is not amusing!”

“But, monsieur,” it was the cringing voice of the steward, “I saw no harm in borrowing two of your horses now and again to lead stone from my little quarries to the castle. They are being well fed!”

“A pest!” said the other with a pretty enough oath, that Loches as a native of Touraine recognised as a familiar one amongst the folk of the Midi. “I send my horses here to get pastured and rested, so that they may lead my victuals and stores for the army when they are rested, not to work for you. A pest!”

“But, monsieur, you must not forget that you are getting your pasture at next to nothing.”

“What is that to me?” came the bullying reply. “What is it to me if you choose to rob Monsieur de Louvois? I buy my pasture where I can at the cheapest price. And it is pasture and not exercise I want for my horses! Ventrebleu! you shall not do it. Do you

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hear? I say it. I! You know I can turn you out if I like! A word from me—and you are a wisp of straw flying up a chimney.”

The steward was evidently convinced, for he made an abject apology.

“At what time did this cursed Polignac depart? I followed him pretty close.”

“He is still here,” said the steward, with a ring of self-approval in his tones. “I kept him! He is asleep up at the castle!”

“Ventrebleu!” said the other, and his further words and those of the steward became inaudible. Loches shifted his position as much as he dare, for those stupid grooms might wake up and see him, but hear anything definite he could not. So he slid off cautiously, always keeping at least two trees in a line behind him, and presently appeared in the Italian garden. From which he sauntered, smelling a flower now and again, till he reached the casement through which he could peep at the sleeping Marquis. He was still asleep, but by leaning Loches could just brush the cheek of the Marquis with his hat, and after one or two vain attempts the Marquis awoke. He listened attentively to the narrative, and then said—

“Get the horses. We must go.”

Loches found the stables deserted so far as the grooms were concerned. It was certainly suspicious, so he examined the horses carefully before putting on the saddles and valises. They appeared to be well enough. Hoofs, ears, tails, saddles, straps, bridles, Loches looked at everything. Nothing escaped this old campaigner of Turenne’s. It was not by hoccussing the horses that danger was to come. Then he looked to the pistols in the holsters and reloaded them. They were dry and had not been tampered with.

No sooner had he led them to the door where the Marquis awaited him, than the steward appeared, somewhat breathless, to entreat his lordship to honour the house with his presence a while longer. It was still hot.

No! The business of the Marquis did not admit of

delay. He would acquaint Monsieur de Louvois of his hospitable reception. Then mounting his horse he rode slowly till he came to the stone-masons, where he halted a moment and asked one of the master craftsmen what stone was being used, and to show it to him. The man did so, explaining in a few words the destination of the different kinds.

"This is a villainous stone," he said, pointing to some, of which many heaps lay about, "not worthy of being put into a nobleman's castle, but Messire Steward yonder bids us use it for every part that we can, without disfiguring a fine design. It is a thousand pities . . ."

The Marquis promised to make mention of the stone to his friend for whom the castle was being rebuilt, for it was a pity to waste good craft over bad stone. Whereat the master craftsman was greatly comforted. And the Marquis left him, riding slowly down the pathway of this beautiful park where Monsieur Bocal, with his usual audacity, was robbing the War Minister himself in collusion with his very steward, whose real master was greed. Bocal was pasturing in De Louvois' park the very horses that were used to drag the base flour and worthless grain that he sold for the king's armies at prices which were draining France dry. His righteous anger filled him so full that for the time he had forgotten his warning, and was both glad and sorry at once that he had come to Montmirail.

Clop!

The horse on which the Marquis rode with a loose rein started and reared, and if the rider had not been as sure-seated as he was he would have been thrown.

A woodman's axe had fallen from his hand just before the horse's nose.

The Marquis looked up. So did Loches. From a limb of a tall poplar a good way up, a man peered out and down at them, and a voice, which sounded so near it startled both of them, cried—

"Clumsy for a woodman from the Pont Neuf."

Loches looked at the Marquis, the Marquis at him, and both at the woodman.

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"Go on! But beware how you go from Montmirail. You are not out of the wood yet."

Loches and the Marquis had just entered the long avenue that led to the gate and wall of the park. It was a half mile long, though looked at from either end, so closely were the trees planted, it seemed but a few yards.

Loches suspected an ambush beyond the gate. The Marquis loosened his sword in its sheath. Both rode at an easy trot till they were within a quarter of a mile of the gate. They did not see the avaricious face of the steward peering through the trees from almost the very spot above which sat the clumsy woodman, nor did they see him raise a hunting-horn to his pursy lips. But they heard the sudden blast of it ringing through the woodland, up to the summit of the hill and back again. They heard the sudden barking of hounds, the breaking and tearing of brushwood and straining of timber, and from both sides of the road near the gate came two droves of terrified horses which, finding but one path, swept up it, a turbulent, snorting, galloping mob, in wild resistless stampede.

The steward stepped out upon the roadway to see the Marquis and Loches hurled by the wild onset from their saddles and trampled underfoot, the victims of his deep-laid scheme.

But as he stood there, chained to the spot by the imminent tragedy, his heart beating like some furiously rung bell, a heavy branch fell from above and crushed him to the ground.

With one impulse the Marquis and his body-servant drew together side by side, halting their horses, who craned their necks and set their ears a-start and twitching, took out a pistol each from their holsters, leant over their saddle-bows, and waited till the foremost horses of the rout were a horse's length from them. Then both fired together and two horses fell at their very feet. The pack divided and swept past them—a hurricane of hoofs and dust and wild red eyes and streaming shoulders—up the avenue, and stayed at the dead body of the steward.

Behind the pack were the two grooms, and these, seeing Loches emerge from the hopeless *mâlée*, turned with one consent to flee. But the tangle of dogs about their horses' feet delayed them, and Loches like a destroying angel was upon them, and sent them to follow their fellow-conspirator with a true sword-thrust, such as he had, perhaps, in battle never given with so hearty a zest.

CHAPTER XV.

THE PÂQUIS OF BAR-LE-DUC.

When the Marquis and his faithful Loches left the lesser gate of the park they turned to the right, and made up the hill they had abandoned by the road leading through the little town, past the church, past the great front gates of the chateau, and pulled up in the quiet corner of Montmirail, known as the Place of the Green Gallant, where the only inn for travellers hung out its sign. Loches quaffed two or three mighty bumpers of wine to steady his nerves after that momentous crisis, while his master wrote a hasty but concise letter to Louvois, and hired a messenger to ride with it post-haste to Paris. Barely was the messenger out of Montmirail than master and man were again in the saddle, and next morning at ten o'clock they broke their fast at Châlons.

But Châlons held him not; for it behoved him to push forward with the utmost speed, leaving minor considerations out of count, to meet Turenne. He must achieve a great exposure, something that would completely confound Bocal, and justify his own journey in the eyes of Louvois. To do this he had to find Turenne before Bocal, armed with all the engines of his rascality, could arrive to withstand him.

From Châlons they took the cross-roads, leaving the great highway, and the roads tried their horses to the utmost. It was almost dusk, and the gates were shutting as they crept into Bar-le-Duc, winding round the wall of the little hill-town, up the Street of the great Clock, beneath the shadow of the clock-tower, past the fountain, and out into the very street of the Dukes of Bar, deserted, wide, and white, where the gargoyles of two hundred years before, still depending from the roofs, had looked down upon merry minstrelsy and coming and going of lords and ladies and knights, and bustle of valets and men-at-arms. Heading for the church steeple they left the wide ghostly street and found St Pierre, and a small hostelry lying in its shadow, where they were glad enough to sit down to a comfortable supper of the best the house afforded.

Thus far they had ridden the same horses, but if they were to reach Nancy on the following night, which still left them two long days' ride to where by repute the Marshal had his camp, they must leave their own and hire strange horses in their stead.

Over a flagon of wine the host discoursed at length of the virtues and vices of all the horses in Bar-le-Duc. It was a small town "incomparably ancient," as he said, the capital of the Dukes of Bar, and one could reckon up all the riding-horses of repute quite easily. For the most part they seemed to be of an age as venerable as that of the town. There were several which were capable of a continuous journey of twenty leagues, but whether mortal man could retain his seat upon them and his patience for the necessary time was very doubtful. The prospect seemed at least hazy. Could his lordship not try post-horses and a chaise? It was not very pleasant for a cavalier to sit hour after hour in a post-chaise! No! Yet that was what Monsieur Bocal, the famous army contractor, usually did. In fact, *only that evening had that gentleman departed* from Bar-le-Duc with the only fresh pair of horses in the town, leaving a pair of sorry wrecks behind him.

- "Your advice comes too late, then," said the Marquis.

"Horses, and riding-horses, must be found somehow. Loches!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"We must have two good riding-horses to start two hours after daybreak to-morrow!"

"Yes, my lord!" Loches would have cheerfully undertaken to procure elephants.

Loches had listened to the conversation as he sat at a little table apart. He had noted the peculiarities of all the horses described by the innkeeper and the names of their owners. It was late, but he could find his way about any town in the dark, and it was odd but he lit upon something on four legs which would carry him, and a fellow which would carry the Marquis, part of the way.

"Give me an order, my lord, in writing!" said Loches.

The Marquis smiled as he handed it to his servant. This was a man of resource. The Marquis des Ressources had a lackey of the same brand.

Armed with it, Loches went out and consulted the ostler about the relative merits of the only animals in Bar-le-Duc. As Loches listened and the other talked, the conversation was illuminative but not long. The ostler had told him the same thing only three times over, which is mere conciseness in Bar-le-Duc, where time never presses any but strangers.

Luckily it was not yet absolutely dark. It was mid-summer, and the twilight seemed almost to shade into the dawn. Loches, however, borrowed a lantern from the ostler and set out. They were trustful folk, and having made friends with the town watch he had no difficulty in penetrating into the various stables where the blue roan which was blind of one eye, and the sorrel mare that was slightly lame in the off fore-leg, the bay that roared a trifle, but that was nothing, and the other equine beauties of Bar-le-Duc, were to be seen. Loches left the stables and roamed up the street of the Dukes of Bar till he came to the Pâquis, an open space of common pasturage interspersed with trees, hoping to hear the neigh of some horse that the cataloguers had

forgotten. He could scarcely believe his ears, for there, ahead of him in the mist that rose breast-high, sounded the hoofs of horses hobbled or picketed, he could not at first tell which, but as he approached with his lantern a dozen curious heads were raised out of the mist, staring at him with glassy eyes.

He went nearer, speaking softly, caressingly, as a trooper who knows his horses does, and taking off his hat put into it a handful of corn he had pocketed from the inn stable. He put the lantern on the ground and stirred the corn with his hand, calling softly, and presently horse after horse came up and stood looking at the intruder. He ran his eye over them and picked out two likely beasts, newly shod, five-year-olds as he guessed, and practising many wiles he got them to dip their noses one by one into his hat. Then by a deft movement he threw a halter over the one and caught the other by his forelock, quieted them with soft speech and the dainties in the hat, and led them off towards the stable, slowly, for they were hobbled, and lodged them there chuckling to himself. Then, as he did nothing by halves, he went back for his lantern, which he had no sooner picked up than two voices sounded threateningly in his ears—

“What the devil are you doing with Monsieur Bocal’s horses?”

Facing about, a ready hand upon his sword-hilt, he said—

“I have taken the liberty, messieurs, of borrowing two for the service of the king!”

“These horses are for the army of Monsieur Turenne,” said one of the unknown, a menacing-looking fellow. “The king can have them when they get to the Marshal, not before.”

“’Tis a singular thing, friend,” replied Loches. “My master and I are going to find the Marshal, and we are in a great hurry. I have borrowed two of your horses, and here is the order,”—saying which he lifted up the lantern and swung it so that he could take in their faces and the extent of their weapons, and tendered the paper.

The fellows bent to look at it, and both muttered the word "Polignac" in a tone that sounded ominous for Loches. Forthwith the lantern went out, and Loches bending low in the mist, ran with all the speed he could back to the inn and barred himself in the stable to await events.

Having foraged successfully he intended to hold his booty.

The ostler had gone to bed. There was no one to send with a message to the Marquis, short as the distance was, for the pursuit might be and in fact soon announced itself as close upon his heels. He had secured the horses to the manger on his first visit. He now barred the stable door and window, and clambered up into the loft to see what danger he might expect that way. There was an ill-secured hatch ten feet from the ground, but no ladder.

Peering out, he saw in the dim semi-darkness not two figures but four approaching. Without an instant's delay he blocked the aperture with a truss of hay, and bundled two more and yet another two down into the stable, which he piled up behind the door. Then he waited events in silence.

The four men held a whispered colloquy, and from the footsteps he learned that two had gone while two remained on guard. These two tried the door and the window, but finding both secure grumbled a little and waited.

For what? For a ladder to reach the upper storey? They were a long time for that, and on reflection it seemed a not very safe point of attack, as the top man on the ladder would be at his mercy. No! There was something else in the design. Loches trimmed his lantern and made the rounds. In the front as at the sides he was safe if he could defend the door, the window, and the hatch. There remained the back, which he had not examined. The stable was built against a barn, but the stable was solid stone on its four sides as it seemed. He looked under the manger. He looked in the harness-room, tapping the wall. It was all solid. He swung himself into the loft, tap, tap, it was all solid to the

eaves. He peered out stealthily. It might be possible to drop a truss of hay on an unsuspecting rogue, but the rogues stood wide, cursing their comrades in low tones. Then he heard a noise against the wooden gable of the stable high up, and looking up saw that some of the wooden slats were missing, and that a truss of hay was pressed against the opening just under the pitch of the roof on the other side.

Now he knew that the other men had gone through the barn, mounted on the hay ("there must be a lot of it," thought Loches, "enough for a regiment of dragoons"), and were coming through this cranny of which they had known. The truss of hay was being removed. The hole became a dark space just as he put out the lantern.

In another moment he threw back the hatch of the loft, which swung outward and slammed back against the wall. Then he called one of the men by his name gruffly, and the fellow came forward under the hatch, just as two pairs of heels made two thuds upon the floor behind Loches, announcing the rear attack. Down went a truss of hay, felling the man to the ground, and on the top of the hay sprang Loches, almost thrusting the breath out of the man's body beneath. Then with his sword he attacked the other, whose weapon was a villainous cudgel. His sword was shivered at the first blow, and if Loches had not himself tripped over the very truss of hay that had done him so much service already, he would have received a crack on his skull that no surgeon's skill would have mended. As it was, he received it on the heels of his heavy riding-boots, and the sensation gave him a faint taste of the joys of the bastinado, which is, we hear, much practised in Turkey.

Loches took immediate advantage of his antagonist's surprise and ran for his life to the back door of the inn, upon which he thundered with the aforesaid boots, hallooing with uncommon vigour at the same time.

Monsieur Bocal's four ruffians came clattering over the cobble-stones, the fourth man hobbling but indifferently, and Loches was just beginning to wonder what

would happen if nobody chanced to hear, when the bolts of the door were hastily shot back, the door opened, and the Marquis de Polignac, who had never gone to bed, the innkeeper, and the ostler, in various stages of undress, appeared in the doorway, and the four fellows with their scowling faces and threatening attitudes fell back a pace, for the Marquis held a pistol in his hand and the innkeeper a fowling-piece.

The presence of the Marquis had an immediate effect on Monsieur Bocal's retainers. He waved his hand and commanded silence, and then bade Loches explain, which he did in a few words.

"It is very well," said the Marquis. "I require the horses for the service of myself, which is the service of his Majesty Louis Quatorze. In the morning you will come to me. I will give you an indemnity in writing. You have been over-zealous. It is a fault I am inclined to overlook, and here is a crown each for your exertions. In order that there may be no misunderstanding, Loches, you and the ostler will bring the two horses with a little hay into the kitchen here, and the ostler will watch them till the morning.

The four drovers were nonplussed, took their crowns and retreated, grumbling both at their good fortune and bad.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CLOISTERS OF ST GENGOULT.

To any one who doubted of the riches of this our France a clear vision would come on a journey from Barle-Duc to Nancy, for he would be journeying along a road fed by three of the most fertile valleys, those of the Marne, the Meuse, and the Moselle. The traffic from many considerable towns and prospering villages either crosses or traverses it. And of this fact the Marquis de

Polignac was made fully aware before he had passed Ligny en Barrois, which was the first stage on the road. It was difficult to make headway. The long wains, with their teams of four horses moving continually athwart the roads whenever the slightest incline stood in their way, and the number of them coming and going, multiplied out of all due proportion by the smaller carts of the farmers round about leading their hay, which was everywhere being cut, would have impeded the progress of the travellers in any case. The Marquis was impatient to get forward, for only by haste could he expect to overtake and pass the energetic Bocal in his light travelling carriage with its pair of excellent post-horses, primed with corn, as the ostler at Bar-le-Duc had said, "as good as the king himself might have eaten."

Unfortunately, in addition to the embarrassing delays caused by peasant waggoners, there was the uncertain behaviour of the two new recruits for his Majesty's stable, whose strength, vigorously exerted at the wrong times, and want of docility—for they were but half broken to the saddle—were only equalled by their uncouth appearance, which would have taken Loches and a trooper of equal perseverance a week to have reduced to sleek and workmanlike trim. Loches had indeed picked out two good horses, the raw material, be it understood. But a good saddle-horse is made by training, and is not born the day that he leaves the horse-breaker. His companions in the troop stable will accomplish wonders with him by example and by the rough precepts instilled by iron-shod hoofs and teeth sharpened on army forage. Loches sighed as he thought of the unalloyed pleasure it would have given him in earlier days to have put this sorry but promising couple through a course of discipline.

But if the Marquis gave vent to any remark reflecting on the character of his mount, Loches would be heard muttering—

"Poor beast! I am a soldier and have not learned. I, Loches, am truly incapable of painting the truth. I won't go so far as to say 'you know your business,' poor beast, but then you haven't been to the school yet. One

must learn, and one must be curried. But you are good metal all the same!"

It was consoling to him, however, that both the Marquis and he were good horsemen, and neither load was precisely light. The self-taught tricks of their steeds' unbroken state, freshly remembered, brought a liberal corrective of whip and spur that did wonders as the leagues lengthened past Sanbar, past Ravec, past Pagnec; and to the relief of both riders they had accomplished the fourteen leagues and caught their first glimpse of the towers of St Etienne of Toul as the clock struck one. The prospect of dinner and a rest before resuming their road to Nancy, which haven seemed now a matter of certainty, filled both men with pleasant anticipation. Eager as the Marquis was to cover ground, fourteen leagues of riding on that untutored horse had made him weary and bruised, and the remembrance that it was all in the king's service was no immediate restorative, for it could not work miracles.

Drawing rein at the "Siren" in the Rue Qui-qu'en grogne, the Marquis gave a liberal largesse to the ostler, and asked him not only to rest and feed the horses, but to see if he and his assistants could not reduce the outward appearance of the steeds to a more martial neatness. As usual, Loches accompanied the ostler to see the beginning of the operations before turning to his own meal.

Loches learned that Monsieur Bocal had sat down to an early cup of wine and a crust at seven that morning, had gone to the cathedral to make his confession, returned at eight and proceeded with two fresh horses. He would be at Nancy by now.

The news did not please the Marquis. This contractor—who was France—was then possessed of the iron frame and resistless energy which laughs at sleep. No wonder he chose a travelling carriage, for day and night were equal then! He was religious too, it seemed. The Marquis respected the observances of religion. It was religion that sharply separated the human from the brute, and however he hated and despised Bocal, he could not

but feel a kind of respect for this man, who in the midst of a mass of affairs could go to make his peace with the Church before proceeding.

Having eaten his dinner and refreshed himself in other ways, he left Loches—stretched asleep on the straw in the stable, convinced, no doubt, that the ostler was honest, and sleep was the first thing needful—and strolled into the market-place and round about. His watchful eyes soon noticed the great number of wains laden with stuff, with victuals and forage especially, in every inn-yard,—and of waggoners standing at ease, or playing for sours over their wine in the little taverns.

On the road Loches had pointed out to the Marquis the different ways in which the waggons were loaded, and how always they could distinguish those that were employed on Monsieur Bocal's service by the superior neatness and intelligence with which the loads were disposed, so that, was it a pair of horses or was it four, the strain was well distributed, and while carrying a greater load it was seldom that Bocal's waggons or horses broke down. The Marquis, seeing the numerous waggons as they stood in the streets and yards of Toul, said to himself, "That is Bocal's! And that is Bocal's! But why is there such an accumulation?" He asked an idle waggoner, who answered simply enough—

"M'sieu! we have been told to wait here till Monsieur Bocal gives the word, or we should have been at Nancy by this."

"And when was your journey stayed?"

"This morning, m'sieu! There will be a block soon if this goes on much longer!"

The Marquis went on his way thinking. Toul is a small town and it is not easy to lose oneself. But turning into a short street sufficiently narrow, he saw before him the portal of St Gengoult with its ten steps, flanked by the two towers, the one crowned with a belfry, the other dwarfed by its sister's superior height, and the portal invited him to enter. Gloomy enough without, the church was all light and spaciousness within. Lorraine smiles with and at the sunshine, and

her churches are like herself. He stayed first in the chapel of St Gengoult, humbling his knees but lifting up his heart, and thence passed on, crossing himself at the altar of Marie, before the grand altar, all radiant with gold and sunlight, before the chapel of St Aubert, and was standing before the adjoining picture of Gethsemane, when a priest in his cassock came towards him and said—

“Monsieur has never seen our windows before?” with which opening the two fell into converse.

The priest was a man of forty. His hair, which had suffered the tonsure, was jet black, his complexion sallow but clear, and his eyes of a vivid dark-brown, startling almost in their quality of arresting attention. The Marquis noticed his eyes, as every one did, at once. And having noticed them, the Marquis's eyes continually resought the priest's as they turned this way and that in the course of conversation.

He was a simple-minded priest, come of humble country stock, who had been taken in hand early by his village curé, and had passed from the choir to the priesthood, and lived all his priestly life in Toul. It was easy to see that the stained-glass windows were not cherished by him so much for their art as for their representing the subjects on which his mind most dwelt.

“You are doubtless a happy man, father?” said the Marquis. “You love the place, you love your office, and the world does not come between you and your thoughts, your devotions.”

“One cannot close the book of memory, monsieur! And when one leads a quiet life, where nothing jostles, the pictures in the book stand out like the red and gold and blue of our illuminated missals. One knows them all so well.”

The glittering brown eyes seemed to pierce through the Marquis and see something beyond. The Marquis was ransacking his private book of memories for the picture of which those eyes reminded him, but at present in vain.

“You have had griefs?” the Marquis asked.

"It is true! When one becomes a priest one becomes father and brother to the whole world; one shares the joy when a new lamb is born into the fold, or when people are married; one consoles the sick, and one carries the holy elements to the dying. Never a day passes but the priest knows and feels the blessed relationship in which he stands to all."

"But?" said the Marquis.

"But one never forgets one's own—father and mother, brothers and sisters, the first of one's relations before entering the wider family of the Church. I never had a brother, but I had one sister. It is at her picture that the book of memory opens.

"Yes! Two or three years younger than myself, my especial care while she was little. I remember her when she was no taller than that bench, a little sun-burned country tot—and by the time I was twelve years old she had begun to mother me, for our girls are full of housewifely cares by the time they are ten years, and far wiser than the boys, who are mostly strong and stupid. She was quick at figures too, and could write and read better than I could then. She was a good little sister, and encouraged me to go on whenever I grew weary, as I did sometimes, of the choir school. I told her all my troubles when I went home, as I did every few weeks. I saw her grow into a strong handsome girl, fit for any one to marry, and two years older though I was, I felt quite a boy beside her, clumsy and silent, while she was quick and capable. I have seen her put on a leathern apron and shoe a horse. My father, I forgot to tell you, was the village blacksmith. Every young fellow in the village came to the forge for something twice or thrice a-week at least, and many of them made an errand just to see our Jeannette. No one seemed to please her, however: she was too clever for them. We all said so. She loved strangers best who could tell her something.

"Among the strangers whom we got used to seeing was a certain young carrier who came at intervals to get his horses shod. He was not at any pains to be civil either.

He had just his horses and waggon and nothing else. One day he asked my father for our Jeannette, in an off-hand way, it is true, but they say his eyes blazed at the girl herself like burning coals, and that she blushed hotly when her own met them. People took it for anger, for every one said she meant to marry above such folk as carriers and smiths. My father was not of the mildest, and said 'No!' very shortly. The carrier looked all manner of evil things but said nothing, and just drove off with one backward look at the girl. It was enough."

"Did he marry her?"

"No! Not so far as any one ever heard," said the priest sadly. A month or two after that she went away, and neither of them came back into our part of the country. We heard that she was travelling about with him—she, Jeannette, that was so ready and clever and full of sense. The pity of it! The pity of it! She knew her mate and her master. For he was clever and strong, and she helped him to get on the road to fortune. To-day he is one of the richest men in France."

"And she?" asked the Marquis tenderly.

"Ask the winds? Ask the streets of Paris? The blessed saints know and are watching her, for I have prayed for her and asked for news of her of every one. But no! I have never heard. He must have deserted her, or she found out the selfish greedy man that he was. Excuse me a moment, monsieur."

The priest knelt down before a crucifix and offered up a brief prayer while the Marquis waited. Then they went out of the nave by a side door.

The sunshine saluted them, and the smell of newly-made hay swept their nostrils. The Marquis looked about him. It was a quadrangle open to the blue sky surrounded by cloisters. On each side were six pointed arches of stone resting on a low parapet, and each arch was divided into two by a small thick column which spread into a trefoil within a quatrefoil of branching arcs soaring with the aspiration of the architect who conceived it. Flamboyant they call these cloisters. So be it. The light broke from the small square without,

casting shadows at every angle over the pavement and broad slabs of sunshine. And the fragrance of the hay was around and through everything filling the air.

The priest's face grew more troubled as his eyes fell upon trusses and trusses of hay, piled neatly at the far end of the cloisters, out of harm's way. Then he exclaimed—

"The man that placed that hay there took away my sister! God forgive him!"

"Monsieur Bocal?"

"You have guessed it!" said the priest. "Toul is full of his forage and his victualling. He has stopped it from going forward."

"It is good hay!" said the Marquis.

"This is!" said the priest. "But there is much that goes to the army that is not. I see, even I, who am but a priest, but I have not forgotten my village days."

"But how comes it here?"

"Monsieur! He can do anything. He has doubtless made a fine offering to our church, or to the Bishop of St Etienne, who is our master, and all things are made easy for him. His hay is safer here than anywhere, for who would dare to set light to it in the very cloisters of St Gengoult? The ways of God are very full of mystery, but I go on praying."

They had some further talk, and then the priest excused himself, thanking the Marquis for his patience, and conducted him, while he was yet speaking, to the door at the end of the cloisters, where he bade him a safe journey.

Then the Marquis set out for Nancy, suffering many delays, but still reaching his goal. And at Nancy they gained intelligence that Monsieur Bocal had arrived long before them, but had not yet set out. There was no difficulty in procuring a fresh pair of horses in this considerable city, so the Marquis left the selection of them to Loches and sought sleep betimes, wondering what the morrow would bring forth, and as he wondered he fell asleep, and never woke till Loches called him a little after dawn.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MARQUIS DISOBEYS.

The next stage in view of the Marquis de Polignac was Saverne of the Vosges, twenty leagues at least, and as he had passed Monsieur Bocal, he rode steadily, without pressing his animal, examining the country with the greater zest that it became more diversified at every league, and by so much the nearer to the meeting he longed for with his old friend, Marshal Turenne. He allowed himself to become absorbed by these pleasant engrossing anticipations and reminiscences, for the meeting with an old friend necessarily recalls the substance if not the details of many previous meetings.

But as there is in all enjoyed reveries some impish cloud that persists in shouldering his way in among the shining guests, so the image of Bocal began to obtrude, till one by one the pleasing memories faded into obscurity, and the Marquis began to ask himself why Monsieur Bocal had allowed himself to be passed at Nancy.

It was true the Marquis desired above all things to come first to Turenne. It was equally true that Monsieur Bocal had something to gain by putting himself in touch and speech with Turenne before the Under-Secretary arrived. It would tend to give him that appearance of confidence and security, which is so much good standing ground from which to deliver battle. Then it followed that, if he were willing to sacrifice that advantage, he must have found it still more to his advantage or vital to his interests to stay at Nancy. The Marquis began to reproach himself for undue haste in passing through so important a city. And in reviewing all his known facts, he was not forgetful of the stoppage in the transit of goods that was so patent at Toul, and probably as much so at Nancy. The Marquis, however, considered

that this might have been due as much to the army contractor's generalship as any other reason. Turenne was prone to movements of extreme rapidity when occasion demanded. He might be making one of his famous feigned retreats into the back of Lorraine, with the view of luring Monteculli and his German legions onwards to a disastrous defeat. If that were so, the stores and provisions were better detained than forwarded till the movement developed. It was not, certainly, any portion of the plan of campaign as conceived by De Louvois and in the knowledge of the Marquis, but De Louvois might, since he left Paris, have changed his plan and informed Bocal at the same time that he sent despatches to Turenne.

Bocal's mind may have been in no wise perturbed by the approach of the Marquis to the scene of action. His vast commissariat schemes, many of which must of necessity converge and focus in or about Nancy, might well demand his presence in that city without a preliminary visit to Turenne, of the condition of whose supplies his agent would keep him well informed.

In consoling himself with this view, which rested on a very reasonable probability, and on a certain undoubted fact, the Marquis was wrong, but the human mind works on its own experiences and knowledge, and is led in such direction as the temperament suggests. The Marquis was not by nature suspicious, and was the more willing to accept what his own nobility proposed as an explanation in the absence of any marked current in another direction. He pushed on to Moyenvic, to Assoudange, to red-roofed Sarrebourg, amid the grateful clustering pine forests, where he made the long halt of the day, and again engaged fresh horses to complete the journey to Saverne.

Sarrebourg is a small town confined by walls, and beyond its capacities as a place to dine and change horses, its own little namesake river Sarre, and its many memories of the ebb and flow of war, it contained little to arrest the Marquis in his onward course. But inasmuch as the end of his journey lay but a little in front

of him, the Marquis prolonged his pleasant enough dinner and his rest. Loches went out to make an inquiring tour of the walls, which he had doubtless at some time seen before.

When Loches returned, and was busy preparing the horses, a light travelling carriage drew up at the door, and in a moment into the inn's one travellers' room, moving like the Mistral, strode Monsieur Bocal. The Marquis was fated to remember the inn at Sarrebourg.

Monsieur Bocal was not wont in matters of business to waste time or words in salutation, but, as from certain facts which he had gleaned on his way by Meaux, by Montmirail, and Bar-le-Duc, he had conceived the idea that the Marquis was more a man of action than he had expected, he respected him accordingly, and wished him a "Good-day," hat in hand. The hat, however, he clapped on again, in token that he was, on the battle-ground, the equal of any Marquis of sixteen quarterings.

The Marquis, whose hat and cloak were already donned, responded with a polite inclination of the head, and offered him some wine.

"That is good comradeship," said Monsieur Bocal, sitting down and pouring out two glasses, flinging off his hat again, and shaking out the black curly locks.

"Now touching this errand of yours, Marquis—this self-imposed task?"

"Excuse me!" said the Marquis, "if I am unable to discuss my official business with you, Monsieur Bocal. We represent very diverse interests."

"Not at all!" said Bocal with rough bonhomie, a favourite pose among the many poses he could command. "You represent the War Office! I represent myself. Our interests are one. It is true you managed somehow to burn down my mill at Meaux, and drop something on the head of a faithful servant of De Louvois at Montmirail, rob me at Bar-le-Duc of two good horses, which I found good for nothing at Toul,—but these are details. A man such as I am does not account matters like these but as flies upon a wheel."

"Pardon me again, Monsieur Bocal?" said the Marquis, gazing at this miracle of effrontery from the Midi. "It was not my doing that your mill was burned, or that the steward was killed. I could give other explanations of these terrible events, but I do not care to. I interrupted you. You were about to show that our interests were, notwithstanding these events, one. Proceed!"

"It is like this," replied the other. "You, the War Office, make a bargain with me to supply so many horses, so many bags of flour, so many bushels of wheat, barley, rye, so many trusses of hay, horses one can ride—pretty good beasts those you impressed, eh?—grain, hay, of good serviceable quality—for soldiers, you understand, not Marquises. You want it delivered to the king's armies wheresoever they may be at stated times, so that there may be no undue delay, neither starvation nor waste. Good! I, and I alone, can undertake it, and I, and I alone, can do it."

"I am not prepared to admit that, Monsieur Bocal."

"No matter, my lord. The contracts exist. I am carrying them out. At this juncture your lordship initiates an inquiry."

"The War Office, Monsieur Bocal, having made a contract with you, desires to satisfy itself that the stipulations are being carried out. That is part of its business."

"I think not, my lord! There are doubtless times and seasons, but not when the army is in close touch with the enemy."

"And why should you dictate times and seasons, Monsieur Bocal?"

"Because I do not like to see a good job spoiled by interference. For example, I learn that you are inquiring about this and the other matter. What do I do? I give orders to stop all supplies. Toul is full! Nancy is full! What will result? Turenne's stocks will run low. His men will be complaining! Turenne will call upon me to explain. I shrug my shoulders and say, 'Great pity, Marshal, but if the Secretary for War wishes

to inspect my stores, let him do so while they are in my hands and not in those of your commissariat officers. Let me know what I am expected to deliver, and not run my head into a noose."

"You are infringing your contract!" said the Marquis coldly, "at your own peril."

"Not I!" retorted Bocal. "Turenne reports that, owing to the zeal of the Under-Secretary for War, supplies are stopped, and the next brilliant movement of Monsieur de Louvois' campaign is completely paralysed. To whose credit will that redound, my lord?"

The great man from the Midi sat back, stretching out his rather short thick legs, and looked cunningly at the Marquis.

"Monsieur Bocal!" said the Marquis, "I am not a man given to boasting. In this matter I represent the true interests of the kingdom of France, and what I have set out to do I am going to do. If you fail to fulfil your contracts either by wilful delay, which you come very near to admitting, or by supplying chalk instead of flour, you do so at your peril: on the word of Gaston de Polignac."

"And I say, my lord, that the peril is yours. The delay would be of your making. But suppose there were no delay. Suppose you could prove that Bocal, instead of supplying 500,000 livres worth, had supplied only 475,000 livres worth, a thing incapable of proof; but supposing—and you made a long report of this, extolling your own sagacity, heaping up blame upon me—what then?"

"Well! Monsieur Bocal! It is devoutly to be hoped that no such discovery will be made. If it were, we should have to look about for another contractor, it seems."

"Monsieur le Marquis! you do not know the world. I do. I have studied it, even when I drove a carrier's cart. I have learned one thing. Lend a man money, and he cannot move against you. Then lend him more, and he will move for you."

"But how does this sordid piece of wisdom concern the War Office?"

"It is best seen when the time comes, Monsieur le Marquis. The inquiry would fall to the ground. I should still get all the contracts I wanted. Come, Monsieur le Marquis, go to Monsieur Turenne, listen to his complaints, make your report, and go back to the War Office. It will be best."

"I am obliged to you for your advice, Monsieur Bocal. But I am bound to say that I shall be guided by my own. In the meantime, if I were you I should push on the supplies from Toul."

"Ventre St Gris! You had better look out for yourself, Monsieur le Marquis!" The eyes of the man from the Midi rolled ominously. The pose of bonhomie had melted.

"For my part," said the Marquis, "if any further attempt is made upon my life by your agents, I shall seek you out and hang you. Your debtors will not prevent that."

With which the Marquis de Polignac was striding towards the door, deeply incensed, when a courier drew up at the door of the inn and asked Loches if the Marquis de Polignac was there. It was a hasty despatch from De Louvois.

Monsieur Bocal recognised the War Office seals, and watched the Marquis's face as he read it.

It was tantamount to an order of immediate recall, which, coming upon the veiled threats of Bocal, was calculated to make the Marquis's temper burst out into storm. The thought occurred to him, however—"Does Bocal know of this?" It was worth a Parthian shot. Preserving his attitude of cold hauteur the Marquis said—

"You will perhaps not be pleased to hear, Monsieur Bocal, that I am directed by his Majesty to prosecute my inquiry to the utmost limits. We shall probably see more of one another. Good day!"

Monsieur Bocal's face was worth looking at with its

look of wide-eyed incredulity, succeeded by the clenching of the brows and the close clip of his firm jaws.

"Mon Dieu! I shall have to teach Monsieur de Louvois a lesson. It is not amusing!"

The Marquis de Polignac was secretly chagrined beyond measure. But not before the eyes of Monsieur Bocal was he going to turn his horse towards Paris. Without a word to Loches, who saw by his face that the courier had brought him unwelcome news, he kept resolutely on towards Saverne.

Turning the thing over and over in his mind he resolved to disobey the order, even at the risk of an open quarrel with that heaven-sent War Minister. Naturally the Marquis held that lofty conception of obedience to the king which the highest traditions of chivalry had always inculcated, and the fast-growing body of modern military precept and esprit tended to strengthen. He recognised in public matters the supreme value of obedience, the only reliable hilt to the sword of public action. But here he was at the cross-roads. His duty to the king's best interests was at variance with his duty to the king's minister. And if he had been able to feel that the king's minister was actuated solely by his own judgment, unbiassed by sinister influences, he would have deferred to his authority.

There was another cause at work, not altogether different. In a manner it was a phase of the same cause. The farther he left Paris behind the stronger grew the influence of Turenne's interests. After all, the War Office was at this moment the less in need of attention, the army in the field and its general the more. He passed in review the wonderful campaign of the previous autumn, in which the great Marshal, with an effective force of twenty thousand men at most, had met and defeated time and again the seventy thousand Germans who were overrunning Alsace. By rapid movements he had taken them in detail at Mulhausen, at Colmar, at Turckheim, and, like the strong rays of the sun, rolled up their clouds of soldiers and dispersed them

to the four winds of heaven. And this in the teeth of the hatred of De Louvois, and the reiterated orders to entrench himself behind stout walls!

Turenne's motto, which was that of the House of Auvergne, ran, "Virtus turris expugnabilis," and Turenne's conception of a campaign, even with numbers hopelessly few, embraced attack as well as defence; in his view the morale of an army is better maintained by activity and privation than by confinement in cities, even well victualled.

The Marquis had watched with an immense unenviable admiration this wonderful display of strategic genius and indomitable courage, and had resolved that, as far as in him lay, Turenne should have the full support of his own single-minded earnestness. If men could be obtained and sent to the front by his exertions, they should go. If supplies could be maintained, they should be: and they should be of good quality.

He realised that France was in greater danger than she had ever been, for the Germans were again mustered to the attack, seeking to cross the Rhine, and that in Monteculli, the veteran Italian, Turenne had an adversary as wary, as full of ruses, as courageous as himself.

So the Marquis decided calmly enough to go on. Having arrived at his decision he signed to Loches to come up with him. He was about to question him as to the road, when Loches drew from his holster a sealed letter.

"The courier brought this also, my lord!"

His master opened it. It ran:—

"No matter! Go through! I will take care of Philippe. Madame la Marquise has left Paris and follows you. They have put me to the Question."

It was for him. The superscription was in the same shaky handwriting, a woman's, as the letter. There was no signature. But he had no doubt that it came from that mysterious woman who was called the Red Neighbour, and by the same courier that had brought the War Secretary's despatch. For a moment the similarity of the daring reminded him of Bocal pasturing his horses

in De Louvois' park. And she was a prisoner under strict surveillance. Of what avail were locks and keys, ciphers, jailers, and the rest of the paraphernalia, when a few pistoles seemed to gain for any one what they wished?

He read it again. "No matter! Go through!" must refer to the Secretary's despatch which she had seen, or of which she had divined the purport. It was the reflex of his own resolve. And although he told himself that it made no difference, he was pleased to feel that this strange unknown force was there in Paris, an invisible rear-guard against the machinations of Bocal.

"I will take care of Philippe!" What in the name of fortune or of sorcery did that mean? Who was Philippe? Philippe? The rattle of his horse's hoofs seemed to ring Philippe. There was but one pre-eminent Philippe—Philippe of France, Duke of Orleans, Duke of Chartres, Duke of Nemours, Duke of Valois, the only brother of the king, who, since the death of his beloved wife and princess, Henrietta, dear to France for her wit and her supreme grace, had sought in the Dutch wars the consolations of his grief. But if this were indeed the Philippe, what was Philippe to him or he to Philippe? It was something to which he had no clue.

"Madame la Marquise has left Paris and follows you!" At the first reading this would almost have furnished his conscience with the excuse to obey De Louvois' order. Marie Gabrielle was but even now travelling to overtake him. He had assured her of a short safe journey and a quick return. But she could not rest without him. Dear heart of Marie Gabrielle! Something had happened. What was it? Had she, too, learned of plots against his safety, and yearned to be with him, a trebly dear but delicate buckler against his adversaries? His answering solicitude, waiving aside his personal risks, pictured the thousand inconveniences of her journey along the great highway,—the inns filled with officers going to the front or returning, the difficulty of getting proper relays of horses if her own broke down. His mind became full of anxieties for her wellbeing, miti-

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gated by the reflection that she would travel in becoming state with four horses and a sufficient retinue of servants. Her name and rank would procure her every respect. He would first see Turenne, then turn back to meet her. With which decision he kept resolutely on the road to Saverne, still inquiring within himself what had caused her to set out. Then the last sentence of that laconic epistle recurred to him. "They have put me to the Question." He had not grasped the force of it before—the Question—the torture! They had put the Red Neighbour to the torture, and Marie Gabrielle had taken fright because of some foolish but quite innocent dealings with the sorceress, that very sorceress who was his one rear-guard. De Louvois had indeed failed him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RED NEIGHBOUR TAKES CARE OF PHILIPPE.

Next to truth comes ridicule. Before truth all men and women become dumb. There is no more to be said. When ridicule raises her voice all the world begins talking, and it is *dommage*, or as the impolite English say, "the very devil."

The particular engine which the Parisians use is something that has come to be called a lampoon. It is in verse. Sometimes it is really witty, and more often it is merely scurrilous. But always it ends with the mystic refrain—"Lampons! Lampons!" which bursts from all the lips at a convivial gathering that can pronounce the words and laugh at the same time.

No one ever pretended to know who wrote them. Like other children of shame, they were usually sent out into the world with no acknowledgment of their parentage. Sometimes it was a princess who was credited

with making quite clever verses when she was a little excited by wine; sometimes it was some obscure writer in a garret, who earned a few sous from the ballad-sellers by profaning in a new lampoon that majesty of whose victories he was writing a glowing eulogium in alexandrines.

Certain it is that quite a number of new lampoons began to descend upon the Pont Neuf a day or so after the Red Neighbour had been escorted back to her prison by a quarter of Paris—a ragged, ominous, and witty quarter—for many of them came from the purlieus of the university, and called themselves students. They were not all students. There were faces among them of hideous foulness and grimness, such as only Paris can, and always could, belch out of her depths and swallow again as readily—raucous-voiced, speaking, if speaking it could be called, a guttural argot, mingled with deep chest-notes of peculiar ferocity. These people had learned a lesson in the outbreaks of the Fronde, and were not loth to refresh their memories by repetition. Then there had been trained bands of the citizens, musketeers, and soldiers more or less in evidence. Now Paris was pretty well drained of her troops and the mob aired itself.

The lampoons had for their subject Madame de Montespan, the reigning “queen of the left hand” (she had bought the goodwill of the business of Madame La Vallière, they said), and Madame du Fresnoy, who was, as we have seen, the particular friend of the great Minister of War. The main facts about these ladies every one knew, but neither lady cared to have the facts dressed out in rhymed couplets more or less garnished, and sung in the streets, on the Pont Neuf, or at students’ supper-parties. Still less did their respective adherents like it, who found their interest in paying court, where they could not approve the conduct.

It was therefore represented to the powers-that-were that this kind of thing was not to be borne, and as it was manifestly undesirable to extinguish summarily the Red Neighbour, impossible to arrest everybody who chose to sing “Lampons! Lampons!” the only course

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was to release the prisoner, on the understanding that her supposed influence with the ballad-mongers should be exerted to quell the nuisance.

The powers-that-were first consulted his Majesty's judges, and elicited from them that there was no evidence to connect the prisoner with the crime for which she was supposed to have been arrested. As far as they were concerned she was free. An officer of the Parliament was therefore ordered to wait upon the prisoner, with her acquittal made out in due form. She accepted it after satisfying herself that it was all in order. But she made no effort to go.

The official who acted as governor of her prison waited on her the next day, and said—

“Madame! I have the honour to inform you that you are free to go. It is possible I may have another tenant before long!”

The Red Neighbour looked at him with disconcerting calmness—

“Monsieur! before I go I shall be glad to be informed if my apartment is ready for my reception, my servants restored. I shall require my keys.”

The next day the governor returned and said, bowing profusely—

“Madame! all is ready! A coach is waiting below! I shall be desolated to lose so interesting, so fascinating a tenant. But”—here he shrugged his shoulders—“we have so many disappointments in our lives!”

“You need not hold the door open like that, monsieur! I am not a cat in a strange room to make a run for it. I am very comfortable. I shall stay yet a little longer. You have forgotten something!”

The governor became very red.

“Madame! I am truly sorry! How can I repair my forgetfulness? What, in short, have I forgotten?”

“Simply this, monsieur. You are not to blame! I have been arrested. I have been put to the Question. I have suffered in my person, in my feelings, most of all in my honour. How much does his Majesty propose to pay me by way of solatium?”

The governor reported to those that sent him that madame expected a solatium. It was unheard of. But she did. She was "a very singular woman."

Of this fact the powers-that-were were fast becoming assured. A new lampoon speedily proclaimed on the house-tops, so to speak, that the Red Neighbour was waiting to be paid to leave her prison. The powers-that-were had no notion of putting their hands into their own purses or strong-boxes. It was problematical besides how much was there. There was the king's treasury. The question was how much did she want!

The governor was relegated to the office of merely introducing the gentleman who was despatched to make the bargain.

Mr Go-between was immensely polite, and after beating about the bush a little while was pulled up very shortly by—

"Are you authorised, monsieur, to agree to a sum?"

More meandering words. Then—"Well, not precisely, madame!"

"Then," said the Red Neighbour with an ugly gleam in those curious brown eyes and a curl of her red lips, "you will be good enough to convey to Monsieur de Louvois that I desire to see some one who possesses full powers, Monsieur Barthélémi Hervart, the Comptroller of the Finances, for instance."

Mr Go-between, somewhat disconcerted, took his leave and made his report in due course. He mentioned this singular request with much misgiving, for Monsieur Hervart was a very important functionary, and one not lightly to be approached. To the great surprise of the powers-that-were, Monsieur Hervart, old as he was and overburdened with responsibilities as he was, agreed.

Monsieur Hervart was no sooner announced than the Red Neighbour hastened to meet him and set a chair for him in a corner of the room where the light, which was not too strong, should not hurt his eyes. Her manner had changed to something resembling gentleness.

"It is a little droll, Monsieur Barthélémi! I thought you would not have forgotten—bankers never forget, do

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they?—your little client who used to come to your little back room in the Rue de Richelieu.”

“Ahem!” said the ex-banker, putting on his spectacles. “Yes! I seem to remember your face!”

“Very good!” She clapped her hands. “You were always a good actor! But you knew how to charge for your money. You have discounted my bills many a time, and always made a good profit.”

“One must always make the turn of the market, madame!”

She laughed again. “How like that is! How very like you, Monsieur Barthelémi.”

“And now,” she added, “you see the situation! They have put me in here and must pay me to go out. I need not enter into tiresome details. What are you empowered to offer me to go?”

“Madame!” said the ex-banker, taking snuff, “I am now the Comptroller of the Finances! It is very different. I do not offer anything.”

“Good! I want twenty thousand livres.”

“What? Twenty thousand livres?” He took off his spectacles, rubbed them and put them on again. “Young woman! There is not at the present time as much in his Majesty’s treasury.”

The Red Neighbour looked demurely down her nose as if she were profoundly disappointed. The old banker had often seen that look on the faces of his clients. He knew it quite well. It was usually the prelude to a very good bargain, for your banker, like any other dealer, if he is a sensible dealer, does not want his customer to go away.

“It is all that war, I suppose? Those horrible greedy army contractors? You have just been paying them?”

“In a sense, Yes, madame. In a sense, No! I am putting them all off. That last fête at Fontainebleau took half a million out of the treasury.”

“Yes? What then do you propose, Monsieur Hervart?”

“When one cannot have the whole one must put up with half!”

“Twenty thousand livres I said, Monsieur Hervart!”

I cannot accept less! What? I can lend the king a few hundred thousands if he needs them."

"What?" The ex-banker surveyed her curiously. "You can lend the king a few hundred thousand livres? Have you found the secret of transmuting metal? You who used to come and beg a loan of five hundred livres or so?"

"Yes! Monsieur Barthelémi. I learned a good deal off you. I knew something of affairs before. But you always told me so much."

"I? I told you? Good heavens! woman, what did I ever tell you?" The Comptroller of the Finances began to get red in the face.

"It is very warm, dear Monsieur Barthelémi. You must not allow yourself these excitements. Besides, it is nothing. Let me have my twenty thousand livres, and I will tell you what next I require."

It was not for nothing Monsieur Hervart had earned his post as Comptroller.

"It is not possible. Besides, on your own admission, you don't need it. You are rich."

"Passably well off—say! Come! Is it the rich man or the poor man that drives the hard bargain?"

Monsieur Hervart began to be a little confused.

"Shall I tell you one of the secrets you told me in the little back room in the Rue de Richelieu?"

"If you tell me a single one I shall be surprised, but you shall have—well, wait. I am not going to be made a fool of."

"Listen, then! Monsieur Philippe, the king's brother, owes Monsieur Bocal twenty thousand livres. Is that not so?"

Monsieur Hervart's face was a study. He puffed out his cheeks and made his eyes two little black dots in wide yellow rings. Then he took some more snuff.

"As you say, madame, one cannot be too careful! I have no recollection of it. It is a trifle, in any case."

The Red Neighbour turned away and took two or three strides and then turned on him suddenly, asking

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in a mockingly pleasant voice, "Shall I tell you another thing you told me?"

"By heaven! madame, I have heard you called a sorceress. Perhaps you are, but I never told you what you have just now told me."

"Then I shall go to Philippe!"

The old man was beginning to get nervous. She would go to the king. She was capable of all—this woman—he was sure of it.

"I was wondering," she went on, "who held the paper? Monsieur Bocal's bankers, or who?"

In the world of finance many curious pieces of information are common property, and yet are absolutely unknown to the world outside.

"Yes! You were wondering!" said the old banker.

"Suppose you were to write an order on the treasury, payable in three months!"

"For twenty thousand livres? It is a big sum." Monsieur Hervart was beginning to feel that this woman wearied him. She scarcely ever took her eyes off his. "Yes. Well, if you won't go for less. But remember, dear child, there is always a *lettre de cachet* which is not quite as good value as a *lettre de change*."

"One moment, Monsieur Barthélemi!" She went to the barred window and blew a shrill whistle three times. The window itself was open because of the heat.

"You are doubtless calling a coach, madame? Mine is at the door, thank you. Shall we say ten thousand livres?"

"Come here, dear Monsieur Hervart," she said. "Your eyesight is not so good as it was, though it was never quite so good as mine. Look out there in the square. What do you see?"

"There are a few people. What of that?"

She blew again. In a trice, all the ruffians in Paris seemed to have sprung to attention, and in the square.

The old man fidgeted nervously.

"How long would it take that mob, do you think, to upset your coach and trample you under foot, dear Monsieur Hervart?" She was quite icily cool. There was very little colour in her lips.

"Twenty thousand livres! Mon Dieu!" He began to make preparations to write out the order.

"You will make it payable in three months to Monsieur Bocal."

"To Monsieur Bocal?"

"I said it," she said.

He trembled, and did as he was told.

"You will then go to his bankers and redeem the paper of Monsieur Philippe, and you will bring it to me. You will also discharge any interest. But you will be able to make it clear to them that Monsieur, being a prince of the blood-royal, does not pay interest."

"Madame! Madame! You are asking too much!"

"It is nothing. They will think you are commissioned by Monsieur. I want the paper. Would you like to be escorted? I will go with you and sit in your coach while you arrange matters."

Monsieur Hervart acquiesced. And that is how it came about that the Red Neighbour made her next appearance in public, leaning not too heavily on the arm of Monsieur Hervart, and stepped into the coach of the Comptroller of the Finances. From the window she waved her hand and said—

"It is enough! Thank you all, comrades."

And St Antoine and the Temple slunk away to their myriad holes.

She was taking care of Philippe.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GROWN-UP CHILD WHO MADE FABLES.

The journey of the Marquise Marie Gabrielle to Meaux was uneventful. But at Meaux, there being no post-horses to be had, she was obliged to proceed with her own to La Ferté sous Jouarre, where she succeeded in hiring a post-chaise which was returning to Château Thierry on the following morning. This is not so direct as the road by Montmirail, but in that direction there was nothing to be had in the shape of a conveyance. She spent the night at La Ferté in comparative comfort, for Pierre and Nanette were admirable indoor servants. Greatly strengthened in her resolution by her achievement of the first stage of the journey, she set out the next morning in good spirits for Château Thierry, intending to reach Epernay by night.

In this, however, she was disappointed, for Château Thierry was a very small town, which had grown up at the foot of the old castle of Charles Martel, and with the decay of the castle, many times besieged and finally fallen into disuse, had remained stationary in its growth or even inclined to dwindle. There was but a single post-house, and the only available pair of horses was the pair in the chaise that had brought her from La Ferté. There was nothing to do but wait till the next morning, by which time they would be able to take her on to Epernay.

Unlike the Marquis, she did not command Pierre to go out and find horses, and if she had, Pierre was not at all likely to have succeeded. She strolled up to the ramparts of the castle, no one hindering her, meditating on the object nearest to her heart, her husband.

Over the ramparts leant a gentleman, somewhat negligent in his dress, his elbow on the wall, brushing back his perruque, his eyes fixed on the landscape. He made no motion at her approach, did not turn his head.

She, filled with her own vision as he with his, looked at him and passed on. Half an hour afterwards, returning, she found him still there, and something in the attitude brought back a terrace at Vaux, where she had attended some hospitable fantasy of the unfortunate, but then all-conquering, Fouquet, and the same figure leaning over it wrapt in the same abstraction. "Yes! There could be no doubt of it." She touched him lightly on the shoulder.

"Monsieur de la Fontaine!"

"Madame!" he said, bowing and making a little gesture as if she should avoid him. "The fool who sells wisdom. Yes! Jean de la Fontaine."

"But you remember me, monsieur?"

He looked still a little confused.

"You are in one of my poems—What? Marie Gabrielle! Marie Gabrielle!" he repeated in a sonorous musical voice, beating out as it were the end of a line. "Marquise de Polignac! It is not so musical. And what, dear Marquise, do you do here? Have you come to share my solitude? Women are so good to me, since poor magnificent Fouquet went to Pignerol. First, there was the dowager Duchess of Orleans, Gaston's widow, you know, and now Madame de la Sablière. She has the true passion for doing good."

The Marquise let him run on thus far without interruption. She knew him for the child of temperament, who had never lost his youth, though he must be, she reflected, quite old—fifty at least. Then she said—

"And Madame de la Fontaine?"

"Odd's life! That is just what brought me to Château Thierry, to see her. My estate is here, what is left of it, you know. Paris is a great eater. It eats estates chiefly. Yes, I came down to see her, dear Marie! A most ravishing beauty,—at least she was. I am afraid I do not notice these things so closely now. A charming intellect! Oh, I assure you! You would say, Marquise, why do we not live more together——?"

"Monsieur! I should never dream . . ."

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“It was in your eyes—

‘Those eyes of Marie Gabrielle,’—

and I reply, because we are much better apart. She, dear soul, loves to read romances: I love the society of the poets. Molière is dead—brave bright Molière, but, God be thanked, Racine and Maucroix are with me still! And then I love reverie. Women do not love reveries, at least not in a husband.”

The Marquise smiled. Monsieur de la Fontaine smiled also.

“Now I have told you what brought me here. What happy chance brought you, dear Marquise?”

“The want of horses to go on.”

“Horses! What need is there of horses? Use your wings, the wings of thought!”

“Yes, Monsieur de la Fontaine; but, unfortunately, the wings of thought will not take me to my husband! I want him in the body, and in the spirit too,” she added.

“You want your husband?”

Monsieur de la Fontaine lapsed into reverie again.

The Marquise humoured him.

From the old ramparts she looked down, a long way down, upon the quiet market-place, with its old basin and the two spouting branches of the fountain. Over the houses, which stood behind the fountain, rose a little belfry tower from which came the silveriest of chimes. To the right wound the river through many pleasant pastures and groves of trees, and opposite were great broad hills: the whole as peaceful a scene as could well be imagined.

“If one could always live in peace like this!” Marie Gabrielle sighed aloud. It was one of the charms of Jean de la Fontaine that one could equally forget to keep silence or to speak in his company.

“The country!” he said, musing. “It is an image of simplicity and innocence, which cannot have much real

attraction for us, who are unhappily neither simple nor innocent!"

The Marquise gazed at the poet. No, he was not turned cynic: he was speaking quite literally.

He went on—

"Besides, madame, it seems to me that the interest one takes in us is one of the most abundant sources of happiness, and if that be conceded, you will surely be happier in Paris than in the provinces. Where in Château Thierry, for instance, shall I find man, woman, or child who has even heard of my little fables?"

The Marquise understood.

"So you want your husband, dear Marquise? That is truly singular. Come! I will find you horses; but first come with me and let me present you to Madame de la Fontaine. She will be charmed to meet you. I left with her for distraction a new acquaintance of mine I picked up in Paris. There was room for two in my post-chaise, so I brought him with me. I forget his name for the moment, but he is an original rogue."

"Rogue, monsieur!"

"A fashion of speech, madame. Perhaps he is a wise man. Your wise man is often perilously near being a rogue. But you shall see. I noticed that he did not offer to pay any of the charges. But unless one sees new people one need not write fables."

"Come," said the Marquise. "I am impatient to see Madame de la Fontaine. As for your original, you can keep him. Paris abounds in them."

They left the ramparts by a little postern gate, first going through an ancient guard-room, and came down by a steep pathway which led into a quiet open space with trees, from which ran a street into the town, not more than common broad, paved with good stones, and after passing three or four houses, they came to a house of noble fashion, a main pavilion with two wings at right angles. Before it was a small courtyard, enclosed by iron railings, and two massive gates of wrought-iron, of the time of Henri Quatre. A stone well with a fountain and canopy stood against the left wing, and to

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the front door led a circular approach of seven steps guarded by wrought-iron railings. Over the doorway, which stood invitingly open, was carved the device of the La Fontaines.

The poet opened the gate. "Here was I born. And here am I the Seigneur de la Fontaine! In Paris—I am what you will!"

It was comical to see with how little the air of a master the poet led the way into a large low room opening on an ill-kept garden, where before open case-monts lounged madame upon a fauteuil.

Opposite to her, on a stiff upright chair, sat Dr Levani.

"Marie, my friend, Madame la Marquise de Polignac!"

The ladies greeted one another with a certain cordiality, the Marquise because she pitied the other, the other because the simple sweetness of the younger woman outshone her rank.

The poet stood waiting to introduce the Doctor, and wondering how he could have managed to forget his name. The Marquise saved him further confusion, by turning about and, with the slightest imaginable nod, saying—

"I already have a slight acquaintance with this gentleman."

This was at once a great relief to the poet, who knew nothing of the man he had introduced to Madame la Fontaine, and the Marquise's acknowledgment of him was in a way a certificate of character, and a greater relief to Dr Levani, who on her ladyship's entry had felt the foundation of things crumbling beneath him. He bowed gravely, and remained standing as his host did.

Dr Levani was a parasite, and no one knows better than your parasite the value of names. Chance at a tavern, in the shape of an appeal to settle a wager, brought him into touch with the writer of fables. At once Dr Levani had attached himself. For the next few days it would be well to quote "Monsieur de la Fontaine," then "my friend Monsieur de la Fontaine,"

next, "my friend Jean de la Fontaine," and finally, "friend Jean." But after three days' acquaintance, Dr Levani had learned two things—first, that the Marquise had left Paris and departed for Meaux; and secondly, that Monsieur de la Fontaine was travelling to Château Thierry.

It was notorious that after these annual excursions to his native place the poet was better furnished with money. In point of fact, though he usually paid a graceful visit to his wife, he had been known to forget to do that, but never to sell a few more of the paternal acres.

The friendly Doctor had learned this, and foresaw no difficulty in arranging for the transfer of some small portion of the patrimony to his own pocket, while he enjoyed a respite from the summer heats of Paris and learned the destination of the Marquise.

He had suffered temporary defeat at the hands of the Count de Roubaix, and by mere brute force been obliged to sign a paper relinquishing his indefeasible rights of blackmail on the Marquise, but now that the affair of the Red Neighbour was subsiding, he looked forward to making some few crumbs out of his former acquaintance.

The sudden arrival of the Marquise upon the scene had disconcerted his plans, never very strenuously followed. Your true parasite does not care to work hard for a living if he can get one by mere suction.

Should he abandon his newly-found friend the poet on the very eve of his temporary inflation, as a wary spider might a particularly fat fly, which was already in his web, for some other object more remote but less likely to stay in the neighbourhood, and renew his acquaintance later, after he had followed up the Marquise, or let that lady go her ways? There was the unfortunate chance possible that the Marquise might hint to Madame de la Fontaine the true character of her guest, and so spoil the market.

He at first decided that nothing should induce him to leave his post in the salon; but a look at the face

The grown-up Child who made Fables. 153

of the Marquise assured him that his presence or his absence would make no difference. If she chose to speak, it would be rather before his face than any other way, and he resolved to be guided by circumstances.

"You were going to use your influence, monsieur," the Marquise turned to the poet, "to procure me two fresh horses for my journey. Would you do me the favour, while I talk to Madame here?"

The Marquise with a glance quelled Madame de la Fontaine's natural desire to ask questions.

"Go at once, Jean," said the poet's wife, "and get the Marquise what she requires. You, monsieur, also will doubtless be glad to see a little more of the town which my husband is making so famous."

The tone in which she said it conveyed less of a sneer than a regret, though it suggested quite plainly that Madame de la Fontaine held her husband's achievements more lightly than the gay world for whom he wrote. It is not uncommon with ladies who possess spouses devoted to literature.

The poet, who had written a fable about charlatans, and the charlatan went out together like two good comrades.

"Did you ever read my fable of the Horse and the Wolf?" the poet asked amiably.

Dr Levani was not an adept in the *belles-lettres*, and after hemming a few times said he had not.

"It is an amusing trifle," said the poet. "I need not weary you with it. The wolf pretended to be a surgeon to sick horses, and seeing one grazing, inquired about his ailment, with the view of quieting suspicions. The horse professed to be taken in, but by way of precaution let slip his hoofs at the pretended doctor and rendered him entirely unfit for his business of butcher."

Dr Levani expressed openly his wonder that his host could imagine all these things, but secretly he wondered whether that same host was quite so simple as he thought him. He decided to go on allaying the suspicions of the nobler animal and keep a good way from his hoofs.

"Horses? Faith! Now where in Château Thierry can one find horses? It is surprising how one forgets. Yet I was born here. Ah! I have it. My friend Jacques Trichet, who buys my land, deals also in horses. Let us go to him."

To this son of avarice they bent their steps. Dr Levani took occasion to ask the poet whether in fact he knew anything about horses. To which the poet frankly replied that he knew nothing, and the Doctor very pleasantly offered to act as adviser, as it was necessary that the Marquise, who had been one of his clients, should have the best that could be hired.

Monsieur Trichet was at home. He was in fact expecting a visit from the poet and a further transaction in land to his own advantage. He eyed his visitants with a hard curiosity when they broached the subject of horses.

He led the way, however, to a paddock where several specimens of the race were consuming some very unsatisfactory herbage.

Dr Levani cast his eyes over them. He knew a horse when he saw one. He also knew that no pair selected from this assemblage would travel five leagues.

Monsieur de la Fontaine was by this time fully astride the winged horse of his imagination. The sight of these lean veterans had suggested another fable. He had even composed three lines of his apologue. He moved slowly away murmuring a fourth. Dr Levani and the horse-dealer, in low tones so as not to disturb him, made a bargain.

"It is easy to see that these horses are absolutely worthless," said the Doctor. "What have you got the conscience to ask for them? That one and that one?"

"Monsieur! They are a bit fined down with the harvest work, but I assure you they are in splendid training."

"A fig, Monsieur Trichet. What do you say to thirty livres apiece?"

"Thirty livres? For how long do you wish them?"

"I was speaking of buying them!"

"Thirty livres. They cost me," he swallowed it hardy, and hurriedly promised his patron saint a candle at three sous—"cost me four pistoles each."

"Four cabbages! Come, we are men of business. I buy to sell again—we will share the profits. They will break down in two hours with a fair load."

"You have no idea how much horses cost. Monsieur Bocal wants so many for the army. He has drained this part of the country."

"It is not a question of Monsieur Bocal but of me. Thirty livres, I say."

"Forty, monsieur. For the love of the saints—forty."

"Tut! I am a bad hand at a bargain, but I know a mere bag of bones. We will call it thirty-five. Send them down to the inn and have the post-chaise put to them."

"Mon Dieu! A post-chaise!"

"Ah! What did I say? Never mind, they shall last as long as I want them. And now you will open a bottle of wine on the bargain, Monsieur Trichet. Monsieur de la Fontaine, our friend is opening a bottle of wine for us!"

"Wine? Famous! To drink to Rosinante and Buccephalus, the most poetical of all steeds."

It was a weird libation—a poet, a miser, and a charlatan celebrating a bargain in horses' bones and leather.

CHAPTER XX.

IN PERIL OF HIS MAJESTY'S OFFICERS.

It is to be regretted that innkeepers, like many other people who live by the patronage of the public, are not always strictly veracious. Had it been the case with him of Château Thierry, the Marquise might have started for Epernay the same day in the same chaise with the

same horses that brought her. The temptation of keeping the custom of the Marquise for board and bed was too much, however, and hence the Marquise set out in the late afternoon in the same chaise behind as sorry a pair of cattle as ever ran on either side of a carriage-pole. From the same greed it arose that Dr Levani had little difficulty in hiring the original pair with another chaise, exactly two hours after Madame la Marquise left, with the entirely amiable intention of overtaking her on the road at the point where the two jades, once the property of Monsieur Trichet, refused from mere helplessness to go any farther.

His plan was admirably laid. A modest feeling of satisfaction came over him when, exactly five leagues from Château Thierry, he espied in front of him the chaise drawn up at the side of the road, and the Marquise pacing up and down in that state of nervous excitement to which the best of women are prone to give way when confronted by their own helplessness.

She had in fact passed through the little town of Dormans, and was about half-way to Epernay when the coachman announced that the horses were not capable of going farther. She was on the point of contemplating a journey on foot back to the Dormans as a last resort. Pierre and Nanette offered no sort of practical consolation. They would do what madame wished. But what did she wish?

Then arrived Doctor Levani, who alighted with well-concealed glee and many protestations of concern from his chaise.

The mingled feelings of the Marquise can be imagined. Doctor Levani's astonishment at finding her in such a plight was great, but not over-acted. He treated the matter with grave politeness, and placed his own conveyance entirely at her ladyship's service. He himself would walk back to Dormans.

"But, Doctor! You have affairs to attend to?"

"Yes! Unfortunately pressing affairs: but everything must give way to your ladyship's immediate need! You are hastening to Epernay?"

The Marquise assented, but, too wise to intrust this gentleman with more of her business, said no more. After all, she could surely shake him off at Epernay.

"I could not think of leaving you behind, Doctor. Since you so graciously place the chaise at my convenience, pray mount with me."

"No, madame! I will, if it please you, ride on the back seat with your maid, and your man can ride in front with the driver."

The Marquise made some faint show of protest, but consented; and after a whispered instruction by the Doctor to the driver of the other chaise, which we may suppose concerned the ultimate disposal of the horses, the party set out, and alighted at the close of twilight at the door of the "Crown of Gold," in the good town of Epernay.

Misfortune makes us acquainted with strange bed-fellows, but more often with odd table-companions. That the Marquise de Polignac should sit down to supper in the "Crown of Gold" of Epernay with a gentleman whose one introduction to her favour had turned out so unfortunately, and had in a measure brought about the chain of events which had led her to this very spot, appeared to possess a fatality which she was as incapable of resisting as explaining.

The Marquise could do no less than ask him to sup with her. He had foreseen that also.

The name De Roubaix was in the thoughts of both, though uttered by neither. Levani was anxious beyond expression to know whether De Roubaix had made use of the paper he had so unscrupulously wrung from him. The Marquise, in whom the insolent love-making of the Count had left a serious resentment, was curious to know whether the Count's story and the paper which he had produced were not alike trumped up—a false card of a cheating gambler. She would like to have believed it.

"Madame!" replied Levani to her courteous invitation, "it is not fit that I, who was once merely governor to the Count de Roubaix, should sit down to table with your ladyship."

It was clever, this swift substitution. A governor was one thing, a valet quite another; but in the mind of the Marquise the Count might easily have degraded Levani to make his own case more plausible.

"Monsieur! It is perhaps graceful of you to mention it, but in our present situation of fellow-travellers it would be absurd to weigh these distinctions. Sit down, I pray you!"

The host waited upon them. And at the conclusion of the repast the Marquise said—

"Touching the hire of those poor horses, and any charges I should be at, I beg that you will arrange the matter for me, and send the money by the coachman who brought us here. I hire fresh ones to-morrow."

Doctor Levani replied that he had already arranged with the driver who had returned, for sixty livres, and that he begged her ladyship would not trouble about such a trifle.

The Marquise was proof against this, and handed him the money with a gracious expression of thanks. And as he had considerably left Monsieur de la Fontaine to settle with Trichet, he looked upon this as the first-fruits of his industry. He was, however, no nearer to his aim to know whether the Count de Roubaix had betrayed him. He made a bold effort.

"Your ladyship doubtless heard that the Red Neighbour was in fact put to the Question?"

"Yes! I knew it. What was the result?"

"She gave up the names of none of her clients but Madame du Fresnoy, the wife of a clerk in the War Department, and Madame de Montespan. There was a great popular outcry, and it is not likely she will be tried further!"

"Indeed! I had left Paris. I had not heard."

"I had no opportunity of carrying out your ladyship's wishes in regard to her, being hindered by the threatening action of the Comte de Roubaix, who in fact extorted from me by force and fraud an undertaking to renounce my efforts. As things have turned out happily for your ladyship, you will, I trust, forgive my seeming inaction."

"You need not have referred to it, Doctor, as I did not. But what right had the Count de Roubaix to interfere—if you had a clear conscience?"

"Alas, madame! it was not a case of conscience, but of my livelihood. Probably he was afraid of my revealing some of his youthful frivolities—not to call them by a harder name—of which I was necessarily cognisant. He threatend to spoil my chances of exercising my profession, acquired at much pains and expense in Milan, by telling all the ladies with whom I hoped to establish myself that I was a mere rogue."

It was a plausible story, if not a very convincing one. It had a powerful advocate, however, in the heart of the Marquise, who was so justly indignant at the Count's professions of love.

"The Count need not have concerned himself," she said coldly. "But believe me, I shall not forget your present aid, tendered with so much delicacy. It is your future reputation in Paris that will decide in what way I shall serve you on my return."

With which the Marquise, summoning her maid, bade the Doctor "Good-night" and went to bed, thoroughly fatigued, but pleased beyond measure to have had the load at her heart so preceptibly lightened, and to be so many leagues nearer to her husband.

She had been careful to enlist over night the assistance of the host to procure a chaise and horses capable of reaching Châlons, which represented the next ten leagues of her journey. The host had promised mountains and marvels, and she had believed him.

Of her name and condition she made no mention at any of the inns she stayed at, and till now met with no contretemps that gave her much reflection. The next morning, however, having taken her morning chocolate in her chamber, she arrayed herself in her travelling cloak. Then having by Pierre discharged her reckoning, she descended to the post-chaise, which she had observed from her window at the door. To her annoyance the entrance to the hotel was encumbered by four officers of a foot regiment, and some of their impedimenta. They

had also been taking a morning draught, doubtless to wash away the remembrance of a night at cards, and were none of them completely sober. They made no effort to stand aside, and to Pierre's requests paid no heed.

"Messieurs! I wish to go to my carriage! Where is the innkeeper? Pierre, find him at once."

The officers laughed loudly. The Marquise coloured.

"That is our carriage, madame, and of course you're welcome to come with us. A pretty woman is always welcome!"

"Excuse me, gentlemen, I ordered that carriage last night."

"And we captured it this morning. Fortune of war, madame. We must onward to Turenne or get cashiered."

Pierre having found the host, once more appeared, in time to see one of the officers putting his arm round Nanette, who was beseeching him to leave her alone.

The host had in fact hidden himself in the wine-cellar, hoping that the situation would resolve itself. As for Dr Levani, he was nowhere to be seen.

The Marquise bade the host in her haughtiest tones open a passage for her to the chaise, and assist her to mount. The host protested that the officers had the power to insist on taking the chaise. He would do his best to procure another if she would only retire to her room and wait.

No one had ever dared to ask Marie Gabrielle de Lusignan de Polignac to wait. She waved the host aside, and, giving the officer who leant against the post in the doorway, half-sleeping, half-amused, a push which sent him to one side, managed to reach the chaise itself, closely followed by Pierre, who made the only display of personal valour he was ever known to show, for he faced about and waited the onset of the officers. The Marquise was already in the chaise. Pierre was thrust down, with his body dangerously close to the hind wheel. One officer had his hand upon the Marquise, intent on dragging her out again. Nanette was screaming vigorously, and the host stood on one side imploring every one

to be calm, when another figure, emerging with three strides from the doorway, caught the rash infantryman by the collar, administered a cuff upon his right eye that raised a very instant swelling, and flung him unceremoniously on the cobble-stones.

The three others drew their swords and rushed upon the intruder with one accord, steadied by the excitement that spurred them on.

The new-comer, with his back to the chaise door, drew his sword coolly and said—

“All three, gentlemen! Be it so!” And before they could get well into play he had disarmed the first, given the second a nasty point in his sword-hand, and drawn blood from the neck of the third.

“You should practise more! Honour is satisfied! Now go indoors! I am the Comte de Roubaix!”

The officers had heard of this justly celebrated swordsman, and retreated with what grace they could.

He turned and bowed to the Marquise.

The Marquise, flustered by her exertions and her narrow escape from personal injury, dismayed even more by this meteoric appearance of the Count, could only stammer out—

“I am infinitely obliged to you, Count. You have appeared quite miraculously.”

“And you, adorable Marquise? Are you still running away from the Red Neighbour or from me?”

“Monsieur le Comte! Will you be good enough to allow Pierre to get up and put my valises on the chaise? I wish to continue my journey.”

“It is still cold,” returned the unmoved Count; and beckoned to his lackey, who assisted the brave Pierre to make the remaining dispositions. Nanette also appeared, little the worse for her adventures, and the chaise drove off. The Count, however, having finished his cup of coffee, mounted his horse, and with his lackey soon overtook the Marquise, who was not at all well pleased when that handsome insolent face bent down and asked her whether she still cherished her animosity.

“Did you follow me, my lord, to ask the question?”

"I followed because I could not rest, madame, knowing you were set upon a perilous journey."

It was a gallant answer. And the Count prided himself upon knowing the exact answer that would please a woman. That it was true or not mattered nothing.

"But I thought, monsieur, that you had important duties which tied you to the War Office?"

"I found means to gain my freedom. I had the honour to arouse the jealousy of Monsieur de Louvois."

The Marquise betrayed no curiosity, she merely said—

"Yes! To a man of your personal advantages, that would be quite easy."

"You do me too much honour, Marquise."

"And how far do you purpose to honour me with your escort, Count? I ask you, because I intended to travel alone, and I still intend."

"To Châlons! There I shall order you an escort of dragoons who will take every care of you till you meet the Marquis de Polignac."

"Thank you. So long as I travel on the king's post-roads I am surely not in need of an escort."

"Madame! you do not understand that the nearer to the field of war you get the less the ordinary amenities of life are possible. The little incident from which I had the honour to extricate you might recur anywhere. It was a mistake not to travel as usual with servants, couriers, and so forth. You exposed yourself to a lack of consideration."

The Marquise felt somewhat humbled. The Count might have been her husband giving her a little lecture.

"If there are any cavalry at Châlons, I shall undoubtedly order you an escort: and I am equally sure that the Marquis de Polignac will thank me for it."

She gave a little toss. "You are very careful for my husband's happiness!"

The Count laughed. "Your greatest charm, Marie Gabrielle, after your beauty, is your innocence. I tell you again I love you. You cannot prevent it. Your name, therefore, which is your husband's, is sacred to me. As far as I am concerned I shall keep it so. That

is why I propose to leave you at Châlons and substitute an escort of dragoons. It is a great sacrifice I make to the honour of the house."

"I do not understand, Count," she said resentfully.

"Do you not, Mignonne?" he went on tenderly. "Did you ever hear me brag of my conquests? Mention a lady's name as if she had conferred a favour too many upon me?"

The Marquise made no answer. If her name was to be kept sacred, her ears were not. She began to think of Turenne, the man of whom she had been so jealous. He was incapable of this cool audacity of licence.

The Count went on, answering his own question—

"No! It is true I have a certain reputation. Who are the authors of it? Not I. It has always been the women themselves. There are so few that understand how precious a thing is a fine passion, finely conceived, and delicately nurtured!"

If the Marquise heard this last piece of effrontery, she made no reply, nor did she open her lips again till they alighted for dinner at Châlons.

There a delightful midday meal had been prepared in advance to the order of the Count's lackey, whom he had sent on, and was served in the open air under some spreading elms, the Count gay as ever, finding other topics which the exigencies of politeness induced her to join in. He trusted to time and persistence. In the meantime he was enjoying the lady's moods with the taste of a connoisseur.

CHAPTER XXI.

MONSIEUR BOCAL WISHES TO ASSIST THE MARQUISE.

In giving the Marquise so gallant a reason for his journey the Count de Roubaix intended her to infer that he was impelled by that sacred fire which "can only subsist in continual movement," by that "one and only kind of love" of which De la Rochefoucauld says "there are a thousand imitations." But the love by which in all things the gay Count was moved to action was of a more ordinary kind, and was very near kin to self-interest.

For once and only once have we seen, and then only by drawing aside the mysterious curtain that separates us from the solitude of great men, the Count showing signs of the mortal weakness of perturbation of spirit. Mere momentary vexation is pardonable, even in the gods who dwell on high, but perturbation is, except in the secret recesses of the chamber, denied to heroes.

It was when he discovered his lodgings had been rifled. For what? A packet of love-letters had been stolen, a packet wrapped in an old plan of the town of Nancy. He had feared for something else.

Even now he could not feel sure whether it was for the letters or for something else that veiled emissary had made her hurried but exceedingly well-timed search. Had it been for the letters he would either have heard of them at once or not at all, according to the motive of the purloiner. There was no answer in the fact that he had not heard of them. No jealous mistress had made a jest of them. The family of the fair Clotilde would naturally preserve silence.

The cause of his alarm was that remittances had stopped from Josef Kuhn. It was to meet Josef Kuhn he had set out for Châlons.

Not only was it to a gentleman of the Count's refined

but extravagant tastes an inconvenience, but taken in conjunction with the other fact it was a cause for alarm. Might, for example, the cut-and-dried De Louvois, the heaven-born Minister of War, have arrested the remittances on their way and incidentally learned something of the Count's transactions beyond the frontiers? Might he not have inspired the search in the Count's lodgings to discover more incriminating evidence? That it might be De Louvois and was not De Polignac, the Count's sensitive skill in reading attitudes of mind told him. De Louvois had acquired, perhaps inherited from the ancestral long-ropes, the habit of a fixed official demeanour, always near freezing-point, and susceptible of running down another ten degrees or so. It was difficult to judge, even for an accomplished skater like De Roubaix, who had learned the art in the Low Countries, whether the ice was very thin or only moderately thick. But the Marquis de Polignac was always himself, and could never profess a geniality he did not feel, any more than he could assume an icy exterior for official purposes, unless his immediate mood was stern and coldly judicial. The Count, as he had artfully boasted, had really aroused the jealousy of De Louvois by paying his court in no halting fashion to Madame du Fresnoy. He had again had a double aim, to gain leave of absence on an immediate mission to the frontiers, and to sound that astute lady, who was such a friend of the War Minister, as to the origin of the raid upon his lodgings.

The Count de Roubaix had in his veins an equal portion of Flemish and of French blood. His ancestral estate, the whole rental and residence of which he left to the enjoyment of his aged mother, contenting himself with mortgaging as far as he could his own reversion, lay near to the Flemish borders, and his early connections as well as his military life had led him into many associations with the enemy and developed his knowledge of four languages, Flemish, Dutch, German, and French, to the extent that it was easy for him to converse, if not to write, in any one of them—no uncommon accomplishment in years when campaign followed

campaign with monotonous repetition, with the same foes, the same leaders, and, but for the large wastage of sickness, almost the same men. Our wars have a habit of being injurious chiefly to the non-combatants.

With much practical knowledge gained in the field, his position in the office of the Minister of War naturally suggested to the self-seeker, "How shall I use what I know and what I have to advantage?"

The answer came in the shape of Joseph Kuhn, a lean dried-up German, white-haired and prematurely bent, who humbly solicited his interest to procure him a contract for army boots, a mere regiment or so.

De Roubaix was new to the inside of the War Office, but he had not been about the Court for a dozen years in the intervals of war without knowing that it was not the excellence of the goods supplied that procured a merchant a contract, but the precise amount of the bribe which the merchant furnished to the right pair of hands. Josef Kuhn had evidently taken him for a more important personage than he was. But De Roubaix was not the man to turn the beggar from the door if the beggar had anything in his wallet worth the taking. He had replied to Josef Kuhn in Flemish, a language difficult to acquire for any one but the native born. To his amazement Josef Kuhn replied with a strong German accent, Hanoverian probably, in good Flemish.

It came about that Joseph Kuhn got into the way of buying the hides of all animals slaughtered in the camp, which he sold to the tanners, and of selling boots first to one regiment, then another, till in his way Josef Kuhn drew a great deal of money from the king's treasury—not so much as Bocal, you understand, but a good sum all the same. And a handsome percentage went to the Count. It was the Count who suggested that he should buy all the horses that were rejected at the camp, alive as well as dead. And it was remarkable what a number were rejected. Whether it was that the air of camps did not agree with Monsieur Bocal's horses or for some other reason, it is certain that, out of a drove of twenty horses, the five or six sleekest almost always went off

after a few days of Monsieur Bocal's camp forage, and became listless and unfit for work.

Joseph Kuhn bought them and sold them outside to a Flemish dealer, indicated by the Count, who in turn fed them up and sold them to the Germans or the Dutch (he was not particular) at a fair price. It was a constant trade, and the Count had money as he had never had in his life before.

Sometimes in Paris, sometimes at some half-way place, Josef Kuhn met the Count and paid over whatever was due to him in bills on Paris bankers, which bore no names but those of the drawer and acceptor, and implicated no one.

If the Count had not been the Count he would have become rich. As to Joseph Kuhn—he was always the same penurious-looking shabby German, always full of respect for the Count, always punctual, always just able to make both ends meet.

Josef Kuhn was always in Châlons on a certain date in July. And the Count had grown anxious. Therefore he went to Châlons.

Some one else had gone to Châlons, the town which is built in a beautiful plain, and is divided by the winding Marne into town, isle, and fauxbourg—the town which has a presidial court and a bishop, a great mart for merchandise, and famous because Attila, King of the Huns, who was called the Flail of God, was put to the rout three leagues off by Meroé, King of the Franks.

That some one was Dr Levani, who, rising betimes, had seen De Roubaix and his valet ride up to the "Crown of Gold" at Epernay, and scenting mischief as a fox sniffs the hounds, had taken to cover and, when the hunt was passed, followed cautiously in the wake till the Marquise was housed at the sign of the "Bell" in the Rue des Tresoriers hard by the cathedral, and the Count had ensconced himself a stone's-throw off in the Rue de l'Arquebuse near the church of St Loup, in a meagre hostelry which ill accorded with his fashion. Dr Levani himself laid aside his black perruque of state, his gold-headed cane, his brown suit, and emerged in a suit which

may have belonged to Pietro, the Italian man-servant he had left behind in Paris.

To Levani's small tortuous mind it was plain that the meeting of the Marquise and De Roubaix at Epernay was the result of a preconcerted plan. De Roubaix was her lover. Levani rubbed his hands, for here was something discovered which would pay him better in blackmail than any exercise in Paris of the natural magic of Albertus Parvus, or of the secret to take away wrinkles, as it was aforesaid revealed by a Persian to a Greek lady of seventy-two years of age, who thenceforward looked no more than twenty-five.

It was a dangerous game to dog the footsteps of his former master; but it was worth while, and Levani had no scruples about lying down to be kicked.

The Count's first movement mystified him, for it was to the citadel, and suggested some military errand at the bottom. The Count came out accompanied by an officer, and both went to the inn where the Marquise was resting after her journey. Levani contrived to walk boldly into the inn-yard, and by pretending some inquiries after an imaginary master, passed in and out, learned the position of the guest-room, and took post outside the open windows on the low wooden balcony which ran round three sides of the courtyard.

It was a question, he concluded from the scraps which reached him, of an escort. This did not make him abandon his idea, but it aroused him to the necessity of keeping the Count in view still further. He could always follow the Marquise, especially if she rode with an escort.

The Count and the officer took their dinner, a joyous one, whereat wine flowed merrily, at an inn in the market-place. Levani took his in the inn kitchen. He could always accommodate himself. He even made friends with the Count's valet. He was not afraid of being recognised. He learned the day they left Paris, the route followed, the incidents of the journey, and the fight at the door of the "Golden Crown" at Epernay. He could make nothing of it. He spent a few livres of the sixty

he had won from the Marquise on this valet without result. Appearances were in favour of the Count's innocence, but Levani disbelieved in its existence and waited.

Presently the Count sent for the valet and instructed him to go out into the town and find if a German trader, one Joseph Kuhn, was to be found at any of the inns.

Obviously it was desirable to go with the lackey and find out who or what was Joseph Kuhn, whom the Count had come so far to see. They searched for an hour, but Joseph Kuhn was not in Châlons. The lackey, who had no interest, asked no questions but "Have you seen one Joseph Kuhn?" Levani asked a dozen, and gained a pretty accurate knowledge of Joseph Kuhn's personal appearance and occupation. He bought hides, it seemed.

They returned to the "Bell," and Levani once more took post by the windows. He heard the voice of the Marquise say, as if following up a protracted argument—

"No, Count! I am infinitely obliged to you, but I do not need an escort of cavalry. It is possible that I may be exposing myself needlessly to the insults of coarse ruffians in the king's uniform, but I shall always expect to find at least one gallant man to rescue me. I shall travel as I did before—alone."

"Madame la Marquise! said the Count quite pleasantly, "you shall do as you like; but you cannot prevent my friend Captain de Commercy, whom you saw just now, from sending a rear-guard! If you order the troopers to go back they will not obey you."

"Then," said the Marquise, in tones that showed her anger quite plainly, "you will incur my lasting displeasure! Who are you to dictate in what way I am to travel?"

"Madame! I am your lover. You cannot prevent that any more than you can a rear-guard."

"If I were to breathe a hint to my husband . . ."

"That is the unfortunate part of it," said the Count, with his most delightful air of the impossible. "You cannot! Because there might be a duel and . . ."

"Oh! . . ." said the Marquise, putting her fingers to her eyes, and then opening them again radiantly, added, "God would protect him!"

"It is possible, Marie Gabrielle, as you say. He might kill me,—more especially that I have so high a regard for him. But then I have a certain skill." He tapped his sword-hilt ominously. "A duel is a game for certain stakes. I always play to win."

The door opened suddenly and admitted the leonine head and shoulders of Monsieur Bocal!

"The Marquise de Polignac!"

The astonishment of all three was apparent.

"I am sorry to have intruded," said the army contractor, bowing low to the Marquise and stiffly to the Count. There is some subject of discussion. What game does the Count propose to win?"

"Monsieur Bocal! I am travelling to the frontier. The Count unexpectedly came up with me at Epernay, and escorted me so far. He now insists that for the remainder of the journey I should have an escort of cavalry. In what condition are the highways from here to Strassburg, or say to Nancy?"

Monsieur Bocal's face preserved the absolute immobility which long training had taught him.

"They are quite safe! There is no fear at all! I am going to Bar-le-Duc. If madame would honour my poor carriage, I start in half an hour!"

"Madame will not," said the Count. "It is not fitting for the Marquise to travel except in her own carriage, with a proper escort."

"Because I am an army contractor?" asked Bocal bitterly.

"I need not labour the point," said the Count.

"At all events I buy contracts," said Bocal pointedly. "I do not sell them to Josef Kuhn!"

"What is this, Monsieur Bocal?" the Marquise broke in, seeing that in some way the Count was nonplussed.

"Our friend here will explain what brings him to Châlons," said Bocal. "It is not my business. But I have not yet had your answer, madame. If you travel

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with Bocal, you travel fast and far and without annoyance."

"You travel too fast, Forage!" the Count retorted contemptuously. "I will escort the lady myself."

The Marquise did not like the way things were going and rang the bell.

"Tell my man to order a poste-chaise and horses at once! I am infinitely obliged to both of you gentlemen, but I cannot accept either offer."

As she left the room she turned to the Count and said in a low tone—

"I begin to see what a gulf there is between a lover like you and a husband like Gaston."

The Count bit his lip.

But all the same the Count's threat had lodged. She might tell her husband of the Count's gallantry in rescuing her from those odious officers at Epernay, but she would be forced to maintain silence on the subject of his persistent addresses. To tell of them was to provoke a duel, and a duel might end . . . ? No! There should be no duel. Free herself of the Count's importunities she would instanter—even by the instrumentality of Bocal. She would use her privilege of great lady and change her mind.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE YOUNG LADY WHO WAS LEFT BEHIND AT MEUDON.

Thérèse, who, if she was long was slim, had succeeded in squeezing her person through a window and between two iron bars which guarded it on the upper floor of the convent at Meudon, and resolutely let herself down to her full arms' stretch, her feet towards the garden,

still a couple of ells beneath her, and barely visible in the darkness which was breaking into dawn.

She let go, and was surprised to find that her fall was broken by some living thing, which gave with her weight, and tumbled her rather inelegantly on the ground. The living thing and she picked themselves up and gazed at one another in the semi-shadow of the wall. The living thing was a boy, not much if any taller than herself. Their surprise was equal.

"Who are you," she whispered eagerly, "and what do you want?"

"I am Giles de Beaupré. I have come to carry off Clotilde."

"Clotilde is fast asleep! Besides, she could not get through that window, and that is the easiest. I have measured them all. I am running away myself, so you had better help me to climb the garden wall. Then there is only the ditch, and I know where it is dry."

"So do I," said the boy. "I came over that way. Come!"

They both ran across the wet grass and clambered over the wall. They resumed their conversation on the other side of the ditch.

"What made you think of carrying off Clotilde? Why, she is quite grown up—seventeen at least—and you?" she measured him doubtfully with her eye, though with a certain degree of approval.

"Fifteen! But what of that when one is in love?"

"You are too young for Clotilde. She has had real lovers. That is why she was sent to Meudon!"

"I don't think you quite understand!" he said. "You see I love her, and it would not make any difference if she was even twenty. I shall soon be a man."

"It seems to me you are wasting time," said Thérèse. "How did you come to expect that Clotilde would be ready to run away?"

"I wrote to her!"

"How silly of you not to know that the nuns open all our letters! It is a pity to waste a really nice letter on Sister Angélique!"

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"I did not know," said Giles despondently. "What shall I do?"

"I cannot tell you what *you* should do. I know what *I* am going to do. I am Thérèse de Polignac (fancy you're not asking me my name!), and I am going to follow my mother, who has gone to find my father, who is with Monsieur Turenne."

"At the war?"

"Yes!"

"I should like to see Monsieur Turenne. Perhaps he would take me as a volunteer, and I might win glory, and come back for Clotilde."

"Who knows?" said Thérèse, who admired the spirit of adventure, but in her own way did not appraise her companion's chances at a high figure. He seemed to her to be too much of a dreamer.

"You are quite sure I could not hope to see Clotilde?"

"Not unless you called with your mother on a visiting day, and then not alone. One of the Sisters would be with her."

"Ah! That would be of very little use. You see, she hardly knows me as yet. Besides, my mother is dead."

"Decidedly," said Thérèse, "you had better come with me. I have a long way to go, and shall be glad of a companion. It is getting lighter."

"It is all one to me if I cannot see Clotilde," he sighed. "Which way do you want to go?"

"Towards Meaux!"

"Then if we walk towards the sunrise we cannot be wrong, and we can inquire."

As they walked towards the sunrise in great haste, for Thérèse was fully aware that the nuns rose at five and she would most assuredly be missed, and the hunt would begin without doors at six, she burst into a merry laugh.

"What makes you so merry?" asked the boy. "I do not feel at all merry. Every step I take is taking me farther from Clotilde, and why do you walk so fast? I am not very good at walking."

Thérèse took another good look at him, smiling still.

"I am thinking what fun it will be when Sister Angélique finds out I am really gone. She will look everywhere—in the cupboards, the pantries, even the water-butts, and she will talk, talk all the time and say prayers as she runs! So you are not very good at walking. Pray, Sir Giles, why?"

"I ride!"

"So they teach you riding! I also can ride. It seems to me that we must get horses somewhere if we are to make progress. Why, you are a perfect snail, Giles. Hurry!"

Giles trod along, the picture of dejection. He was full of Clotilde. Not a bad-looking boy, Thérèse noted. A cap with a single plume; really nice wavy, thick raven hair; a broad brow, and honest blue eyes; rather a short broad face, still round and boyish; a lace collar at the neck; good shoulders; a curve to his back, which his coat of velvet with laced sleeves set off very well; a silk waistcoat daintily embroidered; velvet breeches, again decked with lace; stockings to match, and well-cut buckled shoes, set off a very shapely pair of legs and small feet. She decided that he had a gentleman's carriage, and the little straight rapier at his waist made him quite a miniature cavalier.

"How did you get to Meudon?" she asked.

"On my pony, of course!" he replied. "To be sure! You have made me forget everything. Wait here, Thérèse! I must go back. We shall not lose anything, for he has a good broad back and can carry us both."

"How intensely stupid of you, Giles! Run as fast as you can. Fortunately we have not come very far."

Giles was off in a moment and showed Thérèse that he could really run very well: "towards Clotilde" she reflected. "Decidedly I shall have enough of Clotilde before I have done with him. I must endeavour to cure him. I hope he won't be long."

She took a little survey of herself and her equipment. Her dress was plain and not heavy. She had a little cloak with a hood to it, good stout shoes and a few little

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necessaries, and her money in a tiny valise. She could always buy what she needed, and after all it was not so very far to Strassburg. A matter of ten days with a good horse. She had no horse, but some one would lend her one. There are are no difficulties at fourteen but those of one's own making. Delightful age, fourteen, for a well-grown healthy girl, who is the daughter of a marquis!

"He rides like a cavalier!" was her exclamation as the pony made its appearance and she cast her critical eye upon it.

To do him justice Giles pulled up, doffed his cap, dismounted in the perfect fashion of the *manège*. He also looked less doleful.

"Now that is really delicious of you!" she said. "You have done it as you might have done it for Clotilde. Hold him a moment!"

She was in the saddle in an instant—astride. In another he was behind her, with one arm about her waist and the other hand holding the reins.

The morning air was cool. The sun was shining in real earnest. The birds had awakened.

"How good the world is!" said Thérèse. "Quicker! Quicker!"

It is generally the woman who wants to go quicker at the beginning of life.

They went famously. Passers-by called out, "Ohé! They are riding to school! those two!" Or "Are you looking for a priest?" It was nobody's business. They rode on. When they came to a steep hill they dismounted. Giles showed Thérèse that he knew the ways and needs of a horse perfectly, young as he was, and they had accomplished a great half of the way to Meaux before it even struck them that they must have a story to tell. But they soon made one up between them. Thérèse lived in Paris, and this was her cousin who lived just beyond Meaux. He had been in to fetch her to a *fête de famille*. It was some one's birthday. Her mother and father were coming in a post-chaise. They would reach home quite early in the afternoon.

They tried it at the inn where they stopped for déjeuner. The host and hostess believed it readily, especially as they evidently had money in their purses and were so well dressed.

Strange to say they even reached Meaux. But there they had to invent another story, and Giles had some scruples about telling any more. Thérèse had too, but being of a more practical turn she compounded with her favourite saint, by promising him a few more candles and many, many prayers, quite a number, if only she could put a few more leagues between herself and pursuit.

But Giles's pony and the early morning between them had quite deceived the pursuers. They were still searching the country round and sending messages to the Hotel de Polignac in Paris. The experience was quite new to the Mother Superior. Besides, how did she get out? "Don't tell me, my daughters, that Thérèse got through those bars. I know better!" However, she was in great distress about it all the same. She even forgot to give Clotilde her usual lecture on the sinfulness and futility of writing love-letters, when her parents would find her a fit husband without them. Clotilde wished they would make haste, for she found the convent very tedious, and after all the Count de Roubaix was immensely interesting.

At Meaux the runaways told the innkeeper's wife that they were going to a family festival, but omitted to say they came from Paris. Their father and mother were coming in an hour or two in a post-chaise, and she was riding with her brother for fun on the pony. The innkeeper's wife knew not what to make of it. But they were aristocrats. It was not her business.

CHAPTER XXIII.

TINTORIN ASSISTS THE RUNAWAYS.

"It's all very well," said the innkeeper's wife at Meaux to her spouse. "I don't believe a word of it."

"My soul! my angel!" said the innkeeper, "what does it signify? A boy and a girl ride here on a single pony—from the moon. Good! They order dinner, and they have money to pay. They try to get another pony with a side-saddle; it is more suitable, eh? Well! They will pay the hire!"

"Ah! Well! Have it your own way! Let them go!"

But the innkeeper knew of old time the futility of having his own way. Madame's demonstrations were so lifelong. He patted her on her broad shoulders.

"You have then a grand project in your head, my angel?"

"Oh! As to that," said his wife, pretending not to see his looks of admiration, "it is as plain as can be. The girl runs away from school. We keep her here until her friends search for her. We get our charges, it may be for a week, and a reward into the bargain. Which is the greater?"

"Splendid! And the boy?" asked the host.

"The boy? Well! We can pretend to keep him too, but he will have a separate room, and he will escape. Is it not so?"

The innkeeper had conducted his guests to a room on the upper floor, and it was at the door of this that he next presented himself, his wife behind him, and a sturdy waiter behind her.

Thérèse and Giles had made an excellent meal. They were proposing to go on till nightfall. They had no sense of fatigue.

"You will pardon us, mademoiselle and monsieur, but as you are so young, would it not be better to stay the

night here? Or till your friends come up with you?" Thus the host.

"Quite impossible!" said Thérèse with decision. "We must go on at once. They are expecting us!"

"Where, for example?" said the innkeeper. His wife nudged him and called him "stupid."

"You have no right to question us!" Giles interrupted, springing up impetuously. "Bring me the bill, if you please!"

"We have every right!" said the innkeeper's wife, brushing her husband aside. "We are parents ourselves, and we do not think it right for a young lady like you, mademoiselle, to be riding about the country without protection."

"I am infinitely obliged to you," said Thérèse, with a very good imitation of the Marquise. "My brother here is quite able to protect me as he has done so far."

"But what are your names? And the names of the friends to whom you are going?"

"You will excuse us," said Thérèse, "if we consider that that is our affair."

"You are very stupid people!" said Giles. "We are here to dine. We have dined, and there is a pistole to pay the bill. Be good enough to have our pony saddled."

"It is not enough!" said the innkeeper. "We shall have to give an account for you when your friends come after you. We had better detain you. That is what we propose to do."

Thérèse had visions of a post-chaise and two nuns arriving in an hour or two. Dismay crept over her face. She looked at Giles. Giles—threw down another pistole.

"Come! Is that enough? Now find that other pony and let us be off!" It was not a bad imitation of grown-up self-importance. But the innkeeper's wife knew she had struck the right nail.

"It is not money we want! It is a question of our duty to your parents. You must make up your minds to stay."

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"It is enough!" said Giles. "Stick close to me, Thérèse! Now forward!"

Drawing his small rapier, he ran towards the group in the doorway, closely followed by Thérèse. So sudden was the onset that the serving-man fell headlong down the stairs. The innkeeper made himself as small as possible. The innkeeper's wife flung her apron over Thérèse's head, and lifting her up bodily threw open a door, put her in, locked the door, and dropped the key into her apron-pocket. Giles, never doubting of his victory, found himself at the bottom of the stairs before he looked round for Thérèse. And when he did so, somebody, darkening the inn doorway, wrenched his rapier very neatly from his grasp.

"It was only in case you hurt somebody," said the stranger, a very tall lean man with a comical face and an extraordinarily loud voice.

Giles saw it was useless arguing with a man of this size. He was dressed besides in an outrageous costume, and behind him was a smaller thin man with tow-coloured hair and remarkably thin legs, dressed in a suit of bed-tick.

"Don't mind him!" said the tall man. "It is only the Marquis de Paillasse!"

Behind the Marquis de Paillasse was a string of the children of Meaux.

In the distance Giles heard Thérèse calling "Giles! Giles!"

Giles was on the point of going up again when the innkeeper descended, staring at the tall man in the fool's garments as he did so.

"I have nothing for you!" said the innkeeper, waving his hand.

"I did not expect anything, brother! What I came to ask was permission to set up my stage in your stable-yard and give a performance."

"Be good enough to release my sister!" said Giles with his haughtiest air.

"It is impossible, monsieur. Madame has assumed charge of her."

"Then I shall go to the mayor!"

The innkeeper shrugged his shoulders. "As monsieur wishes!"

Then he turned to the other.

"I will ask madame!"

As Giles strode off with an air of swaggering importance which only just kept back tears, the Marquis de Paillasse followed, copying his walk and gestures with great exactness. The children laughed, and Giles, turning round, saw them and flamed furiously red. Once he had turned a corner he reflected. It was useless to go to the mayor. He would ask a string of questions; Thérèse would be sent back to the convent. It was clearly his duty to rescue her, and equally clear that it could not be done before nightfall, so he walked about the streets of Meaux a little while and then came back to reconnoitre the inn. Of course he could go back there, profess that he had been too hasty, and would wait the arrival of friends, plotting how to release Thérèse. But this he was too proud to do. It should be a gallant rescue. Instinctively he clapped his hand to his sword. There was only the sheath at his side. It was mortifying in the extreme. Presently he heard a drum beating, and this was apparently unusual in Meaux, for people began to flock towards the inn. Giles fell in with them and sidled into the inn-yard, and so into the stable, where he found his pony. No one being there, he clambered into a loft and had a good view of the rough stage which was erected just below a window of the upper floor of the inn.

To his extreme joy he espied Thérèse peeping through the glass. If he could only catch her eye!

But for the present she was evidently caught by the antics of the tall lean man and of the so-called Marquis de Paillasse. They were acting a rough kind of farce in which most of the dialogue was bawled in an astounding voice by the tall lean man, and the merest obvious replies made by his companion, who appeared to be little more than half-witted. The good folks of Meaux gaped and roared at everything.

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And Giles found himself laughing loudly too. He was irresistible, was the long lean man in the fool's habit.

Presently Giles pricked up his ears, for he thought he heard a familiar name spoken.

"Who buys the poor man's wheat at starvation price, Marquis?"

"Monsieur Bocal!" said the half-wit, in the voice of one who replies by rote.

"Who mixes chalk with his flour for the king's army?"

"Monsieur Bocal."

The populace did not laugh at this. They looked at one another and said under their breaths, "That is true!"

"Who rules the good town of Meaux?"

"The mayor."

The long lean man chased the Marquis all round the stage, belabouring him with a bladder on a string.

"Oh! oh! oh! Monsieur Bocal!"

"Quite right. What does he rule it with, Paillasse?"

The zany scratched his tow-coloured locks.

"You don't know, Paillasse? Poor fellow! you're half-witted."

"With a bladder on a string!" was the answer.

The crowd laughed.

"My noble friend is quite right! Monsieur Bocal rules Meaux as I rule Paillasse, with a bladder on a string."

The people became silent.

"The bladder is called 'fear.' Behold! I prick the bladder thus." With which he drove a wooden dagger into it, and let the wind out.

"Is it time yet, Paillasse?"

Paillasse produced a watch nearly a foot in diameter, and studied it attentively.

"Not yet. We must collect a few more sous. In fact it wants about five minutes."

"By the 'Samaritaine' on the Pont Neuf?"

"My watch keeps good time!" said the zany proudly, and held it up. It had no hands.

"Any one who wants to buy the latest ballad, come to me!" shouted the long lean man. "For two sous! The very latest! The ballad of the Red Neighbour! For two sous!"

There was a curious movement in the crowd. To some the play with the watch had no meaning but pantomime. To others there came a look of stern determination, and these flocked to the stage to buy the ballads. To every one the long lean man managed to whisper two or three words, and presently, the show being over, the townspeople dispersed.

Giles had not lost his opportunity. With the boy's cleverness for movement he had slipped out of the stable, threaded the throng, and planted himself just below the stage. Then he whispered low and clearly, "Tintorin! Tintorin of the Pont Neuf!"

The fool came to the edge of the staging. "Yes, little master?"

"You see the window behind you?"

"I can't see it if it's behind me!"

"Get my sister out and hide her."

"Oh, ho! Is that it?"

"The innkeeper has imprisoned her. She is daughter of the Marquis de Polignac."

"Slip under the stage then."

The boy did as he was bidden. In a moment the fool balanced himself on the drum and peered in at the window. A gesture of silence. The window opened and Thérèse let herself fall into his arms, and joined Giles beneath the staging. Paillasse was sitting on the edge sucking his fingers, the picture of inanity.

The long lean man pulled up a hooded cart from a corner of the yard, and proceeded with the help of Paillasse to pull down the staging, and in the course of this he first detached a strip of painted cloth, which formed his one and only background, let it fall below, threw it over Thérèse, and, picking her up as if the weight was nothing, placed it and her in the cart, whistling and calling Paillasse all the time. The boy seized his opportunity and got in too without being

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noticed, for all the servants, as well as the innkeeper and his wife, were busy serving the people whom the play of the mountebanks had made thirsty.

They lay down in the bottom of the cart, while the two men loaded it with their few planks and poles, the drum, and other paraphernalia.

The long lean man put his head in at the inn door and said, "Many thanks, brother, for your hospitality. Till we meet again."

And the cart passed slowly down the street to a very humble hostelry at the town-end, where the horse was taken out, and the cart left carelessly out beside the road.

"Presently," said the fool, "the innkeeper will raise the cry after you and he will follow us. Stay where you are. I shall be within hearing and come out. When they have questioned me, do you, little master, steal back to the stable and get your pony. They will not be thinking of you, for they will be sure you are hidden away in the town. They will never look into the cart, since we leave it carelessly before their eyes. Lie still now, like good children. It will not be long."

It was very long though, quite an hour, which is as good as two when you are lying prone in a cart on a very thin layer of straw, but they could talk in whispers and it was undeniably exciting.

"You behaved very well indeed, Giles!" said the girl, who considered it her place and duty to approve or criticise the action of the prentice cavalier she had enlisted. "I should have been dreadfully disappointed in you if you had not shown yourself brave."

Even Clotilde could not have said more. But the idea of the still more lengthy Clotilde lying on her face in a rather mouldy-smelling cart was more than he could imagine. He contented himself by saying—

"I should have preferred to have done it all by myself!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

ABOUT CLOTILDE'S LOVE-LETTERS.

The runaways, thanks to the droll of the Pont Neuf, who had so great a dislike to Monsieur Bocal, escaped from Meaux in the early morning, and once more mounted their pony, the poorer by two pistoles. Tintorin made no effort to detain them. He pointed out the way by Ferté sous Jouarre and Montmirail. He was going the same way, at a more leisurely pace, for his cart with its load of planks and other belongings had but one horse, an animal as lean as its master. He evidently had other business than looking after two children. At leaving he took Giles aside and presented him with his sword and an admonition.

"A sword, young master, is a good thing in a battle, an indifferent toy in a fencing-school, and wellnigh useless to a man anywhere else, for a good cudgel is less likely to snap. To a boy it is nothing but an ornament, however well he can use it. Therefore draw it not, unless a woman's honour is at stake, and then do not hesitate, use it to kill, and complain not if you be killed also. You will live among the saints."

More secure from pursuit, they travelled at a more leisured pace through Ferté sous Jouarre and on to Montmirail. Perhaps the pony had something to say in the matter, as he had all the work to do. Despite his broad back and stout legs the burden was irksome, and thirteen leagues no mean day's work. Certain it is that it was in the late afternoon that they entered Montmirail.

Grown wiser by experience, Giles went first and stabled his horse at the first inn that possessed a stable. Then, having waited for Thérèse, they both climbed up the main street to the "Green Gallant," and in a matter-of-fact way ordered lodgings for the night. Thérèse was careful to choose bedchambers with windows to the front

of the house and on the upper floor (she felt that she was getting accustomed to escape by the window). She also saw that Giles was within easy call. As a result nothing happened. But the evening being fine and supper over, the boy and girl wandered out along the meadows by the Little Morin and began to exchange those candid confidences of youth, like to which there is nothing in after life.

"I have neither father nor mother," Giles was saying. "They died before I was old enough to remember. The Chevalier de Beaupré, who has no children, adopted me. Why, I cannot tell! It was not out of charity, because he has told me often that when I become a man there is a fine estate waiting for me, and more money than I shall need."

"Are they good to you, the De Beauprés?"

"They are both the very soul of goodness. I get Savoy cake with almonds, or feuillantines of franchipane, almost every day." He sighed.

"You do not seem very happy, nevertheless. Is it on account of Clotilde?"

Giles blushed. "Just then, would you believe it, I was not thinking of Clotilde."

Thérèse was secretly glad. She was as jealous of Clotilde as if she had been twenty.

"Of what then are you thinking that makes you sad?"

"That I do not know who my parents were, what arms they bore, who their parents were, and what battles my father or my grandfather fought in. Of course they must have belonged to a less noble or less ancient family than the De Beauprés, or why should I not have my own coat-of-arms instead of theirs?"

"They will tell you some day," said Thérèse. "Grown-up people are very stupid. They are always telling one — 'Wait till you are a woman,' or 'You will know better some day.' But I should not be sad if I were you. If the De Beauprés have adopted you and made you their son, what matters? You can do as noble things as Giles De Beaupré as if you were plain Giles Bocal, for instance."

"Why do you recall his name, Thérèse? Do you know him?"

"I have seen him and heard my father speak of him."

"It is very singular that to-day that droll Tintorin of the Pont Neuf who came to Meaux . . ."

"How did you know his name?"

"That shows you know very little of Paris!" said Giles with a superior air. "You can see him any day on the Pont Neuf, selling ballads and acting on his little stage, and hear him bawling with that loud voice of his. Every one knows Tintorin."

"What brought him to Meaux?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he wanted a summer holiday: the river smells bad in summer! But after his play yesterday he was making ugly jests about Monsieur Bocal, and some of the people seemed to be glad and to understand something."

"But what does it matter?"

"It matters that Monsieur Bocal, though every one knows he is a great army contractor and very rich, has risen from the people by his own merits, and he is a great friend of the Chevalier de Beaupré. Every now and again he comes, and when he sees me he says—'Eh, Giles—Monsieur Giles,—how goes the riding-school, or the salle d'armes?' And when I show him what I can do, he looks pleased as possible, and claps me on the shoulder crying—'Famous! The Chevalier will make a gentleman of you, I can see!' He will often give me a present too."

"But how can the Chevalier make you, what you are already, a gentleman?" asked Thérèse. "He is not very well-bred this Monsieur Bocal."

"No! That is evident in many things. But he has a good heart, or why should he be interested in my doings?"

"That is true," said Thérèse; "and it was very wicked of Tintorin to pretend otherwise. But if you really wish it I will ask papa to find out who your parents were. He knows everything."

"No, no, dear Thérèse! That would not be perfect

courtesy towards the Chevalier. It must come from him or no one. I have told you how I feel, but there is no one else who could sympathise with me . . .”

“Except, of course, Clotilde?”

“Ah! Clotilde! I think she would if I could have her all to myself as I have you!”

“It is a pity you did not bring her with you as well!” said Thérèse maliciously.

But the boy did not see the malice.

“Yes! But then why should I have come with you? We could not all three have sat on the pony!”

Thérèse laughed at his matter-of-fact reply.

“Tell me how you came to know Clotilde!”

“It was curious. I was riding along the Rue de la Coustellerie, where the houses are very high, four, five, six storeys, when a packet came flying out of a top window and fell just in front of my horse's nose. He started and nearly threw me. But I checked him and dismounted. It was a little packet of love-letters, all signed Clotilde, nothing more, and as they came to me in this singular way I picked them up and took them home and read them in my chamber. They were beautiful letters, full of grace and sweetness, pouring out her heart. There was no name to show to whom they were addressed. And for a little while I tried to fancy—I succeeded in making myself believe—that they were meant for me. They were just such letters as the romances would lead us to think some of the great ladies of old wrote to their lovers. I learned them almost by heart. Then I thought that they could not be meant for me, as no one like that would live in a top floor of the Rue de la Coustellerie. They had been stolen. I listened for talk of any Clotilde amongst my acquaintance, till one day the Chevalier mentioned that some young lady was to be sent to Meudon because of a love affair that was not desirable to continue. I asked who she was—and the Chevalier, without thinking, said, ‘Who? Mademoiselle Clotilde!’ I blushed furiously.

“‘Do you know her?’ asked the Chevalier.

“‘Not in the least! Clotilde what?’

“Clotilde de Lys! Then what made you blush?”

“I said I was angry that they should put a young lady in a convent for a love affair.

“They all laughed at me, and called me Clotilde’s lover for quite a day or two to tease me. But it really pleased me, and I determined to find Clotilde and give her back her letters.”

“It is like a romance!” said Thérèse breathlessly.

“I could not sleep for thinking of it. First of all I thought of going boldly to her parents’ house and saying, ‘Madame de Beaupré’s compliments, and she sends a message for Mademoiselle Clotilde. May I see her?’ Then I thought her mother might intercept me and say—‘What is it?’ I thought and thought. I watched the house, and one day I saw her come out, more beautiful than I had ever dreamed. But she was well guarded by an old nurse and a stern-looking valet. They went to walk in the Tuileries gardens, and I followed them to the main avenue, where, however, the people pressed about her to see her, because she was so beautiful; so much so that my blood boiled at their rudeness. At last she went down a side-walk, and sat down near a fountain. I crept beneath the shrubs that formed the background to the seat. The valet and nurse were walking to and fro, and sitting always a little way off.

“I whispered,—‘Clotilde! Do not look round!’ She had a little book upon her lap. ‘Pretend to go on reading.’

“‘Who are you?’

“‘Giles de Beaupré.’

“‘Yes! My parents know the Chevalier de Beaupré. Why do you not come out and salute me?’

“‘Is it safe for you?’

“‘Safe enough! They are sending me to a convent next week in any case.’

“‘I have something for you. I can drop it at your feet behind you. It is a packet of letters.’

“‘Oh, monsieur! My letters?’

“‘Yes!’

"She picked them up quietly and placed them in a safe hiding.

"Have you read them, monsieur?"

"I have," I stammered; "they came to me from heaven, and I have read them till I love you."

"You are a boy, or at least very young. I know by your voice. If you were not, I should scold you. You should have known they were not for you!"

"I tried to believe they were! Then I vowed to find you!"

"It was a miracle, monsieur. I was very unhappy about them; now I can burn them."

"Burn them!" I cried. "Such beautiful outpourings of love! What a cruel fate for them!"

"They cannot feel—those letters! It is I who can feel, and you also it seems."

"I!" I said; "I would do anything for you."

"You are very courageous and noble, and full of chivalry," she said. "But come out and salute me."

"It was very easy talking to her from the bush. I had never felt like that before, you understand."

"To be quite candid, dear Giles," said Thérèse, "I do not in the least know how you felt, especially about Clotilde, who is very ordinary, but doubtless it will come to me too when I am a woman. But do go on, don't you see how interested I am?"

"But I knew that if I came out I should not be able to say a word properly to her face."

"And only Clotilde! How droll you are! Why, I would say anything to her that came into my mind!"

"It is all very well for you to say 'only Clotilde.' I felt as if my knees must give way, I tell you. But I thought, 'If she does not see me, I can never make her love me.' So I went back and brushed the dust off my clothes, and walked slowly round, and then, pretending to have come upon her suddenly, I bowed, and she said quite loudly—

"Oh! Monsieur de Beaupré—how do you do?" And then she said, making me stand just in front of her, 'You have done me a great service, Giles. When you

grow up you shall be my true knight!' And then her eyes filled with tears, and she gave me her hand to kiss. I felt much more courageous then, and said, 'That will be in three years! It is a long time, but I can already ride the great horse and fence very well. Do you think you can love me all that time?' Clotilde smiled and said, 'I shall never, never forget you, or what you have done for me, and when I need a champion I shall send you a message, and you will come. Yes! I look into your eyes and they are true and faithful.'

"Yes!" said Thérèse, "she is full of that kind of talk: she is very romantic is Clotilde."

"She is divinely beautiful!" said the boy with enthusiasm, "and after that I could not help thinking of her, and when she had gone to Meudon I could not rest till I wrote to her."

"And did you find out to whom she wrote those letters?"

"Yes! She did not tell me, but I am quite sure, because I asked the Chevalier de Beaupré, and he told me it was the Comte de Roubaix."

"The Comte de Roubaix! I know him quite well," said Thérèse. "He is a great fop, very handsome all the same, and he pays many compliments to mamma."

"Do not let us speak of him!" said the boy. "When I am old enough I shall certainly challenge him to a duel!"

"Clotilde has great reason to be proud of you!" said Thérèse, looking at him and speaking in her direct frank way. "But she is too old for you, you know, Giles."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MOTHER SUPERIOR PURSUES.

The host of the "Vert Galant" of Montmirail had procured a pony and side-saddle, and a long cloak of his wife's, which answered the purpose of a habit, so that Mademoiselle Thérèse presented quite a dignified figure as she started with her cavalier in the fresh morning. They were to send the pony back from Châlons in charge of the driver of an empty post-chaise, which they would find at the "Bell."

It was true, much of her golden hair was hidden by her hood, but it was so abundant that little rills of it escaped on either side of her temples, and a great mass of it crowned her forehead, from which the hood fell back. She was desirous of showing Giles that she too could sit a horse in her own fashion, as he in his. Being besides much given to teasing, she played him, who was of a more sedate disposition, as became a youth who had already experienced his first love affair, many a prank, setting her pony to a gallop when Giles was sunk in a reverie, and other provocations. The new freedom had got into her blood, and having no serious subject of contemplation such as his, she gave the rein to her madcap mood.

Giles was now and again spurred into some emulation, but mostly he adjured her to save her beast all she could, seeing that they had a matter of sixteen or seventeen leagues to travel.

Nor did they escape the delays incident to a much-travelled road, though no one offered them any rudeness. When they were thirsty they dismounted and plucked the ripening grapes in the vineyards that spread about them on both sides. When they were hungry they got a slice of rye bread at a cottage. So they reached Vertus, which is a little more than half-way. There they had dinner in a little orchard behind

the inn, and they had but just mounted again when a post-chaise drew up.

A man alighted and ran in, Thérèse gave a careless glance at the carriage, but in a flash her expression changed to one of dismay. Giles saw it, leaned to his saddle, and without a word they urged their ponies to a gallop, which astonished those mettlesome animals very much after their forenoon journey.

The first corner they turned, and it was a long half-mile before they were out of sight of Vertus, Thérèse gasped out—

“It was certainly Sister Angélique and the Mother Superior. What a narrow escape!”

“We are not yet out of reach,” said Giles. “We must not ride like this or our ponies will give up. They have a chaise and four people to carry. They have two horses—who are perhaps tired also; whereas our ponies have had a good rest. Let us then keep up a steady trot and have something in hand when the pursuit waxes hot.”

Thérèse’s madcap mood had evaporated with that one glance that had revealed the nuns.

“If they had seen me and ordered me to get down, I must have done so,” she said. “I could not disobey them.”

Giles laughed. “It seems to me there is no great difference between disobeying them and running away.”

But Giles did not understand the subtleties of a girl’s conscience.

“I am not supposed to know that they are pursuing us,” she said. “I ran away, which was wrong, but I ran away from a good motive, to go to my parents. But if they caught me and ordered me to go back that would be direct disobedience.”

“It seems to me we might as well go back at once,” said Giles.

“No! no!” said Thérèse. “Let them follow. If I am to be caught I am to be caught, and that is pure fate. I can’t help it. But I have no intention of being caught.”

So off they went again, making the dust fly and their ponies' sides run with the perspiration.

It was useless trying to listen for the pursuers. There were other horses and carriages and waggons on the road.

"If we can only reach the top of that hill," said Giles, "we can see behind us a long way." So they urged their steeds up a long, white, dusty hill and looked back.

Their worst fears were realised. A post-chaise was certainly following at a good pace. It had one brown and one grey horse, and it might be a mile behind them. It was difficult to say in that bright dancing air.

Thérèse looked to Giles for guidance. Giles answered her expectant glances.

"We must get off and lead our ponies in among the vines till we find a hollow where we cannot be seen from the road, and wait till we can discover another road, or they go back."

No sooner said than done. They were off in a moment. Thérèse's long cloak being now an impediment, she unpinned it and threw it across her saddle. Then they crunched up the sloping hillside over the stony soil of the vineyards, becoming more and more conspicuous every yard they took. Never was a vineyard so sadly deficient in hollows.

"Never mind," said Giles. "We must reach the ridge." And they did, but not before a man, who was the sole traveller, and for better observation sat on the box of the carriage beside the driver, noticed the figures of the ponies and their riders standing out in bold relief against the sky.

He jumped down, bade the driver go on very slowly and halt a little way farther on till he signalled, and then proceeded to ascend the vineyard, crouching as he went and by a devious route. But at length he peered over the ridge and saw below him the quarry he was stalking.

He muttered an oath of satisfaction. Creeping still nearer, his intention was to spring upon them and, having

rendered the boy incapable of attack, to carry off Thérèse the best way he could.

The boy's ears were quick, however, and he faced round upon the pursuer, saying, "Fly, Thérèse. Take your pony! I will stop this ruffian!" But leave Giles to his fate she could not.

Giles rushed at the man with his riding-whip, but the man with his bullet head down bore him to the ground with one shrewd blow of his brawny fist on the shoulder. Then drawing a piece of rope from his pocket he proceeded to truss him up with the whip under his arms, and tie his feet together, not heeding the blows which Thérèse showered upon his face with her little fists.

"That will do for you!" he said, getting up and looking at the writhing and impotent lad. "And now, mademoiselle! The Mother Superior waits for you down below in the road! Please come with me."

Thérèse drew herself up stiffly.

"No! I shall not! Release my friend Giles and I will come quietly."

"If the young gentleman gives me his word not to interfere again."

"Not I," said Giles stoutly, trying all the while to get his legs free.

"Then you will have to carry me!" she said.

For answer the man caught her by the wrists, drew them together and tied them also with a handkerchief. Then he led her to her pony. She was too little accustomed to personal indignity to make resistance, and he lifted her to the saddle and turned the pony's head towards the ridge, and by a slow stumbling journey reached the road, where he whistled for the carriage.

When it arrived and she found no Mother Superior she was stupefied with anger. She had reckoned on that lady sending the man back to release Giles.

But tears, anger, protestations were nought. The man bundled her in, got in himself, and bade the driver drive on to Châlons as fast as he could.

Thérèse stormed and wept and implored, but this

sullen abductor made no answer, and she crouched in her corner of the carriage meditating impossible schemes of escape. She could give no guess at the reason of the treatment. When she threatened him with all the punishments which her father, the Marquis de Polignac, would inflict, he grinned but said nothing. Then she gave herself up to wondering what Giles would do, and to vain regrets that she had brought him into this pass of trouble. Incidentally she blamed Clotilde de Lys also, whose fatal beauty, invisible to Thérèse's eyes, but apparently blinding to Giles, had led him at so inopportune a moment to the convent of Meudon.

Giles was not lying on a bed of roses, nor is a vineyard, full of poetical associations as it is, the most comfortable of places to repose in when a hot sun has been pouring its rays upon the arid earth for a long summer's day. Giles thought of his sword, and by wriggling managed to persuade it from its sheath. Having done this he got it in his two hands, and using it in a most uncomfortable way behind his back, sawed his way through the thin rope that bound his feet. To release his arms was a much more difficult task, but even this, with the aid of his feet, was accomplished. Giles was persevering, but he was very hot and dusty before, after an almost infinite series of struggles, he broke the bonds and stood once more free. He was glad that Clotilde had not seen him in the bitter hour of discomfiture, and having restored his appearance to something more resembling order, he caught his pony and walked it down to the road.

It must have been nearly two hours after his loss of Thérèse, and the plain course was to go back. His journey eastward was ended. The nuns, he said to himself, were by this time on their way to Montmirail and pursuit was useless, as Thérèse would be overcome by the severe lectures she had doubtless already experienced and decline to make another attempt.

But still anxious to verify the truth, bitter though it was, he asked at least half a dozen waggoners whether a carriage drawn by a brown and a grey horse, and

occupied by two nuns and a young girl, had passed them on the road to Montmirail.

One and all answered "No!" and finally, to make assurance sure, he hailed the driver of a post-chaise and was beginning to ask him whether he had seen the brown and the grey horses, when the red face of a stout nun protruded from the window to inquire the reason of the halt, and Giles recognised the very two nuns he supposed to be travelling in the opposite direction, and there was no Thérèse.

The Mother Superior, in response to his polite salute, began to ask him in his turn whether he had seen a post-chaise drawn by a brown and a grey horse with a man and a young girl in it, whom she described minutely. She evidently did not recognise Giles.

Giles was confounded. The man had then deceived both the nuns and himself, and carried off Thérèse in the direction of Châlons. He therefore had to choose between taking the nuns into his confidence or simply answering the question. He resolved to do the latter.

To his short reply they tendered their thanks, and much agitated they bade the driver hasten onwards to Châlons.

They were soon out of sight, and Giles once more turned his pony's head in the direction of the mysterious haven, or whatever it should prove, whither Thérèse had been taken.

The sense of an imperious duty was upon Giles. He would reach Châlons come what might and find Thérèse. It was a long ride yet, but he hoped to achieve it by nightfall, though his own bruises and soreness craved for repose.

He entered Châlons then dropping with fatigue, and sought the shelter of the "Fox" inn as the bells of St Alpin proclaimed nine o'clock and the last hour of twilight. Feeling incapable of more continued effort, he made a hasty meal, and going to his room dropped off to sleep, clothed as he was, a sleep which lasted till well past daybreak. He awoke with a great self-reproach assailing him, and having shaken out the dust from his

clothes, washed and dressed himself, he crept downstairs, to be greeted by the early-rising ostlers who were already making a rough breakfast in the kitchen. Eager to learn what he could, he asked question after question about the post-chaise, but they could tell him nothing. For a small *pourboire* one of them volunteered to go with him to all the other inns and make inquiries for him. This, as being some satisfaction to his restlessness, he assented to, and they set out.

At the fifth or sixth inn they learned that the post-chaise and horses were there: that the man, whom they recognised as one of Monsieur Bocal's agents, had arrived alone and had gone they knew not whither. Giles was again at fault, sent the ostler back, and perambulated the city from end to end north and east and south and west. Giles was finding his pilgrimage a heavy one.

It was fated that before his search went further he should chance upon that debonair nobleman the Comte de Roubaix.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TOWER IN CHÂLONS.

The Count de Roubaix and Monsieur Giles de Beaupré were mutually unacquainted. Giles knew the Count only by hearsay, and that of the slightest, save in the matter of Clotilde de Lys, and that roused the boy's hot jealousy. What he saw was a handsome officer, whom, on the strength of the uniform of his Majesty, which he longed to don, he invested with all the heroic and most of the modern virtues. And the officer was out early. Was it possible that he might have seen something of the lost lamb? Giles was youthful and naturally confiding. The Count looked good-tempered, and he looked

at Giles, for something in Giles' features brought to his memory some other's—whose?

"You are out early, young sir? And you look very distressed? Can I offer you any assistance?" The Count had not yet found Kuhn, and did not like to leave Châlons. This was the second day after the departure of the Marquise Marie Gabrielle in the coach of that coarse-grained person, whom the Count nicknamed "Forage." He himself was dying to follow, equally dying to see Kuhn, and equally quite ready for any adventure that would pass the time.

Giles returned his formal military salute with great precision. "You are very obliging, sir. I am looking for a rascal who is, I hear, a servant of Monsieur Bocal, the great army contractor. He has carried off the daughter of the Marquis de Polignac . . ."

"You don't mean Mademoiselle Thérèse?"

"How fortunate!" Giles exclaimed. "You know her?"

"Of course! And the Marquis and the Marquise! Come, my friend, what is it you tell me? Some rascal of Bocal's has carried her off?"

"Yes! By force! He knocked me down first, and bound me. I managed to escape. He had two hours start and fresher horses. He is somewhere in Châlons, and has hidden her."

"A hostage!" he muttered.

"I beg your pardon?" said Giles.

"You are quite a cavalier! You were perhaps conducting the young lady and the young lady's governess; . . . stay, I thought she was at Meudon?"

Giles blushed and stammered. He was not prepared to take the stranger, though he was so friendly, entirely into his confidence.

"Excuse me . . ."

"You misunderstand me. I was not seeking to pry into the circumstances. You were knight-errant, shall I say?"

"She was journeying to her father, who is with Marshal Turenne. This man attacked us on the road and carried her off"

"Did he know who she was?"

"Unfortunately, yes. He must have done it in the hope of a reward!"

"Quite so! An excellent idea. And you are trying to find her in Châlons! That should not be difficult, if we join forces. Suppose we begin by having a cup of chocolate."

They went into the nearest inn and discussed the situation. Giles was charmed at once with the Count's bonhomie and his quick mind.

"Think my friend, a moment! He arrived before dusk and put up his post-chaise. He arrived alone. Why?" He answered his own question—

"Because he could not have carried her into any respectable inn without some one hearing her cries and asking a thousand questions!"

"Then he must have left her on the outskirts of the town somewhere!"

"Admirable! You guess my thought at once."

"But the driver! There is the driver!"

"Ah! I had forgotten the driver." This was the very politeness of duplicity. "He must have sent him somewhere on an errand. Depend upon it the driver was either too drunk to notice, in which case he is still asleep on the straw somewhere, or our friend managed to give the thing an air of correctness, put her in charge of some old woman of respectable appearance, but always on the outskirts of the town, where there are not too many neighbours."

"Could you not order out a troop of soldiers to make a search?"

The Count smiled. "That would create too much commotion. It is not desirable. No! We must do it ourselves, and as quickly as possible. Come! We can think as we go along."

"The driver," thought the Count, "has been sent on to inform old Forage. In the meantime *he* knows nothing of it. Suppose that I take the young lady into my charge, while *he* supposes she is immured at Châlons, I shall hold a card or two to play against

his. I wanted a strong card. And who in Heaven's name is this boy who has started so early in his life as a squire of dames?"

They had nearly reached the gate of the town that opens upon the road to the west when the Count stopped.

"It seems to me you had better give me a close description of this fellow, and leave me to hunt for him. As he does not know me, I am not so likely to scare him away. I can follow him or get him followed. Do you stay in this quarter of the town and examine all the houses as closely as you can! Make no inquiries about Thérèse, but ask a few honest people if they happened to see a post-chaise stop hereabout last night. Then we will meet for dinner at the "Cloche d'or" by the Cathedral at one o'clock and pour our winnings out."

Giles agreed to the proposal. His chance of finding Thérèse appeared to be doubled. He gave the Count a very full description of the ruffian, who had taken so much trouble to pinion him, and, having wished the other success, each started on his appointed task. The Count began by finding his valet and despatching him to one quarter of the town while he explored another.

Giles passed between the Hotel Dieu and the Cathedral out at the gate of the town, and began to pick his way through the sparse and not very odorous faubourg that had grown up along the banks of and beyond the Marne. Streets of irregular design straggled out left and right whither they would,—some merely blind alleys, others eventually finding an outlet into the highroad again. Along the highroad, which Giles first explored to the very last house, a small inn of seemingly two rooms, standing up narrow and stark as if it had intended to go farther out and been arrested by the town watch, the houses were for the most part small cottages of recent date, open to the passer-by, and containing no space which

one could not measure with the eye. But amidst the congeries of buildings which formed the side streets were groups of much older buildings, dark and grimed, discoloured with damp, overgrown in places, where the stone or mortar had been wasted, with tufts of vegetation, their seemingly limitless roofs sloping steeply to the sky, three semi-storeys of roof above three storeys of stone walls. At their knees crouched the little roofs of smaller buildings of a different age. Here and there a tower stood up, finished with a short pointed cap, buttressing something which had been castle or church or monastery, and abandoned by its former owners and its ancient dignity, to become a heterogeneous caravanserai for very dubious tenants. Giles' heart sank when he looked up at these, and scrutinised with his boyish and, it is to be confessed, fastidious eyes the ill-kept windows, out of which hung old rags to dry, or frowsy unkempt women and foul-featured men in the very idleness of the unclassed poor, who exist, as the very rats, on the garbage they can pick up, or on the better fare they can, if more industrious, pilfer.

If Thérèse were in one of these? Giles shuddered. If Thérèse were in one of these she must be got out, and that soon.

A pail of dirty water, emptied carelessly from an upper window, without as much as a "Gare l'eau," and splashing him as it fell, admonished him not to loiter, but to move quickly as if on business, for his attire in such a quarter drew a hundred covetous eyes, which measured the chances of stripping him in an obscure corner of one of the passages hereabout, in which reigned a perpetual twilight.

It was long before he made his first inquiry, because it was difficult to find any one who looked sufficiently honest; but at last he stopped at the open shop of a cobbler, and addressed him very politely with a question or two. The cobbler stared, but answered frankly enough that no carriage had passed his door. The

cobbler had a boy, however, and, drawing Giles within his shop, sent him out to pick up the traces of the post-chaise.

"It is a bad quarter, but one must live where one can make one's bread," said the cobbler. "It is not safe for honest folk after sunset." Giles said little, full of his new prudence and of his natural shyness, but still contrived to pass the time in affable converse with the cobbler, chiefly on the subject broached by the latter, to wit, the cost of boots in Paris.

In half an hour the cobbler's boy returned, after an exhaustive study of the subject with his fellow-wits of the quarter.

A post-chaise had drawn up at the Tower of St Martin in the Rue des deux Licornes, and almost immediately had driven off. No one had seen who alighted or mounted. The boy would show him the place.

It was two streets off. The street led out of the high-road, and after executing an irregular bow, found its other end near the bridge which led across the Marne to the gate of the town. The tower of St Martin was square and massive, capped by a little turret. There were three storeys, in each of which was a pointed arched window before one reached a turret. The windows themselves were rough casements, wanting most of their glass, and presenting a patchwork of rags and papers. Uninviting women, as ragged as the windows, peered out, holding their tattered bodices to their yellow necks. The doorway below, once finely carved, was worn and begrimed, and apparently led into a squalid dwelling through which the denizens of the upper floors had to pass. Beside the tower stood a building of ecclesiastical appearance, used as a store for hay, and crammed to the door. The whole had once been a church.

So much Giles took in as he passed by on the other side, and having given his guide a whole livre, which set him off with one hand in his pocket and a face full of the most profound wonderment, he went on a few more yards, hesitating what course to pursue.

The obvious plan was to return with all speed to the "Cloche d'or" and confer with the Count. It wanted, however, still half an hour of the time, and Giles, willing to take in all the features of the place, kept approaching it first from one direction and then the opposite, trying to look unconcerned in this spot to which no one came without concern, and scanning it from the point of its cap to its maltreated archway.

In the turret was a single window, a deep slit in the thick wall. If glass there was, it was invisible. An iron bar divided it, though for what purpose it was hard to guess.

The sun caught the turret and, as Giles gazed, a splash of gold seemed to issue for a moment from the slit, cleft into two rays. It disappeared. Giles watched, riveted to the spot. Was it a celestial sign to him? It was repeated. He felt assured it was. He crossed himself, and said an Ave Maria. His eyes gained a clearer vision. It was surely a girl's long hair that hung for a moment or two from the window. The tresses were withdrawn. Two little hands peeped forth. Without waiting to question whether they belonged to Thérèse or for the assistance of the Count, he sprang across the road, entered without a "By your leave," to the astonishment of the inmates, who were seated round an upturned tub eating a not unsavoury stew out of a pipkin, which served as the common dipping pot for their fingers, and made for the stair that, steep as a ladder, led to the floor above.

There he came to a door at which he knocked impatiently, and almost overthrew the old man who opened it. Making unerringly for the stair that again met his eyes, he reached the second floor. Again a door barred the way. The old man was deaf and doited, and the impetuous Giles easily passed him and, upward yet, found at the third storey another door. It was opened by two girls, one little older than Giles, the other a bold-faced hussy of twenty-five, and a coarse-grained dirty woman with broad shoulders, who might have been any age from forty to sixty, dark-visaged, with heavy eyebrows, and dark hair upon her upper lip.

"God-a-mercy, young sir!" said the older woman when she had recovered her astonishment. "You have come to seek out Minette? She was making signs to you from the window half an hour since. 'That is a proper lad,' she said, 'didn't you, Minette?'" The girl looked as confused as Giles, and Giles knew not what to make of this reception.

"Is there not a stair here leading to the turret above?" he asked.

"The turret?" said the old woman crossly. "The stair? There is no stair above here. My love-birds live in the top cage. As for the turret, no one lives in it that I know, nor how one gets to it. But it is not this way."

Giles looked dubious.

"Go into the bedchamber and see for yourself."

Giles strode across the room and looked in. It was not inviting, and it was dark, but he could see the solid wall. There was no stair, no opening in the ceiling. He turned back disconsolately.

"It is of no consequence," said the old woman. "You will stay and amuse Minette. She has a fine taste—Minette."

Minette laughed, and shook her tangled ringlets and looked at him sidelong.

Giles saw that the old woman and the other one meant evil to him.

"He is too gay a cockerel," said the other, "not to pluck," and caught hold of the lace at his knees, which, with a deft pull, she ragged off, as well as the rosettes of ribbon.

Giles coloured to his brows and pushed her roughly off, but she came back again with an odious smile, and stuffed her hand into his pocket, pulling forth his purse.

"He is well lined, this cockerel."

"Leave him alone," exclaimed Minette. "He is mine, Fifine!" and quick as lightning she snatched the purse from the elder girl and gave it him again. The old woman stood against the door and laughed.

"You must pay your footing, young sir," she said.

Giles pulled out a piece of gold and two or three crowns, and threw them with a clatter on the floor.

The old woman, the younger, and Minette sprang for them greedily. Giles pushed past and leaped down the stairs by fours as if all the witches of hell were after him.

His exit was as sudden as his entrance, and he succeeded in passing out into the street, out of which he ran as fast as his legs would carry him to the "Cloche d'or."

"You are confoundedly late, my friend," yawned the Count. "I am positively dying of hunger. Have you found out something? I see you have. You can tell me while we dine."

"To tell the truth," said Giles, "I would rather you came with me now. I have found her, and yet I cannot reach her. She is in the turret of the Tower of St Martin."

"Good," said the Count. "I guessed as much. Mademoiselle Thérèse is quite safe till after dinner."

The coolness of the Count annoyed Giles more than a little. For himself he had forgotten his appetite, Clotilde, everything but poor golden-haired Thérèse in the turret. Still, he could not afford to throw over this friendly stranger. He sighed and sat down.

"Yes," said the Count. "I have tracked down our ruffian, and can lay my fingers upon him when I wish. The Tower of St Martin belongs to Monsieur Bocal."

The Count, to do so just an epicure no injustice, was not long over dinner. He had a problem to think out. What was he going to do with Thérèse when he found her? Here was the Marquis with Turenne, which might mean Strassburg or much farther, even the heart of Swabia—the Marquise at Bar-le-Duc or a day's stage farther still, and Thérèse here.

He wished to go on eastward, Kuhn or no Kuhn. He ought to escort this damsel back to Paris and restore her to her convent, where pretty Clotilde de Lys was. But he could not do that at once. If he took her onwards she might meet her father or her mother, which would redound to the Count's reputation, or not, in which latter case she would only have hampered the Count's move-

ments. And as the Count always considered himself first, he was rather puzzled, because if any credit attached to saving Thérèse, he would prefer to keep it. Then there was this chivalrous young gentleman of tender years. What was to be done with him? Was he to be added to the party?

"Come, monsieur!" he said, looking through Giles in a vain endeavour to guess the person's name of whom he reminded him. "Is your sword useful at a pinch, eh? Shortish! But a good blade. And you can fence, eh?"

Giles was already a little mollified that he should be thought worthy of seconding the Count's sword with his. He clapped on his cap with a martial air.

"Hullo!" said the Count, looking at the lad's left leg. "What has happened to your braveries? A tattered flag in the first skirmish!" The Count ripped off the trimming at the other knee. "Let us look at least evenly balanced," he said. "Now march!"

Arrived at the Tower, the Count turned in at the door of the main building which, as Giles had seen, was full of hay.

An old woman, lean, bright-eyed, and ill to look upon, rose from a low stool, whereon she had been sitting in the shadow knitting, and asked him his business.

"The keys of the turret, mother!"

The old woman feigned to be or was actually deaf.

The Count made a motion of putting a key into a lock and turning it and pointed on high.

She shook her head.

"Go and find the door!" said the Count to his valet, who immediately disappeared behind the hay.

"Keys!" the Count roared in her ear. Then seizing her by the arm he passed his hand rapidly over her. She was too sparsely clad to have many places of concealment, and she felt his grip too well to doubt the issue. She put the other hand into her bosom and threw two keys sullenly on the floor.

The valet cried out, "I have it!"

"Quick!" said the Count, "before she raises the quarter," and rushed after the valet along with Giles.

The door was well hidden, but it was there, as the Count surmised, and once open they left the valet below and climbed the old worn stone steps, round and round till they reached the second door and burst into the turret.

Thérèse shrank back from their entry and then exclaimed in tones of great joy, clapping her hands, "The Count de Roubaix, and you, dear Giles!"

Giles was taken aback. He was so young as yet; a boy's heart is woefully tender. Thérèse as well as Clotilde was in love with the Count de Roubaix! What a mischance to have stumbled stupidly on the very man on whom Clotilde had wasted the sweetness of her love-letters, to have him spoiling his own rightful joy at the deliverance of his new mistress, for Giles' susceptible heart was beginning to regard Thérèse almost in that light.

But the Count wasted not a moment. Seizing Thérèse's cloak and hurrying her to the door he began the descent, warning her to be careful.

No sound came up. They had all three reached the last few steps at the foot when the valet made a low signal. He had retreated within the door and locked it.

"There is an ambush!" he whispered.

"They will not kill Thérèse!" said the Count coolly. "It is of no use waiting. When I give the word open the door. I will go first, Giles next, Thérèse third, and you" (to his valet) "last. Now draw your weapons!"

The door opened inwards—the Count peered over the threshold, and two men, one from either side, rushed at him with daggers. He drew back a step. And they, seeing another sword-point, hesitated.

"Mon Dieu! Two!" exclaimed the Count, in a tone of extreme surprise. "We must go back!" and the others following his example backed cautiously towards the stair.

The two men stole forward, and, when clear of the door, one made, as the wily Count expected, a half turn to get the key out of the lock.

In an instant the Count's long-reaching point shot forward and found a soft target in the man's neck.

The other rushed at the Count, not reckoning on Giles, who, watchful and courageous, though not without some nervousness at this his first tussle, darted upwards with a thrust that transixed the man's arm. The dagger fell from his hand as his fellow dropped bleeding to the floor.

The Count, taking firm hold of the collar of the one, stepped over the other and strode slowly forward along the narrow pathway round the hay, pushing the fellow before him.

At the first turn two other daggers alighted in the wretched victim's breast, and the Count's sword pierced one assassin to the heart. The fourth man turned and fled.

As Giles stepped over the third man he recognised his old adversary, the agent of Monsieur Bocal.

Thérèse, pale and sick, was borne out by the valet.

When the old woman saw the Count emerge, wiping the blood from his sword upon the hay, she raised one heartrending wail and fell to the floor by her stool, on which lay the knitting that was never to be finished. She was the mother of the third man.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE INGRATITUDE OF THE YOUNG.

"It is necessary that we should understand one another, Monsieur de Beaupré," said the Count to Giles when Thérèse had been handed over to the care of the inn-keeper's wife.

"Yes," said Giles quite readily, "Monsieur le Comte!"

"What do you propose to do, Monsieur Giles?"

"Accompany Mademoiselle Thérèse!"

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"I am sorry, for I propose to place her in the convent of the Ursulines here, to stay till her mother or her father comes back. They must pass through Châlons."

"But she has just run away from the convent at Meudon!"

"She has the genius of escape, it seems, but I shall take care she does not escape from the Ursulines!"

"It seems to me," said Giles, who felt many inches taller since the fray an hour before, "that Mademoiselle Thérèse, who is nearly fifteen, has a right to choose what she will do."

"When one sees a blind man about to walk into a river, one stops him; one does not talk about his rights," said the Count pleasantly. "She was in good company and keeping at Meudon!"

"True; there was Mademoiselle Clotilde de Lys, for instance!" said Giles meaningly, but blushing as he said it.

"And who, pray, is Mademoiselle Clotilde de Lys? Do you take a tender interest in her also? Are you knight-in-chief to the whole convent, Monsieur Giles?"

The Count laughed. It was not so well-mannered of him as one would have expected. But then he had just come through a series of chances of shrewd dagger-thrusts. And this young cockerel of the nobility amused him.

"Clotilde de Lys wrote you," said Giles with a choking throb in his throat, "six beautiful love-letters, the most beautiful I have ever seen, and you ask — Who is Mademoiselle Clotilde!"

Giles' eyes blazed, and his whole manner and attitude brought back to the Count a memory. He became serious, and looking straightly into Giles' eyes, said in a quiet tone—

"One does not betray one's favours. But since you know, my brave Giles, they *were* exquisite love-letters. I was desirous of marrying Mademoiselle Clotilde. Her parents thought otherwise, and placed her in Meudon."

"Why didn't you carry her off," Giles asked, "if you loved her?"

"It would not have been so easy," said the Count, "as getting out of yonder rat-trap! There were many considerations of prudence!"

"Prudence!" retorted Giles. "You could not have loved her, as she evidently loved you!"

"You are very droll," said the Count, "and you are sixteen, shall I say? I forgive your rashness! Pray, how did you come to read the letters?"

"They were flung out of a window, and fell at my horse's feet!"

"They were stolen from my *escritoire*! In what street? Could you tell me the house?"

"Yes, it was the Rue de la Coustellerie, the fourth house on the left as one goes towards the Grève."

"Thanks, my friend! Be assured that I shall not rest satisfied till I find the thief—and then . . ." there was a sinister gleam in the Count's eyes that sent a little shiver down Giles' back. He began to suspect that the Count was not altogether compact of bonhomie and swordsman's daring. He returned to the original topic.

"By this time the Mother Superior of Meudon will have reached here. I passed her on the road. Why not surrender Thérèse at once?" said the boy.

"She will only get punished!" said the Count. "You are not so anxious for her spiritual welfare as her bodily, eh, my friend?"

Giles agreed. As yet he did not suspect the Count's good faith. He merely objected to his usurping the office of protector and disposer. He was also a little jealous; and secretly determined that Thérèse, except of her own free will, should not go to the Ursulines.

"You see it is entirely for her good," said the Count. "The farther we go eastward—well, I daresay it would be safe enough as far as Nancy. But after that we are in the Vosges, and at any moment the enemy may cross the Rhine and push over the mountains. The fortified towns would close their gates, and Mademoiselle Thérèse with her golden hair and blue eyes would be . . . well, much safer with the Ursulines in Châlons."

And if the Count's own motives had been guileless

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this would have been deservedly called well-reasoned prudence.

Giles at all events saw no loophole in the reasoning through which an arrow might be shot. He tried another method of attack.

"With Mademoiselle Thérèse in the Ursulines, what becomes of me?"

"Parbleu!" said the Count quizzically. "You would naturally return to your father, the Chevalier de Beaupré, who by this time wonders what has befallen you!"

This was treating Giles very like a truant schoolboy, and the boy's ardent soul resented it.

"In the first place, the Chevalier de Beaupré is only my father by adoption. In the second place, I left a letter telling him I had set out on a journey, and that he need not be anxious."

The Count did not follow up the first thread. He was a man of many useful qualities, and one was an excellent memory. He took up the second.

"But don't you think you have had adventure enough for one journey?"

"Not I," said Giles confidently. "I want to see some of the fighting, to see Turenne! I should like to join him as a gentleman volunteer!"

"Bravo! Bravissimo!" said the Count, entering into the idea with enthusiasm. "I knew you had the stuff of a cavalier in you. What do you say to accompanying me? I will get you a horse. By the way, you had a horse?"

"A pony rather!" said Giles, who would have given a crown to be able truthfully to call it a horse or even a charger. "It is at the inn where I stayed last night!"

The appeal to his manly side was as strong as it was possible to be. He began to swallow his rising dislike of the Count. The Count began to see his way. Thérèse in the Ursulines, procurable at will—Giles, if he had only known it, a matchless hostage with him! If Kuhn would only come before he started!

As if the stars in their courses fought for him, his valet entered and handed him a slip of paper.

The Count's face lit up.

"Well, my friend, I have some affairs to attend to. Do you see Thérèse, and persuade her of the excellence of the Ursulines, and on my return we will see her safely housed, and then to horse and away for Turenne!"

In an instant the Count was gone.

The Count had reckoned, however, without Mademoiselle Thérèse.

"I am not going to the Ursulines, and I think it most unkind of you to propose it. The Count is different. He is grown-up, and grown-up people are always stupid. He does not want the trouble of looking after me. And I have no right to expect it after all he has risked for me. But you, Giles! Even to wish to desert me when you know how much—how much I have it at heart . . ." the tears were rising fast and coming down in big drops . . . "to find my father . . . and see Marshal Turenne . . . I am really . . . h-h-hurt . . . I can never never . . . trust you again . . . G-G-Giles!"

Poor Giles! The eloquence and bitterness and perversion of logic, which distinguish the demoiselle who happens to consider herself for the time being arbitress of one's heart, were all here in perfect admixture, and held out to him to drink for the first time. He made a wry face.

If Giles had been a little older he would have consoled himself with the reflection that it is always woman's faithful henchman who has to bear her whole sackful of reproaches, and the man that regards her merely as a toy, or as a useful domestic, who gets off scot-free. And then she expects him not to feel hurt because *she* knows that she does not mean half she says, or won't mean it five minutes later.

Giles was the less able to answer because he knew that the Count's suggestion of the ride with him had actually roused an answering gleam in his soul, which in the light of Thérèse's eyes now seemed to be downright unfaith.

"But it is for your good, dear Thérèse! It would be

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too dangerous for you in the Vosges, in the very neighbourhood of the enemy! Think—if we got separated!”

“But we are not going to be!” sobbed Thérèse. “Or if we are, you will find me as you did before, you brave, good Giles!”

Giles was bewildered! She had touched the right chord there. He forgot what she had said two minutes ago.

“It is plain,” she said, drying her eyes and holding out her hands to him. “We must escape again, from the Count this time, and go on at all events to Nancy. When we get to Nancy we can send word to my father! And if it is absolutely necessary, you shall even leave me in a convent there till he comes. There, is that enough for you, Monsieur Giles?”

“We must make haste, then! For the Count will soon be back. We must have a post-chaise and two horses!”

“But what shall I do without my valise?”

“Luckily it is with my pony!” said Giles. “Listen! We are in the Rue St Jacques. Go straight along it till you reach the Rue de l’Arquebuse. There you will find the Chapel of the Adoration. Go in and wait till I come to find you. I shall leave the post-chaise at the corner of the street, and we shall be out of the Porte St Jacques in no time, and above all keep a sharp look-out for the Count. He will pursue us by the Porte St Jean.”

“Trust me, dear Giles!” she said. “I did you an injustice just now. I was horrid. Kiss me and make it up. We must not quarrel if all the world quarrels!”

And impulsively she put her arms round his neck and kissed him for pure joy and gratitude.

It was so sudden that Giles could not hesitate. And he met her embrace with equal ardour. But he wondered, as he ran off to find the post-chaise and the valise and bid adieu to his pony, whether it was, after all, quite fair to Clotilde.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

BOCAL PLAYS TRUMPS.

There has been but one Turenne—Henry of the Tower of Auvergne, Viscount Turenne, Marshal of France—as some of his styles and titles run, son of the valiant companion-in-arms of that valiant king, Henry of Navarre, and of his wife Elizabeth of Nassau, the sister of those staunch Nassau brethren who called William, the first Prince of Orange, father.

For forty-and-six years he had upheld the glory of France, and now, a war-worn warder, he was pacing up and down the well-trodden battlements of Alsace from which in the preceding autumn he had hurled back the German hosts.

It was still the old enemy. Strassburg this time was the key of the position—Strassburg with its bridges, Strassburg professedly neutral, but hoarding within her walls well-stocked magazines of corn intended for the use of the Germans once they came within arm's length of her.

And the enemy had brought with them Montecuculli, an Italian, who, like Turenne, had been a professional soldier from his youth, and approved himself as experienced, as *rusé*, as cautious, as bold to strike when opportunity favoured him, as courageous, as Turenne himself.

Like unto Turenne and Montecuculli were no captains of their age, not even the present William of Orange nor the great Condé, whom he opposed in the Low Countries.

It was the face of a great captain and a great man that looked across the table in the castle of Renchen towards his friend the Marquis de Polignac.

It was the face of a strong man, of a strong thinker, and good-natured withal. Humour kept in reserve, gift of the gods, played in his wide-set eyes under the broad

projecting brows and twitched at the corners of that strong mouth, to which the stiff moustache and tuft of Henri Quatre gave an aspect otherwise of fierceness.

Bussy-Rabutin, himself Lieutenant-General of the armies of the king, who knew him well, has spoken of a certain largeness of the shoulders, and of his great eyebrows meeting over his nose, and another writer of the "something sombre that slept in his aspect beneath this glimpse of laughter that one caught at times in his eyes.

There was no trace about him of the softness of courts, but through the martial exterior his friend saw, with the searching eyes of love and unenvious admiration, the heart of gold, throbbing to the sacred chant of duty and of honour.

"So far, my dear Gaston, the game is ours, but it is a game in which one cannot escape with a merely trifling forfeit for mistakes. Here is Strassburg," he pointed to the map, "where huge stores of flour and corn await Montecuculli. And here am I. There is my camp between Bodesweier and Linx—here is my right on this high ground. His troops are getting short of rations, for I stand between him and Strassburg. If he crosses the Renchen he must fight me on my ground, and if I cross and begin to turn his left, wedging my right between him and the mountains, I press him towards the river. He must either beat me or retreat northward, always northward, along these swampy flats, or break back across the mountains into Württemberg. He is an obstinate old mule, this Montecuculli. Now, what brought me up to the castle of Renchen, think you?

"It was the want of forage. Other supplies are running short, but of forage I had come to have little or none. Your friend Bocal again, doubtless. My horses were dying by dozens down on these marshy low lands. Look at the rains we have had! I was obliged to find drier pastures or retreat. By good luck Josef Kuhn knew a shepherd, who pointed out a way to these uplands which the enemy had overlooked."

"Josef Kuhn?" the Marquis asked.

"The man that supplies our men's boots and buys the old horses to make them of, buys also the hides of our bullocks."

"And his boots?"

"Are honest workmanship!" said the Marshal.

"He is not in league with Monsieur Bocal, at least," said the Marquis.

"And now that I have shown you the strategic use of Renchen, let us go back to camp and meet Monsieur Bocal. Our next movement may begin any day, and we must be sure of our rations if we are to deprive Montecuculli of his."

On the ride back the two friends, though they rode side by side, fell into that silence which is only possible between close friends or secret enemies. The great Marshal was engaged in noting what he could of the dispositions of the enemy, who were quite near on the farther side of the river that broadened down from the uplands to the Rhine. The Marquis was wondering what would be the outcome of to-day's argument with Monsieur Bocal. Time pressed with him. Marie Gabrielle would by now have reached Saverne, and any movement beyond that fortified place might bring her into the vortex of the revolving currents of the two armies. He had received the substance and details of Turenne's necessities and complaints against the army contractor. There remained certain rough practical tests, an acrimonious discussion, the revelation, doubtless, of the power upon which Bocal leaned for support in the last extremity. Had he in fact gained over De Louvois? That despatch he had received at Sarrebourg seemed to indicate it.

They had hardly gained the general's quarters, a plainly furnished but roomy tent in the midst of the camp, than Monsieur Bocal made his abrupt entrance.

He saluted.

"I have ridden post-haste from Saverne, messieurs, to receive all the news you can give me of the future movements of the army."

"I will come to that presently, Monsieur Bocal!" said Turenne. "I am not satisfied with the quality of the provisions you have been sending!"

"Indeed!" Monsieur Bocal's face exhibited incredulous surprise.

"I have too many men sick with dysentery."

"That is the damp, and the low situation of the camp!" was the prompt reply.

"My men, however, complain of the bread, which they say is baked of bad flour."

"Soldiers will grumble at anything!" said Bocal.

There was an angry flush of indignation on the Marshal's face, as he said—

"My soldiers never grumble without cause. They are the best soldiers in the world."

Bocal assumed that look of unspeakable good nature as he replied—

"We are all human, even your soldiers, Marshal. The damp has doubtless affected the bread also: and then the army cooks are not of the best. But to satisfy you—order the waggons of flour that have just arrived in camp to be driven up!"

"No! We will go and see them. There is no need to further fatigue the horses and drivers!"

Monsieur Bocal led the way in the same rapid energetic manner that he did everything.

They came to the gates of the camp. There were three waggons loaded to the last ounce. At Monsieur Bocal's order the waggons hauled down a sack of flour at random from each. The general put in his hand and spread the sample out. It was fresh, new, sweet flour of wheat and flour of rye, pleasant to the eye and taste.

"That will make good bread!" said Turenne. "How much more have you of it—near?"

"Forty waggons, Marshal!"

"Good! Have it sent on to-morrow, I want it."

"It is impossible to have it to-morrow. I have been delayed!"

"How delayed? Your contract says that for every

day's delay you forfeit — how much, Monsieur le Marquis?"

"Fifty crowns a waggon!" said the Marquis.

"That will be two thousand crowns, monsieur!"

"But it is the Marquis de Polignac himself who has caused the delay by his inquiries!"

"Tut! tut! man! In war there is no room for excuses! If your flour was all as good as that there was no reason for delay!"

"We shall see!" said Bocal boldly. "I am not a nobody to be subjected to hampering. The flour will be pushed on as rapidly as possible. But, pray understand, I lodge my protest, and I pay no fines."

"I shall take note, and you also, Monsieur le Marquis!" said the Marshal. "Now for the hay! You have caused us to run short of hay!"

"There are waggons of hay just arrived! Step over here, if you please!"

The new hay was bundled down, and a truss or two spread out. The horses sniffed, and made a movement towards it.

"They say it is good hay!" said Turenne, smiling and nodding at the horses. But I want fifty waggon-loads by to-morrow night."

"Fifty waggon-loads! Mort Dieu! I have two hundred waggon-loads at Nancy and another hundred at Toul!"

"I want one hundred loads here, in this spot, in two days!" said Turenne with decision.

"And if you do not get them?" said Bocal.

"You can be quite sure," said Turenne calmly, "that you will get no more contracts."

"As to that!" said Bocal, "I am a rich man, and when I call in my debts I need not toil for France as I have done: and I have friends mightier even than the Marshal's, who will see that justice is done me. You have tried me by the test of the last waggons that have come up, and found them good. What becomes of the complaints made to the War Office, and the reports of his own discoveries by

Monsieur le Marquis? I am prepared to answer everything."

"In its own time and place, Monsieur Bocal," said the Marshal. "Forty waggons of flour, Monsieur Bocal. One hundred loads of hay in this camp two days from now, and nothing will be said."

"You can rely upon my doing my best to second you, Marshal. But as to you, Monsieur le Marquis, who have put this indignity upon me, more shall be said."

"I do not think we need enter upon a strife of tongues!" said the Marquis. "I shall do what I consider to be my duty, and you what you consider furthers your own interests!"

"One word more before I depart for Saverne! Madame la Marquise de Polignac has done me the honour to ride in my post-chaise from Châlons to Saverne. I left her there. Shall I bid her stay till you come, or make arrangements for her to come here?"

The Marquis was thunderstruck! The Marquise travel with this arrogant contractor! It was a humiliation! But it was not to be argued.

"I am infinitely obliged to you for your good offices, Monsieur Bocal. I will send a messenger. I must wait here two days yet."

"It was a delightful experience, monsieur! Au revoir, Marshal—au revoir, monsieur!"

The contractor stepped into his light travelling carriage and sped away.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"LA SAMARITAINE" DOES NOT GO.

People who came to the Pont Neuf to set their watches were at first puzzled, then incredulous, then, seeing that the hands did not move, shook their heads and looked to the heavens for signs and portents. La Samaritaine, the timekeeper of Paris, had stopped.

Without knowing exactly why, the passers-by experienced a curious elation, almost light-headedness. It was a thing to remember, the stoppage of the great clock. And as, when one strange event happens, the superstitious always look out for the next, the men who made their living by trafficking on the changes went down to their places of customary resort in a state of expectancy. Nor were they disappointed, for by some mysterious agency it got about that Bocal, the great army contractor, was being pressed by his creditors. No one knew whence it arose, this fearful rumour. "Are you a creditor?" they asked one another in whispers. "No! Will such an one lose much?" Heads were shaken and lips pursed; snuff-boxes came into play. But the sum and substance of all their knowledge was nothing. Yet all felt assured, from what every one said, that Bocal was in difficulties. One averred that he had had it from his cousin, who had had it from a clerk to a great banking-house, that bills had been presented for a very large sum—a million of livres at least,—and that the bankers had tendered payment of only a part, which was refused; they had cautiously asked for delay while they communicated with Monsieur Bocal, who was at the war. Then a lawyer's clerk became the centre of a voluble group of questioners. He had just come away from the Court of Requests, and seen a notice of action at the suit of one Chavigny against one Bocal, for payment of the sum which the bankers had declined to pay. This was

confirmation with a vengeance. Every man buttoned up his pockets and began to exercise a scrutinising eye upon his neighbour. For when a great contractor fails a number of little ones must fail also.

The king's clockmakers were very soon at work upon *La Samaritaine*, and the old woman, who had her seat by the Bronze Horse, received a visit from the old man who tended the great clock and the water-tower over the way. At the stoppage of the clock she had been seized with a great excitement and trembling, and could not cross the bridge, so the old man had come to her. It was a great event in their lives.

“Is it then time?” she murmured with enfeebled utterance.

“It is time! The clock has stopped!” said the old man with a grim expression on his old face. “But keep calm, mother. What we know, we know! It is nobody's business. We shall hear news in a day or two. *He* will have deserved it.”

“Did you see *her*?” asked the old woman, fumbling at her basket of wares, which she was trying to set out according to custom.

“Yes! I saw her. She was dressed like a cavalier, and gave me the signal as she rode past. No one would have guessed, but I knew her at once by her eyes. Who would have thought that she could have become so strong, so determined,—she who was once a little helpless baby in your lap, mother!”

A tear gathered in the old man's eye and dropped. It was an unusual sight, and, as it dropped on the old woman's gnarled and veiny hand, it set her weeping for a little while and rocking her body to and fro.

Then the old man crept back to *La Samaritaine* and began questioning the clockmakers with an old man's cunning, made up of feigned simplicity and nods and silences. It seemed that a pinion had worn loose and fallen out. It might have happened to any clock.

Later, the newsmongers on the Pont Neuf who collected all the talk of Paris, spoke of mobs of the very poor ransacking the stores of Monsieur Bocal in whatever

part of Paris they were. They were hungry, they said, and wanted food as much as the army, after whose welfare Louvois would look. He was well paid for it. And when this news also proved to be true, the credit of Monsieur Bocal on the changes fell lower still, and his agents and brokers could do nothing. The one man who was strong enough to restore order was at the war. He had ruled by fear and by his purse, and no one was going to move in his behalf. The moment of attack had been well chosen.

And by the time Paris was well agog with the rumours the cavalier of whom the old man had spoken had reached Meaux.

Since the day when Tintorin, the lean and strident, had played his play with the Marquis of the bed-tick coat in the inn-yard, Meaux had been in a state of unrest. The small shopkeepers, who bought bread and salt and candles and spices and sold them, a few sous-worth at a time, felt it. They said to one another that trade was bad. But as they were in no one's confidence but their own, a parsimonious race, who gave nothing away but a few civil words and nods, and meddled not in the affairs of Monsieur Bocal, they knew nothing. But the miller of Meaux, who had lost his living and was eking out his savings with a few pistoles that the Marquis de Polignac had given him, and the smith who had the shoeing of Monsieur Bocal's horses, the masons who were rebuilding the mills of Meaux, and a few of the small farmers whose steadings were upon the skirts of the town: these were all as manifestly uneasy at their work as they were suspicious and reticent. Monsieur Bocal's agent, the beetle-browed man, found every one unaccountably slow in obeying his orders. His threats and oaths only met sullen looks and murmurs.

Till one day, it was the day that *La Samaritaine* had stopped, just before noon a cavalier attired in a green riding-suit and brown high boots of undressed leather, came riding into Meaux upon a tall horse. He was young, it seemed, for no moustache or chin-tuft showed

upon his face. His auburn hair, neatly, almost coquet-
tishly tied with a green ribbon, fell upon his shoulders,
and a pair of startling brown eyes peered from beneath
the brim of his hat. He managed his horse with a
careless grace that showed long usage to the saddle,
and only when he swung himself down at the door of
the principal inn did one notice that for a man he was,
though well formed with good shoulders and slim waist,
rather below middle size.

He had hardly alighted when a second horseman came
into the town from the opposite end and stopped at the
same inn. They met in the traveller's room.

“Tintorin! My friend!”

“Madame!”

The cavalier was then some great lady, as the inn-
keeper's wife had “guessed at a glance,” and was even
now discussing with her husband.

“The clock has stopped at last. Our friends in Paris
have made a beginning, Tintorin. The train is fired.”

“The tinder is laid ready from here to Nancy!” was
the reply.

“Good! Tintorin! Get me a cup of wine, a piece
of bread, and a slice of smoked ham, and then to
work!”

They talked rapidly while they despatched their
slender meal. Excitement sparkled in the woman's
brown eyes. In the man's was sadness save when some
grim quip fell from his lips.

The meal finished, events moved rapidly. The smith
left his forge, the wheelwright his bench, the masons
their work on the burned mills, and soon there was an
expectant knot of men gathered on the river-quay by
the agent's cottage. He was enjoying a short sleep
after his midday meal, when the hubbub without awoke
him and he came out angrily. What was in the wind
now?

A dozen eager hands tied him to the post of the draw-
bridge, and at a sign from the Red Neighbour two men
laid on blows from carters' whips till he writhed and
screed and swore, and the blood began to make ugly

stains through his shirt. Then he was bound face downward on a sorry horse, and the horse driven out of the town along the road to Paris. A pedlar, who was going that way, engaged to keep the horse in front of him for a league or two at least.

The subordinate offender having thus suffered punishment, the horses of the great contractor were taken to the smith's, who proceeded with much dexterity to unshoe them all, and being thus rendered unfit for immediate service, they were sent back to their stable. The waggons were bereft of their wheels, which were burned, and any grain found in the stores was distributed among the common people. Never had such a day been in Meaux. It was in vain that the mayor fumed and the town-clerk quoted the customs of Brie, the Red Neighbour vouchsafed no word, nor did Tintorin, except that he lent encouraging example and exhortation to the rebel thralls of Monsieur Bocal.

Then having received a solemn promise not to set hand to any work of Monsieur Bocal's from that time forward, neither to buy with him nor sell with him, the Red Neighbour feasted them and went her way on horseback with Tintorin at her heels.

At Montmirail a more serious blow was struck, for here as before was found a great drove of horses, and these were swept out by tens and shepherded by experienced drovers, who sprang, the Red Neighbour and her adjutant alone knew whence, and dispersed to various fairs, where doubtless they were purchased by dealers who were not too particular as to their origin. The drovers took ready money in all cases, and the money was in the course of a few days paid into the hands of Monsieur Bocal's bankers—the Red Neighbour did not need it. She would have deemed herself accused by the touch of it. Her method of revenge—for revenge was obviously her one inspiring motive—was to ruin his credit and destroy the means of resuscitating it.

Having accomplished her task at Montmirail swiftly and without enlisting the folk of the little town, who indeed knew little of, and dealt little with the contractor,

she pursued her relentless way to Châlons, where Josef Kuhn joined her in council.

She learned from him of the fight in the store of the old church, which had left the hay without a guardian, a fact of which the baser sort in Châlons had not been slow to take advantage. It was already pillaged. It was sufficient in Châlons, considerable mart as it was, to spread the news of the crippling of Bocal's resources, to bring about that feeling of doubt and fear which is the death-sickness of trade. And Monsieur Bocal's smaller agents were the first to desert his interests for those of Josef Kuhn, who began to build the first storey, on foundations already laid, of an organisation to supply the place of that which was beginning to fall into ruins. Men who had come to Châlons to sell to Bocal and his agents sold to Kuhn, tempted by better prices and credulous of every rumour.

From Châlons to Bar-le-Duc and from Bar-le-Duc to Toul the mysterious Red Neighbour hastened on her way, pulling out the lynch-pins of Bocal's chariots wherever opportunity offered. It was extraordinary what knowledge she had acquired of him and his doings. By trading on the people's greed or upon their fear, Bocal had built up most of his monopoly. By money the monopoly was destroyed. The highest bidder got their service, and it would require much higher bidding still to recover it.

It was in the Church of St Gengoult at Toul that the first period was put to the victorious advance of Bocal's adversary.

CHAPTER XXX.

"FOR THE POOR—FROM JEANNE."

It is not recorded how the devil tempted St Gengoult, but without having been tempted he would not have commanded the respect of his disciple, Brother Martin, nor inspired that steadfast son of the Church to a like resistance.

For many years it had been the cherished desire of Brother Martin to set eyes once more upon that darling of his boyhood, his sister. He had heard of her going away with Bocal the carrier. He had heard of her desertion by Bocal some year or two later: and then nothing. His old father and his old mother, not so old in years as aged by hard work and sorrow, had gone to Paris to eke out a penurious livelihood, to which he could contribute little or nothing. Their son was a priest, and a good priest. It was their reward but not an aid. Once he had journeyed to Paris, an eventful journey, and seen them, but of him they manifestly stood in awe. They loved his memory, but feared or revered the priest. He had returned, on the whole saddened. They had passed out of his life. He had asked many questions about his sister; but neither could or would give any clue to her subsequent history. That her history was unhappy up to the time of her abandonment by Bocal, just as fortune began to smile upon him, and when, as not unfrequently happens in such cases, a new allurements in the shape of a woman of better condition passed before his ambitious eyes, Brother Martin knew. That her further history was likely to be one chequered rather by black disgrace than by white hope he was content to believe, but that he who spent his life in shedding consolation about him in the streets and nooks of Toul should be debarred by his very office from finding her, and providing her with asylum

and consolation, who was his own sister and the object of his most humanly tender thoughts, was a source of poignant grief which was always there in his heart. It was the means, he told himself, whereby the Seigneur kept Brother Martin's heart tender towards the rest of his great family, who were not blood relations.

Into the face of exactly how many wayfarers, poor and rich, who had found their way into the Church of St Gengoult over many years, he had peered, and turned away disappointed, he could not have reckoned. But still he hoped, still he prayed, that this thing should come to pass.

And one evening in July after vespers, when the church began to get dim, a woman came in and made for the first chapel. Arrived there she did not kneel, as he had expected, but passed on to the next, and, so making the round of the church, stood irresolute. As she stood he moved towards her, and a single westerling ray of light, coming through a window of stained glass, lit up her face.

For a moment she cast up her face towards the window, a strong face, almost defiant in its gaze, and then, with a start, as his footfall approached quite near, her eyes rested on his.

“Jeanne!”

“My brother!”

He took her hand, and falling upon his knees murmured a thanksgiving for this sudden fulfilment of his prayers.

There was the same burliness of build about both of them. But the faces were in sharp contrast. The features were alike, the eyes of the same tint of brown, both arresting in their character; but there nature ceased in her efforts after likeness, for life had intervened and made the man's face gentle and almost feminine in softness, the woman's strong, self-reliant, hard, with something therein of the wildness of the untamed animal. As she watched him kneeling for that brief space, a fitful gentleness came into her eyes. Memory was at work. But the look

passed, and a little tremor went through her. There is no more deep-seated yearning in woman than to be good, to feel kinship with religion, and the sight of this spontaneous exhibition of simple piety had aroused in her heart feelings she had for many a year forgotten.

"Come, sister! Come with me to my little dwelling. How I have prayed for this hour!"

As they passed out he dipped his fingers in the holy water, and turning swiftly made the sign of the cross upon her forehead and touched her hands with it.

She burst into tears, and clung to his arm as they traversed the few steps to his abode.

But once inside her mood changed, her eyes shed no more tears, only presenting a more gentle appearance as the grass shows greener for the shower.

"What a bare room! It might almost be a cell in the Conciergerie, only it is lighter and there is more air."

"You have then been even in prison, dearest Jeanne?" he said in tones of love and pity.

"I was in fact tried for sorcery. But it ended in their paying me to be released!" She laughed an unpleasing laugh.

"Poor sister!" said Brother Martin, devouring her with his eyes, which travelled from her head, which bore a man's riding hat, over the robe which really covered her other masculine habiliments, to her neat feet cased in the riding-boots of untanned leather. "Poor sister! You must have a long sad story to tell me."

"It is of no use," she said, "going over all my struggles again. It would exhaust me. Bocal took me. Bocal abandoned me. He married. He became rich. I also am rich. I have been all these years working and plotting to become rich. Now I am going to bring Bocal to ruin. The train is laid. The fire is creeping along it. A few more days and I shall enjoy the sight of the blackened remnants."

The priest listened. As he sat, devouring her with his eyes, those eyes set in a childlike face, and looking fearlessly and penetratingly with a childlike wisdom, intensified by many years of gazing at many faces of his fellow-men and women, he saw into the soul, and what he saw there filled his with fear and sorrow. He heard with his outward ears the words “rich” and “remnants.”

He looked at her with a very vivid sadness as he repeated half to himself—

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay—saith the Lord.”

“Yes! That is all very well!” she said. “But I mean to have my vengeance. I know it is wrong. But Bocal wronged me in the first place. I mean to have my vengeance in my own way. Do you hear, brother? It is all I live for.”

“It will do you no good, my poor sister! You are rich, you say. Spend your riches and yourself on the poor, who need both. Leave the rest to the Seigneur.”

She seemed to waive his suggestion to one side and went on—

“I will make you an abbé. I will give you whatever you desire to make your remaining years one endless almsgiving, if that will please you,—only you must help me to do what I want.”

The priest rose from his chair very gently and went to the window, and gazing out for a brief space turned again.

“I do not wish to leave St Gengoult, not even to become an abbé. It was an old dream of mine. Yes, when I was a choir-boy I said I would be an abbé. But now I think I am better as I am. I know Toul. They love me here, poor as I am. It would be beautiful to have money to dispense. But if I did wrong to get it, it would not be beautiful, it would be the devil’s money.”

“But it is such a little thing I ask you to do. A few prayers, a few candles to St Gengoult, and the sin would be washed away.”

The priest looked very grave. That which in a lay-

man, a poor passion-driven layman, might be a venial sin for which a true repentance might atone, is mortal in a priest who knows beforehand and sees clearly, because he has been taught. "No, sister! It is the devil who speaks and not you. But tell me what the devil says."

"Listen, then! Bocal has in Toul hundreds of loads of hay awaiting his word to be pushed to the frontier. He has delayed it because he wishes to crush the Marquis de Polignac, a good man, who has set himself to find out all the iniquities Bocal practises in fulfilling his contracts. One of these days a peremptory order will come to hasten on all these loads of hay. And Bocal would be able to fulfil his promises. Give me two days', one day's delay, when that order comes, and I have Bocal in a vice. He will be desperate."

"But how can I . . . ?"

"Quite easily! The carters, who are all true Lorrainers, will obey you. Some of them have already promised me. I have paid them well, but the most have said—

"'No! It is not Monsieur Bocal—we do not love him. It is for the great Marshal Turenne. He wants the hay for his soldiers' horses.'"

"They are right!" said the priest, glowing with the fervour of patriotism.

"Yet war is wrong!" she argued.

"We are striving with the help of the Seigneur, through his servant Turenne, to keep the Germans out of France. That is our bounden duty."

"But Turenne shall not want for hay! I am seeing to that. I am as good a Frenchwoman as any of you!" she said hotly.

"You wish me, however, dearest Jeanne, to come between these servants and their master? It is difficult for the Church to gain the obedience she is always teaching, if the Church began to urge disobedience!" The priest held up his hands. "It would be the end of all things."

His sister also made a gesture of impatience.

“It is easy to see you have become a priest, and have forgotten how to be a brother.”

“I have not forgotten to love you, dearest Jeanne,” said the priest, passing his hand over her hair. “But when I say I love you, I love your imperishable part, your soul. I will not knowingly hurt that, or let you dash it against the devil’s stones. Leave Bocal to the Seigneur. He may not be as bad as you think him. But in any case, who are we that we should be his judges? Go back. Retrieve the wrong you have begun and make your peace with God. You thought when you came into St Gengoult to-night to pray. It is the instinct of the human to lift up one’s heart to the Giver. But you could not find a saint who would intercede. I saw you go from chapel to chapel, and your heart said ‘No! I cannot ask that saint to intercede for me!’ And then I met you. The Seigneur touched your heart when I made His holy sign upon you. It is not wholly hard but it is hardening. Sister! let me pray for you and with you.”

She was near weeping again, so the priest’s gentleness won upon her, but at that moment the tall figure of Tintorin passed the window. It recalled her to her stern resolution and she sprang up.

“I must go, brother. Pray for me if you will, if you must. It can do no harm. I thought you would have helped me.”

Then she bent down swiftly, kissed his hands, held them in her own for a moment, and let them drop.

“Peace be with you, dearest Jeanne!”

Before he had uttered the last syllable she was gone, and Brother Martin fell upon his knees, long accustomed to the posture, and prayed fervently and long for this sister who was lost and was found, only to be lost again, perhaps for ever.

It was when he rose from his knees that he found upon his open window-sill a little purse with five pistoles in it and a line of writing, “For the poor—from Jeanne.”

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE PLAN OF NANCY.

The Red Neighbour, Josef Kuhn, and Tintorin sat round a small table in an upper room of an inn at Nancy. It was in the Grande Rue near the Porte de la Craffe.

A plan of the town on yellow parchment lay upon the table. It had been folded many times, and as they paused for a moment to sit back and talk, the plan curled up, and Josef Kuhn, idly examining an inscription upon the back, read out in his dry German accent—

“My one indiscretion! Potstausend! It is the writing of mine goot friend the Comte de Roubaix.”

“Yes!” said the Red Neighbour. “It was the wrapping of a packet of his love-letters. My woman threw them out of the window for safety. It was while I was in the Conciergerie. I wanted that plan. Mark upon it, I pray Monsieur Kuhn, where the man Bocal has his dépôts.”

Josef Kuhn took the map, and putting on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, pored over it.

“Ja gewiss! Here is his dépôt of grains! Here his stores of flour! Ach! Ja! His horses—they are here, and here, and here!”

The face of the woman puckered up. With people she trusted she sometimes doffed the mask of immobility, which usually concealed everything but the searching quality of her eyes. She made a gesture of disappointment.

“But they are not in the town at all. They are outside the walls, in the fauxbourgs!”

“That is true!” said Josef Kuhn. “There is not room in the town.”

“How far is Nancy from Strassburg?”

“Thirty-five leagues! There was no fear of the Germans coming so far to steal his stores.”

“And the bridges across the Meurthe?”

"There is one at Malzéville! There is another at Bonsecours, and a third on the road to Saint Piquêtes."

"It would take an army to block his waggons!"

"The roads are very open and very flat, it is true. It would not be easy."

The Red Neighbour bit her lips and said nothing for a few moments.

"It seems to me," said Tintorin, "one must lay an ambush in a defile, not in a plain."

"But where shall I find my defile?"

"Donnerwetter! Ja! At Saverne!" (He called it Zabern in his German accent.) "When you get past Sarrebourg you begin to mount into the Vosges, when you get to Lutzelbourg the road becomes narrow and winds along the sides of the hills in and out till it emerges above Zabern. We catch all the waggons there in the pass before they emerge. It is true there may be a few soldiers there, but that is easy. Donnerwetter! quite easy."

"You think it is possible!"

"It is quite possible. Ja gewiss. Word of Josef Kuhn!"

The great contractor Bocal drove rapidly away from Renchen, where Turenne's camp was fixed, rapidly along the highroad to Kehl and Strassburg. He could not pass through Strassburg when the gates were shut. The city professed neutrality. He was obliged to skirt it. He was in a confident mood. It was a part of the man's success, this assurance of always having planned aright. He considered that he had on his part instilled into this busybody Marquis a certain fear of his powers. At the same time he had himself a great respect for Turenne, a man whom no difficulties daunted, a man who, despite the fact that he was a great noble, whose coat-of-arms testified to all manner of royal descents, was in his opinion very like himself. Bocal recognised masterful ability, and did not mean to break with Turenne. Turenne had wasted a whole countryside in the last campaign with fire and pillage so as to leave no means

of subsistence for the invaders. A man who could do that might on the spur of the moment even hang a contractor. It was improbable, but one must not reckon on too much leniency from great commanders. Literal hanging has a spice of finality about it. Bocal had, figuratively speaking, hung a few sub-contractors and others in his time.

But he was not going to fail. He had played his little play. Now a word from his lips and the convoys, carefully checked, would be released and pour down wherever Turenne would have them—chalk, rubbish, and all.

The road is as flat from Strassburg to Saverne as it is from Renchen to Strassburg. He slept peaceably most of the way. The capacity to sleep was a part of his endowment. When he woke he thought of the Marquise.

For two or three days she had been his companion in that light travelling carriage. Her presence had pervaded him even to the extent of interfering with his chains of thought. She had been, once she resigned herself to accept his hospitality as a means to speedy travel, the mirror of courtesy, but, like a mirror, cold, reflecting any passing object. If she spoke it was of the scenery, which from sheer familiarity Bocal had ceased to notice, of the horses, the inns—never of himself, herself, or of the Marquis. Bocal, eager to display himself in something of an attractive light, to suggest something of his dominating masterfulness, barely checking the tumultuous impulses of passion evoked within him by her uncommon beauty, had found that his very proximity to her person made him feel clumsy, talk banality, and suffer the humiliation of seeing that his glowing shaft-like glances made no more impression than a spent musket-shot upon a town wall.

She was leaving at every league the country where woman was more than woman—the France of civilisation and of the social arts—for the country where, because of the war and the inordinate presence and mastery of armed men, woman was less than woman; and yet by

no movement of deference, by no inflection of added graciousness, did she show the slightest consciousness of the realities of her situation, which was that of an unarmed woman without resources in the absolute power of a strong man, whose word was law along the road he followed.

And so they had reached Saverne, where he had left her at the "Black Ox" in the dip of the main street, telling her he would bring the Marquis to her. It was not safe for her to penetrate nearer to the field of action.

Was he, now that he was returning to Saverne, going to relinquish her to the Marquis, who might, even now, be riding on his track to meet her?

Nature had poured into Bocal's veins a full measure of the fiery blood of the south. It was the secret of much of his volcanic energy and of his ambitious temperament. These had both expended themselves for long years, save for the one episode of the carrying off the blacksmith's daughter and his tempestuous wooing in later times of the gentlewoman he had married, in gigantic enterprises, only possible to the strong and the strong-willed. He had sprung of humble stock, and, as he had become successful, so his belief in his own luck and his own abilities had swollen into something of an infatuation. Side by side had grown the constant measuring of himself against the minds and wits of others, and resulted in a blind confidence that nothing could really withstand money and will power. That the Marquise was in some way above him—in something else than either—did not daunt him. She was lovely and alluring to the eye, a woman. His passions, which had long slumbered, arose, tempted by the very quality which made the distance between them impossible to bridge.

Bocal, who for years had never allowed the pursuit of pleasure to come between him and his pursuit of wealth and power, found himself organising a rapid scheme whereby even yet he could retain her in his grasp a few more days, and still preserve the appearance of ingenuous loyal service.

He swept the plan on one side as one clears a table. **Stern**er work must come first as always.

Twenty waggons of flour, twenty waggons of hay awaited his immediate order. Let them go forward! His agent at Saverne went out to bid the carters yoke the short strong oxen that in Lorraine do most of the haulage.

"But"—he called back his lieutenant—"are there no more close by?"

"Expecting!"

"Expecting! Send some one through the pass on a swift pony and get word!" The great contractor's brow darkened visibly.

Away went a mounted messenger, eastwards towards the pine-clad hills, beyond which leagues away lay Nancy.

It seemed a long hour: but it was no more, a **cham**-ping tedious hour before the messenger returned. There were many waggons, but they could not get through.

"Not get through! Has the mountain fallen down?"

"No, monsieur, but some trees have fallen in several places!"

"There was no storm, however, last night!"

"No, monsieur! The trees have been felled! It is a plot! But it will take a few hours to clear the roads!"

"Take every man out of Saverne that is able to lift half a hundredweight and clear the roads. It must be done in one hour—do you hear!"

"It is as good as done, monsieur!"

"And if you catch any one felling trees—shoot them!"

"Yes, monsieur! There is a man from Meaux here, monsieur!"

"Send him in!"

A man came in indescribably disguised in white dust and coated thickly round his strong throat with cakes of plaster formed by chalk, dust, and sweat, his hair and beard a week long without combing, blear-eyed, half dropping with sleep.

"Monsieur! The devil is in Meaux! The masons have stopped repairing the mills. The stores are burned.

The smiths won't shoe the horses. The waggons have no wheels. Nothing goes. It is the Red Neighbour!"

"The Red murrain!" exclaimed Bocal; . . . he was going to add a volley of inquiries, but the man had dropped.

Bocal roared for the inn servant.

"Take this man out and drench him with water and brandy! Bring him round—do you hear!"

"Yes, monsieur! There is one from Montmirail!"

Bocal glared angrily. "What now? Send him in."

Another messenger as grimy as the first—but not quite as exhausted.

"Monsieur! All the horses have been driven off. Not one left in Montmirail! I was just taking my dinner . . ."

"Ah! Off your guard! Villain! Perfidious rascal!"

"But, m'sieu, I rushed out of my hut, but a tall man took me unawares and knocked me senseless. My head is sore yet. Look—monsieur!"

The ocular evidence was strong enough to satisfy even Bocal. No man would inflict such punishment upon himself out of fear.

"When I came to—they were gone—all gone! I mounted the last horse, which was in the stable, and rode to tell you."

"You did well!"

"But wait, m'sieu—as I passed through Châlons I drew rein at the Tower—to get some more fodder . . ."

"Yes! Get on!"

"Jean Pigal is dead. The store is empty. The town has helped itself. I could not stay to inquire further. I had to ride. Ventre St Gris! How I have ridden!"

"Go and get yourself wine and an hour's sleep and a fresh horse. I shall want you."

"Yes, monsieur!"

The contractor took a few strides up and down the room. He had heard of the Red Neighbour, never seen her,—some fool of a sorceress who had got into the Conciergerie. He paid no attention to these matters, but some gossip had struck his ear and he had remembered it.

What was she doing in his affairs? He would wring her red neck! He laughed grimly. But just now he was depending on Nancy. He could easily restore the chain if a few links were broken.

The brain of an ordinary man is capable of solving a great number of the problems of life if they present themselves one at a time at respectful intervals. The brain of an extraordinary man can conceivably grasp a greater number at shorter intervals, but if the number and complexity increase together with less time to solve them, some loss of the exquisite balance of judgment must take place, and the play of the emotions take the place of the intellect.

But he must get rid of the Marquise. Not lose her! Oh no!—All in good time, Monsieur le Marquis!

“Send me Yung.”

Yung came in. He was of the fair-haired, blue-eyed German type, an ostler or coachman—a useful man.

“You can speak only German?” Bocal asked, speaking in that tongue.

“Ja gewiss.”

“There is a lady here to take to Strassburg. You will take my travelling carriage. Drive her slowly to Brumath—then to Wanzenu. Stay at the Inn of the Ford. Await me there.”

“Ja, mein herr.”

“Understand! You cannot speak French. If she complains of the length of the road, you are going to Strassburg. Here is money. Get ready.”

Yung nodded.

Bocal went in search of the Marquise, whom he found drumming with her taper fingers on the windows upstairs.

“I am in prison, it seems, Monsieur Bocal,” she said wearily enough.

“Not at all, Madame la Marquise.”

“But I have tried to get out of Saverne. They would not let me.”

“True, I had forgotten. You had no pass. A thousand pardons, madame. But I have seen the Marquis.”

"You have seen Gaston?" The eagerness with which she spoke riveted his intention.

"All is well! You are to go forward immediately. I am deeply sorry I cannot accompany you. But I give you my travelling carriage. I can ride horseback."

"Monsieur!" For once she appeared full of gratitude. "Monsieur! How obliging of you! At once?"

"Yes! I have found you a trustworthy man, a German who knows the roads well. He will take you safely to Strassburg, where you will wait till the Marquis joins you."

"And my servants?"

"Truly I had almost forgotten them. Your maid will naturally travel with you. Your man will ride with Yung or behind, as you wish. Now, madame, I bid you adieu. The interests of France, which are the interests of you, her loveliest daughter, call for me with an imperative voice—Madame la Marquise! If I can no longer be near you, at least I can serve you with my body and mind. Adieu!"

The Marquise looked at the big-chested, big-bodied man with the great shoulders, the shaggy locks, and the ardent eyes, and she experienced again the same feelings she had had in the picture-gallery at her hotel in Paris. It was as if she had just heard and definitely recognised the rumble of a thunderstorm which she had before taken to be that of a waggon.

"You are not content with good deeds," she said, holding out her hands. "You must needs also cover me with flatteries. Adieu! A thousand thanks, Monsieur Bocal."

Monsieur Bocal took the proffered hand and imprinted on it an unmistakably ardent salute, looked up into her eyes, and left her.

This time the Marquise felt glad when he had gone. She had begun to be a little afraid of this man of the Midi who could do so much.

Then he mounted his horse and galloped off to the mountain pass known as the Neck of Saverne to hasten matters. He had the impatience of all very energetic

men, and the strong belief that subordinates never showed well in crises. If they could, they need no longer be subordinates.

It was an hour's ride to the spot, one of those unsuspected hollows in the hills where the almost separate peaks seem to have encamped and the road wanders in and out the tent-pegs, which are the lower spurs. High up against the sky was an old ruined castle of some turbulent spirit of an earlier period when the marches of Lorraine knew neither German nor French domination, stark for defence, convenient for taking forced toll of the wains that passed below. The road wound in and out, well up the hillside, between the pines above it and the pines below.

There was confusion dire. Three tall pines had been dragged off the road with infinite trouble and commotion. Three more remained to drag before the first waggons entrapped could move. Bocal went on a few hundred yards. There was another trap, and yet another. He rode on till he found no more. There were, if all the waggons were free, barely enough to make up the tale required by Turenne. At once messengers were sent to Nancy with instructions to send fresh men and horses to Toul, to Commercy, to Bar-le-Duc. Every waggon of stuff must be put in motion, and not before this was done did he turn to direct the clearing of the road. With proper engines the task was no herculean one. But with a paltry supply of ropes, saws, men, it taxed all his energies to the utmost. His voice grew hoarser and hoarser. His great shoulders ached, the perspiration poured down his cheeks, his staunch knees trembled with the strain he took upon himself. Night was falling. He had sent to Saverne for more waggons and oxen, for soldiers to patrol the road. The whole convoy was beginning to move forward when two messengers rode up out of the twilight of the hills. Both handed him despatches.

He read the one. It was from his bankers telling him of the attack that had been made upon his credit—asking for instructions as to the payment of the bills presented

on the part of one Madame Jeanne Chavigny. The other was a messenger of the law announcing to him the beginning of an action for the recovery of the moneys due to the said Jeanne Chavigny.

It wanted but these blows.

"Who is this Jeanne Chavigny?" he demanded angrily of the messengers.

"She is called 'The Red Neighbour,' monsieur," they said with one voice.

"Mort de Dieu! I will tear out her entrails by the roots wherever I find her," this man of the Titanic energy roared, so that the forest and the hills re-echoed the last word.

"Tell your masters," he said to the bankers, "to pay every creditor but her, and to defend the action. Does not the king owe me many hundred thousand livres, and shall I be beaten by some cursed spiteful witch?"

"Hold! You must rest the night at Saverne in any case. She has chosen her time well."

The messenger of the bank had got the whole story of the attack on Bocal's credit on the exchange, the burning of his stores. It all sank deeper and deeper in. Turenne and the accursed Marquis in front of him, credit collapsed, horses dispersed, wrecked storehouses behind him. To one thought he clung closely, that of the tie which bound Philippe—Monsieur Philippe of Orleans—to his stirrup-leathers. That should stand between him and peril at last.

The great brain began to move again like a great mill-wheel which has been stopped, but feels once more the flow of the waters against its vans. There was one mighty attempt yet to make before he failed with Turenne.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE STORES OF STRASSBURG.

In order to understand the events which immediately follow, it becomes necessary to state that in the town of Strassburg were very considerable stores, accumulated it is not recorded how, but gathered, there is no doubt, to facilitate the German advance. These stores were the key to Turenne's operations in the neighbourhood of the Rhine. The German objective was not so much Strassburg itself as the stores in Strassburg. The city was professedly neutral, but it was neutral only in the sense that it opened its doors neither to the French nor to the Germans. Only, if the Germans could approach within reach of the city walls, it was certain that the stores would drop of themselves into their outstretched hands.

Turenne, by a masterly series of small movements, was engaged in locking up the Rhine so that neither from the north or from the south could the enemy's boats approach near enough to carry off the precious booty. He was engaged in driving a sufficient wedge of troops between the enemy and the Rhine from Kehl northwards, and, while keeping an unbroken front and preserving an uninterrupted line of communications in the rear, he was gradually forcing the German forces northward and eastward. And eastward was not very far, for in that direction was the great wall of the Schwarzwald with its few and narrow passes into Würtemberg. The Germans could not swarm over the Rhine unfed. They needed the stores in Strassburg before they could, if they crossed safely, go far into Lorraine.

That the stores were there in the old city behind its stout walls, and the walls surrounded to all intents by the river Ill, was known to all, and to none more exactly than to Monsieur Bocal.

The authorities in Strassburg and Monsieur Bocal understood one another. They had had many dealings in past times together. The city was neutral. Its merchants were as ready as ever to deal with all and sundry. Florin or thaler or livre, pistole or crown-piece, nothing came amiss that was money anywhere current. They were hard times when Strassburg merchants and Strassburg money-changers could not gather a small percentage on their multitudinous transactions.

The river Ill approaches the walls of Strassburg at the south-west corner of the city. The spire of St Peter's Church is right ahead, the tower of St Thomas is to the right, and further north-eastward rises the stark tower of the Minster, out of a high square pile of masonry that itself towers far above the red roofs of the houses.

At the spot where it first washes the old walls the Ill divides, and one arm makes the northern circuit of the city, the other the southern, but not before it has split up into four arms like the bars of a gridiron and joined again at the great mill. Along the bars of the gridiron, which are the arms of the river, is the quarter known as "Little France," and there most of the washing of the city is done, and there also are hauled up close to the quays a multitude of almost flat-bottomed boats, useful for carrying merchandise round the city.

It was past one o'clock by the big cathedral clock when the guard at the water-gate, which is outside "Little France," was hailed in soft Würtemberger sing-song and bidden "open." Seemingly he had been warned of some possible advent of the Germans, but how they were to drop down at the south-west corner of the town when their forces lay well to the north-east and the Rhine between, he did not ask. It was sufficient to him that he was hailed in good German, and looking over the tower and waving his torch saw

the Würtemberger uniform on the crew of the large rowing-boat, and of another behind it, as they lay on their oars close against the water-gate.

It was not long before a magistrate made his appearance and gave permission for the new-comers to enter. With much trouble, grinding and grating of the great gates, letting of water into the lock, closing of gates, more grinding and grating and rushing of water, this time with a sort of peaceful swirl like a meeting of relations, the boats made entry. Then the leader stood on the stone quay and talked with the magistrate in German. The men rowed on for a spell to the quay of the flat-bottomed boats, and, having tied up their boats, landed.

There was a pause by the river-side. It might have been an hour or more. The boats were left idle, with the water playing lip, lip, lap, about their broad sides, and running on to join its own current. Presently, after the big clock had struck two, and the town was as silent as that Prince of Nassau who lies, dressed in his clothes as he lived, in St Thomas' Church, a rumbling began, and then another rumbling and yet another, and presently trains of waggons began to come along the narrow, dark, cobble-stoned streets. There was slow progress, and there was creaking and straining of wheels and pins and yokes, and smothered oaths of drivers who were trying to be quiet and to get on,—a difficult matter with teams of horses and oxen roused up at midnight or after. But the officer who commanded, who spoke German with a rather French accent, a burly man with a decided habit of authority about him, was here, there, and everywhere, first in the Schlosserstrasse, then in the Munstergasse, next over the bridge at the old mill, or in and out the Judengasse. And at last the wains, loaded to breaking point, reached the quays where the boats lay, and under the same steady encouraging voice and gesture, rather felt than seen, boat after boat was loaded. Then the boats were lashed, five or six in a string, and the men divided with a few skilled Strassburgers to assist

them. And at last, when all was ready, the officer got into the leading boat and bade them cast off.

"Where do you expect to land the stuff?" whispered the magistrate.

"At Bischen!"

"You have a convoy to meet you?"

"A regiment or so! It is all safe! We shall dish Turenne. Ach so! Good! Till I see you!"

There was a little clink of gold—quite a whisper in itself—and another whisper of "Dank schön."

The worst part of the trial was over. The current would do nearly all the rest.

Slowly the small flotilla passed the great mill, passed St Thomas' Church, and so eastward with the stream. They made no stay at the quays where the river fish is landed, and presently left the tower of the Minster black against a blue sky behind them, as the boats headed north-east and came to a bridge where a cunning boom stayed their progress, till it was removed and they were free of the town, and presently the flat country spread out on either side dimly visible in the starlight.

There was a great stillness, only broken by the creaking of the sweeps against the thole-pins and the swish of the water against the blades. It was a long way to the Rhine at Bischen, and the river makes turns and twists innumerable as rivers will in flat countries. There was nothing to be gained by strenuous exertion, which would only exhaust the rowers, for the work was heavy. Only slow steadily-reiterated pulling could keep those heavily-laden boats moving down the middle stream, in order to reach their haven before the morning sun rolled up the covering curtain of mist which covered the river lands. The leader had calculated on the mist and it had not failed him. But the same mist did not allow the look-out man in the bow of the first boat to see far ahead.

The nearest French camp lay at Linx and Bodesweier, across the intervening stretch of land between the Ill and the Rhine, beyond the Rhine itself, and the flotilla had reached a point nearly due west of the French camp.

The leader could see the reflection of the camp-fires against the sky, and began to relax a little of the grimness in his voice as he gave his orders.

It was a doubly dangerous hazard he was playing, for more than half of the men with him were German soldiers picked for their daring, and although these were spread over the flotilla with underlings of his own, there were present two German officers who had undertaken to assist this unknown man to run these stores out of Strassburg to their own camp. The two or three men nearest to him in his own boat were in his confidence, and to them he could not resist a chuckle as he caught sight of the gleam in the sky, "Our German friends would be uneasy if they thought another hour or two would bring them to those camp-fires!"

Suddenly on the river-bank sounded the rataplan of a side-drum, once, twice, thrice!

The word was passed to lie on their oars and stay the boats against the current. The look-out man peered ahead and towards the bank.

There was the sound of voices giving orders rapidly in the French tongue, and then the splash of oars, and before they could make out anything, a boat full of French soldiers shot across their bow and a grappling-hook brought the two boats alongside.

The German crew, taken aback, seized their weapons, awaiting only the signal or example of the burly man with the black locks and big shoulders who sat in the bow.

The onset was evidently incomprehensible to him, for he swore a French oath under his breath and then said in French—

"What do you wish, gentlemen? I am Monsieur Bocal the contractor. I am bringing some stores to the French camp!"

"You speak falsely," retorted the officer who commanded the other boat. "You have been taking stores out of Strassburg to relieve the Germans. They are all Germans in these boats. Take them all prisoners—all."

Bocal shouted with his great voice orders to the oncoming boats in German, but the mist seemed to muffle the sound, and all the response he got was the noise of musketry and pistol-shots. The leader of the French lit a torch of pitch which one of his men held and waved it over Bocal and his crew.

"Germans all!" he said—but the voice was the voice of a woman, not a man—and in that instant Bocal saw the face. Their four eyes met in a flash of recognition and of hatred.

This, then, was the Red Neighbour! The girl he had betrayed and deserted! She it was, who was become the power that could ruin rich men and thwart their plans.

For an instant he wondered if it was possible to reassert his old ascendancy in spite of all. "Once your woman, always your woman!" was an old brutal maxim of his.

Then his pride reasserted itself, and he called to his crew to "Drown the devils," and springing up he knocked the man that held the boats grappled over the head, seized the grappling-hook, and before the others could stop him caught the Red Neighbour by the arm and with a backward jerk tore her from her boat and threw her into the river: and then swinging it round his head swept off three or four more. There was a general *mêlée*. They fought hand to hand without order—steadied by the train of boats laden with stores behind. No one saw the tall figure of Tintorin slip into the water as he spied a glint of a white face as it came to the surface of the misty stream.

Neither side would give way. Bocal alone seemed to escape unwounded, and at last the whole convoy grounded by the sedges of the shore. Bocal called those of his own underlings that were left, and all sprang off and made across the country. He did not stay to inquire the fate of the other boats which had suffered like attacks. He was only acutely conscious that the bold stroke had failed and he must face Turenne. At all events he had squared accounts with the Red Neighbour!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MARQUIS TURNS TO SEEK HIS WIFE.

The Marquis de Polignac bade adieu to the great Marshal and ordered his horse. Monsieur Bocal had already set out in his light carriage for Saverne with the view of practically demonstrating to Turenne and to the Marquis the ease with which he could furnish supplies of the best quality.

Needless to say, the Marquis, having fulfilled his immediate duty to the king, as he conceived it, was eager to meet his wife and take her under his own protection. It was not altogether the passionate eagerness of the lover. Nor, on the other hand, was love absent. "Love me all in all or not at all" is a pretty poesy for a betrothal ring. But the duties of life conflict sadly with the poetry of life's surface, never with its highest and deepest rhythms.

Often women cannot see above or below that surface, from which they miss the poetical adornments and go seeking asphodel in strange Elysian meads. Whence arise misunderstanding and tempestuous error.

De Polignac was conscious of an undercurrent of uneasiness that his beloved Marquise had left the home, where she was safe in her accustomed ease and dignity, to brave a troublesome dangerous journey, wherein she might see coarse sights, hear coarse sounds, and possibly expose herself to personal insult. He felt that it was more than indiscreet that she should have condescended to accept the company and hospitality of a man so much beneath her estate as Bocal,—a mere sutler of the camps, a man of merchandise and counterfeit merchandise,—a man soiled by a thousand squalid bargains. It was a failure in her to grasp the intention of his own journey. De Polignac did not know of the straits to which she had been reduced.

At the bottom he blamed himself that he had not

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turned back to meet her when first the news came to him that she was upon the road. It was from love of him she had come. Perhaps, he thought, he might have better fulfilled his duty to the State if he had done so: for now there was upon him a sense of disappointment, which all earnest servants of the State, as of all other employments, must feel at times—the sense that the achievement falls so far short of the endeavour, a sense that this clever plausible Bocal, full of practised effrontery, had in a measure justified himself in Turenne's eyes and would make him—the Marquis of Polignac—with his high aims and notions appear a mere futility.

It was then with a sense of duty uncompleted and of love galled by the untowardness of things that he heard his servant Loches tell him the horses were ready.

He was at the door of his tent buckling on his sword when some one he took to be a young officer came up, and, without ceremony, beyond a simple salute, entered and stood before him.

“What is it, young sir?” asked the Marquis.

“You do not then remember me?” Two piercing brown eyes looked into those of the Marquis. And the voice deep, but feminine in its quality, awoke recollections.

“The last time we met, my lord, was in the Conciergerie. It was a question of horses!”

“The Red Neighbour!” His voice showed the astonishment he felt. “Pardon me!” he went on. “There is much I wish to ask you, but time presses. I have urgent business elsewhere.”

“The Marquise!” she said briefly. “Yes! But I have matters still more urgent to bring before you.”

The Marquis made a gesture of impatience, but he stayed nevertheless.

“The first, madame?”

She handed the Marquis a paper. It ran:—

“I owe Monsieur Bocal twenty thousand livres.—Philippe. . . . Paid by the king's treasurer to us on behalf of the above-mentioned Monsieur Bocal.—De Moiron et Ricaud, bankers.”

"This was Monsieur Bocal's bulwark against the War Office!" she said.

"It is no longer there! I understand!" said the Marquis.

"But he does not know it!" she said, with a little triumphant note in her voice. "You can use it when you will."

"Good! And now you, who know so many things, can you tell me if Monsieur Bocal can fulfil his contracts?"

"I think not!"

"But what is Turenne to do?"

"The army shall not suffer. Josef Kuhn will be able to supply the deficiency. Monsieur Bocal, however, will not easily be beaten. He is full of resource when he is desperate. But indeed in a day or two at most the Germans will be in retreat, *if they do not succeed in getting stores from Strassburg*. Listen! I want two companies of foot soldiers to-night, fully armed, to go whither I can lead them. I have heard that an attempt is to be made to-night to get stores from Strassburg. I may be wrong. Let nothing be changed of the usual precautions, but no marching of men to and fro. Get me these two companies! Have them ready to march at midnight. Get me the necessary passes and passwords and leave the matter to me."

The Marquis hesitated. "But, madame!"

"Send whatever officer you like to command. All I desire is to guide them. Trust me as you did to cure the horses. It is a greater matter to-night. It may end in smoke, you understand. I may be misinformed. In which case there is no one to bear the ridicule but myself."

"I must go at once to Turenne! Wait here!"

The Marquis bade Loches keep watch as he walked the horses up and down.

But to find Turenne was no easy task. Turenne was a man of action and spared no pains. Seldom indeed did he linger in his tent except to study a map. He was bent on pushing these Germans back against the

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hills of the Black Forest, which loomed up tantalisingly near in the broad daylight, shrouded from sight at early morn and at even by the mists from the marshy lands surrounding the camp. The Marquis chafed as he went from one point to another. Always Turenne had been there and galloped off again. The Marquis wished he had taken his horse.

By the time he had found him, communicated so much of his information as he deemed necessary, and received the required permissions and passes, Monsieur Bocal had got four hours' start on the road to Saverne.

But he found the Red Neighbour patiently waiting his return. She was in fact asleep, stretched upon his bed. She was one of those untiring women who have sense enough to take rest when rest is to be had. And the bed of the Marquis was there. Why not use it?

A few more words and the Marquis mounted his horse, Loches his, and master and man were soon many leagues from the camp.

It was evening when he arrived at Saverne. The red glow of the westering sun lit up the tower of an old castle, and the tree-tops of the hills, beyond the little town. Empty wains were returning, bells a-jingle, to the town. A sense of approaching rest was creeping over everything, and whispered softly to the tired Gaston de Polignac. He began to say to himself that Marie Gabrielle must be looking out for him and would welcome him with that glorious tender smile of hers. He lost all the soreness of spirit in the anticipation of clasping his wife, his love, first and only love, to his breast. And it was with alacrity he dismounted at the "Black Ox," and with eagerness he inquired of the host which room she had.

"Monsieur! The Marquise drove away by herself for Strassburg two hours since!"

The revulsion of feeling was too great to conceal. He staggered and leant against the door-post.

The host brought him brandy, and expressed again and again his well-meant sympathy. "If madame had only known!"

"She went by herself?"

"But yes! She had her man and her maid with her and a trustworthy German to drive her. She was going to Strassburg in order to get thence to the camp. She would reach Strassburg to-night. Yes—before darkness set in."

"And Monsieur Bocal?"

"He set out for Nancy or somewhere to the west on horseback!"

"He has gone to hasten on his convoys," thought the Marquis. "Please get me some supper—quick, and give my servant something to eat. Tell him to come to me!"

"Ah, Loches! We are too late, it seems. Rub the horses down, feed, and rest them for two hours. Then we start again."

Loches saluted and went out disappointed. "There is nothing but luck or bad luck," he grumbled. He had expected a pleasant evening with some of the soldiery in Saverne.

The Marquis had barely sat down to his meal when the host ushered in another traveller, no other than the Comte de Roubaix.

The Comte's first inquiry was—

"Have you seen Madame la Marquise?"

The astonishment of the Marquis at seeing De Roubaix walk in was very great (he thought him still in Paris), but he controlled it because he expected to find in him another messenger from Du Louvois, and, if the news was disagreeable, at all events he was too proud to anticipate it, or to express the surprise he felt. He answered the question.

"No! She left here two hours ago for Strassburg. I have just arrived from the camp. Have *you* seen her?"

What a question! How fresh it was, the aspect of the little courtyard with the galleries running round it of the "Golden Bell" at Châlons! How plain to him the guest-room with its pieces of faded tapestry, its sanded floor, and the scornful Marquise! "What a difference between a lover like you and a husband like Gaston!"

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"Yes, my lord, I had the honour of escorting her from Epernay to Châlons, whence she preferred to go forward with Monsieur Bocal, instead of permitting me to get her an escort of cavalry. She would not hear of it! I had business in Châlons, and madame could not wait. I am, it appears, not so far behind after all."

"I wish the Marquise had agreed," said the Marquis. "But what brings you here? Does not De Louvois require you?"

"De Louvois could dispense with all of us," said the Count. "He is all-sufficing. The fact is, I saw that a clerk could do my work quite well, and I wanted to see the fighting, so I hinted at bearing despatches and got them. De Louvois is as fond of writing despatches as Monsieur Molière was of writing plays, and having written them he must needs publish them. It is his *métier*."

The Marquis smiled. "Have you anything for me?"

"Yes, Marquis—a lengthy disquisition on the merits of extreme discretion in dealing with army contractors. You need not read it now. I had the pleasure of copying it before starting. It will do to amuse you on the return journey."

The Marquis took the paper nevertheless, ran his eye down it, recognising here and there the well-known official phrases, and put it in his pocket. It was written before that other message which had overtaken him at Sarrebourg.

The Count had not waited for an invitation. He was already satisfying his hunger.

The Marquis looked approvingly. "I ought to have asked you to join me. Are you ready to pursue your journey in two hours in pursuit of the Marquise?"

The Count was not enamoured of the idea, because, after the last two conversations with the Marquise, it was galling to meet her in the company of the man that he was endeavouring to supplant according to the rules of the game: and he was scarcely likely to succeed in the presence of the husband, for whom the Marquise had expressed her preference in

such unhesitating terms. But the Count had a rule of practice which he had found extremely beneficial. It was this. If any one asks you to do anything, agree at once, unless you have a convincing reason to give why you should not. Hesitation implies a balancing of motives and breeds distrust. In nine cases out of ten you can creep out by holding on to the tail of an unforeseen accident.

"By all means! But how did you miss her? There is but one direct road to Strassburg from Saverne!"

"True! But I did not come through Strassburg. I skirted it, and came by Vassionné. Besides, it is ten leagues from Strassburg to Saverne. She may have almost reached Strassburg before I set out."

The Count thought a minute.

"No! You passed Strassburg at two o'clock,—let us ask the host when she set out!"

The host was called.

"At what hour did madame set out?"

"Truly I think about five!"

"Five and four are nine. She will be in Strassburg at nine, and we cannot reach it till eleven at best, The gates will be shut."

"We can camp outside till the morning!" said the Marquis, "if they will not let us in."

"I have other news for you, Marquis. When you have heard it you may wish to go alone."

The Count for once looked quite dejected.

"What is it, man?" The Marquis was wondering what new misfortune awaited his ears.

"It is about Thérèse! I have lost her."

"Lost Thérèse!" The Marquis sprang to his feet. "You are mad. Thérèse is at Meudon!"

"She may be—but I found her at Châlons. She had made her escape from Meudon, made an escort of a young gentleman, a Monsieur Giles de Beauprè, and started in pursuit of you. She is a young lady of great enterprise. I extricated her from some kidnapers at Châlons, and was going to put her in the convent of the Ursulines to await your return when

the two runaways gave me the slip. Where they are now I have no idea. I left word with the Ursulines and every other religious body at Châlons, at Bar-le-Duc, at Toul, at Nancy to stop her and detain her."

The Marquis's face had grown stern and stiff. The Count's expressed immense concern. There was a noticeable silence. One can imagine how the Marquis condemned his own overweening interest in the affairs of State when his wife was in front of him, he knew not exactly where, and his only child behind him, somewhere in the wide Champenois, or the equally wide Lorraine.

"This boy?" he blurted out.

"A brave, well-brought-up lad of sixteen, dying to see the war. He will not desert her! But where are they?"

"You mean to say you could gain no certain news after you left Châlons. Had they a start of you? It is incomprehensible."

"They must have let me pass them on the road somewhere. After Châlons I travelled as rapidly as possible."

"You say you extricated her from danger at Châlons?"

"I had to kill two men and wound another with the help of Giles."

"He is a brave fellow! It seems——" said the Marquis, his eyes brightening.

"He will make a swordsman in time," said the Count. "He was adopted by the Chevalier de Beauprè, once a page to the late king, poor but of good lineage. I do not know who Giles himself is. But he is a fine lad."

"The stars in their courses fight against me," said the Marquis. "You could not have done more. Who would have thought Thérèse could be so determined. It is, however, quite plain I must go back and seek till I find her, and you must go on to arrange for the comfort of Marie Gabrielle in Strassburg till I come. I have not finished my task."

"You absolve me then, my dear Marquis?"

"Quite!" said De Polignac, extending his hand.

"Write, then, to the Marquise that you place her in my charge till you come," said the Count. "Your handwriting will reassure her. She might not believe me. I do not care to be thrown over for Monsieur Bocal."

The Marquis very nearly smiled, called for pen and ink and wrote.

The Count was not displeased at this division of the employment. He wanted very much to be near Strassburg.

So did Loches. But at the end of the two hours he had to turn his horse's face towards the hills, to the Col de Saverne, to wit.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE COUNT DE ROUBAIX FINDS TRACES OF THE MARQUISE.

The Count de Roubaix was as suspicious by nature and training (his own chiefly) as he was frank in manner, a matter of training also, and he was not setting out on a wild-goose chase without trying to find out first the direction of the wild-goose's flight. "Distrust is the mother of safety," was written on the first page of his mind. He learned of the arrival of Bocal from the French camp, his departure for the Col de Saverne, and that he had lent the Marquise his travelling carriage and furnished her with a driver. Perhaps a recent rencontre with Monsieur Bocal had made him more circumspect. At all events he strolled to the three gates of Saverne and learned out of which the Marquise had driven. The Marquis would never have doubted the innkeeper when he said the lady

had set out for Strassburg. The Count had a very cynical view of innkeepers in general, born perhaps of a particular knowledge of their ways, and would have answered readily that an innkeeper's interest in a guest began and ended with his bill, though he was not averse to oblige one in other ways than the provision of board and lodging if, and only if, a suitable *pourboire* were forthcoming.

Whatever the destination of the Marquise, she had undoubtedly set out, not for Strassburg, but Hochfelden and Brumath, a road from which assuredly led to Strassburg, but took two or three hours longer than the direct route. She would know no better. This must be the handiwork of Monsieur Bocal.

The Count lost no time in setting out. There was an added pleasure, instead of the deduction he had anticipated from the company of the Marquis, in pursuing the Marquise, arising from the fact that he was going to put a spoke in the wheel of Monsieur Bocal. The Count felt quite a model of virtue, so much so that he began to doubt whether his elected career of self-seeker was not going to be set aside by the finger of Fate, a lady in whom, as in all other ladies, the Count had little belief, and a new road marked out for him as knight-errant of runaway schoolgirls and beautiful, but excessively fond, wives. It was truly disconcerting.

"We shall see how far one can safely go along the path of virtue," he said to himself. "One can always diverge."

And he galloped all the way to Hochfelden, learned the direction of the carriage, then rode rapidly on to Brumath.

At Brumath he learned that the carriage had taken the direction of the village of Wantzenau, which was strongly held by the French, and, as he had been informed by the Marquis, represented the extreme of the French left designed to prevent any attempt of Montecuculli to cross the Rhine and turn Turenne's flank.

Monsieur Bocal's manoeuvres were then difficult to

see through. He had in appearance sent the lady by a really direct route to the nearest point of the French lines, far enough away from Strassburg it is true, but to a point where it would be quite easy for her to claim the protection of the first officer she met and be conducted to headquarters. Was Bocal then converted into a saviour of marquises? What an intolerably virtuous world it was getting. Only the Count no more believed in Bocal's disinterestedness than in his own. Not that he suspected the contractor of undue admiration of the Marquise. Not at all. He knew enough of the errand of the Marquis to be sure that relations were strained, and very naturally inferred that Bocal fully meant to use the Marquise as intercessor or as a hostage.

But where was she?

At Wantzenau there was no news of her. And certainly no carriage could have passed through unknown, for a strong guard was on the alert and patrols were out towards Bischien, and in the country between the Ill and the Rhine. The whole aspect of things betokened war, and the Count's military instincts sniffed the air. For two pins he would have gladly crossed the Rhine with a troop or two and made a night attack on the German lines, whose camp-fires showed above the river-mists away in the distance. There was, however, little prospect of booty, for the lands of Alsace had been swept and harried till they were bone bare.

Bocal had not wished her to reach the French lines without him. This the Count's first inference made him once more satisfied of the inherent viciousness of human nature. He could go on reasoning. It makes such a difference to the conclusion when your major premise is altered from "All men are naturally self-seeking" to "All men are naturally disinterested."

If not Wantzenau, then some point short of Wantzenau was her harbour. He turned his horse abruptly and trotted back along the road he had come, marking all bypaths, which were few, but were carefully made

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and led to a definite place of human habitation. In a marshy country one does not make bypaths for amusement.

The night was not absolutely dark, but the mist along the riverine lands stood the height of a man. It was a sure driver and a knowing one who had taken a carriage left or right of the main road that evening, even allowing for two hours earlier. Not that there was much danger of drowning. It was the superfluity of mud and shallow water.

The Count rode on. He had decided that the place, wherever it might be, was on the left, for that way lay the river. A few years since he could have, given a sheet of paper, dotted down every farmstead for a few miles round, so familiar had campaigns made the country-side, but now his memory was somewhat overlain by other recollections. He could not remember any side road hereabouts. If any led to the river it must be masked. He went on again. Then there flashed across his mind that they had passed an inn not more than half a mile farther, a place to which the villagers of Wantzenau might wander on Sundays for merry-making. It was called the "Inn of the Ford." What ford? Depend upon it there was some pathway leading from it slantwise to the river.

No sooner thought than a brief application of the spur brought him opposite the door, him and his valet.

There were fresh wheel-marks in the softer earth that led up beside the house into what seemed to be the inn-yard, but was really only a partial enclosure, the fourth side being a grass-covered lode. The Count turned his horse and saw at a glance, first, that his surmise was correct, and second, that a light travelling carriage stood in the yard. The kitchen windows shed a ruddy light upon it, and there was a cheerful noise going on within.

Monsieur Bocal would then have it in mind to overtake his carriage and the occupant.

The Count rode up to the door of the inn and called loudly for an ostler.

The host came out, a German, heavily built, of a fair jolly countenance, and greeted the travellers.

"You have a lady guest here not long arrived?"

"Ja gewiss! Two hours since. She has gone to her chamber. Her maid and her man are in the kitchen having their evening meal. It is late, but I can give you some sausage, a bit of ham, and a slice of cold veal. Hans! Take the horses to the stable."

The Count dismounted, followed the innkeeper into the common room, a plain room with sanded floor and wooden tables and benches—rough and solid.

"Tell the lady the Marquis is here and would speak with her."

The host bowed and lit a candle and proceeded up the narrow stairs. The Count waited below.

He heard the host knock on the door of a chamber, but there was no answer. He knocked again without result and descended.

"She is fast asleep! I dare not waken her, my lord."

"The matter is urgent. Send her maid up to her."

The maid came, curtsying and smiling when she saw the Count, whom she regarded as the beau-ideal of couthood. She blithely undertook the task of awakening madame. She tripped up the stairs and knocked a rapid, sharp, decisive knock. There was no answer. She applied her ear to the familiar keyhole. Not a sound, not a breath but her own and a cold current of air as if from an open window.

She came down again. "It is strange, I cannot make her hear," she said.

The Count drew her outside. Yes, fortunately, there was a ladder. But the window was no great height.

"Go up, my little dear," he said. "I will hold the ladder."

With a coy gesture she mounted and peeped in. She climbed in. Then she reappeared.

"She has gone!" she said in amaze.

"Two crowns for you to keep silence," said the Count. "Let yourself out by the door. I will come up."

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In a trice he had returned to the front of the house, mounted the stair, held a whispered colloquy.

The maid returned to the kitchen.

"My mistress wanted something," she said aloud.

"They will say anything," cynically observed the Count.

No one knew of the departure of the Marquise but the maid and he.

"It is as bad as ever," thought the Count, as he emptied his first bottle of "vin gris," that curious Alsatian wine which is neither Claret nor Moselle nor Hock, nor anything on earth but "vin gris." It was all they had but "vin blanc," and that was worse. "It is as bad as ever—like this wine; here is the beautiful Marie Gabrielle gone off to find the ford through the damp grass and mists. I ought to follow her. Presently—will come Monsieur Bocal, and I ought to stay and meet him . . ."

"Tiens! My rascal will do . . ."

He called his man.

"Follow that green road beside the house—right to the river. Don't fall in, however. I want you. See if there is a ferry. If so find out, if there is a ferryman, whether any one—a lady—has crossed to-night. If there is no ferryman, try and discover all you can. Providence has given you a nose, two eyes, two hands with the usual complement of fingers. Go! Do not lose yourself. Return in an hour at most."

It was very disagreeable. The valet was sleepy. But the Count was no fool. He cudgelled or kicked his servants—occasionally, but not too often, paid them. But they infallibly obeyed him, or ran away both fast and far. They never argued.

The Count put some wood on the fire. It was getting chilly.

"Poor Marie Gabrielle!" he said. "She will assuredly get her feet wet."

One hour went by.

The host reminded him that his bed was ready.

The Count bade him set two more bottles of wine on the table, and go to bed himself.

The valet returned and told his tale.

"So!" the Count mused aloud. "There is an old ferry-boat. It works on a chain. You turn a winch. I remember. There was one at Roubaix where I was as a boy. Some one has used the ferry to-night—for the boat is at the other side, and there is the fresh mark of the boat being pushed off. Yes! And you have found this piece of lace, Point de Venise—from her ladyship's petticoat. I can ask Lucille or whatever her name is.

"Good! If Marie Gabrielle is not drowned—she is by this time in the hands of the patrols. I will wait."

The Count disposed his cloak comfortably about him, his hat well over his eyes, the corner of the table under his right elbow, his sword on the table, his feet on the bench on which he sat, and bidding his man go to sleep in the kitchen and waken him if any one arrived, went to sleep.

Daylight was breaking when the door opened and Monsieur Bocal in fact walked in.

He was muddy, dishevelled, haggard with nearly twenty-four hours incessant travel and toil, his eyes glazed and staring for sheer want of sleep.

Without a second look at the Count, whom he took for some officer going to the camp, he threw a couple of billets on to the expiring ashes, lay down in front of the fire with a couple under his great head, and was asleep in an instant.

The Count, who made no sign, proceeded to take another little nap—Bocal was safe for another hour.

But not for longer. To men of Bocal's type, sleep is a draught that can be taken in sips. An hour would revive his energy. The Count pondered for a minute or two on Bocal's outward condition of mud and water, on the haggard unusual appearance of his face: wondered what Bocal had gone through, and why, in the last twenty hours or so. Then he went to sleep.

It was five o'clock when they woke.

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Bocal shook his head, ran his big hands through his black locks, sat up and looked at the Count.

The Count smiled that disagreeable smile of his that showed his white teeth.

"You here?" said Bocal.

"I have come for the Marquise. Here is my authority," he added, unfastening the letter.

"I am going to conduct her to Turenne's headquarters myself," said Bocal.

"As to that we can ask her," said the Count. "But just now, my dear Forage (Bocal snarled at the name) let us have an understanding."

"About what?"

"The Marquise. It seems to me that you have been doing your best to keep her in your own possession. You must know that it is an impossible game to play. The Marquis . . ."

"Had better look after his own interests!" growled Bocal.

"The Marquis, my dear Bocal, is well able to do that. He has evidently dislocated your plans, and you seek to move his wife about, a lady of the best blood in France, as a sort of hostage till you can arrange terms."

"And what have you to do with that?" asked Bocal. "Are you the Marquis's bully?"

"Not in the least, my dear Forage. But I say that you shall not pursue this line any further."

"You! Pou-ah!"

"Not very prettily expressed," said the Count. "But forcibly. Yes! If you make any further attempt in this direction I shall run you through the body."

Bocal put a strong control over himself. But the effect was immense. He was no poltroon.

"It seems to me that I can ruin you in one short hour by handing to your master, the Marquis, a few papers."

"It was you then who ransacked my rooms while I was in the Conciergerie?"

"Not I!" Bocal replied contemptuously.

The Count was certain Bocal spoke truth that time.

"You can do as you please about the papers, and I shall do as I please about your son."

"My son! What do you know about my son?"

"What you told me and what I have discovered. He is a pretty lad is Monsieur Giles de Beaupré. It would be a pity for him to know who and what his father is."

Bocal glared at the Count, strode two or three times up and down, grinding the sand of the floor beneath his heels. He could have slain the Count where he stood with his two hands, so great was his fury. The Count did not appear perturbed, but his right hand did not wander far from the sword-hilt.

"You know Giles de Beaupré?" Bocal asked, panting.

"Yes! We have had an adventure together at Châlons. We slew two (or was it three?) of your rascals, and released Mademoiselle de Polignac."

The effect of this news upon Bocal was to steady his nerves. He seemed to become in an instant the master of bold effrontery and resource.

"Giles will have the pleasure of seeing you hang one of these days. My servants are not killed for nothing. I shall not release the Marquise till I choose."

"No? You are late then! The Marquise has already gone."

"Gone?"

Bocal rushed up the stair, burst open the first, the second, the third doors. The third showed that the room had been occupied.

The Count awaited his return calmly.

When Bocal descended, he cross-questioned the host, the servants, the maid Nanette. No one knew anything.

"It seems to me," said the Count, "you have been outplayed this time. I am going on to Wantzenau."

Bocal ordered out his travelling carriage, and resumed the journey to the camp, which he had begun on foot earlier that morning.

He felt that all things were crumbling away, and yet he would face the world in spite of it. As for the Count who knew so much, he would get even with him. That at least must be done.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MONSIEUR BOCAL PLAYS "PHILIPPE."

Monsieur Bocal, having made sure that the Marquise had left Wantzenau without waiting, as he had intended, for him, made the best of his way to camp. Concerning his misfortune in the matter of the Strassburg stores, so nearly a success that in fact he felt sure much of them had reached French hands, though not as he had planned, he could not throw off the feeling that the fates were against him. He knew enough, this money-builder, to know that success in a life like his was due to a combination of skill and perseverance, exerted under a certain benign aspect of things themselves,—call it chance, fortune, what you will. The wise contractor reduced chance to a small factor, but it was there; and now, after years of success, he had suddenly met with gigantic reverses—credit shaken in Paris, stores despoiled, horses stolen, organisation broken down, his honest profits the subject of scrutiny, and lastly, a stroke of genius and daring turned aside by the arm of a woman. The woman had been at the bottom of all the rest, except that for which that cursed interfering Marquis had been responsible. Well! She was dead. And no one would be able to swear that he, Bocal, had anything to do with it.

In disposing of her he had once more reduced Fate to a small factor. It would go hard, but he would minimise the importance of the Marquis: not that he had any covert idea of resorting to assassination. But the succession of events had brought into Bocal's mind a tendency to brood over his wrath, and his wrath had led to his dealing the blow at the woman he had once loved, because she stood so manifestly between him and his immediate object, as well as being the author of the many mischiefs that had been wreaked upon his interests. His wrath might burst out again. It might obscure his judgment.

Having made sure of the Marshal's movements, he sent out messengers to direct his convoys from Saverne and other places to converge on a road that should lead conveniently to where the next encampment should be. The Marshal was busy; so was Bocal. The Marquis was no doubt still hunting for his wife. Turenne's storm might blow over, if he was only busy enough, and Bocal could make things go with any sort of smoothness. To this he bent himself.

To his profound disgust he was summoned to the Marshal's tent at Gamshurst, just after the defeat of the German advance-guard by the Chevalier d'Hocquincourt. His disgust became deeper still when he learned that the Marquis de Polignac was with the Marshal.

The Marquis had in fact learned, before threading the Col de Saverne in its entirety, from a waggoner, that he had been passed by a boy and a girl riding on nags on the way from Nancy to Sarrebourg, and by this time they should have passed Saverne. He found on turning back and making further inquiries that this was so, and that they had set off in a baggage-waggon which was bound for Wantzenau in charge of some soldiers.

The Marquis had ridden as quickly as possible back to Wantzenau, thence to Bischen, and finally to Gamshurst, without gaining further trace of them beyond the fact that they had left the artillery waggon at Wantzenau and started on foot for the Marshal's camp.

Still bereft of wife and child, and without knowledge of their precise situation in the midst of this war-swept country, the Marquis was in no very calm mood. It was impossible for any one to be so.

But being at Gamshurst he resolved to see to what extent Bocal was fulfilling his undertaking. Turenne, anxious for his next movement, in which he felt certain of success, was equally desirous that no failure of the commissariat should give him one instant's check.

"Come, Monsieur Bocal," said the Marshal not ill-

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humouredly, for were not his plans maturing to his wishes, "where is your flour?"

"It is on the way, Marshal. I shall have by good luck twenty waggons at Gamshurst to-night."

"But that is not keeping to the contract!"

"I have had grave misfortunes. An ambush was laid in the Col de Saverne. I have had the devil's own job to get it through. The roads are clear now. There will be a steady supply."

"But, monsieur, I move forward almost at once. I want fifty at least at Nieder-Achern by to-morrow or next day at latest."

"Then it is not possible. The roads are bad. You move so fast."

"All this is the chance of war," said Turenne coldly. "We shall have to look elsewhere, it is evident. Your supplies ought to have been nearer."

"Monsieur, you must have patience! If your friend the Marquis de Polignac had not so ill-advisedly interfered, for instance, you would have had plenty."

"Yes; and my soldiers would have been dying of dysentery and bad flour. No, no! Monsieur Bocal, I want flour, not patience. Patience won't feed the soldiers. And hay? Where are my hundred waggons of fine hay? How can we pursue the Germans without hay? I tell you I must have another contractor."

"Very well, Marshal. Where will you find another in France? Where will you find one in Alsace, and where will he find flour?"

"There is Josef Kuhn!"

"Josef Kuhn! Who buys hides and sells boots! Josef Kuhn find flour?"

Bocal's eyes displayed an unmeasured surprise.

"Be it so! We will see if you can break contracts. His Majesty, whom I have served so long, will see to that. Is not De Louvois satisfied? Has he not recalled the Marquis de Polignac, who stays here at his own peril?"

Turenne looked at the Marquis.

The Marquis made no sign.

"It is true his Majesty had given you the contract, but in the field I act for his Majesty, and if the food is not good or not sufficient, I must get another contractor. Yours becomes void."

"Void! His Majesty must pay me for every waggon I have upon the road."

"Not so!" said the Marquis, intervening for the first time. "The contract not being fulfilled the loss falls on the contractor. Doubtless the Marshal will accept any food or forage that you bring in, but it will be at his own price, according to its goodness."

"Ventre diable! No! I will have every penny of my contract price."

"How do you propose to get it?" asked the Marquis coldly.

"Listen, Monsieur le Marquis—the Duke of Orleans is my good friend. He will see me paid."

"The Duke of Orleans!" said Turenne. "The Duke will not trouble about a mere contractor!"

"Will he not? The Duke of Orleans owes me twenty thousand livres."

"I think not," said the Marquis, taking a slip of paper from his vest. "Here is the quittance signed by your own bankers."

Turenne glanced at it, and held it so that Bocal could see it.

Bocal turned furious. "Conspiracy after conspiracy to ruin me! The devil take you all for a set of lying rascally damned . . ."

Turenne was on the point of ordering a guard to arrest him when an officer came in with a message.

"I give you till to-morrow," said the Marshal, "to apologise for your language, but understand your contract no longer holds good. Next time you rely upon a rear-guard see that it is good in an emergency."

Bocal went out murmuring imprecations. He knew he had gone too far and jeopardised his neck, but his evil passions were uppermost and his judgment wanted time to reassert itself.

Was he going to be ruined after all?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DR LEVANI TO THE RESCUE.

There was one quality in Dr Levani, formerly, under another name, lacking to the Comte de Roubaix, which makes for greatness—to wit, doggedness.

He had been a secret witness of the departure of the Marquise in the travelling carriage of Monsieur Bocal. Monsieur Bocal was a new star in Levani's firmament. Their orbits had hitherto been in different planes. The ex-valet, who was now an astrologer, was not long in learning from the stars and other sources all that was generally known about the great army contractor. He did not regard the information as promising much custom. Contractors did not, in his experience, concern themselves much about horoscopes or love-philtres, or the search for the philosopher's stone. They were an unimaginative phlegmatic class, not burdened with superstitious curiosity. All the same, he resolved to follow the Marquise. That she had so suddenly dispensed with the society of the Count seemed to tumble to the ground his previous conclusion about their having met clandestinely to conduct a love-affair. If there were still something underlying it, the Marquise must be a singularly light woman to exchange the Comte for this Monsieur Bocal at so short a notice. Monsieur Bocal was, however, sure to be rich, and, despite outward appearances, Levani judged the Count to be poor. Women were, in the astrologer's opinion, far more easily swayed by wealth than by any other commonplace motive. The true view, that the Marquise was really eager to reach her husband, and regarded the Count, Bocal, and himself as mere signs and tokens, by using which she was nearing her goal, did not occur to him. His experience of the ladies of Paris was that they willingly expended time and money in avoiding the society of their husbands, never in seeking it. The Marquise, then, had some object in view,

but she was deeper than the ordinary woman of fashion. He would still follow. At the worst he would ultimately arrive at the camp, where there would be the usual feminine cohort, passionate or greedy, and therefore gullible. There would be officers and soldiers, idle in the intervals of war, on the look-out for anything that would stimulate their curiosity or their superstition.

The worthy Doctor had hired a horse at Châlons, on a sufficiently plausible pretext to secure its services, for a moderate deposit as guarantee of good faith, fastened his modest valise upon it, mounted, and set out. It was not so difficult a matter to keep up with the quarry, for the reason that, though Bocal travelled fast from place to place, he invariably had business to transact at the towns he came to, and the sufficient rest and refreshment of the Marquise and her servants were scrupulously cared for. By curtailing his own hours of rest to the bare needs of his horse, which, not being overfed, always started with great vivacity for the next stage in the ever alluring hope that it meant his destination and a plentiful supply, Levani made up the ground he lost upon the road.

He climbed up the steep winding ascent into Bar-le-Duc with the fear in his heart that he had been left hopelessly behind, up the street of the Great Clock, past the fountain, and beheld with a certain amazement the street of the Dukes of Bar with its fine houses, wide, white, and quiet, ornamented by sculptured gargoyles, and wondered if he could get news of the contractor and his carriage. He was relieved when he caught a glimpse of it in the yard of an inn, and immediately passed on to a second one of more moderate appearance. After that his mind was at ease. And he devoted his mental abilities to the economy of his funds.

He kept well out of sight, and started for Toul a bare quarter of an hour after Monsieur Bocal.

It had been a sufficiently weary journey to Bar-le-Duc across the wide Champenois, the everlasting verdure flowing like a sea from the roadside to the hills many miles away. But between Bar-le-Duc and Toul the

scene became more diversified. The hills covered with rough pines drew closer about the river. Villages with red-tiled roofs and white houses succeeded one another along the hillside. Now and again showed great cliffs of chalk, where the base of the hills had been cut away or fallen. Vines covered the lower slopes of the hills to the left hand, and the chalk-white riband of the road wound on and on and about, visible for long distances, the dust of it settling upon his clothes and hat till he might have been a miller who rode into Toul, and sought a very welcome inn in the "Rue Qui-qu'en Grogne," once more to find that the elusive travelling carriage was snugly ensconced in a neighbouring inn-yard.

From Toul the patient jackal followed to Nancy, and from Nancy to Sarrebourg, the little town of red tiles set against a middle-distance of pine forests and a dim horizon of blue mountains. Soon began the road through the defile of a northern spur of the Vosges, known as the Col de Saverne, and he duly caught up his prey, to find that a whole day was to elapse before any fresh move was made.

The Marquise was left alone. With what excuse of aid he could present himself was a puzzle, so he contented himself by making his way into the guard-rooms of the town and offering to draw horoscopes or to sell a certain specific against ague, which he had learned incidentally was a common sickness in this part of the country. The same specific he would have been equally confident to recommend in another place for an antidote against the dryness of the atmosphere, the gout, or the smallpox.

From these dealings he made enough money to pay his bill and leave him a little over; and learned the positions of the camp, of the enemy, and other useful details.

At last the welcome travelling carriage was at the door of the "Black Ox," and he saw the Marquise drive away, this time by herself. His fingers insensibly wandered to his slender purse and felt the coins within lovingly, as a widower who marries again may embrace

his first family, before introducing the new-comers to its tender welcome.

He took good care to follow by the right road at no very long interval, and rejoiced to find that he easily kept the carriage in sight.

He made no chain of reasoning to explain the movement of the Marquise or to lay bare the motives at the root of them. He was essentially a waiter on opportunity. He followed, followed, resting at Hochfelden, resting again at Brumath, and then fared onward.

When the carriage was eventually unhorsed near Wantzenau with every appearance of staying the night, he waited to reconnoitre before halting also at this solitary inn, because he wished not to be recognised by the Marquise or by her servants till the moment when he should offer his services. For this reason he led his horse a little way down the grassy road that led to the ferry in entire ignorance of its termination, and eventually to the ferry itself.

He was on the point of going back to the inn when he was aware of some one approaching, and looking up perceived the very object of his solicitude, the Marquise.

She did not at first recognise him, and, taking him for a simple traveller, said—

“Monsieur, I wish to cross this ferry immediately. Will you assist me?”

“With good will, Madame la Marquise!”

“What! Dr Levani! You have befriended me before. Quick! Help me to cross this ferry, and take me to the French camp, to Turenne! I will give you anything.”

“Madame!” the Doctor protested; “you do me injury. In your service . . .”

“We lose time!” she said, dragging with all her puny might at the boat.

The Doctor loosened it from the mud, assisted her into it, and pushed off, turning the winch with a will.

Having landed her safely, he said—“Await me! I must return for my horse. With him we can go far. Without him we can do nothing.”

Impatiently she wrung her hands and wept. But the

Doctor was as speedy as he was dexterous, and returned in good order with the horse.

Then having mounted her upon the horse in as much comfort as he could, he set out to lead the horse towards the Rhine and towards the south. There was light sufficient to see the church-spires of several villages across the Rhine, and the rest was guesswork. In their slow and tortuous journey of perhaps two or three leagues towards the Rhine, and towards that portion of the bank which lay opposite to the village of Linx and Bodesweier where the Marshal's camp was, so far as Levani's information, obtained at Saverne, carried him, Levani by turns reassured the Marquise, growing more and more timid with the lowering nightfall and very evident mist, cold, and damp which seemed to rise about them, and fell into questionings with himself as to where and how he was to take his own reward.

In the first place, always resting his premises on his own general postulate of the extreme fallibility of human nature, he considered that, if a happy chance threw them in the way of a boatman who could put them across the Rhine, his own reward would be very uncertain, as depending entirely on the gratitude of the Marquise, a fine lady, and therefore unlikely to remember so humble a helper as himself. Self-interest urged that he should extract some of the louis d'or she probably carried without delay. On the other hand, by waiting, by playing the disinterested friend, he would establish a claim on the Marquis. Had he known how strong this claim would have been in fact, he would have been content with a future reckoning. But his disbelief in human gratitude, together with his extreme faith in a gospel of self-interest, decided him to take advantage of the fears of the Marquise on the first opportunity which seemed to promise her ultimate safety.

After two hours' journey they were without doubt close to the Rhine, and his quick ears detected the sound of oars.

"If madame will descend," he said, "I will go for-

ward and see if I can procure assistance to cross the river."

The Marquise dismounted and took the animal's reins in her hands, passive with fatigue and chill.

"I may need to bribe them, madame, heavily. It is the time of war!"

She handed him her purse as she would have handed him a biscuit.

He took it with grave deference and placed it in his vest.

"Don't leave me, I pray! Suppose the horse were to run away—don't leave me!"

"It is necessary for one or two moments. You cannot come on to the edge of the river." Levani's tones almost amounted to command. He advanced, cleverly picking his way through the reeds, and caught hold of a willow while he shouted.

"Holla! holla! there! Boatmen!"

A long-boat with a dozen or so of soldiers armed with muskets, four with oars, rumbled slowly into the half light.

"What do you want?" a sergeant, who appeared to be in command, asked gruffly in French. "We are the river patrol. If you have not seen the enemy be silent."

"If you are the river patrol you can earn a little money, Monsieur le Lieutenant, by taking a lady across who wishes to reach the Maréchal."

"Women enough!" said the sergeant. "The Maréchal wants men, not women! Peste! We don't get enough food as it is."

"She is a lady of rank this one, a Marquise, and a great friend of Turenne's. He will assuredly promote you."

"Who are you?"

"I am her physician! It is not every one who carries a physician with her."

"It is no part of our duty," said the sergeant. "Nevertheless for a consideration, a crown a head, seeing she is a woman of rank, we might manage it. What say you, comrades?"

"It is little enough, seeing the night it is!" said one.

"Monsieur, twelve crowns for a little journey like that! Come, you're joking! We must trudge on to Bischen, horse and all. One cannot be robbed of every sou. Come! Say twelve livres and it is yours! The horse can swim behind."

"Five livres for the horse. He might upset us."

At that moment a dull discharge of musketry sounded in the distance.

"The Germans are attacking us at Renchen!" said one.

"At Renchen? What are those villages over there?"

"Linx and Bodesweier!"

"You are no longer there!"

"No! The Maréchal is not the man to stay long anywhere. He is moving north."

The Marquise had crept nearer at the sound of the muskets, and heard the last words.

"The Maréchal! Take me across the river, quick! I must see the Maréchal."

The sergeant ran the boat into the reeds. Levani sprang back to assist the Marquise.

And in a few moments they had her safe in the bow of the boat, and Levani, in the stern by the sergeant, held the horse by the reins, and being a middle-aged beast, which had entirely lost the habit of expostulating, it allowed itself to be towed with some plaintive efforts at self-assertion to the other bank, up which it scrambled with very good will.

Levani dexterously drew out the four pistoles, gave the sergeant two and slipped the other two into his breeches pocket.

"Keep straight on," said the sergeant, "along that road, it will take you into Linx. You will not get farther to-night."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A NIGHT IN THE FOREST.

It was a miserable inn at Linx to which Dr Levani, by help of a belated peasant or two, brought his convoy; for the best rooms were taken up by sick officers, victims to the rains and to the low marshy ground, seasoned campaigners though they were.

Still the Marquise was content, only too glad to have escaped from surroundings full of presage of Bocal, of whom, till her arrival at Saverne, she had taken no real heed, and at whom the last phase of her journey had conjured up an unreasoning alarm.

Now treading on the very skirts of war, she realised what sheer discomfort meant. There was that, however, about the Marquise which procured all the attentions the hostess could pay her and Levani's methods alone would have failed to obtain.

The last information she had been able to glean, before falling asleep in an uncomfortable but clean bed, was that Turenne was at Waghurst, three leagues away. The camp itself had been removed. Half the forces were at Freistett—part on the Renchen near the castle, part at various posts between.

At intervals during that night she awoke to the sound of musketry and even of occasional cannon fire. The enemy was attacking by night to the north and to the east.

Attacking what, and why?

Turenne's plan, after crossing the Rhine, had been to secure the line of the river so that no crossing should be possible on the part of the enemy, and no supplies could issue from Strassburg to maintain him.

This done he began a movement from the right, which was to turn the enemy's left from the hillsides at their back, and roll them into an armed coil, of which the other end was at Freistett. As they re-

treated, they would find themselves either surrounded or driven away from the hills and on to the Rhine at a point so far north of their present posts as to render a crossing nugatory or self-destructive.

Montecuculli, unaware at present of the new development, and thinking that Turenne's forces were for the most part at Freistett, and that there was merely a chain of posts along the line of the river Renchen from Gamshurst to Renchen, had ordered an attack on these posts at the same moment that Turenne was on the road, laid with faggots, through the marshy woods that separated Bischen from Waghurst. The effect was that Prince Charles, who was in command of the enemy's attack, was himself surprised by the weight of the force he was called upon to encounter, and beat a retreat. It was the sound of this conflict by night that reached the sleeping Marquise. Turenne the next day did not deem it advisable to follow up this retreat, owing to the presence of a heavy haze which spread over the plain, obscuring all movements of his own as well as of the enemy's troops, and contented himself with preparing for the further movement by concentrating his forces astride the road which leads from Waghurst to Nieder-Achern.

This was the morning after the Marquise crossed the Rhine. She awoke to find the whole countryside wrapped in mist. Stragglers from the night attacks came in, and some said Turenne was at Waghurst, others at Renchen, others still at Gamshurst, the three other angles of an irregular square, of which one was Linx.

Levani pronounced it clearly impossible to go wandering over the country, the roads of which, bad enough at all times, were filled with baggage-waggons, gun-carriages, and regiments in movement. Even he had become convinced by this time that the one and only desire of the Marquise was to find her husband, and it was because she felt certain he would be with Turenne that she begged and implored to be shown the way to the Marshal himself.

Levani made two practical suggestions—one to send a careful guide to fetch her maid, her man-servant, and her valises, the other that she should rest where she was till he ascertained without doubt where Turenne or the Marquis was.

The Marquise agreed reluctantly enough, and the Doctor, having prudently discharged all expenses to this point, handed her back her purse lighter by several pistoles. She merely opened it to press upon him some further money for his journey, and Levani, with some misgiving as to whether he had not been too modest in his exactions, took leave and set out on his still unsatisfied horse.

The sullen sun, however, would not be denied, and at midday dispersed the haze. The Marquise, ever growing more impatient, fearful, not for herself but for the safety of the Marquis, questioned every soldier upon whom the host could lay hands, and at last made up her mind that the balance of truth lay in the rumour of Turenne's being at Waghurst, the nearest of the three possible points mentioned. She commanded a carriage, a guide, and a sturdy driver, and regardless of her servants, her personal attire, and of her agreement with Levani, set out, buoyed up by a new feeling of independence which her solitary flight had engendered. To Waghurst she would go.

But the same lifting of the haze which had made it possible for her to start from Linx had induced Turenne to start northward to clear the ground in front of him to Gamshurst. With his left as a pivot, his centre and right were advancing to the north—his own objective being Gamshurst, that of his extreme right Nieder-Achern.

This movement was in progress while the Marquise pursued her solitary journey, hindered by all kinds of obstacles. It was night when she reached Waghurst, to find the place and neighbourhood strewn with the *débris* of an army and the last of a long train of waggons following its route to the north.

Inquiries there for Dr Levani proved fruitless.

Another night of even greater discomfort dragged its slow length away. A more haughty lady, or one whose natural sweetness and goodness shone less conspicuously, would have had to spend it in her carriage, for the innkeeper at Waghurst had found more custom than profit in the temporary occupation of his hostel by the staff of the Marshal, and by officers, sick or wounded in the recent skirmishes. The operations of war, which might centre a dozen times in a short month in a little village such as this, did not conduce to the outward courtesies of innkeeping, nor to the refined treatment of women. In every campaign women of different degrees followed the camp, and innkeepers were not careful of their manners to ladies whom their own particular cavaliers treated with little ceremony, except that of a sufficiently coarse gallantry. The officers and men alike got what they wanted for payment or by force. The women got what the officers and men gave them, now profuse, now savagely sparing, according to the quarters they were in and their success at cards, dice, or the gathering of booty.

The innkeeper at Waghurst had not heard of the Marquis de Polignac. The Marquise described her husband to the last button. No! He was positive he had not seen him. Her heart sank, but she determined to go on, and partly persuaded by her beauty and courageous perseverance, partly by other inducements, her guide and her driver agreed to follow the army to Gamshurst.

It was easy to intend. She was now to experience the difficulties of progress along the road, at no time good, cut into a thousand muddy ruts by endless wheels of gun-carriages and waggons, stamped with the criss-cross hoof-marks of numerous horses, choked for leagues on end with every kind of military vehicle, with camp-followers, with regiments of soldiery, under discipline it is true, and officered by some of the bravest and best of Frenchmen. But soldiers on the march to a new camp, officers, whose profession gave a prerogative of licence when not actually upon the

battle-field, were not all of them able to let a carriage pass them as they rested at the roadside without rough salutes of officious gallantry. Time and again she had to raise her voice and say, "Messieurs! You forget your Paris manners. I am the Marquise de Polignac!" before they drew back abashed or tendered a hasty apology.

At last her carriage came to a complete stop. The driver learned from those immediately in front, to whom it had come from mouth to mouth over leagues of road, that Turenne had found a strong body of the enemy in front of him, and had commanded that no one should go forward till he had cleared away the obstacles.

Night found them in the same position. To left and right stretched a forest. Many of the younger trees had been cut down to supply the needs of the army's carpenters and wheelwrights for their crafts, and of the common soldiers for camp-fires. The camp-followers were not slow at following the example set them, and hacked and hewed in all directions. Presently a hundred fires glinted through the trees, sending up a crackling noise and a thick smoke, which on account of the thick foliage above hung above the heads of the bivouacked and spread where it listed.

The driver and guide took out the horses and tethered them in the wood within sight of the carriage, and explained to the Marquise that she must just go to sleep. They would watch by turns. The night would be short, and by sunrise, doubtless, they could get on.

Sleep! The children of fortune that followed the camp, motley medley of men and women, squatted round their fires drinking, eating, throwing dice for sous, chattered and swore in tones now shrill, now deep, in a patois that was made up of many patois. There was an interminable distracting clamour. Sleep!

The Marquise shrank into the corner of her carriage, wrapped in her cloak, fearful lest she should lose sight of both her protectors. Never had she been face to face

with the rascaldom of Paris. She had caught glimpses of it on the Pont Neuf and in other crowded resorts, from her carriage. Here in this dark forest beyond the Rhine surrounding her on every side was a rabble of all Europe, and nothing but the thin covering of her horseless carriage between her and it, except the fidelity and watchfulness of a strange coachman, and an equally strange guide.

If some of these women, who a few steps off were haggling over the value of some silver buttons, were to insist on sharing her quarters for the night?

"Tiens!" one of them was saying. "He was a handsome fellow, I tell you, and he just cut them off his uniform like that and said, 'You are a good girl, Nichette! They are worth a livre each.'"

"One must get what one can!" said another. "We cannot all ride in our carriage like that. She will be some great general's girl!"

The Marquise heard, and saw the gesture. She felt an angry flush pass over her face, and drew her hood closer about her ears.

There was the rattle of a drum. Presently she made out the tramp of men, and peeping out descried soldiers making their way on either side of the road through the trees in irregular order, but always marching as best they could, in and out in endless files, the fires now and again lighting up a button, a buckle, or a sword-hilt. Turenne was wanting them. They had no time for sleep. She wished she was one of them. For an instant she even dreamed of following in their wake, but the wish passed. It was too severe an ordeal to face.

A silence followed. Sleep, which was denied to her, came to all or nearly all. The silence was more intolerable than the noise. The presence of hundreds of fellow human beings sleeping around her gave her no sense of security such as it gave them. She feared the midnight robber stalking in the silence and the darkness. The crackling of a branch, a bird wakeful on the bough, made her start from the half dose into which she occasionally fell. Always she peered out to see if one or other of her

men were on the perch. One was there, asleep like the rest.

The silence became deeper still to the Marquise, for she too became a part of it, for how long she did not know, but she woke to a strange voice calling—

“Madame la Marquise!”

She made a curious petulant movement and nestled her head more closely to the cushions as a child does who refuses to be wakened.

“Madame la Marquise!”

She must wake again to the troublous world. She opened her eyes and blinked at the light of a torch held by some one without the carriage. The light fell on a woman's face surmounted by an officer's plumed hat; beneath the shadow of the brim peered two startling brown eyes.

For a moment the two women looked at one another. Then remembrance asserted itself, amid the unlikenesses of the surroundings.

“The Red Neighbour,” murmured the Marquise.

“It is certainly I, madame.”

“You did not die, then?”

“By the torture? No! I do not die easily.” There was no trace of boasting in the tone, only bitterness. “Monsieur Bocal has done his best to drown me since, but thanks to Tintorin,” she half turned her head to the tall man who held the torch, “I am still alive for vengeance.”

“Monsieur Bocal? Monsieur Bocal?” the Marquise repeated. “Why should he want to drown you? He brought me to Saverne in his carriage. Then I distrusted him and tried to get to Turenne by myself.”

The Red Neighbour noted the uncertain questioning look in her eyes. She divined instantly. She had not been a sorceress of fashion and a woman for nothing.

“There will be a reckoning with Monsieur Bocal. But what takes you to Turenne?”

“To find my husband.”

“Three days ago your husband started for Saverne to find you.”

The Marquise was too proud to weep before this woman who was neither lady nor servant. She could feel the pang, nevertheless. It stopped her speech for an instant.

"He will immediately return to Turenne when he finds you have come on. You had better leave your carriage and come with me. I have a horse. It will carry us both."

Trust herself to the Red Neighbour, the source of all her misfortunes! To a woman who had been in the Conciergerie, put to the torture for sorcery and on a charge of poisoning! The Marquise winced a little at this new irony of destiny.

"Yes!" said the Red Neighbour, reading her mind, "you will be safer with me than with this rabble, the booty of the first scoundrel who lights upon an unprotected pretty woman. Come."

The Marquise marvelled at the Red Neighbour's cavalier suit, at her neat and shapely riding-boots with the tiny spurs, as she sat astride her horse while Tintorin lifted her up and set her in front of the strange woman, marvelled still more at the arm, strong and muscular, as if it had been a man's, that held her tightly round the waist.

Tintorin, with his torch, leading his own horse, went in front. The Red Neighbour followed. They went slowly, but they went. Hope flickered into flame once more.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ON THE VERY EVE OF VICTORY.

The world, if it openly belittles the services and worth of its great commanders, in its secret heart worships them. But its worship, open or secret, its gifts of laurel or of public moneys, were never a feather in the balance

against the joy of the great general in his own feats of strategy.

The shock of battle may fill the younger officers with a tumultuous enthusiasm, almost with a frenzy, but the old commander, who in his day has doubtless been a famous fighting leader too, has a far more subtle joy in the preparation for the event: which he has determined shall have only one ending. His it is to dispose his troops so that one regiment shall do the work of four, so that his mighty hammer shall come down upon the anvil fully and fairly, to flatten out his horse-shoe. There may be movement after movement, an affair of outposts here or there, but his great battle is to be one of his own making, and not of the enemy's.

Turenne, the great Maréchal, knew that he was drawing near to his great battle.

He had reached Gamshurst and found it an unexpected obstacle. The Germans were there before him. They had entrenched themselves in and behind the church, even in the graveyard, a grim rampart from which they could level their muskets in some safety. They had barricaded themselves in the stronger houses of the village, and the church commanded the ford of the river Achern, across which lay Nieder-Achern and the enemy.

It was not possible to leave them there, for the Germans might turn Turenne's flank—unless he changed the direction of his whole line of advance, and that would have been to begin all over again. His scouts brought word that two thousand foot and six squadrons of cavalry were ensconced in and about Gamshurst.

He ordered forward the Chevalier d'Hocquincourt and his dragoons, half a dozen battalions of foot and four pieces of cannon. They were to take the place at all hazards. It was one of the most stirring events of the war, fought at pike's-length in a few minutes from the onset. There is nothing like the French onset. They took the position, and Master of Camp D'Hocquincourt and fifty Frenchmen of all ranks found their last resting-place in the cemetery, along with as many of their foes.

And the great Maréchal had possession of the grass lands between the river Renchen and the river Achern, and his rear-guard was coming up. Montecuculli saw that Turenne had won the first moves of the game. He could get no forage where he was, he was being pushed away from Strassburg, on whose favourable neutrality he had so much depended. He must think about retreat. It was only a move in the game.

For why? If he did not retreat, Turenne would press him vigorously away from the mountains and towards the Rhine, a Rhine of no bridges, a Rhine of swampy mud-flats in lieu of banks. A *saufve qui peut* there was not to be thought of.

Retreat? If one has time, a snug defile through the mountains is as good as any back-door. Draw off your men from the rear, keep a good fighting front as long as possible, and then at the last, when you gather your men together round the jaws of the mountains, the enemy is forced to lie still, for there is no prolonged objective at which to fire. And in the pass itself a bold guerilla or two can stop a regiment.

Such a defile was at Nieder Sassbach, a league or so from Nieder-Achern, where Turenne lay.

Turenne was beginning already to throw out reconnoitring parties across the Achern. Montecuculli had no time to lose. A mounted messenger sped, by what devious routes it is hard to say, but through the country occupied by the French, to Offenbourg, which commanded another mountain pass, to the Comte de Caprara, who had already made several ineffective attempts to take the French in the rear, bidding him creep along the mountains and join his chief at Nieder Sassbach. Perhaps, had Caprara possessed the dash of Turenne, Montecuculli might have hoped that with his lieutenant-general coming up behind, and he himself with one wing resting on the defile, the other facing Turenne, even yet the inglorious, but quite professional, retreat might be averted.

Then Montecuculli's own march began, and in the dead of night, starting from Lichtenau, which was on the

extreme left of the plain between the mountains and the Rhine, he made a forced march, which brought him to Nieder Sassbach by the next day, and an advance-guard occupied the church.

Turenne's scouts were not long in reporting the dispositions of the enemy so far as they could understand them, and the great Maréchal called up all his army save two battalions of infantry and two squadrons of dragoons which he left at Freistett to keep watch over that road to Strassburg, along which Montecuculli so much desired to travel.

Then, his columns formed, he began his march to Ottersweier, where he expected to find Montecuculli. He passed Nieder-Achern, threading a difficult road along the very toes of the mountains, and had got to Nieder Sassbach—at which point he found a strong body of the enemy commanded by Montecuculli himself. It was plain that the German army was only just behind. The wily Italian was strongly posted, and Turenne had no desire to waste the fury of the French attack on an advance-guard. He took ground to the left with the view of an attack on the whole body of the enemy at once.

Caprara, finding his road blocked by the French, had taken to the mountains and contrived, though somewhat late, to keep his rendezvous with his chief, who, feeling strong enough to try Turenne's metal, put his men in battle array, his right resting on Croschweiler, his left in the rear of upper Sassbach. Turenne lost no time in making corresponding dispositions. It was a momentous preparation.

In point of forces as in point of experience, the two generals were on very equal terms. The Germans were to fight with their backs to the mountains, the French with theirs to the Rhine. If the Germans suffered rout, they had little chance of swarming through the narrow defiles of the Black Forest before their retreat would be cut off. If the French gave way, it was a long stride to the bridges, and an army in hot retreat always suffers

murderously at the crossing of a bridge, as much from its own confusion as from the enemy at its heels.

The cup of the glory of France was almost full. A few drops more from the flagon of fate, and Turenne looked to raise it to his lips.

"I shall place my left as near to Sassbach as possible," said the old *Maréchal* to Saint Hilaire, his chief *aide-de-camp*, "with my right stretching towards the mountains. Go you along this front, choose the most suitable spots to post your artillery, and let your father say if they are suitable and bring up his cannon, for in a little we shall be in the midst of a battle in grim earnest."

Then he sat himself down at the foot of a tree, in which was an old soldier who apprised him of the various *manceuvres* of the enemy. The two armies were separated only by the ravine along which trickles the brook of Sassbach. They listlessly exchanged cannon-shots, more perhaps to find the range than with any intent to do harm. They were the amicable salutes of the opposing gunners.

"They are sending away the baggage into *Würtemberg!*" the look-out called.

"*Montecuculli* perhaps meditates retreat after all," said the *Maréchal*, beginning to dictate at midday a despatch to the king. "I shall fall upon his rear-guard the moment his troops begin to leave their positions," he wrote, "and I will send you a further despatch to inform your Majesty of the result."

At two o'clock a body of cavalry and infantry advanced towards a brickwork near the stream at the foot of the mountain.

"*Monsieur le Comte de Roye*, may I trouble you to watch this movement and give me exact details?"

The *Comte de Roye* obeyed, but presently sent two officers for the *Maréchal*, himself fearful of a misinterpretation. Turenne ordered two battalions to advance upon the brickwork. But still *De Roye* was urgent, sending a third messenger, *Count Hamilton*.

Turenne had said a few moments before to the other

two messengers that a Commander-in-Chief should not put himself about except for important events, but at the coming of Count Hamilton he yielded, mounted and rode to the left wing.

Scarcely had the old Maréchal mounted than the Marquise de Polignac came to the foot of the very tree, beneath whose boughs Turenne had spent the hours from eleven till two, listening to the reports of his officers and the advices of the outlook man.

By what infinite and tedious delays the Marquise had been stayed upon her road with the Red Neighbour it is superfluous to tell. The affair at Gamshurst, the march towards Ottersweier, the constant movements of the Maréchal himself backward and forward, his strict orders as to the retention of camp-followers at such a distance as could not involve any interference with the swift and accurate movements of troops. All these had contributed to keep back the Marquise. At Gamshurst she had lost the aid of the Red Neighbour, for at that point the mysterious sorceress, as the Marquise knew her, and her tall escort had disappeared. But still Marie de Polignac had persevered, buoyed up by the hope of reaching the Maréchal within an hour or two at furthest. The hour or two had stretched into forty-eight. But on arriving at Nieder-Achern, and finding herself indubitably in the presence of the army, the rest appeared to be merely a bagatelle.

No one could tell her of her husband. Her only hope was in Turenne, but that hope was confidence itself.

The Maréchal had then just ridden off! One of the soldiers would escort her to the left wing. Still she found fresh spirit and strode on. She even caught a glimpse of the Maréchal as he stayed to speak with some officer, but always a little in front. The familiar big shoulders, the broad open countenance with the moustache and tuft of Louis Treize, caught her eye. Still a few steps more! Courage, Marie de Polignac! Courage!

At last he reined in his horse upon a little knoll amid a group of officers. She waited timidly a few yards off.

In front of her, left and right, rose a great screen of

high mountains, on one of which, half-way up, a castle stood, stronghold of ancient days; below them were lower hills and spurs of the great chain; at the bottom, in the valley itself, was the village of Nieder Sassbach, dotted about with trees. In places she could discern the blue depths of glens leading through the mountains, dense with pines. Behind her were the low wall of the village churchyard of Upper Sassbach, studded with crosses, and the little grey and white church itself. It was a peaceful and a lovely spot. She could see, where the group of officers pointed, some confused movement of soldiery; the gleam of steel and scarlet came to her eyes, and the rattle of drums to her ears. Her ancestry was strong enough to give her the sense of a proud sharing in these stirring events which men called war.

Of a sudden she noticed two little puffs of smoke arise from the enemy's position just descried. An instant later there came a confused cry from the group composed of Turenne and his officers. Then the belated boom of the cannon came to her ears, the knell of a great soul, though she knew it not.

Involuntarily, forgetful of timidity, she ran towards the tree beneath which Turenne had stood.

All was dismay! Some one held a horse, and beside it on the ground lay the hope of France and her own,—the great *Maréchal* bleeding from the left side, through which the enemy's ball had torn a ruthless passage to his mighty heart, and stilled its beat for ever.

She knelt down, regardless of the press of officers, and clasped his hands and looked into his eyes. They had no sense of sight. Then the revulsion set in; she dragged herself away a few steps, and fell in a swoon upon the grassy hillside.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JETSAM OF WAR.

Young Monsieur de Beaupré and his companion, Thérèse de Polignac, had at length arrived, not exactly at the goal of their respective desires (for who does?), but at the vortex of the storm. Strangely enough they attracted less notice, and in consequence advanced more rapidly, as they drew near to the very field of action. During the last two days they had heard confused rumours of the death of Marshal Turenne, but no one took much trouble to answer the inquiries of a boy and a girl, when so many things were in confusion,—and besides, one had to look to one's own gear and children.

The death of the great Marshal brought about an immediate suspension of the French forward movement, for the details of the plan died with the brain of the great strategist. There was no young Cæsar on the field at once able enough to divine them and of sufficient seniority to assume the command and lead the enraged soldiery to the avenging of their beloved commander. Had it been so, nothing would have stood between them and the headlong rout of the hesitating and out-manceuvred Germans.

But instead of advance there was a lull. Montecuculli with all things ready for a retreat, noticed it, noticed that the battle made no beginning. The wary veteran sent out spies into the villages and learned the news, which indeed could not be hid for long. Turenne, his great antagonist, was dead. Perhaps no more genuine a tear was dropped than that of old Montecuculli, who was not expecting the reversion of his rival's pay. Turenne was a man who understood the game of war and played it, a doughty player. Without him to play against even war lost its zest.

But Montecuculli had his own pay to earn, so he began the attack. There is nothing so easy to an able

commander as to confuse and throw into disorder an enemy's army which has no leader, but many generals. Moving this way and that, communications severed, without a common objective, the various corps of the French army recoiled upon themselves, gave ground, retreated.

The boy and girl took refuge, under the friendly cover of the dusk and of the evening mist, in the long loft of a small farmhouse, which boasted of but two rooms. The underside of the floor of the loft was the common ceiling of both rooms below.

They had a loaf of bread, some cheese, and a bottle of some indifferent wine of the country.

"I wish I had stayed at Meudon!" sobbed Thérèse softly. "I am afraid of these fierce tired-looking soldiers that we see every day now. Something dreadful has happened. What is it, Giles?"

Giles put his finger to his lip, and answered in a still lower voice—

"It must be true what we hear. Turenne's dead, and France has no one to lead her."

"She has my father!" the girl answered, as if rather hurt.

"But it is evident he is not leading the soldiers!" said Giles, "or things would not be as they are. The people speak of the Germans being across the Rhine."

"Where can he be, then?" Thérèse asked petulantly. "I have come all this way to seek him. And now you say he is not here! It is too bad!"

Poor Giles was beginning to feel the matchless inconsistency of women. What had he not suffered in body and spirit for Thérèse? He did not grudge it, but he could not have done more for Clotilde. It is a mistake to suppose that a true gentleman grudges any personal efforts in the cause of the woman he has elected to serve. He did not say this, however. It was a shadowy thought. Clotilde herself was a memory. But Thérèse, brave, clever, variable but affectionate Thérèse, had been impressing her very definite self-willed self upon his boyish mind and heart for three or four weeks. When circumstances permitted, he would reconsider his position

with regard to Clotilde. But his immediate chivalric duty was to care for Thérèse. It was only hard if she expected mountains.

Hitherto they had succeeded in creeping into some inn where they could obtain a night's lodgings, but to-day had been a day of harassment from the rising of the sun to its setting. Giles was aware that though they had travelled many miles they had merely passed backwards and forwards over the same area, thrust back and forth by the movements of troops and camp-followers, until he felt incapable of making any fresh effort. Here in this loft they must couch. And he set about making the door fast. There was still light in a degree, and so, pulling together a few armfuls of fodder and a sack or two, he made a not uncomfortable litter for his companion.

Thérèse left off sobbing. She was not old enough to cry for the luxury of it. "You shall at least not make the beds," she said. "That is a woman's work."

"The soldier," Giles replied, "must make his own bed, and if he has a lady to guard, as I have, then hers also."

"We shall see," said Thérèse determinedly. "I shall make yours against the door. You will sleep with your sword drawn beside you."

And she proceeded to follow his plan with a few slight devices of her own added.

"Now," said Giles with an air of command, "the garrison must eat."

"I am very hungry, dear Giles," she said. "Let us begin at once in case we should be interrupted."

For the next few minutes they munched in silence in the semi-darkness. Three weeks ago Thérèse would have considered the prospect as a mere imagination of celestial happiness to be eating rye bread and cheese and sipping sour Alsatian wine in a loft in company with a jolly-looking but somewhat tattered boy of her own age. Now she was weary, and it was not so amusing. But there is a curious fatalism about women, which leads them to acquiesce in all sorts of fortune, if they cannot themselves mend it. She

was in a way quite content—only the future troubled her.

She was anxious to find her father. And no one had been able to tell her anything of him. Giles was anxious too, for although he had never seen war he knew enough to distinguish between the movements of troops under strong disciplinary control and those spasmodic trampings to and fro of armed men, not so much under the command of their officers as carrying their officers along with them. There is a point when an army becomes a mob. The French had not yet reached that point, but isolated bodies of men, an odd company or two of infantry, a squadron or so of cavalry, were here and there out of hand. Giles had noticed more than one happening, which had brought the blood to his temples, of which he had said nothing to Thérèse, but he was none the less troubled in spirit by forebodings of evil.

Presently Thérèse took out a little rosary and said her prayers. Then she made the sign of the cross on Giles' forehead and kissed him very gravely.

"The good God keep thee, Giles!" she said fervently, and lay down at the inner end of the loft beneath a rough window of three or four cobwebby panes of glass, one of which was broken, and in a few minutes she was asleep, her long hair wrapping her face round like a hood and covering her neck, her two hands placed together as if in prayer, under her chin. Giles took one peep at her by the weird light that fell upon her face from above. He was solemn enough before. Now he felt, as one of the young knights that followed Joan of Arc must have felt, a sense of uplifted resolve to guard this treasure of heaven to his last breath.

"God guard thee, sweet Thérèse!" he murmured, and knelt down at the other end to say his own prayers.

He had doubtless fallen asleep a while and then wakened hearing voices below him.

Earlier it had seemed to him that the farmhouse itself was deserted, for he had seen neither man nor maid, heard no lowing of cattle in the byre nor the

restless movement of horses in the stable. Now people were below, but they were not the country people, whose rough voices and patois were very difficult to understand.

The river in flood brings down many diverse objects with it, and, at the first check of a projecting bank, deposits a part of its load,—a log of wood, a wisp of hay, a drowned dog, an old hat, an often unguessable assortment. So into a clearing of a forest when the fires rage, perhaps miles off, flock all kinds of terrified animals, regardless of their natural habitat, bewildered by the one common terror into seeking one common refuge.

Giles decided that below were other refugees from the encircling movements of the hostile forces. If they should by chance be people whose protection would be worth having, he would lose no time in the morning making himself known. There was more safety in numbers.

With a light below, a lantern as he guessed, and a crack between the planks, he could catch a fleeting glimpse of the figures of the guests. By bending an ear he could gather some of their talk.

They were a man and a woman—and another man, evidently a servant, for his rejoinders to orders given him were short, sullen almost, but still respectful, as if respect was wrung from him by a strong hand.

“We have supped—take these things away—have your own supper and sleep till I want you. You have brought in the cushions—our cloaks?”

“Yes, monsieur, there they are.”

“Enough!” The door closed behind him.

“Now that I have brought you to a place of safety, dear madame, let me recapitulate a little. You are tired! Who would not be with such a day? But you can keep awake a little longer.”

The tones were intended to be gentle, but the man himself was tired, and his habit of command and impatience of opposition were evident through the softer notes, as honey thinly spread on peasant's black bread

leaves the coarse food still visible. The man's tones conveyed that he was in the position of master and intended to have his own way.

The boy drew a hasty breath and felt the beating of his heart. He felt indignant at the way the man spoke to the lady, a glimpse of whom he could, though with difficulty, catch. As he held his breath again he heard the soft inhalations of Thérèse, who, lying as she did over the outer room, heard nothing. Then as he listened he took out a small knife he carried and cautiously strove to enlarge the slit by whittling away the wood. He found the wood hard and difficult to scrape or cut without noise, but his busy fingers went on making little more than a mouse's scratching.

"I came up, madame, just after the ball had killed Turenne. I found you lying under a bush a few yards away. No one was caring for you. The nobles (the man underlined the word with a sneer), your peers, were in too much consternation to mind you, a lady of the best blood in France. Consternation—do I say? Perhaps."

"It was quite natural, monsieur!" It was the woman who spoke now, cold, lofty, aristocratic, but all the same an undercurrent of something—was it fear or fatigue?—permeating her reserve. She went on—

"It was very natural. The battle was ranged. It was no time to attend to women!"

"It was fortunate that I should have found time," said the man.

"But you are not an officer of his Majesty. You are only a . . ."

"Contractor of food and forage! It is true. The one is as necessary as the other. But do you think they attacked?"

"Of course!" said the lady with great conviction.

"Not they," returned the man. "They let the occasion slip. They set to discussing who should succeed. Some clamoured for the Marquis de Vaubrun because he was the oldest, some for De Lorges because he was Turenne's nephew. And they did nothing. They cannonaded

for two days and then they began to draw back their troops on Willstett. Montecuculli has advanced, but by dodging this way and that I have brought you thus far in safety."

"Say rather—you have carried me off—out of the camp where I should have been at least safe and in the hands of gentlemen, for what purpose I cannot tell."

"Tiens! You need not be so full of bitterness. I have more resource in my little finger than the general staff has in its whole collection of cabbage heads. From what motive do you think, madame, I ran all these risks, jeopardised a thousand plans?"

"Monsieur! I am too tired to conjecture," said the lady.

"Out of love!" There was no mistaking the earnestness of the man's tones, sincere, passionate, strenuous, tones almost choking with emotion.

The woman made no answer. And Giles could not see the look of scornful contempt which was her answer.

Giles held his breath and trembled, thinking what he should or could do. He knew that the servant was on guard in the outer room.

"You may look as scornful as you like. It makes no difference. I tell you I love you, and you shall return it. Listen—your husband is in peril of losing his head, which matters nothing, it has been of so little use to him."

"I will not hear a word against my husband!" she said.

"It is of no use putting your fingers to your pretty ears. We are alone, and I can make myself heard very well. Your husband disobeyed the orders of the king, conveyed by Monsieur de Louvois,—persisted in disobeying. Do you think Louis will forgive that? It is not his way. I have the power to save him, and will exercise it at the price of your love!"

"I do not believe you!" she said in clear defiant syllables.

Giles' heart glowed within him. He had shivered off a thin strip of wood. What joy! He could see her eyes glancing with courage, the high tranquil look of the woman who can die.

"Look at that!" said the man. "It is the copy of the order signed by De Louvois himself."

"Since when has De Louvois made you his secretary, or have you become a purloiner of State papers? And you offer me your love!"

The man came nearer—Giles could hear his heavy tread.

"The fact is there, Marie Gabrielle! The Marquis is worth nothing. He tried to crush me! I am the victor! To the victor belong the spoils. Come and give me a good-night kiss, Marie Gabrielle!"

The lady cast one glance above as if invoking the aid of heaven, and Giles slid a foot of his sword-blade through the crack in the floor. The lady saw it. It was her answer.

"You forget, monsieur," she said suddenly, and smiling as she did so, "there are witnesses."

Giles understood she was gaining time, and opening the door of the loft, slid down the ladder softly and ran round to the front of the house.

Luckily the door was not fastened. The servant was asleep. In an instant he burst open the inner door.

The man held the lady by the wrists.

He turned angrily at the intrusion.

And Giles and he both stood a pace or two apart, struck by one common amazement.

"Giles de Beaupré!"

"Monsieur Bocal!"

The Marquise looked from one to the other. Apart, one would have scarcely, in seeing one, thought of the other, but together, a quick eye, despite the many unlikenesses, would have divined they were father and son.

"Some one has loved you once, Monsieur Bocal. I had not thought it possible," she murmured.

Bocal shot her a look—it was the single look of

understanding that ever passed between them—a look of entreaty, entreaty for silence.

Giles de Beaupré looked puzzled. No one spoke. Ready of mind as he was, Bocal in presence of Giles could only blurt out—

“You here, young sir?”

“Who is this lady?” asked Giles, with his fine frank air and noble voice, in which a manly sternness made itself felt.

“Madame la Marquise de Polignac!” said Bocal. “I have had . . .”

“Madame la Marquise de Polignac!” said Giles in astonishment and fell on his knee. “Your Thérèse is upstairs asleep. Permit me to conduct you to her.”

Picking the cloak up with one hand, he replaced his sword in its sheath, took her hand, led her through the anteroom as he would have done to her carriage at a grand reception with the air of a faultless cavalier, and ushered her up the ladder to the loft.

“It is somewhat dark, madame. Mademoiselle Thérèse ! Thérèse !”

Thérèse awoke. “What is it, dearest Giles?”

“It is madame, your mother!”

Mother and daughter fell into one another’s arms, and wept together for one another, and for the love that had been perfected between them.

“I shall watch without till dawn,” said Giles.

“You are my little knight,” said the Marquise, “from this time forward!”

And with the full knowledge in her heart whose son he was, she still kissed him—a kiss which consecrated him to her service and thrilled his soul with chivalry and joy.

He was too much troubled in mind and too tired to seek Monsieur Bocal and demand explanations. So he sat himself down determinedly on the bottom step, his sword in his hand.

“Decidedly,” he said to himself sleepily, “I must challenge that Monsieur Bocal. I must ch . . .” and before he had finished he had fallen asleep.

In which position Bocal a few minutes after found him, covered him up warmly with his own cloak, placed a cushion under his head, and returning to the house went to sleep upon the bare floor himself.

CHAPTER XL

IN THE DAWN.

Bocal had gone to sleep because he was tired, and because he could sleep when he would,—a priceless endowment to the man whose genius demands a great physical outlay. His last thought had been that his star was waning indeed, when his own good deeds rose up out of space and intervened between him and his evil intentions. He was a man of action and not a moralist. But he had taken pains to have his son brought up in the strictest code of honour and conduct, in the ideal ritual of life, as it should be lived by the noblest of that very aristocratic class at whose manners, habits, and morals he himself lost no opportunity of gibing. For himself, he deliberately chose the dishonourable, because it gave him no qualms; for his son he chose the path wherein he should learn to walk uprightly. He might more readily, to his own greater ease and perhaps greater enjoyment, have brought him up to be an army contractor. To have his son adopted by the Chevalier de Beaupré was at once better for the boy and a tribute to the memory of the boy's mother, a poor but undoubted gentlewoman, whom Bocal had married when he had climbed the first few and most difficult rungs of the ladder of success. Let us agree that in the main the motive and the means he had taken were good.

And it was this very cherished idol of his good intent, the son that he had made a gentleman, the son that

knew him not as his father, that had appeared,—an angel with a flaming sword could not more effectually have paralysed his movements,—and stood between him and the intended victim of his passions. One reflection he made was a bitter one upon his own folly in supposing that anything could come of a divided purpose. Seek your own interest or what you think your own interest in all things, and you will probably get it. Seek your own interest, and try also to do a little good for some one else at the same time, and you will assuredly spoil the exquisite balance on which hangs your own interest. Such thoughts flashed through Bocal's brain. As to what was to be the outcome in the morning he cared nothing: he was bent upon sleep. It would be decidedly tedious work finding explanations for his own son, that young mirror of the chivalry he despised. Besides, he was expecting a messenger at dawn to tell him of the next movement of the army. He had intended to be as swift in his love-making as in all else for the time being. He would have time to study dalliance at his leisure after the war.

He slept upon the bare floor. And while he slept, the stealthy dawn began to peep over the great black mountains at whose feet Montecuculli, that wary general, and his men (not all of them, one may be sure) slept also. At the first it made visible the mist. And through the mist, could Bocal have been warned by angel, good or bad, and endowed with far-seeing eyes, he would have recognised that at intervals, and all unknowing each of the other's errand, three separate riders came with all the speed the shadowy dawn permitted.

The first was a man. The second a woman. The third was a man. Could he have seen them riding, each intent upon his or her errand, he would have recognised Fate with triple head seeking her own. For the first was his secret enemy, often scorned, often threatened; the second was the woman he deemed was drowned in the waters of Ill; the third the relentless seeker of justice whose wife he had dared to dream of betraying.

But Bocal slept on. And at last the reverberation of horses' hoofs upon the ground coming nearer and nearer shook the very earthen floor on which he slept, and the sleeper awakened.

The Count de Roubaix strode in without ceremony. There was nothing of the careless debonair carriage he affected as a general rule. Bocal had risen to his feet, shaken, and stretched himself. He was not pleased to see him.

"Come," said the Count, "out beneath those trees in the orchard! We have business to settle, you and I."

"The devil take you and your business!" was Bocal's angry reply.

"Do you see this sword?" the Count asked menacingly. "I give you three minutes. Are you coming?"

Bocal clapped on his hat. He was furiously angry, but he went, expecting to find his man in the outer room.

Not finding him he drew back at the door. The Count tapped the hilt of his sword.

When they were out of earshot of the house, Bocal broke out again.

"What tomfoolery is this, De Roubaix?"

"Do you remember our last conversation, monsieur?"

"Yes! I remember threatening to show some papers to the Marquis de Polignac!"

"That is correct! I also told you that if you ventured to press any more of your attentions upon the Marquise I should run you through the body."

Bocal blew a whistle for his man.

"It is useless! I took the precaution to bind your man to the manger in the stable," the Count observed coldly.

Bocal changed his attitude rather clumsily.

"It was mere pretence of mine that speech I made about handing certain papers to the Marquis."

"Yes?" said the Count. "It was also mere pretence, I suppose, that you carried off the Marquise from the middle of the camp,—mere pretence that you were about

to press upon her your vile attentions when you were providentially interrupted."

"You are the right person to talk about Providence," snarled Bocal. "I shall not make any reply to you. Again I say a truce to this tomfoolery; what is it you want—money?"

"There are times when even money fails," said the Count. "Here is a spare sword. Here is mine. Choose. If you can run me through, let it be so. If you can't, I shall most effectually finish with you. There are no witnesses."

Bocal looked to the right, to the left. There was no visible help. It came to this, then, that he had to fight for his life with the best swordsman of Paris. At least he would sell his life dearly, and as for the rules of the duel, he would cheerfully break every one of them if he could compass the death of his adversary.

Did he hear a horse's gallop in the distance? He had good ears. It would be his messenger.

"At least," he said, trying his sword, "I shall choose my own ground."

"Without doubt," said the Count. "You are welcome to all the advantage you can get from it."

Bocal took up his position with his back to the rising sun, which began to glint rather uncomfortably in the Count's eyes.

Decidedly the hoofs came nearer. They stopped suddenly.

"To my aid!" Bocal cried in a stentorian voice.

"On guard, monsieur!" said the Count quietly and sternly, taking up his position.

Bocal could do no less than bring himself to the guard also.

A figure came hurriedly through the trees and stood at the Count's left hand. It was a woman in a coarse brown frock, coarse shoes upon her feet, her hair, bright red hair, tied loosely in a coil hanging upon her neck, with bright red lips, pale skin, and two piercing brown eyes.

Bocal saw her first and threw down his sword. A cold sweat came out upon his brow.

"Jeanne! Jeanne! Alive!"

The Count let fall his point.

"The Red Neighbour!" he exclaimed.

"Yes! It is I, the Red Neighbour, otherwise Jeanne Chavigny. Monsieur Bocal tried to drown me in the Ill, but I am alive and come to see him receive his deserts."

"Pick up your sword!" said the Count.

Bocal shot one imploring look at the woman as he rose from picking up his sword. Then he clenched his lips and looked straight into his adversary's eyes. Bocal had two aids to trust to beside his sword—his quick eye and his great strength. He felt that he would fight better now that he knew the blacksmith's daughter was not dead after all.

He inwardly cursed his bad luck that had sent this assassin to him in this untoward situation, but the presence of the woman assured him that at least he would not play the craven. It was a part he never had played. He settled down to fence for his life. At intervals he had even picked up a respectable knowledge of the art.

Once the Count got past his guard and touched him lightly.

"A shirt of mail, scoundrel," said the Count. "It shall not avail you."

Bocal laughed a bitter laugh. "It is against assassins!" he said, and made a rush at the Count, pressing him back by sheer force, hoping to see him trip over a projecting root of a tree. The Count stepped back warily. He had not forgotten.

The woman held her breath, for she saw that the Count was only biding his time, parrying the lunges, playing a waiting game.

Something began to work within her. Was it the influence of the brother praying afar off in St Gengoult? She began to feel pity for the man who had been her first and only love, her betrayer, the man who had

abandoned her to marry a gentlewoman. She had compassed his ruin, his death, but for the timely death of Turenne. His fall worked for him.

What strength he used to no purpose striving to get at the Count! The Count went on remorselessly, thrust, parry, lunge.

Should she intervene—a hand upon the Count's arm and it was done. Should she? Should she?

The blood began to flow from a long flesh-wound in Bocal's right arm.

"It is enough!" she cried. "Let him go!"

"A thousand pardons," said the Count, keeping his eye steadily on Bocal's. "It is not enough!"

"But I say you shall let him go!" she said, gripping the Count's left arm in a way that almost crippled his activity.

Bocal drew back a space to breathe.

"Madame! I did not challenge you nor invite you. Be good enough to let go my arm."

"Promise me," she said. "I will make you rich."

Bocal came forward again, a sinister look in his eyes.

Quicker than thought the Count twisted his arm from the woman's grasp and resumed the battle, wheeling round so fast that Bocal now got the sun upon his sword, now in his eyes, now nowhere.

In vain the Red Neighbour supplicated and promised mountains and marvels. In vain Bocal tried to grapple with his adversary. There came one great and rapid passage of arms and Bocal gave one gurgling cry, for the Count's sword had pierced his throat. The red blood spurted out flooding the green sward and dabbling the leaves of the apple-trees. Bocal was dead.

The Red Neighbour fell upon his face and kissed it, tried to see a look of recognition once more in his eyes. That was in vain too. Then she offered up a silent prayer and made the sign of the cross.

As she did so the third rider of the dawn came up. It was the Marquis.

He pointed to the dead, and then, looking at the Count, asked, "Why this, monsieur?"

"He had insulted the Marquise beyond pardon. I challenged him and slew him! Let me take you to her!"

They left the Red Neighbour alone with the dead man, who after all belonged more to her than to any one, unless it was to Giles de Beaupré, and he knew nothing.

Presently Tintorin came to seek her.

"It is finished then! Weep a little, my mistress. I will fetch a priest and a carriage from somewhere. And so you are revenged and are sorrier than ever! It is a queer world."

"You must have loved him," he muttered to himself as he stalked off with his peculiar stage stride, "or you would not have hated him so badly." And if it comes to that, what am I doing here? I should have been better on the Pont Neuf. When I was in Paris I wanted to see the country because you were going there, Red Neighbour, and now I have seen the country I think Paris is better; and so it is, but the saints above know if you will go back there, Red Neighbour! And if you don't go back. Pish! What a thing is woman, and, if it comes to that, what is man either? She won't love me now any the more that yon rascal is dead. He was *her* rascal it seems. Tiens!—and here's the rascal's carriage. Now where can I find a priest? They're as plentiful as blackberries when you don't want them. Why, where are my wits, I see a church in the distance. I can surely find a church. And if I can find a church there is sure to be a priest collecting the offerings of the faithful. Heaven be praised!

CHAPTER XLI.

FOR THE BRIDGE AT ALTENHEIM.

The great Marshal was dead indeed. The strong hand was relaxed; for want of it our soldiers began to fall back first on Bischen, then on the Renchen, then farther to the southward on Wilstett: always wary old Montecuculli advanced, hungry for the stores at Strassburg. And as there is nothing so dispiriting to us Frenchmen as retreat, so there is nothing that quickens the wit like hunger stimulated by a pinch of the salt of success.

There had been a skirmish at the crossing of the Schutter, a small affair, only the Imperial troops had gained ground, and after it a council of war, to which the Marquis de Polignac had been invited out of courtesy. Vaubrun had suggested one course, De Lorges, "the obstinate," another, and their dissension showed clearly that between these two eminent pillars of the army the glory of France stood in peril of falling into the mire.

So the Marquis sat down and wrote a despatch to the king, imploring him to send the greatest soldier France now possessed,—in a word, Condé, the great Condé, who was keeping the Prince of Orange in check in the Low Countries. Let him but come with his dashing resource and his great name, worth five thousand men at any time, and at least ruin would be averted. Heavens! How the Marquis wrote—moving, strong, terse sentences, so unlike De Louvois' official, modulated, neatly spaced State papers.

"Loches! This to his Majesty. Spare neither horses nor yourself. Deliver it to the king himself! There is money! Now to horse!"

Loches had scarcely left when once more the Red Neighbour, in her man's attire, entered the quarters of the Marquis.

"What now?" The Marquis was dispirited at the outlook.

"The bridge at Altenheim!"

The Marquis seized his map.

"Look!" she said, "the German left is at Offenbourg, centre there, right coming up!"

In a flash it came to him. The bridge at Altenheim was where Turenne had crossed the Rhine. That in German hands, and Montecuculli's left wheeling round might seize it; Altenheim, and not Strassburg, would become the French objective. They would be fighting in a room with the door locked and the key lost. Panic might spread and the whole French army be captured, or crushed piecemeal. Strassburg would be an open door to the Germans, and once secure of provisions nothing could stay Montecuculli,—not even Condé, if Condé came too late.

The French army must reach Altenheim before the Germans.

"It is in Montecuculli's mind?" he asked.

"Josef Kuhn heard it."

The Marquis, who was so little moved to warmth of speech, wrung her hands, and said—

"Red Neighbour! You have saved France!"

For a moment her eyes glistened. She kissed his hand, saluted, and went out.

The Marquis followed her with his eyes. The implacable woman whom France had braved a — — — — — cereas. Then he went out. It was time for — — — — — retrospect.

Vaubrun and De Lorges were — — — — — leaders, if they could not forge — — — — — listened. They organised a flying — — — — — of the Chevaux-Legers, four — — — — — trooper carrying an infantry — — — — — of pieces of eight, the light — — — — — men to serve them, six light — — — — — and ball, and a couple of — — — — — artillery. An officer of — — — — — command, with — — — — — his forces into the — — — — — the main army. — — — — —

The Marquis told De Lorges that he was going as a volunteer. It was not so many years ago that he had been a captain in the Chevaux-Legers. He broke the news to the Marquise.

"I could not do less, Marie Gabrielle, my beloved!"

"I do not grudge you. I go also, Gaston."

At first the Marquis was amazed. Then he looked into her eyes and saw the spirit that was in them. He did not attempt to dissuade her. He did better. He embraced her.

"And Thérèse?"

Thérèse opened her blue eyes more widely than usual.

"It is certain you cannot go without me," she said.

"You two are in love! . . . Besides, there is Giles."

Giles was riding as a cadet of the Chevaux-Legers.

It is curious how lightly a woman regards real danger. She is afraid of a cow, yet for the sake of those she loves will cheerfully face a cannon.

The Marquis told himself that once at Altenheim he could persuade them to cross the river out of danger. He had not yet learned that to the Marquise and to his daughter love was all, and there was nothing else.

It was young St Hilaire who led the flying column. The same ball that killed Turenne had taken off his left arm. His sleeve was pinned to his coat. He had not stayed to inquire what he would do if called upon to head a charge, but no one doubted that he would use his right arm with terrible effect. His leadership gave all the men confidence. The two cavalymen who rode behind him meant death before any harm came to him, and their grim resolution possessed all that followed. They were a terrible set of fellows were the Chevaux-Legers, without equals in Europe, and they knew it.

Had Montecuculli been Turenne, he would have sent a similar force to seize the head of the bridge, but he was a general of many precautions, and a general cannot take too many. He must know the country well in order to avoid a check, its woods, its ditches, its marshland, its rivers, which is the shortest and the best way for the artillery, for his provisions and heavier baggage-waggons.

Montecuculli was intent on the larger movement of the whole army. His left was to swing round as speedily as possible, his centre more slowly, his right was to stand fast. Because the French were retreating slowly, he did not therefore think he had won the game. Besides, he had but a short way to go.

The bridge at Altenheim was a pontoon bridge, thrown across the river by Turenne's engineers, who, following the best military science, had raised at a convenient distance from the bridge-head a line of earthworks with two bastions, and still a little space in front of them a demi-lune, a raised triangular work, with its base towards the line of earthworks and its apex to the enemy's country.

These had been thrown up hastily to ensure the safety of the army as it crossed from the French side of the Rhine to the German. A few guns had been mounted, and a strong guard of three battalions under De Plessis, left by Turenne when he began his advance step by step northward, but as the Germans fell back, De Plessis and his battalions had been withdrawn. A strong fighting line was always Turenne's notion of the best rear-guard.

The guard at the bridge,—a mere half company who had almost given up any idea of seeing an Imperial flag, so the successes of Turenne had cleared their neighbourhood of German soldiers,—were struck with consternation when stray villagers came to them with tales of the advance of the German army in great force across the Schutter. The sergeants in charge of the artillery divided their time between polishing their guns and peering from the bastions, always peering towards Offenbourg.

“If Turenne had not died!”

They knew well what was expected of them, but they also knew how hopeless their defence must be.

Then came the welcome sound of the French drums. Then the Chevaux-Legers. “What a relief!”

Presently two squadrons of dragoons and as many foot soldiers. Next, two pieces of eight, which they hailed with a great shout, and then the waggons of ammunition.

"Now one can stand fast for a little while," said the sergeants.

The flying column was all in now, the cavalrymen encamped on either side of the bridge-head to right and left of the earthworks. The artillerymen manned the earthworks and the demi-lune, where also a strong body of grenadiers—the *enfants perdus* of the foot soldiers—were posted. The ladies and the baggage-waggon were placed in the rear near the bridge.

Then ensued long hours of suspense, spent chiefly in wondering who would be the first to come up, the French or the Germans. Scouting parties of dragoons were sent out, who brought back first one report then another. But St Hilaire and the Marquis made up their minds that nothing could prevent the Germans arriving first. All they could do would be to hamper them by harassing the head of their columns: and first one squadron of dragoons and then another were sent out. Again and again they met the advance-guard of Montecuculli. But always the German cannon came into play and emptied saddles, till the dragoons had to draw back for fear of losing too many men before it came to the desperately close quarters at the head of the bridge.

In vain did the Marquis exhort his wife and daughter to cross the bridge into safety. They found it more interesting, they said, to bind up the wounds of the dragoons as they returned from the skirmishes. Besides, the soldiers wanted them. "We cannot do without our 'Lady Mother' and our 'Little Mother,'" said the rough children of war. "We will carry them across the river, never fear, my captain, when the time comes." So they told the Marquis. He was forced to let things go on as they were.

Then came moments of eager hope when the news reached St Hilaire that the head of the French columns was but a few leagues off, and marching like men possessed. It was time, too, for the German army was plainly visible, the batteries taking up their stations, so many here, so many there, according to the rules. The bastions would get their share, the demi-lune its share,

the earthworks theirs. And always regiment after regiment was taking up its position, ready to make that overwhelming attack that was lying at the back of old Montecuculli's mind.

The Marquis, after his last fruitless appeal, rejoined St Hilaire. Perched on their little rock of refuge, they watched in silence the tide of war lengthening its ripples, always curling round a little more, always coming nearer, and every ripple was a company, and when that tide should begin to roar and break into white puffs at their feet, what would become of that tiny flying column that was sent to keep the bridge for France at all costs till the army should come up?

They looked out in silence watching with intentness the disposition of the enemy's standards. They seemed to stretch into infinity. Then they fell into whispered converse, while the gunners looked at them inquiringly, their fingers itching to fire the first match, as they laid and relaid their pet weapons. Down below on either side Chevaux-Legers and dragoons stood, with horses ready saddled, on the *qui vive* for the expected order.

A long muttering roll came from the northward.

"Mon Dieu! Our drums at last," said St Hilaire. "You are quite ready, Gaston?"

"Ventre Saint Gris!" cried the gunner in the farthest bastion. "I see the standards! The white and gold of the Gendarmerie de la Garde! The scarlet and silver of the Gardes Françaises!" his fellow almost shrieked with his excitement. "The blue sewn with lilies!"

St Hilaire gave a nod.

"To your touch-holes, Messieurs Cannoneers," shouted the major in charge. "Let them have it all—every gun!"

And the cannons of the bastions and of the earthworks belched out flame and smoke, and then the demi-lune spoke, and the nearest regiments of German infantry received the salute with what cheer they might.

It was the moment for a great diversion. At the head of the Chevaux-Legers, who were followed by the four squadrons of dragoons, the Marquis de Polignac

dashed forward at the right wing of the Germans, scattering their gunners of the first line, riding through their astonished infantry, spreading the pikes like trampled corn, full into the face of the stolid squadrons of German cavalry, at whom the Frenchmen emptied their muskets at short range, and engaged them with such an onset that before they could be beaten back by sheer weight of numbers, the French army was, under cover of the guns, taking up its position with an orderliness born of the discipline and training of the dead Turenne.

The Gendarmerie of the Guard were on the right wing, a superb body of cavalry, then solid masses of infantry, regiment after regiment falling into long lines of six men deep, musketeers on each flank, pikemen in the centre. On their left were the dragoons. Vaubrun commanded the right wing. In front of the earthwork ranged the centre, the famous "old" foot regiments of Navarre, of Champagne, of Piémont, flanked on either side by cavalry, the choice squadrons of Chevaux-Legers on the right, dragoons on the left. The rest of the troops massed in like order spread out, a long left wing, ranged in the traditional first line, second line, and reserve. If the German army looked formidable, so did the French no less. De Lorges, "the obstinate," commanded the centre, Hamilton the left. With the uniforms of scarlet and blue and white, with its forest of pikes and bayonets and muskets, its glory of standards, it was a noble and great array.

By slow degrees the baggage-waggons rumbled up and crept behind the reserve lines, making for the bridge-head ready to cross.

The purpose served, the Marquis rallied his men and withdrew them, a tattered but triumphant remnant from the disorder of the German right, to ride back amid the cheers of their fellows and recover their wind under the protecting lee of the earthworks. St Hilaire, on his way to his place at the head of the Chevaux-Legers of the centre, embraced him with all imaginable joy. "You are too good a soldier for an under-secretary, my friend!"

Then the German cannon awoke, and for a full half hour a furious cannonade deafened the combatants and obscured the air. The cavalry on both sides with difficulty restrained their horses, themselves eager as their steeds to join issue, and, at the word, six regiments of the first line, keeping exact intervals, charged down upon the Germans, to be met half-way by the steady fire of the enemy's musketeers, by long thrusts of his pikemen, and the swords of his heavy cavalry.

As they advanced so did the infantry of the first line, halting, as the cavalry fell back after delivering their charge, to fire at the opposing lines of the enemy's infantry. The battle became general.

Amid the general hubbub one thing was apparent. The German artillery fire was concentrated on the bastions, the earthworks, and the demi-lune. In face, transversely, the balls came pounding at the devoted batteries. The gunners fell, fresh gunners came with fresh ammunition, but always came the unceasing metal from the German lines. The fire from the bastions grew feebler and feebler, and in the centre and on the right the German attack in general seemed to gain ground.

Twice Vaubrun and De Lorges had called back their first line, halted and rested them, while the second line marched through their ranks and took up the cudgels of fight. Again and again were fearful charges of cavalry; not once but a score of times did grenadiers and fusiliers and musketeers ram home their charges, fire, and wait for the stout pikemen to bear the brunt of the rush of the horsemen. Before the Germans lay the Rhine, but between them and it was the still unbeaten army of the French, for whom that Rhine meant homeland and safety.

"Vaubrun is slain!" The word spread, and dismay, quicker than words, spread through the centre. Montecuculli, secure in the relaxing of the fire from the works, launched his best cavalry, held back patiently for such a moment, and down they came, these heavy troopers, routing as they came and following the rout up to the

very fosse of the demi-lune. The German infantry poured in behind them to the attack, regardless of losses, over dead, over dying, intent on taking the earthworks.

In vain did De Lorges, "the obstinate," charge again and again with his Gendarmerie of the Guard, with the men of La Ferté, of Fronsénac. De Lorges fell.

"I am not killed, my children!" he said as he tried to drag himself free from his horse and fainted, for his leg was broken. St Hilaire was about to lead out his Chevaux-Legers, but the Marquis begged him to defer it for a moment or two till word could be sent to the left wing, which, under Hamilton, was still unbeaten, and steadily and grimly gaining ground.

The enemy's infantry had bridged the fosse and scaled the demi-lune despite the hot fire kept up by grenadiers from the bastions above.

The corps commanders in all directions were using their utmost endeavours to steady and rally their men in the centre and on the right. Nothing but a great and immediate show of success would hearten them. The word was given, and the whole demi-lune flew into the air, blown up by its own engineers, and with a tremendous cheer the Chevaux-Legers swept out from the right flank of the centre—St Hilaire leading, the Marquis commanding the second company. They made a wide circuit, and then wheeling, charged full into the flanks of the second line of the Germans, while the left wing of the army began a brisk attack upon the right wing of the Germans, and sweeping round caught the first line of the enemy between the rallying forces of the centre and right and themselves, enfilading and destroying them, while the Chevaux-Legers carried havoc across the German second line almost to the standard of the general.

Once more the French right shouted "Turenne! Turenne!" and rallied. Once more the shattered centre asserted itself. With torn standards and broken pikes they went forward with an *élan* that nothing could stay. In one regiment fifteen officers out of sixteen

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were dead. No matter. The sixteenth remained. Forward! Always forward!

As the Chevaux-Legers rode back again to re-form and breathe by the side of the cherished bastion, which was still untaken, they heard the shouts of the rallied—

“You have hammered in the point. Now we shall drive the nail home!”

It was a very pale and battle-stained cadet that, falling rather than dismounting from his horse, roused himself with difficulty to the sound of a voice crying—

“Giles! My poor Giles! It is never you!”

CHAPTER XLII.

THE BRIDGE OF LIFE AND DEATH.

Life without an object is a terrible possession. To the ambitious who has attained the summit of his ambition, to the avenger who has wreaked his vengeance, there is no next thing. It is finished: and the prospect is terrible. We cannot live on retrospect at forty.

The Red Neighbour had saved France. The Marquis de Polignac had said it. She sat unmoved by the musket-fire, by the roar of the combat which raged on the other side of the earthworks. She had followed the army; she had helped the Marquise to tend the wounded. The first relays had had all the care they could give them. Presently more would be picked up and brought in. No one thought of coming in who could stand and fire a musket or give a thrust with a pike.

It was all indifference with her. She could and would go on using her skill and strength mechanically, as the cock on the great clock of Strassburg flaps its wings and crows. But Bocal was dead. She had had

her revenge. He had died knowing that she had, in a great measure, crippled his resources. She had enjoyed her plans and the working out of them, and now it was all over. Bocal was dead, and she was not sure that she was not sorry. Somehow her long sowing of revenge had not yielded its due harvest. And there was no next thing.

She sought in her old brown dress, for she had again donned it, for the pack of cards with which she had told many fortunes in days gone by, and spread them out before her on a drum-head. Was there anything behind them?

She had traded on the credulity of many with those aces and kings and nines and sevens, filling the air with portents drawn from the brains of the ignorant, herself inwardly scoffing the while. Suppose she laid them out according to the rules of magic, but without manipulating them to suit the scruples or desires of the client. Let the Red Neighbour read her own fate as blind chance, or the spirit of evil, dictated it in the dark language of the cards.

She called a little child to her and bade him shuffle the cards, and then before his wondering eyes she dealt them out into the sets and figures prescribed.

The sounds of battle rang in her ears. It was the business of the army. She heeded it not. She only dealt the cards.

They were arranged. She began to read into them the meanings she had so often read, the laboured jargon of the fabled Trismegistus and other worthies in the never-ending succession of necromancers.

It was a dark fate that unfolded itself before her. There was a stream to be crossed. There were threatening men. There were sick or wounded. There was a red streak of blood. And the gate of death yawned for some one's coming. There was one tall helper. That would be Tintorin—unconsciously she looked round for him. He was doubtless watching the fighting. For a few minutes she read over her destiny again. Pah! Mere playthings for the fools. They were bringing in

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more wounded. She swept the cards aside, and of mere habit placed them in her bosom. Then with her panther stride she went swiftly to the first of them and began to stem the flow of blood, and tie rough tourniquets, and apply her salves, cool, deliberate, with rough words of comfort to the poorer soldiers, such as they understood.

The task grew heavier and heavier as it drew on towards night. The Germans at last had given up the battle and were drawing off in good order, but greatly lessened in numbers, towards Strassburg.

The Marquis had returned and ordered the Marquise, Thérèse, and the wounded Giles into their carriage, and despatched them across the bridge on the road to Paris, promising to follow in an hour and overtake them at the first inn. Going round the rows of the wounded, and telling off the least wearied of the reserve to attend to them, he came upon the Red Neighbour.

"And you?" he asked.

"I stay here till the last waggon crosses!" she said. "And then?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Who knows? The stars await me! There are many things I could tell you, but you must not stay. Take these papers. In exchange, see that Josef Kuhn gets all the contracts. At least he will sell good flour and hay that is not mouldy."

"But you! Red Neighbour! It seems to me that you deserve your reward."

"Pray for me, Monsieur le Marquis! That is all! Adieu."

The Marquis made the sign of the cross upon her forehead with his finger. "I commend you to Him," he said in a voice full of emotion. "Adieu."

All the next day the baggage-waggons rumbled across the pontoons, the artillery, regiment after regiment. It was a retreat but not a rout. They had buried their dead. The Germans had buried theirs. Two thousand five hundred men in all had grisly war claimed as her toll. The French were hastening to take up new positions in Lorraine. The Germans to tap Strassburg and get possession of the stores, which accomplished,

the battle would be renewed, but not for a little breathing space.

Two or three waggons with the last gleanings of the field were ready to cross that hazardous bridge at Altenheim, sadly worn and wrenched by the huge strain of the past two days.

Tintorin with his great hoarse voice tugged at the oxen and led the first waggon across, so that the others followed with little reluctance.

Suddenly, as if fallen from the skies, a small company of German troopers, irregulars, who had been rather looting villages on the outskirts of the battlefield than doing much fighting, rode up. Their intention was, so the Red Neighbour read it, to cross at a gallop, seize the waggons, as like as not throw the wounded into the river, and make what play they could with the booty.

Swift as thought she seized a musket and stood on the bridge a few steps from shore menacing their approach.

They were near enough for her to hear the leader's words—shameful coarse words for a woman to hear. At all events be whose prey she might, she would not be his. She fired and saw him reel in his saddle.

Two men rushed at her. But with a swift blow at the legs of the foremost horse, both men and both horses fell over into the stream.

The next file hesitated.

“Shoot her!”

She felt something burn into her flesh, and heard dimly the report as she clutched at air and fell upon the bridge. Then came rushing feet, and Tintorin lifted her up and sped with her across the planks that gave to their weight. And then no more.

He reached the farther shore and bent down upon the banks trying to staunch the wound, crying piteously in her ear, choking as he did so, a hoarse gabble of utterance pumped out of his heart, the cry of the strong in his agony.

“I loved you! Do you hear? You must hear! I loved you, Jeanne! How I have loved you. You must

not die! Holy saints! she must not die! Oh, Jeanne! My little Jeanne! My Red Neighbour, who made the Pont Neuf paradise to me. Look at me! Will it never stop? Ah! You look at me! You are trying to say? What is it? Ah! My God! She is dead. My God! My God!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE REAL DUEL IS OVER.

They had returned to the Hotel de Polignac.

"It is not to be doubted," said the Marquis, "but that we owe De Roubaix our good opinion." There was a look in his eyes which said, "Madame, I am more than ever in love with you, and I expect you will agree with me!"

The Marquise availed herself of one of the many ways a charming woman has of expressing dissent or at least doubt. She raised her eyebrows.

"Let me remind you of his services, Madame la Marquise!" her husband went on in his pleasantest vein.

"In the first place he preserved you from the exactions of the quack Levani!"

"He did!" She could have added, "for his own purposes," but did not.

"Then there was the affair at Epernay. And he would have got you an escort from Châlons."

"My Gaston! I did not desire an escort!"

"After that he discovered Thérèse and delivered her. Giles has told me the whole history. He certainly showed great address."

"It was my brave Giles who found her and shared the danger! Besides, the Count lost her again!"

"He intended to put her into the charge of the Ursulines."

"And Thérèse didn't want to go. It was very natural!" added the Marquise, rather inconsistently, seeing that she herself had formerly immured the young lady at Meudon.

"But, my dearest Marie, you are doing him less than justice. He made me hugely his debtor when he fought and killed that ruffian Bocal for offering you insult."

"Poor wretch!" said the Marquise. "He had lost his senses. He was perhaps driven by revenge as much as by admiration for my eyes. Who saved me? There again it was Giles. As for the Count, it was not so much a duel as an execution."

"He is an expert swordsman certainly, but the crime cried aloud for punishment."

She shook her head.

"A most gallant cavalier!" said the Marquis with conviction. "I have been using my newly-found favour with his Majesty to find him a better employment."

The Marquise had been growing more and more impatient of her husband's eulogy.

"As far as possible from Paris, then!" She said this with an air that was conclusive of her strong dislike.

"Why, my own Marie?"

"I do not like the Count!"

"You used to! What has happened to change your feelings?"

"Do not ask me, Gaston. It is not good for you to know." Inwardly she felt as if she were trembling on the brink of a precipice.

"But, Marie, my beloved, there are to be no secrets between us. It is our new contract of love."

"Why are you so provoking, Gaston? Is it not enough that I detest him?"

"Then it is true! He has paid court to you?"

"He has certainly beset me with his attentions, which are hateful to me. I belong to you, Gaston!" She emphasised her speech by an embrace, which left nothing to desire in the way of assurance of her truth.

"And you, poor silent Marie Gabrielle, have not dared to tell me for fear I should challenge him."

The Marquise burst into tears.

"It is not fair of you to guess all my thoughts! But you will not fight with him, will you? He is not worth it."

"That depends! Did he ever hint that he was too good a swordsman?"

The tears burst out again.

"Come, tell me, child!" said the Marquis, pressing her head into the hollow of his shoulder.

"He told me—he told me you might . . . get killed!"

"That is possible! But listen, my Marie Gabrielle! When a man gets a reputation like that he becomes a pest, and some one must teach him to do better. Can I really blame him for admiring what I admire, but have too long neglected? Suppose I send for him and give him a little admonition."

"Oh! No—no—no—Gaston! He will challenge you, and . . ."

"I—I shall accept. It will be about a straw, you understand; your name will not come into question!"

"I implore you, Gaston, Gaston!"

"In fact I have an acceptance ready."

The Marquis laid on a table near a letter, something of parchment from which a great seal depended, and a small packet of papers.

"Hush, dry your eyes! He is already here!"

The Marquise screwed up her courage since there was nothing in the manner of the Marquis that suggested warlike intentions.

The Count entered, debonair as usual, bowed with grace to the Marquise, and said to De Polignac—

"So his Majesty has made you a Lieutenant-General, Marquis, and cancelled your Under-Secretaryship! Permit me to make my compliments!"

"Thank you, De Roubaix! But it is not of myself but of you that I wish to speak to-day, if you will favour me a moment."

The Count divined nothing from his manner, which was entirely cordial.

"The Marquise tells me that you have permitted a noble madness to seize you."

"It is true!" said the Count, eyeing the papers on the table, as he inclined his head towards the Marquise, who blushed slightly. "I have the greatest admiration for her!"

"Which has led you into such an importunity of ardour as to have passed bearing."

"Madame has said as much! It is the one affair of the heart in which I seem to have made no progress." The Count's expression was almost mournful.

The Marquis smiled a serene smile. As for the Marquise, she showed in her fine eyes pride, anger, fear, and astonishment, one after the other.

"And always in my absence?" continued the Marquis.

"One does not usually . . ." began the Count.

"Which is quite compatible with the generosity which is our birthright?"

The Count's eyes flashed momentarily, and he showed his white teeth, a proceeding which always gave the Count's face a sinister expression.

"I merely asked a question!" said the Marquis pleasantly.

"Quite in the manner of Socrates?" asked the Count, endeavouring to appear to enter into the humour of the thing, though he still wondered at those papers on the table.

"Quite!" replied the Marquis.

The Count shrugged his shoulders and said—

"In these matters I do not profess to be better than my fellows. It would be pedantic."

"Then, monsieur, it is the mark of a gentleman, who happens to be a good swordsman, to pursue the wife of another, even of his most intimate friend, in the belief that she will in the end submit to him rather than endanger her husband's life in a duel!"

The Count bit his lip. Was this a shrewd guess, or had the Marquise indeed betrayed him? He decided quickly.

"My dear Marquis!" The tone of sorrowful reproach was admirable. "Madame will . . ."

"The Count appeals to you to clear him," said the Marquis, turning to his wife.

"As if I could remember such trifles, Gaston. But since you wish it, I seem to recall a room in the 'Bell' at Châlons, and a gentleman who was very like the Comte de Roubaix, saying—

"That is the unfortunate part of it! You cannot tell your husband because there might be a duel."

"I seem to hear myself saying, 'God would protect him!' and the gentleman replying, tapping his sword-hilt—

"But then I have a certain skill. I always play to win!"

"You must have had many unpleasant dreams in the course of your terrible journey, Marie Gabrielle. This must have been one! It is impossible to doubt the Count's word."

"Quite impossible!" said the Marquise, smiling. "As you say, I must have dreamt it."

"Besides, it would have been the speech of a bully!" added the Marquis. "But you will admit, De Roubaix, that it was indiscreet on your part to push your expressions of devotion so far as to have disturbed madame's repose?"

"I am crushed with remorse!" said the Count, wondering at the diplomacy of the Marquis.

"After all, you handsomely atoned for your indiscretion by avenging the insult offered to the honour of the Marquise by Bocal."

The Count de Roubaix bowed. "Such an insult could only be washed out in blood," he said with a noble ingenuousness.

"There was no private quarrel to sully the beauty of its perfect chivalry?"

"It was for the sake of the Marquise and of you, monsieur."

"I was sure of it. But it is incredible how many enemies one makes. Look for instance at these papers, my dear De Roubaix!"

The Marquis took up the mysterious packet which had so drawn the eyes of the Count. "That is a passable imitation of your signature?"

The Count controlled himself marvellously. He understood now that this was a duel not with swords, which would have given him no qualms, no uneasiness. The Marquis had thrust with the greatest address, and wounded him at every point of pride, humiliated him before the Marquise as he had never been humiliated before. This was a fresh round it seemed.

"It is very like! What is the nature of the document?"

"It is a receipt for money given by one Josef Kuhn to some one, an enemy of yours, perhaps, who imitates your signature."

"Josef Kuhn is a contractor to the army. Of course I remember him, a dry little German!"

"The man who signs your name has evidently shared in the profits of his traffic. It is the consideration which Josef Kuhn has paid. It is the way France bleeds."

"It is unfortunately the way in which all our contractors get their business!" said the Count. "Give me these papers, Monsieur le Marquis. It is so much my affair. I will seek out the man who has forged my signature and done me this infamy."

Even the Marquise was deceived by his splendid indignation.

"You can have them certainly, unless you prefer to hand them to his Majesty's secret agents."

"If you will permit me, Monsieur le Marquis, I think I shall unravel the plot more quickly."

"What a simpleton the Marquis really is!" thought the Count.

"So much for these trifling explanations," the Marquis continued. "I took the opportunity, when his Majesty last received me, to ask him a small favour on your account."

"You overrate my deserts. Indeed you do!" said the Count.

"Do not thank me," said the Marquis, "till you have read this."

"To our well beloved Alphonse, Comte de Roubaix, &c., &c., we grant a commission as Commandant of our fortress of Lille, on the condition that he takes up the post without delay, as we have urgent need of his services on the borders of Flanders. We have ordered our treasurer to pay him five hundred livres a-month. Signed at our Court of Versailles this 30th day of September, 1675. LOUIS."

As the Count raised his eyes from the parchment they met those of the Marquis. There was no longer any trace of pleasantry in them.

"I am overwhelmed with his Majesty's goodness, for which I am indebted to you, Monsieur le Marquis, and to you, madame. I shall not fail to pay my adieux before going . . . into exile."

The Count de Roubaix bowed respectfully to the Marquise. As a connoisseur in sensations, he felt that he had had more than enough for one brief half hour. He took up his hat.

"I had written you a letter," said the Marquis, handing him the third packet.

"It is an answer to one which will never be sent," said the Count. "You may tear it up."

"That poor wretch Bocal accused the Count of something in connection with Josef Kuhn," said the Marquise after the Count had gone.

"It was evidently a plot!" said the Marquis.

"I confess I do not understand it all," said the Marquise. "But it does not matter—he seems very grateful, and there will be no duel at all events?"

"Not the least sign of one. The real duel is over."

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