The Crimson Wing

A Complete Novel Each Week in The Evening World

The Story of the FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR Told from a New Viewpoint.

By H. C. Chatfield Taylor

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Count Ludwig von Leon-Walrum, a captain of Hussian hussars, at Ems on furlough, meets a boyhood sweetheart, his cousin, Marcelle de Lonbach, a French girl. War is declared between France and Prussia, and Ludwig joins the staff of the Crown Prince. Leading a small detail of Prussians, he finds Marcelle visiting at a farm house. A strong detachment of French chasseurs engages Ludwig's command, but, aided by Marcelle, Ludwig escapes. A battle is fought, resulting in a French defeat, Ludwig discovers Marcelle about to be shot with other prisoners in the castle where the last French stand was made, and which Marcelle had inspired. He rescues her. The Crown Prince orders Marcelle's safe conduct to the French lines and decorates Ludwig with the Iron Cross for bravery. Vowing their mutual love, the cousins part. Ludwig witnesses the battle at Sedan. Inadvertently riding within the French lines he is fired upon and wounded. He is nursed to convalescence by Marguerite Clairon, a French actress, who, before the outbreak of war, had met and fallen in love with him, and whose advances he had discouraged. His pleasure in her companionship grows and he accuses himself of being untrue to Marcelle.

CHAPTER XIX.

(Continued.)

One Play and One Ending.

"PLEASE tell me the truth," he asked suddenly. "What made you go with Vinoy's corps? I know it was not for new sensations or reclame."

She turned her eyes away and looked through the window toward the bleak hills, now shadowy in the dusk of evening.

"You guessed the truth the night we met," she said. "He was a poet, and when he touched his lyre my soul was thrilled. He spent a summer here in the Ardennes, and when he left he took me to Paris. He wrote plays and he thought I had talent, so he gave me an opening on the stage. But a poet must have new strings for his lyre, and when the end came I went on living somehow. I won my little triumph in the only arena open to a woman when she has picked herself up stunned and bruised, but my soul was lost somewhere."

She managed to hold back the tears and the words she dared not speak, and after a moment she said in a lower tone:

"Until one night in Paris, when I had been dining with the friends you met at Ems, a regiment passed beneath the window, and somehow the sight of those poor fellows marching to the front made my life seem so futile and vapid, and the air, with its odor of perfume and smoke, seemed to stifle me. When I thought of the wounded I longed to do something to help my country, and—and—when I left those hateful people I went to a church"—— Her eyes had a pleading, hunted look. "Oh, can't you understand without my telling you?"

He touched the softness of her hair. "Sympathy is a poor, abused word, dear," he said, "but now when I want to tell you all, I feel, it is the only one I know."

"It is a blessed word when you long to hear it," and a smile tried hard to tremble on her lips.

"God was very kind to me, Marguerite," he said, "when he sent you with Vinoy's corps."

She looked up trembling.

"It must have been for her sake, Ludwig. I saw you with her that morning in the park at Ems when the King and Benedetti met, and when I heard her name upon your lips, I prayed that you might live."

He could not speak.

"Tell me about her," she whispered after a moment.

He told her the story and she listened to the end.

"I shall never write the play," she said, when he had finished, "because it is already written."

"But the end?" he asked.

"The doctor says you will not be able to fight again. You will pass through Alsace on your way to Prussia and stop at a gray chateau; a stern parent will relent and the curtain fall upon a beautiful drama!"

"But you, Marguerite?"

"I shall go back to the vaudevilles and the farces without the one brief moment."

At the thought that she had said too much her cheeks burned and her eyes dropped. "But I am not in the play," she continued quickly. "The nurse is broad comedy and the first old woman always plays the part. I shall have to search for a more congenial role."

"A miracle play, Marguerite," he said in a deep breath, "and you shall wear the white robes of a saint."

She gazed for a moment through the window. Night had fallen while they were talking and the moon hung large and silvery through an opening in the trees. The stars were thickly spread in the sapphire blue above.

"And if it should be true," she thought, "and we were to go away together—a moment of happiness for me—then misery for both."

"No," her lips said at last. "There is but one play and one ending."

He looked up suddenly. Her face was white and beautiful beneath the coiled masses of her hair and he remembered a moment when he had stood before a mirror—watching her eyes with their curling lashes and arching brows. How gentle her face had grown since then, he thought.

Yes, he had breathed the scented air that night, and with a courage born of despair beaten back a wild flood of passion. But now she stood before him purified—must he wage a new fight and this time with love?"

CHAPTER XX.

The Face at the Window.

OCTOBER came and the doctor said that if a Prussian column passed Ludwig might leave the little white room, though he could not go back to the clamor of war. He will be invalided, Marguerite thought, and on his way to Germany he will stop at a chateau in the forests of the Vosges.

When the doctor left she waited in the doorway listening to the rumbling of his gig upon the highway. For a time she stood, afraid to move, and slowly a temptation mastered her. Closing her eyes she saw a room with gilded chairs and damask curtains, not in far-off Ems but in Paris; when he stood behind her he stooped and took her in his arms, and it seemed as if their souls were laid bare. But the image of purity she had worshipped from afar was shattered in fragments of clay. In the temple of a pagan goddess stood an idol of flesh and blood.

"Ah, no," she thought. "I have been in the temple before and I know the feverish rites. Better the image, though it stand upon a pedestal beyond my reach."

"Marguerite," she heard him calling from the other room.

"Yes, cheri," she answered, and went to him.

"What did the doctor say?" he asked.

"That when a Prussian column passes"—— But she could not finish.

He took her hand.

"Marguerite, dear," he said, "if I could only find the words to tell you"——

"Don't try, Ludwig!" she cried. "Please don't try!" The sunlight caught her white face and glistened on her trembling lips.

Not since that night in the twilight had they spoken of themselves; but if he did not speak it was be .. se he understood.

She stood for a moment by the window and her eyes wandered beyond to the forest of Avaux.

"If the Prussians would only come," she sighed.

"Am I such a burden that you cannot wait?"

"I was thinking of the franc-tireurs."

"The franc-tireurs?" he repeated with a questioning look.

"They are in the forest of Avaux."

"Well," he asked, "what is that to us?"

She turned to him an anxious face. "One evening when the doctor left he thought he saw some one watching the house. Since then he has always come at night through the garden. To-day he drove up by daylight in his gig."

"Not a.. unusual way for a doctor to make a visit," he smiled.

"But if they should know that you are here," and a feeling of dread crept through her.

"A French prison instead of Germany," he said.

"They make no prisoners," she answered.

"You can't frighten me," he laughed, "for even franc-tireurs would not harm a defenseless, wounded man."

She knew her fears were too vague for him to understand, and in time she began to believe they were unfounded.

A week went by. He grew stronger day by day and could walk at last across the room; but his arm hung helpless in a sling and it would be months before he could regain its use completely.

Though the Doctor came and went by daylight in his gig he assured Marguerite that this very boldness would disarm suspicion.

"But the village must know you have a patient," she said.

"My patient is Marguerite Clairon, and she lies ill of small-pox contracted in the hospital where she was nursing wounded soldiers."

"A second Vidocq for artifice," she laughed as she kissed him.

"I can drive up in comfort," he chuckled, "without scratching my hands on the thorns; meanwhile the priests and old women are praying for your soul."

The Doctor never spoke to Ludwig except professionally. To save a wounded man's life was a duty, to keep a charming woman's secret was a delight—but talk to a Prussian!—nom de Dieu, that was treason.

When he had gone Marguerite told Ludwig the story and together they laughed at the priests and old women. Then one day at nightfall they heard the blare of trumpets down the highway toward the South.

"Prussian cavalry!" he said.

"So soon! So soon!" she whispered.

He saw the look of her startled eyes, heard the quickened play of her breath, caught her hand and held it close.

"I shall never forget what you have been to me. Never—never!"

She drew her hand away and brushed back the tears. When he dared look she stood by the window beautiful in the dying light. On the road beyond were Uhlan pennons waving.

"Don't, Marguerite," he cried. "Don't think that I do not care." He went and stood beside her.

"Ah, Ludwig, I knew the moment must come, but it has seemed vague and far off—like death."

The sun was fading behind the hills as he gazed at the passing squadron, the splendid chargers, the shining arms, the soldier faces ruddy in the crimson light.

"All that men care for but love," he said, "and that is an afterthought with most of them."

"There is nothing in the world but Love," she cried impulsively. "Fame, Glory, Money—they are nothing, nothing."

And in that moment her eyes but through him, and he saw a woman's imprisoned passion.

"Shall we write the play?" he whispered in the impulse of a feeling he had never thought would come.

R. CHATFIELD TAYLOR
(AUTHOR OF "THE CRIMSON WING")

A color of deep rose glowed over her; she listened to a voice whispering, "Marguerite, he belongs to you."

He waited, for he was seized wi a sudden terror of himself. His will was being taken from him; yet when the anguish of the struggle was nearly over he looked beyond the hills and saw in the night a single star.

"The play," he repeated, "with but a single ending."

For the space of a moment she stood trembling, throbbing all over in an ecstacy of mingled joy and thankfulness.

"Ludwig," she said, looking up at him with large, honest eyes where courage burned steadily. "I know now that happiness is but the habit of good impulses."

He took her white face between his hands and kissed her trembling lips.

"Tell her, dear," she whispered. "She will understand."

"Heaven grant that she may!" he said.

For a while they stood watching the dim stars wake. He saw the grace of her little head with its heart-breaking beauty, and a keen pain swept through him, for he thought of the time when he parted from Marcelle.

"L'amour oblige," he had whispered then. Through the night he heard the uhlan bugles in the village.

"With God, for Marcelle," he thought. "It is the only way. But love has its obligations, too, and when I tell her of Marguerite Clairon I believe she will understand."

Faintly, faintly, came the bugle calls. Halt! Dismount! Break Ranks!

Marguerite raised her face to his and a delicate fire stole up to burn there unreproved.

"Ludwig," she said, "until to-night I believe I have never lived."

She waited, awed by the luxury of the sacrifice she had made, until at the window she saw a face.

The man's cap was drawn low over his eyes, but she saw the ashen cheeks, the retreating chin with the pointed beard, the smile on the set lips, and fear thrilled every fibre of her body.

White and rigid as a thing of marble she watched the face at the window, then gathered courage and drew the curtain quickly.

"Why did you do that?" Ludwig asked, for he had not seen the franc-tireur.

"Ludwig," she said, "you are very weak, remember, and you must rest. I am going to send word to the Prussians you are here. Promise me you shall not leave this room until I return." Her eyes did not waver from his glance, but in the dim light he did not see the look of terror in her pale, quivering face.

"But, Marguerite," he protested, "you must not go—to the village—alone, and at night."

"I saw at the window a peasant whom I know," she said. "He will take my message."

He caught her hand as she left and touched it to his lips.

"God, give me courage," she prayed as she went out into the night.

CHAPTER XX.

The Tiger's Claws.

MARGUERITE passed into the garden and stood among the shadowy vines with her ears strained for the coming danger. The air was sweet with country vapors; fleecy clouds hung motionless above the trees, the winds were still and the pale fire of the moon kindled her face and her shining hair. It was a night in which to dream away the world, but it was a dirge her heart drummed out, as a footfall rustled the dead leaves and D'Arblay came toward her, glancing from side to side.

He wore a kepi low upon his forehead and a sleeveless sheep-skin jacket over a peasant's blouse; a revolver was stuck in his belt and a sword hung at his side. One by one she saw his franc-tireurs step from behind the trees, their rifles glimmering in the misty light.

"The tiger's claws," he said, pointing toward his men, and he grinned fearfully.

Half defiant, half terrified, she watched him with a steady, narrowing gaze.

"The fool is still hiding behind his threats, I see," but she trembled at her daring.

"He need hide no longer, ma chere. He has waited patiently and his time has come."

In the shadowy light she saw the set smile which neither grew nor faded, but seemed cast upon his lips.

"Well, what is the fool's revenge?" she answered with an attempt at courage, but a deep tide of despair came sweeping over her.

"When the franc-tireurs of the Ardennes find a Prussian in hiding they are apt to suspect him of being a spy and they don't quibble much about courts-martial."

He spoke with sarcasm, but in his eyes she saw a look of craft and venom. Like a caught animal she stared about her. The sense of her impotence overcame her. The catastrophe that overhung Ludwig, the fate so treacherously prepared for him, confused her brain almost to delirium. In lightning flashes of her mind she forecasted what would happen: Ludwig in the hands of those cutthroats—the horror filled her with helplessness. She strove to think, to calculate the chances, to invent some way to save him.

"The Prussians," she thought, "scarce a kilometre away." Her heart gave a great jump, then seemed to stand still—for before her quivering eyes were D'Arblay's ruffians, with their rifles gleaming in the night. Mercy! The man knew not the quality of it. Ah! but he had one vulnerable point—his passion for her. Time and again she had seen him tremble at her glance, but dared she hope?

"Strategy," she thought, "the role of comedienne—and if I fail—tragedy."

He was very close, but she crept nearer until he touched the softness of her dress and her breath fanned his face.

"Really, Paul D'Arblay," she said, looking up at him with insinuating eyes, "you have missed your calling; you should have been a baritone."

"A baritone!" he repeated in amazement.

"Yes, mon cher, a baritone in opera bouffe," and her little low laugh trembled through the night.

His face flushed, his dark brows knitted.

"Take care, Marguerite," he muttered, "I'm in no mood for raillery—I'm here for a purpose."

"What an impressive baritone villain we are," she said with a feigned shudder, and for a moment she hummed a tune. "What a superb coup de theatre we have planned," she went on after she had raised her eyes to his and lowered them gently, after her lips had smiled half parted.

"The chorus of loutish peasants steals on in the moonlight disguised as fierce brigands. Their chief, the baritone villain, holds the centre of the stage while his cut-throats surround the bower where the gipsy maiden nurses her tenor lover back to life"——

"Stop," he growled, his blood afire with anger. "Stop, I tell you; this is no time for badinage. You are concealing a Prussian spy. I am here to do my duty."

"Bravo!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Bravo! You have rehearsed your part superbly—now I will listen while you sing a solo—about revenge."

"By God, Marguerite," he shouted, "you shall hold your tongue," and he clutched her arm and shook her.

She felt pain in her wrist, but she never took her eyes off him. "Ridicule," she thought; "the weapon a man parries worst."

He loosed her arm; she looked up and laughed.

"Now the gipsy pleads for her lover—ah, but wait. I'm not made up for the part."

Trembling, smiling and afire, she tore open her dress and folded it back to form a broad collar. He caught the gleam of her white breast and as her hair fell loose upon her shoulders in a wavy, glinting mass he saw her beautiful beside him in a night of wonderful brilliance—saw her curving lips—her fathomless eyes with a glance that set his pulses throbbing.

"Well, Monsieur le scelerat, shall we go on with the piece; shall it be a duet?" and she threw her arms around his neck.

"Dear villain, sweet villain, a maiden prays," she whispered close to his face. Her breath came fluttering and quick; in that moment as she held him in her arms, a fierce torrent swept through him, but, like a drowning man, he fought to breast it.

"Do you think I don't see through your tricks?" he muttered. "You must be a fool."

With a mocking laugh she sprang away.

"No, Paul D'Arblay, but you are."

"Take care," he growled.

"What! More opera bouffe?" and she rattled the sword by his side and sang in a taunting way:

"Voici le sabre, le sabre de mon pere."

"I'll put an end to this nonsense," he cried, wheeling toward his men.

She saw them beyond in the night—wiry, savage-eyed rascals fingering their gun-locks. The horrors which had beset her seized her anew and filled her with a maddening sense of fear.

"Wait," she said in a dry, low voice "Let me ask one question."

"Well," he answered with a shrug, half afraid to meet her eyes, for all the passion of his fiery nature trembled through him, the pent-up passion from years of scorn.

"You knew when I brought him here; why did you wait until to-night?"

As she spoke the Prussian bugles in the village sounded the beautiful notes of "Tattoo" softly on the night air.

"To let you hear those Prussian bugles," he answered with a laugh of triumph, "and think that your lover was—safe."

"So the revenge was for me?" she said quickly.

He took a step toward her and caught her arm.

"You have played the role of Torquemada—so can I!"

Tense as a swordsman before an adversary, she watched him, for she knew that the moment had come to conquer or fall.

"So the torture is for me?" she said. "I supposed you remembered a pack of cards."

He looked so threatening with his dark, harsh face that she feared she stood to lose all, or more than all she had won by her boldness.

"I could have settled my score with him long ago, but for you, my beauty," and he laughed a low laugh of content.

A woman less brave would have given up the contest. But though her colorless face showed she knew what she had to fear, though her heart was sick with downright terror, she held her ground.

"As for me, Monsieur," she said, looking up at him with a taunting smile, "I acknowledge you are devoted beyond my fondest dreams."

"Devoted?" he answered between his teeth.

"Yes, and jealous, Paul D'Arblay, and a fool into the bargain because you fancy I am in love with this Prussian," she hesitated. "Mon Dieu, if you knew women better."

"Sacre! Not in love with him; another trick"—— But his eyes devoured her.

"My dear Paul," she said, stealing very near him, with the moonlight full upon her, "do I act like a woman in love? Have I shed one tear or gone into a single paroxysm of terror at your threats and the sight of your men? If you carry out your plans to murder a defenseless, wounded man in cold blood—I shall loathe you as I should any other brute, but I can excuse your following me from Paris—excuse your foolish threats of revenge because I believe you are jealous of this Prussian. Yet I do not care for him," she whispered; "so why play opera bouffe?"

He loved her in his tempestuous way—loved her because she had been unyielding.

"You must think I am very credulous," he said, "but I have not forgotten that you fled from Paris on account of this Prussian and that you nursed him back to life."

"I did love him," she answered in a tone of ennui, "but a woman can change her mind, can't she? Mon Dieu, but you are stupid."

He saw the look of the temptress and stood there enraptured.

"If you understood women," she murmured.

"Marguerite," he cried trembling.

"Fichtre, but you are stupid," she laughed. "It is one thing to love a well Prussian—but a sick one—oh, la-la."

He saw her eyes so starry bright and trembled with a throbbing fire.

"I love you, Marguerite," he cried. "I love you!"

His words gave her heart beats a tune of joy. The price! she thought. Yet she knew she should give her life gladly.

"Wait, Monsieur," she said when he tried to take her in his arms. "Because I don't love a Prussian it does not follow that I love tigers—or baritones," she added in a playful way. "I am exacting, Paul D'Arblay."

"And adorable," he murmured. Her hands were cold and her heart throbbed, but she made a bold play of the role she was acting.

"Nursing wounded soldiers," she said. "Very romantic in novels—but when they are peevish and exacting, give me Paris, Paul D'Arblay, even with a mauvais sujet like you," and she turned her lips up toward him, but when he tried to kiss her—a laugh and a slap of her little hand.

"Not till I'm sure."

"You bewitching creature," he cried.

"Listen," she said, with a glance at the franc-tireurs in the night beyond, "I can tolerate a jealous man—but not a brigand. Send those fellows away."

A hard smile crossed his face.

"Ah, I see; a trick to save your lover's life."

"He will think that I betrayed him. I could not be so brutal even to a man who bores me."

"I'm not a fool," he sneered. "I'll settle accounts with him, and then"—

She looked at him straight between the eyes, though her heart stood still.

"You talk to me of love and in the same breath of murder. The man has done me no harm. I'm not a Borgia."

"He is a Prussian spy," he said.

"You know better, Paul D'Arblay," she cried, the gleam of a terrible prescience in her eyes.

"He shall have a trial," he growled.

"By you?"

"No, by the authorities."

"Then I must be tried as well," she answered with a shudder.

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I'm his accomplice if he's a spy. I was a hospital nurse. I deserted my post. You must arrest me, too; yet, you talk to me of love. Allez vous en."

He caught both her hands and peered into her face.

"If I could believe you're not tricking me."

"Have I ever broken my word?" she asked, searching his face for a ray of pity.

He felt the flutter of her hand in his—saw a look which sent the warm blood through his veins.

"You said that some day I should belong to you. Ah, can't you be generous?"

"And if I should be generous?" he said, blind to all but her beauty.

"The Prussians are in the village," she said in a low, measured voice—"A word to them that a wounded officer is here."

"It is treason," he muttered. "My men would denounce me."

"Your men!" she scoffed. "Every rascal in the Ardennes. Brandy and hush money are better than a dead Prussian."

He looked long and searchingly into her face, but her eyes did not waver from his.

"Ah, Marguerite," he cried, "if I did not love you!"

She turned toward the cottage which stood white and shadowy among the vines.

"This afternoon when he is gone you shall find me there."

"If I could believe."

"I have given my word," she said, and turned away.

CHAPTER XXI.

L'Amour Oblige.

SHE stopped at the door of the cottage to listen. The moon had gone behind a cloud, but through the night she heard a muttered command, then footsteps rustling the dead leaves. For a time she stood very still with a hand upon her breast thinking of her misery. When she could hear no sound she went back to Ludwig's room. It was dark, but she heard his gentle breathing and knew that he lay asleep.

She lighted a candle and drew a chair beside the bed. She was capable of but one wish, and she sobbed, rather than breathed, it again and again—only to die! For a few moments she had lived in paradise; then she had been dragged down to torments, neither seeing why such torture had been here, nor reasoning, but knowing only that love had lifted her above this world, above the stars. Ah, those few moments! They were her own, for even he should never understand. They had been the only real moments of her life, the only true moments—all the rest had been falsehood, delirium, emptiness.

She gazed at the sleeping soldier and to her he seemed the symbol of her faith. "A man with the courage to wait," she thought. "Yet, if his comrades knew they would turn from him and laugh. But it is the only way; all the rest is contradiction, hypocrisy, misery. Yes, and for the pleasure of men a world of women must suffer."

She bent her head and kissed his forehead, afraid lest he awake.

"Dear," she whispered, "we know that they are wrong."

Trembling, the girl pored over his face, and at last the words she feared to speak dragged out of her. "And because I am not worthy she will have the best the world can offer."

She paused, and in that moment it seemed as if destiny were beside her awaiting an answer.

Within the narrow prison of her heart a pure and glorifying love had been born and lo! the walls had been torn away and for a few short moments she had been free. Now she had been dragged back to the hateful bondage, and again the walls were there to crush her. "Is there no escape?" she cried out in her misery. "Must I live amid the lights and mirrors to the end?"

She was white except her lips. The moon hung low and its pale glow came through the window and lighted her bowed head.

Motionless and cold she gazed at Ludwig with wide, tearless eyes—it seemed pain was no more for her; she had suffered too much.

"He will go back to the gray chateau—and the curtain will fall upon the beautiful war play." Suddenly her eyes filled with tears and the huge drops fell unheeded. "And he will never know," she thought.

She could see the garden, the still clouds motionless above the trees, the rifles in the misty light—see the glitter of D'Arblay's eyes—the smile of his thick lips.

A low cry of pain started from her; she caught at her breast and touched the locket which hung there. Hurriedly she buttoned the dress, afraid that he might awake and understand.

She took the candle and went over to the bureau. In the mirror she saw her pale face, and shuddering she thought of those hateful words, "Sometime, one year, ten years, it matters not, you will belong to me."

"Dear God!" she cried out. "Is it right? Is it just?" She bent her head and held out her trembling hands; her heart was like an aching, open wound, but praying she seemed to see a dimly lighted church where black gowned women knelt, and pale in the gloom beyond the blazing altar, Saint Mary Magdalene borne heavenward by angels. "Venez, venez, Toi que j'adore" came the voices singing. Upon her outstretched arm she saw the cross of red.

"Ah, what atonement can I make," she thought, "except in death?"

"Marguerite," she heard him calling from behind her, for he had awakened and seen her standing before the mirror with hands outstretched.

Startled she turned and went toward him. She was white as the star shine, but she was smiling.

"The peasant has gone to the village," she said, fastening her tumbled hair and afraid that he might ask.

He raised himself upon his sound arm.

"Ah, yes, I remember," he murmured, rubbing his eyes vaguely, "the uhlans."

She came and stood beside him.

"Ludwig," she said when she dared look into his questioning eyes, "the peasant was a franc-tireur."

"A franc-tireur," he exclaimed, for her tone rose menacing on that word. Her thought was to make him realise the danger, but not for all the world should he know her sacrifice.

"A friend who came to warn me," she went on quickly. "They had watched the house and had seen me at the door when the doctor came, so the ruse of my illness made them suspect, and to-night— Ah, Ludwig, if those uhlans had not come."

She felt his gaze fixed upon her.

"Brave franc-tireurs," she said, with a quick little laugh. "A handful of Prussians come, and they scuttle to their holes like rabbits. To-night they are peaceful peasants—to-morrow they will shoot some lone courier from behind a hedge."

"But the friend who warned you?" he asked.

"At the age of seven he was my sweetheart. Mon dieu, he loves me yet, so I sent him to the village."

"Ah, Marguerite," he cried in a voice full of gratitude, "must I owe you one more debt when my heart is already bankrupt?"

The eyes of the two met an instant, yet something she must have looked, for he understood. She turned away lest he divine the truth.

"Ah, would the Prussians never come!" she thought. Beaten out of her senses by the fear that D'Arblay might have tricked her, she went to the door and opened it. She listened until finally, through the darkness she heard the steps of horses walking, the tinkle of sabres. She remained a long while in the doorway—until she knew that he stood beside her.

"They are coming, Ludwig," she said eagerly; "they the coming," and she closed the door.

He felt in that moment that he could not leave her; gratitude, love—though he dared not think the word—all her sweet nature seemed to hold him spellbound.

"And you, Marguerite?"

But his eyes brimmed over he could say nothing more with his dry lips. She raised her white face and smiled.

"I shall play La Dame aux Camelias and Armand will come to Paris and sit in the stalls; when the house applauds my wonderful acting—perhaps he will understand."

He could not leave her without a word—he could not deny the beautiful love he confessed to his inmost self.

"Marguerite," he cried trembling, "though I break a thousand promises"——

The miserable girl turned him a frightened face.

"Don't," she pleaded, "don't spoil the memory of that night."

Then, turning, she went to the bureau and he saw her open a drawer she had locked and take from among the trinkets hidden there a bow of ribbon she had found next his heart when the surgeons dressed his wound.

She saw nothing with her dim eyes. She could only motion with her lips, but she held out her hand and he took it—a bow of scarlet ribbon stained with blood, and in that moment shame arose, a knight-errant to rescue his love for Marcelle.

His life passed before him with its struggles and pitfalls; he thought of the faith which had guided him from afar—like the single star which shone above the mountains. Was it his own will or an inheritance from that strange sect—his mother's people? He could not answer nor could he understand the mystery of a dual love, distinct, but a part of himself.

Of one thing only was he certain—when he might have wavered Marguerite Clairon pointed the way—so he bestowed willingly the homage of his heart. A poor return it seemed for all she had given him. In his inmost thoughts he seemed to stand alone with all the world arrayed against him. Had his life been a failure? Had he fought in vain for a false ideal? He dared not answer. Marcelle alone could judge.

He heard the steps of the uhlan horses come nearer in the night and he watched her pathetic beauty, but his dumb lips would not speak.

Deadened by the suffering of her mute love she fingered the trinkets in the open drawer before her, until she touched a chemist's phial, and wondered if her heart had the patience to live out its span of misery. Too weak to put aside the thought of peace, she held the pinkish fluid to the light, then, shuddering, she put the phial in the drawer, afraid that he had seen. But a feeling of rest stole over her as it did that night in the silent church, and she gazed steadfastly through the window into the night.

"Halt," came a voice from the darkness, then the jingle of steel as the soldiers swung from the saddle.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Rendezvous.

"THE uhlans march at daybreak," whispered a franc-tireur to Paul D'Arblay. "I have it from Yvette." D'Arblay eyed a Prussian lieutenant holding the hand of a pretty girl beneath a table.

"Yvette would sell her soul to the devil, but not to a Prussian," he laughed.

"Therefore," said the franc-tireur, "it must be true."

The air of the cabaret was dense with smoke. At the tables sat members of D'Arblay's band in the guise of village idlers. Arms and accoutrements lay safely concealed in the forest of Avaux, and where was there a better hiding place, the leader thought, than under the noses of the uhlans?

"And the wounded Prussian?" he whispered.

"Safe at the uhlan camp, my captain."

"Sufficient unto the day," mused D'Arblay, as he filled his glass. "I am content to wait. Perhaps my time will come."

"The men are satisfied, I hope," he said after a moment.

The franc-tireur leisurely rolled a cigarette. "A napoleon apiece and brandy," he grinned.

"It's better than a dead Prussian," D'Arblay continued, thinking of Marguerite's words.

"So is a pretty girl, my captain," said the franc-tireur.

He resented the fellow's impudence, but to surrender a prisoner for his own ends was dangerously near treason. The man was the most desperate character in the band, and he knew that he had need of his good will, so, keeping an eye upon the Prussian officer, he quickly opened his purse beneath the table and slipped a few gold pieces into the franc-tireur's hand.

The man glared at the well-filled purse with envious eyes.

"Sacre," he thought, "enough to keep me for a year." Then he raised his glass.

"To the rendezvous," he said with a knowing look.

The thought of Marguerite thrilled D'Arblay's blood. For a time he watched the uhlan officer and Yvette, the pretty waitress of the cabaret. The Prussian tried to kiss the girl, and when she slapped his face a titter ran round the room. The uhlan was flushed with drink and he staggered to his feet with a hand upon his sabre. While he stormed and cursed at those who mocked him, D'Arblay improved the moment to steal from the room, as he thought, unobserved.

But the franc-tireur who had sat beside him fingered the gold pieces in his pocket.

"There are more where these came from," he mused, and he felt the sheath knife beneath his peasant blouse.

"He is going to the rendezvous. I might go, too—then one less rascal in France and the gold pieces for Jacques Tellier."

Pleased with the thought he drained the absinthe in his glass; while Yvette calmed the angry Prussian with a kiss upon his bearded cheek, he slipped through the door unnoticed and, skulking through the village street in the shadow of the house walls, reached the highway. Hearing D'Arblay's step ahead he walked upon the grass beside the road and kept behind the trees.

"I don't begrudge him the rendezvous," he thought, "but when it is over a few more louis d'or for Jacques Tellier, sergeant of franc-tireurs and ci-devant pickpocket."

He followed D'Arblay until he reached the cottage among the vines. When he saw him enter he crept among the shrubs beside the door to wait and drew from beneath his blouse a knife.

"Mon dieu," he thought as he fingered the blade, "there'll be one less rascal in France—so I do her a service."

When D'Arblay left the cabaret he hurried through the village street until he reached the highway stretching pale between two rows of poplars. He stopped to listen, but the man who followed walked noiselessly upon the grass beside the road and kept within the shadow of the trees; reassured, he hastened on.

It was a still night of surpassing radiance with the moon hanging high in the spangled sky above; the crisp air tingled and his coward heart throbbed faster at the thought of Marguerite's beauty, at the thought of triumph.

At last beside the road a cottage stood white in the silver night. He saw a light in the window. His eyes blazed and his face took on a look of fierce gladness, for he knew that she had kept her promise. The door stood partly open and he entered. In the little white room beside the hall a candle burned.

"Marguerite," he whispered, and hearing no answer crept softly through the door she had left ajar.

In the alcove beside the table where the taper burned he saw the bed. A flicker of moonlight came through the window and beneath the glistening folds of her reddish hair he saw her white face upon the pillow with a smile supremely sweet—a look of happiness in the motionless open eyes.

"Marguerite," he called. She did not answer. He ran to the bedside with outstretched arms and a face eagerly flushed, but a cry of horror started from his lips and he drew back shuddering. In the light which flowed through the window he saw that she was dead. Upon the table beside the bed he saw a chemist's phial with blood-red label and near it lay a gold locket. Clasped in the death-white hands pressed tight upon her breast was a faded rose.

(The End)

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