

# THE FUSING POINT

By Charles Neville Buck

Drawing by William Berger

OCCASIONALLY you meet a man who is willing to put his theory to the touch even where the test involves life and death—and his own life and death.

The young Marquise de Merville had one of those gentle hearts that love to love. It had gladly and wholly surrendered itself to Merville after one joyous summer at Newport. It requires a high and dashing order of wooing to excite Newport; but there was a unique flavor of impetuosity and eagerness in the method of the gallant young foreigner which had succeeded not only in persuading her but had also laid the spell of its chivalrous ardor on all those who love a lover. Folk who in general see a menace in "foreign alliances" saw in this particular case an appropriate dénouement. It was eminently proper that a man should cross the world to win such a bride, and it was fortunate that he—not she—brought the wealth.

She had left her native America for a honeymoon in Spain and later for her husband's house in Paris. She had no deeper trouble in those days than a vague sense of the unreality of so much happiness and the equally vague foreboding that it could not last in a world that many philosophers agree is based upon a principle of vicissitude and suffering. Then, as though in vindication of this latter creed, had come the quarrel between the Marquis and Comte de la Periet, a survivor of an unlamented cult—now, fortunately, almost extinct, but unfortunately not quite so.

Periet was a bully *de luxe*, a consummately skilled duelist, who invited personal difficulties for the mere glorification of assured victory. Of course after the early morning meeting there had been some necessary secrecy; but the Marquis died of his wounds, and the Marquise, all unconscious of her blond loveliness in mourning, wrote over the door of her life, "Ichabod—the glory is departed."

NOW a year later she was returning from a visit in America to her desolated home in France. A slender old man with erect shoulders and gray hair, who was pacing the deck with his cigar and vague regrets became to-morrow the ship would reach Cherbourg, passed the steamer chair where she sat looking wistfully out at the dull, oily heaving of the sea, her book forgotten in her lap and her eyes moist. Suddenly he wrenched and coming back dropped into the vacant seat at her side.

"Do you know, my child," he said as he slowly drew off one of his gloves and sat smoothing it on his knee, "you remind me of verses."

She looked up with a weary smile. There was something in the manner of this man, already starting down the shady slopes of life, that made one wish to lay her tired head on his shoulder and tell him all her troubles. He quoted slowly:

The Empress too had a tear in her eye —  
You'd have said that her fancy had gone back again,  
For one moment under the old blue sky,  
To the old glad life in Spain.

"The old glad life in Spain!" It was that of which she had been thinking, and no matter what she was now she had been an Empress then, if happiness can crown one as well as meaner diadems. There was a gasping catch in her throat, and for a moment she could not speak.

Colonel Treavor leaned over and laid his finger on her elbow. "Many years ago two boys were at school together in Virginia," he spoke with the seeming of abstraction. "It was when Breckenridge was studying how to check Sigel, and the school was the Virginia Military Institute. The world knows the story of the Newmarket Cadets; but the phase I speak of you may not have heard. The Confederacy needed men, and the Cadets were men that day, even if they were really only boys who should rather have been at their mothers' knees than on the battlefield. The boys were at the center of the line of advance. They had been put there because they were drilled until they were letter perfect, and the rest of the formation needed a steady unit on which to guide. Across the wheat field was a federal battery, and as they went forward a shell burst. A half-dozen boys of from fourteen to seventeen fell, and many others went down in the next few minutes. The survivors took that gun, and when they came back collected the wounded they had left. They had lost twenty per cent. of their classrolls. One of those boys



Then the Colonel's Pistol Came Up Once More—for the Last Time.

carried back a roommate who was wounded and saved his life. The boy who carried him back was your father. The boy he saved was I. If I can in anyway serve you, you need only speak."

The young woman turned her head and studied the face of the old man at her side. They had several times talked together during the voyage; but this was the first occasion of striking a personal note. What she wanted now was to talk to some one, to relieve her distress by reciting it, and as she did so he listened silently, but with grave nods of comprehensive sympathy. At last her voice hardened and her eyes glittered.

"It was murder!" she said desperately. "If I could avenge it, I should. I would kill him! And he is a passenger on this ship!"

The Colonel looked up and scrutinized her delicate features, for the moment hardened by anger, almost lustful for revenge. "I know," he said. "It would be hard for you to feel otherwise. He should be punished. Without doubt such bullies should be punished. Yet how? It was quite in conformity with the code. One must quarrel with the system." He looked at the sullen head-swell that moved across the restless bosom of the Atlantic and the pitching course of the small tramp near the horizon off to port, which was the only break in the world of oily sea and leaden sky.

"Some day," he went on, "he will meet some one who will avenge the others. It is the inevitable end of such men."

"That doesn't satisfy me!" she protested. "I want him punished as he deserves. I want him to feel all that he has made others feel. Oh, not just the men he has killed,—they died bravely enough, I dare say,—but those who were left behind! It is those who are left behind that have the heartbreak."

AS she spoke two men strolled forward from the smokeroom swathed in heavy ulsters. One was tall and middle aged, though he still retained his figure with that carefully preserved seeming that characterizes some Frenchmen. His face was hard and his mustache belligerently waxed and pointed upward. There sat on his eyes and lips a satirical smile which seemed habitual.

At his side paced a young American of the tourist type. He was still a boy, and was evidently flattered by the attention and notice of De Periet. One could see how adolescently he realized, and with what empty pride, that he was being accepted in companionship by a man who not only wore a title, but who—if such things were managed among gentlemen as they are among professional sports—would have also the right to buckle about his middle a championship belt for many victorious *affaires d'honneur*.

The girl glanced up and her blue eyes became harder as she turned them quickly aside. The strollers looked over toward Colonel Treavor; but, with recognition of his companion and of the unseeing blankness of his gaze, the Frenchman turned his own indifferently seaward and the boy arrested the motion of his hand to his cap. The two passed on, and neither the girl nor the

Colonel spoke until the silence had become painful, and the arrival of the deck steward with tea brought a welcome diversion. The Colonel watched her sip her tea and nibble at the white fruit cake as he smoked his cigar.

Then at last, when he had talked of inconsequential matters until he had persuaded her to smile, he rose and went to the smokeroom. The seats about the center and the many stalls were crowded; but at last the Colonel found a compartment vacant except for the boy, who had been on deck and was now alone. He dropped down and ordered brandy and soda. While he reflected in silence two other men came into the place. One of them was Comte de Periet. The other was also a Frenchman. Colonel Treavor recognized him as a retired army officer whose face he remembered from other visits to Paris. It was a face seen often among the boulevardiers on Sunday afternoons. During the trip he and Periet had been well nigh inseparable. The man was Captain Faurette, and the Colonel recalled having read his name as De Periet's second in at least one personal encounter.

The two newcomers, flushed from the sharp sea breeze, stood for a few moments looking for places, amid the chatter of several poker games and the loud discussions on the varied topics that serve to kill an afternoon at sea. Finally, with a slight bow and a murmured apology for the intrusion, De Periet and his companion took the two vacant places on the cushions of the Colonel's stall.

Colonel Treavor acknowledged the courtesy with a somewhat stiff nod and sat studying his glass with a manner of aloofness as the other three drifted into loquacity. When once or twice some one addressed him directly, he had to ask that the question be repeated before he could answer. His courtesy was perfect; but it was evident that the quiet old man with the distinguished face was far away with thoughts of his own. He obviously regarded with equal indifference the discussion of the day's run, the prospect of an Anglo-German War, the advance in aviation, and the latest star at the Opéra Comique.

The manners of Comte de Periet were also faultless; yet it was not possible for him to let conversation flow at random longer than a half-hour, and before it had rambled that far he was shaping it, guiding it subtly into channels where his wide personal experience might have the chance to give him the center of the stage. When talk came into fields where he could say "I chanced to be present," or "I was privileged to observe," he felt that he was at his best.

IT was the boy, in his enthusiasm and avidity for learning of new things, who brought forward the discussion of courage in the abstract and at once converted the loquacity of Monsieur le Comte into an electric fountain of conversational display.

"Courage," he said promptly, "is not a positive quality at all. Quite the contrary, it is negative. It is merely the absence of fear. It is only the man who