MADELEINE: A LOVE STORY.

WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY CALL BY GEORGES OHNET; THE ENGLISH ADAPTATION BY PHILLIPE PREVOST.

CHAPTER I.

"WHAT a beautiful girl!" cried Lieutenant Armand Guillot to his friend, Rene Dumontier, as the two young men halted and gazed after the fair creature who had flitted by them almost like a vision in a dream. "I never saw a sweeter face," continued Guillot, "and no grass shall grow under my feet until I have made her acquaintance. You surely must know her, Rene?"

"Only by sight," replied Dumontier; "but take care, my boy, or we shall be rivals, for it was love at first sight with me, too. Her name is Madeleine and she's the daughter of Maitre Zephyre, the wealthy farmer of Bosc-Mesnil near this city. An only child, she has been carefully educated, and is said to be as clever and lovable as she is beautiful; but a bit of a coquette withal."

Rene Dumontier was the son of one of the leading notaries in the old city of Yvetot, in the north of France, so famous in song and history as constituting a little kingdom all by itself. The story is a strange one: It seems that the French King, Clotaire, slew one of the Lords of Yvetot before the very altar of the cathedral of

Soissons, and, to make amends for his terrible crime, decreed that the Lords of Yvetot should thereafter and until the end of time be real Kings, Kings of Yvetot.

It is one of these good little Kings of Yvetot who has always been such a favorite with French poets and been held up by them in strong contrast to the real Kings, who seemingly take such pleasure in taxing and oppressing their people and driving them off to be slain in useless wars.

Lieutenant Guillot had just graduated from the military school and was very proud of the gold lace of his handsome uniform, which set off to fine advantage his erect and graceful carriage. His apple-red cheeks and warm gray eyes, however, were in strong contrast to the pale and scholarly face of his friend Dumontier, to whom he was now visiting, Dumontier's father being his guardian.

Guillot had passed very little of his life in Yvetot and hence it was quite natural that he should have turned to his friend for information concerning the beautiful Madeleine. As the farmer's daughter disappeared in the distance, a strange silence fell upon the young officer and he walked along with his gaze fixed upon the ground.

"Come, come, Armand," said the notary's son; "don't take this thing so much to heart. You're a soldier and you'll win the love of maidens as easily as the bays of victory. Soldiers and sailors, you know, are proverbially heartless. Love-making a mere pastime with them."

"Tut, tut, Rene," replied his friend. "Don't speak so lightly of this matter. I tell you I love that girl madly, and although it may be love at first sight, yet that's the most dangerous kind, so I'm told. It's like a shot at close range; it tears its way through with terrible effect."

Again a dead silence came upon the two friends as they crossed the public square in the grand old town and directed their footsteps toward the club-rooms. It was early in the afternoon and very few members had made their appearance. The notary's son led the way into the reading-room, and, strange to say, the two young men instinctively drew apart and took seats on opposite sides of the room. They both unhooked a file of papers from the rack and seemed to be suddenly deeply engrossed in reading, but a keen observer would not have failed to notice that it was a mere semblance of attention, that in reality neither of them was reading a word. It was a mere pretext on the part of each to enable him to think calmly over the adventure of the half-hour just passed and the words which it had prompted each to speak to the other.

The notary's son had been flippant, almost jestful. Was it not a mere subterfuge? Did he not mean to throw his friend off his guard in order the better to outstrip him in his race for Madeleine's heart? As a rule, Rene was anything but flippant. To him life was an earnest problem—so earnest, in fact, that he had thus far brought to naught all the efforts of his father, the old notary, to inveigle him into marriage. Rene would not be hurried; he wanted time to think the matter over. The young officer knew all this, and hence had been struck by strange misgivings at his friend's banter and scoffing. It startled him. He found himself gazing blankly at the newspaper which he was holding up before his eyes, and with a sudden impulse he tossed the file of papers aside, sprang up and walked to where the notary's son was sitting.

"Rene!" exclaimed Guillot solemnly, so solemnly that his friend was quite startled by it.

"For heaven's sake, Armand," answered Dumontier; "what's the matter? You really frightened me. I didn't hear your step. I was thinking about Madeleine."

The young officer fairly staggered as this name struck his ear. It seemed to him that the notary's son had not pronounced it in a sufficiently respectful tone of voice. Although he had heard the name of Madeleine spoken a thousand times in his life, yet for this one e, the sound of the word sent a mysterious thrill through his frame. He was upon the point of crying out: "Sir, don't presume to mention that lady by her first name in that way to me!" when he bethought himself and forcing a smile to his lips, spoke as follows:

"Rene, I believe it is an old German proverb which says that in money matters all sociability ceases. I think it should be amended and the words "love affairs" be put in place of "money matters." If anyone had ever told me that anything in the shape of a woman could ever come between us so as to endanger our life-long friendship, I should have been infinitely amused, and yet I find myself oppressed by a mysterious something at this early stage in the proceedings. Dumontier," continued the young officer, lowering his voice, "we must be careful—"

"Why, what do you mean, Armand?" interrupted the notary's son, coloring up as he met the earnest look of Guillot's big round eyes.

"I mean," replied his friend, "that in this matter we must be more than honorable—we must be honor itself. Madeleine must be the sole arbiter of our fates. We must not—nor must any one for us—strive in any way to gain an undue advantage. I speak after the manner of my profession. It must be a fair fight in an open field. There must be no ambushes, no masked batteries, no strategems. We must have no allies, no companions in arms. We must ride forth with lances couchant, flying the device, 'May the best man win.' Do you agree with me, Rene?"

"I do, most assuredly!" exclaimed the notary's son, in a very earnest tone of voice; "and speaking for myself, while I'm willing to admit that I have, in a manner that is characteristic of me, admired this fair maiden for more than a year, yet have I never either to her father, whom I know, or to any living being, breathed a confession of my love. So, my dear Armand, we stand on equal footing."

"Not so, my friend," replied the young officer; "you are a rich man's son, while I have nothing but my sword, and its blade is, as you know, new and bright."

"Ah, true, my boy," made answer Dumontier with a sigh; "but you have what I lack—a fine figure and a handsome face."

A faint blush ran up toward the young officer's hair as he cried out:

"Good! then we are perfectly matched," and reaching out his right hand he grasped his friend's right, firmly and heartily, while almost instinctively their left hands flew into the air in token of a solemn compact.

Each looked the other full in the eyes, and each seemed satisfied that there was no guile or reservation of thought in the honest and manly gleam which he saw there.

It so happened about this time that Notary Dumontier was summoned to attend Maitre Zephyre at the latter's spacious residence at Bosc-Mesnil, for the arrangement of some property transfer, and as two witnesses would be necessary, the notary invited his son and his ward to accompany him. The two young men were presented to the beautiful Madeleine, and the friendly but not less earnest contest began at once. The farmer's daughter seemed rather amused than seriously touched by the marked attention of the two friends, while as for Maitre Zephyre, in his homely but forcible language he informed the old notary that "the only difference between a rich man's son and a young army officer was that one spent money which his own father had earned, while the other spent money some one else's father had earned."

But there was a surprise in store for the farmer of Bosc-Mesnil, and it came to him a few weeks later in the shape of a double offer of marriage for the hand of his daughter, the notary acting for his ward as well as for his son.

"You must make your selection, Maitre Zephyre," cried the old notary, laughingly. "They are both good boys, but one has a pot of money and the other next to nothing."

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the peasant farmer; "it seems, friend Dumontier, that we common people are good enough for you aristocrats when our hands are broad. Zounds! all the spendthrifts in Yvetot want to marry Madeleine and go to Paris and live on the proceeds of my farms. They'll not do it! I'll have none of them, not even your pale-faced boy!"

Several days after this interview Maitre Zephyre carried his answer to Notary Dumontier.

"I tell you, friend Dumontier," said he, "what I've told all the others who come to me with their fine promises. I'll not give my girl away! I've spent twenty thousand francs educating her. She has a mind of her own. She knows what she wants better than I do. When she gets ready, she'll make her own pick. Tell those youngsters that's what Maitre Zephyre says."

When Rene heard this decision on the part of the old farmer, his heart strings snapped, for he had hoped that his father's money would influence the thrifty peasant to favor his suit. Now that the question of fortune was eliminated from the contest, Rene became suddenly conscious of his woeful lack of that ability to translate his feelings into words. That he loved Madeleine as deeply as Guillot, he did not doubt, but would he be able to tell her so, and to tell her so in such a way as to persuade her that he was speaking the truth?

That was the question, and a very important question it was.

Days and weeks went by, and with such exquisite coquetry did the beautiful Madeleine repel the earnest attentions of the two friends that they half began to persuade themselves that she would really end in dismissing them both as suitors.

The time was now approaching when the King of Yvetot was accustomed to entertain the nobles and gentry of his tiny kingdom by a series of fetes. A thousand colored lanterns shed a mellow radiance upon the fountains and banks of flowers, imparting a fascinating air of unreality to the gardens and conservatories. At one of these fetes it was that Guillot led the fair Madeleine at the end of a waltz, out of the glare of the ballroom and into the seeming world of fantasy which lay around the chateau.

Armand could distinctly feel against his arm the throb of her heart, now that its beat was intensified by the intoxicating measure of the waltz.

"Mademoiselle," he uttered almost in a whisper, "my leave of absence has almost run its length."

Instinctively Madeleine drew closer to Armand's side as these words were spoken, and he could faintly feel her hold tighten upon his arm.

"Nay, Madeleine," continued Guillot, scarcely above a whisper, "that is not all. After a few days in Paris I must hurry on to Marseilles and join my regiment, for it has been ordered to Tonquin."

Madeleine shuddered and her heart seemed to miss a beat, for she raised her hand to her throat and pressed it there as if to encourage life to resume its healthful march.

"Madeleine," murmured Armand, "the time has come; you must speak or—"

At this moment a cluster of white roses, pinned upon her corsage, was loosened by her arm, which still lay across her bosom, and fell to the ground. Guillot stooped and picked them up, and as he did so the figure of the notary's son appeared on the gravelled walk. He was seeking Madeleine, who was pledged to dance with him for the next dance.

As Armand held the roses out, Madeleine fixed her glorious eyes full upon his face. They were filled with tears.

"Keep them. Oh, keep them!" she whispered as she laid her ungloved hand within Armand's for a brief instant; then turned away and has leaned upon Dumontier.

Guillot quickly thrust the roses into the breast of his tight-fitting uniform coat and stood there watching that retreating figure, so tall, so like a wood nymph's in its native grace and beauty; and as he stood thus straining his eyes to follow her, that wad of crushed roses seemed to be burning into his very heart's fiber. But its fire was such a blissful pain that many minutes passed ere he could bring himself to move away, lest by stirring he might stay the charm of those flowers which still glowed with the warmth of the bosom from which they had fallen.

CHAPTER II.

Andre Boulanger had graduated from the Military Academy in the same class with Guillot and been assigned to the same regiment, and no hand grasped Armand's with more cordiality than did his upon the return of his classmate from the old town of Yvetot.

Boulanger was a genuine Parisian, as ready for a duel as for a drinking bout—a handsome fellow, with large, dark eyes, curly brown hair and small, regular teeth, as white as a dog's. It was not to be wondered at that woman turned soft glances upon this knight-errant of the sword. But Boulanger's admiration was for the sex in general.

"Life is too short to devote one's self to one woman," was one of his favorite shibboleths. As every fiber of his frame was attended by bravery, the news that his regiment had been ordered to Tonquin was extremely pleasing to him, and almost the first word he uttered after encircling Guillot in a vigorous embrace was:

"Ah, but Armand, my boy, isn't this superb! To think that in less than sixty days we are to smell gunpowder on a real battle-field. Ha, ha, ha, it is almost too good to be true. But hearken, comrade, do you know what I'm going to do? Every Celestial I kill I'm going to cut off his cue and take home the collection for braids for my sweethearts in Paris. Ha, ha, ha!"

Guillot made a wry face.

"Why, mon dieu, Guillot, what's the matter?" inquired Andre. "You look so changed; you're not the same jolly fellow you used to be. Look you, I'll wager ten francs to a wisp of straw that you've fallen in love with some country beauty."

"There can be no wager on a certainty," replied Guillot, quietly. "You've struck it, Andre. I have fallen in love; nay, more, I'm engaged to be married to one of the sweetest women that ever drew breath—an angel, a perfect angel."

"Oh, bah!" cried Lieutenant Boulanger; "that's enough for me. When a man sinks so low as to call a woman an angel in solemn earnest he has my sympathy. A woman who is good is apt to be constant, and a woman who is constant is a bore."

Armand laughed heartily at his friend's raillery.

"Ah, but wait till you see my Madeleine!" he exclaimed.

"But has she money?" asked Boulanger, with an air of impatience.

"Yes, her father is said to be wealthy," replied Armand.

"Good, that reconciles me to your blunder, for, my dear boy," cried the other, "marriage is a blunder unless a woman has money; and even then it is only excusable on the ground of dire necessity, but I trust you gave her your photograph, for ten chances to one she'll never see you again. I am told these Celestials are good marksmen even if their eyes are set crooked in their heads."

Many were the long hours which Guillot whiled away by tales of Madeleine's goodness and loveliness. Boulanger ended by becoming so much interested in this Norman maiden that he found himself encouraging his comrade to discourse upon her many virtues.

Long before they had reached Tonquin Andre Boulanger came to know the road from Yvetot to Bosc-Mesnil almost as well as if he had trodden it as oft en as Armand had. The uncompromising Parisian was quite persuaded at last that there might be other parts of the world besides the French capital to which one might, under certain peculiar circumstances, become really attached; and he secretly resolved that if the Celestials failed to make a cold corpse of him he would, upon his return to France, try the effect of those charms which Armand insisted were inherent in flowering hedges, dark-green meadow land, fields of golden grain and long stretches of pasturage with groups of soft-eyed cattle browsing on the tender herbage or ruminating under the clumps of trees which dotted these fields, all of which were so vividly described by Armand as making up the delicious landscape between Yvetot and Bosc-Mesnil.

Above all had the frivolous Parisian been touched by his comrade's description of a certain pond near the spacious farm buildings, which the moon silvered like a huge shield of Achilles the night he parted with the fair maiden of Bosc-Mesnil, and how beneath that glorious firmament the lovers had stood, with wide borders of flowers between them and the water, and exchanged vows that only death could possibly release them from.

There was one thing which Guillot, unlike Boulanger, had firmly resolved to do upon reaching Tonquin, and that was to do his duty and no more. No fighting for the mere fun of it, no taking of risks, no rushing upon the enemy with reckless impetuosity with an idea of winning decoration or of dying in the attempt.

"My life belongs to my darling Madeleine," he would murmur to himself, "and I intend to take good care of it for her."

Not so the hot-headed and reckless Boulanger. Nothing seemed to give him more pleasure than to be aroused at midnight to take command of skirmishers or lead a detachment to repulse an attack on the outposts. No sooner had the dashing Parisian come off unhurt from some affair than he was ready for another. Warnings, even reprimands, had no effect upon him. In one of these engagements the cry went up that Lieutenant Boulanger had been captured. This meant death by horrible torture. At sight of his comrade in the hands of the enemy and dragged senseless and bleeding over rocks and arroyos, even thoughts of Madeleine were not powerful enough to restrain Guillot from making a desperate attempt to save his friend.

Calling upon those of his men who were willing to make up a forlorn hope to follow him, Guillot dashed off in pursuit of the band. His vehemence infected his men and they fell upon the Celestials with a fury that astounded them. After a hard fight, but not until Guillot had been severely wounded, was the rescue accomplished. When Boulanger had regained consciousness he berated his friend soundly for imperiling his life in that way.

"The next time," added Boulanger, "remember Bosc-Mesnil and don't take any chances. There is no one waiting for me, that's the advantage I have over you."

But in spite of this frivolous speech, Andre was deeply touched by the devotion of his friend, and he quietly resolved that if it ever came to the test, he would lay his life down to keep a shadow from resting on the fair fields of Bosc-Mesnil.

A whole year had now elapsed since Guillot had sniffed the fragrance of the flowering shrubs and blossoming fruit-trees of Bosc-Mesnil. Madeleine's letters had reached him with pleasing regularity. But now the intervals between them became noticeably lengthened and the warmth of their tone, too, was perceptibly lowered. Guillot was distressed, and it required all of Boulanger's hopefulness to keep him from breaking down completely.

One morning the bugle-call and long roll of the drums announced that the enemy was about to attack. In deep silence the long lines of French troops took up their position, while from the hills of Lang-Song the hoarse-toned trumpets of the Chinese blowed forth discordantly, and the puffs of blue smoke floated hazily away in the clear morning air. Now and then a battery belched forth its shot and shell, and they went whistling over the heads of the French with weird musical ring.

Suddenly a staff officer reined in his horse within hearing of Lieutenant Guillot, and called out to the Colonel:

"A courrier has arrived from France, Colonel, and there's a letter for Lieutenant Guillot."

"A letter for me?" involuntary queried the young officer; "where is it?"

"In the hands of the Quartermaster," replied the officer.

Guillot raised his eyes to his Colonel's face. That officer read the imploring look that lay in them.

"Go and get it, Lieutenant," cried the Colonel in a cheery tone of voice, and as Guillot hurried away his commander added: "Poor fellow, it a Chinese sharpshooter should single him out, he will at least have had the consolation of having heard from home before dying."

Boulanger had seen his comrade hurry away to the rear, and immediately guessed the object of his errand. The Parisian could feel the cold perspiration beading on his brow as he waited for Guillot to return. At length the young officer came in sight and leaping in his place with his company. A strange pallor had overspread his face.

Boulanger made haste to accost him.

"Well, well, what news, my boy?"

"You mean the letter," answered Guillot with a vacant stare in his eyes; "Oh, I've not opened it yet. I have it here. It's not from Madeleine. I don't know the handwriting."

Boulanger's heart rose into his throat, but he managed to pull himself together.

"Come, come, Armand," he cried out, in as cheery a tone as possible; "courage, comrade! Why, it may bring you the very best of news. Open it and read it, for things are going to be pretty lively in a half hour or so."

Guillot drew the letter forth, and with trembling hands broke the seal. A pitiful expression of suffering came over his face as he read the letter. His lips moved, but the storm of battle had already burst upon the French lines, and no one heard what he said. Before Boulanger could get a word from him the bugles sounded advance and the comrades were separated. As Boulanger took up his position he caught one more glance of Guillot's face. It had changed its expression completely. A demoniac look was upon it. The lips quivered and the eyes were fixed upon the enemy's advancing lines. All the world seemed dead to the young officer, and he faced the furious fire of the Celestials as if it depended upon him alone to stem that wild onset.

Then the smoke of the French batteries which now opened fire swirled up between the two friends and not until his Captain had called out his name did Boulanger face about and manifest the old-time eagerness to lead his men into the fray.

Although the Celestials withstood the furious onslaught of the French troops with admirable steadiness, yet they were gradually forced back within the lines of their fortifications, and it was not until late in the afternoon that the reserves were ordered up and the command given to carry the fort at the point of the bayonet. Here it was that Boulanger after a long search found his unfortunate friend Guillot stretched upon a bed of straw tenderly watched over by several of his men. It did not call for the trained eye to see that he was mortally wounded, but his mind was perfectly clear and he welcomed his comrade with a smile, saying, as with a great effort he held out his hand to him:

"Ah, Andre; I'm glad you have come. I have something to say to you before it's all over. These villainous celestials, they thought my heart wasn't heavy enough, so they've laid an ounce or so of cold lead very near it."

Boulanger, who had thrown himself upon his knees and was holding his comrade's chilly hand clasped between both of his, turned his face away to hide the tears which, in spite of his efforts to appear calm, were trickling down his cheeks.

"Never mind, Andre," whispered Guillot. "It has happened just as I wanted it. It is my own doings. I had nothing to live for."

"What, has Madeleine proved false to you?" gasped Boulanger, "Oh, the vile creature!"

"No, no, Andre," replied Guillot; "don't, oh, don't say that; don't breathe a word against Madeleine. I cannot believe that she was false to me. They have deceived her. Dumontier, Dumontier, has done it all. Read, read, what they write to me." And the young officer drew the fatal letter from his breast and handed it to his comrade. For an instant, as his gaze fell upon the crimson stains which in one place seemed to have set a seal of blood at the end of the letter and in another with merciful intent to have blotted out the beloved name of Madeleine, Boulanger could not read a word. His tears blinded him and his hand trembled as if smitten with palsy. But gradually he got the mastery of his feelings and read the message from Bosc-Mesnil which had wrought such dire effect. The letter purported to come from Maitre Zephyre and contained these words:

To the Lieutenant Armand Guillot—How shall I express to you a father's indignation at the outrageous farce into which your miserable vanity moved you to drag my daughter's name. To think that so honest a face should only be a mask to hide the nefarious workings of a depraved heart! Your letter to Monsieur Dumontier has been read to me; wherein you congratulate yourself upon having proved yourself a more accomplished deceiver of women than he, and wherein you inform him that you have no further use for the peasant's daughter. You thought forsooth that the daughter of a humble peasant deserved no better usage at your hands. Ah, could you but have witnessed the keenness with which she felt my humiliation at thought of my daughter's name bandied from lip to lip by gossips and scandal-mongers, mentioned only to be sneered at, I believe that even your cruel heart would have been touched. But the noble son of my devoted friend Dumontier, who never suspected that your attentions to my daughter were not pure and honorable, has taken good care that my daughter's name shall be immediately rescued from suspicion. He will make her his wife next week. As for you, sir, I rejoice that your parents are not alive to be witnesses of your shameful conduct. From an indignant father, MAITRE ZEPHYRE.

"Oh, that wretch Dumontier," cried Boulanger, beating his forehead with his clenched fist, "that infamous wretch has done all this."

"You are right, Andre," said Guillot, faintly, "and to think, too, that he should so soon have forgotten his sacred compact with me. Ah, why was I so hasty, Andre? Why have I thrown my life away like this? Why did I not bide my time till the end of the war, and first slay this miserable wretch, who has so infamously betrayed me? Oh, what a madman I have been!"

"Listen, my dear Armand," said Boulanger, tenderly, as he encircled the dying man's neck with his arm and set his lips close to Guillot's ear: "If you must die, dear comrade, die in peace. Leave Dumontier to me. When I get back to Paris, I'll take the first train up to Yvetot and spit him as I would a pig."

"Will you, dear Andre?" exclaimed Guillot, as a strange glare began to burn in his eyes. "Will you slay the wretch?"

"I swear it," replied Boulanger solemnly, as he raised his right hand over his head.

"But remember, Andre," whispered Guillot, "not an unkind word against Madeleine. Not even a reproachful look at Madeleine," and the young officer fell back exhausted, his breath coming in quick and ominous puffs.

"Hark, Andre," he whispered hoarsely; "don't you hear it! That's the chapel bell at Bosc-Mesnil. Look, look, there she goes all in white on the arm of Maitre Zephyre. Isn't she beautiful, Andre? Ah, there comes Dumontier, the wretch—the wretch. Give me my sword, Andre; he shall not have her. I'll kill him. I'll kill him at the very chapel-door. Quick, Andre. Help, help, before it's too late! Madeleine, Madeleine, wait for me—wait!"—and with a heart-rending sound of life ebbing away in his throat, the young officer gasped and died.

CHAPTER III.

At the end of one year's service in the Tonquin War, Andre Boulanger, now Captain Boulanger, applied for and was granted six months' leave of absence. He was richly entitled to it, not only on account of the splendid record which he had made for himself, but for the reason that the severity of the climate had begun to tell upon him and the Colonel of his regiment recognized the fact that the country could ill afford to lose such a brave and capable officer. Without doubt, Guillot's death had produced a deep impression upon Boulanger. This was more apparent at the mess table than it was in the field. He fought as well as ever, but his flippancy and gayety had manifestly suffered diminution, and, above all, his opinions of and conduct toward women had undergone revision and suppression. Briefly stated, he was not the same man, and it was darkly hinted at among his brother officers that Guillot, in the hour of death, had unloaded some terrible grief upon Boulanger—a grief so intense and absorbing that to it, and not to the effects of the climate, was to be attributed the breaking down of his health.

Captain Boulanger himself quietly but firmly repelled all attempts of his intimates to get at the true inwardness of the matter.

"Leave that melancholy in Paris!"

"Come back to us with a new liver and a new spleen, too!"

"Remember that like cures like in love!"

Such were some of the good-humored bits of advice volunteered by his brother officers when Boulanger parted with them.

Once out of the warm, moist atmosphere of the East, Captain Boulanger's health mended rapidly, and by the time he found himself once more in the whirl of Parisian life most of the old-time dash of manner and vigor of action had returned to him.

He made but a short stay at the capital, however, for he longed to be where his thoughts were, and within a week after his return to France set out for the old city of Yvetot. It was the blossom time of year when Captain Boulanger reached his friend's birth-place, and it seemed to him that he had never seen a more beautiful country than that which lay around about the famous old Norman town. As the train approached the city his gaze suddenly fell upon a group of spacious and well-kept farm buildings. In an instant he recognized it as Bosc-Mesnil, and, as the fragrance of the blossoming fruit-trees entered the car-window and the twittering of the feathered birds reached his ear, the Parisian found it very difficult to stem the rising tide of grief.

"What a strange thing is fate?" he murmured to himself. "Why was it that poor Armand could not have returned hither instead of me?"

Captain Boulanger's first step was to seek out Guillot's cousin, a well-known manufacturer at Yvetot and deliver to him certain messages and keepsakes in accordance with the dead officer's request, and also to communicate to this relative the full particulars of Guillot's death.

While scrupulously careful not to give Guillot's cousin the faintest intimation of the awful nature of his errand to Yvetot Boulanger could with difficulty restrain his eagerness to get at the heart of the mystery which enwrapped the betrayal of his unfortunate friend and the marriage of Madeleine to the notary's son.

"Although great effort has been made," began the cousin, "to lead us to believe that Armand never really loved Madeleine, but through motives of vanity merely wished to show the good people of our city how easily he could bear the farmer's daughter triumphantly away from all wooers if he so desired, yet to my mind was this only a part of a wicked scheme of deception, which, shortly after Armand's departure, was entered upon with a view to break off the engagement and secure Madeleine for young Dumontier."

"And now that Maitre Zephyre has died," continued Guillot's cousin, "I greatly fear me this mystery will never be cleared up, for naturally the Dumontiers, father and son, the chief conspirators in this wicked business, will never speak to confound themselves. Their lips are sealed forever!"

At the mention of Guillot's perfidious friend, Boulanger felt his hot blood beating on the walls of his brow, but he curbed his inclination to cry out in fury at the infamy of this sworn friend of Armand's and merely said inquiringly:

"But Madeleine?"

"Poor child," murmured Armand's cousin, "the world with all its bright promise of blissful existence has slipped away from her completely. First made to believe that her lover has proved recreant to his vows, then forced into a marriage with a man for whom she has no affection, fate would have been bitter enough if it had stopped there. But then came the news of the death of Armand, the hero of the battle of Lang-Song, when there was every reason to suppose that he threw his life away, and last of all her father's death."

"Terrible, terrible!" whispered Boulanger, and then after a moment's silence he inquired:

"Does she make her home at Dumontier's?"

"Oh, no," was the answer, "she is too deeply attached to the old farm at Bosc-Mesnil to consent to leave it. Here she has shut herself up from the world and persistently refuses all advances of friends and acquaintances. She is said to be almost an object of worship to her overseers and farm-hands. In fact I'm told she looks more like a ministering angel in her mourning robes than she does like an inhabitant of this cold and selfish world."

"And Dumontier?" almost gasped Boulanger.

"He comes and goes between Bosc-Mesnil and his father's home," was the reply, "ostensibly they are man and wife, but in reality they are apart, I fear, forever."

Captain Boulanger had dismissed his cab, for he had resolved to return to the hotel on foot. He now found himself somewhat outside the city limits and it suddenly occurred to him that it would be much more pleasant to dine at the old inn which Armand had so often described to him. The highway seemed wonderfully familiar to him and he unconsciously strolled along, pausing now and then to enjoy the sad satisfaction of looking across the fields and meadows with Armand's eyes, as it were.

The table was set in the garden of the old inn, and Boulanger lingered so long after his dinner that the sun was well down in the west and the hum of bees had almost ceased when he rose to continue his walk in the direction of Bosc-Mesnil.

The evening promised to be one of unusual beauty and serenity and the whim came to him that he would like to see the farm building of Bosc-Mesnil at the twilight hour, when the sheep were folded, the oxen resting from the labors of the day and the cows were tinkling their bells over their feed-troughs. This had been poor Armand's favorite hour to walk forth with Madeleine. Boulanger stood for a long while gazing upon this calm and peaceful scene and then turning aside from the highway he followed a path along a flowering hedge. At once it began to take on a familiar look and he saw that he was on his way to the pond bordered with flowers. A strange joy took possession of his heart and some mysterious psychic force merged his identity into that of his dead friend.

"Oh, Armand, Armand," half sobbed a woman's voice.

"Who calls me?" he cried out, yielding to the fascination of the spell which was upon him, and speaking so like Armand that the sameness of the voice startled him.

With a smothered outburst, half fear, half amazement, a slender figure, clad in deep mourning, confronted him.

"Andre Boulanger!" came with ill-feigned wonder from Madelene, for she it was.

"The same, madam," replied the Captain, taking Madeline's outstretched hand and pressing it respectfull to his lips.

"Armand's description of you," continued Madeleine, in a voice of indescribable pathos, "were so indelibly impressed upon my memory that your face and figure seemed to me like those of an old friend. You will pardon my outcry, but, to be frank with you, you broke in upon my reverie rather abruptly."

Boulanger was delighted with Madeleine's delicious repose and certainty of manner. Offering her his arm, he led her to a rustic seat near the edge of the pond.

"I trust, madam," said he, "that you will be convinced that I come to you in something more than the mere guise of friendship."

Madeleine fixed her eyes searchingly upon Boulanger's face. She was amazed to find that there was no trace of reproach or condemnation there.

"Then you—then he—Armand," she whispered breathlessly, turning her pale face full upon Boulanger; "forgive me. He did not upbraid me? Oh, I was so weak—so weak, but I would have stood firm had not that terrible letter—"

"That letter, madam," broke in Captain Boulanger almost violently, "was an infamous forgery! Armand could no more have penned it than Lucifer have written the beatitudes! His last breath was a benediction upon your head!"

"A forgery?" cried Madeleine bewildered. "Oh, sir, spare me, don't make my crime blacker than it is. I saw the letter from Tonquin addressed to Monsieur Dumontier. It was Armand's hand-writing—there could be no mistaking it."

"Never, madam!" exclaimed Boulanger in a tone that sounded strangely solemn to Madeleine's ears.

At this moment Boulanger saw a wild and distracted look burning in Madeleine's eyes. With a shriek she dashed away toward the water, but a strong arm restrained her ere she had reached it. Boulanger led the wretched woman back to the pathway, where they were joined by one of Mme. Dumontier's maids, who with the Captain's aid conducted her mistress to the house.

If Armand's friend had needed anything to whet the edge of his purpose to punish the treacherous Dumontier, it was furnished him by Madeleine upon his next interview with her, when he learned that in order to move the farmer's daughter to abandon Guillot, the old notary had had recourse to the vile subterfuge of deceiving the simple-minded Maitre Zephyre by announcing that certain of the latter's land speculations had turned out disastrously, and that sure and steady ruin was staring the farmer in the face. The bestowal of Madeleine's hand upon his son Rene was the sole condition upon which the old notary stood ready to go to Maitre Zephyre's assistance. The solemn assurance from Captain Boulanger—which Madeleine could not hear too often—that Armand was perfectly convinced that her love had been turned from him by some infamous trick or device, and that he nobly and generously spoke of her as free from all complicity, carried much-needed balm to that poor wounded heart.

Now that Captain Boulanger had accomplished this half of his mission his thoughts turned with redoubled activity to what remained to be done. He had already met M. Dumontier several times at the club, at which he had been introduced by Guillot's cousin, and he was not a little pleased to discover that this gentleman was prone to take more wine than was good for him, a habit which often led to his being boisterous and ill-mannered at the card table and even unscrupulous in his play. Hence it was not at all to be wondered at that the hot-blooded Parisian should have on such an occasion hurled his cards into Dumontier's face and applied the harsh epithets of liar and cheat to him.

It was still early in the evening. Suddenly it occurred to Captain Boulanger that he had promised to pay a visit at Bosc-Mesnil. By good fortune his horse had not been sent back to the stable, and leaping into the saddle Boulanger turned the animal's head toward the farm house. It might be his last visit. It might be the last look that he would have in this world if that sweet pale face with its wondrously tender and soulful eyes. Dumontier had the reputation of being an excellant swordsman and Captain Boulanger, strange to say, did not feel that steadiness of nerve which he fain would have desired to have, and for which he was so justly famous.

Madeleine met him at the door with a smile which in no wise bettered matters. The Captain had never yet flinched before a woman's eyes, but he could not withstand the mysterious fascination which looked out at him from the windows of this woman's soul. He quailed before it and turned away but he could not escape that sweetly melancholy voice. It followed him; it thrilled him; it moved him like some faint melody heard by a drowning man; it promised help and yet it seemed as if he would rather listen and die than have it come too close to him.

"Why, Captain Boulanger," murmured Madeleine; "how preoccupied you are; how unlike yourself. Has aught happened? If you have any troubles will you not let me sympathize with you?"

The Captain blurted out some flimsy excuse for his absent-mindedness, but it only served to increase Madeleine's disquiet.

He was conscious that he was constrained in his manner, even cold and distant, and quite unlike himself.

Suddenly, Madeleine sank upon the sofa, and covering her face with her hands began to weep.

Boulanger had never presumed to call her by her first name, but she seemed so utterly desolate that he softened, and in a sympathetic tone of voice said:

"Come, dear Madeleine, come, you must strive to part with this sorrow. Don't you hear me, Madeleine—"

With a quick movement Madeleine looked up and riveted her gaze with a strange intensity upon Boulanger's face.

A blind man could have read the thanks in those tear-moistened eyes.

"Ah, my friend," she murmured, "this world is firmly resolved that I shall get no happiness out of it. I feel it. I know it."

Suddenly it occurred to Captain Boulanger again that possibly this was the last time he should meet Madeleine, and he made an effort to free himself from the mysterious feeling of adoration which she inspired in him.

Madeleine saw this and thanked him with one of her smiles of almost celestial sweetness. Again and again he called her Madeleine, and every time he spoke that name it grew sweeter and sweeter to them both. But suddenly a sort of panicky fear came upon him. His friend's bleeding form rose before him. He could hear Armand's piteous cry:

"Madeleine, Madeleine, wait for me," and he felt like a thief in the holiest of places reaching out for monstrance or chalice.

He rose to escape from Madeleine's presence, but her hand was laid upon his.

"Oh, Andre! Oh, my friend!" she pleaded, "wait, wait; I have much to say. Don't leave me alone in this great, cold world. Don't let me sink into the very gulf of despair. Reach out your hand. I'm lost if you withdraw your gaze from me; if I cease to hear your voice. Oh, Andre, Andre, can you not understand me?"

"Too well, too well, Madeleine," whispered Captain Boulanger, "and therefore I must not tarry. You must not constrain me. I must not vex Armand's soul."

"Fear naught, Andre," entreated Madeleine, "I will give our beloved sleep! Look at me, let me but feel that I may speak. Oh, I implore you, Andre, let me tell you how I—"

"Stop, Madeleine!" cried Boulanger, turning almost fiercely upon her. "Don't bring that word across your beautiful lips. I must not hear it. I dare not listen to you. If you would not make me execrate myself, dismiss me in silence. Oh, Madeleine, save me, save me from myself," and as Madeleine hid her face upon his breast and he felt her form rocked by this storm of grief, he took her head gently between his hands and raising it slowly bent it back until the soft light of the candalabra fell full upon it.

For a moment he stood there in silence, with his gaze chained to that divinely fair countenance. Never had he seen such a face, nor had he felt himself so deeply moved since his boyhood days, when in the dim light of some cathedral he watched some angelic countenance of the heavenly choir pictured on the windows.

Madeleine's heart stopped its beating. She hung upon Andre's lips like a criminal upon his judge's. He uttered no word, but bending forward pressed a kiss upon her forehead.

"It cannot be, Madeleine," he murmured slowly, "I have not told you all ——"

Alarmed by these words, and fearing lest he might escape her, Madeleine locked her arms about his neck.

"Not yet, not yet, Andre," she gasped convulsively, as if about to sink forever. "I know what you mean, but, oh, in heaven's name tell me, Andre, why must I be punished for sins I have not committed? I was tricked into this marriage. I loathe Dumontier; the law will set me free. I may be your wife, Andre. Oh, I may be yours."

"Not that, Madeleine; not that," whispered Boulanger.

"What then?" speak, Andre!" she exclaimed breathlessly, "what else may keep us apart?"

"My vow, Madeleine; my sacred vow!"

"Your vow, Andre; your sacred vow!" she repeated with a bewildered look.

"Ay, madam," cried Boulanger; "for you must know that I pledged my sacred word to Armand that I'd kill Dumonier for his infamous treachery, and by the eternal powers of heaven, I'll do so to-morrow morning as soon as there's light enough for me to see the place where the base wretch lies."

With those words Boulanger tore himself out of Madeleine's arms and sprang toward the door.

"Andre, Andre," shrieked Madeleine, as she sprang forward; "no, no! Spare him, Andre, if you love me, don't take his life!"

But Boulanger was gone, and in a moment Madeleine heard the rattling of his horse's hoofs on the highway grower fainter and fainter in the distance and then cease altogether.

Scarcely had the duelists crossed swords when Boulanger fell upon his oppenent with a rage that defeated the very end he had in view. Dumontier was no mean swordsman and was defending himself admirably when Boulanger succeeded in piercing his arm. The surgeon at once declared that the fighting could proceed no further. The brachial artery had been punctured. It was the work of a few moments to tie the artery, however, and the dueling party made its way back to Yvetot.

In a few hours word reached Captain Boulanger that his opponent was dying, and that his presence was needed immediately. Madelaine was already at her husband's bedside. Left alone after reaching home, the wounded man had violently undone the surgeon's work, and when discovered by the servants was rapidly nearing death from loss of blood.

As Boulanger entered the room the dying man held out his hand and smiled faintly.

"It's better thus," he whispered; "it's my own work, Captain; but oh, that Armand could know that I was true to my compact with him," gasped the notary's son, and then the end came quickly and silently, more like a dropping off to sleep than aught else.

Andre Boulanger tried