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should be shot? He had no wish to die like an ignorant, love smitten peasant in a dirty blouse!

Still Colonel Treavor interminably sighted his weapon. Finally he lowered it. It appeared that his wrist had tired. After all, there was no hurry. Why should he not rest and so make his aim surer?

PERIET felt his knees grow weak. Then a terrible fear assailed him and beat insistently upon his brain. It was the fear of fear. What if he should faint like a timid schoolgirl at commencement before the trigger was finally drawn? He had prayed in an agony of impatience for the sharp report and the blackness, and now he must begin afresh to brace his resolution.

Colonel Treavor was slowly moving his pistol hand back and forth, drawing from his wrist the cramp of the long aim. Periet heard the gasp of the two onlookers and the physician who stood waiting. His eyes ranging, though his face was held straight to the front, caught the statuesqueness of their unnatural attitudes. He knew how the murderer feels as he kneels waiting beneath the raised blade of the guillotine, and suddenly he felt oppressed with the realization that he himself was only a different type of murderer.

The Count heaved back his shoulders, which seemed burdened with the load of Atlas, and set his face. He clung desperately to the grim smile; but he knew that it had become a miserable smirk and that under the gray pallor of his cheeks showed the greenish cast of sickened terror. Something in his throat seemed to be struggling to burst out, and he knew that which struggled there was a scream. He would not after all die unafraid. He would be visibly, palpably dying the coward's death—and all because he had for an antagonist a man who was pleased to toy with his life and torture him with delay!

He saw his adversary vaguely. Treavor seemed to have grown heroically tall and to stand wavering, a thing of gigantic proportions. The hand that for the second time leveled the pistol seemed to reach across the space between and press the weapon—this time close to his breast. He cast a quick glance, as though seeking reassurance, toward the stiffly erect Faurette; but Faurette's pale face was an impenetrable mask and was turned toward the Colonel.

Then came an eternity. Periet stood rigidly enough, but with the condition that a fraction of a second might bring collapse, and again after an eternity his adversary paused and dropped the pistol at his side to rest.

Compte de Periet gritted his teeth. His tongue was clamped between them, and he tasted the blood though he could not feel the pain. Already he seemed to be inwardly bleeding from every artery.

THEN the pistol came up once more. There was once more a long, careful interval of aiming, until the muzzle was directly on his heart. He steeled himself to wait; then he caught, in the thousandth part of a second, a tongue of flame. He never heard the report. The cry that burst from his lips was rather a cry of relief than of fear or pain. He wheeled wildly about as a top turns on its axis, and fell at length, face downward, his fingers convulsively clawing the sod.

A groan of relief went up from those standing about, relief from the broken suspense. The physician was instantly at the side of the prostrate figure. Compte de Periet lay on his face, and his arms were outstretched as though desperately clinging to the earth from which he had been so terribly banished. The surgeon seized one wrist and felt for the pulse.

"Dead!" he announced with crisp brevity. Then they turned him, and into the faces of those bending over came bewilderment. On the fine textured whiteness of the linen shirt was not to be found a single stain save that of the earth to which he had fallen!

In excited haste the physician tore open the clothing and examined the chest. There were scars of old battles, rapier slashes long since healed, the mark of a bullet that had once grazed the ribs—nothing more.

"*Mon Dieu!*" whispered the doctor. "There is no wound!"

Colonel Treavor came slowly forward. "Gentlemen," he explained, "his second and mine will bear me out in my statement. I fired a blank cartridge."

Faurette, kneeling on the wet grass, turned his face away from the lifeless one of his friend and covered his eyes with his hands as he sobbed bitterly.

"Monsieur le Colonel speaks the truth," he said somewhat brokenly. "Even steel has its fusing point!"



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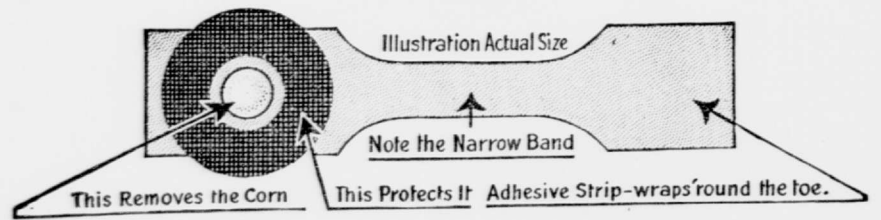
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