

terrible unknown. And yet they had loved each other to distraction. He was a foreman to a contractor and she a dressmaker going out by the day; together they made a plentiful living for themselves and the children who were coming fast. The war had begun their troubles by suspending the works and making orders less plentiful, but they had been economical and could afford to wait for awhile. And another torment was spared them for married men were not liable to military duty. They would have been better off than many others, if, unfortunately, he had not been a non-commissioned officer in Africa, and when that fever for the flag once gets into the blood a man is liable to relapse all his life!

'So when the Prussians began to advance, he became more gloomy; he kept saying that things could not go on like that. However, he resisted, unable to believe it. But when he learned that they were at Orleans, close by, when he heard that Uhlans had been seen up the Collettes road; when he thought it likely that he might see them debouching in his own street some morning, then he could contain himself no longer.

"One day he went away without telling me," she said in a faint voice, stifling a sob with her handkerchief. "And the worst of it was that I had known it would end that way, although he had loved me as tenderly as I did him, and when he did not come home I divined that it was no use expecting him."

'And since? Ah! Since then she had learned that he went a long way off to enlist, out Bordeaux was because to find a place in France which was still French one had to go as far as the Garonne. Whither everyone had drifted who still clung to the rights of the fatherland. She did not know exactly in what corps he served. It must be the chasseurs at least, like ours, but he had been passed from one depot to another, and then suddenly he was sent away. He was on his way now to the army, but his letters had stopped coming; it was a long time since she had heard from him.

"He will come back to you," said I, "you deserve it so well."

"If the Prussians leave him to me," said she as she withdrew. "But meantime I am so afraid!"

'She went, but came back again. I watched her moving about the room warming the bed piping the hearth with fine sticks, preparing an infusion over the night-lamp lamp, and hospitable exquisite in simplicity and grace. The children were asleep under the care of my orderly. The house lighted and closed likewise slept in peace. One forgot loneliness beside this hearth, the dead bodies lying in the streets, the noise of fighting, the dismal pill of this distressing war. Its bridge broken, the river slipped softly through its motionless and sleeping sands assuming safety to both armies.

The moderate warmth of the room had lulled me into that gentle torpor to which exhausted bodies yield so readily. Objects began to recede, still glittering with cleanliness yet growing vague enveloped in a very light cloak of mist. It was the repose, the oblivion of the soul, sweet precursor to that of the body. I was happy and had ceased to suffer.

Suddenly the door flew open with a violence that brought me to my feet with a shock of surprise, as if the call to arms had sounded. A woman stood there—not the chaste and gentle apparition which but now lulled my dreams, but a distracted creature, convulsed by unspeakable anguish, who clung to the door-post to prevent herself from falling—a poor bloodless face disfigured by horror. I sprang towards her. Her gesture repelled me, as she spoke in a harsh voice, with sobs and broken words which in my stupor I was slow to comprehend until a name suddenly enlightened me.

'The Prussians might perhaps have left him to me, but you!—it was different, you would not pardon him!" was her breathless plaint. "All that was my joy, all I lived for, you crushed in the snow one morning against a wall, like a thing that was troublesome and good for nothing. Ah! good for nothing, a being like him! But the very brutes would have admired him! They assassinated him! To go and leave everything, the little ones looking for their bread, the poor creature whose whole soul is wrapped up in you, to destroy the home, to outrage nature and to give yourself up to them that they might stick you against a wall like a mad dog! Yes, Bouscard, whom you condemned, was mine! You took him away from Toulouse. And then, on the road, for a word, for a gesture, for a nothing at all, you killed him! He, the beautiful, the strong and brave, killed like a coward within a stone's throw of the enemy! Such a soldier as that! Ah! it moves you now to think of it! You tell yourself that it was well done! Yes, you also admit that it was he—he my own!"

'I would have been glad to get away, but my will was powerless. I was nailed to the floor. At the name which had evoked this scene I had comprehended the revolting coincidence. There was I the judge, under my victim's foot, the woman I had widowed had overwhelmed me with the most touching cares. I was dropping asleep beside orphans who were my handwork. The horrors were too many for my poor head to endure! I was unable to leave the room. Yet there she stood, close pressed against the door stifling her sobs, wringing her arms as if in malediction. And suddenly the monstrosity of it appeared to her and revolted her. Ah! she cried, lifting her head haughty wild, "were you not one of those who punished him?" The man in the other

room told me so quite innocently; and while he the beloved, lies all bloody in the frozen ground, it is for you that this poor hearth is kindled! No! there is no religion which teaches such a duty as that, a duty which does violence to humanity, for it would no longer appeal to men! No, the executioner and the wife of the victim cannot sit beside the same fire!" And her hand raised, with convulsive energy, signed me to depart.

This time a painful shame restored me to myself. Catching up a garment to throw about me, I made hastily towards the door. And yet I wanted to say something, to give way at least to the agony that tortured me, my brain was filled with contending images; but terror of that lifted hand impelled me towards the threshold my presence profaned.

'At the moment when I was about to cross it—was it the pallor of a sick man, the disorder of my dress, which I was hastily buttoning across my chest, the wildness of inexpressible anguish speaking through my eyes?—or was it rather that the phantom of the soldier lying stiff in death rose from the tomb of his punishment to inspire his well-beloved with the supreme duty of forgiveness? For now it was she who stopped me with hands joined, trembling with grief, terrible with prayer. And when her constricted throat could open, it was an inhuman sob that parted it, a plaint from a too violent despair. She hung upon me, and in a broken voice, passionate with entreaty, she wailed.

"Forget it! I was mad. Ah! the fatherland, even when it grinds you to powder, it is still the fatherland! He would have wished Stay!"

'But grief had overcome resistance. She made a sign that she could endure no more. She put her hands to her breast as if to restrain her suffering, and falling on her knees across the threshold, her eyes, fixed and full of poignant entreaty, clung fast to mine, seeking their intention. For me, I obeyed, blinded by tears, and going backward to a chair, I sank down upon it and buried my head in my hands.

'You can understand that I found the night a long one. The next morning I got into the ambulance, and when I rejoined my regiment after the armistice had been signed, it was at Vierzon. My thought had dwelt upon that lost letter of the unfortunate Bouscard which was the cause of my frightful meeting with his family. The school teacher might be able to tell me something about it. Ah! well; the fatality had been complete. The beast had kept the letter, fearing to afflict the family too suddenly!" — Catholic Times

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