

The Storyteller

THE COURT - MARTIAL.

There were four of us dining in a quiet corner of the immense hall. Three were premeditated idlers who had either attempted nothing or been speedily disenchanted with exertion. The fourth was a born fighter, a man who had tried everything, made three or four superb rushes into danger and risked his life in incredible adventures, always in search of the five-franc piece which gives itself away freely to the stupid, but would have nothing whatever to do with him. Andre Valjac, a man of exceptional vigor who had made the French campaign almost as soon as he left Saint-Cyr, had also led a trapper's life in the Far West, played the guerilla in the Carlist camp, conceived the heroic folly of going to Gordon's assistance, and missed Khartoum by a few days only.

After awhile the conversation languished and died out. At last one of us, yielding to the uneasy languor weighing upon all, began to speak of the suffering produced by certain impressions which seem to have been driven deep in memory as if to mark a precise and fatal spot, and which none of the succeeding shocks of life is able to remove.

Silence reigned, the unaccustomed effort of wholly superficial persons summoned to look within. Then each spoke in turn, admitting that certain always palpitating souvenirs connected with events that touched them nearly did keep doleful watch on the high peaks of memory. In the ordinary course of things one has only to choose between the loss of love, a more cruel rupture, a more signal treason! Yet our eyes interrogated Valjac. Doubtless it was different with him; it must have been something altogether out of the common which had most deeply affected this seeker of adventures. At last he concluded to speak.

'I have seen death very near at hand and in every sort of shape,' he began; 'by fever in the hot countries, by fire on different occasions, by water in the wreck of the Amerique returning from the Far East, when I barely escaped with my life. But it has never impressed me so deeply as in the execution of a private soldier with which I had to do in the capacity of adjutant major as well as by reason of a particularly distressing accident.'

'It was in 1871, just at the end of the war. I belonged to a marching battalion of infantry on its way to a new army that was being created out of fragments to fill the gaps which the retreat of the army of the Loire upon Mans and the flight to Belfort of the army of the East rendered constantly more disquieting. Though we imagined we saw Prussians everywhere arrayed against our improvised armies, there were in fact not nearly so many as our mistaken terror fancied. This is what made it possible for our Twenty-fifth corps to reassemble and solidify not far from Orleans simply under cover of the Loire.'

'We had come that day from Issoudun to Vierzon. The march had been especially painful, under a vivid sky and through stretches of snow up to our knees. Our black shadows, curiously hooded by the boss of the knapsack, went stooping across the dismal whiteness, unreal shadows of a defeated army across a deserted country.'

'When we entered Vierzon night had descended slowly on the desolate scene, as if uncertain of its action on the accumulated shadows of this sky of snow. Through the mere habit of doing things inconsiderately we were halted in the principal street in an immensely long line.

'Then began that indecent, that endless waiting which ruins both men and discipline, because it is forbidden to enjoy the halting place when attained, for lack of a preliminary agreement as to how it shall be divided. Surveillance was at length relaxed, and the ranks were deserted, the wine shops filled, the doors opened, and the inhabitants resigned to hospitality, began to mingle with the soldiers. Above these groups of sordid uniforms, faded blouses, and ragged tricots, reigned a weary silence, crushing in its dread of the morrow, anxious concerning the sufferings yet to come.

The windows were now all lighted. Benumbed, my feet painfully insensible, my mind vacant, I was looking enviously at these interiors, cheerful with light and the hospitality of fire and shelter. Suddenly my name was called in one of those intonations which remind of military duty and extort the answer: Present!

'It was the adjutant who was looking for me. With a little effort he succeeded in reaching the spot where I was. The adjutant-major had been relieved in consequence of having had his leg broken under a worn-out horse. I was appointed to replace him. Moreover, the commandant had sent me word to convolve the court-martial at once for the trial of the chasseur Boussard. Boussard? A name like any other? What had he been guilty of? The adjutant did not remember: it was an old story which the removals of the battalion had prevented from being settled. After all, it was a matter which did not concern me. Mechanically I acquainted myself with the order of convocation, the adjutant lighting me with a taper sheltered from the wind by his kepi. I was one of the judges.

'The affair produced a very special effect on me because it was the first time, and at 22, things still retain their gravity. I shook off the icy torpor which glued me to the ground, and, after notifying my captain, I went to look for the school-room in which the court-martial was to be held. And, stumbling as I went against the chasseurs whom the assembly was summoning to quarter, it occurred to me that this nasty business was the fitting crown of a nasty day.

'Captain Chevardier, who was to preside, was wandering about the schoolhouse, unable to find the door, and in a state of exasperation against the fatigue duty which, by interfering with the hour of absinth, delayed a rite that he preferred.

'The others had found the entrance, and were waiting there inertly until a light should be brought. A subaltern at last appeared with a bald, paunchy little being with round eyes encircled with spectacles, who said he was the teacher, and brought two lamps with charred wicks. He nearly let them fall with fright when he heard what purpose they were to serve.

'A dark group—the prisoner Boussard between four bayonets—stood at no great distance in the snow, and above the walls of the schoolyard rose dancing flames from the cooking in the streets, piercing the darkness like the reflections of a conflagration.

'When we had taken our seats at the back of the room in front of the blackboard, facing the rows of chairs and desks which the little apprentices to life were wont to occupy I was wrung with anguish by the disproportion between this school of infancy and the drama of death to be enacted in it. We sat still while Chevardier, who had framed himself

between the lamps, and was constantly pulling up their wicks in his agony of non-comprehension, was struggling with the documents referring to the case. At last he called over our names, spluttered out the usual questions, and ordered the accused to be brought in.

'The guard halted at the entry, and the chasseur Boussard, unarmed and still in marching uniform, came forward through the aisle that divided the class-room. A handsome fellow, haughty, in full strength and vigor, hair cut short under the kepi set a little to the right, black beard in the shape of a horseshoe, bearing very military.

'His case was simple, one of a sort unfortunately too frequent at the period. While his regiment was being reviewed on a boulevard in Toulouse in the midst of a crowd just before departure, during one of those long waits to which soldiers are so uselessly subjected, the too heavy knapsack, the bitter north wind-they wind from the mountains inhaled by the Garonne in its deep gorge—the excitement produced by the crowd had been too much for him. He lost his head, fuddled himself with words, declared that he was no 'blue' no raw recruit, but could teach those gold-laced fellows their trade; that he had enlisted for the war and intended to give his life, but that Lascars were not the sort of officers for him. His lieutenant came up, spoke gently to him at first, and tried to make him keep silence. Encouraged by the crowd, and carried away by audacity, he refused. Thereupon the officer, who was too young, forgot himself so far as to lift his cane. Dodging the stick, the chasseur threatened in his turn with his raised weapon.

'When the witnesses withdrew after their deposition the struggle of the two men, one of whom was defending himself against the other, the soldier and the presiding officer, became painful to witness, because one side, and that not the usual one had so manifestly the advantage. Disconcerted by the respectful observations of the accused; and put in the wrong by his dignified firmness, Chevardier, flushed and flurried, flew into a temper as he did sometimes in a cafe when asked to pay for three drinks and shown the accusing lines on the decanter. Involuntarily one took the measure of the two men, weighed them in accordance with their human value, and half regretted, being, unable to put the one in the other's place.

'Boussard was allowed to defend himself. Without gestures, without emphasis he said with noble simplicity: "Gentlemen, I failed in discipline by making inconsiderate remarks while under arms. Physical suffering, cold, waiting, the unhealthy excitement of the crowd, might serve as my excuse. But when I saw an officer raise his cane to me—to me, a former sergeant-major—the whole tradition of the French army fairly lifted me off my feet. I had a right to use my weapon in parrying the insult. French soldiers are not beaten. And if I happened to insult my captain at such a moment it is because I was beside myself, for he had never done anything to me and deserved all my respect. That act was an unconscious one, and I regret it sincerely. Any soldier might believe me, for I was free from all military obligation, married, and the father of four children, and yet I enlisted for the war. Gentlemen, my only thought was to give my life for my country; permit the sacrifice to be accomplished in front of the enemy and not under the bullets of my comrades."

'He withdrew while the presiding officer formulated his questions. 'You are aware that death is the only penalty known to a court-martial, and that it results when the act charged is admitted by a majority of votes. How can you evade a question to which the only possible answer is yes or no? What use