

The Storyteller

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR.

Antoine Verdeau, the cobbler of Angeldorf, sat smoking his long pipe at his cottage door. It was a pleasant evening in July and the streets of the little town were full of people eager to get a breath of cool air after the intolerable heat of the day. Some as they passed saluted Verdeau; but, as he either ignored their greetings or simply nodded his head with gloomy indifference, no one felt encouraged to stop and talk with him. Between himself and all the rest of Angeldorf there had long been a barrier of reserve; for what had he to do with the foolish, chattering township, its petty interests, its miserably short memory? His only concern in the few years of life that remained to him was to think, to brood, to remember.

Thirty years ago, and it seemed but yesterday! Thirty years; so long? He felt he was getting old, and the fear froze at his heart lest the shadows should gather round him ere his great dream was realised.

Yes, it was thirty years since the bombardment of Angeldorf. Verdeau, then in the prime of life, had been spared the barbarous spectacle. He was away at the time, far from wife and child, fighting for his beloved France with the army of the Loire. He received the awful tidings, which had turned the whole current of his life, from the lips of a comrade during the dark hours of bivouac; how his little Alphonse, then his only child, had been killed outright by a German shell; and how another missile had struck and shattered the wall of the new house which he had built with the hard-earned savings of his daily toil.

As he thought of it all again—when was he not thinking of it?—he became greatly agitated, and his eyes grew dim. It would drive him mad in time, this silent brooding. He must fly from his thoughts, if that were possible. Rising suddenly from his chair, he put his pipe aside and hobbled down the garden path into the street. He tottered as he walked, he was getting more feeble every year.

Adjoining the cottage garden was a strip of land which he had bought for building purposes many, many years ago. It lay neglected and full of rubbish, for the misfortunes which had overtaken old Verdeau had paralysed most of his energies, diverting those that remained into one channel, concentrating them upon one great ideal—that of La Revanche.

At the extreme end of this fallow land stood the house which he had built, intending it for Alphonse when he grew to be a man—the house which the Germans had made a target for their cruel shells. The old man paused, contemplating the structure in silence. It was much larger than the cottage where he lived, having all the pretensions of a villa. But signs of delapidation were everywhere: the windows were broken, the inside walls were damp and mildewed and the mortar in places was crumbling away. The house was, as it had always been, untenanted, and the ragged aperture at the top of the outer wall, where the shell had pierced, went unrepaired. So it would remain as long as Antoine Verdeau had his way. As he gazed at the unsightly breach a look of bitterness came into his eyes: not the bitterness which a man feels for a particular enemy, but the large hatred which one whose spirit is unbroken by defeat might feel for a whole conquering race.

The gap should never be filled up. He had sworn it. Never, until La Revanche had come. Till then it should remain, to remind Alsace of her shame, France of her duty: a sign and a token, concrete, tangible, insistent.

Some fools in Angeldorf had many times advised him to repair the wall and put the house in order. Ah, they did not understand—those cravens! It would bring in rent—something for Victorine's dowry, they said. But he had always spurned their miserly advice—the German slaves!

Silently brooding, he retraced his steps through the growing dusk. The light from a lamp inside glimmered through the diamond-shaped panes of the cottage window; and on entering old Verdeau found the table laid for the evening meal. A young woman, of twenty-five years or thereabouts, sat the old man's chair near the table. Plump and well-formed, with fair hair and grayish blue eyes, and an even, pleasant expression of face, she might have passed for a German maiden. So appearances can deceive: there was not a drop of Teutonic blood in her veins. She was Antoine Verdeau's daughter.

The old man sank into the chair listlessly and sipped his glass of cheap wine, while the girl repeated rapidly the more important items from her budget of town gossip. A thin smile played round her father's lips as she rattled on.

'So that is what they say?' he remarked. 'You gather gossip as the bees gather honey. Victorine! Indeed, you hear so much, perhaps you can tell me if the new station master is appointed yet?'

'The station master?' she echoed, in a tone of surprise. 'Why, he came nearly two months ago.'

'I hadn't heard,' said Verdeau, wearily. 'There is little to interest me in Angeldorf now. But who is the man? An Alsatian, I hope.'

From the eagerness of his look Victorine knew that she was on dangerous ground.

'I think not, father,' she said. 'In fact—his searching glance compelled the truth—I—I know 'tis not so. The new station master is Herr Bauer.'

A fierce expression leaped from the cobbler's lips. 'A German!' he cried, with supreme contempt. 'I thought as much.'

'But not a Prussian, father,' Victorine exclaimed. 'Herr Bauer is out of Bavaria.'

'The old patriot looked at her with contemptuous pity. 'If a lion had attacked you, girl,' he retorted, 'would you ask what breed it was? Prussian or Bavarian, 'tis all the same. And how does the township take this latest insult to France? With its wonted servility, I warrant, smiling back its thanks for every lash of the German taskmaster!'

'Herr Bauer seems to be popular in Angeldorf,' the girl ventured timidly.

Her father shrugged his shoulders. 'You have seen him?' he asked.

'He has been at the Berniers once or twice,' she replied. 'Yes, I have met him there.'

She rose quickly from her chair.

'And of course you like him, with the rest?' he returned, sarcastically. 'It would not be Victorine if she were not in the fashion!'

The girl reddened. 'He seems to be an agreeable man,' she said; 'but even if he were otherwise, I don't see how it can concern me, father,' she added naively.

'Pierre Michel should have had the job,' testily cried the old man. 'He is an Alsatian born and bred; but there was no one in the place to speak a word for him. Angeldorf fears the oppressor too much for that. It has come to believe that La Revanche is an idle cry—that she will never come. But she will come,' he cried, with wild intensity, lifting his eyes and talking to the ceiling rather than to Victorine; 'she shall come.'

'So you have always said, father,' was the girl's response; 'but how long the time seems!'

'Only to those who have lost hope and courage,' he replied, solemnly. 'Thanks to the good God, I have both still, Victorine. Though I am sometimes impatient, I feel in my heart that the hour is not yet ripe. But that hour will come, child, and with it the man—the new Napoléon, the saviour of France, the liberator of Alsace. Oh, if my boy had only lived, this glorious mission might have been his!'

Little Alphonse, whose death had first kindled and afterward kept alive the idea of La Revanche in the old patriot's bosom, had become the very genius of the great event, so long delayed, which would stanch the wounds of France and recover her lost provinces. It was the cobbler's fond hope that this bright boy, inheriting his father's zeal, would have acquired the culture to shape its promptings. To Paris he would have gone in the flower of his manhood, no peevish railer at destiny, but the victor over incredible obstacles. With convincing force he would have rendered articulate the vague aspirations of the people for revenge, and perhaps—such was the fond parent's conceit—would even have headed the attack against the hereditary foe.

The death of her brother, whom Victorine had never known, was the sole means by which she could obtain any conception of the central idea which dominated her father's mind. In all other respects La Revanche was unintelligible to her. Born a full five years after the war, she unconsciously accepted German ascendancy as part of the established order of things; a French Alsace was historically too remote to be passionately apprehended. 'Why not let the matter rest?' she thought. Like her mother, who had died in giving her birth, she shrank from the idea of war between the nations. Of an eminently practical bent, she considered her father's preference for cobbling shoes in penury instead of repairing the house which the shell had shattered a sad piece of infatuation. To sum up the matter, there was little suggestive of La Revanche about Victorine except her name, which contained, as it were, the promise of the fulfilment of her father's hopes.

Immersed, as he so often was, in dreamy speculations, Antoine Verdeau was nevertheless keen enough to perceive that his daughter was no enthusiast. She had imbibed instead the lethargy of the township, and as a consequence he seldom spoke of his ideas to her. But that last blow to French pride—the appointment of a German station master in a town so near the frontier as Angeldorf—affected him so acutely that he was obliged to talk.

'I saw Pierre Michel pass to-day,' he said a few days later. 'He should have had the post.'

'But is he a more capable man than Herr Bauer?' Victorine asked, somewhat needlessly, for she knew Pierre to be a hopeless ne'er-do-well.

'He is an Alsatian,' was the curt response.

The reason was much too sentimental to appeal to Victorine, and she found herself, before she was well aware of it, blundering into an advocacy of the Bavarian's claims.

'People say, father, that Herr Bauer is well up to his work,' she observed, with some warmth. 'He has been sergeant in the Eisenbahn regiment, and has a good record.'

'Where did you hear all this, girl?' Verdeau asked impatiently. 'Ah, I see—you have met him again?'

Victorine avoided her father's gaze. 'Yes—last night—at the Berniers,' she replied, in a low voice.

'Why does he go there so much?' he inquired, fiercely. 'And what does old Bernier mean by encouraging him? As a lover for the fair Julie, perhaps. Ha! ha! 'Tis glorious,' he shouted. 'The Deutschers have made their conquest complete. We give them our sons for their army, our daughters for their wives. They have conquered us body and soul!'