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Title: When Valmond Came to Pontiac, Volume 3.

Author: Gilbert Parker

Release Date: August, 2004 [EBook #6204]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on September 23, 2002]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

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WHEN VALMOND CAME TO PONTIAC

The Story of a Lost Napoleon

By Gilbert Parker

Volume 3.

CHAPTER XIII

The sickness had come like a whirlwind: when it passed, what would be left? The fight went on in the quiet hills--a man of no great stature or strength, against a monster who racked him in a fierce embrace. A thousand scenes flashed through Valmond's brain, before his eyes, while the great wheel of torture went round, and he was broken, broken-mended and broken again, upon it. Spinning--he was for ever spinning, like a tireless moth through a fiery air; and the world went roaring past. In vain he cried to the wheelman to stop the wheel: there was no answer. Would those stars never cease blinking in and out, or the wind stop whipping the swift clouds past? So he went on, endless years, driving through space, some terrible intangible weight dragging at his heart, and all his body panting as it spun.

Grotesque faces came and went, and bright-eyed women floated by, laughing at him, beckoning to him; but he could not come, because of this endless going. He heard them singing, he felt the divine notes in his battered soul; he tried to weep for the hopeless joy of it; but the tears came no higher than his throat. Why did they mock him so? At last, all the figures merged into one, and she had the face--ah, he had seen it centuries ago!--of Madame Chalice. Strange that she was so young still, and that was so long past--when he stood on a mountain, and, clambering a high wall of rock, looked over into a happy No-man's Land.

Why did the face elude him so, flashing in and out of the vapours? Why was its look sorrowful and distant? And yet there was that perfect smile, that adorable aspect of the brow, that light in the deep eyes. He tried to stop the eternal spinning, but it went remorselessly on; and presently the face was gone; but not till it had given him ease of his pain.

Then came fighting, fighting, nothing but fighting--endless charges of cavalry, continuous wheelings and advancings and retreatings, and the mad din of drums; afterwards, in a swift quiet, the deep, even thud of the horses' hoofs striking the ground. Flags and banners flaunted gaily by. How the helmets flashed, and the foam flew from the bits! But those

flocks of blackbirds flying over the heads of the misty horsemen--they made him shiver. Battle, battle, battle, and death, and being born--he felt it all.

All at once there came a wide peace and clearing, and the everlasting jar and movement ceased. Then a great pause, and light streamed round him, comforting him.

It seemed to him that he was lying helpless and still by falling water in a valley. The water soothed him, and he fell asleep. After a long time he waked, and dimly knew that a face, good to look at, was bending over him. In a vague, far-off way he saw that it was Elise Malboir; but even as he saw, his eyes closed, the world dropped away, and he sank to sleep again.

It was no vision or delirium; for Elise had come. She had knelt beside his bed, and given him drink, and smoothed his pillow; and once, when no one was in the tent, she stooped and kissed his hot dark lips, and whispered words that were not for his ears to hear, nor to be heard by any one of this world. The good Cure found her there. He had not heart to bid her go home, and he made it clear to the villagers that he approved of her great kindness. But he bade her mother also come, and she stayed in a tent near by.

Lagroin and two hundred men held the encampment, and every night the recruits arrived from the village, drilled as before, and waited for the fell disease to pass. No one knew its exact nature, but now and again, in long years, some one going to Dalgrothe Mountain was seized by it, and died, or was left stricken with a great loss of the senses, or the limbs. Yet once or twice, they said, men had come up from it no worse at all. There was no known cure, and the Little Chemist could only watch the swift progress of the fever, and use simple remedies to allay the suffering. Parpon knew that the disease had seized upon Valmond the night of the burial of Gabriel. He remembered now the sickly, pungent air that floated past, and how Valmond, weak from the loss of blood in the fight at the smithy, shuddered, and drew his cloak about him. A few days would end it, for good or ill.

Madame Chalice heard the news with consternation, and pity would have sent her to Valmond's bedside, but that she found Elise was his faithful nurse and servitor. This fixed in her mind the belief that if Valmond died, he would leave both misery and shame behind; if he lived, she should, in any case, see him no more. But she sent him wines and delicacies, and she also despatched a messenger to a city sixty miles away, for the best physician. Then she sought the avocat, to discover whether he had any exact information as to Valmond's friends in Quebec, or in France. She had promised not to be his enemy, and she remembered with a sort of sorrow that she had told him she meant to be his friend; but, having promised, she would help him in his sore strait.

She had heard of De la Riviere's visit to Valmond, and she intended sending for him, but delayed it. The avocat told her nothing: matters were in abeyance, and she abided the issue; meanwhile getting news of the

sick man twice a day. More, she used all her influence to keep up the feeling for him in the country, to prevent flagging of enthusiasm. This she did out of a large heart, and a kind of loyalty to her temperament and to his own ardour for his cause. Until he was proved the comedian (in spite of the young Seigneur) she would stand by him, so far as his public career was concerned. Misfortune could not make her turn from a man; it was then she gave him a helping hand. What was between him and Elise was for their own souls and consciences.

As she passed the little cottage in the field the third morning of Valmond's illness, she saw the girl entering. Elise had come to get some necessaries for Valmond and for her mother. She was pale; her face had gained a spirituality, a refinement, new and touching. Madame Chalice was tempted to go and speak to her, and started to do so, but turned back.

"No, no, not until we know the worst of this illness--then!" she said to herself.

But ten minutes later De la Riviere was not so kind. He had guessed a little at Elise's secret, and as he passed the house on the way to visit Madame Chalice, seeing the girl, he came to the door and said:

"How goes it with the distinguished gentleman, Elise? I hear you are his slave."

The girl turned a little pale. She was passing a hot iron over some coarse sheets, and, pausing, she looked steadily at him and replied:

"It is not far to Dalgrothe Mountain, monsieur."

"The journey's too long for me; I haven't your hot young blood," he said suggestively.

"It was not so long a dozen years ago, monsieur." De la Riviere flushed to his hair. That memory was a hateful chapter in his life--a boyish folly, which involved the miller's wife. He had buried it, the village had forgotten it,--such of it as knew,--and the remembrance of it stung him. He had, however, brought it on himself, and he must eat the bitter fruit.

The girl's eyes were cold and hard. She knew him to be Valmond's enemy, and she had no idea of sparing him. She knew also that he had been courteous enough to send a man each day to inquire after Valmond, but that was not to the point; he was torturing her, he had prophesied the downfall of her "spurious Napoleon."

"It will be too long a journey for you, and for all, presently," he said.

"You mean that His Excellency will die?" she asked, her heart beating so hard that it hurt her. Yet the flat-iron moved backwards and forwards upon the sheets mechanically.

"Or fight a Government," he answered. "He has had a good time, and good times can't last for ever, can they, Elise? Have you ever thought of that?"

She turned pale and swayed over the table. In an instant he was beside her; for though he had been irritable and ungenerous, he had at bottom a kind heart. Catching up a glass of water, he ran an arm round her waist and held the cup to her lips.

"What's the matter, my girl?" he asked. "There, pull yourself together."

She drew away from him, though grateful for his new attitude. She could not bear everything. She felt nervous and strangely weak.

"Won't you go, monsieur?" she said, and turned to her ironing again.

He looked at her closely, and not unkindly. For a moment the thought possessed him that evil and ill had come to her. But he put it away from him, for there was that in her eyes which gave his quick suspicions the lie. He guessed now that the girl loved Valmond, and he left her with that thought. Going up the hill, deep in thought, he called at the Manor, to find that Madame Chalice was absent, and would not be back till evening.

When Elise was left alone, a weakness seized her again, as it had done when De la Riviere was present. She had had no sleep in four days, and it was wearing on her, she said to herself, refusing to believe that a sickness was coming. Leaving the kitchen, she went up to her bedroom. Opening the window, she sat down on the side of the bed and looked round. She figured Valmond in her mind as he stood in this place and that, his voice, his words to her, the look in his face, the clasp of his hand.

All at once she sprang up, fell on her knees before the little shrine of the Virgin, and burst into tears. Her rich hair, breaking loose, flowed round her—the picture of a Magdalen; but it was, in truth, a pure girl with a true heart. At last she calmed herself and began to pray:

"Ah, dear Mother of God, thou who dost speak for the sorrowful before thy Son and the Father, be merciful to me and hear me. I am but a poor girl, and my life is no matter. But he is a great man, and he has work to do, and he is true and kind. Oh, pray for him, divine Mother, sweet Mary, that he may be saved from death! If the cup must be emptied, may it be given to me to drink! Oh, see how all the people come to him and love him! For the saving of Madelinette, oh, may his own life be given him! He cannot pray for himself, but I pray for him. Dear Mother of God, I love him, and I would lose my life for his sake. Sweet Mary, comfort thy child, and out of thy own sorrow be good to my sorrow. Hear me and pray for me, divine Mary. Amen."

Her whole nature had been emptied out, and there came upon her a calm, a strange clearness of brain, exhausted in body as she was. For an instant she stood thinking.

"Madame Degardy! Madame Degardy!" she cried, with sudden inspiration.
"Ah, I will find her; she may save him with her herbs!"

She hurried out of the house and down through the village to the little hut by the river, where the old woman lived.

Elise had been to Madame Degardy as good a friend as a half-mad creature, with no memory, would permit her. Parpon had lived for years in the same village, but, though he was her own son, she had never given him a look of recognition, had used him as she used all others. In turn, the dwarf had never told any one but Valmond of the relationship; and so the two lived their strange lives in their own singular way. But the Cure knew who it was that kept the old woman's house supplied with wood and other necessaries. Parpon himself had tried to summon her to Valmond's bedside, for he knew well her skill with herbs, but the little hut was empty, and he could get no trace of her. She had disappeared the night Valmond was seized of the fever, and she came back to her little home in the very hour that Elise visited her. The girl found her boiling herbs before a big fire. She was stirring the pot diligently, now and then sprinkling in what looked like a brown dust, and watching the brew intently.

She nodded, but did not look at Elise, and said crossly:

"Come in, come in, and shut the door, silly."

"Madame," said the girl, "His Excellency has the black fever."

"What of that?" she returned irritably.

"I thought maybe your herbs could cure him. You've cured others, and this is an awful sickness. Ah, won't you save him, if you can?"

"What are you to him, pale-face?" she said, her eyes peering into the pot.

"Nothing more to him than you are, madame," the girl answered wearily.

"I'll cure because I want, not because you ask me, pretty brat."

Elise's heart gave a leap: these very herbs were for Valmond! The old woman had travelled far to get the medicaments immediately she had heard of Valmond's illness. Night and day she had trudged, and she was more brown and weather-beaten than ever.

"The black fever! the black fever!" cried the old woman. "I know it well. It's most like a plague. I know it. But I know the cure-ha, ha! Come along now, feather-legs, what are you staring there for? Hold that jug while I pour the darling liquor in. Ha, ha! Crazy Joan hasn't lived for nothing. They have to come to her; the great folks have to come to her!"

So she meandered on, filling the jug. Later, in the warm dusk, they travelled up to Dalgrothe Mountain, and came to Valmond's tent. By the couch knelt Parpon, watching the laboured breathing of the sick man. When he saw Madame Degardy, he gave a growl of joy, and made way for her. She pushed him back with her stick contemptuously, looked Valmond over, ran her fingers down his cheek, felt his throat, and at last held his restless hand. Elise, with the quick intelligence of love, stood ready. The old woman caught the jug from her, swung it into the hollow of her arm, poured the cup half full, and motioned the girl to lift up Valmond's head. Elise raised it to her bosom, leaning her face down close to his. Madame Degardy instantly pushed back her head.

"Don't get his breath--that's death, idiot!" she said, and began to pour the liquid into Valmond's mouth very slowly. It was a tedious process at first, but at length he began to swallow naturally, and finished the cup.

There was no change for an hour, and then he became less restless. After another cupful, his eyes half opened. Within an hour a perspiration came, and he was very quiet, and sleeping easily. Parpon crouched near the door, watching it all with deep, piercing eyes. Madame Degardy never moved from her place, but stood shaking her head and muttering. At last Lagroin came, and whisperingly asked after his chief; then, seeing him in a healthy and peaceful sleep, he stooped and kissed the hand lying upon the blanket.

"Beloved sire! Thank the good God!" he said. Soon after he had gone, there was a noise of tramping about the tent, and then a suppressed cheer, which was fiercely stopped by Parpon, and the soldiers of the Household Troops scattered to their tents.

"What's that?" asked Valmond, opening his eyes bewilderedly.

"Your soldiers, sire," answered the dwarf.

Valmond smiled languidly. Then he saw Madame Degardy and Elise.

"I am very sleepy, dear friends," he said, with a courteous, apologetic gesture, and closed his eyes. Presently they opened again. "My snuff-box--in my pocket," he said to the old woman, waving a hand to where his uniform hung from the tent-pole; "it is for you, madame."

She understood, smiled grimly, felt in a waistcoat pocket, found the snuff-box, and, squatting on the ground like a tailor, she took two pinches, and sat holding the antique silver box in her hand.

"Crazy Joan's no fool, dear lad," she said at last, and took another pinch, and knowingly nodded her head again and again, while he slept soundly.

"Lights Out!"

The bugle-call rang softly down the valley, echoed away tenderly in the hills, and was lost in the distance. Roused by the clear call, Elise rose from watching beside Valmond's couch, and turned towards the door of the tent. The spring of a perfect joy at his safety had been followed by an aching in all her body and a trouble at her heart. Her feet were like lead, her spirit quivered and shrank by turn. The light of the campfires sent a glow through the open doorway upon the face of the sleeper.

She leaned over him. The look she gave him seemed to her anxious spirit like a farewell. This man had given her a new life, and out of it had come a new sight. Valmond had escaped death, but in her poor confused way she felt another storm gathering about him. A hundred feelings possessed her; but one thought was master of them all: when trouble drew round him, she must be near him, must be strong to help him, protect him, if need be. Yet a terrible physical weakness was on her. Her limbs trembled, her head ached, her heart throbbed in a sickening way.

He stirred in his sleep; a smile passed over his face. She wondered what gave it birth. She knew well it was not for her, that smile. It belonged to his dream of success--when a thousand banners should flaunt in the gardens of the Tuileries. Overcome by a sudden rush of emotion, she fell on her knees at his side, bursting into noiseless sobs, which shook her from head to foot.

Every nerve in her body responded to the shock of feeling; she was having her dark hour alone.

At last she staggered to her feet and turned to the open door. The tents lay silent in the moonshine, but wayward lights flickered in the sumptuous dusk, and the quiet of the hills hung like a canopy over the bivouac of the little army. No token of misfortune came out of this peaceful encampment, no omen of disaster crossed the long lane of drowsy fires and huge amorous shadows. The sense of doom was in the girl's own heart, not in this deep cradle of the hills.

Now and again a sentinel crossed the misty line of vision, silent, and majestically tall, in the soft haze, which came down from Dalgrothe Mountain and fell like a delicate silver veil before the face of the valley.

As she looked, lost in a kind of dream, there floated up from the distant tent the refrain she knew so well:

"Oh, say, where goes your love?
O gai, vine le roi!"

Her hand caught her bosom as if to stifle a sudden pain. That song had been the keynote to her new life, and it seemed now as if it were also to be the final benediction. All her spirit gathered itself up for a great resolution: she would not yield to this invading weakness, this misery of

body and mind.

Some one drew out of the shadows and came towards her. It was Madame Degardy. She had seen the sobbing figure inside the tent, but, with the occasional wisdom of the foolish of this world, she had not been less considerate than the children of light.

With brusque, kindly taps of her stick, she drove the girl to her own tent, and bade her sleep: but sleep was not for Elise that night; and in the grey dawn, while yet no one was stirring in the camp, she passed slowly down the valley to her home.

Madame Chalice was greatly troubled also. Valmond's life was saved. In three days he was on his feet, eager and ardent again, and preparing to go to the village; but what would the end of it all be? She knew of De la Riviere's intentions, and she foresaw a crisis. If Valmond were in very truth a Napoleon, all might be well, though this crusade must close here. If he were an impostor, things would go cruelly hard with him. Impostor? Strange how, in spite of all evidence against him, she still felt a vital sureness in him somewhere; a radical reality, a convincing quality of presence. At times he seemed like an actor playing his own character. She could never quite get rid of that feeling.

In her anxiety--for she was in the affair for good or ill--she went again to Monsieur Garon.

"You believe in Monsieur Valmond, dear avocat?" she asked.

The little man looked at her admiringly, though his admiration was a quaint, Arcadian thing; and, perching his head on one side abstractedly, he answered:

"Ah, yes, ah, yes! Such candour! He is the son of Napoleon and a certain princess, born after Napoleon's fall, not long before his death."

"Then, of course, Monsieur Valmond is really nameless?" she asked.

"Ah, there is the point--the only point; but His Excellency can clear up all that, and will do so in good time, he says. He maintains that France will accept him."

"But the Government here, will they put him down? proceed against him? Can they?"

"Ah, yes, I fear they can proceed against him. He may recruit men, but he may not drill and conspire, you see. Yet"--the old man smiled, as though at some distant and pleasing prospect "the cause is a great one; it is great. Ah, madame, dear madame"--he got to his feet and stepped into the middle of the floor--"he has the true Napoleonic spirit. He loves it all. At the very first, it seemed as if he were going to be a little ridiculous; now it is as if there was but one thing for him--love of France and loyalty to the cause. Ah, think of the glories of the Empire! of France as the light of Europe, of Napoleon making her rich and

proud and dominant! And think of her now, sinking into the wallow of bourgeois vulgarity! If--if, as His Excellency said, the light were to come from here, even from this far corner of the world, from this old France, to be the torch of freedom once again--from our little parish here!"

His face was glowing, his thin hands made a quick gesture of charmed anticipation.

Madame Chalice looked at him in a sort of wonder and delight. Dreamers all! And this visionary Napoleon had come into the little man's quiet, cultured, passive life, and had transformed him, filled him with adventure and patriotism. There must be something behind Valmond, some real, even some great thing, or this were not possible. It was not surprising that she, with the spirit of dreams and romance deep in her, should be sympathetic, even carried away for the moment.

"How is the feeling in the country since his illness?" she asked.

"Never so strong as now. Many new recruits come to him. Organisation goes on, and His Excellency has issued a proclamation. I have advised him against that--it is not necessary, it is illegal. He should not tempt our Government too far. But he is a gentleman of as great simplicity as courage, of directness and virtue--a wholesome soldier--"

She thought again of that moonlit night, and Elise's window, and a kind of hatred of the man came up in her. No, no, she was wrong; he was not the true thing.

"Dear avocat," she said suddenly, "you are a good friend. May I have always as good! But have you ever thought that this thing may end in sore disaster? Are we doing right? Is the man worthy our friendship and our adherence?"

"Ah, dear madame, convictions, principles, truth, they lead to good ends --somewhere. I have a letter here from Monsieur Valmond. It breathes noble things; it has humour, too--ah, yes, so quaint! I am to see him this afternoon--he returns to the Louis Quinze to-day. The Cure and I--"

She laid her hand on his arm, interrupting him. "Will you take me this evening to Monsieur Valmond, dear friend?" she asked.

She saw now how useless it was to attempt anything through these admirers of Valmond; she must do it herself. He must be firmly and finally warned and dissuaded. The conviction had suddenly come to her with great force, that the end was near--come to her as it came to Elise. Her wise mind had seen the sure end; Elise's heart had felt it.

The avocat readily promised. She was to call for him at a little before eight o'clock. But she decided that she would first seek Elise; before she accused the man, she would question the woman. Above and beyond all anger she felt at this miserable episode, there was pity in her heart for the lonely girl. She was capable of fierce tempers, of great caprices,

of even wild injustice, when her emotions had their way with her; but her heart was large, her nature deep and broad, and her instincts kind. The little touch of barbarism in her gave her, too, a sense of primitive justice. She was self-analytical, critical of life and conduct, yet her mind and her heart, when put to the great test, were above mere anatomising. Her rich nature, alive with these momentous events, feeling the prescience of coming crisis, sent a fine glow into her face, into her eyes. Excitement gave a fresh elasticity to her step.

In spite of her serious thoughts, she looked very young, almost irresponsible. No ordinary observer could guess the mind that lay behind the eloquent, glowing eyes. Even the tongue at first deceived, till it began to probe, to challenge, to drop sharp, incisive truths in little gold-leaped pellets, which brought conviction when the gold-leaf wore off.

The sunlight made her part of the brilliant landscape, and she floated into it, neither too dainty nor too luxurious. The greatest heat of the day was past, and she was walking slowly under the maples, on the way to Elise's home, when she was arrested by a voice near her. Then a tall figure leaped the fence, and came to her with outstretched hand and an unmistakable smile of pleasure.

"I've called at the Manor twice, and found you out; so I took to the highway," said the voice gaily.

"My dear Seigneur," she answered, with mock gravity, "ancestors' habits show in time."

"Come, that's severe, isn't it?"

"You have waylaid me in a lonely place, master highwayman!" she said, with a torturing sweetness.

He had never seen her so radiantly debonnaire; yet her heart was full of annoying anxiety.

"There's so much I want to say to you," he answered more seriously.

"So very much?"

"Very much indeed."

She looked up the road. "I can give you ten minutes," she said.

"Suppose we walk up and down under these trees. It is shady and quiet here. Now proceed, monsieur. Is it my money or my life?"

"You are in a charming mood to-day."

"Which is more than I could say for you the last time we met. You threatened, stormed, were childish, impossible to a degree."

His face became grave. "We were such good friends once!"

"Once--once?" she asked maliciously. "Once Cain and Abel were a happy family. When was that once?"

"Two years ago. What talks we had then! I had so looked forward to your coming again. It was the alluring thing in my life, your arrival," he went on; "but something came between."

His tone nettled her. He talked as if he had some distant claim on her.

"Something came between?" she repeated slowly, mockingly. "That sounds melodramatic indeed. What was it came between--a coach-and-four, or a grand army?"

"Nothing so stately," he answered, piqued by her tone: "a filibuster and his ragamuffins."

"Ragamuffins would be appreciated by Monsieur Valmond's followers, spoken at the four corners," she answered.

"Then I'll change it," he said: "a ragamuffin and his filibusters."

"The 'ragamuffin' always speaks of his enemies with courtesy, and the filibusters love their leader," was her pointed rejoinder.

"At half a dollar a day," he answered sharply.

"They get that much from His Excellency, do they?" she asked in real surprise. "That doesn't look like filibustering, does it?"

"His Excellency!" he retorted. "Why won't you look this matter straight in the face? Napoleon or no Napoleon, the end of this thing is ruin."

"Take care that you don't get lost in the debris," she said biting.

"I can take care of myself. I am sorry to have you mixed up in it."

"You are sorry? How good of you! How paternal!"

"If your husband were here--"

"If my husband were here, you would probably be his best friend," she rejoined, with acid sweetness; "and I should still have to take care of myself."

Had he no sense of what was possible to leave unsaid to a woman? She was very angry, though she was also a little sorry for him; for perhaps in the long run he would be in the right. But he must pay for his present stupidity.

"You wrong me," he answered, with a quick burst of feeling. "You are most unfair. You punish me because I do my public duty; and because I

would do anything in the world for you, you punish me the more. Have you forgotten two years ago? Is it so easy to your hand, a true and constant admiration, a sincere homage, that you throw it aside like--"

"Monsieur De la Riviere," she said, with exasperating deliberation, her eyes having a dangerous light, "your ten minutes is more than up. And it has been quite ten minutes too long."

"If I were a filibuster"--he answered bitterly and suggestively.

She interrupted him, saying, with a purring softness: "If you had only courage enough--"

He waved his hand angrily. "If I had, I should hope you would prove a better friend to me than you are to this man."

"Ah, in what way do I fail towards 'this man'?"

"By encouraging his downfall. See--I know I am taking my life in my hands, as it were, but I tell you this thing will do you harm when it goes abroad."

She felt the honesty of his words, though they angered her. He seemed to impute some personal interest in Valmond. She would not have it from any man in the world.

"If you will pick up my handkerchief--ah, thank you! We must travel different roads in this matter. You have warned; let me prophesy. His Highness Valmond Napoleon will come out of this with more honour than yourself."

"Thanks to you, then," he said gallantly, for he admired her very stubbornness.

"Thanks to himself. I honestly believe that you will be ashamed of your part in this, one day."

"In any case, I will force the matter to a conclusion," he answered firmly. "The fantastic thing must end."

"When?"

"Within a few days."

"When all is over, perhaps you will have the honesty to come and tell me which was right--you or I. Goodbye."

Elise was busy at her kitchen fire. She looked up, startled, as her visitor entered. Her heavy brow grew heavier, her eyes gleamed sulkily, as she dragged herself forward with weariness, and stood silent and resentful. Why had this lady of the Manor come to her? Madame Chalice scarcely knew how to begin, for, in truth, she wanted to be the girl's friend, and she feared making her do or say some wild thing.

She looked round the quiet room. Some fruit was boiling on a stove, giving out a fragrant savour, and Elise's eye was on it mechanically. A bit of sewing lay across a chair, and on the wall hung a military suit of the old sergeant, beside it a short sabre. An old Tricolor was draped from a beam, and one or two maps of France were pinned on the wall. She fastened her look on the maps. They seemed to be her cue.

"Have you any influence with your uncle?" she asked.

Elise remained gloomily silent.

"Because," Madame Chalice went on smoothly, ignoring her silence, "I think it would be better for him to go back to Ville Bambord-- I am sure of it."

The girl's lip curled angrily. What right had this great lady to interfere with her or hers? What did she mean?

"My uncle is a general and a brave man; he can take care of himself," she answered defiantly. Madame Chalice did not smile at the title. She admired the girl's courage. She persisted however. "He is one man, and--"

"He has plenty of men, madame, and His Excellency--"

"His Excellency and hundreds of men cannot stand, if the Government send soldiers against them."

"Why should the Government do that? They're only going to France; they mean no trouble here."

"They have no right to drill and conspire here, my girl."

"Well, my uncle and his men will fight; we'll all fight," Elise retorted, her hands grasping the arms of the rocking-chair she sat in.

"But why shouldn't we avoid fighting? What is there to fight for? You are all very happy here. You were very happy here before Monsieur Valmond came. Are you happy now?"

Madame Chalice's eyes searched the flushed face anxiously. She was growing more eager every moment to serve, if she could, this splendid creature.

"We would die for him!" answered the girl quickly.

"You would die for him," came the reply, slowly, meaningly.

"And what's it to you, if I would?" came the sharp retort. "Why do you fine folk meddle yourselves with poor folk's affairs?"

Then, remembering she was a hostess, with the instinctive courtesy of her

race, she said: "Ah, pardon, madame; you meant nothing, I'm sure."

"Why should fine folk make poor folk unhappy?" said Madame Chalice, quietly and sorrowfully, for she saw that Elise was suffering, and all the woman in her came to her heart and lips. She laid her hand on the girl's arm. "Indeed yes, why should fine folk make poor folk unhappy? It is not I alone who makes you unhappy, Elise."

The girl angrily shook off the hand, for she read the true significance of the words.

"What are you trying to find out?" she asked fiercely. "What do you want to do? Did I ever come in your way? Why do you come into mine? What's my life to you? Nothing, nothing at all. You're here to-day and away to-morrow. You're English; you're not of us. Can't you see that I want to be left alone?"

"If I were unhappy, I could look after myself. But I'm not, I'm not--I tell you I'm not! I'm happy. I never knew what happiness was till now. I'm so happy that I can stand here and not insult you, though you've insulted me."

"I meant no insult, Elise. I want to help you; that is all. I know how hard it is to confide in one's kinsfolk, and I wish with all my heart I might be your friend, if you ever need me."

Elise met her sympathetic look clearly and steadily. "Speak plain to me, madame," she said.

"Elise, I saw some one climb out of your bedroom window," was the slow reply.

"Oh, my God!" said the girl; "oh, my God!" and she stared blankly for a moment at Madame Chalice. Then, trembling greatly, she reached to the table for a cup of water.

Madame Chalice was at once by her side. "You are ill, poor girl," she said anxiously, and put her arm around her.

Elise drew away.

"I will tell you all, madame, all; and you must believe it, for, as God is my judge, it is the truth." Then she told the whole story, exactly as it happened, save mention of the kisses that Valmond had given her. Her eyes now and again filled with tears, and she tried, in her poor untutored way, to set him right. She spoke for him altogether, not for herself; and her listener saw that the bond which held the girl to the man might be proclaimed in the streets, with no dishonour.

"That's the story, and that's the truth," said Elise at last. "He's a gentleman, a great man, and I'm a poor girl, and there can be nothing between us; but I'd die for him."

She no longer resented Madame Chalice's solicitude: she was passive, and showed that she wished to be alone.

"You think there's going to be great trouble?" she asked, as Madame Chalice made ready to go.

"I fear so, but we will do all we can to prevent it." Elise watched her go on towards the Manor in the declining sunlight, then turned heavily to her work again.

There came to her ears the sound of a dog-churn in the yard outside, and the dull roll and beat seemed to keep time to the aching pulses in her head, in all her body. One thought kept going through her brain: there was, as she had felt, trouble coming for Valmond. She had the conviction, too, that it was very near. Her one definite idea was, that she should be able to go to him when that trouble came; that she should not fail him at his great need. Yet these pains in her body, this alternate exaltation and depression, this pitiful weakness! She must conquer it. She remembered the hours spent at his bedside; the moments when he was all hers--by virtue of his danger and her own unwavering care of him. She recalled the dark moment when Death, intrusive, imminent, lurked at the tent door, and in its shadow she emptied out her soul in that one kiss of fealty and farewell.

That kiss--there came to her again, suddenly, Madame Degardy's cry of warning: "Don't get his breath--it's death, idiot!"

That was it: the black fever was in her veins! That one kiss had sealed her own doom. She knew it now.

He had given her life by giving her love. Well, he should give her death too--her lord of life and death. She was of the chosen few who could drink the cup of light and the cup of darkness with equally regnant soul.

But it might lay her low in the very hour of Valmond's trouble. She must conquer it--how? To whom could she turn for succour? There was but one,--yet she could not seek Madame Degardy, for the old woman would drive her to her bed, and keep her there. There was only this to do: to possess herself of those wonderful herbs which had been given her Napoleon in his hour of peril.

Dragging herself wearily to the little but by the river, she knocked, and waited. All was still, and, opening the door, she entered. Striking a match, she found a candle, lighted it, and then began her search. Under an old pan on a shelf she found both herbs and powder. She snatched up a handful of the herbs, and kissed them with joyful heart. Saved--she was saved! Ah, thank the Blessed Virgin! She would thank her for ever!

A horrible sinking sensation seized her. Turning in dismay, she saw the face of Parpon at the window. With a blind instinct for protection, she staggered towards the door, and fell, her fingers still clasping the precious herbs.

As Parpon hastily entered, Madame Degardy hobbled out of the shadow of the trees, and furtively watched the hut. When a light appeared, she crept to the door, opened it stealthily upon the intruders of her home, and stepped inside.

Parpon was kneeling by Elise, lifting up her head, and looking at her in horrified distress.

With a shrill cry the old woman came forward and dropped on her knees at the other side of Elise. Her hand, fumbling anxiously over the girl's breast, met the hard and warty palm of the dwarf. She stopped suddenly, raised the sputtering candle, and peered into his eyes with a vague, wavering intensity. For minutes they knelt there, the silence clothing them about, the body of the unconscious girl between them. A lost memory was feeling blindly its way home again. By and by, out of an infinite past, something struggled to the old woman's eyes, and Parpon's heart almost burst in his anxiety. At length her look steadied. Memory, recognition, showed in her face.

With a wild cry her gaunt arms stretched across, and caught the great head to her breast.

"Where have you been so long, Parpon--my son?" she said.

CHAPTER XV

Valmond's strength came back quickly, but something had given his mind a new colour. He felt, by a strange telegraphy of fate, that he had been spared death by fever to meet an end more in keeping with the strange exploit which now was coming to a crisis. The next day he was going back to Dalgrothe Mountain, the day after that there should be final review, and the succeeding day the march to the sea would begin. A move must be made. There could be no more delay. He had so lost himself in the dream, that it had become real, and he himself was the splendid adventurer, the maker of empires. True, he had only a small band of ill-armed men, but better arms could be got, and by the time they reached the sea--who could tell!

As he sat alone in the quiet dusk of his room at the Louis Quinze waiting for Parpon, there came a tap at his door. It opened, the garcon mumbled something, and Madame Chalice entered slowly.

Her look had no particular sympathy, but there was a sort of friendliness in the rich colour of her face, in the brightness of her eyes.

"The avocat was to have accompanied me," she said; "but at the last I thought it better to come without him, because--"

She paused. "Yes, madame--because?" he asked, offering her a chair. He was dressed in simple black, as on that first day when he called at

the Manor, and it set off the ivory paleness of his complexion, making his face delicate yet strong.

She looked round the room, almost casually, before she went on

"Because what I have to say were better said to you alone--much better."

"I am sure you are right," he answered, as though he trusted her judgment utterly; and truly there was always something boy-like in his attitude towards her. The compliment was unstudied and pleasant, but she steeled herself for her task. She knew instinctively that she had influence with him, and she meant to use it to its utmost limit.

"I am glad, we are all glad, you are better," she said cordially; then added, "how do your affairs come on? What are your plans?"

Valmond forgot that she was his inquisitor; he only saw her as his ally, his friend. So he spoke to her, as he had done at the Manor, with a sort of eloquence, of his great theme. He had changed greatly. The rhetorical, the bizarre, had left his speech. There was no more grandiloquence than might be expected of a soldier who saw things in the bright flashes of the battle-field--sharp pinges of colour, the dyes well soaked in. He had the gift of telling a story: some peculiar timbre in the voice, some direct dramatic touch. She listened quietly, impressed and curious. The impossibilities seemed for a moment to vanish in the big dream, and she herself was a dreamer, a born adventurer among the wonders of life. Were she a man, she would have been an explorer or a soldier.

But good judgment returned, and she gathered herself together for the unpleasant task that lay before her.

She looked him steadily in the eyes. "I have come to tell you that you must give up this dream," she said slowly. "It can come to nothing but ill; and in the mishap you may be hurt past repair."

"I shall never give up--this dream," he said, surprised, but firm, almost dominant.

"Think of these poor folk who surround you, who follow you. Would you see harm come to them?"

"As soldiers, they will fight for a cause."

"What is--the cause?" she asked meaningly.

"France," was the quiet reply; and there was a strong ring in the tone.

"Not so--you, monsieur!"

"You called me 'sire' once," he said tentatively.

"I called my maid a fool yesterday, under some fleeting influence;

one has moods," she answered.

"If you would call me puppet to-morrow, we might strike a balance and find--what should we find?"

"An adventurer, I fear," she remarked.

He was not taken aback. "An adventurer truly," he said. "It is a far travel to France, and there is much to overcome!"

She could scarcely reconcile this acute, self-contained man with the enthusiast and comedian she had seen in the Cure's garden.

"Monsieur Valmond," she said, "I neither suspect nor accuse; I only feel. There is something terribly uncertain in this cause of yours, in your claims. You have no right to waste lives."

"To waste lives?" he asked mechanically.

"Yes; the Government is to proceed against you."

"Ah, yes," he answered. "Monsieur De la Riviere has seen to that; but he must pay for his interference."

"That is beside the point. If a force comes against you--what then?"

"Then I will act as becomes a Napoleon," he answered, rather grandly.

So there was a touch of the bombastic in his manner even yet! She laughed a little ironically. Then all at once her thoughts reverted to Elise, and some latent cruelty in her awoke. Though she believed the girl, she would accuse the man, the more so, because she suddenly became aware that his eyes were fixed on herself in ardent admiration.

"You might not have a convenient window," she said, with deliberate, consuming suggestion.

His glance never wavered, though he understood instantly what she meant. Well, she had discovered that! He flushed.

"Madame," he said, "I hope that I am a gentleman at heart."

The whole scene came back on him, and a moisture sprang to his eyes.

"She is innocent," he continued--"upon my sacred honour! Yes, yes, I know that the evidence is all against me, but I speak the absolute truth. You saw--that night, did you?"

She nodded.

"Ah, it is a pity--a pity. But, madame, as you are a true woman, believe what I say; for, I repeat, it is the truth."

Then, with admirable reticence, even great delicacy, he told the story as Elise had told it, and as convincingly.

"I believe you, monsieur," she said frankly, when he had done, and stretched out her hand to him with a sudden impulse of regard. "Now, follow up that unselfishness by another."

He looked inquiringly at her.

"Give up this mad chase," she added eagerly.

"Never!" was his instant reply. "Never!"

"I beg of you, I appeal to you--my friend," she urged, with that ardour of the counsel who pleads a bad cause.

"I do not impeach you or your claims, but I ask that you leave this village as you found it, these happy people undisturbed in their homes. Ah, go! Go now, and you will be a name to them, remembered always with admiration. You have been courageous, you have been loved, you have been inspiring--ah, yes, I admit it, even to me!--inspiring! The spirit of adventure in you, your hopes, your plans to do great things, roused me. It was that made me your ally more than aught else. Truly and frankly, I do not think that I am convinced of anything save that you are no coward, and that you love a cause. Let it go at that--you must, you must. You came in the night, privately and mysteriously; go in the night, this night, mysteriously--an inscrutable, romantic figure. If you are all you say, and I should be glad to think so,--go where your talents will have greater play, your claims larger recognition. This is a small game here. Leave us as you found us. We shall be the better for it; our poor folk here will be the better. Proceed with this, and who can tell what may happen? I was wrong, wrong--I see that now--to have encouraged you at all. I repent of it. Here, as I talk to you, I feel, with no doubt whatever, that the end of your bold exploit is near. Can you not see that? Ah yes, you must, you must! Take my horses to-night, leave here, and come back no more; and so none of us shall feel sorrow in thinking of the time when Valmond came to Pontiac."

Variable, accusing, she had suddenly shown him something beyond caprice, beyond accident of mood or temper. The true woman had spoken; all outer modish garments had dropped away from her real nature, and showed its abundant depth and sincerity. All that was roused in him this moment was never known; he never could tell it; there were eternal spaces between them. She had been speaking to him just now with no personal sentiment. She was only the lover of honest things, the friend, the good ally, obliged to flee a cause for its terrible unsoundness, yet trying to prevent wreck and ruin.

He arose and turned his head away for an instant, her eloquence had been so moving. His glance caught the picture of the Great Napoleon, and his eyes met hers again with new resolution.

"I must stay," he answered; "I will not turn back, whatever comes. This

is but child's play, but a speck beside what I mean to do. True, I came in the dark, but I will go in the light. I shall not leave them behind, these poor folk; they shall come with me. I have money, France is waiting, the people are sick of the Orleans, and I--"

"But you must, you must listen to me, monsieur!" she said desperately.

She came close to him, and, out of the frank eagerness of her nature, laid her hand upon his arm, and looked him in the eyes with an almost tender appealing.

At that moment the door opened, and Monsieur De la Riviere was announced.

"Ah, madame!" said the young Seigneur in a tone more than a little carboic; "secrets of State, no doubt?"

"Statesmen need not commit themselves to newsmongers, monsieur," she answered, still standing very near Valmond, as though she would continue a familiar talk when the disagreeable interruption had passed.

She was thoroughly fearless, clear of heart, above all littlenesses.

"I had come to warn Monsieur Valmond once again, but I find him with his ally, counsellor--and comforter," he retorted, with perilous suggestion.

Time would move on, and Madame Chalice might forget that wild remark, but she never would forgive it, and she never wished to do so. The insolent, petty, provincial Seigneur!

"Monsieur De la Riviere," she returned, with cold dignity, "you cannot live long enough to atone for that impertinence."

"I beg your pardon, madame," he returned earnestly, awed by the look in her face; for she was thoroughly aroused. "I came to stop a filibustering expedition, to save the credit of the place where I was born, where my people have lived for generations."

She made a quick, deprecatory gesture. "You saw me enter here," she said, "and you thought to discover treason of some kind--Heaven knows what a mind like yours may imagine! You find me giving better counsel to His Highness than you could ever hope to give--out of a better heart and from a better understanding. You have been worse than intrusive; you have been rash and stupid. You call His Highness filibuster and impostor. I assure you it is my fondest hope that Prince Valmond Napoleon will ever count me among his friends, in spite of all his enemies."

She turned her shoulder on him, and took Valmond's hand with a pronounced obeisance, saying, "Adieu, sire" (she was never sorry she had said it), and passed from the room. Valmond was about to follow her.

"Thank you, no; I will go to my carriage alone," she said, and he did not insist.

When she had gone he stood holding the door open, and looking at De la Riviere. He was very pale; there was a menacing fire in his eyes. The young Seigneur was ready for battle also.

"I am occupied, monsieur," said Valmond meaningly.

"I have come to warn you--"

"The old song; I am occupied, monsieur."

"Charlatan!" said De la Riviere, and took a step angrily towards him, for he was losing command of himself.

At that moment Parpon, who had been outside in the hall for a half-hour or more, stepped into the room, edged between the two, and looked up with a wicked, mocking leer at the young Seigneur.

"You have twenty-four hours to leave Pontiac," cried De la Riviere, as he left the room.

"My watch keeps different time, monsieur," said Valmond coolly, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XVI

From the depths where Elise was cast, it was not for her to see that her disaster had brought light to others; that out of the pitiful confusion of her life had come order and joy. A half-mad woman, without memory, knew again whence she came and whither she was going; and bewildered and happy, with a hungering tenderness, moved her hand over the head of her poor dwarf, as though she would know if he were truly her own son. A new spirit also had come into Parpon's eyes, gentler, less weird, less distant. With the advent of their joy a great yearning came to save Elise. They hung watchful, solicitous, over her bed.

It must go hard with her, and twenty-four hours would see the end or a fresh beginning. She had fought back the fever too long, her brain and emotions had been strung to a fatal pitch, and the disease, like a hurricane, carried her on for hours, tearing at her being.

Her own mother sat in a corner, stricken and numb. At last she fell asleep in her chair, but Parpon and his mother slept not at all. Now and again the dwarf went to the door and looked out at the night, so still, and full of the wonder of growth and rest.

Far up on Dalgrothe Mountain a soft brazen light lay like a shield against the sky, a strange, hovering thing. Parpon knew it to be the reflection of the campfires in the valley, where Lagroin and his men were sleeping. There came, too, out of the general stillness, a long, low

murmur, as though nature were crooning: the untiring rustle of the river, the water that rolled on and never came back again. Where did they all go--those thousands of rivers for ever pouring on, lazily or wildly? What motive? What purpose? Just to empty themselves into the greater waters, there to be lost? Was it enough to travel on so inevitably to the end, and be swallowed up?

And these millions of lives hurrying along? Was it worth while living, only to grow older and older, and, coming, heavy with sleep, to the Homestead of the Ages, enter a door that only opened inwards, and be swallowed up in the twilight? Why arrest the travelling, however swift it be? Sooner or later it must come--with dusk the end of it.

The dwarf heard the moaning of the stricken girl, her cry, "Valmond! Valmond!" the sobs that followed, the woe of her self-abnegation, even in delirium.

For one's self it mattered little, maybe, the attitude of the mind, whether it would arrest or be glad of the terrific travel; but for another human being, who might judge? Who might guess what was best for the other; what was most merciful, most good? Destiny meant us to prove our case against it, as well as we might; to establish our right to be here as long as we could, so discovering the world day by day, and ourselves to the world, and ourselves to ourselves. To live it out, resisting the power that destroys so long as might be--that was the divine secret.

"Valmond! Valmond! O Valmond!"

The voice moaned out the words again and again. Through the sounds there came another inner voice, that resolved all the crude, primitive thoughts here defined; vague, elusive, in Parpon's own brain.

The girl's life should be saved at any cost, even if to save it meant the awful and certain doom his mother had whispered to him over the bed an hour before.

He turned and went into the house. The old woman bent above Elise, watching intently, her eyes straining, her lips anxiously compressed.

"My son," she said, "she will die in an hour if I don't give her more. If I do, she may die at once. If she gets well, she will be--" She made a motion to her eyes.

"Blind, mother, blind!" he whispered, and he looked round the room. How good was the sight of the eyes! "Perhaps she'd rather die," said the old woman. "She is unhappy." She was thinking of her own far, bitter past, remembered now after so many years. "Misery and blindness too--ah! What right have I to make her blind? It's a great risk, Parpon, my dear son."

"I must, I must, for your sake. Valmond! Valmond! O Valmond!" cried Elise again out of her delirium.

The stricken girl had answered for Parpon. She had decided for herself. Life! that was all she prayed for: for another's sake, not her own.

Her own mother slept on, in the corner of the room, unconscious of the terrible verdict hanging in the balance.

Madame Degardy quickly emptied into a cup of liquor the strange brown powder, mixed it, and held it to the girl's lips, pouring it slowly down.

Once, twice, during the next hour, a low, anguished voice filled the room; but just as dawn came, Parpon stooped and tenderly wiped a soft moisture from the face, lying so quiet and peaceful now against the pillow.

"She breathes easy, poor pretty bird!" said the old woman gently.

"She'll never see again?" asked Parpon mournfully. "Never a thing while she lives," was the whispered reply.

"But she has her life," said the dwarf; "she wished it so."

"What's the good!" The old woman had divined why Elise had wanted to live.

The dwarf did not answer. His eyes wandered about abstractedly, and fell again upon Elise's mother sleeping, unconscious of the awful peril passed, and the painful salvation come to her daughter.

The blue-grey light of morning showed under the edge of the closed window-blind. In the room day was mingling incongruously with night, for the candle looked sickly, and the aged crone's face was of a leaden colour, lighted by the piercing eyes that brooded hungrily on her son--her only son: the dwarf had told her of Gabriel's death.

Parpon opened the door and went out. Day was spreading over the drowsy landscape. There was no life as yet in all the horizon, no fires, no animals stirring, no early workmen, no anxious harvesters. But the birds were out, and presently here and there cattle rose up in the fields.

Then, over the foot-hills, he saw a white horse and its rider show up against the grey dust of the road. Elise's sorrowful words came to him: "Valmond! Valmond! O Valmond!"

His duty to the girl was done; she was safe; now he must follow that figure to where the smoke of the campfires came curling up by Dalgrothe Mountain. There were rumours of trouble; he must again be minister, counsellor, friend, to his master.

A half hour later he was climbing the hill where he had seen the white horse and its rider. He heard the sound of a drum in the distance. The gloom and suspense of the night just passed went from him, and into the sunshine he sang:

"Oh, grand to the war he goes,
O gai, vive le roi!"

Not long afterwards he entered the encampment. Around one fire, cooking their breakfasts, were Muroc the charcoalman, Duclosse the mealman, and Garotte the lime-burner. They all were in good spirits.

"For my part," Muroc was saying, as Parpon nodded at them, and passed by, "I'm not satisfied."

"Don't you get enough to eat?" asked the mealman, whose idea of happiness was based upon the appreciation of a good dinner.

"But yes, and enough to drink, thanks to His Excellency, and the buttons he puts on my coat." Muroc jingled some gold coins in his pocket. "It's this being clean that's the devil! When I sold charcoal, I was black and beautiful, and no dirt showed; I polished like a pan. Now if I touch a potato, I'm filthy. Pipe-clay is hell's stuff to show you up as the Lord made you." Garotte laughed. "Wait till you get to fighting. Powder sticks better than charcoal. For my part, I'm always clean as a whistle."

"But you're like a bit of wool, lime-burner, you never sweat. Dirt don't stick to you as to me and the meal man. Duclosse there used to look like a pie when the meal and sweat dried on him. When we reach Paris, and His Excellency gets his own, I'll take to charcoal again; I'll fill the palace cellars. That suits me better than chalk and washing every day."

"Do you think we'll ever get to Paris?" asked the mealman, cocking his head seriously.

"That's the will of God, and the weather at sea, and what the Orleans do," answered Muroc grinning.

It was hard to tell how deep this adventure lay in Muroc's mind. He had a prodigious sense of humour, the best critic in the world.

"For me," said the lime-burner, "I think there'll be fighting before we get to the Orleans. There's talk that the Gover'ment's coming against us."

"Done!" said the charcoalman. "We'll see the way our great man puts their noses out of joint."

"Here's Lajeunesse," broke in the mealman, as the blacksmith came near to their fire. He was dressed in complete regimentals, made by the parish tailor.

"Is that so, monsieur le capitaine?" said Muroc to Lajeunesse. "Is the Gover'ment to be fighting us? Why should it? We're only for licking the Orleans, and who cares a sou for them, hein?"

"Not a go-dam," said Duclosse, airing his one English oath. "The English

hate the Orleans too." Lajeunesse looked from one to the other, then burst into a laugh. "There's two gills of rum for every man at twelve o'clock to-day, so says His Excellency; and two yellow buttons for the coat of every sergeant, and five for every captain. The English up there in Quebec can't do better than that, can they? And will they? No. Does a man spend money on a hell's foe, unless he means to give it work to do? Pish! Is His Excellency like to hang back because Monsieur De la Riviere says he'll fetch the Government? Bah! The bully soldiers would come with us as they went with the Great Napoleon at Grenoble. Ah, that! His Excellency told me about that just now. Here stood the soldiers,"-- he mapped out the ground with his sword, "here stood the Great Napoleon, all alone. He looks straight before him. What does he see? Nothing less than a hundred muskets pointing at him. What does he do? He walks up to the soldiers, opens his coat, and says, 'Soldiers, comrades, is there one of you will kill your Emperor?' Damned if there was one! They dropped their muskets, and took to kissing his hands. There, my dears, that was the Great Emperor's way, our Emperor's father's little way."

"But suppose they fired at us 'stead of at His Excellency?" asked the mealman.

"Then, mealman, you'd settle your account for lightweights sooner than you want."

Duclosse twisted his mouth dubiously. He was not sure how far his enthusiasm would carry him. Muroc shook his shaggy head in mirth.

"Well, 'tis true we're getting off to France," said the lime-burner. "We can drill as we travel, and there's plenty of us for a start."

"Morrow we go," said Lajeunesse. "The proclamation's to be out in an hour, and you're all to be ready by ten o'clock in the morning. His Excellency is to make a speech to us to-night; then the General--ah, what a fine soldier, and eighty years old!--he's to give orders, and make a speech also; and I'm to be colonel,"--he paused dramatically,--"and you three are for captains; and you're to have five new yellow buttons to your coats, like these." He drew out gold coins and jingled them. Every man got to his feet, and Muroc let the coffee-tin fall. "There's to be a grand review in the village this afternoon. There's breakfast for you, my dears!"

Their exclamations were interrupted by Lajeunesse, who added: "And so my Madelinette is to go to Paris, after all, and Monsieur Parpon is to see that she starts right."

"Monsieur" Parpon was a new title for the dwarf. But the great comedy, so well played, had justified it. "Oh, His Excellency 'll keep his oath," said the mealman. "I'd take Elise Malboir's word about a man for a million francs, was he prince or ditcher; and she says he's the greatest man in the world. She knows."

"That reminds me," said Lajeunesse gloomily, "Elise has the black fever."

The mealman's face seemed to petrify, his eyes stood out, the bread he had in his teeth dropped, and he stared wildly at Lajeunesse. All were occupied in watching the mealman, and they did not see the figure of a girl approaching.

Muroc, dumfounded, spoke first. "Elise--the black fever!" he gasped, thoroughly awed.

"She is better, she will live," said a voice behind Lajeunesse. It was Madelinette, who had come to the camp early to cook her father's breakfast.

Without a word, the mealman turned, pulled his clothes about him with a jerk, and, pale and bewildered, started away at a run down the plateau.

"He's going to the village," said the charcoalman. "He hasn't leave. That's court-martial!"

Lajeunesse shook his head knowingly. "He's never had but two ideas in his nut-meal and Elise; let him go."

The mealman was soon lost to view, unheeding the challenge that rang after him.

Lagroin had seen the fugitive from a distance, and came down, inquiring. When he was told he swore that Duclosse should suffer divers punishments.

"A pretty kind of officer!" he cried in a fury. "Damn it, is there another man in my army would do it?"

No one answered; and because Lagroin was not a wise man, he failed to see that in time his army might be entirely dissipated by such awkward incidents. When Valmond was told, he listened with a better understanding.

All that Lajeunesse had announced came to pass. The review and march and show were goodly, after their kind; and, by dint of money and wine, the enthusiasm was greater than ever it had been; for it was joined to the pathos of the expected departure. The Cure and the avocat kept within doors; for they had talked together, and now that the day of fate was at hand, and sons, brothers, fathers, were to go off on this far crusade, a new spirit suddenly thrust itself in, and made them sad and anxious. Monsieur De la Riviere was gloomy. Medallion was the one comfortable, cool person in the parish. It had been his conviction that something would occur to stop the whole business at the critical moment. He was a man of impressions, and he lived in the light of them continuously. Wisdom might have been expected of Parpon, but he had been won by Valmond from the start; and now, in the great hour, he was deep in another theme --the restoration of his mother to himself, and to herself.

At seven o'clock in the evening, Valmond and Lagroin were in the streets, after they had marched their men back to camp. A crowd had gathered near the church, for His Excellency was on his way to visit the Cure.

As he passed, they cheered him. He stopped to speak to them. Before he had ended, some one came crying wildly that the soldiers, the red-coats were come. The sound of a drum rolled up the street, and presently, round a corner, came the well-ordered troops of the Government.

Instantly Lagroin wheeled to summon any stray men of his little army, but Valmond laid a hand on his arm, stopping him. It would have been the same in any case, for the people had scattered like sheep, and stood apart.

They were close by the church steps. Valmond mechanically saw the mealman, open-mouthed and dazed, start forward from the crowd; but, hesitating, he drew back again almost instantly, and was swallowed up in the safety of distance. He smiled at the mealman's hesitation, even while he said to himself: "This ends it--ends it!"

He said it with no great sinking of heart, with no fear. It was the solution of all; it was his only way to honour.

The soldiers were halted a little distance from the two; and the officer commanding, after a dull mechanical preamble, in the name of the Government, formally called upon Valmond and Lagroin to surrender themselves, or suffer the perils of resistance.

"Never!" broke out Lagroin, and, drawing his sword, he shouted: "Vive Napoleon! The Old Guard never surrenders!"

Then he made as if to rush forward on the troops. "Fire!" called the officer.

Twenty rifles blazed out. Lagroin tottered back, and fell at the feet of his master.

Raising himself, he clasped Valmond's knee, and, looking up, said gaspingly:

"Adieu, sire! I love you; I die for you." His head fell at his Emperor's feet, though the hands still clutched the knee.

Valmond stood over his body, one leg on either side, and drew a pistol.

"Surrender, monsieur," said the officer, "or we fire!"

"Never! A Napoleon knows how to die!" was the reply, and he raised his pistol at the officer.

"Fire!" came the sharp command.

"Vive Napoleon!" cried the doomed man, and fell, mortally wounded.

At that instant the Cure, with Medallion, came hurrying round the corner of the church.

"Fools! Murderers!" he said to the soldiers. "Ah, these poor children!"

Stooping, he lifted up Valmond's head, and Medallion felt Lagroin's pulseless heart.

The officer picked up Valmond's pistol. A moment afterwards he looked at the dying man in wonder; for he found that the weapon was not loaded!

CHAPTER XVII

"How long, Chemist?"

"Two hours, perhaps."

"So long?"

After a moment he said dreamily: "It is but a step."

The Little Chemist nodded, though he did not understand. The Cure stooped over him.

"A step, my son?" he asked, thinking he spoke of the voyage the soul takes.

"To the Tuileries," answered Valmond, and he smiled. The Cure's brow clouded; he wished to direct the dying man's thoughts elsewhere. "It is but a step--anywhere," he continued; and looked towards the Little Chemist. "Thank you, dear monsieur, thank you. There is a silver night-lamp in my room; I wish it to be yours. Adieu, my friend."

The Little Chemist tried to speak, but could not. He stooped and kissed Valmond's hand, as though he thought him still a prince, and not the impostor which the British rifles had declared him. To the end, the coterie would act according to the light of their own eyes.

"It is now but a step--to anything," repeated Valmond.

The Cure understood him at last. "The longest journey is short by the light of the grave," he responded gently.

Presently the door opened, admitting the avocat. Valmond calmly met Monsieur Garon's pained look, and courteously whispered his name.

"Your Excellency has been basely treated," said the avocat, his lip trembling.

"On the contrary, well, dear monsieur," answered the ruined adventurer. "Destiny plays us all. Think: I die the death of a soldier, and my

crusade was a soldier's vision of conquest. I have paid the price.
I have--"

He did not finish the sentence, but lay lost in thought. At last he spoke in a low tone to the avocat, who quickly began writing at his dictation.

The chief clause of the record was a legacy of ten thousand francs to "my faithful Minister and constant friend, Monsieur Parpon;" another of ten thousand to Madame Joan Degardy, "whose skill and care of me merits more than I can requite;" twenty thousand to "the Church of St. Nazaire of the parish of Pontiac," five thousand to "the beloved Monsieur Fabre, cure of the same parish, to whose good and charitable heart I come for my last comforts;" twenty thousand to "Mademoiselle Madelinette Lajeunesse, that she may learn singing under the best masters in Paris." To Madame Chalice he left all his personal effects, ornaments, and relics, save a certain decoration given the old sergeant, and a ring once worn by the Emperor Napoleon. These were for a gift to "dear Monsieur Garon, who has honoured me with his distinguished friendship; and I pray that our mutual love for the same cause may give me some title to his remembrance."

Here the avocat stopped him with a quick, protesting gesture.

"Your Excellency! your Excellency!" he said in a shaking voice, "my heart has been with the man as with the cause."

Other legacies were given to Medallion, to the family of Lagroin, of whom he still spoke as "my beloved General who died for me;" and ten francs to each recruit who had come to his standard.

After a long pause, he said lingeringly: "To Mademoiselle Elise Malboir, the memory of whose devotion and solicitude gives me joy in my last hour, I bequeath fifty thousand francs. In the event of her death, this money shall revert to the parish of Pontiac, in whose graveyard I wish my body to lie. The balance of my estate, whatever it may now be, or may prove to be hereafter, I leave to Pierre Napoleon, third son of Lucien Bonaparte, Prince of Canino, of whom I cherish a reverent remembrance."

A few words more ended the will, and the name of a bank in New York was given as agent. Then there was silence in the room, and Valmond appeared to sleep.

Presently the avocat, thinking that he might wish to be alone with the Cure, stepped quietly to the door and opened it upon Madame Chalice. She pressed his hand, her eyes full of tears, passed inside the room, going softly to a shadowed corner, and sat watching the passive figure on the bed.

What were the thoughts of this man, now that his adventure was over and his end near? If he were in very truth a prince, how pitiable, how paltry! What cheap martyrdom! If an impostor, had the game been worth the candle?--Death seemed a coin of high value for this short, vanished comedy. The man alone could answer, for the truth might not be known,

save by the knowledge that comes with the end of all.

She looked at the Cure, where he knelt praying, and wondered how much of this tragedy the anxious priest would lay at his own door.

"It is no tragedy, dear Cure" Valmond said suddenly, as if following her thoughts.

"My son, it is all tragedy until you have shown me your heart, that I may send you forth in peace."

He had forgotten Madame Chalice's presence, and she sat very still.

"Even for our dear Lagroin," Valmond continued, "it was no tragedy. He was fighting for the cause, not for a poor fellow like me. As a soldier loves to die, he died--in the dream of his youth, sword in hand."

"You loved the cause, my son?" was the troubled question. "You were all honest?"

Valmond made as if he would rise on his elbow, in excitement, but the Cure put him gently back. "From a child I loved it, dear Cure," was the quick reply. "Listen, and I will tell you all my story."

He composed himself, and his face took on a warm light, giving it a look of happiness almost.

"The very first thing I remember was sitting on the sands of the sea-shore, near some woman who put her arms round me and drew me to her heart. I seem even to recall her face now, though I never could before --do we see things clearer when we come to die, I wonder? I never saw her again. I was brought up by my parents, who were humble peasants, on an estate near Viterbo, in Italy. I was taught in the schools, and I made friends among my school-fellows; but that was all the happiness I had; for my parents were strict and hard with me, and showed me no love. At twelve years of age I was taken to Rome, and there I entered the house of Prince Lucien Bonaparte, as page. I was always near the person of His Highness."

He paused, at sight of a sudden pain in the Cure's face. Sighing, he continued:

"I travelled with him to France, to Austria, to England, where I learned to speak the language, and read what the English wrote about the Great Napoleon. Their hatred angered me, and I began to study what French and Italian books said of him. I treasured up every scrap of knowledge I could get. I listened to all that was said in the Prince's palace, and I was glad when His Highness let me read aloud private papers to him. From these I learned the secrets of the great family. The Prince was seldom gentle with me--sometimes almost brutal, yet he would scarcely let me out of his sight. I had little intercourse then with the other servants, and less still when I was old enough to become a valet; and a valet I was to the Prince for twelve years."

The Cure's hand clasped the arm of his chair nervously. His lips moved, but he said nothing aloud, and he glanced quickly towards Madame Chalice, who sat moveless, her face flushed, her look fixed on Valmond. So, he was the mere impostor after all--a valet! Fate had won the toss-up; not faith, or friendship, or any good thing.

"All these years," Valmond continued presently, his voice growing weaker, "I fed on such food as is not often within the reach of valets. I knew as much of the Bonapartes, of Napoleonic history, as the Prince himself, so much so, that he often asked me of some date or fact of which he was not sure. In time, I became almost like a private secretary to him. I lived in a dream for years; for I had poetry, novels, paintings, music, at my hand all the time, and the Prince, at the end, changed greatly, was affectionate indeed, and said he would do good things for me. I became familiar with all the intrigues, the designs of the Bonapartes; and what I did not know was told me by Prince Pierre, who was near my own age, and who used me always more like a friend than a servant.

"One day the Prince was visited by Count Bertrand, who was with the Emperor in his exile, and I heard him speak of a thing unknown to history: that Napoleon had a son, born at St. Helena, by a countess well known in Europe. She had landed, disguised as a sailor, from a merchant-ship, and had lived in retirement at Longwood for near a year. After the Emperor died, the thing was discovered, but the governor of the island made no report of it to the British Government, for the event would have reflected on himself; and the returned exiles kept the matter a secret. It was said that the child died at St. Helena. The story remained in my mind, and I brooded on it.

"Two years ago Prince Lucien died in my arms. When he was gone, I found that I had been left five hundred thousand francs, a chateau, and several relics of the Bonapartes, as reward for my services to the Prince, and, as the will said, in token of the love he had come to bear me. To these Prince Pierre added a number of mementoes. I went to visit my parents, whom I had not seen for many years. I found that my mother was dead, that my father was a drunkard. I left money for my father with the mayor, and sailed for England. From London I came to New York; from New York to Quebec. All the time I was restless, unhappy. I had had to work all my life, now I had nothing to do. I had lived close to great traditions, now there was no habit of life to keep them alive in me. I spent money freely, but it gave me no pleasure. I once was a valet to a great man, now I had the income of a gentleman, and was no gentleman. Ah, do you not shrink from me, Monsieur le Cure?"

The Cure did not reply, but made a kindly gesture, and Valmond continued:

"Sick of everything, one day I left Quebec hurriedly. Why I came here I do not know, save that I had heard it was near the mountains, was quiet, and I could be at peace. There was something in me which could not be content in the foolishness of idle life. All the time I kept thinking--thinking. If I were only a Napoleon, how I would try to do great things! Ah, my God! I loved the Great Napoleon. What had the Bonapartes done?"

Nothing--nothing. Everything had slipped away from them. Not one of them was like the Emperor. His own legitimate son was dead. None of the others had the Master's blood, fire, daring in his veins. The thought grew on me, and I used to imagine myself his son. I loved his memory, all he did, all he was, better than any son could do. It had been my whole life, thinking of him and the Empire, while I brushed the Prince's clothes or combed his hair. Why should such tastes be given to a valet? Some one somewhere was to blame, dear Cure. I really did not conceive or plan imposture. I was only playing a comedian's part in front of the Louis Quinze, till I heard Parpon sing a verse of 'Vive Napoleon!' Then it all rushed on me, captured me--and the rest you know."

The Cure could not trust himself to speak yet.

"I had not thought to go so far when I began. It was mostly a whim. But the idea gradually possessed me, and at last it seemed to me that I was a real Napoleon. I used to wake from the dream for a moment, and I tried to stop, but something in my blood drove me on--inevitably. You were all good to me; you nearly all believed in me. Lagroin came--and so it has gone on till now, till now. I had a feeling what the end would be. But I should have had my dream. I should have died for the cause as no Napoleon or Bonaparte ever died. Like a man, I would pay the penalty Fate should set. What more could I do? If a man gives all he has, is not that enough? . . . There is my whole story. Now, I shall ask your pardon, dear Cure."

"You must ask pardon of God, my son," said the priest, his looks showing the anguish he felt.

"The Little Chemist said two hours, but I feel"--his voice got very faint "I feel that he is mistaken." He murmured a prayer, and crossed himself thrice.

The Cure made ready to read the office for the dying. "My son," he said, "do you truly and earnestly repent you of your sins?"

Valmond's eyes suddenly grew misty, his breathing heavier. He scarcely seemed to comprehend.

"I have paid the price--I have loved you all. Parpon--where are you? --Elise!"

A moment of silence, and then his voice rang out with a sort of sob. "Ah, madame," he cried chokingly, "dear madame, for you I--"

Madame Chalice arose with a little cry, for she knew whom he meant, and her heart ached for him. She forgot his imposture--everything.

"Ah, dear, dear monsieur!" she said brokenly.

He knew her voice, he heard her coming; his eyes opened wide, and he raised himself on the couch with a start. The effort loosened the bandage at his neck, and blood gushed out on his bosom.

With a convulsive motion he drew up the coverlet to his chin, to hide the red stream, and said gaspingly:

"Pardon, madame."

Then a shudder passed through him, and with a last effort to spare her the sight of his ensanguined body, he fell face downward, voiceless--for ever.

The very earth seemed breathing. Long waves of heat palpitated over the harvest-fields, and the din of the locust drove lazily through. The far cry of the king-fisher, and idly clacking wheels of carts rolling down from Dalgrothe Mountain, accented the drowsy melody of the afternoon. The wild mustard glowed so like a golden carpet, that the destroying hand of the anxious farmer seemed of the blundering tyranny of labour. Whole fields were flaunting with poppies, too gay for sorrow to pass that way; but a blind girl, led by a little child, made a lane through the red luxuriance, hurrying to the place where vanity and valour, and the remnant of an unfulfilled manhood, lay beaten to death.

Destiny, which is stronger than human love, or the soul's fidelity, had overmastered self-sacrifice and the heart of a woman. This woman had opened her eyes upon the world again, only to find it all night, all strange; she was captive of a great darkness.

As she broke through the hedge of lilacs by the Cure's house, the crowd of awe-stricken people fell back, opening a path for her to the door. She moved as one unconscious of the troubled life and the vibrating world about her.

The hand of the child admitted her to the chamber of death; the door closed, and she stood motionless.

The Cure made as if to rise and go towards her, but Madame Chalice, sitting sorrowful and dismayed at the foot of the couch, by a motion of her hand stopped him.

The girl paused a moment, listening. "Your Excellency," she whispered. It was as if a soul leaned out of the casement of life, calling into the dark and the quiet which may not be comprehended by mortal man. "Monsieur--Valmond!"

Her trembling hands were stretched out before her yearningly. The Cure moved. She turned towards the sound with a pitiful vagueness.

"Valmond, O Valmond!" again she cried beseechingly, her clouded eyes straining into the silence.

The cloak dropped from her shoulders, and the loose robe enveloping her fell away from a bosom that throbbed with the passion of a great despair. Nothing but silence.

She moved to the wall like a little child feeling its way, ran her hand vaguely along it, and touched a crucifix. With a moan she pressed her lips to the nailed feet, and came on gropingly to the couch. She reached down towards it, but drew back as if in affright; for a dumb, desolating fear was upon her.

But with that direful courage which is the last gift to the hopeless, she stooped down again, and her fingers touched Valmond's cold hands.

They ran up his breast, to his neck, to his face, and fondled it, as only life can fondle death, out of that pitiful hunger which never can be satisfied in this world; then they moved with an infinite tenderness to his eyes, now blind like hers, and lingered there in the kinship of eternal loss.

A low, anguished cry broke from her: "Valmond--my love!" and she fell forward upon the breast of her lost Napoleon.

When the people gathered again in the little church upon the hill, Valmond and his adventure had become almost a legend, so soon are men and events lost in the distance of death and ruin.

The Cure preached, as he had always done, with a simple, practical solicitude; but towards the end of his brief sermon he paused, and, with a serious tenderness of voice, said:

"My children, vanity is the bane of mankind; it destroys as many souls as self-sacrifice saves. It is the constant temptation of the human heart. I have ever warned you against it, as I myself have prayed to be kept from its devices--alas! how futilely at times. Vanity leads to imposture, and imposture to the wronging of others. But if a man repent, and yield all he has, to pay the high price of his bitter mistake, he may thereby redeem himself even in this world. If he give his life repenting, and if the giving stays the evil he might have wrought, shall we be less merciful than God?"

"My children" (he did not mention Valmond's name), "his last act was manly; his death was pious; his sin was forgiven. Those rifle bullets that brought him down let out all the evil in his blood.

"We, my people, have been delivered from a grave error. Forgetting--save for our souls' welfare--the misery of this vanity which led us astray, let us remember with gladness all of him that was commendable in our eyes: his kindness, eloquence, generous heart, courage, and love of Mother Church. He lies in our graveyard; he is ours; and, being ours, let us protect his memory, as though he had not sought us a stranger, but was of us: of our homes, as of our love, and of our sorrow.

"And so atoning for our sins, as did he, may we at last come to the perfect pardon, and to peace everlasting."

EPILOGUE

I

(EXTRACT FROM A LETTER WRITTEN BY MADAME CHALICE TO MONSIEUR PADRE, CURE OF THE PARISH OF PONTIAC, THREE MONTHS AFTER VALMOND'S DEATH.)

". . . And here, dear Cure, you shall have my justification for writing you two letters in one week, though I should make the accident a habit if I were sure it would more please you than perplex you.

"Prince Pierre, son of Prince Lucien Bonaparte, arrived in New York two days ago, and yesterday morning he came to the Atlantic Bank, and asked for my husband. When he made known his business, Harry sent for me, that I might speak with him.

"Dear Cure, hearts and instincts were right in Pontiac: our unhappy friend Valmond was that child of Napoleon, born at St. Helena, of whom he himself spoke at his death in your home. His mother was the Countess of Carnstadt. At the beginning of an illness which followed Napoleon's death, the child was taken from her by Prince Lucien Bonaparte, and was brought up and educated as the son of poor peasants in Italy. No one knew of his birth save the companions in exile of the Great Emperor. All of them, with the exception of Count Bertrand, believed, as Valmond said, that the child had died in infancy at St. Helena.

"Prince Lucien had sworn to the mother that he would care personally for the child, and he fulfilled his promise by making him a page in his household, and afterwards a valet--base redemption of a vow.

"But even as Valmond drew our hearts to him, so at last he won Prince Lucien's, as he had from the first won Prince Pierre's.

"It was not until after Valmond's death, when receiving the residue of our poor friend's estate, that Prince Pierre learned the whole truth from Count Bertrand. He immediately set sail for New York, and next week he will secretly visit you, for love of the dead man, and to thank you and our dear avocat, together with all others who believed in and befriended his unfortunate kinsman.

"Ah, dear Cure, think of the irony of it all--that a man be driven, by the very truth in his blood, to that strangest of all impostures --to impersonate himself--He did it too well to be the mere comedian; I felt that all the time. I shall show his relics now with more pride than sorrow. Prince Pierre dines with us to-night. He looks as if he had the Napoleonic daring,--or rashness,--but I am sure he has not the good heart of our Valmond Napoleon. . . ."

II

The haymakers paused and leaned upon their forks, children left the

strawberry vines and climbed upon the fences, as the coach from the distant city dashed down the street towards the four corners, and the welcoming hotel, with its big dormer windows and well-carved veranda. As it whirled by, the driver shouted something at a stalwart forgeron, standing at the doorway of his smithy, and he passed it on to a loitering mealman and a lime-burner.

A girl came slowly over the crest of a hill. Feeling her way with a stick, she paused now and then to draw in long breaths of sweet air from the meadows, as if in the joy of Nature she found a balm for the cruelties of Destiny.

Presently a puff of smoke shot out from the hillside where she stood, and the sound of an old cannon followed. From the Seigneury, far over, came an answering report; and Tricolors ran fluttering up on flagstuffs, at the four corners, and in the Cure's garden.

The girl stood wondering, her fine, calm face expressing the quick thoughts which had belonged to eyes once so full of hope and blithe desire. The serenity of her life--its charity, its truth, its cheerful care for others, the confidence of the young which it invited, showed in all the aspect of her. She heard the flapping of the flag in the Cure's garden, and turned her darkened eyes towards it. A look of pain crossed her face, and a hand trembled to her bosom, as if to ease a great throbbing of her heart. These cannon shots and this shivering pennant brought back a scene at the four corners, years before.

Footsteps came over the hill: she knew them, and turned.

"Parpon!" she said, with a glad gesture.

Without a word he placed in her hand a bunch of violets that he carried. She lifted them to her lips. "What is it all?" she asked, turning again to the Tricolor.

"Louis Napoleon enters the Tuileries," he answered. "But ours was the son of the Great Emperor!" she said. "Let us be going, Parpon: we will plant these on his grave." She pressed the violets to her heart.

"France would have loved him, as we did," said the dwarf, as they moved on.

"As we do," the blind girl answered softly.

Their figures against the setting sun took on a strange burnished radiance, so that they seemed as mystical pilgrims journeying into that golden haze, which veiled them in beyond the hill, as the Angelus sounded from the tower of the ancient church.

Vanity is the bane of mankind
You cannot live long enough to atone for that impertinence

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