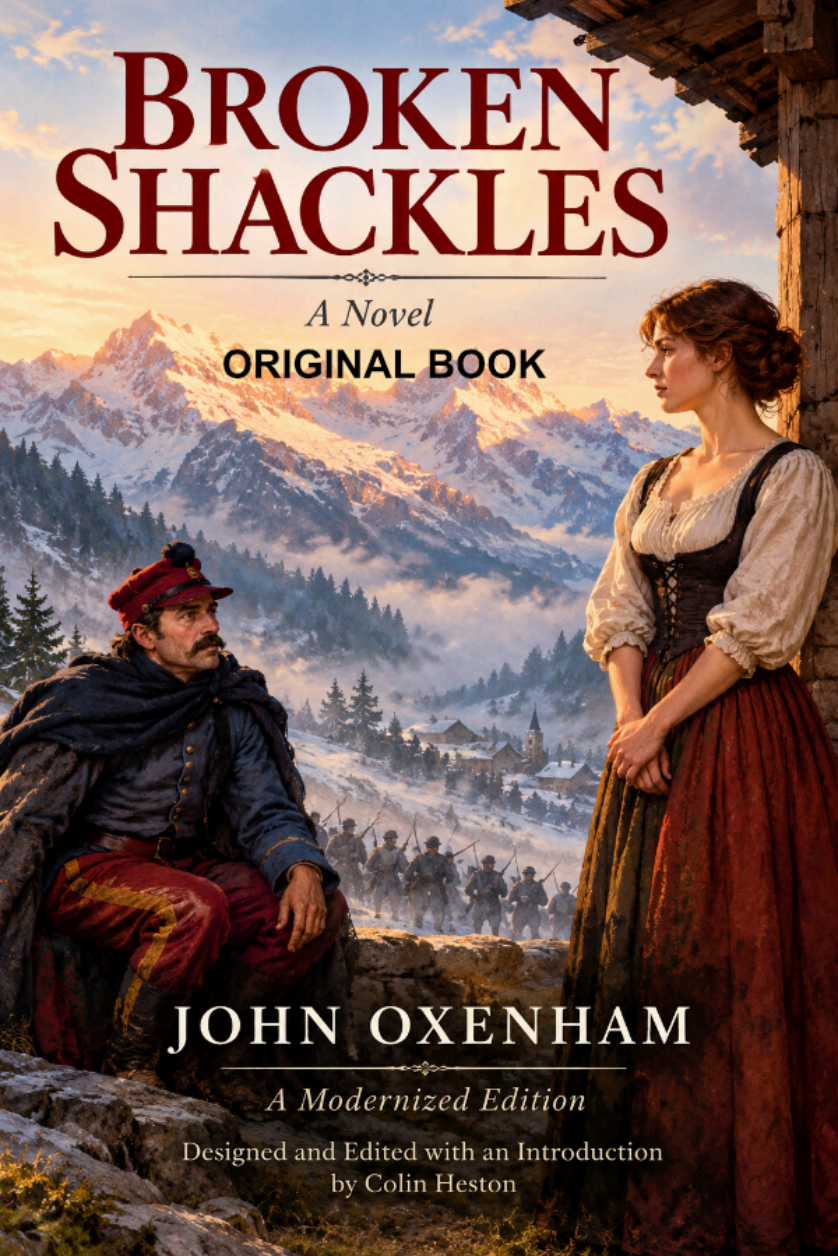
BROKEN SHACKLES

A Novel

ORIGINAL BOOK



JOHN OXENHAM

A Modernized Edition

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OUT OF THE VALLEY OF DEATH

BROKEN SHACKLES

BY

JOHN OXENHAM
AUTHOR OF "THE QUEST OF THE GOLDEN ROSE"

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY FRANK WRIGHT

THIRD EDITION

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TO

MY FRIEND

HOWARD OWEN DAVIES

M.D. AND B.S. (LOND.)

IN REMEMBRANCE OF OUR GOOD TIMES

AMONG THE ALPS AND THALS

BROKEN SHACKLES

BOOK I

DE VALLE

I

IN the private room of the Chief of the Staff at Besançon—a big bare room furnished with nothing but the plainest of tables and chairs and a stove and a large idea—two men leaned absorbedly over a map fixed to the table by drawing-pins. It was studded here and there with longer pins, some with heads made of red sealing-wax and some of black.

The black-headed pins clustered thickly in places all over the upper part of the map. In point of numbers the red pins compared unfavourably with them. Moreover, the red pins were wide apart and isolated, and in most cases ringed round, wholly or in part, by a bristling hedge of black pins whose heads seemed to twinkle viciously in the lamplight.

"You see the idea, de Valle?" asked the elder of the two men as he straightened up, the insistent forefinger of his right hand still glued to the map, his other hand on his hip to ease the irk of much stooping.

"Perfectly, Colonel," said the younger man, bending over the map still, and nodding his head at it in

that half-acquiescent fashion which implies still more of doubt.

"Well, then?"

"If it could be carried out as you postulate it——"

"And what's to hinder? Here—" with so swift a dart of the insistent forefinger at a red pin that it fell over and had to be reinstated—"is Bourbaki, drumming his heels about Bourges and Nevers. He's not lifted a finger for the last three weeks."

"He's maybe kept the Red One from joining the others against Chanzy, however."

"Chanzy can hold his own against them both. If we could strike up north here, as I suggest, and cut their communications, their game is up. Three-quarters of all they need—food, ammunition, men, everything—comes in through there, by Strasburg and Nancy. Werder certainly has not more than fifty thousand men at the outside. With what we have here Bourbaki would have one hundred and forty thousand, and he could be here in four days without undue pressure. Cut their line up there and they must all scuttle home"—with a comprehensive wave over the viciously-twinkling black pins—"or starve. The country can't feed them, that's certain. They've eaten it bare. Cut off their supplies and they must go. Paris is relieved, and France is free again."

"It could be done," said de Valle, straightening up at last, and looking steadily at the other.

"Could be, pardie? Can be! What the deuce is to hinder? It's all as clear as daylight. It only needs doing. I see no reason why we should not go right on into Baden—ay, and into Prussia itself, and give them a taste of their own hell-broth," and his face flushed and his eyes kindled at thought of it all. But a puzzled

frown succeeded, at the lack of response in his junior's face.

"What's it, de Valle? Spit it out!" he said brusquely.

"You want me to go to Tours and lay this idea before Monsieur Gambetta, Colonel?"

The colonel nodded impatiently.

"Do you know what I would say if I were Gambetta?"

"What then?"

"I would say, 'It is a great scheme. It is worth risking. Let the man that conceived it carry it out.'"

At which the colonel tightened his lips and regarded him questioningly.

"You doubt Bourbaki?" he asked presently.

"Not his courage—not for a moment. He is a brave man. But I have served under him in the Guard, and I know him. He can handle a division, but I doubt very much his capacity to carry through a great combination."

"I know he's a bit headstrong, but that's the kind of man we need for a job such as this. It will need dash and courage——"

"The trouble is that he sometimes acts first and thinks afterwards, and this needs a clear, strong head, ready to adapt itself to new circumstances at a moment's notice, and even beforehand."

"And you doubt Bourbaki's capacity for that?"

"You ask me to speak freely, M. le Colonel. Well, from all accounts, M. le Général is not the man he was since that odd Metz business. They say he has lost confidence in himself and suspects everyone of suspecting him. That does not make for good leadership. Our men everywhere are more or less demoralized. Everything depends on how they are led. This"—with a

flick of the hand towards the map—" may save the whole situation if it is properly carried out——"

" It must be carried through just as I have explained it to you," said the colonel weightily. " The advance in four columns, or still better in five—one keeping the passes on the Swiss side, the others converging on Belfort by separate roads to avoid confusion and crowding. In these narrow valleys only limited numbers can move quickly. And speed is everything."

" Suppose Gambetta puts it so—may I say you will undertake it yourself, Colonel ? "

At which Colonel de Bigot turned and tramped the length of the room half a dozen times, with a frown on his face, before he stopped in front of de Valle and said quietly :

" No . . . I ask nothing better than to die for France, but I will not serve under a revolutionary government."

" But "—was on the young man's lips, for he could not himself see any difference—except in degree—between his chief's present service and this larger one that might be asked of him.

But a peremptory gesture stopped him.

" I received my commission from the Emperor. I cannot relinquish it in face of the enemy. I will do my best for my country, but I cannot bring myself to take orders from any of this canaille that has laid hold of the reins. . . . It must be Bourbaki, unless they can find a better. I wish it could be Chanzy, but that's out of the question. He's got his hands full in the west. Anyway, whoever they send, I will give him all the assistance in my power."

" It is a great scheme. It may save France—if it is properly carried through. It would be a terrible pity if

it miscarried for want of proper handling," urged the younger man.

"It is no use, de Valle. Serve under these men I will not. If you are clear on all the points, get away as soon as you can, and come back with such a force, and with such a leader, if you can, as will give us a fair chance. How soon can you start?"

"In ten minutes, if they can give me an engine."

"Away with you then! I shall be on thorns till you get back. We will save France yet."

The young man saluted and went off briskly. The elder bent over his map again, followed the lines he had traced on it for the swift inrush of the eager host that might change all the face of things, even at this desperate eleventh hour—could see no flaw in it all, and his vivid imagination ran victorious riot over the immense possibilities.

Bourbaki, or whoever they chose to entrust the matter to, would come up by rail to Dôle—or to Dijon, if the Germans retired from that place, as they probably would in face of such a force—and thence in four columns—one by way of Gray and the forest of Belle Vaivre; one by Fesmes and the Vesoul high road; one by the valley of the Oignon; one up the valley of the Doubs and Besançon; and a smaller column by Pontarlier to keep the line by the Swiss Frontier open.

Already he saw Werder crumpled up, perhaps annihilated, Belfort relieved, the long thin line of communications by Strasburg and Nancy—which groaned all day and all night under the interminable heavy trainloads of necessaries for the hungry hosts round Paris and in the field—smashed into uttermost confusion, and the hitherto-always-victorious reduced to the misery and

starvation they had so far only inflicted. He saw Bourbaki—or whoever it might be—swinging triumphantly across the Rhine and carrying death and desolation into the very heart of Germany itself—and thereupon an honourable peace, and France lifting her bowed head among the nations once more.

His plans were perfect—if only they were carried out to the letter. He had worked it all out on the map with the precision of a mathematical proposition. He knew to a mile where each division ought to be so many hours after it started out from Dijon. Working so, to time, they would ultimately converge simultaneously on Belfort, and Werder would find himself assailed in front and on both flanks by forces overwhelmingly greater than his own.

Then came this troubling suggestion of de Valle's. Was Bourbaki the man for the job ?

He had immense confidence in de Valle. He had known him from a boy, and had followed every step of his career with as keen an interest as if he had been his own son. He had never been one of the feather-brains, though, like the rest, he had seized on life with both hands and levied fullest toll. And even after that most unfortunate marriage of his—when life had lost its flavour for him and held nothing but disillusionment and disappointment—he had not gone to the devil as most would have done, but had flung himself into his work with a grim determination to wring something else out of life since he could not have what he had hoped, and an ardour which had admitted of no distractions.

And these doubts of his as to Bourbaki's absolute fitness for so momentous an undertaking carried weight and disturbed him greatly.

His plans were perfect. Of that he was certain. To have them miscarry through inability, or over-eagerness, or pig-headedness—Dieu-de-Dieu, he was almost tempted to send word after de Valle that he would accept the leadership if it were offered.

It was mightily tempting, without a doubt. The man who carried it through to success, and snatched France from the very jaws of hell, would be worshipped as a demi-god. Any post he chose would be his for the taking. He could make himself President—Dictator. He could do anything but one thing—reinstate his former master. And to him, fallen though he was, and held in utmost contempt and derision, he was loyal.

With a bang of his fist on the table, which jerked half the pins out of their holes, he consigned Gambetta and all his crew to perdition, and ended his own momentary vacillation with an emphatic, " No—never ! "

Then he set to work and methodically replaced the pins.

II

DE VALLE, requisitioning locomotives with a high-handed peremptoriness that brooked neither denial nor delay, was closeted with Gambetta at Tours early the next morning.

The fiery Dictator's southern imagination flamed to white heat at the gigantic possibilities underlying de Bigot's carefully-thought-out scheme.

In his mind's eye he already saw the besieging hosts round Paris *in extremis* through the cutting off of their supplies—saw them struggling hastily back to their own country, decimated by cold and hunger and the venomous harrying of the French legions—saw his chief bug-bears, Prince Frederic Charles, and Mecklenburg, and Manteuffel, surrendering at discretion as the only alternative to annihilation or starvation—saw France, still raw-red from her own punishment, threshing Germany into the German mire with the fiery flail that knew neither pity nor mercy.

"It is magnificent!" he said, tossing back his head and mane, and glowing on de Valle with an eye like a live coal. "It is heaven-sent. Now who . . .? De Bigot is of that country, if I remember rightly?"

"Of the Jura."

"He is the man for it. Will he undertake it?"

"He will not, Excellency."

"Why then?"—like the crack of a pistol.

De Valle hesitated.

"Speak out, Captain. This is no time for a close mouth."

"He is staunch Imperialist. He declines to serve any other government."

"Tchah! The first thing is to save the country. Then we can settle our little differences. He sends us this great idea, but he will not help to carry it out! For me, I cannot understand that frame of mind. However —you are certain on the point?"

"Absolutely. I took the liberty of saying to him that in your Excellency's place I would ask the man who conceived the scheme to carry it through——"

"Exactly. And he——"

"He considered the matter. I even ventured to urge it upon him as a duty to the country, for you will find no other to do it so well. But it was useless."

"Well, well! Then—who? Bourbaki, naturally. Chanzy we cannot well transfer. Besides, Bourbaki would resent it," and he pursed his lips and pondered.

Pursuing a certain train of thought, and forgetful for the moment that he was not alone, with a click of the tongue, the words, *Hérissons tous*—Hedgehogs all—whistled unconsciously from the black-bearded lips, and de Valle smiled to himself. For it described with most apt and absolute exactitude the relations existing among the leaders of the heterogeneous forces jerked into existence by this fiery demagogue, to whom their sensitive bristles were still a matter of constant wonder and distraction.

"Bourbaki, then," he said with quick decision. "You will accompany me to Bourges, Captain, and we will set the machinery in motion at once. You will join

Bourbaki's force, and give him all the assistance you can in carrying the matter out as de Bigot formulated it. You came that way. How are his men ? "

" Crude," said de Valle with a shrug.

" Naturally ! They are just from the soil, most of them. What would you ? They are good material anyway."

" It takes time to lick even good material into shape, Excellency."

" And time is just what we cannot have. We can only do the best with what we have."

And an hour later they were speeding back to Bourges.

III

GENERAL BOURBAKI did not kindle to the great adventure as Gambetta's fiery spirit had done.

Perhaps it was that he felt it overlarge for his handling but could not of course admit it. Possibly he resented having another man's scheme thrust upon him. If he carried it through to fullest possible success it would still be de Bigot's scheme, and honours would be to some extent divided.

He pointed out difficulties. His force was ill equipped for so arduous an adventure ;—which was true. He was deplorably short of officers of any practical experience whatever ;—painfully true once more. With artillery he was fairly well supplied, but his commissariat, even at Bourges and Nevers, left much—almost everything—to be desired ; and as to transport—the most expressive of shrugs could not begin to describe it. It was on a par with his so-called cavalry, which consisted of relics of all the regiments that had been reduced to fragments elsewhere.

His cumbrous raw battalions could hold Bourges and Nevers and the Romorantin lines, and keep Prince Frederic Charles on tenterhooks, and so prevent him joining Mecklenburg against Chanzy—but a winter campaign in the Jura, in bitterer weather than had been known for years, did not commend itself to him.

If he moved, the Red Prince would either follow him and harry his rear or would join Mecklenburg and make an end of Chanzy. Besides, he had a pet scheme of his own for getting round the Germans on his front and making a dash on Paris by way of Fontainebleau.

All these things he advanced with a certain curious diffidence, strangely at variance with de Valle's generous memories of his old chief, but painfully in line with the rumours he had mentioned to Colonel de Bigot. And below this new Bourbaki he was cognizant of still another one, obstinately obsessed with his own ideas and unable or unwilling to open his mind to anyone else's.

But the fiery Minister of the Interior, who called up legions from the soil of his stricken country with a stamp of the foot, and kindled them into something like patriotic fervour and the suffering of unutterable woes by the flame of his own irrepressible ardour, would recognize no impossibilities.

This great idea of paralyzing the German dragon, by gripping its long thin throat where all its supplies came in, had taken possession of him. Grip the throat, or slit it, and the devastating brute must shrivel and die.

It was a stubborn duel of wills, and the stronger won. When Bourbaki recognized that if he refused another would be called in to undertake it, he accepted—but obviously against his will and against his judgment. And de Valle augured none too favourably of the outcome.

By Gambetta's instructions he detailed de Bigot's ideas with the utmost minuteness and reduced them to writing. Then, as the one man on the spot who knew more about the business than anyone else, he was temporarily attached to Bourbaki's staff and instructed to render him every assistance in his power. An appoint-

ment which carried within itself its own practical nullification, for Bourbaki, though he knew de Valle well and esteemed him highly, could not but regard him in this matter as somewhat in the nature of Gambetta's agent and watch-dog, imposed on him to see that he did his duty. And he resented it.

De Valle was striding along the street to his billet in the Hotel de l'Europe when he came unexpectedly, and greatly to the comfort of his heart, on two old friends.

He was walking quickly, turning the matter over in his mind somewhat distastefully, for Bourbaki's whole attitude, both to himself and the great scheme, was distinctly depressing, when the sudden confrontation of two bodies, one large and one small, but both equally obstructive of his passage, brought him to a stand, and a cheerful voice cried, "So-ho! Half the street, if you please, for M. le Comte de Valle! He carries France on his back from the look of his face—all that is left of her, that is."

"Why—boys? . . . Actually I did not know you with all that hair on your faces——"

"Oh, well, you can't crow. You're another!" chirped the smaller of the two. "It's too cold to shave in this country. They're Prussianizing even the weather."

"Besides, it's useful when you go to Germany," drawled the big man. "You simply square your beard —so—and make a parting in it, and there you are. Zo!—jawohl!—and you walk out again."

"You've been in Germany? You too, Charles?"

"Of course. It was the fashion, you see, and we had to be in the swim. We went in with Ducrot and several others, after Sedan, you know, and came out with him on a load of potatoes. You should have seen him, with

his bare feet in a pair of old sabots, and a dirty blouse, and a black pipe in his mouth! You'd have died of laughing. He sat on the off-shaft with his legs dangling, and cursed us high and low. I sat on the potatoes, and Jules there led the pony by the nose. It was a regular picnic, but I can smell those beastly potatoes yet. And you?"

"So far I've escaped——"

"Oh, we did that; but we followed the fashion first, and went in, just to see what it was like, you know. You're quite out of the train, old boy."

"Come along to my billet and we'll wash away the smell of the potatoes, and you'll tell me all you're doing here."

"Doing? We're not doing anything. Please, sir, it wasn't me! I never threw nothing."

"Where are you, de Valle?" asked Jules of the big body.

"Hotel de l'Europe——"

"That's all right. We're there too," and they turned and all went along together.

And as they sauntered along, talking eagerly and perfunctorily returning the salutes of those who passed, the face of one suddenly caught de Valle's eye, by reason of the exceedingly venomous scowl upon it.

"Who's that fellow?" asked Jules Breton. "I seem to know his ugly mug. And what the devil's he scowling at?"

"His name is Ravaud," said de Valle quietly. "Jean-Marie Ravaud. He was my orderly in Paris for a couple of years——"

"I remember him. He stole your wife's jewels," said Lamotte. "I thought he went to the galleys."

"He's here, anyway, and we won't give him away. Let the poor devil have his chance."

"We've got all the scum of the earth here," growled Breton.

"Not all, my boy. There's some dregs still left in Paris, and some of the top-scum at Bordeaux," cackled Charles.

"Now, tell us what you're doing here, Pat, and why you're so sad about it?" asked Breton, as they drank hot coffee laced with cognac, and lit their cigarettes.

"There was apparently a dearth of efficient officers in Bourbaki's command," said de Valle, with his quiet smile, which hardly got past the corners of his eyes. "So they've attached me to the staff here. For the rest, I don't see anything in the general situation to provoke any undue joviality."

"Might be worse, my boy," said Charles Lamotte. "Think of our poor beggars out in the country. We've at all events got a roof to our heads and something to eat occasionally. I never could stand cold weather. It shrinks me to half my natural proportions, both inside and out. Campaigning ought to be confined to the summer months by international law."

"You might suggest it to Bismarck and old Moltke," said Breton. "I'm sure they'd listen respectfully to anything you say."

"Curse them both, for a pair of grasping old hucksters! They want to worry us to death apparently. If I could just have them all by themselves for five minutes or so——" fumed the valiant little lieutenant.

"—There wouldn't be much of you left, my chicken. What's your explanation of our crumple up, de Valle?" asked Breton heavily.

"Same as your own, my boy, since you have had eyes to see and a heart to understand. We were rotten, and some of us didn't know it."

"Did you?" snapped Lamotte sharply.

"I had reason to. I saw so much of it. Anyone who looked below and behind could not fail to see how hollow it all was, underneath the pomp and show."

"Why the devil didn't you speak out if you knew so much about it?" growled Breton.

"I did—at risk to myself. I was with Stoffel in Berlin all the time he was military attaché there, you know. We saw what was going on—all they would let us see; and we knew there was still more behind. We sent the fullest possible accounts to headquarters—and never got so much as a 'thank-you' for it all. In fact, I doubt very much if our reports were ever read——"

"They were all too busy playing skittles," said Charles.

"We knew they were ready over there. They had been getting ready for us ever since '66. And as for us —well, as you know, we were not as ready as we thought we were. There's the whole matter. They had been hard at work on their machine. We had been playing skittles, as Charley says, and letting ours get rusty."

"And who was it you spoke to?" asked Breton.

"The Emperor himself. He had always placed great confidence in my father, and used to discuss matters with him as I doubt if he did with anyone else, until he died. And he was always very kind to me. He sent for me when I came back from Berlin the last time, and told me to speak freely. And I did. I told him plainly that in my opinion they were readier than we."

"And what did he say?"

"He said Leboeuf assured him we were all right, and

so it would be a question who could hit quickest and hardest, and hold out longest. He said the longer we waited the stronger they would become, and it was absolutely necessary to check them."

"They're devils to fight," said Breton; "but we'd have done better if we'd been properly led. Our fellows showed over and over again that they had the old grit in them still. They were simply wasted and thrown away by the damnable jealousies among the heads."

"Ay—damnable, indeed! Too many cooks in the first place, and every man of them thinking only how fast he could make his own little pot boil for his own especial benefit. . . . And no direction," he added, musingly—"Every man for himself, and the devil take the others. It was like a dozen men playing chess blindfold, each moving the pieces regardless of the others, against a champion player with his eyes very wide open. A poor game for us!"

"Your friend the Emperor didn't make much of a show," said Breton brusquely.

"He ought never to have gone to the front. If you'd seen him as I saw him you wouldn't feel as you do about him."

"Why then?"

"He was mortally ill—suffering horribly. They had to lift him off his horse after Saarbrück, and he sank down on my arm so that I thought he would fall. I heard afterwards that the doctors had examined him before he started and forbade him to go under pain of death. He deemed it necessary to go, and he suppressed their report."

"He'd have done better to stop at home."

"Better for himself undoubtedly, and they ought to

have insisted. But he considered his place was at the head of his troops——"

"Which it wasn't," snapped Lamotte.

"As it proved. All the same, there are not many men would have gone out in his condition. Now tell me about your men here. How are they?"

"Raw meat, most of them," said Breton. "Equipment poor. We're improving it as fast as we can. As for officers——"

"Here they sit," said Lamotte, with an airy wave of the hand round their table.

"What we have are mostly rawer than the men. Many of them have never been under fire. They're learning, but it takes time. If his Red Highness over there will keep quiet for another month or two we'll have more to say to him than we would have if he came on now. My wonder is that he hasn't come on long since and eaten us up."

"H'm!" said de Valle, and the glow and glamour of that dashing enterprise that was to slit the dragon's throat dimmed somewhat in its hopeful possibilities. And down somewhere at the back of his heart there was a little chill doubt that possibly Bourbaki had reason for his diffidence in the matter.

For there could be no half measures in so desperate a venture. Either it must be a mighty success or a most disastrous failure.

So far the course of events had suggested no likelihood of a turn of the tide. From what he had seen, and from what he now heard, these raw and ill-equipped levies of the First Army of the Loire did not suggest themselves as likely saviours of their country. But there was no knowing. When the tide was at its lowest it

rose again; dawn follows the darkest night; France might recover herself by a bold stroke at this eleventh hour. And if the instruments of her recovery were crude and rough the greater would be the glory of their achievement.

IV

A WOUND or a bruise seems always to offer itself unduly for further bruising.

The sight of his old orderly recalled to de Valle's mind all the chagrin and bitterness of those times in Paris, when his marriage was slowly but surely proving itself a hopeless and disastrous failure.

And the curious thing was that, after that first meeting, he seemed to be always running across the fellow, and always Ravaud's black face turned on him that venomous scowl, as though it were he that had wrought its wearer's downfall and not its wearer's own cupidity and lack of moral sense.

He had not worn a face like that in those earlier days, or he would have had small chance of becoming orderly to the Vicomte de Valle, as he was then, before his father died.

The Count, as his son has told us, had the Emperor's confidence, possibly because he held himself rigidly aloof from party politics and the mazy whirl of gaiety and intrigue which pervaded the Court, and did not by any means tend to elevate it in the minds of the thoughtful.

He had served under the First Napoleon, sinking the prejudices of his birth in the glamour of his idol's achievements, and the belief that France, under him, was destined mistress of the world.

He had married late, lost his wife after a brief happi-

ness, and was left with the boy, Patrice, the only occupants—save their very meagre household—of the great mansion in the Quartier St. Germain, which had sheltered de Valles from time immemorial in fair weather and in foul.

The fair weather had ended with the Count's father, who trifled away at the Court card-tables all his delicate fingers could lay hands on. He died gallantly, with the rest, in '92, two years after his son was born.

When, in due course, the Count came to marry, money was essential. He was fortunate in finding love also.

But he was no man of affairs. In the endeavour to increase his boy's patrimony he lost the most of it. And so, as the only means of restoring the fortunes of the house and enabling young Pat to take his proper position in the world, he cast about for a bride for him who should, in her own person and rights, unite wealth, beauty, and, if possible, love—a combination none too easy of achievement.

And if he set love last in the scale it was not that he deemed it unessential. In his own case he had attained all three requirements. Why should not his boy do the same ?

Marriages so arranged appeal to our insular prejudices as unnatural, surcharged with risk, pre-ordained to failure. But experience has proved otherwise.

In any case it was the custom, and young Pat, with infinite faith in his father's wisdom, fell in with his ideas, and in due course became affianced to Mlle. Claudine Jeaudenans, only daughter and heiress of the wealthy banker of the rue de Provence.

Jeaudenans was one of those shrewd business men to whom the feverish activities of the Empire offered

endless opportunities. He had invested boldly in real estate before the Hausmannising of the city was dreamed of. He reaped his reward, and settled down to the less risky vocation of financing the later comers on his own terms, which, one may be sure, left little prospect of loss for himself or of anything very excessive in the way of profit for them, unless by lucky fluke.

Still, if he was hard he was straight, and had even been suspected of unlooked-for generosities, and his name stood high on all the exchanges of Europe.

Outside his business his one concern was his daughter. Claudine had grown up motherless. He adored her, and spoiled her to her heart's content and detriment. She had inherited great beauty from her mother. From him she would inherit great wealth. Obviously she was destined for a position in life where these mighty assets could be turned to fullest possible account.

And no one could offer her that position, together with a personality entirely unobjectionable to her, more amply than young Patrice de Valle.

The de Valles had borne an irreproachable name from the days of Charlemagne and Louis le Débonnaire. Family tradition, indeed, held that the name Alcuin, which every de Valle bore as the first of his string, was so ordered by Charlemagne himself in honour of Alcuin the Briton, his instructor in logic and the finer arts, and the founder of the great school—afterwards the University—of Paris. That the present Vicomte was, among other names, given that of Patrice, and was universally so called—by his intimates, Pat—was due to the fact that his mother was of Irish descent, and that his father thought more highly of her even than he did of Charlemagne.

The present representatives of the family had shown

their common-sense and broad-mindedness by accepting the new order of things, instead of sulking aloof, as did so many of their kind. Both the old Comte and the Vicomte were on terms of quite unusual friendship with the Emperor and Empress, though hitherto the Comte had not cared to launch upon the turbulent, and somewhat turgid, tide that swirled around the Tuileries and Fontainebleau and Compiègne.

But the Vicomtesse—who must, in the natural course of things, in short due course become the Comtesse—de Valle, with almost unlimited wealth at her disposal, with the Jeaudenans' brains, and beauty of face and figure beyond most, had no doubt whatever as to the position she could take on the crest of the tide.

And so, with all due formalities, Pat and Claudine were married. Their respective fathers did their respective duties by dying within a year and leaving them in uncontrolled possession of the titles and money they had respectively contributed to the new *ménage*, and the troubles began.

De Valle was keen on his profession. He was one of those who looked ahead and abroad and endeavoured to read the signs of the times. He had his misgivings, and worked manfully against the odds of inertia, cupidity, and rascality, to give the lie to them. For the whirling gaieties and extravagances of the Court he had the profoundest distaste and contempt.

Claudine, to an extent, despised these things also, but saw in them her opportunity, and was resolved to make the most of it. She was welcomed at Court with flattering distinction, and was very soon hand and glove with Pauline Metternich, Mélanie de Pourtalès, and the rest of the merry crew, whose only apparent aim in life was

to wring from it every drop of enjoyment it contained, no matter what the cost.

Such a life could not tend to conjugal happiness. Claudine was never at home. She was at Compiègne, at Fontainebleau, at Biarritz, at the Tuileries. Children she flatly refused to consider, as interruptions and interferences with her other enjoyments.

Her money was practically her own to do what she would with. The shrewd banker had seen to that.

Had there been a child, de Valle might have asserted himself on its behalf. But there was not. Instead—remonstrances, hot words, cold looks, a drifting apart. For de Valle, a grim hiatus where he had looked for a home and children; a blank hopelessness where he had had the right to hope for happiness. For Claudine, a position in society equal to her highest aspirations, and a continuous whirl of pleasure which apparently adequately filled the places of husband, home, and children.

Rumour at times sharpened its venomous tongue on her, and hinted at too warm a friendship with this man and that. But in those feverish years it required more than mere rumours to smirch a reputation. If de Valle ever heard of them he estimated them at their proper value, had sufficient belief in his wife's common-sense and selfishness to fear any actual lapse that might endanger her position in society, and devoted himself more keenly than ever to wrestling with the demons that beset his own path.

They met, of course, occasionally, in off-times, in the old house in the Rue St. Dominique. But it was almost as strangers. Claudine refused all his efforts at reconciliation. She had all she wanted. Life was yielding her beyond her expectations. In reply to his

remonstrances and appeals she told him plainly that she was going her own way and he was at liberty to go his.

His way, as we have seen, took him to Berlin with Colonel Stoffel; and there, with his Chief, he watched more keenly, reported more succinctly, warned more earnestly, than a man more at peace with himself might have done.

If those reports and warnings had been read and taken to heart by the puff-balls in Paris, things might have gone differently, and Pat de Valle would not have been at Bourges that black December, bound on the great adventure of endeavouring to slit the dragon's throat away up there in the Jura.

Jean-Marie Ravaud, when he served him as orderly, was a bright, black-eyed young fellow of three-and-twenty, smart and efficient, and well up to his duties. Unfortunately for him he developed an intimacy with Claudine's Italian maid, Anastasie Gondo, a black-browed beauty with no more moral sense than a cat. In the end they bolted together, taking with them one hundred thousand francs' worth of Claudine's favourite jewels wherewith to make a fresh start in a new country. Arrested on board ship at Nantes, Jean-Marie was consigned to the galleys; while Anastasie, making play with her black eyes and pleading the constraint of the stronger male will, went scot free.

And now, here was Jean-Marie in the ranks once more, whether as *échappé* or on ticket-of-leave de Valle had no means of knowing.

But, however he came there, it was evident from the black face he always turned on his former master that, by some crook in his brain, he attributed all his mis-

fortunes to him rather than to himself, and bore him deadly grudge in consequence.

Possibly he lived in constant fear of disclosure. The wide sweep of Gambetta's net had landed many an odd fish in the ranks.

But the galleys warp a man out of his humanity, and the roughest and rudest would draw the line at consorting on friendly terms with one who bore their indelible brand.

De Valle, however, had no thought of giving him away. France was *in extremis*. Every man was needed. Even a man from the galleys might have his place in the vile economy of war. Times so desperate might even offer to the fallen the chance of getting on to their feet once more, and he would be the last to interfere with any man's opportunity.

V

BUT the way in which Ravaud seemed to pervade the streets of Bourges was extraordinary. De Valle was always coming across him, and was always greeted with that scowl of black hatred which truly looked as though it needed but opportunity to translate itself into deadly action.

"Dieu, mon ami," said Jules Breton as Ravaud passed them again in the street one day, "take my advice, and keep that black-faced rascal in front of you if ever you go into action together. That kind always takes first chance of paying off scores in that way."

"You believe it?"

"I know it. My best sergeant fell before my eyes at Woerth with his back as full of holes as a sieve. He was a demon on slackers, it's true. But it's devilish nasty work all the same. I wonder if those others suffer from that too."

"I doubt it."

"Human sausage is much the same whether it's in a French skin or a German."

"That's true; but they look at things differently over there. I studied them closely for two years, and I tell you, Breton, they are breeding better men over there than we are."

"The luck's been against us, and they've come out top."

"It goes deeper than that. They've got in them something that we haven't."

"What, then? Stronger muscle? Redder blood? Better grit?"

"All those. And we're proving it."

"And why?"

De Valle hesitated, then said quietly, "I'm no preacher, as you know; but I'm strongly of the opinion —and remember I've been among them for two years— that it all comes of the fact that they still cling to beliefs that we have lost——"

"Tiens! That's an odd idea. What beliefs?"

"You were at Sedan. You heard them singing round their fires at night? Some old hymn, I believe. That's what I mean. It went right to the marrow of my bones. I can hear it yet. They don't speak much about such things ordinarily, but it's there and it comes out. What do we believe in France?"

"Nothing—except that they've always had the most men and the devil's own luck. . . . You may be right, de Valle. I'm no hand at such matters. But without doubt"—as a gang of dirty, ill-clad little infantry-men slouched past with stolid faces and rough mechanical salutes—"we're a rotten lot as a whole."

"The Germans, as a nation, have come through very hard times. It's our turn now. Maybe it'll have the same effect on us."

"And the time'll come when we'll pay them back for their damnable treatment now," said Breton bitterly.

Twice during the week of his stay in Bourges and its neighbouring camps, while the huge unwieldy First Army of the Loire was slowly being transformed into

the Army of the East, de Valle came into pointed contact with his *bête noire*.

It was bitter weather. The countrysides lay deep in snow. Inside the town, which could accommodate but a fraction of the host, and in the adjoining camps, the icy mud was ankle-deep. It plastered pedestrians from head to foot; made horsemen, and still more their shivering steeds, very unhappy; and clogged the wheels of guns and tumbrils, and forage and ambulance waggons, till they almost struck work.

De Valle, working almost night and day against the dull inert mass of ignorance and crass stupidity which pervaded all ranks more or less, but especially those who should have been the brains of the army, found himself not far from despair at times.

This—a force to slit the dragon's throat! It seemed to him more like a warren of terrified rabbits crouching in the mud till the dragon should choose to come and gobble them up.

The men were mostly willing enough, but they were dull, heavy, cowed. They would do what they were told, but their raw, untrained officers did not know what to tell them, nor how.

It was nightmarish work. When he did tumble into his bed of a night he would dream that, single-handed, he was endeavouring to push a gigantic half-inflated balloon —sometimes it was a lump of dough the size of the earth —all the way from Bourges to Besançon, and the more he pushed at it the more it overwhelmed him with its dull insensate inertia.

Breton and Lamotte seconded him with all their powers, without as yet the least glimmer of understanding as to what it was all about.

Some great move they saw was to the fore, but where or what was kept profoundly secret. They pointedly taxed de Valle with being at the root of all the pother, but he kept a tight mouth on it. Secrecy was of the very essence of the stroke. Once their destination was whispered abroad, the Red Prince would hear of it within four-and-twenty hours. Those four-and-twenty hours must give them a hundred miles start of him.

Very late one night, de Valle, with his capuchon drawn up over his cap to keep out the cold, was picking his way home through the ill-lighted muddy streets, when, from the dark tunnel of an alley-way as he passed, there came the muffled shriek of a woman.

He turned in at once to see what was wrong, saw a glimmer of light in front, and groped his way towards it. He came against a door, heard dull sounds of struggle inside, and kicked it open.

It was one of the shabby drinking-dens which ministered mischief to the boys. In one corner was a dim oil lamp with a tarnished reflector. By the light of it a man was struggling with a girl, with the fierce, silent intensity of a wild beast on the kill. The girl screamed again as the door burst open. The man shot one venomous frustrated look at him as de Valle's fist laid him flat, and the girl scrambled up and clung, panting and sobbing, to the zinc-covered table.

"They ought not to leave you here all alone," said de Valle; "it's not safe with canaille such as this about."

"They don't . . . as a rule," panted the girl. "My father got hurt in a row, and had to go home."

"Well, lock up now and get home yourself. We'll leave him outside;" and the girl hastened to help him to drag the unconscious Ravaud out into the passage-way,

blew out the light, locked the door, and hurried away with breathless thanks for his assistance.

Two days later, in the company of Breton, he was overlooking the preparation for active service of an artillery-train, with a special eye to the horses whose condition touched him to the quick. He was always a lover of horses. Their nervous terrors and ghastly sufferings in the field stirred him to the depths and awakened his profoundest sympathies, their ultimate fate appealed to him as tragically as did that of his men.

As he watched the shivering, half-starved beasts falling reluctantly into their places with the dull lethargy which characterized men and beasts alike, a booted foot came suddenly up from the off-side into the belly of one opposite him, and the poor brute groaned hollowly and hunched its back at the kick.

In an instant de Valle had swung his own horse round in rear of the gun and brought his riding-cane down heavily on the shoulders of the kicker.

" Never kick a horse, my man," he said sharply, and as Ravaud's black face turned viciously up at him, he added, " You, at all events, ought to know better. Clear out of this ! Another man here ! " and Ravaud humped his shoulders in insolent menace and loafed away.

" Take my advice, de Valle, and blow out that black devil's brains first chance you get," said Breton.

" He'd be no great loss, that's certain."

" There are about a dozen more like him that I'd be glad to see set up against a wall and made an end of."

De Valle nodded. " Unfortunately we'll have to leave it to the Germans to do. And it's always the rascals who escape."

VI

IMPLICIT as was de Valle's faith in the great enterprise, it flickered and left him sadly despondent at times, as the inefficiency of the force with which it was to be attempted was brought closer and closer home to him.

A very paralysis of brain and energy seemed to have fallen upon those responsible for the conduct of affairs. The men for the most part were willing enough, to the extent of their bodily and mental powers, which, however, seemed to de Valle to have, in some incomprehensible way, suffered sudden deterioration—the effect possibly, he thought, of too long a run of ill-fortune. They wore the dull, careless look of those who have sounded the depths and given up hope of better things—the look of men who had come to expect to be beaten. And men who look to lose have small chance of winning. Long-continued bruisings dull the heart and soul as the blows of a club numb the brain.

There was no enthusiasm for a winter campaign even among the officers—perhaps, indeed, among them least of all, especially among the newly-joined and consciously incapable. Conditions were uncomfortable enough as it was. Still, in camp one could, at all events, make shift to live, and the commissariat was on the spot. But fighting over snow-covered country in that bitter weather! —they shrugged their incompetent shoulders disgustfully

and cursed the Germans, and the Emperor—whom they called Badinguet—and the weather, and their ill-luck in finding themselves there, and things in general; and bungled their orders and doubled the already too great confusion; and kept Pat de Valle and his horse in one long sweat of hasty reparation of other people's blunders, and his heart in one long sweat of fear for the outcome of it all.

Breton and Lamotte, though a trifle sore at being kept in the dark, seconded him nobly, but were saved his heart-sweats by their lack of knowledge of the object of it all, and so maintained a more cheerful demeanour.

Their characteristic little ebullitions—Breton's caustic brusqueries and Lamotte's saucy prattle—which no chill of weather or circumstance could wholly repress, were very serviceable to him. They held the flavour of old times—of the times before the Catastrophe—of the old unconquerable spirit that had once made France the head of the nations. They were like whiffs of fresh air in a fetid room.

"Ah-ha!" chirped Lieutenant Charles, when at last he saw the first contingent of the 18th Corps fairly started on the high road on its eastward march to La Charité. "To Berlin, is it? I seem to have heard the suggestion before. Then we go via Baden, I presume. Jules, my boy, we'll have to part our beards in the middle again to satisfy the requirements of the fair, fat, gentle fraülein——"

"To Berne, more likely," growled Jules. "God help you, Pat de Valle, if you've any such wild idea as Baden in your noddle. I always gave you credit for a certain amount of brain——"

"Too much—too much," sighed Lamotte, with a wag of the head. "It's interfered sadly with his enjoyment

of life. Give me a cheerful heart in these days, and who will may have the brain. The more you think——"

"The less you smile," said Breton. "But, nom-de-Dieu, I wish some of these new beggars had half a brain between six of them. Not that they're any great hand at smiling either. There's not one out of six can take an order, and if he does he doesn't know how to carry it out. They're raw as butcher's meat."

"Nasty simile! When the shop's apparently just about to open again on the same old lines. I suppose we really are going to do something, Pat? It's not just a —er—full-dress parade to keep our blood from freezing."

"No, it's business, boys. Good business, it ought to be, if—" and he nodded pregnantly. "The idea is excellent. Whether it is possible to carry it through with the tools we have, I am seriously doubting, these last few days. I was pledged to silence till the start was made, but now we can discuss it," and he outlined de Bigot's scheme and pointed out all its mighty possibilities.

They recognized them to the full, but knowing the First Army of the Loire—now the Army of the East—even better than he did, they shared his misgivings.

"If we were not such a scratch lot," said Breton, "we'd do it like a waltz and slit their gizzard like a Christmas turkey's. But you can't get over the fact that we're about the scratchest lot that ever took the field——"

"Say the snow, which makes it worse," said Lamotte. "They're half baked to begin with, and half starved to go on with, and they've lost their spunk with so many whippings. We're badly officered, and our cavalry's riff-raff——"

"And it's a mighty risky business, and a toss-up what the end will be. Oh, I know," as de Valle turned a

repressive, remonstrative face on him—" I'll talk it sky-high to everyone else, but between you and me and the post—that's Charles here—if we were an army, I believe we could do it. The trouble is we're not an army. We're just a mob, and a shabby, ill-found mob at that. The men have lost confidence in themselves, and, what's still worse, in most of us——"

" You can't wonder at it," piped Lamotte. " Those new fellows in charge of the mobiles are enough to turn a worm sick. They've no more thought for their men than—than a mule has for its cast shoes," as one of those forlorn animals limped past through the mud—for the weather had changed in the night to rain and thaw—on three sound feet and one shoeless one, in the company of three horses and an Armstrong gun.

" Not half as much," growled Breton.

" All the same, it'll give us a chance of a bite at the beasts, and, for me, I thirst for Prussia's blood to take away the taste of Sedan and those damnable potatoes. I only hope Werder won't bolt before we get to Belfort."

" They're not much given to bolting," said de Valle quietly.

VII

SPEED and secrecy were the very essence of their enterprise.

Once the troops were *en route*, every hour brought nearer that moment when word of this sudden move would reach the subtle brain of the lean-faced old Wire-puller at Versailles, who held all the threads in his gentle fingers and moved Kings and Princes and Grand-Dukes and Generals like so many pieces on a board.

And the moment he heard he would sit down before his maps and quietly ponder the probabilities, and the best method of checkmating each one. Where there was choice he would provide for each. He would leave nothing to chance. "If," as a possibility, he had no use for. "If," as an alternative, he would provide for to the last available man.

The roads between Bourges and the railway line leading to Dôle and Dijon were heavy with the melting snow and rain, and the passage of 30,000 men and nine batteries of artillery. It was the following night—the twentieth of December—before the 18th reached the small country station of La Charité. Twenty-five miles—two days! Not speedy going, but it might have been worse, and the men were in better spirits than might have been expected.

Half their breath *en route* had been spent in speculation as to where they were bound for. For the railway

line at La Charité could carry them up north to Montargis and Fontainebleau and Paris, or by way of Gien to Orléans for another dig at the Red Prince, or south to Lyon, or east to Dijon and Belfort. So—where ?

It was only when, late at night, they filed in long thin line over the bridge across the Loire that the rumours as to a dash on Belfort, and perhaps even Baden, gained general acceptance and raised their crests still higher.

Many of them had already tasted the drastic medicine of the Red Prince and the Duke of Mecklenburg, at Orléans, at Artenay, at Beaugency, and had no wish for more. This move towards the unknown seemed to hold more hopeful possibilities, and they became eager to put them to the test.

In spite of the fatigues of their toilsome cross-country march, the men were early astir next morning and eager to be off. And promptly the demon of incompetence that dogged their every move sprang up and danced a can-can over their hopes and turned them into angry curses.

It was a single line of rails. At Nevers, twelve miles south of them on the same single line, their comrades of the 20th Corps were hard at work entraining for Châlon-sur-Saône to join them in the dash on Belfort. Waggons were scarce. The officials were off their heads with bewilderment. La Charité was but a wayside station—a small country town whose only claims to even local distinction were a corn market and a lunatic asylum. Never, since the railway wakened it out of its original sleep, had such demands been made upon it, and there had been no time to meet them.

Dieu-de-Dieu-de-Dieu !—What was the use of raving in that fashion ? Why had they not been advised in time ?

Trucks and waggons could not be procured at a moment's notice; and, besides, the 20th down yonder were fighting for all they could lay hands on. Eh b'en, then! What would you?—And angry shrugs shed off unmerited blame and declined all responsibility for the contretemps, no matter what the consequences might be.

Time and secrecy were the essence of their enterprise, and time was flying fast and to no purpose; and faster still, they knew, word of their doings must be speeding up north to the clever brain that would strain every nerve to outwit them.

It was maddening. Cursings and recriminations filled the air. The furious troops watched the artillery slowly getting their guns on board the few trucks that were available. Three mortal hours went to the shipping of the first battery, and there were eight more to follow.

"La-la!" jibed a cadaverous linesman under his officer's nose unchecked. "It's the same old tune we've danced to all along. Let's go home for Christmas, boys. There's nothing going on here."

And many were with him. Their new-found spirits found vent, first in sharp-pointed jocularities, then in venomous jeers, in grumblings and cursings, and presently evaporated altogether.

The weather turned deadly cold again. They hung about, chilled to the marrow—still worse, chilled to the heart, at this fresh evidence of negligence and incompetency on the part of those whose duty it was to direct matters and set their willing feet against the enemy.

At best it was an arduous road. It came sharply home to them that the very least that could have been done was to deliver them to what most of them had come

to look upon as the inevitable slaughter in the best possible condition.

In a word, they felt themselves being wasted, thrown away without any possible profit to anyone—unless to those accursed Germans—and nothing takes the heart out of men more surely than that.

They had ached yesterday in the rain and mud to get another and more hopeful chance at the enemy. Hanging about in this hopeless depression, with the thermometer below freezing-point, aches and pains of a more intimate character laid hold of them.

De Valle, when the duty assigned to him of superintending the despatch of the troops from Bourges had been carried out to the last man and the last gun, had ridden along the line of march and taken heart again at the unexpected cheerful bearing of the men in spite of the heavy going.

Everything shaped well—better than he had of late dared to expect. They were, indeed, taking longer across country than he had hoped, but they were visibly doing their best, and showed more heart for the work than he had looked for.

Minutest directions had been issued for the entrainment, and, though that was not his department, he rode on ahead to see if he could be of any service at La Charité —and there came butt against the Devil " Can't."

He stormed with the rest, and to as much purpose. They came near to fusing the wires with the heat of the messages which whistled to and fro along every line where trucks might possibly be found, and could get no satisfaction. Finally, weary as he was with his taxing labours of the last two days, he got a fresh horse and sped away down to Nevers to see if anything could be done there.

And there he found the confusion almost as great; but they had trucks, and were getting their men off—into the trucks, at all events. He was to learn later that getting men into trucks and getting them to their destination were two very different things.

He got hold of General Clinchant himself and explained their situation at La Charité. But General Clinchant could only say that he could not make trucks, and that he needed twice as many as he could get hold of.

It was a sick-at-heart de Valle that rode back through the night to La Charité and gloomily reported his want of success.

"It's all of a piece," said Breton gloomily, when they stumbled across one another. "It's been the same all through from the very beginning. De Valle, I'm sick of it."

"Not as sick as I am, my boy. But we've got to put it through somehow. Where's Charles? We want him to give us a fillip."

"He's fillipping his men. And, poor devils, they need it! They're mostly from the south, and they're coughing like a consumptive hospital. Makes me ill to hear them."

"And the General, where is he?"

"Headquarters—Curé's house next the old church."

And de Valle went along there with a new idea, which had been growing within him as he rode through the dark. Briefly it was—to take the whole corps on by road, by way of Prémery and Corbigny, straight to Dijon. It was, he reckoned, about ninety miles—say, five days. It looked as if it might be weeks before they were able to get trucks for their requirements, and without a doubt the men would be infinitely better on the road than cursing themselves blue in the face round La Charité.

He found Generals Bourbaki and Billot closeted together, and both in the same state of black disgust which pervaded all ranks and gave them, at all events, one feeling in common.

The Commander-in-Chief listened, somewhat petulantly, to de Valle's suggestions, then, with but brief consideration, pronounced against them.

"Werder is still at Dijon," he said. "He may fall back when he learns our strength"—de Valle found himself fervently hoping he might not learn their weakness. "If he should not, the 18th alone could not drive him out, and we should simply waste ourselves and imperil the greater scheme you are so keen on. Moreover, in a long cross-country march such as that our line would be exposed to attack from Prince Frederick Charles. We have no definite news of his movements yet, but I get vague reports of a new concentration of their troops at Troyes and Châtillon, and that means that they suspect what we are up to down here. No—the only thing we can do is to stick to the plans arranged, get to Chagney as speedily as possible and link up with Clinchant at Châlon, and Bressolles at Besançon. Then we shall be strong enough to act."

General Billot agreed with his chief, and de Valle could do no more. He sought out his billet, weary to death and sick at heart.

For—time was the very essence of their enterprise, and here they were at a dead stand, and, as far as he could see, like to remain so.

VIII

IT took four whole days of that precious time—every minute of which meant the lives of many men, and all the difference between success and failure—to get the 18th Corps entrained.

And then it was that de Valle came to the bitter knowledge that getting men into trains is one thing, and getting them to their destination is a matter of very different complexion.

They were packed like sardines into cattle trucks, some open, some closed. But, as Charles Lamotte quietly replied to that universal remark, "Happy sardines! They have at least the advantage of being dead."

The lucky ones who were packed in with horses fared best, for horses are warming, even though they shiver. The rest shivered without palliation through days and nights of purgatory.

And starved. For, in the general confusion, the provision waggons had gone astray, and lay in sidings miles away from the mouths that hungered for them.

And, again, those cursed provision waggons were not always even in the sidings. They drifted helplessly about the single line, and came to a stand here and there, anywhere except where they were wanted, and blocked the way for the troops; so that the progress of the forlorn host was a series of short runs and long waits, and some-

times the runs would be of minutes only, and the waits would be of hours, while the derelicts were towed out of danger.

It was bump and clank, clank and bump, and a series of rough shocks from one end of the long train to the other, and then they ground slowly along for a space, and the men betted on the length of the run. Then with another series of shocks and bumps and clanks they would come to a stop, and in the comparative silence the hoarse coughing of Lamotte's men would make itself heard. Their nearest neighbours chaffed them about it, whistled and chirped to them as to stray dogs, and barked back at them.

But it was no laughing matter, though they laughed and joked about it till they were black in the face with the fits of coughing the laughter brought on.

Lamotte did his best for them. Unlike the most of his fellow-officers, he rode with his men, and joked and laughed with them, though his heart was sore for their sorry state.

He told them endless humorous stories. He tried to get them to sing. But they were most of them too hoarse, and could only croak the choruses he started, while the rest coughed and nodded approvingly.

He did his utmost to keep up their spirits on that dismal journey. He was here, there, and everywhere, wherever a large heart in a small body, and a very cheerful face could insinuate themselves—first in one truck, then in another, changing about at any odd time when they came to a sudden stand. And he told de Valle later on that the awful atmosphere in some of those closed trucks came near to making him physically sick as soon as he entered them.

It was during one such long pause that he got out to stretch his legs, and stood looking at half a dozen great box-trucks in a siding over against his contingent.

Then he turned to the faces peering out of the dark doorway from which he had just descended, and with his head on one side, like a perky robin's, said softly :

" Are you hungry up there, mes enfants ? "

" Hungry—mon Dieu ? I could eat raw rat," croaked one, with a hopeless grin.

" Eh bien ! " said Lieutenant Charles, flicking his little gloved hands to and fro. " Here, on one side, I see hungry friends, and there, on the other, I see waggons marked, down below, on that small ticket there, ' provisions.' If, by any chance, the hunger on the one side should be stronger than the locks on the other——"

They were out like mud from an up-tipped cart at the word. They flowed round the waggons. The locks gave in an instant, and before their comrades in the more distant trucks comprehended what was going on, the first two waggons were emptied of every eatable scrap that could be carried off. Then the rest of the starving train flung itself at the other trucks and stripped them bare.

" Tiens, mes enfants ! " said Lieutenant Charles, as he climbed back into his odoriferous truck through the opposite door. " So the rations have arrived while I was out ! Well, well ! I congratulate you. We will curse the commissariat no more until to-morrow," which they greeted with hoarse chuckles of enjoyment, being otherwise occupied at the moment and much too busy to speak.

They had found tobacco too, and matches, in those Pandora waggons—thanks to the forethought and insistence of young de Serres, the Minister of War's lusty

right-hand man, who was a smoker himself, and knew the virtues of tobacco when other things lacked—and Lamotte's big heart rejoiced in his little body at sight of their contented faces, as they lit their pipes and sweetened the atmosphere and resigned themselves cheerfully to the further rigours of the journey.

They did not, as a whole, say much by way of thanks, but they looked more than they said, and to a man they would have followed him to the death.

Before they started again, some wag found a chunk of limestone and emblazoned the first emptied waggon with an admirably executed device in huge white letters :

TRAVELLING RESTAURANT

18TH CORPS D'ARMÉE

HELP YOURSELVES. NO CHARGE.

And the hint was not lost on those who came after.

Incredible as it may seem, it took them three full days to cover the short hundred miles to Chagney and detrain there, and most of them vowed they never wanted to see a cattle truck again as long as they lived.

They were cramped and stiff with their unnatural cooping-up. They had suffered terribly from the cold. Some had horrible sores and frost-bites. Feet and hands swollen out of their owners' knowledge with chilblains were too commonplace for mention. Lamotte, when he went through his regiment with his Chief and the surgeon, found close on 700 men unfit for active service, and they had started from Bourges 2500 strong.

But—worse than all, this was the 29th of December.

They had left Bourges on the 20th.

In nine days they had covered 125 miles.

And—time was the very essence of the enterprise on which they were bound.

No wonder de Valle, and Breton, and all who understood the full significance of these things, found it beyond their power to keep their spirits up.

And if Charles Lamotte appeared to do so, it was simply because his nature was such that he would have had a cheerful face and a joke even for a file of men who propped him up against a wall to serve them as a target.

IX

THE waste of time, when time was of such vital moment, had been terrible. Still, they were at last all assembled round Chagney and Châlon, and in touch with Besançon. Werder had retired from Dijon, and the way was open for the great march of the four converging columns on Belfort, which still held the besieging Germans stoutly at bay.

One hundred and thirty thousand men falling on Werder's forty thousand from different sides, and the Belfort men harassing his rear, should surely bring that redoubtable warrior to his knees or wipe him out completely. Then the road would be open to the dragon's long thin throat up Nancy-Strasburg way.

De Valle heartened himself with hope. It had been a ghastly time, but the worst was past, and here they were.

So—with as stout a heart as circumstances could be reasoned into permitting, and a calmer face than his private judgment justified—to the preparations for the swift march which must lead to the greatest victory of the war, or to direst disaster!

De Bigot, with the skill of a tactician who knew every inch of his ground, and had weighed all the possibilities and probabilities with most critical care, had laid down the lines of the advance by four parallel routes, one corps d'armée to each, so that there should be no confusion or overcrowding.

From Dijon to Belfort was, roughly speaking, eighty miles—four days' good marching, with commissariat and artillery. And to do even that, the lines of march must be rigidly kept, and every item of the force must maintain the position assigned to it, and work along like a cog in a great machine, or there would be buckling-up, confusion, loss of time, and half the force might find itself in front of the enemy while the other half was still miles away.

The weather had gone from bad to worse. Such malignant intensity of cold had not been experienced in those parts within memory. The snow lay deep over all the countrysides. When the trampling of many feet and the passage of many wheels beat it flat, it froze into sheets of ice, which made the going difficult and dangerous, almost impossible.

Truly it seemed as though Nature herself had ranged all her forces on the side of the enemy, and was determined that no smallest dreg of the cup of bitterness should be left undrunk by her prodigal sons of France.

The men suffered cruelly. They were for the most part utterly unprovided for so rigorous a campaign. Their uniforms were rags and patches. Their winter overcoats were playing hide-and-seek on distant railway lines.

Their contract-made boots would have been things to laugh at had they not had to wear them. As it was, they were cause of offence and occasion for stumbling, and gave rise to much profanity. The muddy tramp to La Charité had been altogether too much for their brown-paper soles. So, some cut slabs of wood and bound them to their feet with rags ; some found sabots ; some limped barefoot, with only the mockery of their thin white linen gaiters to hide their wounds and nakedness.

Frost-bite was common; and provisions were scarce; for 130,000 men need much feeding, and the commissariat, where it was not stricken with paralysis, was working wretchedly.

De Valle and Breton and Lamotte were constantly meeting during those strenuous two or three days, while the further advance was being organized. And it taxed even Lieutenant Charles to keep his face from undue lengthening, and to scrape up a stray joke now and again even at his own expense. For the sufferings of his men he had nothing but profoundest sympathy and the heartiest of curses.

Jules Breton's most ardent desire at the moment was to lay his big hands on an army-contractor or two, or failing them, since they were far away enjoying their unholy plunder, on any responsible members of the commissariat who might stray within his reach for prompt dismemberment. But they also were far away, storming and wrangling, and doubtless doing their best, though little evidence of it came to the front. Difficulties abounded, and they had lost their heads; though not to the extent that Jules, in his righteous anger, would have seen to, had it been left to him.

De Valle, cut to the quick as he was by this all-abounding suffering which proper foresight might have avoided, bore a still heavier load of anxiety through his growing mistrust as to the outcome of it all.

De Bigot's well-conceived plans called for an army for their proper execution. This shivering host of tatterdemalions was nothing of an army. Only in name and in numbers had it even the most elementary claim to such a designation.

As an effective force he could not bring himself to

trust it. As a victorious legion, trampling the sturdy, well-found Germans into the mud of their entrenchments, sweeping their connexions out of existence, carrying the war into Baden, and redeeming France from her miseries . . . he was blessed with a vivid imagination, but no wildest effort of it could fit together cause and effects so widely sundered.

However, they were there; and, in numbers at al events, greatly in excess of Werder's forces. If their men could cover the eighty miles of snow-covered country that lay between them, and fall upon him from all sides at once, as de Bigot had arranged, they might still do something to lighten the cloud that had fallen on the glory of France. Werder driven back, and Belfort relieved!—it would be something, though a very small thing compared with their original hopes.

So, once more—since time was of the essence of the enterprise, and much time had already been lost—to the mighty labour of getting the ill-conditioned host under way for the front, where Werder lay awaiting it—at Vesoul and Lure and Villersexel, in extremest puzzlement as to what game they could be playing, and why they took such an inordinate time about it.

X

DE VALLE had proved himself a most efficient aide. He was blessed with brains and the will to use them. And as for work—he had grown lean and lank with his ceaseless exertions and the anxiety they entailed.

By all with whom his multifarious duties brought him into contact he was held in highest esteem and liking —save only by his Chief. The man who had known him longest and best, and knew him worthy of the most implicit confidence, held him somewhat at arm's length.

De Valle was not greatly surprised. Bourbaki's suspicion of his fellows, born of his fears of their suspicion of him—as the result of his adventure out of Metz at the instance of the mysterious M. Regnier—obscured all his outlook on life.

Not perhaps entirely without reason. He believed his fidelity to the Republic was questioned, and his resentment of the imputation took the form of all-round distrust.

In de Valle's case there was the additional discomfort of his being there by M. Gambetta's express orders, and his position was anything but a happy one. His unfailing tact, however, and the fact that his Chief's suspicions concerning him were absolutely without foundation, and, still more, that his whole heart and soul were devoted to the one end of carrying to a prosperous issue the enter-

prise on which they were bound, had so far enabled him to tread his rough path with equanimity.

He had no bristles out. Self was nothing; the honour of his country everything. It had been well for France if similar feelings had more generally prevailed.

As representing, in the Chief's mind, Gambetta and de Bigot and the great scheme generally, de Valle had so far been required to attend the heads of the various corps when they met in conference. With Billot, Cremer, Clinchant, Bonnet, de Penhoat, Bignolles, he was on the best of terms. They savoured the situation with complete understanding. They estimated de Valle at his full value, and one and all expressed the vehement wish that there were a hundred more like him to leaven the ineptitude and inexperience of the rest.

He had been out and about in the lines all day, helping with every ounce that was in him to bring some semblance of order out of almost universal chaos, and was making his way wearily to headquarters one evening when he met General Bignolles coming down the street.

"Hello, de Valle, you look tired," said the General sympathetically.

"Yes, I'm tired of seeing hungry men shivering with cold, General."

"Ay—it hurts. And it takes the heart out of them."

"The sooner we're off the better. All this hanging about plays the mischief with them."

"Well, we start in the morning. Why were you not at the meeting? Too busy, I suppose?"

"What meeting?"

"We've just been finally settling matters—or unsettling them, I'm not sure which. Do you mean to say you were not called?"

"I've heard nothing about it. I saw the General this morning. He did not mention it."

"Tiens!" snapped Bignolles, with a sharp surprised glance at him. "That's odd. He has altered the plan of advance——"

"Altered it? How?"—in an absolute bark of surprise.

"We go up all together, first to Besançon, then by the valley of the Oignon——"

De Valle lurched back against the wall as if he had been struck.

"All together!—by the Oignon!" he gasped, and his face was the colour of lead. "But it is impossible! It is madness!"

Bignolles shrugged his heavy shoulders. "He has news of a concentration of troops up Châtillon way—so he says—and that if we divide, as originally planned, we are simply tempting them to take us one by one in flank and make an end of us."

"It is absolute madness," said de Valle, with such control as he could muster, which yet could not keep the angry shake out of his voice. "Can't you stop it, General? It must be stopped. The Oignon cannot possibly take us,—130,000 men up one narrow valley! Dieu-de-Dieu! Don't you see what it will mean? Utter confusion—no food—untold miseries and loss——"

"The men are to carry biscuits in their haversacks——"

"Four days' heavy marching and a bloody fight at the end—on biscuits! God in heaven, General! Has he gone quite mad?"

"More or less, I imagine. We did our best to keep him to the original idea, but he would not hear of it. He's got this force up north on the brain. Anyway, it's

his own soup he's brewing—" and, with another heavy shrug, he cast all responsibility for the outcome on the Chief.

Just that same spirit of indifference to consequences, since they would fall upon someone else, which had played so fatally into the enemy's hands from the very first days of the war.

" His own soup—but we're in it, and all these poor devils who will pay heaviest of all," said de Valle bitterly.

" He's still closeted with Billot. You'd better see them yourself and put it to them. But you'll not change him. He's as pig-headed as a mule."

" It means utter smash," said de Valle hoarsely; " utter, absolute smash," and with a quick salute passed on.

He went straight to headquarters and requested audience of Bourbaki. He was engaged with General Billot. De Valle waited.

He was only human, and the self-evident fact that he had been purposely excluded from this momentous meeting was galling in the extreme. He felt it keenly. But his personal feeling in the matter was of small account with him. All that counted was the fact that a vital mistake was being made, and he was as certain it would lead to irreparable disaster as that he was cooling his already half-frozen heels in Bourbaki's cold anteroom.

He had small hope of moving him. A reversal of the Chief's new plans, laid down at a meeting from which he had been deliberately excluded, would be a confession of error impossible to a man like Bourbaki. He was a splendid fighting man, but no tactician—a one-power man, and, like all such, too small-minded to acknowledge a

mistake. He was, in fact, as Bignolles said, as pig-headed as a mule.

Nevertheless, and at the risk of a snubbing or worse, de Valle felt that he could not leave the matter there. For France's sake, and de Bigot's, and his own conscience's, he must do his best to get the original plans adhered to, cost what it might.

It was a weary hour before he was admitted, and a glance at the faces of the two generals showed him that there had been controversy between them. Bourbaki looked worried, anxious, mulish ;—Billot reserved, aloof, unconvinced, and non-committal.

De Valle briefly made his report, and then, in as level a voice as he could manage, said to Bourbaki :

" May I be permitted a word, General, as to the change of plan you contemplate ? "—which was diplomatic enough in its implication that the matter was still open.

" I know all you would say, de Valle," said the General quickly, " but the circumstances have changed and it has been necessary to meet them. To go up there, spread all over the countryside, with steep hills between each column, is simply courting disaster. There are 50,000 men gathering at Châtillon to fall on our flank. Our only safety lies in moving in such force as will keep them from the attempt."

" With all deference, General, the Oignon valley cannot possibly take all our force in safety. It is too narrow. It would mean a terribly long thin line, and an almost dead certainty of buckling up. It would mean very slow going, and difficulties of transport and commissariat beyond thinking of. And, above all, at the end it means meeting the enemy in one unwieldy column instead of taking him on all sides at once."

"I have considered all that, but the other matter weighs heavier with me. Problematical difficulties of the route we can and must overcome. Fifty thousand Germans at Châtillon are solid facts which you cannot reason with or argue about."

"With all deference, General"—with the shake in his voice again in spite of himself, for the blind folly of it all made it hard to keep his anger and distress within bounds—"the Oignon valley is possible for 30,000 or 40,000 men at most. For 130,000, dependent on a commissariat as ill-organized as ours, it is impossible. Cost what it may to me I am bound to warn you that it means disaster."

"Are you in charge of these operations or am I, sir?" asked Bourbaki harshly.

De Valle bowed, saluted, and left the room.

And left in it the last shred of that faint hope he had struggled so hard to keep alive through all these later days of anxiety and disillusionment.

He passed a most hideous night without a wink of sleep, his brain one vast chaotic whirl, which felt like to break its natural bounds.

Had it been possible to him he would have liked to hand over his sword to General Bourbaki and retire into the wilds—to the middle of the Sahara—to some lone mountain valley in Tirol or Switzerland—anywhere away from his fellows, with their monumental ineptitudes, their overweening self-sufficiencies, self-seekings, selfishnesses.

He was sick at heart, sick of life. He had nothing left to live for.

His married life was a failure. Through no fault of his own, he thought. He had done his best, but his wife was no longer a wife to him. All his hopes there were as

dead as last year's flowers, and no faintest perfume clung to their memory.

His country was humbled in the dust, broken to pieces by the enemy she had despised. Fifty years would scarce suffice to lift her head again, if he knew anything about it.

And now, even this last hope of one final desperate dash for honour's sake was foiled by the same lack of efficient leadership which had been their most prominent characteristic from the firing of the first gun at Saarbrück.

But a brave man never quite loses hope. And at length he found the faint semblance of a ray at remembrance of General Bignolles' word that they were going to Besançon. De Bigot, then, would be able to have his say in the matter, and he knew with what vehemence he would say it.

But of anything coming of it he had little expectation. Bourbaki would probably ask him who was conducting the operations, and would have his own disastrous way. And de Bigot would fervently curse the day Bourbaki was born, but he doubted if he would change him.

If they ever succeeded in coming to grips with the enemy he could at all events fulfil his destiny by selling his useless life as dearly as possible.

That was the last and only hope left to him.

XI

GENERAL BILLOT sent for de Valle next morning, and said, briefly, "I wished to tell you, de Valle, that I consider you absolutely justified in every word you said last night. We were all against him, and did our best. But you saw the frame of mind he is in. He's got that force up north on the brain. We must all do our best, but I'm afraid you are right. It will end in disaster."

"Young de Serres understands the matter. Couldn't he put Gambetta and Freycinet on to him?"

"De Serres left yesterday, and God knows where he'll be by this time. He was doing a general whirl round to liven things up. We shall be in the soup—or the Oignon Valley, which is the same thing—before he could do anything. All we can do is to go through with it and save what is left. It's a great chance thrown away. That is if our men are up to it—which I doubt."

"They are suffering terribly."

"Any greatcoats yet?"

"Not so much as a sleeve! They're doing their best with their blankets. And they're as cold inside as out. As to their feet . . ."

"I'd like to hang the whole commissariat—and the transport too, and especially the contractors. There doesn't seem one sound head among them, much less a conscience."

"The commissariat and transport are raw at their work. The contractors are damned scoundrels. And we pay the price all round. . . . You think it quite impossible to get back to the original plan then, General?"

"Quite impossible . . . unless you can get rid of Bourbaki. He's not strong enough to acknowledge a mistake."

And de Valle went heavily on his way, striving to kindle the thought of de Bigot at Besançon into a ray of hope —knowing in his heart that it was only a will-o'-the-wisp.

During the next three days he had his hands more than full, helping to get the forlorn host under way once more.

It was amazing to him that men could and would suffer such tortures of hardship even for the sake of their country. But, wrung as his heart was at the sight of it all, with a bitterness of anger too deep for words, there was still room in it for a profound admiration.

These raw lads, dragged from their homes at the peremptory call of the State, were suffering martyrdoms of cold and misery. More than half-starved—he was constantly coming across gaunt-faced regiments that had been left uncatered for for thirty-six hours on end; less than half-clothed; and many of them absolutely unshod—they doggedly tramped the icy roads with rag-swathed feet, such as had been lucky enough to secure rags for the purpose—with raw blue and red faces, which were sickly white in patches, and ears inflamed to twice their natural size. Their hands, purple and swollen to bursting point, were in many cases mere agonizing lumps of useless matter.

Not that they bore it all in silence or with equanimity. Many had brains enough to understand that it was all

unnecessary, that all this suffering might, and ought to have been avoided. Their comminations of all and sundry were scorching enough, could they have been translated into effective caloric, to reduce those responsible to ashes. But yet—they tramped doggedly on!

Amazing that men would suffer so for any earthly reason whatsoever!

And de Valle—pacing alongside them, with his horse's bridle over his arm, since he could not bring himself to sit up aloft at his ease while these broken men dogged along on foot—when he thought of the men they were going to meet—the sturdy, well-clothed, well-fed, in every possible way well-found, and well-equipped levies of united Germany, proved warriors all, and led by men in whom they reposed implicit confidence—the contrast was almost too much for him. In his overstrung and overwrought condition it was all he could do at times to keep down the devil-laughter that beat and bubbled in his sick heart.

It was all too crazily hopeless to think of. If he could have got away all by himself into the deepest depths of the snow-draped firs and larches it would have been a mighty relief to him to let the devil-laughter out; but the end of it would have been either a stupor of despair or the soothing vacancy which follows the final snap of an overwrought brain.

It would have taken very little to drive him across the dread borderland at times; and he felt it, and held himself with a tight hand and a face like death.

He came across Breton and Lamotte now and again, and Jules was bitter and gloomy, and Charles was subdued almost out of knowledge.

"It's simply hell," said Breton one time when they

met, in reply to de Valle's mechanical "How goes it?" as they paced on side by side. "To see these poor devils in torment like this . . . I tell you, de Valle, if there's much more of it I shall shoot myself or go mad—both, maybe. It's not human. It's devilish."

"Ay—it's heart-breaking."

"How much more of it?"

"The sooner we get in touch with them the sooner it'll be over. But we're terribly behind time."

"They're doing all they can—and more. Every damned soul of them ought to be in hospital, and half of them would never come out alive. . . . Fighting Germans is all right enough, but there are some nearer home I'd sooner slaughter. I'd turn them naked into the snow with nothing to eat, and let them feel what it's like," and he cursed them categorically—contractors, commissariat, and transport, and all their descendants to the point of extinction.

The news of the precipitate retreat of Werder from Dijon had heartened the troops somewhat, and braced them to fresh endeavours. The all-victorious were running before them at last! They knew when the chances were against them! They were conquerable then! It was a good omen. It was the next best thing to a good square meal, and boots with soles to them, and an overcoat, or a rise in the thermometer. Their leaders knew that it was simply prudent strategy on the part of the enemy, and had no illusions on the subject. But it cheered their men, and so they made the most of it.

Here and there along the line of their march they came on grim scenes of desolation and destruction which brought hot curses hissing through grinding teeth—piles of blackened stones and charred roof-trees and dead bodies,

where, but two days before, hearths glowed, and smoke curled cheerfully from cottage chimneys, and children's faces peeped from windows and doors, and men and women went quietly about their daily work.

These were places where francs-tireurs, men of the neighbourhood or not as the case might be, had made a stand or laid an ambush for the retreating enemy, had in some cases carried out their little coup successfully, and passed on to try again elsewhere.

But the Germans never forgave such doings, and their reply was always prompt and final. Back would come a sufficient force, and when they went no living thing remained, nor one stone stood upon another. No tongue was left to tell the tale, nor was it needed. Blood and fire speak louder than words; and news of that pitiless vengeance would circulate through all the countryside and act as warning to those who would do likewise.

Breton and de Valle, with their contingent of the 18th, came one midday on a village, Labergement, where they had hoped to get a mouthful of food for their men.

The houses were there, covered with snow but still standing, but not a soul greeted them, not a face at door or window.

"They've bolted for fear of the Prussians," said Breton, as he called a halt in front of the Mairie, and his men dropped their haversacks in the snow and themselves on top of them. "Eh bien, we'll help ourselves, if there's anything left," and he and de Valle walked into the Mairie.

And there, to their amazement, they found M. le Maire asprawl over the table at which he was wont to administer justice, with his head in his arms, and below the table the body of another.

Their first thought was that the Germans had been there, but the fact that the houses still stood contradicted the idea. And Breton, laying hands on the Maire to find out what was wrong, lifted the heavy head and then dropped it with a laugh, " Drunken hog ! He sets a good example, pardie ! "

The man below the table was in the same happy condition, and, spreading through the village in search of food, they found every man in it, and most of the women, similarly circumstanced, and the few who were not were hidden away in cellars and outhouses.

They had been celebrating the New Year and the retreat of the Germans, and two such great events coming together had been too much for them.

So the hungry soldiers helped themselves, and did not fare badly for once.

Long after dark they trudged wearily into the village of St. Fer, where they had billets for the night. But again no welcoming gleam from hearth or candle showed through the shuttered windows, and every door was locked and barred.

" What the devil ? " growled Breton, after thumping on three doors and getting no response, while his men stood expectant in the snow, such as had not flung themselves down and were already half asleep.

De Valle had been trying other doors across the street.

" Are these all drunk too ? " he said ; " or have they bolted ? "

" We'll soon see," said Breton. " Here, boys ! Two of you smash in this door," and, under the impact of rifle-butts and eager shoulders, the door flew open—and disclosed, inside, a sour-faced proprietor, whose angry, quailing eyes gave them the reverse of welcome.

"Now then, what's the meaning of this, my man?" asked Breton furiously. "Don't say you thought we were Prussians or I shall be tempted to drive your teeth down your throat. What's wrong with you?"

"We've nothing for you here."

"Haven't you? We'll see about that. Dieu-de-Dieu, are you a Frenchman, or what? You would refuse food and lodging to the men who are giving their lives for you?"

"All we want is to be left in peace——"

"Cowardly skunk! You'll want more before we've done with you. The country may well be sick if there are many like you."

"Those accursed Prussians will take it out of us for every bite we give you. They will return——"

"Better not let my men hear you say it. We are going to clear them out."

"All the same,—" said the man, with a disbelieving shrug. And in every house it was the same. Every door had to be broken open—possibly to be shown to the Prussians as evidence of *force majeure* when they returned—food and lodging had to be extorted with threats at the point of the bayonet.

"It's worse than a burnt-out village," said de Valle gloomily, as they munched a meagre meal at a fire they had had lighted by their men.

"In one respect," grunted Breton; "not in others. Shows how low we've got, but it's better here than camping in the snow as we did last night."

Next day de Valle caught up with Lamotte's company, and was shocked at the change in his friend's appearance. He was as spruce and neat as ever, though how he managed it de Valle could not imagine. But his face was pallid

and hollow, and though he did his best to walk jauntily, his step had lost its spring, and he went limply.

"Why, Charles, what's all this?" asked de Valle, and took step and walked with him.

"All what? We're off to Berlin . . . pic-nic, isn't it? . . . Happen to have a spare bit of boot-sole on you, or the end of a strap——?"

"What do you mean, boy?"

"It's a game. Don't tell anyone. Those comic chaps of the commissariat are trying how long we can go without eating. At the present moment it's exactly thirty-seven hours since we had a bite——"

"You don't mean that?"

"My inside does. A scrap of leather to chew would be a godsend——"

De Valle remembered some biscuits he had crammed into his saddle-bag one day when he had had to make an unusually early start. He got them hastily, and thrust half a dozen into Charles's neatly-gloved hand.

"Good for you! Friend in need! Wish you had a ton of it on you, old man." And he handed all but one to his nearest men, who wolfed them ravenously, while their neighbours turned eagerly at the sound.

"Quite odd to be eating again," said Charles, as he nibbled his scrap very slowly to extend the enjoyment as much as possible. "What about your mare, Pat? She'd cut up fairly well. In a week she'll be nothing but bones. Better turn her to account before it's too late."

"Not that way. Poor old girl! I've had a deuce of a job to feed her, but I'll keep her as long as I can," and he patted the rough brown neck, and the mare turned her head and nuzzled him affectionately.

He had picked her out from the little mob of troop

horses at Bourges, with an eye to her usefulness rather than her beauty. But they had become friends at once, and the trouble he had had to provide for her, and her gratitude at being provided for, had made her dearer to him than horses that had cost him ten times her price at her best. She was rough-coated, and stood the weather well, sure-footed, and willing to the last gasp. She knew his voice, and would answer to it, even when jaded, better than she would have done to another's spur.

"It's all very well from the point of view of morale, my boy, to share, like and like, with your men," he said, for Charles's ear only, as they kicked along through the snow. "And if some of those others would have a leaning that way, it would be the better for all concerned. I came on a gang of them the other night as comfortable as cats, in a deserted farm-house, with a big fire and food to eat, and apparently not caring a hang that their men were sleeping outside on the bare snow without a bite for their teeth."

"Beasts!"

"Yes, beasts! And bad both for them and the others. But you can go too far the other way. You are the brain of your company, my boy. Suppose Werder pounced down on you at this moment, what condition are you in to lead them?"

"Rotten. But what would you? I've spent every sou I brought on them——"

"I've got plenty. Take this," and he got out a hundred-franc note and pushed it into his hand. "And feed yourself up as soon as the chance offers."

"Thanks! Pay you back if I come through."

"Punch your head if you try to. Yonder's Marnay in front," as they came to a cross-road where a sign-post,

twisted round by some patriot for the misleading of Prussians, advertised Besançon ten miles away to the north-west. "You camp there for the night. I'm going into Besançon to see de Bigot. If there's any grub to be had, I'll send it out to you. Salut!" and he mounted his horse and rode off to the south-east through the snow.

He found Colonel de Bigot in his quarters in a state of furious despair, obviously anxious for something or someone to rend into fragments.

"What in the name of all the devils is the meaning of this, de Valle?" he broke out angrily.

"Ah! you've been seeing Bourbaki, I perceive, Colonel. I felt the same myself after my last interview with him," said de Valle quietly.

"But — — —! Do you know what it means, man?"

"Yes—disaster."

"Absolute and utter smash! . . . The very last chance flung to the winds . . . France deeper in the mire than ever. Why the — — — didn't you stop it?"

"He purposely excluded me from the meeting at which he announced his change of plan. As soon as I heard, I went straight to him. It ended by his asking me if it was I that was in command, or he?"

"We ended on the same note. Ten thousand curses on the man! It's monstrous. He is utterly and absolutely incapable. His silly brain is buzzing with fears of some force in the north."

"I was hoping you could get Gambetta on to him."

"Not possible! He's pushing his men up the Oignon as fast as he can get them along, which is devilish slow, and he starts himself for Voray at daybreak. Oh, he'll rue it, he'll rue it, but . . . it will be too late. . . . God

in heaven! Why are men without brains shoved into such positions?"

Because—flashed reminiscently through de Valle's mind—the capable men decline to serve under a Republican Government even for the salvation of their country. But there was thunder and lightning enough in the atmosphere, and he kept silent, while de Bigot strode about the room cursing the day Bourbaki was born.

"There's nothing to be done, I suppose?" said the younger man gloomily at last.

"Nothing . . . except to sell the remains of the show as dearly as possible. And even that, — — —! The whole thing has been boggled to death. Seventeen days since you started, and five should have sufficed. By this time you ought to have relieved Belfort and been up between Nancy and Strasburg, and into Baden. Now . . . and with your men in the state they are . . . Before God, de Valle, I'd like to cut the whole business and bury myself in a hole."

"We can, at all events, try to bury as many Germans as possible in the same hole."

"There will be more Frenchmen than Germans in it. He is going up the Oignon straight at their centre. It is madness . . . madness . . . madness . . ."

XII

OUR chief concern in all this matter is with Patrice de Valle, its effect upon him, and the change it wrought in his life.

We are not going to follow him through the climax of that most disastrous campaign; but, as briefly as possible, the historic incidents of the next few weeks must be recounted.

The French forces, creeping up the valley of the Oignon, came into contact with the Germans in the neighbourhood of Vesoul on the 8th and 9th of January. As a matter of fact, the Germans had been expecting them for many days past, and had at last come out to learn what was delaying them.

At Villersexel there was heavy fighting, all through the night, in which Bourbaki—in his element at last—displayed the greatest personal bravery, leading his men to the charge, when they showed signs of crumpling, and doing his utmost to carry the town and castle by storm. But even therein the critical mind would find him at fault, and claim that the Chief in charge of operations involving the lives of many thousands of men mistakes his vocation when he risks his own life and all his plans by plunging into the mêlée himself.

Considering all they had gone through, and the dire straits to which the demoralization of the commissariat and transport had reduced them, the men behaved well. They endured the utmost miseries of cold and hunger.

They fought or marched all day, and lay out, night after night, in the snow and twenty degrees of frost, without food, fires, or tents. If they still grumbled—the wonder was that they still had heart and breath left even for grumbling.

They fought dogged little skirmishes, and sometimes won; but even when they won, the advantage was always thrown away by most inept delay in following it up, or by not following it up at all. In spite of all discouragements, the hands and legs and suffering bodies of the army did all that was in them. But it is brains that tell, and here brains were lacking. Sadly lacking also cohesion, loyalty, initiative among the leaders. Personal bravery in plenty, but little understanding or common-sense.

After Villersexel, from which the Germans withdrew during the night, Bourbaki with his immense preponderance of numbers could and should have outflanked Werder and reached Belfort. He was as near to it as were the Germans.

But his indecisions, delays, and constant changes of plan, and lack of plan, were his undoing. Werder fell back on the Lisaine, whose banks he had strongly entrenched and rendered almost impregnable with the big siege-guns from before Belfort.

The most elementary knowledge of tactics would have taken Bourbaki round so formidable a position by flanking movements north and south. Instead, after wasting three precious days in throwing up useless entrenchments at Villersexel, he slowly followed the Germans to their new position and doggedly flung his raw levies in solid masses against its fiery front—with most horrible and disastrous results.

It is just possible, however, that he found his famished

and worn-out force incapable of the necessary marches. The Germans did twenty miles a day with ease; the French compassed four, or at most five, with exceeding difficulty. The business side of the army had gone to pieces. An army marches on its stomach; the French stomach was left unprovided for.

For three awful days, the ill-trained, half-starved host flung itself in ceaseless, useless effort against the German entrenchments about Héricourt. There were heroic deeds done in those three days. Faint with hunger and fatigue, scarce able to stand, something of the old spirit still flamed here and there inside their rags and tatters, and in places there was very strenuous fighting.

But on the third day, Bourbaki received definite information that Manteuffel, with two army-corps, was working round his rear by Gray and Dôle. The force from the north, fears of which had worried him all along, had materialized at last; and he lost his nerve completely. While his troops were still fighting pluckily, and the final issues still in doubt, to the amazement of all he gave the order to retire, and the disorganized force, losing heart like its leader, began its desperate retreat on Besançon.

All was over. The forlorn hope had failed. The Great Adventure had been muddled into a Great Disaster, and France was done for.

But the board was crowded still with the pieces. Check had been called, but final checkmate was still to come, before the terrible game was quite played out.

It took the Germans two days to recover from their battering. Then they came pouring down the Oignon Valley in pursuit, and found the line of march strewn with the relics of the host on which France had built her final hopes.

XIII

ONE incident only in de Valle's experiences of that unhappy time may be given. It was so very typical of all the rest.

He had been despatched late one night, from the Château of Bournel, Bourbaki's headquarters after Villersexel, to the commander of a portion of the 15th Corps near Arcey, with his instructions for the following day, and orders to wait there himself till they were in course of carrying out, then to return and report.

He found the usual strange admixture of forces, and among them was delighted to come on Breton, whose regiment had suffered at Villersexel, and had been temporarily attached to the 15th.

They were bivouacked in a thick wood just outside Arcey. The snow lay a foot deep, and a keen wind was blowing. They had no tents. Fires had been forbidden, and they had had neither bite nor sup since six in the morning.

The famished men had cut down the thick undergrowth and strewed it over the snow for bedding. They lay tightly packed in grotesque clumps, with their ragged blankets wrapped round their heads, and as the snow sifted in through the branches and covered them with fine white powder, they looked more like corpses than living men.

Breton was sitting gloomily chewing the end of a

cigar. He explained that it was his last, and as it was all the food he had had that day, or was likely to have before the next, or possibly the next again, he could not afford to waste it by smoking it in the usual way.

De Valle found him some biscuits and another cigar, which cheered him greatly. Then, with the help of a little linesman, he made his mare as comfortable as circumstances permitted, with brushwood below and an old blanket over her. And when she presently lay down, they sat with their backs against hers for mutual warmth, and exchanged experiences of the last few days.

"And friend Charles?" asked Jules anxiously, when he had cautiously lighted the precious cigar.

"He's busy digging trenches outside Villersexel."

"Digging trenches? What the devil is he digging trenches for?" and he stared so amazedly at de Valle that his cigar went out. . . . "I thought we were going on."

"The Chief may know. No one else seems to."

"I wish to God he'd got himself killed when he led them in the other day. It would have been the best thing he could have done. Another mistake!"

"Best for himself and best for us without a doubt."

"Does he know himself what he's about?"

"One can only hope so. There's not much evidence of it."

Then word came along that fires might be started, and the weary men, seeing possibility of sleep through warmth, set to work trying to light them—no easy task with frozen green larch and fir branches in a foot of snow. Some succeeded; many gave it up, and rolled back on to their damp couches, cursing things generally and the Germans and the cold in particular.

"You're a mighty mixed lot," said de Valle, as a party

of Turcos, clad only in thin linen garments, padded softly past with bare feet, dragging branches for their fire.

"Those poor devils were in Algeria a month ago. I don't know how they stand it. It's bad enough with clothes on—if you can call them clothes," he added, looking down at his own ragged garments.

They talked drowsily for a time, and were just nodding towards broken sleep, when word was brought to Breton that food was waiting for them in Arcey, and he was to send at once and fetch it.

To discover his sergeants and quartermasters among all those corpse-like figures swathed in blankets, and to learn where the bivouac of one company ended and another began, and the number to be provided for, was impossible without rousing the whole contingent. So up they had to get, heavy with sleep, shivering audibly, and cursing still more so.

The fatigue-party started off at last, and Breton went with it himself to make sure that no default occurred in so vital a matter. The rest lay down again and dreamed fitfully of full stomachs and warm beds.

Three hours later the food-seekers returned, empty-handed, black with disgust, empty even of curses. The promised provisions had not arrived. There was no news of them. The roads were sheets of ice. Horses—not yet roughed for frost, though they had been in it for a month—and men alike were sore with the bruises of their many falls—the latter sorer still and sicker with the maddening ineptitude that sent them on so useless a quest. It really seemed, as one old stager growled, as though the devil himself were making game of them.

They made up their fires and lay down again, some with their feet so close that when their owners got

up next time their scorched apologies for boots fell to pieces.

And next time was not long of coming. They were just dozing off, and the fires were dying down again for want of fuel, when an old Zouave sergeant suddenly sprang up with a yell—"The Prussians! Here they come! Here they come! To arms!"—and dashed among the heaps of sleepers, kicking lustily at all and sundry to rouse them the more speedily. But the word was enough for most. The sleepy crowds sprang to their arms and huddled together in the chill white darkness awaiting the onslaught, while their officers did their best to get them into something like order and to locate the enemy.

Finally it was discovered that the old sergeant, who had been in Mexico and had had sunstroke, was suffering from nightmare, and the oncoming enemy existed only in his tangled brain.

But de Valle, exerting himself with Breton to reduce order out of the chaos, had noticed very many of the men still lying on the ground undisturbed by all the tumult. And shaking this one and that to rouse them, he found them in that state of torpor which slips unwittingly into death.

"Better rouse them all out and march them up and down, or half of them will be dead before morning," he said to Breton, and the Colonel, coming up at the moment, adopted the suggestion. But already there were some who were past rousing, and for whom the bitternesses of the campaign were ended.

An hour later word came from Arcey that the looked-for provisions had arrived, and at daybreak the contingent broke its twenty-four hours' fast.

It was under conditions such as these that they had set off to dislodge the Germans lying, full of meat and in every respect well cared for, behind their entrenchments on the Lisaine.

"It's all of a piece," said Breton gloomily, as they took the route next morning, and de Valle mounted for his ride back to Bournel. "It would be a sight easier to die than to go on with it."

"Au revoir!" said de Valle meaningly.

But Jules shook his head unhopefully.

XIV

FIVE days after his disastrous withdrawal from the fight at Héricourt, Bourbaki was back in the neighbourhood of Besançon, rueing it all, even as de Bigot had predicted—as bitterly as de Bigot at his hottest could have desired.

His position and mental condition were pitiable. Disorganization, demoralization, and disorder were rampant. On every side the enemy was closing in upon him. The net drew tighter every hour, and every hour the strings in his own hands ravelled and broke, and his grip on them grew laxer.

Hasty orders, hastier counter-orders, resultant confusion, were the prevailing note at headquarters.

Picture the man as de Valle, in the midst of the whirl, and working superhumanly to bring some order into it, saw him in those days, and pitied him with all his heart, though he could not but recognize him as the source of all their troubles—the man who rejoiced in a dashing charge and knew no fear, but detested details of organization and strategy.

He roved about his room at Château Farine, unable to rest for a moment from the anxieties that rode him. Messengers hastened in with reports, and rushed out with orders. Others dashed after them presently with counter-orders; and presently came reversal of the counter-orders and insistence on the orders first given, till de

Valle's own brain swam with it all, and he had no more idea than anyone else what was aimed at or required.

As a matter of fact, he himself was not in the best of shape for either hard work or hard thinking. At Héricourt he had been sent racing hither and thither over the wide-spread front of battle, carrying orders and counter-orders, regardless of danger-zones and raining shot and shell.

It was a marvel that any man could come through such with nothing worse than a rip along the side of the head, from a bullet which a vicious little black Badener sent after him as he sped along their front in search of General Billot.

An inch to the right and it would have done for him. As it was, he reached Billot with his face a mask of blood, delivered his message, had his head tied up in a clout, and rode away back to Bourbaki.

He still wore a bandage to keep the frost out, and what with his wound, in which the buzz of the bullet still hummed like a bee at times, and the racking strain on all his faculties to keep things straight, or at all events to keep some track of them, his head was like to split at times, and his one physical desire in life was to drop into some quiet corner and have done with it all.

And the harassed Chief continued to drive them all almost crazy with his decisions and indecisions, his orders and counter-orders, his lack of grasp of the situation, and his mulish obstinacy.

General Bressolles had been ordered to hold Lomont and the defiles of the Doubs on the east, so that Werder should not get through and come down upon them on that side.

"Send word to Bressolles to bring his corps here at once," ordered the Chief, and the wires got to work.

The Quartermaster-General came hurrying in to say that the ample provisioning promised to await them at Besançon had not arrived, and there was famine in the land. The men were, as usual, absolutely starving.

"But nom-de-nom-de-Dieu!" stormed the Chief. "They were promised me before we started. Where have they got to, then?"

"The Transport say they must have gone astray——"

"Gone astray! Gone astray! Send the Head of the Transport here to me."

General Billot came hastily in with grimly set face.

"Minot wires that he can no longer hold Quingey. He says Zastrow is pressing him with a whole corps."

Quingey lay to the south-west less than ten miles from Besançon. The net was drawing very close.

"Tell Minot he must hold Quingey at all costs. It threatens our retreat, if we should decide on that."

Half an hour later came word that Minot was falling back.

"Then Bressolles must hold Lomont and the Doubs. Send him word instantly. It is vital."

While these matters were pending, the heads of the various corps were summoned to a hasty conference.

Three courses were possible, none of them tempting to a beaten and disorganized army—to make a dash through Manteuffel's forces, closing in on them on the west; to strike up north by Langres, the way Manteuffel had come; to make for Pontarlier and the valley of the Rhone, and so get down to Lyon.

There was hot discussion. Billot alone stuck sturdily to the idea of falling on Manteuffel and getting back to

their starting-place on the Loire. All the rest were for Pontarlier.

Word came in, while they talked, that Bressolles had evacuated the defiles of Lomont before the counter-orders reached him. He was *en route* for Besançon, as originally ordered.

"They will be on to us on that side also, then," said the Chief wearily.

The Quartermaster-General came in excitedly to exonerate himself by settling the blame on others.

"There were two hundred and thirty trucks of provisions still on the line at Dôle, M. le Général—overlooked by those fools of the transport—and now—" with a shrug.

"And now——"

"Eh bien, mon général"— with another shrug— "they took Dôle two days ago, as you are aware, and we are empty and starving."

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! Everything fails me," groaned the worried Chief, and turned again to his wrangling lieutenants.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we are in no condition to tackle Manteuffel. His men are fresh and fit. Ours are starving and broken. Make all dispositions for Pontarlier as speedily as possible."

Word of the decision was sent to Bordeaux, and back came despatches, each hotter than the last, condemning the move. It was so easy for the politicians there to say "Bourbaki should do this! Bourbaki should do that!"— to point out the impossibility of what he contemplated, and to fulminate against him for doing nothing.

But for Bourbaki the all-important question was whether he could move at all. His force was utterly disorganized and demoralized. Disorder was rampant.

Empty stomachs and bitter weather, with an enemy in front who might possibly be beaten, were one thing. The same personal conditions in the beaten were quite another thing. They had lost heart and hope. The only things they craved now were food, warmth, and safety.

On one point only were they all of one mind—that their leading had been imbecile; that their officers, with one or two exceptions, were at best fools, and at worst cowardly fools, with more thought for their own skins and stomachs than for anything else; and that if they had not been called off in that utterly idiotic fashion at Héricourt they would, without doubt, have won the day.

The sight of a gold-braided *képi* excited their jeers and curses. Officials of the transport and commissariat ventured abroad at risk of their lives.

XV

DE VALLE was lying almost upside down in the easiest chair the anteroom possessed, with his tired feet up against the wall by the fireplace, snatching a few minutes' rest.

It was so long since he had had his clothes off and slept in a bed that he could not remember when nor where it had been. The ever-changing plans of his vacillating Chief took no account of the possibilities of physical weariness in his aides. By day and by night they were flying hither and thither, the irresponsible shuttles with which he wove and ravelled the web of his unhappy destiny—gasping often at the orders they carried, but required only to cover the ground with the least possible delay, and not to reason on the why and wherefore.

But at last there had come a blessed temporary lull in the stream of orders and counter-orders. The Chief had shut himself up in his room, and locked the door, and given orders that he was not to be disturbed.

Werder was coming down like a baited bear by Rougemont on the north and by the Lomont defiles on the east. Manteuffel was straining his men's sturdy legs to the utmost to complete the bristling circle to the west and south. Every second was of most vital importance if the broken army was to take advantage of the one possible gap in the hedge and escape by way of Pontarlier and the valley of the Doubs.

One may reasonably take it that the simple fact was that the Last Hope of France, having sunk to the ground in utter weariness, found it almost impossible to get on to its feet again.

So Pat de Valle lay upside down—which made the wound in his head throb like a distant cannonade, but eased his tired limbs—and snatched a few minutes' rest while his Chief was locked in his room. He wondered drowsily if Bourbaki had fallen asleep also, and if so, how soon he would wake up and start them all off again on their futile errands.

Then, from a monotonous thud, thud in the next room, and the recurring creak of a loose board, he knew that the troubled brain inside there permitted its owner no more rest than it permitted others. And he sighed to think that any moment might see the renewal of their crazy activities. If it had been for him to decide, he would have started the army for Pontarlier two days ago. . . . It was the only chance . . . and that getting smaller every hour. . . . To think of breaking through Manteuffel . . . with the men in their present state . . . out of the question. . . .

He was just falling into a doze when Generals Billot and Clinchant came hurrying in, and he tumbled hastily right side up.

"The Chief? Inside?" asked Billot.

"In his room, General. Not to be disturbed."

"We must see him all the same," and he tapped on the inner door.

"Presently! Presently! Leave me!" cried the irritated voice inside.

"But Monsieur le Général——"

"Leave me, I say. Return presently!"

The two generals conferred for a moment in subdued tones. Then old Clinchant turned to de Valle.

"Will you beg General Rolland to join us here, as speedily as possible, Captain de Valle? You will find him——"

And from behind the locked door there came the most pregnant and ominous sound closed room can yield —the muffled crack of a revolver.

With a startled "Mon Dieu!" from Clinchant, and a quick meaning glance at one another's faces, they all three put their shoulders to the door and burst it open.

"Keep a close mouth, de Valle, and fetch us Rolland," said General Clinchant, as he and Billot bent over the fallen man.

XVI

JULES BRETON and Charles Lamotte had come through the evil times with nothing more serious than a bruise on the leg from a piece of shell in the one case, and a prick in the arm from a bayonet in the other—both in the three days' fight at Héricourt.

But both were so sick at heart at the experiences of these last five weeks—at the shocking mismanagement in every department—at the hideous suffering entailed thereby—at the sickening lack of loyalty and cohesion in official ranks—that both would liefer have been buried on the field at Héricourt by the German grave-diggers than have found themselves squatting by their damp-wood fire in a field outside Besançon, waiting for news of what the next unfortunate move was to be. Whatever it was, it was bound to turn out badly; of that they were convinced. France was down on her luck. Fate was against her.

They were subdued almost out of knowledge. Jules had scarce a growl left in him. Charles's jokes were of the feeblest. Ninety-odd thousand more, spread all over the snowy countryside, were in much the same case, some much worse.

Close about them sat and lay a band of about a score of Turcos and Zouaves and men of Lamotte's regiment. Lamotte's men had stuck to him like leeches all through the rout. The Turcos and Zouaves had attached

themselves to Jules—the binding tie in each case the same. Charles had spent himself for his men, as few of his kind did, and they were grateful. Jules had exerted himself to get clothing of sorts for the linen-clad warriors from Algeria, because, as he explained, he could never get warm himself while they shook the ground with their shiverings.

In their various ways they had all along done their best to show their appreciation of such unwonted attention from the higher powers. And more than once when, as usual, the commissariat failed entirely, both Breton and Lamotte would have gone emptier than they did but for the scraps the Turcos and Zouaves—skilled in such matters—managed to get somehow from somewhere. They were excellent cooks, and so long as dead horses were to be got at, their officers fed and asked no questions.

"Dieu, but I wish they'd make up their minds over yonder, and do *something*. I don't care what damned silly thing it is as long as it's doing something. Things get worse among the men every day," growled Breton.

"Naturally. It's against Nature to stand still. If you can't go forward you go back. We can't go back, and apparently we can't go forward. So, you see——"

"Your brain's getting as soft as mine. *If* ever we get out of this mess alive—which we shall not do—I shall retire to the hottest hole in the Sahara and bake there for ten good years. I doubt if even that will ever warm the marrow in my bones again."

"It's been hell . . . only hell's supposed to be hot. It wouldn't do for the padres to preach that here. There'd be such a rush we'd never all get in. When did you see de Valle last?"

"Met him this morning. Hardly knew him. Worn to death. Looked like a sick dog."

"He's able to feed anyway," sighed Charles enviously.

"Told me he was so sick of it all that he wished he was dead."

"Same here. I've wondered more than once if one wouldn't be justified in ending it all."

"Easiest way out, but bad example for the men. Poor devils! Beats me why they stand it. I can't for the life of me see what they've got to live for."

"Each man knows for himself, I suppose. . . . Talk of the devil! There's the boy himself. . . . Hello, Pat!" he called, and at the unexpected summons de Valle reined in his horse, and they got up and strode across to speak to him.

"Well?—has your old weathercock made up his mind yet?" asked Charles.

"Yes."

"And which way's he pointing now—north, or south, or west?"

De Valle looked down at them for a moment, and his face was very grave. Then he leaned over towards them, pointing a gloved forefinger earthwards, and said quietly:

"Keep it to yourselves. He's tried that way."

"Shot himself?" growled Breton in a hoarse whisper.

"Through the head—an hour ago."

"Dead?" asked Lamotte.

"Not yet, but——"

"La—la! He couldn't even carry through a little matter like that successfully."

"All of a piece," said Breton. "And who takes charge?"

"Clinchant. Their telegram from Bordeaux super-

seding Bourbaki crossed ours telling them he had—resigned."

"I'd sooner have had Billot. He's got more brains, and he's younger."

"He'll turn out another old weathercock, I expect," said Lamotte. "There's nothing like gold braid for setting up dry-rot."

"We're wet-rotting here. For Heaven's sake, Pat, get them to start us off somewhere, if it's only to the devil. This squatting about day after day in snow and mud is killing work."

"You can get your traps ready. We start at daybreak——"

"Traps!" said Charles. "Got a pin about you to cover my nakedness. . . ."

"Where for?" asked Breton anxiously.

"South—Pontarlier—Lyon, if we can."

"And where have those German devils got to now?"

"Making for Levier——"

"Good Lord! And you think we can beat them to Pontarlier? Why, man——"

"Cremer's off to hold the passes. It's the only chance left us. . . . Now I must get along. Au revoir, boys!" and he shook up his horse, very gently, lest he should shake her to pieces, and went on his way.

"We'll never do it, never in this world," said Breton gloomily. "They march five kilometres to our one. And they're fit, and we! . . . My God, we're nothing but a drove of starving pigs!"

"I've an old aunt in Bern," said Charles cheerfully. "We may get that length anyway. But she'll never believe it's me till I've had a bath. I wonder if there's a Turkish bath in Bern. If so, I shall stop in it for

a whole day. Think of a Turkish bath, Jules my son!"

"I suppose it's the only thing left," mused Jules, as to the route. "But we'll never get there—never in this world."

"Oh, well, we'll be on the move anyway, and that'll be better than hatching mud."

And they turned their thoughts to preparations for the road.

XVII

THAT march—which was almost a flight—of the broken host from Besançon to Pontarlier was one of the most woeful pilgrimages in the records of inhumanity. It was a second retreat from Moscow, performed, not by grizzled warriors seasoned to endurance, and instinct, even in unaccustomed defeat, with the martial spirit, but by beardless lads and half-drilled levies, with no immortal past behind them—nothing but failures and flights before an always-victorious enemy—and nothing in front but the elemental hope of escape.

Physically wasted by hardship and suffering to the point of apathy, morally degenerated by lack of leadership and constant defeat, they were no longer an army. They had become simply a horde of sullen, hunger-maddened men.

Order out of such chaos was impossible. Still, here and there a corps, better officered than the rest, had held in some sort together, and of these a rear-guard was formed to afford the hurrying mob in front a chance.

And so in two breathless days they drew, by way of Dommartin and Arçon, by Goux and Vons, by Sombacourt and Chaffois, towards Pontarlier and the forbidding heights of Jura, whose bristling slopes and snow-packed gorges offered the only chances of escape from the pitiless foe behind and on both sides.

While Bourbaki had been making up his mind what

to do, Manteuffel and Werder had been marching their hardest. And now their fiery net was terribly close to its final sweep.

At their best speed, spurred by fear, yet making but slow time, the rout toiled on along the encumbered roads —artillery, baggage, very little commissariat—for the men, at all events—officers' mess-waggons, officers' private carriages—from which peeped scared white faces of women who, on all counts, would have been better elsewhere—deep snow, churned in time into freezing slush which froze again into ice; pitiful scarecrows of horses, floundering and falling and never rising again, the quivering flesh stripped off their bones while the last panting breaths still whuffled in their raw nostrils—such of them as kept their feet gnawing ravenously at anything teeth could bite, at one another's manes and tails, at woodwork of waggons, at spokes of wheels.

With out-of-date conformity to rule, and regardless of circumstances, here and there flanking parties were thrown out on either side to protect the lugubrious line of march from attack. But off the roads the snow was up to the marchers' waists and the horses' bellies, and there were ditches and dykes which rendered progress impossible. So they were called in again and added to the jam, and the melancholy procession was entrusted to Providence, as so much—too much else—had been in the whole unhappy-unlucky adventure.

General Minot, who had let the Germans through at Quingey, and General Dastugue, with the 1st division of the 15th Corps d'Armée, were posted in the village of Sombacourt to ward off any attack on the west.

Late in the afternoon of the second day, de Valle, who was at Pontarlier, in attendance on General Clinchant,

was sent by him with an urgent message to General Minot to the effect that the Germans were close upon him, but that he must hold the defiles, no matter what it cost.

It was no great distance to Sombacourt, but the going was terrible. More than once he had to dismount and wade slowly through waist-high snow, hauling his willing but distressed mare after him as best he could. In the urgency of his mission he was tempted at times to leave her and flounder on by himself; but there were times when she was useful, and she was so willing, and had served him so well, that he had not the heart to desert her.

Heavy but desultory firing in front warned him that he was in any case probably too late. But he pressed on, to see what was happening, and to render any help that might be possible.

He struggled on to a high road at last, where much traffic had levelled the snow, and riding into the village came on a most amazing sight.

The one street of the village was a seething mob of soldiers, many of them Zouaves, and every man of them seemed to be doing his best to make an end of his neighbour with whatsoever weapon he held. Everywhere wrathful eyes and furious faces, vicious gleam of dirk and bayonet, smoke and flashes, and whistling bullets. A mounted officer in their midst was trying his best to calm them, but his voice was drowned in the howl of many curses. Two officers, with napkins in their hands and food in their mouths, had just flung open the window of the inn and were shouting at the mob with no more effect than men who shout at an angry sea.

And before de Valle had more than time to wonder what it all meant, a column of German infantry swept

round the further end of the street, halted like a machine, and poured volley after volley into the surging mass.

It broke and fled. The part nearest him came hurtling past him like a burst dam, foaming curses, blind to everything but the crackling death behind and the open country in front.

De Valle did his best to stem the torrent and brace them to a stand. He got his mare across the roadway and thrust his drawn sword between them and the open. They dived under his horse, hustled past her, jostled her till she fell, and would have swept over and trampled them both under foot, if her master had not cleared a space for her with a whistling blade.

One man fired point-blank at him with his *chassepot* and sent his *kêpi* spinning. Half a dozen struck wildly at him with their clubbed guns as they sped past. An elderly sergeant sprang to his side, as the mare scrambled tremblingly to her feet, and said, " Best come along, sir. They've lost their heads, and it's all up over yonder anyway," with a backward jerk of the head towards the village, where the firing had ceased.

" What was the row about ? " asked de Valle, as he drew his hood over his head, for it was bitterly cold, then looped his bridle over his arm, and walked on with him in the throng which swirled past them.

" God knows ! They lost their heads. Those Zouaves were our advance-posts. They came running in like hares, and the others had a panic. Tenez, monsieur ! " —as they came to a fork in the road. " This way will perhaps be safest."

He turned off the main road. Some followed them, but the greater number swept on after their fellows.

They plodded on into the grey darkness of the open

country, and presently the sergeant stopped and lifted his hand; and down below, from the direction in which the mob had gone, there came once more the sharp, ordered volleys of the German needle-guns, and he said, "I was afraid they'd know of that. That road runs through a gorge, and they've got them all bottled up."

"We are greatly indebted to you, Sergeant. Now can you get us to Pontarlier?"

"It's a rough road, but we can make it in time, sir. Have they got anything to eat there?"

"I'll see that you get something anyway. The disorganization has been terrible."

"Ay; you can't expect men to fight like men when sometimes they've not seen so much as a crust for two whole days."

"You can't. It's surprising they've borne it as well as they have."

"It's surprising some of them didn't put a bullet into those two at the inn-windows. With their napkins in their hands, parbleu! . . . Generals must eat, I suppose, even if their men are starving. But, thousand thunders, even I would have had the good taste not to flaunt my rag before all those empty stomachs. However—now they'll get their supply of German sausage with the rest, I suppose, and so they'll be happy. Dieu, how I wish it was all over and done with! We're beaten flat. Why the devil can't we end it and make a fresh start?"

"The end's not far off, I'm afraid."

"Switzerland?"

"You seem to know these parts. What's your opinion of our prospects of getting past them?"

"I wouldn't give a sou for it. They are fit, and they march four leagues to our one."

They tramped along at the head of their little troop of some fifty men of this regiment and that, talking quietly together. The rest all stumbled doggedly in the rear, with no more than a jerking oath now and again as inflamed and frost-bitten feet, bare or swathed in rags, jarred roughly on the inequalities of the road.

It was, as the sergeant had said, a rough road, but from the way the wind tore across it, de Valle judged it was somewhat elevated, and it carried less snow than the one by which he had come. Here and there, too, there were high-curved fences, and behind these the drifts piled deep and the force of the wind was broken.

The sergeant told him discursively, as they plodded along, that his name was Barbin, that he was a native of Beaune, in the Côte d'Or, not far from Dijon, and that he had known all this Jura country from a boy. He had been in the Crimea and in Italy, was married, and had children and grandchildren, and since he had got through this far, he had not entirely given up hope of seeing them all again. His remarks on the conduct of the campaign, and especially on the sudden withdrawal from Héricourt, were pertinent and pointed, and quite beyond de Valle's power to controvert.

But dwelling on the past was profitless work. He drew him round to the present and possible future.

"Those two forts I saw, just beyond Pontarlier—are they any use? It seemed to me that a handful of determined men in each, with a gun or two, ought to be able to hold the Germans for a month."

"So they could if there were any decent guns in them. Larmont—that's the one on the left as you look from Pontarlier—used to have nothing but pieces of the Middle Ages. Joux—that's the opposite one—was better, but,

mon Dieu, all the guns up there are trained against Switzerland, and the walls pierced for that too. No one in this world ever dreamed of needing them on the other side. Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, mon Dieu! To think of needing them to keep Prussians from chasing Frenchmen out of France! It beats the devil!" and it took him many minutes to chew that bitter cud.

The willing little mare followed them meekly with drooped head and trembling limbs, stumbling now and again on the frozen road, but heartening up somewhat when her master turned at the jerk and gave her a pat and a cheering word. Behind her, close up, with hungry looks, plodded the straggling band of fugitives, and if de Valle could have seen their faces he would have read in them the thought that, failing anything else, horse-flesh is not to be despised when the sides of one's stomach are clapping together for lack of padding.

The time comes when even a willing, but ill-nourished mare gives out. And the more willing she is, the more sudden the end. Possibly, also, her rough overthrow in the mêlée at Sombacourt had disorganized her ill-furnished interior in some way.

The poor beast fell suddenly with a groan. She struggled bravely to rise to her master's uplifting. Then she gave a start and a gasping sob as a vicious knife ripped into her flank to hack off the first slice.

De Valle saw, and with an oath let out with his boot at the owner of the knife, and sent him over headlong into the snow. Then he drew his revolver, patted the rough brown head gently, and as she looked up at him, he felt for the right spot, and killed her with one shot. It was the only thing to do, but his heart was heavier at her going than it had been at thought of the capture

of Generals Minot and Dastugue, back there in the inn at Sombacourt.

The famished ones behind were on to her with their knives before her hind legs had done kicking.

"It hurts to lose her so," said de Valle quietly, as he took the road again.

"I know," said the sergeant. "One gets fond of them. But she's better so, poor beast."

"And that—that's ghastly," as the men behind came hastening up, swinging red lumps of the mare in their hands, some of them licking the blood like ravenous wolves.

"It's not their fault. They're starving. . . . There's Pontarlier . . . Dieu-de-Dieu, it sounds like hell!"

XVIII

PONTARLIER was, as Sergeant Barbin had said, a very inferno.

There that vast tumultuous flood of disorganized humanity—not far short of 90,000 bitter and broken men, starving furiously—seethed and swirled before the one possible outlet of escape that remained to it. Every step of its slow progression was a martyrdom scored with suffering and strewn with fragments, and yet at hint of stoppage its anger flamed into frenzy.

A halt had been ordered,—a halt!—when everyone knew that the Germans were all the time pushing on further and further round to the south to cut them off, and that every hour might make just all the difference between safety and slaughter. And no one—except the few—knew what it meant.

The old mutinous slanders growled to and fro. Old Clinchant had received a million, and they were to be sold to the Germans. They were all the same, those Fat-Heads and Full-Stomachs at the top. Bourbaki there—if he had chosen he could have walked right over them. Yes, pardie! Why, at Héricourt, we were beating them, as everyone knows, and then—"Stop, my children; you are going too far! You mustn't hurt them! Sound the retreat there, or my fee will be in danger!"—and so on, and so on, ad nauseam. For so deeply rooted in their minds was their belief in France's unconquerability under

any fair conditions, that every defeat was imputed to treason in high places, and the effect on those below was most deplorable.

A halt had undoubtedly been called when every moment was of consequence. For a strange thing had happened.

De Valle, when he reached headquarters that night, had had no more than time to see to Sergeant Barbin's promised meal, and a hasty snack for himself, when General Clinchant sent for him again.

He found him deep in conference with General Billot. The confidence these two reposed in him was his one tiny spark of consolation in those bitter black days. But they knew their man, and it was much in those days to have a man who put duty before everything, and had no end whatever of his own to serve. They knew that any mission entrusted to him would be carried out though it cost him his life. He was as a right hand to them, and so saw more of the inside of things than most.

"De Valle," said General Clinchant, "we have just got news from Bordeaux of a general armistice. The Germans cannot have heard of it. They were pressing Thornton hard, over there at Chaffois. Take a bugler and a flag and put a stop to it. If necessary, see the German commander. I will give you a line to him."

"Put on my cloak," said Billot. "A parlementaire in rags would give them but a bad impression of us. How is your képi?"

"Shot off my head at Sombacourt this evening, General—by a Frenchman."

"Ah!"—with a wince—"take mine. And your horse—is it decent?"

"Dead—at Sombacourt. They hacked her to pieces, and are feeding on her now in Pontarlier here."

"Take mine. Smarten up your bugler and make as good a show as you can. Take my spare horse for him."

"And lose no time, de Valle. The sooner it's stopped the better for us," urged General Clinchant.

So de Valle rigged himself out in his borrowed plumes —which after all only amounted to a serviceable cloak and képi and a couple of horses that had occasionally been groomed—and set off in haste with the smartest bugler he had been able to lay hands on.

Their way led across the Doubs, and over low pine-clad hills where the trees held back the snow and the going was fairly good. Chaffois lay straight in front when they topped the rise, and there was no possibility of mistaking it. The village, in which Thornton was holding back the German advance, was spitting and blazing and crackling like a gigantic firework.

On hearing his news Thornton instantly ordered the "Cease fire!" to be sounded.

"They're pressing us hard," he said to de Valle. "We'll be glad to get our breath anyway."

The Germans, taken by surprise, were still pushing on into the village, regardless of the fact that the French fire had ceased. To put a stop to further slaughter, de Valle, with a word to Thornton, spurred into the firing zone with his bugler and his flag, and the Germans stopped in their tracks, finger on trigger, and stood staring at him.

A stout, well-fed young captain in a spiked helmet came towards him, and asked in excellent French, "You surrender, monsieur?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear von Grumer. Why the devil should we?"

"The devil! Why, it's Pat de Valle, as I'm a living sinner." And, as he looked him over from képi to saddle-

cloth, "What the devil are you? Field-Marshal? Commander-in-Chief?"

"Parlementaire. I've come to tell you of the armistice signed in Paris to-day. So it's all over, I suppose, and we can shake hands again," which they solemnly proceeded to do, while all their men looked wonderingly on.

"We supposed you would have heard," said de Valle loftily. "Understood you rather prided yourselves on your communications and news, and so on——"

"No, we've not heard," said the young Prussian slowly, "and if it was anyone but you brought the news, I'd doubt it was only a trick——"

"Come out into the fields yonder, and I'll punch your head, Grumie, for casting reflections on the honour of France——"

"Oh, la-la! He's as touchy as ever. All the same, you know——"

"Here's a letter from our old man to your old man, since you are pleased to doubt my word——"

"Not for a moment, my dear. But the letter will regularize the matter," and he held out his hand for it. "You see, he doesn't know you as I do."

"Who is he?"

"Old Moltke himself, and we've nine hundred thousand men just back of beyond here. Any further information I can give you?"

"I won't burden your conscience any more. Suppose you deliver that letter to the High-Well-Born One, whoever he is, and I'll wait to hear what he's got to say about it."

Von Grumer went off with the letter, and de Valle sat quietly observing the stalwart, well-fed, well-clothed men opposite him, and contrasting them with the starving and

shivering host round Pontarlier. And his heart was sick within him at the disparity between them. It had become a contest of gutterlings with giants, of shadows with solids.

Von Grumer came back presently, looking grave under his bonhomie. He handed de Valle a letter, saying:

"Your news was quite correct—as far as it went, my dear. But, unfortunately, you haven't apparently received the latest edition——"

"What do you mean?"

"An armistice has been agreed upon, as you say, but—at the special request of your Monsieur Favre, you and I, and the inconsequent rest who carry on the operations in the east here, are specifically excluded from it——"

"You don't mean that?" jerked de Valle.

"Yes—I'm sorry. I'd sooner have seen an end. But ça y est, as they say in France! And so I'm afraid we'll have to call on your Monsieur—Thornton, isn't it?—to give himself up. You see, our old man knew all about it, and has been occupying the land all the time we were talking. That's good business, and will save us the trouble of killing any more of you. As a matter of fact, you are at the present moment all corralled up as tight as pigs in a pen, so you may as well chuck up the sponge—and we'll give you something to eat."

"Honour bright, von Grumer! You're not bluffing us?"

"I've given you simple facts, my Pat. I wish it was the other way—though it's too late to get home for Christmas now. It's become a trifle monotonous, you know, and we're all as tired of it as you are."

"I must get back to Pontarlier. They're acting there on the news they've received."

"Then the sooner you open their eyes the better. Our men will let you through. Drop your Thornton a word of advice as you go. It will save life. Au revoir, old man, and safe deliverance to you!"

They shook hands again, and de Valle trotted back to Thornton, told him all that had passed, suggested his verifying von Grumer's assertions before renewing what must prove a hopeless contest if they were true—and he knew von Grumer too well to doubt it himself—and set off for Pontarlier.

A gruff challenge, and the hardly visible but none the less distinctly perceptible presence of a great body of men, on what had been the open road to the village a few minutes before, satisfied him as to the correctness of, at all events, that portion of von Grumer's statements. He explained himself in a word, and galloped off into the darkness of the night with his bugler pounding after him. There was no more firing in Chaffois, so he supposed Thornton had seen the uselessness of it and surrendered.

Clinchant and Billot were aghast at his news. They could hardly bring themselves to believe even the note he brought, which was signed "von Zastrow."

The wires to Bordeaux were kept busy, but yielded little satisfaction. They were apparently too busy there and elsewhere to attend to the dire necessities of the last dying kick of the defence in this far-away corner of the Jura.

Meanwhile, word of the armistice had got out and had been hailed with rapture by the long-suffering mob.

It was ended at last—and not a moment too soon, ma foi! Now they would perhaps get something to eat —and drink—perhaps even an occasional smoke. Another day or two and they'd have been done for—dead, or

prisoners, or over the border. Of choice the last, for there would certainly be something to eat there.

Anyway, now it was all right, and there could be no need to hoard up stores for the route. Was that a provision-waggon? Officers' Mess? Curse the Officers' Mess!—When men were starving, officers had no right to mess. Allons, mes enfants!—and those in the job got a bite or two all round, and even a smoke.

In the vast relief of this eleventh-hour deliverance, the tension all round relaxed. The invisible bonds that make for order slackened to such an extent that they got trodden into the mire. Disorganization was rampant.

Just here and there a *peloton*, a battalion, all that was left of a regiment, held together aloof—from a feeling of unusual respect for its commander—in recognition of exceptional treatment by its officers—in some cases simply through ties of locality—the men of this district or that standing together and looking askance at the doings of the strangers among whom their unhappy lot was cast. And it was well for the rest that it was so.

At the end of two days—which the astute and better-informed Germans utilized to the utmost in the completion of their steel network round the doomed host—the true facts were made known, and the air was filled again with impotent cursings.

Jules Favre—he who, to his lasting sorrow, insisted on the Paris Nationals retaining their arms when the regulars laid theirs down, and so brought about the grim red episode of the Commune—in negotiating the armistice with Bismarck, again put down his foot in the wrong place. Bismarck wanted Belfort. "But Belfort still holds out," said old Jules, who had been shut up in Paris

for months, and had not, as von Grumer would have said, received the latest editions from the east.

" Then we will, if you like, exclude the eastern operations entirely," said the wily Bismarck, who foresaw a second Sedan in the retreat on the Swiss frontier.

And to that old Jules agreed—again to his lasting sorrow. But it is better at all times to know beforehand what you are doing than to sorrow for it afterwards.

Old Jules's mistakes cost his country thousands of lives and millions of francs, and miseries untellable.

Once assured of the actual facts, General Clinchant hesitated no longer at the final plunge. The gateways to the south were held by the Germans. Prisoners of war, or prisoners of peace, were the only alternatives. He chose the latter, and drove away at once along the high road to Verrières, to arrange the matter with old Hans Herzog, the Swiss Commander-in-Chief, whose forces had been in arms all along the frontier for weeks past in expectation of this very thing.

General Clinchant had tested old Hans's mettle while the matter was still in abeyance. He had sent him a train-load of sick and wounded men without so much as a " by your leave," or " pardon the necessity." And old Hans promptly declined it, and sent back so strong a remonstrance at such a breach of international law that Clinchant saw he was not to be played with.

He sent de Valle in to Verrières to arrange preliminaries, with an absolutely free hand as to terms. The Germans were pressing close on their rear. There was no time for bargaining. Old Herzog's terms were, like himself, simple and to the point: The French army to lay down its arms, equipments, and munitions of war at the

frontier;—no men suffering from contagious maladies to be admitted.

But there were many necessary details to be arranged, and de Valle and old Hans sat up all night reducing them to proper form.

About four o'clock in the morning word came in that masses of French guns were pressing on the frontier as though they meant to cross, permission or no permission. General Herzog rose instantly from the table, ordered out a whole brigade, and despatched it with orders to resist by force any violation of Swiss Territory. De Valle apologized for the necessity and explained that the disorganization in their ranks had got beyond official control.

By daybreak everything was settled, and the convention was taken out to General Clinchant, who sat awaiting it at the frontier. His carriage stood by the sturdy little gray stone on one side of which is carved an F, and on the other an S—where still, in these days, you may stand with one foot in France and the other in Switzerland—with an hour's difference in time between your right foot and your left, by the clocks of the two countries.

Behind him a strong body of Swiss infantry held at bay the threatening head of the huge black snake which writhed and twisted along the road all the way back to Pontarlier.

The old General hastily signed the document, wrung de Valle's hand with a few final words, and drove in over the border; and close on his heels, pell-mell, without distinction of rank or thought of order, poured in that swollen torrent of misery to which the Army of the East had been reduced.

De Valle sat watching the ghastly stream for a few

minutes, sick at heart at thought of it all, and sorely shamed at the sight.

For here, surrounded by deep-eyed, hollow-cheeked, broken men, coughing as he had never heard men cough before, dragging their bare and bleeding feet with difficulty over the frozen ground, skeletons of scarecrows in the tattered rags which fluttered about their emaciated limbs—here also, to their own everlasting shame and the bitter provocation of those others, came members of the general staff, well fed and warmly clad ;—and with them, objects of their solicitude as their men had never been, those carriages, with their blinds drawn down now lest the sight of their fair occupants should prove too much for the temper of the starving beasts alongside ;—and heavy fourgons which vicious growls reputed to be full of gold plate and costly wines ;—and behind them, post-waggons, military chests, ambulances, guns.

Each man as he passed the frontier-stone flung his arms—gun, bayonet, cartridge-box—on to the growing heap by the side of the road. On to another heap the officers flung their swords. In the very few minutes de Valle waited there the first heap was already the size of a house.

Then, sicker than ever, and feeling limp and laxed and weary of life, he turned General Billot's best horse's head towards Pontarlier, caring little if he never set eyes on Verrières again.

XIX

"YOU understand, de Valle," had been General Clinchant's last words, "there is safety here for all who can get here. But this has nothing to do with the Germans. They will do their utmost to cut off all they can, for their own glorification. Billot must hold them back as long as possible to give the rest a chance. Do all you can to help him."

And de Valle saluted and turned to this final duty. It was while he was inquiring from some of Herzog's staff how best to get back to Pontarlier that he watched the incoming of the refugees.

The main road was obviously impracticable. It was packed to overflowing with the slow-moving host. As well might a chip attempt to stem the rapids of Niagara as any man try to make his way against that bristling crowd.

It was an absolute and degrading *sauve-qui-peut.* Behind there, at Pontarlier, there was booming of guns and desultory crackle of small arms. They were fighting again then. And wild, white-eyed glances shot across to the pine-clad hills on either side in momentary expectation of seeing those devils of Germans come pouring down to cut them off.

Why, in the name of their master, couldn't they be content and leave them alone? They were broken and done for. All they wanted was to get out of it, and lie

down, and have done with it all. They were out of the game. It was beyond humanity to harry them further.

But . . . They forgot the years that had been—when the boot was on the other leg—when Germany lay in the dust and France stamped her down with iron heel. And now it was Germany's turn, and she was determined that what had been should never be again. She had got France down. She would bleed her white, and so safeguard the years to come.

And so—against one's feelings and yet understandably—she went on kicking away at her opponent although she lay helpless in the mire.

It was only by cutting across country to the road that leads from Yverdon, with risk of meeting the enemy at every turn, that de Valle succeeded at last in striking the lugubrious procession again at the point where the road to Verrières forks off to the east.

The sounds of conflict were closer here, and the eagerness to escape and consequent confusion all the greater. The fields were deep with snow and quite impracticable. Along the single road and the railway line, over 80,000 men, mixed up with baggage-waggons, artillery-trains, ambulances, were pressing desperately towards life, with death roaring and crashing doomfully just round the corner behind them.

For once, one absolutely unanimous spirit pervaded that vast crowd, though it found expression in 80,000 different ways. Every man was for himself, for without doubt those devils of Germans would take the hindmost. And so each man pushed on regardless of his neighbour.

If a man fell, he lay, and if he could not rise again, the crowd at first swept round and finally stumbled over him with jerking curses.

Now and again a battery of artillery or a squad of cavalry, chafing at delays, would make a rush, hurling all obstructives headlong and leaving in its wake a sulphurous lane of fallen men. In more than one such case curses translated themselves into bullets, and the reckless plungers were lucky if they escaped with their lives.

There was no slightest attempt at order. All arms jammed along in one wild welter—mobiles, Zouaves, Turcos, linesmen, francs-tireurs, all in rags and tatters, convoy-drivers from the Midi who had deserted their convoys, ambulance-men who had lost their ambulances, cuirassiers in dingy helmets and battered breastplates on scarecrow horses without manes or tails, artillery-men who would have been only too glad to lose their guns if they could have done it unobserved; and all who had breath enough were cursing and coughing. The very horses coughed and groaned as they slipped and stumbled along the frozen road.

Such officers as were there had drawn their hoods up over their *képis*, and plodded on doggedly, deaf to the jeers and insults which whistled about them. But, to their credit, many had preferred the less distasteful and more honourable risks of holding back the German wolves with Billot and the rear-guard.

De Valle got his horse on to the cotils under the lofty rock on which stands the Fort de Joux, and crept slowly round it towards the village of La Cluse, where he saw a body of men drawn up on either side of the road in something like formation while the disorganized mob flowed through between.

Further on, where the wooded hills on either side closed in, and the road from Pontarlier curled round through the defile, he saw more men posted among

the trees. The turn of the road was still black with the slow-moving crowd, though the crash of guns just round the corner showed that the Germans were pressing close on their rear.

He edged along to the village, but it was impossible to make headway along the street because of the pack. He bored his way through it amid a fusillade of curses.

"Do you know where General Billot is?" he asked of one of the men drawn up there, a marine-infantry man, who seemed oddly out of place so far away from the sea.

"He's not come round the corner yet, sir."

"If this ruck would only get along," growled another, "we'd maybe get the chance of a whack at the Sausages. But there seems no end to them. They've been coming all night, and always the same crowd."

"It's my belief they go round somewhere and keep coming through again," said the first, "same as they do in a theatre."

"And who commands here?" asked de Valle.

"Our Admiral—Penhoat. He's up the bluff there, planting guns to rake the Sausages if they try to come through."

De Valle was making for the hillside when he heard an urgent voice behind him call to the sailormen: "Have you a surgeon here?" and he turned and swung down from his horse, as one of the two he had been speaking to ran off in search of their surgeon.

It was Jules Breton, rougher and more ragged than ever, yet undoubtedly Jules. And he was standing beside a stretcher which two sullen bearers would obviously have dropped long since, but for the revolver in his hand. On the stretcher, grey-faced and covered with blood, lay the slight figure of Lamotte.

"You—Pat?" said Breton, in a husky whisper. "The little one's got it. They've gone for a surgeon. There was no one over there, so I collared two fellows and— Well, I'll be hanged!"—for the bearers had quietly set down the stretcher while his back was turned and disappeared into the moving crowd.

They carried it gently to the side of a wall and set it down in a snow-drift, and the white snow below became riddled with ugly little red-brown holes as Charley's life-blood ran out of him.

De Valle raised his brows questioningly at Breton as they set him down, and Jules shook his head sombrely.

Charles opened his heavy eyes and stared vacantly up at them for a moment. Then he smiled—a brave, twisted little smile—and gasped,

"Malheur! . . . thought I was home . . . all cleaned up. . . . Horrible mess!"—which they took to refer to things generally.

"Don't talk, dear lad!" said de Valle, kneeling in the drift by his side. "The surgeon will be here in a minute or two, and as soon as he's patched you up we'll get you on into Switzerland. You'll be all right there."

But Charles knew better. He smiled up at him whimsically, though his eyes were swimming with pain, and murmured:

"Old Guard . . . dies . . . never surrenders. . . . Where's Jules?"

"Here, lad."

"Good fellow! . . . See you . . . both again . . . soon perhaps," and the limp hand in his ragged brown glove flapped feebly against the webbing of the stretcher in a valiant attempt at a last jaunty farewell,

"A—dieu!" he murmured, and lay still just as the surgeon came hastily up.

"Gone?" he panted.

"Just gone."

The surgeon bent over the stretcher for a moment, and then said, "I could have done nothing anyway. He's worn away to nothing. Wonder he lived five minutes. Nothing of him left," and he saluted and went off on his business that permitted of no delays.

They drew the ragged hood over the quiet face, sunken-eyed and hollow-cheeked like all the rest of them, and lifted the abnormally light body on to the snow, so that the stretcher might be available for anyone whose need was greater. And there they had perforce to leave him.

"What are you doing?" asked de Valle, as they turned away.

"Anything. My fellows are mostly in Switzerland by this time, unless they've dropped on the way. And you?"

"I'm here to help keep them back in any way I can. Where's Billot?"

"Just backing out from Pontarlier. We're to make a stand here."

"Suppose we see Penhoat. He's a good fighting man. He's up on the hillside there."

"Right!"

"Where the deuce——"

"What's it?"

"My horse—Billot's rather—his best." But it had wandered off and joined the crowd, and two very grateful Zouaves were rejoicing in the relief of it a quarter of a mile away.

"It'll probably be recognized when it gets there," said de Valle, and they ploughed through the snow up the hillside, to where Admiral Penhoat was busily training a half-battery and a couple of mitrailleuses on the corner round which the Germans must eventually come.

He knew de Valle well and welcomed him warmly. They had met many times at headquarters during the last six weeks.

"Hello, de Valle! You're the very man I want. Know anything about guns?"

"Enough to use 'em, sir."

"And you're free?—not on business?"

"There's only one business left, and that's to hold back the enemy as long as possible."

"And your friend?" eyeing Breton's weathered roughness approvingly.

"Captain Breton, of the 14th——"

"Of course. But your own mother wouldn't know you, Captain——"

"Can't remember when I washed last," growled Breton. "But it keeps out the cold. What can you give us to do, sir?"

The Admiral jerked his head across at the Fort de Joux up on the lofty rock opposite.

"That ought to help, but they say it's not ready. Take a hundred of my fellows and make it. I don't know who's up there, but he can't be up to much. If their guns are any good at all you ought to play skittles with the Prussians as soon as they show nose round that corner. Are you game?"

"Rather!" they shot out together.

"What about this one?" asked de Valle, nodding up

at Larmont on the crag above them. "Couldn't we handle them both?"

"Nothing there but old pop-guns. I've found that out. Come on, then, and I'll find you the men," and they plunged down the hill together.

XX

ADMIRAL PENHOAT knew his men and they him, and they were all equally game. They had done great things at Chenébier, during the three days' fight at Héricourt, and were still rankling under the belief that if they had not been called off by Bourbaki they would have won the day there.

Within five minutes a hundred still fairly lusty lads —for the Admiral had a way with him which filled his boys when others went empty—had disorganized the traffic of the roadway by charging through it regardless of spills and curses, and were climbing the steep ascent to the Fort on the heels of Breton and de Valle.

They stood at last puffing and blowing at the gate of the Fort and hammered for admittance.

A voice above their heads demanded their business.

"We're detailed to the Fort here. Let us in, if you please," said de Valle.

"By whom?"

"Admiral Penhoat."

"Got it in writing?"

"No. You'll have to take my word for it. Hurry up! We're wasting time. They may be round the corner any minute."

"And who may you be?"

"De Valle of the Staff. This is Captain Breton of the 14th."

There was a pause which de Valle put an end to by bidding one of his men hammer again at the door with the butt of his gun.

"You ought to have it in writing, you know——" began the petulant voice up above again.

"See here, Monsieur Whoever-you-are," stormed de Valle, "if this door isn't open in one minute we'll break it in, and the first thing I'll do on getting in will be to shoot the officer in charge here. Understand?"

Within the minute the door swung open and they hurried in.

A stolid-faced captain of a local force met them in the tunnel-way, and said sourly, "You understand, I have admitted you against my judgment——"

"That's all right," said de Valle. "It's no time for chopping straws, man, when Germany is coming round yonder corner."

And the sulky one marched away and shut himself up in his quarters, and they never set eyes on him again. It was the spirit that cost France dearly in those days, and there was a terrible amount of it about, especially among the higher grades.

The newcomers set to work overhauling their capture, assisted heartily by all the original garrison with the exception of its commander.

The armament left much to be desired, and, with the exception of one small piece, every gun and every embrasure pointed towards Switzerland. As Sergeant Barbin had said, "Who would ever have dreamed of needing to train French guns against France?"

With mighty labours they succeeded at last in getting them mounted in the other direction, and trained on the opening from Pontarlier, through which at any moment

they looked to see the end files of their own lugubrious procession come rolling in still greater confusion with the enemy yapping at their heels.

But with all their manœuvring they could not cover the road as well as they had hoped; and, casting about for possibilities, Breton suggested planting a portion of their battery on the small north-west platform below the wall of the Fort.

"They'll see it the moment you fire and blow you sky-high," said de Valle. At the obvious truth of which Breton scratched his tangled head and thought hard.

"I have it," he cried. "We'll make a snow-screen with embrasures. It'll look all of a piece with the rest of the hill."

"Good boy!" and they all set to work with the ardour of schoolboys, shovelling up the snow, and pouring water on it, which turned it instantly into ice, until they had an excellent epaulement carrying three of their larger guns trained directly on the road from Pontarlier, and two smaller ones bearing on the Fauconnière hills to the left, along which the Germans were certain to swarm as soon as they entered the valley.

And all the time, below them as they worked, the gruesome mob swarmed on along the roadway; for all the world, thought de Valle, when he had a moment to watch it, like an endless funeral procession. And, gloomily, followed the further inevitable reflection—a funeral procession in very truth it was—the burial of France for many a long year to come.

That awful black centipede below there, which crawled along, hour after hour, and seemed to have no beginning and no end—nothing but an interminable wriggling body which moved with a strange subdued murmur, punctuated

by incessant barking coughs—had been France's final hope. And now it was dead, and this was its funeral. It was like a hideous nightmare. He grew sick at heart as he looked.

A sudden exclamation from their look-out man recalled him to his duty.

"Enfin! Les voilà!" cried the man joyfully, as one who announces good news.

Every eye strained to the turn of the road leading from Pontarlier; and there, with bated breath, they saw the tail of the procession come whirling round in haste, all tangled up with the retiring rear-guard, and, in among them, German officers, sword in hand, apparently calling on them to surrender.

"Let them come on a bit, Breton," called de Valle; "then make that corner hell for them. Maybe ours will turn and cut off those who have come too far," and Breton trained his guns carefully on the corner again and waited, lanyard in hand, to fire the first shot.

"Now!" cried de Valle, and when the thin grey cloud drifted by they saw a gap in the middle of the German column that had come surging round the corner. And Admiral Penhoat, watching keenly for the moment when he could take a hand, cried, "Good lads! Good lads! I knew they'd make play up there."

"Again!"—from de Valle, and they saw the Germans retiring hastily from the line of fire, some making for the bridge to cross the river and push on along the Fauconnière; some climbing the cotils on the other side; the greater part rolling back on their own advance, which pushed steadily on unaware of the danger.

Penhoat's mitrailleuses and guns opened on those who had advanced too far; the retiring rear-guard plucked

up heart and fell upon them, hand to hand, and cut them down almost to the last man. So inextricably mixed were they that Breton's guns could not fire on them, and he had to content himself with playing on the turn of the road as a dissuasive to those behind the corner.

Then came a lull.

"They're gathering for a rush in force," said de Valle; "and we'll not be able to stop it. All we can do is to pepper them."

And presently they came on round the corner, in steady solid masses through which both Breton's guns and Penhoat's cut dreadful gaps without delaying them an instant, and spread out over the level and up the hillsides firing as they ran, till all that end was a reek of rolling grey smoke, dense and heavy as the morning mists which fill those valleys till the sun has strength to suck them up.

From their eyrie on De Joux, the guns of the snow fort, and of the old Fort itself played incessantly on the smoke clouds below and the spot inside them where lay the fatal corner round which every man must come. They could no longer see the effect of their work; the men their shots smashed to pieces had no idea where they came from; it was modern warfare at its lowest and worst, warfare reduced to a mere knowledge of projectiles, devoid of all the old-time possibilities of personal courage and chivalry.

De Valle felt it, but it was the way civilization endorsed for the settlement of disputes, and there was no getting away from it.

"Brutal work!" he growled in Breton's ear, as they stood looking down on the boiling cauldron below.

"They ask for it," growled Breton in reply. "We're

finished, and they know it. Why the devil need they harry our bones like this? It's nothing but bloody murder. . . . Give it those fellows on the hills there, boys!"—pointing to the Fauconnière slope, where the Germans were hard at work planting a couple of guns which they had smuggled through the smoke and across the bridge.

"They've found us out," said de Valle.

"Probably knock us to pieces. But it's the walls they'll aim at. I doubt if they've located the snow fort yet. They're having hot work down there."

For now the enemy, by weight of numbers, had made an end of the rear-guard and was pushing on along the road, and the village of La Cluse was an inferno of smoke spitted with vicious jags and belches of flame, and crashing volleys, and the boom of field-pieces, and the harsh rattle of the mitrailleuses.

"They're not having it all their own way," said Breton.

"Here's a message for us," said de Valle, as a round shot smashed into the wall above them and fell at their feet with a thud.

For a while still the Germans on Fauconnière made the grim old walls of the Fort their target and hammered them hard. The snow fort just below was so hardly to be distinguished from the rest of the snow-covered crag that it escaped observation. The smoke from its guns mingled with those above it and afforded no clue.

But that could not last. Keen eyes and powerful glasses at last discerned the flashes issuing apparently from the snow itself, and the end of the game was in sight.

They were excellent marksmen over there, and once having found their new target, shot and shell came pour-

ing in on them with obvious intent to finish the business as speedily as possible.

Never, surely, did fort of snow get such a battering, or chance of showing what it could stand. Shot and shell fired point-blank at it did comparatively little damage. If a shot struck the icy crown of the epaulement it glanced off as from armour-plate, and flew high over the heads inside, leaving only a dent behind it. If it plunged into the well-packed snow it stopped there. If it was a shell it burst with a dull crash and raised a snow storm, but none of the fragments came in.

They saw the little black figures on Fauconnière hauling guns to a higher level, and did their best to stop them. And all the time, with their larger guns on the other side, they rained down shot on the attack on La Cluse, where the fight wavered indecisively to and fro, but accomplished its object. The tail of the crawling black snake had wriggled out of sight along the Verrières road, and the hunters could not follow.

Once there came a strange lull down below there, and as the smoke lifted they saw a parlementaire with a white flag advance beyond the German attack and parley with two French officers in the roadway. And Breton swore under his breath at the sight.

"They've played that trick before," he growled. "See them sneaking along the hillside there all the time," and, parley or no parley, he launched a shot at the Fauconnière slope where the little dark figures were gathering in increasing numbers.

The short winter day was drawing in before the enemy's newly-mounted guns began to play on them, but, once they got started, shot and shell came curving gracefully

in over the top of their snow walls with fatal precision and deadly effect.

Three successive shots put three of their pieces out of action. Their men were falling fast. They had done splendid work. They had spent themselves for their fellows of the retreating army. It was suicidal to stop there.

"Into the Fort, all of you!" ordered de Valle, and the men made a bolt for it.

"Just this one," said Breton, glancing along the one gun left on the Fauconnière side.

And as he pulled the lanyard a round shot came hurtling through the smoke of his own discharge and smashed him out of all semblance to humanity.

It was a fighting man's death—as fighting goes in these days. But it was none the less shocking, even to one who had seen so much of war as de Valle. He had thought himself proof and case-hardened. The hideous miseries of these last five weeks had seemed to him worse than anything death could threaten. But as he walked slowly up to the gate of the old Fort, spattered with fragments of what had been his friend but a moment before, he felt physically sick, and utterly indifferent though the next shot should scatter him in similar fashion.

They continued the fight from the upper fort, hiding from the Fauconnière guns, to which they could no longer reply, and in the intervals flinging their own shot haphazard into the crowding Germans below. But as the winter night settled down, with biting frost and a wind that cut like a knife, and a sky full of stars that seemed to blink in amazement at the sorry doings of men, the fighting died away by degrees. Now and again a sullen shot or two spurtled out from one side or the other,

as though to show that either was ready to begin again if the other so wished.

But France had saved the rags and bones of her army, and so had accomplished all that was left for her to do, and Germany had suffered enough to make pursuance of the game not worth the candle.

And, possibly, having won the game so completely, she was magnanimous enough now to entertain some feeling of admiration for this valiant remnant that had flung itself so gallantly into the breach for the benefit of the rest.

Those last dropping shots were the last official shots of the war. And de Valle, as he leaned gloomily over an embrasure and watched them, knew that it was all over. For, down below there in the darkness, he could hear the subdued movements of marching men, and he knew that the survivors of the last stand were being quietly drafted off to Verrières.

His mind swept tragically back to that bright August morning when, in attendance on the Emperor and Marshal Lebœuf, he had seen the opening shots fired at Saarbrück, and his soul was sick within him as he thought of the dolorous way his country had travelled—from Weissembourg to Sedan, from Metz to Paris, to this last hope and final disaster in the East.

XXI

DE VALLE called the remnant of his men together, and said briefly:

"They are clearing out below there, and there is nothing more for us to do here. We will pick up our wounded and follow them. I thank you all, in the name of France, for what you have done for her to-day."

They had not many wounded to pick up, however. Men died quickly in those bitter days. Worn as they were with the miseries of the campaign, they would fight valiantly till they fell. Then the attenuated life that had responded to the sudden call upon it went out like a match in the mire. They had no reserves to call upon, and the best of surgeons could not supply them.

A dozen were all they could discover among the tumbled heaps of snow outside and in the corners of the old Fort, and with these on stretchers fashioned by the handy-men out of rammers and spongers and old coats, they set off through the darkness of the path that wound round the rear of the Fort to the Yverdon road, along which de Valle had come in the morning.

As he was leaving he picked up and put on an artillery-man's coat, which had been stripped off a dead man for stretcher-service but had not been required. His uniform was in tatters, the wind was cold, and his need was greater than the dead man's.

Now that his work was done he felt suddenly laxed

and limp, as if all the strength had gone out of him. He felt the cold as he had never felt it before. The wind cut through him like a knife in spite of the dead man's coat, and set him shivering as though he would shake to pieces. He stumbled as he walked, and lurched awkwardly against this man and that.

At the fork of the road they fell in behind the straggling final files of the defenders of La Cluse, and pressed on with them in silent haste towards the safety of the frontier.

Hugging their rags to keep out the cold, with no martial tramp, because they had scarce a boot among them, they passed like a phantom army. The dull crunch of gun-wheels, and the jolt and bump with which they rolled over a fallen body, the panting sobs of worn-out horses as they scrabbled for a footing on the frozen road, the hastily-suppressed click or clink of steel or the rattle of a chain—those, and their husky coughings, were the only sounds of their passage. Not a word was spoken, for there was nothing more to be said. It was the end, and it lay heavy on them.

And to Pat de Valle, as he trudged along with the rest, there came a sudden resolution.

Why should he thrust himself once more into that welter of misery on ahead there? His work was finished. He had done his uttermost duty. The fact that Switzerland had opened her doors to the broken army was guarantee that she would see to its necessities. He was not needed there.

For himself, all he desired, and his whole soul craved it as a dying man craves salvation, was to get away from it all and from all remembrance of it for a time—for ever if that were possible;—to hide himself away in some dark corner till his sick soul found itself again;—and if

it did not, then to die there in peace and quietness, which would perhaps be the better way.

In his prostrate and broken humour the idea took complete possession of him—seemed indeed the only way out—save one. That other way had never commended itself to him. He could sympathize with his unlucky Chief who had tried it, for he had been an eye-witness, in his case, to the growing feeling of personal responsibility for the disasters which had overwhelmed them, till the burden had become insupportable and the over-worried brain gave way.

He had no such feeling himself. He had nothing to reproach himself with. He had done all that a man could do. That he had come through alive was merest chance of fate, and doubtful blessing. Lamotte's quiet bed in the snow under the wall at La Cluse, or Breton's instant passing in the snow-fort on De Joux, were perhaps to be envied. Wherever they had got to it could not be worse than this bleak misery of the world they had escaped from.

Life seemed to him, as he dogged along through the bitter darkness, one huge failure.

For himself, the flavour and hope had gone out with the ghastly mistake of his marriage—when Claudine elected for the poor high-life of the Court, and closed whatever heart she had to him, and denied him the joys of home and children.

He wondered dully what had taken their and his place for her, now that that to which she had given herself had vanished as though it had never been.

He had no hope of recovering her. She had shown him too plainly that her only object in marrying him was the position he could help her to. Now she could have still less need of him.

But he had no fear as to her power of looking after herself. If she heard of his death he thought she would be glad. It would leave her free to make a fresh start, and with her beauty and her wealth that would not be difficult. Yes, he was sure in his own mind that she would be glad if she heard he had gone out with the rest.

When he lost her he had given himself wholly to his work—to his duty and his country.

And now these, too, had failed him. France was in the mud, and would be for fifty years to come—if indeed she could ever rise again. For, weary as his brain was with its overstrain and its bruisings, he comprehended dully that, for her own future safety's sake, this new Germany must ever strive might and main to keep France under, now that she had got her down. The bitterness he felt towards her would rankle in every French heart for years to come—would never be assuaged till the scales were turned the other way again. And Germany knew it.

Even in the slow rebuilding of his country he could not discover any place for himself. The men into whose hands the reins had fallen were repugnant to him. He had not, in this time of crisis, been able to put patriotism below party, as de Bigot and others had done. France in need had still been France to him, whoever held the jerking reins. But now—he could not change so quickly as would be required of him. The new régime would have partisans for all its places. He was not needed. There was no place for him.

Brooding in such wise, his steps lagged, and no one heeded him.

Except in the case of the few who self-denyingly assisted in the carrying of their broken fellows—many of whom had crossed their own last frontier before their bodies

reached the little grey stone by the roadside—each man's thoughts were for himself alone. Now that the fighting was all over, their energy was gone ; and but one thought filled each man's mind—to get safely to cover, and rest, and food, and that as speedily as their foundered feet would let them.

A detachment of stalwart Switzers was in charge of the huge mounds of discarded weapons by the frontier-stone, and when they had flung theirs on to the heaps they were directed towards Verrières.

Those bristling heaps of guns and bayonets and swords were the visible emblems of the cataclysm—the tombstones of the great enterprise that began so ominously at the station of La Charité and had been dogged by disaster every step of the dolorous way since.

De Valle's sword was the last to be dropped on the heap, and as it left his hand he felt as though a bond had snapped.

The others trudged on into the darkness to join their fellows in misfortune. The shuffling of their worn-out feet died away.

There was a glow in the sky over there from the camp-fires in which the starving host was rejoicing. There was food over there—and safety, and unlimited rest. There was, in fact, everything over there which his body had craved these weeks past.

But there was one thing his sick soul craved still more, and that was solitude.

Round the fires there, there would be discussions and disputings, and heated argument and recrimination. As their spirits revived again with food and drink they would become loud-mouthed and quarrelsome. And the thought of it all was nauseous to him.

He came upon a road branching off to the left. It was well-trodden by reason of the numbers of country-folk who had flocked in all day long to see the most amazing sight of their lives.

Without a thought of whither it might lead him he turned into it, and the way it led him was a strange one.

XXII

THE branching road led him in the first place to a village, the wooden houses of which had wide-sloping roofs and far-projecting eaves.

He came to it in the dimness of the dawn, but lower doors were already open, and from their black cavernous mouths came fragrant scent of cows and the sharper flavour of goats and pigs. After the raw and acrid odours of the campaign—powder-smoke and dead and unwashed men—these homely smells were heavenly sweet and breath of new life to him.

He had money in plenty. Cut loose from one's base, as one necessarily was on campaign, it was as well to provide for all eventualities. If one fell—one's need was ended, and it went as spoil to the prowler. If, as had happened so frequently of late, one had to take an enforced trip to Germany, it helped at all events to alleviate the weariness of exile. On the march it was of service at times in the supplementing of billet-fare or in the assistance of the less provident.

He stuck his head into the first black opening and drank his fill of the sweet warm smell of many cows. Up at the far end of the byre was the dim illumination of a lantern on the floor and the soft swish of milk into a wooden pail. In the faint light he could see the bony hind-quarters of many recumbent beasts. The steady chewing of many cuds filled the air with a gentle susur-

ration, broken now and again by the jerking rattle of a head-chain.

He waited till the milker should have done with the beast he or she was at, and presently a girl with a shawl over her head came out into the alley-way, and he called to her softly in French:

"Mademoiselle, will you favour me with a drink of milk?"—and hastened to add—"if I pay for it."

For painful late experience of his own people had taught him to expect nothing for nothing, and nothing even for payment if the dreaded Germans were likely to hear of it. Strangely enough, though he had not had much time for moralizing on it at the time, it was only in certain little Protestant communities, as at Issans and Allondans, near Montbéliard, that anything approaching Christian charity had been vouchsafed them.

The girl came slowly down the alley-way swinging the pail in one hand and the lantern in the other.

"Who is it, then?" she asked.

"A tired man dying of hunger;" and she held up the lantern to look at him.

"Tiens donc! You are of the army, then? Why are you not with the others? I saw them come in yesterday down yonder."

"I waited with some more to cover the retreat—to give the others a chance——"

"But why haven't you gone with the rest?"

"Because I am sick of it all. I want to get away by myself—now that it's all over."

"Mon Dieu, I'm not surprised. Never in my life have I seen such misery.—And the smell of them! . . . Yes, indeed, anyone might want to get away from them. I hope they won't give us all the plague and fever. Come

up into the house and I'll give you bread also, and cheese if you will."

"But I mustn't stop your work——"

"That was the last," and she led the way up the wooden staircase and across the wide, covered-in balcony to the warm brown homely living-room, where a great tiled stove was roaring and rumbling with a newly-stoked fire.

"You are an angel from heaven, mademoiselle—the first I have seen this many a day. It has been a terrible time for us."

"I'm sure. One could see it by their faces—to say nothing of their poor hands and feet."

She emptied her milk into a white wooden tub and thrust some fresh lumps of wood into the stove, and he knelt by it gratefully and chafed his blue hands back to prickly life, and then stretched his decrepit riding-boots to it, for below the knees he had no feeling whatever.

"My father and brother are over there with our General, Hans Herzog," she said, as she placed bread and cheese on the table and set the coffee-pot on the stove. "You've given us a lot of trouble among you. They were all out for a month last July because of you. I'm glad it's all over at last."

"You can't be as glad as we are; but I could have wished it had gone the other way."

"Why has it gone so bad with you?"

"Because they were the better men," he said; and she was sharp enough to detect the bitterness in his voice.

"Mon Dieu, yes! They couldn't possibly be worse than the ones I saw yesterday. They were pitiful to look at."

"They have suffered horribly."

"One could see it. If I had known I'd have taken

some food down with me. They looked like starving wolves. I'm glad to be able to feed one of you anyway."

"As long as I live I shall never forget your goodness, mademoiselle. It is like a taste of heaven after a long spell of hell. Yes—I assure you," as a smile flickered about the corners of her mouth. "Until you've been in hell you don't know how little it takes to make heaven. Your fire, your bread and cheese; above all, your kindness—to a stranger."

She was not beautiful. Sturdy, not over gainly, perhaps, in her movements; rough-skinned of hand and face, and commonplace of feature, but clear-eyed and full of compassion for the miseries of which he was to her the representative—she was to him the most gracious thing he had seen for many a day.

"Are all Switzers as kind as this?" he asked, as he drank her hot coffee and milk, and thought he had never tasted anything so delicious in all his life.

"There are all kinds, I suppose," she said; "but it's a woman's place to help when a man's in want."

"I've met very different treatment in my own country."

"That was hard. They'd been badly treated themselves, maybe."

"Not by us, anyway. But they would give us nothing—not so much as a mouthful of bread—for fear of the Germans."

"And their own people, too! For me, I cannot understand that. But perhaps they had nothing left."

"Oh yes, they had. But they feared the Germans more than they loved their country."

"Well, I don't hold with that. One's country should come first of all. Help yourself! There's plenty, thank God!"

" Is there a bootmaker in this place ? "

" Of course. Old Jacob Stiefel up the road there. But "—eyeing his disintegrated boots—" those would take a lot of mending."

" They're past mending. Besides, I'm going to walk now. I wonder if I could buy a pair of warm stockings. Mine are in rags, I'm sure. But I haven't seen them for over a week."

" Dieu-de-Dieu, think of that now ! I'll get you a pair of Peter's. You're about of a size," and she bustled away upstairs and came back with a pair of thick woollen stockings that made his feet warm just to look at them.

" Give me one of your boots, and I'll give it to Jacob Stiefel for the size and tell him to bring you some to try on," she said ; and he wrestled off his long boots, and she exclaimed at the state of his stockings and feet.

Then she got down a shallow white wooden bowl and placed it on the hearth before him and filled it with warm water and said, " Wash them, and they'll feel better," and went off with his boot, leaving him in sole possession.

When she came in again presently with a little bent old man carrying an armful of boots, he had on the new stockings and was fast asleep in his chair.

He was wakened by the old man, whose time was valuable, methodically trying boots on his unconscious feet, and apologized for his lapse.

" We were fighting all day and walking all night," he said.

" Have ye the money to pay for 'em ? " squeaked old Jacob suspiciously, as he found a pair that fitted comfortably at last.

" Of course. How much, Monsieur Stiefel ? "

" They're good boots, those. They'll last you two

years and more without anything done to them. They'll be five-and-twenty francs."

The girl knelt down and looked them over knowingly and carefully.

"They're all right," she said; "but eighteen francs is the proper price, and not a franc more. I'm ashamed of you, Jacob Stiefel."

"Suppose we say twenty," said de Valle, and handed the old man a twenty-franc piece; "and I'm much obliged to you, Monsieur Stiefel, for bringing them."

"Well, well! I don't see what call you have to put in your word, Susi Allmer," grumbled the old man. "It's not often one gets the chance of making a bit extra nowadays; and they're uncommon good boots, those."

"Here's a cup of coffee for you, and don't you say any more about it," said the girl brusquely. "I don't hold with taking advantage of folks' necessities."

"You will when you get a bit older."

"No, I won't. I'm not like that, thank God!"

"Well, well! And where are you bound for?" he turned to de Valle.

"Where do I get to along this road?"

"Huh!—to Locle, if ye keep on and go far enough. And what will you want at Locle?"

"I want to get away—from dead men and starving men, and the smell of war—and everything, for a time——"

"Ay, them's bad things, and ye've had your fill, I'm thinking."

"Yes, I've had my fill."

"Well, them shoes'll take ye to Locle and as much farther as ye'll let 'em. But I can't stand talking t'ye all day long. Got to earn my living, I have," and, having

finished his coffee, he gathered up his boots and trotted away.

De Valle rose also, but stiffly and with visible regret, and stamped comfortably in his new boots.

"I've hardly known I had any feet for a week past," he said. "But now, I must not presume on your kindness——"

"Nay, you can sit there as long as you will. You won't bother me. I'll get on with my work."

"If I sit down I shall go to sleep."

"You're needing it, I'm sure. I'll not disturb you. Sleep as long as you will, and welcome."

"Thousand thanks!" and he dropped back into the chair with a grateful sigh, and was asleep in a moment.

And Susi, as she went quietly about her work, looked at him many times and wondered about him.

Speaking herself the rough French and German of the countryside, she had no fine discrimination in the matter of tongues. But she liked his speech and his ways, and his worn, lean face, though it was grimy like his hands.

His clothes were torn and soiled, and the coat he had on was of coarse material and common make. All the same, she liked the look of him, and she would have wished no better than that he should stop about there so that they might perhaps become good friends.

It was after midday before he stretched comfortably and opened his eyes on the table, spread again with bread and cheese and a jug of milk; and Susi, on the other side, munching slowly and watching him with visible curiosity and enjoyment.

"I feel a new man," he said, "and I have to thank you for it, mademoiselle. If ever I can be of service

to a Switzer, I'll try to pass on some of your kindness to him."

"Help yourself," said Susi, and pushed the bread and cheese closer to him.

As they ate, he told her of some of the things he had seen during the war—of nights spent in the bitter open, sitting on the snow—of days without bite or sup—and of the last day's fighting and the snow fort on De Joux. And she wished he would sit there all day eating and telling her terrible stories of cold and hunger and suffering, which made the fire and the simple fare things to be grateful for as never before.

But at last he got up.

"I must get on my way. Your kindness I cannot pay for, mademoiselle," he said gratefully, "but for these very good stockings and the food you will let me pay."

"Nay!" she said, standing before him confusedly and with a red face, "I'd sooner you wouldn't——"

"It is like your great goodness of heart. But you will make me feel like a beggar and an intruder——"

"Nay, I wouldn't want that," she said hastily. "You can pay three francs for the stockings, if you must. The rest is nothing——"

"I don't believe you could make those stockings for even five francs. Did you make them yourself?" as he laid a five-franc piece on the table.

"Of course. I make them all."

"I shall think of you with warm feet all the time, and you will remember that there is one man in the world who will never forget your kindness as long as he lives. When I came here in the dark I was sorry I had not been killed in the fighting yesterday. You have given me fresh heart"—and he caught hold of her rough, workaday

hand and raised it to his lips, and kissed it with more fervour than ever he had done the Empress's.

And while she still stood in open-mouthed surprise at the tumult of novel emotions he evoked in her, he wrung her hand warmly and was gone.

She turned to her work at last with a sigh, and yet with a little glow of secret gladness in her heart. Never in her life had she met a man she liked so much and could have liked so much more.

He was gone, and it was not likely she would ever see him again. But she had been of service to him, and he had been grateful. When he kissed her hand all her being had seemed to rush to meet his lips. He might forget her, but never, as long as she lived, would she forget him and that kiss of his.

XXIII

DE VALLE, pushing briskly on through the straggling village, caught a glimpse of old Jacob Stiefel's head and shoulders inside a window as he bent over his work. And Jacob, straightening up for a moment, saw him, and waved him a greeting with a cobbler's needle and a grimy fist.

De Valle pointed to his new boots and nodded his satisfaction with them, and old Jacob got up to see how they went, and flopped down again grumbling, "And but for that Susi I'd have had five francs more for them."

It was very cold still, and the country was one vast white plain hedged in with bristling firs and pines all canopied with snow. But the sun shone, the road was possible because of much recent traffic, and his new boots, though terribly clumsy as yet, were warm and comfortable, and the big nails in them gripped the snow so that he walked with ease.

The food, the rest, and, above all, that girl's great goodness of heart towards him had helped him mightily and given him a lift out of his slough of utter despond.

There was goodness still in the world, in spite of his bitter experiences of these last five weeks—in this corner of it, anyway. His own country was all in ruin and chaos and had no place for him. But here were peace and quietness, rest for body and soul, and generous welcome for weary and broken men.

And here for a time he would stop. For a time—perhaps even for such time as might be left him, if he found a corner to his liking. He was sick of the world he had left. He would make friends among these kindly folk, and if the past slipped away from him for ever he would feel no loss in that, but rather gain.

The road led up and up till it wandered in among the clustering pines and firs. And here it was as though he had strayed into a mighty cathedral, with a lofty roof of snow and pillared aisles extending far on every side. And in it reigned a strange, dim silence, vast, illimitable depths of utter stillness, accentuated rather than disturbed by occasional rustling falls of streams of snow from overburdened branches up above.

The winter sun had sunk, like a great red ball of fire, into the heavy snow-clouds that lay behind the pillared aisles on his left, before he topped the ridge and came out into more open country. It was almost dark when at last he saw a light in front and pushed on hopefully after food and lodging. He had not met a soul since leaving the village.

It was evidently not Locle he was approaching. Locle, he understood, was a town. Here were only a few scattered houses. That, however, did not trouble him. All he needed was a roof over his head and a bed or a chair to lie in, and something to eat and drink. And all these his experiences of the morning made him feel sure of, however small the place he was coming to.

As he drew nearer he saw with surprise that if the houses were few there was no lack of life about them. The place, in fact, seemed all alive with men, and presently he made them out to be soldiers of the Swiss army, and reckoned there were between fifty and sixty of them. They

were standing in groups with the air of men awaiting orders.

But, strangest of all, drawn up in front of the largest of the houses, most of whose lower windows were lighted by lamps or candles inside, stood two great four-horse army waggons, whose loads gleamed and twinkled in the lamplight.

Before he could make out more his approach had been noticed. A buzz of talk ran round; all eyes were fixed on him; and a young sergeant came hastening to meet him.

"At last, Herr!" he said, in German, and in tones of hearty relief. "We began to fear you had got lost on the way."

"As a matter of fact, I believe I have," replied de Valle cheerfully. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, just receive these things and let them go. They've been here a couple of hours and they're anxious to get back."

"But what things? What is it all about?"

The young sergeant, a fine upstanding lad who was obviously something else first and soldier afterwards, stared at him in surprise.

"You are from the French army down yonder, are you not?"

"I am."

"Jawohl! It is precisely you we are all waiting for, this two hours and more."

"Had I known I would have hastened. But I still do not understand——"

They had come, as they talked, to the waggons; and to de Valle's immense surprise, he found their loads consisted of French chassepots and bayonets and a few swords.

"Nom-de-Dieu!" he jerked, in French, in his amazement. "What are all these?"

"They are the things you are to take over from the Prussians."

"But why?"

"They took them, they say, at Chaffois, under some misunderstanding in connection with some armistice. I don't understand it properly myself, but that's their story. They sent word to your General Clinchant that they would deliver them here this afternoon, and we understood some one would be sent to receive them, and give a receipt for them. Are you not he whom we expected, then?" and in the fuller illumination he eyed de Valle's old artilleryman's coat doubtfully.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not. I know nothing about it. But I suppose I could give a receipt for the things as well as the man who hasn't turned up. He's probably got lost also."

"Well, I wish you would. Those fellows are on the growl at being kept waiting so long. They were threatening to take them away again, which would be a pity. I've kept them as quiet as I could by giving them wine and cigars in the gasthaus there. There are about two thousand guns, they say, and a big lot of bayonets, and some swords and revolvers. Seems to me you might as well have them as they."

"Surely! I'll give a receipt for them all right. What about counting them?"

"We can count as we unload. I'd have done it before, but they wouldn't let us until you—or the other one—came. Better not say you're not the one we expected. It will only complicate matters, and once the things are all stacked inside there it'll be all right."

"Are you in charge there?"

"Our lieutenant, who is in command, has ridden into Le Locle to consult the colonel as to what was to be done. He may be back any time."

"All right! Perhaps you will be so good as to tell the Prussian gentlemen that you are ready now to get rid of them. By the way, what place is this?"

"Col-des-Roches."

"And Locle—where is that?"

"About a mile and a half over that way," and he hurried into the inn, and came out again with a number of Prussian soldiers and a couple of sergeants, all comfortably full of wine and all smoking long wiry black cigars.

They glanced superciliously at the representative of France and passed some rough jokes about his appearance. But de Valle paid no attention to them whatever. He strode into the inn, bought half a dozen of the best cigars they had, and stood coolly smoking while the unloading went on.

When it was finished, one of the Prussian sergeants produced an official receipt, and de Valle went inside with him to sign it. When he affixed his name and grade the Prussian eyed him curiously. But, lest he should betray his ignorance of the whole affair, de Valle judged it best to enter into no conversation with him.

The Prussian, however, asked, "Do you know if there are any *francs-tireurs* hanging about here, Herr?"

"I do not. I know nothing of the neighbourhood," and the man saluted and went out, marshalled his men, and with rough farewells to the Switzers, they tramped away into the darkness, joking among themselves as they went, and obviously glad to be off.

The young Swiss sergeant came up to de Valle and said, "I should think I may dismiss my men to their billets now. I can't imagine what's keeping the lieutenant, unless the colonel's off somewhere and he can't get hold of him. We've been guarding the whole frontier, you see, and it means a lot of work."

"I'm sure. Well, thank God, it's all ended at last. Yes, I should say you could dismiss your men. I want something to eat. Will you join me presently?"

"Glad to. I'm as hungry as a bear."

He hastened away to release his men, and de Valle went into the inn and bade them prepare their best and as quickly as possible. To pass the time he called for wine, and sat sipping it and hungrily sniffing the tantalizing odours of the coming dinner.

The young sergeant came in at last and flung down his cap and unbuckled his belt.

"Right man or wrong, I'm mighty glad you came, or those fellows would have drunk the place dry."

"You must let me reimburse any expense you've been put to. By the way, you haven't introduced yourself by name——"

"Christen Bayr. I'm from Brunnen Thal. We run the sawmills there, you know. Do you know the Brunnen Thal, Herr?"

"No; whereabouts is it?"

He was a pleasant, open-faced youngster, not over tall, but strongly built, of an easy-going gait to de Valle's soldierly sense, yet alert and quick-eyed, as befitted one whose life was spent in close proximity to whirring saws; and his manners were perfectly natural and therefore essentially good.

"You go by Bern and Thun and the lakes. It

is the prettiest place in all Switzerland. We get water pretty nearly all the year round, though we have steam we can turn to in case of need. I'll be glad to be back there. We were out for over a month in July, you know, and it makes a big break in one's work. And when you're working at high pressure all the time, it's a bit rough. They thought you might try to come in by Bâle, you see. We were up at Porrentruy—Herrgott, what's that now ? " and they both jumped up and ran outside.

For, from over there, in the direction in which the Prussians had gone, there had come the sharp crackle of rifles along the clear darkness of the winter night.

" Gott ! what can it be ? " jerked young Bayr again.

The Prussian sergeant's query came into de Valle's mind, and he asked sharply, " Are there francs-tireurs about ? "

" I've not heard of any."

" We must see what it means. Mon Dieu, if it should be so—! Yon Prussian asked me as to francs-tireurs—Call some of your men, and bring lights ! "

And in three minutes they were hurrying down the road, with every man of the little command at their heels. They had all heard the firing, and were as keen as their leaders to know the meaning of it.

They very soon found out. Along the road towards them came a tumultuous throng, noisily exultant, the sound of whose coming preceded them.

" Halt there ! " shouted de Valle, as they drew near.

The two bands stopped abruptly, leaving a space between, and he went forward with young Bayr, who swung a big stable lantern in his hand.

" What's all this ? " demanded de Valle.

But by the light of the swinging lantern he already

saw that his worst fears were realized, and his anger flamed hot and high.

In the midst of a wild-eyed mob of wolfish tatterdemalions, whose ragged blouses seemed held together only by their bayonet-belts, some wearing dilapidated *képis*, but all carrying rifles, stood the Prussians—or some of them—and behind them were the waggons which had just been discharged at Col-des-Roches.

"We trapped them down yonder in the wood, and had them before they knew. Half a dozen killed and wounded and twenty prisoners—" boasted one who came out to meet them and seemed to be the leader of the ragged crew.

"You trapped them—! Misérable! Is France sunk so low as that? These men came to make honourable reparation for a mistaken advantage, and you—you trap them! Out on you—treacherous skunks that you are!"

"And who the devil are you?" demanded the ragged leader, taken all aback by reception so brusque where he had looked for nothing but commendation.

"I represent France in this matter. By every law of right these men were under safe-conduct. You violate humanity. You are no better than murderers——"

"Mort-de-Dieu! Murderers indeed! Do you know who I am, then—you in the old coat? I am Riou, the franc-tireur——"

"Arrest him and all his gang! And set those men free," said de Valle authoritatively to the Switzers. "This will make trouble, and it will be hard to explain it. Miserable wretches!"

Then as the Switzers closed in on them, and the young sergeant went forward to lay his hand on Riou, the latter hauled a revolver out of his belt. De Valle dashed at him to knock it aside, and received the discharge full in

his chest. Before the franc-tireur could fire again Bayr's fist brought him to the ground.

The rest, discomfited by the rough reception of their exploit and the fall of their leader, yielded to the superior force of the Swiss and threw down their weapons, and most of them disappeared into the darkness.

Young Bayr was on his knees by de Valle, doing his best to stanch the wound in his chest, which was bleeding wastefully. A hasty word to one of his men sent him off hot foot to Le Locle for a surgeon.

"Send off the Prussians," said de Valle faintly, and as his eye lighted on the burly sergeant to whom he had given the receipt for the guns, "You understand . . . I greatly regret . . ."

"We understand, Herr," he said gruffly. "I would like to string that scoundrel up to a tree, but it was not your fault. Here—I can perhaps stop that bleeding," and he produced lint and bandages, and knelt and applied them with skill and understanding. "All the same," said he, "it's a job for a surgeon——"

"I've sent for one," said Bayr.

"Then carry him carefully back to the house and put him flat on a bed, and give him a little cognac. And now" —he turned furiously to Riou, the franc-tireur—"you give me back the receipt for the guns that you took from me, you —— murderer! If France has any honour left, she'll hang you sky-high."

They found the receipt in Riou's pocket, and gave it back to its rightful owner. The Prussians turned with their waggons, in which lay their dead and wounded, and tramped away into the night again, and the Switzers, carrying de Valle carefully on an overcoat, went slowly back to the inn.

Fate was surely kept busy in those days manufacturing her strange little ironies of Life and Death. There was poor Charles Lamotte, the cheerfullest and most generous of comrades, come safely through the whole of the war and all the miseries of that most hideous final campaign, only to fall on the very threshold of the open door of safety; and Jules Breton, staunchest and truest and brusquest of men, killed by almost the last shot fired; and, grimmest of all, here was Pat de Valle, surviving all the hailstorms of the German needle-guns, laid low by a French bullet—for taking the part of Germany against France—and that after the fighting was all over and done with! Truly, as grim and grotesque a parody on probabilities as mind could have conceived of!

XXIV

FOR a whole month de Valle lay prisoner in the little brown upper room in the Col-des-Roches inn, to which they had carried him the night he was shot. And never was prisoner more perfectly contented with his lot.

Outside, the snow piled high, almost up to the eaves, the country roads were next to impassable, and the oldest gossip could not remember ever being so pinched with the cold before. But in his snug brown room, with its big tiled stove, he lay as warm and comfortable as he had done in his dreams, whenever he had managed to snatch an hour's sleep during those bitter long nights of the disastrous march from Dijon.

And as he lay there, with ample time for thought, enjoying, in spite of his wound, the most utterly restful time he had ever known, his mind was confirmed in its resolution to seal up, since he could not tear out, the faded and crumpled leaves of the past and begin a fresh chapter in his life among the simpler people of this peaceful land.

He was sick of strife and all the petty meannesses of Courts and Parties and Society. He longed to get back to the peace and quietness and wholesome sincerities of a more elementary life. The past had yielded him little but heart-weariness and sorrow. He had been in the shadow. He would live for a time in the sun.

" He'll do," the surgeon from Le Locle had said, when he had overhauled him and got the bullet out from under

his right shoulder-blade. "He's terribly lean, nothing but skin and bone, and he badly needs a wash. But he's sound and hard. Feed him well as soon as the fever's down, and he'll pull through all right."

"I'll see to him," said Sergeant Bayr. "That bullet was meant for me, you see, and he took it. So I owe him something."

And, like the good fellow he was, he paid his debt to the full.

What became of General Clinchant's deputy in the matter of the returned weapons, they never learned. In the general confusion of providing for that vast horde of starving men, scattered all along the Val de Travers, discipline had vanished entirely. Orders were disregarded. They were like a mutinous shipwrecked crew, and the spirit was infectious. Once safe over the border, hooted and miscalled by their men, many of the officers simply shrugged their shoulders, washed their hands of the whole canaille, and gave all their attention to their own pressing needs.

Young Bayr saw that his patient had all that was good for him, and made a point of cramming more wood into the stove every time he came in. He ran up several times a day to see how he was getting on, and his cheerful face and talk were the best of tonics to the convalescent.

They became very good friends. Bayr had got his name as Duval; and de Valle—set on his idea of loosing himself completely from his old world, for a time at all events—let it stand at that. Claim to higher title and his proper standing, which he had no easy means of proving and no slightest desire to establish, might have placed a burden on their good-fellowship. He enjoyed the boy's frank and easy camaraderie, and let him see it. It was like a fuller draught of the new life.

Their conversation was indeed very one-sided. For many days, even when he was beginning to pick up strength again, much talking was forbidden him. And if at times Bayr ingenuously tried to sound him as to the past, a lift of the hand and a shake of the head always sufficed to turn him on to pleasanter subjects.

And of these he had no lack. Brunnen Thal, with its innumerable falls and streams; the sawmill, whose thudding wheel and screaming saws were sweetest music to him, though he confessed to other likings in that direction also, and broke out unconsciously, now and again, into melodious little yodel songs, which he said they all learned at school; his father, whom he obviously held in very high esteem as the possessor of much wisdom and understanding and unusual capability in business affairs—"He is maire of our commune, you understand, and has been for five years now, and they never had so good a maire before"; and of his sister Christine—"We are twins, you understand, and we have many thoughts in common. She is Christine. I am Christen. But she is cleverer than I am. She has been to school at Zurich. She knows things which even my father does not know."

"And your mother?"—as he made no mention of her.

"Ah, she died many years ago. And so Christine is house-mother to us, and better there could not be."

He dilated at length on the joys of the life devoted to trees: of journeys through the higher woods with the communal fathers to mark those that were to be cut; of the keen delights of the fellings, and the still riskier sport of shooting them like 100-foot lances down the mountain-slides—"They are devil-possessed, you understand, and you never know what they will do."

But best of all he loved his whirring saws, and the

long swift rush of the cool grey water under his thudding wheel, and the pungent smell of the sawdust, and the piles of clean-cut planks ready for multifarious service in the outer world.

"Christine says she wonders sometimes, when she hears my saw go screaming through their hearts, if it is certain they cannot feel. But we have settled it in our minds that they cannot, or one could not find one's so-great joy in the work. All the same, the first stroke of the axe into a tall red pine always makes me a bit uncomfortable, for, after all, it is killing it, you see. Then I say to myself, 'It's only wood; it cannot feel.' And then, as I chop, I forget its feelings, and only enjoy my own. And, anyway, wood is a necessity, and I suppose it was put there for our use."

"Undoubtedly. Same with cattle."

"Of course. One must eat, and one must have fire and shelter."

"Ay," said de Valle soberly. "It's when you come to the killing of men . . . and killing them in their thousands that the monstrosity of killing comes home to you."

"You have killed men?" asked the boy ingenuously, hoping perhaps to get him to talk of his past life.

"In fair fight . . . But think of this—we left Dijon between one hundred and thirty and one hundred and forty thousand strong. I doubt if there are half that come into Switzerland. Grim business!"

"It's awful to think of. I hope we'll never have it here."

"For your sakes, I hope not. . . . And for myself, I have had enough of it, and too much. I will have no more. . . . I will stop in this little country of yours that lives at peace with its neighbours——"

"You will come home with me to Brunnen Thal," said Christen, with a sparkle in his blue eyes. "My father says it. As soon as you can travel. He wishes to thank you himself——"

"Thank me? What for?"

"For taking that bullet that was meant for me, as you very well know. Oh, you may make small of it, but if it hadn't been for you, I might have been killed that night. Thunder, yes! That beast of a fellow!"

"It was nothing—just one of the little chances one takes a dozen times a day in war-time. But I would like to see your home, and the sawmills, and the glaciers, and the great mountains you have spoken of——"

"And my father, and Christine. They will make you very welcome. And the smell of pine sawdust will be good for you. It is the finest smell in the world. They will disband us very soon now. There is nothing more to fear. Then we will go . . . if you are able for it."

"I'll be all right. I feel sounder and fitter every day."

He had visits also from Lieutenant Bohlen, the officer in charge of the post, who had been detained at Le Locle that critical night, by the absence of his colonel, who had been away making a round of the other posts in his district, and no one else would take upon himself to advise in the matter.

But their conversations ran almost entirely on the war, and de Valle's experiences in it, and the reasons that had led to the tragic collapse of France. They never got in any way intimate, but his visits helped to pass the hours, which grew in length as the patient gained strength and began to long for the turning of the leaf and the opening of the new chapter in his life.

XXV

YOUNG Bayr came bounding up the stairs one day, all ablaze with his good news.

"The orders have come. We can start on Wednesday. Will you be fit?"

"Fit and ready, and mighty glad to move—though I've been uncommonly comfortable here, thanks to you, my boy."

"And that I'm here at all is thanks to you, my boy," mimicked Christen, almost off his head at thought of seeing his home-folk and smelling his beloved sawdust again.

With Bayr's help de Valle had procured from Le Locle a complete rig-out—warm underclothing and a thick rough suit and hooded cloak—and had been glad to see his previous rags rammed into the stove and made an end of. He felt as though the old life vanished with them up the chimney, and left him freer for the new. He stipulated that on their journey they should stop one day in Bern, so that he might visit a barber and have a Turkish bath, to cleanse himself finally of the very last taint of the war.

And he remembered Charles Lamotte's craving for the same in the depths of his squalor, as the one highest good. Eh bien!—in shaking off the taint of earth itself the dear lad had cleansed himself still more effectually, and reached, he hoped, a higher estate than any earth could offer.

His own ideas on such matters were of the vaguest and most inchoate. He had never thought very deeply upon them. Like the rest of his world—though his personal grievances with life had made him more introspective than many—religious feeling had withered in him before its roots had had time to strike. His lot had been cast in a frankly pagan atmosphere.

As a soldier, he had walked hand in hand with Death so long that he regarded it simply as natural and inevitable, sooner or later, and so, to be considered no more than the enemy's bullets. If one began to fear either the one or the other, it was time to seek some other way of life and death.

As to what came after, he had wondered of course, as men must wonder when that after may come at any moment. But he had got no further than the hope that, somehow or other, it would be an improvement on the woeful muddle here below. A pagan philosophy, with no foundation of faith or belief, but it was all his training had given him. And yet, if the call had come to him, he would have answered it as quietly and bravely as any Christian martyr—outwardly. Inwardly is a different matter.

They started at the earliest possible moment on the Wednesday morning, and drove in a farmer's cart to Le Locle, and there got the train for Bienne and Bern, found a barber and got trimmed into shape, and then sought the Sommerleist Bad in the Laupen Strasse. And there de Valle got baked and steamed and rubbed till he felt himself a new man at last; and Christen, who had never enjoyed a Turkish bath before, came out of it grateful to find himself still alive, and possessed of any skin whatever. "Herrgott!" was his explosive com-

ment, when they were well out of the building. "It was a foretaste of Hades!"

Then a very hearty meal among the gigantic barrels of the old Kornhaus-Keller, and they were ready for the road again.

By train to Thun, a dream of romantic beauty under its shimmering mantle of snow; then by steamer down the lake, with Stockhorn on the right, sprawling like a huge white rhinoceros nosing up to the snowy pyramid of Niesen—more appalling masses of snow on the Blümlis than de Valle had ever dreamed of—then three majestic peaks in front, soaring high into the upper blue in all the conscious serenity of indisputable dominance.

Christen pointed them all out with the gusto of possession. They had been his all his life. He was conscious and proud of his debt to them.

"Jungfrau, with her little white baby, Silberhorn, on her breast—Mönch in the middle—Eiger to the left. And the pointed one behind, with the two little white doves on, is Finsteraarhorn. Always she carries the two white doves."

"They are wonderful. Have you been up any of them?"

"Some of them, and so has Christine. But it is very hard work, and there is danger in places."

"They challenge one. They seem to say, 'You can't.' When I am quite all right again, I would like to try," said de Valle, with the customary craving to conquer the pride of them.

At the old Post Hotel in Unterseen, Christen hailed with high delight a wrinkled old fellow who was nodding in the sun on a wooden bench by the door.

"Hans Trinkler, you old turnip, wake up and give us

welcome ! " and he gave the ancient one so hearty a clap on the shoulder that he nearly rolled off his perch.

" Ey, but I'm glad to see you back safe and sound, Master Christen," grinned the old man, netting all his wrinkles into a close mesh and displaying a mouth devoid of teeth.

" And how's everybody ? "

" Everybody's all right, and Fräulein Christine too. She's been missing of you badly. They're all up getting the logs down from the higher woods."

" Ah-ha, I wish I was with them ! They've not got them all down yet ? "—with visible anxiety lest he should be missing it all.

" No, no. There's plenty more to come. And they're fine big trees this year, tall and straight and plenty wood in them."

" And what have you got here for us, Hans ? "

" The big sleigh and young Black Boy. He's eating his head off inside there. I bin here since ten o'clock so's to give him a proper rest."

" You've had something to eat yourself ? "

" Oh ay—and to drink—and to smoke—and was beginning to think you'd got yourself lost on the road."

" Or got kidnapped, I suppose," laughed Christen. " He never can get over the belief that I'm only about three years old, you see," he said to de Valle, and then, bethinking himself, introduced them to one another. " This is my friend, Herr Duval, who saved my life out there, Hans ; " and to de Valle, " Old Hans taught me to ride—on his foot—when I was three, and he's not quite sure if I've grown any since then. He always thinks of me as a kindchen."

The old man shook de Valle's hand very warmly,

saying with deep seriousness, " Ye did a good job that time, mein Herr, for if he'd bin taken 'twould have killed the Fräulein, I'm thinking."

" Then I'm glad the job came my way, Hans."

" Ye'll be wanting to eat," said the old man thoughtfully.

" No ; we ate at Bern inside a barrel as big as a house," said Christen. " We'll harness up and get along at once."

" He-he !—A barrel as big as a house—and ye ate inside it ! " chuckled old Hans, as he hurried through the big arched gateway to the stables, and they followed him.

Young Black Boy greeted Christen with a shrill whinny of delight and nuzzled him affectionately, and in five minutes more they were gliding across the bridge over the Aare, and all, including Black Boy, looking eagerly forward to the end of the journey.

It was a long ride, through a wonderful valley, which looked to the newcomer as though it had been cleft out of the heart of the mountains by one straight stroke of an Almighty hatchet.

In places the granite walls rose sheer as the side of a house for a thousand feet and more, and yet were but the pediments and footstools of the great white giants behind. The nearer sight of these, with their heads in the sky and their feet in the valley, and their mighty bulks and sprawling limbs all softened into curves of wondrous beauty by the thickness of their wintry robes, was almost overpowering.

And everywhere there were snow-draped trees—clinging to the stark face of the rocks like ferns to a wall, massing up above into great black battalions, clustering thick and white in clefts and hollows where side valleys opened

up new dim vistas, or where the great walls were seamed and chasmed by cracks and falls.

It was the most wonderful ride de Valle had ever had, and he sat silent under the overpowering impression of it all, while his companions chattered away of home concerns and all the little happenings during Christen's absence. The road kept crossing the foaming torrent of glacier water by stout wooden bridges roofed with shingles —to keep the snow from lying on them and blocking them, Christen told him. But at last, pounding over the last of these, they drove into a lateral valley; and Christen, his face alight with anticipation, turned to his companion and said, "Brunnen Thal!" in a tone which expressed more than all the words in the world.

The shadows were creeping about the lower lands, gathering in clusters here and there among the pines and firs and larches, preparing to swarm the heights; like soldiers getting ready to storm a fortress, thought de Valle, as his eye took it all in.

But up aloft the great white mountain-tops still shone like molten gold. And, as he watched, they paled and chilled, and the shadows below made an upward rush. And then of a sudden the ghostly peaks gleamed out again, all bathed in softest rose, of a hue so delicate and tender that he held his breath with the wonder of it, and all the shadows fell back.

The rose deepened into pink—into golden red—faded upward to the topmost peaks—and disappeared, as though an invisible hand had drawn it up into the sky. And the time of shadows and darkness had come.

The houses were scattered all along the valley, and lay back from the road in their gardens and orchards. So far they had not seen a soul. But as they drew towards

a cluster of buildings ranged along the edge of the stream, de Valle could make out great piles of logs and stacks of white cut timber, and many people gathered about them.

"They have met to give us welcome," said Christen, and standing up in the jolting sleigh, with a hand on each of their shoulders, he gave them one of the merry yodel calls with which the goat-herd greets his fellow or his girl on the opposite mountain-side.

But no jovial answer came back to them.

Then they were among the outer groups, and in place of the cheery greetings they expected, there was silence, and solemn faces.

"Herr Gott! What's got them?" jerked the boy, and as they drew up by the house and he jumped out, there came to meet him, swiftly but in silence, with arms extended in something more than welcome, one whom de Valle recognized by her likeness to Christen as his sister Christine.

She was taller than her brother by several inches, and an unusually shapely figure made her look taller still.

Her face he could not judge of. It was tragic with some great sorrow, and yet most marvellously quiet and composed. Her eyes were misted in dark circles which made them look unusually large, and lent a strange enchantment to her face. But they were steady as stars, and held each a little point of light like veritable star-shine.

"She is very strong," said de Valle to himself.

Not for one moment did he ascribe her composure to lack of feeling. He could see she was under the influence of some extraordinary emotion, and was holding herself in hand with every power she possessed.

Even in the failing light he saw the colour die out of Christen's face, as the gold and the rose had died off the mountain-tops and left them wan and white. He was pale to the lips before his sister spoke. He told de Valle, later on, that he had gauged the worst before she said a word. Only one thing possible could make Christine look like that.

"Father—?" he jerked; for that was the only possibility since Christine was there alive.

"Yes, my brother," and she put her hands on his shoulders in a way that seemed to bid him be strong, and at the same time besought him to help her to be strong too. "God has called him. You and I are left alone. . . . Come!" and they went into the house side by side.

Old Hans had sat the while with pinched face and gaping mouth, dazed and dumb-stricken. As a grave-faced elderly man came up to the side of the sleigh, the old man's mouth mopped and mowed but no sound came.

"You will be Herr Duval," said the newcomer, reaching out a large welcoming hand. "You find us in great sorrow, Herr. But we dare not think what it would have meant to the Fräulein if her brother had been taken too. And but for you it would have been. We give you very hearty welcome."

De Valle wrung his hand, and climbed out of the sleigh.

"Something terrible has happened, I can see. Would you tell us what it is?"—for old Hans was leaning over the side on both his hands, to learn the same, and seemed like to fall out in his craving for information.

"We were up in the high woods sending down the logs. Herr Bayr was directing. One, more devil-possessed even than usual, kicked awry and caught him on the back of the head and killed him on the spot. He

was a great man and good. We cannot realize that he is gone. Our loss is beyond our understanding."

The shock of it took de Valle's breath for a moment. Then he said, with deep feeling, "It is a terrible home-coming for the boy. He was so full of it, and of his father Poor lad! But Mademoiselle is strong in her sorrow."

"Yes; our Fräulein Christine is like her father—strong and good. Will you do me the honour to come with me to my house, Herr Duval—for a while at all events. They will be best left alone with their grief. I am Johan Rix."

"That is good of you, Herr Rix. Hans, old friend, get that horse to his stable. He is feeling the cold."

"Ey, ey!" said old Hans, fumbling the reins into his shaking hands. "To think of it! And last thing he said to me this morning was, 'Bring that boy home safe, Hans Trinkler, and I'll give you a whole pound of tobacco all for yourself.'"

"You shall have it, my friend."

"Ey, ey! But I'd sooner have had it from him," and he moved slowly on to the stables.

XXVI

MANY of the sober-faced neighbours came up to shake de Valle by the hand and give him welcome, as he and Johan Rix went back along the road.

They were a sturdy, bearded set, homely of speech and garment, but obviously full of kindliness, and sorely shocked and grieved at the day's tragic happening.

Herr Rix turned in at one of the brown wooden châlets, and a pleasant-faced woman met them at the top of the steps.

"My wife," said Rix. "Anna, this is Herr Duval, whom we have all been looking forward to meeting—but not like this. He will wait here with us for a time till we see——"

"You are welcome, Herr; and supper is just ready. You have had a long journey."

"If the ending had been happier it would have been nothing," said de Valle. "But my heart is very sore for Christen—and his sister. It is terribly sad for them."

"It is that," said Frau Rix. "But Fräulein Christine is very strong. She will help them both to stand it," and she poured out the coffee, and urged him to the bread and cheese and honey.

"We shall miss him terribly," said Rix, as they ate. "He was a wonderful wise man. He was father to us all—to the whole commune. What I can't get over is

why that damned log should have taken him, the best of us all, when it had choice of a dozen others who would hardly have mattered, compared with him."

"I suppose people have been asking that question since ever the world began. But no one has ever found the answer," said de Valle. "My two best friends came safely all through the war, and both were killed on that last day at Pontarlier; and I came through it all alive, only to be shot down by a Frenchman. These things are beyond us."

"Maybe you were spared to save Christen's life," said Frau Rix thoughtfully. "It makes me shiver to think what Christine would have done if Christen had gone too. They are very much to one another those two—more than most."

"She'd have carried herself as bravely as she does now, and let no one see how she felt it," said her husband.

"'Twould have broke her heart, all the same."

"Maybe, but she wouldn't have shown it. She takes after her father more even than Christen does. Though he's a fine lad too. But the Fräulein—! Ah!—steel of the finest, she is."

"She is that," confirmed Frau Rix heartily.

Rix was curious to hear about the war, and full of questions as to the why and wherefore of things. De Valle would fain have left it all behind him at Col-des-Roches, but there was no getting away from it, and he satisfied his host, to some extent.

But he said at last, "And now, I am sure you will understand it is not a very palatable subject with me, Herr Rix, so let us drop it. I want to forget it all. If I can find anything I can do here, I'm of the mind to stop here. I've had enough of war to last me a dozen lives."

"I'm sure," said Frau Rix, "I don't hold with war myself."

"Do you suppose I can find work here, Herr Rix?"

"There's plenty of work. Can you do figures—accounts and such?"

"I ought to be able to. What kind of accounts?"

"I was thinking of the saw-mills. Herr Bayr had a terrible good head for figures, you see. Better than Christen has. He's good at the work, but it was his father and Fräulein Christine saw to the business part. And they'll miss him there."

"I'd be glad if I could help in that—or anything else."

"I'm thinking Christen will see to that for you—when he's had time to get over his trouble."

And, as they sat discussing such matters, there came footsteps across the wooden balcony, and with a knock on the door Christen himself came in.

"It was good and thoughtful of you, Rix, to take Herr Duval in. . . . You saw how it was—" to de Valle. "It was a terrible shock to me, you see."

"Don't speak of it, Christen," said de Valle quietly. "All our hearts are with you. Don't trouble about me for a moment. I only wish I could be of any help——"

"She wants you,"—there was only one "she" for Christen at the moment. "She sent me to beg you to come."

"But . . . Surely I shall be intruding——"

"You don't know her. If she hadn't meant it she wouldn't have said it. Maybe it'll do her good too." And de Valle got up at once and went with him.

XXVII

CHRISTINE had risen from her seat by the great white-tiled stove, at sound of their footsteps, and was standing waiting for them.

De Valle was struck again by her shapely figure and grace of movement as she came to meet them. The shaded lamp did not permit him to see her face very clearly, but he was conscious of a pair of dark-seeming eyes, with a tiny ray of light in each, fixed very steadily on his. And her voice was gravely sweet and full and round in tone.

"You have pardoned our seeming neglect, I am sure, Herr Duval," she said. "I knew you would understand——"

"I understood perfectly, Fräulein. I would not have intruded now but that——"

"I could not have slept if I had not thanked you for my brother here. If I had lost him too—! But God was good to us and he was spared. Our dear father was longing to thank you also. He was looking forward to it. Now—you must accept his grateful thanks through me"—she stretched a quick impulsive hand towards him, and he grasped and shook it warmly.

"I am grateful that the opportunity was granted me," and he bowed over her hand before releasing it.

"You will stop here with us——"

"But will not a stranger be in your way?"

"He who saved my brother's life at risk of his own can be no stranger in this house. I thank you in my heart each time I look at him. Thank God, I have him back! But—perhaps—with our dear dead one still here—you would prefer——"

He laid his hand gently on her arm to stop any such thought in her.

"War hardens one terribly. My two dearest friends died by my side at Pontarlier. I had seen men falling in hundreds and thousands, but the loss of those two came home to me more than all those others. And now—here—your loss I do think hits me harder still. And that is very strange, for I had never known, or even seen, your father. . . . Would it pain you to let me see him?"

"Come!" she said, and took up the lamp and led the way into an adjoining room, which had evidently been their father's office and workroom.

There were drawings and sectional diagrams relating to doors and windows and wooden houses, and all the multifarious things that are made out of wood; and a desk covered with papers. And in the middle of the room, on a long table which had been transformed into a bed by means of a mattress and sheets and a pillow edged with lace, lay the body of him who, but a few hours before, had been everything to his children, everything to his neighbours, everything to the whole commune.

De Valle gazed down at him with a keen desire to learn for himself what manner of man he had been. Christine held the lamp with a steady hand so that the light fell full on their father's face. Christen gulped down his grief till he came near to choking; he had not yet got over the shock and the sudden disappearance out of his life of that which had been so vital to it.

It was a very fine grave face that lay there on the lace-edged pillow, and as de Valle looked down at it he understood whence Christine got her brave composure. The wide, strong forehead, the somewhat prominent cheek-bones which gave distinction and character to the face, the shapely clear-cut nose, the firm mouth just slightly smiling now as though in scorn of Death, the resolute, rounded chin; all these he got tantalizing glimpses of in the strong sweet face still shadowed by the lamp-shade.

The dead man's face was white almost as the sculptured marble of a saint. The dreadful wound, from which the life had fled so instantly, was hidden. There was nothing to show that he had not died in his bed, cheerfully certain of better things to come.

"It is a noble face," said de Valle softly. "I feel it a loss not to have known him."

"It is true," said Christine. "Everyone who met him was the better for it. The world is the poorer for his going."

She bent and kissed the white forehead, and the dead man seemed to smile back at her. Then she quietly led the way back into the other room.

"Your room is all ready for you," said Christine, "for we were looking forward to your coming. And I'm quite sure he would not like the accident of his death to interfere with your comfort."

"You think . . . they still know . . ."

"Of course. He lives on—there. And he would have no joy in the life there if it meant forgetting us altogether. Of course he will have greater interests as well up there, but they will not keep him from thinking about us. Christen dear, smoke if you please! And you, Herr Duval. It will be good for us all."

"I don't know," said Christen, fingering his pouch doubtfully. "It doesn't seem quite right——"

"What nonsense! What harm do you do him by smoking? What good do you do him by not smoking? That is foolishness. You will smoke all you wish, as you would have done had he been here to smoke with you."

So they lit their pipes and found comfort in them.

And de Valle—when, later on, Christine had, with the courtesy of the good house-wife, lighted him herself to his room, and bidden him good-night and good sleep—was conscious that a new and gracious influence had come into his life.

She was undoubtedly very wonderful, this Christine. When she shook his hand that time, he felt a sudden enrichment of life, as though she were so charged with strength and virtue that she passed them on to others by simple contact.

He was eager for the morning, to give him a proper sight of her. For, even when she took him to his room with the candle, its flickering dappled her face with shadows and he could not see it properly. He knew what it would be like, but he wanted to see it and watch it.

He slept well and woke early, and the sight he got from his bedroom window quickened in him a desire for more. He dressed very quietly, and stole noiselessly down the stairs to have a look round before the rest of the world was astir.

But he counted without his hostess. She was busy in the kitchen, draped from neck to foot in a most house-wifely overall of blue and white check, and came at once to greet him.

"You did not sleep?" she asked, with an inflection of regret in her voice.

"Thank you, I slept like a top! But I've got used to sleeping in snatches and rising early, you see, and when I looked out of the window I couldn't rest till I had seen it in full."

"Our Thal is very beautiful. I don't know any place equal to it. Will you have coffee before you go out?"

"May I wait till you and Christen are having yours?"

"I had mine half an hour ago. Christen is not up yet. Yesterday was very sore on him, poor boy!"

"I'll wait for him, then. You must have been up very early—or perhaps you never went to bed—or at all events, could not sleep."

"Nay, I slept well for I was very tired; but there is much to be done——"

"I hope you will let me do anything I can to help."

"We will see. Have a look about you now, and I will have Christen down in half an hour. He will want to show you the saw-mill himself. It is his great delight."

She nodded and went back to her work, and he strolled along the road, devouring the beauties of the Thal with the outward eye, but with the deeper eye of his mind dwelling enjoyably on this first sight he had had of Christine Bayr in the full light of day.

There was undoubtedly a most wonderful charm about her, and he sought to trace it to this feature and to that.

Was it her eyes? They still looked unusually large, by reason of the misty shadows her grief had lodged there in spite of her brave composure. They were, he decided, very dark blue, with tiny sparks in them, and unknown depths of understanding and earnestness.

Was it the wonderful thick plaits of dark brown hair, coiled round the shapely head like a coronet? They were

entrancing, and gave her a most queenly and commanding air.

Was it simply her face, to which the high cheek-bones, like her father's but more sweetly rounded, gave such a look of purposeful strength? Or the firm little chin? Or the straight clear-cut nose? Or the soft white column of her neck rising out of the blue and white check apron? Or the supple shapely figure of her, full of gracious curves and the buoyancy of life?

All these it was that went to the making of her—mused de Valle, while his eyes ranged entrancedly over the snowy peaks shimmering like silver in the early sun, and over the lower valley, all a great placid sea of white mist just beginning to boil and melt under the impulse of the sunbeams—all these were herself; but in, and above, and through, and more than all these was the inner Christine—the hidden soul that showed somewhat in her face, that looked somewhat out of her eyes, that expressed itself somewhat and indefinably in her hair, her hands, her movements, in the varying tones of her voice.

He recognized her in short as an unusually strong and beautiful soul in, to him, a very beautiful body. But he knew that what he saw was only what she permitted the rest of the world to see—that above and beyond were the true heights and depths of her nature, an inner sanctum into which one man alone would be permitted to enter.

And he sighed as he thought that to one man there could not be permitted even the thought of entering there.

He saw Christen come out and look about for him, and then come along to meet him. He was looking the better for his night's rest—more composed, at all events, but still sorely shocked and grieved—as different a

Christen Bayr from him of the little brown room in the inn at Col-des-Roches as could well be imagined.

"Well, did I say too much about our Thal?" he asked as they met.

"You didn't say half enough. No one could. It is the most wonderful place I have ever seen."

"And in Spring, and Summer and Autumn it is more beautiful still. Will you come in to breakfast now? And afterwards I'll show you the saw-mill."

"He finds it better even than he expected, Christine," said Christen, as they sat down to the table, and Christine sat down with them out of courtesy, and to have another bite; it was so long since she had had her first coffee.

"You like it?" she turned to de Valle with shining eyes.

"I have never seen anything so beautiful; and Christen says it is still more beautiful without the snow."

"When all the Spring flowers are out it is like a dream of heaven. I think I like it best then. It is the coming of life. Summer and Autumn are very beautiful, with all the fruit and the changing leaves. But—yes, I like the coming of life the best."

"Have you decided how to make use of me?" asked de Valle. "You promised to see in what way I could help."

"You had better help Christen and Jan Rix, I think. We shall need many tables, Christen; just planks and trestles will do, with cloths on. You see,"—to de Valle, with a touch of proper pride that became her very prettily —"they will come from far and near to the funeral of Christian Bayr. He was mayor of the commune for the last five years, and they would never have wanted another as long as he lived. And we must offer them such simple

hospitality as we can. Anna Rix and Bertha Grun are coming in to help me with the bread-making and cooking, and we shall be at it all the day. . . . I sometimes think it is a very wise provision of Providence that such things have to be done. It keeps one from dwelling too much upon one's loss just when it is heaviest."

"Better to be kept too busy than to brood," said de Valle with a nod. "We know that in the army also."

After breakfast Christen took him along to the saw-mill, which was at a stand, and would be till after the funeral. But he showed him round and explained things to him with great gusto and obvious pride, for this was the business he loved and understood from beginning to end—from growing pine to saw-dust pit. The whole place was deserted, except one far-away workshop where, with closed doors, old Hans Trinkler and another, who might have been his brother, were busily at work, with as little noise as possible, on the Master's coffin.

Christen just looked in on them to see how they were getting on.

"It's made out of a big pine from the Brunwald," he said soberly. "He cut it himself, and sawed it himself. We none of us thought what use would be made of it."

"Never thought he'd be the first to go," said old Hans shakily. "I mind of the day he was born. Ye mind of it, Abraham Rys?"

"Ay, I mind of it. His father giv every man in this mill a whole pound of tobacco all for himself."

"Ay, he did, and good tobacco it was too—better'n what one gets nowadays."

"'Twas that. And day he was married. I mind o' that too."

"So do I. We had a feast here that day such as Brunnen Thal doesn't often see."

"An' now he's gone, and us old chaps left. Don't seem right somehow."

"They're the two oldest we have," said Christen, as they passed on, "and they make all the coffins. I have heard that they've made their own, and have got them all ready and waiting somewhere about."

Then Jan Rix came along, and they were all three busy picking out planks, and carrying them to the house, and fixing them up on trestles in the kitchen and living room and in a large new workshop, just erected, where doors and window-frames were to be made on a large scale. The machinery had not yet been fitted up. It had all come up the valley on sledges while Christen was away, and he had not seen it yet.

"We were to fit it up the very first thing when I got back," he said soberly. "And now instead—this!"

Similar reminders of their loss and its tragic suddenness met him at every turn.

A man came along the mountain-side, in some marvellous fashion, to see Herr Bayr about some trees that were to be cut by the village fathers in the Meien Thal. Another came all the way from Unterseen to place a contract with him for the woodwork of some new houses there.

It seemed almost incredible that at this time yesterday he was in the full vigour of life, and now—that quiet figure lying like a sculptured saint in his own business-room in the house there, done for ever with trees and axes and screaming saws and well-cut planks—except the six that formed his coffin.

It was in the stress of these matters, which weighed

heavily on him in their constant recurrence, that Christen turned to de Valle one time and said, "Let me call you by your christened name, as you call me Christen. It will feel more friendly. But I only know you as Herr Duval and that sounds——"

"Do. My name is Constant," said de Valle, selecting on the spur of the moment one among his many forenames.

"It is a good name," said Christen, and thereafter called him by it.

And since, in this new chapter of his life, he was known to them only as Constant Duval, M. le Comte de Valle may well disappear—killed, as was reported, in that final hot fighting at La Cluse, which held the Germans at bay and gave the broken army its last chance—and Constant Duval, apt student of trees and saws and planks and doors and windows, may very well take his place with us as he did with them all in Brunnen Thal.

BOOK II

DUVAL

I

CONSTANT DUVAL developed a quite genuine, and to Christen's mind and great content, a flatteringly keen, interest in the saw-mill in all its details.

With all reverence, and the inexpressible regrets of his commune and business acquaintances from far and wide, Herr Bayr was laid to rest in the little stone-walled graveyard in the Unter Thal.

Duval in his time had seen many funerals—the grim hurried sepultures of the battlefield, just one degree better than the frequently unavoidable neglect which left the dead where they lay till fears for the living shovelled them into the common trench; and grand military funerals with all the ceremonious pomp of slow-marching troops, and muted bands, and crêped colours, and myriads of eager spectators.

But never had funeral impressed him as did this simple cortêge winding slowly along the snowy road—just a thin black streak in the vast white hollow of the valley.

On either side the great snow-clad mountains, peak after peak, looked down in solemn silence on this last

journey of him who had known and loved them so well. And all along their sweeping flanks and towering sides the sombre pines and firs and larches hung like funeral plumes—or, again, to Duval's newly-impressionable mind, they seemed, like the dense crowds of Paris, straining eagerly to see the passing show.

It was, indeed, a very simple show. Just the plain pine coffin on a sledge drawn by Black Boy, who was so restive under the unusual constraint to walking-pace that Johan Rix had his hands full; then Christine and Christen, and behind them Frau Rix and Duval, and behind them every soul in Brunnen Thal, except those who were too old, and those who were too young, to walk the long five miles there and five miles back.

Christine, strong in her own ideas of the fitness of things, had begged them all to come in their everyday clothes.

"For myself," she had said, "I do not believe in mourning-clothes," and when Duval—in the spirit of his Parisian traditions where the emblems of mourning were apt to run to somewhat fearsome lengths, and in the spirit of inquiry which her personality provoked in him—expressed surprise, she said:

"He never would wear mourning things. He used to say that too often it was only an outward parade of sorrow, and he saw no reason why we should grieve because a friend had come into the good fortune of the larger life. That is how he looked at it, and he made me see it that way also."

"It is a new idea to me, and a great one," he said thoughtfully.

"It is also very comforting," she said.

A still larger crowd was waiting for them at the little

graveyard. And there, in the bright sunshine, in the solemn silence of the bare-headed throng which could not nearly all get inside the walls, and of the great white giants looking down from above, the old grey-headed pastor, in his gown and Geneva bands, said their simple farewell to him they had loved, and consigned his body to earth and his soul to his Maker.

And all the way there and all the way back, as he walked beside Frau Rix and talked with her at times, Duval's war-weary eyes turned constantly, and with a new and curious sense of restful contentment which he did not seek to define, on the graceful figure with the well-poised head and energetic step, pacing along just in front of him with Christen.

On the way back Fräulein Christine loaded the sledge with the smaller folk, and sent them briskly home in Johan Rix's charge, to Black Boy's great delight.

So Christen and Christine reigned in their father's stead.

There were no legal formalities to be gone through. They simply carried on the business; and the day after the funeral the great wheel started its masterful thudding again, and the saws began their whirring and screaming which was Christen's sweetest music.

Here he was in his element, and it was a pleasure to Duval to watch his deft handling of the huge logs which had once been kingly pines swaying their tall crests on the higher mountain sides.

Christen had made a careful and efficient sergeant of the line, though he had never looked a soldier or enjoyed the work. But here—it was a revelation to Duval to see him, with long steel crowbar in one hand and stout steel hook and chain in the other, step thoughtfully from log to log till he came on the one he wanted. Then, with

a deft thrust or two of the bar, the chain was fixed round it in a certain position and a certain way, and Christen, hooking his short chain on to a longer one, would pull a lever, the chain would tighten, and that huge log would come sliding and bumping over its fellows till its meek blunt nose was on the great travelling table which it would only leave in planks when the screaming saws had done their work. Duval grimly likened it to an operating-table.

"How long did it take you to learn that, Christen?" he asked admiringly, the first time he watched him at it.

"Oh, I don't know," laughed the boy. "It seemed to come natural; with always being in the midst of it, I suppose."

"It's mighty clever. Suppose you'd hitched that chain an inch higher up or an inch lower down, what would have happened?"

"It wouldn't have come to the saw, that's all. You learn by experience just where to fix it. In time it becomes a kind of instinct, I suppose."

For two or three days Duval watched the working of the saw-mill, and wandered about the Thal as far as the snow would let him. Then, one night after supper, when their pipes were going, and Christine was sitting by the stove with her knitting, he said quietly, "I wonder if you could find me a job about the saw-mill, Christen. Without disturbing anyone else, of course."

"Of course I can,"—with a quick gratified glance at his sister, which showed that this had been subject of discussion between them, and this resolution hoped for. "We hoped you would decide so——"

"That was very good of you. I'll have everything

to learn, but I think you'll find me teachable. Whether I'll ever be able to make logs dance along to my bidding as you do I don't know."

"That is only a small part of it. If you and Christine could see to all the books and figures and letters, that would be fine. You see, she used to help my father with all that, and she is better up in it than I am, and I never liked that part of the business anyway. I can do all the rest, but I'll be mighty glad to be rid of all the book-work.

"I'd like to chop things now and again," said Duval longingly, at which Christine laughed softly.

"That is so like a man," she said. "He never thinks he's really doing proper work unless he's either making or marring—at all events doing something with his hands," —as two remonstrative faces turned on her with energetic puffs which heralded argument. "Whereas really the headwork is the most important of all."

"All the same," said Christen stoutly, "if Hand did not furnish stuff for Head to sell, Head would soon have nothing to eat. You can't fell trees or saw logs with your head alone."

"It's the same as in the body, or in the army, or anything else. Unless the different parts work properly together they won't accomplish much. That's been our trouble over yonder," said Duval, with a jerk of the head. "The machinery didn't work well together, and as for the Heads. . . ."

"As for the Heads?" repeated Christine, who was still much mystified as to the causes of The Great Collapse, and eager, like all the rest of the world, for clearer understanding of it.

"Oh, well, there were too many Heads altogether,

and not much in some of them. And they were most of them thinking all the time how they could manage to force themselves up a bit above the others."

"No wonder you came to grief," said Christine.

"And are glad to get out of it all," added Christen.

"Yes, I am glad to get out of it. When I was in the thick of the muddle I used to say to myself, 'If I ever get out alive,' which did not seem at all possible, 'I'll cut the whole business, and find some quiet corner where I can live and die in peace.' And I don't suppose there are many prettier places than Brunnen Thal."

"None," said Christen. "I told you so. And we're glad you feel like that about it. You will go on living here with us——"

"But that is altogether more than I could have hoped for," he said quickly; and, glancing across at Christine through the smoke to see what her face would tell him, asked, "Are you sure I won't be one too many, Fräulein Christine?"

But there was no reservation or shadow of uncertainty in it as, with quiet energy, she endorsed her brother's ideas.

"Of course you will stop with us," she said. "The house is much too large for just us two. . . . And we never can forget that but for you there might have been only one of us left all alone in it."

"You are both very good to me. I'll do my best to repay all your kindness——"

"Done it," grunted Christen through his pipe-stem.

"And you'll let me have a whack at a tree or a log now and again, just to feel as if I was really doing something at times?"

"As much as you want," Christen assured him, and

so that matter was settled, and Constant Duval's future decided.

If Christian Bayr had lived he would undoubtedly, without in any way abating his recognition of the mighty service their guest had rendered them, have desired, and would probably have arrived at, a greater knowledge of his antecedents and his reasons for being so willing to expatriate himself.

Christen accepted him without reserve or question. He had saved his life at risk of his own, and on that solid foundation their friendship had thriven bravely.

Christine, with more of her father's nature, pondered him much, and her clear eyes rested on him at times, not in doubt, but undoubtedly in thoughtful questioning.

She liked all she saw and knew of him. She had to acknowledge to herself that they did not know very much, but what they did see and know was surely some guarantee for what they did not.

She judged him something more than an ordinary soldier of the line; though what he might really have been, her experience in such matters was too small to assist her to.

His face was frank and open, and his voice had an honest ring in it. His hands were the hands of a soldier who had just come through six weeks' hard campaigning and four weeks on the shelf. His manners, his ways of eating and drinking and talking, all the little details of behaviour which count for so much in a woman's eyes, and tell for or against a man in her conception of his personality—all these seemed to her exceptionally good.

She had been at school in Zurich, and knew good manners when she saw them. Her neighbours of the Thal were as good, honest, hard-working folk as one could

wish, but they had had little time for the cultivation of polite behaviour.

Of course, as she said to herself, the French were like that. Whatever they might lack in other respects their manners were good.

His German was hardly as fluent as their own, which was not surprising. The wonder was that a Frenchman should speak any at all. It was a fortunate thing that he had once worked in Germany for a time—as some kind of a clerk, she had gathered.

Both she and Christen also spoke French, but German mostly and from preference. Had their intercourse been in Duval's native tongue, the niceties of his speech might have set her wondering still more.

But—and more than all—he was to her the man who had saved her brother's life at risk of his own, and she never forgot it. Even though he had been a very different man from what he was, that thought—and the one that invariably followed it with a shiver, "What if he had not?"—would have been enough to encircle him with a halo which would have rendered all his faults of small account to her grateful eyes.

His own mouth was of necessity closed concerning himself. He would not lie to them, and he could not tell them all the facts without inevitably raising barriers against their fuller friendship.

He desired nothing more than they so generously offered him—a home, work, genial companionship, and a quiet and simple life in this hidden pocket of the hills.

II

THE remaining logs were got down from the higher woods without further accident. Christen preferred leaving the superintendence of the work, for this once, to Johan Rix. As a rule it was an adventure in which he took the greatest delight, but the thought of what those upper woods had cost them was too heavy on him still, and he decided to leave it to the others.

At home, Duval—" Constant " always with Christen, and before long, by reason of their close association both in and out of business hours, with Christine also —proved himself an apt pupil.

The accounts and correspondence were indeed of no very intricate character, and once he had fathomed the measurements and prices and different varieties of wood, he could easily have taken all the office-work off Christine's hands. But, in the first place, her companionship in the matter was very pleasant to him ; and in the next place, he would sooner have quitted Brunnen Thal than have done anything that should have even the remotest appearance of wishing to oust her from the position she had occupied during her father's life.

And so, whenever he found any time on his hands inside, he went out to Christen and set himself to learn the various natures of trees and woods, and the capabilities of strangely-toothed saws, and all about the not very complex machinery of water-wheels and saw-mills. And,

when Christine came out with her knitting or sewing, and sat on a log and watched and listened, this was the part of the business he liked best, just as Christen did.

The upper alps and mountain-sides were still deep in snow, but bit by bit it was disappearing from the lower lands, and brown earth and faded pasture were beginning to show through.

It was like the slow withdrawal of a tattered white cloak from a sleeping beggar. Discoloured patches lay here and there in shady hollows for a time, till at last there came a week of sweeping rains which dressed the high lands all in spotless white again but swept the low lands bare.

Spring came merrily in, and the Thal became transformed. White-rushing streams and waterfalls, large and small, were everywhere. The faded pastures flushed suddenly with tender vivid green. The lower forest trees quickened into life and leaf. The orchards burst into leaf and flower almost at the same time. And, not to be behindhand, the very firs and larches, which had stood the winter's frost and snow without a shrivel, put out new little green fingers at the ends of their stiff gaunt arms and prinked it with the rest.

And Constant Duval, in closer touch with this sweet coming of new life than ever he had been before, watched it all with new eyes—and thought of him who lay under the wall at La Cluse, and of him who lay on the platform of De Joux, and wondered who would bury them ;—and of the tens of thousands whose bodies strewed the route from Héricourt to Pontarlier,—and of those still more tens of thousands waiting patiently to be sent back to their ruined and desolated homes.

And he thanked God—with a " Dieu merci ! " that

lacked nothing in fervency if, as yet, it implied little to him in the way of belief—for franc-tireur Riou's treacherous bullet that had landed him in Brunnen Thal. Thanked God, too, after the same fashion, that the Comte de Valle was dead, and that Constant Duval, the sawyer, was very much alive, and very much happier than ever he had been in his life before.

The doings of the outer world troubled them little as a rule in Brunnen Thal. Twice a week Christen received by post a *Bund*, which gave them all the news they wanted. It was from it they learned that the Swiss authorities had decided to put Riou on his trial at Neuchâtel; and presently, to Christen's intense disgust, there came a summons to him to attend as witness. He was very full of work, and could ill spare the time, and the thought of going was detestable to him.

"You'll come too?" he grumbled to Duval. "You know as much about it as I do."

"Not I. I've had quite enough of the fellow. Besides, I must stop to help Johan Rix with things here. There's heaps to do."

"You'll get your hands cut off if you're not careful," grinned Christen, to whom his amateurish incursions into practical work were still a source of amusement.

"I'll let Johan do all that part of the business. But, in any case, I'm not asked to go, and I'm glad of it."

"I hope they'll shoot him—the wretch," said Christine energetically, for she could never forget how near he had come to leaving her all alone in the world.

However, before the time arrived for Christen to go, there came word that the French authorities had claimed the right to try Riou themselves, on the grounds that he was a Frenchman and that whatever he had done had

been done on French soil; and so Sergeant Bayr's attendance would not be needed.

"Hourra!" cried Christen.

"I'm glad you haven't to go," said Duval thoughtfully. "But——"

"But what, then?"

"I'm ashamed to say it, but I fear it means that the wretch will get off. What he did—I mean in ambushing that convoy—was a disgraceful piece of treachery, seeing that the Germans were doing an act of courtesy which they had no need to do. You would think that every right-minded man would condemn it. But—" he pieced out his train of thought carefully—"it was done on French soil—while France was still at war with Germany, for the armistice in Paris specifically excluded us. It was done against Germans, and resulted in the death and capture of Germans—a score for France. And, if I know anything of my countrymen, the feeling will be so bitter against Germany still, and for a very long time to come, that the man who managed to score off them—even by treachery—will be looked on as a hero, not as a malefactor. Morally, you see, he's a disgrace to his country, or any country. But from a purely legal point of view—" and he shook his head doubtfully.

"As you put it, I'm afraid he'll get off," said Christine regretfully. "He's a wicked wretch all the same."

"Undoubtedly! . . . But war is a terrible thing for stirring up all that is worst in a man. . . . And the Germans were ruthless in their treatment of the francs-tireurs. I have seen whole villages burnt to the last stick because some of the men were francs-tireurs. They may have burnt this man's home, killed his wife and children——"

" Mein Gott, I hope we will never have war in Switzerland ! " said Christine fervently.

" For your sakes, I hope we never shall. And, for myself, one war—especially a losing war—is more than enough for a lifetime."

The matter ended very much as he had foreseen. Riou was tried, and acquitted with acclaim.

" France has sunk low," said Duval, when they saw it in the *Bund*. " Can you wonder that I have no desire to return there ? "

III

DUVAL marvelled to himself at times that so quiet and uneventful a life should contain such soul-satisfying content and happiness.

Every day was sheer delight to him. When he contrasted his present joy of living with the years that were gone, especially the later ones, he breathed his fervent "Dieu merci!" with something more of meaning and understanding.

He was learning much—not only in the matter of accounts, and the methods of feeding screaming saws without getting his hands cut off—but in wider and higher ways.

His close companionship with the Bayrs, and more especially with the lofty spirit of Christine, developed the deeper nature in him which his previous life had barely sounded, until its utter break-up under the batterings and bruisings of misfortune had brought him to the ground and to a new and absolutely elemental outlook on life.

The de Valle of Court and camp was dead in him before Riou's bullet laid him low at Col-des-Roches. Riou had only helped him along the road in which he had already set his feet in their typical stout new boots. Old Jacob Stiefel's hobnailed masterpieces had been the first outward and visible signs of his determination against the past and his intention towards the future.

He was living, for almost the first time in his life, in

a perfectly healthy environment. The mental and moral atmospheres were as bracing as the physical, and his whole nature responded heartily to all these new uplifting influences.

It seemed to him that now, at last, he could breathe freely and live his own life. His boyhood had been largely passed in the leading-strings of priestly tutors. His younger manhood, which at the time had seemed to him freedom, since it had meant release from the leading-strings, had proved but a change of durance.

In camp, at Court, in the brief hope and failure of his home-life, he had found bonds and fetters as cramping and repressive as the rules of the Lycée.

Never until now had he felt himself absolutely his own master; responsible to none save to these new friends, whose generous recognition of a slight service had made this happy state of things possible to him.

It was natural, and indeed inevitable, that he should fall into their ways—of living in the first place; and, as a consequence of their close intimacy—of thinking also, both in regard to the common things of life and presently in larger matters also. And, one of the greatest of the changes wrought in him by his coming to Brunnen Thal was a gradual widening and deepening of thought respecting matters which had hitherto concerned him little or not at all.

It could hardly be otherwise with anyone living in the same house and in such close community—almost family relationship—with Christine Bayr.

That her nature was an unusually fine one was very apparent to him. Her full heights and depths he could not yet fathom, but what he did see and comprehend sounded new chords in him.

Never in his life had he met anyone quite like her. She was at once so blithesome and so considerate; so full of the joy of life, and yet so thoughtful on the deeper matters and of the welfare of all about her. Her ready laugh was like music. She would sing to herself, as she worked, the little yodel songs of the schoolhouse, as unconsciously as a bird sings, from sheer gladness of living. He saw her skipping and dancing with the children of the village, the merriest of them all, and on occasion he heard her rate them soundly for their little peccadilloes and lapses from her high standard of right.

If a neighbour was ill or in any need, she was there masterfully ministrant. Young as she was, she practically mothered them all, by reason of the somewhat better education she had had, and of their profound belief in the common-sense and sagacity she had inherited from her father.

Did Black Boy sprain a hock, it was Christine, equally with Christen, that Hans Trinkler came to consult, and Christine who found the liniment and bandages. Did Bertha Grun's youngest fall ill with croup, it was Christine who flew to the rescue.

Whatever went wrong, the first and most natural thing to do was to run up to the big brown house by the mill and consult Fräulein Christine, certain that some good would come of it.

Her life was obviously guided by principles which were as yet somewhat beyond him. He believed in truth and honour, and generosity and courage, and by these he had endeavoured to shape his ways. Of religious belief he practically had none, but that was the fault of his upbringing.

His mother's early death had consigned him to the

care of priests. His father's education had been on the same lines. They had been of one mind in their dislike of the black robes and all their teachings. The old Count died as he had lived, like one of the stoics of old, indifferent as to what might follow. And his son, if the call had come to him before he came to Brunnen Thal, would have gone by the same cheerless road—gallantly and uncomplainingly, but with never a hope of better things.

But here he was in a new atmosphere, as different from that of his previous life as life is from death. His mind, still sore from its bruisings, was peculiarly open to new impressions. Face to face with Fräulein Christine he felt something lacking in himself. She had something that he had not. And he, who had known Courts and Kings, consciously acknowledged her his superior in regard to many things which the Courts and Kings he had known, being overmuch occupied with other matters, had had little time to attend to.

His physical environment, too, was not without its effect on him. In one accustomed to the lower life of the cities of the plains, this sudden transplanting to the noble companionship of the everlasting hills, in all the solemn silence and majesty of their dazzling winter robes, could not fail to produce an exaltation of the mind and senses which was wholly beneficent and vivifying.

He was not, by very many, the first man who has discovered his soul through the uplifting influences of God in Nature and in the form of a good and beautiful woman.

IV

EVERY Sunday the whole village was in the habit of turning out and wending its way down the valley to the plain little church in the Unter Thal, and as a rule arrived there earlier and more regularly than did those who lived under the shadow of its pointed spire.

It was five miles there and five miles back, and at times the road was almost impassable. But it needed an avalanche across it, or something quite abnormal in the way of weather, to stop the Brunnen Thal people from going to service. Up there they were Lutherans every one, though down in the lower valley there was a sprinkling of the older faith.

On the first Sunday after his arrival, Duval watched the universal pilgrimage with no little surprise.

He had strolled out after breakfast to smoke a pipe. Nothing had been said to him on the subject of church-going. Possibly they had taken it for granted, he thought, that he would not wish to go.

As a matter of fact, Christine had asked her brother the night before, "Will he go to church with us to-morrow?"

And Christen had said he did not know, but that he supposed that, being a Frenchman, he would be a Roman Catholic, and so might not want to go. "Shall I ask him to come?"

"No," said Christine, after thinking it over. "He might not like to refuse, though he would sooner not go. It is a free country. Let him do as he pleases."

So Duval, from the upper end of the valley, to which his stroll had taken him, saw them all start off in their best clothes and stream away out of sight along the Unter Thal road.

And this, too, made its impression on him. Decidedly there was something in the air of this place which made for a different outlook on life.

He sat down on a felled pine and pondered the matter as he smoked.

He had not been inside a church, except for his own marriage and his father's funeral, or for some other purely ceremonious function, since—he could not remember when. Not since he was a boy anyway, and then only because he could not help himself.

These good people were going to walk ten miles there and back for the simple purpose of attending church. Why? . . . Obviously they must get, or believed they would get, something there worth going for. And, again, it must obviously be something more than he had ever got by going to church;—possibly that something which made that girl Christine what she was;—if so, something undoubtedly worth going for.

He had seen, of course, from the simple service at Herr Bayr's funeral, that they were not of his faith. . . .

And, as that phrase flitted through his mind now, he brought himself up with a sharp turn.

His faith? What faith had he?

He had had faith in the honour of men and the goodness of women—till, in his own experience, he had seen

these shrivel under the frosty touch of Self, and had been left chilled and empty by their failure.

Of faith in those higher matters which were beyond human frailty to assoil, he faced himself honestly and answered, "None!" and for the first time in his life felt a lack in that respect.

He puffed many thoughts through his pipe-stem that morning, and of a character to which it was quite unaccustomed, as he sat on his log and looked out over the long white trough of the valley and the silent giants beyond with their silvered crests high in the heavenly blue.

In the presence of those white peaks, and of the deserted village down there, and the thought of the crowded little church in the lower valley, he found himself, in spite of his knowledge of the world and the position he had held in it, and still might hold if he chose, no better than a heathen, an outsider. And it is good for a man to come to such an understanding of himself, come how it may—through sore bruisings into the mire, through humiliation and loss, through the uplift of Nature at her noblest and best, or through the unconscious influence of a good and beautiful girl.

When he sauntered down to the house to see if he could find some bread and cheese, Christine's housewifely thoughtfulness had anticipated him. He found bread and cold meat and cheese ready spread for him on the table. Her consideration and forethought warmed his heart, but now it pleased him to await their coming before he ate.

There were goodness and graciousness in the world still, and it was odd to find them more conspicuous in this out-of-the-way corner than in the greater world outside.

His newly-awakened perception told him that here, too, even in so small a matter as this, was evidence and practical outcome of the larger nature engendered doubtless by the practice of that higher faith of which he knew so little.

It was mid-afternoon before he saw the advance-guard returning, and went along to meet them.

"You have had a long walk," he said to Christine when he met her, cheering along a small boy on the one hand and a smaller girl on the other, with merry talk and laughter, and he relieved her of the boy.

She had a fine colour in her face, and looked a picture of healthy energy and gladness of life.

"We're used to it, aren't we, Gretchen?"

"Ja! But I am hungry."

"So am I, little wolf. But it is good to be hungry when dinner is waiting for you at home. It is only bad to be hungry when there is nothing to eat—and that never happens to anyone in Brunnen Thal. I hope you found all you needed?" she turned with a smile to Duval.

"Indeed, yes; but you should not have troubled about me. I preferred waiting till you all came home."

"Oh, but you should not. There was no need to starve."

"Starve!" he laughed. "One begins to think of that when one has been thirty-six hours or so without a bite. And, anyway, it was pleasant to think of fasting with you all if I could not worship with you."

"You are of the old faith, we supposed."

He was silent for a moment, and then said frankly, "I'm afraid I am not much of any faith."

"That's a pity," she said heartily.

"I know it is. I am beginning to feel it. . . . I am

inclined to think that it's at the root of all our disasters. We have lost our faith. The Germans have kept theirs. We have fallen."

"There may be hope for your country if she realizes that."

"I doubt very much if she does. They cry aloud of treasons and betrayals and all the rest of it, but those are only the outward signs of the disease. It lies deeper."

"Well," she said, in that naïve masterful way of hers which went straight to its mark, "when a man knows what's amiss with him he knows how to set about curing himself," and left that to sink in.

The days sped very swiftly; every moment occupied, and filled, for him at all events, with rare enjoyment of this new and uneventful life, which had in it so little in common with all his life hitherto.

If anyone had told him, six months before, that he could by any possibility have been not only content but absolutely happy in so simple an estate, he would not have credited it.

He mused at times on what might have been, if things had gone as they expected when the fatal die was cast for war—if they had swept triumphantly across Germany to Berlin, as the hysterical crowds in Paris had predicted. If he had come through it all he would undoubtedly have risen high. For that success would inevitably have led to further aggression. Holland and Belgium would almost certainly have been attempted—and from that, trouble with England without doubt—all Europe in a turmoil—an endless succession of campaigns after the fashion of the first Napoleon, and similar chances of distinction.

And the conclusion he came to, as the result of all such musings, was that, bitter as it was for his country,

it was better for the world at large that things had gone as they had. And, as for himself, he was content and happy as never in his life before.

The upper heights were all dazzling white again that week with a heavy fall of snow, and he jumped hastily out of bed one night at a strange rumbling roar outside which made the house shake as with an earthquake. But in the morning he learned that it was only snow-slides tumbling over the lips of the upper ledges straight down into the valley.

In places the sides rose sheer like the walls of a house. The snow on the higher slopes got loose at times and poured over the edge, as over the eaves of a house, with a hoarse, long-drawn "Purr-r-r-r-r-r!" till it all lay quiet again in vast white piles close under the wall.

He soon got used to the sound, and to the solemn roar of the avalanches which fell continually in the great basin of the hills at the head of the valley. These things were awesome but harmless. The Thal had never suffered as had some of its less fortunately situated neighbours. But he had much to learn of the ruthless powers and vagaries of the snow, and Christen would not let him wander far alone lest unexpected trouble should befall him.

"It's only those who have lived all their lives among the snow that understand it," he said.

"And not always they," nodded Christine.

The following Sunday morning when they all turned out Duval turned out also, and walked along with them down the valley.

"You are coming with us?" asked Christine, with the star-shine in her eyes as he joined her.

No further word on the matter had passed between

them. Much as it disturbed her to think of one, in whom she could not but feel so deep an interest, having to confess that he was practically ignorant concerning those higher and deeper things which were to her the very roots and springs of life, she had judged it best to leave him to find his own way. Any attempt to reason him into her way of thinking would not be in accordance with her ideas. A man's beliefs in such matters were his own most private possession.

"I'm coming to see what you get down there," he said quietly. "Judged by results it is worth the journey, for I never saw a more cheerful set of people."

"I hope you will find it worth the journey," and he walked on with her and Christen.

But he was not to get his first lesson in such matters from the good old Herr Pfarrer in the black gown and Geneva bands at the little church in the valley that day.

His education had, indeed, already begun in this purposeful joining of the churchgoers, and Christine did not hide the fact that she was glad he had come.

The road was still somewhat heavy with the rains that had covered the mountains with new snow, but the sky was clear again and the sun was bright, and they trudged on cheerfully, the village-folk straggling behind in a long wavering tail.

About a hundred yards in front of them were Frau Grun and her neighbour, Frau Bolz, both solidly built matrons, who always started first and arrived last, their walking powers not being so good as their intentions.

As a rule the neighbours, as they passed them, merrily offered them rides on their backs, or promised to tell the parson they were coming, and to hold back the service till they arrived, and the two sturdy dames jogged stolidly

on, talking all the time of their household affairs, and giving the others as good as they got.

"Ah-ha, the old gossips!" said Christine, at sight of them just turning the corner into the Unter Thal.

And then, before Duval's startled eyes, the two women shot suddenly into sight again, no longer walking on the road but hurtling through the air twenty feet above ground, and disappeared amid the agitated tops of the trees that grew along the slopes of the precipitous descent on the right.

"Schlag-Lawine!" shouted Christen, and as he and the rest started running towards the corner huge curded masses of snow came churning over the road, piling higher and higher under the impulse of some irresistible force behind, which kept driving them onwards and outwards over their own bulk.

By the time they got there the still heaving mass in front was six times the height of a man. It had poured on over the lower slope, cleaving a wide gap through the trees, snapping them like carrots, and carrying them down into the valley.

But their first concern was with the women. There was no doubt as to their being still alive, for they could be heard shrieking at the tops of their voices somewhere in among the trees, and the men shouted back till they located them, Frau Grun in the top of a larch, and Frau Bolz half-way up a tall fir-tree.

It was no easy matter to get them safely down. They both clung to their trees with grim desperation, screaming hysterically the while. When at last they were torn down and got to earth, Frau Bolz's right arm was found to be broken, and they were both suffering badly from shock and scratchings and bruisings.

"Jawohl!" said Herr Grun, when he had got his wife to her right senses again. "You may be thankful it's no worse. If you'd been one yard further on you'd be down at the bottom there."

"But what on earth was it?" asked Duval, when there came a chance of getting any answer.

"It's that gully just round the corner," said Christen. "The snow must have slipped up among the mountains, and it fell all in a lump into the gully and drove the air out, as you saw. It was only just the edge of it caught them or they'd have been done for. It will take us many days to dig the road out again. When the Unter Thal people see none of us at church they will come up to see why, and they will dig at the other end."

"It is what we call Schlag-Lawine," said Christine, as they walked back home. "They do a lot of damage to the trees, and sometimes to the houses if there are any in their way, and the wind they send in front of them is terrible."

"Old Hans Trinkler could tell you," said Christen. "He was coming home with two horses and his empty cart after delivering a load down in the Unter Thal, and a Schlag-Lawine came down a gully on the opposite side of the valley. None of it reached him, but the wind of it lifted him and the cart and horses and whirled them more than fifty feet into the Schnee-Rutsch below the side of the mountain. One of the horses was killed, and he and the other one lay there all night pretty badly hurt. We found them there next day, and Hans was laid up for a month. He keeps an eye on that gully to this day if he has to go past it in winter time."

"It's a wonderful country," said Duval. "But I

think you told me you never have avalanches in Brunnen Thal. That's a comfort anyway."

"Not avalanches, no. But Staub-Lawine we might have."

"We might have earthquakes and tornadoes," said Christine.

"But father remembered a Staub-Lawine up on the mountain-side, once when he was all alone up there felling trees."

"It is a very long time ago, when he was quite young."

"I know. Still, there it was. And what has been might be."

"And what is it—and how can one avoid it?" asked Duval.

"I can only tell you from hearsay, for they are not common hereabouts, thank God! It is something like a whirlwind made of snow-dust. How it comes I do not know, but it is all about you like a thick white mist, so thick that you cannot see or move. It holds your feet and gradually buries you, and it freezes as fast as it settles, and so all the breath is squeezed out of you, and you die there where it catches you."

"It sounds anything but pleasant," said Duval. "I'm glad you say they're not common."

"I don't think you'd find anyone in Brunnen Thal who has ever been in one," said Christine indignantly. "He is just trying to astonish you."

"Well, he asked, and it's just as well he should know."

"Though I don't see that there's much to be done in any case if you get caught, except just die quietly," said Duval.

"Snow can be very terrible," said Christine soberly. "It is like a blind white giant that goes mad with fury at

times, and comes roaring down from the mountains, crushing and killing all it meets, men and women and children, and cows and goats and houses. Oh, it is terrible! But we are safe in Brunnen Thal. It is the way the mountains are shaped, they say. That and the great forests up there, which no one may cut except to thin when it is necessary."

"Then one may sleep of a night without fear of waking somewhere in the Unter Thal?"

"It has never kept me awake for one minute," said Christine.

V

IT took them nearly the whole week, working in relays, to cleave a way through the vast mound of snow flung across the roadway in the space of a few minutes by the slide. It packed tighter and grew harder each day, and towards the middle, where the snow was mixed with earth and rocks and trees, they simply made a big tunnel, and on the other side of it met the Unter Thal men who had worked smaller shifts, having other matters of the same kind to attend to elsewhere.

And it was through the white-walled cleft and the tunnel that they all streamed the following Sunday on their way to church.

Duval followed all the service attentively, and thrilled in a way that was new to him at the sound of Christine's clear full voice in the hymns.

He had heard her singing about the house every day, and knew how sweet her voice was. But this was somehow different. She was just across the gangway from him, and in this unreserved outpouring of her heart in worship he seemed to catch a revelation of her very inmost self, a glimpse of the hidden soul which peeped out of her eyes, and expressed itself in all her doings, and made her what she was.

He did his best to follow the long, long sermon, but grew very tired of it, being unaccustomed to mental exercise so strenuous and on such unknown ground. He

found keener enjoyment in the inspiration of Christine's worshipful face, as she bent forward in her eagerness to miss no word of it all, the starry gleam of the one eye nearest him fixed intently on the preacher—in the soft, sweet curves of her cheek and chin and the misty allure of her hair.

He felt unusually uplifted when he came out; and—whether it was due to the Herr Pfarrer's ministrations, or to his quiet observation of Christine in her time of exaltation—when she asked him, "Well, and how did you like *our* church?" he was able to answer with utmost sincerity:

"I liked it immensely. I shall come every Sunday."

And whether she knew or not that he had been looking at her out of the corner of his eye quite as much as at the Herr Pfarrer—and it is doubtful if any woman, even in her most sublimated mood, can ever be quite unconscious of the observation of a man whom she likes—she showed that she was pleased, and carried him off to be introduced to the Herr Pfarrer himself.

The Herr Pfarrer knew all about him—that is to say, enough to welcome him warmly.

"You earned all our gratitude by saving this dear child from a loss that would have been disastrous, Herr Duval," said the old man heartily.

"I am glad it fell to my lot, mein Herr. They are more than repaying me."

"You had sad times over yonder"—in a tone that showed how much he would like to hear all about it.

"Bitter bad times. I am glad it is ended."

"Ay, indeed! . . . You will join us again, mein Herr?" as others claimed his attention.

"Many times, I hope."

And as they walked homewards he said, " He is a good old man, your Herr Pfarrer. . . . It is all very different from our ceremonial, and surely comes nearer to the heart of things . . . and to the people's hearts. . . . Yes, I liked him . . . but I found his sermon over long——"

" It is always long," said Christen. " I can hardly keep awake sometimes. It is the walk, I suppose ; and then the church is warm——"

" It is not too long when it is for the whole week," said Christine. " It gives you something to think about."

" If one could only remember it," sighed Christen. " But when he goes on so long I find my thoughts back among my saws and logs, thinking about to-morrow's work——"

" But that is not good of you. You should try to keep from thinking such things in church. You have six days——"

" I know. But, all the same, when he talks straight on for over an hour, it's not too easy——"

" How would you like it if it was mostly in Latin, and conducted by men you had learned to distrust ? " asked Duval quietly.

" I wouldn't go."

And Christine, pacing briskly alongside, quite understood how easy it must be for a man of his faith to become a man of no faith, and to lose all interest in such matters.

Whether it really was so, or only seemed so to him, he found her after this more charmingly frank and friendly even than before. Possibly it was so, for there is no surer way to a good woman's heart than, consciously or unconsciously, to inspire it with the hope of uplifting a needy soul to better things.

The busy days sped by so quickly that it was only the

ever-changing aspects of the Thal that showed him how time was flying.

The fields were ablaze with flowers which had to be mown down to give the grass a chance. The orchards gave a festive look to the whole valley—whitened the earth with fresh and fragrant snowdrifts—made one somehow think of brides and weddings. The woods and underwoods were radiant in their new leafage. By every roadside streamlet, round every boulder on the rough mountain side, through all the dreamy dim-lands—which never got a proper glimpse of sun or sky because of the pushing pines overhead, which wanted all they could get, and struggled up after light and air as little men strive for honours—everywhere was beauty in the making—of fern and moss and lichen, and tiny creeping plants innumerable. And, high over all, with their heads in the flawless blue, the great white peaks looked calmly down and lifted men's thoughts out of the ruts and grooves of life.

Not all men indeed. Duval was surprised at the little attention the valley folk paid to these things. To him they were new and wonderful beyond words, but most of the others gave little heed to them because they had known them all their lives.

Inside, in the office, there was also the added distraction of Christine. Through the window he could see the orchards and woods, and a round score of waterfalls, and the snow-peaks; and as if all that was not enough to draw a man's eyes and thoughts from measurements and prices and the common affairs of earth, there was Christine, sometimes at his side, or, still more attractively facing him across the table, and discoursing on business points very much, he was sure, as her father used to do, with an acumen and clear-headed sagacity which went

charmingly oddly with the star-shine in her eyes and the girlish curves and graces of her face and figure. And if she was not there she was somewhere close at hand, singing softly to herself as she attended to her cooking, or made bread, or swept and dusted and kept her house in order. But, whether he could see her or could only hear her, she could never be far from his thoughts, and the place she came to occupy in them grew ever larger.

Essential part of his new surroundings, too, was the mellow clanging and chiming of deep-toned cow-bells and the sharper tinkling of goat-bells, and the strange-cadenced yodels and calls of the herd-boys to their fellows on the opposite hillsides; and below and above and behind them all, as though they all depended on it, and without it could not be, was the melodious, deep-toned thud, thud, thud of the big water-wheel. And every now and again, like a gash on the beauty of it all, came the long-drawn "skiaw-aw-aw-aw" of Christen's whizzing saw as it screamed through the heart of a pine.

Christine used to purse her firm little lips at times when she heard it, and wince in her seat. And the first time she saw her companion notice it, she laughed apologetically and said, "It is foolishness, I know; but I never can quite get over the fear that they may feel it. We have decided that they do not, or it would be horrible to go on cutting them up. But, all the same——"

"They feel no more than a dead man would feel if you cut him up; I'm sure of that."

"I suppose they don't. But one can't forget that once they certainly were alive on the hillsides up there. They die, I suppose, when they are cut down."

"No doubt about it. And, anyway, they were made to be made use of. So there is no need to feel

sad about them. Besides—we had calf for dinner yesterday."

"Yes. . . . I wish we didn't. Oh, don't let us think about it."

"It's nothing when you've seen men smashed by the thousand and dying like flies. . . . And the horses—you'll maybe think ill of me, but truly my heart bled for them as much as for the men."

"I know," she nodded; "I quite understand. The men at all events know—more or less—what it's all about. But the poor dumb beasts——"

"Ay, it's horrible. But, as a matter of fact, the men very often understand little more about it than the horses."

If he had to step across to the mill to speak to Christen it was no easy job to get across that twenty yards without stopping to look about and savour it all.

And when he got there, the sight of the water as it sped along the stout wooden sluice to its work—dancing merrily, gurgling and laughing audibly, pouring mischievously out of tiny leak-holes in silvery cascades whenever it got the chance, then sobering suddenly to its work and dashing headlong at the wheel in one swift final rush—like a regiment in close formation hurling itself at an army which forthwith swallowed it up, he always thought—that always drew him, and he would sit on a log and watch it untiringly, to Christen's vast amusement.

And sometimes Christine would snatch a few minutes, and come out and sit and watch it also.

"I like it too," she said. "When I was very small I used to sit watching it by the hour. Those flowers were there just the same—or their forefathers and mothers—dipping their heads in the sluice and shaking them, dipping and shaking all day long. They used to fascinate me."

"What makes the water come in gulps like that?" —at which they both laughed reminiscently.

"That puzzled us for a long time," said Christen; "and when I asked my father, he said, 'Try if you can't find out,'—which was his way of making us learn things for ourselves. So we set off to follow the stream up till we found what did it."

"And what was it? Or do you want me to go up and find out for myself also?"

"We'll go up one of these days, all the same," said Christine. "It is very beautiful up there. The stream falls two hundred feet straight down into a hollow basin, and the basin is always boiling and tumbling. When the waves jump over the edge they form our stream, and so the water reaches us in gulps. And that's what makes the wheel go 'Thud—thud—thud-thud-thud—thud—thud—thud-thud-thud.' Had you noticed that?"

"I've been wondering ever since I came what made it go like that. But there is so much to wonder at about here that I've hardly begun to ask questions yet."

"Don't be shy," laughed Christen. "We'll tell you all we know."

They had many a delightful jaunt up into the mountains. There were days when they were on plain straightforward work, and Christen could leave the mill in charge of Johan Rix without fear of anything going wrong. Then Christine would pack their rucksacs with eatables and a couple of bottles of wine, and they would start before daybreak and thread their way through the dim aisles of the woods, where their feet sank deep in the years'-old deposits of pine needles, till they came out on the higher alps, to which the cows would be driven when the lower pastures were wearing thin.

The first time Duval, sitting alongside Christine in the fringe of the wood, saw the great cold peaks opposite suddenly quicken under the first rays of the sun and start up from sleep aflame with rosy gold, while all the world below lay steeped in shadowy grey and wreathing mist, he held his breath and gazed as at an apocalyptic vision.

And Christine, who had seen it many times before but each time with new eyes, sacrificed a moment of it to watch its effect on him, and was satisfied. A man who could feel such things, as this man evidently did, could not but be a good man. Of that she was sure—and was glad of the conviction.

"It is very wonderful," he said at last, when the rose-gold had turned to silver, and all the lower peaks had come to life, and the mist in the valley had begun to seethe and boil like an angry sea. "And to think that that goes on every morning, and always has done, and always will do——"

"Not every morning," laughed matter-of-fact Christen. "You wouldn't see much of it some mornings; and for me, on those mornings I would sooner be in my bed."

"It's a wonder, all the same, and I'm glad to have seen it. One can, at all events, always think of it like this."

"And that is the better way," said Christine.

Then they would climb on again till they came to the upper woods, and though these were "Bann-Wald"—preserved for the holding back of snow-slides from the lower lands—still they had to be thinned at times, and Christen's professional eye would note the giants he considered ripe for the axe—like a butcher on the look out for meat, chaffed Christine.

One time, as they climbed, they came on a long, straight cleft among the trees, which ran right down

the mountain-side like a giants' rough pathway, and a silence fell on the other two.

"What is this?" asked Duval.

"It is the great slide for sending down the logs," said Christen.

"It is where our father was killed," said Christine gravely, and they crossed it and went on in the shadow for a time.

Then, in the crisp sunshine of that sweet upper air, they would sit and eat and smoke and talk, with the great white peaks opposite and the wonder-world spread wide below them.

And Christine would ramble away and come back with rich store of wild fruits—bilberries, raspberries, strawberries—small, but of such flavour as Duval had never dreamed of. And with flowers of most exquisite form and colour—gentians and monkshoods and bell-flowers of the deepest heavenly blue, and pale blue columbines, and purple saxifrage, and crimson listera, and red alpine roses and campions, and delicate white anemones and crowfoot, and violets and forget-me-nots, and many more. She knew them all most intimately, and called them by their names, and rejoiced in them as very dear friends.

And Duval, very conscious of the lovely picture she made as she sat there with her lap full of the delicate things and arranged them deftly to her liking, would turn away his eyes to the great snow-peaks and yet would see her still, and would sigh internally—he scarce knew why—at thought perhaps of his own broken life, turned into a waste wilderness by the selfish cravings of the woman who ought to have helped him to make of it a fruitful garden of delight—as this girl would, sooner or later, for some thrice-happy man.

For, in spite of himself, his mind would at times sweep back over the last blurred pages of his life before he turned them down;—Claudine, and his bitter disillusionment through her; Berlin, and his growing doubts; Paris, and her criminal neglect of their warnings; Saarbrück, and his sick master; Sedan, and Metz, and all the heart-breaking tale of disaster from Weissembourg to Paris; the purgatory of that grim march to Belfort, and the still more awful retreat; Pontarlier; Lamotte below the wall at La Cluse; Breton in the ruins of the snow-fort at De Joux; and the scarecrow army coughing its pitiful way through the final gates of escape.

Ay, you can at times turn down the spoiled pages of life, but you cannot tear them out. And you may say to yourself with most resolute intention, "It is past and done with. I will think of it no more." But, while your brain still holds its balance, your thoughts are free, and no strength of will suffices to control them absolutely. They will slip back in spite of you to the things you would forget. The heaviest blows make the deepest impressions, and your thoughts will at times hover round those black pits of sorrowful memories like crows over yesterday's battlefield.

"Thank God, I'm out of it all—and for those great peaks—and for these good friends—and for this new life!" he said to himself;—and to Christen, by way of diversion to happier things:

"When are you going to take me up yonder?" and nodded across at the gleaming giants.

"It is too early yet. The snow is not safe. In a month from now, if you still feel like it. It is not easy, you know."

"Things worth doing are not easy as a rule. But you have been up, I think you said," to Christine.

"I don't remember saying so, but I have. And I shall go again when you two go," she nodded masterfully.

"You see," he explained, "they always look as if they looked down on me and challenged my right to be here. 'You!' they seem to say, 'what do you want here? You are only an outsider.' If once I had stood on their heads I should feel more like a native."

"You are satisfied with our Thal and our mountains," said Christine naïvely, "and you would like to feel like a native."

"I do not think there can be another place like it."

"I am glad. And you will be content, you think, to live here always?"

"More than content."

"Then you must become a member of the commune," said Christen.

"Of the commune?"—with a wrinkle of the brow—for the word had an offensive taste since its degradation in Paris.

"Of our commune here. Then you will have all the rights of a native."

"And how does one become a member?"

"Oh—you pay—let me see, for you, since you are not married, it will be three hundred francs. If you were married it would be seven hundred. But I will see to all that——"

"Oh, I can pay for myself. . . . But why does a married man pay more?"

"Well, it's like this, you see, every member of the commune has a right to his share in the communal property—the woods, the grazing on the upper pastures, and so on. The more members there are the smaller each one's share. And married people may have children

who in time would claim their shares, and so they pay more if they want to join a commune."

"I see. That is only fair."

"And how does one join?" he asked presently.

"I'll see to all that for you," said Christen with an air of satisfaction.

VI

NO objection was raised by the communal fathers to Constant Duval becoming a member, by purchase at the tariff price, of the commune of Brunnen Thal. On the contrary, they accorded him the heartiest of welcomes. Had he not earned an honoured place in their hearts before ever they met him? And since meeting him they had come to respect and like him for himself.

Christine made no concealment of her pleasure at his decision.

"Now," she said, "I feel that you really are one of us. And you will have your duties to do like the rest. You will have to confer with them, and you will have to vote."

"I hope you will help me with your advice, and keep me in the straight path," he said gravely.

"Oh, we will tell you all about everything. But it is not often we have any disputes here in Brunnen Thal —never while my father was mayor. He was so wise. They always agreed with everything he wanted done."

"I think I shall vote for you and Christen being mayor together."

"I'm sure I could do it as well as some of the men. But we don't have women-mayors."

"Then I'll vote for Christen, on the understanding

that he does just what we tell him, and that will be almost as good as being mayor."

"All in good time," said Christen complacently. "I am too busy to be mayor just now. When the new sheds are in full swing I might think of it."

The new developments of the business, planned by him and his father, were likely to prove very profitable. Hitherto they had supplied the cut wood for others to make up into windows and doors and interior fittings. But with ample room and power it had seemed to them a throwing away of chances not to make all these things right on the spot. The question of transport came in too. Cut planks make heavy loads, while doors and windows are comparatively light and leave much larger profit.

There was only one difficulty, and that was the question of labour. All told, there were not many men in Brunnen Thal, and all who were not occupied with their own land were already employed at the saw-mill.

The Unter-Thal men were entirely agriculturists, and, according to Christen, lazy at that. The nearest sources of supply were the Schwarz Thal and the Maien Thal. The men of the former were born wood-workers, and Christen had secured half-a-dozen of them to run the door-and-window sheds.

Christine had shaken her head over it, but deferred to his superior knowledge of men and the necessities of the case.

"I do not like Schwarz-Thalers overmuch," she said. "They may be clever workmen; but they are rude and rough and given to drinking—not at all like our own men."

"As long as they do their work well, that's the chief thing," said Christen.

"It is not everything. I hope they will not make trouble in the Thal."

"If they do we'll fire them out and get in Maien men, but they are not as clever as the Schwarz-Thalers."

The Schwarz Thal men, however, were working very well, and once it got known outside that Bayrs of Brunnen Thal were now turning out doors and windows on their own account, orders came pouring in for them; and saws, and things generally, hummed merrily.

Extension of business not infrequently makes for increase of anxiety, however, and here was to be no exception to the rule.

The Schwarz-Thalers were skilled men and earned good wages. But the making of doors and windows and interior fittings is dry work, by reason of the amount of fine dust flying about off the whizzing little saws and planes and boring and cutting tools, that turned out the necessary parts in most marvellous fashion. And when the day's work was done the day's thirst had to be quenched somehow, and as Christine had predicted, they occasionally over-quenched it, and were noisy and quarrelsome.

They were all Roman Catholics, too, and the simple Brunnen-Thalers quite unnecessarily looked somewhat askance at them in consequence, and that did not make for the general well-being.

On Sundays, when all the rest went off to church, these others loafed about smoking and drinking, and playing cards or skittles.

"I am sorry they ever came," said Christine, in her usual decided way.

"They're doing no harm," said Christen. "And they do good work."

"I don't like them, all the same; and the looks of them still less."

"One can't choose one's workmen for their looks. Even Johan Rix is not exactly a beauty."

"He's honest, and that's a great thing. I'd trust Johan with anything."

"Oh well, I don't see how these fellows can rob us. They can't very well make away with doors and window-frames."

"What do you think of them, Constant?" asked Christine.

"I don't feel towards them as I do to our own Brunnen-Thalers, but they certainly get through their work well, and, as Christen says, I don't see that they can rob us even if they wanted to. That black-bearded fellow, Grabner, strikes me unpleasantly at times. I shouldn't wonder if we had trouble with him sooner or later."

"How?" asked Christen.

"He's a kind of leader among them; and he's a surly discontented beggar—the kind that is never satisfied whatever you do for him."

"He's doing very well. He's earning better money than he ever got at home."

"He's doing well, but he knows you're doing better, and he's inclined to grumble at it and to ask why he shouldn't do better still. I've come across many of him in my time. They're the kind that the sergeant is always falling foul of, and when their chance comes they shoot him in the back."

"Couldn't you send him home?" asked Christine, as anxiously as though she foresaw Christen or Constant lying dead with a hole in his back.

"If we sent him off without reason the rest would go

too," said Christen gloomily. "And we're cram full of orders."

"We won't worry about him till he gives us reason to," said Duval. "And meanwhile we'll keep an eye on him."

Christine showed plainly that she thought it possible to go ahead too fast. She would have been quite content to go on as they always had done, satisfied with the very sufficient profits from the saw-mill, and happy among their own simple folk, as she certainly had not been since these strangers came among them.

Christen, however, argued, reasonably enough, that the extension had had their father's approval. It was the natural development of the business, and was proving itself very profitable. If the Schwarz-Thalers caused any trouble—which they had not done so far—they would have to get rid of them. But they could not cross that stream till they came to it.

And Christine could not but agree, but held her own opinion still.

Down between the lakes which once were one—until the Oberland mud brought down by the twin Lütschines threw a dam across and made them into two—lies the Bödeli, the fertile strath where the monks of old built their monastery of "Inter Lacus" and the first inn in Oberland. Between the old monastery and the little town of Unterseen runs the fine avenue of walnut trees which they planted and called "Höheweg." And now, along the Höheweg, and far and wide over Bödeli, the newer town of Interlaken was wakening to the possibilities of the future, and stretching itself in every direction.

Great hotels were being put up, and the older ones were extending themselves out of recognition. Hence a

tremendous demand for doors and windows and woodwork of all descriptions, and good times for saw-mills.

Contracts of size were going, and visits to Interlaken were necessary at times, and Christen, having his hands more than full at the mill, delegated that duty to Duval whenever he could. And Duval, fully posted on all points, proved himself, after a few initial mistakes, an excellent negotiator, and quite enjoyed his quick flights up and down the valleys on Black Boy. There was a physical pleasure in being astride a horse again, and the greater that his business now was making not marring, and that neither one nor the other of them ran risk of being ripped to shreds by shot or shell.

He was a fine horseman, and Black Boy, who much preferred legs across him to wheels behind him, knew it and did his best. And Christine, whenever she watched them off along the road, recognized it also, and found them a goodly sight.

He had at first been somewhat diffident about going. It was just possible, he thought, that he might run across old acquaintances in the rising town, and he had no desire whatever for anything of the kind. Pat de Valle was dead, and he had no desire to resuscitate him. Pat de Valle had never tasted such full and simple joy of life as Constant Duval was delighting in. So, let the dead Pat lie in his unknown grave at La Cluse, and Constant go on his way rejoicing.

But he soon lost all fear on that score. The beard he had allowed to grow, and cut square in Brunnen-Thal fashion, changed him completely. He looked as typical a Switzer of the finest breed as any born within sight of Jungfrau.

On his second visit he came face to face with young

Desrolles, who had been on Clinchant's staff, and was recuperating still at the new Beaurivage, in the company of the fair occupant of one of the closed carriages—who, of course, might have become a hospital nurse, though, in Paris, de Valle had seen her in quite a different rôle on the boards of the Opéra Comique. Desrolles looked him full in the face without the slightest sign of recognition, and Duval was well pleased.

The long ride to and fro through the valleys was always an enjoyment to him, but he was always glad to turn his back on the busy life of Interlaken, and return to his own little pocket of the hills—and to Christine.

Full of such uneventful activities, the summer sped quickly. Christine, too healthy-minded as she had shown herself to brood, or even to grieve unduly, over her father's death, found herself somewhat surprised at the new well-spring of happiness which bubbled constantly within her heart and seemed to permeate all her being.

Never, she acknowledged to herself, had life seemed so wholly bright and beautiful, so full of joyous hope, so well worth living—and that, in spite of the tragedy of their recent loss.

She was too honest to make any pretence of chiding herself for it. There it was ; she found it good, and lived joyously in the sunshine. Too perfectly frank with herself also to make any pretence of not understanding whence these strange new feelings came. They had come, she knew, with the coming of Constant Duval.

No man had ever come into her life as he had, or made such appeal to all that was best in her as he did. Nor could she imagine any other man doing so. He seemed to her a man among men. He was upright, and courteous, and gentle, and strong, with reserves of courage

and forcefulness which her womanly instinct percepted though she had not herself seen them displayed. Was not Christen, her brother, living proof of these things perpetually before her eyes ?

Duval's very gentleness and courtesy to all about him came, she was sure, from the strength that was in him. And, observing him quietly at times, she wondered, and tried to imagine, what he would be like if occasion called for the laying aside of these gentler attributes and the exercise of the forces that lay below.

Just now and again she caught fleeting glimpse of a tightening of the jaw or stiffening of the face which gave her indication, she thought, of what he might, at all events, look like under undue stress of mind or circumstance. But such slight suggestions of the hidden man were obviously unintentional and never more than momentary, and they but served to confirm her belief in his strength of mind and purpose.

His quiet courtesy never lapsed for a moment ; not even when, with womanly wilfulness, and simply for his provocation and to see how he would take it, she would take up a position opposed to his views and argue it with all the skill at her command.

They wrestled together with contracts and prices and the financial problems of a rapidly extending business. At first she, being so much more familiar with all the details, had led in argument and decision. But presently, as knowledge grew in him, she found herself deferring to his judgment in the puzzling situations that occasionally faced them. His understanding of men, and their ways and motives, was infinitely larger than hers ; and his mind had been trained, in ways unimaginable to her, to clear and prompt decisions.

Until he knew his ground, he had gone warily and sought her advice on all points. When he had got clear grasp of things he would lay the matter before her so clearly, and argue it so cogently, that the decision they came to was always a joint one, quite as much hers as his, and even apparently more so. And it was, to her, the obviously right decision or she would not have agreed to it, even for him.

But at times she would smile to herself, as she thought it over afterwards, and saw how cleverly he had reasoned her out of what would have been a mistake, until the decision they arrived at really seemed to be what she had intended all along.

Mistakes, of course, they made at times, but when they occurred he pondered them till he saw where they had gone wrong, and that mistake never occurred again.

"So!" he said, on one such occasion. "Well—we were wrong in spite of all our care. No man is infallible —not even the Pope, though he would have us believe so. Who makes no mistakes makes nothing. We are making many things, but we won't fall into that hole again."

Christen, too busy in the oversight of his own special department to eat almost, if Christine had not seen to it, was only too glad to be relieved of all this headwork. They discussed matters all together of a night, over the supper-table and pipes, but he was often too tired to go very deeply into things, and desired nothing better than to be left to his screaming saws and whizzing tools.

And Constant Duval's feelings in all this matter?

Outwardly, he was all that Christine saw him—upright, courteous, gentle, strong. Inwardly—prey to various emotions, torn with feelings which he had thought dead,

but which he came at times to think had never until now been born in him.

He could not but perceive that Christine approved of him, that he found favour in her eyes, that she liked him.

And he? . . . Herr Gott—if only! . . .

But there it was. And more than once he debated within himself whether he ought not to go—to fling aside all this new sweet prospect of happiness, and cast himself out to the void once more and begin it all afresh.

And part of him said, "Yes!" And part said, "No!" And the conflict that raged within him at times was almost too bitter to be borne.

"It cannot be!" he told himself roughly, and held himself with stiffened face and firm, clean hand.

But break his life again and go? . . . leaving behind him all that was best in him. . . . If he went so, he would go hopeless and embittered, and the chances were that he would go to the devil. He would have a grudge against Fate, and Fate always downs the man who rails against her.

He was not so strong a man as Christine imagined.

Here he had dropped, by marvellous force of circumstance, into a sweeter, simpler, and more desirable life than he had ever dreamed of. He had found friends such as he might search the world over and never find again. Here he was beginning to live for the first time in his life. Here he could spend the rest of his days in all peace and contentment, and the most perfect happiness.

The only disturbing element was, at the same time, the one that drew him most. The very strength of the attraction might make it necessary for him to go.

He was as honest with himself as she was.

Christine appealed to him as no other woman ever had

done. Women more beautiful, more fascinating, more bent on charming, he had met in plenty ; but never had all their bewitchments combined so stirred his heart to its depths, and kindled such holy fires within it, as did this simple girl by simply being herself.

She brought no arts into play. She practised no allurements, wove no spells. But her very proximity stimulated and inspired him. The touch of her skirt as she passed him quickened his blood. The accidental touch of her hand or arm, as they worked together over their business-books and papers, gave him a thrill which had the effect of stiffening his face and tightening his jaw.

She drew him out of himself by her simple presence. She uplifted him by her obvious belief in him. He felt himself on a higher plane than ever before, and it was she who had unconsciously lifted him to it.

And was he to forego all this—was he to sadden her life, and break his own, for an eventuality which might after all be only a conceited imagination of his own brain ?

She liked him—he was sure of that and was glad of it. It would have been awkward indeed if she had felt otherwise. But was it not grossest presumption on his part to imagine more ?

His own feeling for her was indeed grown beyond simple liking. But there was no need for her to know that. He believed himself strong enough to keep it within bounds and show no sign.

He had no right to assume more than she permitted to show, and that was just heartiest good-fellowship and the sweet high friendship which may surely exist between a man and a good woman without implication of more on either side.

He argued with himself and reasoned with his doubts,

and rambled off at times in the long summer twilights, which hardly deepened into dark before the dawn was back again, to fight the matter out all by himself.

He would climb up among the ghostly pines, and cast himself down on the carpet of sweet-scented needles, and lie there, a shadow among the shadows, debating these matters.

There he was free from all distracting influences—even from the sweet distraction of Christine herself. The stiff, plumed heads a hundred feet above him might rustle in the night-wind but they did not disturb him. The long aisles among the great red boles were very silent. There was nothing to come between him and his thoughts. And there he would lie, drinking in the pungency of the pines, which clears the head, and thinking of Christine, who filled his heart.

Could he stop? . . . Must he go? . . .

He would do anything sooner than cause her a moment's sorrow.

He would do anything sooner than dim the estimation in which she held him.

Anything! . . . Ay, but . . . everything?

For, going—he did not blink the fact—meant certain distress of mind for Christine, and almost certain ruin of his own life.

If he left Brunnen Thal, leaving his heart behind him, what hope in life was left him?

It would make a cleaner end to drop by accident into some deep hole in the glacier up yonder—and would leave a sweeter thought of him in all their minds.

And the conflict within him waxed sore at times.

VII

IT was with a sigh of thankfulness that hard-worked Christen said, one night as they sat smoking their last pipes on the wooden balcony looking over towards the snow-peaks, "Day after to-morrow is always holiday with us. The folks go down to Unterseen for their shopping and to see their friends. We will go up yonder. It will be a rest"—at which Duval laughed.

"But it is true," said Christine. "It is hard work, but the best rest is change of work, unless you want to lie and loaf like those Schwarz-Thalers. Do you think you are able for it?"

"Certainly!—if you are."

"I am Swiss-born," she smiled.

"You had no option in the matter. I'm Swiss by choice."

"That's better in one way. It shows your good taste. But it doesn't make you native to the snow."

"We'll take crampons," said matter-of-fact Christen. "Then he can't slip if he tries."

"Those spikes you have hanging up inside? Truly, with those on one's feet one couldn't slip far."

"You may slip into a crevasse," said Christine.

"I'll see to that," said Christen. "I'm as heavy as he is, though he's a good deal taller. I'll go first, and try all the snow bridges."

"And you'll take the rope," said Christine.

"Of course. We can't leave him in a crevasse. You'll be a mighty tired man by the time you get back, Constant."

"It doesn't sound exactly restful, but I'll feel more satisfied when I've had my feet on one of those big chap's heads."

They started soon after midnight, armed with ice-axes, rope, and crampons, and two rucksacs full of eatables, and walked quietly down the moonlit road into the lower valley, where the mists lay thick and white. But Christen and Christine could have found their way blindfold; and crossing the Unter Thal, and passing up a smaller thal on the opposite side, they were soon out into the moonlight again, and climbing by steep and stony ways towards the white basin of the Roththal, intending thence to get on to the back of Jungfrau.

But Duval found that Christine was right, and that though he had of his own free will elected to become a Switzer, that did not make him native to the snows.

He found it desperately hard work, and Christine saw it but admired the dogged determination which would not permit a thought of giving in.

It was even harder work than Christine could perceive. For the exertion of such deep and rapid breathing in that cold thin air gave him a pain in the chest, which he attributed, in his own mind, to Riou's bullet, but did his best to show no sign of it.

For his sake, however, though she claimed it as for her own, Christine called frequent halts, and he was able to pant himself back into reasonable comfort, though he began to doubt if he would ever be able to reach the top.

They came at last, by rough and toilsome ways, to

the great white hollow of the Roththal, just as the first rays of the sun tipped the peaks round the head of their own valley behind with rosy gold. And Duval was glad of the excuse to sit down and watch them and to savour the wild beauty of Roththal.

And as they sat and watched the growing glory spread along and down the chill white peaks, and quicken them into new life, there came a strange hollow moaning from the great snow basin in front, which waxed and waned and filled the air with tremors, and sounded to Duval as though the spirits of all those who had died in the Great Disaster had gathered there to tell their woes.

"What on earth is it?" he asked. "Or is it of earth at all?"

"Ghosts," said Christen.

"So people say," said Christine. "But of course it is not. No one knows what makes it. They do say that once this valley was fertile and beautiful. But its owner was godless and wicked, and so it was buried under snow and ice, and his spirit was condemned to wander here for ever. It is also said to be a general gathering-place for ghosts and wizards and evil spirits."

"One could imagine that of it. Let us get away from the ghosts of the past," and they went on.

Presently they came to a great couloir filled with tumbled masses of snow, and, even as they prepared to cross it, a broken torrent came rushing down from the heights above and swept past them into the great white cup below.

"H'm!" growled Christen. "That's not too agreeable. It ought to have done vomiting by this time."

However, it had not, and after careful inspection, he made them all put on crampons, as the bed of the couloir

was in places polished into ice by the pressure and friction of many falls. Then they bided their time.

It seemed to Duval a risky business, for if one of those torrents of snow should catch them in the transit it would sweep them away like leaves in a mill-stream and bury them deep in the cup below. But Christine evidently had faith in her brother, and he would show no less.

They waited long, and the snows up above seemed waiting also—waiting too with venomous intention. For when Christen gave the word, and they were just about to start, a larger fall than any they had yet seen came roaring down, and they had to scuttle back to the higher rocks to avoid its hissing fringe.

"Now!" said Christen, the moment it had passed, and they clambered across, in gruesome doubt, as concerned one of them, as to whether they would ever reach the other side at all.

"Many more little traps like that?" asked Duval, as casually as he could manage it, when they were all safely landed.

"None quite so big, nor so vicious," said Christen; "but there are several more to cross."

"And you never get caught?"

"If I'd ever got caught I shouldn't be here. They've generally stopped business at this time of year. I don't know why they're working so late."

They scrambled on, over new snow which lay on old snow compacted almost into ice and provided pitfalls for inexperienced feet, which Christen scrupulously pointed out. They wound in and out among bristling grey rocks, and crossed another great snow-flume which was fortunately taking a rest, and so came to a sloping wall of rock,

seared and chasmed, and crowned with a formidable coping of snow.

"Don't sneeze," said Christen, "or it may all come down on top of us," and they turned to the left and crept cautiously along, the White Death above shooting out its heavy lip at them with something of disdain in its chill silence.

Now and again showers of stones came rattling down the smaller couloirs towards which they were heading, but Christen turned suddenly up a larger one which led straight up to the cornice, bade them, with a peremptory gesture of the hand, wait where they were, and climbed up himself by means of his fingers and toes and knees and elbows, carrying the rope. He landed on a ledge half-way up, and with the rope drew them up to him one after the other, and then set off again along the ledge to the left.

They came to a great white slope of deep snow, and Christen roped them together, Duval in the middle; and following very cautiously in one another's steps, lest the snow should start running, they came at last to the top of the slope and looked over into a new white world beyond—a vast amphitheatre of snow wrought into long smooth sweeps, and rounded waves, and strange and wonderful convolutions, streaming away to the south in great ice-rivers, and hedged all round with mighty snow-clad peaks, behind which rose peaks innumerable as far as the eye could reach.

Duval had never in his life seen anything so impressive. It took what breath the climb had left him, and he gazed in awestruck silence, hardly hearing the description of the wonderful sight which the others whispered in his ear.

"This is the top of Jungfrau on the left," said Christen.

"And that's Finsteraarhorn," said Christine.

"And Oberaarhorn beyond there."

"That in the middle is Grüneck."

"And that big sweep of ice that goes round the corner is the Aletsch Glacier . . . Herr Gott!"—he broke off short, and the others turned at the startled tone of his voice, and saw what was the matter.

Behind them the sky was black. The ragged clouds that were rushing towards them, were deluging the earth as though they would swamp the valleys and wash the mountains down.

They had been so intent on their climbing, and then on the wonder of the scene in front, that their backs had all along been towards the coming storm. It was only when Christen's eye followed the great sweep of the Aletsch that he caught sight of it. And he knew what it meant.

"We must get down out of this," he said hastily, and turned and led the way.

"Seek shelter, Christen," said Christine quietly. "We cannot possibly get down in time."

"Shelter!" grunted Christen.

"Any crack we can creep into. The storm will pass."

"And be snowed up for a week maybe. All that rain will be snow up here. And lightning too—" as a vicious jag of yellow-blue flame ripped haphazardly through the dense black curtain in front, and the crash that followed reverberated among the mountain-tops as though it would never end, and seemed to shake the earth.

Duval had heard the thunder of massed batteries and big siege guns, but never a sound like this. Those others were toys compared with it. It was a most appalling

uproar, crash following crash without so much as breathing-space between, splintering crackles among the grim white peaks as though they were being blasted to pieces, bellowing roars multiplied a hundred-fold—but in his ignorance of the dangers of the situation his feeling was simply one of intensest interest.

"Slide, Christine! We haven't time—" cried Christen, and set the example; and the others followed, shooting down the smooth slope they had climbed so warily, regardless now of starting avalanches or of any mortal thing but getting to the bottom with the least possible delay.

They arrived there breathless, and smothered with snow.

"Quick!—up the slope!" cried Christen, and hauled them along on the rope after him, up the opposite side of the flume in which they had landed, just as a torrent of snow, started by their slide, rushed past them with a vicious purring hiss.

The storm was full upon them now. The rocks and snow about them had taken on a deadly pallor. The falling grey flakes whirled down on them so thickly that they could not see a foot before them.

They were among great tumbled boulders, splinters from the heights above, flung down by the silent disintegrating fingers of the frost or by elemental cataclysms such as they were enduring.

The lightning and the crackle and crash of the thunder were incessant—blinding, deafening, dazing.

Christen suddenly dragged them in between two rocks which had fallen against one another and offered an apology for a shelter. Then he ran out and began heaping snow with his hands against the windward side, and

Duval turned to and helped him, piling up stones along with the snow for strengthening.

The lightning played viciously about them, spectral flashes of thin snapping blue flame darting from rock to rock like demonic will-o'-the-wisps. The great forked flares up above rent the black sky from zenith to horizon. The crash of the thunder came with the flash. They were in the very heart of the storm, and it was amazing to Duval that they escaped catastrophe.

But they worked on doggedly, and when Christine made as though she would come out to help them, they shouted her back into her hole and told her to lie down. For more than once the ghostly blue flames shot between them as they toiled, and darted through the opening they were gradually closing up. Their ice-axes, which they had dropped among the stones, flared and spluttered continuously, and Christen buried them under a heap of snow. When their wall was finished they crawled into their shelter and crouched alongside Christine.

"It is years since we had such a storm," she said soberly, "and we're right in the thick of it."

"We ought to have seen it coming, but we were too busy," said Christen. "It has made me hungry. Let's have something to eat," and they opened the rucksacs, and ate and drank, and watched the whirling flakes and goblin fires.

"I never heard such thunder," said Duval. "It sounds as if the whole world was smashing up. . . . Hello!"—for, passing a bottle of wine to Christen behind Christine's back, his hand had accidentally touched her hair and it crackled and shot out sparks. "Why, you're full of electricity!"

"Am I? I wish there was some warmth in it. I'm freezing. How soon can we get on, Christen?"

But Christen shook his head. "Not till all this racket stops anyway. And then it will be difficult going, till we get below the snow. But it's better in here than outside."

"Smoke, you two! And sit up close, and each of you put an arm round me. I'm cold to the bones."

So they all huddled together, with Christine in the middle, and did their best to keep her from freezing. And to one of them, and perhaps to two, this closer contact than ever before sent the blood chasing through the veins and gave it no chance of congealing. And Christine complained no more of the cold.

The lightning became less persistent at last, and the thunder died away among the peaks in angry mutterings, as though the powers of the air regretted the little damage they had been able to do. Christen plunged out into the still-falling snow which came nearly up to his knees.

"We'd better get on," he decided. "It will be heavy work, but we'll get dry again when we get home. The sooner we're across the big couloir the better. It'll begin to be very sick before long."

It was, as he said, heavy work, and dangerous going. For the new snow hid the traps and pitfalls which might otherwise have been seen, and they slipped and stumbled until Duval wondered that human bones could stand it.

The big couloir had not begun to be sick. They crossed it safely, and trudged on past Roththal, too busy over their feet for more than a glance at the grim desolation of it. And so in time they got out of the snow and on to the mountain paths, which were now all running streams and very uncomfortable walking.

But comfort was a small consideration. They were all soaked from head to foot, but well content, as Duval said, to have any heads or feet left to be soaked. And, for himself, he had no fault to find with the day's doings —except indeed that he had not set his foot on one of the highest peaks, and so they would still mock him as an outsider.

"It will be for another time," said Christen philosophically. "If we'd gone on we might never have got back."

VIII

OTHER excursions they had of a less strenuous nature, whenever opportunity offered and work permitted. For Christine, ever desirous of confirming in Constant Duval's mind the good impression their country had made on him, was bent on showing him all she could.

One long afternoon they spent with the haymakers in the higher pasture-lands, cutting the short sweet grass mixed with innumerable flowers and sweet-smelling herbs, and carrying it in huge bundles, in nets and sheets, to the velvet-brown hay-châlets, and ramming it in tightly, to be sealed up presently by the snow, and left there all through the winter till the beasts in the stalls at home should need it.

" Then we'll come up again to bring it down," said Christine, " and you will smell it all over the mountain-side as soon as the huts are opened. And you shall ride on a bundle right down to the village. It is like riding on an avalanche. It will take you two hours to climb up through the snow, but you will go down in—oh, just a minute or two."

" It sounds exciting. Do you never fall off ? "

" Oh yes, but into the snow, you see, it does not hurt."

It was a day or two after their hay-making that an urgent call came for her to go over to Brienz, to nurse a cousin who had been married a year, and had just had her first baby, and rather a bad time with it.

"The poor Freda!" cried Christine. "Yes, I must go; and you two will have to get on as well as you can without me."

"We'll get on all right," said Christen.

"Bertha Grun will come in each day to see to you and do the cooking, and I will get back as soon as I can. I do hope you will be all right," and she looked doubtfully at them, but longest at Constant.

"We'll do our best," he assured her.

But she knew, better than they, all the unseen little details of household management which make all the difference between men's absolute comfort and the reverse.

Bertha Grun did her very best for them, but, in spite of all her efforts, the house was not like itself. They missed their own charming haus-frau at every turn, and even their pipes of a night could not make good their loss. They would sit by the hour hardly speaking; until that came which gave them plenty to think and talk about.

For, on the Saturday after Christine went, the Schwarz-Thalers, headed by the black-a-vised Grabner, stated bluffly that they wanted more wages.

"Why, then?" asked Christen, in his brusquest, sergeant's manner.

"We work well, and you can very well afford it," said Grabner.

"You are already getting higher pay than you ever got at home."

"Maybe—but——"

"And higher pay than anyone else in the Thal."

"Yes—but——"

"And you are getting the wage agreed on when you came."

"Yes—but——"

"A bargain is a bargain. When I have made a bargain I stick to it."

"If you paid us twice as much you would still be doing very well out of us."

"Who put up those sheds, and bought all that machinery, and took all the risk of it being a failure?"

"Not much risk about it with us at the machines."

"Well, I'm not going back on the bargain I made with you. If you're not satisfied, say so, and I'll find plenty who will be."

They took their money and went off blackly, got very drunk before nightfall, and gabbled unwisely in their cups.

"We shall have trouble with those fellows," said Duval, as he and Christen sat smoking, after what Bertha Grun considered an adequate supper.

Christen grunted acquiescingly. He was feeling generally disgruntled—at Bertha's ideas of proper faring, at Christine's absence, at this upsetting demand of the Schwarz-Thalers; for, from their manner, he had little hope that the matter would rest where they had left it.

"I'm not sure it wouldn't be best to get rid of them at once," said Duval. "They're a black-faced lot. If they turn nasty there's no knowing what they may be up to."

"How do you mean?"

"Just that. I don't trust them."

"We can't give them more. It wouldn't be fair to the others. Besides, if we gave in to them now they'd only try it on again."

"Better send them about their business at once. Give them a week's wages and see them out of the Thal."

"It'll block us for a time. We're crammed with

orders, and we can't get men for those machines at a moment's notice."

"They're easily learnt. It'll reduce the output for a time till the newcomers get accustomed to the work. But it'll be cheaper in the end maybe. You see——" but he hesitated to express all that was in his mind.

"Yes—what?"

"Well—maybe it's absurd, but, in the first place, those fellows are rascals and no fools; and in the second place, I can't help thinking all the time how very open we are to reprisals, if they get it into their heads that they're being ill-used."

"How do you mean?"

"That type goes to extremes at times. They might set a match to the mills, for instance."

"Herr Gott! if I thought that!" and Christen sprang up as though to rush out at once and make summary end of every Schwarz-Thaler in the village.

Curiously enough, just at that moment, the door opened and Johan Rix came in with a portentous look on his face.

"Hello Johan! What's up now?" asked Christen.

"Those Schwarz-Thaler bullies are all noisy drunk and talking in a way to make your hair stand up."

"What talk?"

"Threats of what they'll do if they don't get what they ask,—and that kind of thing. Of course they're drunk, but still——"

"What threats?"

"'Saw-mills burn easily, matches are cheap; it's easy to light a fire.' That's their talk."

"So!" said Christen, grimly. "If that's the talk we'll meet it," and he lifted down from its hooks on the

wall the long chamois-gun which had been his father's. "We'll keep watch to-night and to-morrow, and on Monday we'll pay them off and send them about their business."

"That's the most sensible thing to do," nodded Duval. "Put some of our own men into the door-and-window sheds. They'll pick it up by degrees. And get men up from Unter-Thal for the ordinary work."

"Keep an eye on those beasts, Johan, as well as you can, and we'll keep an eye on the mill," said Christen.

"They're too drunk to-night to do any mischief——"

"Even a drunken man can fire a saw-mill. It's just the kind of thing he would do. You'll take watch about with me, Constant?"

"Of course. I only wish they'd give us the chance of going for them."

The night passed, however, without disturbance. Neither Christen, nor Constant, nor Johan Rix went to church next day, and the Schwarz-Thalers, loafing about, heavy-eyed with their debauch, grinned understandingly when they saw them, and muttered pleasantries among themselves, but went no further than that.

On the Monday morning they found the sheds locked against them, and Christen, Duval, and Rix waiting for them outside.

"You are not satisfied with your pay," said Christen. "Our agreement provides for one week's notice on either side. But I don't choose to have dissatisfied men about. So here's the week's pay for each of you and you can clear out as quick as you like."

"And suppose we don't choose to clear out," growled Grabner. "We're at liberty to stop here if we choose, I suppose."

"If you're not away by mid-day I send down to Interlaken for the police to come and remove you."

"And on what grounds, Herr High-and-Mighty?"

"They'll explain that to you in the jail at Interlaken."

"Jail indeed! We've done nothing . . . yet, to get us into jail. Think you can bully us like that, Little Turkey-Cock?"

"You'll find out if you stop here, my man."

They were viciously angry at the turn matters had taken. Eventually, cursing things in general, they pocketed their money and moved off in a body. But their anger was visibly turned partly on their misleader, who had given them to expect a very different ending to the business.

Before mid-day they had packed their bundles and departed, with more curses for every man, woman and child, and every stick and stone, in Brunnen Thal.

"So far good," said Duval, as they watched the last man slouch slowly down the road. "But, all the same, we'll keep our eyes open of a night for some time to come."

"You think they'll come back and make trouble?" asked Christen.

"It would only be their kind of human nature to try it, anyway."

"Herr Gott, but I'd like to catch that Grabner at it and put a bullet through his mischief!"

"What would your law say to it?"

"If he tried to fire the mill our law would say he was well served."

"Then we know how we stand, and if he should be up to any tricks we won't stand on ceremony with him."

So, night after night, for a whole week, they watched turn about and nothing happened.

Christen promoted his most capable men to the door-and-window sheds, and devoted himself to their instruction. He gave them an increased wage, and promised them the Schwarz-Thalers' full scale as soon as they were efficient. They were mightily pleased and took to the new work with gusto, spoiling comparatively little, but turning out, for the time being, considerably less than their predecessors. However, they grew more expert every day, and Johan Rix and Duval succeeded, though none too easily, in filling their places for the rougher work of the saw-mill from the likeliest men among the Unter-Thalers.

"How long do you think we need keep on the watch?" asked Christen one night, as he was turning out for sentry-go.

"If he comes at all, it will be when he thinks you will have given up expecting him."

"Thunder! It may go on for ever at that rate."

"No, he's not going to hang about for ever, even to fire the mill—only till he thinks it likely we've given up expecting him."

"I wish he'd come and get done with it. Night and day work like this is pretty heavy."

"It's child's play compared with war, my boy. And there's commonsense in it and very obvious gain—which there very often isn't in the other. We'll hope he won't come, but if he does we'll be ready for him."

They were still keeping guard every night, when Christine came home after a fortnight's absence. Her surprise at what had happened, and her anxiety as to what might happen, were, however, more than equalled by her relief at the disappearance of the Schwarz-Thalers.

"The Thal feels sweet and clean, and like itself again,

now that they are gone," she said. "I only wish they had never come. . . . And how have you got along without me? Has Bertha Grun given you enough to eat?"

Constant looked across at Christen, and said, "Have we had anything to eat since she left, Christen?"

"Can't remember a thing."

"Oh, you poor boys!" she cried. "You must be starving. What has Bertha been thinking of?"

"I've no doubt she did her best," said Constant. "But—well, the house has not felt like itself, you know. If it had gone on much longer Christen and I were thinking of laying our necks against the big buzz-saw for a change."

However, she soon had things up to her own standard again, and the only fly left in their honey was the possibility of Grabner and his fellows making some unpleasant attempt on the saw-mill.

He, at all events, had not left the neighbourhood; for Duval, on a hurried visit to Unterseen to pacify hungry builders, caught sight of him there, and took the opportunity of a word with the Chief of Police on the subject.

"We've had an eye on the fellow," said the Chief. "But we can't fire him out unless he gives us occasion."

"And if he should make any attempt on us——"?

"Every man has the right to defend himself and his property. If the other should happen to get shot, the blame would be entirely his, and the world would be rid of one more rascal,"—rough-and-ready counsel which Duval assimilated with satisfaction and did not forget.

"If the chance offers, then, we'll do our best for you," he promised.

And so each night they still kept vigilant watch for

the danger which might materialise out of the darkness at any unknown moment, but which by its delay began to get somewhat on their nerves.

Duval alone, more accustomed to the discomforts of campaigning than the others, stood it not only without complaint but with equanimity. Johan Rix, and some of the younger men who had been pressed into the service, and even Christen in course of time, since nothing came of it, began to doubt the necessity of its continuance.

"We're not safe till one or other of us has put a bullet through that black-faced rascal," said Duval quietly. "That's how I feel, anyway. But there's no need for you others to stick to it if you feel otherwise."

However, they all stuck to it, though not without a grumble at times, and a suggestion in their manner that Constant Duval had got a bee in his bonnet that would not let him sleep quietly in his bed of a night.

For himself, he did not find this patrol duty unduly irksome. Compared with other night-watches he had kept, it was almost child's play. But he was well aware that it might develop into something very different at any moment. He was convinced that that moment had to come, that there would be no peace for them till it had come and gone; so he possessed his soul in patience and kept his eyes and ears on the alert.

Apart from that possible development, indeed, he found much to enjoy in these lonely vigils. In the moonlight the mighty peaks across there gleamed like silver. And if the moonless nights called for greater caution, then the stars shone larger and clearer and closer than he had ever known them, and they were very companionable.

Up among the mountains, when the föhn was blowing,

he would hear the dull roar of the avalanches,—nearer at hand, the rustle of the night-wind in the pine-tops. And always the swift brimming rush of the mill-sluice had in it the murmur of many voices, and the little spouts from its sides babbled secrets as they fell.

Then, too, in the clean width and freedom of the night, he could think as was not possible to him in the full and busy day-time. And he had much to think about.

Of Christine, and all that the very sound of her name had come to mean to him.

And of whither all this was tending for both of them.

If only he were free ! . . .

He knew that her feeling for him was ever growing. He felt it in her eyes, in her face, in the tones of her voice when she spoke to him, in her whole attitude towards him. She was full of attraction for him, all the greater for its naïve unconsciousness.

She drew his very heart and soul.

He had died in the past and buried himself in the snows at La Cluse. And he was reaping the benefit. But it was bitter to think that the full joy of the harvest could not be his ; for the old ties and shackles still held him, although it was to get rid of them that he died.

It seemed hard, very hard, that he should have given up everything for the sole purpose of being free and yet should not be free.

His thoughts took strange flights at times as they ranged over the what-had-beens, the what-was, the what-might-have-beens, the what-might-be-yet-if——

Should he take a holiday and go back to France, and seek out Claudine and sever the irksome bond between them ?

That she would consent, he did not for one moment doubt, for he had no longer anything whatever to offer her of all that her soul desired.

The idea grew in him the more he pondered it. It would be no injustice to her. She had money more than she knew what to do with. Freedom would afford her another chance of giving her soul its highest satisfaction.

He considered how to set about it. The church was not very amenable in such matters, he knew. But perhaps, under the new order of things, it might not be so rigid. There had come a slackening all round, an absolute enfranchisement in some matters.

His death at La Cluse made a cleaner end; if only he could bring himself to feel that it was an end, and that the past had no more claim on him. . . .

He was brooding deeply on these matters as he tramped his beat one night, and in spite of his absorption he had done his rounds steadily and had neither seen nor heard anything suspicious. This night seemed just the same as any of the other nights, except that it was colder and clearer, with a crisp touch of frost in the air. The gossips said it was going to be an early winter and a hard one.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, that came for which he had waited, and the sleepy little Thal had the hottest time of its life.

It was one of the very dark nights and just the darkest time of it. An hour more and Christen would come out to relieve him, though it would probably require half a dozen pebbles on his window to bring him to it.

He stood for a moment at the end of his beat, and leaned on the long chamois-gun, savouring the stillness and the sweet night air before starting on his round again.

Then, from the far side of the window-shed, whence he had but this moment come, his eye caught a sudden brief glow on the walls of the surrounding darkness. He sped towards it, and as he rounded the corner a flame broke out and forked up the side of the shed with a swift vicious lick that spoke of petroleum, and a stooping figure rose and ran for the safety of the outer darkness.

Another second and he would have reached it. But the flare he had lit was his undoing, and Duval asked no more than that second. He was too good a shot to miss so good a mark. As the report bellowed out and raised the sleeping Thal, the runner rolled over in a tumbled heap, and Duval, without giving him another look, ran for the water-buckets.

There had never been any great fire in the Thal, but dwellers in houses of wood are never free from the fear of it, nor short of the means to quench it. Every man and woman who came tumbling out of bed brought a bucket, and there was no lack of water. In three minutes Duval and Christen had two lines formed and buckets passing to and fro like clockwork. But even three minutes, with wood and petroleum to feed on, gave the flames a mighty advantage.

The window-shed was well alight and blazing furiously.

"Never mind the shed," jerked Christen. "Fling on to the machines," and, as well as they could for the glare and the smoke, they concentrated their efforts on lessening the flames about the machinery.

In an hour the last stubborn sparks were drenched out, and they were able to estimate the damage. The shed was gone. But wood was plentiful. They would soon have it up again. And the machines, Christen said, had suffered less than he expected. Within a week he

could have it all running again, and it might have been worse.

Christine had been one of the first to join the line of bucket-passers, but when more help arrived than was actually needed, and she was as wet as if she had fallen into the flume, she gave up her place and ran into the house and brewed coffee for the multitude.

When the rush was over, and they were all standing about discussing it, she called them all in to partake, and set out the Kirsch bottles also. And they needed no pressing, for the work had been fast and furious and they were all soaked through.

There had been no time for even a thought of the huddled body lying in the shadows beyond, but now Duval and Christen went across to it and turned it over, and found what they expected. They carried it into the other shed and locked the door.

"Now we can sleep in our beds of a night," said Christen, as they mounted the steps to the house. "I am glad it is ended."

"Yes," he said, in answer to many questions, as they drank their hot coffee. "It was Grabner."

"And——? He is wounded?—dead?" asked Christine anxiously. "It was the shot wakened me."

"He is dead. Constant's bullet went through his head. To-morrow we will take him back to Interlaken."

"It is dreadful to have had to do it," she said, shocked and startled at the thought of the black life cut short by such instant death. "But . . . I suppose . . ."

"Nothing else would have stopped him," said Duval quietly. "I don't think you need trouble about him. He was bound to make mischief wherever he went."

"It was well done," said Christen weightily. "You

pile up the account against us, my friend," with a hearty clap on Duval's shoulder. " But for you the whole place might have been fired and we all been burned in our beds."

And Christine, though she said no more and still showed white-faced in the lamp-light, was yet very grateful for their deliverance, and confessed in her inmost heart to a new feeling of security in life through the coming of Constant Duval.

IX

IN the morning all hands were set to work clearing the ruins, and Christen rejoiced to find his machines even less damaged by the fire than he had feared. He had them carefully extracted from their charred tables and carried into the adjoining shed and well cleaned and oiled, and promised to have them in running order before the new shed would be ready for them.

Then the heads of the community set off for Interlaken to settle matters with the authorities—Christine, Christen, and Duval, in the light cart drawn by Black Boy, and Johan Rix following in another cart with the body of Grabner swathed in a horse-cloth.

Christen assured Christine there was no need for her to come, but she insisted.

"I want to see the end of the matter," she said, with a touch of anxiety. "I hope there will be no trouble about it all——"

"Trouble!" scoffed Christen. "How can there be any trouble? They will be as glad he is ended as we are. It was a good shot"—to Duval. "Last time you took the bullet. This time you gave it. If you had not insisted, I would probably have given up the watching long since, and we might have been all burned to ashes."

"I was sure it had to come sooner or later. That kind of man can never rest till he's got in his kick back at you. I don't think we need fear any trouble about

it," he added, to Christine. " If there should be, I will take it all on myself. But the police told me we would be justified, and they're not likely to go back on it."

Nevertheless, her mind was not wholly at ease until they had deposited their burden at the old Schloss, and made their depositions, and been assured by the Chief that it was what he anticipated, and that they were all indebted to Herr Duval for ridding the world of a rascal who had been bound to make trouble as long as he lived.

Then, free at last of all that matter, they turned to the pacifying of urgent builders who were waiting hungrily for doors and window-frames, and here even the most exigent proved amenable in the presence of Fräulein Christine, and forbore to cancel contracts or to make undue difficulties about delays.

They had to seek one contractor at the Hotel Victoria, where he was busy on extensions, and as they stood there explaining matters to him, the door swung open, and a handsome and wonderfully-dressed woman came out, followed by a tall man of distinguished bearing, whose face seemed to hint that life was barely worth living, since he had exhausted its pleasures to the utmost.

" Bien, mon ami," the lady was saying, as she passed. " There is some old lace in one of those shops which I must look at again. Then, after dinner, if you are still set on it, we can go on."

And at the sound of the clear hard voice, Duval started and bent suddenly to tie his well-tied boot. If the eyes of the foreigners saw the little group of Switzers on the steps at all, that was all they saw, and they were not in the slightest degree interested in any of them.

" What a handsome woman, and how beautifully she

is dressed!" said Christine, looking after them as they went down the Höheweg. "I wonder who she is."

"It is the Princess Constantine Varenin," said Herr Rosen, their contractor, proud of his knowledge. "And that is the Prince. He is Russian and very wealthy. Madame is French by birth, I believe. They are only recently married and have been here for a week or more. I have seen them many times."

"Her clothes must have cost more than I have spent on mine in all my life," said Christine.

"They are immensely wealthy," said Herr Rosen impressively. "They pay fifty francs a day here for their rooms alone,"—with visible enjoyment at the thought of foreigners suffering to that extent for the benefit of Interlaken.

"Think of it!" said Christine. "Why, it would keep a whole family for a week in comfort."

And Constant Duval watched the pair sauntering slowly away under the walnut trees, and said nothing, but thought the more.

For the woman was Claudine, who had, and had not, been his wife, and was now, with no consciousness of wrong, the wife of another man. His heart had given a mighty leap at the thought of what this might mean to him. And he was a very thoughtful man for the rest of that day.

This unexpected meeting brought home to him with overwhelming effect the fact that Patrice de Valle was indeed now dead beyond all doubt to all who had known him. If he had wanted to come to life again it would now have been quite impossible, without doing Claudine serious wrong and putting her into a grievously false position.

But he had no such desire or intention. Of his own

will he had died to the old life. If blame attached, he accepted it all, and none must fall on the unconscious Claudine.

The sight of her, married in all good faith to another, gave him something of the feeling a man may have who looks upon his own tombstone. The past was buried and done with. He felt himself free at last, and his outlook on the newer, simpler life he had chosen was, for good or ill, changed entirely and mightily enlarged.

X

CHRISTINE got it into her head that Constant's noticeable quietness and thoughtfulness at this time were due to what would have seemed to her some not unnatural compunction at having shot the Schwarz-Thaler. For after all, and however much the man deserved it, one does not, outside the battlefield, lightly take another's life. And he, debarred from other explanation, let it go at that.

Her quiet endeavours to distract his thoughts from the matter would have amused him had they not done very much more. For, all unconsciously, she was constantly showing how much he was in her thoughts, and how near to her heart were his well-being and happiness.

"I do wish you could put it all out of your remembrance, my friend," she would say, with a gentle hand persuasively on his arm maybe, as he sat smoking thoughtfully—brooding as it seemed to her.

"But I have, I assure you, Fräulein."

"No," she would say, with a sagacious nod, "you say so to please me, but still you think and think, and it lies heavy on you. And I lie and think of a night and wish I could help you to forget it. After all"—very charmingly, for his consolation, adopting in its entirety his own and the Chief of Police's view of the matter—"you must remember, if you did him a wrong, he brought it on himself. And you did it for us, and saved us once

more from great loss—greater, perhaps, than we imagine, as Christen says. For, if he could have done it, I do not doubt he would have rejoiced to burn us all in our beds."

"I'm truly thankful that old gun shot so true."

"I wish you would really be as thankful as I am. From the bottom of my heart I thank you for shooting that wretch, even as I thanked you for getting shot by the other. Our indebtedness to you grows."

"You more than repay it all. Life is happier with me than ever it was before."

"You assure me so?"

"I do," and his eyes met the bright challenge of hers full and frankly—and yet, she was clever enough to perceive, not without a slight touch of reserve—so very slight that none but herself could possibly have apprehended it.

And it set her pondering as to the possible reason for it, for this could hardly be the Schwarz-Thaler intruding again, after what Constant had said. So that often, as they sat of a night, she with her work and they with their pipes, chatting discursively of the day's doings and the morrow's work, he was conscious of her eyes on him in gentle questioning—as a mother might look at a son, or a sister at a brother, who was much on her mind. Ay—and more, and he was ever more and more conscious of it. More and more conscious too that the thoughts and aspirations which drew his own eyes surreptitiously after her, as she flitted to and fro about her homely duties, were not those of either father, or brother, or best of friends.

She was, in fact, becoming essential to him. Without her as its joy and crown, he could not think of life save as a drab dull thing, to be endured with such equanimity

as might be possible, but void of that supreme radiance of which it was capable, or of any complete satisfaction.

And these things made him thoughtful indeed, and drove him at times beyond the range of her questioning eyes, so that he might think deliberately and coolly, undisturbed by that which was in him and his fear of her perceiving it.

Many the night that he strolled off into the upper Thal to wrestle with his thoughts and take counsel of the darkness and the stars.

Surely now—he would argue with himself—he was free to let his heart take its own way without restraint or disguisement.

To all intents and purposes he was dead and buried. He could not come to life again without inflicting grievous wrong in the only quarter that had so far held him back from his heart's desire. So, dead he must remain.

But surely, the shackles of the dead past were not to bind him for ever? In all good faith, believing him dead, Claudine had formed new ties. It would be a dastardly thing for him to thrust a spoke into her possible happiness by coming to life again. And that being so, he was surely free to do as she had done. The only difference between them would be that she had acted unwittingly and he of knowledge.

He almost succeeded at last in convincing himself that in giving his heart free rein in this matter he would also be doing well. He would undoubtedly be contributing to the happiness of two people—Christine and Claudine; even of three, and perhaps even of four—though, from his own experience, he was not without some natural doubts as to Prince Constantine Varenin finding the future all he had possibly painted it.

With Christine as his wife, he himself would ask nothing more than to live and die in Brunnen Thal. Nothing more, save that, for all their sakes, the skeleton past should never thrust its bony fingers into the brimming cup of the future.

If he could in any possible way have obtained a proper release from the entanglement he would have sought it. But that was now out of the question. The fault was all his. Perhaps he ought to have foreseen this possibility. But when he made up his mind to be rid of the old life and all the miserable past, it was simply because it had become intolerable to him, the chance of starting afresh in happier surroundings was not to be resisted, and it had seemed to him the very best thing for all concerned.

And now it was too late. He could not go back, and there is no standing still in life. A man either goes up or down, backward or forward. If he calls a halt and stands at ease the world sweeps on and he is left behind.

So—forward!—with stout heart and quiet face for whatever the future might hold. He had passed through the Gates of Sorrow; through the Grim White Gates of La Cluse, which were to him as the Gates of Death; before him lay the Golden Gate of Hope, and if a shadow lay across it he would strive his best to take it all, so that Christine should walk in the sunshine all her days.

XI

NOT hastily, nor lightly, did Constant Duval come to this momentous decision. Head went slower than Heart in the matter. And even when he had decided for himself he hesitated afresh on Christine's account.

For himself he was willing to take all the risks the future might hold. He looked them squarely in the face and did not deem them great.

But, for her, whom he held in higher esteem and love than any woman had ever won from him before, he hesitated, lest the result should, in some unforeseen way, bring her sorrow greater than the passing joy.

And yet—to withhold from her all that he could give, and all that he believed she looked for from him—would that make for her happiness ?

So, though his mind was made up, he waited still.

The winter came on them, sharp and sudden, before its time. The great peaks were more wonderful than ever in their rich white robes, and up in their high valley they were one week in all the later glory of autumn and the next in the icy grip of mid-winter.

It had taken them somewhat unawares but made little difference in business matters. The wooden flume bristled thick with yard-long icicles where the merry spouts were wont to play, but the plunging fall up above gave the big pool no chance of freezing and the great

wheel thudded on methodically through a gleaming chevaux-de-frise of its own creation. They put up stoves in the door-and-window sheds and the work went on as usual.

Christen had made more than one appointment with Herr Graf, the new mayor of the commune, to visit the higher woods and mark the trees for felling. But Herr Graf was a farmer, and work had pressed, and so the matter had been constantly postponed till a more convenient season. Now, when farming was over for the time being, he sent word to Christen to name his day and he would go.

"I go too," said Christine promptly, for excursions up aloft were always joy-days to her. "And you will come, Constant? I am sure you need a holiday. You have never been yourself since you saved us from the Black Man."

"I go, of course. I want to learn all I can."

And that was how they found themselves one morning high up on the outer face of Oberberg, in the company of Herr Graf and two more of the communal fathers, Joseph Schwab, and Franz Imboden.

Herr Graf was stout and many years past his climbing days, more accustomed of late to roads and pastures than to the higher alps and woods. He was jovial and willing, however, and fell in most amiably with all Christen's expert suggestions. So the work of blazing and marking the trees went on merrily, when they came to them, the only delays being in the getting of Herr Graf from one wood to the next.

It was very cold up there. There was no sun and a keen wind, and the snow, though light and powdery, was plentiful. However, they got through a good morning's

work, and lit a blazing fire to cheer their rucksac dinner and sat eating it and looking out over the long grey stretch of the valley below, with its dark sheer side-walls, and the black streak of river ploughing through the white level at the bottom, and across at the endless array of snow-peaks opposite, among which the avalanches growled almost ceaselessly though they did not often see them. Then, after a sufficient rest and a smoke, they set off again for the further woods.

They crossed the great slide by which most of the logs would presently be shot down into the valley, and trudged on round the shoulder of Oberberg, climbing in and out of the seams and wrinkles which from below looked no more than streaks and scars on the mountain's side, but were in actual fact little gullies, sixty to one hundred feet deep, none too easy of passage when the snow lay deep, and specially difficult when one of the party was stout of body and stiff in the legs.

Christen and Constant, however, one on each side of the mayor, hauled him up the slopes by main force, and he found no difficulty in going down them. And so they progressed slowly, and with shouts of laughter at Herr Graf's grotesque glissades, which generally resulted in his having to be dug hastily out of the deep loose snow at the bottom, red-faced and chuckling, and just in time to prevent suffocation or an apoplexy.

Christine, light-footed, and not needed for these salvage operations, was generally on ahead, laughing down at them as she stood leaning on her ice-pick on the opposite height, then ploughing on, and out of sight in the next gully before they had got the mayor right side up again and up to the top of the slope.

They were nearing the further woods, Christine was

down in the gully in front, the others had just got the mayor safely up the previous slope and were standing and panting vigorously after their labours, when that happened which Constant Duval never forgot to his last day.

First, there came a louder roar than usual from the opposite side of the valley. But they were used to such and gave it no heed. Then, before their astounded eyes, the tops of the tall pines in front of them parted from their stems and came whirling towards them like thistle-down on a driving gale. The next moment Duval found himself in the grip of an icy blast which whirled him round, and flung him down, and kept him down.

Never in his life had he experienced so hideous a sensation. He tried to get up. He struggled to his knees, but could do no more. The atmosphere about him was no longer air but finest snow-dust which froze instantly where it lighted.

His lungs felt full of it. His eyelids were weighted with it. He was buried in it and felt himself freezing as though inside a block of ice. Breathing became almost impossible. The blood surged in his head and belled in his ears. He believed himself dying and thought pitifully of Christine. She must be dead. No girl could possibly stand such punishment. And he could not move a limb. He was frozen stiff and the pressure was unbearable.

Then, just as his head felt like to burst, there came the frantic blows of an ice-pick close by his neck as he knelt. The ice-covering broke reluctantly as though loth to give up its prey, and was peeled off him like half-congealed toffee by Christine's trembling fingers.

The blast had sped on to other destructions. The air was clean and fresh, almost warm compared with the

snow dust of which he was full; and oh, but he was thankful, as never before in all his life, for simple power to breathe.

He still knelt in his forme, panting life back with slow and laboured respirations; and, looking heavily up, with weighted eyes and packed ears, he saw Christine's agonised face and heard her unconscious, "Thank God, my beloved! I feared you were dead."

Her face was white and warped with fear, and there were tears on it frozen into the semblance of pearls.

He struggled up out of his icy mould, grateful beyond words for her, and for life, but instantly thoughtful of the others. If their case was akin to his own, every second that passed was making all the difference between life and death to them.

"Where are they?" he jerked.

But she was already picking frantically at a dark body dimly visible beneath the hardening crust. He groped hurriedly, among the fragments out of which he had risen, for his own ice-pick and helped her, but found himself trembling, as he had never trembled in his life before, in every limb and nerve and sinew.

They tore off the clinging ice in slabs and curls. It stuck like glue. Their fingers shook and slipped with maddening impotency. In their absolute unhinging, the knowledge that life or death to what lay below there depended on their quickness was in itself paralysing. They fumbled frantically, and at last laid it bare.

It was the body of Christen. With a sob that seemed to rend her, Christine fell on her knees beside it and put her arms round it. Duval gently turned it face upwards, and the sight of it, swollen almost out of recognition and violently discoloured, gave fresh shock to their grief and

upsetting. He hastily cleared the lips and mouth of the frozen snow-dust reddened with blood, and poured in some drops of cognac from his pocket-flask.

"Rub his chest as hard as you can," he said, and himself set to work drawing Christen's inert arms up above his head and depressing them—up and down, up and down, without cessation, while Christine, with a face like the Angel of Pity and of Death, bent over the motionless body and rubbed and rubbed and rubbed—with waning hope, since nothing seemed to come of it, till at last with another gasping sob she fell spent across it.

Duval thought she had fainted, but it was only a momentary collapse induced by the apparent uselessness of it all and the realisation of what that meant to her.

"My God! My God!" she sobbed, heart-brokenly as he lifted her up. "He is dead. He is dead. . . . Oh, my brother! . . . forgive me, forgive me!"

Her wild words had no meaning for him. He set them down to her jangled nerves and tried to hearten her.

"We mustn't give up," he urged. "It takes long. . . . There may be life yet. . . ."

And she bent again and rubbed for dear life and that small chance of it.

But it was all of no avail, and they were both conscious of it before they ceased their efforts. But working left them still a feeling of hope, and they dreaded the word that should end it.

But it had to be spoken, for there was no faintest sign of life in that which lay so stark and still before them.

"God rest his soul!" said Duval, and knelt and put his arm about her to support her.

Christen dead! And but a moment or two before so

full of bounding life! It seemed impossible—and yet it was.

She sunk her head against his shoulder and sobbed as though her heart were broken.

And as they knelt so, there came a muffled cry from the gully out of which the men had just climbed when the blast struck them. They started up and scrambled over the new icy covering of the ridge till they came to the edge. Some one was alive and they must do what they could. There would be time and enough to grieve.

They peered down into the gully, and found it and the slope beyond thickly strewn with the sliced-off tops and branches of the further woods. And here the surface of the deadly covering was rent and broken by reason of protruding stems and tufts of foliage, which, to Duval's jangled consciousness bore horrible likeness to the broken bones and stark hair of dead men sticking up out of the hasty graves of the battlefield.

From one such rent came that muffled shout again. Duval plunged down to help, and Christine, smothered in snow, was at his side a minute later. They tore the stiffening branches apart with hands and picks, and saw Franz Imboden's up-turned face and clawing hands in a deep hole below them.

"Thank God!" he cried, at sight of them, and presently, by means of their ice-picks, he was able to drag himself up out of his burrow.

He was white and all of a shake with the terrible experience, but his first thought, like Duval's, was for the others, and his first question, "Where are they?"

Duval shook his head sadly. "We are thankful for you, Herr Imboden. There is no one else——" and Christine sobbed as she clung to his arm.

"Good God! Good God!—Herr Bayr?—The Mayor?——"

"Christen is up there, but he is dead. We have found no trace of the others."

Imboden stared at them incredulous, aghast. His own grim experience had shaken him badly. Their terrible news completed his undoing. He sat down on a frozen branch like a broken man.

"Christen! Herr Graf! Joseph Schwab! . . . Is it possible? Herr Gott! Herr Gott! Herr Gott!"

But presently, as the first shock passed, he was loth to sit acquiescent under so dire a calamity.

"They may be there underneath that rubbish, as I was," he cried, as he scrambled to his feet. "And they may well be alive but unconscious. You see, it keeps the snow-dust from closing up entirely. We must search for them," and they set to work, but without much hope.

It was a huge task, but, grateful at their own deliverance, they worked with a will, hauling aside the huge branches where the ice-covering would allow of it, poking and delving into gaps and holes everywhere.

Imboden made the first find not very far from his own hole. With a shout he laid hold of a man's foot projecting from the loose snow under a screen of pine-tops, and hauling at it they dragged forth Joseph Schwab, unconscious, but still alive.

"Oh, I am so glad," panted Christine. "He has five little children."

Duval handed her his flask, and they left her to bring him round, and went on with their search. But all their poking and peering revealed no trace of Herr Graf, and finally they climbed up to the ridge again to try if they could see any sign of his body up there.

Where the snow-blast had passed, the ground was enamelled with a sheet of ice many feet in thickness. It had come down as snow-dust or finely-powdered ice, and solidified as it fell. The surface of it was still fairly clear, but was becoming more opaque, and marble-like every minute.

Duval shivered as he crawled to and fro peering down into it, at thought of what another second or two would have done for him, but for Christine.

Imboden, as they stood by Christen's body, knelt suddenly and kissed the cold white forehead.

"I loved him," he said simply. "And his father before him. Thank God, you are here, Herr Duval, to comfort our Fräulein! This is very hard upon her."

Search as they might they could find no trace of Herr Graf, and so at last they gave it up and went down again to the others.

Joseph Schwab was sitting on the pine-tops, very white and shaken still, and Christine, silent and stricken, was giving him sips of cognac from the flask.

Duval shook his head in answer to her questioning look, and said gravely:

"There is no sign of him, and we can do no more. We had better get home, and the others will come up to-morrow and make more thorough search."

"It must have been a Staub-Lawine," said Imboden, shakily. "It is all a sheet of ice up there. Never in my life have I been in one before."

"And never in my life do I wish to be in one again," said Schwab. "How did you others fare?"

"I was in the hollow," said Christine, "and it mostly passed over my head. I saw the branches whirling past and the snow-dust, and knew it must be Staub-Lawine.

I climbed up as quickly as I could, and there was not a sign of any of you. Then I saw a mound with something dark inside it, and I loosened the stuff with my pick and found it was Constant,"—and she broke down and sobbed quietly.

"Then we found Christen," said Duval, "and got him free, but it was too late. We did all we knew to bring him back, but——" he shook his head. "And then we heard Herr Imboden calling and found him here under the branches."

"And God save us all from such a thing again!" said Imboden fervently. "Fifty years have I lived in Brunnen Thal, and never have I seen anything like it before. The trees over there are sliced off like cut grass, and the track of it is as straight as a ruled line."

"It must have struck upwards by the way those branches went," said Joseph Schwab thoughtfully. "If it had come straight at us we would all be lying stiff below it. We only got the flick of its tail."

When they felt able for it, they made a rude litter of interlaced pine branches, and laid Christen's body on it —a fitting bier for one whose life had passed so much among the trees; and so they bore him slowly home.

Duval wished to take his share of the burden, but they begged him to see to Fräulein Christine.

And she seemed, indeed, to need all his help. She clung to his arm, convulsively at times, and hardly spoke a word, but he felt the sobs that shook her now and again.

And knowing her so well, and her broad and gracious views of death, and remembering her wonderful composure at the time of her father's equally sudden going, he was puzzled by the extremity of her grief, but forbore to intrude upon it.

As they went slowly round the mountain-side, along which they had come so blithely in the morning, he learned, from the disjointed talk of the men in front, all they knew about avalanches in general and the deadly dust-avalanche in particular.

It was probably, they agreed, the sudden fall of some huge mass of snow—thousands of tons of it maybe—into one of the chasms on the opposite mountains that had shot out the blast as from a monster mortar. And the snow on the slopes, being dry and powdery, had been caught up in the whirl and shot from hill to hill, carrying everything before it and leaving death in its track.

They had heard tell of sharp clean swathes cut through dense pine forests, and of houses levelled as though they were built of cards, by these terrible dust-avalanches. But Brunnen Thal had never suffered from them, and indeed they expected that no one down there would know anything about this one. It was the fact of their meeting it round there, away up the mountain-side, that brought them into peril, and the force of the blast would probably be dissipated before it swept across the Thal high up in mid-air.

Down there they might get but an unexpected sprinkling of snow-dust, fine as hoar-frost, but here that same fine dust in the might of its going spelt death.

XII

GREAT were the grief and consternation in the Thal when they came slowly down the mountain path with their sorrowful burden and their tragic news.

Two of their principal men carried off by one fell stroke! Fräulein Christine left all alone! What would happen now? Who would carry on the business? And —generally—what was going to be the upshot of it all? They had more than enough to talk about that night in Brunnen Thal.

Christine had recovered herself somewhat by the time she reached home. She had not spoken half-a-dozen words all the way down, but Duval could tell by the convulsive pressures of her arm that she was grateful for his silent companionship.

His own heart was filled with gratitude to her for the prompt assistance that had undoubtedly saved his life, but of that he would tell her later.

When they had laid Christen on his bed, he went along to give his brief orders to old Hans Trinkler, and the old man broke down completely.

"Herr Gott! Herr Gott! . . . another! . . . And the last of them! . . . Never did I look to see this day! . . . Old Hans left and all the Bayrs gone! . . . Herr Gott! Herr Gott!" and he rocked to and fro in his grief.

"Fräulein Christine is left to us, Hans, by God's good mercy——"

"Ay! . . . Ay! . . . And she is good. . . . But she's only a girl . . . only a girl. . . . The Bayrs of Brunnen Thal are ended. . . ."

When Duval got back to the house he found Christine in her house-wifely apron preparing supper, and Bertha Grun—who had come in to help but had not been allowed to—sitting watching her. He remembered Christine's idea that the necessity of the common task was a merciful dispensation of Providence to stricken souls, and was not surprised, but he could very well have dispensed with Bertha Grun.

But Johan Rix and his wife also came in before they had finished supper, and he had to condone what seemed to him the unseasonableness of these intrusions by the obvious good-feeling and sympathy which had prompted them.

Most of the talking fell to him, however, for Christine was unusually silent, though she answered quietly when directly appealed to.

Johan knew as little of dust-avalanches, from personal experience, as anyone else in Brunnen Thal, and he had a keen curiosity to hear all about it. In his craving for knowledge it did not seem to occur to him that those who had just passed through so terrible an ordeal might, not unreasonably, feel unnerved and weary and indisposed for talk about it. He could not, of course, know that his delvings after all the details of the tragedy were like so many stabs to Christine's sore heart.

But Duval saw her distress and put an end to it.

"To-morrow I will tell you more, Johan," he said. "For to-night, you can understand, we are tired out.

It has been a trying day for us, and the sooner Fräulein Christine is in bed the better."

When he had closed the door upon them he went straight across to Christine, who was quietly assembling the supper-dishes on a wooden tray.

He took both her hands and held them. She made no pretence of withdrawal or reluctance. The busy, capable hands lay passive in his, but he could feel her heart throbbing in them. They looked deep into one another's eyes.

"Heart's dearest!" he said, in a voice that shook her to the depths. "You saved my life. It is all yours—as my heart has been yours from the first moment I saw you."

Her hands loosened themselves and groped up to his shoulders. She leaned her head on his breast, and sobbed brokenly.

"I have only you left—only you! Oh, my dearest!"

"I will be all to you, Christine—father, brother, lover. I will try to make up for all you have lost. I will give all my life to your happiness."

For response she held him tightly, but still sobbed brokenly with downcast head. This was a Christine he had not known, and he could not understand it.

"Oh, my dearest," she sobbed, clinging to him convulsively. "I feel as though I had killed him—and he had always been first with me all my life——"

"But why, dear? You did everything possible——"

"When I climbed up on to the ridge I could see none of you. . . . Then I saw someone in the ice . . . one of you . . . I did not know which. . . . And—oh, Constant!" she wailed, "when I found it was you my heart was glad . . . and I knew then that I had hoped it was you, and I was gladder even than if it had been Christen.

If I had found him first he would be here now. . . . I feel as though I had killed him. . . ."

"Dearest!" he said, with complete understanding, and lifted her face and kissed it. "You need not feel so. You did everything possible. You could not tell who it was. You had no choice. Had you hesitated one second you would be alone now. By God's mercy you were just in time, and I do thank Him that I am left to care for you. All my life shall be given to your happiness."

"My poor Christen!"

"He was a dear lad and lived without reproach. It is well with him, Christine."

"I know. I know."

He sat down in the big chair that had been her father's, and drew her into his arms with her head on his shoulder, and soothed her with quiet talk.

And among other things for her comforting he said, "What was it the good Herr Pastor read in church last Sunday—'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother and shall be joined unto his wife.'"

"I was thinking of you," she murmured.

"And I of you."

"I was doubtful sometimes whether you cared for me—in that way. . . ."

"I have cared for you in that way since ever I dared to hope that you might some time come to care for me."

"I was afraid, you see, that there might have been some one else. . . ."

"You are the only one who has ever had my heart's love, dearest. And you had it from the first day I saw you, though I did not then dare to hope . . ."

"Thank God, you came to us. Your coming has been all for good."

"God grant it!" he said quietly.

" If this terrible thing had come and you not here! Oh, how could I have borne it? . . . Yes," she murmured, " for this cause shall one leave all . . . and give oneself wholly to the one one loves," and she put her arms round his neck and strained herself to him in completest surrender.

In the morning every available man set off, armed with proper picks, to search for the body of Herr Graf.

" You will be very careful, Constant. Think what it would mean to me if I lost you too," was Christine's last word as he set off with the rest.

She had at first wanted him not to go, but, in view of the position he must take in the community now, he gently showed her that he could not wait behind. And she agreed, but urged them all to extra caution.

" Keep your eyes on the opposite mountains also, Johan," she had said to Rix. " It came from over there. And if you judge it wise make them all come down at once. We must not sacrifice the living for the dead. You have all got wives and children. Poor Herr Graf leaves no one."

In addition to that universal reluctance to leaving a body in the snow—which will keep the men of the mountains and valleys digging for weeks for the victims of disaster—there was in this case a keen desire on the part of the Brunnen-Thalers to learn all they could about a phenomenon with which they were so fortunately unfamiliar. They were home-birds all and their whole lives were spent in or near the Thal—except here and there one who spread his wings for the outer world and sometimes never returned. So that none of them had more than heard of the deadly ways of the dust-avalanche.

Before the ridge on Oberberg was reached they knew

all that Duval and Imboden and Schwab could tell them. And there, keeping a sharp look-out for accidents across the valley, they first made thorough search among the great bristle of tree-tops, many of which required three men to shift them, and of the snow below, and then they attacked the ridge itself.

Duval and the other two located as nearly as they could the spot where Herr Graf had been standing when the blast struck them, and they all set to work with their picks on the coat of mail with which it had plated the ridge in the space of a few seconds.

They noted with keenest interest the sharp line of its flight and the hardness and tightness of its congelation, and always they kept anxious look-out on the opposite mountains lest a like death should strike them unawares.

The deposit was four feet thick in places, in some places even more, and, being more or less impregnated with air, it was so opaque that nothing could be distinguished more than a few inches below the surface.

Somewhere below it, however, lay the body of Herr Graf and they were determined to find it. But four feet of ice needs much picking and it was desperately hard work.

A shout at last gave the welcome news of discovery, many feet away from the place they had expected to find him. He had doubtless turned to run and been flung down, just as Duval was, and then been suffocated where he lay.

They carried him down on pine branches, and old Hans Trinkler seeing them pass, from the window of the shed where he and his mate had just finished Christen's coffin, set to work at once on Herr Graf's.

"Thank God, you are safely back!" was Christine's greeting to Duval, and he kissed her there before them all.

XIII

NEXT day the people of the Unter Thal, being of a lower cast of mind and more given to mundane consideration of the outward appearance of things, witnessed a sight which astonished them much and provided gossip for slack tongues throughout the winter.

The Brunnen-Thalers came down in force, dragging on two sledges the bodies of their late mayor and young Christen Bayr for burial. And when the Herr Pfarrer, in his gown and Geneva bands, and a black skull-cap because of the cold, had read the prayers over them, and the graves had been filled in, the two chief mourners went into the church which was filled to overflowing, and kneeling before him, there they were married according to the rites of the Lutheran faith.

And to the Unter Thal this seemed a strange and very doubtfully correct proceeding. A burial and a marriage in the same family on the same day! Extraordinary! But then what could you expect from such strange outlandish people as those Upper-Thalers?—quaint and simple folk who knew nothing of the ways of the world.

But to Brunnen Thal, who understood things better, and who had loved Christine all her life, and had esteemed Herr Duval all the time they had known him, it was quite the right and proper thing to do, and they were glad it

was done. For now Fräulein Christine would not be all alone in the world—the business would be carried on as usual, and everything would be all right with the Thal.

Christine had needed no urging to it. While she could not have brought herself to propose it, it chimed entirely with her own mind in the matter, and she thanked Constant for his good thought of her.

The morbid feelings induced in her by the shock of the catastrophe had passed by the next morning. It was the Christine of his earliest remembrance who greeted him, gravely indeed, but with a quiet equanimity and loftiness of spirit which recalled to him Frau Rix's saying that first night of his arrival in Brunnen Thal—" Fräulein Christine is very strong."

The same Christine—and ah, how much more! All that he had dimly imagined her then, she had proved herself, and infinitely more. And now—she was to be his wife!

He sternly bolted the doors of his mind on the past. Patrice de Valle had died at La Cluse, and Constant Duval was happier than that other ever had been or ever could have been.

In this little pocket of the hills, which to some might have seemed cabined and confined, and would have seemed so to himself in his former state, his vision and his outlook had become transformed. The love of a gracious woman had opened his eyes. He had been blind to the larger life and the things that count, and now he saw.

And with this wider vision he knew well what he was doing; and yet, having weighed the whole matter, he deemed it not ill-done. The past was past, he said to himself. It was dead and buried, and any tampering with it could only rake up useless skeletons. By God's

help, and so far as in him lay, the future with Christine should more than make up for all previous deficiencies and present defects, and the outcome he would leave to a judgment which, the Herr Pfarrer never ceased to assure them, was not only all-wise but was also largely tempered with mercy.

The great wheel resumed its thud-thud-thudding the day after the funeral and the wedding, and the work of the Thal went on as usual.

They all missed Christen at every turn, but Christine and Constant most of all, because of the empty room and the vacant place at table. But Christine's heart was greater than its losses, and this fulfilment of love which had come to it brought new grace into her life and jewelled it with new and larger hopes.

They made some wise rearrangements in the business. Trusty Johan Rix was given a share in it, and took up Christen's work among the gliding logs and great buzz-saws. Constant overlooked the door-and-window sheds, where the men were becoming expert and earning high wages. Christine attended to the books and correspondence, with such assistance as Constant could give her.

The three heads considered and settled everything. Johan's life-long practical experience, Constant's understanding of men and their handling, and Christine's fine tact and commonsense, made a strong working team, and everything ran smoothly.

The vast expansions going on along the Bödeli created a corresponding demand for woodwork of all descriptions. Brunnen Thal buzzed like a bee-hive. There was work for all and great prosperity and contentment.

Christine was perfectly happy, both in the present

and in a future charged with still greater hopes and possibilities.

And Constant was happier in her and in the present than he had believed it possible for man to be. . . . And as to the future . . . The past and the future are practically one—parts of a whole which the present divides by no more than the passing instant. In this life death is the only complete divider, and that only to our imperfect vision.

Close association with Christine had widened and deepened his outlook on such matters.

Sometime, in this world or in the next, he knew that he must answer for this that he had done. He prayed that it might be in the next, and that the brightness of her life might never be clouded with a knowledge of his default.

Inevitably, he wondered at times how she would bear herself if that knowledge should, by any mischance, come to her. And, so high was his thought of her, that it was fear only for her suffering in the breaking of her belief in him, and not at all for his own loss in losing it, and possibly her—though he doubted this last, knowing her as he did—that cast its shadow on him at times.

But when the shadow came he thrust it resolutely back into the deepest recesses of his heart and mind and let no sign of it appear.

BOOK III
BAYR

I

WHEN human experience has crystallized observation into homely proverb, you may count upon a certain amount of truth in the saying, though without doubt there are exceptions to all rules.

And the old saying that "Murder will out," though riddled with exceptions, is nevertheless a true saying, and, since the greater includes the less, applies equally well to smaller matters.

Five years brought changes to Constant and Christine Bayr, but only changes for the better.

Three children, Christian, Christine, and Constant, graced the big brown house and rounded their lives to completest happiness.

The business had prospered. They were well-to-do people. And the Thal had prospered with them. In all the length and breadth of Switzerland no happier community could be found than that of Brunnen Thal.

Constant Duval, to the great satisfaction and joy of his wife, had become Constant Bayr. As the only representative of Bayrs of Brunnen Thal, he was so regularly addressed by that name that at last he judged it well to adopt it publicly and legally. Even the Brunnen-Thalers

were almost beginning to forget that he had ever borne any other.

A year ago the commune had elected him Mayor. He had not sought the honour. He would have declined it had it been possible. All he had aspired to was the simplest and quietest of lives, as far away as possible from the stress and turmoil of a world that had yielded him nothing but disillusionment and discomfort. But he was the most influential, and far-and-away the best educated man in the commune, and the position unanimously voted him could not be declined. The commune expects and exacts service for the general weal from all its members.

He was also captain in the Elite and held in the very highest esteem in military circles at Thun. He served his five days each year there with the others, and the authorities would fain have kept him altogether. This honour also he had not desired. But his citizenship entailed it upon him, and he would shirk none of his duties.

And he had long since set his foot on the summit of Jungfrau, and so was no longer provoked by her lofty arrogance, but felt himself at last true son of the mountains and the snows.

Truly it seemed as though this man had been justified in what he had done. Everything had prospered with him, and the Dead Past had not protruded so much as one grisly finger from the secret chamber into which he had flung it.

He had almost ceased to fear it or even to think about it. And then, without a moment's warning, the door he had believed so securely locked was plucked open by an alien hand, and his carefully concealed skeleton grinned out at him.

Little Christian was four years old; Christine three; and Baby Constant one. Christine, their mother, was to him the apotheosis of all that was beautiful and sweet and good and true in woman. His home-life was comfort itself; his public life without a stain.

For such high possessions, and for their safe-guarding from harm, a man will go far, and in the eyes of man be justified. Will the Clearer Vision judge a man more harshly than his fellows?

II

THE rapid growth of the business entailed upon its head frequent visits to Interlaken, and occasional ones as far as Spiez and Thun.

Taller than most Switzers, Herr Bayr's commanding figure and upright military carriage made him well known in all these places. So that, if a stranger, struck by his appearance, should inquire who he was, he would be answered, "That? Oh, that is Bayr of Brunnen Thal. He makes doors and window-frames for half the country."

Always when he had to stop overnight, he put up at the Old Post Hotel in Unterseen, to which Christen had taken him that first day, when old Hans and Black Boy were awaiting them in happy unconsciousness of the tragedy that had taken place at home. And every time he came to the Old Post it brought vividly back to him that first day's happenings and his first sight of Christine.

Old Hans was still alive, to his own great surprise, but by no means greatly to his satisfaction. He was almost past work and found no great joy in life, and even grumbled at times that "they" had forgotten him —meaning the Higher Powers who give old men rest when their time is come.

As to Black Boy, Constant always rode him in, unless the snow made sleighing easier work. And Black Boy looked forward to those trips as the very spice of life—the joyous gallops down the Thals under a rider who felt like

a part of oneself, thundering across the wooden bridges like a charge of cavalry, clattering between the wooden houses, scattering hens and dogs and pigs and children. And then the long delightful rest in the great warm dark stable, with its rough tree-trunk pillars polished with much usage to the semblance of mahogany, and its huge cob-webbed beams, and its homely smells and excellent feed, and the exhilarating exchange of ideas with one's crunching neighbours on either side.

The ground floor of the Old Post at that time was a large café or trink-halle, which formed a general meeting-place for all the men-folk of Unterseen. There they made and kept their appointments, and over the beer-mugs or Kirsch-glasses or coffee-cups, in an atmosphere thick with the smoke of big-bowled pipes and long thin cigars, contracts were negotiated, disputes settled, accounts paid, and much business got through.

Constant Bayr was well known there, and sitting in a corner one night, deep in negotiation with Herr Rosen, the builder, who had grown fat over the Höheweg expansions of the last five years, he was the object of searching scrutiny by a pair of very keen black eyes belonging to a man who sat with the other working-men in an adjoining corner.

Shifty black eyes they were, with a trick of quick side-glances which threw the dirty whites of them into undue prominence—the eyes one meets in a vicious dog, or a biting horse, or, say, in a man who has good and sufficient reason to doubt what the next moment may hold for him, and would not be greatly surprised if it proved to be the hand of the law on his shoulder.

He had a face to match—sallow, evil, with lowering brows, a perpetual scowl, and an obvious grudge against

the world in general. Not, on and by the face of him, a sociable companion, and those who found themselves at the same table regarded him somewhat askance and accorded him only the courtesy of holding themselves aloof.

He had come into the town—from Lausanne, he said, about a week before.

He called himself Jules Bichard, and was working on one of the new hotels in the Höheweg. His looks commended him neither to masters nor men, but hands were short for all there was to do, and he did his work efficiently enough, what time he was not quarrelling with his neighbours on the job.

"Bad lot!" said the Chief of Police, when his eyes lighted on him, and forthwith informed himself as to who he was—or claimed to be, and whence he came.

All that Lausanne could say was that Bichard had been knocking about the lake towns for some years past, and was understood to be one of the French refugees of '71 who had elected to remain in Switzerland when his comrades went back home—a decision which Lausanne unequivocally regretted, for the fellow was quarrelsome and troublesome and generally at loggerheads with all about him. They forgot to add that they had paid his fare to Interlaken to get rid of him.

We have, however, met the black-faced rascal several times before; more than once, and always unpleasantly, at Bourges, where de Valle recognised him as his one-time orderly, Jean-Marie Ravaud, but accorded him his chance and made no inquiry as to how he came to be there instead of in his rightful place, the hulks; the last time, on the bleak cross-road between Sombacourt and Pontarlier, when his hungry knife was slicing steaks from

de Valle's foundered horse before the breath was out of it, and de Valle spoiled his appetite with an involuntary kick which left him sore inside for many a day.

We have seen that, through some twist in his nature, he had, from the very beginning of trouble, most unreasonably set down all the misfortunes of his life to de Valle's account. But of late he had not thought about him, except to curse his memory whenever he did so. For nothing comes of hating a dead man, and de Valle had died with the rest at La Cluse.

And Madame la Comtesse had married again! He had seen her less than a month ago in Lausanne, as beautiful as ever, and colder and haughtier than ever—a Princess now, and fabulously rich, as very little inquiry informed him, for Madame was never one to hide her splendour under a bushel, and wherever she went everyone very soon knew who she was.

So, Jules Bichard, ci-devant Jean-Marie Ravaud, sat and stared at Constant Bayr as though fascinated by him, and there was wild clash of diverse thought going on behind his lowering mask.

There was certainly money in it. For de Valle's wife was princessing it on the lake down there with an unmistakably living husband; and de Valle himself, no more dead at La Cluse than he himself, was sitting there before his eyes.

No woman is allowed two husbands! The Princess would undoubtedly pay him well to keep his mouth closed.

Nor is a man allowed two wives! If only this resuscitated de Valle should have taken to himself a wife now——

"Who is he—that big fellow in the corner?" he growled, to the one who unfortunately found himself

next him on the seat—one, Jan Schafer, a decent-enough fellow but heady in his cups.

"That? That is Herr Bayr of Brunnen Thal—the big door-and-window man."

"Bayr be ——! Can't you speak without lying—you?"

"Liar yourself!" said Jan, and emptied his beer mug in Bichard's face.

They were hustled outside and fought it out there with no great harm done, once they had deprived Bichard of his knife, but ample bad feeling because of his strenuous attempts to use it.

But the battering he got was not sufficient to eliminate from his mind what had led up to it. De Valle—undoubtedly alive and flourishing! They called him by another name, indeed, unless that hot-headed beer-slinger was making a fool of him, as he had at the moment believed. He would settle with the beer-slinger another time. For the moment his business was with de Valle, who called himself Bayr, and came from Brunnen Thal, wherever that was.

He knew he was not mistaken. The eyes of hate are the keenest in the world. Love may be deceived—too often is; but whole-souled hatred pierces all masks and veilings.

He had not lived two years with M. le Comte de Valle, and seen him on campaign, without knowing him through the disguise of a beard. He had caught the tones of his voice too, and it was the voice he knew and hated.

Money—and all it could give him of the things his nature craved? Or the satisfaction of his soul? The possibilities warred within him.

Money he could get from the Princess without doubt.

But from this other he wanted more than money. Was it not he who had brought him to the ground, landed him in the hulks, harried him time and again, whenever opportunity offered at Bourges, nearly kicked the life out of him on the road to Pontarlier ?

More than money would be needed to wipe out all that.

If, now, he could work the double event ?—get money from the Princess and settle accounts with de Valle ! That would be a master-stroke. It would mean playing the Princess false of course, but that was not worth troubling about.

He was not such a fool, however, as not to see that the Princess's second marriage, while her first husband was still alive, might, almost certainly would, have been entered into under the reasonable belief that he was dead.

She might pay, all the same, to avoid a scandal. But that was not enough. Sweeter even than much money would be a settlement with de Valle.

If only he also were married again !

He determined to seek out this Brunnen Thal, and see how matters stood with M. le Comte de Valle, who called himself Bayr and made doors and windows.

III

A LATE April morning in the Thal—the time of year that Christine loved best—the time of the coming of new life—the time of resurrection and of promise.

The higher peaks were radiant in the sunshine with fresh snow. It had fallen on the lower lands in sweeping showers before which the last of the winter had fled.

Everywhere was the sweet green flushing of the Spring. The meadows were white with flowers, the orchard-trees with opening buds. Cow-bells and goat-bells tinkle-tankled joyously, and the cow-boys and goat-girls yodelled cheerfully along the hillsides.

The flume was so full that it could hardly hold the riotous race for the lakes and the sea. The water leaped over the brim and spouted in full-bodied jets from every hole and crevice.

The great wheel thudded a business-like diapason to it all, and the big saws and the little saws, and the shriller tools of the door-and-window sheds, whizzed and screamed and made sweet music for those whose welfare depended on them.

Constant and Johan Rix were busy selecting and marking logs to be cut into beams for another great hotel in the Höheweg, for which Herr Rosen had got the contract. They were to do all the floors and panelling, all the doors, windows, cupboards; every bit of woodwork

was to come from Brunnen Thal. There would not be much holiday-making for any of them that summer.

In the great hill of saw-dust, just emptied out of the pit, little Christian and his sister Christine were disporting themselves, with much merry prattle and occasional shrieks and shouts.

They were always waiting for the pit to be emptied, for fresh pine saw-dust is almost as good as snow to play in and not nearly so cold to hands and feet and sprawling limbs and careless little bodies.

They climbed and slid, and wallowed, and buried one another, dug caves in its sides which immediately fell in, built castles which insisted on breadth instead of height, and at the present moment were nowhere to be seen because their mother had come out on to the balcony of the great brown wooden house and was looking for them. They had seen her coming and wriggled backwards inside the hill like worms into their holes.

Christine, with Baby Constant on her arm, stood in the wide wooden balcony and looked out over the long green flower-boxes, which in another month would make it gay with all the colours of the rainbow. She had come to look for the rest of her family. Unless she was able to locate the children by their voices—in which, as a rule, there was not the slightest difficulty—she was always in doubt as to what they might be up to. Silence implied mischief; and mischief, in the neighbourhood of whizzing saws and water-wheels and flumes, might mean danger.

"Where have those two got to, Constant?" she called down to her husband.

"I don't know. They were here a moment ago—on the dust-hill there, I think," and he strode towards it to investigate.

But just as he came to it, there burst forth a howl, and Christian scrambled out holding his leg very tightly with both hands, while little Christine pushed out a saw-dusty head and gazed at him in wonder.

"My leg, my leg! There's half a tree in it," howled Christian; and as his father bent down to inspect, his mother plucked a needle out of her case and came down the wide wooden steps and joined them. This was the commonest accident of all.

And as she came towards them, poising the weight of Baby Constant on her hip, she was a sight to gladden the eyes of any man—tall and upright, and very comely of figure, with the graceful carriage of an Eastern water-carrier, and in her face all the matronly dignity and beauty of five years of happy married life.

"Hold Baby!" and she dumped his namesake—wide-eyed and thumb in mouth—into her husband's arms and bent over the tree in howling Christian's leg.

"Less noise, manny! You'll have them coming up from Unter Thal to see whose little pig is being killed. There!—that *was* a big one," and she held up the splinter for his satisfaction. "Now, let me suck it for a minute. . . . And now you can forget all about it, and all of you come in to dinner. 'Tinie, shake all that saw-dust out of your hair. You look like a fuzzy caterpillar."

She hooked her arm inside her husband's free one and they climbed the steps up to the house, Christian in the rear limping excruciatingly and twisting his face out of recognition to excite his sister's sympathies.

And up there, among the bushes on the hillside, a pair of venomous black eyes watched it all with vicious

exultation, and found in it only a weapon for the furthering of their owner's malevolent plans.

He had set out from Interlaken the previous day, and spent the night at the little Gasthaus in Unter Thal. He was a worker in wood and had heard that Bayr of Brunnen Thal was needing hands. He had never been in Brunnen Thal. What kind of a place was it, and what kind of man was Herr Bayr ?

Quite out of the way kind of place, was it ? Well, he didn't mind that, so long as the pay was good and treatment decent.

And Herr Bayr ?—A good sort, eh ? Ah ?—not one of the actual original Bayrs ? A Frenchman, was he ? —name of—what did you say ?—Duval ?—de Valle ?— ah, Duval ! Yes ?—came in with the others, five or six years back, and had chosen to stop on. Saved young Bayr's life, did he ?—I understand—and then when young Bayr died he married the sister and took on the saw-mills and the name. Good stroke of business, that ! And he's a fine fellow, you say ? Chosen mayor, eh ? And captain in the Reserve !—well, well ! He's not done so badly for himself.

There was no difficulty at all in getting them to talk about Bayr of Brunnen Thal. Herr Bayr had never drawn rein there for so much as a glass of kirsch, but they were very familiar with the quick beat of Black Boy's galloping hoofs as he sped up and down the valley, and they were all rather proud of the gallant figure he made, for riders were not very common among them. They said to one another, " Here comes Herr Bayr ! " and stepped to window or door to watch him, and felt a kind of proprietary right in him and foam-flecked Black Boy.

So Black-Eyes learned all he wanted, and it was all as his evil heart would have had it. And now he had only to mature his plans and carry them out with care and he would be a made man.

He would have money to squander on every evil craving that he had never hitherto been able to satisfy to the full; and, better even than that, he would have the satisfaction of blasting to the winds the happiness and fair fame of this man who had always been his enemy, who had thwarted him at every end and side, and had kicked him in the stomach when he was dying of hunger. Gr-r-r-r! Now he had him, and he would make him foot the bill to the last centime.

But, though he was satisfied in his own mind by the prattle of the Gasthaus-keeper, he would still go on and see what he could, with his own eyes, of this de Valle-Duval-Bayr's surroundings, and then he would get quietly back to Interlaken and mature his plans. So he started on his way before daybreak, and was lying hidden in the bushes on the hillside before Brunnen Thal was fairly awake.

As he sat watching the little family idyll, and saw in it all only the eagerly-desired opportunity for his vindictive humour, a possible flaw in his plans suddenly suggested itself to him, and he ground his teeth over it savagely.

Would any man have gone so far in the making of a new life without seeing to the security of its foundation? What if de Valle had been legally divorced from his first wife? Divorce, he knew, was not easy. (It was in fact very difficult in those days, since the Church refused its countenance.) But to wealthy folk few things were absolutely impossible, and they might have managed it somehow. If it should be so, all his scheming was use-

less, all his hopes undone. And he had no possible means of finding out.

He viciously pondered other plans. He could steal down after dark and fire the house, and trust to his master, the devil, that some of them should come to grief.

He could perhaps make away with one of the children —or steal one and hold it for ransom. He had met men in the hulks who had played that game. But the discomforts of his meeting-place with those who had tried it did not particularly commend the idea to him.

He could waylay de Valle one of these days as he went in to Interlaken and shoot him down from the hillside. He had passed scores of possible places as he came along, and, given luck and a clear field, he could get away across the hills before anything was known of the matter.

But . . . revenge was good without a doubt—very good! But revenge and money were better still—oh, very much better!—and he was set on both if both were to be had.

After terrific cudgelling of black brains, he stole away along the hillside and set off on his way back to Interlaken.

Various plans surged within him. He could go back to Lausanne, seek out Princess Varenin if she should be still there, discover the matter to her suddenly, and in private of course, and judge from her manner how things really stood.

If they had by some means obtained a divorce, she would of course simply have him kicked out or handed over to the police. He had no money to waste on travelling, and the possibility of spending any simply to land himself in the hands of the Lausanne police, who had already, by their action in deporting him, expressed

themselves with unmistakable point on the subject, did not greatly appeal to him.

The only other course was to tackle de Valle in Interlaken—where he could not take the law into his own hands as he certainly could up here in his own valley—and endeavour by close observation to learn whether he stood on solid ground or on a hollow crust, and then act accordingly.

This idea commended itself to his rancorous mind from another point of view also. If things were as he hoped, he would, after satisfying himself, leave them there as regarded de Valle himself, while he went on to Lausanne and squeezed all he could out of the Princess. And meanwhile de Valle here would be suffering the tortures of the damned. For none knew better than Jean-Marie Ravaud how heart-sickening and nerve-destroying was the knowledge that at any unknown moment the hand of Fate might clap down on one's shoulder and jerk one into outer darkness.

He had suffered like that more than once, and now this man, who looked so hearty and so happy and so prosperous, should suffer this infernal torment also.

Think as he would he could devise no better plan. It pleased him mightily on the whole, and to it his whole mind was given as he trudged back down the valley. And no single one of all the beauties through which he passed—of towering pine-clad wall, or budding leaf or opening flower, of foaming stream and white-laced waterfall—did he notice as he went.

His eye was evil, and his whole body full of darkness, and great indeed was that darkness.

IV

JEAN-MARIE had no difficulty in learning that Herr Bayr came into Interlaken almost every week just now, and that when he had to stop the night he always put up at the Old Post. Every night accordingly found him in the darkest corner of the big ground-floor room, waiting patiently like a spider for its fly, like a crouching forest beast for its unconscious prey.

He was not of a social disposition at the best of times; but these days of feverish waiting, when his mine was all prepared, and only this aggravating delay on the part of the victim hindered its springing, wore his nerves raw.

In working-hours he stuck doggedly to it, because a man cannot travel without money—unless indeed the police pay his fare, and he preferred keeping clear of the police. And while he worked, his mind was so full of his schemes, rehearsing just what he would say and do, and forecasting what de Valle would probably say and do in reply, that to speak to him was only to elicit a snarl or a curse. While, in the café of a night, he was even more unapproachable still. Any minute might bring things to a head, and what the hades had he to do with the trivial jokes and silly chatter of these gabblers in their cups. He was a skeleton at the feast, a death's-head at the board, and the others resented his gloomy presence and did their utmost to jibe him out and give them his room instead of his company.

He had as much right there as they, however, and a vastly deeper reason for stopping there. So he sat it out and refused to budge, but there were many biting remarks on their part and much bitter cursing on his—and the venom all round was the more corrosive that it had to be furtive and hidden from public view or they would all have been flung out together.

More than once, when he had to turn out because the place was closing for the night, he found one or other of the Switzers waiting outside to ram his curses back into his throat, and many a rough scuffle took place. But these were of small account to him—the buzzing of flies to the waiting tiger; and every minute brought his prey nearer.

When, at last, Herr Bayr came striding in one night, Jean-Marie shrank back into his darkness, all the hatred seething in him more furiously than ever by reason of its late repression.

When Bayr had eaten, he hurried out to keep an appointment he had made with Herr Rosen, the builder, in Markt-Gasse, and Jean-Marie slipped out after him. But, though it was a night of wind and rain, there were too many people about still to suit him, so he followed his man and waited outside the house in Markt-Gasse for a time which seemed longer to him than all the time before.

And that waiting in the wind and rain did nothing to cool his temper. He shrank in under the projecting eaves of this house and that, changing his position as the malevolent gusts found him out and drove the rain in on him.

The water pattered down in melancholy cascades from spouts and gutters and long-sloped roofs. He was very wet, and would have been cold and miserable but for

the hot fires within which needed more than dribbles from spouts and gutters to cool them. The wetter he became the fiercer burned the fires within him. Every drop that fell on him was an addition to Bayr's account, and the reckoning was at hand.

It was he that was out in the cold and wet now—but just you wait, you, de Valle-Duval-Bayr, and in next to no time it would be you the chill would fall on—and it would be a chill that would out-chill all the rains that ever fell.

The door opened at last and Bayr came out, said a final word to Herr Rosen, turned up the collar of his big cloak, and strode away down the street towards the upper bridge.

Jean-Marie followed him at a cautious distance. There were still occasional wayfarers in Markt-Gasse and Höheweg, though good citizens were mostly getting to bed. Lights flickered dimly in upper casements. Doors and windows below were shuttered and barred. From every projecting eave and spout the water splashed dismally on to the cobbles below.

It was to get his man all to himself that Jean-Marie had waited, and now at last he had got him.

As they crossed the bridge he was only a few paces behind. He quickened his step. Bayr heard him and turned casually to see who came so late.

"Monsieur le Comte!—Monsieur de Valle!" came Jean-Marie's harsh insistent voice—not very loud, but sharper than any dagger to Bayr's peace and happiness.

It struck him to the heart. It cut at the very foundations of his life. He did not recognize the voice. He had no idea who this could be. But he saw in one swift flash all that it might mean to him.

Some one called to him out of the past—the past that he had thought safely dead, securely buried—some one who knew him! And there was not a single soul in all that past that he had ever wished to see again.

It meant the end! The utter irretrievable end of all things—Christine—the children—all his new-found peace and joy in life—the end too of Claudine and whatever of satisfaction she might have found in her new estate.

Even if it were some old friend or acquaintance, who had recognized him in spite of his beard and utterly changed appearance, it meant discovery and must inevitably lead to disaster. . . .

Characteristically he had walked on. He would acknowledge nothing. He would brave it out and deny everything. For Christine's sake and the children's—he must.

To stop would be to acknowledge acquaintance with the name that had been flung at him. He walked on—quietly and unconcernedly to all outward appearance—a very volcano of distress and fury in actual fact.

Jean-Marie understood and quickened his steps.

"Stay, Monsieur le Comte! We must have a word together. It will pay you, I assure you."

They quitted the covering shade of the bridge just as Jean-Marie got that far. And Bayr, turning, knew him in the flicker of the swinging lamp. Knew too, from one glance at the venomous face, what he had to expect from Ravaud's recognition of him.

And on the instant the volcanic fury within him broke loose. He raised his fist and struck fair and straight between the black eyes that showed so much too much quick-gleaming white about them.

Ravaud gripped at him with futile hands, reeled, and fell backwards into the Aare and disappeared.

Bayr's fury chilled. He had not meant— Nay, he did not know what he had meant— The impulse to smash that crawling thing had overpowered him.

But the man would drown. Without hesitation he loosed his cloak and leaped in after him, and dived for him, and swam and sought . . .

The river was very full—there was no dam at the end of Spielmatten in those days—the current was like a mill-race, the glacier water deadly cold.

As the sight of Ravaud reeling into the flood had chilled his fury of resentment, so again the icy benumbing of the water chilled his natural impulse to save a drowning man.

What was he doing there? What did he want?—to save the wretch?—to save him to his own certain destruction? . . .

Anyway it was too late. The man was gone. In another minute he would be gone too. His limbs were lumps of ice. The fires within him were out . . .

He struggled to the bank and hung there for a minute till he got his breath. Then he drew himself up and staggered back to the bridge for his cloak, and then ran hard along the new walk they were making on the river-bank, till the life came prickling back into his veins again, and then he turned and went back to his hotel. And, all the time, he thought but vaguely of what had happened.

It was all like a hideous dream—dim and unreal already. The one thing he was certain of was that he was deadly cold—as cold almost as when the Staub-Lawine had him by the neck, and Christine dug him out just in time.

Ah—Christine! . . . And the children! . . . and that snake of a Ravaud! . . . Well, he was gone and they were saved. . . .

Herr Brunner, the landlord of the Old Post, was a man of large discretion. He asked no questions but attended to his needs. In five minutes he had him between warm blankets, as full as he could safely hold of hot cognac-and-water, and his clothes drying on the big stove in the kitchen.

"Herr Gott!" exclaimed Frau Brunner, as she hung them up. "He couldn't have got much wetter if he'd been in the river!"

"It is a very wet night," said Herr Brunner, and there for her the matter ended.

For himself—if he had not known Herr Bayr, indeed. . . . But the only fault he, as a landlord, had ever been able to find with Herr Bayr was that he was so abstemious . . . and besides, if he had been drinking he could not possibly have held all that hot cognac-and-water and shown no more sign of it than just falling asleep, which he had done almost instantly.

And there, for him also, the matter ended, and he never referred to it again.

And there, it seemed to Constant Bayr, when he woke up next morning, fit and well both in body and mind, the matter also ended for him, the principal actor in it.

What had become of that other he could only surmise. That Ravaud was dead he did not for a moment doubt. He had gone under like a stone. His body was long since rolling in the Thuner See—underwater from choice—and he could not but hope it would stop there. The Thuner See was, he had been told, seven hundred feet deep in

places—deep enough surely to engulf even the rascality of a Ravaud.

He felt but small compunction in the matter, and therein one must take into account his upbringing, his military training and outlook, and the whole circumstances of the case. And, indeed, relief from menace so startling and so far-reaching might well outweigh all other considerations in any man's mind.

If—he reasoned—an ordinary footpad had attacked him for his purse, the simplest instinct of self-defence would have prompted him to do as he had done.

This man was infinitely more dangerous than all the footpads in the world. He was an immediate and overwhelming peril to the safety and well-being of those who were dearer to him than his life.

The moment he recognized him, he recognized also, in one lightning flash of apprehension, all the mischief of which he was capable and on which he was obviously bent. His own life, and Christine's and the children's, and Claudine's and Varenin's—all were in the scale against that one black-faced schemer's. To his mind there could not be one moment's question as to which must go.

He had all the soldier's instinct for defence and quick riposte. Time and again, in fight and skirmish, his practised sword had foiled attack and replied with instant death, and he had counted it no more than an incident in the day's work. If he thought of it at all, it was only to congratulate himself that it was his sword that had got home first.

How, then, did this foul attack differ from any of these others ?

In just that one particular, which, acting uncon-

sciously within him, was at the root of his strange attempt to save the man from the death to which he had sent him.

None of these others had he ever thought of saving. They tried for his life, and, failing, died. It was the chance of the field.

But—yes, there was a difference. In open fight one strikes to kill and thinks no more of it. He had had no definite intention of killing this man. He had struck on the instant as one strikes at a threatening snake. When he saw the result of his blow so much greater than he had definitely intended, he plunged in after him instinctively to avert the unlooked-for consequences.

And yet—he asked himself now with some surprise—what earthly good could he have expected from saving him? No good whatever!—no possible good! If he had saved the fellow he would have been more venomous than ever. Things were better as they were.

He recalled too, with satisfaction, the Chief of Police's terse saying—" Every man has the right to defend himself and his property. If the attacker should happen to get killed, the blame would be entirely his, and the world would be rid of one more rascal."

Surely if ever man was justified, he was.

But deep down, behind all his reasoning and self-justification, was the knowledge that the reason why this attack, and this defence to the death, differed from all these others, was the fact that it was the flaw in the foundations of this new life of his which had laid him open to the attack. If he had had nothing to fear this man would have had no reason for attacking him and would not have gone to his death.

Subconsciously that feeling was in him, but he would not give it head or permit it to disturb him. Natural

instinct had taken him into the water after Ravaud; cooler consideration—which the icy Aare water instantly provoked—suggested the futility of attempting to undo that which he had done on the righteous spur of the moment. He had done what seemed to him right and he would not let it trouble him.

He went about his work next day as usual, and galloped up the valley on Black Boy in the afternoon with the uplifted mind of one who has foiled an attack and won a fight.

Ravaud had hated him with all the strength of his perverted mind ever since he had fallen on trouble through his own delinquencies. There had been no grounds for his venom so far as his master was concerned, but his mind had got warped and his ill-feeling had grown till, in everything that had happened since, he saw the hand of de Valle pushing him still further outside the pale.

Much greater cause for disturbance in him was the fact that the man should have recognized him. But he said to himself, "The eyes of hate are keen, keen eyes," and he could not recall any other who could have even such small reason to hate him as this man had mistakenly believed he had.

But, anyway, he was gone, and that danger had passed. He resolutely locked the whole matter within that secret chamber of his heart which already held so much that must never be known if Christine's peace of mind was to be preserved. The burden was his. He would bear it stoutly and without sign.

Never by shadowed moment or troubled look did he give her cause for any slightest apprehension, and never did she know how near she and the children, and all their ever-growing happiness, had been to utter and disastrous shipwreck.

V

BUT . . .

One may say to oneself that an incident is closed and done with. One may lock it in the secret chamber of one's heart, and rigorously bar it from one's thoughts—though that, indeed, is no easy matter at times. But one's powers are limited to one's own small province, and outside that the great natural laws work on, inexorable, uncontrollable.

Ten days later Herr Bayr's business took him to Interlaken again, and he found the place in some excitement.

Away down at Thun, where the Aare flows through the town by wide double channels, its freedom is curbed and its wild tumultuous rush turned to various utilitarian account. It flings itself against dams, foams over weirs, dashes in ragged white anger through sluice-gates and traps, and then flows on serenely to lave the feet of Bern.

Regulating the flow down there at Thun one morning, the guardian of the floods was surprised to find one of his half-opened traps jammed by some unusually bulky obstruction. It proved on investigation to be the body of a man, trying in vain to force its way through an aperture altogether too small for it. In time they succeeded in getting it ashore, and then the police took the matter in hand to find out who he was and how he came there, where he had obviously no right to be.

No man had been reported missing in Thun. They

made inquiries among the villages on the lake, and finally at Interlaken ; and there learned that a dark-haired man such as they described had disappeared about a week before—one, Bichard, a quarrelsome fellow of doubtful reputation who had come to them from Lausanne.

The Chief of Police at Interlaken took a trip down the lake, recognized the body as Bichard's, and took it back with him to Interlaken to assist his investigation into the matter.

Very small inquiry informed him that Bichard had been at loggerheads with pretty nearly every man he had come in contact with, that quarrels culminating in scuffles had been of almost daily and nightly occurrence, that he carried a knife and was much too inclined to use it—reasons enough for him finding himself jammed at last in the sluice-gate at Thun.

Still—even a Bichard cannot be allowed to pass by absolutely unknown ways. They were thankful enough to be rid of him, but still they must endeavour to find out how he went.

The very natural idea that he might have got drunk and fallen into the river of his own accord, was promptly negatived by Herr Brunner of the Old Post.

" Drunk ? " said he. " Why the rascal never took but one small glass of kirsch and he made it last the whole evening. I've never seen him anywhere near drunk since he first put his ugly face inside the door."

And so, in due course, they came on the exceptional bad-feeling between Bichard and Jan Schafer. Jan admitted it without reserve. Bichard was an ill-conditioned cur, with a knife in his belt and a hand that slipped to it all too quickly. Yes, he had fought him more than once, as the others knew. But as to putting him out

entirely—he knew nothing about that, though he could not truthfully say he was sorry he was gone. Nor was he able to account with absolute exactitude for his time on either of the nights which, through a comparison of various witnesses' ideas of the last time they had seen Bichard, the Chief had settled as the probable date of his death.

For a man who drank freely, and often grew muddled of a night, there was perhaps nothing much in that. But taken in connection with the known ill-feeling between the men, and the constant threats from one to another of direr happenings when the chance arrived, and the fact that, according to the doctors, Bichard had received a blow in the face which rendered him insensible before he reached the water, the authorities decided to take Jan Schafer into safe-keeping for a time, and he was lodged in the old Schloss amid the walnut-trees, on suspicion of knowing more about the matter than he had so far been able to remember.

Such was the story Bayr picked up bit by bit on his next visit to Interlaken.

He transacted his business as quickly as possible, and then went up to the Schloss and demanded audience of the Chief of Police. They had been on the best of terms ever since the affair of the Schwarz-Thaler. As mayor of his commune, captain in the Elite, and one of the most prosperous men in the canton, the Chief held Herr Bayr in the very highest estimation.

So much the greater then was his surprise when his so highly esteemed visitor said quietly, "Herr Chief of Police, I have only just heard that you are holding young Schafer on suspicion of causing the death of that rascal Bichard. He had nothing to do with it. It was I killed

him—though I did not know for certain at the time that I had killed him."

"You, Herr Bayr? You killed him?"

"Yes, he came at me as I was crossing the upper bridge on my way to the Old Post last Monday week. I had been with Herr Rosen at his house in Markt-Gasse, and we sat late over some business matters. As I crossed the bridge I heard quick footsteps behind me, then a man came at me. I struck him full in the face and he reeled and tumbled into the river. I jumped in after him, but he had gone down. It was icy cold and numbed me. I got out as best I could and ran to the hotel, and Herr Brunner put me into hot blankets and gave me hot drinks."

"He is a discreet man is Herr Brunner. Not one word of it all has he told us."

"He knew nothing about it. It was raining in torrents. I did not tell him I had been such a fool as to jump into the river after a rascal I'd just knocked into it."

"Herr Gott, it's more than I'd have done myself!"

"Yes, I can't quite explain why I did it—except that I'd no intention of doing that much when I struck him. If I'd heard of the matter sooner I would have come before, but news is slow of reaching Brunnen Thal and not a word of it has got there yet."

"And you're sure the man you hit was Bichard?"

"I'd never even heard the name of Bichard till this morning. I took it for granted that the man you had found must be the man I struck. Have you got him here? I would know him again, for it was just under the lamp at the far end of the bridge, and I saw his face clearly as I hit him."

The Chief took down a key from a nail and led him to an out-house in the old courtyard of the Schloss.

"That is the man," said Bayr, as they looked down at the dark discoloured face, pinched and livid with its long immersion in the icy water.

"Now what will you do with me?" he asked, as they went back to the Chief's room. "Lock me up in Schafer's place?"

"Not a bit," said the Chief, holding out his hand and shaking Bayr's warmly. "We say 'Thank you, for ridding us of another rascal.' This is the second. Do it again whenever so good an opportunity offers. I've just learned that the folks at Lausanne paid this fellow's fare to get rid of him and land him on to us, for which I do not thank them—no, indeed! I will release Schafer at once and tell him I'm satisfied he had no hand in the matter but he's not to do it again. It will maybe do him good to have been locked up. He's had no drink the last two days anyway. We'll have the other buried, and there's an end, Herr Bayr. I shall say no more about it than is necessary. But if it should get talked about it will do you no harm."

He was a shrewd man was the Chief of Police and had had considerable experience of the ways of men. Possibly he suspected there might be more behind it all. He had known Herr Bayr when he was Constant Duval. He remembered that he was one of those who came in in '71 and elected to remain. He had learned that the so-called Bichard was a refugee also. Yes, he thought it by no means impossible that there was something more behind it all.

But he had the highest possible opinion of Herr Bayr, as had all who came in contact with him. And of Bichard

they were all glad to be rid. So not one word would he say that should cause Herr Bayr any further trouble in the matter. The blow that settled Bichard was all for the good of the community. As to the why and the wherefore of it, he would not inquire.

The startling case of the American, Robinson-Smythe, who was accused of killing his wealthy wife by pushing her over the edge of Lauberhorn, occurred a few days later and the matter of Bichard dropped out of sight.

Up in Brunnen Thal they never even heard of it, and life there flowed on like the mill-stream, with quickening throbs at times, but always steadily, beneficently, intent on the duty in hand, and too busy to disturb itself over the affairs of the outside world.

The years as they passed brought only greater happiness to them all. Christine, looking back at times, wondered what life would have held for her if Constant Duval had never come to the Thal; and every night and every morning she thanked God gratefully for His great gift of her good man's love.

Had she known everything she would have loved him still, for whatever of wrong he had done, he had done it from his overpowering love of her. But there would have been a shadow on it all that Time itself, greatest healer of all, could never have dissipated entirely; and that she was spared, for her husband kept it locked for ever in its secret place and permitted no sign of it to show.

I do not justify him. I do not judge him. There is his story. Judge him or justify him for yourselves—and let him or her that is blameless among you cast the first stone.

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