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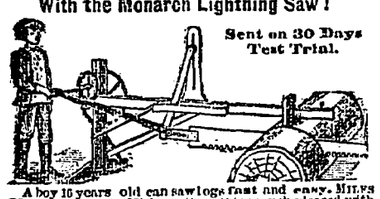

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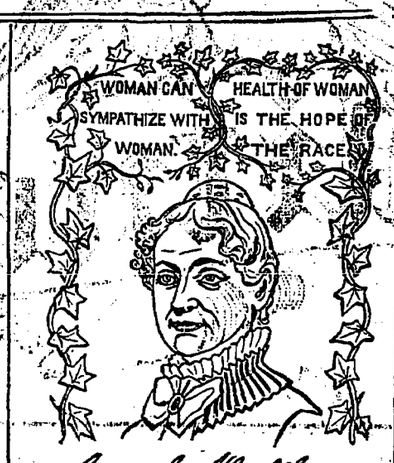

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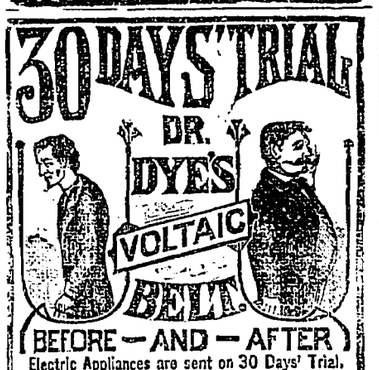

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THE DWARF'S SECRET.

"She cannot," said the priest," and I approve of what she has done. For it would be wrong to bring the dowry of unmerited disgrace to a worthy man so full of heart and of talent. I deplore it though, for I doubt if Benedict is strong enough to stand such a test. What must be our regret, if that noble intellect of his should lose the sentiment of the good, the beautiful, the true, now so strong? If Benedict once ceased to be the Christian artist whom we loved, he falls into an abyss, whence there is little hope of rescuing him."

"This is terrible," said Nicois; "and do you not curse the hand which has stricken you?"

"We adore it, even in its severity," said the priest.

"Have you any hope?" said Nicois.

"Yes; that light may be thrown upon it all," said the abbe.

"But if such should not be the case, if like Lesurques, your brother should die before his innocence is made manifest?"

"I shall look for justice there," said the priest, pointing upwards.

"There above us," said the banker, "is the air, the ether peopled with countless stars, but that is all. I do not believe in another life."

"That is the very reason you are inconsolable," said the priest; "believe me, there *is* no sorrow so great that faith cannot soften its bitterness. To the Christian a grave is a cradle. When we kneel beside a funeral pile, we venerate the remains of a being made to the image of God. Whilst our eyes follow it into the eternal world where all is pure and incorruptible, the certainty of its joy is the best solace for our grief. Ah! if, recognizing the hand which had stricken you, you had bowed down humble and contrite before the justice of Heaven, deploring your fault instead of blaspheming God, you would have suffered less I assure you. If, in the name of your lost child, you had relieved misery, assisted poor mothers, provided asylums for orphans, you might have appeased the anger of God, and obtained the recovery of your child. You believe your wretchedness in complete, but are you certain that Heaven has punished you sufficiently?"

"Spare me!" cried Nicois; "do not add to my misery."

"I would rather," said Sulpice, "apply thereto the sovereign remedy of resignation."

"Ah! if you could promise me that at any cost I should find my child."

"I do not work miracles," said Sulpice; "nor do I tempt the Lord, my God. I simply tell you of His law, and transmit to you His precepts. You have suffered a great deal, and hitherto found no alleviation for your grief. It is because He alone who inflicted the wound can heal it. All your wealth could not console you as much as one tear shed at the feet of God."

The banker shook his head.

"I have given up hopes of finding my son," said he, "and I cannot suffer more than I have done. Thank you for hearing me with such patience. My heart still remains closed against that God whom you would fain make me to love. To find happiness in abnegation and self-sacrifice one must have known and loved that God from childhood."

"Then," said the priest, "there is nothing that I can do for you?"

"Do not say so," said the banker. "I regard you as among my warmest friends, and friends are scarce. If I should ever have new cause of suffering I will confide it to you alone."

The banker shook hands warmly with the young priest and went away.

"My God!" cried the priest, when he was thus left alone, "wilt Thou permit that heart to suffer so, instead of drawing it to Thee?"

He remained some time prostrate in prayer for the man whom so many envied, and who was, nevertheless, so wretched. Then going down stairs, he found Sabine, who had just come in.

"You have been there?" he asked.

She answered by an affirmative nod.

"Tell me of him," said the priest

"I found him more prostrated than ever by his misfortune. There is reason to fear for his health, which has been terribly shaken by all these shocks. He is in a high fever. He asks justice of men and forgets to ask pardon of God. If I did not hope that he would yet be acquitted, and that the real culprit would be found, I should ask God to take Xavier to Himself."

"There is every reason to hope, Sabine, even against hope. If the unhappy boy perseveres in these rebellious dispositions we can only pray and suffer for him and with him that he may at length be brought to resignation. An occasion for further self-sacrifice may soon be offered us; even women may be called upon to fulfil a sublime mission, and in that case we will hope that our misfortunes have kindled in us a sacred and purifying flame."

"Ah!" said Sabine, "I understand. But for my utter loneliness and desolation you would have gone with the army. A soldier of the Cross, you would have faced death beside the soldiers of glory. When I see so many young and noble priests hastening to the scene of war, I have often thought that your place is with them; but my courage failed me when I would have advised you to follow them. I asked myself what would become of me, between the thought of my poor despairing brother and the memory of one whom I shall never see again."

"Then you still regret him?" said the priest. "You are grieving for him. Why not call him back?"

"Duty forbids it. Sorrow has its dignity, and I would rather he should think me cold and insensible than selfish and cowardly. If I cannot at once subdue an affection encouraged by my father and blessed by you, I can at least prove myself worthy a good man's love by wearing mourning like a widow."

Baptiste came in just then with the papers. The abbe tore them open with a hasty gesture, and glanced down the columns anxiously. Broken exclamations escaped him; his eyes grew dim; his heart beat high.

"Defeated!" cried he; "not in an equal combat, but overpowered by force of numbers. Reverses on all sides! And, though obscure soldiers are covering themselves with glory, and performing prodigies of valor, they cannot save the army, nor preserve France. Ah! will Heaven abandon the country of Charlemagne, of St. Louis, and of Joan d'Arc? Will this invasion, swelling like a threatening sea, at last engulf Paris? Alas! there is no Genevieve's crook to oppose to Attila's battle-axe. It is heart-breaking to read of it. France betrayed, sold, delivered to its enemies by some new Judas. Such will be the verdict of posterity. Never again shall that sublime feeling of love of country fill all hearts. Never again shall France rise as a nation, indignant, wronged but yet invincible. No nation could ever conquer her till she has once felt the shame of defeat. They spend the time for action in words. Plans are being made when the moment has come to take up arms, and meanwhile the Prussian army is encircling us in its folds, and will finally crush us."

"What!" cried Sabine. "Do you fear that France—"

"Will be conquered? Such is ever the fate of nations when, enervated by luxury, permeated to their very core by vice, they deserve a terrible awakening. How terrible it seems to me, as a priest, no less than as a Frenchman, that a Protestant soldiery should set foot upon Catholic France! And yet—"

"They dare not attack Paris!" said Sabine.

"They will dare. It is their turn now."

"What will you do?" asked Sabine.

"When I thought of you going away with the army to some distant place, and leaving me alone and desolate, my courage failed me. But if I can as it were, fight by your side—take my share of the common burden, staunch wounds, console and comfort—in a word, play a woman's part, count on me, Sulpice. The sister will be worthy of the brother. My weakness and my hesitation shall be lost sight of in face of danger; and, rising above my own sorrows, I will do all for love of Him who has afflicted us."

Baptiste threw open the door of the room, and said in a voice of deep emotion,

"Sir, a deputation from Charenton, wants to see you."

"Show them in, and I will see them presently," said the priest.

"Bring them here," said Sabine; "they are, we might say, part of the family."

Baptiste went out for the workmen, and soon ushered in about twenty of them. They were men of various ages, all scrupulously neat in their personal appearance.

"Pardon us," said the spokesman, "for intruding upon you here, and, so to say, forcing your door; but our reason is important. Not a moment is to be lost in a matter which we have so much at heart. Terrible news is placarded on the walls; and, in spite of reassuring words from some of the papers, we suspect the fearful truth. We have come to you, our guide and counsellor to ask your advice, and whether you are of opinion that France will be conquered in this war, and Paris besieged?"

"I still hope that France will repel the foe which has now set foot upon her territory, but Paris will be besieged."

"Then who will defend it? Our soldiers are on the frontiers."

"The Parisians," answered the abbe.

"We wanted but the word, sir," cried the man; "for we know that your advice will coincide with the dictates of honor. If the Parisians have to defend Paris, they must know how to hold a musket. Our comrades are frantic since yesterday's news; they long to fight like lions. This is our idea; since the beginning of the war labor is at a standstill. Let us stop all ornamental work for the present. The founders will find plenty to do; for cannon and artillery will be needed before long. They can serve their country by preparing engines of war; and the others—well, the others must learn to be soldiers as fast as they can. We will unite in forming an independent battalion. And we have come to ask you to be our chaplain."

"Brave men!" cried the priest, shaking hands with the foremost; "worthy sons of France! I accept with all my heart. You, arms in hand, and I with the crucifix, will do our duty before God and men."

"And I?" said Sabine, stepping forward. "And I, brother?"

"You will go to Charenton. Assist these brave men's wives. Tell them from me that their husbands shall receive their usual salary as long as the war lasts. Then, as we have to look forward to great trials and stern realities, you must choose the most intelligent women, and with them organize an ambulance in the factory. The wounded can be brought thither. Draw as largely as you please upon our coffers; for we shall be always rich if we always succeed in doing good."

"Ah, Mademoiselle," cried Blanc-Cadet, "we shall fight with tenfold courage, when we have the consolation of knowing that if a ball should strike one of us he shall be brought to our dear factory and cared for by you."

"We are only paying our father's debt, good friends," said Sabine; "the fortune which we now enjoy was made by you; it is just that it now be of assistance to you. You know that even before our recent afflictions we always had your welfare at heart. Your wives and daughters will henceforth be our sisters; I adopt your children. If any of you should fall upon the field of battle he will leave no orphans, they will belong thenceforth to the Pomereul family."

There were few dry eyes among the group when she had finished, but the Abbe Sulpice resumed:

"And it must be understood that I shall take upon myself the equipment of the men; any of you who have been soldiers can drill the others. This very day I will go to the archbishop and ask his approval. I shall not see you again to-day, as I have a great deal to do, but to-morrow I shall meet you without fail."

"To-morrow," repeated Sabine.

The workmen then withdrew, with renewed acknowledgments to Sulpice and Sabine, and the young priest almost immediately left his sister.

"My path is now marked out for me," said he; "let us be with God, and God will be with us."

Sabine spent the afternoon in arranging papers, and disposing of everything, as if for a long absence. At six o'clock her brother returned.

"On the eve of the gladiatorial combats," said he to his sister, "the martyrs always took their last meal together. I will share yours this evening?"

"Ah, Sulpice, do you already think of death?"

"I want at least to be ready," said he. "But do not be downcast. For it seems to me that my mission will be long, and that I have yet to save Xavier."

Then he kissed her upon the forehead.

"It is, my dear sister," said he, "the brother's kiss and it is also the priest's benediction. And now hold out your arm."

She did so, and the Abbe Pomereul fastened thereupon the white shield bearing the Geneva Cross.

The young girl knelt down before him.

"My brother," said she, "and my father also, for you are my spiritual father, bless this life which will be exposed henceforth for my neighbor, and bless my death should God take me."

"Rise, Christian," said the priest when he had blessed her; "it is the will of God."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WAR.

On the night of the 1st October, 1870, a party of young men were gathered round a camp fire. It was very cold. And in spite of many armfuls of wood and logs thrown upon the embers, they could scarcely keep warm. They held their hands over the blaze which now rose into the air, and again, driven downwards by a blast of wind, almost scorched their faces. They were silent. At that crisis the thoughts of men, and especially of those who had taken up arms to defend the ramparts were marked by a melancholy gravity. The beginning of that disastrous war had been remarkable for heroic efforts, for deeds of valor worthy the archives of glory; but, by a strange fatality, or by the incompetence of those who had usurped power on the 4th of September, all this courage, valor and enthusiasm were nullified. The National Guard and the volunteers, not being called to arms, were consumed with secret rage, thinking of the perils which threatened the capital on every side.

Each time that the call resounded in Paris they rose, sniffed the air, scenting the powder, and attaching the last green branches to their muskets, thus saluting in advance the victory which was to break up the iron column that now threatened the besieged city with destruction. Every evening, alas! the remnants of heroic battalions returned from the slaughter blood-stained, weary, their numbers lessened, blaming their commanders, who had made them believe that the war would be a war of extermination, and who veiled their cowardice under an appearance of devoted patriotism.

That night the hearts of the young soldiers were bursting with indignation.

Ever and anon one of them raised his head with a threatening scowl upon his face, or another examined the condition of his arms, while a third wrote in a note-book his will in favor of those dear ones whom he could scarcely hope to see again. Ever and anon a young artist, who was among the little group of patriots, recited some martial verses from the poets, or sang one of those military airs which so often serve to revive drooping courage, and to thrill the soul with love of country.

This little group of men, who gathered grave and stern around their camp fire, chilled by the cold night air, were all artists, students, or men of letters. They had been carefully chosen, poets, painters, sculptors and novelists, undertaking with noble enthusiasm and generous valor the defence of their beloved Paris, destined to be so treacherously betrayed.

In truth since the very commencement of that succession of disasters, unparalleled in history, they had indulged in much lawful anger, and shed many tears; but once the word went forth to stand, they were found arms in hand, with courageous hearts, a resolute, brave and noble phalanx, waiting to be cut to pieces, less indeed by the enemy than by the misdeeds of those who should have sustained them, and whose aim seems to have been to act the Judas.

"What a dreary vigil!" said the youngest of the watchers suddenly breaking silence; "far better the roar of cannon than this dead-like stillness. When the sound of artillery strikes upon the ear, then, at least, we can fight, struggle, and take our chances of victory or a glorious death. But when all is quiet, and we feel that in these nights of perfect calm we are wasting our lives and consuming our provisions, on my word it drives one mad."

"Yes, Gildas," said another; whose face as the fire-light fell upon it was dark with despair, while his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural, "yes, Gildas, better the struggle than such repose as this. What say you, Benedict?" he added, turning to one of the group, who sat with his face hidden in his hands.

"I say," answered the young sculptor, "that I pray Heaven to be among the first killed upon the field of battle when we are exposed to fire. I am weary of this defence which is not a defence, of this marching and never advancing; of victories which end in retreat, of the day's orders which resound with the names of obscure soldiers who must be forgotten to-morrow."

"It is true," said a dramatic author, who was taking notes on a tablet. "We are spectators of a bloody tragedy, and when the flag goes down we cannot exclaim with the ancient armies, even in their defeat, 'All is lost, save honor.' The soldiers have indeed sustained their former reputation. But what will the leaders, the members of that usurping and incompetent government, answer to France when it demands of them, 'What have you done with my sons? They were willing to fight, to die, through you it has ended in a bloody farce.' Ah! may the shame at least fall upon them. I swear that if we come forth defeated from this struggle I, at least, will do my utmost to place the stigma of infamy where it is due."

"Think of the long list of battles lost," cried Benedict Fougerais in a tone of feverish excitement. "When we remember with what ardor the soldiers marched to battle, and witness the result of the struggle, it fills us with shame, terror and amazement."

"How proud we were," continued Gildas, "when the first battle took place outside of Paris, on the 19th of September. At Chatillon, Clamart and Plessis-Piquetour troops made a brave but useless defence; and the Bretons rushed into the thickest of the fight, with the scapular on their breasts and a hymn on their lips, their venerable chaplain following them into battle animating them, consoling when they fell, and praying over the grave which he dug for them. Such details brought tears to our eyes and filled us with enthusiasm; but when these brave men had won a position, they were recalled and hindered from pushing their victory farther."

"Ah, but it was worse next day," exclaimed Benedict. "Gildas you remember, and you, Lionel. The Prussians, from their ambush, kept up a furious fire upon the forts of Aubervilliers and Noisy. The order was given in Paris, and the Bretons set out like the brave men they are, singing and vowing to return as conquerors. How they did fight! with what wonderful daring they skirmished about Bondy before making the assault! And when they had not only made good their position, but would have pursued the enemy, they were as usual commanded to retreat, which they did in good order, according to the reports.

"Oh," he cried after a pause, "if they had but called out a hundred or two hundred thousand of the national guard, sharp-shooters, infantry, volunteers, all under different names united for the same end. Only the word would have been needed. 'Dig a trench,' and the trench would have been dug. But, instead, a few battalions are ordered out, and go to unavailing butchery. In the history of all great sieges every man took up arms and fought, and when there were no more men to guard the ramparts, the women sufficed to defend them, and God be praised! the women of Paris once roused have heroism enough for anything."

"You are right," said Gildas, "and that is why whenever I see one of those heroic creatures wearing upon her arm the Geneva Cross I take off my hat with profound respect. People rail against the Parisian woman for her levity, her coquetry, her love of dress and of luxury; but there remains in her something of that old valor which belonged to the peasant girl who led the Parisians to their defence against Attila, and braved the fury of the 'Scourge of God.'"

"When we consider," said an old man, raising his tall figure gradually from the ground, "that the occupation of the village of Vitry and of Moulin Saquet by the Mauduit division had no result, any more than when on the following day it took up a splendid position at Villejuif."

"And at the very same time," said Gildas, "Admiral Saisset did something brilliant in the way of reconnoitering, and finished his retreat by inches!"

"Always retreat," cried Benedict. "Read the bulletins. 'The troops fell back in good order.' The permanent occupation of places taken not seeming advisable, a retreat is made with the most wonderful coolness. Well, I say, let us have done with it; let us have no more retreat, no more falling back; we have had enough of this child's play, at which the enemy must be laughing behind its bastions! Come now, Colonel, you are a veteran, and have fought on many fields, and I ask you is this what you understand by war?"

An old man with white moustachios and figure somewhat bent, whom Benedict addressed as colonel, though he wore none of the insignia of such a rank, shook his head and answered in a voice, husky at first, but which gradually became clear and ringing.

"No, gentlemen, I will tell my children, as I have already told my old soldiers. I was at Sebastopol, and when we heard the order, 'To the assault' no leader ever dared to stop us on our way to victory. I have fought in Africa against the Arabs, and the watch word amongst us was, 'Return as conquerors or not at all.' Why, the Spartan mothers had more military genius than the generals of to-day. 'Above or below,' said they to their sons, as they buckled on their shields. In Mexico—a bad country it was—but every one did his duty. In Italy, wherever, in fact, I have heard the roar of cannon or the whistling of bullets, the order was 'Go forward,' and none ever dared to say 'Fall back,' till the enemy were defeated or put to flight. That is why, do you see, the old Colonel, who was wont to lead his Zouaves to fire, would rather serve like you as private soldiers, than command men who might one day cast upon him the stigma of a shameful defeat. I would willingly have offered my country my long experience of war, and such military genius as is the result of *sudden inspirations*; but I might have been cast into the shade, and the orders of incompetent superiors so enrage me that I would break my old sword. I might perhaps have given bad example to my men by blaming their leaders, so I became a soldier, and when the time comes I will shed my blood for my country."

"Ah! it is deplorable," cried Benedict. "Paris will be taken, when if she had been otherwise governed she might have been triumphant. People hearing me might accuse me of want of patriotism. Yet God knows I love France, but to defend a city leaders are wanted as well as an army. A struggle to the death, but an intelligent and reasonable one; blood must flow in profusion, but let it at least bring forth the fruits of victory."

"Yes," continued the old Colonel," who would count the cost if victory could be won? But unhappily, as it now stands, those who are not traitors or eager only for their own ends, are incompetent. France, which once possessed such scores of famous leaders, has still many brave and devoted generals, but not one of that calibre who, appearing in a great national crisis, saves a country by the sole power of his genius. Loyalty is not always sufficient."

"I swear," cried Benedict, "that the moment they show us a given point of attack with the word 'Advance,' I will advance without troubling myself about counter orders. And if victory is not for us I shall continue to fight, even though I remain alone among the enemy, and fail to rise no more."

After a moment's pause, he resumed in a tone of deep bitterness,

"For after all why should we value our lives so much? We have left fragments of our hearts on so many brambles that they are in shreds. To survive our defeat would be the most terrible of all our misfortunes. Having no other idol, we have kept that of military glory. We smile with ratified pride at sight of our flag. A stranger detects the note of haughty joy in our voices when we say, 'We are Frenchmen.' If, then, we must renounce this noble pride, hang down our heads and descend from our rank among the nations with agony such as we alone can know, then I say better, far better, to lie buried in the open grave of our country."

"Wrong, Benedict," cried Gildas, "wrong; even should the military glory of France be forever tarnished—and of that we need not despair—her artistic glory will still remain."

At this moment a scout arrived.

"Give me place at the fire and a mouthful of cognac," said he.

Room was made for him, and a gourd offered him. When he had somewhat warmed his frozen limbs, he said, rubbing his hands,

"Good news, my lads, we fight to-morrow."

"For a certainty?"

"For a certainty!"

"Who told you?"

"An aide-de-camp of General Noel's."

"Where?"

"At Malmaison."

"Are we among those who are to fight?"

"Yes, all of us, Franchetti's Infantry, the Amis de la France, and every one has sworn to fight unto death."

"Provided," said the Colonel, "that the force be considerable."

"General Noel is decided upon that course."

"Yes, but those above General Noel?"

"Well," cried the new-comer, "if we are again ordered to desert a position once taken I will break my sword, for it will then be useless."

"No," cried the Colonel, "no one has a right to do that now."

"But if we are driven to despair?"

"We cannot despair of God nor of France."

The new-comer then proceeded to give an animated account of the plan of action.

The little group listened with feverish interest.

"The troops for the assault will be formed into three detachments," said he, "each having its own artillery. General Berthaut will command the first, marching at the head with 3,400 infantry, sustained by a squadron of cavalry and twenty pieces of ordnance."

"What position does General Berthaut intend to occupy?" asked one of the listeners.

"He will lie between the St. Germain Railroad and the upper part of the village of Rueil."

"And the second detachment?" asked the Colonel.

"Will be commanded by General Noel," answered the scout.

"At last," cried Benedict, "our turn has come."

"But there will be fewer men and less artillery on our side, comrades," continued the scout.

"We will supply the want of both by redoubled bravery," said the Colonel.

"Thirteen hundred and fifty men and ten cannon," said the scout.

"Where are we to be placed?" asked Benedict.

"We are to fill up the ravine stretching between St. Cloud and Bougival, and force the park of Malmaison."

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