

THE LAST TRYST.

Over brown moors and withered leas
The angry winds were sweeping;
Over the great grey northern seas,
The crested waves were leaping;
And you and I stood close together,
In the chilling gleam of the wintry weather,
As the bare gaunt branches, overhead,
Shook their lingering leaflets, gold and red,
While in every faltering word we said,
Rang the pitiful wail for the days that were dead;
For, by the sad seas, 'neath the storm-beat trees,
Our last tryst we were keeping.

I scarce could hear the words you sobbed,
Amid your passionate weeping,
And the glow from my eager prayer was robbed,
By the chill around us creeping;
From the silent paths, where in summer weather,
Youth, joy, and music had met together,
From the cry of the sea-mews flitting past,
O'er the wild white waves in the bitter blast,
From the breakers that crashed on the hollow sand,
From the sigh of the breeze o'er the dull damp land,
From sea and shore rose "No more, no more,"
As our last tryst we were keeping.

There was not a pale bud left, in sooth,
'Mid the dry leaves round us heaping,
The bitter harvest of reckless youth,
Time's iron hand was reaping;
Our lips still said, "Forever, forever,"
As the trembling fingers clung together.
But even then each sad heart knew
What fate and circumstance meant to do,
And the mighty billows boom'd like a knell,
As we turned apart from that long farewell;
And to wind, and rain, and the moaning main,
Left the last tryst of our keeping.

NINETY-THREE.

BY VICTOR HUGO.

PART THE THIRD.

IN VENDEE.

BOOK THE FIRST.

VI.—A HEALED WOUND; A BLEEDING HEART.

After that cry—"My children"—Tellemarch ceased to smile, and the woman went back to her thoughts. What was passing in that soul? It was as if she looked out from the depths of a gulf. Suddenly she turned toward Tellemarch, and cried anew, almost with an accent of rage, "My children!"

Tellemarch dropped his head like one guilty. He was thinking of this Marquis de Lantenac, who certainly was not thinking of him, and who probably no longer remembered that he existed. He accounted for this to himself, saying, "A lord—when he is in danger, he knows you; when he is once out of it, he does not know you any longer."

And he asked himself, "But why, then, did I save this lord?" And he answered his own question, "Because he was a man." Thereupon he remained thoughtful for some time, then began again mentally, "Am I very sure of that?"

He repeated his bitter words, "If I had known!" This whole adventure overwhelmed him, for in that which he had done he perceived a sort of enigma. He meditated dolorously. A good action might sometimes be evil. He who saves the wolf kills the sheep. He who sets the vulture's wing is responsible for his talons. He felt himself in truth guilty. The unreasoning anger of this mother was just. Still, to have saved her consoled him for having saved the Marquis.

But the children?
The mother meditated also. The reflections of these two went on side by side; and, perhaps, though without speech, met one another amid the shadows of reverie.

The woman's eyes, with a night-like gloom in their depths, fixed themselves anew on Tellemarch.

"Nevertheless, that cannot be allowed to pass in this way," said she.

"Hush!" returned Tellemarch, laying his finger on his lips.

She continued: "You did wrong to save me, and I am angry with you for it. I would rather be dead, because I am sure I should see them then. I should know where they are. They would not see me, but I should be near them. The dead—they ought to have power to protect."

He took her arm and felt her pulse.

"Calm yourself, you are bringing back your fever."

She asked him almost harshly, "When can I go away from here?"

"Go away?"

"Yes. Walk."

"Never, if you are not reasonable. To-morrow, if you are wise."

"What do you call being wise?"

"Having confidence in God."

"God! What has He done with my children?"

Her mind seemed wandering. Her voice became very sweet.

"You understand," she said to him, "I cannot rest like this. You have never had any children, but I have. That makes a difference. One cannot judge of a thing when one does not know what it is. You never had any children, had you?"

"No," replied Tellemarch.

"And I—I had nothing besides them. What am I without my children? I should like to have somebody explain to me why I have not my children. I feel that things happen, but I do not understand. They killed my husband; they shot me; all the same, I do not understand it."

"Come," said Tellemarch, "there is the fever taking you again. Do not talk any more."

She looked at him and relapsed into silence.

From this day she spoke no more.

Tellemarch was obeyed more absolutely than he liked. She spent long hours of stupefaction, crouched at the foot of an old tree. She dreamed, and held her peace. Silence makes an impenetrable refuge for simple souls that have been down into the innermost depths of suffering. She seemed to relinquish all effort to understand. To a certain extent despair is unintelligible to the despairing.

Tellemarch studied her with sympathetic interest. In presence of this anguish the old man had thought such as might have come to a woman. "O yes," he said to himself, "her lips do not speak, but her eyes talk. I know well what is the matter—what her one idea is. To have been a mother, and to be one no longer! To have been a nurse, and to be so no more! She cannot resign herself. She thinks about the tiniest child of all, that she was nursing not long ago. She thinks of it; thinks—thinks. In truth, it must be so sweet to feel a little rosy mouth that draws your very soul out of your body, and who with the life that is yours, makes a life for itself."

He kept silence on his side, comprehending the impotency of speech in face of an absorption like this. The persistence of an all absorbing idea is terrible. And how to make a mother thus beset hear reason? Maternity is inexplicable; you cannot argue with it. That it is which renders a mother sublime; she becomes unreasoning; the maternal instinct is divinely animal. The woman is no longer a woman, she is a wild creature. Her children are her cubs. Hence in the mother there is something at once inferior and superior to argument. A mother has an unerring instinct. The immense mysterious Will of creation is within her and guides her. Hers is a blindness superhumanly enlightened.

Now Tellemarch desired to make this unhappy creature speak; he did not succeed. On one occasion he said to her, "As ill-luck will have it, I am old, and I cannot walk any longer. At the end of a quarter of an hour my strength is exhausted, and I am obliged to rest; if it were not for that, I would accompany you. After all, perhaps it is fortunate that I cannot. I should be rather a burthen than useful to you. I am tolerated here; but the Blues are suspicious of me, as being a peasant; and the peasants suspect me of being a wizard."

He waited for her to reply. She did not even raise her eyes. A fixed idea ends in madness or heroism. But of what heroism is a poor peasant woman capable? None. She can be a mother, and that is all. Each day she buried herself deeper in her reverie. Tellemarch watched her. He tried to give her occupation; he brought her needles and thread, and a thimble; and at length, to the satisfaction of the poor Caimand, she began some sewing. She dreamed, but she worked, a sign of health; her energy was returning little by little. She mended her linen, her garments, her shoes; but her eyes looked cold and glassy as ever. As she bent over her needle, she sang unearthly melodies in a low voice. She murmured names—probably the names of children—but not distinctly enough for Tellemarch to catch them. She would break off abruptly and listen to the birds, as if she thought they might have brought her tidings. She watched the weather. Her lips would move—she was speaking low to herself. She made a bag and filled it with chestnuts. One morning Tellemarch saw her preparing to set forth, her eyes gazing away into the depths of the forest.

"Where are you going?" he asked.
She replied, "I am going to look for them."
He did not attempt to detain her.

VII.—THE TWO POLES OF THE TRUTH.

At the end of a few weeks, which had been filled with the vicissitudes of civil war, the district of Fougères could talk of nothing but the two men who were opposed to each other, and yet were occupied in the same work, that is, fighting side by side the great revolutionary combat.

The savage Vendean duel continued, but the Vendée was losing ground. In Ille-et-Vilaine in particular, thanks to the young commander who had at Dol so opportunely replied to the audacity of six thousand royalists by the audacity of fifteen hundred patriots, the insurrection, if not quelled, was at least greatly weakened and circumscribed. Several lucky hits had followed that one, and out of these successes had grown a new position of affairs.

Matters had changed their face, but a singular complication had arisen.

In all this portion of the Vendée the Republic had the upper hand; that was beyond a doubt; but which republic? In the triumph which was opening out, two forms of republic made themselves felt—the republic of terror, and the republic of clemency—the one desirous to conquer by rigour, and the other by mildness. Which would prevail? These two forms—the conciliating and the implacable—were represented by two men, each of whom possessed his special influence and authority; the one a military commander, the other a civil delegate. Which of them would prevail? One of the two, the delegate, had a formidable basis of support; he had arrived bearing the threatening watchword of the Paris Commune to the battalions of Santerre, "No mercy; no quarter!" He had, in order to put everything under his control, the decree of the Convention, ordaining "death to whomsoever should set at liberty and help a captive rebel chief to escape." He had full powers, emanating from the Committee of Public Safety, and an injunction commanding obedience to him as delegate, signed Robespierre, Danton, Marat. The other, the soldier, had on his side only this strength—pity.

He had only his own arm, which chastised the enemy, and his heart, which conquered them. A conqueror, he believed that he had the right to spare the conquered.

Hence arose a conflict, hidden but deep, between these two men. The two stood in different atmospheres; both combating the rebellion, and each having his own thunderbolt—that of the one victory; that of the other terror.

Throughout all the Bocage nothing was talked of but them; and what added to the anxiety of those who watched them from every quarter was the fact that these two men so diametrically opposed were at the same time closely united. These two antagonists were friends. Never sympathy loftier and more profound joined two hearts; the stern had saved the life of the clement, and bore on his face the wound received in the effort. These two men were the incarnation—the one of life, the other of death; the one was the principle of destruction, the other of peace, and they loved each other. Strange problem. Imagine Orestes merciful and Pylades pitiless. Picture Arimanes the brother of Ormus!

Let us add that the one of the pair, called "the ferocious," was, at the same time, the most brotherly of men. He dressed

the wounded, cared for the sick, passed his days and nights in the ambulance and hospitals, was touched by the sight of bare-footed children, had nothing for himself, gave all to the poor. He was present at all the battles; he marched at the head of the columns, and in the thickest of the fight, armed (for he had in his belt a sabre and two pistols) yet unarmed, because no one had ever seen him draw his sabre or touch his pistols. He faced blows, and did not return them. It was said that he had been a priest.

One of these men was Gauvain; the other was Cimourdain. There was friendship between the two men, but hatred between the two principles; this hidden war could not fail to burst forth. One morning the battle began.

Cimourdain said to Gauvain: "What have we accomplished?"

Gauvain replied: "You know as well as I. I have dispersed Lantenac's bands. He has only a few men left. Then he is driven back to the forest of Fougères. In eight days he will be surrounded."

"And in fifteen days?"

"He will be taken."

"And then?"

"You have read my notice?"

"Yes. Well?"

"He will be shot."

"More clemency! He must be guillotined."

"As for me," said Gauvain, "I am for a military death."

"And I," replied Cimourdain, "for a revolutionary death."

He looked Gauvain in the face, and added: "Why did you set at liberty those nuns of the convent of Saint-Mare-le-Blanc?"

"I do not make war on women," answered Gauvain.

"Those women hate the people. And where hate is concerned, one woman outweighs ten men. Why did you refuse to send to the Revolutionary Tribunal all that herd of old fanatical priests who were taken at Louvigné?"

"I do not make war on old men."

"An old priest is worse than a young one. Rebellion is more dangerously preached by white hairs. Men have faith in wrinkles. No false pity, Gauvain. The regicides are liberators. Keep your eye fixed on the tower of the Temple."

"The Temple tower! I would bring the Dauphin out of it. I do not make war on children."

Cimourdain's eyes grew stern.

"Gauvain, learn that it is necessary to make war on a woman when she calls herself Marie-Antoinette, on an old man when he is named Pius VI and Pope, and upon a child when he is named Lou's Capet."

"My master, I am not a politician."

"Try not to be a dangerous man. Why, at the attack on the post of Cossé, when the rebel Jean Treton, driven back and lost, flung himself alone, sabre in hand, against the whole column, didst thou cry, 'Open the ranks! Let him pass!'"

"Because one does not set fifteen hundred to kill a single man."

"Why, at the Cailleterie d'Astillé, when you saw your soldiers about to kill the Vendean, Joseph Bézier, who was wounded and dragging himself along, did you exclaim: 'Go on before! This is my affair!' and then fire your pistol in the air?"

"Because one does not kill a man on the ground."

"And you were wrong. Both are to-day chiefs of bands. Joseph Bézier is Moustache, and Jean Treton is Jembe d'Argent. In saving those two men you gave two enemies to the Republic."

"Certainly I could wish to give her friends, and not enemies."

"Why, after the victory of Landéan, did you not shoot your three hundred peasant prisoners?"

"Because Bonchamp had shown mercy to the Republican prisoners, and I wanted it said that the Republic showed mercy to the Royalist prisoners."

"But then, if you take Lantenac, you will pardon him?"

"No."

"Why? Since you showed mercy to the three hundred peasants?"

"The peasants are ignorant men; Lantenac knows what he does."

"But Lantenac is your kinsman."

"France is the nearest."

"Lantenac is an old man."

"Lantenac is a stranger. Lantenac has no age. Lantenac summons the English. Lantenac is invasion. Lantenac is the enemy of the country. The duel between him and me can only finish by his death or mine."

"Gauvain, remember this vow."

"It is sworn."

There was silence, and the two looked at each other.

Then Gauvain resumed: "It will be a bloody date, this year '93 in which we live."

"Take care!" cried Cimourdain. "Terrible duties exist. Do not accuse that which is not accusable. Since when is it that the illness is the fault of the physician? Yes, the characteristic of this tremendous year is its pitilessness. Why? Because it is the grand revolutionary year. This year in which we live is the incarnation of the Revolution. The Revolution has an enemy—the old world—and it is without pity for it; just as the surgeon has an enemy—gangrene—and is without pity for it. The Revolution extirpates royalty in the king, aristocracy in the noble, despotism in the soldier, superstition in the priests, barbarism in the judge; in a word, everything which is tyranny, in all which is the tyrant. The operation is fearful; the Revolution performs it with a sure hand. As to the amount of sound flesh which it sacrifices, demand of Boerhaave what he thinks in regard to that. What tumour does not cause a loss of blood in its cutting away? Does not the extinguishing of a conflagration demand an energy as fierce as that of the fire itself? These formidable necessities are the very condition of success. A surgeon resembles a butcher; a healer may have the appearance of an executioner. The Revolution devotes itself to its fatal work. It mutilates, but it saves. What! You demand pity for the virus! You wish it to be merciful to that which is poisonous! It will not listen. It holds the post; it will exterminate it. It makes a deep wound in civilisation, from whence will spring health to the human race. You suffer? Without doubt. How long will it last? The time necessary for the operation. After that, you will live. The Revolution amputates the world. Hence this hæmorrhage—'93."

"The surgeon is calm," said Gauvain, "and the men that I see are violent."