

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

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

Thirty years ago, and it seemed to him but yesterday, thirty years, so long? He felt he was getting old, and the fear loomed before him that the shadows should gather round him ere his great dream was realized. Yes, it was thirty years since the bombardment of Angeldorf. Verdeau, when in the prime of life, had been a witness to the barbarous spectacle. He was away at the time, far from wife and child, waiting for his beloved France with the army of the Loire. He received the awful tidings which had turned the whole current of his life from the life of a comrade during the dark hours of the bivouac; how the little Alphonse, then his only child, had been killed outright by a German shell, and how another missile had struck and shattered the wall of the new house which he had built with the hard-earned savings from his daily toil.

As he thought of it all again—when was he not thinking of it?—he became greatly agitated and his heavy sighs drove him mad. A time, this silent brooding, he must draw from his thoughts, if that were possible. Rising suddenly from his chair he put his pipe aside and hobbled down the garden path into the street. He iterated as he walked; he was getting more feeble each year.

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

At the extreme end of this fallow land stood the house which he had built, intact, for Alphonse when he grew to be a man—the house which the Germans had made a target for their cruel shells. The old man passed, contemplating the structure in silence. It was much larger than the cottage where he lived, having all the pretensions of a villa. But signs of neglect were everywhere; the windows were broken, the inside walls were damp and mildewed and the mortar in places was crumbling away. The house was, as it had always been, untenanted and the ragged aperture at the top of the outer wall, where the shell had pierced, was unprepared. So it would remain as long as Antoine Verdeau had his way. As he gazed at the unsightly breach a look of bitterness came into his eyes; but the bitterness which a man feels for a particular enemy, but the large hatred which one whose spirit is unbroken by defeat might feel for a whole conquering race.

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

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

Silently brooding, he retraced his steps through the glowing dusk. The light from a lamp inside glimmered through the diamond-shaped panes of the cottage window, and on entering old Verdeau found the table laid for the evening meal.

A young woman of twenty-five or thereabouts, set the old man's chair near the table. Plump and well-tanned, with fair hair and grayish-blue eyes, and an even, pleasant expression of face, she might have passed for a German maiden. So appearances can deceive; there was not a drop of Teutonic blood in her veins. She was Antoine Verdeau's daughter.

The old man sank into the chair impatiently, and she laid the table as she went. While the girl rapidly repeated the more important items from her budget of town gossip. A thin smile played round her father's lips as she rattled on.

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

or Bavarian, 'tis all the same. And how does the township take this latest insult to France? With its wonted severity, I warrant, smiling back its thanks for every lash of the German taskmaster!"

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

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

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

She rose quickly from her chair. "And of course, you like him, with the rest?" he returned sarcastically.

"It would not be Victorine if she were not in the fashion!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Immersed, as he so often was, in dreary speculations, Antoine Verdeau was nevertheless keen enough to perceive that his daughter was an enthusiast. She had imbibed instead the lethargy of the township, and as a consequence he seldom spoke of his ideas to her. But that last blow of French pride—the appointment of a German station master in a town so near the frontier as Angeldorf—affected him so acutely that he was obliged to talk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the conclusion of this outburst Victorine's cheeks were flaming red.

"What are you saying, father?" she cried. "The new station master marry Julie Bernier? Eugene marry her? Never!"

The intensity of her voice caused him to look up suddenly, and the tell-tale flush on her cheeks was revealed to him. Victorine had betrayed her secret—that secret which she had so jealously guarded for a whole month! Antoine Verdeau sank back in his chair like one smitten with the palsy.

"Victorine!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "You yourself love this man—this Prussian?"

She threw herself at his feet. "Not Prussian," she protested vehemently. "But Bavarian. He is different from all other Germans, for he hates the Prussians and admires France and her brave people!"

Apparently he did not hear this passionate protest, or even notice the distress which the sudden disclosure

of her love had caused her. He simply looked down upon her sadly, reproachfully, as at some weak and unworthy object, such a look in his eyes as schoolmaster might give a child who was unable to grasp a theme, to him, so simple. Then he left her to tears, and slowly ascended the creaking staircase. When he reached his bedroom at the back of the cottage he threw open the window and looked out.

The white radiance of the moon rendered all the more prominent objects of the landscape plainly visible. He could see the clearing in the forest which ran up to the borders of Angeldorf, and near by glistened one of the white stones marking the frontier line. Suddenly, as if by magic, his illusion fell away from him and the bubble of his dream was burst.

He realized for the first time since the war the mad futility of it all. The landmarks yonder set by the Germans—the forest clearing, the white stones—were fixed and immovable. La Revanche would never come. He had been a fool for cherishing his hopes so long. France cared nothing for her lost provinces. Her glory had departed; she was supine and asleep.

The occasional frontier troubles, the restiveness of a few Alsaitians under the conquering iron decrees, Boulanger, the charlatans, the surprising alliance with Russia, the verses of Paul Deroudele, the staid heroics of a few hot-headed Parisians; where did all these things lead? Nowhere! The ideal was burned out, and these were the miserable flickerings from its smouldering embers.

He heard Victorine sobbing in the next room, and a great pity surged at his heart. He had never tried to understand the girl. Leaving her to her own devices, he had lived with La Revanche, and cared for no one else. Small wonder, then, that to her surprise, society Victorine had thrown herself into the arms of the foe.

Before he fell asleep he had again become the Antoine Verdeau of the days before the war; the practical tradesman, intent upon affairs, eager to save and acquire, to benefit his family. What had worked the miracle? It may have been his daughter's grief, or the strange, immutable look of the frontier stones in the cold moonlight. He could not tell.

When he awoke he felt numbed and listless. The dream which had led his vitality had departed. There was a marked change in the girl as well. Her vivacity was gone. She no longer gathered gossip as the bees gather honey; no longer lavishly retailed it. Subdued and careworn she went about her duties mechanically, and when her father would have spoken with her the mute appeal for silence in her eyes restrained her.

"For a whole week she remained indoors, and then, one balmy summer evening, she went out of the cottage, leaving the old man still at his work. She returned late, her eyes bearing traces of recent tears. Then it was that Verdeau found it within him to break the silence.

"Years ago Edward Wilson had gone to America young and poor; he had returned middle-aged and rich. Who had later account alone his widow's sister received him with open arms. That she and her children would eventually reap the harvest of his toil and thrift she did not for a moment doubt, arguing that there was no one else with any claim upon him. While he toiled she had ignored the very fact of his existence, but she fondly hoped that her later policy would obliterate her past, and also appear to him in the light of absolute disinterestedness.

"He wants me to call on those O'Briens," she remarked—and Bernard, her good-looking son, bent his head over the cat stretching sleepy paws to the warm blaze. "He met them at church the other day and, it seems, recognized a former acquaintance in the old man. Anything to please him, of course. They might give me something for the bazaar."

"Oh, you can't take people up like that!" declared Nancy, crossly. "What do you know about them, except that they are hopelessly shabby? Uncle Edward's early acquaintances were not very choice, if all accounts are true. I dare say, the child has been deliberately flung in his way, for reasons sufficient."

"Heigh-ho for the charity that thinks no ill!" said Bernard. "Come, Nancy, you should be glad of the opportunity of doing a double kindness pleasing Uncle and breaking, if ever so slightly, the monotony of Miss O'Brien's society. I should have made her acquaintance long ago if I had been a girl."

"Then, thank goodness, you are not!"

"That is exactly what I have been doing ever since I knew her." "Pray, when or how did you come to know her?" asked Nancy, sharply and suspiciously.

"In my own sweet way, through the medium of a treacherous 'biker. She and her father came to my assistance when it played me false. You can take my word that, shabby or not, she is a thorough little lady."

"So, why don't you introduce her to me?"

"If you must know the truth, my pretty Nancy, it is because you can be so intensely disagreeable to people you don't like, and I feared—she might think it a family falling," he replied; which retort rang down the curtain, so to speak.

By "those O'Briens" Mrs. Wilson meant a fragile old man and his pretty daughter, who lived on the borders of "villedom" in a most secluded and unpretentious style. That they had known better days was apparent to the most superficial observer. They now entered the stronger motives of humoring Edward and of circumventing any designs Nellie O'Brien might have on him. Therefore a few days later Mrs. Wilson called on them; she informed Miss O'Brien that all the bazaar gifts and fancy work would be



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Antoine Verdeau shook his head. "La Revanche is dead, child. She will never come—now. You see, monsieur"—he turned to the station master—"it was my dream once."

He smiled sadly, but there were tears in his eyes. The younger man bowed his head in respectful silence. He was a soldier and patriot, too, and so understood.

And thus it was that Angeldorf lost that insistent reminder of its shame, and once more the havoc wrought through the hatred of the nations was repaired by the love of a man for a maid.—Chambers' Journal.

A HASTY JUDGMENT

Nancy drew from a morocco case a slender gold chain glittering with pearls, and held it up with an air of dissatisfaction.

"This is Uncle Edward's present to our stall," she said. "It's a great deal more than I expected from the cranky creature. No doubt he gave it because he knew we should have some difficulty in finding a purchaser. When on each buys jewelry at a bazaar! I would rather have had hard cash."

"Hush-sh!" warned Mrs. Wilson, for there was danger of the individual thus obliquely censured being within earshot, and on no account must he be offended.

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