

THE IVORY CROSS.

By JAMES WORKMAN, in the Strand Magazine.

One evening in July, 1793, Marie Lavoisier stood on the summit of a hill on the coast of Normandy, shading her eyes from the level rays of the sun just dipping below the horizon, and watching the white sails of a large, square-rigged vessel creeping along the Channel before a faint easterly breeze. She was trying vainly to discover the colours of a flag hoisted at the mainmast. It drooped so listlessly in the dying breeze that it was impossible to tell whether it was the Tricolour or the Union Jack. The sun disappeared, and presently the ship, moving ghost-like through the twilight, was lost in the gathering darkness.

The girl turned reluctantly away, and descended a path that led inland. She glanced nervously about her, and at times stopped and listened intently. Not a sound broke the silence but the cry of a night bird, or the flight of some little wild creature terrified at her approach; but her fears turned the slim trunks of trees into moving figures, or the rustling of leaves into the sound of stealthy footsteps. She imagined herself surrounded by spies, and hurrying breathlessly on broke at last into a run, and fled panic-stricken to a solitary cottage standing half-way between the village and the blackened ruins of the chateau of M. le Vicomte de Trouville, which had been plundered and burnt by the neighbouring peasantry in the early days of the Revolution. Darting through the door, she stood for several minutes panting and straining her ears for the sound of pursuing footsteps. Convinced at length that the sights and sounds which had terrified her were purely imaginary, she lit a candle and searched the house to make sure that the old woman with whom she lived had gone, as she had promised, to spend the night with a relative in the village.

Having satisfied herself that she was alone and unpursued, she grew calmer, and began to arrange the rude furniture of the bare and poverty-stricken room to the best advantage. In her eyes it had never looked so mean and squalid. She glanced wistfully at her wooden shoes and coarse peasant's dress. What a contrast they seemed to the dainty clothes she had worn when she waited on the Vicomte's mother in the beautiful old chateau before that terrible night, when she was awakened by the yell of the frantic peasants, the crash of broken windows, and the thundering of sledge-hammers upon the door! Even yet she shuddered at the thought of the fierce, gaunt faces that watched the flames go roaring up against the black sky.

As she moved about the room she was recalling every incident of the grim scene. Her father was the Vicomte's steward, and, though, unlike most of his kind, he had endeared himself to the peasantry by numberless acts of charity, they would have stabbed or hung him without scruple had they discovered him while their frenzy was at its height. She saw again his tall, stooping figure, standing half-dressed in the doorway, his face livid with fear, the candle quivering in his shaking hand, as he bade her get up and follow him instantly. Leaping out of bed she had wrapped a cloak about her, and rushed after him. That frantic flight along the gloomy passages by the dim, flickering light of the candle, while the crash of splintering wood and the yells and shrieks of the frenzied peasants rang in her ears, haunted her like an evil dream.

Fortunately the attention of the mob concentrated on the front entrance, and she and her father managed to escape unperceived by a side door. Lighted torches had already been hurled through the shattered windows, and the tears trickled down the old steward's wrinkled cheeks as he saw the flames leaping and writhing about the beautiful old home of the family he had served so long and faithfully.

They were not pursued, and a compassionate neighbour sheltered them until the fury of the villagers, excited by a revolutionary fanatic from Paris, had exhausted itself in the destruction of the chateau. In a mood of half-contemptuous pity for the feeble old man, they had subsequently allowed him to live undisturbed in the cottage, which had been previously occupied by a gamekeeper. He would no doubt have been treated very differently had they known that he carried out of the burning chateau the silver casket containing the family jewels, which had been left in his charge during the Vicomte's absence.

To restore these jewels to his beloved young master became the one absorbing passion of the old man's life; and the fear that they might be discovered before he had an opportunity of doing so tortured him day and night. He was perpetually devising some new and more ingenious place of concealment for them, and striving by all the means in his power to discover the whereabouts of the Vicomte, who, according to a vague rumour, had succeeded in escaping from France.

At last the news arrived that the Vicomte was safe in London; but it came too late. Worn out by grief and anxiety, the old steward had been growing feebler every day, and he died without being able to accomplish the task on which he had set his heart. With his latest breath he had implored Marie to devote herself as he had done to what, in the eyes of the faithful old servant, was a sacred duty; and Marie had eagerly vowed to spare no effort, and shrink from no danger, in order to place the jewels in the Vicomte's own hands.

Indeed, the task to which she devoted herself was a labour of love, and she went about it with so much courage and energy, that at length she succeeded in forwarding a letter to the Vicomte. It was carried across the Channel by her cousin, Pierre Laporte,

the owner of a swift lugger and a notorious smuggler, who had grown famous for his skill in avoiding cruisers and revenue cutters. When Pierre returned from a more than usually successful run, he brought back a reply to Marie's letter. It informed her that the Vicomte had secured a promise of assistance from the captain of an English frigate, and intended to come himself to the cottage in order to obtain the jewels. The vessel she had seen from the hill might prove to be the frigate, and in half an hour or so—she flushed and trembled at the thought—she might hear his step upon the garden path.

Marie, as her gentle, refined face and slim, graceful figure suggested, was by no means on a level with her neighbours as regards training and education. The Vicomte's mother, having taken a fancy to her when a child, had sent her to a convent school to be educated, and had treated her more as a friend, or even as a daughter, than a servant. This perhaps mistaken kindness made her present lot all the more difficult to endure. Her step was growing less elastic, her little, white hands rough with toil; the habits and accomplishments she had acquired were gradually fading away; and slowly, insensibly, she was sinking to the level of the coarse, ignorant peasants by whom she was surrounded.

But the misery of extreme poverty, or the dread of the guillotine, the inevitable doom of those who befriended the nobles, had never caused her to waver in her determination to fulfil the duty she had undertaken. Her heart leapt with delight to think that in a few minutes she might taste the joy of placing in the Vicomte's own hands the jewels that would make him—now a penniless exile, earning his daily bread by teaching French in London—once more a comparatively wealthy man.

That her efforts to restore them had not been solely the outcome of gratitude for the kindness she had received from his mother, or a desire to fulfill her father's last wishes, was her own secret. Neither he nor anyone else should ever know that she treasured in her heart every pleasant word he had spoken to her, every careless, good-natured smile he had given her. She assured herself again and again that she would be more than content with this opportunity of proving her loyalty and devotion, of convincing him that, whoever had proved false and treacherous, she and her father had been true to him.

As the minutes dragged slowly by, until the brief night was almost gone, she grew listless and dispirited. She told herself that it was useless to expect the Vicomte any longer, and that she might as well go to sleep and prepare herself for the next day's laborious and monotonous toil. Suddenly, however, she rose to her feet with a white face and wildly beating heart. Surely she had heard a stealthy footstep on the garden path? Yes, there it was again. A few moments' silence ensued, and then she heard the low murmur of voices, followed by a knock at the door.

Quivering with agitation, she stepped across the room, withdrew the bolt, and threw open the door. Two men muffled in cloaks, with their hats, in which were large tricolour cockades, drawn over their eyes, stepped abruptly in and closed the door behind them. Something in their appearance alarmed her, and she shrank back, white and trembling.

"Are you the citizeness Marie Lavoisier?" demanded one of them, sternly.

"Yes," she faltered, timidly.

"Then I arrest you as a suspect, in the name of the Republic."

"Monsieur," she stammered, "I—"

"Hold," he interposed. "Listen to me. If you wish to save your neck from the guillotine, you will answer my questions without reserve."

She gazed at him with a pale, terror-stricken face, but made no reply.

"It will be at your peril if you refuse to answer," he cautioned, harshly. "Is it true that to-night you are prepared to receive into your house an aristocrat, an enemy of the Republic—Louis, formerly known as the Vicomte de Trouville? Speak! Is it not so?"

Again she made no answer. Her tongue seemed paralyzed. The room appeared to be swirling round her. She saw the men through a strange, luminous mist.

"I see you cannot deny it," he continued. "Well, you shall find that your silence will not serve your purpose, and that I know everything. You receive this man, this aristocrat, this traitor to the Republic, for what purpose? It is in order that you may deliver into his hands the family jewels, purchased in the past at the cost of the tears and toil of the wretched peasants who tilled the soil, and suffered hunger and misery that he and his ancestors might build chateaux, and hunt leopards, and ride in carriages, and go clad in silks, and laces, and jewels. These gems belong by right to the people, and should be paid into the Public Treasury for the benefit of those who are fighting against the enemies of France. You have undertaken to restore them to this aristocrat who lies under sentence of death. What can you plead in defence of such conduct?"

The girl's self-control—she was hardly eighteen—gave way. This hideous, nightmare-like reversal of all her hopes overwhelmed her. She saw herself already seated on the death-tumbrel rolling through the streets towards the guillotine. Covering her face with her hands she sank shuddering into a chair.

"Come," said he, more gently, "you are young—you have been misled. There is yet time to repent, to show your loyalty to the Republic. A considerable discretionary power has been placed in our hands. Deliver up these jewels to us, and assist us to arrest this Louis de Trouville, and we

will grant you a full and ample reward. Come, time presses—what say you?"

The girl rose slowly to her feet and faced him. She was very pale, and her lips quivered as she spoke, but, in spite of her simple peasant's dress, there was a dignity in her attitude, in her gestures, in the tones of her voice, that might have become a queen.

"Monsieur," she said, quietly, "that the people have suffered much wrong God knows to be true. I, one of the people, know it; but not, God also knows, at the hands of the family of M. le Vicomte de Trouville. For generations past they have dealt kindly and justly with their peasantry, and those who proved false in their hour of need, who plundered and burnt their chateau, were guilty of black ingratitude. I and my parents received countless favours from them; I have eaten of their bread and lived upon their bounty. If it must be so, monsieur, I will go with you to Paris, I will go to the guillotine; but, as to M. le Vicomte, I will not betray him, nor deliver up the jewels to anyone but himself."

"She expected an outburst of wrath, and was surprised to see a look of something like relief on the man's face. He was about to speak, when his companion stepped forward.

"Enough, Raoul," he said. "It is clear that the girl may be trusted. Let us have done with this mummery."

As he spoke he removed his hat, and at the sight of his face, and the sound of his voice an exclamation of joy and astonishment burst from Marie's lips. It was the Vicomte himself. He was greatly changed. The few terrible years that had passed since they last met had considerably aged him. His face was thin and pale, and the same had gone from the "brow's eye" that had once twinkled with kindly merriment.

"Your pardon, Marie," he said, "I might have known that the daughter of Jacques Lavoisier would never betray a de Trouville; but the times are evil, and men have learnt to suspect even their own fathers, sisters, and brothers. Come, my child, do not be hurt at our stratagem. I had no fear myself. It was this good fellow who contrived it. His anxiety for my safety makes him over-cautious. You have stood the test nobly."

Marie had indeed been cut to the quick by his distrust of her. The scene was so different from that which she had pictured in her day-dreams; but she made a brave attempt to conceal her disappointment.

"Yes, monsieur," she said, timidly, "that you should act with caution after all that has taken place is most natural. It could not be otherwise. If you will please to be seated, monsieur, I will get you the jewels."

The Vicomte sat down, but Raoul, who had been watching Marie suspiciously throughout the interview, moved to the door. He had been the Vicomte's valet in more prosperous days and had obstinately refused to desert him.

"I will conceal myself in the wood and keep watch, monsieur," said he. "I liked not that rustling we heard among the bushes. It may have been, as you said, some stray animal, but I could have sworn I heard a footstep."

"As you please, Raoul," rejoined the Vicomte, indifferently. "I heard nothing. Nevertheless, act as you think best."

Meanwhile, Marie stepped to the hiding-place in which her father had deposited the casket containing the jewels. Ever haunted by the fear that he was suspected of having them in his possession, and that spies were on the watch to discover where they were hidden, he was perpetually moving them from one place of concealment to another. Eventually, with infinite pains and no little ingenuity, he had constructed a secret chamber in which he could safely hide them, and could himself take refuge if the villagers, as at times seemed likely, should decide to arrest him and send him to Paris as a suspect. The chamber was made by doubling the partition between two rooms, the entrance to it being at the back of a cupboard fastened against the wall.

Marie opened the door of this cupboard, which contained a few articles of dress, hanging from hooks at the sides. Removing these she pressed a spring, and the back of the cupboard slid on one side, and revealed an aperture in the wall. Stepping through this into the narrow chamber beyond, she brought out the silver casket and placed it on the table.

"The jewels are inside," she said, simply. "They have remained untouched since my father's death. Will monsieur be good enough to examine them? The list is within. There is not, I believe, one missing."

"No, no, Marie," said the Vicomte, deeply touched by the girl's manner. "It is unnecessary. Your word is more than sufficient."

"If monsieur would be so good,"

she remained seated, her hands clasped in prayer.

To please her he complied, opening the casket, and spreading the glittering gems on the table. Even in the dim light of the candle they gleamed, and quivered with a lustre, luminous radiance. He glanced at the shimmering jewels sparkling in rings and brooches, bracelets and necklaces, rare and priceless works of art for which too many of the women he had known would have sacrificed their nearest and dearest, and then at the slim, pale-faced girl, in the poor peasant's dress, and was inexpressibly touched by her fidelity and devotion. It was true, then, as he had often thought in the past, that broad, white brow, the sweet, firm lips, the calm, clear, deep grey eyes, were indications of a noble spirit, of a character incapable of the craft, and greed, and treachery, and the animal-like selfishness which, amid the brutalities of the evil days, through which he had lately passed, had seemed inseparable from human nature. He noticed her worn face, her roughened hands, suggestive of the sacrifices she had made so uncomplainingly, and an involuntary sigh escaped his lips.

"What unkind Fate had placed that deep, impassable gulf of rank between them? Had she been of noble birth, how different it would have been. As it was, the Vicomte de Trouville could not mate with a child of a peasant. It was impossible. With an effort he thrust the idea from his mind.

"Come, Marie," he said, kindly, "the jewels are before you. Choose which you will. They shall be yours, and will, indeed, be but a poor recompense for your fidelity."

"I wish for nothing, and shall want for nothing, monsieur," she replied, in a quivering voice. "Do not ask me to accept a reward, I beg you."

"No, no!" he said, eagerly, "not as a reward, as a souvenir—as something which will remind you of the service you have rendered to one who will never cease to be grateful to you. Come, you will pain me by a refusal."

She listlessly selected a small ivory cross attached to a fragile gold chain, the least valuable article in the glittering heap. He watched her regretfully, with a vague suspicion that she was disappointed and pained by what had passed between them, and yet not knowing what to say or do to comfort her. He replaced the jewels mechanically in the casket.

"It is time to go," he said. "The east was brightening as we came in. Farewell, Marie. When these troubles have passed we shall meet again, and it may be in my power to be of service to you. Then I may be able to show my gratitude by deeds and not by mere empty words. Au revoir, Marie."

Farewell, monsieur.

The door closed behind him. It was all over. She had nothing now to look forward to, of hope or plan for. The dull dreary days, stretched before her in blank monotony. Ah, the closing of the door had awakened her from a dream. The ache at her heart told her what mad folly she had been capable of, what impossible fancies and rosy visions she had half unconsciously indulged in. In a paroxysm of shame and self-contempt she hid her face in her hands, and her slender figure shook with suppressed sobs. The sudden opening of the door startled her, and she sprang to her feet, her cheeks still wet with tears. The Vicomte stood in the doorway, looking at her remorsefully.

"Monsieur," she stammered.

"I could not leave you like this, Marie," he said, coming in and closing the door behind him. "Surely you will let me provide you with the means to live as befits your training and education. Presently you will sink to the level of a peasant, Marie, with coarse hands and twisted body, and grow old, and sad, and wrinkled, while you should still be young and happy."

"It is better so, monsieur," she said, drearily.

"It must not be so," he answered, almost angrily. "I will not permit it. If you will not accept the jewels, I shall find means to assist you in a way you cannot reject. I have still friends who—"

"Oh, monsieur," she said, pitifully, "I beseech you to leave me. Say no more, I beg you. See, the candle is growing dim, the dawn is breaking. If one of the villagers chance to see you the alarm will be given, and you will be arrested. Go, I implore you. It is the one favour I ask of you."

His face flushed with a sudden resolve. What, after all, were the claims of rank and title when weighed in the balances with a character capable of such unselfish loyalty and affection?

"No," he exclaimed, passionately, "I will not go. Listen to me. When you were but a child in the old days at the chateau, even then, though I struggled against it, I—"

He stopped abruptly and clutched instinctively at the hilt of his sword. The report of a pistol rang out in the still air, and was followed by shouts and the hurried tramping of feet. Marie rushed past him and looked out. In the growing light she could see a little cloud of blue smoke drifting among the trees on the hillside, and three or four men running at full speed along the path that led to the shore. It was clear that they had discovered Raoul, and were evidently in hot pursuit of him. She was drawing back when, happening to glance towards the village, she caught sight of a crowd of dark figures advancing stealthily and swiftly in the direction of the cottage. She closed the door and turned with a white face to the Vicomte.

"You are betrayed, monsieur," she cried, in agony. "They are coming to arrest you."

His eyes grew hard, and he looked at her with a bitter smile. She could not mistake the meaning of that look.

"You think that it is I who have betrayed you?" she exclaimed, in piteous, heart-broken accents. "Oh, monsieur, may the good God forgive you."

"The facts speak for themselves," he rejoined, coldly. "No one but yourself knew of my presence here. Your trap was well laid, Marie, and the jewels were a clever bait. I hope your indignity will secure you a generous reward. Open the door and call in your friends. I never feared death less."

She looked at him with an air of be-

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wilderness, as though scarcely able to comprehend the meaning of his words. Then a flush of indignation crimsoned her pale cheeks.

"Monsieur," she said, "you wrong me cruelly, as you will know before long. See, the hiding-place is known to no one but myself. Enter it, and you will be safe."

He still hesitated, and she clasped her hands entreatingly.

"Enter, I beseech you, monsieur," she cried. "Listen. They are surrounding the house. There is no other way of escape. Oh, quick, quick, or they will be here!"

With a shrug of his shoulders he turned on his heel, and stepped into the recess. Swift as thought, Marie thrust the sliding panel into its place and closed the cupboard. She had hardly done so when the door was dashed violently open, and a crowd of gaunt, ragged peasants, hustling and jostling each other in their frantic haste, rushed headlong in. They were armed with roughly-made pikes and pitchforks, and were shrouded at the sight of their unbridled weapons, lean, swarthy faces, fierce eyes, and threatening gestures. But the necessity of appearing ignorant of their errand led her to make a desperate effort to preserve her self-control. In a faint, unsteady voice she began to inquire what they wanted.

But their leader, a brawny, black-haired smith, in a leathery apron, with a huge sledge-hammer in his hand, stopped her rudely.

"No lies," he said, roughly. "They will not serve you turn this time. You have long been suspected and watched, and to-night Jean Brisasse saw two men enter the house. They came from the English frigate now lying off the coast. One he recognised by his voice: It was the Vicomte de Trouville. The other is now being pursued. What has become of the Vicomte?"

Marie tried vainly to meet his eyes, to stammer out some evasive reply. But the ferocious expression on the

man's coarse features struck her speechless, and she shrank back trembling with terror.

"You refuse to answer?" he cried. "Well, we shall talk with you presently. Search the house, citizens, and be quick about it. If our comrades don't put a pitchfork or a bullet through the fellow who went skipping through the wood like a rabbit, he may bring the English upon us at any minute."

His followers, who had been impatiently awaiting the signal, rushed eagerly forward. The cottage resounded with their shouts and oaths, the clattering of their wooden shoes, the clashing of their pikes, and the crash of broken crockery, which in their wantonness they flung upon the floor and trampled into fragments. They threw open the door of the cupboard, and in an agony of fear Marie buried her face in her hands, stifling with difficulty the screams of terror that rose to her lips. But, finding it empty, they turned away without suspecting the existence of the recess behind it. The search was soon over, and with malignant looks, and muttered threats and curses, they crowded about the white-faced girl. The brawny smith pushed his way to the front.

"Now then, little viper," he exclaimed, in his great, hoarse voice, "do you understand that you are a traitor to the Republic, that you are guilty of harbouring aristocrats, who are in league with the perfidious English, the enemies of France? Well, the punishment is death, Marie, death—do you understand? The guillotine would slice through that pretty white neck of yours like a knife through a carrot. Come, come, don't be obstinate, child. Out with all you know, or your head will be rolling in the sawdust before you are a week older."

But terror seemed to have deprived Marie of the power of speech. She gazed shudderingly at the ring of cruel, scowling faces that surrounded her, and her lips moved, but the words they formed were inaudible. Hitherto the smith had shielded her from actual violence, and evidently wished to save her life if she would consent to betray the Vicomte. But her continued silence enraged him, and he glared at her with a savage glitter in his black eyes. Suddenly he leaped forward, and snatched the ivory cross from her neck with a force that snapped the slender chain to which it was attached.

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