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The Helmet of Navarre

BY BERTHA RUNKLE. GROSSET & DUNLAP Publishers: New York.

(Continued.)

"Shall we start, Vigo? Once at St. Denis, I am hostage for his safety. The king can tell Mayenne that if Mar is tortured he will torture me! Mayenne may not tender me greatly, but he will not relish his cousin's breaking on the wheel."

"Mayenne won't torture M. Etienne," Vigo said, patting her hand in both of his, forgetting she was a great lady, he an equerry. "Fear not! you will save him, mademoiselle."

"Let us go!" she cried feverishly. "Let us go!"

Gilles was in the court waiting, stripped of his livery, dressed peacefully as a porter, but with a mallet in his hand that I should not like to receive on my crown. I thought I were ready, but Vigo bade us wait. I stood on the house-steps with mademoiselle, while he took said Equerry (Charlot) for a low-voiced, emphatic interview.

"Must we wait?" mademoiselle urged me, quivering like the arrow on the bow-string. "They may discover I am gone. Bided we wait?"

"Aye," I answered. "If Vigo bids us. He knows."

We waited then. Vigo disappeared presently. Mademoiselle and I stood patient, with all what impatience in our hearts, wondering how he could so hinder us. Not till he came back did it dawn on me for what he had stayed. He was dressed as an under-groom, not a tag of St. Quentin colors on him.

"If beg a thousand pardons, mademoiselle. I had to give my lieutenant his orders. Now, if you will give the word, we go."

"Do you go, M. Vigo?" She breathed deep. It was easy to see she looked upon him as a regiment.

"Of course," Vigo answered, as if there would be no other way.

I said in pure devious, to try to ruffle him:

"Vigo, you said you were here to guard Monsieur's interests—his house, his goods, his money. Do you desert your trust?"

Mademoiselle turned quickly to him:

"Vigo, you must not let me take you from your rightful post. Felix and your man here will care for me."

"The boy talks silliness, mademoiselle," Vigo returned tranquilly. "Mademoiselle is worth a dozen horses. I go with her."

He walked beside her across the court, if followed with Gilles, laughing to myself. Only yesterday had Vigo declared that never would he give aid and comfort to Mlle. de Montieu. It was no marvel she had conquered M. Etienne, for his must needs have been in love with some one, but in bringing Vigo to her feet she had won a triumph indeed.

We had to go out by the great gate, because the key of the postern was in the Bastille. But as if by magic every guardman and hang-about had disappeared—there was not one to stare at the lady; though when we had passed some one locked the gates behind us. Vigo called me up to mademoiselle's left. Gilles was to loiter behind, far enough to seem not to belong to us, near enough to come up as a need. Thus, at a good pace, mademoiselle stepping out as brave as any of us, we set out across the city for the Porte St. Denis.

Our quarter was very quiet; we scarce met a soul. But afterward, as we reached the neighbourhood of the markets, the streets grew livelier. Now were we glad, for we were to pass the duke's quarters; for whenever we approached a band of roustabouts or of gentlemen with lights, mademoiselle sheltered herself behind the equestrian's head, hidden as behind a tower. Once the gallant M. de Champdrey, he who in pink silk had adopted Mlle. de Mayenne's salon, passed close enough to touch her. She heaved a sigh of relief when he was by. For her own sake she had no fear; the midnight streets, the open road to St. Denis, had no power to daunt her; but the dread of being recognized and turned back rode her like a nightmare.

Close by the gate, Vigo bade us pause in the door of a shop while he went forward to reconnoiter. Before long he returned.

"Bad luck, mademoiselle. Brisac's not on. 'Thou don't know the cutter, but he knows me, that's the worst of it. He told me this was not St. Quentin night. Well, we must try the Porte Neuve."

But mademoiselle demurred:

"That will be out of our way, will it not, Vigo? It is a longer road from the Porte Neuve to St. Denis?"

"Yes; but what to do? We must get through the walls."

"I suppose we face no better at the Porte Neuve? If your Brisac is suspected, he'll not be on at night. Vigo, I propose that we take company here. They will not know Gilles and Felix at the gate, will they?"

"No," Vigo said doubtfully. "But—"

"Then we get through!" she cried. "They will not stop us, each humble folk. We are going to the bedside of our dying mother at St. Denis. Your name is Gilles. Forgetter, mademoiselle," he stammered, startled.

"Then are we all Forestiers—Gilles, Felix, and Jeanne. We can pass out, Vigo, I am sure we can pass out. I am loath to part with you, but I fear to go through the city to the Porte Neuve. My absence may be discovered—I must place myself without the walls speedily."

"Mademoiselle need have no doubts of them," Vigo said. "Felix is M. le Comte's own henchman. And Gilles is the best man in the household, next to me. God speed you, my lady, I am here, if they turn you back."

We went boldly round the corner and up the street to the gate. The entry walking his boot ordered us away without so much as looking at us. Then Gilles, appointed our spokesman, demanded to see the captain of the watch. His errand was urgent.

But the sentry showed no disposition to budge. Had we a passport? No, we had no passport. Then we could go about our business. There was no leaving Paris to-night for us. Call the captain! No, he would do nothing of the kind. Be off, then!

But at this moment, leaving the altercation, the officer himself came out of the guard-room in the tower, and to him Gilles at once began his story. Our mother at St. Denis had sent for us to come to her dying bed. She was a street-porter; the messenger had had trouble to find him. His young brother and sister were in service, kept to their duties till late. Our mother might even now be yielding up the ghost! It was a pitiful case, M. le Capitaine; might we not be permitted to pass?

The young officer appeared less interested in this moving tale than in the fact of our being in the city without a passport. Perhaps you have one, though, from my Lord Mayenne?"

"Would our kind be carrying a passport from the Duke of Mayenne?" quoth Gilles. "It seems improbable," the officer smiled, pleased with his wit. "Sorry to disappoint you, my dear. But perhaps, checking a passport, you can get oblige me with the countersign, which does so well. Just one little word, now, and I'll let you through."

"If monsieur will tell me the little word?" she asked innocently.

He burst into laughing.

"No, no; I am not to be caught so easy as that, my girl."

"Oh, come, monsieur capitaine!" Gilles implored. "many and many a fellow goes in and out of Paris without a passport. The rules are a net to stop big fish and let the small fry go. What harm will it do to my Lord Mayenne, or you, or anybody, if you have the gentleness to let three poor servants through to their dying mother?"

"It does not me to hear of her extremity," the captain answered, with a fine irony. "but I am here to do my duty. I

am thinking, my dear, that you are some great lady's maid?"

He was eying her sharply, suspiciously; she made haste to protest:

"Oh, no, monsieur; I am servant to Mlle. Meunier, the grocer's wife."

"And perhaps you serve in the shop?"

"No, monsieur; I am never in the shop. I am far too busy with my work. Monsieur does not seem to understand what a servant-lady has to do."

For answer, he took her hand and lifted it to the light, revealing all its smooth whiteness, its dainty, polished nails.

"I think mademoiselle does not understand it, either."

With a little cry, she snatched her hand from him, hiding it in the folds of her kirtle, regarding him with open terror. He softened somewhat at sight of her distress.

"Well, it's none of my business if a lady chooses to be misapprehended round the streets at night with a pester and a lackey. I don't know what your purpose is—I don't ask to know. But I'm here to keep my gait, and I'll keep it. Go try to wheedle the officer at the Porte Neuve."

In helpless obedience, glad of even so much leniency, we turned away—to face a tall, grizzled veteran in a colonel's shoulder-caps. With a dragon at his back, he had come so softly out of a side alley that not even the captain had marked him.

"What's this, Guilbert?" he demanded. "Some folk seeking to get through the gates, sir. I've just turned them away."

"What were you saying about the Porte Neuve?"

"I said they could go see how that gate is kept. I showed them how this is."

"Why must you pass through, as this time of night?" said the commanding officer, civilly. Gilles once again beseeched the dying mother. The young captain, eager to prove his fidelity, interrupted him:

"I believe that's a fairy-tale, sir. There's something queer about these people. The girl says she is a grocer's servant, and has hands like a duchess—has a mother or not. The point is whether these people have the countersign. If they have it, they can pass, whoever they are."

"They have not," the captain answered at once. "I think you would do well, sir, to demand the lady's name."

Mademoiselle started forward for a bold stroke just as the superior officer demanded of her the countersign. As he said the word, she pronounced distinctly her name:

"Lorraine!"

"Lorraine!" the Colonel said instantly. "Pass them through, Guilbert."

The young captain stood in a mull, but no more hesitated than we.

"Mighty queer!" he muttered. "Why didn't she give it to me?"

"Strike yourself, sir!" his superior gave sharp command. "They have the countersign; pass them through."

There were plenty, and as dangerous. The hangings of the army—beggars, feagues, and footpads—hovered, like the cowardly bands of prey they were, about the outskirts of the city. Did a leaf rustle, we started; hid a shambling shape in the gloom white for aims, we made ready for onset. Gilles produced from some place of concealment—his jerkin, or his leggings, or somewhere—a brace of pistols, and we walked with finger on trigger, taking care whenever a rattle in the grass, a shadow in the bushes, seemed to follow us, to talk loud and cheerfully of common things the little interests of a humble station. Thanks to this diplomacy, of the pistol-barrel shining in the faint starlight, none noticed us, though we encountered more than one mysterious company. We never passed into the gloom under an arch of trees without the resolution to fight for our lives. We never came out again into the faint light of the open road without wondering thanks to the sainte-silence, thanks, for we never spoke a word of any fear, Gilles and I. I throw mademoiselle knew well enough, but she spoke no word either. She never faltered, never showed by so much as the turn of her head that she suspected any danger, but eyes on the distant lights of St. Denis, walked straight along, half a step ahead of us all the way. Stride as we might, we two strong fellows could never quite keep up with her.

The journey could not at such a pace stretch out forever. Presently the distant lights were no longer distant, but near, nearer, close at hand—the lights of the outskirts of the camp. A sentinel started out from the queue of a wall to stop us, but when we had told our errand he became as friendly as a brother. He went across the road into a neighbouring townside to report to the officer of the guard and came back presently with a torch and the order to take us to the Duke of St. Quentin's lodgings.

It was near an hour after midnight, and St. Denis was in bed. Save for a drowsy patrol here and there, we met no one. Fewer than the patrols were the lanterns hung on ropes across the streets; those were the only lights, for the houses were one and all as dark as tombs. Not till we had reached the middle of the town did we see, in the second story of a house in the square, a beam of light shining through the shutter-chink.

"Some one in mischief!" Gilles pointed.

"Aye," laughed the sentry, "your duke. This is where he lodges, over the saddle."

He knocked with the butt of his musket on the door. The shutter above groined open, and a voice—Monsieur's voice—sailed:

"Who's there?"

Mademoiselle was concealed in the embrasure of the doorway; Gilles and I stepped back into the street where Monsieur could see us.

"Gilles Forester and Felix Broux, Monsieur, just from Paris, with news."

"Wait."

"Is it all right, M. le Duc?" the sentry asked, smiling.

"Yes," Monsieur answered, closing the shutter.

The soldier, with another salute to the blank window, and a nod of "Good-by, then," to us, went back to his post. Left in darkness, we presently heard Monsieur's quick step on the flag of the hall, and the clatter of the bolts. He opened to us, standing there fully dressed, with a guttural exclamation.

"My son!" he said instantly.

Mademoiselle, crouching in the shadow of the doorpost, pushed me forward. I saw I was to tell him.

"Monsieur, he was arrested and driven to the Bastille tonight between seven and eight. Lorraine—Paul de Lorraine—went to the governor and swore that M. Etienne killed the lackey Ponton in the house in the Rue Couperettes. It was Lorraine who killed him—Lorraine sold Mayenne, so Mlle. de Montieu heard him, to. And here is mademoiselle."

At the word she came out of the shadow and slowly over the threshold.

(To be continued.)

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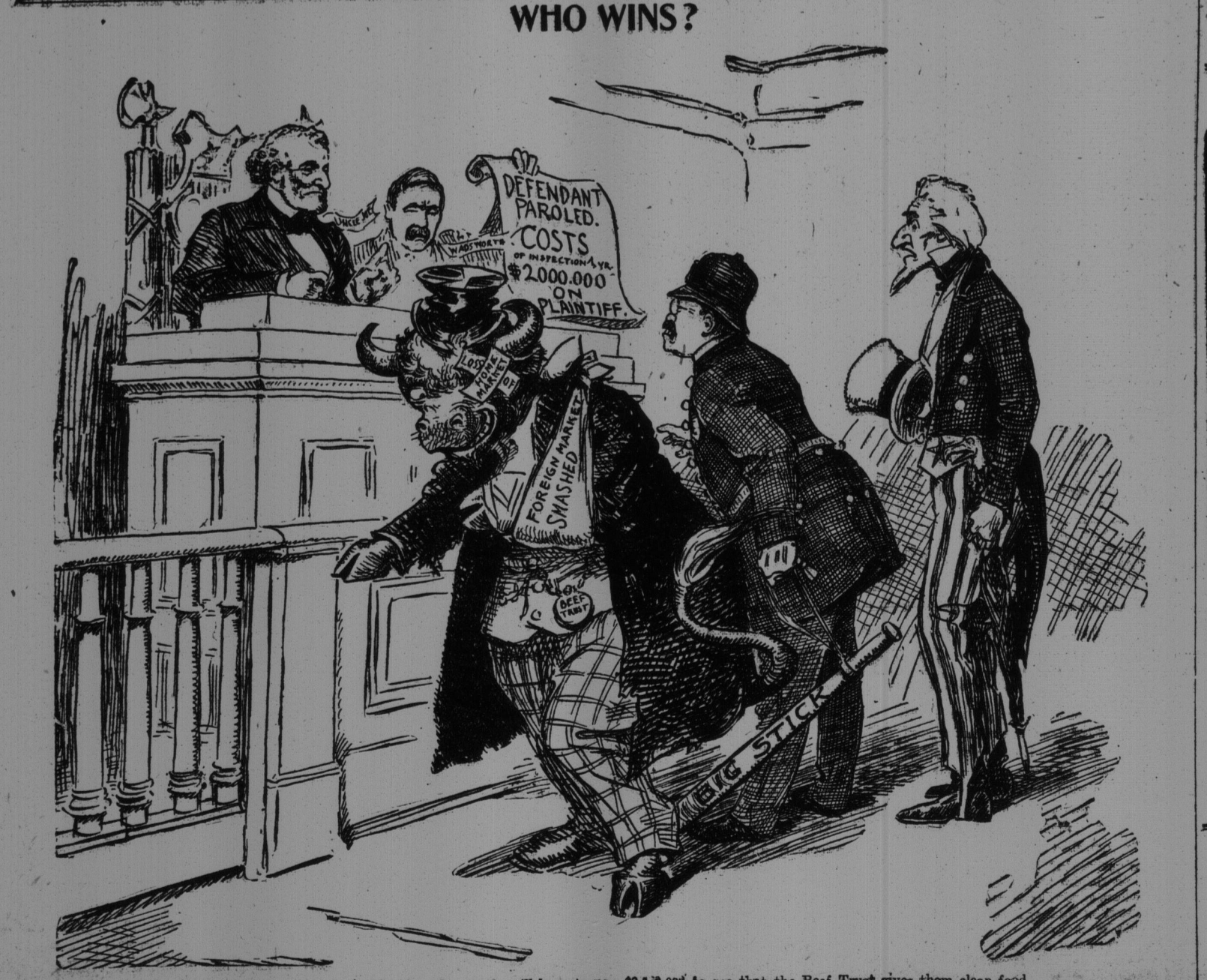
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