

Jean Renault--Conscript

By Howard P. Rockey

"My friends," said Jean Renault, "I ask you to wish me untold success. This day I have signed my most wonderful contract! I stand before you, Jean Renault, the greatest of all tenors—I who have just been engaged for three years by the leading impresario of modern times—M. Gatti-Carranza. It is he, the most divine of men in appreciation, who has the rare good judgment to acclaim me the utmost in vocal attainment."

"A bas!" exclaimed M. Dupre with some heat. "I, who have heard the most wonderful operatic voices of the age, doubt you. I cannot believe what you say."

Renault, the handsome, the egotist, the accomplished, shrugged his shoulders.

"Monsieur," he said quite calmly for a Frenchman provoked, "not without affront, I challenge thee, even thou, to scan the agreement I have this day made with M. Gatti-Carranza. It means that next season I shall be the highest paid tenor in operatic history. You will doubt me, for heretofore no singer has ever commanded such a salary. This next six months—which is the New York season with the Metropolitan Opera—I shall earn \$3,500 a night, and I shall have a guarantee of \$250,000 a year for three years, with additional compensation for extra performances. I beg of you, my friend, to read my agreement."

"Hein!" almost gasped Dupre. "It is impossible. It is written—I read it—yet it cannot be!"

"So one might think," answered Renault quickly. "Yet in America such things are true."

Beautiful Alys Dupre advanced slowly across the gravel path. She put her arms about the shoulders of Renault and smiled down at him. "You are a dreamer, mon cher," she said softly. "Is this thing true thou sayest to mon pere?"

"Quite true," answered Renault, with smiling eyes. "Will you come with me over the seas as my wife and share with me the honors and the gold that will be mine in New York this winter?"

Alys gazed into his eyes, her hand stole into his, and she let him kiss her softly upon the lips.

Renault gazed over her shoulder at the pleasant village lying beyond the garden. The green hills, the trees, and the picturesque old mill down by the narrow stream gladdened his eye. The most wonderful woman of all the world was his and he was the most wonderful tenor of his time. His happiness was complete.

He thought of the peace and quiet of the place and of the bustle and hurry of New York, but he longed to be there with Alys and the beginning of his triumph.

Now M. Dupre, aged and dignified, put down his pipe, rose from his seat, and took a tottering step forward.

"Oh, mon fils," he said with a sob in his voice, "I have read this wonderful paper of agreement signed by the great judge of merit across the seas, and I am happy and proud to give unto thee my daughter. May she be worthy of thee!"

Renault wrung the old man's hand. "Worthy?" he repeated. "Who am I—only a great tenor—to deserve her?"

Just then a powerful motor car came along the dusty road and stopped before the garden wall. From it a foreigner descended, entered the pretty garden, and doffed his hat.

"My dear Renault!" the man exclaimed. Then, to the embarrassment of the new arrival, the great tenor embraced him effusively. Red of face, but accepting the situation as a part of his experience abroad, the newcomer permitted Renault to introduce him to his companions.

"The chairman of the committee from the wonderful opera company called the Metropolitan of New York!" exclaimed Renault with enthusiasm: "the powerful and wise organization

that has engaged me—Jean Renault. I am entranced! You, monsieur, are come just in time to congratulate me—and oh, thou sly dog, thou hast put M. Gatti-Carranza up to engaging me. I congratulate thee."

The new arrival smiled indulgently. He knew Renault—had before experienced the vanity and temperament of the man.

"But congratulate me once more," Renault went on. "I am just affianced to the most beautiful woman in the world. What is more, I, Jean Renault, have won her from Heinrich Berghoff—an inferior director of the orchestra at the Metropolitan—who has had the audacity to plead for the hand of my divinity!"

"Impossible," said the American. "Yet I hear that Herr Berghoff has renounced all thought of returning to the States this season. He has applied for a commission in the army."

"Bah!" exclaimed Renault contemptuously. "Let him handle a sword as clumsily as he handled a baton, and France will have an easy victory over Germany!"

The American laughed heartily. "Permit me," he said to the company about them. "M. Renault is so enthusiastic, so happy, that he has forgotten to introduce me save by a title

Calmly he began as they all listened intently. His voice seemed wonderful even at the outset, then it seemed like the voice of one gifted by heaven. Now he sobbed, and real tears streamed down his cheeks as he sang the song of the disappointed, heart-broken clown—the song that had made him a world-wide figure and a rich man at one and the same time.

At last he ceased. His head sank upon his breast. He was overcome with emotion.

And then, and then only was it that everyone in the little garden looked up as a saber clanked against a spur and an officer in uniform entered. Reverently he had stood by the gate while Renault sang. Now, with doffed cap and courteous air, he came toward the little group. He appeared to hesitate, yet his manner was businesslike, as that of a man who had an unpleasant duty which would best be performed quickly.

"M. Renault," he said quietly, yet with the voice of authority, "M. Renault, France calls you. You are needed with her sons to suppress our foes. It seems a sacrilege to intrude upon so great an artist, yet, pardon me, it is no fault of mine; all the sons of our country are drafted for the military service. You are a citizen—a reservist. France

would draft them, too. France calls all—rich and poor alike."

Renault paled. Then the dramatic side of the situation appealed to him. He turned to Alys.

"Dear heart," he said, "I go to war. I go for France and for thee. No longer shall I be a soldier of the footlights—a make-believe warrior with a tin sword against a singing enemy. From this moment I am a soldier of France. I shall show them. I, Jean Renault, shall return to thee not only the greatest of living tenors, but a wearer of the Legion d'Honneur—a hero of this war with Germany. Bah! May I encounter this boaster Berghoff. He is less than the shadow of a dog—a miserable whining conscript who cannot even beat time with a baton let alone parry the sword thrusts of Jean Renault!"

Then, with the instinct of a dramatic exit, he strode from the garden, while the saber of the soldier accompanying him clanked against the stones.

II

A few hours later Jean Renault, who had not seen military service for five years, stood uniformed and armed at the railway station, not in the centre of the stage, but one of a company of pale-faced, nervous recruits about to entrain for the frontier. Yet even under these conditions Renault enjoyed a certain distinction. His companions knew him, held him in awe, the greatest of French tenors.

They boarded the cars. The train moved, and Jean Renault, soldier of France, was being hurried toward the enemy.

The journey's end arrived. The men were hastily formed into line beside the railroad track. There was a sharp command and the company moved off toward the site chosen for their camp.

Night came, and with it a feeling of awe. No camp-fires were permitted to be lighted, and the sole faint glimmer came from the tent of the general commanding the division, where a small electric battery lamp was carefully shrouded to prevent its rays being seen from a distance. On the ground, wrapped in his blanket, lay Jean Renault, thinking of Alys and dreaming of his contract with the Metropolitan Opera Company. Also he thought of the possibility of his being shot, and his flesh grew cold.

Overhead there was a faint whirring sound. Dimly he made out a great bird-like shape hovering down in his direction. He sat up and then laughed softly. It was an aeroplane, and now it touched the earth almost noiselessly.

A scout of course. Renault turned over and tried to sleep. But a few moments later a dark figure edged toward him. A hand was placed upon his shoulder and he sat up, startled. "M. le General wishes to see you," said the man, and then, beckoning to Renault to follow, started off thru the darkness.

Renault arose. He dusted off his clothing and twirled his mustache. He, Jean Renault, must make a creditable appearance before his commandant—this man, a mere soldier, not yet, if ever he should be, a world-known figure. Doubtless, thought Renault, the general wished to ask him to join his staff.

But just inside the flap of the commander's tent a sharp voice awakened the tenor from his reverie.

"Renault," said the grizzled veteran of Sedan, "my aeroplane scout has just reported that the enemy are invading France. They have crossed the border and are marching between our column and that of the Marshal Le Fevre. As they proceed they are wrecking the telephone and telegraph wires. Our wireless outfit is crippled. I must go back fifty years in warfare and send an orderly with despatches because I dare not risk betraying our position by using rockets or firebrand signals."

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In that moment he recognized the officer who had brought him there

which amounts to but little, except in that it gives me an opportunity to show my appreciation of the art of M. Renault. I am Richard Van der Wynt, of New York."

M. Dupre arose and extended his hand. "We are honored, M. Van der Wynt," he said. "Pray be seated." He had heard of multimillionaires across the sea.

"And now," said Van der Wynt as he sat down in a rustic chair, "I wish to ask a great favor. I am music hungry. It has been months since I have heard M. Renault sing the 'Vesti la giubba' from 'Pagliacci.' Would you consent to sing it for us here—now?"

All eyes turned to Renault, who stood up self-consciously. The lights, the excitement, the many "bravos" of the opera rang in the ears of his memory. He had all the old-time inspiration and passion, he recalled the flattery, the adulation of his past performances. And added to this was the presence of Alys.

Renault thought of their marriage, of their departure to the States, of the triumphs they would share there. And then he sang.

beckons—calls to you to take up the sword against the enemy." The man replaced his cap and saluted as his spurs clinked together sharply.

Renault arose to his full height. He twirled his mustache. He was dramatic, tragic, theatric.

"I am Jean Renault!" he exclaimed. "I leave shortly for America, where I have contracted to appear. I, Jean Renault, sing—I do not fight!"

"Sing it to the minister of war!" said the soldier contemptuously. "Sing it to whomsoever you like, but come with me. It is the military law of France. It is a pity. I am no great singer, I earn no fabulous sums. I am a blower of glass. Yet France calls us together, perhaps to die side by side, even Jean Renault the great and Anton Marceau who earns ten francs the day. Such is fate. So France wills."

Van der Wynt spoke up. "What is the fee for the release of a conscript?" he asked of the officer. "I will gladly pay any sum you ask to free M. Renault from service. I will buy a substitute for him."

The soldier smiled. "There will be no substitutes," he said. "If there were men available for substitution we