

The Usurper By HAVELOCK ETRICK

There was a strange silence brooding over Paris. The moon looked down upon a white city and frosted the snow that rested on every pinnacle and fretted carving with a silver glory.

Those among the besieged who were learned in such matters had been heard to declare that in five days at the latest capitulation must come and the cup of degradation be emptied to its dregs.

Within the city there reigned a stagnant misery, starvation and smouldering fury. Men looked at one another with an unspoken curse shining in their eyes, and women bearing the mark of long-drawn-out misery in their pinched faces trudged wearily to the few bakers' shops still open and waited their turn for the purchasing of such meagre portions of bread as were to be bought.

In the matter of provisions things had reached their lowest ebb; the flesh of cats and dogs was a luxury known only to the rich, and the sewers of Paris were scoured by hungry men for the lean rats that starvation had brought down to common level of degradation—they hardly showed fight for their wretched lives!

Still the iron circle of conquest drew tighter round the city, and prayers froze on the lips of the worshippers that filled the churches, for there seemed none who answered and hoped died grudgingly in the hearts of those who still clung to the belief in a Divine justice.

Therefore silence brooded over Paris, being broken only by the shells that landed in unexpected spots at all hours of the day and night. The quarter of Montmartre was especially dangerous for the pedestrian, for the Prussian marksmen had got their range and bombarded the hill continuously.

The defenders of the city had dragged their heavy cannon up to the heights and from their vantage point returned the fire, but the position was a hot one, and the wayfarer in that quarter of Paris took his life into his own hand, for at any moment a bursting shell might bring it to an abrupt termination.

Two men, both wearing the uniform of lieutenant, were pacing the bastion near the eastern gate of the city. From time to time they stopped and looked over the snow-shrouded plain that lay between them and the twinkling lights of the Prussian camp and then again with a shrug of their shoulders resumed their tramp.

They were both young, having, indeed, but recently left boyhood behind them, and they were curiously alike in appearance, though the likeness was explained by the fact of their being brothers.

Enveloped in the long military cloak, and with peaked caps drawn down over their eyes, it was difficult to distinguish between them.

"To surrender," said one of them, "is our only chance. At least it will save the whole place being knocked to bits and the certainty of being starved to death."

"It will be a sorry sight to see Bismarck riding through the streets as a conqueror," replied Armand de Quetteville. "I wonder how the people will take it!"

"The people," observed the other, "have had all their spirit crushed out of them by sheer starvation. What they want is food, Bismarck or no Bismarck! Empty stomachs are great levelers of pride!"

"But we French do not take defeat easily, Silvestre, and there is a pride in us that not even hunger can kill."

"His brother did not reply, but again stopped and looked out over the plain at their feet.

"The night was dark now, for the moon had set, but the gloom only helped to intensify the glitter of the enemy's camp fires. The lights looked vindictive in their watchfulness and like so many hungry wolves waiting for their prey.

"What of Therese and Madam Raudin?" asked Silvestre at length. "I have had no time to go up to the house to-day."

"It goes badly with them, as with everybody else. There was waited for two hours at the baker's in the Rue Blanchard for some bread."

"She got it, I hope?" interrupted Silvestre.

"The supply was sold out before it came to her turn!"

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the young soldier. "What will they do?"

thoughts were none of the pleasantest. After a bit Silvestre took his brother's arm.

"It is strange, Armand, that you and I—brothers and the best of chums all our lives—should be rivals now. Isn't it?"

"I see nothing strange in it," retorted the other, rather hotly. "To see Therese as we have done all these years is to love her, and that I believe we both do."

"But what of her?" persisted Silvestre.

"Ah, that is past man's understanding. I do believe she cares for one of us in the way a woman should the man she means to take for her husband, but which?"

The sudden breaking off of the sentence betrayed his inability to fathom the riddle of a woman's heart.

"She is so young," said Silvestre. "At her age women don't know their own minds. They want somebody or something to decide for them."

Armand laughed a little, and leaning against the wall gazed out into the darkness.

"Do they ever know their own minds, Silvestre, think you? I agree with you on one point: they want something that appeals to their imagination or their hearts—whatever you like to call it—before they wake up to the realities of life. Now, for instance, if either of us had done something out of the common, anything that called for great courage or personal risk, during these past few weeks, we should not be in doubt now as to which of us she really loves. Women," continued the young philosopher, "are great hero worshippers, and often love a man more for what he does than for his own personality, though God knows what they ever see to love in us."

"Well, it hasn't been our fault that everything has been as dull as dishwater lately," replied Silvestre. "Perhaps if an opportunity offered we might show the grit that is in us. But I see no chance—"

"Beg pardon, sir."

The young men looked round. A soldier was standing with his hand to the salute.

"Yes," said Armand, sharply. "What is it?"

"Beg pardon, sir," said the man again, "but the colonel wants you in the orderly room."

"Right," was the reply. "Come, Silvestre, let's go and see what's up."

They found their commanding officer and one or two others awaiting them.

"Ah," said the colonel, "here you are, lieutenant—and your brother, I see. I want to send one of you upon an errand which means the devil's own risk. Which of you will undertake to go through with it?"

"I will, sir!" The brothers spoke simultaneously, and the officer laughed as he looked from one to the other.

"You are both of you as keen as anything!" he said, "and small wonder, after being cooped up here with nothing to do but watch the lines yonder. But come," he added, briskly, "there is something on hand now. The general has received information that a fellow in the secret service has secured some valuable intelligence—probably plans of attack—which he has committed to paper—a rash proceeding, but one excusable under the circumstances. He sends word that he will be ready to give up the papers to an accredited officer if met on the outskirts of the camp. He has disguised himself as a loafer, but is to be recognized by the exchange of a password and the fact of his whistling airs out of 'Les Huguenots.' Now, do either of you know that opera well enough to be able to continue any air he might be whistling?"

"I do, sir," replied Armand de Quetteville. "And I, too, added his brother.

"So—both of you again! You will have to toss for the honor of going. I won't disguise to you that it is an undertaking of great danger. The enemy's lines will have to be passed, the risk of detection will have to be run—that and the chance of being shot as a spy. Should the secret service man be there and the exchange successfully carried out, the papers must be carefully secreted. The information will be closely written on thin tissue, and if the bearer should be taken on his way back through the lines, he must eat and swallow it. The Prussians must not get hold of the papers. You understand?"

"Perfectly!" replied the young men in a breath.

"Now, settle between yourselves which is to be. Whoever goes will make for the knoll—that one with the trees upon it—at the extreme left of the camp, and then bear away to the northeast. He will come to a cottage, leave that on the left and follow the hedge that runs parallel with the garden wall. The holder of the papers will be hanging somewhere about. The word to be answered is 'Le Roi Blanc,' and the reply, 'Avec coronne d'or.' He will then know you for our messenger. Whichever one of you goes will have the satisfaction of doing his country an inestimable service; the information received

may alter the whole aspect of affairs."

"At what hour will the man expect a messenger, sir?"

"At 2 o'clock. There is no time to be lost."

The brothers saluted and left the room. Once outside the house they faced each other with mutual irresolution. The bursting of a shell not far from them was the only sound to be heard for a few moments. Neither wished to relinquish the opportunity of distinguishing himself.

"Well," said Armand, at last, "there is nothing gained by standing here. Which of us is it to be?"

"Don't you think we had better toss up for it?" said Silvestre, with a little laugh. "That will be the fairest way to decide which of us is to court renown—or death!"

Both men felt more than the possible welfare of Paris was at stake in the expedition. The vision of a fair, girlish face lit up with pride was present in the minds of each, and with the certainty of her appreciation of a brave action and contempt of danger was a stronger actuating force than patriotism!

"Good! We will toss for it," was the reply.

Armand de Quetteville took a coin from his pocket.

"Ready?" he inquired. The other nodded.

"You call, then. Let's decide by a single throw."

The coin was spun in the air and fell in the snow. Silvestre called—and won.

"You're!" exclaimed Armand. "You are in luck. Come, you had better be seeing about starting."

He consulted his watch. "After 1 o'clock. It will take you all your time to get there, for you must have your wits about you and go cautiously. I will wait at the outer gate till you return."

They descended to the drawbridge, the heavy machinery was put into motion and the two men crossed the moat, making their way towards the second rampart. The man in charge of the outer gate being curtly told of the work in hand prepared to open it.

Silvestre turned and grasped his brother's hand.

"You bear me no ill will, Armand, for my luck?"

"Ma foi, no! It was an even chance for us both. I only hope it will prove luck to you. Got your revolver all right? Good. Well, God guard you, old chap, and bring you safe back—with the papers. Vive la France!"

The gate swung back and Silvestre, creeping cautiously out, was swallowed up in the gloom.

With the advance of the night a light mist had arisen. This, argued Armand, would be in Silvestre's favor, lessening the chances of his being detected by the Prussian outposts. But it was a dangerous job, one requiring all the nerve and thorough knowledge of the lay of the land that his brother possessed.

The reward would be great, however—the consciousness of doing his duty for the honor of his country and of being perhaps the means of averting the grim doom that looked so fatally certain, also—and to a lover's eyes the best—the hope of bringing to a maiden's face a flush of pride for a loved one's deed of daring, a flush that might lead to much—to the winning, maybe, of that wavering heart!

With his cloak wrapped well about him Armand de Quetteville kept watch for the return of his brother. The monotonous passing to and fro of the sentry hardly disturbed his thoughts as he leaned over the breastworks of the ramparts, his eyes trying to pierce the impenetrable darkness of the country that lay between the walls and the Prussian camp.

An irritating and to all appearances purposeless bombardment was maintained intermittently, the shells being directed against the upstanding hill of Montmartre, where the artillerymen, under cover of the night, were busy at the work of remounting guns dislodged by the Prussian fire.

Occasionally a shot fell short and ploughed its way into the hard frost-bound earth at the foot of the walls, not more than thirty paces from where the officer stood. The gate was in the direct line of fire, and those in charge of it ran no small danger of becoming victims to the Prussians' persistent endeavors to dislodge the artillery from their position.

The minutes passed very slowly to Armand de Quetteville. In spite of his words to the contrary, he was very jealous that the lot had fallen to Silvestre. It was not so much that the love of his country burned in his heart as that he begrudged Silvestre the chance of becoming a hero in the eyes of Therese Raudin.

From childhood those gray eyes had been the lode-star of the two brothers. Being orphans, they had of late years found a second home in the house of Madame Raudin, an old friend of their mother's. Thus side by side with themselves had grown up the sweet-faced child whose heart—when she grew old enough to realize that she possessed such a thing—wavered between her two willing slaves.

Each brother considered that the other was the favorite, and Silvestre, on his side, was willing to admit the superior claims of Armand. He was the elder by a year, and

certainly the cleverer, and possessed of the greater wit and fun.

Armand, to do him justice, was conscious that Silvestre had points to which he could not lay claim. He envied him his gentleness, the power of sympathy and readiness to sacrifice his own pleasure for that of others. He knew, too, that in spite of being the younger he enjoyed the confidence of his senior officers to a greater degree than himself—his word was always implicitly to be relied upon also his unswerving sense of honor.

Thus there were many disquieting thoughts in Armand's brain as he looked out into the gloom of the raw winter's morning.

The church clocks had sounded the hour of 2, and still there were no signs of Silvestre.

Supposing—!

Armand shook the thought from him; but the devil that had prompted it was only momentarily abashed, and again whispered into his ear, urging the supposition.

If Silvestre failed in his mission! Failure could only mean one thing. Either he came back with the papers, or he did not! If the latter, then—the devil at his shoulder grinned as he saw the hot flush of shameful hope rise to Armand's face—then his path would be unobstructed.

Dieu! What was that? The flash of a musket caught his eye, and a few seconds later the dull crack of the shot. As far as he could judge, it was about a couple of miles distant.

Armand started to his feet, erect and vigilant, and peered intently into the darkness.

The minutes passed, drew out into half an hour or more, and yet nothing happened. There had been that one musket shot, and then—silence! Strain his eyes as he would he could see nothing. That the shot was in some way connected with his brother he was positive, yet—

Yes, there was a figure running toward the gate—a reeling, staggering figure, as of a drunken man, groping blindly in the snow, though almost in touch of the gate.

Armand flung himself precipitately down the steps leading to the entrance, and seizing a lantern that hung upon the wall, ordered with an oath the man in charge to unlock the gate. He waved the light frantically to and fro as a guide to the wayfarer, whom he knew for a surety was Silvestre.

Out of the darkness a figure staggered into his arms—it was Silvestre, blood-stained, pale and utterly spent. Armand drew him quickly into the guard room by the side of the massive wooden barrier.

"See here," gasped Silvestre, "the papers—quick, take them—I can go no further—they hit me twice." He pointed to his right arm, which hung helplessly by his side. "I have been bleeding like a dog for God knows how long—take the papers; they are safe enough—take them—"

Before Armand could catch him he tumbled in a heap on the floor in a dead faint.

But the papers were safe. Telling the corporal in charge to look after his brother and to fetch a doctor, Armand grasped the precious bundle and hurried at the top of his speed towards the inner gate. He must go at once to the commandant's office; the papers must be delivered.

As he walked swiftly a curious feeling crossed him. With the packet in his hand he could almost have believed that he had been the means of procuring them for his country. True, the colonel did not know which of them—Silvestre or himself—had finally decided to go on the perilous quest. He almost laughed at the strange feeling of envy that swept across him. Silvestre was wounded, poor chap—but what of that? He would be a hero on the morrow—one who had wrought a great deed at the peril of his life.

A weird humming sound, as of the working of a thousand looms, filled the air—the rush of something that shrieked like a demon in mortal fear as it tore its way through the atmosphere—a blinding flare of light—a crash—a belching hell of flame!

Armand de Quetteville lay on the ground, his hand tightly grasping the package of papers, his body deluged with blood, struck almost insensible by the bursting shell. He was grievously wounded, but he still kept the power of speech. Men rushed from all quarters and raised him gently.

"To the commandant's office!" he had sufficient strength to whisper before oblivion came to him.

So tightly did his fingers grip the papers that the officers had to use force before they would give up their charge.

"Take him to his quarters," said the colonel, "or stay—better still—take him to the house of Madame Raudin in the Rue Blanchard, and tell the surgeon to go there at once. They will take good care of him—for they have known him from childhood. Not much the matter with him, I fancy," added the officer, "a few flesh wounds and a nasty knock on the head from a splinter. Be careful of him my lads—so—he's a brave fellow, and it's rough on him for this to have happened just as he had finished his work—so—gently there."

Not even the roar of the bursting shell roused Silvestre from the

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