

The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

A Race for Life.

By the Author of "Danesbury House," "A Life Secret," &c.

CHAPTER I.

ROBERT LETELLIER.

It may not have been the reader's privilege to visit the department of the Isere, in the south-east of France. Not to have travelled as far as Paris would be something surprising in these days, but comparatively few have penetrated beyond the capital. The remoter parts of France are beautiful; the scenery is magnificent; nothing can be more enchanting to the eye than the views on the line of route from Lyons to Grenoble, coach-road; they are beyond what the imagination can conceive. I cannot say as much for the towns and villages; some of them are as wretched as the scenery amidst which they rise is fine; and the manners and customs of their inhabitants, taking them on the average, are at least a hundred years behind Paris in refinement.

I passed some months in these towns years ago; and I and the streets, and the streets' peculiarities, not the least remarkable of which were the smells, did not get on well together. Some streets were narrow; a long-armed man could touch the houses on either side; and, what with the contiguity of the houses and their excessive height, you had, in walking along, to throw your head completely back, and strain your eyes upwards if you wished to obtain a vista of the rich blue sky, darker and richer than it is with us. The narrowness of the streets was not all the grievance; a gutter, a yard wide, ran through the middle, the sides gently sloping down to it; and when a carriage came along, the horse splashing through its midst, and splashing you, you had to make a rush for the nearest open doorway, and obtain shelter till the carriage had passed; for, as there was but barely room, not an inch to spare, for its wheels to escape the houses, what was to become of you had you remained in its way? Foot-pavement was a thing unknown (had there been space to lay it on), and the sharp, rude stones hurt unaccustomed feet. Woe to you, also, if you were perambulating these streets at ten at night; you might venture earlier, or you might venture later, but if you were in them when the hour struck, you would hear the windows above open, stentorian lungs shout out "Sauve qui peut," and then woe to your head unsheltered from the deluge! These were some of the "customs," a stranger then had to encounter, very much to his astonishment; and I do not doubt that they prevail still.

One evening, the cathedral clock in the town of Grenoble struck six, and the cathedral bell immediately rang out for "Salut." Some stragglers, chiefly women, might be seen turning into the Place Notre Dame, where the cathedral is situated, in obedience to its call, but the congregation is not scanty at the ordinary evening services. One lady, dressed in black, stole in quietly, apparently noticing nothing. Her eyes were cast down, her air was abstracted, and it might be suspected that she was in some trouble. It was Madame Letellier. She drew off her right-hand glove, dipped her fingers in the *eau benite*, touched her forehead with it, and then, lifting a chair, carried it close to the altar, first paying her halfpenny for it. There she knelt upon it, her head bowed in her clasped hands; she never lifted her head; she never lifted her eyes: she appeared to be perfectly absorbed in grief or devotion, perhaps both. The very short service over, she turned to leave the church again; but ere she could pass out at the great doors, many friends surrounded her, one only question on their lips—How was her husband?

"Thank you," she answered, "he is no worse; indeed, the doctors consider there is a slight improvement this evening. I do all I can—*pray*; I cannot do more. I trust it may please God to hear me."

"That He will hear your prayer is certain; God is good," whispered a lady at her side, one who had a countenance marked with care; "whether it will see fit to answer in the manner you wish is another thing. His ways are not as our ways."

"When my dear mamma was ill, I prayed that she might live, but she did not," interposed a pretty girl, with tears in her eyes—Annette Carine; "therefore, as God took her, I know that it was best she should go."

Smiling sadly upon Annette, and curtseying several times ceremoniously low to the group in general, as is the custom with the French ladies, Madame Letellier withdrew from the church and passed on. She took her way in the direction of the Place Grenette, and entered one of the handsomest houses in the vicinity. It was the property of her husband, and they occupied the first floor, and retained exclusive right to the courtyard at the back and to the garden. Her son was in the saloon when she entered it—a gentlemanly young man, taller than the average run of his countrymen, and with a remarkably pleasant countenance.

"Robert, how is he now?"

"Much better," was the edifying answer; "he has actually been asking if he may not have something to eat."

"A deceitful improvement," murmured Madame Letellier. "Now, mother, don't continue to worry yourself," laughed Robert, who could not associate the idea of danger with his father, hitherto in the enjoyment of robust health. "As if colds ever killed strong men!"

M. Letellier—he who was lying in bed ill—was one of the first glove manufacturers of Grenoble; glove manufacturing, you may be aware, being the staple trade of the place. He was deemed to be a rich man, and they lived in very good style and kept their carriage—not that it takes half the money to do these things there, and to maintain certain luxuries, that it does in England. We spend our money in pretension, in keeping up appearances, in trying to be finer than others; with the French pretension is rare. Two children were theirs: the daughter had married well, and lived in Lyons; the son, Robert, who had received a liberal and classical education, was with his father in the manufactory. M. Letellier had caught cold, and it had settled on his chest; the French doctors called it *fluxion de poitrine*; we should call it inflammation. It was violent, and attended with dangerous symptoms.

Madame Letellier went to his room and found him, to all appearance, much better, as her son had said; and at the stated time the household retired to rest. Before morning, however, they were aroused; M. Letellier was worse; and when the medical men arrived they said he had not many hours to live.

Standing over the bed, as the morning advanced, were his

wife and son. He appeared restless, casting his eyes to the door and anxious to say something, but power of speech had nearly left him. Suddenly he clutched his son's arm, and the latter bent down to catch the half-formed words that issued from his lips.

"The letters! Any letters? Where are they?"

Robert went to the manufactory and brought back three letters.

"Shall I unseal them for you, father?" he bent to whisper.

For answer, M. Letellier grasped the letters with an eager movement, as of fear, and thrust them under himself as he lay in bed. His wife turned to her son. "What is in them thus to agitate him?"

"Nay, I know nothing," replied young Letellier.

The doctors were not wrong; they seldom are when they pronounce that life is on the wing; and when the spirit of Robert Letellier the elder passed away, the attendants drew the letters from underneath his body. He had died in such peace as is given by the rites of his professed religion, having received absolution and the last sacraments of the church.

But whether death is busy or not, business may not be neglected; and Robert, in the midst of his grief, drew his mother's attention to the letters.

"Shall I open them, or will you?" he enquired. "Two, I see, are from England, and may contain pressing orders which must be made known in the manufactory."

Madame Letellier lifted her pale face from the arm of her cushioned chair. "You."

Robert opened the first that came to hand; it was, as he had surmised, an order for gloves from one of the London wholesale houses. He then opened the second; that was from another London house, but it conveyed no order, only an intimation that, from the pressure of misfortunes, they had been obliged to suspend payment. It was bad news; Robert knew that a heavy sum was owing by them to his father. He said nothing, judging that his mother had enough grief for the present moment, but quietly laid the letter atop of the other, and took up the third.

That was the letter that M. Letellier had been so anxious for in his last moments; its contents proved it—ominous contents, which seemed to stop the pulses of Robert as he gathered them in. M. Letellier, unknown to his wife and son, had been embarking in large speculations connected with the Bourse in Paris—one of those delusive schemes which (in prospect) are certain to make the fortune of all who engage in them, turning staid old merchants' heads with golden visions, but which, in their result, generally bring ruin. Nothing short of ruin, utter ruin, did this letter convey to the senses of young Robert Letellier. It appeared the crash had been expected for some days, and had now come; and its deluded supporters, not content with venturing their available money, had managed to render themselves liable for damages. Did the anticipated blow contribute to his father's sudden death? No wonder he had been anxious for letters, dying though he was; no wonder he had striven to hide them from the eyes of his wronged family. An exclamation of dismay, which, in the anguish of the moment, he was utterly unable to suppress, burst from Robert's lips; but he recollected himself, drowned its sound in the best way he could, and put the letters in his pocket.

Madame Letellier's ears were quick, for they were sharpened by an undefined dread. She turned round and looked at her son. "Who are the letters from?"

"Two are from London and one from Paris," was the answer. "Rather a large order from London."

"Go on, Robert; there is bad news behind."

"If there is, mother, this is not a day to impart it to you."

"A day of grief like this has never come to you or to me before, Robert; such a one can never come to me again. Whatever ill there may be behind, it cannot be worse than what has come. Let me know it. Does it concern Charlotte?"

"Oh, no; the news is not from Charlotte. One of the London houses has gone; it was owing us largely."

Madame Letellier paused a moment. "Was the failure expected by you in the manufactory?"

"Not in the least."

"Then it was not that fear which disturbed your father in dying. Terribly disturbed in his mind he has been for some days past; I have seen. There is a third letter, Robert."

"Mother, I cannot tell you the tidings that letter brings. Spare me; spare yourself to-day."

She held out her hand for the letter. "I will read them for myself; better I should know all at once. Give it me, I say; you have but one parent now, and you may not begin by being disobedient."

Most reluctantly he handed her the fatal letter; but, in the absorbing grief of her husband's loss, she appeared but little affected by its contents; and yet she no doubt fully took in the utter ruin that must come upon them. "Aujourd'hui roi, demain rien," she muttered, crushing the letter in her hands.

The French saying Madame Letellier had used, "To-day king, to-morrow nothing," was a not inapt illustration of their fortunes, past and to come. Three months after the death of its chief, the respected old house of Letellier had ceased to exist in the commercial world. It had not failed; it had not become bankrupt; it had honorably paid all its obligations in full; but, to do this, everything they possessed had to be sold, even the household furniture, and Madame Letellier and her son were left deprived of a home. Robert had not relinquished the business without a struggle to retain it; it was one of the best in Grenoble, but to carry it on without funds was impossible; and indeed its stock, machines, etc., had to be parted with to help pay the debts.

A gentleman came forward, Monsieur Jean Marie Carine, the father of that girl you saw for a moment in the cathedral. He was another substantial glove manufacturer of Grenoble, but his business was not so large or his connection so good as that of the Letelliers.

"I should like to buy the house and premises," he said; and I will establish my business where yours has been, and will pay you what is fair for the goodwill, if you will introduce me to the *clientele* as your successor. What say you to the proposal?"

Robert reflected, and, seeing nothing better to be done, was fain to acquiesce. The premises and the business must pass from him, and they might as well pass to the Pere Carine (as he was familiarly called in the town) as to anybody else.

"I am willing," was his reply, "if we can agree about terms." Pere Carine did agree, and took possession.

The French, for some social virtues, are not so eminent as the English; but there is one in which they put us to shame, that of filial piety. Nothing can exceed the love, the reverence, all classes of the French, whether in a high or a low station, bear for their aged parents; I can tell you, some of us might go over there and take a lesson from them. Charlotte, the daughter of Madame Letellier, arrived from Lyons with her husband, and they carried her off in all tenderness.

"Our house is yours, mother," they both said, "and our chief study shall be to make you happy in it."

But Robert—what was he to do? Grenoble prophesied that Robert might become a *vaut-rien*; might, as we sometimes phrase it in these fast days of ours, go to the bad. Robert Letellier had been expensively reared, and, though a glove manufacturer, was rather given to idle and extravagant habits—to live the life of a gentleman. Shooting or fishing often occupied his morning, the cafe in the afternoon, visiting and the theatre in the evening; the Letelliers had moved in the best society of the place, and Robert was much courted in it. How would he like to turn to and earn his bread before eating it?

Whether Robert would like it or not, he resolved to do it. He stood one day without the gates of the town, leaning over the bridge that covers the river Drac, its waters flowing on to Grenoble to empty themselves into the Isere. He was taking stern counsel with himself.

"I am fit for nothing but to follow the occupation to which I have been brought up," he soliloquized. "My brother-in-law will get me a clerkship in a banker's house at Lyons if I choose; but I never did make any hand at accounts, at book keeping, and I hate it worse than anything going. No, I must stick to my trade; and as I can no longer be master—say, and the first master in the place, as I looked to be—I must even swallow my pride and become a journeyman."

A scowl contracted his brow, for the word went terribly against the grain; and he bent his eyes over the running waters, seeing them not, so lost was he in deep thought. The river was flowing gently between its green banks, the scenery rising behind it was beautiful in its grandeur; but he saw nothing.

"But let me embrace it with a will. There's no lot on earth but may be rendered palatable by our making the best of it in all open earnestness before our fellow men. I shall not be the less Robert Letellier, a name respected in Grenoble; I need not be less the gentleman, save that I shall have scant time on my hands to waste as such. If the Pere Carine is looking out for a manager, as report goes, why I'll go and offer myself; in a week's time I shall have got over the humiliation of serving in the house where I have commanded; and better days may turn up in time, who knows? I may become master again if I resolutely bring my energies and hopes to the task, and work on for it; steady perseverance in duty must and does bring its reward sooner or later. 'Aide-toi, et Dieu t'aidra.'"

With the valuable axiom on his lips, valuable in their language as in ours, and in any, and pregnant with truth, "God helps those who help themselves," Robert Letellier turned round, re-entered the town through the gates of its heavy fortifications, closed at night, and proceeded with a rapid step, fearful perhaps that his resolution might fail, to the house of M. Carine—his own house until a month ago. Passing under its large gateway, *porte cochere* the French call it, over which the house was in part built, he gained the paved yard and entered the manufactory, leaving the pleasant garden on his right.

"Can I see M. Carine?" he enquired, finding his way to the counting-house.

"M. Carine is in-doors, sir; he is ill again."

Pere Carine was in fact subject to periodical fits of gout, and they had the knack of coming on at particularly inopportune seasons. He was a short, stout, jolly sort of man, with the reputation of being the best judge of kid-skins and the best judge of a good dinner in all Grenoble; and little cared he for anything in existence save the good dinners and his pretty daughter Annette; not but what he did care for money also, and liked to make it. The faculty told him that the gout was the result of the dinners, but Pere Carine laughed good-humoredly and would not believe them. In talking to the Letellier premises and to its *clientele* (as much of the latter as he could get), he had considerably increased his scale of business, had more workmen and larger doings altogether; but scarcely were they set afloat when his old enemy the gout came on, confining him to his room. Pere Carine fumed for a day, then he fretted for a day, and then he resolved to look out for somebody above the run of a common foreman who might manage in his place; and the resolve went forth to Grenoble.

On a green baize rest, when Robert entered, were his two legs, each looking in its linen bandages the size of a beer barrel. Annette, a blue-eyed laughing fairy of nineteen, was with him, chatting merrily; but her silvery tongue died away to silence, her laughter to reserve, and she rose and dropped a stately curtsy. Robert bowed formally in return, his head bending towards the ground—just one of those bows you were made to perform by your dancing master, but which an Englishman would never use afterwards, in real life, unless he believed himself a candidate for Bedlam. Annette Carine had often met Robert in society; but the manners in France of young unmarried ladies, and those observed to young ladies, are reserved and ceremonious in the extreme. She left the room.

"M. Carine," began Robert, in his frank, straightforward way, "I have called upon a matter of business. Are you well enough to hear me?"

"I am well enough for anything except getting beyond this room, and I wish the plague had the gout," was the answer of Pere Carine. "Take a seat, young sir."

"I have been informed that you are looking out for a manager," proceeded Robert.

"So I am."

"Will you try me?"

The question took the manufacturer by surprise. "You! what good do you suppose you would do me?"

"As much good as any one else, I hope, be the other who he may," answered Robert. "I know the business thoroughly."

"To know a thing is one affair; to do it is another," objected Pere Carine. "You never troubled yourself with too much work; you played the gentleman."