

handed, she certainly could not do, then quickly started to bring us water. "This is all I can do for you," she said in her awkward French as she put her cup to my lips, and I thanked her. "But keep your eyes on the image of the Saviour there; think only of Him, and you will find your pain eased, until we can do more for you."

"I thank you, Madame," I said, "but as I do not believe in a God, of any description, I fear your wooden image would not help me."

She crossed herself in horror, and drew back, and when she brought me water again did not speak. Poor woman, she probably knew nothing of life outside her orderly convent walls, and now she was alone with two hundred men, half of whom were raving and cursing in delirium, and all were doubtless to her infidels or heretics, outside her pale of salvation. I wondered that she stayed, but stay she did, and worked bravely, even when the lull in the fight near us ended suddenly. Our howitzers had opened fire on the village, and the air was filled with the shrieking thunder. The chapel was not fired upon, but the hot shot soon had set the village on fire in a dozen places, and the chateau still held out. I listened in vain for the slackening of their fire. Then suddenly I forgot the battle and all that depended upon it.

The nun stood at my feet, with terror frozen on her face. All round us was fire. I could see the long tongues of flame reaching out towards the chapel walls. She could escape, if she did not linger too long, but for every one of us there was nothing but the most terrible of deaths.

"Run, Madame," I said impatiently, "you can do nothing here, and the fire may cut you off if you are not quick."

SHE did not hear me. One quick step, and the next moment she was kneeling at the feet of the wooden Christ, her hands clasped in passionate entreaty, and her face uplifted with lips moving in voiceless prayer, while above her head I saw a long flame dart, like the unsheathed sword of a red death.

I had begun to command, and to beg her to leave us, but I was silenced by her face. I had seen men die, ay, and women, too, in many ways. In France, under the Revolution, death walked so near to us, that we learned to meet him with a jest. But this woman was different; she ignored death for herself. She did not seem to know or care that she could die, as she threw out all her love, and all her soul, to shield and save us.

She was looking at the image, and past it, and then I was almost afraid to look at her, there shone on her face a light so wonderful. I knew then there was a God, for I had seen His reflection.

And, explain it as you will, the flames dropped back; a while they lingered eating up the cottages, but no red feeler fastened itself on the chapel. No fire came past the doorway, where the wooden image of Christ stood, with a woman kneeling.

The fire burned itself out in the village, but the chateau still held its own. The first play in the battle game of St. Jean was lost to France.

Three months later I sat with my crutches at the door of my father's cottage, looking across his tiny farm. "And how goes it with the cabbages?" I asked lightly, as he came up. "Do you think a lame man will be able to help you with them?"

His face brightened. I knew that for a time he had not thought I would live, and he had feared that I did not want to, after the emperor had lost.

"Cabbages are really the only satisfactory thing in the world," he answered. "We will grow them together, Anne. And you must marry; we want children to grow them for."

Then I told him, for I knew he would understand, of the wooden Christ.

"That means you will make your submission to the Church," he said. "Well, you may be right. Evidently when we abolish the Deity, it is only to deify something else, and I can hardly call our gods and goddesses altogether satisfactory. And a woman like your nun would convince any man against his reason, that there was a reality behind the Christ-myth, and its wooden image of Him."

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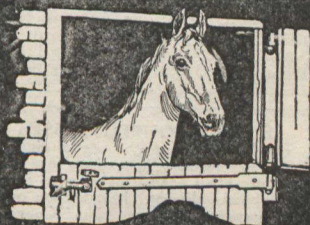
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