

## The Abbe Constantin.

BY LUDOVIC HALEVY.

CHAPTER I.

With a step still valiant and firm, an old priest walked along the dusty road in the full rays of a brilliant sun. For more than thirty years the Abbe Constantin had been curé of the little village which slept there in the plain, on the banks of a slender stream called La Lizotte.

The Abbe Constantin was walking by the wall which surrounded the park of the castle of Longueval; at last he reached the entrance gate which rested high and massive on two ancient pillars of stone, embrowned and gnawed by time. The Curé stopped and mournfully regarded two immense blue posters fixed on the pillars.

The posters announced that on Wednesday, May 16, 1881, at one o'clock P. M., would take place, before



the Civil Tribunal of Souvigny, the sale of the domain of Longueval, divided into four lots.

1. The castle of Longueval, its dependencies, fine pieces of water, extensive offices, park of one hundred and fifty hectares in extent, completely surrounded by a wall, and traversed by the little river Lizotte. Valued at six hundred thousand francs.

2. The farm of La Rozeraie, two hundred and fifty hectares, valued at four hundred thousand francs.

3. The farm of Blanche Couronne, three hundred hectares, valued at five hundred thousand francs.

4. The woods and forests of La Mionne, containing four hundred and fifty hectares, valued at five hundred and fifty thousand francs.

And these four amounts added together at the foot of the bill gave the respectable sum of two millions and fifty thousand francs.

Then they were really going to dismember this magnificent domain, which, escaping all mutilation, had for more than two centuries always transmitted intact from father to son in the family of Longueval. The placards also announced that after the temporary division into four lots it would be possible to unite them again and offer for sale the entire domain; but it was a very large morsel, and to all appearance no purchaser would present himself.

The Marquise de Longueval had died six months before. In 1873 she had lost her only son, Robert de Longueval; the three heirs were the grand children of the Marquise, Pierre, Helene and Camille. It had been found necessary to offer the domain for sale, as Helene and Camille were minors. Pierre, a young man of three-and-twenty, had lived rather fast, was already half-ruined, and could not hope to redeem Longueval.

It was mid-day. In an hour it would have a new master, this old

castle of Longueval; and this master, who would he be? What woman could take the place of the old Marquise in the chimney corner of the grand salon, all adorned with ancient tapestry—the old Marquise, the friend of the old priest? It was she who had restored the church; it was she who had established and furnished a complete dispensary at the vicarage under the care of Pauline, the Curé's servant; it was she who, twice a week in the great barouche, all crowded with little children's clothes and thick woollen petticoats, came to fetch the Abbe Constantin to make with him what she called "the chase of the poor."

The old priest continued his walk, musing over all this; then he thought too—the greatest Saints have their little weaknesses—he thought of the beloved habits of thirty years thus rudely interrupted. Every Thursday and every Sunday he had dined at the castle. How he had been petted, coaxed, indulged! Little Camille—she was eight years old—would come and sit on his knee and say to him—

"You know," Monsieur le Curé, "it is in your church I mean to be married, and grandmamma will send such heaps of flowers to fill, quite fill the church—more than for the month of Mary. It will be like a large garden—all white, all white, all white!"

The month of Mary; it was then the month of Mary. Formerly at this season the altar disappeared under the flowers brought from the conservatories of Longueval. None this year were on the altar except a few bouquets of lily-of-the-valley and white lilac in gilded china vases. Formerly, every Sunday at high Mass, and every evening during the month of Mary, Mademoiselle Hébert, the reader to Madame de Longueval, played the little harmonium given by the marquise. Now the poor harmonium, reduced to silence, no longer accompanied the voices of the choir or the children's hymns. Mademoiselle Marbeau, the post-mistress, would with all her heart have taken the place of Mademoiselle Hébert, but she dared not, though she was a little musical. She was afraid of being remarked as of the clerical party and denounced by the Mayor, who was a Freebinker. That might have been injurious to her interests and prevented her promotion.

She had nearly reached the end of the wall of the park, that park of which every corner was known to the old priest. The road now followed the banks of the Lizotte, and on the other side of the stream stretched the fields belonging to the two farms; then still farther off, rose the dark woods of La Mionne.

Divided! The domain was going to be divided! The heart of the poor priest was rent by this bitter thought. All that for thirty years had been inseparable, indivisible to him; it was a little his own, his very own, his estate, this great property. He felt at home on the lands of Longueval. It had happened more than once that he had stopped complacently before an immense cornfield, plucked an ear, removed the husk, and said to himself—

"Come! the grain is fine, firm, and sound. This year we shall have a good harvest!"

And with a joyous heart he would continue his way through his fields, his meadows, his pastures—in short, by every chord of his heart, by every tie of his life, by all his habits, his memories, he clung to this domain whose last hour had come.

The Abbe perceived in the distance the farm of Blanche-Couronne; its red tiled roofs showed distinctly against the verdure of the forest. There, again, the Curé was at home. Bernard, the farmer of the Marquise, was his friend; and when the old priest was delayed in his visits to the poor and sick, when the sun was sinking below the horizon, and the Abbe began to feel a little

fatigue in his limbs and a sensation of exhaustion in his stomach, he stopped and supped with Bernard, regaled himself with a savory stew of potatoes, and emptied his pitcher of cider. Then, after supper, the farmer harnessed his old, black mare to his cart and took the Vicar back to Longueval. The whole distance they chatted and quarrelled. The Abbe reproached the farmer with not going to mass, and the latter replied—

"The wife and the girls go for me. You know very well, Monsieur le Curé, that is how it is with us. The women have enough religion for the men. They will open the gates of Paradise for us."

And he added maliciously, while giving a touch of the whip to the old mare—

"If there is one!"

The Curé sprang from his seat.

"What! If there is one? Of a certainty there is one."

"Then you will be there, Monsieur le Curé. You say that is not certain, and I say it is. You will be there; you will be there at the gate, on the watch for your parishioners, and still busy with their little affairs; and you will say to Saint Peter—for it is Saint Peter, isn't it, who keeps the keys of Paradise?"

"Yes, is it Saint Peter?"

"Well, you will say to him, to Saint Peter, if he wants to shut the door in my face. 'Ah! let him in. It is Bernard, one of the farmers of Madame Marquise, an honest man. He was Common Council-man, and he voted for the maintenance of the sisters when they were going to be expelled from the Village school.' That will touch St. Peter, who will answer. 'Well, well, you may pass, Bernard, but it is only to please Monsieur le Curé.' You will be Monsieur le Curé up there, and Curé de Longueval too, for Paradise itself would be dull for you if you must give up being Curé de Longueval."

Curé de Longueval! Yes all his life he had been nothing but Curé de Longueval, had never dreamed of any thing else, had never wished to be anything else. Three or four times excellent livings, with one or two curates, had been offered to him; but he had always refused them. He loved his little church, his little village, his little vicarage. There he had it all to himself, saw to every thing himself; calm, tranquil, he went and came, summer or winter, in sunshine or storm, in wind or rain. His frame became hardened by fatigue and exposure; but his soul remained gentle, tender and pure.

He lived in his vicarage, which was only a large laborer's cottage, separated from the church by the churchyard. When the Curé mounted his ladder to trim his pear and peach trees, over the top of the wall he perceived the graves over which he had said the last prayer, and cast the last spadeful of earth. Then while continuing his work, he said in his heart a little prayer for the repose of those among the dead whose fate disturbed him, and who might still be detained in purgatory. He had a tranquil and childlike faith.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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