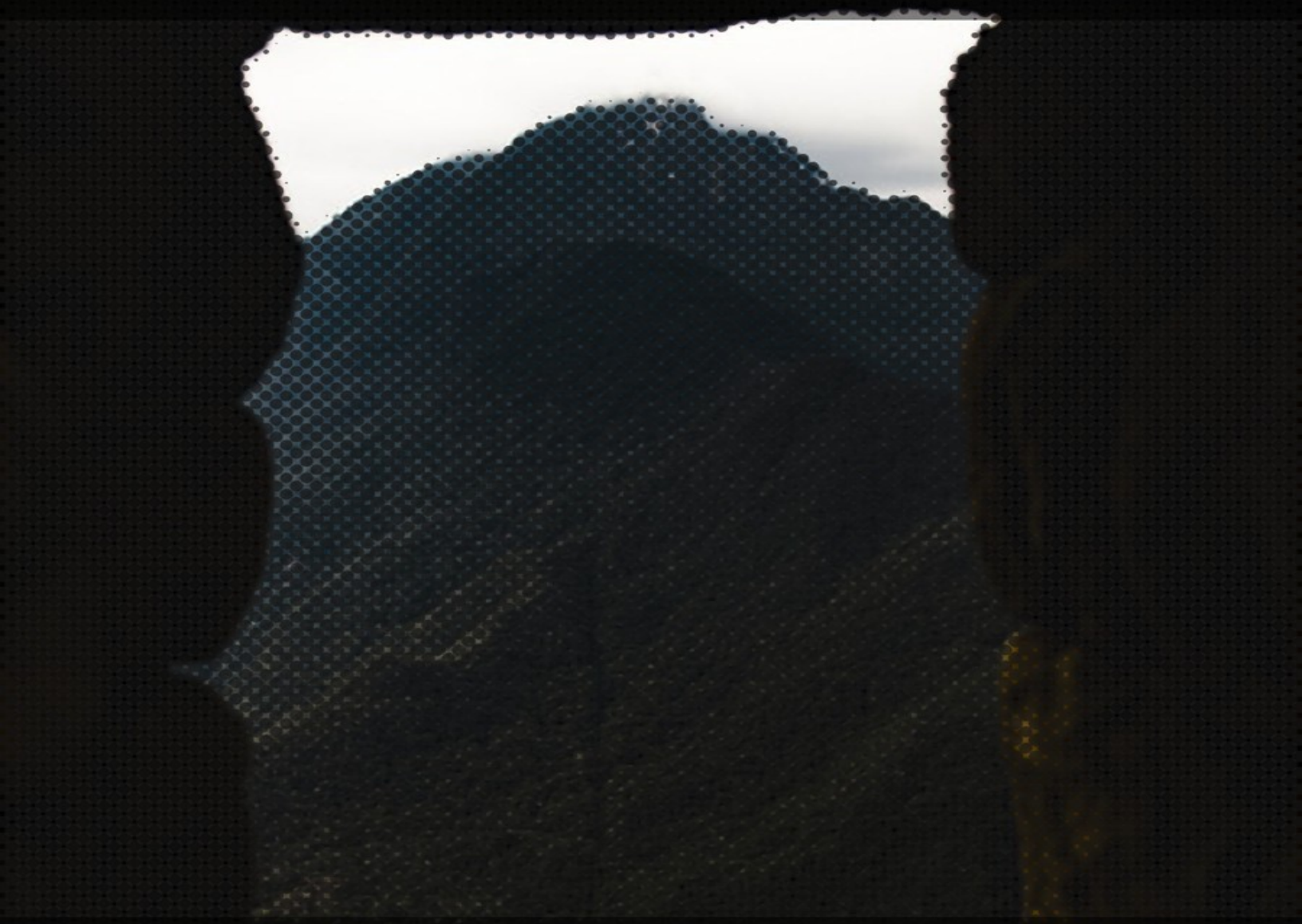
Robert William Chambers



Ashes of Empire

Robert William Chambers

Ashes of Empire

A romance

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CHAPTER I.

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THE FLIGHT OF THE EMPRESS.

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The throng outside the palace had swelled to menacing proportions; the gay cocked hats of the police glittered above a sombre sea of heads, threading the packed square with double strands of colour. The throng was not yet a mob; there were no rushes, no sullen retreats, no capricious stampedes, but it grew denser. Again and again the Imperial police pushed into the square only to be crushed back against the park railings by the sheer weight of the people. From the river a battalion of mutinous Mobiles advanced singing a deep swinging chorus through which the treble voices of the newsboys soared piercingly: “Extra! Extra! Frightful disaster in the north. Defeat of the French army at Sedan! Capture of the Emperor! Surrender of the army of Châlons! Terrible battle at Sedan! Extra! Extra!”

Across the bridge the people surged against the Palais Bourbon, receding, advancing, retreating, only to dash back again on the steel-barbed grille, a deluge of eager human beings, a chaos of white, tense faces and outstretched hands. And now over all swept a whirlwind of sound—of splendid sonorous song—the Marseillaise!

The crowd had become a mob. The Empire was at an end.

A short, fierce howl broke from the crowd which filled the rue de Rivoli from the Louvre to the Place de la Concorde, as an officer of the Imperial Guard appeared for a moment on the terrace above the Orangerie and attempted to speak. “Go back, go back!” shouted the mob. “Down with the

Empire! Long live Republic! The Empress has betrayed Paris! Shame! Shame!” Somebody in the crush raised a gilded wooden eagle on a fragment of broken flagstaff and shook it derisively at the palace. “Burn it!” cried the mob; “we want no eagles now!”

In a moment the gilded eagle was on fire. A drummer of the National Guard reversed his drum and beat the charge; a young girl marched beside him, also beating a drum, her thin, white face set with a hard smile, her eyes flashing under knit brows. A compact mass of people hurled themselves against the garden grille, the iron eagle and the Imperial N were torn from the gilt gates amid a tempest of cheers; the railing crashed in, the mob was loose.

At that moment, through the alley of trees, a detachment of the Garde Impériale marched silently up and massed itself before the great gate of the Tuileries, waiting there, solid, motionless, with rifles at parade rest. The mob came to a sudden halt.

“Down with the Imperial Guard! Hurrah for the National Guard!” shouted the man with the blazing eagle, and he swung the flaming emblem of empire till it crackled and showered the air with sparks and burning flakes of tinsel.

The girl with the drum, sitting beside the parapet of the Orangerie, beat the rappel and laughed down at the Imperial Guard.

“Are you afraid?” she called in a clear, bantering voice. “I’ll give you a shot at my drum—you there, with the Crimea medal!”

A young ruffian from the outer boulevards climbed to the parapet beside her. “Silence!” shouted the crowd. “Listen to

the Mouse!”

The Mouse, however, contented himself with thrusting out his tongue and making frightful grimaces at the Imperial Guard, while his two companions, “Mon Oncle” and “Bibi la Goutte,” alternately laughed and proffered menaces. Twice an officer advanced a little way along the alley of trees, summoning the crowd to fall back. The second time a young fellow in the uniform of the National Guard dragged himself from the crowd and nimbly mounted the parapet.

“You tell us to disperse,” he shouted in reply; “I tell you that we’ll go as soon as that flag comes down from the Tuileries.” Then he turned to the mob with violent gestures;

“Do you know why that flag is flying? It is because the Empress is still in the Tuileries. Is she to stay there?”

“No, no! Down with the Empress! To the palace, to the palace!” howled the mob.

The Mouse, who had climbed down inside the gardens, began to yell for pillage, but a drummer of the Imperial Guard kicked him headlong through the gate and burst out laughing. The crowd surged forward, only to fall back again before the levelled rifles of the troops.

“Get off the wall!” cried the officers, angrily, “you gamine there with your drum! Go back, or we fire!”

The girl with the drum regarded them ironically and clicked her drum-sticks; the young officer of the National Guard beside her cursed the troops and shouted: “Tell your Empress to go! Who is she to sit in the Tuileries? Who sent the army to Sedan? Who betrayed the nation to the Prussians? Tell your Empress to go while she can! Do you think the people are blind and deaf? Do you think the people

forget? Tell her to take herself and family out of the land she sold to Bismarck! Then let her remember the city she betrayed—the people who watch and wait for Prussian shells cowering in the cellars of devastated homes—here in the city she sold!”

The crowd shouted hoarsely and pressed to the gate again. The young orator’s fierce eyes shone with a hate so intense that the troops thought him mad. And perhaps he was, this fanatic who in days to come would prove his brainless bravery to an insurgent city and die under the merciless sabres of Thiers’ gendarmes.

“Capt Flourens,” said an officer of the Imperial Guard, “if you do not call off your mob, their blood will be on your head. Shame on you! You disgrace your uniform!”

“Captain de Sellier,” replied Flourens fiercely, “to-morrow, if the Prussian army halts before Paris, I will be the first to face it, for the honour of France. But I will not face it for the Empire. Shall Paris fight for the woman who sold France? Shall France do battle for a rotten dynasty tottering to ruin?—a dynasty that seeks to pull down the motherland with it into the abyss of corruption and cowardice and treachery. The Prussians are here! Let them come. But before we face them let us cleanse ourselves from that which brought us to destruction. Down with the Empire!”

He ceased and stepped back. The girl beside him swung her drum to her hip, sprang up, and, facing the troops, began to sing:

“Ça ira! Ça ira!”

A thunder of cheering answered her; the steel stanchions of gate and grille were wrenched out; the mob was armed.

The Imperial Guard hesitated, then fell back slowly, as old General Mellinet galloped up, glittering with orders, sashed and spurred, his face crimson with anger.

“It is well,” he shouted, shaking his clenched fist at the crowd;—“it is well for you that her gracious Majesty commands that not one drop of blood shall be spilled to protect this palace! Cowards, go back to your kennels! The Empress is leaving the palace!”

He walked his splendid bay horse straight up to the shattered gate; a straw in the balance would decide his fate and he knew it.

“You, gentlemen,” he said violently, “are here on a vile errand. Are you not blushing for your uniform, Captain Flourens? And you, Monsieur Victorien Sardou, with your clay mask of a face,—and you Armand Gouzien—”

For a second rage choked him.

“What do you want of me, gentlemen?” he said, controlling his passion with an effort. “I have made a promise and you will find that I will keep it. If General Trochu has deserted the Empress, make the most of it. Let God deal with him. As for me, I am here to stay. Say so to your mob.”

At this moment came a roar from the crowd outside; “The Empress has gone! The Empress has gone! To the palace! To the palace! The Empress has gone!”

The crowd started forward. Then, as the soldiers silently brought their rifles to a charge, the people fell back, crushing and trampling in their hurry to regain the pavement.

“Look out, Bourke,” said a young man, in English, dragging his companion away from the gate: “there’ll be a

panic if the troops fire. Come on; let's get out of this."

"Look," said his comrade, eagerly, "look, they've lowered the flag on the cupola! Do you see, Jim? The Empress has left the Tuileries!"

The crowd saw it too, and a tumult arose, answered by vociferous cheering from the packed masses in the rue de Rivoli;

"Vive la Republique! Down with the Empire!"

"Hurrah for the republic!" shouted Bourke, laughing and waving his hat. "Harewood, why the devil don't you cheer?"

Malet and Shannon, two fellow correspondents, passed and called out to them in English: "Hello, you fellows; it's all over. The Empress has gone!"

"Wait for us," motioned Bourke. But already the others were lost in the crowd, which now began to pour along the face of the park parapets towards the river.

Bourke, his arm linked in Harewood's, struggled for a while to keep his course to the rue Royale, but the pressure and shouting and torrents of dust confused him and he let himself go.

"Confound it!" he gasped, "this is almost a stampede. Keep your feet, Jim, if you want to live to get out. I hope the Empress is safe."

"Where are our horses?" asked Harewood, struggling to keep with his comrade.

"In the arcade of the Continental. Good heavens, Jim, this crush is frightful," he said, seizing a bar of the railing behind them. "Climb up and over: it is the only way!"

"They'll shoot you from the palace!" cried a dozen voices.

“I rather be shot than squashed!” replied Bourke, clambering up and over the gilded railing.

In a moment Harewood sprang to the turf beside him, panting and perspiring.

“Now!” motioned Bourke, and they glided across the terrace of the Orangerie, and let themselves down into the street, dirty, bruised and breathless.

At the end of the street toward the Place de la Concorde, a mob, flourishing clubs and knives, was vainly trying to scale the parapets of the gardens, shouting: “Death! Death to the Empress!” But a squad of police held the parapets and hammered the more venturesome of the people with the flats of their swords. Several line soldiers and Mobile officers joined the police; on the other hand the throngs increased every moment, and their angry shouts swelled to a solid roar: “Death to the Empress! Remember Sedan!”

Among a group of frightened pedestrians who had been blocked on the quay between both mobs, were two ladies. Bourke caught a glimpse of their light summer gowns as he crept along by the quay wall. One of the ladies carried a covered basket, which she held close to her breast. Both were in helpless consternation, daring neither to proceed nor to return to the quay alone, where already the mob had seized the Batteau Mouche, crying, “On to Saint Cloud!”

“See those girls!” cried Bourke. “They’ll get into that crush in a moment. Jim, they’ll be trampled!”

Harewood started across the street just as the young lady who carried the basket turned and hastened toward the Louvre, where a cab stood near the gutter. Her companion

followed, running ahead in her anxiety and calling to the cab driver, who, however, shook his head, refusing to move.

As Harewood came up, the girl who carried the basket shrank back, looking at him with startled eyes, but he raised his hat, and then turned to the cabman. “We want you,” he said, sharply.

“I am engaged. I was told to wait for the Austrian ambassador,” said the driver, adding impudently: “Are you his excellency, Monsieur Metternich?”

“You must take these ladies,” said Harewood. “They can’t stay here—the police may fire at any moment.”

“Monsieur,” said the cabby, sarcastically, “can I pass that mob with my cab?”

“You can pass,” insisted Bourke, “to the Place Saint Germain—l’Auxerrois. We’ll lead the horse.” He laid one hand on the bit.

Before the cabman could protest, Harewood flung open the door, saying; “Mesdames, there is no time to lose!”—while Bourke scowled back at the driver and shook his fist. “Pig of a cabman,” he whispered, “drive slowly or I’ll push you into the river.”

Harewood was laughing as he closed the cab door and stepped to the other side of the horse.

“Now, Bourke,” he said, “touch up your jehu!”

Bourke uttered another awful threat and signalled the cabby. The latter obeyed with a despairing grimace, and the horse moved off along the quay, the two young fellows walking on either side of the horse’s head.

In a moment they were in the crowd that surrounded the gate of the Carrousel, but the crowd was not very compact

and they threaded their way slowly, amid cheering and singing and savage yells, “Death! Death to the Empress!”

“Poor thing!” said Harewood. “Hang these ragamuffin cutthroats! Go slowly, Bourke. Hello, what’s up now?”

From a stairway on the south colonnade of the Louvre a group of ladies and gentlemen were issuing. Hurriedly they traversed the court to the street gate, where a mob of loungers stood, staring up at the gray façade. As one of the party, a lady heavily veiled in crêpe, stepped out to the sidewalk, a gamin clinging to the gate piped up shrilly:

“That’s the Empress!”

Instantly one of the gentleman in attendance seized the urchin by one ear and boxed the other soundly, saying, “I’ll teach you to shout, ‘Vive la Prusse!’”

For a moment the knot of idlers laughed. Then some one in the crowd said distinctly: “All the same, that is the Empress.”

A silence followed, broken by a single voice, low but perfectly distinct: “Death to the Empress!”

There was a restless movement, a quick pressing forward of wicked faces, a shuffle of heavy shoes. In a second the crowd doubled itself as if by magic; voices rose, harsh and ominous. Somebody struck the iron railing with a steel-banded club. Bourke, standing close to the gutter by the cab, felt the door pushed outward and he turned, alarmed, as both young girls sprang out. One of them ran to the Empress and motioned toward the cab.

“Hasten, madame,” she said, “here is a cab.”

Before the crowd comprehended what was being done the Empress had passed them, followed by another lady and

two gentlemen.

“Good heavens,” muttered Harewood to Bourke, “it is the Empress and Madame Le Breton.”

The Empress laid one hand on the cab window, then drew back and said: “I would not wish to take your cab if you also are in danger.”

With one foot on the carriage step she looked back at the young girls, appearing utterly oblivious of the risk she herself ran.

“Hasten, madame,” they cried. “We are in no danger! Ah, hasten, madame!”

Both of the gentlemen in waiting urged the Empress to enter, but she refused, and looked steadily at the crowd, which was now closing round the little group. Then she quietly stooped and kissed the girls.

“Thank you,” she said, “I accept, my children.”

Bourke and Harewood had recognized her two escorts as the Italian minister and the Austrian ambassador. And, while the Empress and her lady in waiting entered the cab, Bourke said in English:

“Go quickly, gentlemen; these young ladies are safe with us. God knows why the mob does not attack you!”

Monsieur de Metternich turned, cool and collected, and bowed to Bourke. The Empress leaned from the cab window and looked at the young girls standing together, white and frightened.

“Will you tell me your name?”

They seemed not to understand, and Harewood said:

“Quick, the Empress asks your names?”

“I—I—am Yolette Chalais—and this is Hildé, my sister,” stammered one of the girls. As she spoke, in her embarrassment the basket dropped from her hands, the lid flew open, and three white pigeons whirled out, fluttering through the crowd, that scattered for a moment, trying to see what had happened.

“Now!” cried Bourke, as the two diplomats jumped into the cab and slammed the door. The cabman seized his reins and lashed savagely at his horse, the crowd stumbled back shrieking, and, before they understood, the cab dashed away in a torrent of dust and flying pebbles.

In his excitement Bourke laughed aloud, crying: “Jim! Jim! What a fool of a mob! Well, of all the bloodless revolutions I ever heard of! Look! Here come some troops, too. The thing is over!”

The thing was nearly over. Even the Saint Germain omnibuses were running now, halting as usual for passengers in front of the beautiful church opposite, and to one of these omnibuses Bourke and Harewood conducted the two young ladies who had given up their cab to the Empress of France. Nobody interfered with them, nobody seemed to notice them except a pasty-visaged young man with pale, pig-like eyes who nodded hastily to Bourke and walked away.

“That was Speyer, the war correspondent for that German-American sheet,” said Bourke to Harewood. “I didn’t know he was in Paris.”

Harewood frowned and said nothing until their disconcerted but grateful charges were safely seated in the

omnibus. Then Bourke said several civil things in well-intentioned French.

Both young men offered to act as further escort, were timidly thanked but unmistakably discouraged, and they finally stood back, raising their hats as the omnibus started.

“Thank you again for all you have done,” said Hildé. Yolette inclined her head with pretty reticence; the driver cracked his whip and the three horses moved off at a trot.

Harewood stared after the vehicle until it disappeared. Bourke lighted a cigarette, smiled quietly, and said: “Come on, Jim.”

As they turned into the rue de Rivoli Harewood began: “Hildé Chalais—that’s one of them—I don’t know which. Pretty, isn’t she? I mean the one with the dark eyes. Wonder whether we’ll see them again. Sorry they lost their pigeons. Nice girls—don’t you think so? They live out on the rue d’Ypres. We’ll pass their house next week when we go to Saint Cloud by the Porte Rouge.”

Harewood laughed easily and walked on in silence. Life was very pleasant at times—even delightful when lighted by a pair of deep hazel eyes.

“I wonder—I wonder—” he muttered.

“What?” asked Bourke.

“Nothing—only that one with the brown eyes—plucky little thing to give up her cab—eh, Cecil?”

“Yes.”

“Well, if we go to Saint Cloud, we’ll go by way of the rue d’Ypres.”

“And there you’ll stay?” asked Bourke, scornfully.

“What? I? What for?”

Bourke yawned in his face and said wearily: “Because, Jim, I never knew you to miss making an ass of yourself when the devil sent the opportunity.”

CHAPTER II.

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“THE MOUSE.”

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In the heated silence of afternoon the tap, tap, tap of a drum came up from the southwest, now indistinct and smothered, now louder as the sound approached the Porte Rouge, waking soft echoes along the sodded fortifications.

A dozing sentry in front of the Prince Murat barracks sauntered out to the gutter, shading his face with one tanned hand. At the end of the rue d’Ypres sunlight sparkled on the brass of a drum, bayonets twinkled through the dust haze, a single bugle blew long and faintly.

When the red trousers of the gate patrol had passed and the dull rumble of the drum had softened to a vibration in the dazzling stillness, the sentinel strolled back to loaf, blinking, in his shadowy sentry-box, leaning on the chassepot rifle which he did not know how to use. For the sentinel was a National Guardsman, and they had taken away his Gras rifle and given him a chassepot, and set him to guard empty barracks in a street inhabited principally by sparrows.

At that moment, however, the rue d’Ypres, which, with its single row of weather-battered houses, faced the fortifications of the Porte Rouge secteur, was not entirely deserted. Beside the sentinel and the sparrows, some one else was moving aimlessly about in the sunshine with his hands thrust into the pockets of a stained jacket.

As he passed the barrack grille he raised his hard face and fixed a pair of narrow, uncertain eyes on the sentinel. One of his eyes was very bright—almost luminous, like the

eyes of small animals at night; the other eye was sightless and seared.

There is something ominous in the upward gaze of a startled animal; there was something more sinister in the glance of “The Mouse” as it fell before the frowning, suspicious face of the sentinel.

“Passez au large!” growled the sentinel, straightening up.

“C’est ça; et ta sœur!” retorted the Mouse, with a frightful leer. Then he passed on, his mouth distorted in a smile, for he was thinking of the future and of destiny, and the market value of petroleum. He was a philosopher at all times, occasionally, perhaps, a prophet.

The Mouse enjoyed the hot September sunshine. As he slouched past the passage de l’Ombre and across the rue d’Ypres he yawned with semi-torpid satisfaction, and shuffled his worn shoes luxuriously through the taller grass below the glacis. Exertion disagreed with the Mouse; unnecessary effort was abhorrent to him. Under his insolent eyelids his shifty eyes searched the talus of the fortifications for a grassy, sun-warmed nook, created by Providence and the Imperial engineers for such as he.

Across the street the afternoon sun blazed on the shabby houses. The iron gateway of the Prince Murat barracks was closed, the National Guard sentinel now leaned in the shadow of his box, drowsy and motionless. Not a soul was stirring in the street; there was no sound, no movement except when a dusty sparrow raised its head from the hot grass, beak agape as though parched.

The Mouse contemplated the sparrow with his solitary eye. He, too, was thirsty. He clacked his tongue twice, spat

upon the grass, scratched one large ear, and yawned. Presently he drew a pipe from some recess beneath his jacket, filled it, rammed one dirty finger into the bowl, and gazed trustfully toward heaven for a match. Neither matches nor manna were falling that year in Paris; there were to be other showers from the autumn skies.

With one finger in the bowl of his pipe and the dingy stem in his mouth he gazed heavenward until the sun made him blink. Then he shifted his glance along the glacis of the fortifications. Across the rue d'Ypres, where there were houses, a caged canary bird twittered, trilled and ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Without turning his head the Mouse's eye searched the other side of the street until it rested on a sign:

Chalais
Dealer in Birds.

Under this hung another sign;

Apartment to Let,
Inquire Within.

After a minute's restless contemplation of the signs and the open door, the Mouse sauntered over to the bird store, slouched up to the window and pressed his insignificant nose against it. Little by little the dim interior of the bird store became visible. He leisurely surveyed the rows of wire and wicker cages, drumming on the window glass with grimy fingers. A grey and scarlet parrot, dozing on a perch, woke up and turned a penetrating look on him.

The Mouse flattened his face against the window and thrust his tongue out at the parrot.

At first the bird paid little attention to this insult, but, as the Mouse persevered, the parrot eyed him with increasing animosity.

“Coco! Coco! Salaud! Tiens pour toi, vieux crétin!” sneered the Mouse, tapping on the window with his pipestem and distorting his mouth in derision until the parrot flapped its wings and screamed, the feathers on its head erect with excitement and irritation. One by one the other birds, now also greatly agitated, joined in; the jackdaw croaked and chattered, and the finches, thrushes and canaries chorused a shrill treble. A young monkey in a corner set up an ear-piercing shriek and a red squirrel rushed madly around in his wire wheel.

The Mouse was amused. With sneers and jibes and jeering gestures he excited the parrot; he made awful faces at the monkey until the little creature clung to the cage wires, shivering and screaming; he frightened the smaller birds by waving his dirty fingers to and fro before the window frames. Presently, however, he tired of the sport; his restless eye roamed about the interior of the shop; he pressed his pitted face closer to the glass, with now and then a rapid sidelong glance peculiar to the chevalier of industry the world over.

There was nobody in the outer shop, that was clear. There seemed to be nothing to steal there, either: the Mouse did not consider birds worth stealing. Still, nobody seemed to be about, and it was the instinct of the Mouse to rummage. He withdrew from the window, assured himself

that the street was deserted, then slouched silently around to the open door and entered.

As he set his worn shoe upon the threshold the feathers on the parrot's neck flattened in alarm, the monkey crouched trembling in a corner of his cage, every little bird became mute and motionless.

For a minute the Mouse peered about the shop. The squirrel still scrambled madly in his wheel, and the narrow eye of the Mouse followed the whirling spokes.

There was a closed door at the further end of the room; the Mouse fixed his eye upon it and stepped softly across the floor, one hand outstretched toward the knob. When he had it in his hand he paused, undecided, then turned the handle in silence. Instantly something moved on the other side—something heavy and soft—the door was pushed open with a steady, resistless pressure that forced the Mouse back flat against the wall.

It was then that the Mouse, peering over his shoulder, felt his blood freeze and his shabby knees give way. For, staring up into his face, stood a full-grown lioness with her brilliant eyes fixed on his. He would have shrieked if he could, but terror paralyzed him; he felt that he was going to swoon. Suddenly there came the sound of voices, a distant door opened, steps echoed across a tiled hallway, and two girls entered the shop from the further room. The lioness turned her head at the sound, hesitated, glanced back at the Mouse and finally slunk hastily away, only to be seized and held by one of the girls, while the other alternately slapped, cuffed and kissed her.

“Schéhèrazade ought to be slapped instead of kissed,” cried the taller girl, shoving the anxious but docile lioness towards the doorway; “really, Yolette, you spoil her; some day she’ll run out into the street, and then they’ll shoot her.”

“Poor darling,” said Yolette, “she didn’t mean to be naughty. Somebody must have left the door open—Schéhèrazade can’t turn the knob, you know.” As she spoke she laid one hand on the neck of the lioness.

“Come, naughty one,” she said, and urged the great creature towards the inner room, calling back to her sister: “Hildé, dear, shut the door!”

“I’ve a mind to shut it on Schéhèrazade’s tail,” said Hildé: “she’s frightened the birds and animals nearly to death. Our squirrel is going mad, I believe.”

The parrot clamoured on its perch, and she went over to quiet it, talking all the while.

“Poor little Mehemet Ali, did the big lion frighten him? There! There! and poor little Rocco, too!” turning towards the shivering monkey. “It’s a perfect shame—it is, indeed!”

“Hildé! Do shut the door!” called Yolette from the inner room; “I’m going to give Schéhèrazade her ball to play with and then I’ll come out.”

Hildé gave one last pat to the parrot’s head and went towards the door. As she laid her hand on the knob her eyes encountered a pair of dusty, flat shoes, protruding beneath the sill. The shoes covered the feet of the Mouse, and, as she threw back the door with a startled exclamation, the Mouse himself stood revealed, terribly haggard from the effects of his recent fright, but now sufficiently recovered to bound with much agility into the street.

“What are you doing here?” stammered Hildé, following him to the outer door.

“I?” said the Mouse, recovering his composure a little and crossing one foot before the other. “I, mademoiselle, am an authorized agent for the public defense.”

“If you are soliciting subscriptions, why did you not ring the doorbell or knock?” asked Hildé, as Yolette entered and stood at her side.

“Why, to tell the truth,” said the Mouse, bowing impudently, “I only intended to ask for a match. I knocked, politely, as I was taught to do in my youth, but—”

“If you please, will you go away?” interrupted Yolette, quickly.

“I have the honour,” said the Mouse, removing his greasy, peaked cap with a flourish, and smoothing the lovelocks plastered over each ear, “I have the honour to obey. Always at the service of ladies—always devoted”—he flourished his pipe with dignity—“although I had hoped for the small courtesy of a match.”

“Hildé,” whispered Yolette, “he will go away if you give him a match.”

Hildé stepped to the counter, found a card of matches, and returned to the door. The Mouse’s small eye followed every expression on the two girlish faces. He took the matches with condescension, smirked, and continued impudently: “Ladies, in the present unfortunate condition of public affairs, in the face of a revolution which, within a week, has changed the government of France from an empire to a republic, in the face of the impending advance of the Prussian armies and the ultimate investment of the

city of Paris, may I venture to solicit a small contribution for the purpose of adding to the patriotic fund, destined to arm the fortifications yonder with new and improved breech-loading cannon?”

He glanced from Hildé to Yolette, his wary eye narrowing to a slit.

“I don’t believe he’s an agent,” whispered Hildé; “don’t give him anything.”

Yolette drew a small purse from her gown and looked at the Mouse with sincere eyes.

“Will you really give it to the public defense?” she asked. “Or—if you are hungry and need it for yourself—”

“Don’t do it,” murmured Hildé; “he is not honest.”

The Mouse’s eyes filled with tears, his lips quivered.

“Honesty is often clothed in rags,” he sniveled, drawing himself up. “I thank you for your courtesy. I will go.”

He moved away, furtively brushing a tear from his cheek. Yolette stepped across the threshold and touched his ragged elbow impulsively. He turned with a dramatic start, accepted the small silver coin, then stalked across the street, his head on his breast, his arms folded. Presently the stalk relapsed into a walk, then into a shuffle, then into a slouch. The sunshine lay warm on the grass-grown fortifications; where it lay warmest the Mouse sat him down and crossed his legs.

When he had lighted his pipe he stretched out at full length, both arms behind his head, cap tilted to shade his single eye. Under the peak of the cap he could see the pipe-smoke curl; he could also see the long yellow road, stretching away into the country from the Porte Rouge. Out there somewhere—perhaps very far, perhaps very near—the

Prussian armies were moving across France toward Paris. The thought amused the Mouse. He scratched one large ear and speculated. With the Prussians would come bombardment, with bombardment would come panic, with panic might come anarchy, and with anarchy would come pillage!

The Mouse smacked his lips over the pipe-stem. He reflected that the revolution, accomplished five days previous, had brought with it no plunder so far as he was concerned. It had been a stupid revolution—shouting, jostling the bourgeoisie, a rush at the Tuileries, a whack over the head from a rifle-stock, but no pillage. In vain had he, the Mouse, in company with two ambitious companions, Bibi la Goutte and Mon Oncle, descended from the shady nooks of Montparnasse with the frank intention of rummaging the Tuileries—and perhaps some houses of the stupid citizens. In vain had Bibi la Goutte bawled anarchy and treason, in vain had Mon Oncle demanded to be led to the sack of palaces. The brutal guards had thumped Mon Oncle with their rifle-butts, the Imperial police had mauled Bibi la Goutte, and, as for the Mouse, he had gained nothing but an abrasion of the scalp from contact with an officer’s sword-hilt.

But now the Mouse truly hoped that, with the advent of the victorious Prussian armies before the walls of Paris, things might be different. When the big shells began to sail over the Seine and knock houses and churches into kindling wood, the Mouse intended to do a little exploring on his private account, and he acknowledged with enthusiasm that

it would be a degenerate knight of leisure who should fail to amass a pretty competency.

So the Mouse lay musing and smoking in the warm September sun, one eye half closed, but still fixed on the yellow road which crawled across the plain at his feet. He was absolutely contented; he had tobacco, sunshine—and 50 centimes in silver in his pocket, to spend on food or drink, as he chose. Once he thought of the lion, and shuddered at the thought. Some day when he had time he would find a way to poison the creature, he hoped, and incidentally to rob the bird store.

As he lay diverted by these pleasant thoughts, he became aware of a cloud of dust on the road below. He watched it; it came nearer and nearer; he could distinguish the red trousers of French infantry; a gun boomed from some distant bastion; another, still more distant, answered the signal. The Mouse sat up. He could see that the dust cloud enveloped heavy moving columns of troops, advancing slowly toward the walls of Paris. At the Porte Rouge drums were beating.

The Mouse rose, stretched, yawned and slouched off down the embankment to the street. As he passed the bird store, Yolette and Hildé came to the door, gazing anxiously toward the fortifications.

The Mouse leered at them, removed his cap, laying a dirty hand on his heart. “Always the ladies’ slave,” he called across the street, and shuffled on toward the Porte Rouge.

At the gate he shoved and elbowed his way through the increasing throng until he reached the pont-levis. The line sentinels drove him back again, but he managed to crawl up