Baroness Orczy

The Bronze Eagle

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1
The Glorious News

Table of Contents

1

Table of Contents

Where the broad highway between Grenoble and Gap parts company from the turbulent Drac, and after crossing the ravine of Vaulx skirts the plateau of La Motte with its magnificent panorama of forests and mountain peaks, a narrow bridle path strikes off at a sharp angle on the left and in wayward curves continues its length through the woods upwards to the hamlet of Vaulx and the shrine of Notre Dame.

Far away to the west the valley of the Drac lies encircled by the pine-covered slopes of the Lans range, whilst towering some seven thousand and more feet up the snow-clad crest of Grande Moucherolle glistens like a sea of myriads of rose-coloured diamonds under the kiss of the morning sun.

There was more than a hint of snow in the sharp, stinging air this afternoon, even down in the valley, and now the keen wind from the northeast whipped up the faces of the two riders as they turned their horses at a sharp trot up the bridle path.

Though it was not long since the sun had first peeped out above the forests of Pelvoux, the riders looked as if they had already a long journey to their credit; their horses were covered with sweat and sprinkled with lather, and they

themselves were plentifully bespattered with mud, for the road in the valley was soft after the thaw. But despite probable fatigue, both sat their horse with that ease and unconscious grace which marks the man accustomed to hard and constant riding, though—to the experienced eye—there would appear a vast difference in the style and manner in which each horseman handled his mount.

One of them had the rigid precision of bearing which denotes military training: he was young and slight of build, with unruly dark hair fluttering round the temples from beneath his white sugar-loaf hat, and escaping the trammels of the neatly-tied black silk bow at the nape of the neck; he held himself very erect and rode his horse on the curb, the reins gathered tightly in one gloved hand, and that hand held closely and almost immovably against his chest.

The other sat more carelessly—though in no way more loosely—in his saddle: he gave his horse more freedom, with a chain-snaffle and reins hanging lightly between his fingers. He was obviously taller and probably older than his companion, broader of shoulder and fairer of skin; you might imagine him riding this same powerful mount across a sweep of open country, but his friend you would naturally picture to yourself in uniform on the parade ground.

The riders soon left the valley of the Drac behind them; on ahead the path became very rocky, winding its way beside a riotous little mountain stream, whilst higher up still, peeping through the intervening trees, the white-washed cottages of the tiny hamlet glimmered with dazzling clearness in the frosty atmosphere. At a sharp bend of the road, which effectually revealed the foremost of these

cottages, distant less than two kilometres now, the younger of the two men drew rein suddenly, and lifting his hat with outstretched arm high above his head, he gave a long sigh which ended in a kind of exultant call of joy.

“There is Notre Dame de Vaulx,” he cried at the top of his voice, and hat still in hand he pointed to the distant hamlet. “There’s the spot where—before the sun darts its midday rays upon us—I shall hear great and glorious and authentic news of *him* from a man who has seen him as lately as forty-eight hours ago, who has touched his hand, heard the sound of his voice, seen the look of confidence and of hope in his eyes. Oh!” he went on speaking with extraordinary volubility, “it is all too good to be true! Since yesterday I have felt like a man in a dream!—I haven’t lived, I have scarcely breathed, I . . .”

The other man broke in upon his ravings with a good-humoured growl.

“You have certainly behaved like an escaped lunatic since early this morning, my good de Marmont,” he said drily. “Don’t you think that—as we shall have to mix again with our fellow-men presently—you might try to behave with some semblance of reasonableness.”

But de Marmont only laughed. He was so excited that his lips trembled all the time, his hand shook and his eyes glowed just as if some inward fire was burning deep down in his soul.

“No! I can’t,” he retorted. “I want to shout and to sing and to cry ‘Vive l’Empereur’ till those frowning mountains over there echo with my shouts—and I’ll have none of your English stiffness and reserve and curbing of enthusiasm to-

day. I am a lunatic if you will—an escaped lunatic—if to be mad with joy be a proof of insanity. Clyffurde, my dear friend," he added more soberly, "I am honestly sorry for you to-day."

"Thank you," commented his companion drily. "May I ask how I have deserved this genuine sympathy?"

"Well! because you are an Englishman, and not a Frenchman," said the younger man earnestly; "because you —as an Englishman—must desire Napoleon's downfall, his humiliation, perhaps his death, instead of exulting in his glory, trusting in his star, believing in him, following him. If I were not a Frenchman on a day like this, if my nationality or my patriotism demanded that I should fight against Napoleon, that I should hate him, or vilify him, I firmly believe that I would turn my sword against myself, so shamed should I feel in my own eyes."

It was the Englishman's turn to laugh, and he did it very heartily. His laugh was quite different to his friend's: it had more enjoyment in it, more good temper, more appreciation of everything that tends to gaiety in life and more direct defiance of what is gloomy.

He too had reined in his horse, presumably in order to listen to his friend's enthusiastic tirades, and as he did so there crept into his merry, pleasant eyes a quaint look of half contemptuous tolerance tempered by kindly humour.

"Well, you see, my good de Marmont," he said, still laughing, "you happen to be a Frenchman, a visionary and weaver of dreams. Believe me," he added more seriously, "if you had the misfortune to be a prosy, shop-keeping Englishman, you would certainly not commit suicide just

because you could not enthuse over your favourite hero, but you would realise soberly and calmly that while Napoleon Bonaparte is allowed to rule over France—or over any country for the matter of that—there will never be peace in the world or prosperity in any land."

The younger man made no reply. A shadow seemed to gather over his face—a look almost of foreboding, as if Fate that already lay in wait for the great adventurer, had touched the young enthusiast with a warning finger.

Whereupon Clyffurde resumed gaily once more:

"Shall we," he said, "go slowly on now as far as the village? It is not yet ten o'clock. Emery cannot possibly be here before noon."

He put his horse to a walk, de Marmont keeping close behind him, and in silence the two men rode up the incline toward Notre Dame de Vaulx. On ahead the pines and beech and birch became more sparse, disclosing the great patches of moss-covered rock upon the slopes of Pelvoux. On Taillefer the eternal snows appeared wonderfully near in the brilliance of this early spring atmosphere, and here and there on the roadside bunches of wild crocus and of snowdrops were already visible rearing their delicate corollas up against a background of moss.

The tiny village still far away lay in the peaceful hush of a Sunday morning, only from the little chapel which holds the shrine of Notre Dame came the sweet, insistent sound of the bell calling the dwellers of these mountain fastnesses to prayer.

The northeasterly wind was still keen, but the sun was gaining power as it rose well above Pelvoux, and the sky

over the dark forests and snow-crowned heights was of a glorious and vivid blue.

2

Table of Contents

The words “Auberge du Grand Dauphin” looked remarkably inviting, written in bold, shiny black characters on the white-washed wall of one of the foremost houses in the village. The riders drew rein once more, this time in front of the little inn, and as a young ostler in blue blouse and sabots came hurriedly and officiously forward whilst mine host in the same attire appeared in the doorway, the two men dismounted, unstrapped their mantles from their saddle-bows and loudly called for mulled wine.

Mine host, typical of his calling and of his race, rubicund of cheek, portly of figure and genial in manner, was over-anxious to please his guests. It was not often that gentlemen of such distinguished appearance called at the “Auberge du Grand Dauphin,” seeing that Notre Dame de Vaulx lies perdu on the outskirts of the forests of Pelvoux, that the bridle path having reached the village leads nowhere save into the mountains and that La Motte is close by with its medicinal springs and its fine hostels.

But these two highly-distinguished gentlemen evidently meant to make a stay of it. They even spoke of a friend who would come and join them later, when they would expect a substantial *déjeuner* to be served with the best wine mine host could put before them. Annette—mine host’s dark-eyed daughter—was all a-flutter at sight of these gallant strangers, one of them with such fiery eyes and vivacious

ways, and the other so tall and so dignified, with fair skin well-bronzed by the sun and large firm mouth that had such a pleasant smile on it; her eyes sparkled at sight of them both and her glib tongue rattled away at truly astonishing speed.

Would a well-baked omelette and a bit of fricandeau suit the gentlemen?—Admirably? Ah, well then, that could easily be done!—and now? in the meanwhile?—Only good mulled wine? That would present no difficulty either. Five minutes for it to get really hot, as Annette had made some the previous day for her father who had been on a tiring errand up to La Mure and had come home cold and starved—and it was specially good—all the better for having been hotted up once or twice and the cloves and nutmeg having soaked in for nearly four and twenty hours.

Where would the gentlemen have it—Outside in the sunshine? . . . Well! it was very cold, and the wind biting . . . but the gentlemen had mantles, and she, Annette, would see that the wine was piping hot. . . . Five minutes and everything would be ready. . . .

What? . . . the tall, fair-skinned gentleman wanted to wash? . . . what a funny idea! . . . hadn’t he washed this morning when he got up? . . . He had? Well, then, why should he want to wash again? . . . She, Annette, managed to keep herself quite clean all day, and didn’t need to wash more than once a day. . . . But there! strangers had funny ways with them . . . she had guessed at once that Monsieur was a stranger, he had such a fair skin and light brown hair. Well! so long as Monsieur wasn’t English—for the English, she detested!

Why did she detest the English? . . . Because they made war against France. Well! against the Emperor anyhow, and she, Annette, firmly believed that if the English could get hold of the Emperor they would kill him—oh, yes! they would put him on an island peopled by cannibals and let him be eaten, bones, marrow and all.

And Annette's dark eyes grew very round and very big as she gave forth her opinion upon the barbarous hatred of the English for "l'Empereur!" She prattled on very gaily and very volubly, while she dragged a couple of chairs out into the open, and placed them well in the lee of the wind and brought a couple of pewter mugs which she set on the table.

She was very much interested in the tall gentleman who had availed himself of her suggestion to use the pump at the back of the house, since he was so bent on washing himself; and she asked many questions about him from his friend.

Ten minutes later the steaming wine was on the table in a huge china bowl and the Englishman was ladling it out with a long-handled spoon and filling the two mugs with the deliciously scented cordial. Annette had disappeared into the house in response to a peremptory call from her father. The chapel bell had ceased to ring long ago, and she would miss hearing Mass altogether to-day; and M. le curé, who came on alternate Sundays all the way from La Motte to celebrate divine service, would be very angry indeed with her.

Well! that couldn't be helped! Annette would have loved to go to Mass, but the two distinguished gentlemen expected their friend to arrive at noon, and the *déjeuner* to

be ready quite by then; so she comforted her conscience with a few prayers said on her knees before the picture of the Holy Virgin which hung above her bed, after which she went back to her housewifely duty with a light heart; but not before she had decided an important point in her mind—namely, which of those two handsome gentlemen she liked the best: the dark one with the fiery eyes that expressed such bold admiration of her young charms, or the tall one with the earnest grey eyes who looked as if he could pick her up like a feather and carry her running all the way to the summit of Taillefer.

Annette had indeed made up her mind that the giant with the soft brown hair and winning smile was, on the whole, the more attractive of the two.

3

Table of Contents

The two friends, with mantles wrapped closely round them, sat outside the “Grand Dauphin” all unconscious of the problem which had been disturbing Annette’s busy little brain.

The steaming wine had put plenty of warmth into their bones, and though both had been silent while they sipped their first mug-full, it was obvious that each was busy with his own thoughts.

Then suddenly the young Frenchman put his mug down and leaned with both elbows upon the rough deal table, because he wanted to talk confidentially with his friend, and there was never any knowing what prying ears might be about.

“I suppose,” he said, even as a deep frown told of puzzling thoughts within the mind, “I suppose that when England hears the news, she will up and at him again, attacking him, snarling at him even before he has had time to settle down upon his reconquered throne.”

“That throne is not reconquered yet, my friend,” retorted the Englishman drily, “nor has the news of this mad adventure reached England so far, but . . .”

“But when it does,” broke in de Marmont sombrely, “your Castlereagh will rave and your Wellington will gather up his armies to try and crush the hero whom France loves and acclaims.”

“Will France acclaim the hero, there’s the question?”

“The army will—the people will—”

Clyffurde shrugged his shoulders.

“The army, yes,” he said slowly, “but the people . . . what people?—the peasantry of Provence and the Dauphiné, perhaps—what about the town folk?—your mayors and *préfets*?—your tradespeople? your shopkeepers who have been ruined by the wars which your hero has made to further his own ambition. . . .”

“Don’t say that, Clyffurde,” once more broke in de Marmont, and this time more vehemently than before. “When you speak like that I could almost forget our friendship.”

“Whether I say it or not, my good de Marmont,” rejoined Clyffurde with his good-humoured smile, “you will anyhow—within the next few months—days, perhaps—bury our friendship beneath the ashes of your patriotism. No one, believe me,” he added more earnestly, “has a greater

admiration for the genius of Napoleon than I have; his love of France is sublime, his desire for her glory superb. But underlying his love of country, there is the love of self, the mad desire to rule, to conquer, to humiliate. It led him to Moscow and thence to Elba, it has brought him back to France. It will lead him once again to the Capitol, no doubt, but as surely too it will lead him on to the Tarpeian Rock whence he will be hurled down this time, not only bruised, but shattered, a fallen hero—and you will—a broken idol, for posterity to deal with in after time as it lists."

"And England would like to be the one to give the hero the final push," said de Marmont, not without a sneer.

"The people of England, my friend, hate and fear Bonaparte as they have never hated and feared any one before in the whole course of their history—and tell me, have we not cause enough to hate him? For fifteen years has he not tried to ruin us, to bring us to our knees? tried to throttle our commerce? break our might upon the sea? He wanted to make a slave of Britain, and Britain proved unconquerable. Believe me, we hate your hero less than he hates us."

He had spoken with a good deal of earnestness, but now he added more lightly, as if in answer to de Marmont's glowering look:

"At the same time," he said, "I doubt if there is a single English gentleman living at the present moment—let alone the army—who would refuse ungrudging admiration to Napoleon himself and to his genius. But as a nation England has her interests to safeguard. She has suffered enough—and through him—in her commerce and her prosperity in

the past twenty years—she must have peace now at any cost."

"Ah! I know," sighed the other, "a nation of shopkeepers. . . ."

"Yes. We are that, I suppose. We are shopkeepers . . . most of us. . . ."

"I didn't mean to use the word in any derogatory sense," protested Victor de Marmont with the ready politeness peculiar to his race. "Why, even you . . ."

"I don't see why you should say 'even you,'" broke in Clyffurde quietly. "I am a shopkeeper—nothing more. . . . I buy goods and sell them again. . . . I buy the gloves which our friend M. Dumoulin manufactures at Grenoble and sell them to any London draper who chooses to buy them . . . a very mean and ungentlemanly occupation, is it not?"

He spoke French with perfect fluency, and only with the merest suspicion of a drawl in the intonation of the vowels, which suggested rather than proclaimed his nationality; and just now there was not the slightest tone of bitterness apparent in his deep-toned and mellow voice. Once more his friend would have protested, but he put up a restraining hand.

"Oh!" he said with a smile, "I don't imagine for a moment that you have the same prejudices as our mutual friend M. le Comte de Cambray, who must have made a very violent sacrifice to his feelings when he admitted me as a guest to his own table. I am sure he must often think that the servants' hall is the proper place for me."

"The Comte de Cambray," retorted de Marmont with a sneer, "is full up to his eyes with the prejudices and

arrogance of his caste. It is men of his type—and not Marat or Robespierre—who made the revolution, who goaded the people of France into becoming something worse than man-devouring beasts. And, mind you, twenty years of exile did not sober them, nor did contact with democratic thought in England and America teach them the most elementary lessons of commonsense. If the Emperor had not come back to-day, we should be once more working up for revolution—more terrible this time, more bloody and vengeful, if possible, than the last."

Then as Clyffurde made no comment on this peroration, the younger man resumed more lightly:

"And—knowing the Comte de Cambray's prejudices as I do, imagine my surprise—after I had met you in his house as an honoured guest and on what appeared to be intimate terms of friendship—to learn that you . . . in fact . . ."

"That I was nothing more than a shopkeeper," broke in Clyffurde with a short laugh, "nothing better than our mutual friend M. Dumoulin, glovemaker, of Grenoble—a highly worthy man whom M. le Comte de Cambray esteems somewhat lower than his butler. It certainly must have surprised you very much."

"Well, you know, old de Cambray has a horror of anything that pertains to trade, and an avowed contempt for everything that he calls 'bourgeois.'"

"There's no doubt about that," assented Clyffurde fervently.

"Perhaps he does not know of your connection with . . ."

"Gloves?"

"With business people in Grenoble generally."

“Oh, yes, he does!” replied the Englishman quietly.

“Well, then?” queried de Marmont.

Then as his friend sat there silent with that quiet, good-humoured smile lingering round his lips, he added apologetically:

“Perhaps I am indiscreet . . . but I never could understand it . . . and you English are so reserved . . .”

“That I never told you how M. le Comte de Cambray, Commander of the Order of the Holy Ghost, Grand Cross of the Order du Lys, Hereditary Grand Chamberlain of France, etc., etc., came to sit at the same table as a vendor and buyer of gloves,” said Clyffurde gaily. “There’s no secret about it. I owe the Comte’s exalted condescension to certain letters of recommendation which he could not very well disregard.”

“Oh! as to that . . .” quoth de Marmont with a shrug of the shoulders, “people like the de Cambrays have their own codes of courtesy and of friendship.”

“In this case, my good de Marmont, it was the code of ordinary gratitude that imposed its dictum even upon the autocratic and aristocratic Comte de Cambray.”

“Gratitude?” sneered de Marmont, “in a de Cambray?”

“M. le Comte de Cambray,” said Clyffurde with slow emphasis, “his mother, his sister, his brother-in-law and two of their faithful servants, were rescued from the very foot of the guillotine by a band of heroes—known in those days as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“I knew that!” said de Marmont quietly.

“Then perhaps you also knew that their leader was Sir Percy Blakeney—a prince among gallant English gentlemen

and my dead father's friend. When my business affairs sent me to Grenoble, Sir Percy warmly recommended me to the man whose life he had saved. What could M. le Comte de Cambray do but receive me as a friend? You see, my credentials were exceptional and unimpeachable."

"Of course," assented de Marmont, "now I understand. But you will admit that I have had grounds for surprise. You—who were the friend of Dumoulin, a tradesman, and avowed Bonapartist—two unpardonable crimes in the eyes of M. le Comte de Cambray," he added with a return to his former bitterness, "you to be seated at his table and to shake him by the hand. Why, man! if he knew that I have remained faithful to the Emperor . . ."

He paused abruptly, and his somewhat full, sensitive lips were pressed tightly together as if to suppress an insistent outburst of passion.

But Clyffurde frowned, and when he turned away from de Marmont it was in order to hide a harsh look of contempt.

"Surely," he said, "you have never led the Comte to suppose that you are a royalist!"

"I have never led him to suppose anything. But he has taken my political convictions for granted," rejoined de Marmont.

Then suddenly a look of bitter resentment darkened his face, making it appear hard and lined and considerably older.

"My uncle, Marshal de Marmont, Duc de Raguse, was an abominable traitor," he went on with ill-repressed vehemence. "He betrayed his Emperor, his benefactor and his friend. It was the vilest treachery that has ever

disgraced an honourable name. Paris could have held out easily for another four and twenty hours, and by that time the Emperor would have been back. But de Marmont gave her over wilfully, scurvily to the allies. But for his abominable act of cowardice the Emperor never would have had to endure the shame of his temporary exile at Elba, and Louis de Bourbon would never have had the chance of wallowing for twelve months upon the throne of France. But that which is a source of irreparable shame to me is a virtue in the eyes of all these royalists. De Marmont's treachery against the Emperor has placed all his kindred in the forefront of those who now lick the boots of that infamous Bourbon dynasty, and it did not suit the plans of the Bonapartist party that we—in the provinces—should proclaim our faith too openly until such time as the Emperor returned."

"And if the Comte de Cambray had known that you are just an ardent Bonapartist? . . ." suggested Clyffurde calmly.

"He would long before now have had me kicked out by his lacqueys," broke in de Marmont with ever-increasing bitterness as he brought his clenched fist crashing down upon the table, while his dark eyes glowed with a fierce and passionate resentment. "For men like de Cambray there is only one caste—the *noblesse*, one religion—the Catholic, one creed—adherence to the Bourbons. All else is scum, trash, beneath contempt, hardly human! Oh! if you knew how I loathe these people!" he continued, speaking volubly and in a voice shaking with suppressed excitement. "They have learnt nothing, these aristocrats, nothing, I tell you! the terrible reprisals of the revolution which culminated in

that appalling Reign of Terror have taught them absolutely nothing! They have not learnt the great lesson of the revolution, that the people will no longer endure their arrogance and their pretensions, that the old regime is dead —dead! the regime of oppression and pride and intolerance! They have learnt nothing!" he reiterated with ever-growing excitement, "nothing! 'humanity begins with the *noblesse*' is still their watchword to-day as it was before the irate people sent hundreds of them to perish miserably on the guillotine—the rest of mankind, to them, is only cattle made to toil for the well-being of their class. Oh! I loathe them, I tell you! I loathe them from the bottom of my soul!"

"And yet you and your kind are rapidly becoming at one with them," said Clyffurde, his quiet voice in strange contrast to the other man's violent agitation.

"No, we are not," protested de Marmont emphatically. "The men whom Napoleon created marshals and peers of France have been openly snubbed at the Court of Louis XVIII. Ney, who is prince of Moskowa and next to Napoleon himself the greatest soldier of France, has seen his wife treated little better than a chambermaid by the Duchesse d'Angoulême and the ladies of the old *noblesse*. My uncle is marshal of France, and Duc de Raguse and I am the heir to his millions, but the Comte de Cambray will always consider it a mesalliance for his daughter to marry me."

The note of bitter resentment, of wounded pride and smouldering hatred became more and more marked while he spoke: his voice now sounded hoarse and his throat seemed dry. Presently he raised his mug to his lips and

drank eagerly, but his hand was shaking visibly as he did this, and some of the wine was spilled on the table.

There was silence for a while outside the little inn, silence which seemed full of portent, for through the pure mountain air there was wafted the hot breath of men's passions—fierce, dominating, challenging. Love, hatred, prejudices and contempt—all were portrayed on de Marmont's mobile face: they glowed in his dark eyes and breathed through his quivering nostrils. Now he rested his elbow on the table and his chin in his hand, his nervy fingers played a tattoo against his teeth, clenched together like those of some young feline creature which sees its prey coming along and is snarling at the sight.

Clyffurde, with those deep-set, earnest grey eyes of his, was silently watching his friend. His hand did not shake, nor did the breath come any quicker from his broad chest. Yet deep down behind the wide brow, behind those same overshadowed eyes, a keen observer would of a surety have detected the signs of a latent volcano of passions, all the more strong and virile as they were kept in perfect control. It was he who presently broke the silence, and his voice was quite steady when he spoke, though perhaps a trifle more toneless, more dead, than usual.

"And," he said, "what of Mlle. Crystal in all this?"

"Crystal?" queried the other curtly, "what about her?"

"She is an ardent royalist, more strong in her convictions and her enthusiasms than women usually are."

"And what of that?" rejoined de Marmont fiercely. "I love Crystal."

"But when she learns that you . . ."

“She shall not learn it,” rejoined the other cynically. “We sign our marriage contract to-night: the wedding is fixed for Tuesday. Until then I can hold my peace.”

An exclamation of hot protest almost escaped the Englishman’s lips: his hand which rested on the table became so tightly clenched that the hard knuckles looked as if they would burst through their fetters of sinew and skin, and he made no pretence at concealing the look of burning indignation which flashed from his eyes.

“But man!” he exclaimed, “a deception such as you propose is cruel and monstrous. . . . In view, too, of what has occurred in the past few days . . . in view of what may happen if the news which we have heard is true . . .”

“In view of all that, my friend,” retorted de Marmont firmly, “the old regime has had its nine days of wonder and of splendour. The Emperor has come back! we, who believe in him, who have remained true to him in his humiliation and in his misfortunes may once more raise our heads and loudly proclaim our loyalty. The return of the Emperor will once more put his dukes and his marshals in their rightful place on a level with the highest nobility of France. The Comte de Cambray will realise that all his hopes of regaining his fortune through the favours of the Bourbons have by force of circumstances come to naught. Like most of the old *noblesse* who emigrated he is without a sou. He may choose to look on me with contempt, but he will no longer desire to kick me out of his house, for he will be glad enough to see the Cambray ’scutcheon regilt with de Marmont gold.”

“But Mademoiselle Crystal?” insisted Clyffurde, almost appealingly, for his whole soul had revolted at the cynicism of the other man.

“Crystal has listened to that ape, St. Genis,” replied de Marmont drily, “one of her own caste . . . a marquis with sixteen quarterings to his family escutcheon and not a sou in his pockets. She is very young, and very inexperienced. She has seen nothing of the world as yet—nothing. She was born and brought up in exile—in England, in the midst of that narrow society formed by impecunious *émigrés*. . . .”

“And shopkeeping Englishmen,” murmured Clyffurde, under his breath.

“She could never have married St. Genis,” reiterated Victor de Marmont with deliberate emphasis. “The man hasn’t a sou. Even Crystal realised from the first that nothing ever could have come of that boy and girl dallying. The Comte never would have consented. . . .”

“Perhaps not. But she—Mademoiselle Crystal—would she ever have consented to marry you, if she had known what your convictions are?”

“Crystal is only a child,” said de Marmont with a light shrug of the shoulders. “She will learn to love me presently when St. Genis has disappeared out of her little world, and she will accept my convictions as she has accepted me, submissive to my will as she was to that of her father.”

Once more a hot protest of indignation rose to Clyffurde’s lips, but this too he smothered resolutely. What was the use of protesting? Could he hope to change with a few arguments the whole cynical nature of a man? And what right had he even to interfere? The Comte de Cambray and

Mademoiselle Crystal were nothing to him: in their minds they would never look upon him even as an equal—let alone as a friend. So the bitter words died upon his lips.

“And you have been content to win a wife on such terms!” was all that he said.

“I have had to be content,” was de Marmont’s retort. “Crystal is the only woman I have ever cared for. She will love me in time, I doubt not, and her sense of duty will make her forget St. Genis quickly enough.”

Then as Clyffurde made no further comment silence fell once more between the two men. Perhaps even de Marmont felt that somehow, during the past few moments, the slender bond of friendship which similarity of tastes and a certain similarity of political ideals had forged between him and the stranger had been strained to snapping point, and this for a reason which he could not very well understand. He drank another draught of wine and gave a quick sigh of satisfaction with the world in general, and also with himself, for he did not feel that he had done or said anything which could offend the keenest susceptibilities of his friend.

He looked with a sudden sense of astonishment at Clyffurde, as if he were only seeing him now for the first time. His keen dark eyes took in with a rapid glance the Englishman’s powerful personality, the square shoulders, the head well erect, the strong Anglo-Saxon chin firmly set, the slender hands always in repose. In the whole attitude of the man there was an air of will-power which had never struck de Marmont quite so forcibly as it did now, and a virility which looked as ready to challenge Fate as it was able to conquer her if she proved adverse.

And just now there was a curious look in those deep-set eyes—a look of contempt or of pity—de Marmont was not sure which, but somehow the look worried him and he would have given much to read the thoughts which were hidden behind the high, square brow.

However, he asked no questions, and thus the silence remained unbroken for some time save for the soughing of the northeast wind as it whistled through the pines, whilst from the tiny chapel which held the shrine of Notre Dame de Vaulx came the sound of a soft-toned bell, ringing the midday Angelus.

Just then round that same curve in the road, where the two riders had paused an hour ago in sight of the little hamlet, a man on horseback appeared, riding at a brisk trot up the rugged, stony path.

Victor de Marmont woke from his rêverie:

“There’s Emery,” he cried.

He jumped to his feet, then he picked up his hat from the table where he had laid it down, tossed it up into the air as high as it would go, and shouted with all his might:

“Vive l’Empereur!”

4

Table of Contents

The man who now drew rein with abrupt clumsiness in front of the auberge looked hot, tired and travel-stained. His face was covered with sweat and his horse with lather, the lapel of his coat was torn, his breeches and boots were covered with half-frozen mud.

But having brought his horse to a halt, he swung himself out of the saddle with the brisk air of a boy who has enjoyed his first ride across country. Surgeon-Captain Emery was a man well over forty, but to-day his eyes glowed with that concentrated fire which burns in the heart at twenty, and he shook de Marmont by the hand with a vigour which made the younger man wince with the pain of that iron grip.

“My friend, Mr. Clyffurde, an English gentleman,” said Victor de Marmont hastily in response to a quick look of suspicious enquiry which flashed out from under Emery’s bushy eyebrows. “You can talk quite freely, Emery; and for God’s sake tell us your news!”

But Emery could hardly speak. He had been riding hard for the past three hours, his throat was parched, and through it his voice came up hoarse and raucous: nevertheless he at once began talking in short, jerky sentences.

“He landed on Wednesday,” he said. “I parted from him on Friday . . . at Castellane . . . you had my message?”

“This morning early—we came at once.”

“I thought we could talk better here—first—but I was spent last night—I had to sleep at Corps . . . so I sent to you. . . . But now, in Heaven’s name, give me something to drink. . . .”

While he drank eagerly and greedily of the cold spiced wine which Clyffurde had served out to him, he still scrutinised the Englishman closely from under his frowning and bushy eyebrows.

Clyffurde’s winning glance, however, seemed to have conquered his mistrust, for presently, after he had put his

mug down again, he stretched out a cordial hand to him.

“Now that our Emperor is back with us,” he said as if in apology for his former suspicions, “we, his friends, are bound to look askance at every Englishman we meet.”

“Of course you are,” said Clyffurde with his habitual good-humoured smile as he grasped Surgeon-Captain Emery’s extended hand.

“It is the hand of a friend I am grasping?” insisted Emery.

“Of a personal friend, if you will call him so,” replied Clyffurde. “Politically, I hardly count, you see. I am just a looker-on at the game.”

The surgeon-captain’s keen eyes under their bushy brows shot a rapid glance at the tall, well-knit figure of the Englishman.

“You are not a fighting man?” he queried, much amazed.

“No,” replied Clyffurde drily. “I am only a tradesman.”

“Your news, Emery, your news!” here broke in Victor de Marmont, who during the brief colloquy between his two friends had been hardly able to keep his excitement in check.

Emery turned away from the other man in silence. Clearly there was something about that fine, noble-looking fellow—who proclaimed himself a tradesman while that splendid physique of his should be at his country’s service—which still puzzled the worthy army surgeon.

But he was primarily very thirsty and secondly as eager to impart his news as de Marmont was to hear it, so now without wasting any further words on less important matter he sat down close to the table and stretched his short, thick legs out before him.

“My news is of the best,” he said with lusty fervour. “We left Porto Ferrajo on Sunday last but only landed on Wednesday, as I told you, for we were severely becalmed in the Mediterranean. We came on shore at Antibes at midday of March 1st and bivouacked in an olive grove on the way to Cannes. That was a sight good for sore eyes, my friends, to see him sitting there by the camp fire, his feet firmly planted upon the soil of France. What a man, Sir, what a man!” he continued, turning directly to Clyffurde, “on board the *Inconstant* he had composed and dictated his proclamation to the army, to the soldiers of France! the finest piece of prose, Sir, I have ever read in all my life. But you shall judge of it, Sir, you shall judge. . . .”

And with hands shaking with excitement he fumbled in the bulging pocket of his coat and extracted therefrom a roll of loose papers roughly tied together with a piece of tape.

“You shall read it, Sir,” he went on mumbling, while his trembling fingers vainly tried to undo the knot in the tape, “you shall read it. And then mayhap you’ll tell me if your Pitt was ever half so eloquent. Curse these knots!” he exclaimed angrily.

“Will you allow me, Sir?” said Clyffurde quietly, and with steady hand and firm fingers he undid the refractory knots and spread the papers out upon the table.

Already de Marmont had given a cry of loyalty and of triumph.

“His proclamation!” he exclaimed, and a sigh of infinite satisfaction born of enthusiasm and of hero-worship escaped his quivering lips.