THE EVENING NEWS.

Saturday, - - - June 24, 1871.

THE THREE FRIENDS OF VAUX VILAINE.

An Episode of the Late War.

BY F. M. F. SKENE.

[CONCLUDED.]

But suddenly there was a movement in the crowd, and a young man came forward with a light, active step, and laying his hand on Lepelletier's arm, to prevent him continuing his dreadful task, he made a sign that he wished to speak. There was silence over the whole church in an instant, and all eyes were turned on Evariste Rossel. Familiar as his features were to most of them, they looked on him now as though they had never seen him before, so completely was his thoughtful face transfigured by the pure heroic resolution that shone in his soft eyes and thrilled in his clear young voice as he spoke, with the utmost simplicity, words death-laden to himself.

"*Mes amis,*" he said, and every individual in the sad assembly heard him distinctly, "if we cast lots for the victims of the enemy, it may be that the doom will fall on fathers of families who would leave widows and orphans to mourn them, not only in sorrow, but in poverty and destitution. It is not well, therefore, that such as they are should be taken from the homes they support and protect, while there are others who have not, as yet at least, formed ties so close and binding. Of these I am one—my mother has other sons—my *fiancee* will find many a worthier man to seek her love, and I offer myself freely to die, that the husbands and fathers may be spared. I am sure that there are others, situated as I am, who will no less willingly give their lives to make up the number."

Evariste carefully avoided looking at Jules and Martel as he spoke, for he would not seem to summon them, but they needed no other call save his bright example. Instantly they started forward, and ranged themselves at his side.

"We, too, give ourselves freely to the death," they exclaimed; "the number is complete."

Lepelletier had been on the point of remonstrating with Evariste, because he could not bear the thought of that young life being quenched in blood; but when he saw that Martel, his own son, was amongst the offered victims, the words died on his lips, and he turned his face to the wall, groaning in unspeakable anguish. He felt, Brutus-like, he could not ask that a father of a family should die to spare his own unwedded son. No time was given him, however, to struggle with his heart. The Prussian officer held up his watch, exclaiming that the ten minutes were expired—he must have three men instantly for execution.

"We are here, we are ready," said the three friends, coming forward with firm step and dauntless look.

"One moment only," exclaimed Evariste, and taking his two companions by the hand, he drew them down on their knees before the cure, saying, "Father, absolve us, bless us in this supreme moment!"

The good old man, appalled and bewildered, turned toward them, his eyes streaming with tears. He seemed too much overwhelmed to know almost what he was doing; but, upheld by the habit of priestly functions he murmured the form of absolution, made the sign of the cross, and blessed them in the threefold name of Him before whom they were about to appear.

They thanked him, adding, "Adieu, *mon pere,*" and rose from their knees. Instantly the Uhlans surrounded them, bound their hands, and hurried them to the door. One moment those gathered in the church saw their shadows darken the threshold as they passed out into the dazzling sunshine, and the next instant they were gone, to be seen of men no more for ever! Then, with a simultaneous impulse, the whole assembly fell upon their knees, and as the cure, turning to the altar, intoned the *De profundis*, the wailing voices joined in the funeral chant with one deep, heart-wrung cry that rose in mournful appeal to the listening heaven.

Meanwhile, across the sunlit churchyard the doomed men were hurried by their executioners; out their terrible march had a momentary interruption. Suddenly, from beneath the spreading branches of the tree which the victims knew so well, the graceful figure of a young girl bounded forth, as if her feet were winged, and Leonie, flinging herself on the breast of her lover, exclaimed in a tone of horror, "Evariste, what are they going to do with you?"

"Adieu, my darling!" was his only answer; but the instinct of her woman's heart told her all the dreadful truth. She flung up her hands with a bitter cry, and, as his bound arms could not hold her, she sank at his feet as if she had herself already sustained the death-blow he was about to meet. Yevette, who had followed her, was clinging to Martel, uttering shriek on shriek.

"Remove these women," exclaimed the commanding officer, with angry impatience, and the soldiers instantly tore Yevette from Martel's arms, while others lifted up the senseless form of Leonie, and both were roughly flung aside upon the churchyard grass, and the captives hurried on without another moment's delay. Then indeed did the bitterness of death pass into the hearts of Martel and Evariste, while Jules turning to them with a pathetic smile, said softly:

"I may well be thankful that I have no *fiancee!*"

Yes, truly, that hour had come to them, as come it will to all of us, when those are happiest who have fewest earthly blessings, and whose best treasures are garnered in that realm where all that has been brave and sweet and good, like the self-devotion of these three young men, will have a place throughout the eternal ages, among the imperishable things of God.

There was an open field just below the churchyard wall, which had been the favorite play-ground of Evariste and his companions through all their happy boyhood. There were they taken by the soldiers, and placed with their eyes bandaged, facing the sun they were never to see again!

A few moments more, and through the wall of the *De profundis* rising and falling amid the sobs of men grown weak as woman in their anguish of pity, there went the sharp ringing report of the volley which told that the sacrifice was consummated, and that if the brief earthly life of the noble young men was over—on the roll of the glorious army of martyrs, their names would live for evermore.

The story we have told is no fiction. It is but a few weeks since the village of Vaux Villaine witnessed the execution of the three friends who, lest the lot should fall on the fathers of families, volunteered to satisfy the blood-claim of the Prussians for the death of their colonel. We have given this little record of their fate, not to harrow the feelings of our readers by the mere recital of a tragedy, but to afford them another instance of that glorious springing of good out of evil which has been the deathless consolation of the human race since first man woke to the mystery of suffering.

Amid the horror and anguish, and aching helpless compassion with which this dreadful war has filled the world, such deeds rise up full of sweetness and refreshment, like the fragrance of flowers which only give forth their richest perfume when they have been crushed and beaten down under the foot of the destroyer.

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