

Suppressed shrieks from the women followed these words as the young men drew back from the door. Vaux threw himself into Martel's arms, and Leonie lifted up her blue eyes, swimming in tears, to Evariste, and became suddenly aware of the fact that the peculiar expression of his face; his soft, hazel eyes, wide open, appeared to be looking far away into scenes unperceived by others, and his lips were parted with a calm, sweet smile, which seemed full of hidden meaning. All agitation she felt, was misplaced in presence of such a look as Evariste wore, yet Leonie trembled with some dark mysterious foreboding, even as she gazed, and she wished with all her heart that he would look less beautiful and noble, and more like the joyous light-hearted fiancé with whom she hoped to pass all the years of her existence.

For an hour or so the persons assembled at Farmer Lepelletier's remained talking together, the women in tears, the men silent and disquieted, and then in groups of two or three they crept away silently to their homes.

Before day broke over Vaux Village another morning it was known throughout the village—none could have told, but—that the Prussian Colonel had been shot dead by an unseen foe as he rode round the outposts the evening before. It was whispered constantly that two of the hottest spirits among the young men of Vaux Village were missing from their homes.

From the moment that this was known but one thought filled the anxious mind of every inhabitant of that once happy village—what vengeance in blood or fire would the Prussians require for this ill advised and cruel deed? They were not long left in suspense.

A beautiful sunrise it was which brought the light of day to Vaux Village on that first autumn morning. The heavy dew which had fallen the night before glistened like scattered gems in the early sunshine, and the air was sweet with the breath of flowers, yielding up their perfume to the soft warm breeze. The bleating sheep and cattle, lowing in the fields, seemed to call the people to their usual peaceful occupations, and the little church bell, with its silvery tone, gave notice that the cure must be made an early mass on behalf of their dear people, so sadly in need of aid from heaven. All things were as they had been many and many a morning before, when the people of Vaux Village were so full of the gentle, peaceful life which made so sweet an existence for them, and Nature still was doing her part in beauty and grandeur. The white shires failed not to show on all their brightest smiles, but there were human passions at war upon earth; and, truly, the records of this tremendous struggle might well lead one to believe that all the demons of hell had been let loose, they could hardly have made more terrible havoc in God's fair world.

While yet the peaceful church bell rang, and the sunbeams streaming through the windows of the village cottages woke the children in their cradles, there was heard coming, ever nearer and nearer, the heavy tramp of a large body of mounted Uhlans, galloping down the village street. In a moment more they were swarming, a fierce and marvellous crowd, in the main street, and in every lane and alley in the place. A certain number were told off, who dismounted and entered all the houses, from end to end of the village, they dragged out every man they could find, and drove them in a mass into the church, where a very different scene was to be enacted. The quiet holy service the good cure had intended to hold.

The women, who would have followed their husbands and brothers, were driven back with blows and curses by the Uhlans, and the church doors were shut upon the whole male inhabitants of the village. What would be done to them there? The poor women shrieked and wept as they asked themselves that question.

Leonie and Verette, united by the anguish of their common suspense and terror, crept hand in hand towards the church, then any of the others dared to go, and hid themselves behind the very tree beneath whose branches the three young men had held their conversation on that bright, peaceful evening, before even the shadow of war had cast its gloom on the earth, and when they were looking forward so gaily to the fulfilment of their various plans of happiness.

Meanwhile a strange scene was taking place in the church. The cure, already ready for mass, was thrust rudely aside by the Uhlans, and he sat down in a corner, praying fervently, while the commanding officer of the troop of avengers went and stood on the steps of the altar. There, in a loud ringing voice which he heard down the village church, he announced the tribute of blood which the clemency, as he expressed it, of his superiors would allow exact for the murder of the Colonel. They would not bear down the village as would have been but just, nor would they put the inhabitants to the sword, richly as they deserved it, but they would be satisfied with the lives of three men out of the number, selected in the church, who must be executed instantly, before the morning resumed their concurring march through France, not as Leonie's deity could be ascertained. The officer, that the choice of the victims might be made by lot, amongst themselves, but it must be done then and there, without loss of time. As he concluded, he held up his watch before them.

"In ten minutes," he said, "your choice must be made; if you delay longer than that, I choose for myself, and I shall take the first three on whom I happen to lay my hands, and have them shot at once."

It was but too plain, there was no appeal, and that it would be only wasting the precious moments to attempt to negotiate with some of the Uhlans, the men, began in silence, and with trembling hands, to prepare the lots with the three fatal numbers, which would be drawn by the cure, when the doom of death should fall upon them.

To be continued.

Caution to the Public.

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