

Ashes of Empire.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

Inside the church the officers were at dinner. He accepted an invitation and sat down on the altar steps with his bit of bread and morsel of dry loaf.

The wavering flare from the campfire filtered through the stained glass; the somber depths of the church were tinged with violet and crimson—dusky and clustered columns glittered purple; the crucifix was bathed in shadow, save where a single trembling beam of light, red as blood, lay like an open wound across the pierced side of our dying Lord.

He looked up into the vaulted roof, stone-ribbed, black with the shadows of centuries. He heard the roar of the campfires, the crackle of damp logs, the scrape and stamp and stir of sleepy horses, the deep breathing of sleeping men. He rose noiselessly and crept into the street. The fog hung thick on the heavy, flying buttresses, on fleche and gargoyles, and on the fluted robes of saints and martyrs, peering down from their niches into the fire glow, where, swathed in their elegant robes, the martyrs, not saints, but men, sick, freezing, starving things, called the 123th of the line.

They lay there like lumps on the church steps, in doorways—they nestled in the gutter, they huddled against doorposts, these cloths of breathing clay—sodden and ragged and filthy, sinful, lustful, and human, sleeping their brief sleep till the white dawn roused and summoned them home forever.

Faint cries from the sentries, fainter responses, the crackle and snap of logs afloat, and the tall shadows swaying, these were all that he saw and heard. The carved stone gargoyles dripped water from every fantastic snout, the reflected flames played over pillar and column, saint and martyr, cross and crown.

As he lay he driven thoughts of Hilde from him, but now, at midnight, when the lamp of life burns lowest and the eyes close, and death seems very near—he thought of her, and lying down in the street beside the fire, he questioned his soul. At night, too, the soul, stirring in the body—perhaps at the nearness of God—awakens conscience.

He had never before thought seriously of death. Its arrival to himself he had never pictured in concrete form. In the abstract he had often risked it, never fearing it, because mentally too inert, too lazy, to apply such a contingency to his own familiar life. Now, for the first time in his life, he closed his eyes and saw himself, just as he lay, but still, wet, muddy, and horribly silent. He opened his eyes and looked soberly at the fire. After a little he closed his eyes again, and again he saw himself lying as he lay, wet, muddy, motionless, as only the dead can lie. He had known fear, but never before the dull forebodings that now crept into his heart. To open his eyes and see the fire was to live; to shut his eyes was to die. He had seen the death upon his closed lids. At first he disdained to shake it off—this mental shadow that passed across his senses. What if it were true? He had lived. It was the old selfishness stifling the sense of responsibility—the responsibility to the world, to himself, to Hilde and Hilde.

He sat up in his blanket and stared into the fire. Slowly the comprehension of his responsibility came to him, his duty, and all that was due to her from him, all that he owed her, all that she should claim, one by one, claim that he felt himself unable to meet. He couldn't die—yet. There was something to do first! Who spoke of death? There was too much to do, there were matters of honor to arrange first, there was a debt to pay that neither death nor hell nor laws of paradise could cancel. Was death about to prevent him from paying that debt?

He was walking, now, moving aimlessly to and fro under the porch of the church. A sentry, huddled against a column, regarded him apathetically as he passed out into the street. And always his thoughts ran on:

"If I have this debt to pay, what am I doing here? What right have I to risk death until it is paid? And if I die—if I die—"

Hilde's pale face rose before him. He read terrible accusations in her eyes. And he repeated aloud, again and again, "I must go back." For he understood now that his life was no longer his own to risk—that it belonged to Hilde. Nor would he ever again have the right to import his life until they had risen together from their knees, before the altar, as man and wife. He looked out into the mist, ruddy with the campfire glow. Would morning ever come? Why should he wait for the morning? At the thought he caught up his pouch and blanket, rolled, strapped and adjusted them, and stole out into the darkness.

Almost at once he heard somebody following him, but at first he scarcely noticed it. Down the main street he passed, over the slippery cobblestones, eyes fixed on a distant fire that marked the last bivouac in the village before the street ends at the ruined bridge across the Mollotte. It was as approached this campfire that he realized somebody had been following him. He paused a moment at the circle of the firelight and turned around. Nothing stirred in the darkness beyond. He walked, then started on again, crossing the little highway to the line of bushes that marked the water's edge. No sentinel challenged him; he waded the ford below the wrecked stone bridge, climbed the bank opposite and started across a wet meadow, beyond which lay the muddy road to Paris. Half way through the meadow he halted again to listen. The unseen person was wading the ford—he

could hear him in the water; now he was climbing the bank, the bushes crackled, a footstep fell on the gravel.

Harewood waited, peering through the gloom. He could see nothing; the silence was absolute. Whoever was following him had stopped out there somewhere in the darkness.

A little unsteady, Harewood turned again and hastened through the meadow to the highway. When he reached the road he could scarcely see it, but he felt the mud and gravel beneath his feet, and started on. In a moment he heard the footsteps of his follower, not behind, now, but in front—between him and Paris. He stopped abruptly and drew his revolver. A minute passed in utter silence. Then there came a soft footfall close in front, a whining voice:

"Harewood!"

"Who are you?" said Harewood sharply. "The Mouse, monsieur."

In his astonishment the revolver almost fell from Harewood's hand. "What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded, "and why the devil are you speaking about like this? Answer, you fool! I nearly shot you just now!"

The Mouse crept up to Harewood as a sulky, vicious cur comes to his punishment.

"Answer," repeated Harewood, "why are you following me?"

"I wasn't sure it was you," muttered the Mouse.

"What? Why did you come to Le Bourget?"

"I don't know," said the Mouse sullenly. Harewood's amazement turned to impatience.

"You'd better answer me," he said; "you certainly didn't come here for love of my company."

But that was exactly the reason why the Mouse had come. The instinct of a savage cur for his master, the strange attraction that decency and courage have for the brutally vicious, the necessity that dwarfed intelligence feels for the companionship and guidance and protection of healthy mentality—all these started the Mouse out of Paris as an abandoned mongrel starts to find its missing master.

Harewood understood this at last, and it touched him—not that the Mouse explained it. He could not have explained it, even if he had himself comprehended the reason of his seeking Harewood. All he knew was this—that he missed Harewood, that he was lonely, that he felt uncomfortable without him. So he came. Even a gutter cat, forcibly transported into distant parts, turns up again in its old haunts. Harewood's company had become the haunt of the Mouse. So he came back to it.

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"Imbecile!" he whispered while the Mouse gnawed the crust, squatting on his muddy haunches; "there may be Prussian pickets anywhere along the fields. Didn't you know it?"

"Yes," said the Mouse tranquilly, "there's a picket of Uhlans just ahead."

This was startling news for Harewood.

"Where?" he demanded under his breath.

"About a kilometer over that way," replied the Mouse, jerking his thumb toward the southeast. He was going to add something more when the sudden tinkle of a horse's shoe told striking stones broke out in the night. They crashed low in the thicket listening. The road was lighter now, a gray shadow passed, a horseman toward the southeast. Other riders mounted on wily little horses, all carrying tall lances that rattled in their saddle boots.

As Harewood strained his eyes the moon broke out overhead—a battered, deformed moon, across whose pale disk the flying scud whirled in a mad, mad race.

A guttural voice began in German: "Where are the scouts—eh?"

Then in the moonlight Harewood saw Speyer and Stauffer, clad in the uniform of the carabiniers, salute the Uhlans officer and hand him a message of greeting.

The Mouse beside him trembled like a tortoise at a rat hole; Harewood clutched his arm and stared at the group in the road.

There was a brief parley, a word of caution, then the Uhlans wheeled their horses and galloped back toward Paris, and the two traitorous carabiniers struck off across the meadow toward Le Bourget, then made a demi-tour, and followed the bank of the river. Very cautiously Harewood crept out to the road when the gallop of the Uhlans had died away.

The Mouse stood beside him, an open clasp-knife in his fist, nostrils quivering in the freshening wind.

Harewood glanced at the knife and said, "What are you going to do? Cut your way to Paris? Come back to Le Bourget, you fool!"

Half way back across the wet meadow the Mouse asked: "And if we overtake Speyer?"

"Are you the public executioner?" said Harewood sharply. "Put up that knife, I tell you!"

The Mouse closed his knife and plodded on in silence.

After a while Harewood asked him about Bourke and Hilde and Yolette. But he knew little more than Harewood did, for he had left the house on the ramparts the morning after Harewood's departure, and since then had been following him up.

Morning was breaking as they forded the Mollotte and answered the sentry's challenge from the ruined highway. It was Sunday, the 30th of October—a desolate Sunday in a desolate land. They hurried through the main street, where sleepy reliefs were marching to replace the pickets along the river, and at last they reached the church, where a group of officers stood on the steps in attitudes of dejection.

"Colonel Martin," cried two captains of the carabiniers, Speyer and Stauffer. I charge them with treason. Here is my witness." He dragged the Mouse up the steps and led him forward. He had a dozen sentences he told them what he had seen. The Mouse nodded his corroboration, stealing cunning glances about him and shuffling his muddy shoes, partly to inspire self-confidence, partly because he appreciated the importance of his present position.

"But," said an artillery officer, "the carabiniers have already gone. I heard them breaking camp before daylight."

"Gone!" repeated Harewood.

The artillery officer the river bank toward Blanc-Mesnil.

Before Harewood could speak again cannon shot from the end of the street brought the soldiers out of the church on a run. At the same moment a shell struck a house opposite and burst.

Colonel Martin, now ranking officer in the village, turned quietly to Harewood and said: "If I live to get out of this I'll have the carabiniers before a drumhead court-martial. Are you going back to Paris?"

"If I can," said Harewood.

"If you get there, have these carabinier officers arrested by the first patrol." Harewood started again toward the river, calling impatiently to the Mouse to follow.

The bombardment from the Prussian guns had suddenly become violent; shells fell everywhere, exploding on slate roofs, in court yards, in the middle of the street.

The Mouse, half dead with terror, shrieked as he ran, ducking his head at every crash, one shielding his face.

"This won't do," cried Harewood, dragging the Mouse into a hallway "we've got to wait until the bombardment stops. Here, break in this door. Quick!"

Together they forced the door and entered. The house was dark and empty. Harewood climbed the stairs, groped about, unfastened the scuttle, and raised himself to the roof. North, east and west, the smoke of the Prussian guns curled up from the plain.

In the north vast masses of troops were moving toward Le Bourget, cannonaded by the fortress of the east at long range.

There was no chance to reach Paris; he saw that at the first glance. He saw, too, the French pickets being chased back into Le Bourget by Uhlans, and he heard the drumming of a full battalion in the west end of the village where columns of smoke arose from a burning house. Far away in the gray morning light the fortress of the east towered, circled with floating mist, through which the shotted flashes of the cannon played like lightning behind a thunder cloud.

And now began, under the guns of St. Denis and Aubervilliers—almost under the

for the German riflemen; bullet after bullet dashed against the chimney behind which he crouched. He waited his chance, then crawled along the slates and dropped into the scuttle where the Mouse stood speechless with terror.

It was time that he left. A shell, bursting in the ceiling, had ignited the stored fags, and the first floor of the house had already begun to burn fiercely.

"Come," he said, "we must make a dash for the church!" And he seized the Mouse, dragged him down the smoking stairs to the street door, and but over the cobblestones, where a group of officers and a couple of dozen volunteers of the guard were running toward the church, pursued by Uhlans.

Up the steps and into the dark church they tumbled pell-mell, Harewood and the Mouse among them. They closed the great doors, bolted and barricaded them with benches, pews and heavy stone slabs from the floor. Already the volunteers were firing through the stained glass across the street; the officers climbed beside them and emptied their revolvers into the masses of Prussians that surged around the church in a delirium of fury.

Harewood, looking over the shoulder of an officer, saw the walls of the houses across the street, saw the German riflemen pour into the breach, saw them at the windows bayoneting the remnants of the 123th, and flinging the wounded from the windows. From house to house the pioneers opened

the doors, and the 123th of the line, which had been sent on Saturday to the zoological gardens in the Jardin des Plantes, had been ordered to Le Bourget, and was becoming alarmingly scarce; there was no fresh meat to be had except horse meat, and even that was to be rationed the first week in November.

The lions had been carted off sorely against her will. She snarled and growled and snarled and growled, and in which the last trace of gentleness and affection had been extinguished.

Hilde, deep in her own trouble, scarcely heeded this new one. Scheherazade had been changing in disposition ever since the commencing of the Prussian invasions, she hunted the depths of the garden, ignoring Hilde's advances until Yolette began to fear the creature. So now, when it was necessary to send the lioness away, Hilde said nothing and Yolette was not sorry. Mehemet Ali, the parrot, however, screeched his remonstrance, which amused Bourke because Scheherazade was the first living thing that the vicious old bird had ever shown any fondness for.

So the lioness was packed off to be fed by the government, and Burke improved that opportunity by sending Mehemet Ali and the monkey also, which made two mouths the less to feed in case of famine.

Down in the cellar Yolette stood, piling tinned fruit and vegetables against the division wall, aided by Red Riding Hood. At the child's request Yolette was varying the monotony of their toil by telling a fairy story. Red Riding Hood listened gravely as Yolette continued:

"And the princess waited and waited for her dear prince, who had gone to fight the war-wolf. And he did not return."

"I know," said the child, "what you mean."

"What?" asked Yolette absently.

"The prince is M. Harewood and the princess is Mlle. Hilde."

"And the were-wolf?" said Yolette, faintly amused.

"The were-wolf—that is the Prussian army," Yolette's face sobered.

"The Prussians are very cruel and very fierce—like the were-wolf," she said. "Come, little one, we must go to the kitchen."

At the top of the cellar stairs they met Bourke. His serious face changed when he saw Yolette, but his expression had not escaped her.

"Breakfast is ready," she said quietly. "I have not yet breakfasted myself. Shall we go in?"

She led the way into the dining room and closed the door. He put his arms around her and looked into her clear eyes.

"It is bad news?" she said slowly.

"Not—not about M. Harewood?"

"No—I hope not."

"Metz has surrendered; Bazaine and his army are prisoners."

"Tears filled her eyes."

"What else, Cecil? There is something else."

"Yes, there is. Le Bourget was carried by assault yesterday forenoon."

She sat down by the table, nervously twisting the cloth. He took a chair opposite, resting his chin on his hands.

"Jim was there," he said after a silence.

"When—then—"

"Yes, he will come back to Paris because the sortie has failed to pierce the German lines."

"He should have come back last night," said Yolette.

Bourke nodded silently.

"And because he has not yet returned you are worried," continued Yolette. Her hand stole across the table and his own tightened over it.

"He has been delayed—that's all," said Bourke, making an effort to shake off his depression.

"We will say nothing to Hilde about it."

"No, not to Hilde," murmured Yolette.

Red Riding Hood entered bearing the breakfast covers. Hilde came in a moment later and looked toward Yolette at Bourke.

He smiled cheerily and began to read from the morning paper aloud, how M. Thiers, who had been trotting around all over Europe to enlist the sympathies of the great powers in behalf of France, had just returned from Vienna and had entered Paris with Bismarck's kind permission. It seems that M. Thiers had sounded England, Russia, Austria and Italy, and found them in accord with himself, that an armistice should suspend hostilities for a while until a national assembly could be convened and terms of peace discussed with Bismarck and his sentimental sovereign. Hilde scarcely listened. Yolette nibbled her toast, and tried to understand a diplomatic muddle that needed older brains than hers to solve.

Outside in the street the newsmen were crying: "Extra! Surrender of Bazaine! Fall of Metz! Terrible disaster at Le Bourget! Extra! Full list of the dead and wounded!" Bourke kept his eyes on Bourke as he read the long columns of dead, wounded, and missing. When he finished she said:

"Will he come back to Paris now?"

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They all smiled a little. Bourke went out

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"It helped her to look out into the darkness. For he was somewhere there in the darkness."

Shivering, she sat down by the window. On the fortifications below the unwieldy bulk of the Prophet loomed up, tilted skyward, a shapless monster in its waterproof covering. Rockets were rising slowly from Mont Valerien; in the east light glowed, tinged with a somber, lurid light, perhaps the reflection of some hamlet, fired by the Prussians, burning alone at midnight.

A wet wind blew the curtains back from the open window; her little naked feet were numb with cold. The never-ending desire to see her room, his clothes, his bed again, came over her. She dared not light a candle—it was forbidden to those who lived on the ramparts—she rose, and passed along the benches, pews and heavy stone slabs from the floor. Already the volunteers were firing through the stained glass across the street; the officers climbed beside them and emptied their revolvers into the masses of Prussians that surged around the church in a delirium of fury.

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