

Ashes of Empire.

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS.

CHAPTER XII.

In the Moonlight.

When Harwood and Bourke entered the Rue d'Ypres a thin rain was falling, driven by sudden little volleys of wind that grew colder and more violent as the rain thickened.

They stood for a moment looking out into the black void beyond the ramparts. There was nothing to see, not a star, not a sentry—nothing but quivering sheets of rain slanting across dim signal lamps set low on the bastions.

Bourke unlocked the door noiselessly. Harwood followed him upstairs and into his own bedroom; and, as he struck a match and lighted the lamp, he felt a sudden case, a sense of home-coming—something he had not known in months. Bourke answered his unspoken thoughts. "Yes—it is very pleasant to get back, Jim. I think I'll turn in directly."

Harwood sat down on the bed; his glance wandered around the lamp-lit room, resting finally on the window.

"Somebody has filled the window frames with oiled paper," he said listlessly. "Do you suppose the Prussians shattered the glass?"

"Probably," said Bourke.

The rain rattled on the oiled paper; gust after gust set it crackling and bulging inward. Bourke started aimlessly toward the door, halted, returned and leaned on the footboard of the bed.

"What are you going to do?" he asked wearily.

"About Buckhurst?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"After a minute of silence Bourke resumed: 'I'd cable in a minute if it wasn't for the threat he made about Yvette and Hilde.' Harwood's face grew red, but he did not look up.

"General Trochu is a strange man," continued Bourke. "If those blackguards should denounce Yvette and Hilde, and bring a lot of ruffians to swear to anything, who can tell what might happen?"

"You mean that the governor might expel them—under the law covering the temporary expulsion of disolute women?" demanded Harwood with an angry frown.

"Yes," replied Bourke, "that's what I mean."

Again a silence ensued, broken at length by Bourke.

"As for Buckhurst's threat to cut our throats—of course, that bothers neither of us—at least, not so long as we are in the city. But I shall not cable now and risk ruining the lives of those two girls."

"No," said Harwood, "we cannot cable." Then he looked up, his face so transformed with hate that Bourke involuntarily recoiled.

"Ceil," he whispered, "ever since they trouble Hilde I've been waiting for you to kill them both, when and where I can!"

Bourke did not reply. Gradually the fierce hate faded away from Harwood's face. He rested his chin on his hand, eyes vacant, lips parted.

"You see, they've got you, Ceil," he said more quietly. "You can't remember meeting Speyer in the crowd when we were watching the Tulleries? Of course, he saw us when Hilde and Yvette gave up the cab to the empress. I suppose he can annoy us if he tries and I'm sure he's going to try."

"It's curious," reflected Harwood, "how anxious he and the rest seem to be to get out of the house. And their returning the other day to re-engage rooms is queer, too. What do you suppose they want?"

Harwood rose suddenly and began to walk up and down, hands clasped behind his back. Presently he halted before his comrade, looking him squarely in the eye.

"Do you know, Ceil, I think I believe Speyer is a German spy!"

"Yes," replied Bourke blankly.

"Eh, spy? Why did he enlist in a Belleville battalion? Do war correspondents do that? Why is he fawning and flattering the Belleville revolutionists? To get news for his miserable German主子? Not much; war news is more important to Americans than a report of anarchist squabbles in the slums of Paris. I'll tell you why he's cringing to Buckhurst and Flourines; he's a paid emissary of Bismarck, hired to stir up internal strife in Paris while the Germans pound the forts to bits outside. And I'll bet you, Ceil, that he never was anything but a spy. What has he done for his paper in New York? Nothing. His columns are filled with stolen dispatches and special work from all the other papers. Speyer is a spy; he has corrupted Stauffer, too. As for Buckhurst, he's a criminal, just now because he believes there's something in it for himself. That is my theory."

Bourke stood by the bed, eagerly attentive, acquiescing with nods and gestures as Harwood proceeded.

"He tried to stab me there in the street when I was down; he had his knee on my chest; if it hadn't been for the Mouse I don't know—I don't know, Ceil—but I think he meant to cut my throat."

He looked up into Bourke's face soberly, beginning for the first time to realize his recent danger.

"The Mouse is a grateful beast, after all," he continued. "I never thought anything about bread cast upon the waters, you know."

"Cast more," said Bourke seriously; "it's a good scheme, Jim."

Opening the door, he added: "We'll cable nothing about Buckhurst for the present. Good night. I'm fit for sleep, I think."

"Good night," replied Harwood absently. After Bourke had gone away he sat for a while on his bed listening to the drumming of raindrops on the paper window panes.

He thought he could sleep, but when he lay among the chilly sheets his lids remained open in the dark. It was Buckhurst's colorless eyes that haunted him—that, and the memory of the pistol flash, the momentary impression of Buckhurst's ashen face streaked with blood, as he groped on the sidewalk for the pistol. The blood? That had been his doing. Twice he had struck Buckhurst heavily between those pale eyes. And as he lay there he knew that this deadly criminal would never forget, never forgive, he had satisfied a criminal's ruling passion—revenge.

Harwood, resting motionless among his pillows, heard the wind rising in the night, heard the sudden creak and swing of storm-shaken shutters, the swelling monotone of the rain. It seemed to beat on his heart. He felt the harmony of the million drops, the swift shafts of wind-swept rain blowing over vast valleys, over hills and plains, and the crinkled surface of unseen rivers.

He wondered whether the Prussians were very near—how soon their black shells would come moaning and whistling over the city. That very morning he had read the bulletin warning the Prussians to prepare for the bombardment by placing valuables in the cellar, installing barrels of water on roof and landings to fight fire, and particularly to remove all paving stones from court and sidewalk in order to lessen the effects of shelling.

He himself had seen workmen stuffing the windows and balconies of the Louvre with bedding and mattresses. He had seen the Arc de Triomphe swathed and padded and sheathed for protection against shot and shell. How soon would the Germans arrive? Which way would they come—from the north or from the east?

Outside the storm was subsiding, a cooler current of air swept across his face. The beat of rain on frame and sill ceased, leaving dripping echoes from rainpipes and eaves. As the wind freshened the dripping roof gutters grew silent. The sobbing of the wind through wet awnings, the rattling of branches, outlined on the paper panes, where long shafts of silvery moonlight fell athwart the window ledge, turning the oiled paper to sheets of palest gilt.

He could not sleep. He crept from the window and to the window and opened it a little way.

Vast masses of silvery clouds swept away into the north, trailing in their wake flecks and filmy tatters. In the midnight velvet of the sky rare stars twinkled like diamonds, dimmed by the splendid white lamp of the moon.

The black ramparts, sharp out against the sky, stretched out their angles east and west; the crimson and sapphire lanterns glittered like gems, staining the wet sidewalks with their colors. Over the bastion the Prussians roared, detached from the massed ramparts, a colossal shape, up-lifted, printed clean black against the horizon.

Even the wind was subsiding now, leaving a clear, fresh odor of distant winter in the air. The moon, too, sparkled with a wintry radiance; the stars went out in its white lustre.

On wall and pavement the etched foliage no longer moved, Harwood leaned from the window ledge, scarcely breathing; for the beauty of the night was upon him and upon his soul was a spell.

He did not know it; he knelt heavily in the moonlight, chin on clasped hands, eyes dimly gleaming. For him the breath of war was far away; alarms, rumors, the dull discolor of expectancy, all had vanished in this placid shadow world, passionate, unreal as a pale aërial vision.

And so, pensive, dreaming, he rose and moved about, unconscious that he was dressing, unconscious why he passed through the door and down the dusky stairs, deeper and deeper into the silent house. At last he stood before a closed door at which he had not knocked. It opened silently and he went in.

Moonlight silvered everything. The white bed, the curtain clustered overhead, the polished falence Sante, smiling her set smile through the shadow; but Hilde's hair, clouding brow and neck, veiled her pale face in a shower of silk and gilt.

They did not speak; she stood silent and white before the Sante; he knelt beside her, holding her hand against his eyes.

All by itself the door swung softly to, and closed.

A clock ticked through the silence; after a long time the weights slid, creating, and an hour struck. There was an imperceptible movement of her hand; he held pressed to his eyes, a soft stir of a fragrant garment, delicate as lace. When he stood up she was waiting; he held her waist imprisoned now, and her silky head; she put both arms around his neck.

When he passed again through the door, the perfume of her lips on his, she sank before the corner where, in the meshed moonlight, Sante Hilde of Carhaix smiles. And there she lay, faint with the sweetest happiness life holds for maid or man.

As for the man she loved, he went blindly up the dusky stairs, groping for his comrade's door. And he entered and sat by his sleeping friend.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Soul of Yvette.

Bourke awoke with a start, his ears ringing in a din so sudden, so frightful, that for a moment he lay, half stupefied, among his pillows. Under his feet, shock on shock, the earthquake outbreak rocked the house, the windows shook and clattered as the cannon's lightning, blast after blast, split the keen air of dawn.

He saw Harwood at the window, beckoning him to come, and he went, shivering and stumbling in the morning chill.

"The forts," motioned Harwood, with his lips. "Look! There's h—l to pay!"

Far across the shrouded country, in the pale dawn, five dim forts towered, crowned with clouds, through the clouds, heaving, rolling, floating, bright lightning darted. Sudden yellow flares of light, spirals of flame, swift canon-jetted flashes played under the canopy of smoke. The great fort of Issy roared from every embrasure; Vanves roared like a volcano; from Montreuil, Ivry, Bricre, peal on peal, the reverberation rolled, until the humming air, surcharged and overstrained with sound, dinned in the ears with muffled, deadened echoes, that set the sickened senses swimming.

And now it seemed as if the wind had changed; the thunder blew clear of the city, and clouds below a pale, there was a sudden silence, filled almost instantly by a roar from the street in front of the house—the shrill, frenzied howl of a mob. "The Prussians!"

Harwood ran back into his own room and looked out into the street. It was choked with people, men, women, children, screaming over the ramparts, shouting, screaming, gesticulating, pointing. Officers stood out against the sky on the bastion, the rising sun warming their crimson caps and striking dazzling sparks from brass-tipped field glasses. Drums were beating everywhere, down by the Porte Rouge, in the parade of the Prince Murat barracks, on every bastion, in every guardhouse. The line battalions fled at double quick from their caserne; the cannoneers of the Prophet clustered over the epaulement and glacis, scanning the distant hills toward Viroflay, Velizy and the plateau of Châtillon.

Up in the window Bourke knelt, his marine glasses fixed on a hillside below Chaville, where a single horseman stood, immovable.

The horseman was a Prussian Uhlán.

Presently Harwood's glass brought more Uhláns into focus. "I'm not afraid," said Bourke. "I'm not afraid." "Why, Hilde?" he said. "WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU HIDING OUTSIDE HERE FOR?"

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