THE LOST PROVINCES.

How Vansittart Came Back to France.

By Louis Tracy.

CHAPTER XXI.

How Wilhelm Received the News.

At about the time when the news of the abduction of Evelyn reached Paris, it reached also the German corps at Metz. The great men laid their heads together and whispered and smiled. But there was one man who heard nothing of it—the Emperor Wilhelm.

When he did hear, as undoubtedly he must, what would he say? That became the question. And also this: Who should undertake to tell him?

What really happened was this: Wilhelm suddenly found himself the object of the steady persecution of all the men around him who could by any means get at his ear.

It began in this way:

About the same hour of the evening as that when the event happened at the inn of Vimes, but on the following night, Von Gossler was alone with Wilhelm. It was in an apartment of the Hotel de Ville at Metz. Wilhelm curled with one hand the upward-tending arc of his aggressive moustache, while a finger of the other pointed to a spot on the long, baize-covered table in the room.

"You understand, then," he said, "it is here—here, about three miles east of Conflans, where the hills open. What the American's plans may be—"

Now was von Gossler's chance.

"The truth is, sire, that, at the moment, if rumor be correct, the American has no plans."

Wilhelm glanced quickly up.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, sire, that something has happened to him which unfits him to manage any affair which even a child might direct."

The general sought to read keenly the face of the emperor. Wilhelm's eyes were cast down and hidden. For ten seconds there was silence.

"What something?"

"His wife, sire—his wife has been kidnapped."

The emperor knew and felt that the eyes of the general were riveted upon his face, and felt, too, that from it every sign of color had faded. But he did not speak. The clock ticked sixty seconds, and sixty more, filling a perfect silence, and during that silence the devils were busy in the room.

When Wilhelm raised his head he was still very pale. He said:

"You understand, then; it is here—here about three miles east of Conflans, where the hills open—"

"Yes, sire," returned von Gossler; "that is quite plain. The idea arose in the brain—"

"What idea, sir?"

"The idea of kidnapping Mrs. Vansittart, sire. It arose in the brain—"

"It has nothing to do with me, general."

"It seems to me a piece of superb strategy, sire. The man who conceived it—"

"Deserves to be hanged, sir! However, it was no one in the pay of Germany. It has nothing whatever to do with me."

"But, sire, I was going to tell you, the man in whose brain the scheme originated is, as a matter of fact—"

"Not what he ought to be, General von Gossler. Pray let the subject drop. I desire now to discuss with you the relative importance of these two hills here."

The two heads went together over the map in a long colloquy. After an hour Von Gossler arose. In the very act of his final bow, he said, as a man who bursts with words and cannot be silent:

"I may whisper—in your majesty's ears—that he is said to be utterly prostrated."

"'He!' Who, general?"

"Mr. Vansittart."

"What about?"

"Well, your majesty, about the disappearance of his wife."

Now Wilhelm lost his temper.

"God in heaven, general!" he cried, can't you let me alone with this man and his wife? Is it my fault if this man's wife is stolen, or hanged, or quartered, or the deuce knows what? Where is your tact, your penetration? Why should I be compelled against my will— Confound you, man! Is it my fault?"

Wilhelm stamped his foot. Von Gossler cowered backward and was silent. With bowed head, he walked from the room. At last he understood Wilhelm; not fully, for the man's nature was not cast in so good a mold as that of his master. Yet, dimly, he understood that here was a noble soul in the throes of a struggle with a huge temptation; and it was clear that the soul had succumbed.

At last, on the second day, the situation became intolerable and Wilhelm was compelled to acknowledge to himself the inner motive of his constant interruptions.

He was then, early in the morning, riding down the Rue des Clercs toward the outworks in company with a bevy of officers. The mass of horses came with a slow clatter behind; he himself rode somewhat in advance, in company with a Teilungs major.

The two had been discussing for some minutes Vansittart's device of presenting infantry before artillery.

"It has only one element to recommend it, sire," the major had said, "and that is its success."

"But we are engaged in a regular war, major," Wilhelm answered; "the tricks of an upstart are one thing and the rules of tactics are another. The upstart may succeed once, twice, thrice; but tactics will tell in the end."

"He is said to be very low, sire."

Here was Wilhelm's sore point. He flushed.

"Who, sir?" he asked, with averted head.

"Mr. Vansittart, sire."

Wilhelm did not reply. There was a minute's silence. Then the Teilungs major cleared his throat. He said:

"We need have little fear, sire, of further novelties proceeding from that head."

Would the man keep on repeating the same thing in infinite iteration, Wilhelm wondered.

"I care nothing about his head, major," said Wilhelm.

There was a pause; there was embarrassment.

Then the major said:

"No doubt you have heard, sire—"

Wilhelm had heard; Wilhelm objected strongly to hearing again. He turned sharply in his saddle like a horse pricked by a sudden spur, saying loudly:

"Heard what, major?"

"That Mrs. Vansittart—"

"What about her?"

"Has been—"

"You lie, sir!" he shouted, all encrimsoned with sudden rage, brandishing his fist. At once he stopped his horse, turned round and pranced into the midst of the bevy of oncoming horses. Then he lifted his voice, and a torrent of invectives came from him.

The officers round hung their heads in half-bewildered awe at this wholly unexpected outbreak. As Wilhelm once more turned his horse's head and the procession moved on the guilty major slunk quietly behind.

Thus did Wilhelm securely seal his ears against the truth. Later in the day it became widely known that no whisper of the facts was to be permitted to reach the monarch. Wilhelm had crushed his nest of ants.

But in doing so he had definitely admitted to himself that he had a motive for this imposition of silence, and that the motive was not a good one.

CHAPTER XXII.

The Quest.

M. Folliet, prefect of police, was busily eating a long-deferred meal in the immemorial old inn at Vimes at 9 o'clock in the evening, when there reached him the sound of voices from the courtyard below, and presently the landlord entered backward, bowing, ushering in two new guests. Folliet stared, almost starting to his feet.

There was Armand, and there, bonnetted and begloved, was Marie.

That morning Folliet had left Armand in Paris with no apparent intention of coming hither. But now, with a sudden remembrance, he recollected Armand's question whether or no he, Folliet, would be found at Vimes that night; and he recalled the fact that Armand had asked it just after the detective's expression of uncertainty as to whether he would be able to find Mrs. Vansittart.

"Well, I'm very glad to see you, sir," said Folliet, "and you, madam," extending his hand. "This is very unexpected. Are you passing through?"

"No, not exactly that, monsieur," answered Armand. "Paris is getting insufferably dull just now. So I thought I would give you a shock. To be startling is my vocation. I see that the village is quite a charming bit of quaint antiquity. Are the wines drinkable?"

"So—so," said Folliet, but about the machines! I thought—"

"O, quite so, monsieur. Those have been attended to. I had plenty of time, for that matter. I have left my instructions with the firm you mentioned, and the things will, no doubt, be ready within the specified time. But—Mrs. Vansittart! Is there any hope, monsieur, if one might ask?"

Now that Folliet's laugh was over at the whimsical apparition of the pair, he was rather vexed at the intrusion.

"Well, I suppose we must not despair," he cried dryly.

By this time Marie had taken off her things. The landlord's daughter entered with a roast capon, and a grimy bottle of wine. Armand began to eat, and also to drink.

"Here," he said, "is to her speedy rescue," and drained his glass twice in succession.

"But if you drink much wine," whispered Marie, "how is M. Folliet to find her then?"

The relation between the amount imbibed by Armand and Folliet's powers of discovery, though vague, seemed quite clear to Marie; Folliet, had he heard, would not have been greatly flattered perhaps.

"I have been reading the Paris papers, Folliet. Of course, they are full of nothing but the story of the abduction, as much of

"SHE APPEARED TO BE WALKING SLOWLY TO AND FRO.

it as our host here could supply to reporters. And I have been making a theory of the event.

"It is not bad wine," said Folliet meekly, "one has only to keep on drinking it, in order to arrive at a stage of absolute self-satisfaction."

"Yes," he said, "it is—it is Argonne wine. Monsieur, Mrs. Vansittart is at Argonne."

"What do you mean, monsieur?"

"That in wine is truth, monsieur—sometimes quite unexpected truth, as now. I presume you are able to see some sort of relation between the fact that this wine is Argonne and the disappearance of Mrs. Vansittart?"

Folliet winked a little—meditatively—then he lifted his head and looked round the room. No, certainly, here the chain of inference was too long for his ken; and he had been able to see much in his time, too.

"I do not see any relation, monsieur," he said simply.

"No," replied Armand, "perhaps it is unfair to expect that you should. The fact is, I believe, that I have a far more intimate knowledge of French wines than you, monsieur. Let me, however, tell you two facts, and then, I think, you will be able to comprehend; first, that when I entered this inn, I ordered our host, with threats which he could see I meant, to place before me the very best wine in his house; and, secondly, that, in spite of these threats, I never for a moment supposed that he would give me Argonne, inasmuch as Argonne has lately become the rarest, as it is one of the most exquisite, wines on earth."

"And why did you not suppose that he would give it you, when you asked for his best?" said Folliet.

"Because I felt sure, monsieur, that such a wine could not possibly be found in such an inn."

"Yet here, you see, it is."

"Yes, here it is, monsieur. But I am willing to wager you a thousand francs that if you offer our host a million louis for a dozen similar bottles he will be unable to produce them."

Saying so, he rose, and tugged the bell-rope. The old man came shambling into the room.

"Monsieur," said Armand carelessly, "this is excellent beverage you give me. I compliment you."

"I am pleased you like it, sir," said the old man, bowing.

"So well, monsieur, that I have determined to offer you 400 francs per bottle for six bottles tomorrow when I continue my journey."

"Four hundred francs," echoed the old man in a kind of glee.

"Four hundred francs."

"But, sir, I have only four bottles left!"

"That is a pity," said Armand. "Four will be useless to me." He glanced at Folliet.

"I am sure, sir, it is very unfortunate," said the old man, confused. "You have one, the gentleman near you another—there are but four left."

"What! You gave monsieur a bottle, too, without his asking for it? You are generous, landlord."

"How I should like to buy some! Pray tell me, whom did you buy them from?" The old man hesitated. Folliet's eyes, fixed on his face, saw it pale a little, though, so far, the detective knew not in the least whither this dialogue tended.

"Ah, you are unwilling to tell me whom you bought them from," said Armand. "It is a trade secret, perhaps. Yet I know. Let me tell you. You bought them from the two guests who drove away from your inn last night at 8 o'clock."

The old man's eyes opened in some alarm. Suspicion, he knew, had turned upon these two as being connected with the two who had remained behind, and had presumably committed the outrage. The old man began to perceive clearly that these were none other than detectives from Paris before whom he stood. What if he, too, were implicated, and his neck endangered? He shuffled and stammered.

"No, monsieur," he said. "I swear—"

"Do not swear," interrupted Armand, "for there is no necessity; merely assert. You did not buy the wine, then? These gentlemen gave it to you?"

"Sir, sir, neither the one nor the other," cried the landlord, resolving now to tell the history of the six bottles of Argonne; "yestere'en, near 6, there arrived at the inn-yard four gentlemen; two of them in a carrosse and pair, and about ten minutes later two others on foot. The first two didn't know the second two—or didn't seem to. But they all had dinner together in the parlor; and during the meal one of the carriage two sent my daughter down to the carriage in the stables, telling her to look inside and she would see a basket with ten bottles of wine in tho squares, of which she was to bring four—which she did, and all four drank of it, friendly like, though there was hardly a word spoken among them. Well, messieurs, about 8 or thereabouts, the carriage two went off in their carriage, leaving the others, and with them, of course, they took their basket of bottles. I didn't care about their wine. I didn't want their wine. But what was my surprise this morning on going to the bottom of the garden to find there the basket with the six bottles in it, right enough, and the squares half choked with mud and the rain which had fallen during the night. There's all my fault, messieurs—a poor man who finds a windfall of wine, what would you have?"

"Why didn't you tell me all that before when I was questioning you?" asked Folliet.

"I thought it of no moment, sir—a poor man who finds a windfall of wine—where's the harm?"

"No harm whatever," said Armand, "on the contrary, to find a basket of Argonne at the bottom of one's garden is the eighth and greatest of the virtues. You may retire, monsieur."

The old man bowed himself out.

"And am I to understand, sir," said Folliet, "that you divined, or deduced, this tale which we have just heard from observations of your own?"

"Something of that sort," replied Armand. There is absolutely no mystery or magic about the matter. You are perhaps not so exquisitely familiar with the aspect of bottles that have long lain in old cellars as I, and there is the key to my present penetration. The first thing, of course, a connoisseur looks at on the presentation before him of his wine is the grime-stains on the outside. I, looking at this bottle tonight, determined first of all that it had never, even for a day, lain in a cellar at all. It was grimy; yet, with absolute certainty I knew that here was not the grime of the cellar. We now know that it was the grime left by soil and rain water when dried, and this, as a matter of fact, I guessed. I expected, on pouring it out, to taste the wretchedest dregs; guess my delight at finding delicious Argonne—Argonne that had never lain in a cellar—Argonne begrimed with rain—Argonne, above all, whose bottle had no label on it, and whose cork had not been sealed with resin. I think now, monsieur, that I need go no further. You draw your own conclusions."

"I do! I do!" cried Folliet with some excitement. "Yet, let me hear yours. I know quite well that they are worth hearing, M. Armand."

"The first conclusion at least!" said Armand, "was at once obvious; namely, that the landlord had, from whatever source, only just acquired the wine—it had never been in his cellar. But the Paris papers assert that he declares that for some days he has had no visitors whatever except the four who interest us. I say the four, for Mrs. Vansittart and the two men who carried her off must have used some conveyance, and since none was hired in the neighborhood, it can only be that the two in the carrosse having gone away, returned and waited for ther confederates in the dark at the bottom of the garden. You have seen this garden, monsieur, and I have not; my conjecture is that at the end of it runs a path large enough to admit a carrosse. Is that so?"

"It is, monsieur. Pray go on."

"Then in that path the carrosse waited. We have therefore to do with four and not two. And you see how it was impossible for me to doubt that, somehow, by means of the four, our host had obtained his Argonne.

"If you see a company of four people going about with an indefinite number of bottles of Argonne without labels, drinking it prodigally at their ordinary meals, and casually leaving the rest of it behind at the bottom of a garden as soon as it becomes inconvenient to them, you may be quite certain that at least one of them is a denizen of Argonne, who, having plenty of Argonne habitually in his possession, brought with him for the pleasure of the rest these odd unlabeled bottles."

Folliet's eyes were riveted on the young man's face. He did not speak; he murmured and nodded assent.

"The landlord tells me," said Folliet, "that three of the four spoke with marked German accents, whereas the fourth spoke quite good French, but was fair-haired. He probably was a German, too, you see, but spoke good French for the simple reason that he has lived a long time in France."

"And if in France, monsieur," replied Armand, "then in Argonne. That one of them came from there I have proved. To be certain that they returned there, one need only remember that Argonne at least fulfills the conditions as to remoteness, a friend, a house and so on, and to remember the extreme rarity of the chances that any other place would fulfill all the conditions necessary to the accomplishment of the design, Mrs. Vansittart is at Argonne."

Marie's head, leaning on his shoulder, suddenly nodded with a jerk. She was asleep.

Folliet arose.

"It is well reasoned," he said. "Through your acumen, monsieur, perhaps by this hour tomorrow night we may have—"

"Discovered their motive for leaving their wine behind, monsieur," said Armand, with a rather strange laugh.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Race.

At about 4 the next morning Folliet knocked at Armand's door and roused him.

"Monsieur," said the detective, "I am about to breakfast and set out upon my search; I need not say that I shall be delighted if you will share my investigations."

"Certainly, monsieur," Armand replied. "I, too, shall be delighted. Can you lend me 100 francs?"

Folliet smiled in the half darkness.

"By all means, monsieur! Here is a note."

Armand turned to dress. When the process was completed he bent over drowsy Marie and kissed her. She put an instinctive arm about him, murmuring sleepy contentment. He said:

"I am going away."

"No!"

She sprang up at once.

"I am!"

"Armand! what for?"

"To find Mrs. Vansittart."

"And you are going to leave me?"

"I must, darling."

"How wretched you will be, and I also! Ah, cruel!"

"No, I can't help; one must be practical and good. I don't quite know where I may have to go to, or I could take you. It won't be very long, our parting. Here are a hundred francs which M. Folliet has given me. With these you will pay your expenses

"NO, MONSIEUR," HE SAID, "I SWEAR—"

at this inn; and from Gravelotte I shall telegraph to you, telling you where to come to me. There are some novels in the trunks which you can read; goodbye, sweet—ah sweet!"

He undid her arms from his neck, and ran away from her half vexed, half tender tears. In half an hour he was with Folliet on a train.

Armand said:

"And now, monsieur—your plans."

"They are simple," replied Folliet. "The distance between Vimes, which we are now leaving, and Argonne, to which we are finally going, is about eighty miles. Just about midway between the two is a little station called Renne. I intend to stop at Renne."

"What for, monsieur?"

"You will immediately agree with me when you hear," said Folliet. "This distance of eighty miles it was evidently the intention of the kidnappers to traverse during the hours of darkness. Morning, of course, would be extremely dangerous to them. But their horses had already done some traveling men they arrived at Vimes, and the rest there was short. It is certain, then, that by some contrivance or other, they managed to change horses during the night, and the place most advantageous to them for the change would be somewhere not far from the middle point between Vimes and Argonne; somewhere not far from Renne. Within a radius of twenty miles around Renne I intend, therefore, to make personal, well-directed inquiries."

"Excellent, monsieur," said Armand—"if we only had a year to spare."

At these words the countenance of Folliet flushed to a deep and angry red.

"Pray explain your meaning," he said, curtly.

"I suppose that Mr. Vansittart is anxious for the recovery of his wife as soon as possible, monsieur?"

"I suppose so, sir. That is why I propose the very speediest means of recovering her."

Armand bowed.

"I differ from you, monsieur, that is all. I think we should go on straight to Argonne at once."

"Very well; then we must agree to differ, monsieur."

"Very well, monsieur."

Armand at once turned to the book he was reading, Follier to his memoranda. Till the train drew up at Renne neither spoke a word.

Folliet rose, collected his stick, mackintosh, and papers, and stepped toward the door. To his surprise he noticed when he reached it that Armand had not moved.

"This is the station, monsieur," said Folliet.

"I know."

"Aren't you coming out?"

"No—I am going on to Argonne."

"O, very good. Good morning."

"Good morning, monsieur. I shall find Mrs. Vansittart before you!"

Folliet flushed.

"That time alone can show, sir."

"Before you, monsieur!"

Folliet had put out his foot on the step-board by this time. He half turned to answer:

"Happy season of youth!"

His foot touched the platform.

"Before you, monsieur!" cried Armand.

"Blessed innocence of childhood!" sneered Folliet.

"O, but M Folliet!" called Armand: "will you lend me 100 francs? I have no money."

Folliet put his hand in his pocket, and without a word handed the other a note. As he was about to pass through a doorway of the station, he heard the unrelenting voice crying after him:

"Before you, monsieur!"

If ever he was on his acme of effort to do a thing well and swiftly he was so now. He had been challenged by a child.

Armand, too, as soon as he found himself alone in the train, knit his brows.

"Come, now," he said aloud, "suppose we teach M. Folliet, the prefect of police, a lesson in modesty."

At the station Armand drank a large tumbler of genuine Argonne, for which he paid only about 4 pence. He walked twenty yards down the street, stopped at an unpretentious hotel and drank another, preparatory to dejeuner. Here was paradise to the light-of-heart, and the quaffing of goblets in Valhalla! His eyes began to sparkle and his feet to tread on air.

His problem was not merely to find Mrs. Vansittart, but to souse himself with Argonne wine and find Mrs. Vansittart as well. The thing was not easy; but with every additional glass his hopes grew rosier-hued.

"Do you know a German named—I forget his name—but a wine grower about here?" he asked the patron of his hotel.

"A German, sir? No."

"Just think now."

"I know none such, monsieur. But I have been only here six months; you would be more likely to find what you want by inquiring in the villages."

He went presently, after breakfast, sauntering through the town, whistling loudly for the benefit of passersby, his hat thrown far back on his head. Armand, as Mr. Arnold says of Heine, was so essentially "disrespectable."

And Folliet all the time was probably working hard, straining every nerve. Every time he thought of this he quickened his steps; every time he heard the cry of the 100 francs in his pocket he struck up a song and entered a drinking house.

But through all the ferment of his brain he did not for a moment entirely lose sight of the end in view; and his fine faculty of thought remained pretty intact, like a glowing coal under heaps of fluff and ashes. He stopped a passerby and said:

"What is the nearest village?"

"Rouflet."

"How far?"

"Four kilometers."

"Any vineyards near it?"

"Two or three round it."

"Can one get good Argonne wine there?"

"O, certainly. It possesses the best vines in the district."

"Thank you, monsieur."

He set off. He had already decided to seek what he wanted in a poor rather than a rich locality, and in a village rather than the town.

Rouflet he found to consist of a steep street, flag-paved. He passed through it singing, and near the further end entered a diminutive cabaret.

On each side of the door two men were leaning, talking. One was the proprietor, a burly figure with a thick black mane of hair, the other was tall, wore rings and a heavy watch chain, and had a nose with a distinct dent in the center of the ridge. The proprietor of the basserie spoke to him with a certain deference which Armand, as he entered, noted. He could hear that they were talking about the war, and the rumored probability of another great battle taking place on the following day.

As Armand entered the landlord left the door to serve him. The other man, who seemed to be merely lounging away a morning's hour at the inn door, followed, and as he did so said with a yawn:

"Well, gossip Pierre, it is long since I have bought a glass of my own wine from you. I, too, will have a sip for good luck."

"Ah, that's talking," answered Pierre; "we must mark it up with chalk."

Yet the tip of the wine grower's broken nose was of so vivid a scarlet that it was certain the drinking of his own wine was not such a rarity with him as Pierre implied.

"Now, here's a spark from Paris," said the wine grower, "you can see from the very cut of his clothes and the way he sips his wine, as if it were dangerous. Isn't that so, neighbor?"

With this playful sally he addressed Armand. They were standing side by side, shoulder to shoulder.

"You are right," said Armand. "I am from Paris."

"And what are you doing our way—touring?"

"No—they sent me down here—doctor people. Left lung. Argonne air, Argonne wine—and plenty of it."

"You are quite a stranger here, then?"

"I don't know a soul."

"What do you think of the chances of a battle tomorrow?"

"I don't care a curse about the chances of a battle tomorrow. What does it matter to such as you and me? I am come down here to drink wine—and get health. My left lung is ba-a-d."

"Well, I wouldn't have thought that to look at you. Do you play chess?"

"Rather! Do you?"

"Hear him, Pierre! He asks if I can play chess! Why, man, of course I can."

"Good! I don't mind taking you at a game, then. But chess playing isn't what I devote myself mostly to. I have another hobby."

"And what's that?"

"Stamp collecting."

Armand had seen a pocketbook end sticking from the breast of the stranger, such a one as is used for the temporary home of stamps, and standing a little out the serrated edges of some specimen sheets.

The man was surprised.

"No!" he said. "Why, it's wonderful! It's the very thing I do myself!"

"I've got a fine example of the suppressed Nevis 84," remarked Armand.

"No! Well, that's a treasure! Will you show it me?"

"With pleasure. My stamp book is in Clermont. Some day during the week, if you will pay me a visit."

At this point the landlord presented to them the chess board and the box containing the pieces. They proceeded to a little room back of the bar, and sat with the board between them. Armand ordered a bottle of 90.

At the end of three hours they still sat there. Of five games Armand won three, and with every game he ordered a bottle of 90. The talk was all of stamps.

At 4 o'clock, in a little village twelve miles from Renne, Folliet, on his side, was deep in talk with a small vigneron of the district.

He had been hearing a tale about a carriage from which the horse had been taken at midnight in order to put in their places two of the vigneron's own which had been bought from him during the day for ready money down.

"How many people were there?" asked Folliet.

"Four, I fancy, monsieur, but I only saw one of them well."

"A German?"

"No—French."

"How do you know?"

"He spoke French quite well."

"What sort of looking man?"

"Tall, with fair hair and moustache."

"Go on."

"That's about all I remember. He was a pleasant kind of man to talk to, too. O, stop! There was something wrong with his nose. It had a dent in the middle of the bridge."

"Why didn't you give information of all this to the police instead of giving me this trouble?"

Folliet, as he said it, glanced anxiously at his watch, with an exclamation of impatience.

"I had no idea that there was anything wrong," answered the man. "All was square and above board."

"Well, here's a louis. I may want you again."

He jumped into a fly at once, and went galloping through the lanes toward Renne. He sent a telegram to the bureau de police at Clermont.

"Find out at once address of man, fair, tall, broken nose, probably German, probably vintner, in district of Argonne. Promptitude of supreme importance. Will arrive next train. Folliet, Prefect."

Then he went to the station, and chafing with nervous impatience, walked up and down the platform, waiting.

CHAPTER XXIV.

To Gravelotte.

Folliet did not arrive at Clermont till after 7 that night. But he arrived full of hope, and at Clermont-en-Argonne the address and the name of the man he wanted were waiting for him. The detective who made inquiries was in attendance and handed him a slip on his entry into the bureau des renseignements. There was a man who almost entirely answered to the description, and there was only one in the district. His name was Henri Riechenberg, and he was the owner of the vineyard called La Piblouette, about two kilometers northeast of Rouflet, which in turn was a village four kilometers north of Clermont.

With joy he saw that there was no moon and that the sky was covered over with black clouds. He took a cab to Rouflet, dismissing it just outside the village. The night was then confirmed and dark.

He drew the collar of his mackintosh high over his ears and chin and passed quickly down the street. Then he struck northeast over the open country.

He met no one anywhere.

He had received a description sufficiently minute of the place. He turned to the left along a footpath which ran along the base of the rock. In his course, he passed by a square spot of deeper blackness in the rock face. He tapped it; it was wooden. It was a door—the entrance to the cellars of Henri Riechenberg.

He walked on and in three minutes came to a break in the continuity of the cliff; it was a narrow steep flight of stone steps, cut out of the rock to the upper level of the cliff. He ascended.

At the top he found himself at the entrance of an extremely long avenue of lindens, which met overhead. Here it was very dark. He proceeded up the avenue with intense caution, though, in reality, there was little need for it, for not a sound broke the silence of the world and the moss under foot was deep and continuous, rendering the footfall noiseless. Presently, at the far end of the avenue, where the trees almost met in perspective remoteness, he saw the glimmer of a light. But it vanished almost at once.

He went on. "That light," he said, "is a light in the house of Henri Riechenberg. Some one has opened and shut a door or a window—hence its appearance and disappearance. Is Mrs. Vansittart really and truly behind those shuttered apertures? I wonder—I wonder. The mere shutting of them is suspicious. I shall know, Henri Riechenberg, within fifteen minutes.

But he knew sooner; he knew within five minutes. Suddenly, as he walked through the now dense darkness on the absolutely soundless moss, he came into sharp collision with some one coming in the opposite direction down the avenue. It was a man, bigger than himself and heavier. Folliet nearly fell backward.

"Pardon, m'sieur," said a rather thick and drowsy voice. "Collisions are natural to Erebus and modern civilization alike."

The remark was quite in the tone of the Latin quarter. Folliet, with a start as violent as though he had heard the devil speak, recognized Armand.

"Ah, M. Amand—you!" he gasped.

"What, you, M. Folliet?"

"It is I," admitted Folliet.

Armand's hand went out and hit upon Folliet's in the dark. He gave the detective a hearty grip.

"M. Folliet," he said, "allow me to congratulate you. You are a great man."

"How!" exclaimed Folliet—"it is you!—you were here first!"

"That is true, monsieur. But then, I did the right thing. You did the wrong—and get here all the same. That is what I call greatness."

"Well, if this fellow isn't a gentleman to his marrow!" said Folliet to himself. He added aloud: "But, monsieur, this is the mere sophistry of generosity! Don't you see, it is you, this time, at least, who are the great man."

"Monsieur, we are both great men," said Armand with large sententiousness.

"But—but—how long have you been here?"

"About two hours."

"Good Lord! not in the house?"

"Yes—in the house. I have just left it."

"And is Mrs. Vansittart there?"

"For the last hour and a half I have been sleeping in the room adjoining hers."

"Sleeping! O, this is incredible."

"Only at first, monsieur. Not when you know the facts. The truth is, monsieur, I have been—drunk on Argonne wine. Or, if drunk is too coarse a word to apply to the effects of Argonne, say transfigurated."

"Yes you are. I believe you are soberest when you are drunk. Pray tell me—how did you manage?"

"There is a man, monsieur, who, according to my present recollection, is called Henri Riechenberg. This man, almost as soon as I saw him, and as soon as I heard him, I knew to be one of the four. It is not true that he speaks perfect French, though his French is near perfection. He has, in fact, lived half his life in Munich. Having understood this, I persuaded him to get drunk in my company. When I played chess with Riechenberg, I beat him only sufficiently to induce him to keep on playing. Finally, as we are both ardent philatelists, he took me home to see his collection of stamps, and while he was showing me we both fell asleep. Riechenberg, believe me, still slumbers."

"But, Mrs. Vansittart! You saw her?"

"I saw her, monsieur. She will die soon if not rescued."

He said it in an awed whisper. And in an awed whisper, Folliet answered:

"How? die, you say. How do you mean?"

"I only caught one glimpse of her face. The house, I may tell you, is a small, mean one—two stories—built of white freestone—not more than eight rooms. But six of these rooms are crowded with men, armed, soldier-like people, Germans. The seventh room, on the first floor, is Riechenberg's, who has her under his immediate surveillance; the eighth is Mrs. Vansittart's. As I passed into Riechenberg's room I saw through a slightly opened door—a woman. She appeared to be slowly walking to and fro; it was evident at once that she was harassed to the point of lunacy. But her face, monsieur! Anything as wan, and drawn, and pity-kindling, you can hardly imagine. If this lasts—"

He stopped.

"Ah, but it won't last!" cried Folliet with clenched fists. "It is you who have found her. What do you advise?"

"I don't advise anything, M. Folliet," said Armand. "A practical point like that I leave to you. But I have one warning to give you—don't make an attack upon the house unless you are quite sure that your force of gendarmes very largely preponderates over the force of armed men within it. Bring a merely equal force against the place, and we lose Mrs. Vansittart."

"I entirely agree with you, monsieur."

"Then, let us go to him, and consult him."

"By all means—and at once."

"Can you ride?"

"Is there no train?"

"Not for some time. Too swift and strong horses—that's what we want. Twenty miles or so, the distance is nothing. Let us go back to Clermont. I can get two of the gendarmerie mounts."

They at once set out at a rapid walk. On the road near Rouflet they met an empty cart and offered the driver a louis to take them at a gallop to Clermont. In twenty minutes they arrived in the town.

As they went toward the bureau de police they passed a postoffice. Armand entered and dispatched a telegram to Marie at Vimes:

"Take the first train to Gravelotte. I shall be there, looking out for you."

Then he joined Folliet at the bureau over the way.

In ten minutes they were mounted on two stout coursers, and clattering through the town.

Twice only they drew rein to knock at cottage doors and make themselves certain of the route. The rest of the journey was one long, silent, intense gallop. They passed through the French army, and at about midnight dashed into Gravelotte on horses panting and wet with spume.

Vansittart was putting up at the inn called Cheval d'Or. He had retired to bed, but a chambermaid was able to give positive assurance that he was not asleep. He could be heard walking still in his room. She took up a message, and returned with the command that Folliet should wait in the salon. Armand had not sent up his name.

Presently Vansittart entered, wrapped in a dressing gown of crimson silk, with a gold-wrought cointure.

"Ah, M. Folliet," he said, "this is a surprise. And do my eyes deceive me? Surely here is M. Dupres."

He spoke quite heartily. But his pretence of nonchalance was as hollow and shallow as possible, making him still more an object of pity. He could not hide the haggard glare of his eye, nor the care which sat on his faded cheek.

"We are now arrived post haste from the neighborhood of a small town called Clermont, in Argonne, Mr. Vansittart," said Folliet. "I may tell you at once that we have found Mrs. Vanstittart; or, rather, to be exact, this gentleman here has found her."

"M. Dupres?"

"Yes, sir."

"Seen her?"

His face was screwed into an expression of gaunt, distorted inquisitiveness.

"Yes, I have seen her," said Armand.

"Really? You have? My God, you have seen her, then?"

His knees gave, and he sank backward upon a couch.

"I merely caught a glimpse of her face in passing," said Armand.

"And she is—well? Did she seem—well? To think that you have seen her!"

Armand, in pity, said:

"O, she is well enough. A little pale, perhaps—no more than is natural under the circumstances."

"A little pale, perheps," Vansittart repeated mechanically.

"She is in a healthy locality," ventured Folliet.

"But where—where?"

"At a house surrounded by vineyards in the Argonne district."

"But, M. Folliet, you have left her there?"

"The place is full of armed men, monsieur. I did not at the moment feel myself in a safe position to attempt a rescue without consulting you. An attempt which failed would make matters only worse."

"How many men?"

"I should say between thirty for forty," replied Armand.

There are extensive wine cellars beneath the house, a labyrinth of hiding places, doubtless in direct communication by stairs with the building. During an attack which is not also a complete surprise, your wife could be—"

"Ah, I see! taken down into the cellars, eh? An excellent plan! Is your object, then, to drive me mad, monsieur?"

"No, no. It is merely a suggestion which I make. Find me the men, and I will undertake the rest. You must not come. You must see that you are not in the right frame of mind for such an enterprise. And the army here cannot—spare you."

Vansittart's head was bowed down to his knees. For some time he sat so. Then he said:

"Well, M. Folliet, if you will come with me, I think I can put at your disposal at once whatever force we may think necessary for a rescue. As for myself, I am sorry I cannot accompany you; things here, you see, will probably require my presence."

The three left the inn together and proceeded down the street to a private house where Colonel Montsaloy, a man whose activity and resource Vansittart had observed, was now lying asleep. They roused the house and in a few minutes the four men were deep in colloquy.

Vansittart recommended a contingent of sixty chasseurs as a suitable escort, insisting upon the necessity of secrecy, and reminding them of the wine cellars beneath the house. In case of need the local gendarmerie might be called into requisition.

"If I have the happiness to see you here by 9 o'clock tomorrow morning, monsieur," he said to Montsaloy, "you will possess my lifelong gratitude."

They walked toward the west end of the village. Within twenty minutes Armand and Vansittart stood listening to the hoofbeats of the troop lessening in the distance and darkness.

(To Be Continued.)