

THE MOTHER.

A Recollection of the Siege.

(Translated from the "Contes du Lundi," of Alphonse Daudet, by Katharine Melick.)

That morning I went to Mount Valerien, to see our friend the painter Barre, lieutenant of the militia of the Seine. Just now the brave soldier found himself in the trenches. No chance of a movement. He must content himself with promenading up and down like a shipman of the watch before the fort postern, talking of Paris; of the war, of our dear absent ones. All at once my lieutenant, who, beneath his militia uniform keeps always the ardor of the artist apprentice, interrupted himself halting abruptly and clutching my arm.

"Oh, what a perfect Daumier!" he said softly, and the corner of his little grey eye lit suddenly, like that of a hound catching a scent, as he showed me two venerable profiles appearing upon the ridge of Mount Valerien.

A perfect Daumier it was. The man in long maroon redingote, with a collar of greenish velvet that seemed made of old forest moss, slender, tiny, red-checked, with low forehead, round eyes and a nose like the beak of the snowy owl. A wrinkled crow's face, solemn and stupid. To complete the setting, a rush basket garlanded with flowers, from which stood out the neck of a bottle, and under the other arm a canister of preserves,—the indispensable canister which Parisians never see without recalling the five months' blockade. * * * As to the woman, one saw at first only a huge riding hood, and an old shawl which wrapped her tightly from head to feet, as if the better to outline her wretchedness; then an occasional glimpse, between the faded ruches of the capote, of the tip of a sharp nose, and some thin grey locks.

Arrived on the plateau, the man stopped to take breath and to wipe his forehead. Yet it was not warm up there in the mists of the end of November; but they had come so quickly.

The woman did not stop. Marching straight to the postern, she looked at us a minute, hesitating as if she wished to speak; but, abashed perhaps by the face of the officer, she turned instead to the sentinel, and I heard her ask timidly to see her son, a soldier of the sixteenth, the thirtieth of Paris.

"Stop there," said the guard; "I will call him."

Overjoyed, with a sigh of relief, she turned to her husband, and the two went away to sit down at the edge of a slope.

They waited there very long. This Mount Valerien is so large, so intricate in course, and slope, with its bastions, barracks, casemates! Undertake, then, to search for a soldier of the Sixteenth, in that inextricable city, suspended between earth and sky a spiral floating among mists like the isle of Laputa. And not this alone; for at that hour the fort swarms with drummers, trumpeters, soldiers running, horses neighing. Guards are relieved, drill executed, rations issued; a bloody spy is brought in by the sharpshooters; some peasants of Nanterre come, to complain in general; a courier arrives at a gallop, the man terrified, the horse reeking; ambulance panniers return from the advance posts with the wounded, balanced, one on each flank of the mules, and groaning softly, like sick lambs; sailors mount a new field piece, to the music of the fife, and the "heave ho;" the flocks of the fort are driven forth by a shepherd in red pantaloons, goad in hand and musket in shoulder-belt: all this throng, coming, going, crossing in the court, is swallowed up beneath the postern as within the gateway of an Oriental caravansary.

"They cannot have forgotten my

son," said the eyes of the mother, all this time, and every five minutes she rose, cautiously approached the entrance and, sheltering herself against the wall, peered furtively into the outer court; but she dared ask no more, for fear of making her son ridiculous. The man, even more abashed, did not stir from his corner; and every time she returned, trembling, disheartened, it was evident that he chafed at her impatience, and gave her emphatic explanations of the necessities of the service, accompanied by gestures like those of an imbecile trying to make himself comprehended.

I have always been keenly interested in those little scenes, silent, suggestive, wherein one divines far more than one sees; those pantomimes of the street that elbow you, as you walk, and with a gesture reveal a complete existence; but what captivated me here above all was the simplicity, the naiveness of my actors, and I felt an exquisite emotion in reading through their expression, transparent and clear as the soul of two actors of Seraphin, all the phases of an adorable domestic drama.

I saw the mother saying, on a fair morning, "He wears me, this Monsieur Trochu, with his orders. For three months I have not seen my son. I am going to embrace him."

The father, alarmed, disturbed in his customary way of life, terrified at the thought of the pilgrimages to be made in order to procure a permit, at first attempts to reason.

"But you do not think, my dear. This Mount Valerien is tremendous. How can you go there without a cart? Besides it is a citadel! No women can go there."

"I shall go there," says the mother, and as he executes her behests, the man sets forth. He goes to the secretary, to the mayor, to the staff major, the commissary, sweating with fear, trembling with cold, driving himself along, losing his way, waiting two hours at the rear of a department, to find that it is not the one. At last he comes home, in the evening, with a permit from the commander in his pocket. The next day they rise betimes, in the cold, by lamp light; the father breaks a crust to sustain himself, but the mother is not hungry. She wants to eat up there with her boy. And to regale a little the poor soldier, they heap quickly, very quickly, into the rush basket, the store and the reserve store of provisions for the siege,—chocolate, comfits, bottled wine, all, even to the canister, an eight-franc canister which they have guarded sacredly against the days of dire want. See them set forth. Now they come to the ramparts; they reach the gates. The pass must be shown. It is the mother who trembles. But no. It appears that they are in order.

"Pass," says the adjutant.

Then alone she breathes.

"He is very polite, that officer," and, light as a partridge, she trips, she hastens. The man can scarcely keep step.

"How fast you go, my dear."

But she hears not. High up there in the mists of the horizon, Mount Valerien signals her.

"Make haste—he is here."

And now that they are come, a new anguish. If they should not find him! If he should not come?

Suddenly I see her start, touch the arm of the old man and rise at a spring. From afar, beneath the arch of the postern, she has recognized his step.

It is he!

When he appears, the whole facade of the fortress is illuminated.

A noble lad, by my faith! Firm built, with knapsack on shoulder, gun in hand. He greets them with frank face, in tones glad and troubled.

"Bonjour, maman."

And on the instant, knapsack, mil-

tary cape, musket, and all disappear in the huge riding hood. Then the father has his turn, but this is not so long. The riding hood covets all for itself. It is insatiable.

"How are you getting on? Are you well bedded? What of your washing?"

And beneath the frills of the poke I felt the long look of love with which she enveloped him from head to feet; in a shower of embraces, tears, little smiles; an arraignment of three months of maternal tenderness, which she paid him all in a breath. The father also was much excited but did not wish to seem so. He felt that we were noticing, and glanced at us as if to say:

"Pray excuse her; she is a woman."

Excuse her!

A trumpet call blew suddenly upon the ecstasy.

"The summons," said the son; "I must go."

"What! not eat with us?"

"Oh no. I cannot. I am on duty for twenty-four hours up there in the fort."

"Oh!" said the poor woman; and was speechless.

They remained a moment, all three, looking at one another dismayed. Then the father spoke:

"At least take the canister," he said in a broken voice, at once touching and comical in its gourmand abnegation. But alas! In the distress and confusion of farewell, they cannot find that luckless canister; and it is pitiful to see those feeble, trembling hands searching, fluttering; to hear those voices, choked by tears demanding, "the canister! Where is the canister?" without reproach at mingling that small culinary loss with the mighty sorrow. The canister recovered, there was a last long embrace, and the son re-entered the fort a run.

Thinking how far they had come for that lunch together, what a grand feast they had made it, how the mother had not slept that night,—could anything be more heart-breaking than that broken party, that corner of paradise displayed and instantly shut up?

For some time they remained motionless on the spot, their eyes riveted upon the postern where the boy had disappeared. At last the man shook himself, made a half turn, coughed once or twice very courageously, and, once well assured of his voice,—

"Come, mother. We must be off," he said loudly and cheerfully. From a distance he made us a low bow, and took the arm of his wife. I followed them with my eyes to the turn of the road. The father had a wild air. He brandished the rush basket with furious gestures. The mother appeared more calm. She walked at his side, with bowed head, dropped arms. But over her narrow shoulders I saw the shawl shake convulsively.

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COLONEL STOTSENBURG.

For I remember stopping by the way
To watch a Potter thumping his wet clay:
And with its all-obiterated Tongue
It murmured,—“Gently, Brother,
gently pray.”

—Rubaiyat.

I do not ask the impossible when I ask for greater consideration on the part of each of us toward the other. I want merely a change of position. As it stands now, we condemn men until they work themselves out of our condemnation—why should we not appraise their work at first and hold them as good until shown to be faulty. Neither heroes among men nor perfection in mankind is necessary: let the one live in epic and the other in theory. The conditions of our time will give us all that can be desired. Contemporaries tell us that this age is eminently a practical one, that romance glows for the average man only between book covers or in the imagination. For what we do, we beg that judgment be deferred until results may speak for themselves; and if they are good, give us the appreciation that by right it ours.

Such a gentleman was the Colonel, asking but this. However; we did not wait, when first he came among us, but stamped him with the seal of our condemnation, and so held him while he crossed the seas and stretched his firing-line. Those illustrious Fellows, who sit in high places, using postage stamps free of charge, possessing superior acumen, demanded that his removal be immediate and instantaneous.

But this is as it may be. His revenge upon this unjust censure of ours was sweet, though at best the means were scanty; he was too brave to cry out against it, too noble to return it. He chose the last and best way—to die for it.

The sharp crack of rifles and the ping of flying bullets sound across the swamps and beneath the tangled creepers tossed in lattice work along sluggish streams. Armed men lie panting in the tall grass, hot sweat running down their faces. The slender blade-stalks quiver and rattle in the scorching air.

A man springs to his feet—"Charge!" The grass is alive with rushing men; it ripples between their legs, and lies broken behind. The moment is a long one—an eternity—to cross that strip of fire. Spurts of smoke and tips of red dart into the air. Short snappy reports are heard.

But he is there—at their head—sword in hand—face tense and mouth set tight. A ringing shout comes from the line.

Suddenly he stops with a quick, convulsive jerk. The sword slips from his fingers. He falters and sinks to his knees with hand on breast. And so to the ground. The bullets sing on, the slender grass and white flowers nod and whisper.—*The Kiote.*

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“Why did all of those actors leave that boarding house so suddenly?”
“The landlady bought an egg plant.”