The Siege

WE were going up Avenue des Champs-Elysées with Dr. V——, asking the shell-riddled walls, and the sidewalks torn up by grape-shot, for the story of the siege of Paris, when, just before we reached the Rond-point de l'Etoile, the doctor stopped and, pointing to one of the great corner houses so proudly grouped about the Arc de Triomphe, said to me:

"Do you see those four closed windows up there on that balcony? In the early days of August, that terrible August of last year, so heavily laden with storms and disasters, I was called there to see a case of apoplexy. It was the apartment of Colonel Jouve, a cuirassier of the First Empire, an old enthusiast on the subject of glory and patriotism, who had come to live on the Champs-Élysées, in an apartment with a balcony, at the outbreak of the war. Guess why? In order to witness the triumphant return of our troops.

Poor old fellow! The news of Wissembourg reached him just as he was leaving the table. When he read the name of Napoleon at the foot of that bulletin of defeat, he fell like a log.

"I found the former cuirassier stretched out at full length on the carpet, his face covered with blood, and as lifeless as if he had received a blow on the head from a poleaxe. He must have been very tall when he was standing; lying there, he looked enormous. Handsome features, magnificent teeth, a fleece of curly white hair, eighty years with the appearance of sixty. Beside him was his granddaughter, on her knees and bathed in tears. She looked like him. One who saw them side by side might have taken them for two beautiful Greek medallions, struck from the same die, one of which was old and earth-coloured, a little roughened on the edges, the other resplendent and clean-cut, in all the brilliancy and smoothness of a fresh impression.

"The child's grief touched me. Daughter and granddaughter of soldiers, her father was on MacMahon's staff, and the image of that tall old man stretched out before her evoked in her mind another image no less terrible. I comforted her as best I could, but in reality, I had little hope. We had to do with a case of complete paralysis on one side, and at eighty years of age few people recover from it. For three days the patient lay in the same state of inanition and stupor. Then the news of Reichshofen reached Paris. You remember in what a strange way it came. Up to the evening, we all believed in a great victory, twenty

thousand Prussians killed and the Prince Royal a prisoner. I know not by what miracle, what magnetic current, an echo of that national rejoicing sought out our poor deaf-mute in the depths of his paralysis; but the fact is that on that evening, when I approached his bed, I did not find the same man there. His eye

was almost clear, his tongue less heavy. He had the strength to smile at me, and he stammered twice:

"'Vic-to-ry!'

"And as I gave him details of the grand exploit of MacMahon, I saw that his features relaxed and his face lighted up.

"When I left the room, the girl was waiting for me at the door, pale as death. She was sobbing.

"'But he is saved!' I said, taking her hands.

"The unhappy child hardly had the courage to reply. The true report of Reichshofen had been placarded;

MacMahon in retreat, the whole army crushed. We gazed at each other in consternation. She was in despair, thinking of her father. I trembled, thinking of the old man. He certainly could not stand this fresh

shock. And yet what were we to do? Leave him his joy, and the illusions which had revived him? But in that case we must lie.

"'Very well, I will lie!' said the heroic girl, quickly wiping away her tears; and with radiant face she entered her grandfather's chamber.

"It was a hard task that she had undertaken. The first few days she had no great difficulty. The good man's brain was feeble, and he allowed himself to be deceived like a child. But with returning health his ideas became clearer. We had to keep him posted concerning the movement of the armies, to draw up military bulletins for him. Really, it was pitiful to see that lovely child leaning night and day over her map of Germany, pinning little flags upon it, and struggling to lay out a glorious campaign: Bazaine besieging Berlin, Froissart in Bavaria, MacMahon on the Baltic. For all this she asked my advice, and I assisted her as well as I could; but it was the grandfather who was especially useful to us in that imaginary invasion. He had conquered Germany so many times under the First Empire! He knew all the strokes beforehand: 'Now this is where they will go. Now this is what they will do'; and his anticipations were always realised, which did not fail to make him very proud.

"Unlucky it was of no avail for us to take cities and win battles; we never went quickly enough for him.

That old man was insatiable! Every day, when I arrived, I learned of some new military exploit.

"'Doctor, we have taken Mayence,' the girl would say to me, coming to meet me with a heart-broken smile, and I would hear through the door a joyous voice shouting to me:

"'They are getting on! They are getting on! In a week we shall be in Berlin!'

"At that moment the Prussians were only a week's march from Paris. We asked ourselves at first if it would be better to take him into the provinces; but as soon as we were outside the city, the state of the country would have told him everything, and I considered him still too weak, too much benumbed by his great shock, to let him know the truth. So we decided to remain.

"The first day of the investment of Paris, I went up to their rooms, I remember, deeply moved, with that agony at the heart which the closed gates, the fighting under the walls, and our suburbs turned into frontiers, gave us all. I found the good man seated on his bed, proud and jubilant.

"'Well,' he said, 'so the siege has begun!'

"I gazed at him in blank amazement.

"'What, colonel! you know?'

"His granddaughter turned towards me:

"'Why, yes, doctor, that's the great news. The siege of Berlin has begun.'

"As she said this, she plied her needle with such a sedate and placid air! How could he have suspected anything? He could not hear the guns of the forts. He could not see our unfortunate Paris, all in confusion and dreadful to behold. What he saw from his bed was a section of the Arc de Triomphe, and in his room, about him, a collection of bric-a-brac of the First Empire, well adapted to maintain his illusion. Portraits of marshals, engravings of battles, the King of Rome in a baby's dress, tall consoles adorned with copper trophies, laden with imperial relics, medals, bronzes, a miniature of St. Helena, under a globe, pictures representing the same lady all becurled, in a ball-dress of yellow, with leg-of-mutton sleeves and bright eyes;—and all these things: consoles, King of Rome, marshals, yellow ladies, with the high-necked, short-waisted dresses, the bestarched stiffness, which was the charm of 1806. Gallant colonel! It was that atmosphere of victories and conquests, even more than anything we could say to him, that made him believe so innocently in the siege of Berlin.

“From that day our military operations were much simplified. To take Berlin was only a matter of patience. From time to time, when the old man was too much bored, we would read him a letter from his son—an imaginary letter, of course, for nothing was allowed to enter Paris, and since Sedan, MacMahon’s aide-de-camp had been sent to a German fortress. You can imagine the despair of that poor child, without news from her father, knowing that he was a prisoner, in need of everything, perhaps sick, and she obliged to represent him as writing joyful letters, a little short, perhaps, but such as a soldier on the field might be expected to write, always marching forward through a conquered country. Sometimes her strength gave way; then they were without news for weeks. But the old man became anxious, could not sleep. Thereupon a letter from Germany would speedily arrive, which she would bring to his bedside and read joyously, forcing back her tears. The colonel would listen religiously, smile with a knowing air, approve, criticise, and explain to us the passages that seemed a little confused. But where he was especially grand was in the replies that he sent to his son. ‘Never forget that you are a Frenchman,’ he would say to him. ‘Be generous to those poor people. Don’t make the invasion too hard for them.’ And there were recommendations without end, admirable preachments upon respect for the proprieties, the courtesy which should be shown to the ladies, a complete code of military honour for the use of conquerors. He interspersed also some general considerations upon politics, the conditions of peace to be imposed upon the vanquished. Thereupon I must say that he was not exacting.

“‘A war indemnity, and nothing more. What is the use of taking their provinces? Is it possible to turn Germany into France?’

“He dictated this in a firm voice; and one was conscious of such candour in his words, of such a noble, patriotic faith, that it was impossible not to be moved while listening to him.

“Meanwhile the siege went on—not the siege of Berlin, alas! It was the time of intense cold, of the bombardment, of epidemics and of famine. But, thanks to our care, to our efforts, to the unwearying affection which multiplied itself about him, the old man’s serenity was not disturbed for an instant. To the very end I was able to obtain white bread and fresh meat for him. There was none for anybody but

him, to be sure; and you can imagine nothing more touching than those breakfasts of the grandfather, so

innocently selfish—the old man seated on his bed, fresh and smiling, with a napkin at his chin, and his granddaughter beside him, a little pale because of privations, guiding his hand, helping him to drink, and to eat all those forbidden good things. Then, enlivened by the repast, in the comfort of his warm room, the winter wind whistling outside and the snow eddying about his windows, the ex-cuirassier would recall his campaigns in the north and would describe to us for the hundredth time that terrible retreat from Russia, when they had nothing to eat but frozen biscuit and horseflesh.

"'Do you understand that, my love? We had horseflesh!'

"I rather think that she did understand it. For two months she had had nothing else. From that day, however, as the period of convalescence drew near, our task about the patient became more difficult. That numbness of all his senses, of all his members, which had served us so well hitherto, began to disappear. Two or three times, the terrible volleys from Porte Maillot had made him jump, with his ears pricked up like a hunting-dog; we were obliged to invent a final victory of Bazaine under the walls of Berlin, and guns fired in his honour at the Invalides. Another day when his bed had been moved to the window—it was, I believe, the Thursday of Buzenval—he saw large numbers of National Guards collected on Avenue de la Grande Armée.

"'What are all those troops?' asked the good man; and we heard him mutter between his teeth:

"'Poorly set up! Poorly set up!'

"That was all; but we understood that we must take great precautions thenceforth. Unluckily we did not take enough.

"One evening when I arrived, the girl came to me in great trouble.

"'They are to march into the city to-morrow,' she said.

"Was the grandfather's door open? In truth, on thinking it over afterwards, I remembered that his face wore an extraordinary expression that night. It is probable that he had overheard us. But we were talking

of the Prussians; and the good man was thinking of the French, of that triumphal entry which he had been

awaiting so long—MacMahon marching down the avenue amid flowers and flourishes of trumpets, his son beside him, and he, the old colonel, on his balcony, in full uniform as at Lutzen, saluting the torn

flags and the eagles blackened by powder.

"Poor Father Jouve! He had imagined doubtless that we intended to prevent him from witnessing that parade of our troops, in order to avoid too great excitement. So he was very careful not to mention it to any one; but the next day, at the very hour when the Prussian battalions entered hesitatingly upon the long road which leads from Porte Maillot to the Tuileries, the window up there opened softly, and the colonel appeared on the balcony, with his helmet, his long sword, all the glorious old array of one of Milhaud's cuirassiers. I wonder still what effort of the will, what sudden outburst of life had placed him thus upon his feet and in his harness. This much is sure, that he was there, standing behind the rail, amazed to find the broad avenues so silent, the blinds of the houses closed, Paris as gloomy as a huge lazaretto, flags everywhere, but such strange flags, white with little crosses, and no one to go to meet our

soldiers.

"For a moment he might have thought that he was mistaken.

"But no! Yonder, behind the Arc de Triomphe, there was a confused rumbling, a black line approaching in the rising sunlight. Then, little by little, the points of the helmets gleamed, the little drums of Jena began to beat, and beneath the Arc de Triomphe, while the heavy tramp of the regiments and the clashing

of the sabres beat time, Schubert's Triumphal March burst forth!

"Thereupon in the deathlike silence of the square, a cry rang out, a terrible cry: 'To arms! To arms! The Prussians!' and the four uhlans of the vanguard saw up yonder, on the balcony, a tall old man wave his arms, stagger, and fall. That time, Colonel Jouve was really dead."