WALSH WILLIAM SHEPARD

IN SEARCH OF A SON

William Walsh

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Содержание

CHAPTER I. 5
CHAPTER II. 8
CHAPTER III. 10
CHAPTER IV. 12
CHAPTER V. 14
CHAPTER VI. 16
CHAPTER VII. 18
CHAPTER VIII. 20
CHAPTER IX. 22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 23

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CHAPTER I.
THE DESPATCH

In the great silence of the fields a far-off clock struck seven. The sun, an August sun, had been up for some time, lighting up and warming the left wing of the old French château. The tall old chestnut-trees of the park threw the greater part of the right wing into the shade, and in this pleasant shade was placed a bench of green wood, chairs, and a stone table.

The door of the château opened, and a gentleman lightly descended the threshold. He was in his slippers and dressing-robe, and under the dressing-robe you could see his night-gown. After having thrown a satisfied look upon the beauty of nature, he approached the green seat, and seated himself before the stone table. An old servant came up and said,—

"What will you take this morning, sir?"

And as the gentleman, who did not seem to be hungry, was thinking what he wanted, the servant added,—

"Coffee, soup, tea?"

"No," said the gentleman; "give me a little vermouth and seltzer water."

The servant retired, and soon returned with a tray containing the order. The gentleman poured out a little vermouth and seltzer water, then rolled a cigarette, lighted it, and, leaning back upon the rounded seat of the green bench, looked with pleasure at the lovely scene around him. On the left, in a small lake framed in the green lawn, was reflected one wing of the old château, as in a mirror. The bricks, whose colors were lighted up by the sun, seemed to be burning in the midst of the water. The large lawn began at the end of a gravelled walk, and seemed to be without limit, for the park merged into cultivated ground, and verdant hills rose over hills. There was not a cloud in the sky.

The gentleman, after gazing for some minutes around him, got up and opened the door of the château. He called out, "Peter!" in a subdued voice, fearing, no doubt, to waken some sleeper.

The servant ran out at once.

"Well, Peter," said the gentleman, "have the papers come?"

"No, sir; they have not yet come. That surprises me. If you wish, sir, I will go and meet the postman."

And Peter was soon lost to sight in a little shady alley which descended into the high-road. In a few moments he reappeared, followed by a man.

"Sir," said he, "I did not meet the letter-carrier; but here is a man with a telegraphic despatch."

The man advanced, and, feeling in a bag suspended at his side, he said,—

"Monsieur Dalize, I believe?"

"Yes, my friend."

"Well, here is a telegram for you which arrived at Sens last night."

"A telegram?" said Monsieur Dalize, knitting his brows, his eyes showing that he was slightly surprised, and almost displeased, as if he had learned that unexpected news was more often bad news than good. Nevertheless, he took the paper, unfolded it, and looked at once at the signature.

"Ah, from Roger," he said to himself.

And then he began to read the few lines of the telegram. As he read, his face brightened, surprise followed uneasiness, and then a great joy took the place of discontent. He said to the man,—

"You can carry back an answer, can you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Peter, bring me pen and ink at once."

Peter brought pen, ink, and paper, and Monsieur Dalize wrote his telegram. He gave it to the man, and, feeling through his pockets, pulled out a louis.

"Here, my good fellow," said he: "that will pay for the telegram and will pay you for your trouble."

The man looked at the coin in the hollow of his hand in an embarrassed way, fearing that he had not exactly understood.

"Come, now,—run," said Monsieur Dalize; "good news such as you have brought me cannot be paid for too dearly; only hurry."

"Ah, yes, sir, I will hurry," said the man; "and thank you very much, thank you very much."

And, in leaving, he said to himself, as he squeezed the money in his hand,—

"I should be very glad to carry to him every day good news at such a price as that."

When he was alone, Monsieur Dalize reread the welcome despatch. Then he turned around, and looked towards a window on the second floor of the château, whose blinds were not yet opened. From this window his looks travelled back to the telegram, which seemed to rejoice his heart and to give him cause for thought. He was disturbed in his reverie by the noise of two blinds opening against the wall. He rose hastily, and could not withhold the exclamation,—

"At last!"

"Oh, my friend," said the voice of a lady, in good-natured tones. "Are you reproaching me for waking up too late?"

"It is no reproach at all, my dear wife," said Monsieur Dalize, "as you were not well yesterday evening."

"Ah, but this morning I am entirely well," said Madame Dalize, resting her elbows on the sill of the window.

"So much the better," cried Mr. Dalize, joyfully, "and again so much the better."

"What light-heartedness!" said Madame Dalize, smiling.

"That is because I am happy, do you know, very happy."

"And the cause of this joy?"

"It all lies in this little bit of paper," answered Monsieur Dalize, pointing to the telegram towards the window.

"And what does this paper say?"

"It says,—now listen,—it says that my old friend, my best friend, has returned to France, and that in a few hours he will be here with us."

Madame Dalize was silent for an instant, then, suddenly remembering, she said,—

"Roger,—are you speaking of Roger?"

"The same."

"Ah, my friend," said Madame Dalize, "now I understand the joy you expressed." Then she added, as she closed the window, "I will dress myself and be down in a moment."

Hardly had the window of Madame Dalize's room closed than a little girl of some ten years, with a bright and pretty face surrounded by black curly hair, came in sight from behind the château. As she caught sight of Monsieur Dalize, she ran towards him.

"Good-morning, papa," she said, throwing herself into his open arms.

"Good-morning, my child," said Monsieur Dalize, taking the little girl upon his knees and kissing her over and over again.

"Ah, papa," said the child, "you seem very happy this morning."

"And you have noticed that too, Miette?"

"Why, of course, papa; any one can see that in your face."

"Well, I am very happy."

Miss Mariette Dalize, who was familiarly called Miette, for short, looked at her father without saying anything, awaiting an explanation. Monsieur Dalize understood her silence.

"You want to know what it is that makes me so happy?"

"Yes, papa."

"Well, then, it is because I am going to-day to see one of my friends,—my oldest friend, my most faithful friend,—whom I have not seen for ten long years."

Monsieur Dalize stopped for a moment.

"Indeed," he continued, "you cannot understand what I feel, my dear little Miette."

"And why not, papa?"

"Because you do not know the man of whom I speak."

Miette looked at her father, and said, in a serious tone,—

"You say that I don't know your best friend. Come! is it not Monsieur Roger?"

It was now the father's turn to look at his child, and, with pleased surprise, he said,—

"What? You know?"

"Why, papa, I have so often heard you talk to mamma of your friend Roger that I could not be mistaken."

"That is true; you are right."

"Then," continued Miss Miette, "it is Mr. Roger who is going to arrive here?"

"It is he," said Monsieur Dalize, joyously.

But Miss Miette did not share her father's joy. She was silent for a moment, as if seeking to remember something very important, then she lowered her eyes, and murmured, sadly,—

"The poor gentleman."

CHAPTER II.
TWO FRIENDS

The château of Sainte-Gemme, which was some miles from the village of Sens, had belonged to Monsieur Dalize for some years. It was in this old château, which had often been restored, but which still preserved its dignified appearance, that Monsieur Dalize and his family had come to pass the summer.

Monsieur Dalize had become the owner of the property of Sainte-Gemme on his retirement from business. He came out at the beginning of every May, and did not return to Paris until November. During August and September the family was complete, for then it included Albert Dalize, who was on vacation from college. With his wife and his children, Albert and Mariette, Monsieur Dalize was happy, but sometimes there was a cloud upon this happiness. The absence of a friend with whom Monsieur Dalize had been brought up, and the terrible sorrows which this friend had experienced, cast an occasional gloom over the heart of the owner of Sainte-Gemme. This friend was called Roger La Morlière. In the Dalize family he was called simply Roger. He was a distinguished chemist. At the beginning of his life he had been employed by a manufacturer of chemicals in Saint-Denis, and the close neighborhood to Paris enabled him frequently to see his friend Dalize, who had succeeded his father in a banking-house. Later, some flattering offers had drawn him off to Northern France, to the town of Lille. In this city Roger had found a charming young girl, whom he loved and whose hand he asked in marriage. Monsieur Dalize was one of the witnesses to this marriage, which seemed to begin most happily, although neither party was wealthy. Monsieur Dalize had already been married at this time, and husband and wife had gone to Lille to be present at the union of their friend Roger. Then a terrible catastrophe had occurred. Roger had left France and gone to America. Ten years had now passed. The two friends wrote each other frequently. Monsieur Dalize's letters were full of kindly counsels, of encouragement, of consolation. Roger's, though they were affectionate, showed that he was tired of life, that his heart was in despair.

Still, Monsieur Dalize, in receiving the telegram which announced the return of this well-beloved friend, had only thought of the joy of seeing him again. The idea that this friend, whom he had known once so happy, would return to him broken by grief had not at first presented itself to his mind. Now he began to reflect. An overwhelming sorrow had fallen upon the man, and for ten years he had shrouded himself in the remembrance of this sorrow. What great changes must he have gone through! how different he would look from the Roger he had known!

Monsieur Dalize thought over these things, full of anxiety, his eyes fixed upon the shaded alley in front of him.

Miette had softly slipped down from her father's knees, and, seating herself by his side upon the bench, she remained silent, knowing that she had better say nothing at such a time.

Light steps crunched the gravel, and Madame Dalize approached.

Miss Miette had seen her mother coming, but Monsieur Dalize had seen nothing and heard nothing.

In great astonishment Madame Dalize asked, addressing herself rather to her daughter than to her husband,—

"What is the matter?"

Miss Miette made a slight motion, as if to say that she had better not answer; but this time Monsieur Dalize had heard.

He lifted sad eyes to his wife's face.

"Now, where has all the joy of the morning fled, my friend?" asked Madame Dalize. "And why this sudden sadness?"

"Because this child"—and Monsieur Dalize passed his hand through his daughter's thick curls—"has reminded me of the sorrows of Roger."

"Miette?" demanded Madame Dalize. "What has she said to you?"

"She simply said, when I spoke to her of Roger, 'The poor gentleman.' And she was right,—the poor gentleman, poor Roger."

"Undoubtedly," answered Madame Dalize; "but ten years have passed since that terrible day, and time heals many wounds."

"That is true; but I know Roger, and I know that he has forgotten nothing."

"Of course, forgetfulness would not be easy to him over there, in that long, solitary exile; but once he has returned here to us, near his family, his wounds will have a chance to heal; and, in any case," added Madame Dalize, taking her husband's hand, "he will have at hand two doctors who are profoundly devoted."

"Yes, my dear wife, you are right; and if he can be cured, we will know how to cure him."

Madame Dalize took the telegram from her husband's hands, and read this:

"Monsieur Dalize, Château de Sainte-Gemme, at Sens:

> *Friend*,—I am on my way home. Learn at Paris that you are at Sainte-Gemme. May I come there at once?"
>
> *"Roger."*

"And you answered him?"

"I answered, 'We are awaiting you with the utmost impatience. Take the first train.'"

"Will that first train be the eleven-o'clock train?"

"No; I think that Roger will not be able to take the express. The man with the telegram will not have reached Sens soon enough, even if he hurried, as he promised he would. Then, the time taken to send the despatch, to receive it in Paris, and to take it to Roger's address would make it more than eleven. So our friend will have to take the next train; and you cannot count upon his being here before five o'clock."

"Oh!" cried Miss Miette, in a disappointed tone.

"What is the matter, my child?" asked Monsieur Dalize.

"Why, I think–"

"What do you think?"

"Well, papa," Miss Miette at last said, "I think that the railroads and the telegrams are far too slow."

Monsieur Dalize could not suppress a smile at hearing this exclamation. He turned to his wife, and said,—

"See, how hurried is this younger generation. They think that steam and electricity are too slow."

And, turning around to his daughter, he continued,—

"What would you like to have?"

"Why," answered the girl, "I would like to have Monsieur Roger here at once."

Her wish was to be fulfilled sooner than she herself could foresee.

CHAPTER III.
MONSIEUR ROGER

Monsieur and Madame Dalize went back into the château, and soon reappeared in walking-costumes. Miette, who was playing in the shadows of the great chestnut-trees, looked up in surprise.

"You are going out walking without me?" said she.

"No, my child," answered Madame Dalize, "we are not going out to take a walk at all; but we have to go and make our excuses to Monsieur and Madame Sylvestre at the farm, because we shall not be able to dine with them this evening, as we had agreed."

"Take me with you," said Miette.

"No; the road is too long and too fatiguing for your little legs."

"Are you going on foot?"

"Certainly," said Monsieur Dalize. "We must keep the horses fresh to send them down to meet Roger at the station."

Miss Miette could not help respecting so good a reason, and she resisted no longer.

When left alone, she began seriously to wonder what she should do during the absence of her parents, which would certainly last over an hour. An idea came to her. She went into the château, passed into the drawing-room, took down a large album of photographs which was on the table, and carried it into her room. She did not have to search long. On the first page was the portrait of her mother, on the next was that of herself, Miette, and that of her brother Albert. The third page contained two portraits of men. One of these portraits was that of her father, the other was evidently the one that she was in search of, for she looked at it attentively.

"It was a long time ago," she said to herself, "that this photograph was made,—ten years ago; but I am sure that I shall recognize Monsieur Roger all the same when he returns."

At this very moment Miette heard the sound of a carriage some distance off. Surely the carriage was driving through the park. She listened with all her ears. Soon the gravelled road leading up to the château was crunched under the wheels of the carriage. Miette then saw an old-fashioned cab, which evidently had been hired at some hotel in Sens. The cab stopped before the threshold. Miette could not see so far from her window. She left the album upon her table, and ran down-stairs, full of curiosity. In the vestibule she met old Peter, and asked him who it was.

"It is a gentleman whom I don't know," said Peter.

"Where is he?"

"I asked him into the parlor."

Miette approached lightly on tiptoe to the door of the parlor, which was open, wishing to see without being seen. She expected she would find in this visitor some country neighbor. The gentleman was standing, looking out of the glass windows.

From where she was Miette could see his profile. She made a gesture, as if to say, "I don't know him;" and she was going to withdraw as slowly as possible, with her curiosity unsatisfied, when the gentleman turned around. Miette now saw him directly in front of her in the full light. His beard and his hair were gray, his forehead was lightly wrinkled on the temples, a sombre expression saddened his features. His dress was elegant. He walked a few steps in the parlor, coming towards the door, but he had not yet seen Miette. In her great surprise she had quickly drawn herself back, but she still followed the visitor with her eyes. At first she had doubted now she was sure; she could not be mistaken. When the gentleman had reached the middle of the parlor, Miette could contain herself no longer. She showed herself in the doorway and advanced towards the visitor. He stopped, surprised at this pretty apparition. Miette came up to him and looked him in the eyes. Then, entirely convinced, holding out her arms towards the visitor, she said, softly,—

"Monsieur Roger!"

The gentleman in his turn looked with surprise at the pretty little girl who had saluted him by name. He cast a glance towards the door, and, seeing that she was alone, more surprised than ever, he looked at her long and silently.

Miette, abashed by this scrutiny, drew back a little, and said, with hesitation,—

"Tell me: you are surely Monsieur Roger?"

"Yes, I am indeed Monsieur Roger," said the visitor, at last, in a voice full of emotion. And, with a kindly smile, he added, "How did you come to recognize me, Miss Miette?"

Hearing her own name pronounced in this unexpected manner, Miss Miette was struck dumb with astonishment. At the end of a minute, she stammered,—

"Why, sir, you know me, then, also?"

"Yes, my child; I have known and loved you for a long time."

And Monsieur Roger caught Miette up in his arms and kissed her tenderly.

"Yes," he continued, "I know you, my dear child. Your father has often spoken of you in his letters; and has he not sent me also several of your photographs when I asked for them?"

"Why, that is funny!" cried Miette.

But she suddenly felt that the word was not dignified enough.

"That is very strange," she said: "for I, too, recognized you from your photograph; and it was only five minutes ago, at the very moment when you arrived, that I was looking at it, up-stairs in my room. Shall I go up and find the album?"

Monsieur Roger held her back.

"No, my child," said he, "remain here by me, and tell me something about your father and your mother."

Miette looked up at the clock.

"Papa and mamma may return at any moment. They will talk to you themselves a great deal better than I can. All that I can tell you is that they are going to be very, very glad; but they did not expect you until the evening. How does it happen that you are here already?"

"Because I took the first train,—the 6.30."

"But your telegram?"

"Yes, I sent a despatch last night on arriving at Paris, but I did not have the patience to wait for an answer. I departed, hoping they would receive me anyway with pleasure; and I already see that I was not mistaken."

"No, Monsieur Roger," answered Miette, "you were not mistaken. You are going to be very happy here, very happy. There, now! I see papa and mamma returning."

The door of the vestibule had just been opened.

They could see Peter exchanging some words with his master and mistress. Then hurried steps were heard, and in a moment Monsieur Dalize was in the arms of his friend Roger. Miss Miette, who had taken her mamma by the arm, obliged her to bend down, and said in her ear,—

"I love him already, our friend Roger."

CHAPTER IV.
MONSIEUR ROGER'S STORY

The evening had come, the evening of that happy day when the two friends, after ten years of absence, had come together again. Monsieur Roger had known from the first that he would find loving and faithful hearts just as he had left them. They were all sitting, after dinner, in a large vestibule, whose windows, this beautiful evening in autumn, opened out upon the sleeping park. For some moments the conversation had fallen into an embarrassing silence. Every one looked at Monsieur Roger. They thought that he might speak, that he might recount the terrible event which had broken his life; but they did not like to ask him anything about it. Monsieur Roger was looking at the star-sprinkled sky, and seemed to be dreaming, but in his deeper self he had guessed the thoughts of his friends and understood he ought to speak. He passed his hand over his forehead to chase away a painful impression, and with a resolute, but low and soft voice, he said,—

"I see, my friends, my dear friends, I see that you expect from me the story of my sorrow."

Monsieur and Madame Dalize made a sight gesture of negation.

"Yes," continued Monsieur Roger, "I know very well that you do not wish it through idle curiosity, that you fear to reawaken my griefs; but to whom can I tell my story, if not to you? I owe it to you as a sacred debt, and, if I held my tongue, it seems to me a dark spot would come upon our friendship. You know what a lovely and charming wife I married. Her only fault—a fault only in the eyes of the world—was that she was poor. I had the same fault. When my son George came into the world I suddenly was filled with new ambitions. I wished, both for his sake and for his mother's, to amass wealth, and I worked feverishly and continuously in my laboratory. I had a problem before me, and at last I succeeded in solving it. I had discovered a new process for treating silver ores. Fear nothing: I am not going to enter into technical details; but it is necessary that I should explain to you the reason which made me"—here Monsieur paused, and then continued, with profound sadness —"which made *us* go to America. Silver ores in most of the mines of North America offer very complex combinations in the sulphur, bromide, chloride of lime, and iodine, which I found mixed up with the precious metal,—that is to say, with the silver. It is necessary to free the silver from all these various substances. Now, the known processes had not succeeded in freeing the silver in all its purity. There was always a certain quantity of the silver which remained alloyed with foreign matters, and that much silver was consequently lost. The processes which I had discovered made it possible to obtain the entire quantity of silver contained in the ore. Not a fraction of the precious metal escaped. An English company owning some silver-mines in Texas heard of my discovery, and made me an offer. I was to go to Texas for ten years. The enterprise was to be at my own risk, but they would give me ten per cent on all the ore that I saved. I felt certain to succeed. My wife, full of faith in me, urged me to accept. What were we risking? A modest situation in a chemical laboratory, which I should always be able to obtain again. Over there on the other side of the Atlantic there were millions in prospect; and if I did not succeed from the beginning, my wife, who drew and painted better than an amateur,—as well as most painters, indeed,—and who had excellent letters of recommendation, would give drawing-lessons in New Orleans, where the company had its head-quarters. We decided to go; but first we came to Paris. I wished to say good-by to you and to show you my son, my poor little George, of whom I was so proud, and whom you did not know. He was then two and one-half years old. My decision had been taken so suddenly that I could not announce it to you. When we arrived in Paris, we learned that you were in Nice. I wrote to you,—don't you remember?" said Monsieur Roger, turning to Monsieur Dalize.

"Yes, my friend; I have carefully kept that letter of farewell, full of hope and of enthusiasm."

"We were going to embark from Liverpool on the steamer which would go directly to New Orleans. The steamer was called the Britannic."

Monsieur Roger stopped speaking, full of emotion at this recollection. At the end of a long silence he again took up the thread of his story.

"The first days of the journey we had had bad weather. And I had passed them almost entirely in our state-room with my poor wife and my little boy, who were very sea-sick. On the tenth day (it was the 14th of December) the weather cleared up, and, notwithstanding a brisk wind from the north-east, we were on the deck after dinner. The night had come; the stars were already out, though every now and then hidden under clouds high up in the sky, which fled quickly out of sight. We were in the archipelago of Bahama, not far from Florida.

"'One day more and we shall be in port,' I said to my wife and to George, pointing in the direction of New Orleans.

"My wife, full of hope,—too full, alas! poor girl,—said to me, with a smile, as she pointed to George,—

"'And this fortune that we have come so far to find, but which we shall conquer without doubt, this fortune will all be for this little gentleman.'

"George, whom I had just taken upon my knees, guessed that we were speaking of him, and he threw his little arms around my neck and touched my face with his lips."

CHAPTER V.
FIRE AT SEA

"At this moment, a moment that I shall never forget, I heard a sudden crackling noise, strange and unexpected, coming from a point seemingly close to me. I turned around and saw nothing. Nevertheless, I still heard that sound in my ears. It was a strange sound. One might have thought that an immense punch had been lighted in the interior of the ship, and that the liquid, stirred up by invisible hands, was tossed up and down, hissing and crackling. The quick movement of my head had arrested George in the midst of his caresses. Now he looked up at me with astonished eyes. The uneasiness which I felt in spite of the absence of any cause must have appeared upon my face, for my wife, standing beside me, leaned over to ask, in a subdued voice,—

"'What is the matter?'

"I think I answered, 'Nothing.' But my mind had dwelt upon an awful danger,—that danger of which the most hardened seamen speak with a beating heart,—fire at sea. Alas! my fears were to be realized. From one of the hatches there suddenly leaped up a tongue of flame. At the same instant we heard the awful cry, 'Fire!' To add to our distress, the wind had increased, and had become so violent that it fanned the flames with terrible rapidity, and had enveloped the state-rooms in the rear, whence the passengers were running, trembling and crying. In a few minutes the back of the ship was all on fire. My wife had snatched George from my arms, and held him closely against her breast, ready to save him or die with him. The captain, in the midst of the panic of the passengers, gave his orders. The boats were being lowered into the sea,—those at least which remained, for two had already been attacked by the fire. Accident threw the captain between me and my wife at the very moment when he was crying out to his men to allow none but the women and children in the boats. He recognized me. I had been introduced to him by a common friend, and he said, in a voice choked with emotion, pointing to my wife and my son,—

"'Embrace them!'

"Then he tore them both from my arms and pushed and carried them to the last boat, which was already too full. Night had come. With the rise of the wind, clouds had collected, obscuring the sky. By the light of the fire I saw for the last time—yes, for the last time—my wife and my child in the boat, shaken by an angry sea. Both were looking towards me. Did they see me also for the last time? And in my agony I cried out, 'George! George!' with a voice so loud that my son must surely have heard that last cry. Yes, he must have heard it. I stood rooted to the spot, looking without seeing anything, stupefied by this hopeless sorrow, not even feeling the intense heat of the flames, which were coming towards me. But the captain saw me. He ran towards me, drew me violently back, and threw me in the midst of the men, who were beginning a determined struggle against the fire which threatened to devour them. The instinct of life, the hope to see again my loved ones, gave me courage. I did as the others. Some of the passengers applied themselves to the chain; the pumps set in motion threw masses of water into the fire; but it seemed impossible to combat it, for it was alcohol which was burning. They had been obliged to repack part of the hold, where there were a number of demijohns of alcohol which the bad weather the first days had displaced. During the work one of these vast stone bottles had fallen and broken. As ill luck would have it, the alcohol descended in a rain upon a lamp in the story below, and the alcohol had taken fire. So I had not been mistaken when the first sound had made me think of the crackling of a punch. We worked with an energy which can only be found in moments of this sort. The captain inspired us with confidence. At one time we had hope. The flames had slackened, or at least we supposed so; but in fact they had only gone another way, and reached the powder-magazine. A violent explosion succeeded, and one of the masts was hurled into the sea. Were we lost? No; for the engineer had had a sudden inspiration. He had cut

the pipes, and immediately directed upon the flames torrents of steam from the engine. A curtain of vapor lifted itself up between us and the fire, a curtain which the flames could not penetrate. Then the pumps worked still more effectually. We were saved."

CHAPTER VI.
MISS MIETTE'S FORTUNE

"The rudder no longer guided us. What a night we passed! We made a roll-call: how many were wanting? and the boats which contained our wives, our children,—had those boats found a refuge? had they reached land anywhere? The ocean was still rough, and, notwithstanding the captain's words of hope, I was in despair,—anticipating the sorrow that was to overwhelm me. Every one remained on deck. At daybreak a new feeling of sadness seized us at the sight of our steamer, deformed and blackened by the fire. The deck for more than forty yards was nothing but a vast hole, at the bottom of which were lying, pell-mell, half-consumed planks and beams, windlasses blackened by fire, bits of wood, and formless masses of metal over which the tongues of flame had passed. Notwithstanding all this the steamer was slowly put in motion. We were able to reach Havana. There we hoped we might hear some news. And we did hear news,—but what news! A sailing-vessel had found on the morrow of the catastrophe a capsized boat on the coast of the island of Andros, where the boat had evidently been directed. A sailor who had tied himself to the boat, and whom they at first thought dead, was recalled to life, and told his story of the fire. From Havana, where the sailing-vessel had stopped, a rescuing-party was at once sent out. They found and brought back with them the débris of boats broken against the rocks and also many dead bodies. These were all laid out in a large room, where the remaining passengers of the Britannic were invited. We had to count the dead; we had to identify them. With what agony, with what cruel heart-beats I entered the room. I closed my eyes. I tried to persuade myself that I would not find there the beings that were so dear to me. I wished to believe that they had been saved, my dear ones, while my other companions in misfortune were all crying and sobbing. At last I opened my eyes, and, the strength of my vision being suddenly increased to a wonderful degree, I saw that in this long line of bodies there was no child. That was my first thought. May my poor wife forgive me! She also was not there; but it was not long before she came. That very evening a rescuing-party brought back her corpse with the latest found."

Monsieur Roger ceased speaking. He looked at his friends, Monsieur and Madame Dalize, who were silently weeping; then his eyes travelled to Miette. She was not crying; her look, sad but astonished, interested, questioned Monsieur Roger. He thought, "She cannot understand sorrow, this little girl, who has not had any trials."

And the eyes of Miette seemed to answer, "But George? George? did they not find him?"

At last Monsieur Roger understood this thought in the mind of Miette without any necessity on her part to express it by her lips, and, as if he were answering to a verbal question, he said, shaking his head,—

"No, they never found him."

Miette expected this answer; then she too began to weep.

Monsieur Dalize repeated the last words of Monsieur Roger.

"They did not find him! I do not dare to ask you, my dear friend, if you preserve any hope."

"Yes, I hope. I forced myself to hope for a long time. But the ocean kept my child in the same way that it buried in its depths many other victims of this catastrophe, for it was that very hope that made me remain in America. I might have returned to France and given up my engagements; but there I was closer to news, if there were any; and, besides, in work, in hard labor to which I intended to submit my body, I expected to find, if not forgetfulness, at least that weariness which dampens the spirit. I remained ten years in Texas, and I returned to-day without ever having forgotten that terrible night."

There was a silence. Then Monsieur Dalize, wishing to create a diversion, asked,—

"How does it happen that you did not announce to me beforehand your return. It was not until I received your telegram this morning that we learned this news which made us so happy. I had no reason to expect that your arrival would be so sudden. Did you not say that you were to remain another six months, and perhaps a year, in Texas?"

"Yes; and I did then think that I should be forced to prolong my stay for some months. My contract was ended, my work was done. I was free, but the mining-company wished to retain me. They wanted me to sign a new contract, and to this end they invented all sorts of pretexts to keep me where I was. As I did not wish to go to law against the people through whom I had made my fortune, I determined to wait, hoping that my patience would tire them out; and that, in fact, is what happened. The company bowed before my decision. This good news reached me on the eve of the departure of a steamer. I did not hesitate for a moment; I at once took ship. I might indeed have given you notice on the way, but I wished to reserve to myself the happiness of surprising you. It was not until I reached Paris that I decided to send you a despatch; and even then I did not have the strength to await your reply."

"Dear Roger!" said Monsieur Dalize. "And then your process, your discovery, succeeded entirely?"

"Yes, I have made a fortune,—a large fortune. I have told you that the enterprise was at my risk, but that the company would give me ten per cent. on all the ore that I would succeed in saving. Now, the mines of Texas used to produce four million dollars' worth a year. Thanks to my process, they produce nearly a million more. In ten years you can well see what was my portion."

"Splendid!" said Monsieur Dalize; "it represents a sum of–"

Madame Dalize interrupted her husband.

"Miette," said she, "cannot you do that little sum for us, my child?"

Miette wiped her eyes and ceased crying. Her mother's desire had been reached. The little girl took a pencil, and, after making her mother repeat the question to her, put down some figures upon a sheet of paper. After a moment she said, not without hesitation, for the sum appeared to her enormous,—

"Why! it is a million dollars that Monsieur Roger has made!"

"Exactly," said Monsieur Roger; "and, my dear child, you have, without knowing it, calculated pretty closely the fortune which you will receive from me as your wedding portion."

Monsieur and Madame Dalize looked up with astonishment. Miette gazed at Monsieur Roger without understanding.

"My dear friends," said Roger, turning to Monsieur and Madame Dalize, "you will not refuse me the pleasure of giving my fortune to Miss Miette. I have no one else in the world; and does not Mariette represent both of you? Where would my money be better placed?"

And turning towards Miss Miette, he said to her,—

"Yes, my child, that million will be yours on your marriage."

Miette looked from her mother to her father, not knowing whether she ought to accept, and seriously embarrassed. With a sweet smile, Monsieur Roger added,—

"And so, you see, you will be able to choose a husband that you like."

Then, quietly and without hesitation, Miss Miette said,—

"It will be Paul Solange."

CHAPTER VII.
VACATION

Monsieur and Madame Dalize could not help smiling in listening to this frank declaration of their daughter: "It will be Paul Solange."

Monsieur Roger smiled in his turn, and said,—

"What! has Miss Miette already made her choice?"

"It is an amusing bit of childishness," answered Madame Dalize, "as you see. But, really, Miss Miette, although she teases him often, has a very kindly feeling for our friend Paul Solange."

"And who is this happy little mortal?" asked Monsieur Roger.

"A friend of Albert's," said Monsieur Dalize.

"Albert, your son?" said Monsieur Roger, to whom this name and this word were always painful. Then he added,—

"I should like very much to see him, your son."

"You shall soon see him, my dear Roger," answered Monsieur Dalize. "Vacation begins to-morrow morning, and to-morrow evening Albert will be at Sainte-Gemme."

"With Paul?" asked Miss Miette.

"Why, certainly," said Madame Dalize, laughing; "with your friend Paul Solange."

Monsieur Roger asked,—

"How old is Albert at present?"

"In his thirteenth year," said Monsieur Dalize.

Monsieur Roger remained silent. He was thinking that his little George, if he had lived, would also be big now, and, like the son of Monsieur Dalize, would be in his thirteenth year.

Next day the horses were harnessed, and all four went down to the station to meet the five-o'clock train. When Albert and Paul jumped out from the train, and had kissed Monsieur and Madame Dalize and Miss Miette, they looked with some surprise at Monsieur Roger, whom they did not know.

"Albert," said Monsieur Dalize, showing Monsieur Roger to his son, "why don't you salute our friend Roger?"

"Is this Monsieur Roger?" cried Albert, and the tone of his voice showed that his father had taught him to know and to love the man who now, with his eyes full of tears, was pressing him to his heart.

"And you too, Paul, don't you want to embrace our friend?" said Monsieur Dalize.

"Yes, sir," answered Paul Solange, with a sad and respectful gravity, which struck Monsieur Roger and at once called up his affection.

On the way, Monsieur Roger, who was looking with emotion upon the two young people, but whose eyes were particularly fixed upon Paul, said, in a low voice, to Monsieur Dalize,—

"They are charming children."

"And it is especially Paul whom you think charming; acknowledge it," answered Monsieur Dalize, in the same tone.

"Why should Paul please me more than Albert?" asked Monsieur Roger.

"Ah, my poor friend," replied Monsieur Dalize, "because the father of Albert is here and the father of Paul is far away."

Monsieur Dalize was right. Monsieur Roger, without wishing it, had felt his sympathies attracted more strongly to this child, who was, for the time being, fatherless. He bent over to Monsieur Dalize, and asked,—

"Where is Paul's father?"

"In Martinique, where he does a big business in sugar-cane and coffee. Monsieur Solange was born in France, and he decided that his son should come here to study."

"I can understand that," replied Monsieur Roger; "but what a sorrow this exile must cause the mother of this child!"

"Paul has no mother: she died several years ago."

"Poor boy!" murmured Monsieur Roger, and his growing friendship became all the stronger.

That evening, after dinner, when coffee was being served, Miss Miette, who was in a very good humor, was seized with the desire to tease her little friend Paul.

"Say, Paul," she asked, from one end of the table to the other, "how many prizes did you take this year?"

Paul, knowing that an attack was coming, began to smile, and answered, good-naturedly,—

"You know very well, you naughty girl. You have already asked me, and I have told you."

"Ah, that is true," said Miette, with affected disdain: "you took one prize,—one poor little prize,—bah!"

Then, after a moment, she continued,—

"That is not like my brother: he took several prizes, *he* did,—a prize for Latin, a prize for history, a prize for mathematics, a prize for physical science, and a prize for chemistry. Well, well! and you,—you only took one prize; and that is the same one you took last year!"

"Yes," said Paul, without minding his friend's teasing; "but last year I took only the second prize, and this year I took the first."

"You have made some progress," said Miss Miette, sententiously.

Monsieur Roger had been interested in the dialogue.

"May I ask what prize Master Paul Solange has obtained?"

"A poor little first prize for drawing only," answered Miette.

"Ah, you love drawing?" said Monsieur Roger, looking at Paul.

But it was Miette who answered: "He loves nothing else."

Monsieur Dalize now, in his turn, took up the conversation, and said,—

"The truth is that our friend Paul has a passion for drawing. History and Latin please him a little, but for chemistry and the physical sciences he has no taste at all."

Monsieur Roger smiled.

"You are wrong," replied Monsieur Dalize, "to excuse by your smile Paul's indifference to the sciences.—And as to you, Paul, you would do well to take as your example Monsieur Roger, who would not have his fortune if he had not known chemistry and the physical sciences. In our day the sciences are indispensable."

Miss Miette, who had shoved herself a little away from the table, pouting slightly, heard these words, and came to the defence of the one whom she had begun by attacking. She opened a book full of pictures, and advanced with it to her father.

"Now, papa," she said, with a look of malice in her eyes, "did the gentleman who made that drawing have to know anything about chemistry or the physical sciences?"

CHAPTER VIII.
A DRAWING LESSON

For a moment Monsieur Dalize was disconcerted, and knew not what to say in answer. Happily, Monsieur Roger came to his aid. He took the book from Miette's hands, looked at the engraving, and said, quietly,—

"Why, certainly, my dear young friend, the gentleman who made that drawing ought to know something about chemistry and physical science."

"How so?" said Miette, astonished.

"Why, if he did not know the laws of physical science and of chemistry, he has, none the less, and perhaps even without knowing it himself, availed himself of the results of chemistry and physical science."

Miette took the book back again, looked at the drawing with care, and said,—

"Still, there are not in this drawing instruments or apparatus, or machines such as I have seen in my brother's books."

"But," answered Monsieur Roger, smiling, "it is not necessary that you should see instruments and apparatus and machines, as you say, to be in the presence of physical phenomena; and I assure you, my dear child, that this drawing which is under our eyes is connected with chemistry and physical science."

Miette now looked up at Monsieur Roger to see if he was not making fun of her. Monsieur Roger translated this dumb interrogation, and said,—

"Come, now! what does this drawing represent? Tell me yourself."

"Why, it represents two peasants,—a man and a woman,—who have returned home wet in the storm, and who are warming and drying themselves before the fire."

"It is, in fact, exactly that."

"Very well, sir?" asked Miette.

And in this concise answer she meant to say, "In all that, what do you see that is connected with chemistry or physical science?"

"Very well," continued Monsieur Roger; "do you see this light mist, this vapor, which is rising from the cloak that the peasant is drying before the fire?"

"Yes."

"Well, that is physical science," said Monsieur Roger.

"How do you mean?" asked Miette.

"I will explain in a moment. Let us continue to examine the picture. Do you see that a portion of the wood is reduced to ashes?"

"Yes."

"Do you also remark the flame and the smoke which are rising up the chimney?"

"Yes."

"That is chemistry."

"Ah!" said Miss Miette, at a loss for words.

Every one was listening to Monsieur Roger, some of them interested, the others amused. Miette glanced over at her friend Paul.

"What do you think of that?" she asked.

Paul did not care to reply. Albert wished to speak, but he stopped at a gesture from his father. Monsieur Dalize knew that the real interest of this scene lay with Monsieur Roger, the scientist, who was already loved by all this little world. Miette, as nobody else answered, returned to Monsieur Roger.

"But why," she asked, "is that physical science? Why is it chemistry?"

"Because it is physical science and chemistry," said Monsieur Roger, simply.

"Oh, but you have other reasons to give us!" said Madame Dalize, who understood what Monsieur Roger was thinking of.

"Yes," added Miette.

And even Paul, with unusual curiosity, nodded his head affirmatively.

"The reasons will be very long to explain, and would bore you," said Monsieur Dalize, certain that he would in this way provoke a protest.

The protest, in fact, came.

Monsieur Roger was obliged to speak.

"Well," said he, still addressing himself to Miss Miette, "this drawing is concerned with physical science, because the peasant, in placing his cloak before the heat of the fire, causes the phenomenon of evaporation to take place. The vapor which escapes from the damp cloth is water, is nothing but water, and will always be water under a different form. It is water modified, and modified for a moment, because this vapor, coming against the cold wall or other cold objects, will condense. That is to say, it will become again liquid water,—water similar to that which it was a moment ago; and that is a physical phenomenon,—for physical science aims to study the modifications which alter the form, the color, the appearance of bodies, but only their temporary modifications, which leave intact all the properties of bodies. Our drawing is concerned with chemistry, because the piece of wood which burns disappears, leaving in its place cinders in the hearth and gases which escape through the chimney. Here there is a complete modification, an absolute change of the piece of wood. Do what you will, you would be unable, by collecting together the cinders and gases, to put together again the log of wood which has been burned; and that is a chemical phenomenon,—for the aim of chemistry is to study the durable and permanent modifications, after which bodies retain none of their original properties. Another example may make more easy this distinction between physical science and chemistry. Suppose that you put into the fire a bar of iron. That bar will expand and become red. Its color, its form, its dimensions will be modified, but it will always remain a bar of iron. That is a physical phenomenon. Instead of this bar of iron, put in the fire a bit of sulphur. It will flame up and burn in disengaging a gas of a peculiar odor, which is called sulphuric acid. This sulphuric-acid gas can be condensed and become a liquid, but it no longer contains the properties of sulphur. It is no longer a piece of sulphur, and can never again become a piece of sulphur. The modification of this body is therefore durable, and therefore permanent. Now, that is a chemical phenomenon."

Monsieur Roger stopped for a moment; then, paying no apparent attention to Paul, who, however, was listening far more attentively than one could imagine he would, he looked at Miette, and said,—

"I don't know, my child, if I have explained myself clearly enough; but you must certainly understand that in their case the artist has represented, whether he wished to or not, the physical phenomenon and the chemical phenomenon."

"Yes, sir," answered Miette, "I have understood quite well."

"Well," said Monsieur Dalize, "since you are so good a teacher, don't you think that you could, during vacation, cause a little chemistry and a little physical science to enter into that little head?" And he pointed to Paul Solange.

The latter, notwithstanding the sentiment of respectful sympathy which he felt for Monsieur Roger, and although he had listened with interest to his explanations, could not prevent a gesture of fear, so pronounced that everybody began to laugh.

Miette, who wished to console her good friend Paul and obtain his pardon for her teasing, came up to him, and said,—

"Come, console yourself, Paul; I will let you take my portrait a dozen times, as you did last year,—although it is very tiresome to pose for a portrait."

CHAPTER IX.
THE TOWER OF HEURTEBIZE

Next morning at six o'clock Paul Solange opened the door of the château and stepped out on to the lawn. He held a sketch-book in his hand. He directed his steps along a narrow pathway, shaded by young elms, towards one of the gates of the park. At a turning in the alley he found himself face to face with Monsieur Roger, who was walking slowly and thoughtfully. Paul stopped, and in his surprise could not help saying,—

"Monsieur Roger, already up?"

Monsieur answered, smiling,—

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.