A COMMITTEE-MAN OF 'THE TERROR'

We had been talking of the Georgian glories of our old-fashioned watering-place, which now, with its substantial russet-red and dun brick buildings in the style of the year eighteen hundred, looks like one side of a Soho or Bloomsbury Street transported to the shore, and draws a smile from the modern tourist who has no eye for solidity of build. The writer, quite a youth, was present merely as a listener. The conversation proceeded from general subjects to particular, until old Mrs. H--, whose memory was as perfect at eighty as it had ever been in her life, interested us all by the obvious fidelity with which she repeated a story many times related to her by her mother when our aged friend was a girl--a domestic drama much affecting the life of an acquaintance of her said parent, one Mademoiselle V--, a teacher of French. The incidents occurred in the town during the heyday of its fortunes, at the time of our brief peace with France in 1802-3.

'I wrote it down in the shape of a story some years ago, just after my mother's death,' said Mrs. H--. 'It is locked up in my desk there now.'

'Read it!' said we.

'No,' said she; 'the light is bad, and I can remember it well enough, word for word, flourishes and all.' We could not be choosers in the circumstances, and she began.

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'There are two in it, of course, the man and the woman, and it was on an evening in September that she first got to know him. There had not been such a grand gathering on the Esplanade all the season. His Majesty King George the Third was present, with all the princesses and royal dukes, while upwards of three hundred of the general nobility and other persons of distinction were also in the town at the time. Carriages and other conveyances were arriving every minute from London and elsewhere; and when among the rest a shabby stage-coach came in by a by-route along the coast from Havenpool, and drew up at a second-rate tavern, it attracted comparatively little notice.

'From this dusty vehicle a man alighted, left his small quantity of luggage temporarily at the office, and walked along the street as if to look for lodgings.

'He was about forty-five--possibly fifty--and wore a long coat of faded superfine cloth, with a heavy collar, and a hunched-up neckcloth. He seemed to desire obscurity.

'But the display appeared presently to strike him, and he asked of a rustic he met in the street what was going on; his accent being that of one to whom English pronunciation was difficult.

'The countryman looked at him with a slight surprise, and said, "King Jarge is here and his royal Cwort."

'The stranger inquired if they were going to stay long.

'"Don't know, Sir. Same as they always do, I suppose."

'"How long is that?"

'"Till some time in October. They've come here every summer since eighty-nine."

'The stranger moved onward down St. Thomas Street, and approached the bridge over the harbour backwater, that then, as now, connected the old town with the more modern portion. The spot was swept with the rays of a low sun, which lit up the harbour lengthwise, and shone under the brim of the man's hat and into his eyes as he looked westward. Against the radiance figures were crossing in the opposite direction to his own; among them this lady of my mother's later acquaintance, Mademoiselle V--. She was the daughter of a good old French family, and at that date a pale woman, twenty-eight or thirty years of age, tall and elegant in figure, but plainly dressed and wearing that evening (she said) a small muslin shawl crossed over the bosom in the fashion of the time, and tied behind.

'At sight of his face, which, as she used to tell us, was unusually distinct in the peering sunlight, she could not help giving a little

shriek of horror, for a terrible reason connected with her history, and after walking a few steps further, she sank down against the parapet of the bridge in a fainting fit.

'In his preoccupation the foreign gentleman had hardly noticed her, but her strange collapse immediately attracted his attention. He quickly crossed the carriageway, picked her up, and carried her into the first shop adjoining the bridge, explaining that she was a lady who had been taken ill outside.

'She soon revived; but, clearly much puzzled, her helper perceived that she still had a dread of him which was sufficient to hinder her complete recovery of self-command. She spoke in a quick and nervous way to the shopkeeper, asking him to call a coach.

'This the shopkeeper did, Mademoiselle V--- and the stranger remaining in constrained silence while he was gone. The coach came up, and giving the man the address, she entered it and drove away.

'"Who is that lady?" said the newly arrived gentleman.

'"She's of your nation, as I should make bold to suppose," said the shopkeeper. And he told the other that she was Mademoiselle V--, governess at General Newbold's, in the same town.

'"You have many foreigners here?" the stranger inquired.

'"Yes, though mostly Hanoverians. But since the peace they are learning French a good deal in genteel society, and French instructors are rather in demand."

'"Yes, I teach it," said the visitor. "I am looking for a tutorship in an academy."

'The information given by the burgess to the Frenchman seemed to explain to the latter nothing of his countrywoman's conduct--which, indeed, was the case--and he left the shop, taking his course again over the bridge and along the south quay to the Old Rooms Inn, where he engaged a bedchamber.

'Thoughts of the woman who had betrayed such agitation at sight of him lingered naturally enough with the newcomer. Though, as I stated, not much less than thirty years of age, Mademoiselle V--, one of his own nation, and of highly refined and delicate appearance, had kindled a singular interest in the middle-aged gentleman's breast, and her large dark eyes, as they had opened and shrunk from him, exhibited a pathetic beauty to which hardly any man could have been insensible.

'The next day, having written some letters, he went out and made known at the office of the town "Guide" and of the newspaper, that a teacher of French and calligraphy had arrived, leaving a card at the bookseller's to the same effect. He then walked on aimlessly, but at length inquired the

way to General Newbold's. At the door, without giving his name, he asked to see Mademoiselle V--, and was shown into a little back parlour, where she came to him with a gaze of surprise.

'"My God! Why do you intrude here, Monsieur?" she gasped in French as soon as she saw his face.

'"You were taken ill yesterday. I helped you. You might have been run over if I had not picked you up. It was an act of simple humanity certainly; but I thought I might come to ask if you had recovered?"

'She had turned aside, and had scarcely heard a word of his speech. "I hate you, infamous man!" she said. "I cannot bear your helping me. Go away!"

'"But you are a stranger to me."

'"I know you too well!"

'"You have the advantage then, Mademoiselle. I am a newcomer here. I never have seen you before to my knowledge; and I certainly do not, could not, hate you."

'"Are you not Monsieur B--?"

'He flinched. "I am--in Paris," he said. "But here I am Monsieur G--."

'"That is trivial. You are the man I say you are."

'"How did you know my real name, Mademoiselle?"

'"I saw you in years gone by, when you did not see me. You were formerly Member of the Committee of Public Safety, under the Convention."

"I was."

'"You guillotined my father, my brother, my uncle--all my family, nearly, and broke my mother's heart. They had done nothing but keep silence. Their sentiments were only guessed. Their headless corpses were thrown indiscriminately into the ditch of the Mousseaux Cemetery, and destroyed with lime."

'He nodded.

'"You left me without a friend, and here I am now, alone in a foreign land."

'"I am sorry for you," said be. "Sorry for the consequence, not for the intent. What I did was a matter of conscience, and, from a point of view indiscernible by you, I did right. I profited not a farthing. But I shall not argue this. You have the satisfaction of seeing me here an exile also, in poverty, betrayed by comrades, as friendless as yourself."

'"It is no satisfaction to me, Monsieur."

'"Well, things done cannot be altered. Now the question: are you quite recovered?"

'"Not from dislike and dread of you--otherwise, yes."

'"Good morning, Mademoiselle."

'"Good morning."

'They did not meet again till one evening at the theatre (which my mother's friend was with great difficulty induced to frequent, to perfect herself in English pronunciation, the idea she entertained at that time being to become a teacher of English in her own country later on). She found him sitting next to her, and it made her pale and restless.

'"You are still afraid of me?"

'"I am. O cannot you understand!"

'He signified the affirmative.

'"I follow the play with difficulty," he said, presently.

'"So do I--now," said she.

'He regarded her long, and she was conscious of his look; and while she kept her eyes on the stage they filled with tears. Still she would not move, and the tears ran visibly down her cheek, though the play was a merry one, being no other than Mr. Sheridan's comedy of "The Rivals," with Mr. S. Kemble as Captain Absolute. He saw her distress, and that her mind was elsewhere; and abruptly rising from his seat at candle-snuffing time he left the theatre.

'Though he lived in the old town, and she in the new, they frequently saw each other at a distance. One of these occasions was when she was on the north side of the harbour, by the ferry, waiting for the boat to take her across. He was standing by Cove Row, on the quay opposite. Instead of entering the boat when it arrived she stepped back from the quay; but looking to see if he remained she beheld him pointing with his finger to the ferry-boat.

'"Enter!" he said, in a voice loud enough to reach her.

'Mademoiselle V--- stood still.

'"Enter!" he said, and, as she did not move, he repeated the word a third time.

'She had really been going to cross, and now approached and stepped down

into the boat. Though she did not raise her eyes she knew that he was watching her over. At the landing steps she saw from under the brim of her hat a hand stretched down. The steps were steep and slippery.

'"No, Monsieur," she said. "Unless, indeed, you believe in God, and repent of your evil past!"

'"I am sorry you were made to suffer. But I only believe in the god called Reason, and I do not repent. I was the instrument of a national principle. Your friends were not sacrificed for any ends of mine."

'She thereupon withheld her hand, and clambered up unassisted. He went on, ascending the Look-out Hill, and disappearing over the brow. Her way was in the same direction, her errand being to bring home the two young girls under her charge, who had gone to the cliff for an airing. When she joined them at the top she saw his solitary figure at the further edge, standing motionless against the sea. All the while that she remained with her pupils he stood without turning, as if looking at the frigates in the roadstead, but more probably in meditation, unconscious where he was. In leaving the spot one of the children threw away half a sponge-biscuit that she had been eating. Passing near it he stooped, picked it up carefully, and put it in his pocket.

'Mademoiselle V--- came homeward, asking herself, "Can he be starving?"

'From that day he was invisible for so long a time that she thought he

had gone away altogether. But one evening a note came to her, and she opened it trembling.

> '"I am here ill," it said, "and, as you know, alone. There are one or two little things I want done, in case my death should occur,--and I should prefer not to ask the people here, if it could be avoided. Have you enough of the gift of charity to come and carry out my wishes before it is too late?"

'Now so it was that, since seeing him possess himself of the broken cake, she had insensibly begun to feel something that was more than curiosity, though perhaps less than anxiety, about this fellow-countryman of hers; and it was not in her nervous and sensitive heart to resist his appeal. She found his lodging (to which he had removed from the Old Rooms inn for economy) to be a room over a shop, half-way up the steep and narrow street of the old town, to which the fashionable visitors seldom penetrated. With some misgiving she entered the house, and was admitted to the chamber where he lay.

'"You are too good, too good," he murmured. And presently, "You need not shut the door. You will feel safer, and they will not understand what we say."

'"Are you in want, Monsieur? Can I give you--"

'"No, no. I merely want you to do a trifling thing or two that I have

not strength enough to do myself. Nobody in the town but you knows who I really am--unless you have told?"

'"I have not told . . . I thought you might have acted from principle in those sad days, even--"

'"You are kind to concede that much. However, to the present. I was able to destroy my few papers before I became so weak . . . But in the drawer there you will find some pieces of linen clothing--only two or three--marked with initials that may be recognized. Will you rip them out with a penknife?"

'She searched as bidden, found the garments, cut out the stitches of the lettering, and replaced the linen as before. A promise to post, in the event of his death, a letter he put in her hand, completed all that he required of her.

'He thanked her. "I think you seem sorry for me," he murmured. "And I am surprised. You are sorry?"

'She evaded the question. "Do you repent and believe?" she asked.

'"No."

'Contrary to her expectations and his own he recovered, though very slowly; and her manner grew more distant thenceforward, though his

influence upon her was deeper than she knew. Weeks passed away, and the month of May arrived. One day at this time she met him walking slowly along the beach to the northward.

'"You know the news?" he said.

'"You mean of the rupture between France and England again?"

'"Yes; and the feeling of antagonism is stronger than it was in the last war, owing to Bonaparte's high-handed arrest of the innocent English who were travelling in our country for pleasure. I feel that the war will be long and bitter; and that my wish to live unknown in England will be frustrated. See here."

'He took from his pocket a piece of the single newspaper which circulated in the county in those days, and she read--

> "The magistrates acting under the Alien Act have been requested to direct a very scrutinizing eye to the Academies in our towns and other places, in which French tutors are employed, and to all of that nationality who profess to be teachers in this country. Many of them are known to be inveterate Enemies and Traitors to the nation among whose people they have found a livelihood and a home."

'He continued: "I have observed since the declaration of war a marked difference in the conduct of the rougher class of people here towards me.

If a great battle were to occur--as it soon will, no doubt--feeling would grow to a pitch that would make it impossible for me, a disguised man of no known occupation, to stay here. With you, whose duties and antecedents are known, it may be less difficult, but still unpleasant. Now I propose this. You have probably seen how my deep sympathy with you has quickened to a warm feeling; and what I say is, will you agree to give me a title to protect you by honouring me with your hand? I am older than you, it is true, but as husband and wife we can leave England together, and make the whole world our country. Though I would propose Quebec, in Canada, as the place which offers the best promise of a home."

'"My God! You surprise me!" said she.

'"But you accept my proposal?"

'"No, no!"

'"And yet I think you will, Mademoiselle, some day!"

'"I think not."

'"I won't distress you further now."

'"Much thanks . . . I am glad to see you looking better, Monsieur; I mean you are looking better."

'"Ah, yes. I am improving. I walk in the sun every day."

'And almost every day she saw him--sometimes nodding stiffly only, sometimes exchanging formal civilities. "You are not gone yet," she said on one of these occasions.

'"No. At present I don't think of going without you."

'"But you find it uncomfortable here?"

'"Somewhat. So when will you have pity on me?"

'She shook her head and went on her way. Yet she was a little moved. "He did it on principle," she would murmur. "He had no animosity towards them, and profited nothing!"

'She wondered how he lived. It was evident that he could not be so poor as she had thought; his pretended poverty might be to escape notice. She could not tell, but she knew that she was dangerously interested in him.

'And he still mended, till his thin, pale face became more full and firm. As he mended she had to meet that request of his, advanced with even stronger insistency.

'The arrival of the King and Court for the season as usual brought

matters to a climax for these two lonely exiles and fellow country-people. The King's awkward preference for a part of the coast in such dangerous proximity to France made it necessary that a strict military vigilance should be exercised to guard the royal residents. Half-a-dozen frigates were every night posted in a line across the bay, and two lines of sentinels, one at the water's edge and another behind the Esplanade, occupied the whole sea-front after eight every night. The watering-place was growing an inconvenient residence even for Mademoiselle V--- herself, her friendship for this strange French tutor and writing-master who never had any pupils having been observed by many
who slightly knew her. The General's wife, whose dependent she was, repeatedly warned her against the acquaintance; while the Hanoverian and other soldiers of the Foreign Legion, who had discovered the nationality of her friend, were more aggressive than the English military gallants who made it their business to notice her.

'In this tense state of affairs her answers became more agitated. "O Heaven, how can I marry you!" she would say.

'"You will; surely you will!" he answered again. "I don't leave without you. And I shall soon be interrogated before the magistrates if I stay here; probably imprisoned. You will come?"

'She felt her defences breaking down. Contrary to all reason and sense of family honour she was, by some abnormal craving, inclining to a

tenderness for him that was founded on its opposite. Sometimes her warm sentiments burnt lower than at others, and then the enormity of her conduct showed itself in more staring hues.

'Shortly after this he came with a resigned look on his face. "It is as I expected," he said. "I have received a hint to go. In good sooth, I am no Bonapartist--I am no enemy to England; but the presence of the King made it impossible for a foreigner with no visible occupation, and who may be a spy, to remain at large in the town. The authorities are civil, but firm. They are no more than reasonable. Good. I must go. You must come also."

'She did not speak. But she nodded assent, her eyes drooping.

'On her way back to the house on the Esplanade she said to herself, "I am glad, I am glad! I could not do otherwise. It is rendering good for evil!" But she knew how she mocked herself in this, and that the moral principle had not operated one jot in her acceptance of him. In truth she had not realized till now the full presence of the emotion which had unconsciously grown up in her for this lonely and severe man, who, in her tradition, was vengeance and irreligion personified. He seemed to absorb her whole nature, and, absorbing, to control it.

'A day or two before the one fixed for the wedding there chanced to come to her a letter from the only acquaintance of her own sex and country she possessed in England, one to whom she had sent intelligence of her

approaching marriage, without mentioning with whom. This friend's misfortunes had been somewhat similar to her own, which fact had been one cause of their intimacy; her friend's sister, a nun of the Abbey of Montmartre, having perished on the scaffold at the hands of the same Comite de Salut Public which had numbered Mademoiselle V--'s affianced among its members. The writer had felt her position much again of late, since the renewal of the war, she said; and the letter wound up with a fresh denunciation of the authors of their mutual bereavement and subsequent troubles.

'Coming just then, its contents produced upon Mademoiselle V--- the effect of a pail of water upon a somnambulist. What had she been doing in betrothing herself to this man! Was she not making herself a parricide after the event? At this crisis in her feelings her lover called. He beheld her trembling, and, in reply to his question, she told him of her scruples with impulsive candour.

'She had not intended to do this, but his attitude of tender command coerced her into frankness. Thereupon he exhibited an agitation never before apparent in him. He said, "But all that is past. You are the symbol of Charity, and we are pledged to let bygones be."

'His words soothed her for the moment, but she was sadly silent, and he went away.

'That night she saw (as she firmly believed to the end of her life) a divinely sent vision. A procession of her lost relatives--father, brother, uncle, cousin--seemed to cross her chamber between her bed and the window, and when she endeavoured to trace their features she perceived them to be headless, and that she had recognized them by their familiar clothes only. In the morning she could not shake off the effects of this appearance on her nerves. All that day she saw nothing of her wooer, he being occupied in making arrangements for their departure. It grew towards evening--the marriage eve; but, in spite of his re-assuring visit, her sense of family duty waxed stronger now that she was left alone. Yet, she asked herself, how could she, alone and unprotected, go at this eleventh hour and reassert to an affianced husband that she could not and would not marry him while admitting at the same time that she loved him? The situation dismayed her. She had relinquished her post as governess, and was staying temporarily in a room near the coach-office, where she expected him to call in the morning to carry out the business of their union and departure.

'Wisely or foolishly, Mademoiselle V--- came to a resolution: that her only safety lay in flight. His contiguity influenced her too sensibly; she could not reason. So packing up her few possessions and placing on the table the small sum she owed, she went out privately, secured a last available seat in the London coach, and, almost before she had fully weighed her action, she was rolling out of the town in the dusk of the September evening.

'Having taken this startling step she began to reflect upon her reasons. He had been one of that tragic Committee the sound of whose name was a horror to the civilized world; yet he had been only one of several members, and, it seemed, not the most active. He had marked down names on principle, had felt no personal enmity against his victims, and had enriched himself not a sou out of the office he had held. Nothing could change the past. Meanwhile he loved her, and her heart inclined to as much of him as she could detach from that past. Why not, as he had suggested, bury memories, and inaugurate a new era by this union? In other words, why not indulge her tenderness, since its nullification could do no good.

'Thus she held self-communion in her seat in the coach, passing through Casterbridge, and Shottsford, and on to the White Hart at Melchester, at which place the whole fabric of her recent intentions crumbled down. Better be staunch having got so far; let things take their course, and marry boldly the man who had so impressed her. How great he was; how small was she! And she had presumed to judge him! Abandoning her place in the coach with the precipitancy that had characterized her taking it, she waited till the vehicle had driven off, something in the departing shapes of the outside passengers against the starlit sky giving her a start, as she afterwards remembered. Presently the down coach, "The Morning Herald," entered the city, and she hastily obtained a place on the top.

'"I'll be firm--I'll be his--if it cost me my immortal soul!" she said.

And with troubled breathings she journeyed back over the road she had just traced.

'She reached our royal watering-place by the time the day broke, and her first aim was to get back to the hired room in which her last few days had been spent. When the landlady appeared at the door in response to Mademoiselle V--'s nervous summons, she explained her sudden departure and return as best she could; and no objection being offered to her re-engagement of the room for one day longer she ascended to the chamber and
sat down panting. She was back once more, and her wild tergiversations were a secret from him whom alone they concerned.

'A sealed letter was on the mantelpiece. "Yes, it is directed to you, Mademoiselle," said the woman who had followed her. "But we were wondering what to do with it. A town messenger brought it after you had gone last night."

'When the landlady had left, Mademoiselle V--- opened the letter and read--

> "MY DEAR AND HONOURED FRIEND.--You have been throughout our acquaintance absolutely candid concerning your misgivings. But I have been reserved concerning mine. That is the difference between us. You probably have not guessed that every qualm you have felt on the subject of our marriage has been paralleled in my heart to the full.

Thus it happened that your involuntary outburst of remorse yesterday, though mechanically deprecated by me in your presence, was a last item in my own doubts on the wisdom of our union, giving them a force that I could no longer withstand. I came home; and, on reflection, much as I honour and adore you, I decide to set you free.

"As one whose life has been devoted, and I may say sacrificed, to the cause of Liberty, I cannot allow your judgment (probably a permanent one) to be fettered beyond release by a feeling which may be transient only.

"It would be no less than excruciating to both that I should announce this decision to you by word of mouth. I have therefore taken the less painful course of writing. Before you receive this I shall have left the town by the evening coach for London, on reaching which city my movements will be revealed to none.

"Regard me, Mademoiselle, as dead, and accept my renewed assurances of respect, remembrance, and affection."

'When she had recovered from her shock of surprise and grief, she remembered that at the starting of the coach out of Melchester before dawn, the shape of a figure among the outside passengers against the starlit sky had caused her a momentary start, from its resemblance to that of her friend. Knowing nothing of each other's intentions, and screened from each other by the darkness, they had left the town by the

same conveyance. "He, the greater, persevered; I, the smaller, returned!" she said.

'Recovering from her stupor, Mademoiselle V--- bethought herself again of her employer, Mrs. Newbold, whom recent events had estranged. To that lady she went with a full heart, and explained everything. Mrs. Newbold kept to herself her opinion of the episode, and reinstalled the deserted bride in her old position as governess to the family.

'A governess she remained to the end of her days. After the final peace with France she became acquainted with my mother, to whom by degrees she imparted these experiences of hers. As her hair grew white, and her features pinched, Mademoiselle V--- would wonder what nook of the world contained her lover, if he lived, and if by any chance she might see him again. But when, some time in the 'twenties, death came to her, at no great age, that outline against the stars of the morning remained as the last glimpse she ever obtained of her family's foe and her once affianced husband.'

1895.