

CHAPTER II—A TALE OF A PAIR OF SCISSORS

I was still plunged in these thoughts when the bell was rung that discharged our visitors into the street. Our little market was no sooner closed than we were summoned to the distribution, and received our rations, which we were then allowed to eat according to fancy in any part of our quarters.

I have said the conduct of some of our visitors was unbearably offensive; it was possibly more so than they dreamed—as the sight-seers at a menagerie may offend in a thousand ways, and quite without meaning it, the noble and unfortunate animals behind the bars; and there is no doubt but some of my compatriots were susceptible beyond reason. Some of these old whiskerandos, originally peasants, trained since boyhood in victorious armies, and accustomed to move among subject and trembling populations, could ill brook their change of circumstance. There was one man of the name of Goguelat, a brute of the first water, who had enjoyed no touch of civilisation beyond the military discipline, and had risen by an extreme heroism of bravery to a grade for which he was otherwise unfitted—that of *maréchal des logis* in the 22nd of the line. In so far as a brute can be a good soldier, he was a good soldier; the Cross was on his breast, and gallantly earned; but in all things outside his line of duty the man was no other than a brawling, bruising ignorant pillar of low pothouses. As a gentleman by birth, and a scholar by taste and education, I was the type of all that he least understood and most

detested; and the mere view of our visitors would leave him daily in a transport of annoyance, which he would make haste to wreak on the nearest victim, and too often on myself.

It was so now. Our rations were scarce served out, and I had just withdrawn into a corner of the yard, when I perceived him drawing near. He wore an air of hateful mirth; a set of young fools, among whom he passed for a wit, followed him with looks of expectation; and I saw I was about to be the object of some of his insufferable pleasantries. He took a place beside me, spread out his rations, drank to me derisively from his measure of prison beer, and began. What he said it would be impossible to print; but his admirers, who believed their wit to have surpassed himself, actually rolled among the gravel. For my part, I thought at first I should have died. I had not dreamed the wretch was so observant; but hate sharpens the ears, and he had counted our interviews and actually knew Flora by her name. Gradually my coolness returned to me, accompanied by a volume of living anger that surprised myself.

‘Are you nearly done?’ I asked. ‘Because if you are, I am about to say a word or two myself.’

‘Oh, fair play!’ said he. ‘Turn about! The Marquis of Carabas to the tribune.’

‘Very well,’ said I. ‘I have to inform you that I am a gentleman. You do not know what that means, hey? Well, I will tell you. It is a

comical sort of animal; springs from another strange set of creatures they call ancestors; and, in common with toads and other vermin, has a thing that he calls feelings. The lion is a gentleman; he will not touch carrion. I am a gentleman, and I cannot bear to soil my fingers with such a lump of dirt. Sit still, Philippe Goguelat! sit still and do not say a word, or I shall know you are a coward; the eyes of our guards are upon us. Here is your health!' said I, and pledged him in the prison beer. 'You have chosen to speak in a certain way of a young child,' I continued, 'who might be your daughter, and who was giving alms to me and some others of us mendicants. If the Emperor'—saluting—'if my Emperor could hear you, he would pluck off the Cross from your gross body. I cannot do that; I cannot take away what His Majesty has given; but one thing I promise you—I promise you, Goguelat, you shall be dead to-night.'

I had borne so much from him in the past, I believe he thought there was no end to my forbearance, and he was at first amazed. But I have the pleasure to think that some of my expressions had pierced through his thick hide; and besides, the brute was truly a hero of valour, and loved fighting for itself. Whatever the cause, at least, he had soon pulled himself together, and took the thing (to do him justice) handsomely.

'And I promise you, by the devil's horns, that you shall have the chance!' said he, and pledged me again; and again I did him scrupulous honour.

The news of this defiance spread from prisoner to prisoner with the speed of wings; every face was seen to be illuminated like those of the spectators at a horse-race; and indeed you must first have tasted the active life of a soldier, and then mouldered for a while in the tedium of a jail, in order to understand, perhaps even to excuse, the delight of our companions. Goguelat and I slept in the same squad, which greatly simplified the business; and a committee of honour was accordingly formed of our shed-mates. They chose for president a sergeant-major in the 4th Dragoons, a greybeard of the army, an excellent military subject, and a good man. He took the most serious view of his functions, visited us both, and reported our replies to the committee. Mine was of a decent firmness. I told him the young lady of whom Goguelat had spoken had on several occasions given me alms. I reminded him that, if we were now reduced to hold out our hands and sell pill-boxes for charity, it was something very new for soldiers of the Empire. We had all seen bandits standing at a corner of a wood truckling for copper halfpence, and after their benefactors were gone spitting out injuries and curses. 'But,' said I, 'I trust that none of us will fall so low. As a Frenchman and a soldier, I owe that young child gratitude, and am bound to protect her character, and to support that of the army. You are my elder and my superior: tell me if I am not right.'

He was a quiet-mannered old fellow, and patted me with three fingers on the back. 'C'est bien, mon enfant,' says he, and returned to his committee.

Goguelat was no more accommodating than myself. 'I do not like apologies nor those that make them,' was his only answer. And there remained nothing but to arrange the details of the meeting. So far as regards place and time we had no choice; we must settle the dispute at night, in the dark, after a round had passed by, and in the open middle of the shed under which we slept. The question of arms was more obscure. We had a good many tools, indeed, which we employed in the manufacture of our toys; but they were none of them suited for a single combat between civilised men, and, being nondescript, it was found extremely hard to equalise the chances of the combatants. At length a pair of scissors was unscrewed; and a couple of tough wands being found in a corner of the courtyard, one blade of the scissors was lashed solidly to each with resined twine—the twine coming I know not whence, but the resin from the green pillars of the shed, which still sweated from the axe. It was a strange thing to feel in one's hand this weapon, which was no heavier than a riding-rod, and which it was difficult to suppose would prove more dangerous. A general oath was administered and taken, that no one should interfere in the duel nor (suppose it to result seriously) betray the name of the survivor. And with that, all being then ready, we composed ourselves to await the moment.

The evening fell cloudy; not a star was to be seen when the first round of the night passed through our shed and wound off along the ramparts; and as we took our places, we could still hear, over the murmurs of the surrounding city, the sentries challenging its further passage. Leclos, the sergeant-major, set us in our stations, engaged our wands, and left

us. To avoid blood-stained clothing, my adversary and I had stripped to the shoes; and the chill of the night enveloped our bodies like a wet sheet. The man was better at fencing than myself; he was vastly taller than I, being of a stature almost gigantic, and proportionately strong. In the inky blackness of the shed, it was impossible to see his eyes; and from the suppleness of the wands, I did not like to trust to a parade. I made up my mind accordingly to profit, if I might, by my defect; and as soon as the signal should be given, to throw myself down and lunge at the same moment. It was to play my life upon one card: should I not mortally wound him, no defence would be left me; what was yet more appalling, I thus ran the risk of bringing my own face against his scissor with the double force of our assaults, and my face and eyes are not that part of me that I would the most readily expose.

‘Allez!’ said the sergeant-major.

Both lunged in the same moment with an equal fury, and but for my manoeuvre both had certainly been spitted. As it was, he did no more than strike my shoulder, while my scissor plunged below the girdle into a mortal part; and that great bulk of a man, falling from his whole height, knocked me immediately senseless.

When I came to myself I was laid in my own sleeping-place, and could make out in the darkness the outline of perhaps a dozen heads crowded around me. I sat up. ‘What is it?’ I exclaimed.

'Hush!' said the sergeant-major. 'Blessed be God, all is well.' I felt him clasp my hand, and there were tears in his voice. 'Tis but a scratch, my child; here is papa, who is taking good care of you. Your shoulder is bound up; we have dressed you in your clothes again, and it will all be well.'

At this I began to remember. 'And Goguelat?' I gasped.

'He cannot bear to be moved; he has his bellyful; 'tis a bad business,' said the sergeant-major.

The idea of having killed a man with such an instrument as half a pair of scissors seemed to turn my stomach. I am sure I might have killed a dozen with a firelock, a sabre, a bayonet, or any accepted weapon, and been visited by no such sickness of remorse. And to this feeling every unusual circumstance of our rencounter, the darkness in which we had fought, our nakedness, even the resin on the twine, appeared to contribute. I ran to my fallen adversary, kneeled by him, and could only sob his name.

He bade me compose myself. 'You have given me the key of the fields, comrade,' said he. 'Sans rancune!'

At this my horror redoubled. Here had we two expatriated Frenchmen engaged in an ill-regulated combat like the battles of beasts. Here was he, who had been all his life so great a ruffian, dying in a foreign land

of this ignoble injury, and meeting death with something of the spirit of a Bayard. I insisted that the guards should be summoned and a doctor brought. 'It may still be possible to save him,' I cried.

The sergeant-major reminded me of our engagement. 'If you had been wounded,' said he, 'you must have lain there till the patrol came by and found you. It happens to be Goguelat—and so must he! Come, child, time to go to by-by.' And as I still resisted, 'Champdivers!' he said, 'this is weakness. You pain me.'

'Ay, off to your beds with you!' said Goguelat, and named us in a company with one of his jovial gross epithets.

Accordingly the squad lay down in the dark and simulated, what they certainly were far from experiencing, sleep. It was not yet late. The city, from far below, and all around us, sent up a sound of wheels and feet and lively voices. Yet awhile, and the curtain of the cloud was rent across, and in the space of sky between the eaves of the shed and the irregular outline of the ramparts a multitude of stars appeared. Meantime, in the midst of us lay Goguelat, and could not always withhold himself from groaning.

We heard the round far off; heard it draw slowly nearer. Last of all, it turned the corner and moved into our field of vision: two file of men and a corporal with a lantern, which he swung to and fro, so as to cast its light in the recesses of the yards and sheds.

'Hullo!' cried the corporal, pausing as he came by Goguelat.

He stooped with his lantern. All our hearts were flying.

'What devil's work is this?' he cried, and with a startling voice summoned the guard.

We were all afoot upon the instant; more lanterns and soldiers crowded in front of the shed; an officer elbowed his way in. In the midst was the big naked body, soiled with blood. Some one had covered him with his blanket; but as he lay there in agony, he had partly thrown it off.

'This is murder!' cried the officer. 'You wild beasts, you will hear of this to-morrow.'

As Goguelat was raised and laid upon a stretcher, he cried to us a cheerful and blasphemous farewell.