

## CHAPTER X

### *LES MISÉRABLES*

VALETROI knew that the next big push of the enemy would doubtless be in its direction. They had been informed that the gray clouds had been gathering for weeks and were assured that it was only a question of days before the storm would break. All summer long the 138th Battalion had been unusually active digging trenches and placing wire entanglements.

Galahad had wanted to suggest to the Rougets that they should leave the farm and move, either into the village or to some place more remote from the threatened sector. However, he temporized. His solicitude for their safety was offset by his reluctance to lose their society; and then the drive might not come. Before he could do what he fully intended to do, the Germans launched one of their hurricane advances. After a comparatively quiet morning they began late in the afternoon "strafing" the undefended villages, back of the French line, even dropping occasional shells on isolated farmhouses.

Jeanne and her mother both noticed the increased noise in the air as they were having an early tea. Out of the general din a whining sound became audible, growing in volume every second. It seemed to envelop the house, to lift it; and then came the crash of a bursting shell, which rocked the building and broke the windows. Both women leaped to their feet with an involuntary scream. They rushed to the door. Where the flower garden had been was a great shell crater. One of the largest trees in the yard had been cut off five feet above-ground, and the top lay across the roof of the cottage.

They waited for a repetition of the blow, but none came. To the east and south of them they heard explosions and saw the smoke of burning houses rising. Jeanne would have left her mother and run to the village for advice, but Madame Rouget was too nervous even to go into the house and trembled constantly from head to foot. So they stood in the yard near the rose-bush, not composed enough to sit down.

The familiar sound of an *aéroplane* came to their ears. It was a common sight, but they looked up and could clearly see a *Boche* plane nearly over them. The white dresses of the women must have made them a tempting target, for bullets began to fall about them, and the leaves and twigs of the trees, cut by the bullets, floated down. Before they had time to retire within the house, to which they had immediately turned, Mrs. Rouget, going first, swerved, uttered a groan, and sank in the path at the feet of her daughter.

With unwonted strength, Jeanne lifted her mother's body and carried it into her bedroom, laying it upon the bed. She looked so quiet and peaceful that at first Jeanne thought she had only fainted. She ran for a glass of water, sprinkled a little over the calm face, and tried to force some between her lips. As she was working to restore her, a stain of blood ran red upon the sheet. Dazed, she stood staring at it, then summoning herself to action began swiftly to hunt for the wound, which she found in the left breast just over the heart. Death had been instantaneous.

In an agony of grief, the girl threw herself across the mother's form. How long she remained there she did not know; but after a time she became calmer and, rising, wiped her eyes and walked to the door, where she stood looking out without seeing anything. Life had lost all dimension, all detail. It was a shoreless sea; it was a bottomless pit.

The dusk had begun to gather in the woods. The

booming of the guns was growing in intensity. All at once her attention was attracted by a man moving cautiously among the trees as if searching for something. As he caught sight of the house, he moved forward more rapidly, making a detour around the edge of the shell crater.

"Any men about?" he asked sharply, as he drew near.

"No, I am alone," answered the girl.

"Good," he responded. He came close to her. "Do you recognize the uniform?"

"Certainly," she said; "it is that of the British army."

"Can you give me something to drink and let me rest a bit?" he asked, looking apprehensively behind him. He noticed her hesitation. "You surely would not refuse anything to your allies."

"We have just had a great sorrow," she began. "My—"

"What family has not?" he brutally interrupted, pushing past her into the house. She followed and lighted a small lamp. Turning, he closed the door, then threw himself wearily into a chair and took off his cap.

In the lamplight Jeanne was able to get a better view of her self-invited guest. He was dressed in the uniform of a British officer. His clothes, and especially his shoes, were muddy, as if he had been tramping over bad roads or through plowed fields. Though intelligent, the face was not a pleasant one. It was too highly colored, for one thing. A small black mustache accentuated the full, sensual lips, over which he kept running his tongue as if they were parched.

"Any liquor in the house?" The question was a command.

"We have some wine," answered Jeanne.

"Let me have it, then. My mouth is as dry as a pretzel."

Jeanne brought one of the two bottles they had had in

the house since her father went away. The sight of them brought him to mind, and with the thought a great feeling of loneliness swept over her. She was indeed alone now. Conquering with great effort the desire to cry, she wiped her eyes and began to clear away the remains of the food which they had left so precipitately at supper time. The officer's eyes were too dull to notice the evidences of sorrow in her face, but the sight of the wine made them sparkle with anticipation. Without even the ceremony of pouring it into the glass Jeanne set out, he raised the bottle and finished it—guzzled it, she thought.

"Now I am ready for supper," he said, rubbing his hands together and smacking his lips. The announcement was interpreted by Jeanne as an order, as it was intended she should. "I will drink another bottle with my food, pretty one."

His hostess busied herself in the preparation of the meal and kept as far away from the man as possible. She had disliked him from the first, when he was so heartlessly indifferent to her grief; she feared him now that he had begun to use sweet names. There was, moreover, something about his French which did not seem quite right. He spoke, not with an English, but with a Continental accent. She wondered why. Besides, he began to ask questions about the character of the forces in the neighborhood, the ammunition dumps, the woods, and the roads. Jeanne knew little of the military situation. Moreover, why should he question her about these things if he were connected with any of the British regiments in the vicinity?

As he began his meal, he raised his glass. "To the prettiest girl in Valetroi." It was a clumsy compliment such as a man might offer to any peasant girl. She ignored his look as well as his cheap flattery. Unabashed by her silence and with liquor-loosened tongue, the man continued to leer and taunt her for her bashfulness. Her

disgust at his silly compliments was complete. As she waited upon him in scornful silence, he suddenly grasped her about the waist and pulled her roughly down upon his knee, saying, "You don't need to be afraid, sweetie." Turning in his embrace Jeanne struck him full in the face with all the force she could summon and, taking advantage of his momentary surprise, leaped to her feet and ran panting to the farther side of the room.

"*Du kleines Teufelchen!*" he cried, as he staggered up and started toward her with clenched fist. Jeanne screamed.

Neither had noticed a face at the broken window watching the scene. A moment more and the door was flung violently open. The officer reached for his pistol. "*Gott in Himmel!*" he ejaculated, "if it isn't a Chink!"

Before he could utter another word Galahad had sprung over the table which stood between them. The white man's automatic barked as he was in the air and the boy's right arm fell useless; but not his feet. With one of those marvelous movements such as Jeanne had seen on that first day, he leaped into space, both feet off the ground at once, and kicked straight up. A mule's hind leg could not have been more effective nor a sharpshooter's aim more accurate. It caught the florid face beneath the chin and the man fell back into the corner in a heap.

"O Galahad, have you killed him?" asked Jeanne.

"I don't know, nor care; but you, are you injured?" he anxiously inquired. She shook her head. "Who is this man, Miss Rouget?" he asked, somewhat suspiciously.

"I do not know, but I think he is a German spy."

"If that is so, I had better look after him." He examined the unconscious form. "He's not dead. He will come to in a few minutes. Please get me a rope." He picked up the automatic, then rolled the man over on his

face and tried to tie his hands. She thought it rather strange when he asked her to tie the knots, but complied.

"Now you must hurry and get ready to leave here at once. The Germans are advancing. A couple of my coolies will be here in a few moments to help carry your things and your mother's."

She turned white and leaned against the table weakly. He put out his hand to help her. "O Mr. Galahad, they have already killed Mother this afternoon." Quietly she led him to the bedroom and drew down the sheet that covered the face. The boy was visibly affected and could with the greatest difficulty restrain his tears as she told him the few details of the gruesome story.

With resolution, but tenderly, he said: "We must leave her body behind. Will you prepare her for burial?" Even as he spoke, he heard voices outside and went to the door. He gave a few sharp orders in Chinese to the two stalwart fellows who stood there, and they, finding some farming implements, went to work to open a shallow grave. The body, wrapped in several sheets, was brought out, Jeanne holding the lamp so that they could see in the darkness. As they stood above the open grave, she asked, "Won't you pray? I don't like to think of Mother being buried without even a prayer."

"I'll try," he answered, "if you don't mind my using Chinese; I couldn't do it in French."

"That will be better than none," she murmured, with a sob.

So Galahad prayed, or rather talked to God. At first the coolies stood with their hats on their heads, merely waiting to throw in the earth; but gradually their hands stole up and the hats came off, and they stood reverently bowing to the end. The prayer was brief.

"O Father, You understand how we feel when our loved ones leave us, for did not Your dearly beloved Son leave You to come to this sea of bitterness? Comfort.

the heart of Lu Ku-niang as she sorrows for her mother, and comfort every mother in France or in China who sorrows for the loss of a son. O God, You who are the Father of all nations, Governor of the whole earth, bring this cruel war to a speedy close. Keep us this night in our journey and bring us all to meet again in heaven above. Amen."

"Thank you," she said simply, when it was finished. She was perfectly calm.

"Won't you get your things together now?" he suggested.

While she was gone, the coolies finished their task, so that when she returned, the grave was covered with branches of trees and a few flowers.

"He has come to and is swearing fearfully," she said.

Yung-fu took one of the coolies with him into the house, who, in obedience to his command, loosened the German's feet but kept hold of the rope tied about his wrists. "Get up," said Galahad, "and no fooling." He held the automatic in his left hand. "If you try to escape I shall kill you. Stop your cursing; there's a lady here."

"Shades of Paotingfu!" muttered the man, in German. "If this isn't the irony of Fate! I, Ludwig von Stein, member of the punitive expedition against China, captured by Chinese!"

Hastily Jeanne had packed a few belongings and treasures into a small trunk. It was brought out. They blew out the light and locked the door. One of the coolies shouldered the trunk, the other made himself responsible for the spy. Then the journey began.

The path was more familiar to Jeanne than to the interpreter, and she guided him in the darkness. Indeed, he needed guidance. She noticed he swayed from side to side and stumbled repeatedly, but attributed it to the unfamiliarity of the way. When they reached the battalion camp, all was in a bustle. The men were to

start for the rear at ten o'clock. As they came in front of the captain's headquarters, MacGregor appeared. "Oh, there you are," he said, in English. "I was getting worried about you, Mr. Yao. Have you brought the ladies?"

"Only one of them, sir. The mother was killed this afternoon."

"My God, too late!" cried MacGregor. "But what have you there?"

"A spy, I think, sir."

"Well, I'll be blowed. What a boy!"

Jeanne had stood timidly near, without understanding what was said. Without warning, Yao staggered and fell. "Well, well, what's this?" said MacGregor.

"Oh, I fear he is wounded, sir. I have been thinking of myself so much I never asked, and he did not say." Quickly Jeanne sat down and tenderly raised Galahad's head upon her lap. She wiped the dirt from his face with her handkerchief.

"*Shui*, water, get some water," thundered the captain, and some one ran for it. "I'll get an ambulance and have him taken to the hospital, mademoiselle," he said, going in to telephone.

When he came out, a curious group had gathered to look on the strangest sight they had ever seen, and never dreamed of—a white lady bathing the face of a Chinese, who lay with his head in her lap. "Get away from here, every one of you, chop chop," shouted MacGregor. The crowd melted, but the memory remained.

"Where's that German?" asked MacGregor, but nobody knew. In the excitement occasioned by Yao's fainting the Chinese coolie had let go the rope and, indeed, had forgotten all about the man, who had quietly faded into the darkness.