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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DIPLOMAT'S MEMOIR OF 1870 ***

A DIPLOMAT’S MEMOIR OF 1870

A DIPLOMAT’S MEMOIR OF 1870

Being the Account of a Balloon Escape from the Siege of Paris and a Political Mission to London and Vienna by

FREDERIC REITLINGER

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Translated from the French, by his Nephew,
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LONDON
CHATTO & WINDUS
1915

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

At a time when Englishmen and Frenchmen are brothers-in-arms, a translation of this curious and little known narrative may be of interest.

It is a record of a somewhat remarkable episode in a stormy and remarkable year. It describes, possibly not without the inevitable bias of one sent on a forlorn hope, the necessary refusals of Gladstone and Lord Granville to intervene in favour of France. But, as the writer quite prophetically declares, the surrender of Alsace-Lorraine and the aggrandisement of Prussia were fated to be the inevitable stumbling-block to peace in Europe, and so "not without moment" to England. This we now know only too well. 1870 was to be the prelude of 1914.

*   *   *   *   *

Frederic Reitlinger was not by profession a diplomatist, though circumstances gave him this rôle for a brief and not inglorious moment. He achieved some distinction at the Bar in Paris under the Second Empire, and at the request of Napoleon III., made an exhaustive study of the co-operative movements in England, France and Germany. When the Empire fell, after Sedan, he accepted the position of private secretary to the head of the provisional government, M. Jules Favre. It may well have been his striking and remarkable gift of eloquence—attested to by all who heard him plead in the courts—that prompted Favre and the Government in beleaguered Paris to choose him for the desperate task of attempting to win over the rulers of England and Austria. The effort failed, as it was bound to fail, but not discreditably.

After the Peace of Frankfort, Frederic Reitlinger devoted himself to his practice at the Cour d'Appel. He died in 1907.

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CHAPTER I

PARIS BESIEGED

The Political Situation

It was the last week in the month of October, 1870. M. Jules Favre, at that time Vice-President and Minister for Foreign Affairs in the National Defence Government, summoned me to his office in the Quai d'Orsay and said:

"You will find it very strange, but since yesterday I have changed my mind. I now wish to entrust you with another mission. I want you to go to Vienna and London. The last news which has reached us makes me hope for a change of public opinion in Europe. There is beginning to be anxiety for our fate; public sympathy seems to be turning in our favour and coming back to us. Europe admires the resistance we are making and is perhaps not far from wishing us successful."

In his grave and wonderfully modulated voice he described the situation as it appeared to him. Paris was splendid in its courage and enthusiasm; the whole of France was up and decided for resistance; South Germany was discontented with the iron hand weighing upon her, and anxious to finish a war into which she had been dragged against her will, and which was devouring her strength and ruining her country. Finally, Europe returned from her apathy, was deeply impressed by France's efforts, and looked forward to the end of what threatened to degenerate into a war of destruction which would seriously shatter the equilibrium and general interests of Europe.

I am well aware that this picture was not true at all points; I know that there was much illusion in the hope which animated the Minister's patriotic heart, of seeing Europe cast aside her inertia and raise her voice on behalf of conquered France against the conqueror ... in favour of a great and generous people which had fought so much for others, and which was now defending its own hearths and the integrity of its national soil against a formidable invasion.

To-day we know all the springs of that steel ring which encircled France and checkmated the whole of Europe by robbing her of all initiative and liberty of movement. To-day it is certainly easy to laugh at these generous hopes, but at that moment they were shared by all. And it would have been difficult in the great, brave town of Paris, where so much devotion, energy and patriotism had united for a supreme struggle for existence, to find spirits sober enough to consider the enterprise a vain one, or sufficiently far-sighted or discouraged to regard such generous promptings as illusions.

You who have lived through the siege of Paris, try and recollect the tremendous change which the situation had undergone since the 4th of September, and admit I am not exaggerating.

After the disaster of Sedan, when the enemy's columns were marching without obstacle against a Paris shorn of troops, materials and munitions of war,—lacking everything that might allow of further resistance—everyone thought that the war was finished, that the defeat of France was consummated, and that resistance, even for a day, would be absolutely impossible.

We were told at that time to "hold out" a little longer, to resist for only a few weeks, in order to allow public opinion in Europe to awaken. If Paris could defend herself, if she could only maintain herself a few weeks, we were told, the impression in Europe would be immense, and sympathy for us would revive. The provinces would have time to form an army and to come to our rescue, and Europe would be able to raise her voice in favour of an honourable peace.

Such was the language which official visitors to the Quai d'Orsay daily uttered to our Minister for Foreign Affairs; and even if the spirited population of Paris had not peremptorily demanded resistance, communications from the Diplomatic Body, (I am not speaking of their advice, for *that* they could not give), would have imposed on the National Defence Government the imperious duty of attempting a final effort. And the effort *was* attempted, and admirably maintained by the heroic town. We were asked to "hold on," and we did "hold on."

The great city held out, and not only for some weeks. Nearly two months had passed since the catastrophe of Sedan, two months employed in organising resistance.

At the moment of which I am speaking, Paris had already undergone more than fifty days of siege without weakening. Do I say without weakening? On the contrary, the greater her privations, the greater became her courage; the greater the wastage of her resources, the greater the strength of her resistance. A whole arsenal had been improvised, a redoubtable fortress had been created out of nothing. The ramparts, which at the approach of the Prussians were bare of everything, had been swiftly furnished with cannon, ammunition, and defenders; the peaceable citizens had changed into soldiers, the workshops had become factories for arms—in a word, this charming and beautiful town, the city of wit and pleasure, was transformed into a vast armed camp forming the centre of radiating sectors which united her closely with the ramparts.

The spirit of war had breathed into men's souls, and manly enthusiasm reigned supreme; unshakable confidence inflamed the most timid minds and filled them with courage. And with courage hope had entered into all hearts, and faith had revived—the faith of soldiers, the conviction of success. All men sincerely believed in it.

How could one admit that all these great endeavours, these generous aspirations, all this sublime devotion should remain sterile, that the intelligence and energy, in a word all the great and wonderful spirit of a nation fighting for its life, should result in deception and vanity!

And would Europe, who was watching us and observing our efforts, remain dumb? Would she shut herself up in selfish indifference, cross her arms and assist as a careless spectator in the mutilation of France, in the humiliation of a great people which had fought so much for others and which was now struggling for existence?

Would Europe allow the dismemberment of a great-spirited country, so necessary to the equilibrium and the very existence of Europe? Such a thing was not to be thought of.

So it came about that, when we heard of considerable changes in the public opinion of Europe, and when it was reported that the Powers, astonished at our prodigious efforts, were not disinclined from joining their activities to ours in order to arrive at the conclusion of an honourable peace, we thought the news very plausible, and it found ready credence.

And when M. Jules Favre, changing the purpose of the mission that he wanted to entrust to me before, and which it is unnecessary I should speak of here, asked me to undertake a journey to the Courts of Vienna and London in order to try and interest these Powers more directly in the struggle and to lead them into effective intervention on our behalf, it was well worth the attempt, and I was proud to be its bearer.

Let me explain further.

When the unfortunate declaration of war was hurled into the midst of a peaceable Europe sleeping in profound security, it provoked universal stupefaction and disgust. Every state had reduced its contingents, every parliament had terminated its labours, after casting a smiling and satisfied glance at the complete tranquillity of the universe. Every sovereign was making holiday, or reposing with gently closed eyes in the most retired part of his princely residence. Every people was intent on its affairs and preparing, in absolute security, for the peaceful labours of the harvest. The entire universe was tasting the sweets of a general peace and resting in a quietude threatened by no discord.

The explosion of the “année terrible” crashed through all these countries, awoke every parliament, stupified every sovereign, and irritated every people. The world was disgusted by the nation which had fired off the sacrilegious cannon and let loose the scourge of war into the midst of a situation which was regarded as the Golden Age of universal peace. It was France that had troubled this beneficent peace. It was France that, without appreciable cause, had provoked the frightful struggle. So much the worse for her if she succumbed to what she had herself unchained without a thought for the general interests of Europe.

Such was the opinion, the “state of soul,” as they say nowadays, of Europe at the beginning of the war.

France was completely isolated, in the most distressing sense of the word; that is to say, she not only had not a single ally, but not a single sympathiser. All her neighbours, States, sovereigns, and people, even her oldest friends, had turned from her as from a criminal who had destroyed public happiness.

But when, after disasters without name and precedent in the glorious history of France, the brave population sprang up again under defeat like a steel blade, when after the war of regular armies there commenced a new war of a people which would not surrender, but insisted on remaining erect and fighting with the broken sword picked up on the battlefield of its conquered armies, which insisted on battling for the honour of life and the integrity of its sacred soil, then her most obstinate enemies admired and saluted a resistance unexampled in history, and contemplated with ever-growing interest the struggle of a scarcely-armed people against the best trained, best led, and most formidable armies which had ever invaded an enemy’s country. France, which had yesterday been found guilty of commencing the war, became in defeat the object of admiration and a living image of the civic virtues; Europe recovered from her irritation and began with an anxious eye to follow and to desire the end of an unequal duel.

We therefore had reason to hope that we might find in the great Powers, not only the sympathy with which everyone had been inspired by our resistance, but the firm desire to help us in our efforts at arriving at the conclusion of an honourable peace.

Certainly I could not, and did not, hope to succeed in drawing either England or Austria into a war against Prussia. I knew both countries too well to abandon myself to such an illusion. But what we hoped for with conviction, and what we had reason to hope for, was that the European Powers, in the general interests of the future, would arrive at an entente, and would associate themselves in an effort to obtain from Prussia terms of peace less harsh than those which the latter had proudly been announcing ever since the first days of her victories.

If Austria and England seriously desired this result, then Italy, that beautiful kingdom for whose unity France had poured out the best of her blood, could not withdraw from the union, and Russia, herself a powerful and precious friend of the old King of Prussia, would be happy to serve as mediator between the Powers thus united and Germany.

There was, in fact, reason to hope that the Powers would come to an understanding with the object of speaking the language of reason to Prussia and making her understand, with firmness and resolution, that all Europe was interested in seeing this war terminated by a lasting peace, whose conditions could be accepted without humiliation and without the arrière pensée that a contract, accepted by France against her will and under the force of necessity, might be torn up in time to come. Such were my sincere hopes.

What really happened disappointed these hopes. But that does not prove that we were wrong in conceiving and attempting the enterprise, and there will certainly come a day[A]—perhaps not far distant—when history will judge that European diplomacy then lost one of the most propitious occasions for laying the foundations of a pacifist policy and preparing the era of general disarmament. Already to-day this dream might be realised, to the profit and happiness of all humanity. For if France had not been mutilated, what obstacle would there now be to the general disarmament of Europe?

[A] NOTE:—M. Reitlinger’s volume was published in Paris in 1899.

* * * * *

We had also received divers reports concerning Prussia’s allies.

Certain individuals, who claimed and believed themselves to be well informed, carried rumours which were really very extraordinary to the Hôtel de Ville. Bavaria and Wurtemburg, it was said, were tired of the war, tired in particular of always seeing their soldiers in the front rank, and ardently desirous of peace. One even went so far as to say that South Germany was animated by great discontent against Prussia, and that a breach was not far distant.

It really needed absolute ignorance of the true situation in Germany to believe even for an instant such chimeras as these. It was certainly true that in the month of July, 1870, neither Bavaria nor Wurtemburg were enthusiastic for a war which the parliaments of these two countries had only voted with difficulty. It is equally true that at the beginning of the campaign, a single small advantage won over the Prussians, even a swift march of the French army beyond the Rhine, would have been sufficient to expose Prussia to the risk of being isolated and left alone in her struggle with France. But the situation had been completely changed since the prodigious and terrible successes of the armies of M. de Moltke. [14]

At the beginning France was feared, and there was no desire to embark on a war whose issue was in doubt. So great was the anxiety, that the Rhine provinces made hasty preparations for receiving the "*pantalons rouges*." It was already believed that France was on the threshold, and it was feared that she would cross it from one day to the other. But when it was seen that the French did not arrive, when the Prussians crossed the Rhine and won victory after victory, then immense enthusiasm, an unparalleled delirium, seized the whole of Germany, and the people would have dethroned their kings and driven out their ministers had there been a single one willing to separate himself from the common cause of the German Fatherland's sacred war against the hereditary enemy.

It was indeed all Germany that was against us. And it required absolute ignorance of her inclinations, of her tendencies, and of her aspirations, to seriously believe that discord could still exist in Germany after the unhoped-for successes of her armies. [15]

* * * * *

It was arranged that I was to leave at once.

In order to receive M. Jules Favre's last instructions, the day before my departure I went back to see him at the Hôtel de Ville, where the National Defence Government sat every evening until a very late hour of the night. That evening the Council sat till one in the morning. At nine o'clock on the 28th of October my balloon was to leave the *Gare d'Orléans*.

* * * * *

In the next chapter the reader will find a description of my journey; it was adventurous enough in all conscience, but I have not allowed the story of it to come before the necessary resumé of the political situation and of the sentiments of Europe towards ourselves. [16]

I cannot, however, resist a desire to describe a scene which I witnessed en route, and which moved me to tears. The reader will excuse me if I tell it here. He will not read it without emotion.

Early one morning, in the beautiful Norman countryside between Eu and Dieppe, if I am not mistaken, we met a hundred or so young recruits on the road, freshly enrolled for the terrible war. They were very lightly clad, as if for a summer excursion to the country.

The biting morning wind whistled cruelly through their cotton trousers, and I felt my teeth chatter with cold, but these brave Norman boys did not feel the cold. They marched on gaily, singing the Marseillaise, and when they passed our carriage they waved their felt hats in token of gaiety, as if they were going to a fête, and, carried away by enthusiasm, they cried, "*Vive la République! Vive la France!*"

A tear fell from my eye—one of those bitter tears that run silently along one's cheek, like the overflow of a great grief. I wiped my eyes and whispered, "*E pur si muove.*" [17]

Such gaiety in the face of danger, such conviction, such sublime faith in the midst of so many ruins! Is not this the fundamental strength of the French character and its great superiority, in spite of the proverbial fickleness with which it has been reproached since the time of Cæsar? Is not this the secret of the immense resilience and strength of our country?

"*E pur si muove!*" Yes, the cause of such a people could not be lost. It must force fortune to smile and victory to return to its banners.

Everywhere I met the same enthusiasm and the same confidence in our final success, and certainly, had it been within the bounds of human possibility to repair the disasters of the terrible campaign, France would have accomplished the miracle and would not have succumbed.

[18]

"*Si Pergama dextra*
Defendi possent: etiam hac defense fuissent."

But against physical impossibilities no struggle can succeed; all strength exhausts itself, the strong will weakens, and patriotism, courage and resistance to the last, every prodigy of flaming love for one's country, is impotent to effect the impossible—impotent to do what is beyond human strength.

Many have criticised the desperate efforts of a people who refuse to recognise that they are beaten, and do not acknowledge the evidence of defeat; but these are precisely the efforts which, in spite of final defeat, will be written in its history in letters of gold.

All the victories and glories, all the past grandeurs of the nation, pale in the presence of the greatness, unique in history, of a vanquished people which would not despair and would not surrender, a people which, when its Government, its army, its generals, all had foundered around it, alone remained upright to save its honour, grasping in one hand its flag and in the other the hilt of its broken sword. [19]

*   *   *   *   *

I was convinced, in the course of my journey across Europe, and particularly by my welcome in Austria and England, that France, who was detested at the beginning of the war for having suddenly lit such a formidable fire, had reconquered general esteem by the energy she showed in the midst of her disasters.

M. de Chaudordy, whom I saw at Tours, gave me much encouragement in the interviews I had with him before leaving for Vienna. This gentleman was in daily communication with the representatives of the Powers at Tours and so was better able than we, who had been shut up in Paris, to give an exact estimate of the opinion of Europe and the changes it had undergone. He assured me that M. Jules Favre was right in telling me that there was a considerable move in our favour in the sympathies of Europe.

He also, without abandoning himself to over-sanguine ideas, hoped much from this change of opinion. He thought that the efforts which I was about to make in the Cabinets of Vienna and London ought to be attempted, and that they might very well produce satisfactory results.

Under these circumstances I was all impatience to leave and arrive at Vienna, since, according to my instructions, the Austrian Government was the first that I was to address. But before going to Vienna I wanted to inform myself as to the situation in Germany, in order to be able to speak with full *connaissance de cause*.

I left Tours in the first days of November, and directed my course towards Germany.

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CHAPTER II

THE DEPARTURE

Our departure from Paris was fixed for the 28th of October, at nine in the morning.

It was a beautifully fresh and clear day. The sky was cloudless and the sun sent its fairest rays over the earth, while an icy wind swept the calm and deserted streets of the capital. In spite of the early hour there were already many people standing round the balloon, which was being inflated. Two or three hundred of the curious had come to watch our departure.

When I arrived the balloon was filling slowly and pompously. It was already beginning to leave the ground, little by little and majestically, like a giant rising out of the earth.

Its formidable mass was soon entirely upright, and balanced and shifted as if impatient to take flight.

Now it has mounted and floats in the wind over its little “nacelle” or car, the latter still firmly attached to the ground to allow its cargo to be loaded.

The car was packed with five or six mail-bags full of correspondence and *depêches*—thousands of little letters, on the fine paper invented during the Siege of Paris for the needs of a new correspondence service through the clouds—rare and impatiently expected messages which distributed to France outside the solace of a written line and a living signal from the beloved ones shut up within the ramparts.

When all was loaded, it was the passengers’ turn. Before going up it was necessary to know the direction of the wind. As all the east of France was already invested, balloons could only leave with some chance of safety if the wind blew towards the west.

This was the only precaution taken in despatching balloons, which were left literally to the mercy of the winds. Our party had not even a compass to indicate the direction we were taking, as if the winds always remained the same and never changed, and as if it were sufficient to know its direction at departure in order also to know where we should arrive.

Our departure was accordingly preceded by a “ballon d’essai,” which was let up in order to explore the air and show the direction of the wind. The direction was a good one, and the wind propitious—*obstrictis aliis, praeter Iapiga*.—The wind showed itself from the east, and the little pioneer balloon went off gaily, promptly to disappear over the western horizon. Then came a solemn voice: “*Messieurs les voyageurs en ballon!*” I shall never forget that voice; I can hear it in my ears to-day.

Messieurs les voyageurs, en ballon! A quick, last goodbye to one’s friends, then up the little rope ladder which leads to the basket and a last look back. A last handshake, and here we are, seated in our aerial craft, bound for an unknown destination.

The unknown always contains an element of the fearsome, and without being exactly anxious as regards the physical dangers of our journey, we had a certain feeling of solemnity when the basket left the earth. There were three passengers—M. Cassier, the Director of the French pigeon-post—who had brought a number of his faithful messengers with him; a sailor, who acted as an improvised aeronaut; and myself.

We all made ourselves as comfortable as possible on the little wicker seats which were fitted inside the basket. There were two of these, facing each other, and on each there was room for two persons. Piled up at our feet at the bottom of the basket were the sacks of *depêches* and letters, and the ballast. The anchor was firmly fastened to the side of the basket, fastened even too firmly, and altogether too heavy to be of use in case of accidents.

The whole thing might have weighed about a ton. As soon as we were seated, the balloon began to tack about. Our departure was not effected without difficulty. The balloon had to be guided so as to leave it a free passage, in order that in its ascent it should not encounter and demolish the roofs of the houses surrounding the open space of the *Gare d’Orleans*. This was not an easy operation; it required time and a certain amount of skill on the part of those who were holding on to the balloon and watching its ascent, and who were only supposed to let it entirely free when the basket had passed the tops of the houses. These complicated manœuvres were long and gave us time to look around us and think....

Suddenly we heard the sacramental words, “Let go.” The moment had arrived.

All hands simultaneously let go of the ropes and quickly cut the moorings. The balloon was free, and mounted swiftly, turning round its axis, great and majestic as an eagle in flight. “*Bon voyage*, bold travellers, *bon voyage*!” shouted the crowd, and everybody waved their hands, handkerchiefs, and hats. There were even flags floating gaily in the breeze. It was a touching thing to see all these arms held out to us, and sending us a last goodbye from the beloved earth which we were leaving.

It was a very short moment and passed like a flash. The balloon turned on itself with dizzy swiftness. It went up, and up, and up, always turning.

The *Gare d’Orleans*, the streets of Paris with their houses, the monuments, the last lines of the city, the circle of fortifications, the countryside with its fortresses, all appeared and disappeared with maddening rapidity. The eye no longer saw and the intelligence ceased in stupefaction, paralysed by this mad, gigantic dance, without purpose and without end.

Where were we and where were we going? What was the meaning of this continual turning? When would we stop and what would be the end of this phenomenal journey?

The sun was radiant and the shadows were deep and clearly defined. The wind whipped and hastened the spinning of our balloon. Contrasts followed each other with such prodigious swiftness that it became impossible

to follow them. Sight and mind slid over this marvellous ocean as if in a dream, no longer distinguishing shape or time or space. Where were we? We did not know; one half-minute of the balloon's free course was enough to make us feel completely lost. If the balloon had only proceeded in a straight line in the same way as any other known craft, we should not have lost the bearing of our starting-point, in spite of the swiftness of our progress; but the balloon twisted ceaselessly and with terrible rapidity about its own axis. After a few revolutions that were quicker than lightning, it was impossible to recognise the direction in which we were going or to know our position.

Whither were we going? Left, right, south or north—it was impossible to say.

A compass might have told us. But, as I have already said, our balloon had no compass, a thing so necessary to every navigator. Our only instrument was a little barometric scale which registered the height at which the balloon was travelling. In addition the unfortunate sailor, who was our improvised aeronaut and who was to direct our expedition, had as much knowledge of the art of aerial navigation as an inhabitant of the moon has of the mysteries of the Indian Brahmans. This will give you an exact idea of the manner in which our journey was undertaken. Our expedition went off, in a doubly true sense, at the mercy of chance and the wind.

CHAPTER III

WONDERS AND EVENTS OF AN AERIAL VOYAGE

We were, however, all three very glad and proud of our journey. We were in excellent spirits, and our hearts beat more rapidly at the thought of doing something for the wonderful defence of the great besieged city and of taking our share in the common effort.

We did not even think of danger, and not one of us would have stopped to consider for a moment the defective equipment and slightly precarious nature of our conveyance. We were entirely given up to our enterprise and to the magnificent spectacle which rolled, renewing itself every moment, before our astonished eyes. It mattered little to us where we were or where we were going; we were at least sure of not stopping on the way.

Suddenly our attention was awakened by a singular and characteristic sound which struck our ears and informed us, in no uncertain manner, of our whereabouts. We were crossing the lines of the besieging army, and the latter were presenting their compliments by shooting at us with rifles. But their bullets were unable to hit us. Though we heard them whistling, that did not prevent the balloon from continuing its swift course towards unassailable altitudes.

We soon rose out of the range of their marksmen, and the rifle fire ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Our attention was then again drawn to the wonders and surprises of our aerial voyage.

This is a thing I cannot describe, and even to-day, after the lapse of twenty-eight years, I cannot find words to give any idea of the prodigious spectacle ceaselessly rolling at our feet, or of the deep and ineffacable impression which it produced on us. Only those who have made the ascent of high mountains can realise feebly what is a journey in the air at a height of two or three thousands yards.

Who is there who has not once in his life enjoyed that experience, who does not know the imposing calm and the absolute silence that reign over the eternal glaciers, the effect of which, in conjunction with the immense panorama which these almost inaccessible heights unfold, is to fill the spirit of the traveller with sublime admiration and a species of poetic delirium? Well, the impression left on me by this aerial journey far outstrips the fairy memories of mountain glaciers.

There was the same calm, the same absolute and grandiose silence, the same majestic response, as if at the approach of the Divinity, but the horizon was wider and the view more varied. The balloon floated on, and the horizon changed every minute with the rapidity of its course. The subdued tints of the far distance served as a sort of border to the fresher and more accentuated colours of those tracts of country that were nearer and bathed in light. Valleys and mountains followed each other and mingled like the ever-renewed waves of the sea.

The waves of the sea are an exact comparison, for there was always an immense ocean under our eyes, an ocean such as no mariner has ever beheld. It comprised and blended together all things—plain and mountain, earth and river, cities and countryside, meadows and forests. Every possible contrast was linked together, every colour and every tone stood out and was reflected, and on this great, glistening ocean under a cloudless sky the gigantic shadow of the balloon travelled like the image of some unknown spectre, striding across the universe.

I can find no further words, and think that no human speech is able to describe the fascination of the amazing scene that sprang as it were from an unknown world before our dazzled eyes.

As the balloon continued its course, sometimes slowly, as if cradled by the zephyrs, and sometimes violently agitated by the breath of the storm which was already threatening, we became accustomed to the grandeur of the ceaselessly changing spectacle.

Once recovered from our amazement, it seemed to us natural to be thus transported in an aerial vessel two thousand yards above our ordinary habitations, and we tried to make ourselves as comfortable as we could in the car. The air was fresh, and although the sun was veiled by no trace of clouds, the temperature at these altitudes was very chilly. Our first need, therefore, was to protect ourselves against the cold and to cover ourselves from the icy atmosphere with everything we could find. Our second preoccupation was hunger.

We had left Paris before nine in the morning. The fresh air had set our blood in motion and awakened our appetites. At half-past ten the crew of the "Vauban"—that was the name of the balloon—simultaneously remarked, "Luncheon."

No sooner said than done. We had not far to go to find the restaurant, nor did our meal require great preparations.

We each drew out of our pockets the provisions we had brought, and these provisions were by no means extravagant. At this period Paris was already under rations as far as meat was concerned, and if my memory serves me aright, I think that everyone in Paris had at that time the right to four ounces of beef, whose only connection with that succulent comestible was its name, given it under false pretences and in order to deceive the palates of the Parisians.

But if our repast was modest and meagre, the wine which washed it down was excellent and our appetites were first-rate.... Moreover, the view from the balcony of our dining-room was enough to make us forget the frugality of our repast and transform the simplest menu into a feast. When we had finished eating and drinking we sent a telegram to M. Jules Favre.

A telegram from a balloon? Yes, a real telegram.

You have not forgotten that M. Cassier, Director of the French Pigeon Post, was with me, and that he had brought a score of pigeons with him. One of these graceful birds was charged with a message for M. Jules Favre. I had promised to inform him as well as I could of the events of our journey. The most hazardous part

seemed to me to be already accomplished.

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This was far from being the case, as will be seen later, but that is what I thought at the moment. We had been crossing the enemy’s lines for a considerable time and our balloon had not ceased moving with very great and noticeable rapidity and without changing its direction. We therefore had reason to suppose that we were not far from those western latitudes where we were to descend. This was the sense of my message. I added a few notes on the regions we had traversed and the different altitudes to which we had attained—for it is interesting to remark that our balloon, without apparent reason, often rose to a height of two thousand yards or more, and afterwards, again without reason, fell to one hundred and fifty yards and less.

When I had finished my note, I rolled up tightly the square of paper on which it had been written and tied it up. M. Cassier concealed the little roll under the pigeon’s wings by skilfully attaching it to the upper part of one of the bird’s legs. And then “*Bon voyage* for Paris!”

36

It was curious to see the departure of our messenger. The little bird seemed to share our own uncertainty as to the direction we were taking and did not appear to know its bearings. But its embarrassment did not last as long as ours: once it had left the balloon it flew two or three times round it, always coming back on its traces as if to find out where it was and seeking its route, and sheltering itself near us as long as it felt uncertain. But suddenly it lifted its delicate little head, gave a cry of joy, and flew off like an arrow in a straight line, without deviating or looking to the left or right. It had found its way and was going straight back to its nest in Paris.

37

CHAPTER IV

A CHANGE

This was the end of the peaceful part of our voyage and the prelude of a new and more exciting phase.

The wind, whistling ceaselessly, finished by somewhere picking up a few clouds which had been almost imperceptible in the four corners of the horizon. The balloon’s course began to be less regular; sometimes it jumped in a disquieting manner, and our barometer then showed variations of one thousand yards in a few minutes. Once we were even so near the earth that we were able to speak to peasants who were working in the fields. We asked them to tell us where we were, and they seemed to have understood our question, for they answered us, but we could not catch their reply.

The excessive swiftness with which the balloon had passed prevented us from understanding what they said. The sound of their voices only reached us as the distant echo of human speech. Our ears only heard inarticulate sounds whose meaning escaped us, so swiftly was the distance increased which separated our question from their answer.

[38]

At another time the car floated majestically over an immense plain which filled the horizon and stretched as far as the eye could see. Then it was I wanted to effect our descent. I said so to our aeronaut, and asked him to open the valve and let the gas escape slowly, so as to allow our balloon to sink gently to the ground.

The plain which was unfolded before our eyes seemed to me created expressly for a successful landing. Here we could descend without fearing any of those terrible accidents which threatened every descent on less propitious ground. For a balloon does not always stop when it reaches the earth; it often drags its car and knocks it with terrible rage against obstacles, as we ourselves were destined to see.

Nothing of the kind was to be feared here. The balloon might graze the earth and drag the car along the ground as much as it liked without any great danger to ourselves. It was bound to end at any moment by literally expiring, without crushing its passengers in its agony. But it was fated that we were to continue our journey and descend later on in a less peaceable manner.

[39]

The sailor certainly made an excellent soldier, as did all the brave seamen who had pluckily done their duty in the Siege of Paris; but as an aeronaut he was mediocre. He took no account of anything, neither the direction we had followed, nor the swift speed of our passage, nor the distance we must have traversed since our start from Paris. He said: “If you give orders to come down, I will open the valve. I will do so to obey orders, but may I take the liberty of saying that we have not yet gone very far. We shall fall into the enemy’s lines, and once the valve is open we shall not be able to go up again.” I was not of this opinion; I considered that we must be very far from Paris and that this plain must be one of the fertile plains of Normandy, which extend from the banks of the Seine to the sea. We had been travelling for more than two hours with a powerful east wind and had moved with almost painful speed the whole time. Unless one supposed that the balloon had changed its direction on the way, which was by no means probable as the wind had not changed at all, it was easy to estimate the distance which we must have traversed.

[40]

It was sufficient to watch the shadow of the balloon gliding at express speed over the distant earth.

If the course of this immense phantom appeared very rapid to us at a height of one thousand or one thousand five hundred yards, what must have been the real speed of the balloon itself, which projected such a rapid shadow into the distance!

I imparted this reflection to our pilot, but he was insensible to my arguments and would not listen. He shook his head in doubt, and without consenting to discuss my reasons, repeated: “If you give the order, I will obey; but I think it will be better to wait.”

[41]

I finally gave way and consented to wait. After all, I said to myself, we were not badly off in the air, and it was always better to be a little longer up there than to come down too quickly and fall into the hands of the enemy.

So we continued our journey.

It was a mistake, an irreparable mistake, one which came near costing us dear.

From that moment the weather suddenly changed, and a quarter of an hour later all hope of ending our journey peaceably by a regular descent was completely lost.

The horizon, which up till now had been clear and radiant, began to take on a disquietingly sombre tint. Mists arose. We could not see where they came from, but they came, interminably rolling and surging and thickening more and more; a tempest was forming around us. It was a strange scene, at once beautiful and terrible, and its very horror so contributed to its beauty that I forgot for the moment that we were ourselves about to play a part in the drama.

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[42]

CHAPTER V

THE STORM

I will try and set down what I saw. The balloon was above the tempest that was forming; the storm was in preparation, so to speak, under our eyes. The sky above our heads did not change in aspect, but remained placid and transparently blue.

We were therefore floating over the clouds, with a full view of the storm beneath us and the unclouded sun above us.

It was a dazzling contrast; over our heads was the golden and intense brilliance of an unclouded blue sky, the transparent azure of pure air inundated with light, and under our feet lay deep and changeable night—a black, weltering mass of uneasy chaos, that seemed as if set in motion by the hands of giants; a nameless thing without a form or colour that rolled and eddied and swarmed—the *Tohu-bohu* of Genesis.

It might have been an army of Titans whipping and tormenting the clouds, that were piled up and shattered on one another, and again piled up and shattered endlessly.

And over this feverish chaos we heard the rumble of thunder, while the violent and icy wind drove the clouds as a wolf does the sheep when it falls upon a flock. Our poor balloon, though it was great and heavy, carrying, as I have said, not less than a ton, was as light as a feather on the wings of the hurricane. It danced madly up and down, shaken and tossed about like a fragile skiff. So we rolled over this stormy sea without compass or rudder, fascinated by the grandeur and the strangeness of the sight.

How long were we in the storm?

I cannot say; but suddenly the aeronaut cried, “Monsieur, we are sinking!” And the balloon, without showing any breakage to explain such an accident, sank rapidly, or rather dropped perpendicularly, like a mass.

We were then still above the clouds, which were shedding torrents of rain on to the earth, and it was impossible for us to see through the thick night which lay cold and damp under our feet. We tried in vain to find our bearings and to guess how or where the balloon would strand us. Would we be cast on terra firma or into the sea; on mountains or on to the trees of a forest?

It was a critical moment.

Lighten the balloon, quickly! And in a moment we were all occupied in lifting our ballast—big sacks of sand—out of the hold, and the inhabitants of the country over which we were passing must have been astonished at seeing a sudden rain of gravel mixed with the showers of water which were drowning the countryside.

But we could not deal quickly enough with the ballast, and the balloon continued to sink. It descended with a rapidity that made us shudder and drove us to work with feverish activity. We heaved over the sacks of ballast as briskly as real sailors who have done nothing else all their lives. Each of us laboured at our task, and the sand fell like hail.

Suddenly the daylight disappeared and darkness enveloped us. We were inundated by a cold, intense fog and pierced to the skin by icy dampness. We were running through a veritable aerial tunnel, to use a permissible metaphor. The clouds which the storm had just before been rolling at our feet were now all round our balloon and us. When the balloon had passed through them, dripping with rain and frost, I saw with amazement that we were just above an immense wood which pointed its spikes at us like so many threatening spears. We were inevitably about to land in the middle of this wood and in the branches of its trees.

I remained standing in order to see better, but what I saw was terrifying. A thick and endless forest extended under our eyes, showing thousands of branches like so many terrible defences ready to tear us. Nowhere was there a clearing which might give us hope.

The balloon continued falling, in spite of its being lightened, with all the speed of its enormous weight. I could not help looking, like a man who cannot help himself and who sees himself being hurled into an inevitable abyss.

“If we could only pass the wood!” I had scarcely uttered these words when a terrible noise was heard. We were shaken by a frightful shock, which seemed as if it would dislocate all our limbs. The car was thrown among the trees and bounded against them, breaking them into small fragments. It was a terrible fall, but when it came to the point and I felt the first signs of the end I gave a sigh of relief. “This is it, at last—this is the end!” The unknown, which one fears and trembles at and cannot avoid, is always more terrible than the reality, once one has seen the latter face to face.

But all, unfortunately, was not yet over, and still greater and more violent turns of fortune were to await us. The car alone had crashed against the trees, breaking them with the violence of the shock, but the balloon still floated intact over the basket, presenting its whole volume to the wind. It dragged us with terrific force over the trees, which broke under the shock and at the same time held back the car entangled in the broken and twisted branches.

It was a terrible conflict! The balloon tried to rise, but the trees held us back and the car was dragged over the trees, bounding, smashing, and annihilating everything it met in its frantic course.

CHAPTER VI

THE FALL

The danger was here, and our position seemed absolutely desperate. Death is not the most fearful thing in the destinies of man. It was when we first embarked on the “Vauban” that we offered the sacrifice of our lives, knowing perfectly well that we were exposing ourselves to the danger of falling on the road. We had, therefore, foreseen the possibility of death; but to die torn by a blind force, to be dragged over trees and not to know if the branches will first wrench off your head or your arms, is a thing more painful than death. And there was no physical power nor intelligence—no means whatever which might save us. We had nothing to fall back on, absolutely nothing but hazard, as blind as the force which was playing with our existence. The situation caused a strange thing to happen in my imagination, which I have never been able to explain and which I should like at this point to describe.

For a few moments I had a sort of vision. There is nothing extraordinary in this. It can be easily explained. But what I at least find more difficult to explain and what up till now I have never been able to understand is that I was at the same time absolutely and entirely master of myself, in full control of my intelligence, my will, and my self-command. I felt the vision, knowing that it was a vision, as an interested observer of an extraordinary phenomenon.

This is what I saw:—

I was back in my birthplace, in my father’s house. The big parlour was lit up as if for some festival. The room was full of people; all my family, as well as my boyhood’s friends and companions, were around me.

My mother was among them, beautiful but pale, and she kissed me and cried. My dear father, who has since left us and now rests in eternity, my little sister, my brothers, and everyone, thronged round me and I said good-bye to them.

It was dark outside, but the big chandelier shed its light on this numerous concourse. They were all in holiday attire, but it was a silent festival and the only voice was the caressing one of my mother, who said to me: “Don’t leave me yet.”... “No, Mother.” And then the vision vanished.

If I had not the most indisputable proof that at the moment when I had this vision I was absolutely cool and in control of my faculties, there would be nothing extraordinary in this and it might be easily explained by my nervous state and by the fatigue and over-excitement of the journey.

But I looked at the vision simply as a vision, taking my part in it, but knowing at the same time that it was a chimera and that I was perfectly calm and self-controlled. My intelligence and my powers of comprehension were absolutely lucid, and here is the proof:—

From the moment that I saw the first impact of the car against the trees threatening, I thought of a plan for protecting myself, which both argued that my wits were at work and required presence of mind.

Anyone who has seen a balloon will know that between the gas-bag and the car there is a solid ring of wood to one side of which the gas-bag is attached, the other side supporting the car. This wooden ring is called the “crown” and is between the balloon and the basket, which are both strongly roped to it.

Now the crown, by reason of its being between the two rope attachments, is the best place of refuge from a crash which must necessarily be considerably broken after being transmitted over the ropes to the crown, particularly as the latter is a considerable distance from the car. In order to reach it one has to get up on the seat and hoist oneself along the ropes from the edge of the basket to the crown, which is several metres distant.

As soon as I saw that there was no more hope of maintaining ourselves in the air and that our car was inevitably bound to crash against the summits of the trees, I jumped on the seat and climbed up to the crown.

The formation of this plan and its rapid execution in the exact moment of danger was sufficient proof of my presence of mind at the moment of our fall and of the vision which accompanied it. I even remember that I laughed at a remark, which really was laughable, of my companions in distress.

When they saw me climb on to the seat, and from there to the side of the basket, in order to swarm up the ropes to the crown, they asked me in all seriousness if I was going to get out. The question made me laugh. There was really something comical in the contrast between our situation and my friend’s question. To get out of a balloon in motion which is about to fall upon the spiked branches of a forest! They had asked me seriously, and with a certain amount of anxiety: “Are you going to get out?...” “No,” said I, and laughed. “Where do you want me to go?” It was at that moment that I saw my vision.

But to go back to our descent. The balloon, which thus dragged us over the trees, had kept all its power, for it was still filled with gas, and might drag us a long time yet.

What could we do? Opening the valve would by no means have stopped it, as it would have taken too much time and the gas would not have escaped quickly enough. We therefore decided to cut the ropes which bound the car to the crown in order to separate it from the infuriated balloon.

The good sailor took out his trusty axe, but scarcely had he given the first cut when the balloon succeeded in disengaging the basket from the branches which held it back and impeded its course. It then recommenced its flight, rising like an eagle towards higher regions.

We were stupified. So we were to have a new journey and fresh adventures!

Fortunately it was not one of long duration. The wind and the rain whipped the balloon from all sides and prevented it from regaining its original vigour and mounting higher. Then a last struggle engaged between the balloon and the storm, which had continued raging. The balloon, once free, tried to rise, but was held back by

the extreme violence of the tempest. In its struggles it leapt and bounded, making us fear at any moment that the basket would upset and precipitate its contents pell-mell into space. Twice a squall threw us to the ground—that is to say, into the trees—and twice the unexhausted strength of the balloon snatched us from their branches. A third, more violent, gust enveloped the balloon entirely, bent it to the ground in front of the car, and hurled it against a large and magnificent oak—which I can see to-day before my eyes. We were in safety—the balloon gave the expiring yell of a strong fabric torn by violent explosion. It burst, rent along its side, and hung in a thousand enormous rags against the ancient branches of the great oak which had destroyed it.

We were at once enveloped by clouds of gas escaping from the disembowelled balloon. In a moment all was over. The car had stopped and we were safe. My watch pointed to one o'clock when I jumped down from the tree.

But in what part of the country were we? Whose was the wood which protected us? Should we meet Frenchmen or had we fallen into the enemy's country? That old navigator Ulysses, when he walked on the beach of Ithaca, was not more ignorant of his fate than we when we left our car in the branches of the trees in which it remained captive.

CHAPTER VII

AN ENCOUNTER

As a rule I am bad at topography, and do not easily find my way in places that I see for the first time. But my faculties had been made keen by danger during our aerial voyage and my sustained attention remembered everything that my eyes had seen.

The second time the balloon rose above the forest I had, from my elevated perch, observed a fairly broad path across the wood, which looked as if it might lead to some neighbouring village. I kept this path in my memory and, while our balloon was engaged in its last struggle, I tried to take note of our movements in order not to lose the direction of this path. So much so that, when at last we touched the ground, I was able to find it.

I left my companions to watch near the wrecked balloon and bent my steps to the left in order to find the way.

I had not been mistaken. After walking for scarcely ten minutes, I found the path I was looking for. Happy at my discovery, I was about to return through the wood to tell my companions, when I saw a man leave the thicket on the other side of the road and come towards me.

What manner of man was this, and what did he want with me? What singular chance had driven him to this wood in such weather?

It was still raining in torrents. Instead of returning through the undergrowth, as I had intended, to find my fellow-travellers, I made as if I were looking for shelter from the rain, and stood with my back against a tree.

In this position I could wait for the unknown to come up, and could examine him while he crossed the road to reach me.

He at once came forward. He was well dressed and had the appearance of a man of means. He looked neither like a peasant nor like a dweller in large towns, and it was difficult to guess exactly what kind of individual I had to deal with. He seemed, however, to be looking for me, for he walked directly towards me and crossed the path, bearing towards the point where I was standing.

What was this man, friend or enemy? What could I say to him, and how should I speak to him, in French or in German?

I thought it would be best not to say anything and to wait till he addressed me. “Bon jour, Monsieur,” said he, on coming up. I returned his greeting.

“Have you been here long?” he asked me.

“No.”

“Where have you come from?” he continued.

I began to be reassured and noticed that my unknown spoke with the Alsatian accent. But the Alsatian accent is very similar to the German, and was not Alsace entirely occupied by the enemy?

Such were my thoughts on hearing him, and instead of answering his question, I asked him point-blank, “Are you French, Monsieur?” And as I asked I looked him well in the face and did not take my eyes from his, trying to read into his soul. “Oui, Monsieur,” was his answer, and the “Oui, Monsieur” was pronounced simply and with a frankness that concealed nothing and invited confidence.

I felt he had spoken the truth. I held out my hand and said: “Well, Monsieur, I am also a Frenchman. We have come from Paris and our balloon has just come down in this forest....”

“Oh, is that you! Good God, what sufferings you must have undergone! I have watched you battling with the storm for at least half an hour. My friends and I came out to beat the forest in order to find you and help you, for we foresaw a catastrophe.”

I was profoundly touched, and heartily wrung his hand....

“But where are we?”

“At Vigneulles in the Meuse; this is the wood of Vigneulles, the village is three kilometres away, and behind the wood, a league from here, are the Prussians. They came into the village yesterday morning.” After saying this he gave a signal by whistling in a particular manner, and I at once saw ten or twelve peasants running up from different part of the wood. He explained our situation to them and gave them orders. While they went off to find my companions and the débris of the balloon, I followed my new guide towards the village in order to lose no time in preparing a way to leave the district as quickly as possible.

My mentor took me to the Mairie, a little house in the village, comprising the offices and the personal residence of the Mayor, the latter on the first-floor.

The behaviour of this village worthy was in singular contrast with that of the brave man who had brought me to him. He trembled when he heard that Frenchmen, coming from Paris, and recently descended from a balloon, were there, and he asked himself whether he could and ought for a single moment to shelter them. “If the Prussians hear that I have received them I am lost....”

I will pass quickly over the painful scene which followed. The poor man is since dead, and I only speak of the incident in order to show that the devoted efforts of our guide to carry us to the Belgian frontier were not without risk to himself. His name is Julien Thiébeaux; he was at that time employed in the Excise Department and has since been promoted to a Collectorship. He was a brave man and a good citizen.

When he saw the Mayor’s disposition towards ourselves, he said to me: “You can’t remain here, Monsieur, as

the Prussians are encamped close at hand. They were here yesterday and may be here again to-morrow. They may come at any moment, even while we are speaking. I wanted to let the Mayor have the honour of saving you, and for that reason have said nothing; but the time has now come to act. Will you trust yourselves to me?”

I looked at the speaker and fixed my eyes on him a second time, trying to penetrate and read his secret thoughts from his countenance. He will pardon me for this last trace of suspicion, as will those who read these lines; it was not unnatural.

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We were in the midst of a Prussian encampment, and the Mayor of the village had shown his sentiments in most unambiguous fashion; he had not the slightest desire to risk his neck in order to save some unknown men, who had been wrong-headed enough, according to him, to cross the Prussian lines in a balloon, and to drop exactly into his unfortunate village, which had all the best reasons in the world to live on good terms with the enemy’s army.... And then appears a simple villager, the first-comer as it were, and one who has no reason to interfere in a nasty business which does not concern him, and offers his services spontaneously and light-heartedly without being asked by anyone, in order to save three unknown men from under the Prussians’ noses! By doing so he was exposing himself, when he returned from his expedition on the morrow, to a reward at the hands of the enemy whose nature could not be doubted.

Such were the thoughts in my mind while M. Thiébeaux explained how urgent it was that we should leave, and offered to conduct us to the frontier through the Prussian army.

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So I again inspected M. Thiébeaux, and not without suspicion.

But the more I looked at him the further did suspicion fly from my mind. He had a frank and honest eye and a simple and natural attitude. Such clear signs of sincerity and loyalty emanated from his whole person that my doubts ceased, and I felt remorse at having for a single moment suspected the sincerity of his devotion.

He had finished his little speech by asking the simple question, “Will you trust yourselves to me?” I held out my hand, and said, “Shake, M. Thiébeaux, and let us start.”

“But I do not want to start alone,” he said. “I have a friend who knows the way better than I, and we shall have need of him. I will answer for him. May I bring him with me?”

A little later my companions and I were seated with our brave guides in a little country carriage and making for the Belgian frontier.

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Vigneulles is in the Meuse, at the entrance to the great plain which is known as the “Grande Woëvre.” This was the scene of the memorable battles of the 16th and 18th of August, 1870, the battles which are called Mars-la-Tour, Rezonville, Gravelotte and Saint-Privat.[B] The little village lies between Verdun and Metz, and is about forty kilometres distant from the latter.

[B] NOTE:—It is also the scene of very serious fighting at the present moment (Feb., 1915). Vigneulles is a few miles from the German position at St. Mihiel.

This enabled us to calculate the path we must have taken in our balloon.

The distance from Paris to Metz is about four hundred kilometres, but our balloon did not take a direct course. During the first part of our journey we went persistently in an opposite direction—that is to say, towards the west of France—and it was only when the storm commenced, which was about 11 o’clock in the morning, that the wind must have shifted and carried us towards the east.

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It was not yet 11 o’clock when I had expressed a desire to come down on the great plain which offered us such an immense and propitious terrain for coming to earth. The wind had at that time not yet changed, and we could hope to come down in the fertile plains of Normandy or possibly in the direction of Brittany. Our aeronaut did not share my point of view, and we continued our journey. It was only then, after two hours navigation, that the weather changed. So it is evident that the balloon must have traversed at least twice the distance between Paris and Metz, since it had travelled for two hours at full speed in an opposite direction. The whole journey had been carried out in the space of four hours—from nine in the morning till one in the afternoon. That represented an amazing speed: two or three hundred kilometres an hour.

And now for the Belgian frontier!

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CHAPTER VIII

EN ROUTE FOR THE FRONTIER

The distance we now had to go was very much shorter, but it was also more difficult, and we only arrived at the frontier the next morning, between ten and eleven. Had it not been for the intelligence and devotion of M. Thiébeaux and his friend M. Charles Jeannot, we should not have arrived at all.

It was a long, slow and painful journey, a regular Odyssey, across country entirely occupied by the enemy.

It is not my purpose in this short narrative to tell of its events and adventures ... that would take us too far and would only serve to revive sad memories. I only refer to it in token of gratitude to our courageous guides who carried us by night under a drenching rain through the lines of the army of occupation with no less intelligence than courage and presence of mind. It is clear that the Germans saw our balloon as well as M. Thiébeaux and his friends, and they at once set out to capture it. Fortunately for ourselves the forest and the rain prevented their following our movements and taking exact note of the place where we had come down.

At midnight we met some of M. Thiébeaux' friends on the road, returning from a neighbouring fair. "Anything new?" asked our guide.

"Yes, a balloon has come from Paris. There were three or four persons in it, and the Uhlans are after them."

"In which direction have they gone?"

"I believe they are pursuing them in the direction of Verdun."

"Are there any Prussians in the neighbourhood of...?"

"No, they are at ... to-day."

"Good-night."

Our carriage again moved off, while M. Thiébeaux' friends began to interrogate us as to whether there was anything new on our side. The place where the Uhlans were hoping to catch us was in exactly the opposite direction to the way we were now going, and M. Thiébeaux rubbed his hands with pleasure at the knowledge that they were on a false scent.

At eight in the morning we arrived at Montmédy.

There we learnt the sad news of the surrender of Metz.

We were not far from the frontier, and crossed it an hour later, subsequently arriving at Virton, a little Belgian town which was swarming with French. Here we said good-bye to M. Thiébeaux and his friend M. Jeannot and took the first diligence for the nearest station on the Luxemburg railway, by which we arrived at ten or eleven at night at Brussels.

If I were to let myself be carried away by my memories, I would here throw a sidelight on the remarkable but saddening aspect of the Belgian capital, which was the temporary home of so many Frenchmen and the seat of so many diverse and conflicting passions, hopes, and fears. But what would be the use? I will say no more than that the city of Brussels was crowded with people. It was full of Frenchmen and particularly Parisians. The faces of the stout Flemish burghers were bright and radiant and broader than usual; they were delighted with the golden flow of business, but, none the less, had no love for the French who brought them all this gold.

The Belgian capital, which I had often before visited and which had always charmed me by its beauty and elegance, then seemed to me ugly and hateful, and I only stayed there for as long as was absolutely necessary to get things in order for my departure.

CHAPTER IX

A SPY AT DIEPPE

Before leaving for Austria, I had to go to Tours, where the Delegates of the National Defence Government were at this time sitting.

I had therefore to go back to France, and could only do so by going a long way round. Part of the north was already occupied. The trains no longer went regularly, and in order to get from Brussels to Tours I had to slip through a great many obstacles and often leave the railway and have recourse to carriages. There was no lack of episodes on the road, but they were not gay ones and I prefer not to speak about them. The country was in a fever and disorganised, and to a large extent occupied and ruined. Where the enemy had not yet come they were expected, and the days were anxiously counted which were to bring the first Uhlans.

“Spies” were suspected everywhere, just as in Paris, where I saw a crowd gather one night before a house in [71] the Boulevard Montmartre, and where a cruel injustice would that night have been committed if the police had not intervened in time to clear up the mistake.

There was a light in an attic on the sixth floor. It was only a poor woman at work, but she was accused of signalling with her little lamp from the height of her attic to the Prussians who were besieging Paris. The latter were at least fifteen or twenty miles from the boulevard, even where their siege-works had approached our ramparts. So it was simply ridiculous to suppose that signals could have been given to the Prussians from a window in the boulevard. The feeble little light on the sixth floor, however, was quite enough to make the passer-by believe that there was a spy up there communicating with the enemy and signalling messages to him. That is the kind of spy mania which was responsible for yielding me an amusing quarter of an hour when I least expected it.

The event took place at Dieppe. This peaceable and innocent little seaside town, well known to all Parisians, [72] certainly had no reason to attract the attention of M. de Moltke and his generals, but it was there that I was nearly arrested as a vile spy, by order of the sous-préfet, who no doubt smelt out an ingenious plan on the part of the Prussian Field-Marshal for taking this important fortress without a blow.

I had just arrived in a carriage from Eu, and had come to Dieppe to take the train there.

I was waiting for the time when the train was to start, and had gone to the hotel for lunch in company with the persons who had come with me, or rather, who had brought me in their carriage, very kindly putting it at my disposal because for the moment there was no other means of communication between Eu and Dieppe.

I had scarcely sat down to table when the proprietor came up with a thousand bows and stammered excuses and told me that there was someone there ... someone who ... a gentleman who ... in a word that there was [73] someone who wanted to speak to me.

Someone to speak to me at nine in the morning; me, an unknown, a stranger from a distance, who had passed the night on the road and had only just arrived in the place! It seemed a curious demand and I foresaw mystery. “Let him come in,” I said to the proprietor, smiling, for I could not help being amused at his grave and embarrassed manner.

The dining-room opened on to a large, dark corridor which had not been lit up and in which it was difficult to distinguish what was happening. My host rushed into the corridor and disappeared in the darkness.

There was a moment of deep silence, then hasty footsteps and a confused noise; I vaguely saw an ill-defined movement, the gleam of weapons, arms waving in the thick of the darkness, advancing footsteps! At last a figure appeared out of the background and drew near; then a mad burst of laughter and these words: “Is that you, Reitlinger? What a joke!” And when the speaker came out waving his long arms, from the dark corridor [74] where he was standing with his armed men, I recognised an old friend: it was one of the most charming sub-prefects in the provinces, one who was the ornament of the “parquet” at Dieppe and whom I had known when he was studying in Paris. He sat down at my table and told me that he had come purely and simply in order to lock up my dangerous person and prevent me from doing a hurt to the National Defence!

The supreme authorities of Dieppe had been informed that the Secretary of the Government was at the hotel. The sous-préfet had pricked up his ears at this report, shrugged his shoulders, shaken his head and considered, incredulity in his soul! The Secretary of the Government? ... an invention, a clumsy imposture! Was the Government not at Paris? Was not Paris besieged by the Prussians? Would not the Prussians have intercepted this Secretary?

That is not the way to humbug authorities who watch over the town and district with a vigilant and [75] circumspect eye!

This Secretary is simply a spy and he covers himself with the name of the Government the better to hide his schemes, the better to betray the poor town of Dieppe, and carry away the plans of its fortifications with greater security. Let us put him under lock and key.

The “parquet” had been hastily assembled, and the “parquet,” full of admiration for the perspicacity of the sous-préfet, had ordered out its *posse*, while the latter promptly headed the expedition to assure himself of my person. My sous-préfet was the first to laugh at this deployment of armed force and his own haste in taking part in such an adventure.

“Now that the security of our country permits it,” said he, “I will send back my braves and we will drink to the success of your mission.”

This was excellent, but I asked myself what would have happened if the task of arresting me had been entrusted to one who did not happen to know me personally. Would M. le Sous-Préfet have kept me under lock [76]

and key, or would I have been obliged to show him the Minister’s confidential letters accrediting me for my mission?

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CHAPTER X

ACROSS GERMANY

My first stopping-place was the Grand Duchy of Baden, then Wurtemburg and, finally, Bavaria. I was everywhere able to confirm that our Government had received untrue reports and even untruer interpretations with regard to these countries.

It was true that everyone was weary of the war and the sacrifices of men and money which the country was making; everyone deplored the complete stoppage of industry and commerce, and the misery which was its consequence, and everyone ardently desired the end of these sufferings and the rapid, the immediate conclusion of peace.

But on what conditions?

Did it mean that this ardently desired peace would be accepted on any conditions and at any price?

On this capital point people in France had the fondest illusions, and found themselves most completely mistaken.

Yes, they wanted peace, but they wanted it at the price of a good ransom which would permit the German Government to indemnify all those who had suffered damage either directly or indirectly from the war. Nor was that all. Besides a money indemnity, all were unanimous in demanding as “guarantees for the future” the cession of Alsace and Lorraine.

That is the manner of peace they wanted, and if all Germany was tired of the war and desired its ending, all Germany considered it a crime on the part of France not to consent and not to understand that the hour had struck for her to surrender at discretion.

People were exasperated with France for prolonging a hopeless struggle and by her obstinacy preventing a conclusion of peace for which the world had an immense need. In such a sense as this Germany was tired of the war, and had it been necessary to send even more soldiers to augment the million combatants already on French soil, had it been necessary to raise and again raise new levies in order to arrive at the goal, all Germany without exception—north, south, east, and west—would have given its last man capable of bearing arms.

I will even go further. Supposing for a moment—such a supposition has no kind of foundation, but suppose for a single moment—that if Prussia or one or other of her allies had desired the end of the war under conditions that were easier for France, and supposing they had attempted to establish this view in the United Council of Ministers, public opinion would have swiftly reduced such a proposition to silence. The first Government to have attempted an enterprise of such a nature would have immediately been overturned by the general indignation of the whole people, who would have risen against it as a single man.

A king or prince liberal enough to have proposed such a peace would have been driven out as a traitor to his country, and as unworthy to sit henceforward on the throne of his august ancestors.

M. de Bismarck knew his people well, and expressed an indisputable truth when he told M. Jules Favre, at the interview of Ferrières, that the King himself could not conclude peace without the cession of Alsace and Lorraine.

This feeling, far from being weakened since that time, had only been increased and strengthened. The longer the war lasted, and the greater the sacrifices that it imposed, the greater and the stronger also grew the general opinion of Germany that peace must be concluded solely in return for, over and above a large ransom, the cession of these two provinces, Alsace and Lorraine, which were regarded as German, and, above all, as a necessary rampart against France.

Here and there, of course, scattered and lost among the crowd, there were a few philosophers whose dreams were in more elevated spheres and who did not wish to admit the right to annex a country by the brutal path of arms and conquest, at any rate without consulting its population.... But who would listen to them? Who took them seriously? They were regarded as Idealists, only to be laughed at; they were accused of madness, and if they had really been thought to be of sound mind, they could not have failed to be treated as traitors to their country.

I spoke with many individuals between the Rhine and the Danube, but I never met anyone who would have consented to a peace without territorial gains. Even those whom I had formerly known as “Liberalists” and belonging to the “Republican Party” were no exception, and energetically insisted on annexation. The fact is that the situation had changed since the month of July of the “année terrible.” At the beginning of the war—as I have already remarked—a good part of Prussia’s allies were lukewarm enough, but later on enthusiasm had become general.

I was told an incident which seems characteristic. I will cite it as I heard it, without comment and without guaranteeing its authenticity. The King of X., who did not love the new régime, who suffered cruelly from it in his own capital and who did not wish to let his authority over his own army be taken away from him, was ready to cry with vexation when he was asked for the last reinforcements to be despatched to the theatre of war. He would like to have refused them, but dared not do so. Shutting himself up in his palace, he refused to see his troops at their departure defiling with music across the public square in front of his palace.

* * * * *

But the whole of Germany had become drunk with the unheard-of, unhoped-for success of its arms, and this success exalted the different populations all the more that it had been greater than they had dared to hope for when the war began.

Up to that time France had been a formidable and much-feared power. The “*Rothosen*,” or “Red Breeches,” were regarded beyond the Rhine as invincible soldiers. At the news of the declaration of war, the various peoples were at first in great anxiety; everyone expected to see the French arrive from one day to the other.

If at that moment, I repeat, we had pushed vigorously forward instead of groping about and letting the enemy have time to concentrate his troops, take the initiative, and throw his soldiers in his turn on to our soil, the war would perhaps have taken another complexion, in spite of the wonderfully prepared plans of M. de Moltke.

A swift march to the Rhine, a vigorous advance beyond the frontier, carrying our arms beyond the river into the midst of German soil, would have produced an immense impression, and would have thrown doubt and hesitation among the allies of Prussia. Perhaps the whole campaign might have turned in favour of France.

I have no intention of here trespassing on military ground, where even those more competent than I are not always in agreement. But I can certainly bear witness, for it is the exact truth, that the anxiety of all sections of the German population was great, and that, when the news of the first victories arrived, one could not believe them, but rather considered them as miracles and attributed them to the Divine Justice which wished to punish “impious” France, the hereditary enemy of Germany, for having forced a quarrel on her and having without serious reason begun this terrible war. Once the first victories were won, there was no limit to the rejoicings, and as success increased and was accentuated, when one battle after the other was won and the German armies advanced in numbers and irresistibly on to French territory, this immense, matchless, and unprecedented victory produced an equally immense change in public opinion. What, was France letting herself thus be beaten? France, who had set the ball rolling, France, who had menaced the security of Germany for a century and who would always menace it, if Germany did not profit by the opportunity and take her precautions!

And so, from the depths of the German mind, the idea had arisen which M. de Bismarck expressed so vigorously and insistently to M. Jules Favre in the interview at Ferrières, the idea which had stiffened the king’s back and resulted in the interview being fruitless. “We must have guarantees for the future,” and the more they saw the rapidity and persistence of their success, the more did they become attached to this idea: “We must have guarantees.”

Guarantees!

And they insisted on having for “guarantees” what was directly contrary to all guarantee, for who can deny to-day that Alsace-Lorraine is the only obstacle, and a permanent obstacle, to a durable peace between the two nations? But at that moment the most far-seeing could not see this; their eyes were blinded by success, their spirit was drunken with military glory and the desire to use their strength up to the hilt and without consideration for the future.

After the surrender of Metz, where the last soldiers of France had given up their arms and gone as prisoners of war into German fortresses, one hoped that the war would be finished and the signing of peace would only be the work of a few days or weeks. But as the days and weeks passed, and as Paris was “obstinate” in its resistance and the provinces continued arming and defending themselves, in a word as one arrived at the certainty that France would not surrender and that after the defeat of her armies it was still necessary to conquer the “nation” and invade the entire country, then passion and impatience were born. An immense anger seized all Germany; her rulers, her thinkers, her writers, the whole people, all those who wielded the pen or the sword, all who lived and breathed, united in a single thought, and proclaimed and repeated this formula of M. de Bismarck: “We must have guarantees for the future.”

So much so that when history in the last instance judges and declares this annexation as one of the greatest mistakes of our century, history will be obliged to state that the entire German nation forced the hands of their Government to commit it.

Since France had commenced this “impious” war, and “Divine Justice” had granted victory, and an immense, a prodigious victory, one had to have guarantees for the future against the chances of a future attack. The sacrifices that had been made must not be lost to “the children.” Future generations must be sheltered from the chances of new provocations on the part of France, in case the latter should ever again wish to declare war.

Such was the exact public opinion of Germany, and that is why it was impossible to arrive at peace without the surrender of Alsace and Lorraine, if France and Germany were to remain alone on the bloody field to conclude it, and if the Powers were to refuse to intervene against German demands and to force her to modify them.

From Munich, my last stopping-place, I went direct to Vienna.

CHAPTER XI

IN AUSTRIA

From the first day of my arrival, it was clear to me that the good people of Austria were with us in their hearts and were praying for our success—but that was all. Our Ambassador, who was to present me to the Imperial Chancellor, did not leave me in ignorance that the Imperial Court had made its decision, and that I could obtain nothing from the Austrian Cabinet. The latter was firmly resolved not to depart from the most strict and absolute neutrality.

I was not long in convincing myself that this information was perfectly accurate and, at my first interview with M. de Beust, at that time Imperial Chancellor, I became assured that Austria was not in a condition to accord the effective intervention necessary to carry weight with Germany.

I have purposely said that Austria was not in a condition to, that she *could* not intervene effectively, because this was the truth and because if I said that she *would* not do so, it would perhaps be doing her an injustice. It was not the goodwill that was lacking, but the power.

That was exactly the great misfortune of our situation; not a single power in Europe was prepared for any kind of action: none was in a position for action.

In 1870 Europe was not expecting war. Among all the living and active nations, from the Ocean to the Ural Mountains, from the Mediterranean to the North Pole, only one Power was on the watch and getting ready. Only one Power was prepared at the moment of shock, and that Power was exactly the one which France, herself unready, had chosen for an enemy. Outside Prussia no one in Europe had foreseen war, and no one was armed or in condition for a campaign.

The declaration of war in 1870 had burst unexpectedly in the midst of peaceable Europe like a thunder-clap which shakes the earth in the middle of a calm spring day.

All the Powers of Europe were enjoying a complete rest. Their armies scarcely existed, their soldiers were on furlough and working quietly in fields and workshops. Contingents had been reduced. All lived in peace and security. Prussia herself had diminished her standing army, and it was only due to her prodigious military organisation that she was able to assemble her forces with hitherto unknown rapidity.

So France was alone in presence of her enemy. She was isolated in Europe, not only from the diplomatic but also from the military point of view. When the combat turned into defeat for the armies which Europe had always regarded as legions of victory, panic seized the minds of all. Europe, which had not armed *before* the declaration of war, because there was no cloud on the political horizon to menace general peace, now, after the sanguinary battles and great successes of Prussia, did not dare to arm, because she did not want to provoke France’s conqueror, now become the all-powerful arbiter of Europe.

How often during this painful journey did I not hear the characteristic remark: “We cannot mobilize a single soldier without exposing ourselves....” The *quos ego* of the conqueror paralysed Europe.

Austria was no better prepared than other nations. Consequently she was not in a condition to intervene in the conflict more effectively than by diplomatic intervention. And diplomatic intervention was bound to be useless, since Prussia had formally declared that she would not accept the mediation of any Power, and that she would deal direct with France for the conclusion of peace.

I was excellently received by M. le Comte de Beust. He welcomed me frankly and cordially, and did not attempt to conceal his views. His first words convinced me that I was speaking to a sincere friend of France—but to an impotent friend.

The interview, therefore, which lasted more than an hour, resembled a familiar conversation rather than a diplomatic conference, and I shall never forget the eagerness and, shall we say, the “*laisser aller*” of the Imperial Chancellor, who seemed to seize with pleasure an opportunity which allowed him to say what he thought of the war, of the Imperial Government that had provoked it, and of the situation in France since the surrender of Metz.

He was sincerely sorry for the defeat of France, but it did not astonish him, for he knew well that Prussia had long been prepared for this war, and he had never ceased, while there was still time, from warning those who then ruled France. But his good advice had found no hearing.

He was full of admiration for the resistance of Paris and the splendid spirit of the provinces, but he was afraid that all these prodigious efforts would have no success. “The best thing you can do,” said he, “would be to conclude peace as promptly as possible.” And he repeatedly cited the example of his own country and reminded me of what Austria had done after the disastrous Battle of Sadowa.

I find it difficult to describe the insistence and animation with which he showed that all further efforts must be hopeless, and that there was nothing left but to accept the evidence and conclude peace without prolonging our resistance.

“The more you delay the more you are weakening yourselves—without speaking of the irritation you are causing the enemy, who will augment his demands as he advances his troops further and further into the heart of the country. Take the advice of a sincere friend of France; surrender and make peace.”

I did not hide from him that France had not yet reached the extremity of concluding peace at any cost or under any conditions which the conqueror would impose on us.

“It is quite true we have lost our last army at Metz; but Paris, the great city, can hold out for a long time yet. Paris will stop the enemy and give the provinces a chance of forming new troops.”

He shook his head and said simply: “You can no longer stop the invasion, and it is better for you to surrender to-day than to-morrow.” [94]

I then told him that the Powers also were interested in the result of this war, because the equilibrium of Europe and their own security was menaced by the weakening of France and the undue aggrandisement of Prussia. “Is it not true that Europe has need of France, and of an unlessened, unmutilated France, in its own interests and in order to establish the balance of power in face of the menacing superiority of Prussia?

“In their own interests the Powers ought to cast aside their apathy and leave their rôle of quiet spectator in order to raise their voices and signify to Prussia that all Europe wishes this war terminated by a durable peace, by a peace which France can whole-heartedly accept. I find it difficult to assume that Prussia, victorious as she is, can disregard such intervention.”

M. de Beust answered me, smiling delicately and almost bitterly. “Is that what you think?” said he. “Well, you are mistaken; Prussia will listen to no one in Europe. She will be influenced by nothing except the number [95] of soldiers whom Europe can send to the theatre of war, and Europe has none to send.”

The conversation had arrived at this point, and the Chancellor was speaking to me so openly and frankly, in language so free from reticence and reserve,—that I answered him in the same open manner.

I told him that I had just traversed a large part of Germany and that I was perfectly informed as to the situation. “With one hundred thousand men,” I said, “you could take Berlin.” “Perhaps that is true,” he answered, “but Russia would then send two hundred thousand men into Austria.”

* * * * *

That was the situation in Europe.

As regards our attitude towards Prussia, he found that we were lacking in cleverness. He was convinced that we were uselessly stimulating the appetite of our enemy by our attitude and that we ought to have said exactly the contrary to what was the gist of our language to Prussia.

“You make yourselves out too rich,” he added. “You repeat to M. de Bismarck: money, as much money as you [96] like, but no provinces. These are bad tactics! You do not know your enemy. He will take both your money and your provinces.

“Tell him, on the contrary, that you are poor, that the war has exhausted your resources and that you are no longer capable of paying a large indemnity. Give up Alsace. It is an inevitable necessity and you cannot escape from this calamity. Who can say what the future has not in store for us? A province lost is not necessarily a province lost for ever, while as to your millions, you will never see them again.”

He then went on to examine the resources of Germany in their turn—and he knew them well—and admitting for a moment the most favourable chances that could still befall us, M. de Beust, after having weighed and calculated everything, concluded as he had commenced. He thought it impossible to resist the forces that had invaded France. Any continuation of the conflict was a useless sacrifice. We should only exhaust the country [97] without being able to hope for any result. And he sincerely advised us to stop the struggle and conclude peace as quickly as possible, because the more we delayed, the greater would be the demands of the conqueror. “To-day rather than to-morrow,” said he. We had already shrunk too long from facing the facts.

He would have liked to see an assembly of the Representatives of the Nation, but he freely admitted that in order to have elections we should have need of an armistice and the revictualling of Paris, which appeared difficult to obtain.

I took the opportunity offered by this remark to revert to my former demand for an effective intervention on the part of Austria in concert with the other Powers. Commencing with the desirability of convoking a National Assembly, I went on to say that an armistice and the revictualling of Paris, which would have allowed us to hold elections, were exactly the things that Prussia had refused.

“Perhaps,” said I, “Prussia may change her mind on this question and perhaps also allow of more tolerable [98] conditions of peace if she sees that France is not isolated.” And I added that, if my information was accurate, the populace of the Austrian Empire was disposed to intervene, and that public opinion would see in helping France an opportunity of avenging Austria’s own defeat of 1866.

The Hungarians in particular had been reported to me as fervent admirers of France. They would rise in a body to help us if the Government did not prevent them.

But this was far from being M. de Beust’s view.

There was certainly great and sincere sympathy for the French cause everywhere in the Austrian monarchy. But one must not exaggerate. To conclude from this that a war against Germany would be a popular war in Austria would be a great exaggeration and a great mistake. “Besides,” said he, lowering his voice, “we are absolutely lacking in the material means for a campaign.” And he frankly explained the whole situation that I [99] have previously described and everywhere insisted that: “We are not armed, and it is too late and too dangerous to mobilise now.”

Before leaving M. de Beust I confessed to him that my mission did not stop short with Vienna, but that I was also going to England. I asked him if he had no message for me to carry to the English Cabinet, and if Austria, under certain conditions, would not take part in common action.

“I authorise you to say to Lord Granville that, if England wished effectively to intervene with the object of obtaining honourable conditions of peace for France, England would not be alone and Austria would go with her.”

This answer, which might appear to be full of promise, did not signify very much and did not greatly compromise him who made it, in good faith I admit, but with the certainty that England would not put him to the necessity of keeping his word. The situation, therefore, was one of frightful simplicity. It was this:—

If the Powers—I do not of course refer to Russia, who was in a situation by herself—if the Powers had been able to intervene for France without exposing themselves to a war with Prussia, intervention would have taken place and France would not have remained alone to face Germany in negotiating for conditions of peace.

France was, in fact, at this moment in the position of having regained the sympathies of those who had turned away from her at the beginning of the war. Moreover, the question was being asked with a certain amount of anxiety whether the crushing of France would not become a permanent danger to the general peace. If there had been any possibility of influencing Prussia’s determination without the mobilisation of soldiers, intervention would not have failed us, and M. de Beust’s answer would not have been an evasive promise but the sincere pledge of a friend willing to give all that circumstances permitted him. I am inwardly convinced that M. de Beust intended keeping his word should England have been able to decide to take a similar initiative. But, as we shall see hereafter, England absolutely refused, and always for the master reason that she did not wish to be exposed to a rebuff from Prussia, who in the last instance would only have heeded the voice of a general at the head of an army.

The “*quos ego’s*” of the conqueror held back Europe—for, “if Prussia would not listen, what was then to be done?”

It was thus the fate of France to remain alone from the beginning of the war to its close, and Prussia was well aware of it. She therefore proclaimed, most energetically and with disdainful pride, to the whole of Europe that she would not allow anyone to interfere in her affairs, or to interpose as mediator between her and France; peace would be concluded on conditions which she alone would settle with France, and Europe had nothing to say to this arrangement which only concerned the two principal parties.

And Europe allowed this thing because she had no means of checking it. She knew well that words were not enough for Prussia, and she was not armed so as to throw her sword if necessary into the balance in order to give her words weight.

From Vienna I went direct to London, where I arrived in the first days of December.

CHAPTER XII

LONDON

In the absence of our Ambassador, the Embassy in London had been since the 4th of December under the charge of the First Secretary, and it was this gentleman who presented me to Lord Granville. He warned me, just as our Ambassador in Vienna had done, not to harbour any illusions; nothing was to be obtained from England. The English Cabinet was absolutely decided not to deviate from the strictest neutrality, and all efforts to make them leave it would be waste of time.

This was just at the time of a military event of the greatest importance which had taken place during the last days of November.

I refer to the sortie of General Ducrot, which commenced so gloriously and which unfortunately so quickly disappointed all our hopes of a change in the hazard of arms. To-day the events of this painful time are far from our minds. The passing years have robbed them of their intensity. I should therefore like to write down here, without making any change, some passages from my diary, in order to give some idea of the situation at the beginning of December.

“… All this was not encouraging. What was even worse, our affairs, which had begun to improve with the good news of Ducrot’s victorious sortie—a fact which had accelerated my voyage to London—have again fallen into that critical and distressing situation which inspires Europe with fear of our enemy and holds aloof from us all those who admire our resistance and who would like to see it crowned with success.

“The ray of sunshine which for a moment shone on the fate of our arms has vanished all too soon. The victory which restored our courage and inflamed our hopes has lasted all too short a time.

“Already at Rouen, where I spent the night the day before the Prussians entered it, alarming rumours were circulating in the town, and when I arrived in London all hope of success was lost!

“Our young and valorous army of the Loire, which the day before had been still victorious, was beaten. The army of Paris had been obliged to abandon the positions it had bravely conquered in the bloodstained days of the 29th and 30th of November. On the 3rd of December it retreated to Paris.”

This was the military situation when I went for my first interview with the late Lord Granville, at that time Minister for Foreign Affairs.

I will not draw a portrait of this eminent statesman, but would like to indicate some peculiarities of his manner of speech, in order to throw light on the conversation which I am about to describe.

I had been told that Lord Granville was extremely polite and distinguished, but cold and chary of speech, and that his caution was such as sometimes to be taken for timidity. He spoke little, and easily allowed the conversation to drop into silence.

If I discovered those good qualities in the English Minister that had been reported to me, I feel bound to say that I observed none of those defects of which I had been warned.

Lord Granville certainly did not like to waste his time in useless speech, but he did not allow the conversation to drop when a serious question was being elucidated, and he knew how to be eloquent, even in French. Only occasionally his tongue stopped suddenly—he spoke French very slowly but very correctly—as if he had encountered a material obstacle which he would not or could not overcome.

When I entered the Foreign Office I entertained no great illusions, but I was armed with deep confidence and with a determination that was difficult to subdue. I had faith in the justice of my cause, and this faith animated my courage.

What I was about to ask was so just and reasonable, so in harmony with the interests of England herself, that in spite of all that I had been told I still preserved a spark of hope at the bottom of my heart.

I was at any rate decided not to leave the Foreign Office before completely exhausting the question which was the object of my mission, and I was determined not to leave without having clearly understood and defined the attitude towards ourselves that England proposed to maintain. I had to know, in a word, what we might hope from her.

I must say, and I say it with pleasure, that the eminent statesman was at pains to facilitate this task. His welcome was perfect, his language was frank, direct and courteous, and his answers precise and complete. At the beginning of our conversation only, he appeared to me a little cold and reserved in his answers. But, the ice once broken, he no longer hesitated to express all his thoughts. He even seemed to find pleasure in sounding the situation with me, so as to leave nothing in doubt or obscurity.

CHAPTER XIII

AT THE FOREIGN OFFICE

I began by telling him of the situation in France, comparing its actual condition with that of the days before the 4th of September. I tried to show him what had been done since the disaster of Sedan, from the fall of the Empire and the coming of the Republic till the present moment.

I pointed out—and he agreed—that after Sedan France was face to face with despair. She was in chaos, in the void; nothing remained; everything had to be recreated.

Paris was without arms and soldiers. The provinces were discouraged and denuded of everything that might allow of a single day's resistance. The enemy's armies were advancing without obstacle, invading France town by town, province by province, devastating the country and trampling it underfoot....

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After this distressing but truthful picture, this miasma of exhaustion and desolation, I drew for him a picture of the awakening of the great nation on the day after the 4th of September. I described its hope when there was no more hope, its courage when courage was madness, its resistance when all means of resistance were at an end.

I described the whole nation erect, from Paris down to the smallest hamlet lost in the mountains, unconquered and unconquerable, strong and proud and with arms in its hands. A force had been created out of nothing, and arms out of the Void.

Lord Granville listened.

He listened long, without making the slightest movement.

My words became more and more animated. He followed them, if I may describe it so, with his eyes....

"You see, M. le Comte," I said at last, "you see what we have done, and from that you can judge what we are still capable of doing and what we will certainly do. Paris is determined to undergo the greatest rigours of war rather than surrender.

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"The provinces, who for a moment hesitated, plunged as they were in that evil habit of waiting for everything to come from above and never undertaking anything themselves, the provinces also have awakened to the inspiration of a powerful genius and have risen as one man. They also are up and resolute. They are animated by the same spirit, penetrated by the same conviction, and inflamed with the same courage. All France is in arms. She has lifted high her flag, on which she has written: "Victory or death!"

He still listened without a movement.

Had I spoken into space? Was silence to fall before the conversation had well commenced?

Was this silence to be interpreted as approval, or, on the contrary, was the eminent statesman's mouth closed by the painful impression of complete disapprobation?

I looked into his eyes and said: "I have spoken frankly and sincerely to you, from the very bottom of my heart; have you no answer to give me?"

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His profound blue eyes rested on mine for a moment, then he said slowly, almost stumblingly:

"M. Thiers, who came to see me, has already spoken to me as eloquently as you have to-day.

"All that you have done is admirable, and France has shown an elasticity which has astonished everyone. I have already said so to M. Thiers. I repeat it gladly, and I can add with the utmost sincerity that our admiration has only augmented and increased since that time. We have attempted to intervene in your favour as much as the situation permitted. We have done all we could to stop this war, which we deplore. But we are not listened to. We have neither the right nor the power to interfere in an affair which does not concern us. We desire greatly that the war should be finished. We have made many efforts to arrive at least at an armistice, but the Government in Paris has refused the armistice which we have tried to negotiate...."

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He again fixed his blue eyes on me as if to ask me: "Why has this armistice been refused?"

It seemed to me to be an unfair question, and I said with a certain amount of spirit: "Pardon me, M. le Comte, one cannot accuse the Government of Paris of rejecting an armistice and means of coming to terms. On the contrary, they have done everything humanly possible to bring it about, but an armistice without re-victualling—that is to say, an armistice with the prospect of starving Paris out, while Prussia is recruiting her strength, was not acceptable, and Prussia refused any other kind of armistice."

"This refusal," said he, mechanically lowering his eyes, "was not reasonable. An armistice would have prevented many inconveniences to Prussia and considerable difficulties to France, and the Government could, at any rate, have profited by it to form a legal representation of the country." I was astonished at these words which appeared to me absolutely unfair.

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"What?" said I. "You consider it a reasonable thing to offer a twenty-five days' armistice, without re-victualling, to a town of two millions which has been besieged for three months?

"Why, that would be taking away exactly so many days from the resistance of this courageous town, which has shown in its days of misfortune that it was something more than a city of pleasure. Prussia's acceptance of negotiations for an armistice could have had no meaning without at least the re-victualling of the city. By her refusal she has made the armistice impossible, and on her must fall the responsibility of breaking off the negotiations. It is she who has refused an armistice desired by the whole world."

"No, it was not unreasonable," he again answered me. "Prussia would have lost much too much during a twenty-five days' armistice." And he went on to give the most detailed reasons why the refusal was not an

“unreasonable” one.

This was his principal argument:—

If the armistice had not been successful in producing peace, Prussia would have lost precious time which she would have been obliged to pass in inaction. She would thus herself have prolonged the term of sacrifices and of sufferings which the war necessarily imposed on her, and she would have lost this precious time without any kind of compensation.

“Your Government,” added the noble lord, “formally instructed M. Thiers to reject the armistice, so it is not Prussia that has to be considered responsible.”

It is difficult for two persons to come to an understanding if they start from such different points of view that one says to the other “This is just” where the other only sees a manifest injustice.

It was easy for me to see that Lord Granville would depart from none of his views, and would answer all my arguments by contrary ones. So it seemed useless to discuss the point any longer. I contented myself with saying that the actual Government of France would have been glad to convoke a National Assembly to share its heavy burdens, had they been allowed to do so.

“The devoted men,” I said, “at the head of our nation have picked up the fallen reins of power solely to arm the nation and organise national defence against the invasion. They are not ambitious of honours. They have arrogated to themselves only the duties of power, and they have done so with the sole idea of national defence.

“They would have been glad to convoke the delegates of the nation and place their power in the hands of a freely elected National Assembly, and it is solely and entirely for this end that they have demanded an armistice. Perhaps they would have been content with less than twenty-five days,” I added, in order to sound Lord Granville on this question.

This remark was to his liking. He interrupted me briskly and asked me: “How many days do you think would be enough for the elections?”

I answered that, at the narrowest computation of what was strictly necessary, I thought that it would take perhaps twelve to fifteen days to carry out the elections, but that I was in no sense qualified nor competent to say so, and this was merely my personal opinion. “But then,” said he, “the Government would do well to proceed to election in this delay and to ask for a twelve days’ armistice. It would be a great advantage for you if the country had a legal representation.”

“Would Prussia accept?”

“Yes,” said he, “she would have accepted any armistice without re-victualling....” Then, as if he had gone too far, and, as it were, to correct himself, he immediately added that of course he had no means of knowing what were the dispositions at this moment of the Prussian General Staff. He did not know whether they were still inclined to grant an armistice, and he did not like to promise us anything with regard to this....

Such was the dominant note I encountered in all my official conversations: an unmeasured fear of being exposed and compromised.

To reassure him I answered: “Do not think, M. le Comte, that I will take you at your word. I do not think the National Defence Government is willing to accept the responsibility of an armistice with the prospect of starving Paris out, even though it be only for twelve days.”

“But,” he answered, “since Paris could hold out a long time yet, as you have just told me, twelve days cannot hurt her much and twelve days will give you the immense advantage of having the country constitutionally represented.”

He developed the idea that up to the present the National Defence Government was only a *de facto* Government, and that it would be in its highest interests to have a National Representative at its side on which to lean.

I replied that his observation was subject to correction; that the National Defence Government was not only a *de facto* Government, but was approved within the country and recognised without as a legal and regular government. However, there was nothing it more ardently desired than the chance of convoking a National Assembly. “I will,” I said, “faithfully transmit your excellent suggestions to my Government.”

“How can you communicate with the Government in Paris?” he asked.

I was very glad that he put this question, for it was my intention to ask him to intervene so that I might be able to return to Paris in order to report directly and personally to my Government all the information I had gathered since the time I left.

But as I did not wish to interrupt the trend of our conversation, I answered that I should like to speak on this subject later, before taking my leave, and I asked him to have the kindness to continue developing his ideas regarding the question of the “Representation of the Country.”

Lord Granville then discussed two other methods of creating what he called the “legal representation of the country.” In asking for a “legal” representation he was above all guided by the following idea, which seemed to preoccupy him considerably, for he often came back to it; there was actually no longer a “legal” authority in France; there was a *de facto* Government, but it had not received legal sanction.

“There is no one,” he repeated, “under existing conditions, who has the right of treating in the name of France, and Prussia would not even know with whom to come to an understanding when the moment arrives for discussing conditions of peace.”

It was with this event in view that he so desired the meeting of a national assembly. It was no use telling him he was mistaken—for I considered it essential to show him the true situation; he persisted in his opinion; and these were the two means which appealed to him for arriving at the creation of a National Representation:—

First of all, he thought, the Conseils Généraux might furnish a Constitutional Assembly.

After developing the details of his point of view and the advantages which were to be gained from such an Assembly, he finished his remarks by this question: “Why will you not have recourse to the Conseils Généraux?”

I told him that the Conseils Généraux had no constitutional right to represent the nation. He seemed to admit my argument, and reverted to his first idea:—

“But why not have the Elections without an armistice?”

His previous remarks, when we were speaking about M. Thiers, had sufficiently shown me the gist of his thoughts. He wanted to see Elections held in France by any means whatever, even without an armistice.

I could not accept such a proposition and I refused to understand how a statesman, anxious for the dignity as well as for the material interests of his country could give such advice. Elections in a country invaded by the enemy! Elections under the enemy’s gun-fire! Elections at a time when every citizen was under arms against the invader, elections, in a word, while Prussia was bombarding Paris and advancing her armies! That was an idea which I simply could not grasp. I tried, but in vain, to make him share my perplexity. Moreover, I had encountered the same idea with M. de Beust.

At the time I could not understand it and it revolted me. To-day I can see how the idea arose and held its own simultaneously in the minds of these two eminent statesmen, who held the reins of Government in two countries so different in origin, constitution and tendencies.

The National Defence Government was only, when all was said and done, a *de facto* Government.

The men who composed it had picked up the Executive when it fell from the Empire’s hands, only for the purpose of not letting it fall into the gutter, and for using it to defend the country against the invaders. These men certainly had the confidence of Europe, and their Government was immediately and gladly recognised by all the Powers; it had been recognised and respected even by the enemy.

But side by side with this *de facto* Executive there also remained the débris of the fallen Government, which had by no means renounced its past, and still lived in the hope of coming back and again laying hands on the Crown, which though fallen they still thought unbroken.

On the other side there were demagogues, orators and low-class politicians, all that unhealthy ferment which had burst out on the 31st of October and nearly overthrown the National Defence Government.

The latter, it is true, had conquered this first revolt, but the pretensions and aspirations of the party which had caused the rising were not conquered. They were only pushed out of the way and reduced to silence, but they still smouldered in the ashes and no one knew when they might not break out afresh, or whether the Government would again be as fortunate in reducing them to impotence and maintaining its authority.

This is what seriously preoccupied foreign statesmen and inspired them with the idea of creating a “legal representative,” in any manner whatever, by any means and at any price. Above all they wanted to guard against unexpected surprises. Before all and above all they wanted to have an authority to deal with, which was not only a Government *de facto* but a Government that had been consecrated—even if only apparently—by the votes of the French people, and that could by that token be accepted by all parties and be safe from sudden attacks and ambushes. This is why Lord Granville first asked me to have recourse to the Conseils Généraux of the Empire, and when I showed him the impossibility of such a solution, this is why he suggested that we should simply hold the Elections without any armistice, by carrying them through as quickly as possible.

I should have liked to show him again how unfair and impossible I considered his proposition, but it would have been preaching in the wilderness, and so all I said was: “What would you do in the provinces that are invaded and occupied by the enemy?”

The noble lord’s answer showed me, more than anything I have said up till now, what were the thoughts which exclusively obsessed him.

Lord Granville was not embarrassed by my question. He thought one could simply get the votes of the yet unoccupied provinces, and that that would be enough to obtain a “Representation of the Nation.” I began to have less and less understanding of the Minister’s arguments, and carried away by feelings which I had difficulty in controlling, I answered with spirit: “No, M. le Comte, France will never hold Elections in such a manner.”

Did Lord Granville feel the bitterness of his proposal, or did he understand the uselessness of insisting on it? Whichever it may be, he answered me in roughly these words: “I understand. But let me see if I cannot convince you. As you do not want to have Elections without an armistice, and as the Conseils Généraux cannot serve for the composition of a Constitutional Assembly—you have explained the reasons and I quite understand them—then why have you not accepted an armistice? You say that you think twelve days might at a pinch be enough for the Elections. Then why do you not ask for a twelve days’ armistice?” Without waiting for my answer he went on to say: “Think well and look the facts in the face. Prussia could push her troops even further into France. She could occupy the whole country and would always be in the situation which is troubling us, that of not knowing with whom to treat for peace.” I think that at this point Lord Granville touched as it were on the possibility of restoring the Empire. To be more exact, he allowed me glimpses of a theory, timidly and in terms that were so vague that they have escaped my memory, that Prussia might very well come to the idea, failing a better one, of treating with the last Government which France had had.

And without waiting for my reply he continued: “France has given an exhibition of military courage which has aroused the admiration of the world, but there is also a *civil courage* which a great people must not neglect, and which is even greater and more admirable than military courage. You have done great things, but you must now have the civil courage which consists in recognising your true situation and in ceasing to sacrifice the precious blood of your children when such a sacrifice can no longer be of use.”

“M. le Comte,” said I, “I thank you sincerely for the expressions of admiration you have just uttered. Coming

from you they have great value, but I believe that though you admire our military courage you take too black a view of the situation. We have not reached that point yet.

“Paris, wonderful Paris, the heart and the hope of France, has held out. She is on her feet and inflamed with the desire to defend herself, and she will defend herself for a long time yet. The great city is not yet ready for surrender, and the provinces are only beginning to awaken. In but a little while they will bring against Prussia, who is accustomed to the idea that there are no more soldiers in France, a young but enthusiastic army, and it will not be the first time that young French recruits have beaten the seasoned armies of Prussia. There is the truth. Military courage, therefore, is not yet useless. It is not yet beaten and need not yet hand over the fate of the country to that elder brother whom you have well called “civil courage.” [127]

Lord Granville answered: “If you think your resistance can bring about a better result for you, you are right in continuing the struggle, however unequal it may be. But if this only serves to weaken the country even more, the men who have the fate of the nation in their hands are *in duty bound* to stop and not to ask for useless sacrifices from this courageous people. The resources of France are immense; we know it well. She will very quickly lift herself up from these temporary disasters.”...

M. de Beust, it will be remembered, had already expressed the same idea....

“Yes,” continued Lord Granville, “she will recover very quickly. Her elasticity is wonderful, but one must not put it to too severe a test. One must not break the springs.”

[128] I found pleasure in hearing him speak in this manner, and I began to like his slow and well-weighed words, which so far had not given me much encouragement. Lord Granville had shown a certain warmth in admiring the resources and the “wonderful elasticity” of France. He finished by laying weight on his words: “Your Government’s responsibility in continuing the conflict is great, for the nation itself has not yet pronounced on the serious question: Does it want war to continue *ad infinitum*?

“Your Government is full of confidence in the vitality of the country and refuses to surrender to Prussian demands, but you do not know what are the feelings of the nation. And if the nation is not of your way of thinking, or if your Government is mistaken, if instead of pushing back the enemy you were to see him advance still further? His demands would only be increased and you would have imposed sacrifices on your country that are as fruitless as they are painful.”

[129] It was difficult not to admit the justice of this reasoning, and I did not hesitate to tell him so. But I again and insistently asked him to reflect and to admit that it was impossible to go to the country to sound its feelings while the enemy refused us the physical means of doing so. I assured him that the Government would have been happy to be able to consult the country, and that even now there was no greater nor more pressing desire; but how was it to be effected?

“Can one make Electors come together with rifles on their shoulders in order to vote, while the Prussians are advancing to occupy our towns? Is it not evident that to have Elections we must have an armistice?

“Just now,” I said, “I think I gathered that if you had a counsel to give us it would be to try and have the Elections in the shortest possible time, and to ask for a shorter armistice than in the previous negotiations, which fell through over the question of re-victualling. Would you in such a case offer your good services, and would you charge yourself with reopening the negotiations on this matter?” He answered: “I have already told [130] M. Thiers that the best form of negotiation would be for you to address the General Staff at Versailles direct and without intermediary.”

I pointed out to Lord Granville that he himself knew the situation sufficiently well to foresee that the result of direct negotiations with the General Staff at Versailles could only be negative. “Besides,” I said, “the question which I have taken the liberty of putting to you had its sole *raison d’être* in our conversation. The question was born of the moment and is part of a purely personal reflection. It was only suggested to me by my desire to show you how much I have at heart the understanding of the remarks which I have the honour of hearing from your lips.”

After Lord Granville’s advice to address ourselves direct to the General Staff at Versailles, it was clear to me that the only wish of the English Government was not to expose itself, to keep strictly and prudently out of the way and to interfere in the negotiations as little as possible—that is to say, to have nothing to do with them. For [131] all this there was a peremptory reason. It was not entirely lack of goodwill, but the fear of compromising themselves.

Everywhere I observed this exaggerated fear of being dragged into a conflict with Prussia. At that time I regarded this feeling as one of weakness, but on reflection it seems to me that it must be judged less severely. One cannot arm from one day to another. Moreover, a great Power cannot raise its voice without giving its words the support of arms should it not be listened to. And Prussia, as I have already said, would have listened to nothing, unless it were a general at the head of a strong army. Now England at that time had no army either. She was in a complete state of peace. Besides, had she not been warned by her rebuff from the Prussian General Staff that she had only one thing to do: *keep quiet!*

[132] In fact if Lord Granville thus sent me back to Versailles to re-open negotiations for an armistice it was because “Odo”—that is the Christian name by which he called the Under-Secretary of State, Mr. Odo Russell, who was with the General Staff—had written him that M. de Bismarck would no longer listen to him. “M. Odo,” said he, “wrote to me only yesterday that France had now better approach the General Staff direct and that M. de Bismarck has nothing further to say to me.”

It was an irrefutable argument, and the least I could do to repay such frankness was not to insist any more, unless it were openly to ask the Secretary of State that England should go to war.

But yet I did not wish to retire. Seeing that Lord Granville still listened to me with interest and appeared in no hurry to terminate our interview, I moved the armchair, on which I was seated and which I had pushed back a little during the last part of our conversation, a little nearer to him. His knees nearly touched mine. I looked at

him, trying to read into his blue eyes, and I said:—

[133] “You have received me so kindly that I would like to speak as frankly as you will allow me. I am young, M. le Comte, and I am still younger in diplomacy....”

“And I am old in diplomacy,” he answered, laughing and showing a line of very white teeth which seemed formally to belie his words.

“You must therefore be indulgent to me and my inexperience....”

“I have not noticed it,” said he, laughing again, in order to encourage me.

“And if you find that I am perhaps too persistent you will lay the blame on my inexperience and the youthfulness of my heart. I cannot remain calm and master my emotion, when I think of Europe to-day and of the actual situation in France. It is a situation that you know well.

“Now you have given us advice, a good and excellent piece of advice, and the advice of a friend. You have told us: Hold your Elections. I have pointed out the impossibility of doing so without an armistice.... And you send me back to the General Staff at Versailles to get it!

[134] “I assure you, M. le Comte, *that* means war, the continuation of war to the point of exhaustion. France will not yield; she will continue to defend herself to the last man; she will let her territory be invaded down to the last village rather than accept unacceptable conditions.

“Will Europe continue as an impassive spectator of this terrible conflict?

“Will England continue to fold her arms without intervening to stop the carnage between two peoples?”

“We can do nothing to stop it,” he objected.

“But,” I said, “what a great and wonderful part you could play! You would stop a barbarous war of destruction between two civilised peoples, give back to Europe the peace she so ardently desires, and of which she has as much need as France herself after these terrible conflicts, after the entire upsetting of all political, economic and financial relationships. You would thus create for yourselves a striking claim to the gratitude not only of France, your ancient friend and ally, but also of the whole of Europe. [135] With your great experience you can yourself clearly see that if we remain alone to deal with our enemy, his demands will be such that peace cannot be concluded in a lasting fashion.

“Therefore your intervention would be a service to all Europe.

“And all this would cost you no great sacrifice. There would be no need for you to go to war against Germany. It would be enough for you to take up a firm and resolute attitude such as reason, humanity and forethought for the future all dictate to you.”

“And if they do not listen to us? We cannot make war on Prussia! We have done all we could; we have made many representations at Versailles, but they will no longer listen to us.”

“Because you have not dared to speak as one must speak in order to be listened to. Because you have not dared or wished to speak the strong words which alone carry weight with Prussia and because you have confined yourselves to timid observations and discreet counsels, hesitatingly offered ... [136] and which you scarcely dared to offer.

“Prussia will certainly not yield to these! But if you were to change your tone, you would very quickly see Prussia change her attitude.”

“But what attitude do you want us to take up, and what do you mean by “*strong*” words?”

“I will tell you, M. le Comte; say this to Prussia:—

“You have attained unprecedented successes and you have completely and entirely gained all your desires. A new conflict will add nothing to the advantages you have gained. Therefore stop now, for the war is now beginning to become a war of racial destruction. Stop, and give the French Government a chance of consulting with the people, and then conclude peace with it. Do not refuse Europe the peace which she has need of.”

—“But if Prussia pays no attention to these words?”

[137] —“You must support your words by arms, I admit. But that will not be war, because you do not want to make war. No, it will not be war, because Prussia does not want it any more than you do. But Prussia will yield before the possibility of seeing England entering the fight at a time when she has need of all her strength to finish off with France alone.”

“How should you know that?” he answered. “What guarantee can you give me? Allow me to tell you,” and he smiled very graciously in order to sweeten his words, “you are not in the counsels of the King at Versailles and you cannot know anything about it any more than I can.”

“I do not know, it is true; but may one not make calculations?

“You know even better than I how immensely the whole of Germany desires to see the war ended. Prussia thinks that with France alone she will soon reach her goal. Will she be willing to prolong the war and in a sense renew it with a great Power like England? And I am entitled to tell you that England would not be alone with France in such a war.

[138] “I have just come from Vienna. I was told at Vienna, and authorised to repeat it to you, that Austria is disposed to go hand-in-hand with England in everything that concerns France. Austria would follow England if the latter would decide to intervene effectively in favour of France.”

“... Who told you that?” Lord Granville quickly interrupted me. “Was it M. de Beust?”

As I saw that Lord Granville was in no way inclined to do what I asked him, it did not seem necessary to answer him and perhaps to compromise a sincere and devoted friend by publishing the secret of his friendly

disposition towards ourselves. So I answered this question by saying that, if Lord Granville would be kind enough to wait a moment, I would later on tell him who was the person in question. The promise, however, had been made me in Vienna, it had been made in full view of its provoking action on the part of England, and I had been expressly authorised to speak of it here.

"But that would be war—and we do not want war!" he answered energetically.

"No, it will not be war. On the contrary, it will be the end of war," I said with spirit. "It is certainly very bold of me to want to foresee events better than you and contradict a view which appears to you sound. But I say it with conviction, it will not be war. No, it will be peace, and a peace worthy of two nations, a durable peace.

"And this is the reason why. In the face of European intervention, brought about by the initiative of England, Prussia would be obliged to diminish her exorbitant pretensions, and France would, on her side, be reasonable and listen to the counsels of Europe.

"You know from his action at Ferrières what M. Jules Favre's policy is.

"That policy has not been changed.

"We are decided to continue the fight to the last limits of human strength, as against demands which we cannot accept. But we are ready, France is ready, to accept any conditions which are not incompatible with her honour.

"Effective intervention on the part of England would therefore mean peace, and a durable peace, because it would be consented to without humiliation for the conquered side, for valiant France who will always, in spite of her actual defects, remain a great and chivalrous nation."

My persistence did not appear to satisfy Lord Granville. He followed me willingly on every question and infused much spirit and cordiality into the conversation, but every time I came back to the noble rôle that England might play by using her authority and power for effective intervention, he seemed painfully impressed and impatient to terminate the discussion. Perhaps he himself felt, without caring to confess it, that I was right when I showed him the splendid part his country might play in the sanguinary drama that was being enacted in France, and perhaps his were the painful feelings of a man who is obliged to fight against his own convictions. In any case, the subject seemed to importune him and try his patience.

On this occasion he answered me that France must not forget that it was definitely she who had commenced the war. Our conversation turned at length round this point, the declaration of war by the Empire, the military consequences of the Empire's fall and the change in the very nature of the war. But these questions are no longer of interest to-day, and I pass them by. Our conversation had already lasted more than an hour, and I was getting ready to say good-bye to Lord Granville.

"If I have understood you aright," I said, "you will do absolutely nothing for us?"

"Personally I should like to do all that is in my power. For you see," he added, with a sincere and almost paternal air, "I am fond of France and the French, and I would be happy to contribute to your success. But as a statesman I must tell you that we cannot make war for France. War, you see, is a terrible thing, and one must think well before going to war. You are a more warlike people than we are; the French fight for an idea, and that would be impossible for us. When we closed the last Session of Parliament, we undertook not to deviate from the strictest neutrality, and we were applauded by Parliament. We cannot go before Parliament now and proclaim war. We have not the right and we cannot do it."

"But, if I am well informed," I objected, "a war with Prussia would not actually meet with much opposition from public opinion. It seems to me that such a war would, on the contrary, be popular in England." I also said that the situation had altered considerably since the English Cabinet had given its parting message to Parliament.

"France is to-day fighting for a just cause. She is defending hearth and home and the integrity of her soil. She has given proof of extraordinary strength and vigour in this unequal and terrible combat and she has regained that which she had lost by the declaration of war—I mean the sympathies of the entire world. That is why public opinion has changed also in England, and that is why I believe that effective intervention would in England to-day be a popular action." Lord Granville answered me: "Let me explain the true situation of our country in this matter. The military, particularly the officers, are in favour of France. They want war. Then there is a numerous enough party among the working-class population who share this sentiment. But all the rest of the population have ideas which differ according to the political opinions which they profess. We have Republicans, Imperialists, Orleanists, Legitimists, etc. You see we have seriously considered the question," he went on to say, "we don't want to speak without being able to give our words the support that is necessary to make them heard. If Prussia did not listen to us, we could not let it remain at that, and we are quite decided to keep the undertaking we have made to Parliament. That is why we cannot do more than we have done up till now."

"Which means," I said, "that you can do nothing?"

"Not so," he answered. "But *for the moment* we can do nothing. Later on, when peace conditions are discussed, we will be able to intervene in the negotiations more successfully."

"Later on!" I exclaimed. "Do you know what will happen later on, M. le Comte. Later on one of two things will happen; either we shall be victorious and we will push the Prussians back; that is what I hope, and then we will have need of no one; or we shall be conquered, and then you will dare to speak even less than now; at any rate, Prussia will then pay no more attention to your words than she does now. If you do not want to be condemned never to act, you must act now."

Lord Granville answered: "I don't want you to leave me under the slightest illusion on this matter. I have already said so to M. Thiers—we cannot deviate from the strict neutrality which we have observed till to-day." He added that Prussia had long been complaining about England's interpretation of neutrality in delivering

arms to France and so prolonging her resistance. But he, Lord Granville, had answered that such had been England's conduct since the beginning of the war, that her conduct was perfectly compatible with strict neutrality, and that she was not going to change it now, etc.

I answered: "Your reply, M. le Comte, is distinct and categorical, and I thank you for it. Only let me present one last consideration. It concerns the Eastern question. Have you nothing to fear on that side? Do you not think that France's word will one day be useful and her help precious?

"You do not want to make war now, but perhaps you may be forced to make it later, and then you will be isolated and alone because you have abandoned France, your old friend and natural ally, in the hour of danger. Think of the future, M. le Comte! France has a future; she will recover from this war and she will be stronger, greater, and more powerful, because she has given proof of her wonderful vitality and energy in adversity. Our fleet will then be able to play a great rôle. If you abandon us now you may be alone in your turn when you are forced to take up arms and have need of an ally."

"When we are forced to it," said he, "well, we will take up arms and we will go to war...." But he said that England was not for the moment in this situation and consequently he did not see the necessity for changing her policy. His Government would never take the formidable decision of dragging the country into war without being absolutely obliged to do so.

He once more recalled the terms with which the last Session of Parliament had closed, and the terrible responsibility for a Government to precipitate a nation into the sufferings and miseries of war. Then, after some protestations of friendship towards France, he finished with these words:—

"I do not want to leave the slightest misapprehension in your mind, and would like to continue elaborating my ideas." He then definitely laid down as it were into an unchangeable proposition, the reasons which he had indicated why it was impossible to change anything in the policy that England had observed up till now.

Our Interview was at an end. Only I did not want to leave Lord Granville without saying a word on the impossibility of restoring the Empire.

He had done no more than hint at the idea that the Empire might possibly be restored to France by the enemy, and his allusions were so slight and, I might almost say, so intangible, that when an hour afterwards I returned to my lodging and made notes of the principal passages in our conversation, I found it impossible exactly to remember the terms he had employed in speaking of it.

However, he often came back to this point. Even when he insisted that the National Defence Government would do well to call a National Assembly under any conditions whatsoever, even without an armistice, one of his arguments consisted in pointing out the possibility of an Imperial Restoration. "At the worst," he insinuated, "Prussia might well negotiate with what remains of the Empire."

I therefore thought it would be useful not to let this idea take root in his mind, and to make him understand that it was a pure delusion, which it would even be dangerous to entertain. I told him that I did not know up to what point competent men in England were capable of seriously regarding such an event as being possible in France, but if they believed in it for a single moment they would be strangely deceived. The restoration of the Empire was henceforward absolutely impossible. The supporters of the fallen régime had absolutely no illusions on this point.

"They themselves are perfectly aware," I continued, "at least, those who have remained in France, that the country is no longer with them, and that the prisoner of Wilhelmshohe will never remount the throne of France, neither he nor those that are his. Sedan has for ever demolished the Napoleonic Idea, and the bloodstained and terrible ending of the Second Empire has for ever cured the nation of all dangerous legends. To-day we know too well what it costs a great country to give itself a master whose only merit is an illustrious name, and there is no temptation to again give way to that sort of madness! He who is to-day the enemy's willing prisoner has fallen too low for a proud nation like France ever to forget the disgrace. Has the unhappy Emperor even to-day no fear of accusing, against all sense of justice, the brave country which was formerly his Empire, of having wanted and provoked the war? His return to France would be the signal for a general rising, and if Prussia wanted to attempt it she would be obliged to protect him with her armies and so perpetuate the war instead of definitely terminating it."

Our conversation had lasted more than an hour and a half, and it was at Lord Granville's own wish that it had done so, for he had been interrupted several times. On each occasion I rose to retire, but he had held me back every time, graciously and with the serious insistence of a man who does not wish to interrupt a subject which he does not yet consider exhausted. When at last I took my leave of him, he wrung my hand cordially and said he would be happy to obtain me a safe conduct which would allow me to go back to Paris, and that he would ask for it to-morrow morning.

In our conversation, as has been seen, I did not conceal my desire to find a means of returning to Paris. I would thus be able to describe to the National Defence Government the general situation in Europe, and the attitude of the Cabinets and the sentiments of the Courts of Vienna and London.

Lord Granville heard my wishes very affably, and was at great pains to help them. So I did not hesitate to profit from his disposition, and begged him to ask for a safe conduct for me.

Unfortunately my desire and his were not realised. Next day Lord Granville informed me that the démarche had not succeeded and that he had been refused the safe conduct which he had asked for me.

CHAPTER XIV

HAWARDEN CASTLE

I have been scrupulously exact in reporting nearly all the essential parts of my conversation with Lord Granville.

I should like to do as much for the long interview which I had later with Mr. Gladstone, at that time Prime Minister in the English Cabinet. The words of this eminent statesman are all of them imbued with a special character, which renders them in the highest degree interesting, even when they ran counter to my wishes. However, “est modus in rebus” and one must know when to stop in a short narrative and be careful above all not to repeat oneself.

Mr. Gladstone clearly had the same ideas as Lord Granville regarding the war and regarding England’s neutrality and the possibility of her taking any steps in the interests of France. In substance he told me exactly [152] the same as Lord Granville had done on all these questions.

It will appear later that the two Ministers must have conferred together and taken concerted views before receiving me, so as to express exactly the same opinions. So I will do no more than give an extract of my conversation with Mr. Gladstone and record in summary the principal questions which arose.

I first met Mr. Gladstone at the house of his colleague, Lord Granville.

The latter gave a dinner in my honour the day after my first interview with him, and among other persons he had also invited Mr. Gladstone. That is how I made this gentleman’s acquaintance, and I looked forward to profiting by it in furtherance of the enterprise which had brought me to London.

It was certainly impossible for me to hope, after the formal declaration of Lord Granville, that his colleague the Prime Minister would have different views and would be more disposed than the former to depart from the contemplative policy which seemed so dear to England.

[153] At the same time I was convinced that it was not necessary for England to plunge into war, which she would not do at any price, in order effectively to serve France’s interests. If only she had consented to take up another attitude, her intervention would have certainly sufficed without it being necessary to go to the point of armed intervention in order to modify Prussian demands at the moment of negotiation.

I had not lost all hope of persuading English statesmen of this truth, and I was very desirous of seeing the Prime Minister to sound his thoughts, and in my turn express our views and aspirations.

The day after meeting him at Lord Granville’s I wrote to him asking for an interview. He had already gone off to spend Christmas at Hawarden Castle, a splendid country seat in the extreme west of the island, in the county of Lancashire, near the city of Chester. London society always passes a good part of the winter at its country seats. That is easily understood, as the winter is sad and sombre by the foggy banks of the Thames, while the English countryside is charming even in winter. [154]

What astonished me more was that the Prime Minister of a great country like England could find it possible to live for a part of the year at such a distance from the capital, Hawarden Castle being situated at the other end of Great Britain. One has to cross the entire length of the country between London and Liverpool to get there, and if my memory serves me aright, I think the express train from London takes six hours to reach the little station, which is two miles from the Castle. What would they say in France of a “President du Conseil” who wanted to live so far from Paris? The thing would be thought impossible and so in truth it would be. But in London, on the contrary, everybody finds it natural and things are not carried on any the worse for it. But the English are a practical people, and we are not.

Mr. Gladstone has simply got the telegraph as his auxiliary; it is installed at the Castle and goes direct from his study to his Ministerial Office in London. He can thus be in permanent communication with the whole [155] Department and can transmit his orders at any hour of the day or night.

Mr. Gladstone immediately answered my letter. He wrote that he much regretted having left for the country before having had an opportunity of receiving me, but that he flattered himself by hoping that I would not shrink from a journey in order to give him the pleasure of a visit and that I would accept his hospitality at Hawarden Castle. He did not intend returning to London for some time and we should be quite at our ease at the Castle and could talk together about any matter I liked.

I did not hesitate to accept his invitation, but knowing that in England Christmas is par excellence a family gathering, I did not want to come in as a stranger, and I answered that I would make a point of visiting him two days after Christmas. Mr. Gladstone’s son met me at the station on my arrival, and my room was ready at the Castle.

[156] The next day, after breakfast, the master of the house put himself at my disposition for an interview, and we repaired to his study.

The interview was a long and cordial one, and again confirmed my conviction that the reason why we had been so completely abandoned by our neighbours was that the war had broken out so suddenly that no one had expected it and no Power had had the time to be prepared.

At the risk of being accused of needless repetition, I must again describe what had already struck me in my interviews in Vienna, in London and everywhere—that is, that the Powers were afraid of our conquerors. Nor was this fear without foundation; it arose from the state of impotence into which the suddenness of the war had plunged every Government. The war had surprised them while in absolute repose, and, as it were, asleep.

In all Europe a single Power was on guard and not taken by surprise, for she was waiting for the alarm signal and had long been prepared for it. It was the enemy which the Empire had chosen in a moment of evil [157]

fortune and blindness.

When I say that only a *single* Power foresaw the signal and was prepared, that is true in the literally numerical sense of the word; not even with the exception of the unhappy Empire which had caused such general stupefaction by provoking the war.

To-day it is proved that the Empire went to war with Prussia as if it had been a military promenade to Berlin. It did not see any danger, and not even any difficulties ... and such was its blindness that it entered on this ill-omened war without even having prepared the material means necessary for such a struggle, and without having assured itself of any allies. We were completely isolated, and this isolation was forcibly and by the fatality of things doomed to last till the end, till the conclusion of peace.

When the candidature of the Prince of Hohenzollern was definitely abandoned, and when it appeared for a moment that the threatening storm had cleared, the Powers all immediately recovered from their alarm and thought the incident finished. The declaration of war which afterwards supervened at a time when it was no longer expected by anyone, forcibly threw all the States in Europe into profound stupefaction, and found them in a state of absolute impotence. They were denied the material possibility of arming, and the rapidity of events had robbed them of the time necessary for their preparations. 158

Then, hostilities once commenced, Prussia did not allow them to take breath or to recover from their stupefaction. On the contrary, their amazement grew day by day, with the swift and bewildering rush of her victories. Therefore our isolation, which marked the beginning of the war and which gave the character of criminal folly to the enterprise, continued during our disasters up till the last moment of the terrible negotiations which finished with the mutilation of France.

The selfishness and the inertia of the Powers certainly equalled the madness of those responsible for such a declaration of war. If the rulers who presided over their destinies had then decided to follow a more elevated and far-seeing policy, the mutilation of France would have been prevented. The germs of new complications in the more or less distant future would have been removed, and the foundations of a sincere and lasting peace would have been laid in Europe. The era of general disarmament, the Golden Age of modern times, could have been prepared. But alas, the opportunity was lost! 159

The Powers, however, were able to explain their conduct in words often repeated to me at the time: “You have taken us by surprise and we are not ready. France is invaded, the German armies are victorious and intoxicated by success. If Prussia were to refuse our intervention and take us as at our word, the day we spoke more boldly we should with you be beaten, because we are neither armed nor in a condition to fight against victorious Germany.”

This is the explanation of the pusillanimous attitude which the States of Europe maintained during the war and which no Power dared to depart from, even at the moment of concluding peace. 160

France lacked neither sympathy nor good wishes, but our enemy was feared, and none felt themselves in a position to challenge him. This, if I am not in error, was the real cause of our isolation, even at the end of the conflict when sympathy for us had revived and France had shown courage and vigour worthy of another fate.

But to return to my interview with Mr. Gladstone at Hawarden Castle. If it was as sterile as all the others, it was at least complete. We examined every question exhaustively and in the minutest details.

Mr. Glynn, the member of Parliament and Secretary to the Treasury, who was a friend of the family, on seeing me leave the study with Mr. Gladstone, said: “You may flatter yourself on having enjoyed more of the Prime Minister’s society than anyone else I know. Since Mr. Gladstone has become Premier he has never granted anyone as long an interview as he has to you.”

This was evidently very flattering to the cause which had brought me here. Indeed, it was worth anyone’s while thoroughly to discuss it, but without in the slightest degree overlooking the great kindness of my charming host, I would have preferred a more satisfactory result even if it had meant a shorter interview. 161

Mr. Gladstone spoke French perfectly, but he asked my permission—this is a characteristic trait which shows the practical and cautious mind of the great statesman of the Anglo-Saxon race—to carry on the conversation in English because, as he said, he was more certain of the accuracy of his expressions in his own language.

“The accuracy of his expressions!”——Does that not teach one a remarkable lesson?

Here is an eminent Minister who has grown old in politics and is accustomed to the most important and difficult conversations. He finds himself in the presence of one who is young enough to be his son, and he takes serious precautions to guarantee the sureness of his speech and the accuracy of his expressions! 162

I learnt the lesson and followed his example. I accepted his proposal and asked for reciprocity—that is to say, for permission for me to answer in French. Our conversation was therefore carried on in two languages, Mr. Gladstone speaking English and I replying in French.

The first point we discussed was the election of a National Assembly.

On this matter Mr. Gladstone gave utterance to an opinion which well marks the difference between him and Lord Granville. I have faithfully set down Lord Granville’s views, and the reader has seen how insistently he advised the election, in any manner whatsoever, of a National Assembly. Now here is what Mr. Gladstone thought on this matter:—

Should one proceed to elections, said he, or should one not even think of such a thing under existing circumstances? That is purely and essentially a domestic question, which concerns no one outside the French Government. The French Government is the only judge, and a sovereign judge, of that question; and no foreign nation has the right to be heard on the desirability of this measure. But Mr. Gladstone, like Lord Granville, could not see the impossibility of holding Elections without an armistice, and said that, if he were entitled to offer his advice to the French Government, he would counsel them to do so. But he did not refuse to recognise 163

that there were very good grounds for a contrary opinion.

If one cannot go so far as to declare, said he, that it is materially impossible to call a National Assembly, at least there is what may be called a moral impossibility. Because the dignity of the elections would suffer very much from the presence of the enemy and the actual condition of the country.

Personally he had no hesitation in recognising the National Defence Government as for the time being the legal government of the country. This Government was strong with the approval and the assent not only of Paris, which had confirmed it by a formal vote, but of the whole of France, and every day that passed served to augment its moral force and authority within and without the country. He recognised with pleasure the efforts that had been made by the National Defence Government to hold its own against the enemy, and he congratulated it on the great progress in resistance which, thanks to its efforts, had been made.

Mr. Gladstone was not chary of compliments to ourselves, and seemed animated by great admiration for France and by a deep desire to see our efforts crowned by success. Recent events in particular had given him hopes that we should arrive at the desired result by our own strength.

When we were speaking of the military deeds of the last fortnight—the battles of the army of the Loire and the general organisation of the country—he himself contrasted the position at the beginning of the war with the progress that we had since made.

“I have observed with pleasure,” said he, “that there is a great change in your situation; your military organisation has made considerable advance. As you rightly say, the war has entered a new phase. You have no longer only defeats, you have also successes to record and, above all, your resistance is a serious one. You have soldiers, you have army corps to put in the field against the enemy. Prussia is beginning to encounter serious obstacles in her path. All this is really admirable and gives one reason to hope that you will perhaps soon enter a last phase, that of success. But one must not hide from oneself that it is only a distant hope. You are still only *in the state of solid resistance*.

“I have great confidence in your final success. The *fundamental power of the French Nation is greater than is usually thought*. This fundamental power appears throughout her history. Take, for instance, the reign of Louis the Fourteenth. See what France suffered in the wars of that period and see what she became in spite of her exhaustion. And one must not forget that France was at that time divided into small States, while she is now a single and great united country.”

Mr. Gladstone continued on these lines, and he did not tire of admiring the prodigious efforts which we had made and which we were daily making to resist an enemy who had every advantage over us. But when I thanked him for his words and asked him for more effective and less Platonic assistance than pure admiration, he answered me as his colleague Lord Granville had done, by an absolute “non possumus.” England wished for France’s success, but she could not leave the strict neutrality she had maintained from the beginning of the struggle. The Government could not unnecessarily throw the country into such an adventure and expose it to a formidable war.

And the English statesman expounded his system with great warmth and remarkable eloquence.

Parliament had closed its last Session with a formal declaration on the part of the Cabinet, which might be resumed in the single word: “Peace.” The Government had solemnly promised to an approving country that it would assure it the precious boon of peace, and it had no right to take away all the advantages and all the blessings which peace sheds on a rich, strong and industrious nation. The Government were bound by their promise and they would be guilty of a crime if they wished to break it.

Mr. Gladstone is a philosopher and a historian. He likes to go back to principles and to look at questions from the lofty point of view of morality. After pointing out that his Government had given the country an undertaking that it would maintain peace, he discussed the question of war in general.

“War is a terrible disaster for humanity. Are there any circumstances which may justify a Government throwing a country into war, and what are such circumstances?”

Mr. Gladstone desired to narrow the limits within which war might be considered justifiable as much as possible, but he thought that a great country had the right to make war whenever the *cause* was a *just* one. Consequently he considered that a Government may engage the country in a just war, but only on condition that the nation has given its consent.

I accepted this principle; the proposition seemed to be a good one for my case, and I let him continue without interruption. After his exposition I brought the conversation back to the actual state of affairs by observing to Mr. Gladstone that the war between France and Germany had greatly changed in character since the overthrow of the Empire.

At the beginning, it might have been held from a philosophic point of view that the war was an unjust one as far as we were concerned, and that it had been provoked without sufficient reason for the purpose of conquest. But now the Empire had disappeared and France alone was face to face with Germany. *Reparation was being offered for the damage which her Government had done in provoking the war.* The French nation, which had never wanted the war, was now fighting for its existence and the integrity of its soil. France was now defending herself against invasion and *conquest*. She was therefore continuing the fight for a just and strong cause, and it was Germany that was refusing to end a war which had become an immoral and an impious one as far as the latter was concerned, since her haughtily avowed and only end was the brutal conquest of Alsace and Lorraine.

Mr. Gladstone did not deny the justice of this argument.

I went on, and asked him if he did not admit that a great nation might not only have the right but even, up to a certain point, the duty, of intervening in a war of this nature. Did not the necessity for intervention exist, if intervention not only served to maintain a just and moral cause, but were also to a nation’s own interest?

Mr. Gladstone again admitted that there might possibly be circumstances which would oblige England to

take up arms and intervene in a struggle between two other Powers, but he held that there were no such circumstances in the present war.

[170] I then told him that the future—perhaps the very near future—would give him cause to regret not having seized the opportunity of putting us under an obligation by going to war for a “moral cause,” and with the approval of the English people. I referred to the difficulties preparing for England in the East and the services we in our turn could render her in that direction. He answered that he did not consider the situation in the East as dangerous, and that he did not share the opinions of those who saw in it a source of grave complications for England; “I have no fears in that direction,” said he. “At any rate it must not be forgotten that Russia has German provinces and that she is more threatened by Prussia than we are. Moreover, we are sheltered from the attacks of Prussia by the natural situation of our country. The latter could not even attack the little island of Heligoland against our will.”

I then went on to another order of ideas. I spoke of the ancient friendship which united the two people and the great economic interests which were drawing them nearer to each other day by day. [171] I asked him if England from this standpoint was not pledged to another attitude towards France than that of being an inert and impassive spectator at a time when her intervention could assure for France an honourable peace, a just and moral peace....

Mr. Gladstone freely recognised that France had rights to England’s friendship. “But,” he said, “I do not think those rights are such as to make us intervene in a war which France has commenced herself and without us. I do not think our friendship can go to the point of our declaring war against Prussia and fighting at your side.”

At this point Mr. Gladstone reproachfully repeated the charge which had everlastingly been made against us since the beginning of the war and which I encountered everywhere from those I addressed. “Who was it,” said he, “who definitely commenced this deplorable war? Who was it who provoked it without any reason and for the sole purpose of conquest, for the purpose, that is, of taking the Rhine?”

[172] My answer was a very simple one. I looked at the question from Mr. Gladstone’s own standpoint and loyally recognised the wrong we had done. The war was the work of the French Government. The French Government alone had commenced it without sufficient reason and for a, from a philosophic standpoint, inexcusable and immoral purpose—that of conquest. I did not even try to exculpate the nation, by saying, as I might have done, that the French people were far from desiring the war, and that, had they been consulted, they would have refused it with all their energies.

I admitted the nation’s responsibility on the ground of their having supported the Imperial Government and accepted a régime which had the power of plunging them into such a war and in such circumstances. It is best to argue after his own fashion with a Minister who likes to mix philosophy and politics. “But do you not perceive that the situation is to-day no longer the same? [173] The Government which commenced the war no longer exists. To-day the people are free and have pronounced their opinion—they have never wanted the war. To-day they want it less than ever. They are offering ransom to the enemy. Do you not think that the wrongs of the past have been made good, as far as the nation is concerned, by the overtures made by M. Jules Favre to M. de Bismarck at Ferrières?”

I was not mistaken. Such arguments as these were to his taste.

Mr. Gladstone freely recognised that the interview at Ferrières might be regarded as a considerable event. It had given another character to the continuation of the war, and to-day the rôles were changed. It was Prussia who was now pressing the purpose of conquest, and it was France who was now defending the sacred soil of her territory. Mr. Gladstone put much lucidity and eloquence into the task of expounding his views concerning wars of conquest, legitimate defence of one’s territory, and the “impious” continuation of war....

[174] I will not write down the entire system of England’s learned Prime Minister, but will only state that he himself admitted what I had said at the beginning—namely, that a great nation had the right and even the duty to intervene in an *impious war* in order to finish it in the interests of morality.

But when I asked him what was the application of his theory to the existing war, and when I pointed out that this was a case in point and that his theories could never be put into practice with more reason than now, he shook his head....

“That is a tremendous responsibility,” he answered with conviction and in a grave and solemn voice. “To throw a nation into war is a responsibility that makes one shudder. The English people have suffered cruelly from the wars of past centuries. They need peace and they want peace. We have not the right to throw them into all the miseries of such a war. For it would be a European war, a general conflagration, and we have no right to throw ourselves voluntarily in, without being provoked or attacked.”

[175] Invoking his own words against him, I insisted on my point and did my best to show him that his fears were exaggerated. Far from bringing about a general conflagration, the intervention of England would result in preventing the continuation of an *impious* and *immoral* war, and intervention would have the approval of the English people. It would be just and moral, and almost popular in the country.

Mr. Gladstone did not engage in the discussion of the principle which he had laid down and developed. He admitted it, but he added; “We are not as sure as you seem to be that war against Prussia would be popular in England.

“Far be it from me to think that a great nation can refuse to go to war when the war is for a moral purpose. I am equally far from denying that this war is completely changed in character since the fall of the Empire, inasmuch as its continuation on the part of Prussia has conquest, an immoral thing in itself, as its end. But I am by no means convinced that a war against Prussia would be really popular in England. [176]

“Even if Austria joined us, you see it would still be we who had commenced and who had brought it about. Consequently it would always be we who had caused war, and that is a tremendous responsibility which neither

I nor any of my colleagues would ever care to assume.”

As regards the surrender of Alsace and Lorraine which Prussia demanded as a *sine qua non* for conditions of peace, this is what Mr. Gladstone thought of it. “England will never agree to any territorial cession. The English people have a horror of wars of conquest and will never give their agreement to the dismemberment of France.”

I did not understand what that might mean, as on the one side Prussia was loftily announcing these claims, and on the other England was definitely decided not to oppose her. I finally understood that this was another theory of Mr. Gladstone’s. All he meant was that England simply did not approve of Prussia’s annexation of the two provinces, but that she could do nothing to stop it.

From the commencement of our conversation Mr. Gladstone had expressed great confidence in our ultimate success. At the end he reverted to this theme. “Your efforts,” said he, “are prodigious and will be crowned with success. You will end by being victorious.” He then reopened the question of England’s intervention and said: “Perhaps our intervention may be useful later.”

“Later,” said I. “May I ask when?”

“When the French armies are victorious.”

“What,” said I. “Is it *then* that you intend to intervene? Is that what your friendship consists of? You want to intervene *against* us?”

“No,” said he, “*for* you. But the opportunity will then be more favourable than now, and Prussia will give way to us more easily....”

I answered the eminent statesman as I had already answered his excellent colleague Lord Granville, that this was a singular manner of practising friendship and that at any rate his friendship would then be useless.

“*Hic Rhodos, hic salta!* It must be intervention now or never!”

* * * * *

I will not end this summary account without mentioning some curious phrases uttered by Mr. Gladstone concerning the Second Empire.

It was clear that we were bound to speak of it. I had made it a rule, ever since the inception of my journey, to speak of it only with the greatest reserve.

I had foreign diplomatists to address, and it was consequently unworthy of my rôle and unnecessary for my mission to belittle a Government, which France had tolerated for eighteen years, more than it had belittled itself.

But the persons I interviewed did not consider themselves bound to the same reserve, and the fallen Government which had plunged France into this war was criticised very severely both in Vienna and in London. Among other things Mr. Gladstone said:—

“We have always regarded the 2nd of December with horror, and we have always detested the régime it initiated. We have a hatred of despotism. But since the French nation accepted it, we had on our side no other course but to tolerate it. It was a question of domestic politics, which in no way concerned a foreign people.

“Later on our dislike grew less. The friendly relations which the Empire established between France and England, particularly the *great commercial relations*, which it opened up by means of commercial treaties, made us forget the horror which its origin and its despotism had inspired in us ... but with the latter we were never frankly reconciled.

“It was not till the month of January, 1870, that we had hopes of amelioration. We then thought that a new parliamentary régime, with its attendant liberties, was about to commence in France, and we greeted the Ministry that was to have given it with pleasure and satisfaction.

“Unfortunately, we were mistaken....”

Coming back to the war and the causes which had brought it about, Mr. Gladstone said: “We did everything that depended on us to prevent the fallen Government from plunging into this war with Germany.

“We warned them, but they would not listen.

“They absolutely wanted the war, and they engaged in it, but not without having been sufficiently warned, and well informed of the condition of the enemy they were about to provoke....”

The reader will remember that the same thing had already been told me in Vienna, and I again make no comments.

Nor will I comment on a very characteristic trait of Mr. Gladstone’s, which struck me most forcibly.

As he rose and left the apartment with me, he said: “Have you from our conversation gathered any difference between my views and those of Lord Granville?”

* * * * *

I will here terminate this narrative. Should circumstances permit me I will take it up again later, in order to set down the events which followed during the months of December and January until the conclusion of peace.

Note:—The sequel contemplated by the author was never completed.

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Transcriber's Notes

Punctuation, hyphenation, and spelling were made consistent when a predominant preference was found in this book; otherwise they were not changed.

Simple typographical errors were corrected; occasional unbalanced quotation marks retained.

Ambiguous hyphens at the ends of lines were retained.

"armistice" was mostly printed that way, so occasional occurrences of "armstice" have been changed to match the prevailing spelling.

Text uses "revictualling" and "re-victualling", "*Gare d'Orléans*" and "*Gare d'Orleans*"; both forms retained.

Page 16: Closing quotation mark added after "*Vive la France!*".

Page 30: "ineffacable" was printed that way.

Page 129: Paragraph ending "we must have an armistice?" did not have a closing quote, but as it is unclear whether the author or someone else was speaking, the punctuation has not been changed here.

Page 178: "*Hic Rhodos, hic salta!*" was printed that way, rather than as "Rhodus".

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DIPLOMAT'S MEMOIR OF 1870 ***

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