THE SECRET SPRING

PIERRE BENOIT

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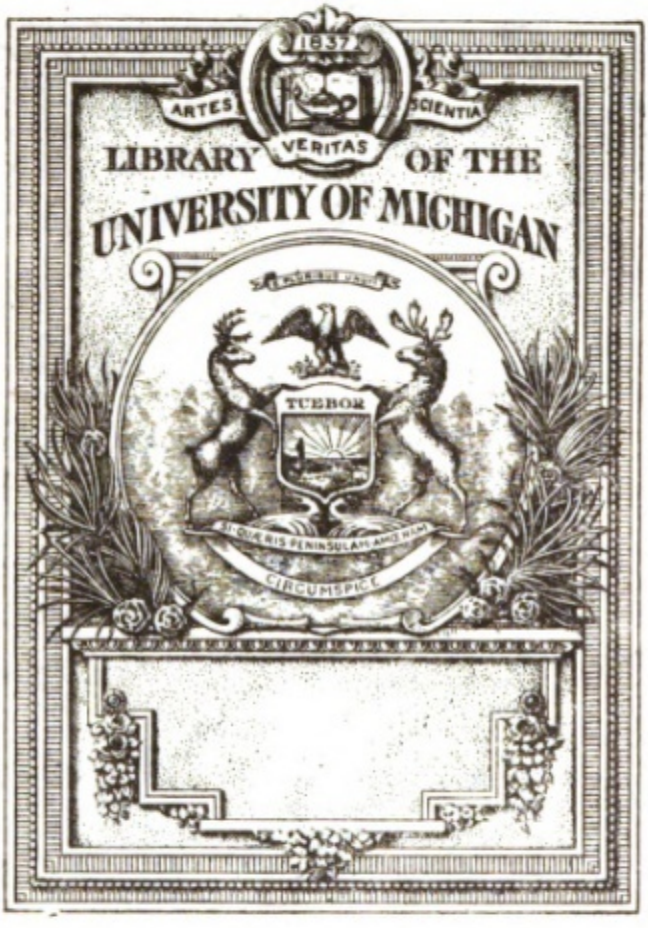

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THE SECRET SPRING

BY

PIERRE BENOIT

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY
1920

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A FOREWORD

LONG have I hesitated to give back to Life the legacy left me by Death. But at last, reflecting that Lieutenant Vignerte and She whom he loved have vanished into the eternal shades, I have decided that there is no longer any reason to keep silence about the tragic events staged in the German court of Lautenburg-Detmold in the months immediately preceding the Great War.

P. B.

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PROLOGUE

"Unpile Arms!"

Of its own motion and by that force of habit which makes the word of command superfluous, the dark mass of the company rose and formed fours to the right.

The darkness was falling, cold and cruel, slashed with long liquid streaks. It had been raining all day. In the middle of the clearing a grey-green sky looked up at us from shadowy pools.

An order rang out: "Quick March!" The little body moved off. I was at the head. At the edge of the wood was a country-house, some eighteenth-century fantasy; two or three shells had been enough to demolish the wings. The chandeliers of the big ground-floor room, multiplied in its mirrors and sparkling through its tall windows, enhanced the sinister blackness of the falling October night.

Five or six shadowy forms in long cloaks stood out against this background of light.

"What Company?"

"The 24th of the 218th Regiment, sir."

"Are you taking over the Blanc-Sablon trenches?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. When you've got your men installed, go for your orders to battalion headquarters. Your C.O. has them. Good luck!"

"Thank you, sir."

In the darkness, like a group of fantastic hunch-backs, the men stood round, leaning on their sticks and arching their backs under the amazing weight of their packs, crammed with miscellaneous paraphernalia. For the trenches were a desert island. How could you tell what you might want there? So the men took down everything they could carry.

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They maintained a grave, morose silence, the usual silence that marked the occupation of a new sector. Besides, Blanc-Sablon had a bad reputation. The enemy's trenches were some way off — three or four hundred yards — it is true, but the nature of the ground was such that the only cover consisted of a few wretched dug-outs which were always collapsing and indeed, only kept in existence at all by great baulks of timber. Further, the place was wooded and cut by ravines where you could not see fifty yards ahead of you. And nothing in war is so nerve-racking as the mystery of the invisible.

A voice — "Any chance of lights?"

"Lights" meant cards. Card-playing was permitted when the dug-outs were deep enough and there was a good thick tarpaulin to cover the entrance.

Another muttered:

— "How long are we going for?"

A question that remained unanswered. In October, 1914, the war had not yet become an affair of administration, with a rota of reliefs, leave. . . . You never knew how long you would stay in bad trenches which you could not make up your mind to improve. It was not worth while. You might have been there a month already, but you would be certain to be moved off before the end of the week.

I felt my way with my stick down the forest path, helped by three feet of light from the puny lantern which a soldier hid under his cloak. It is a trying experience to lead men by unfamiliar paths through a forest at night. Behind you the men, and even the officers, follow like sheep, their one concern being to avoid knocking their noses against the pack of the man in front — their sole horizon — at some sudden stop. The others could think of reliefs, their cards, their homes, anything. . . . But I was pre-occupied solely with the necessity of keeping my sightless column on the right track.

Nothing could be heard but the muffled tramping which

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wound along indefinitely behind me. The trees made a dark dome above our heads. Every now and then we looked up as we came to a clearing, but the sky was as dark as the vault of foliage.

"Where is Lieutenant Vignerte?"

"At the head, sir."

A hand was placed on my shoulder. It was Vignerte's.

Since our Captain left us after Craonne to command a battalion of another regiment, Raoul Vignerte, senior to me in the service, had been in command of the company. He was a man of twenty-five, slight, with a splendid dark head. Two months of war had done more than ten years of peace could have done to draw us together. We did now know each other before August, 1914, yet we had common memories of those bygone days. I came from Béarn, he from Landes. I had taken German at the Sorbonne. He, two years later, had taken history. Alternately jovial and absorbed, he was always a wonderful company commander. Occasionally the men found him a trifle distant, irresponsible, perhaps, but they liked his calm, soldierly bearing, his never-failing interest in their welfare. Vignerte did not sleep with the men, as I did. But they knew that if he kept his dug-out to himself it was invariably the most dilapidated, straw-less, and exposed he could find.

As far as I was concerned, he left nothing undone to make me forget that, though he was two years younger than myself, he was my superior officer. On my side, glad though I was to have such a comrade to obey, I was even more glad to escape all the responsibilities of a company commander. Strength-returns, discussions with the sergeant-major and the quartermaster, company accounts (though these are reduced to a minimum in the field), would never have been much to my liking. Vignerte, who had not slept one hour a night during the retreat, who had been the last to leave Guise in flames and the first to enter Ville-aux-Bois in ruins, this same Vignerte dealt with the horrible mass of detail with

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methodical vigour. Every now and then when I saw this charming intellectual wholly absorbed in such sordid duties, I would think: What distraction is he seeking? From what black thoughts is he fleeing? . . . Then, as if fearing detection, he would come to me with some joke and that day the regiment would know no one more merry and careless.

This evening he was in his dark mood. And why not, with the responsibility of introducing two hundred and fifty men to a new sector? Besides, he might have orders of which I did not yet know.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Ten minutes more to battalion headquarters," I replied. And, lowering my voice, I queried: "Any news?"

"I believe one company of the battalion is to carry out some operation. But it's not our turn. Besides, I'm going to remain at headquarters. You can carry out the relief without me. I shall come down with the orders a quarter of an hour afterwards."

Blanc-Sablon was indeed a lugubrious spot. On one wall of a ravine rose its shell-riven dwarf forest, with wooded horns and great caves of shadow, while away in front a road, barricaded with tree-trunks, stretched to the village, a few hundred yards off, occupied by the enemy.

The men, hitherto silent, could no longer restrain a hasty comment.

"Good Lord! What a show! Here's a pretty place for you! We always strike a hole like this!"

"Silence!"

In some respects taking over is not unlike the figure of a cotillon. The Company-Commander, each section officer, corporal and man must immediately seek out his opposite number, the company-commander, section officer, corporal or man whose place he has to take.

It was all over in five minutes, soundlessly, of course, or hostile artillery would soon have had this human

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mass, half of it without cover of any kind, under fire and reduced to pulp.

Silence, comparatively easy to obtain from the incoming party, was nothing like so easy to exact from the departing host. The pleasant prospects of approaching sleep under cover and a few days' " rest " behind the lines loosened their tongues. They could not resist a few words of advice to their successors:

" I'd advise you to keep clear of that loophole. There's a gent over there who doesn't love me. I have had three pots at him today. If he isn't dead he will be wanting his turn. And then . . ."

—" SILENCE! "

Truly a vile sector — four, five small posts to be manned, twelve sentries to be found, not to mention patrols. Not much chance of sleep for my poor fellows here.

" Good-bye."

" Good-bye. Thanks for your help."

It was the officer of the out-going company who was moving off. The sound died away in the woods.

It was high time. The moon was already up.

Swathed in pale yellow mist, she swam mournfully through a sea of grey flakes. She had turned her lamp on the desolate white countryside, the shattered tree-stumps, and clayey wastes. The men vanished into their shelters. The sentries kept their rifles down lest the bayonet should catch the light. Behind us a number of small, flat mounds, with pathetic wooden railings, loomed into view.

These were the graves.

The men had not noticed them. All the better. It was better they should not see them until next morning —. by daylight, when they would have got used to the place and our little world would be feeling the comparatively enlivening influence of the sun.

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My five small posts and twelve sentries were placed. The company was established in its burrow. Those not on watch were already snoring. With two trusty men — you can always find some of that breed, wakeful and inquisitive — I started on my rounds.

"Tell Lieutenant Vignerte I have gone to get into touch with the 23rd. Ask him to wait for me in my dug-out. I shall be back in a quarter of an hour."

We crept along the hedges. At regular intervals lights soared from the German trenches and fell back to earth in a pale blue halo.

"Who goes there?"

"Masséna."

"Melun."

"It is the officer of the 24th sent to get into touch with you. Anything new on your side?"

"No, sir, unless it's the scrap we've just had with a German patrol. It was the shots you heard just now. We've killed one."

A corpse was lying in the grass. I bent over it. On the shoulder strap was the number "182."

"What about his papers?"

"The Captain has them."

"Our small post is two hundred yards away, there, in the coppice. . . . Oh, yes! At two o'clock a patrol will come round. Don't forget it!"

"Very good, sir."

"Good night."

When I got back Vignerte was in my dug-out. He was smoking a cigarette.

"Anything fresh?" I asked him.

"Nothing," he replied, "at any rate for tonight. But of course the 22nd may get a knock. In front of them is a horn of the wood where we have reason to think that the Boche is working on a sap. The 22nd are to inspect and, if possible, upset their game. One section goes over at 6 a.m., the rest follow to support it. As soon as the explosions are heard the 23rd are to fire

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at the trenches opposite to hold down their occupants, but we ourselves are not to move unless things go wrong. In any case the 23rd attack before us. So we can count on a quiet night. Have you anything fresh?"

"The company has taken over all right," I said. "They're so uncomfortable, in fact, that I don't think we need worry about them. Many of them can't help keeping awake. I have got into touch with our neighbours; their is nothing to report in that quarter except that they've had a scrap with a German patrol. They've knocked out one."

"Really," said Vignerte. "Infantry or Jäger?"

"Infantry. 182nd Regiment of Prussian Infantry."

"I should like to know," said my friend, "where those folk opposite come from."

So saying he drew out his pocket Lavanzelle. "160th — Posen, 180th — Altona, 181st — Lippe, 182nd — Lautenburg . . . Lautenburg . . ."

"Well?"

He repeated, "Lautenburg."

"Do you know Lautenburg?" I said, struck by the tone of his voice.

"Yes," he replied gravely. "Are you sure of the number?"

"Of course," I replied rather sharply. "But what does it matter — Lautenburg or anywhere else!"

"Yes," he murmured, "what does it matter!"

I looked at him closely. It was quite easy, because, absorbed as he was, he had no thought for me at all.

"Vignerte," I said, "what's the trouble; you don't seem yourself — any bad news?"

But he had already recovered and shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear chap! Bad news! From whom? I have no one in the world and you know it."

"That may be," I answered, "but you are upset to-night. I want you to stay with me and you can fix up company headquarters where you like."

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"I admit I'm a bit overwrought," he broke in. "What's the time?"

"Seven o'clock."

"Let's play cards."

The suggestion was so unexpected coming from him that the two men with me looked up in amazement. No one in the company had ever seen Lieutenant Vignerte touch a card.

"Here, Damestoy," he said, "surely you or Henriquez have got some cards."

They nodded.

As if they would be without!

"What can you play?"

"Ecarté, sir."

"All right; écarté." For a full hour Vignerte lost steadily. It was an odd game. The two penniless soldiers were looking at each other in amazement, unable to determine which was the more remarkable feature of this adventure, the honour Lieutenant Vignerte had done them or the sum — 12 francs — they had won from him.

I looked at him in growing perplexity. Suddenly he threw down the cards: "A silly game. It's eight o'clock and I'm going out to see the first relief."

"I'm going with you."

I shall never forget that night. The sky had gradually shed its fleece of clouds, and the moon, almost at the full, shone in the cold blue dome. Below, the line of sandbags and trenches made long white tracks.

Starshells were now useless and none were seen.

Dead silence reigned. Occasionally a sharp buzz marked the passage of a stray bullet close by and soon after the crack of the rifle down in the valley was heard.

In low tones we exchanged the password with our sentries, some sprawling full length in a shell-hole, others crouching behind bushes. The company was strung out over a long front, five hundred yards at least, and our round took us a good hour.

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When we got to the end of it Vignerte asked me:

"Where is the last post of the 23rd?"

We visited it. The four men were about to bury the German who had just been killed as deeply as they could.

Vignerte quickly stepped down among them and leaning over the grave searched in the soil they were throwing back. The corpse appeared.

"—182nd. That's it," he murmured.

He shivered and turned to me: "Let's go back. I'm beginning to feel cold."

* * * * * *

Damestoy and Henriquez were asleep in the dug-out where the three runners had come for them. With the natural deference of the private soldier they had arranged the best spots for us — two holes with plenty of straw and a pile of dark blankets.

The silence was broken only by the gentle breathing of these good fellows and, occasionally, the squeak of a field-mouse hunting for the ears still left in the straw. I could not see Vignerte, who was lying beside me, but I was sure he was not asleep. The open door of the dug-out showed a blue patch of sky with a silvery star hanging like a tear in its depths.

An hour, perhaps, passed thus. Vignerte had not moved. He ought to have been asleep, this mysterious comrade whom the war had sent me. Why was he so moved tonight? What memories had possessed a mind which appeared to be fixed ruthlessly on the thousand details of war as if to avoid straying aimlessly through forbidden worlds? . . .

And suddenly I heard a deep sigh while a hand clasped mine.

"Vignerte, what on earth's the trouble?"

An even more convulsive clasp of his hand was all my reply.

Then I burnt my boats.

"Old man, dear old man. I think I've earned the

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right to call you that. Let me share the trouble that's weighing on you. You are unhappy tonight. Tell me your sorrow. If we were in Paris, or anywhere else, I should not be guilty of this indiscretion. But a confidence which would be absurd elsewhere becomes sacred here. Tomorrow, perhaps, we shall be in action, Vignerte! Tomorrow, perhaps, four men will be digging our graves where that German sleeps now. Won't you speak to me, Vignerte, won't you tell me? . . ."

I felt the pressure of his hand relax.

"It will be a long story, old fellow. And will you understand?. I mean, won't you think me a bit mad?"

"I'm listening," I said firmly.

"You shall hear then. For these memories almost choke me, and indeed there are some which it would be selfish for me to take away alone. So much the worse for you. You will get no sleep tonight! . . ."

This is the strange story which Lieutenant Vignerte told me that night of October 30th, 1914, at the spot which those who have known it call the "Crossroads of Death."

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THE SECRET SPRING

I

YOU are a University man, he began. You must forgive me if the opening of my story is not free from a suggestion of bitterness against the University of which I was never a member. No doubt my feelings are without justification, since to the fact that I was never admitted I owe memories which, after all, I would not exchange for a chair at the Sorbonne.

I took the course marked out for those with some intelligence and no money, and went in for scholarships. That means I undertook, somehow, to get through examinations every year, to acquire a certain habit of mind and with it, as climax, a teacher's diploma and a post in a provincial school.

At first I justified the hopes reposed in me by the Council-General of my Department. My scholarship at the Mont-de-Marsan school was succeeded by another in advanced rhetoric at the Henry IV. school. There it was that in 1912 I tried to get into the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. Thirty-five candidates were accepted. I came out thirty-seventh. By way of consolation prize I was offered a scholarship at the *Faculté des Lettres* of Bordeaux University.

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I then did something which met with disapproval from the few friends who took any interest in me. During my year as a boarder I had glimpsed Paris as a convict sees green fields through the bars of his cell. I remember myself as a penniless schoolboy walking in the Champs-Elysées one Grand-Prix day in June. All the millionaires were returning home from the races. Each of the cars that flashed down the avenue in a brilliant stream cost ten times more than my poor self had cost since I came into the world. A wonderful lemon and mauve light flooded the scene. I was dazzled. This vision of extravagance inspired me with none of the sentiments that turns the underdog into a rebel.

If only I could have my share some day!

"Balzac is an excellent realist," my professor of rhetoric used to splutter out. And if that narrow-minded but honest old fellow said so, it vouched for the truth of those adventures of young provincial heroes who, rather than accept insignificance in an obscure corner of their native land, have come to the Great City, tamed her and made her the submissive hand-maid of their desires.

And now they were proposing to send me to the end of the earth. I had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. Well, we should see!

Accordingly I resigned my scholarship and decided to enrol myself at the Sorbonne with a view to taking my *licence ès lettres*. A voice within said: "Do not enter the University, but do not

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despise its degrees. They are only useful when you have not been there. Outside they are excellent blinds."

In a year I had taken my *licence*, living on the lessons I managed to give here and there, and imbibing from these tasks an ever-keener longing for freedom. But in the end I felt myself beaten, and resigned myself to the fate I had despised. I entered for a scholarship in history, asking for Bordeaux. And I bade farewell to Paris.

The Consultative Committee of Public Education, whose duty it is to decide in these matters, usually met at the beginning of October. I spent the intervening two months at a fishing village in the Landes, at the house of an old curé (it sounds dull, but it's true), who opened his poor house to me in memory of my parents, whom he had known.

It was there, my friend, that I passed the most peaceful days of my life. I was free to roam at will through the great woods of the district, with no other appointments beyond meal-times. For the first time my reading was confined to such things as did not figure in an examination syllabus or the annual competition, and my mind could take in undistracted the glorious miracle of the dying season.

The curé's house was at one end of a small lake which communicated with the sea through a narrow channel choked with aquatic plants. In the morning the roar of the tide woke me in my open room. From my window I would watch the irresistible

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advance of the great green ocean under a pink and grey sky. Wild duck and curlew wheeled overhead with their plaintive cries. What a temptation to stay there for ever! To watch the calm passage of the seasons. To be free from social ties, official routine, or any link with life. To spend all day and every day on the long straight dunes, where the great waves roll up ceaselessly in the wind and the jelly-fish thrown up high and dry on the silvery sand look for all the world like amethyst pendants.

Then one October morning came two letters, one from the Bordeaux Academy which announced that the Consultative Committee "regretted they had been unable to give favourable consideration to my application for a post." The other was signed by Monsieur Thierry, Professor of Germanic Language and Literature at the Sorbonne. This good man and conscientious scholar had been my tutor for a year, and he it was who had corrected the thesis I submitted in July for my *licence* — on "Clausewitz and France," of all things. I had never had anything but praise for him. I knew he cherished friendly feelings for me and possibly reproached himself somewhat. He was on the Committee and his letter was an endeavour to justify the decision. Personally he had done what he could, but some of the members had expressed doubts as to my suitability for the teaching profession, and on this point even he himself had to confess he spoke without much conviction. But in any case, it was better

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thus. He could not imagine me a provincial student. "Return at once," he ended up, "there is perhaps a way out which will enable you to live in Paris."

I bade farewell to my good old curé, promising him to return in the January vacation, and next day I stepped out on the platform of the Gare d'Orsay.

It was already winter. You could easily count the statues in the leafless Luxemburg. The fire was crackling in M. Thierry's little room in the Rue Royer-Collard.

"My dear boy," he began — and lonely as I was, I felt extremely grateful for this preface — "you mustn't think hardly of the Committee. It is the duty of my colleagues to keep a single eye on the interests of the University, and you yourself won't deny that in your work you have often displayed — how shall I put it? — a spirit of fancy, yes, a spirit of fancy likely to alarm folk so . . . serious-minded. I, of course, know you, and it's another matter. I know that that spirit under good guidance will become nothing more than a pleasant originality. But first let me put a question. Do you really feel a call to the teaching profession?"

What reply was to be expected from a man with exactly one hundred and seven francs and a few centimes in his pocket? I stoutly protested my conviction.

"Well," he went on, "I have the very thing for

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you. That post would have given you one thousand two hundred francs at the most. I have recommended you to an old friend of mine who is director at the Ternes, a private institution. He is looking out for a history teacher. Six hours a week for one hundred and seventy-five francs a month, and the chance of some private tuition. For example, you may, if you wish, continue your own studies at the Sorbonne at the same time. I know you and will make myself responsible for you. It is now Tuesday. If you like the prospect you can start on Friday."

I felt the harsh, cold grip of usherdom upon my neck. Oh, those Champs-Elysées! The fur-swathed women with their entrancing wake of perfume behind them! But how could I fail to "like the prospect"? One hundred and seven francs and a few centimes. . . .

I overwhelmed him with my gratitude.

He rubbed his hands.

"I am seeing M. Berthomieu this evening. Come back at ten tomorrow and I will give you place and time."

* * * * *

Tuesday, October 21st, 1913.— Night was falling. In the Rue August-Comte I ran into groups of schoolboys coming out of the Lycée Montaigne. Oh, schoolboys, scholars and otherwise, stick to your mathematics, enter the Arts et Métiers, keep to your counters, lest one day you, too, find yourselves

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this comic puppet which skirts the Luxemburg and is lost in the Rue d'Assas.

Always that " spirit of fancy " of which my kind tutor disapproved! Well, let's give the poor thing a farewell treat and take it to dine on the right bank.

Vignerte paused at this point of his story. Then he resumed:

" A bullet whistled past a short time back — there, just above our heads. Did it occur to you that if you had happened to pop your head out at that precise moment you'd have been laid out stiff? How far do you think luck goes in life? "

"The other day," I answered, " there was trouble in the 11th Squad. No one wanted to go on water fatigue. Each of them said it wasn't his turn. As the squabble grew fiercer I intervened. I sent the first man I came across, the one who had been protesting loudest, as it happened. He went off grumbling that it wasn't fair. He left his cap behind him. When he came back he couldn't find it. It had been pulverized by a shell and his twelve comrades with it."

" We seem to agree," said Vignerte.

He resumed his story.

What impulse was urging me on that evening, I, who confined myself to the tawdry delights of the Latin Quarter and never crossed the bridges at night? I remember I tried a one-man orgy at the " Grand V." Then I thought I'd like to take my coffee on the terrace of the Weber. Pretending I could refuse myself nothing, I passed before the lamps of the Olympia with the fixed intention of granting myself the joys of the promenade. Rather

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excited after my bottle of Barsac I walked very straight, staring brazenly at the girls.

It was cold. I went back to Weber's and at once the lights and the throng restored my natural timidity. I sat down humbly in a corner with that lack of ease characteristic of a man who is afraid that people will notice he is not used to being there.

Opposite me a group of young people were making a good deal of noise. Enviously I studied their clothes and that air of easy assurance, the sure sign of a happiness which, perhaps, I should never attain. Truly I was not exactly made for the University, I whom learned expositions, bibliographies and works of reference left sceptical, I whose heart almost beat quicker at the sight of a well-cut waistcoat, a well-tied tie and elegant socks visualized under well-creased trousers!

They were a party of four, one a woman, pink and pretty, in her furs. Painted a little, perhaps, though I've never minded that. She was seated next to one of the handsome young men, and facing me. The other two had their backs to me, but in the mirror I could see their faces, slightly flushed by a good dinner, which was then approaching its end.

That evening I realized the humiliation of those who go for their coffee to a fashionable restaurant. Said I to myself: "You'd far better have stayed at home, dined anywhere, gone to bed and slept, yes,

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slept. Sleep is the poor man's haven. You oughtn't to have come here."

And yet. . . . It was gradually beginning to dawn upon me that one of the men with his back to me was studying me closely in the mirror, when he got up and came over to me.

"Vignerte!"

"Ribeyre!"

I had come across this Ribeyre during my advanced rhetoric course. He had already obtained his *licence,* and was, like me, a candidate for Normale, though he displayed that indifference to results which comes from a private income and ambitions in other directions.

"What are you up to?"

"You can see for yourself," I said, somewhat stung. Then I added quickly:

"What about you? Anything new since Henri IV.?"

"Don't mention that awful hole, old boy. Talk about instructing youth! I should have made a mess of things if I'd listened to them. . . ."

He, too, added:

"What about you?"

"I couldn't help having to listen to them. I'm still listening to them," I replied bitterly. "But what's your job now? You don't seem to be having a bad time."

"I've been extraordinarily lucky, my boy. I was

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appointed Private Secretary to a Deputy, and six months later he became Minister for Foreign Affairs. I followed him to the Foreign Office. There we are! But come out of your corner and I'll introduce you to the friends of Ministers."

Ribeyre did indeed introduce me.

"My friend Vignerte — a worker if there ever was one. Got his diploma and Lord knows what else — *Agrégé*, perhaps? No — so much the better for you. Who knows it better than we three, not to mention Clotilde."

Clotilde nodded stiffly and gave me an ironical glance.

I was on the rack. This panegyric was so suited to my poor, baggy trousers! It was very charming of them all the same, though perhaps this praise of my brains was more a compliment to their own tact and skill in dealing with any situation.

After a short time Ribeyre got up.

"Good-bye till tomorrow, you people. My salaams, Clotilde. You must come with me, Vignerte, and see me home."

Outside he took my arm.

"I'm going to the office. There are some letters of the old man's to send off. Come with me."

The Rue Royale was a blaze of light. Women swathed in long silk cloaks stepped from cars at restaurant doors. The sight of this world of luxury intoxicated me, urged me, drove me to try and extract some material advantage from my chance

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meeting with Ribeyre. I felt he was only too anxious to dazzle me with his new glory. Who knows, perhaps I should end by getting something out of his desire to parade his power. What can't be got from human vanity!

What about my own vanity, when I ascended the steps of the Foreign Office at his side? A tall lackey took us up in the lift — another received us on the first floor.

"Any telephone messages, Fabien?"

"Yes, sir, one from the Minister of Commerce. He is dining with the Minister tomorrow, and says they will meet at the Chamber. I took the message down in writing."

A minute later we were in a charming little grey and gold room. Ribeyre tapped the desk.

"Vergennes' table," he said casually. "Excuse me," he added, sitting down. He began to open letters, marking them with a red pencil as he did so. "Don't mind about talking. This isn't a very exacting job. Tell me what you are doing. How far have you got with the University?"

I told him the whole story from my leaving Henri IV. to my approaching appointment at M. Berthomieu's. He looked up.

"You've accepted it?"

"What else could I do?" I answered sharply. "I can't starve."

Starve! The word sounded oddly among all the Gobelins, Boule furniture and Sèvres.

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Ribeyre rose. I had an intuition that I was saved.

"You needn't go to Berthomieu's, old chap. You'll do for yourself at that game. I know you, and I'm positive you're not made for the University. What you want is *this*."

With a sweep of his hand he indicated the pageant of power about us.

What a psychologist Ribeyre was!

"Listen," he said, perching himself on the arm of my chair. "Have you any objection to leaving the country for a bit? I say for a bit, because it is only in Paris that the game is really played and won. At present you haven't a sou. This is the sort of place where a fellow like you with enough to live on for a year and no material preoccupations could have the future at his feet."

"Well?" said I, breathless.

He went on, relishing the pleasure of appearing such a great man. "All right, then. You will do me a good turn in exchange for mine. I lunched this morning with Marçais at the German Embassy. Do you know Marçais? He is our Minister at Lautenburg. Have you heard of Lautenburg?"

"It is one of the German States."

"It is the Grand Duchy of Lautenburg-Detmold. Reigning Sovereign, His Highness Frederick-Augustus," he said magisterially. "His Highness is afflicted with an heir of about fifteen, for whom he is seeking a tutor. You know that French is a

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sine qua non in every Court. Have you got your *licence?*"

"Yes."

"Good. Do you know German?"

"Fairly well; enough for the Sorbonne."

"Doesn't matter. They all talk French over there. Well, the Grand Duke instructed Marçais, when he left for Paris, to find him a tutor. Marçais is a charming fellow, a man of real distinction! . . . Charvet makes him his exclusive ties. Afterwards he destroys the model. But this is no reproach. He's not much good at getting out of a hole. Yesterday he casually told me of his mission. He is going to the Ministry of Education tomorrow, and as you can imagine, he will find tutors galore there, especially in view of the salary the Grand Duke offers — ten thousand marks a year."

"Ten thousand marks!" I echoed in amazement.

"We must fix the thing up at once. I'll write a note to Marçais."

He read it out to me. I could only blush at the compliments he lavished on me.

"Marçais will get this tomorrow morning. He is a punctilious old fellow, and if he's up at nine o'clock it will be to summon you. By the way, what's your address?"

"7, Rue Cugas."

"Don't forget to give your Rue Cugas a call or you may miss his appointment."

"Give me the note," I said. "I'll post it myself."

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My eagerness obviously flattered him. A vain smile spread over his face.

"Lucky dog! Instead of old Berthomieu's fare you're going to sample life at a castle, or, rather, a palace. Lautenburg is a marvellous place, I'm told. Marçais preferred remaining there to two years' promotion. The Grand Duke is a pleasant fellow. The Grand Duchess hunts foxes better than a man. Marçais told me he killed his best horse trying to keep up with her. The only thing is, mind you make a place for yourself."

I saw him glance at my poor clothes.

"You need not be afraid of that," I broke in, with an assurance that surprised him. He looked at me and smiled again.

"I do believe I'm revealing you to yourself. Keep at it over there, old chap. Come back to us with a few spare thousands. My chief is well established here, but if he sinks I shall leave the ship first. We shall come up smiling. If you really want to get something useful out of people you must have passed the stage of depending on them. There's nothing better than a Minister's cabinet, but you must be able to sit tight and have something in reserve. Otherwise you may find yourself reduced to selling local offices for two thousand francs. You won't find it hard to save six thousand marks over there. You'll have no expenses, so fit yourself out well. It is money invested at a hundred per cent. You might copy Marçais in that.

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If he wasn't so well-dressed he'd have been booted out long ago."

So spake Etienne Ribeyre. Among other valuable tips, he had just proved to me that in life it may often happen that a casual acquaintance can do more for you than a friend.

Oh, lovely October moon, gazing down on Paris! The Seine flowed in a soft purple mist. I posted my note in the Rue de Bourgogne at the corner by the Chamber of Deputies. Then I felt I must have a walk to be alone with my thoughts. Ten thousand marks! Twelve thousand, five hundred francs! Money does not mean happiness! Then what on earth does? What had given me that confident step, that self-assurance, that lightness of heart?

The Rue de Varenne, the Rue Barbet-de-Jouy, the Boulevard Montparnasse, in turn witnessed my triumphal march. I took no notice of my fellow-men, for I was in my hour. I do not know how my gaze happened to fall, near the Observatory, on a figure moving furtively under a lamp. It was a slip of a girl, with a fleece of red-gold hair. My joy was too great that evening for me to bear it alone. But, standing by her, not for a moment did I think that her body was really her own. The slight form was that of the women of the Champs-Elysées, of the beauties of Maxim's, nay, of those maidens, incomparably fairer, who were doubtless even then awaiting me in a far away German Court, on the

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banks of a Wagnerian river, beguiling the weary hours with the sweetest strains of the *Intermezzo*.

* * * * *

Ten o'clock, and the appointment with M. Thierry which I had almost forgotten. He was reading in a corner by the fire, and when I entered he came forward with a beatific smile.

"I have arranged everything with M. Berthomieu. You are to go to him."

"My dear master," I replied, "I'm afraid I have given you all the trouble for nothing."

And I told him all that had happened the previous evening. In spite of my wish to appear unmoved, I could not manage to conceal my pleasure. I was disappointed that he did not seem to share it at once. He looked at me with astonishment, even with disapproval, I thought.

These university people are all the same, I reflected, no salvation outside the University. I abandoned the pose I found so unnatural to proclaim far and wide my pride in my new glories.

"And, after all," I wound up, "I ask myself how many examinations I should have to pass, how many years I should have to wait to reach the position which is open to me at the start, ten thousand marks a year."

"That's true," he murmured, musing. He looked into the fire for a minute, then got up and went to the book-case, from which he returned with a large volume in one of those dull-coloured, gilded, but

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tasteless bindings which characterize many English and German books.

"Are you certain that the proposal has been made to you on behalf of the Grand Duke of Lautenburg-Detmold?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "on behalf of the Grand Duke Frederick-Augustus."

"That's the man. To be tutor to his only son, Duke Joachim."

It was thus that I learnt the name of my future pupil.

My old tutor thought a few seconds more, and then, raising his glasses towards me:

"May I ask if you are already bound by any formal contract?"

"Not yet, strictly speaking, but my mind is made up, and I shall go unless some one else is preferred to me."

"In that case let us say no more," said M. Thierry, putting the book back.

I was intrigued and a little annoyed.

"My dear master," I said, "will you be really frank with me? I know you are too interested in my welfare to suggest my refusing such an attractive offer unless you had very serious reasons for doing so. Besides, I may confess that in coming to you this morning I hoped to obtain some valuable information about the Court of Lautenburg-Detmold for your unique knowledge of the men and affairs of modern Germany. I am sure you are

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even more familiar with these details than I suspected. I am to interview Count de Marçais, our Minister at Lautenburg, very shortly, but it will not be easy for me to question him. Besides, a diplomatist must doubtless observe a certain reticence, which you have not the same reason to consider with me. To put it shortly, may I ask you a question which sums up all this? If you had a son, Monsieur Thierry, would you let him do what I propose to do? Would you let him go to Lautenburg?"

He looked straight at me, and replied firmly, "No."

I confess that my astonishment began to give place to a slight feeling of apprehension. I knew perfectly well that it was not childish pique at my not accepting the post he had found for me, that influenced a man of his profound judgment.

"You must have very good reasons, sir," I said, my voice trembling a little, "to give me so categorical an answer."

"I certainly have," he replied.

"Would you mind telling me what it was you looked up in that book?"

"My dear boy, don't start thinking that that year book of Reigning Houses contains any details of a kind to justify the apprehension I feel at your going to Lautenburg. I have verified a name, confirmed certain recollections — that's all.

"It is true that I have certain private informa-

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tion about the House of Lautenburg-Detmold of which Count de Marçais himself might know nothing, even assuming that he were a more gifted diplomatist than he is reported to be. Besides, he has not been very long at Lautenburg, and never knew the late Grand Duke Rudolph."

"Who was the Grand Duke Rudolph?"

"Haven't you ever heard of him? He was the elder brother of the present Grand Duke. He died a few years ago, two, if I remember rightly."

"So it was his death which gave the succession to the Grand Duke Frederick Augustus?"

"Not directly. The constitution of Lautenburg-Detmold is peculiar. The Salic Law does not apply, and the ducal crown, on the Grand Duke's death, passed to his wife, the Grand Duchess Aurora Anna Eleanor."

"So she has married her brother-in-law?"

"Quite so, and thus it happens that in the absence of children of the Grand Duke Rudolph, your future pupil, Duke Joachim, son of the Grand Duke Frederick and some German countess, is now the heir presumptive to the State of Lautenburg-Detmold. To alter the situation the marriage of his father with the Grand Duchess Aurora would have to be honoured with a bond, a thing which seems most improbable."

"I seem to remember something about it now," I said. "Wasn't there a German Grand Duke who died in Africa — the Congo — while engaged

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in geographical research two or three years ago?"

"Precisely," replied M. Thierry. "That was the Grand Duke Rudolph. He was always an enthusiastic geographer. His travels could not, it is true, be described as altogether unpolitical. When I remember that a few months later we had Agadir and the loss of the Congo, I can't help thinking that the Grand Duke of Lautenburg had been sent to accomplish some mission on behalf of his august cousin, the Kaiser. It is true he hadn't much time in which to effect his purpose as he died in the Congo shortly after his arrival. It would be interesting. . . ."

"But what is there in all this, sir," I broke in, "that in any way accounts for the solicitude you've just shown on my behalf?"

He seemed put out.

"My dear boy," he said, with an obvious effort. "A historian's plain duty is to accept as fact only what he has been able to verify. From that point of view I confess that my knowledge is confined to vague rumours barely susceptible of proof. Certain reports, an allusion or two, and last — but not least — certain details communicated to me some time back by a friend whose name I must withhold — that's all. I should perhaps add the proverb that there is no smoke without fire."

"Couldn't you be a little more precise as to the purport of the rumours?"

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"Will you promise you will keep this entirely to yourself?" he said.

"I give you my word."

"I am told that violent deaths are not unknown at the Court of Lautenburg-Detmold."

My curiosity reached fever-heat.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, or rather, fortunately, nothing definite. Still, we can't ignore the fact that two persons stood between Duke Frederick Augustus and the crown."

"But the Grand Duke Rudolph died of sunstroke in the Congo," I said. "It was reported in the press."

"Agreed. That was a natural death all right, but apparently the same cannot be said of the death of Countess von Tepwitz — the present Duke's first wife and the mother of Duke Joachim."

"Do you mean that the Grand Duke was responsible for her death?"

"The Grand Duke Frederick Augustus is a very extraordinary man," continued M. Thierry, "able, well-educated, but a master of dissembling. Is he playing for his own hand? Or for that of the King of Würtemberg, his immediate suzerain? Or, indeed, for the Kaiser? I have studied this question from the point of view of German high politics. It isn't a simple one. Frederick Augustus is a man of ambition, and I don't think he would stop at anything."

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"Anyhow," I said, "his calculations have had to take account of the Grand Duchess Aurora. Her consent to marry him was an essential factor."

M. Thierry smiled.

"They might have been in collusion. I admit I don't know that side of the question. In fact, I know nothing of the Grand Duchess except her age," he said, taking up the blue and gold book again, "her Christian names — Aurora — Anna — Eleanor; her Russian origin, and that she was a Tumene princess. The Tumenes are the most powerful family in the Government of Astrakhan. Has she acted in collusion with the present Grand Duke? It is possible. You know as well as I that reasons of state sometimes dictate marriages, but, as I said, I know nothing about her."

"All this does not seem very enlightening, but in any case, I can't see why a humble tutor should have to suffer for the intrigues of such high personages."

"That sounds plausible, but how can you ever say what may result from these sordid affairs. You might find yourself drawn in without knowing it. Do you know, in fact, exactly what your duties are? I will tell you what is really in my mind. Your salary is to be ten thousand marks, isn't it? I can't help thinking that figure is unduly high. Your friend Boubelet, with Normale and his *agrégation* behind him had only eight thousand from the King of Saxony."

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I saw clearly that the old professor had some very definite reason for speaking in this way, but that fear of compromising himself prevented him from saying more. I admit it would have made no difference in any case. My curiosity was thoroughly aroused. The lust of adventure was kindled within me, and there was no hesitation about the tone in which I answered:

"I am very much obliged, sir, for your kind warning but my mind is made up. By minding my own business and sticking to my own job, I think I can avoid any and every danger. You admit that it is by no means certain I am running any risk. Will you grant me one more favour?"

"Certainly."

"If anything ever strikes me as suspicious, I will write to you about it and ask your advice. Then will be the time . . ."

"Don't do any such thing, my young friend. You had better realize now that over there you will inevitably be surrounded by spies. Never write a letter you don't want the Grand Duke to read for you can be quite sure that if he wants to, he won't ask your permission. Once at Lautenburg you'll be absolutely isolated from the world. I know the palace. Its magnificence does not prevent it being more of a fortress than a château."

"I shall always have Count de Marçais."

M. Thierry smiled, a smile which recalled

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Ribeyre's words: "He's not much good at getting out of a hole."

"Well," he said, "I see your mind is absolutely made up. After all, my apprehensions are possibly exaggerated. You are young and without dependents. You have resolution and strength of mind. I don't know whether I have any right to blame your thirst for adventure. From that point of view I'm possibly too much the slave to my academic outlook. Give me peace and a library. For instance," he concluded, "at Lautenburg you will have one of the finest libraries in the world at your disposal. The Grand Duke's collection is famous. It contains the manuscripts of Erasmus and most of Luther's. So go, my boy.

"One minute, though," he added. "Come back after you have seen Count Marçais. I may be able to give you some practical hints on the best way of performing your tutorial functions."

A note, with a dainty purple seal, was waiting for me at my lodgings. Count Marçais wrote that he would be delighted to see me that day at three o'clock. As I walked to the house of the French Minister at Lautenburg in the Rue Alphonse de Neuville, I reviewed the details of my conversation with M. Thierry. He knows a good deal more than he likes to say, I thought. Was I really being a fool? Well, it remained to be seen. After all, there is no greater folly than letting 12,000 a year

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