

FONTENAY,

THE NOVEL BY

A MILITARY NOVEL.

BY FORTUNE DU BOISBOEY.

(Translated by H. L. Williams.)

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

"We've hit it, lieutenant," said Tournesol, "and if you will believe my report—"

"Stop!" Fontenay interrupted, "you are a brave fellow and I am pleased with your intention; but it is useless for you to risk the crossing. Stay here while I go over. If I go to the bottom, go and tell the marshal."

"How can you think of that, lieutenant! he would have me court-martialed for deserting my superior—and quite right, too! That is not what worries me, though, but if I let you go without me, I shall be a coward, and I will not have it said in Gascony that Jean Tournesol quailed. It will be told there, for the marshal belongs to that part and he will tell the tale."

Under any other circumstances, Fontenay would have laughed at the soldier's simplicity, but he was not in the mood when danger was so great.

The Esla rolled its turbulent waters with dreadful impetuosity, the wind raged and showers fell at intervals which blinded the two soldiers. Yet there was no means of drawing back or of preventing Tournesol from sacrificing himself. Fontenay was still wavering about granting him leave to follow when he heard him hum the children's song of "The Broken Bridge" (*Pont Cassé Les Canards l'ont bien passés, etc.*)

"The ducks have gained the other beach, Tooral, looral, lay!"

Not to be outdone, Fontenay joined in on the same tune:

"And though no stones the bottom reach, We will make our way!"

On, into the main channel!"

"Well and good, lieutenant," exclaimed the subordinate, "we shall see if the water is pleasant. It does not have much effect on me, but pooh! we must take the rough with the smooth in war times."

"Is this the ford?" queried Fontenay, speaking to himself.

"My idea is that we have alighted on it at the first plunge. Troops of horse have passed here, for the bank is churned into mire. It is the ford, for here our light horsemen crossed this morning."

"The river must have swollen since they got over for the rain has not stopped falling."

"Well, lieutenant, our horses must swim it. We will get through with a wetting up to the shoulders. That happened me more than once last year in Poland. It does not kill a man."

Fontenay, although he had not had the experience in the 1807 campaign, had swum a bayou and a tropical torrent on horseback, and, being a good rider, he was pretty sure to come handsomely out of the transit.

"Look you, lieutenant," said Tournesol, reading his thought, "the main thing is to let the steed shift for himself by slackening the reins, so his action is not fettered. Steer with the knees, and one may hold on by the mane if there be any danger of being swept away. It is as easy as the telling. If you listen to me, we should bear to the right, because, if the ford lies before us, as it seems to me, we had better strike above it than below; for, in the latter case, if we lose footing, we cannot go up against the current and it will carry us heaven knows where! I will take the lead anyway and you can do as I show you. This time you will be second, lieutenant, but you know that in the procession the priest walks last."

So much courage and good humor removed Fontenay's hesitation and he did not protest against the arrangement proposed by the valiant Gascon. The latter urged on his horse, and turning at the moment of riding into the water, said with comic gravity:

"To-morrow is the first of January, lieutenant! allow me to wish you a happy new year! 1892 has not yet commenced, but nobody knows what may happen before midnight, and I hasten to present my good wishes!"

"Thank you, old hero! to-morrow you shall have my gifts!"

"Oh, I crave no other than the pleasure of piloting you into a safe port and remaining in your service. Whereupon, I make the plunge! Take the pace from me and ride steadily!"

Fontenay was absent in thought. Fancy had carried him far from this lugubrious river. The mention of New Year's Day by Tournesol recalled that of 1808, passed in the Tuileries amid the dazzling luxury of the imperial court. Marguerite de Gavre was there and they had begun to love one another without telling of their love.

What a contrast!

Now it was black night, and if he succeeded in crossing the tide, death might be awaiting him on the other side.

Paul also recollected that he wore on his heart the sash embroidered by his betrothed and brought by George de Prégnay; in it she had put two emblematic flowers to signify: "Forget not Marguerite!" and he hoped again that this

anxiety would shield him from all harm. He had placed himself behind his man and entered the water. It rose to the horses' chest but their hoofs touched the bottom. Undoubtedly this was the ford. The difficulty was not to deviate from it, and following Tournesol's advice, they marched obliquely to the right to cope with the current. They had hard work to resist, but they advanced to the middle without losing foothold. Already they saw the seemingly steep bank confusedly, and so near that they did not doubt they could reach it without accident.

CHAPTER XIV.

"FORGET NOT MARGUERITE!"

At this very moment a voice from the right bank challenged in French: "Who goes there?"

"France! the Emperor's staff!" responded Tournesol. "That," said he to his superior, "that is one of our chasseurs who has stayed on the farther side after our engagement this morning. So much the better! for he can tell us if there are any English about."

"You, there!" resumed the voice, "you are not in the right road. There's a hole before you and you'll fall into it. Take a course a little more to the right."

For a man facing the horsemen "the right" was their left, exactly the contrary direction to that Tournesol was following, but the obliging soldier who cautioned them, ought to know what to say as he had crossed the Esla before them. They hastened to perform the evolution indicated.

All went wrong. The ground suddenly failed under their horses' hoofs, which sank and struck out for the shore. Surprised by this mishap, Fontenay embraced his steed's neck, the shock having made him lose his stirrups. He uselessly tried to recover his seat, and his strangled horse sank lower and lower. He would have gone under with it when Tournesol, who had scarcely kept his own saddle, caught him by the cloak collar, shouting:

"Let go the neck, lieutenant! cling to me and try to tread water!"

Fontenay undertook to do this. Left to itself, the horse was carried away like a feather, but the rider kept aloft. Tournesol held firmly and the current hurled them towards the bank, not far, and, by a concurrence of good fortune, not very steep at this spot.

After reaching land, the lieutenant drew a long breath like a man hauled up out of a chasm and thought only of thanking heaven for the succor in a hopeless case; but Tournesol swore like a pagan at the evil giver of advice.

"Oh, the villain! fie, the brute!" he roared. "We should have reached land without wetting our knees but for him! I want to know what he meddled for? We were going on in the right road and he amused himself by telling us the wrong one!"

"He mistook, with a good intention," muttered Fontenay.

"Unless he did it expressly. Oh, I could shake him! he has put us in a nice position: only one horse between two! and not yours either! that's on the way to Portugal, whither I heard that rascally river runs, and we can hardly wade after! But the scurvy soldier who played us the trick cannot be far, and he shall pay for the joke. Come, lieutenant!"

Dragging his horse by the bridle and followed by his master, he reached the ridge of the bank, but he saw nobody.

"Where has the scamp gone?" he queried.

"He perceived the folly he committed and took to his heels for safety, of course! It is not worth while to pursue him, for you would not overtake him, and, before all, we must advise the marshal that his cavalry can cross."

"Yes, provided they go two by two without departing from the ford. It will not be easy to explain that across the stream with the roar of the wind and the rushing of the water."

"Let us try, though!"

"Try it is, lieutenant—but if even I catch that idiot who—halloa! here I am nearly breaking my neck now! Upon what the mischief have I stepped?"

"On a dead body," muttered Fontenay, through his clinched teeth.

"That is true. One of our mamelukes—and many another, too. There has been hot fighting here—see the *Chasseurs de la Garde*—red-coats, also—and horses! what a mountain of horses!"

Tournesol did not exaggerate; the ground was strewn with corpses. The fiercest part of the conflict had happened here, but after the English had badly beaten the French and hurled them across the Esla, they abandoned the battle-field and none were visible but the dead.

"Not one to bar our crossing, lieutenant. This is the time to fall the comrades over."

Letting go his horse, which had no desire to stray, Tournesol planted himself on the extreme edge of the bank, made a speaking-trumpet of his hands held together and set to bellowing with all the strength of his lungs.

"There is a ford, and the right bank is not guarded!"

No doubt the summons was lost in the noise of the river and the rumbling of the storm, for no one made answer.

"I foresaw this," grumbled Tournesol, "and the marshal might have thought of it, too. But the fault is done and the only

means of repairing it is to go over and tell them the story—all the more because they cannot pull through without me. Now that I know the way, I can serve as guide for the crossing."

"What! do you purpose crossing the river again where we both nearly went under?"

"Again, and again, since I shall come back at the head of the column. You may do some fine talking, lieutenant, but you cannot act like me from your horse being gone, and you have had enough of a bath! if you try it again you will catch a cold. But I have a tough hide and go through water as I do through fire. Mark time to warm yourself until I fetch over the friends. The marshal will gladly give you a horse till the Emperor's arrival and your orderlies' bringing up the extra mounts. Not one of them equals the bay Arab—but they will carry you all the same."

Upon this consoling peroration, he got into the saddle and headed for the river. Though it went against Fontenay's grain to let him go, he was obliged to do it for want of any objections to the brave soldier's reasons for renewing the perilous passage alone. The younger man felt wholly out of condition to undertake swimming it again; before ten strokes he would have gone to the bottom, so exhausted was he. It would be useless throwing away his life. But on the other hand, at any price it was imperative to inform the marshal that the right bank was not occupied by the enemy, or an operation of war would miscarry on which the Emperor placed much importance. Without news from the staff-officer, the general would conclude that he had fallen into English hands and await reinforcement before engaging against superior forces in an affair likely to turn out as a defeat, like the morning's one.

Paul had nothing to reproach himself for. It was not until after almost mortal wrestling that he let the heroic Tournesol go. He was not left on a bed of roses. Indeed, soaked from head to foot, Paul shivered in the chilly night while drawing his cloak tightly around him as a poor protection against the blast, and stamping to try to warm himself without success.

At first he tried to catch Tournesol cleaving the Esla's torrentuous tide, but the gloom was so thick that he soon lost sight of him. He drew back from the edge to trace a ring in which he tramped round and round in the hope of restoring the circulation of congealed blood. A lugubrious course, as it lay among heaps of the dead. He had to make circuits to avoid treading on them and in spite of the care he took, often tumbled over a corpse stretched on the ensanguined ground.

It was war beheld again in its most sinister aspect, and the field of carnage sickened his heart.

How many obscure heroes had fallen here, the victims of military duty, far from their native land, and some for a cause not their own: these Mamelukes, for example, who had attached themselves to Napoleon Bonaparte's fortunes and followed him into Spain, as Caesar's legions followed him of old into the confines of the Roman Empire. The simile is a little strained, and, to tell the truth, did not present itself to the American's mind, having no time to carry his classic studies very far; but he felt keenly how little a sub-lieutenant's life weighed in this giant's struggle between three nations.

No cowardly thought mingled with the bitterness of his reflections, and, shaking off the ideas besieging him he resumed consideration of the dangers threatening him on the bank where he stood alone.

What would become of him if the marshal did not think proper to attempt the crossing, and more than that, if Tournesol did not come back? He ran great risk of dying from cold and hunger, or attack from the camp-followers who roamed through the night to strip the dead—human hyenas of the battle-field with whom Spain was infested in this atrocious strife.

The incident marking the close of his passing over the Esla, returned to memory. Who was the man whose perfidious advice had nearly cost him his life? No doubt a Frenchman, as he had hailed them in their language, and, certainly, a traitor who had endeavored to lead them to their loss by changing their course.

Why had he disappeared as they set foot on the bank where he stood? was he hiding to rush, in an unguarded moment, upon the isolated officer? If the villain took advantage of the murkiness to attack him, what resistance could Fontenay oppose—exhausted, almost weaponless as his pistols had remained in the holsters and would be useless from the priming being wet, if he had them.

His saber hung from his belt, but it was not a very dreadful weapon when wielded by his now frozen arm; he had barely the strength to draw it from the scabbard. In case of having to defend himself Paul could only trust to the arrival of the vanguard, guided by the intrepid Tournesol, who would not require goading to run to his rescue. As yet there was no stir on the left bank, whence he expected comfort; at least, he heard no sound indicating a forward move of the marshal's cavalry. Nothing save the dull rushing of the river and the howling of the wind blowing off the other shore, without bringing that clanking of the swords against the stirrups which betrays from afar the march of a body of cavalry.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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