

A GALLIC VICTORY

[1871]

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I was in the days of the great war, now half-forgotten. No, not forgotten. Unknown to the young: nearer than yesternight to the old.

I am of the old. I remember the war as the fiercest fever of my youth. We were neutral, squeezed between the two contending parties. My foreign cousins fought on both sides.

One of these, a few months afterward, related the following episode. He was bronzed: he was scarred: he was glorious! I sat at his feet. I wonder, can I still catch, in this revival, some reminiscence of the thrill in his voice, of the flash in his eye?

The thing happened when the acknowledged fighting was over. There was peace. If the stupid vanquished had only accepted it. The treaty of Frankfort had been signed. The ceded provinces were annexed. The army of occupation gathered toward the new eastern frontier, waiting for the war-indemnity to be paid. There should, perhaps, have been silence, the silence of resignation or, at worst, of despair. But there was not. All through the yet occupied zone about the lost provinces was a murmur of murderous hate.

And a tumult of scarce subsiding strife. As the waves eddy wearily and angrily down, under foam and wreckage, when the storm is spent. The clouds, exhausted, drooping, with no more strength to beat the breakers, disentangle their gloom round a chilly returning sun.

The smitten and bedraggled of the tempest, sullenly staggering to their feet, turned their backs on the watery rays. Hid their faces for shame, from the East, where the orb of peace rose over the glitter of Prussian helmets in the French towns with the new German flags.

"Not peace," they whispered. "War to the end. The sun is blood-red."

They were powerless, these down-trodden of the invasion. They whispered. Over yonder, at Tours, at Bordeaux, their unshackled brethren might yell.

It was at Féry-le-Coultinois, in the very thick of concentrating repression. The victorious armies, rolling back from the humiliated capital, heaped themselves up between Paris and Metz, daily expecting the payment of the first two milliards, as agreed. Féry-le-Coultinois lies in Seine-et-Marne, thirteen miles from Provins, the home of "Provence" roses. The hamlet, embowered in vineyards and gardens, depends largely, as does the townlet, on the culture of blooms for the famous shaving-soap. Like most of these localities within hail of the metropolis, it is, under ordinary circumstances, almost unpleasingly prosperous, living in animal comfort, by bread,—and such good bread, too!—alone.

The "bread alone" includes fragrant sausages, creamy omelets, sparkling wines, as the German soldiers discovered. And in the hour of their coming there was every emotion to be had for the taking which can stir the spiritual life of man. Hate, heroism, love, hope, fear—prayer, hourly, to gods and devils, to help man in whatever he was combining, red-hot, right or wrong.

There were thousands of them everywhere, the "square-heads," the "*biglobes*" (Pickelhauben), the barbarians! They spoke loud: they drank deep: they did little harm. Beyond ruining the country and destroying its inhabitants, internationally, they did little private harm. How could they? Was there not peace? Somebody had signed something last month at Frankfort, permitting the Ogre Bismarck to swallow many hundred thousand French men, women, and little children. He must digest them. And we must pay