

How We Outwitted Napoleon.

TOLD IN 1843.



WHEN I was a junior clerk in the house of Richepin, in Paris, at 1,500 francs a year, the narrowness of my finances allowed me to indulge in no amusement but chess; and, as a constant *habitué* of the Café de la Régence, I had attained a certain degree of force: all my leisure time was spent over the chess-board. In order to conceal the poverty of my appointments, I maintained the most rigid secrecy at the Régence as to who or what I was, and was universally supposed to be living on my means—a mere Paris *flaneur*. Well, I bore my condition cheerfully, practised the most rigid economy as to ways and means, and sat early and late at my desk during business hours; *existing* on the present, *living* for the future; watching the opportunity to better my hard fate by seizing that critical moment (should it present itself) which they say Fortune offers once at least in the life of every man.

On the 5th of March, in the year 1815, we were all at our posts in the evening, making up the monthly mail for Constantinople. It was late—between eight and nine o'clock. I was rocking on my hard wooden stool, as usual, scribbling away for dear life in company with some nine or ten other clerks, when the door flew open and our chief, Richepin, stood before us, with a face as pale as a pretty woman's when the doctor says her aged husband *will* recover.

Every sound was hushed, every pen stopped scratching. Something important had evidently happened. Richepin spoke, and his voice quivered:—

"Gentlemen," said he, "France is no longer France! The whirlwind has smitten her! The thunder-cloud has burst upon our happy shores! I may be announcing to you the ruin of the house of Richepin and Brothers!"

Ruin and Richepin! The association of terms appeared *too* ridiculous. We thought the governor mad!

"Gentlemen," resumed the mighty Israelite, "hear me out. Napoleon Buonaparte has left Elba, has landed in France; the army join him, and his eagles are flying to Paris with lightning speed. Louis XVIII. will be off for Flanders in a few days, as fast as his fat will let him. The Ministers are drawing up a bombastic proclamation to

issue to-morrow to the people, but I foresee their downfall is assured. The folly of the Bourbons again breaks the peace of Europe, and France is about to plunge anew into a thirty years' war!"

"Hurrah!" shouted two or three clerks, staunch Buonapartists.

"Forgive me, my dear sir," cried one of them to Richepin, "but this cannot touch the house. This alarm is surely premature. The Emperor must have money. He will want a loan. We shall have the Crown jewels, worth fourteen millions of gold in—"

"Sir," replied Richepin, sternly, "sir, you are a fool! The Emperor must have money instantly—true enough, too true! But Louis is even now packing up the crown jewels, and all his private treasure of gold and diamonds to boot. The Emperor will tender me his note of hand—bah! and the Congress of Vienna still sitting! and the armies of the allies not disbanded! and the Russians in Germany! and the Cossacks of the Don in sunny Europe, like vultures eager to whet their filthy beaks in the dearest blood of France! Sir, you talk like a child. Do you remember that in our vaults lie five millions of golden napoleons? And, doubtless, Talleyrand and Fouché will try to make their peace with Buonaparte, by advising that this sum should be seized as a forced loan. Yes," continued Richepin, "five millions in gold, one hundred millions of francs! My brain reels—the house must go! Nothing but a miracle can save us. Five millions!"

"But," asked the Imperialist clerk, "can we not hide the gold?"

"Where can we hide it," impetuously interrupted Richepin, "that its place of concealment will not be known? I must give up this vast sum, or, perhaps, be tried by court-martial and shot for petty treason. Remember the active part I have taken in arranging the affairs of these Bourbons. A hundred millions! Oh, brother! my dear brother! Of all men on earth, you alone could save me by your counsel; and I am in Paris and you are in London."

"The Emperor cannot be here yet: why not send to your brother?" asked the Imperialist.

"The barriers are closed, and guarded by the artillery with loaded guns. I applied myself for a passport and was refused. The

gratitude of Kings! None may pass but one courier for each Ambassador. The messenger of the English Embassy this moment leaves with despatches for the Court of St. James. He is a German, named Schmidt. I have spoken with him and have offered him £500 to bear a letter to my brother, and the man refuses. May he break his neck on the road! The moment he communicates his news in London, the British funds fall 10 per cent., as they will do here to-morrow morning, and in both cities we hold consols to an immense amount. Five millions of napoleons in our cellars! Oh, my brother, why cannot the spirit of our father arise and stand before thee in London ere the arrival of this courier?"

The climax had arrived. Richepin's heart was full. He sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands. A deep silence prevailed through the office.

Now, whatever was the feeling of my fellow-clerks, I cannot convey the slightest idea of the revolution which had sprung up in my breast during the foregoing conversation. I had not spoken, but eagerly watched and devoured every word, every look, of the several speakers. Never was there more burning genius of inspiration for an enterprising man than an income limited to 1,500 francs! Anyhow, I jumped up, kicked my wooden stool away, and presented myself before Richepin.

"If being in London three hours before the courier may advantage the house," cried I, "here do I undertake the task. Give me some token of credence to hand your brother, sir, gold for my expenses on the road, and trust to me!"

"What mean you? Are you mad?" said Richepin, surprised, while my fellow-clerks began to mutter at my pretensions.

"I have my plan," returned I. "Oh, do but trust me. I am acquainted with this courier—with Schmidt. I have a hold on him—a certain hold, believe me. Though I am but the junior here, I will travel with Schmidt, aye, in his very carriage, and will win the race, though I should be guillotined afterwards for strangling him by the way. Time flies, sir—trust me—say I may go."

Richepin hesitated.

"Is he trustworthy?" asked he of the head clerk, with whom I was

luckily a favourite, because I was in the habit of mending his pens and taking his children bon-bons on New Year's Day.

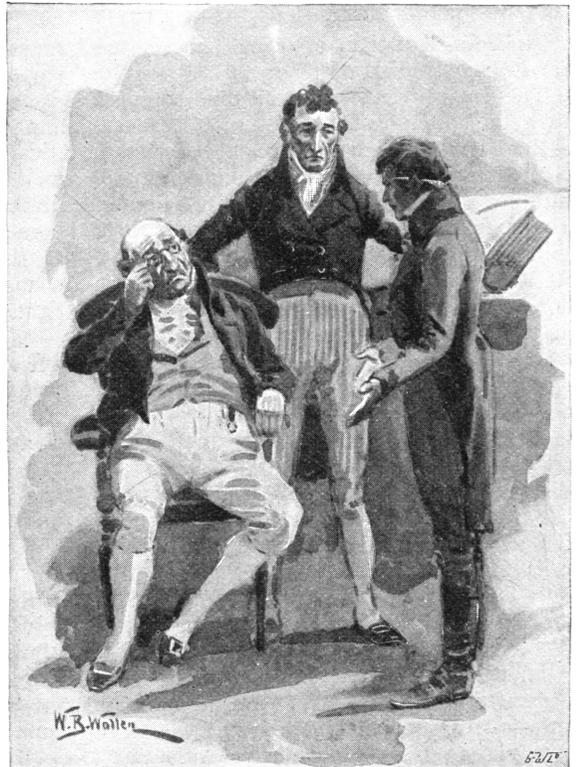
"He is steady as time," answered the head clerk. "I would trust him with my children—and wife too!"

There was little time for parley. Great men decide quickly. The truth was, I presented myself as a *pis-aller*—a sort of forlorn hope. Even if I went over to the enemy, nothing could be lost, matters being evidently at their worst, and the critical moment all but on the wane. Richepin resolved to trust me. All was the work of a few seconds of time. He took from his finger the carbuncle I now wear and placed it in my hand.

"Show the ring to my brother," said he; "he knows it well; and, stay—quick—give me ink."

Snatching up a slip of paper, our chief wrote in the Hebrew character, "Believe the bearer!"

"Put that in his hands. What your plan is, I know not. You have *carte blanche*. Explain all to my brother. He is the genius of the family. The fortunes of the house of Richepin are this day in your keeping. The



"TIME FLIES, SIR—SAY I MAY GO."

courier starts at the stroke of ten. It wants twelve minutes!"

"He goes, of course, from the house of the Embassy?" I asked, clapping on my hat, snatching a cloak from the wall, and pocketing a heavy bag of gold all in a breath.

"He does—he does—away with you—away!" and Richepin literally pushed me out of the door, amid the varied exclamations of the clerks. I took the steep staircase at half-a-dozen bounds, and in half-a-dozen more found myself in the Place du Palais Royal.

Here I must explain the nature of the relations that existed between me and Schmidt. We were both frequenters of the Café de la Régence. Schmidt was the slowest chess-player I have ever seen. He has been known to sit for three-quarters of an hour over a move, his head covered in his hands. We had mostly singled out each other as antagonists because prettily evenly matched. Schmidt loved me, as I knew, because it was not every man who would play with him. Nobody but a chess-player can appreciate the strong tie of brotherhood which links its amateurs. I had managed to do many little favours for Schmidt in other matters, and so he regarded me as more than a friend. He no more suspected me of being a banker's clerk than of being King of the Sandwich Islands.

The English Embassy at this time occupied an hotel adjoining the Café de la Régence, at the door of which latter temple of fame I planted myself in a careless-looking attitude, with my pulse beating like a sledge-hammer. The night was dark above, but bright below, shining forth in all the glory of lamplight. At the *porte-cochère* of the British envoy's hotel stood a light travelling-carriage. I was in the nick of time. Schmidt was ready; five horses were being caparisoned for the journey. I went up to the carriage and addressed my friend:—

"How's this, Schmidt? No chess to-night? I've been looking for you in the Régence!"

"Chess! Have you not heard the news? It's no secret. Buonaparte has landed from Elba on the coast of France. Paris will ring with the tidings in an hour or two. I'm off this moment for London with despatches."

"I don't envy you the journey!" said I. "What a bore, shut up in that machine all night; to be sure, you can read all the way, and—yes, you can study our new gambit!"

"What a pity you can't go with me!" responded Schmidt, in the pride of five

horses and a carriage all to himself; "we'd play chess all the way!"

My heart leaped to my mouth. The trout was gorging the bait. Schmidt had drawn the marked card!

"Don't invite me twice!" said I, laughing, "for I am in a very lazy humour, and have no one earthly thing to do in Paris for the next few days." This was true enough.

"Come along, then, my dear fellow!" replied Schmidt; "make the jest earnest. I've a famous night-lamp, and am in no humour to sleep. I must drop you on the frontiers, because I dare not let the authorities of Calais or Boulogne see that I have a companion, lest I should be suspected of stock-jobbing, but I'll pick you up on my return. Now, are the horses ready, there?"

"Do you really mean what you say, Schmidt?"

"Indeed, I do."

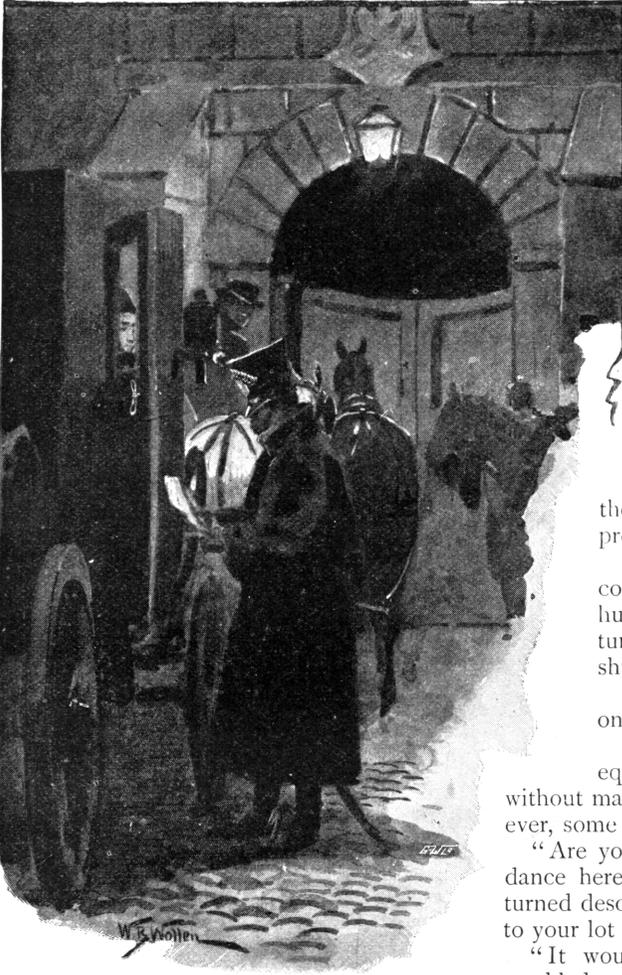
"Then I'll tell you what," said I, "I'm your man, and famous fun we'll have."

I darted into the café, snatched up the first chess-board and men that came to hand, and stood in a moment again by the side of my friend. The postillions were in their saddles. In we leaped, bang went the door, round rolled the wheels, and away bounded our light calash at the rate of ten French miles an hour. For a moment we were stopped at the barrier of St. Denis. The gates were closed, and a heavy force of horse and foot drawn up by the portals. My friend's passport was strictly examined, and we learned that no other carriage could pass that night, the order being special. I may here say that, throughout the route, thanks to the telegraph, our horses were always changed at the various post-houses with lightning speed.

"Good-night, gentlemen!" cried the officer on guard, and away we went. Schmidt, poor fellow, was setting up the chess-men. By-the-bye, if ever you play chess in a carriage, and cannot make the men stand, wet the board with a little *vin de Grave*, as we did, and you'll find no difficulty.

We played chess all night, talked, laughed, and enjoyed ourselves. We supped *en route* in the carriage, and, as my courteous antagonist was busily discussing a bottle of old Markbrunner, I could but sigh that time had been denied me to put a vial of laudanum in my pocket. Schmidt should have slept so soundly!

Time wore on. "Shall I pitch him out by main force?" I reflected. "Too hazardous.



"MY FRIEND'S PASSPORT WAS STRICTLY EXAMINED."

I must take care not to find my way into that dirty old gaol at Calais. Shall I tell Schmidt the whole truth, and throw myself on his friendship? No; I should be checked and checkmated." We have rattled through Abbeville: we are even passing Montreuil, and I am just where I was. But, stop! a thought lights up my brain. Will it do?

Luckily, my adversary was the slowest of all slow players. This gave me time to ruminate, and my scheme, such as it was, became at length matured. By this time we had reached that little village, I forget the name of the dog-hole, seven miles on the Paris side of Boulogne. It was half-past four in the afternoon, and we had eaten nothing since our scanty breakfast at eight in the morning. I easily prevailed on Schmidt to alight at the little inn of the village, which

was also the post-house, for a quarter of an hour to snatch a hot dinner—which I assured him was far better than his dining at Boulogne and crossing on a full stomach—so, chess-board in hand, Schmidt went into a dark, back little room to study his coming move while dinner was dishing. I rushed outside and demanded—what think you? A blacksmith! I was gazing on our carriage when the man stood before me. No one was within hearing.

"What a curious thing is a carriage like this, friend!" said I, musingly. "Now, what would follow were that large screw there taken out? Answer me promptly."

"What would follow? Why, the coach would go on very well for a few hundred yards, and then would overturn with a crash, and smash all to shivers."

"Hum!" said I. "And what if only that tiny screw were drawn?"

"The body of the vehicle would equally fall upon the hind axle, but without material consequences, causing, however, some considerable delay."

"Are you the blacksmith always in attendance here? I mean, if this carriage overturned descending yonder hill, would it fall to your lot to right it?"

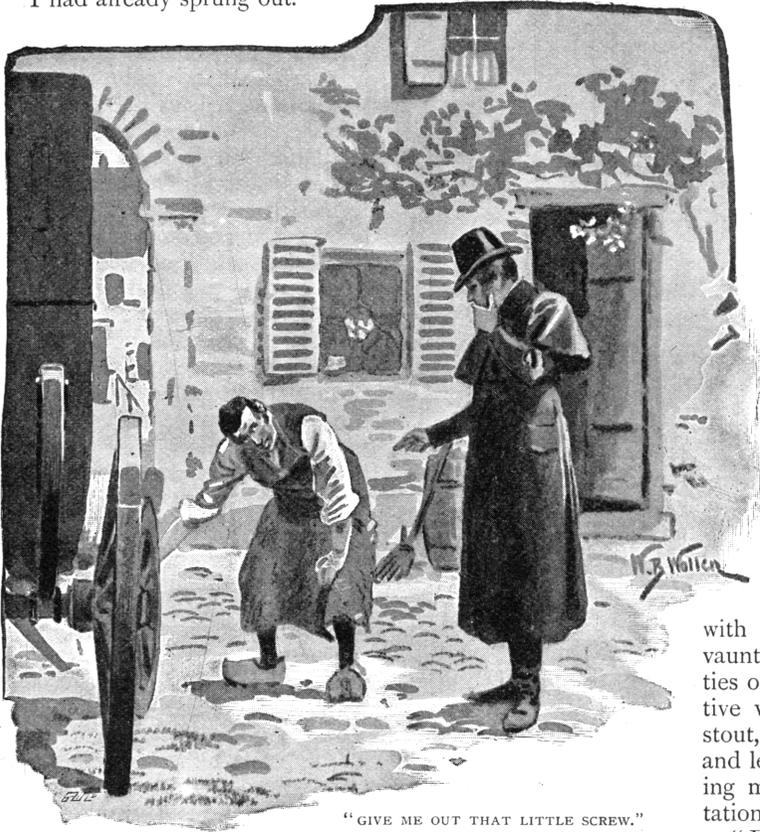
"It would!" and the Frenchman's eye sparkled with intelligence. I could have hugged the swarthy man to my bosom. I adore a blacksmith!

"Here are ten napoleons. Give me out that little screw, I have a fancy for it." And the screw was in my hand. "I *hope* no accident will happen," I continued; "but, should the carriage overturn, have it brought back here to repair. And take a couple of hours to finish the job in, that you may be sure the work is done properly, you know. And remember that a man who earns ten napoleons so lightly has two ears, but only one tongue."

"I understand," grinned Vulcan; "*soyez tranquille!*"

I pocketed the precious screw, and rushed in to dinner while the horses were putting to. I intend that screw to go down in my family as a heirloom. We left the inn at full gallop. A very small quantity of a pace like ours proved a dose. The postillions pulled up.

"We are overset!" I cried.
 "God forbid!" said Schmidt. "What's to be done?"
 I had already sprung out.



"GIVE ME OUT THAT LITTLE SCREW."

"There seems to be little the matter, Schmidt. Back the carriage to the inn, and all will be right in a twinkling."

My friend the blacksmith assured us he would repair all damage directly; and, while he began to hammer away, we philosophers coolly resumed our chess in the inn-parlour. The position of the game was now highly critical both for Richepin and Napoleon, and also for me and Schmidt. I felt my antagonist must occupy twenty heavenly minutes over his coming move. I left the room and darted to the stable. A groom was busy at his work.

"Have you a saddle-horse ready for the road? I am sent on in advance. Tell the landlord my friend within settles all. Give me the bridle."

I mounted and galloped off like the wind.

"Boulogne! Boulogne!" cried I, aloud, as I raced through the village in a state of ungovernable excitement. In a few minutes more I had alighted at the water-side. If that

horse yet lives, be sure he recollects me. The soldiers shouted behind for my passport. I threw them some gold, which they were

vulgar enough to pick up from the beach. I cast my eyes around. It was six o'clock and the scene was deeply interesting. The breeze had set in well from the west. The evening was cold but bright; the air slightly frosty. It was known already that Napoleon had escaped from his prison-house, and was marching on Paris; and the English residents were flying from France like sheep before the wolf. I was hailed in a moment by several bronzed fishermen,

with offers of service and vaunts of the superior qualities of their several respective vessels. I selected a stout, trim-looking boat, and leaped on board, leaving my horse to his meditations.

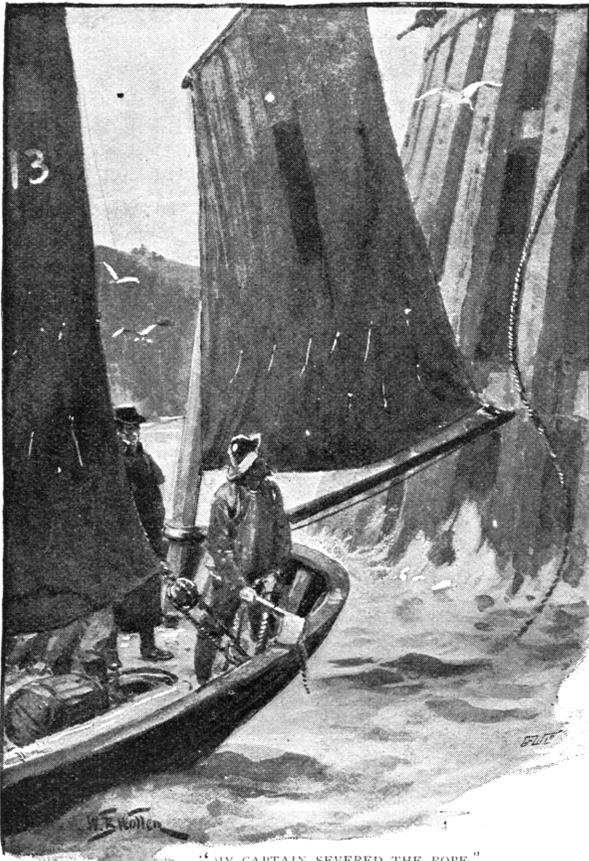
"For Dover!" cried I to the master of the boat. "My pay is five guineas a man; I must have eight men on board in case it comes on to blow. Be smart, fellows, and away!"

The men were as active as eels. The police were about to detain me with some infernal jargon about my passport again.

"Cut off," I cried, eagerly.

My captain (if I may so term a Breton sailor, half-smuggler, half-fisherman) severed the rope which held us to the pier-head, our heavy brown sails were flung to the wind, and we were sweeping across the waters. We dashed under the bows of a large English-built packet, straining at her lashings like mad. The captain was reading the very stones and windows of the town impatiently through a glass. The mob of idle spectators were so busily engaged watching his proceedings, I was hardly noticed.

"A nice craft, that, sir," said one of our men to me; "waiting for the English courier. If he don't make haste she'll lose her tide."



"MY CAPTAIN SEVERED THE ROPE."

We went ahead. Every bit of canvas we could stretch was spread, and the billows washed our deck from stem to stern. The little vessel answered gloriously to the call. At one moment I verily thought we should have been swamped. My fellows, themselves, hesitated, and seemed inclined to take in sail.

"Carry on," cried our captain.

A little more washing and we were in comparatively smooth water, under the chalk cliffs of Albion. By half-past nine I had left Dover, and was tearing along the London road behind four fleet horses. Canterbury and Rochester were won and lost. I took the direction of London, and my carriage pulled up before the gates of Richepin's villa before five o'clock in the morning. I had come from Paris in thirty hours.

The inmates must have thought I had come to take the mansion by storm, so powerful were my appeals to the great bell, as I stood at the gates in the early morning. In five minutes more I found myself by the conjugal bed of Richepin. God only knows how I got there.

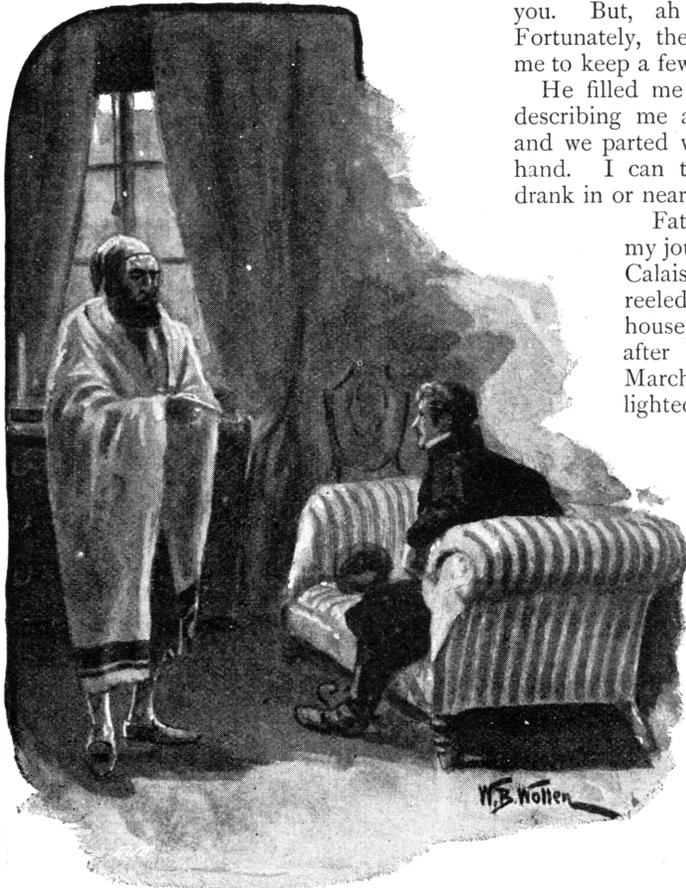
By the time Richepin was fully wakened up, I handed in my credentials. I rapidly explained the circumstances of the case, and minutely detailed the situation of our Paris house. What words I used I cannot remember. Indeed, I spoke as in a state of delirium. I had not slept for two days and nights, and my brain began to reel for want of rest.

"Go into my dressing-room there," said Richepin, with the most imperturbable *sang froid*. "Do me the favour to open the shutters, and in three minutes I shall be with you."

I retired mechanically. A heavy load seemed removed already from my chest. In every tone of the great man's voice there was something more than authority: there was genius, talent, power. I threw myself upon a sofa. Richepin joined me. He wore a scarlet night-cap, and, enveloped in the blanket he had hastily dragged off the bed, looked, with his grisly beard and massive throat, like an Indian chief about to give the war-whoop. Startled abruptly from his sleep, informed that the whole fortunes of his house were trem-

bling in the balance, that name and fame were being rent asunder, he was still Richepin.

"Return to France," said he, "to my brother with all speed. Spare no exertion to be at Paris some little time before Napoleon enters. Your services in this affair will not be forgotten by our house. To thank you here were waste of time. Now mark my words: The Napoleon dynasty will not last long. The army will declare in his favour, but the nation, torn by war, will not stand by him. The problem to be solved is this: To keep the gold out of his hands, and yet to remain friends with him. And thus would I have my brother proceed. We have undue bills to the amount of millions and millions flying about Paris. Every holder of a note of hand will be glad to allow 10 per cent. discount for gold. Any premium will be given for gold to hoard during the crisis. Seek out the holders of our paper, call it all in, and pay it off in gold. Call in all. Lock your paper in your desk, and the ship will ride out the storm. The bills will be useless to Napoleon; gold alone will meet his views.



"SEEK OUT THE HOLDERS OF OUR PAPER."

Meanwhile, bid my brother be foremost at the Tuileries' *levées*, and profuse in his assurances of devotion to the Emperor, with regret that he has no gold. And now away with you, sir, on the wings of the winds; but, hold! What is the earliest hour at which the courier of the English Embassy can be at the Foreign Office here?"

"I should say, eight or nine."

"Ha!" said Richepin; "then stop a moment."

Seating himself, Richepin hastily wrote and sealed a short note, addressed to Lord C—.

"Leave London by Westminster, and hand in this note as you pass Downing Street (of course, you know London), to be delivered as early as possible. Return by Calais. The Boulonnois might lay hold of

you. But, ah! you have no passport! Fortunately, the English Government allow me to keep a few blanks for emergencies."

He filled me up a passport ready signed, describing me as on "a special mission"; and we parted with a cordial squeeze of the hand. I can truly say, I neither ate nor drank in or near the British Metropolis.

Fate was constant throughout my journey. I reached Dover and Calais without an accident, and reeled into our Paris counting-house, more dead than alive, soon after noon on the 8th day of March. I need not say how delighted was our French Richepin at the counsel I brought. All hands went immediately to work to carry out the scheme. As for me, I went to bed. The success of the house of Richepin was complete: all our gold was paid away; barely a single twenty-franc piece remained in our treasure-vaults. We stood upon our bills and waited the event.

Buonaparte had landed in France on March 1st; on the 21st of March the Emperor had a grand *levée* at the Palace of the Tuileries, to which our chief went, though with a trembling heart. Buonaparte looked at him from head to foot, with anything but a pleasant expression of countenance, and turned on his heel with this significant phrase: "I see there are two Napoleons in Europe."

The Emperor took no further notice of the matter, but subsequently alluded to it at St. Helena, in his conversation with Las Casas. He then laughed at the trick, and owned we had completely foiled him. A Napoleon to confess himself beaten is twice vanquished.

My friend, Schmidt the heavy, never can have forgotten the last game of chess we played together. We have never seen each other since I left him studying how to parry the impending checkmate; should we ever meet, I shall be happy to finish the game.