

The Cork Leg

by William E. Burton

“I have told my story, frank and free,
And now I’m singing its L. E. G.”

Song of the Cork Leg.

[The following little sketch is NOT translated from the French, although, from the nature of its construction, such an origin might have been surmised. The principal incident was related to me in France, and, I believe, actually occurred during some portion of the French Revolution, but the location of time and place is my own arrangement.]

ABOUT a quarter of a mile from the main street of the village of St. Florent, near Ancenis, in the old French province of Poictou, now forming the department of La Vendee, stands an antiquated chateau, or rather did stand in the fall of the year 1816, which the reader will please to notice as the date of this little tale. The neighborhood of the chateau was consecrated ground. In that quiet and rural spot commenced the sanguinary war of La Vendee, one of the most remarkable episodes in French history, unequalled in the ferocity of its character and termination. On the 10th of March, 1793, the peasantry were assembled on the lawn of the chateau by sound of drum, and directed by the officer of a detachment of gendarmerie to draw lots for their chances of escaping the hateful conscription, levied to fill the armies of the revolutionary convention. The peasantry refused to acknowledge the power of the distant rebels, and when the gendarmes endeavored to force them to the enrolment, they rushed upon the mercenaries, and deprived them of their weapons. A wagoner, named Cathelineau, headed the insurgent Vendeans, who scarcely numbered a hundred individuals, and drove the conventional force not only from the village of St. Florent, but from several of the military posts in the neighborhood. The success of the first operations induced similar risings in other parts of the district. Gaston, a wig maker, and a gamekeeper named Stofflet, raised hands of peasantry which, at first, were armed only with knives, pitchforks, and scythes—but successive victories over the republican troops supplied them with arms and ammunition. The heroic Henri de la Rochejaquelein devoted himself to the service of his countrymen, and during the war of La Vendee gained sixteen victories in the short space of ten months, finishing his brief but glorious career at the early age of twenty-two. He was killed while fighting in single combat with one of the soldiers of the republic.

I have recalled these little matters of history to the recollection of the reader for the purpose of assisting his perception of some of the allusions in the following narration. The war had ceased; the emperor was secure in his island jail; and Louis *Désiré* once more rested his gouty leg upon the footstool of the Bourbon’s throne. Hundreds of *émigrés* flocked to their native land; the *ancien régime* shook off the slime of the rabble dynasty, and various devoted servants and friends of *le gros monarque* were rewarded for their fidelity and assistance in what, at one time, was considered an almost hopeless cause.

Luc Bonchretien, for many years previous to the outbreak of the revolution, had been an old smuggler from the neighboring province of Britanny, and commanded a hardy and valiant gang who contrabanded salt across the mountains, and afterwards distinguished themselves in the

Vendean war. The Chouans, as the smugglers were called, from *chat-kuant*, (a screech owl,) the cry of which bird they used as their signal, were of much importance in the bloody struggle, and Luc Bonchretien, finding his business ruined by the disturbed state of the country, devoted the energies of his strong mind to the support of the Bourbon cause; and, although defeated, and at one time sentenced to the guillotine, yet the activity of his band enabled him to escape from the dungeons of the Conciergerie at Paris to the other side of the Rhine, where he dwelt until the restoration of Louis XVIII allowed him to visit his native land with an assurance of perfect safety. During his exile, he had been of considerable service to the allied armies upon more than one occasion; and had scarcely settled himself in his native village before the grateful monarch presented him with the chateau at St. Florent, with the ownership of the adjacent lands.

The Marquis de la Mont Lozère was the owner of the chateau at the time of the commencement of the war of La Vendee, but instead of joining the ranks of the royalists and using his influence in behalf of the Bourbons, he fled to England; and when deprived of his property by the ordonnance of the convention, obtained an humble living in the great cockney city by officiating as dancing master to the little masters and little misses, who were in *statu pupillari* at one of the boarding schools in the vicinity of London.

At the restoration of Louis, he was soon at the foot of the throne, petitioning for the return of his property; but his pusillanimity in the royal cause had stopped the royal ears; his claims to his own were unregarded, and Luc Bonchretien remained the installed possessor. This warm-hearted fellow immediately invited the marquis to occupy a room in the chateau, respectfully signifying also, that a knife and fork would be laid for him as long as he chose to remain a member of the household. It is scarcely worth while to say that the offer was accepted.

Luc Bonchretien had a daughter, the produce of his marriage with a Rhenish maiden immediately after his departure from the vallies of the Loire. Vif Bonchretien possessed her father's good humor, without its boisterous quality. Vif was a beauty, and although well aware of the power of her charms, and like other beauties, much inclined to coquetry, yet she had resigned her heart to the safe keeping of a stalwart sergeant, one Pierre de Faon, who had figured in the armies of Napoleon, and had followed the fortunes of the imperial eagle in many a scene of weal and wo, from the hour of his conscript drill to the fatal rout upon the field of Waterloo. Pierre was born in the department of Landes, and exhibited the Gascon in his appearance; the severity of six severe campaigns had been unable to tame the potency of his swagger, or the completeness of the many defeats in which he had shared, convince him of the fallibility of the fortune of "*mon empereur*." In his devious wanderings from Flanders after the great defeat, being almost afraid to turn towards his native land, he had encountered Vif, with her father and a party of friends, who, one fine summer's evening, were dancing merrily on the table land of a bluff that overlooked the glorious Rhine, and celebrating the defeat of Pierre's beloved chief. The sparkling beauty of the little girl struck upon the bachelor heart of the wayworn soldier, and he resolved to obtain an introduction; he immediately effected his object, although Vif did not, like other heroines, swoon at the sight of his haggard face and bushy whiskers, nor fall opportunely into the river to allow him the chance of fishing her out—nor did she roll down a precipitous cliff—nor mount a runaway horse—nor in any other way afford him the slightest opportunity of exhibiting his chivalry. Pierre, to say the truth, had seen too much of the world to expect that any of these stale novel incidents would happen to oblige him, therefore he marched boldly into the middle of the

party, and doffing his damaged hat with the ready grace of a Frenchman, complimented the gentlemen on the beauty of the ladies, and congratulated the ladies on the fitting beauty of the evening. He addressed Bonchretien as the ostensible head of the party, and, detecting the remains of the old *militaire* in the bearing of the *ci-devant Chouan*, claimed him as a *bon camarade*, and, after detailing the extent of his lengthy march, requested shelter for the night. Pierre's behavior was undoubtedly a little impudent, but he could not afford to be modest; and although his ragged regimentals and travel-worn appearance were not in his favor, yet he was, or had been, an officer in the imperial army, and his Gascon spirit never allowed him to suspect his own inferiority; therefore, he advanced to the group with the best face that he could put upon the matter, which is not saying much when it is remembered that he had not been shaved for a fortnight, and that he had sold his shirt at Juliers for the means of obtaining a meal. In ten minutes Sergeant Pierre de Faon, after "pouring huge draughts of Rhenish down," and swallowing a handful of *gateaux de farine d'avoine* and a large bunch of grapes, which refection the Frenchman preferred to the fleshy edibles that graced the board, was dancing cheerily in the midst of the girls, with a compliment to one, a joke for another, a kiss for a third, and a smile for all. In ten minutes more, he was Vif's accepted partner; and she confessed that, although the legs of his military pantaloons were fringed with rags, and his boots were not in perfect dancing order, inasmuch that his right hand great toe would peep out every now and then to see what had caused this sudden jollification, yet monsieur the stranger was evidently a gentleman of boundless wit, elegant manners, and delightful agility in the dance.

Pierre found his quarters very agreeable, and suffered the next day, and the next, to elapse without indulging in the idea of leaving the house of the hospitable Luc; who, while he laughed at the impudence of the sergeant, pitied his destitution, and eventually offered him the run of the house till the family went to *belle France*, an event which was to happen in the course of a few days. Pierre accompanied the Bonchretiens in their transit; and having, by his vivacious industry, made himself almost necessary to the father, whose ways and habits he had studied with true cosmopolitan skill, he was invited to share the comforts of the old chateau at St. Florent. The soldier, with commendable delicacy, pretended a loathness of intrusion, when Mademoiselle Vif gave him a reproachful glance from her large black eyes, and the bashful sergeant surrendered at discretion.

Pierre, when well dressed, with his whiskers reduced to the peace establishment, was, in reality, a good-looking fellow; and Bonchretien looked without regret at the inevitable result of the soldier's admission into his family. When the old Chouan became rich, he gave up his habits of business, and rejoiced in the acquisition of an active son-in-law, who would be able to manage the estate, and regulate his household; the sergeant, therefore, at the opening of this tale, may be considered as the intended husband of the pretty Vif.

The chateau had another inmate—a person of some importance to the reader, and of absolute necessity to the writer. He was the owner of the cork leg. In the early passages of the Vendean outbreak, Jacques Cloporte, a gentleman of property in the neighborhood, considerably distinguished himself in the cause of the royalists, and devoted his interests to their welfare. He joined the forces under Rochejaquelein, and after that hero's death, he joined the *émigrés* who had landed on the peninsula of Quiberon, and in the fatal *soutir* from Fort Penthièvre, where count d'Herville fell, Cloporte lost his right leg. Several hordes of Chouans, with their families,

had sought the protection of the fort, and our friend Bonchretien was by the side of Cloporte when the latter was shot down. The Chouan carried the wounded man back to the fort, notwithstanding the defeat of his party and the enemy's hot pursuit. When the occupiers of Quiberon were compelled to surrender to the generalship of the valiant Hoche, the Chouan leader was forwarded to Paris as a prisoner of importance, but he soon contrived to escape from the sentenced guillotine by the agency of his band. Cloporte, who, from the severity of his wound, was not expected to live, was suffered to remain an inmate of a small farmhouse in the immediate vicinity of the battlefield; but the whole of his property was declared confiscated. When he arose from his bed of sickness, he knew that he was unsafe in the west, where his family's name was proscribed and his life denounced. He succeeded in reaching the shores of England, where, during the war, he existed upon a small annuity allowed him by a relation upon the borders of Flanders. Out of this slender pittance he continued to save sufficient for the purchase of a handsome cork leg, in place of the wooden stump he had been compelled to wear. Thanks to the skill of the artist, the artificial limb was so perfectly formed, and naturally joined just below the knee, that when Cloporte was dressed in his best kersey smalls and black silk hose, it was barely possible to tell which was the lame limb. The hitch, or jerk in his gait, still continued. The cork leg could not remove his lameness, although it mended his appearance. When the final restoration of the Bourbons took place, Cloporte journeyed to Paris, and busied himself in endeavoring to obtain a restoration of his lands, but in vain. Vexed and irritated at his want of success, he went, one evening into a *café*, and contrived to pick a quarrel with a *vieux moustache* who sat in the adjoining box. A recourse to arms was the result; the veteran proposed to settle the difference with the sword, but Cloporte evidenced his cork leg as a proof of inability, and was generously allowed to name his weapons. Pistols were procured, seconds appointed, and the party proceeded to the Bois de Boulogne. At the first fire, Cloporte shot his adversary through the body. The old soldier fell, but raising himself up, he applied a handkerchief to the wound, and claimed his shot. The seconds were compelled to accede. He was placed sitting on the ground; he held out his left arm at a small distance from his chest as a rest for the barrel of his pistol, which he held in his right hand. After a long and earnest gaze, during which the blood streamed down his body and dribbled over his white pantaloons, he fired; but his aim had been affected by the coming glaziness of his eye and the weakness of his body—as he fired, he gazed at the effects of his shot, and fell backwards upon the grass. The bullet struck Cloporte upon the calf of his cork leg, knocked off a splinter, and damaged the silk stocking. He smiled at the shot, bowed politely to his antagonist's friend, and taking his second's arm, hobbled from the field. The wounded man was carried home, and a surgeon was procured, who, when he saw the nature of the wound, insisted upon the attendance of the police. The gentleman who had officiated as second took the hint, and retired. The police appeared—the wounded man recovered from his swoon, and was questioned respecting the name of his adversary. He gazed wistfully in the face of his interrogator, and exclaiming, with an oath, "I did not hurt him—he has a cork leg!" sunk back again into insensibility, from whence the doctor in vain endeavored to arouse him.

The officer of the gendarmes, perceiving the death of the old soldier to be inevitable, marched off to give the requisite information to his superior. But Cloporte had left the city, ere the necessary steps were taken for his apprehension; he had encountered his *ci-devant* comrade, the Chouan, in his visit to the metropolis, some months before, and rejoiced at his prosperity, anticipating, at that time, a favorable result to his own application. Bonchretien gave a hearty invite to Cloporte, and made him promise to spend the next year at the chateau, let matters turn

as they might. Towards Vendee, therefore, did Cloporte bend his way; and in the hospitable reception of his friend, forgot for a while the failure of his schemes, and the death of his antagonist, *le vieux moustache*.

Time went pleasantly at the chateau. The Marquis de la Mont Lozère hovered about the charming Vif with all the gallantry and devotion of a *preux chevalier*; and sergeant Pierre was not jealous, but laughed at the antiquated beau's attentions to his affianced wife. The marquis generally assumed the court costume of the days of Louis the Sixteenth, whom he regarded as the martyred god of his idolatry, and refused to recognise the gouty, fat, imbecile who then filled the throne, as a fitting representative of the royal line. *Louis Sièze* gave him his title. *Louis Dixhuit* refused to reimburse him for the loss of his lands. But the old gentleman led a cheerful, happy life, such only as a Frenchman of the old school knows how to lead; he was unable to get rid of the habits of the dancing master, for he was never happy unless he was fiddling and capering, and making all the household follow his example. It was a good sight to look upon him on a Sunday evening, with the lads and lasses of the neighboring villages mustered round him upon the lawn; or, if the weather was not propitious, he assembled them in the hall of the chateau, and with his *violon de poche* poked under his chin, he scraped, and chattered, *chasséed* and *balancéed*, till he was in an ecstacy of delight. He had even taught Luc Bonchretien to dance, and it was worth while to contrast the burly Chouan's demeanor in the mysteries of the quadrille with the ceremonious gliding of the dancing-master marquis, whose antique face, ghost-like figure, and old-fashioned costume reminded one of times gone by.

The bride expectant, Mademoiselle Vif, and her handsome sergeant, were always the leading couple in the evening dance. The marquis had but one trouble in the world; monsieur Cloporte's cork leg prevented the possibility of a participation in the amusement, although the maimed gentleman endeavored to remove the evident ill feeling with which his deficiency was regarded by the marquis, and offered to stand up in one of the fancy figures wherein numbers were required—but the horrible stumping of the unnatural limb, and the stiffness and squareness of its owner's movements tortured the sensitive nerves of the supple marquis, and he was compelled to request, with all possible politeness, that monsieur Cloporte would not so excruciatingly fatigue himself again.

Pierre de Faon, by way of tittillating his nostrils with the well-beloved scent of gunpowder, made horrible war upon the quails and red-legged partridges that frequented the slopes of La Vendee. One day, in his rambles with his gun, he met with something of such an extraordinary nature that he deemed it worth while to transmit a note to Bonchretien; commissioning the carrier, a miller's boy, to ride as if he were fetching the doctor to his dying father. The lad executed his orders faithfully, and placed in the hands of old Luc, a paper, with the following inscription:

“An agent of the Parisian, police is in the village. He is attended by two gendarmes, and is on the search for a person accused of murder. He seems ignorant of the name or character of the delinquent, but describes him as having a cork leg. He has heard of our friend, and will be with you before I can get home. He declares his intention, upon satisfactory proof of the identity of the accused, to convey him to Paris, alive or dead.

Yours,

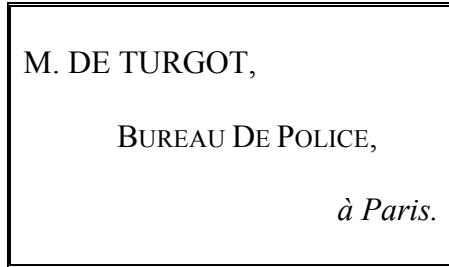
P. de F.”

Cloporte was instantly made acquainted with the contents of this express, and as instantly declared his readiness to release his host from all responsibility, by quietly decamping from the chateau—doubting not but he could obtain a bateau upon the Loire, which would speedily float him far enough from the suspected district. Old Luc swore that he would not part with him, and insisted upon his remaining in the house. “Do you think that an old smuggler has not a trick in reserve for the rascally *commissaire*?” said Bonchretien. “Let him come as soon as he likes: I have something ready for him even now.”

The words were scarcely said when Garon, the old gray-headed servant of Bonchretien, announced a gentleman from Paris, who requested a few minutes conversation with the owner of the chateau. Luc exchanged a significant glance with Cloporte, and told Garon to show the stranger into the little parlor, and to be cautious not to answer any question that might be put, and to come back to him (his master) instantly for farther orders. The servant retired.

“Now, Cloporte, you must face this tiger yourself, while I prepare my household. I will be with you in five minutes. Announce yourself as Bonchretien: if he chooses to take you for me, the owner of the chateau, let him: if he presses you very closely in his questioning, you are my brother, and we all came from Paris together about twelve months since. Get all you can out of him in return. Now, then, down with you. Ah, stop! that cursed hobble will betray you at once; I will tell Garon to send him into this room, and do not you walk, if only across the room, till I come in.”

Luc Bonchretien encountered his servant at the door, and desired him to show the gentleman from Paris into the room upstairs, and then rejoin him in the marquis’s apartment. Garon did as he was desired; and the stranger, advancing to Cloporte, gave him a card, with a polite bow.



“I have the honor to address M. Bonchretien?”— Cloporte bowed.

“To a gentleman who is remarkable for his devotion to the interests of his most sacred majesty, I scarcely need apologise for my present intrusion. A notorious malefactor has escaped from justice, and, I believe, has sought shelter in your chateau.”

“You surprise, me! May I ask his name?”

“You will have the politeness to excuse me in that particular, at least. I have called upon you, M. Bonchretien, in an honorable and friendly way, trusting that I shall receive cooperation and not annoyance. Permit me the *surveillance* of your household for a day, and the arrest shall be managed without bestowing a shadow of disrepute upon the family of the chateau. If I am

opposed, I have force at hand, and the real nature of the affair must become public, which otherwise may be stated as a requisition from government for the presence of your friend at Paris, on business connected with the late war."

"We are in your power, monsieur Turgot," said Cloporte," and can but thank your kindness. May I inquire the charges against the person you suspect?"

"Murder, of the blackest hue. A veteran of the imperial army was shot down in the Bois de Boulogne; Paris swarms with Bonapartean troops, who, under the act of grace, are allowed to return to the duties of citizenship. The death of a member of their body by a friend to the Bourbons, would, if allowed to pass unpunished, be deemed an act of gross partiality, and serve to increase that bitterness of feeling which it is the desire of the executive to repress."

This plausible statement of the police officer had its effect upon the unsuspecting mind of Cloporte, and his countenance betrayed the workings of his thoughts. Wishing to hide his emotion, which he perceived was noticed by the officer, he continued the conversation, and made the matter worse.

"Bois de Boulogne?—soldier?—shot? May he not have been killed in a duel?"

This was a natural question, but he gave it with much blundering timidity, and suspicious hesitation. The officer immediately glanced at the legs of Cloporte with mistrustful eagerness, and said, with much satisfaction, "Ah, ha, M. Bonchretien, I see that you know something of the affair."

At this critical moment, Bonchretien himself walked into the room, talking in a loud tone, and swinging the door wide open with a boisterous rudeness, as if ignorant of the presence of a stranger. He swung his right leg forward with an awkward jerk as he walked, in exact imitation of Cloporte's gait, and gained the centre of the room before he pretended to perceive M. de Turgot, who bounded from his seat with a joyous exclamation when he saw the evident symptoms of the cork leg.

"Hallo, brother," said Bonchretien, "who have you here?"

"M. de Turgot, from Paris. He has visited on—"

"On *confidential* business," said the officer, with marked emphasis. "*You* have but lately quitted Paris, I believe?" continued he, addressing Bonchretien.

"Haven't been there since the first restoration. I see that you are a stranger here, or you would have known that I have not quitted my estate during the past year."

"May I inquire how monsieur became lame?"

"Lost my leg in '95, under Sombreuil, here, on the isthmus. Brother, ring the bell, and order refreshment for your friend."

Cloporte rose from his chair, and hobbled across the room. “*You, too, lame?*” exclaimed Turgot, with astonishment.

“Why not?” said Bonchretien. “Did monsieur never hear of two wounded soldiers in the same family?”

Before the officer could reply, the Marquis de la Mont Lozère entered the apartment but not with his usual dancing-master step, *a la pas avancez*, but with a shuffling of the right leg, and a hitch and wobble in his gait that told well of his powers of imitation. It was Cloporte’s own walk.

“M. de Turgot, allow me to present you to monsieur Cloporte,” said Bonchretien, leading the limping marquis to the side of the officer, whose first inquiry was about the lameness.

“Fell through a sewer grating in the kennel, one foggy morning in London, and broke his tibia,” said the host.

“Sacre Dieu! three cork legs!”

M. de Turgot asked when the last comer had been in Paris, and failing to obtain a satisfactory reply, confessed within himself that he was egregiously mystified. It will be as well to state here how it happened that the police officer was unable to obtain a more satisfactory clue to the killer of the soldier. Cloporte had not given his name at the *café* where the quarrel took place, and as the whole of his applications to the executive had been made by letter, his person and lameness were unknown to the police. Paris was full to overflowing of strangers, not only from all parts of France, but from every place in Europe, Fouché having been compelled to resign the *portfeuille*, the whole of the police system was in a state of disorder; the countless thousands of passports that were required were readily granted, and carelessly *visé*d by the various officers throughout the kingdom.

Cloporte, by the intercession of a friend, obtained a passport under a fictitious name; his cork leg was not included in the description; and he wrapped up his insensible member in a case of flannels, pretending to suffer wofully from the agonies of an excruciating gout. Turgot, who was actuated as much by the hope of gain as the desire of justice, obtained a clue only by inquiring among the drivers of the various diligences and mail-posts. The lame man was followed, and at the end of the first day’s journey, he obtained the remains of the black silk stocking which had cased Cloporte’s cork leg when he received the bullet of the *vieux moustache*. Previous to retiring to bed, Cloporte filled up the wound with putty, having first cut off the damaged stocking, which he replaced with a new cotton one; but, inconsiderately leaving the rags in his bed chamber, he furnished Turgot with a clue that convinced him he was on the route of the man with the cork leg.

When sergeant Pierre called in at the country tavern, he was told of the many inquiries made by a police officer after a lame gentleman who had recently arrived from Paris; Pierre, discovering an old comrade in one of the gendarmes, soon made himself acquainted with the purport of Turgot’s

visit, without coming in personal contact with the officer himself. Bonchretien, with the active shrewdness of the old smuggler, determined to nullify the principal evidence against his friend, and resolved not only to assume lameness himself, but to insist upon every male member of his establishment doing the same. The marquis at first refused; he could not exist without dancing—he could not dance with a lame leg. His pupils could not do without him—he could not do without his leg. He was proud of his legs; they had supported him when his heart, his hands, and his head had failed. Could he now insult them by passing off the dexter as a sinister counterfeit? by palming the real flesh and blood upon a stranger, and that stranger a Parisian, for a base mechanical contrivance of cork? He would die in defence of his patron and his friend; he would challenge Turgot to mortal combat, and shoot the gendarmes, but he would not degrade his understanding by walking with a limp. “Besides,” added he, looking at his leg with a smile, “the attempt would be nugatory; the officer would detect me at a glance: he would know that it was impossible for the hand of man to fashion such a leg as that.”

Bonchretien had contracted a summary method of direction among the Chouans, and his farm business on the Rhine had benefited thereby. He refrained from arguing the point in dispute with the marquis, but told him that if the very next minute he had not a halt in his walk, he should walk without halting a minute longer in the chateau. The marquis had no wish to renew his acquaintance with the short commons of a journeyman dancing master; he prized the fleshpots and wineskins of the jolly Chouan with an intensity of affection that many years of privation only can bestow. He dropped a few decent tears, and fell immediately into the practice of the Cloporte step.

Bonchretien gave a few orders to the trusty Garon, and after acquainting his daughter with the circumstances of the case, telling her to watch for Pierre’s return, and instruct him in the nature of the plot, he entered the presence of the police officer, whither he was soon followed by the marquis, who was introduced to the officer by the name of Cloporte, for the purpose of discovering whether he had any clue to the name of the suspected person.

“Sacre Dieu! three cork legs,” said Turgot.

“Cork legs are rarities at Paris, I presume,” said the Chouan. “Monsieur may see a plentiful variety in La Vendee.”

Garon appeared to announce that refreshments had been prepared in an adjoining room. Bonchretien, Cloporte, and the marquis rose, and with a simultaneous hitch in the same leg, advanced to Turgot, and offered him an arm. As he left the room, in company with the host, he observed that Garon limped with the right leg as he preceded them. This awakened suspicion, because he had not observed any lameness in that servant when he first attended him, and he resolved to watch with redoubled eagerness.

Mademoiselle Vif Bonchretien, from the upper stairs of the second flight, had seen this procession of halting men with inconceivable glee. First came poor Garon, limping most lamely with his right leg; then, the police officer, resting upon her father’s arm, whose excellent limp was accurately imitated by Cloporte and the marquis, and both of them from the same cause, because they could not help it. The idea seemed to please the young lady, for, after two or three

preparatory limps across her room, she determined to join the party below, and give them a specimen of her imitative quality. The very thing that her angry father imagined would ruin his plot, served to dispel the rising suspicions from Turgot's mind; he knew that it was within the bounds of probability that they should have directed every male to assume lameness for the sake of screening the individuality of the real cork leg, but it was ridiculous to suppose that they should insist upon a young and lovely girl pretending to be lame. He therefore looked upon the family at the chateau as an extraordinary specimen of lame coincidences; and although his gallantry prevented him from inquiring how the lady met with her accident, yet he entered into an animated conversation with her, and had just arrived at the conclusion that, despite her lameness, she would make an excellent little wife, and that it would be no bad thing to be son-in-law to Luc Bonchretien, when Pierre passed the window, and Vif, hopping, jumping, and screaming with laughter, left the room.

Turgot looked at Bonchretien for an explanation. "My daughter's affianced," was the reply.

"Is he lame, too?" said the officer, almost involuntarily.

"If he were not, would he wed a cripple?" said the father, in a solemn tone of voice. Turgot was silenced. The door opened, and Pierre, with a facsimile hitch, limped into the room and saluted the company.

Turgot was hardy able to keep his seat. There had been no time for explanation—scarcely sufficient for the greetings of the sweethearts, as the man passed from the outer door. The three old fellows could not be acting, for they were free and unembarrassed, and he had mentioned his business to but one of the Bonchretiens, who had never been out of his sight, and therefore why should they attempt deception when they were ignorant of the purport of his visit? Still he had an undefined idea that the object of his pursuit was in the house, although he was unable to point him out. There was but little difference in the size of the four men, and the silk stocking had been so much mutilated in its removal from the leg, as to afford no clue to the size of the limb. The soldier-like bearing and comparative youth of the sergeant induced the officer to regard him with a suspicious eye.

"You have been shooting, monsieur," said he, as Pierre laid aside his equipments. "Did you ever shoot a man?" added he, with considerable point.

"Some dozens," was the reply, and the sergeant quietly lighted his cigar.

"Is not your lame leg a serious difficulty in the sports of the field?" inquired Turgot.

"Something; but we have a general method here in Vendee, of using guns when lame legs do not succeed."

The policeman quailed, and changed the conversation: "I heard music and dancing when I entered. Is there a professor in the chateau?"

The marquis rose and made a bow. “I have the honor. Ah, what would Louis *Sezieme* say, if he knew that his old and faithful servant the Marquis de la Mont Lozére—”

“Hem!” said Bonchretien, with a loud voice.

“What!” said the officer; “are you the Marquis de la Mont Lozére? I thought your name was Cloporte?”

“I thought so too, but I can’t answer for anything if I am interrupted. What, I say, would Louis *Sezieme* say, if he knew that the Marquis de la Mont Lozére had resigned his ancient hall to the purposes of a dancing school?”

“I beg your pardon, monsieur, for having interrupted you. A cork leg must be a serious evil to a dancing master.”

“So is a gouty head to a nation,” said Pierre, whose republican spirit prompted him to have a fling at the diseased monarch then filling the French throne. “Like our cork legs, we would rather be without the incumbrance, if we knew a way to better ourselves.”

This remark turned the conversation upon the absorbing topic of politics; Turgot for a while forgot the nature of his errand. Garon, with officious eagerness, limped about the room, but, unused to the trouble of acting a part, neglected to keep up his character, and frequently dropped the limp in toto, till reminded by a glance or “hem” from his master, when he would instantly limp again, and frequently jerked the wrong leg; but never did he make a mistake without instantly looking at the police officer, as if he dreaded being discovered in his fault. Turgot observed all this, and determining to solve the enigma of the universal lameness, if possible, proposed a walk before dinner. He was aware that cork legs were as good as flesh when folded under a table or before a fire, but in the open fields, in constant exercise, he expected to make some valuable observations. The proposal was coolly received. Bonchretien begged to be excused, as his daughter was about to write him some answers to letters from Paris of great importance. The marquis, under pretence of whispering to Mademoiselle Vif, followed her out of the room. Cloporte went upstairs for his snuffbox, and sergeant Pierre pulled off his shooting gaiters, and swore that he had walked enough for one day. As he doffed his high quartered shoes, and donned a pair of easy slippers, Turgot observed a very natural working of the muscles of the right foot. Pierre took up his fowling piece, and standing in front of the fireplace, began to clean out the barrels after his day’s sport. Turgot entered into conversation with him, and watching his opportunity, seized the fire tongs as if to replace a fallen stick of wood; pretending to stumble, he rammed the live coal which he held between the nippers of the tongs, against the calf part of the leg which Pierre had declared to be cork. The sergeant jerked away his leg with an awful oath, and applied the ramrod of his gun, with a swinging cut, across the lower sections of the officer, as he was stooping over the fire. Both actions were involuntary with Pierre; he instantly recovered his composure, and although the integument of his calf was severely burnt, he refrained from exhibiting any farther emotion. Turgot rubbed his wounded seat in silence, for some moments; he was aware that he had given the first offence, and the firm determination of the sergeant’s gaze prevented any expression of resentment at the severity of the return. At last, he stammered out, “I thought your right leg was made of cork?”

“Is that any reason why it should be burnt?”

“Do you pretend to have feeling in your wooden limb?”

“Monsieur must know but little of the force of sympathetic affections in the human frame, or he would not have asked the question. I have heard old wooden-legged invalids declare that they felt their fleshy toes ache at the end of their oaken stumps. I myself often feel the shooting of a corn that once tormented my live foot.”

Turgot had heard of these freaks of the imagination, but he thought that Pierre’s sympathy with the scorched cork was rather too lively. He felt satisfied that Pierre and Garon were but shamming lameness, and was more convinced that the inmates of the chateau were playing him some trick. The sound of a fiddle from an adjoining chamber attracted his attention; resolving to follow up his researches, he left the room with a short apology, and quietly opened the door of the next apartment; he wished to surprise the dancers, but his object was frustrated by the superior vigilance of the sergeant. As Turgot approached the dancing room, he heard two loud thumps against the wainscoat of the apartment he had just quitted. When he opened the door, the marquis and the lively Vif were practising the minuet de la cour, with lame agility and limping grace. The imperturbable gravity with which they went through this ridiculous duet of the cork legs, almost induced the officer to believe in the reality of their deprivations, but a loud laugh from the doorway claimed his notice, and soon dispelled all doubt. Bonchretien, who had followed him into the room, was so amused at the oddness of the grotesque evolutions indulged in by the dancers, that he was unable to contain his laughter. The old fellow was altogether much delighted with the comicality of his scheme, and emboldened by success, had been planning a few more jokes for the astonishment of the Parisian policeman. “Come, M. de Turgot,” said he, “the gravity of M. Cloporte always draws a laugh from me; you wished to walk; we have half an hour before dinner—let me take you over my grounds.”

The Chouan and the policeman left the room together, liberating the dancers from the necessity of restraint. The lively Vif threw herself upon a *canapé*, and indulged in a hearty fit of laughter that reached the ears of Turgot as he quitted the hall. Upon crossing the lawn, a sabotier ploughman was limping down the path, shuttling the wooden shoe and his lame leg with pompous deliberation and much dust. Turgot smiled, and, pointing to the peasant, said pleasantly to Bonchretien, “It was scarcely worth while to put him to the trouble.” A donkey started from beneath the garden fence; a heavy clog was fastened to one of his hind legs, and gave him a catch in his gait. “T’were well if every ass who has walked lame today, had as good a reason,” said Turgot. Bonchretien coughed, but continued his limp. Some little ducklings scrambled from a ditch, and with evident lameness waddled across the road. A litter of young pigs hobbled along on three legs each, holding up the dexter leg of pork, and squeaking vilely. “You have given yourself much trouble, M. Bonchretien; do not lame your live stock on my account. Let us understand one another. It is evident that you are aware of my business, and of my limited knowledge of the offender’s person. I know not if yourself, or your brother, or the old dancer be that offender, but I am certain that he is to be found amongst you three. We are alone, and I will speak freely—a *handsome excuse* for my return to Paris, would free you from this trouble, and prevent any future annoyance.”

"We will speak of this tonight," said Bonchretien. "It cannot be lightly settled."

The day wore on. The dinner hour passed, and the lovers limped off to the arbor at the end of the garden. Bonchretien and Cloporte retired to the little back parlor for consultation on Turgot's proposal, which was settled to be deliberately slept on and decided in the morning. Turgot was to be invited to sleep at the chateau; his demands were to be ascertained; but the general limp was to be kept up, in case he should be too exorbitant in his price, or they should otherwise decide not to accede to his proposal. The marquis, after vainly endeavoring to keep up a conversation with the policeman, asked permission to enjoy his usual half hour's siesta, and throwing himself upon the sofa, he covered his face with his handkerchief, and seemed to sleep. Turgot, with a policeman's eye, saw the opportunity, and resolved to seize it; drawing a penknife from his pocket, he stealthily crept to the side of the marquis, and inserted the point in the calf of the supposed cork leg. The marquis, who was not asleep, had seen his motions from beneath the thin texture of the silken veil as he stood in strong relief against the dining room window, illuminated by the setting sun. He guessed the purpose for which the knife was drawn, and resolved not to sacrifice his friend. The blade of the knife was thrust into the flesh, but he moved not a muscle of his leg; and Turgot retired from the sofa believing that he had merely wounded a case of cork enwrapped in silk and flannel. In a few minutes afterwards, he quitted the room, satisfied that the sleeper was the object of his pursuit. The marquis rose from the sofa—a thin streak of blood glided down the old man's leg; his limb was stiff and painful. He burst into tears; he feared that his dancing days were over, and the sun of his happiness was eclipsed for life.

Turgot demanded five thousand francs for the secret and hinted that he was acquainted with the person of the criminal, and should raise his price if his terms were not acceded to by the morning. The parties retired to rest. Turgot, dreading some surprise, carefully searched round his room, and locked the door with a double turn. He went to bed, but was unable to sleep; a sound of moaning arose in the adjoining apartment; sobs of deep distress, and starts of suffering and of pain. The officer rose, and peeping through a crevice in the boarded partition, saw the old marquis sitting upright in bed, in the next chamber; his spectacles were saddling his nose, and with many salves and heaps of lint, he was dressing the knife wound in the calf of his beloved leg. The policeman stared, and looked again, and wondered as he looked. The leg was not cork—it was bona fide flesh and blood, and the dancing master could not be the murderer of the *vieux moustache*.

It was evident that he could make no bargain with Bonchretien while he was ignorant of the culprit's person; he knew that Pierre, the marquis, and Garon, were exempt from all cause of suspicion; the criminal was either Bonchretien himself, or that quiet mysterious brother who had received the statement meant only for Bonchretien's ear. His plan was soon formed; he applied his candle to the curtains of the bed, and as the flames mounted to the ceiling, he shouted aloud "Fire! fire!" and, throwing open his door, watched for the appearance of the objects of his doubt. Cloporte had not retired to bed; he rushed from his room on the first alarm, and with his unavoidable and natural limp, hobbled along the gallery; but Bonchretien, anxious for the safety of his daughter, darted from his chamber with all his native energy, forgetful of the limp he had assumed, and exhibiting two thick fleshy legs which could not be mistaken for cork. He jumped into the midst of the flames, and, with Pierre's assistance, tore the blazing curtains from the rods;

a few buckets of water, handed up by the active Garon, extinguished the fire, and it was soon determined that all danger was at an end.

"How in the name of heaven did you contrive to ignite the drapery?" said Bonchretien.

"An accident—not to be regretted, certainly, since it has given me an excellent sight of your cork leg."

"Dog!" said Bonchretien, as the truth flashed on his mind, and he seized the policeman by the throat; "dog! to satisfy a curiosity tending not to the ends of justice, but to your own infernal avarice, you have risked the destruction of my house, and the lives of my children and my friends: out of my house! no longer shall my roof shelter you, viper as you are—out of my house, and if I see you here again, you shall have the contents of my smuggler's blunderbuss in your black and brutal heart." The contest was short; the sturdy Chouan worked the struggling policeman towards the window, which had been lifted up for the purpose of letting out the smoke. He dashed the fellow through the open space; the body fell onto the roof of an outhouse, which, fortunately, was not far beneath, and rolling down the slanting roof, tumbled pretty easily onto the lawn. Bonchretien closed the window, and desired all parties to retire again to their respective rooms.

Turgot was not much hurt by his fall, although considerably alarmed. He roared for pity; shrieked murder; and swore revenge—but all in vain. He tried the fastenings of the doors of the chateau, but he might as well have attempted to open the solid wall. An ominous growling from a mastiff that seemed close at hand, and the withdrawal of the lights from the various windows, beside the nipping of the cold night air, for Turgot was *en chemise*, gave him potential hints of the necessity of motion. He roared for his clothes, but was answered only by the baying of the dog. He tried to find the stables, but the fury of the animal seemed momentarily to increase; and, mad with rage and revenge, he jumped the paling of the chateau, and set off running down the road for the village inn—a distance of more than two miles.

"I suppose the scoundrel will fetch up the gendarmerie in the morning," said Bonchretien to Pierre, as they retired along the gallery.

"I doubt it. In one of his troopers I discovered an old comrade, who was with me at Waterloo. He was one of Ney's pets, and is already tired of the Bourbon pay. I promised him a situation on the farm for life, if he would desert; he jumped at my offer, and went off this evening to Fontenay, there to hide till Turgot shall have left this part of the country. To save trouble, I believe that he made his comrade drunk before he went, and carried off the arms and ammunition of the party."

"Good!" said Bonchretien. "Poor Turgot! il a la mer a boire! Go to bed—we are safe for tonight."

Turgot succeeded in obtaining admittance at the village inn, and jumped into bed, but found it difficult to sleep. He was chilled to the heart, and perfectly dispirited. He determined, at all hazards, to summon his men in the morning, proceed to the chateau, and arrest the brother of Bonchretien upon the charge of murder. He could not be wrong: he had proved the falsity of four

cork legs, and the limp of the fifth, in the hour of danger, could not be deceptive. He buried his head beneath the sheets, and tried to sleep—countless cork legs floated in the depths of the dark void; armies of limping men marched to the rescue; troops of lame horses, ridden by sergeants armed with ramrods; rats with cork legs; flying angels with wooden limbs—all the strange chimeras of diseased fancy, restlessness, and pain—entered the arena of his imagination. At one time, just as he dozed into a fitful nap, he fancied that he was kicked from the tower of Notre Dame by some gigantic demon with a cork leg—the long and horrid fall terminated in the breaking of all his limbs, and he awoke in an agony of sweat and fear. Twice did he jump from his bed, satisfied that the room was in flames; and once, when chilled and wretched, he returned to his bed, the cold settled in his extremities, and as he dozed, he believed that both his legs were turned to cork; he parted with this opinion only when a streak of cramp seized upon the sinews of his dexter calf, and caused him to imagine that the dancing master was returning, with interest, the thrust of the penknife. He arose, at daybreak, feverish and sad; cork legs were still the subject of his thoughts. He caught himself in an unconscious hobble as he walked to the window, and almost expected to see the tavern sign exchanged from the newly revived *fleur-de-lis* to the omnipresent *jambe de liége*.

M. de Turgot called for the gendarmes: he was informed that both of them had departed from the inn—one of them, with the arms of himself and his companion, went on the previous evening; and the other, dreading rebuke and punishment for his drunkenness and neglect, had followed his comrade's example in the early morning. The officer did not complain of his desertion: he saw that fate ran against him, and resolved to struggle to the last. He asked the landlord a few questions about Bonchretien's brother—the man with the cork leg. He was surprised to find that Bonchretien had never been blest with a fraternal tie; that the dancing-master was the ci-devant marquis; and that the Chouan, who now inhabited the chateau, was so much beloved by the peasantry, that it would be dangerous for any force less potent than an entire regiment, to endeavor to remove one of his friends from the shelter of his roof. The policeman knew that he was foiled in every way; but, determining upon revenge for the many deceptions practised upon him by the wily smuggler, he resolved to return to Paris, and by the strength of his asseverations, and the exertion of his interest, procure sufficient force and extra authority for the arrest of the person of the murderer.

On his return to Paris, he was annoyed to find that the whiskered veteran who had combated Cloporte, the man with the cork leg, had not thought fit to die at all. He ridiculed the idea of a pistol ball putting an end to a man who had frizzled in Egypt and froze in Russia, among the veterans of the glorious Napoleon. The life of the *vieux moustache* was a sad disappointment to Turgot, who had encountered such mishaps, not so much for the purpose of seeing him revenged, as in the hopes of making the capture of his murderer a means of promotion, or at least of deriving pecuniary advantage from winking at the culprit's escape.

The inhabitants of the chateau remained for some weeks in ignorance of the alteration in affairs, produced by the obstinate clinging to life in Cloporte's antagonist. The chateau remained barricaded; Pierre and his comrade, the deserter gendarme, relieved each other in the watch, and taught the peasantry the use of some half dozen muskets and cutlasses, with various evolutions and methods of defence, till the arrival of a letter from the friend at Paris who had assisted Cloporte in his escape. The news of the veteran's restoration ended the warlike state of affairs,

and changed the preparations into notes of festivity and marriage joy. Demoiselle Vif became madame Sergeant Pierre de Faon: Cloporte assisted Bonchretien in tapping some dozen barrels of home brewed; and the Marquis de la Mont Lozére, not quite cured of the wound in his calf, danced a new *courante* with increased success. The health of the bride was given with many cheers; Pierre returned thanks, and Bonchretien, as her father, indulged in a speech. He reverted to the visit of the policeman, proudly detailed his means of triumph, swore never to desert an old comrade who had assisted him to fight the good fight in days gone by, and ended with proposing a bumper to the longevity of M. Cloporte, the man with

THE CORK LEG.

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