

The Brute-Breaker

by Johnston McCulley

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CHAPTER I. A CRIPPLE'S HOPE.

HE was whimpering like a friendless and frightened cur, now, and the tears of rage were streaming down his cheeks; and still he tried to run, attempted to dodge, endeavored to escape the pestering evil that followed at his heels.

There was no real fear in his heart, for Jean the Cripple was well aware that Baptiste Navet, the bully, would do him no actual harm. Nor was it pain that made him weep, for he was inured to cuffs and blows from strong men.

His bent and twisted leg hampered him, of course, and it was mere folly to think that he could outdistance his pursuer. At any time it pleased him, Baptiste Navet could make a quick spring forward and give him a cuff alongside the head.

Yet Jean the Cripple deemed it more

the manlike part to attempt to evade the blows. He could have crouched on the ground, arms held over his head, and received them, knowing that Baptiste Navet would not dare give many, yet he felt called upon to do his best to avoid the indignity.

Baptiste Navet had made sport of him for years. Always, it seemed, Navet had been the bully of this camp, where the dense forest came down to the bend of the roaring river, and always he had kicked and cuffed Jean the Cripple in a way of amusement.

Nor was that all. Baptiste cuffed and kicked what men he willed, it appeared, else stood up to them stripped to the waist and gave and received sledgelike blows, and always emerged from a fray the victor. Jean the Cripple prayed that some fine day a real man would come down the river—a man who would conquer and humble Baptiste Navet and

drive him away.

Now he tried to dodge again, and Navet sprang forward like a panther and hurled him heels over head in the tangled grass, to laugh raucously when Jean stumbled, in an attempt to get upon his feet. And half a hundred other men laughed, for this was a feast day and an afternoon of celebration, and all the crews were in from the woods. Presently the superintendent, Jacques Bossuet, would appear and preside at the rough games, and until he came the men amused themselves watching this torture of the crippled boy at the hands of Baptiste, the bully.

Navet seized his victim by the neck of the shirt now, and held him out at arm's length, where he dangled like a puppy. Jean kicked and tried to squirm and shrieked imprecations, at which the men laughed the more. Their loud shouts rang through the woods and mocked the roaring of the stream; and the brant flying overhead honked in quick alarm and swerved from their true course.

And then, without warning, big Baptiste Navet dropped Jean to the ground as if he had been a live coal, and took off his cap to twirl it in an embarrassed manner with the fingers of his two hands. Jean the Cripple glanced up from the ground and beheld the reason.

Annette Bossuet, the superintendent's daughter, stood there before them. A little thing she was, weighing

not more than a hundred pounds. No bigger than the great thigh of Baptiste Navet, yet charged with vivacity and the pure love of living, with black eyes that could snap in a show of anger and dimples that could flash when she was pleased—that was Annette Bossuet!

Her eyes were flashing now and seemed to send forth little flakes of fire, and her tiny fists were planted on her hips, and she bent her head back that she might look up straight into the eyes of Baptiste Navet and see the shame written there.

For a moment there was quiet; all the men stood still, waiting for her words; they could see that she was breathing quickly and heavily, as though she had run some distance. Her pretty red lips were made ugly for the time with sternness, and the dimples did not show, and anger seemed to radiate from her.

“So!” she cried, in a voice that thrilled them all. “The camp bully tortures boys who cannot strike back!”

There was a continued silence for a moment, and then the men behind her laughed again because of Navet's discomfiture, and she whirled around to face them.

“You are no better than he!” she exclaimed. “You watched—and laughed! Shame! Is this the sport for strong men? What will those of the other camps say when word goes down the river that Bossuet's bullies mistreat boys and call it fun? They'll be sending

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

their cooks to meet you, when next a wrestling-match is held!"

They hung their heads for shame, and Baptiste Navet made bold to speak.

"The boy was not hurt, ma'm'selle."

"Perhaps not in body. But he is human and has feelings, m'sieu'! Often have I seen you mistreat him, and the time has come for an end to such things in the Bossuet camp. You have displeased me, Baptiste Navet! And you have wished to dance with me this night!"

"Surely this—" Navet began. He gulped hard in an attempt to overcome his embarrassment, and choked in the effort.

"This means that I do not dance with you!" she cried. "Does Annette Bossuet dance with a maltreater of boys? Can a woman trust herself in the arms of a man who attacks the helpless? Would my father's daughter smile into the face of a bully who had made a crippled boy's heart sore? Go about your games! My father comes soon to judge them. But rather shall I lead the dance with Jean the Cripple, Baptiste Navet, before I do it with you!"

She turned her back upon him then, as if he had been quite nothing at all, and ran to where Jean was crouched in the tangled grass. She went down on her knees beside him, and threw an arm around his shoulders, and looked back at the bullies for all the world like a mother protecting her young.

And the men faced toward the river

and started walking in that direction, some of them boldly and with swaggering step, others on the tips of their boot-toes as if they had been leaving a sick-room.

Jean the Cripple choked a little as Annette's arm pressed him closer. He loved the pretty daughter of the superintendent, and would have faced death for her if the need arose, yet he felt that there were some things that a woman did not understand. It was pleasant for her to take his part, and yet it made him appear as a child.

And Jean the Cripple wanted to be a man! In years he would be soon, but not in body. A falling tree had broken him when he was but ten; and so he always would be called boy because of his size, though a beard grew upon his face. He longed to do a man's work and fight a man's battles, to engage in the rough sports and feats of strength of which real men made boast around the fires. He wanted to be able to strike back when bullies tormented him. He asked only the God-given right of taking his own part.

A fine man he was, when a woman had to protect him! Down in his heart he sobbed at the ignominy of it, but into Annette Bossuet's ear he purred a sentence of thanks, and then tried to slip away. The men would torment him no more this day, he knew; even now Jacques Bossuet was down beside the river and a space was being cleared for the games.

But Annette held him close beside her and forced him to walk so. She spoke no word, for anger was still flashing from her eyes and was turbulent in her heart, and she wanted the words she spoke to be those of kindness.

She led him near the edge of the water, and there they sat down on a fallen log to watch the men lifting weights; and Jean snarled when Baptiste Navet put the others to shame.

“Some day a man will come down the river!” he breathed.

That was the hope he lived—that some day a real man would come down the river and drive Baptiste Navet away. It was not only because Baptiste tormented him, but also because he did not relish the look in the eyes of the bully, whenever he glanced at Annette Bossuet.

Jean knew that Navet was a big man in a way, and that Jacques Bossuet stood a little in fear of him. Might not the father strike a bargain with the bully regarding a visit with Annette to the priest? He could not imagine a thrush mating with a panther.

“Some day a man will come down the river!” he breathed again; and Annette’s arm seemed to press him closer.

ABOVE the bend of the river ran the rapids, a turbulent mass of seething water with here and there the black, ominous nose of a jagged rock, showing through. There was a carry around it, for even those men skilled with canoe and paddle, blanched in the face and turned quickly away when one spoke of running that maelstrom to the broad bosom of the deep river below.

In the old days it had been tried, generally by some foolhardy newcomer to the woods, or else by an Indian who had been drinking the forbidden spirits of the white man. And each attempt had netted a new victim for the rushing stream, so that now running the rapids never was mentioned, and men packed their canoes and goods around the length of them, sweating from the toil, and wondering why it had been necessary for Nature to build the rapids just there.

Even the fish hated that five hundred yards of seething water, the old Indians said, and they called the place after a French phrase that meant “deserted of God.”

It seemed to Jean the Cripple that the rapids were alive, and that they spoke, could one but understand the language they used. Often he had spent hours sitting on the shore and listening to their roaring, and he knew that the tone of it changed now and then, and was not always the same.

Sometimes the rapids purred like a great cat, a sort of deceptive purr that

CHAPTER II. THE MAN ARRIVES.

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

spoke of hidden claws that could make a wound. Sometimes they raged in anger, and then the water roared, and the spray dashed higher, and the woods seemed silent in the face of such a display of temper. And then, at other times, they rippled, seeming to sing, and the sun danced on the broken surface, and gorgeous rainbows showed against the cool green of the forest on the other shore.

This afternoon the rapids roared, and Jean the Cripple, turning away from the games because he was sick of watching Baptiste Navet win them all, looked up their savage length and wondered at their anger. And so it was that Jean, first of all, saw a black speck bobbing on the water in the far distance—a black speck that went out of sight at times and then came into view again, and always came closer.

Jean thought nothing of it at first, for he supposed the men at some camp above had thrown a giant stump into the stream, as they did often. There were times when the stump swept through and into the quiet water before Bossuet's, but generally it was splintered and torn, indicating what would happen to a canoe that made the journey, or to the body of a man.

Jean gave it no more than a passing glance, and then forced himself to turn toward the cleared space, where the men were stripping to the waist for the wrestling. Back against the edge of the forest a score of Indians sat, huddled in

their blankets, and wondered why the white men made fools of themselves by exerting their strength when it was not at all necessary.

They understood the passing of money, however, and nodded their heads when they saw it change hands, for gambling was nothing new to them, though they themselves generally wagered goods instead of coins. Blankets, ponies, and now and then a squaw—there was nothing wonderful in wagering those things. They seldom possessed money.

They chattered among themselves when big Baptiste Navet stood forth and challenged all comers to the wrestling mat, and grinned when no man responded; and then they settled themselves to watch more equal contests between pairs of men who could not hope to cope successfully with Baptiste Navet.

Now that Baptiste was not in it, Jean the Cripple exhibited some enthusiasm himself, and would have wagered on the outcome of one match, except that he had nothing to wager. He watched a man take two straight falls, and then turned away again in huge disgust when Baptiste Navet once more issued his challenge.

He remembered the stump in the rapids, and wished that it might have been Navet's giant body whirling to destruction. And so he turned to look for the stump again, wondering whether it yet had been splintered and torn by

the jagged rocks.

He still could see it! It was a stanch and proper stump then. It was no more than a couple of hundred yards away now, and bobbing from side to side like a thing possessed.

And then Jean rubbed his eyes and pulled away from Annette's encircling arm, and ran a little way up the shore, and peered intently across the boiling water.

"A man! A man!" he screeched. "A man comes down the river! A man runs the rapids deserted of God."

The games stopped as if the men had been struck dead, and Jacques Bossuet broke off a sentence in its middle, and there was deep silence to greet the cripple's announcement. And then some unbeliever laughed his skepticism and turned toward the wrestling-mat again without even glancing at the river, and the others started to follow him.

But Annette Bossuet had run to Jean's side, and had shaded her eyes with her hands and looked over the boiling water, and now she raised her voice with his.

"A man! It is a man!" she cried. "A man comes down the river!"

Her eyes met those of Jean as she spoke, and in the mind of each was the same thought—that perhaps this was the man for whose coming the lad had prayed—the man who was to drive Baptiste Navet away.

The men came running, led by Jacques Bossuet himself, and they

formed a group about the cripple and Annette, and Jean pointed with a crooked finger to indicate the black speck that bobbed far up the rapids.

"Mon Dieu! But it is a man!" Bossuet gasped.

"A dead man!" Baptiste Navet added. "Some Indian who has been drinking spirits, else some fool who thinks to succeed where better men have failed!"

"He's down!" Bossuet cried.

But he was not down. For an instant canoe and man were out of sight, and then they came into view again on the crest of a boiling wave, missing a jagged rock by a fraction of an inch, it appeared, and rushing onward.

Now it seemed that the man was doomed, for the current drove him toward the frowning, rocky shore; and they saw him standing in the canoe and striving with all his strength to drive it back into the middle of the stream. How he succeeded they could not guess, but he did. The water seized the frail craft and tossed it, and twice it was hurled around as though it had been in a whirlpool—which did not speak for the man's seamanship—and then was whirled forward as if to be passed on to the next demon of the rapids.

Now the man was on his knees again, and bending forward. His paddle flashed from side to side. He turned from rocks just the right instant. He skirted the edges of pools that might have sucked him down. They heard his

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

shout, and it sounded like one of elation instead of fear as it rang over the water.

“Mon Dieu! A man!” Bossuet gasped.

Those around him were breathless because of the scene, and not a man of them expected to see the canoeist win through alive. Only Jean the Cripple, unnoticed by any, knelt behind them against a clump of brush, and prayed that the man might be spared. And when he opened his eyes and looked at the river again the canoe had passed a cluster of rocks that marked the danger-line, and was racing toward the broad bosom of the quieter stream.

“If he makes the last hundred yards —” Bossuet exclaimed.

“There is where he will die!” said Baptiste Navet.

Jean hated him the more for the words he spoke. Did Baptiste sense, he wondered, that this was the Heaven-sent man who was to humble him? The cripple ran down to the water’s edge to see the better, and his action seemed to arouse Jacques Bossuet and make him alive to the needs of the moment.

“Ready to aid him!” he cried. “Spilled he may be in the last fifty yards of that devil’s stream, and badly battered, yet his life may be saved if he is taken in time from the water! An extra day’s pay to the man who brings him in!”

But the men hung back. That still water below the rapids looked as peaceful as a lake on the surface, but

they knew that there were treacherous currents underneath that might draw a man down. Did not they walk half a mile down the stream when they wanted to bathe?

Only Baptiste Navet, muttering a curse as he saw that the man was to win through and do something no other man ever had done, dared to brave the stream. Already he was stripped to the waist for the wrestling-mat, and he had but to kick off his heavy boots, and he stood ready. He poised himself on the shore, and watched the advancing canoe. Again it bobbed like a cork on the water, again it missed a rock by a narrow margin, and on it came.

Baptiste Navet cursed again, and thought that with the extra day’s pay he could buy a ribbon for Annette’s hair, and so win her favor, and then took the plunge. Down he went, and up he came, his teeth chattering because of the icy water. He waved a hand to those on the shore and struck out.

Less than fifty yards away was the canoeist now. He was standing in his craft again, and again those waiting on the shore heard him shout. Before him was a treacherous place where the river narrowed, and between the two banks it raced like a mad thing eager to escape confinement. He grasped his paddle firmly and bent forward once more, and at just the right time he plunged the blade into the boiling water, and whirled the canoe to the right. Around it spun quickly, but its nose remained

down-stream.

“The only way he could have done it!” Bossuet gasped.

And then the canoe floated on the safe, broad bosom of the wider space, and the man who had ridden the rapids “deserted of God” shaded his eyes with a hand and gazed at the shore.

“Ho! Bossuet’s camp!” he cried. “A goodly place to look upon!”

Baptiste Navet had witnessed all this as he swam, and now he turned around, with black anger in his heart, and struck out for the shore. His great arms flayed the water and churned it into spray, for thus he gave way to his rage. And behind him came the canoe, the man in it paddling slowly.

Navet came from the river like some big dog, and shook himself much after the fashion of one, and then went aside to pull on his boots, a dark look on his face. Those on the shore could see the stranger well now, and the heart of Jean the Cripple sang for joy.

For this was a proper man that had come down the river. Tall he was, as tall as Baptiste Navet, and his shoulders were broad and his thighs lean. His heavy shirt was open at the throat, and the sleeves of it rolled up to show his massive arms. A broad-rimmed hat sat on the back of his head, and between the edge of it and his eyes there protruded dark, curly hair.

But it was the man’s smile that Jean noticed first—a rare smile that seemed like a small sun, so much radiance did it

cast. He did not present the appearance of a man who had toyed with death and evaded it by a scant margin. Running the rapids might have been in the day’s work with him.

The canoe touched the shore, and the man sprang out and pulled it from the water. Then he whirled toward those gathered there, and swept his hat from his head.

“Is the welcome of Bossuet so warm that you swim out to meet me?” he asked, laughing a bit, and glancing at Baptiste Navet struggling to pull a boot over a wet leg.

“We expected to bring you in a bruised and battered thing,” Jacques Bossuet admitted. “Never before has man cruised the rapids deserted of God and lived to boast of it!”

“ ’Tis nothing of which to boast,” the stranger said. “Danger to life and limb in such a game? Name of a name!”

“You felt no fear?” Annette asked, stepping forward and seeming to forget that she did not know this man.

“Not the slightest, mademoiselle,” he replied, smiling down at her from his great height. “Had I known so pretty a flower as yourself were here, I could have cursed such a sluggish stream.”

Annette retreated in confusion at that, for she was of the woods and not used to pretty speeches, and Jacques Bossuet forced himself forward and engaged the stranger in conversation again.

“May I ask your name and from

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

whence you come?" he asked.

"I came down the river, m'sieu', as all here can testify," came the answer. "As for a name, you may call me Louis Grantaire."

"And your business?" Bossuet demanded.

"I seek work."

"In the woods, m'sieu'?"

"Work—any sort of work, m'sieu'! You will give it me?"

He glanced at Annette again as he spoke, and the admiration he felt for her was in his eyes for all the world to read. Bossuet frowned a little at that, and the black looks on the face of Baptiste Navet increased.

"There always is work for a true man at the camp of Bossuet," said the superintendent. "But I must know the man I engage."

"Ah! You wish information concerning myself, m'sieu'? You have my name."

"That is not enough!" There was a certain gruffness in Bossuet's voice as he spoke.

"Perhaps," said the stranger, "you doubt I have the strength to endure a man's labor?"

He rolled back a sleeve and showed what muscle he had, then threw his arms wide and gave them a look at his broad shoulders, and laughed again as if at an excellent joke.

"I believe that there can be no doubt of your strength, m'sieu'," Jacques Bossuet said. "We have seen an

exhibition of it, and of your general skill."

"Then what? Perhaps there may be some shadow cast upon me as to moral character? Perhaps some here may think I am a fugitive fleeing a crime? It may be that I am not the proper sort of person? Is there any man here present who dares face me and say such a thing?"

He turned and looked at them all, his eyes narrowed and his fists clenched at his sides, and more than one pair of eyes fell before his gaze. For an instant he clashed glances with Baptiste Navet, while the heart of Jean the Cripple seemed to stand still.

But Navet turned his head slowly and looked out across the river, and made no reply. And Louis Grantaire faced Bossuet again, and smiled as before.

"I give you my word that I am a proper person," he said. "I have come down the river seeking work, and my reasons and intentions are my own. If you take me, it must be with that information and no more. Do I stop here, or shall I continue to the camp below?"

There was silence while his eyes blazed into these of Jacques Bossuet and they appraised each other. It seemed that Bossuet never would make up his mind and speak, and Jean feared that Louis Grantaire would be sent on.

But what Bossuet saw in the newcomer's eyes must have pleased

him, for suddenly he extended a gnarled hand for the other to grasp, and his great voice boomed out above river's roar.

"You stop here! I'll give you work!"

CHAPTER III.
ANNETTE DANCES.

AFTER this interlude the games went on, but Jean the Cripple no longer remained within Annette Bossuet's encircling arm and watched them from a distance. Where Louis Grantaire went, there went Jean, his face alight with expectation; for this was the man who had come down the river to humble Baptiste Navet, and the cripple expected him to consummate the task immediately.

Grantaire greeted the other men collectively, not taking the trouble to ascertain the name of each, and then he sat him down on a big rock at the edge of the clearing, not far from the Indians, and watched the sport, and applauded with the rest, giving each man his due for his skill. Jean the Cripple crouched at his feet and watched his face, feeling that the humbling of Navet was only a matter of a little time. The man had just ridden the rapids deserted of God. Was he not to have a few moments in which to regain his breath?

Once Grantaire's hand dropped and caressed the cripple's head, though the newcomer did not look at him, and Jean's heart glowed anew.

"M'sieu'?" he asked.

"Well, little one?"

"When is it to be done?" Jean asked.

"I know not your meaning."

"When are you to humble Baptiste Navet, m'sieu'? When are you to beat him and laugh at him, and send him away from Bossuet forever?"

"Navet? I know not the man. And why is he to be humbled?"

"You but jest with me, m'sieu'. For years, it seems, this Baptiste Navet has mistreated me, because I am a cripple and cannot fight back. Only to-day he was doing it, but Mlle. Annette Bossuet made him cease. He taunts me because of my crooked leg, and he cuffs and strikes and kicks me, and throws me about, and laughs when I cry. And for this long time, m'sieu', I have prayed the good God to send a real man down the river—a man who would humble Baptiste Navet and force him to go away and leave us in peace here at Bossuet. Do not tell me, m'sieu', that you are not the man!"

Grantaire looked at him quickly, and then at the throng of men in the clearing, and his brows were wrinkled for an instant. And then his hand gripped Jean's shoulder so that it almost hurt, and he spoke in a whisper that none other could hear.

"It is a little secret between ourselves. I am the man!"

"And when do you do it, m'sieu'?"

"That will come in good time, little one. We must not hasten things. And tell

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

me, pray, which one is this Baptiste Navet?"

"The one with the brow like thunder, m'sieu', who stands at the end of the row just now. The one who swam out to bring in your torn and battered body when you ran the rapids deserted of God."

Grantaire smiled at that, remembering what he had said of the camp's warm welcome, and glanced at Navet with increased interest. Once the bully met his eyes, but turned away quickly. And Grantaire patted Jean's shoulder again, and the Indians told one another that here was a good man because he protected the helpless.

Jacques Bossuet approached them.

"I suppose you do not care for the games this day," he said. "You are welcome to play, if it is your wish. But you may be tired after your journey, and you are new to us—"

He ceased speaking and looked a question-mark at Louis Grantaire, and the other men waited for his answer, some hoping that here was a man who could give them added sport, others wishing he would keep to himself.

"It is not that I am fatigued," Grantaire replied. "No, it is not that, m'sieu'. But, as you say, I am newly come among you, and it is scarcely proper that I indulge in games this first day. It pleases me to watch the others. When I have worked for you a time, and there is another day of feast and celebration, then will I add my poor part

to the entertainment."

"As you please, m'sieu'," Bossuet said, and all wondered that he addressed the man in that courteous fashion, for generally he was gruff with the men he employed, believing that it made for discipline. "At least you can join in the dance this night."

"With pleasure," said Louis Grantaire, and glanced around for Annette, but could not see her.

"Dancing suits some men more than hardier sport," Baptiste Navet observed, to nobody in particular, but in a voice that all could hear.

Jean's heart began pounding at his ribs, for he supposed Grantaire would make use of this chance to humble the bully. But Grantaire merely gave another of his radiant smiles and made no reply. Instead, he addressed himself to Bossuet again.

"What already has been done in the way of games?" he asked. "How stand you here at Bossuet in these entertainments?"

"We have lifted the weights, for instance," Bossuet replied. "I have a man—Baptiste Navet, there—who always wins in such events. There are real men in this camp, m'sieu'."

"I do not doubt it, m'sieu'."

"You see that huge rock? Baptiste Navet lifted it free of the ground an hour ago. It was an effort, but he cleared the earth with it."

Louis Grantaire got up and walked over to the rock, and stood looking

down at it for a moment. Not a glance did he give Navet.

"It is, indeed, a bit of a rock," he said. "It would take a strong man to lift it clear of the ground, eh?"

"That it would, m'sieu'."

Grantaire chuckled and bent forward. Before the others guessed his intention he had stooped and put his hands beneath it. He tugged, and one of the men laughed. And then he tugged again, and lifted the rock from the earth as if it had been a sack of meal, and not content with that he tossed it half a dozen paces away, and then stood up again and dusted his hands.

"Yes, it is quite a bit of a rock," he admitted, and went back to sit down again.

The men looked at him in amazement, and many swore out of pure admiration. Only Baptiste Navet scowled and cursed beneath his breath, because the newcomer had belittled his feat, and all there knew by this that Baptiste and Louis Grantaire would clash one day. It was as good settled.

The heart of Jean thrilled as he crept close to Louis again, happy to have such a champion. The games went on, and Grantaire watched, never as much as glancing at Navet, which angered the latter the more. A man may suffer another to outdo him, but it troubles him greatly to be ignored.

And then the dusk came, and the great fires were lighted down by the river. The Indians hung around like so

many hungry dogs, for Bossuet always was generous with them on feast days. From the cook's cabin came odors to please every nostril. Great, rough tables were spread at the forest's edge beneath the trees, and heaped high with food, and the laughing, shouting men began to fill their bellies, eating and talking at the same time.

Louis Grantaire had a place near the end of one of the tables, and Jean the Cripple sat beside him. It seemed that the man who had come down the river had little to say now, though he smiled a great deal and appeared to make himself at home. Now and then he patted Jean's shoulder, as if to tell him that he remembered, and there was a deal of courtesy in his manner when he answered the sallies of the others. Remembering how he had lifted and tossed the great rock, they forbore rough play. None had wished for broken bones.

Nor did Baptiste Navet speak much, but for quite a different reason. Rage at this newcomer consumed him. Also, he remembered that Annette had said she would not dance with him, because he had tormented Jean, and he wondered whether she had meant it.

"You seem to have made a friend of the cripple," Baptiste spoke directly to Louis Grantaire finally.

" 'Tis appropriate that the weak and the strong should join forces," Grantaire replied.

The men laughed, and the face of

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Baptiste flushed darkly around the edges of his beard.

" 'Tis appropriate," said Baptiste, "that he who rides the devil's rapids should attach himself to the devil's offspring."

"Do you mean that little Jean's father was not a proper man?" Louis Grantaire asked.

This was dangerous ground, for Jean's father was a memory respected by all at Bossuet, he having given his life in an effort to save other men; and Baptiste Navet knew better than to continue the conversation along that line, lest all there fall upon him and drive him away.

"Jean's father was a great man," he said, and the appeased throng resumed eating.

Louis Grantaire smiled into his plate, and glanced at Jean from the corners of his eyes. Baptiste choked on a bit of meat. He was fast storing up rage against this newcomer, but he knew better than to urge a combat now. There were rules about such things that should be observed. When the man had swung an ax for Jacques Bossuet, when he was in reality one of Bossuet's men, then he could be made to stand and answer. This night he was similar to a guest. Tonight it could be only a clash of wits and words, at which Baptiste Navet heretofore had excelled.

"Did you hear the devil laugh and wish you well as you passed through the boiling water?" he asked.

"I found him swimming before Bossuet when I arrived," Grantaire replied.

The men laughed again, but Navet held in his anger. When the man once had swung an ax—

"You should have fetched a squaw with you," he tried again. "There is to be a dance. We are short of young women here, and you may lack for feminine partners."

"There seems to be no shortage of old women," Grantaire observed, looking at all of them, but his eyes resting the longest on Baptiste Navet.

"And all old women nurse the cripple," Baptiste said.

The men roared, and he knew that he had scored that time. Louis Grantaire smiled again, and chuckled a bit to himself as if enjoying it, and looked down at Jean once more.

"Jean may not always be a cripple," he remarked after a time.

"When his leg grows straight, then will I leave the woods never to return," Navet promised.

Grantaire looked across at him quickly.

"On your word?" he asked.

"On my word, m'sieu'!" Baptiste replied and laughed loudly.

"Legs have grown straight before now, m'sieu'. And men have grown crooked by forgetting their word."

"I have yet to forget mine," said Navet.

"The honor of some men shrinks

with dampness, and you were in the river to-day.”

“What mean you by that?” Baptiste cried, somewhat angrily.

“I was but making an attempt at pretty speech, m’sieu’. ’Tis a habit I have.”

“A habit fit for women and weaklings! Your meaning, m’sieu’!”

“Suppose,” said Louis Grantaire, “that you search until you find it.”

The men began sitting back from the tables, for the feast was over. Baptiste glowered into Grantaire’s smiles, and turned away. He promised himself several things regarding what he would do to this upstart when once he had swung an ax. What was the forest coming to when unknowns with clever tongues paraded through it and got jobs at honest camps? Was this a part of the régime of M. Pretot, the “big boss”?

M. Pretot was not exactly a myth, yet he was little more than a name in some ways. It was known only that he had inherited thousands of acres of timberland, and that hundreds of crews worked for him under their foremen and superintendents. None of these latter ever saw M. Pretot. He sat behind a big desk in an office in Montreal and transacted his business and took his profits, and his managers went into the woods.

That was all the men knew concerning M. Pretot. They did not see how business could be conducted in that manner. It was not natural for a man to

remain away from his property. And surely things would not be right for long unless he came to supervise them. They could not complain, for they got their money regularly, but they felt that there were many conditions that could be remedied if the “big boss” was on the ground.

“M. Pretot should be here and send this man on down the river,” Baptiste Navet growled to himself.

The fires on the bank of the stream had been replenished and the flames were leaping high against the sky, sending their reflections out over the water. There was a fiddle in the camp, and one of the men seized it now and sat down on a log to put it into tune.

This was to be such a dance as debutante never saw. There would be no smooth floor, no orchestra, no banks of flowers, no scintillating lights. The leaping fires beside the river, the bright moon, the twinkling stars would furnish the illumination. The flowers were Nature’s own, uncultivated by man. The orchestra was the cook with an old fiddle that squeaked and screeched; the floor was the sward.

Annette Bossuet represented the young femininity. The cook’s fat wife was the only matron present, unless one took into consideration half a dozen squaws who were greasy and who believed a proper dance meant hopping on their toes and yipping at every other step. And so for the greater part, the men danced with one another, shouting

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

and laughing as they did so, now clasping each other tightly, now separating and jigging in what manner pleased them.

The cook got his fiddle going, and the men crowded closer to the fires. Always at Bossuet, Annette opened the dance with one of the men. It was a great honor to be so chosen, and the girl played no favorites. It had been understood that she was to dance with Baptiste Navet first, this night.

But Baptiste remembered the scene earlier in the day, and doubted whether he was to be honored. The men remembered it, too, for they had heard her words.

"I dance with pretty Annette," he announced now, "else none dances with her. It is understood? The man who clasps her waist before she dances with me will feel the weight of my fist against his jaw."

They glowered at him, but made no reply. Louis Grantaire heard the words and turned away abruptly, looking to where Annette Bossuet stood with her father at one end of the clearing.

Out upon the sward they danced, the men two by two, their loud laughter ringing through the woods. Baptiste Navet crossed deliberately to where the girl was standing, and her father saw him coming and moved away, for this was a thing for Annette to settle herself.

The bully stopped before her with an attempted smile!

"We dance now?" he asked.

"I do not dance with a man who mistreats boys," she said.

"The boy came to no harm, ma'm'selle. I promise not to bother him again if you dance with me."

"I told you this afternoon, m'sieu', that I would not be your partner. Are you so dense in the head that a girl must repeat her words?"

His face black as thunder, Baptiste Navet turned away. The girl remained where she stood, and gazed across at the fires, watching the laughing, shouting, dancing men. Her heart was a little sore, for she wanted to dance. Dances came only too infrequent at Bossuet, and were to be made the most of.

The cook was like a man inspired now. His old fiddle sang. Little Annette allowed her body to sway slightly with the rhythm, and one tiny foot patted the ground, as she wished that Baptiste Navet had not been such a bully and spoiled her evening.

And then, suddenly, she felt a strong arm around her; and a big hand grasped her little one and lifted it. She felt drawn against a broad breast and lifted to her toes. She glanced up, a little in alarm, fearing that Baptiste had so taken advantage of her, and looked into the smiling face of Louis Grantaire.

"Let—me go!" she gasped.

But Grantaire only laughed aloud and held her closer. In an instant they were out on the sward, swinging in the dance. Men stopped to watch them, and Baptiste Navet's face went white with

fury, for he thought she danced willingly.

And Annette Bossuet felt her heart singing, and her feet seemed as light as feathers. Never in her life before had she danced like this. She seemed to float on the music. She was like a fairy dancing in the moonlight. Louis Grantaire lifted her away from herself, it seemed, carried her for the moment into another world, gave to dancing a meaning it had never had before.

She heard the exclamations of wonder from the men they passed. And then the realization came to her.

This stranger had seized her waist without as much as asking her permission! This newcomer to Bossuet had presumed to imagine that she would dance with him willingly!

Fury came into her breast at the thought; and the song died out of her heart. She struggled to be free; but he only laughed and pressed her close again, and swept her feet from the ground and carried her down the line in a rush that left her almost breathless. The fiddle was still; they stopped at the clearing's edge.

She gasped for breath. She pulled away from him. Her eyes blazed up into his smiling face.

"M'sieu?! I—I hate you!" she hissed.

"Hatred is akin to love, mademoiselle," he replied. "It may be love before we are done!"

And he stooped and kissed her hand before he would let her go.

CHAPTER IV. A MAN AWAKE.

BAPTISTE NAVET had seen them dance, naturally, and his rage had increased until he seemed scarcely human. He hated Louis Grantaire because his arm had been around Annette's slim waist, and he hated Annette for a moment because he believed she had danced purposely with the newcomer to shame the bully before his comrades.

Behind a clump of brush Baptiste took many drinks out of a long black bottle, which would have moved Jacques Bossuet to expostulation had he known, for Bossuet disliked red liquor in his camp. Then, half intoxicated with the contents of the bottle, and wholly consumed with his rage, he sat for a time at the edge of the clearing and watched the scene of merry-making, a blot of gloom in an ocean of joy.

Annette pretended to be talking to some of the Indian women, and wondered why none of the other men approached her, cap in hand, and asked the honor of a dance. But the other men, remembering Baptiste Navet's warning, held back and would not ask her, and wondered meanwhile how the bully would punish this newcomer who had dared go against his orders.

Jacques Bossuet had seen, too, and after a time he managed to reach a place

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

by Grantaire's side, and, disregarding the presence of Jean, spoke:

"Is it that you danced with my daughter against her will?" he demanded in a stern voice.

"I did not stop to consider that," Louis Grantaire replied. "The music struck into my blood, the scene is a romantic one, and your little daughter is rarely beautiful."

"Have you no sense of the fitness of things?"

"Ample sense of such," Grantaire said. "I overheard one of your men command that none dance with your daughter unless he danced with her first. She refused to dance with him. That put a proposition up to a man, m'sieu'. To refuse to dance with her then would be to admit fear of the man who commanded. And she was eager to dance, and the other men held back."

"I presume you mean Baptiste Navet?"

"The same, m'sieu'!"

"Beware of him, Louis Grantaire. He has been bully for years here. They say a blow from one of his fists is like the kick of a mule. Every man who works here, he conquers, in time."

"A pretty bully, indeed!"

"I have warned you, m'sieu'. I may mention, too, that Baptiste Navet is not nice when he has downed a man against whom he holds a mean grudge. He will not hesitate to use his boot-calks on a human face."

"You endure such a man?"

"He demands that I do so—and he is an excellent workman. He has strength enough for two."

"I fail to see the economy of it if his prowess keeps some of your men in their bunks, injured, a part of the time."

"I have never looked upon it in that light, m'sieu'. But I have warned you. And, as to my daughter—"

"I am sorry if I have affronted her," Louis Grantaire interrupted. "You may be sure, m'sieu', that I'll treat your daughter as a gentleman should treat a lady."

Bossuet walked away, and Louis Grantaire walked slowly down to the edge of the river and stooped to drink, Jean following close at his heels. He heard an ejaculation from the cripple, and sprang to his feet to find Baptiste Navet standing near him.

"A word with you, m'sieu'!" Navet said.

"Well?"

"Perhaps you did not hear me when I spoke, and so are not in error. I merely wish to make sure. I served notice that no man was to dance with Annette Bossuet until she had done me the honor of dancing with me."

"I heard," said Grantaire boldly.

"And yet you danced with her, m'sieu'?"

"As you saw."

"Perhaps it was a foolhardy thing to do, m'sieu'. Was it not an affront to me?"

"You are the best judge of that, I

think.”

Navet’s face flushed darkly, and his hands twitched.

“You are a stranger among us, m’sieu’,” he said. “You are our guest, in a way. But after you have done one day’s work, then you’ll be a Bossuet man. And then, m’sieu’, I may remember the affront!”

“I trust your memory is not proving faulty through age,” Grantaire said.

“Beware, m’sieu’! You may go too far!”

“Let us hope, in that event, that I find pleasant faces at the end of my journey.”

For an instant, Jean felt sure that Baptiste Navet would strike, and he noticed that most of the men had ceased dancing and were alert for trouble. But Navet conquered his rising anger and turned his back and walked away. Louis Grantaire laughed aloud, and went back to the clearing with Jean.

Behind the clump of brush, Baptiste Navet drank again and brooded over what he pleased to style his wrongs. The dancing continued, and there was more to eat, and the Indians, at Bossuet’s order, continued to heap wood on the fires. And all this time Baptiste Navet considered the situation in his brain; and finally he called Jacques Bossuet aside and spoke a word into his ear.

“I do not like this newcomer,” he said. “He is an upstart, an unknown who may not be a proper sort of person. You

will send him on down the river.”

“I have promised him work, and I am a man of my word,” Bossuet replied.

“My wishes count for nothing in this matter then?” Navet asked angrily, stepping nearer the superintendent.

“Why should you object to the man?” Bossuet countered. “Is it that you fear him?”

“M’sieu’!” Navet cried.

“Your likes and dislikes should concern yourself and those who cause them,” Bossuet went on. “I have enough difficulties of my own with which to contend.”

“Does that mean that you leave this man to me?”

“I am his employer, and not his protector,” Bossuet said. “I ask only that what you do be done with honor.”

Then Baptiste Navet walked away and went back to the clump of brush again. Once more he drank and hurled the empty bottle from him. He walked the forest lanes, assembling his rage, kicking at such logs as came close to his feet, clenching his great fists and shaking them toward the sky.

Like a madman he became, forgetting his honor and the code of the woods. This man’s subtle shafts of wit that stung, his free manner—he could not endure them.

He watched while the fires were allowed to die down, and noticed that Bossuet showed Louis Grantaire the bunk-house where the men slept when they were in camp, and assigned him to

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

a bunk there. Baptiste Navet knew the bunk, for there was but one empty one.

Why do this man the honor, he asked himself, of stripping to the waist and standing up to him? Nobody knew from whence he had come, and none would question where he had gone. The quick thrust of a knife in the dark, a body weighted and sunk in the river, a canoe sent floating down the stream—and every one would think that the stranger had decided to go on to another camp rather than work at Bossuet's. Moreover, some men might even think that he had gone because of his fear of punishment at the hands of Baptiste Navet because he had danced with Annette, which would enhance Baptiste's reputation in the eyes of men.

Navet strolled along the river until the fires were but ashes, and the moon had disappeared and heavy clouds that promised rain for the new day obscured the stars.

In the bunk-house there were no lights now, and it was the proper time for his deed. He knew that all the men there would be sleeping soundly, as was their custom, and that a pistol could be fired without one of them awaking. Yet what he intended doing must be done in silence, for all that.

He followed the edge of the clearing, and so came close to the bunk-house and stood beside an open window to listen. A chorus of snores greeted him; inside it was so dark that a man could not see half the length of his arm.

Baptiste Navet slipped around to the door. He had taken the precaution of removing his heavy boots. From his belt he took his long, sharp knife. He knew that he must do the work with a single blow, so that no more sound than a sigh would escape the stricken man.

He crossed the threshold, scarcely daring to breathe, and there he stood silent for a moment to locate the bunk he sought. Then he gripped the haft of his knife and crept forward on the tips of his toes.

Once more he stood still to listen, for should some of the men be awake and knowledge of his deed become public, he would be forced to take to the woods and remain fugitive, living with the Indians and always alert for white men. But naught reached his ears except the deep snores and heavy breathing, nothing to indicate that a man there was awake. On he went toward the bunk in the corner, which, he knew, had been assigned to Louis Grantaire.

He hesitated a moment just before he reached it, for some bit of conscience remained to him and tried to speak to him now, but liquor had dulled his sense of hearing.

Two more steps he took, and lifted the keen knife for the strike. He could hear the regular breathing of the man in the bunk, and he listened carefully so that he could judge where his heart must be.

The muscles in his arm grew taut; the knife was lifted higher. Baptiste

Navet drew in his breath until his great chest seemed ready to burst, meaning to expel it in one gasp as he drove the knife home and tore his enemy's life from his body.

But suddenly he recoiled. A match had been struck. In its glow he saw the smiling face of Louis Grantaire looking up into his own, and he knew that Grantaire had seen the knife, too, and had guessed his purpose there. To his ears came Grantaire's soft voice.

"Ah! Baptiste Navet! You are late getting to bed, m'sieu'. Can it be that you have been lost in the woods? And I believe that your bunk is at the other end of the room!"

CHAPTER V. THE WARNING.

BAPTISTE NAVET got his boots at the door and then went to his bunk, but not once during the remainder of the night did he close his eyes in sleep. Nor did he attempt to approach the bunk of Louis Grantaire again, for he felt sure the stranger was awake—wherein he erred. Knowing men, and realizing that Baptiste would feel just that, Louis Grantaire slept soundly, perhaps the more so because Jean was curled up at his feet, and was alert.

Navet had noticed Jean, too, in the flare of the match. And he knew that both the newcomer and the cripple were aware of the fact that he had attempted

to do a murder and had failed. He wondered what would happen in the morning, whether Louis Grantaire or the boy would tell, and what manner of story he could present if either of them did.

The effects of the liquor he had consumed began to die away, and he found himself cold and despondent. He could scarcely understand the abiding hatred of the newcomer that he felt. And he felt something akin to dread, also, and could not understand that.

He decided that this Louis Grantaire was not an usual man, and that it would be well to take matters slowly. Between him and this stranger there was that which could be removed only by combat, of course, but there was no rush about coming to blows. If here was an adversary worthy of his best efforts, Baptiste Navet decided it would be the better part to spend some time in studying him before he offered battle.

He watched furtively in the morning when the crews were called to their breakfast, but Louis Grantaire gave him not so much as a glance. During the meal, Baptiste Navet was silent, at which many of the men wondered; but all of them, remembering the events of the evening before, expected Navet to give battle as soon as the stranger had swung an ax for Jacques Bossuet.

After they had eaten, they set out for the cutting, which was to be a new one and two miles away through the woods. They laughed and snouted as they went

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

to their work, for while they labored so near they would eat and sleep at the home camp, which was good. Louis Grantaire was in the rear, as became a newcomer, with Jean the Cripple running along by his side, skipping queerly to keep pace. Jean did not intend missing the great event when it occurred.

As they began to work, Baptiste was across the creek from Grantaire, but he could watch him well, and every glance seemed to feed the fires of his wrath. He began telling himself that he was a fool for waiting, that he should strike the stranger at once. And he told himself, too, that this was not to be like other fights. Heretofore, he conquered a man, and afterward that man took his regular place in the Bossuet camp and went his way, so long as he did not cross the path of Baptiste Navet, nor deny his leadership.

But this man, Baptiste felt, would do no such thing, even if he was defeated. There was something about him that told Navet he would fight again and yet again, and never admit defeat. Besides, Navet did not wish him to remain at Bossuet. Some sense he could not explain warned him that the stranger's presence here boded ill for both the bully and his fondest desires.

If he only had not failed last night! He felt that Grantaire was laughing to himself even now when he thought of it. "Can it be that you have been lost in the woods?" Bah! Baptiste Navet could not

endure such cleverness!

There might yet be an opportunity, he told himself. Many queer things can happen to a man in the woods, especially if he has an enemy. An ax can slip, and a tree can fall in a manner unexpected. Baptiste Navet had only to watch and wait.

The long morning's work came to an end, and Jacques Bossuet drove out from camp with the cook and the midday meal. Annette was with him, a bewildered Annette, who could not understand the feeling her heart had harbored since the stranger had danced with her. She told herself that she hated him and always would, yet her eyes seemed drawn to him now.

He had not yet stopped work. He was swinging an ax, and the girl watched as his broad shoulders rose and fell. The work seemed play to him, and when he threw the ax down and started for the food-wagon, he appeared as if he had not been at work at all; yet Annette heard the foreman telling her father that he was the best of them all.

If there is any time when true men of the woods forget their enemies, it is when food is before them. Baptiste Navet forgot the existence of Grantaire now as he wolfed down potatoes and bread and meat. He ate much as the others, seemingly with an effort to destroy what food was in sight more than to appease hunger.

And so he did not notice, nor did the other men, that Louis Grantaire ate only

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

as much as he actually needed, and then washed his face and hands in the creek, and then wandered along the tiny path, following the direction Annette Bossuet had gone a moment before.

He came upon her at a bend in the creek, where she stood beneath a tree and “sassed” a squirrel, and when she whirled to meet his gaze the red flamed into her face.

“A fine day, mademoiselle,” he observed, sweeping off his hat and smiling at her.

Annette shrugged her shoulders and turned away, pretended to sass the squirrel again, and then would have returned to the camp, except that she found him standing in the path before her.

“You will please stand aside and allow me to pass, m’sieu’,” she said. She tried to draw herself up in dignity as she spoke, and it was a laughable spectacle, for she was such a little girl. Louis Grantaire laughed.

Therein he showed that he scarcely understood women; for what woman can endure to have a man laugh at her? He may scold, storm, be profane, profess indifference, and be forgiven quickly; but not so when he laughs.

Annette’s eyes snapped with anger as she faced him, and she bit her lips to keep from saying angry things, as the priest had taught her, the while she waited for him to step out of the way.

“It grieves me, mademoiselle, that you are displeased because I danced

with you against your will,” he said, not moving a foot. “Cannot you be honest and admit that you liked the dance?”

“M’sieu’!”

“Are we not to be good friends?”

“I have no friendship for you, m’sieu’!” she said sharply.

“True; I had forgotten for the moment. They say friendship does not exist between persons who love.”

“M’sieu’!”

“For I am convinced that it is to be love between us, mademoiselle. I felt it when first I set eyes upon you. I am sure that you felt it, too.”

“The donkey is an animal who imagines that he can sing, I have heard it said, m’sieu’, although I never have seen a donkey and do not know as to the truth of the statement.”

“Meaning that I have somewhat of a conceit?”

“I am glad my meaning is clear to you, m’sieu’.”

“You are charming when you are angry, mademoiselle. I am tempted to anger you just to watch the effect.”

“Shall I ask you again to stand aside?”

“Your wishes are commands, mademoiselle,” he said, and stepped to one side of the path.

“Then let me say that I wish you never to speak to me again!”

Louis Grantaire’s face went white for an instant, and when he next spoke his voice sounded peculiarly.

“You mean that, mademoiselle?” he

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

asked.

"I do not speak idle words. It is my wish that you never speak to me again, unless I first should ask you to."

"It is a command, mademoiselle, and shall be obeyed," he said; and then, without another word to her, and without waiting for her to reply, he turned his back and plunged into the dense woods. Men have said that he attacked the big trees like a maniac that afternoon.

And perhaps it was fortunate for Baptiste Navet that he did not clash with Grantaire during the hour that followed. By the end of that time the newcomer to Bossuet had worked off a share of his anger. Jean, who had not approached near enough to hear their words when Grantaire was talking to Annette, wondered at the manic fury, and told himself that the camp bully was due to receive the beating of his life when the clash came.

For the remainder of the afternoon, Grantaire talked and joked with Jean as he worked, and paid little attention to any of the men, and now and then he whispered to the boy, and the others could see Jean's face shining with joy.

And when the sun dropped behind the edge of the forest and the day's work was done, the newcomer swung Jean to his shoulder and carried him so, with his ax beneath the other arm, and thus they followed the others of the crew along the path, through the woods to the Bossuet camp beside the river.

The evening meal was ready when they arrived, and after they had plunged their heads into the rushing stream and dried them on rough towels, they sat down to table.

" 'Tis an excellent camp," Louis Grantaire observed then to the men about him. "Yet there are peculiar things happen in the neighborhood of it."

"How mean you, m'sieu'?" one of them asked.

"Late in the afternoon I walked along a path at the edge of the cutting and stepped upon a branch. My mere step released a sapling that sprang into the air like a wild thing, oceans of strength behind it. Had it caught me beneath the chip my head would have been torn from my body. And it might have done that thing, except that I have seen such clumsy traps before, and stooped when I stepped on the branch."

He grinned into his plate, and the men looked at one another with questions in their eyes, and a few glanced toward Baptiste Navet, who pretended not to have heard.

"There also was a pit at the edge of the creek," Louis Grantaire went on. "It was deep, and there were some jagged stakes in it. Over its mouth dry brush had been piled. What easier, I ask you, than for a man to step upon it and be plunged down upon the sharp stakes? In such event he might sustain a bruised leg—or a stake might go through his vitals. Such traps are a nuisance about a

cutting. I am sure you all agree with me. A man must keep his eyes open and observe that they are covered with dry brush. Honest ground, of course, would be covered with green at this time of the year."

Once more he grinned into his plate, and the men knew that there could be no mistake now, and they glanced at Baptiste Navet again, who had his eyes only upon his plate. But Navet's face was flushed with shame because he had used the dried brush.

"A man must get acquainted with the country," Grantaire went on to say. "For instance, it is my pleasure to light a pipe and take long walks in the evening after food. Often I go into the woods and listen to the Nature noises there. A man might run into wild beasts doing that in a country with which he is not acquainted. A panther might spring from a tree, and the man be found in the morning lacerated so that other men could not tell exactly how he came by his death. Yet in the face of such possibilities I cannot forego my walk. Naturally, I shall be alert at all times. And I am considered proficient with this."

He placed a pistol on the table before him, and many bent forward to look at it, for the most of them never had seen such a weapon. They had rifles and knew how to use them, and they had heard considerable about this short gun that could be used in close quarters. Baptiste Navet looked down the length

of the table, and for an instant his eyes met Grantaire's, and something seemed to flash between them.

Immediately thereafter Grantaire went for his walk in the woods, and would not let even Jean accompany him, whereat the boy sulked about the bunk-house until the men drove him away.

The others went out to sit on the ground around the fire until it came time to go to their bunks.

"What manner of man is he?" one asked when Grantaire was so far away that he could not hear.

"There is something peculiar about him," another said.

"He is a boaster, a braggart, a good-for-nothing!" declared Baptiste Navet. "I have been studying how best to handle him."

"I would not be a panther and attempt to spring upon him," one advised.

"Dry brush in place of green!" said another, and though the men chuckled, Navet did not spring upon the speaker.

"It is this way," the bully said. "The man affronts all of us. Whence he came, we know not. Neither do we know his real object here, though he has said he came to work. He does not show the proper spirit of humility that would be expected of a newcomer. The time will come when he must be taught a lesson. I placed the traps in the woods—but it was only to ascertain whether he was green to the forest and its ways."

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Baptiste Navet puffed at his pipe then, and all the men looked at one another and told themselves that the bully lied. However, it was none of their business. Louis Grantaire had not affronted any of them, and until he did they would not concern themselves with him.

Beyond the light of the fire there was some small commotion at that moment, and an Indian runner appeared, breathing heavily. He glanced over the men, and then approached Baptiste Navet and handed him a folded piece of paper.

“From Pierre, on the river above,” he said.

Baptiste motioned the runner to seat himself before the fire, and then stretched the bit of paper out. Pierre was a bully like himself, and dominated the next camp. Seldom did he write, except, at the close of the season, to know at what time Baptiste was going to journey to the distant town. And this was but the commencement of the season, so Baptiste was a little apprehensive as he looked at the letter.

He read the message slowly by the light of the fire, and the men who watched saw his pipe drop from between his lips, and his black brows contract.

“Here we have it, bullies!” he cried presently. “Here is your answer to all questions concerning this newcomer to Bossuet. He has but left Pierre’s camp. Listen to what Pierre has to say!”

And then he read the letter:

“BAPTISTE NAVET (IN BOSSUET’S):

“Strange things are happening in the forests, and it is well for you to be put upon your guard. There has been a man going about the camps who calls himself the breaker of brutes. He is tall and strong and can fight like a wildcat. He makes it his business to get a job and search out the camp bully, and then he tries to conquer and cripple him. When asked his reasons, he says nothing except that bullies should be driven from the woods. It is right for a man to fight when he had a grievance, he says, but wrong for a bully to beat up men merely because they resent his leadership.

“This man has come from the head of the river, and the Indians say he has beaten all the best men and driven them away. I admit with shame that he conquered me yesterday. He humbled me before the men, and when you read this I shall be on my way out of the woods, for I am ashamed to remain.

“This man is going in your direction, and mayhap he will stop at Bossuet. Look to yourself. Conquer him, mark him well, and I am your friend for life, and whatever I have is yours. He calls himself Louis Grantaire.”

Baptiste Navet finished reading the letter and looked up into the wondering faces of the men.

“So that is the way of it!” he cried.

“This man hopes to whip all bullies that he may be the greatest bully of all himself. He has conquered my good friend, Pierre. Now, this man shall clash with me! On the morrow I shall stand up to him—I swear it! We shall see then of what stuff he is made!”

At that moment, Louis Grantaire stalked from the edge of the woods and walked toward the bunk-house. He did not look toward the fire, but all the men there knew that he had heard.

CHAPTER VI. FLIGHT.

FOR a time Baptiste Navet sat and stared into the fire, speaking no further word, and then he arose, knocked the hot ashes from his pipe, and beckoned to the Indian runner.

With the native following at his heels, Baptiste led the way down to the river, and there he motioned for the runner to sit down again, since what he had to say would take some little time in the telling.

“You are ready to take several journeys for me, if the payment is satisfactory?” Baptiste Navet asked.

“Um!” the Indian grunted, which might have meant either an agreement or disagreement, whichever happened to be proper. Baptiste took it in this instance for agreement.

“You have heard tales of this brute-breaker?” he asked.

“Um!”

“Does that mean that you have?”

“Um!”

“I suppose you have, then. Is it true that he has made his way down the river from camp to camp, and that in each camp he has whipped the best man and shamed him and driven him from the woods?”

“Um!”

“Your mother should have taught you that a wise man does not let his tongue run away with him,” said Baptiste, who had a small sense of humor at times. “Have you heard what became of the bullies this brute-breaker whipped?”

The Indian pulled his blanket closer about his shoulders, took a deep breath and straightened himself somewhat. He threw out one arm as if in gesture, and Baptiste Navet thought that now would words pour from the native’s lips.

“No!” the Indian said, and composed himself again.

“If I send you back up the river can you get help, and in some manner find all of these beaten bullies and hand them a message from me?”

“Um!”

“Then pay close attention, and if you carry out my orders you will have such gorgeous blankets and new rifles and knives that every young squaw in the north country will make eyes at you and want to cook your food.”

“Um!”

“You will start immediately and

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

make all haste to the first camp up the river. Start there on the trail of my friend, Pierre, if he already has departed, and find him. Before you do that, send some blood-brother of yours on up the river, and have him send another, and so forth. All of these beaten bullies must be found, and to each of them must be given my message."

"Um!"

"On second thought, the message shall be by word of mouth, for a written one might be lost. And these words shall constitute the message, talkative one: 'The brute-breaker is at Bossuet's. Baptiste Navet asks you to come quickly and take your vengeance.' You understand that?"

"Um!"

"Repeat the message."

"Brute-breaker at Bossuet's—come quickly—take vengeance—um!"

"If that message is not delivered properly the woods will not prove wide enough to hide you from punishment. It is well that you understand that. If you do your work well, return to me here and take the honorable word of Baptiste Navet that you shall have blankets and tobacco, a new rifle and knife, and possibly—if you are careful—a flask of firewater. Go!"

"Um!" exclaimed the runner.

He stood up and lowered his blanket and bound it about his waist. He nodded to Baptiste Navet, swung his elbows into his sides, and flashed from view

like a shadow, running evenly and swiftly up the river.

Baptiste waited a moment after the man had gone, and then made his way back to the fire, where the other men remained sitting. He took his place among them.

"This Louis Grantaire?" he asked.

"Remains in the bunk-house," one answered.

"I have thought of a better plan than standing up before him on the morrow and testing his mettle. This man has humbled certain friends of mine, and of yours, since they are loyal men of the woods. I have sent word by the Indian that the men he has beaten are to gather here, and when they have arrived we shall have some sport with this fellow who calls himself the brute-breaker."

"Then you do not fight him to-morrow?" asked a man who had hoped to see a battle.

"Not to-morrow. I owe it to my friends to await their arrival. You understand, and you will do your utmost to keep this man and me from coming to blows until the proper time. There are many ways in which you can prevent him coming in close contact with me. Do you understand? And let it be understood that this postponement is not because I fear the man! Does any one here believe that I fear him?"

No matter what they thought, none there would say as much, of course, since Baptiste Navet had thrashed all of them easily, and could do it again if

occasion required.

"It is well," said Baptiste Navet; and he loaded his pipe again, and lighted it with a coal from the fire, and stretched himself on the ground to rest.

Some of the men repaired to the bunk-house after that, and later more of them went, and still more, until Navet was alone before the fire. Presently he knocked out his pipe and went to the bunk-house himself, and straight to his bunk in the corner of it. Already the men were snoring.

Break of day found them rolling from their blankets, a laughing, joking crew that raced to the river and plunged their heads into the ice-cold water, with thoughts of nothing save breakfast. When they rushed upon the rough tables heaped high with food, Baptiste Navet was careful to get near one end, far from where Louis Grantaire would sit. He did not see the man when first he glanced around, and a moment later was attacking the food before him.

They ate like hungry wolves, these men of the woods, talking with their mouths filled with food with a fine disregard of table niceties. With them eating was the act of sustaining life, and meal-time was not the time for social intercourse.

It was only when they had finished and were getting ready to follow the trail into the forest that it was noticed Louis Grantaire was not one of them.

Now that it was mentioned, no man could be found who had seen him at the

morning meal. One was sent to the bunk-house to call him to work, and returned with the intelligence that his bunk was bare of blankets, and that the man was gone.

There was a quick search conducted then. They found that the canoe of Louis Grantaire was gone also, and marks in the sand on the shore told plainly that it had been launched some time during the night.

Word of the matter was carried to Jacques Bossuet, who came and made an investigation himself. And then the camp was looked over generally, not that it was actually believed Louis Grantaire might be a thief who had taken things, but it was best to make sure. He was an unknown, when all was said.

Nothing of value was missing, however, except a small quantity of provisions.

"For some reason, the man has gone on down the river," Bossuet declared. "He came to us through the rapids deserted of God, had some sport, and worked for a day, and hurried on. How can we know his motives?"

"Perhaps fear caused him to leave," Baptiste Navet insinuated.

"Fear?"

"Here is a letter, m'sieu', received by me last night from my friend, Pierre. After reading it, I made mention that to-day I would stand before this man and see of what stuff he was made. The others will bear witness that he

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

overheard my words. Perhaps he slipped away in the night because he feared to clash with me.”

“It is possible,” Jacques Bossuet admitted, though he looked as though he doubted it considerably. “Well, let us go to our work! Must the getting out of logs cease because a stranger has come and tarried a while and gone?”

Annette had seen the men crowded around the bunk-house, and knew that something unusual had happened, and now she came down among them to hear the story. It was Annette who first thought of Jean, remembering that he had clung close to Louis Grantaire since his arrival.

She voiced her fears, and again a search was made, this time for the boy, while Jacques Bossuet cursed beneath his breath because it was keeping the men from their work. No trace of Jean could be found, and it was Annette who discovered that the blankets she had given him were gone.

An old Indian was called, and the matter explained to him, and he spent a time in silence on the bank of the river, looking at marks the other men could not see. And finally he made his report.

“Boy go with stranger man,” he said. “Tracks show that. They go down river in canoe.”

“But why should he take Jean the Cripple with him?” Annette asked; and no man there had answer for her.

“He was afraid, and he ran away!” Baptiste Navet boasted. “That shows

what sort of a man he is! Brute-breaker he called himself, eh? Name of a name!”

He led the way into the woods, laughing his loudest, and Annette Bossuet stood near the shore of the river looking at the place where Louis Grantaire’s canoe had been. She could not understand the feeling that took possession of her now. At first she was ashamed, because she felt that it was interest in the stranger, and then she told herself that it was because Jean the Cripple was gone.

She asked herself what interest a wanderer of the forest could have in a cripple boy, and could think of no appropriate answer. The stranger was most mysterious, she decided. And he had danced with her forcibly, and had kissed her hand, and had declared that some day there might be love between them.

“I hate him!” the girl told herself.

She wondered whether it was fear of Baptiste Navet that had driven him away. If that were true, then she would despise him so much that she could not even honor him with hatred.

And then another thought came to her. Had Louis Grantaire gone away because she had told him he was not to speak to her again unless she asked it? Being a woman, the thought pleased her at first, until she considered the possibility that he had taken Jean with him by the way of revenge. Perhaps he had guessed that Annette loved little

Jean.

"I hate him!" she told herself again; and she wondered when she spoke whether that was a falsehood and she should tell the priest about it.

CHAPTER VII. A BROKEN LEG.

BEFORE the noon meal, Baptiste Navet had impressed upon all of the crew that he had driven the brute-breaker away. It was necessary, while this was being accomplished, to beat up two men who expressed disbelief in their countenances, but Jacques Bossuet said nothing about it when he arrived with the cook and the food-wagon. It was right, according to the rules of the forest, that one man should show his superiority and dominate. Then, as long as the superintendent ruled the bully, discipline could be maintained. It also was true that a bully, to be a good one, should outdo the others at work as well as at fighting, all of which went to swell the season's cutting and impress the distant and somewhat mysterious M. Pretot with the superintendent's value.

Annette did not make the trip to the woods this day, for she was seeking at Bossuet's some clue as to why Louis Grantaire had taken Jean with him; and so Baptiste Navet looked for her in vain. He was eager to explain to her that he had frightened away the man who called himself the brute-breaker and had

whipped some of the best men in the woods, and that, therefore, he must be considered quite superior even to other bullies.

It was after the men had finished eating and had gone to work again that Navet approached Jacques Bossuet.

"I would like a word, m'sieu'," he said.

"A score, Baptiste."

"It is concerning your daughter, Annette."

"Well?" Bossuet asked, looking away through the trees.

"Any man could have told this long time since, that I have been greatly interested in her. I have been with you several years, and you know what manner of man I am. Could you look with favor upon me as a son-in-law?"

"That is a broad question, m'sieu'," Bossuet replied. "Would it not be more to the point to ask whether my daughter would look upon you with favor as a husband?"

"Women are peculiar animals," Baptiste explained. "There are times when they believe they know their own minds and do not. There is a strain in them, I have understood, that calls for a lot of foolishness prior to mating. You have been a married man, and no doubt you know."

"And if it is true?"

"I cannot make pretty speeches, m'sieu', but I can make a woman's living. Once wedded to me, your daughter no doubt would be content. It

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

needs a strong man to tell her what she must do."

"Well?"

"You are a strong man, m'sieu'. Were you to tell her she must go to the priest with me, she would prepare instantly for the journey."

"In such a thing as this, I would rather my daughter had her own pleasure," Bossuet said.

"Then I may not have her for wife?"

"If you win her, m'sieu'. You cannot win a woman by fighting her with your fists and putting your boot-calks into her pretty face. And each man, be he of the right sort, wins his own woman, m'sieu'. Only a weakling asks another man to aid him."

Baptiste Navet's face flushed darkly and his hands clenched at his sides. But he remembered that this was the superintendent before him, and were he to start an assault every man in the woods would turn upon him.

"Then I can expect no help from you?" he asked, bluntly.

"If you want her, you must win her," Bossuet said. "Let that be understood between us. And at all times you are to remember that she is my daughter and must be treated with the utmost respect."

Then Jacques Bossuet turned away abruptly without another word and told the cook to prepare for the return to the river.

Navet returned to the cutting, and his mood was so ugly that men remained

away from his vicinity. He soon worked off his great anger, however, and when time came for the day's work to end, he had decided that Bossuet had spoken the truth. Perhaps it was true that every man must win his woman in his own way. He would have liked to have had the thing settled without botheration, looking upon the business of marriage as no more than that of cutting a tree, all in the day's work. But if a man must pay court, then he would do so, he decided, though it looked foolish to other men. One consolation he had—no man would dare laugh at him.

But a man may not change his character in an instant without becoming ridiculous to those who know him. For Baptiste Navet to be polite and ape the actions and words of a gentleman was for the world to come to an end. Yet he tried.

Being a woman, Annette Bossuet sensed the fact that the man was trying to give the impression that he had changed, and sensed also the reason. She choked back the laughter when Baptiste Navet attempted to talk in calm tones, and tried to handle himself with gentleness. Day followed day in this manner, and Baptiste felt that he was making small progress. Annette Bossuet weighed only a hundred pounds, and surely a big bully had no need to be afraid of her, yet Baptiste feared to ask the question that always was on the tip of his tongue and had to be swallowed and choked back repeatedly. He did not

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

know what a psychological moment was, but he knew he had not encountered one.

At the end of a week, Pierre appeared. The Indian runner had followed swiftly at his heels and finally had overtaken him and urged him to return. Baptiste Navet met him with the news that the brute-breaker had run away, and insinuated that it was through fear of him. The implication was that Baptiste was a better man than Pierre, and the crew almost saw a wonderful fight.

At the end of ten days, two more defeated bullies arrived from up the river. They cursed roundly when they found that their intended prey had flown, and because they were too ashamed to return to their own camps and face the men, they remained at Bossuet's, and hired out, and went into the woods to work, which pleased Bossuet immensely, since all were choice workmen.

But four bullies cannot live in the same camp, unless they have a common object of hatred, without coming to blows sooner or later. There is the question of superiority that must be settled, for it is proper that a realm have only one king, though there may be many pretenders.

Besides Baptiste and Pierre, there were Edouard Norres and Roland Leblanc, each having been a king in his own camp, and it was no more than human that they should spit at one

another. Jacques Bossuet knew the situation well, but held his tongue, for talking did no good in such matters.

Two more weeks passed, Louis Grantaire having been gone almost a month now and being only a mere hated memory. There was a deal of rain, which made the woods miserable. And on a certain night great logs were heaped on the fire down by the river, so that the men could dry out their clothing.

Nerves were on edge because of the bad weather; and the odor of steaming clothes is not conducive to peace and contentment. Leblanc, making his way around the fire, knocked Navet's coat into it.

It was an accident, of course, and at any other time and under different conditions would have amounted to nothing. But Baptiste Navet sprang to his feet with an oath on his lips, and rescued the garment from the flames, which Leblanc had failed to do, and hurled a curse after the man who had knocked it into the fire.

Leblanc turned with a snarl upon his lips.

"Such a great man, who chases away a brute-breaker, needs no coat," he said.

"At least the brute-breaker did not break me before he left," Navet replied. "I am not ashamed to face the men of my crew. There are others who cannot say the same."

"Do you refer to me, m'sieu'?" demanded Norres, before Leblanc could

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

make a reply, he being slow of wit. The voice of Norres was like ice, and held a warning.

"I refer to any who please to think it so," Baptiste Navet declared. "I choose not my words to suit any newcomer to this camp."

"Words have been eaten before now," Norres told him.

"Not when you held the spoon, m'sieu'!" Navet exclaimed.

"Some words mean battle."

"Battle?" Baptiste sneered. "Who here cares to give me battle? Surely not rabbits who run from a so-called brute-breaker!"

It was the necessary phrase. Burning logs and hot ashes flew to the four quarters as Norres hurled himself across the fire. He was a bit quicker than Leblanc. His swinging fist caught Baptiste Navet on the shoulder, so that the man was whirled halfway around; and then they were in each other's arms.

In a flash of time, the crew had formed a great circle, with the two combatants in the middle of it. At first they were voiceless, for this was an unusual battle, and word often had come down the river of the great strength of Edouard Norres. They were loyal to their home camp, of course, and hoped that Baptiste Navet would win for the glory of Bossuet's, though many of them disliked him, yet they knew that the winning would be no easy task.

For a moment the two men strained their muscles, and then Navet threw his

adversary from him, and they rushed forward and clashed again. But this time there was no attempt to clinch. Face to face they stood, and began the exchange of blows, their great fists hammering at each other, trying to break through a guard, endeavoring to smash against a sneering mouth.

Both men were marked in that first two minutes of fighting, yet so great was the endurance of each that the marks amounted to nothing. They hammered each other's heads, breasts, backs, and now and then they separated for an instant as if by mutual consent, only to rush forward again and continue the battle.

The blood flowed hot in the veins of the watchers now, and cries began to ring out on the night air. There were shrieks for Baptiste Navet to make an end of it, nor did Edouard Norres lack backers, for the two other bullies Navet had been baiting had small love for him now, not even his old friend Pierre.

Once Navet went down, but he was up before Norres could take advantage of his fall. Twice they fought across the fire, scattering the brands and embers, and not seeming to care that their boots were burned and the bottoms of their pantaloons on fire.

And then they were nearer the bunkhouse, for Edouard Norres was giving ground. He had broken a fist, but the men did not know that, and every heavy blow he gave hurt him as much as it did the other man. And after a time he

tripped and fell, and Baptiste Navet was upon him.

But he had no chance to appease his wrath by the use of his boot-calks, for Leblanc finally was in action, and he stepped over Norres's prostrate body and faced the victor.

"You answer to me now!" he cried. "You use no boots on the face of my friend. You are scarcely winded, and so we shall fight!"

Baptiste Navet accepted the challenge as quickly as it had been given. Leblanc, in his first great rush, drove him back as far as the fire, and Pierre roared his glee. The men were shrieking and shouting by now, and the noise carried to the Bossuet cabin, and Jacques Bossuet heard. He got up from his supper-table quickly and hurried down to the fire.

He made no attempt to interfere in the business, of course, for it is the code of the woods that men be allowed to fight their battles to an end, but he watched closely, and questioned a man who stood near him.

Navet was in a rage now, and the stolid Leblanc was fighting carefully and with considerable cunning. Blows thudded against bruised flesh, breath was expelled in grunts. There was no science in this battle, only a display of brute force.

They clinched, and separated again, and for an instant Leblanc had the advantage. Baptiste Navet darted two paces to one side, where the footing was

better and the light from the fire would not be in his eyes, and as one of Leblanc's fists crashed against his breast, he fell.

There came a roar of triumphant rage from Leblanc as he charged forward, but Jacques Bossuet was before him and waved him back. Bossuet had noticed the twinge of pain that had crossed Navet's face, and had guessed that all was not well.

"My leg," Navet said, as the superintendent looked down at him, holding Leblanc behind him. "The bone is broken, m'sieu'."

Bossuet's examination was swift and left no room for doubt.

"Navet's leg is broken," he said, turning to the others. "This is a delicate business. According to the rules, I should stand back and let the victor work his will with this injured man. But the injury did not come because of the victor's strength, and it is my judgment that the quarrel end now, and be renewed, if it is necessary, after the leg had healed."

"The judgment is good," Leblanc said, and turned away.

There was no doctor, of course, and there was small need for one. Baptiste Navet was carried to the bunk-house, and Jacques Bossuet set the leg and bound it in splints, and assigned one of the Indians to watch the patient for fever. And within the hour Navet was puffing at his pipe and laughing and talking with all of them, and promising

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

what he should do to Leblanc and Edouard Norres and Pierre when his leg was healed.

And in the morning, after the crew had gone into the woods, the brute-breaker returned!

CHAPTER VIII. THE RETURN.

AN old Indian, pottering around the huge piles of wood, saw him first, and grunted to himself by way of comment. Jacques Bossuet, walking across the clearing, saw him at almost the same instant.

Louis Grantaire was paddling slowly against the current, and his canoe was low in the water, as if he carried many provisions. He drove it near the shore, where the pull of the water was not so strong, and so came to the place where he had landed that day after his journey through the rapids.

He sprang to ground, and pulled the canoe from the water, and then stood up and glanced around the clearing and the camp.

"Good morning, m'sieu'," he called, when he saw the superintendent.

"Why did you return?" Bossuet asked.

"Your camp pleases me."

"But perhaps your presence in it does not please me. Have you ever taken that into account, m'sieu'? You hire out to me as one of my crew, and

then you slip away in the night, taking some of my provisions—"

"As to that, here is gold to more than doubly pay you for the provisions I took," Louis Grantaire replied. "It was necessary, I assure you, that I leave as I did. Let us say no more about it."

"No more about it!" sputtered Bossuet. "Do you think I am so lax in discipline? Do you imagine a man may come and go here as he fancies, work when he wills, and rest when he is of that mind? How could I ever get out the logs for M. Pretor?"

"It is a pity," Louis Grantaire observed. "Did not the bullies come, then? I had imagined two or three bullies could do as much work as I could do alone."

"Ah! So you did run away because you were afraid of Baptiste Navet and his friends!"

"Careful, m'sieu'! I am not in the habit of allowing the taint of cowardice to cling to my name."

"What else am I to think from your actions?"

"Think what you please, m'sieu', so long as it is not that!"

"Do you care to say where you have been this month?"

"I do not, m'sieu'. My business is my own."

"And why have you returned?"

"I like the country."

"And what have you done with Jean the Cripple?" Bossuet demanded suddenly.

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

“Neither does that concern you, m’sieu’, if you force me to say it!”

“Does not concern me? The father of Jean was my close friend, and I knew his mother. Both have passed on now. I held myself responsible for Jean.”

“Were you holding yourself responsible for the boy when you allowed Baptiste Navet to make his life a sorrow? Did you ever wonder whether he had a tender heart? Did you not think him a nuisance at times because of his crooked leg?”

“You have not answered my question, m’sieu’. I asked what you have done with the boy.”

“I cannot say at present, m’sieu’. But I give you my word of honor that he has come to no harm.”

“Bah! Your word of honor!”

“I do not like your tone, Jacques Bossuet! Is my honor in question?”

“I must insist that you say what has become of Jean. My daughter grieved when he went away.”

“For that, I am indeed sorry. You may say to Mlle. Bossuet for me that the boy is well and happy, and will return some day. I would tell her as much myself, but she has forbidden me to speak to her unless she requests me to do so.”

“She is a sensible girl,” Bossuet observed.

A serious look came into Louis Grantaire’s face then, and he took a step nearer the superintendent.

“I want you to believe me,” he said,

“when I say that it was necessary for me to leave when I did, and that Jean is in no trouble. And I request, also, that you ask no questions at this time.”

“I cannot make the arrangement,” Bossuet said. “You must tell me what has become of the boy.”

“If I refuse, m’sieu’?”

“I shall hold you to account.”

“In what manner?”

“We shall see about that later. Because this is the woods, you cannot steal boys and escape the consequences.”

Louis Grantaire threw back his head and allowed the laughter to roar from his throat, and Bossuet’s face flushed with anger, for he felt sure Grantaire was laughing at him.

“Is it true that you call yourself the brute-breaker?” he asked, presently.

“Yes; it is, m’sieu’. I knew that Baptiste Navet had word of it the night I left.”

“Is that why you left?”

“I have warned you once about such sentiments, m’sieu’. Do not presume too much on your age!” Grantaire thundered.

“And by what right do you go through the woods beating up honest men?”

“Is it not the rule of the woods that a man can fight whom he will to show his mastery? Do you stop brawls at Bossuet? Do you not allow your bully to beat up every newcomer, and is it not always the hope that the bully will be

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

vanquished and a new champion rise in his stead?"

"But you have gone from camp to camp."

"I found only one worthy man in each, and they were not so very worthy. How many bullies are here now, by the way, waiting for a chance at me?"

"There are a few," Bossuet admitted.

"Do you expect me to stand still while they beat me?"

"I expect nothing of the sort, for you are not going to remain here and fight with them."

"How is that, m'sieu'?"

"I have no work for you."

"I have food and money, and the woods are broad. I do not need your work, m'sieu'."

"You cannot remain here."

"I can go a few feet away, and your authority ceases."

"The land and the timber belong to M. Pretot."

"And I shall leave when M. Pretot tells me to do so, and not before," Grantaire declared.

"Why should you wish to remain?"

"And that, m'sieu', is my personal business."

"I warn you that you shall answer for the kidnaping of Jean the Cripple."

"Thanks for your warning. And I warn you, and your men, that I shall protect myself at all times. Convey that intelligence to Baptiste Navet."

"He lies in his bunk with a broken leg."

"Then there is all the more reason why I should remain near Bossuet. I cannot fight a crippled man."

Grantaire turned back to his canoe, launched it, and paddled on up the river, to turn toward the bank again when he had gone a matter of two hundred yards. There he landed, and began unloading his provisions. He sang as he worked, and Jacques Bossuet could hear him above the roaring of the stream.

Bossuet admitted to himself that he could not understand the man, and was troubled greatly because of Jean the Cripple. There appeared to be some mystery about this self-styled brute-breaker that could not be fathomed at present.

Bossuet walked slowly back across the clearing to his cabin, and the old Indian told other Indians what had happened. Thus it came to the ears of Baptiste Navet as he puffed at his pipe in his bunk and wished that his leg would mend more rapidly.

"Name of a name!" Navet cried. "He has returned, eh, and I am here with a broken leg! May Heaven grant that he remain in the vicinity until I am able to stand up to him! The bullies must keep their hands off; he belongs to me!"

Word of the arrival was carried through the woods to the crew, too, and that afternoon there was not the usual amount of work, because of so much talking. Norres and Pierre and Leblanc all had a score to settle with this man. Each knew he could not hope to settle it

alone, and so they decided to join forces. There was no question of being fair—the man had to be punished, crippled, driven from the woods as an example of what happened when the will of bullies was disregarded. For this man to leave unscathed would mean that there was an end of the old order of things.

Jacques Bossuet did not keep the news from Annette, of course, and asked her why she had forbidden Louis Grantaire to speak to her, and was told that the man had been insolent, but not insolent enough to warrant punishment at the hands of her father and his men.

Annette listened with wonder while Jacques Bossuet recited the brute-breaker's words concerning Jean the Cripple, and felt a little fear for the boy.

After a time she went out into the clearing and looked up the boiling river. Louis Grantaire, she found, had built his camp not far back from the stream, and about two hundred yards away. His provisions were unpacked, and his fire was going, and his canoe was turned upside down a short distance from the river, which showed that he was settled for some little time.

Annette debated with herself for some minutes, but her anxiety for the welfare of Jean overcame all other feeling, and finally she walked rapidly along the edge of the woods toward the brute-breaker's camp, being sure that she could not be seen from the house, for she feared that her father would stop

her.

Louis Grantaire was busy eating a fish when she appeared before him. She glanced around his camp quickly, and told herself that here was a man used to the woods and its ways; but she tried to have a sneer on her lips when she spoke.

"My father told me that you had returned. Will you let me know what you have done with Jean the Cripple?"

Louis Grantaire did not even look up, but continued eating his fish; and when he had finished he attacked another one.

"I can understand why you ran away," she said, "being afraid of Baptiste Navet, but I cannot understand why you have dared return."

She had the satisfaction of seeing his face flush at that remark, and he raised his head and looked at her straight, and then past her at the woods, and then went on eating his second fish.

"Have you a tongue in your head? Have you lost your wits?" she demanded now. "Is this a new sample of insolence?"

He seemed about to reply, but choked back the words. Annette Bossuet stamped a tiny foot and glared at him, and bit her lip because of her anger. She would have liked to have turned her back upon him and gone away, but she wanted to find out about Jean.

"What did you do with Jean?" she demanded angrily.

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Still there was no reply. Louis Grantaire had finished eating the fish, and he got up and walked to the edge of the river and washed his cooking things, and dried them, and hung them up. He hummed as he worked, and acted as if no human being other than himself was within a thousand miles.

“Are you going to answer me?” she cried. “Do you not know that I hate you? Cannot you see that I despise you? Are you going to tell me what has become of Jean?”

One of the Indians came through the woods at that moment, and Louis Grantaire called to him.

“Do you wish some food?”

“Um!”

“Then do as I say. Stand here beside me, and tell this young lady that it grieves me I cannot reply to her questions, but that I am ordered by her not to speak unless she asks it direct.”

The Indian gazed from one to the other of them in astonishment, not knowing what to make of it, and wondering why the man did not tell the young squaw so himself.

Annette Bossuet felt her face flushing, and her eyes snapped with anger as she gave Louis Grantaire one straight look, for she knew that he was struggling to keep back the laughter. She threw her head up haughtily and turned away, and without a single backward glance she hurried along the bank of the river toward the clearing. Grantaire and the native watched her

go.

“Um!” the Indian said. “Squaw heap mad!”

Louis Grantaire laughed lightly.

“Something seems to tell me that you are right,” he acknowledged.

CHAPTER IX. THE BULLIES DEPART.

ATHIRST for vengeance, Pierre, Norres, and Leblanc came in from the cutting far ahead of the others, having walked swiftly all the way, and hurried to the bunk-house to get confirmation of the rumor of the brute-breaker's return from Baptiste Navet.

Though none would admit it to the others, the return of Louis Grantaire had sent a thrill of anxiety through them all. They were not in the same class as Baptiste Navet; they had met this man, and each one of them had gone down to defeat before him, and had listened to some words of wisdom from him besides.

They remembered, now, what he had told them about getting out of the country. At the time they had been enough fear-stricken to think of nothing else, had not Navet's message recalled them. The brute-breaker's absence had done much to make them forget their fear of him in the last three weeks, but now that he had presented himself on the scene again, they suffered some qualms.

But there was safety in numbers, they conjectured. Louis Grantaire would not be meeting but one of them now. He would be facing combat with at least three; and it would have been four were not Navet stretched in his bunk waiting for his leg to heal. Moreover, they felt no necessity for regarding the courtesies of combat. They were to do away with the brute-breaker—that was all.

It took them only a fraction of an instant to hear from Baptiste's own lips that Grantaire had indeed returned, and in addition he told them how the man had spoken to Jacques Bossuet, and that he was camping a short distance from the clearing, as good as daring any man to send him way.

"And you will not touch him, unless he attempts to leave," Navet ordered. "He is my man. Each of you has stood up to him and been conquered. It is no more than fair that I should have my chance. It is understood?"

"That depends upon how he carries himself," Leblanc growled in reply. "I am for having it over with at once."

"Do you hope to down him and get your boot-calks in his face?" Navet asked. "You did not do it before."

"Even with you in bed, there remain three of us," Norres said.

"What would you do?" Navet demanded.

"It is immaterial; the object is to remove this pest of a man from the woods. A shot from the darkness, a knife in the back—what you will."

"It is not according to the code," Navet said.

"Our future depends upon this man's defeat," Leblanc reminded him.

"Then I ask that you do not touch him now, but watch him. As long as he does not attempt to leave, keep hands off him. He is my man. And when I am upon my feet again I shall face him. If he conquers me, then we shall consider other means."

And so it was arranged, for they felt that Baptiste Navet had some rights in the matter, and the plan was whispered among the men, and arrangements made to watch the brute-breaker day and night, for fear he might take a notion to leave Bossuet.

After the evening meal they scattered themselves around the fire as usual, and far up the river they saw the yellow pinpoint of the brute-breaker's fire, and knew that he was in camp. While the other men smoked their pipes, Leblanc, Pierre, and Norres explained what they would do to this man, if he downed Baptiste as he had the others, and hinted that they might grow tired of waiting and do it anyway.

It was at this juncture that one of the Indians grunted a warning, and they saw the brute-breaker striding straight toward the fire, coming from the shadows at the edge of the clearing. Breathless, they waited to see the object of his visit. He approached until he stood within the circle of bright light, and they saw that the smile was gone

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

from his face, and that a look of grim determination was in its place. Moreover, the unusual pistol swung against his hip, and his right hand was dropped quite near the butt of it.

He swept the gathering with his eyes, and then spoke.

“Leblanc, come here!” he commanded.

A gasp came from the men nearest him, and there was some movement out of his way. Leblanc hung his head sullenly.

“Come!” the brute-breaker commanded again.

Leblanc raised his head, and they could see that his face was almost purple because of his fury and hatred. He got unsteadily to his feet, and shuffled forward until he was within ten feet of Louis Grantaire.

“Well, m’sieu’?” he growled.

“Closer!” Grantaire ordered.

Leblanc growled again, and shrugged his great shoulders, but he stepped closer. And then Louis Grantaire spoke to him in such a low tone that none of the others could hear.

“You will move with more speed after this when I order, or I shall teach you another lesson. What are you doing here at Bossuet?”

“I am at work.”

“You came because Baptiste Navet sent word for you to hasten here and help conquer me, did you not? You hoped to set the calks of your boots in my face! Answer me!”

“Baptiste sent word—yes!”

“Leblanc, you should have had sense enough to know better. I met you in your own camp, and I thrashed you soundly, and then I let you go, when I could have crippled you for life without a man holding me to blame. And what did I tell you then, Leblanc?”

“M’sieu’?”

“I told you that you were whipped because I had heard of your cruelty to other men. It was your custom to pick upon those who could not defend themselves against you, and beat and cripple them. You used to laugh when they cried out in agony. You even slapped Indian women and little girls. For that, I beat you. And then I told you to leave this part of the country, did I not? I said that you could not work in any of M. Pretot’s camps, because I was not pleased to have you.”

“What right have you—” Leblanc began.

“The right of a man who has beaten you, and so by your own code can order you about. If it is necessary for me to teach you another lesson, you’ll walk like a crippled dog the remainder of your days. Now get your blankets—and get out!”

“M’sieu’?”

“You understood me. If you are not gone by morning, I’ll handle you again, Leblanc. Is that understood? And, all your bullying friends will not be able to help you. Do not stop to consider them, for you will stand alone. Remember

what I did before—and go!”

Now their eyes clashed, for Leblanc had some spirit left, but he could not look into those of the brute-breaker without shivering. He seemed to tremble from head to foot, and he looked down at the ground again, and shuffled his feet. And then he turned slowly away and walked toward the bunk-house without speaking a word to any of the others.

There was some slight commotion near the fire, and Norres sprang to his feet, Pierre beside him. Louis Grantaire looked straight across at them for an instant, and his hand gripped the butt of the pistol that swung at his hip. Many men pretended to glance in another direction at that.

“Norres, come here!”

The brute-breaker’s voice rang with anger, and Edouard Norres threw up his head and looked at the man with something of defiance in his manner, but he was trembling for all that, as those nearest him could see.

“Come here, Norres, or I shall come for you!”

Norres sneered openly, as if to show the others that he obeyed this man because it pleased him to do so, and not through any fear of him, and swaggered around the fire until he stood within a pace of the brute-breaker.

“Well, m’sieu’?” he asked, insolently.

“Did I not tell you that you were to work at no camp of M. Pretot? And I

understand that you are working here!”

“You are not king of the woods,” Norres said.

“Assuredly not, but I am your master. If you doubt it, we shall test my mastery now.”

His words were loud enough for all to hear, and those about the fire expected Edouard Norres to reply with a blow from one of his great fists. But Norres seemed to shrink and shrivel before the gaze of the other, and made no violent move.

“I beat you once,” said Louis Grantaire, “and for a very good reason. You maltreated an infirm man because he objected to your attentions to his daughter. That was unworthy of a woodsman, Norres, and so I taught you your lesson and bade you leave this part of the country. Yet here you are!”

“A man must work.”

“You have a canoe, blankets, a rifle. You can travel to some other part of the country. The clean, pure woods shall not be sullied by the presence of such as you. Take your things, and go. If you are at this camp in the morning, I shall call you to account!”

Norres raised his head as if to reply, and his fists twitched at his sides, but after hesitating a moment he turned and walked away. The men scattered around the fire marveled at such a thing. Was the man’s blood water, they asked one another? Was it possible a bully could endure an affront like that without giving a blow.

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

“Pierre!” Louis Grantaire’s voice called out now.

“Well?” Pierre sneered.

“Come here!”

“Suppose I do not care to take the trouble?” Pierre said, giving the brute-breaker a black look.

Louis Grantaire was across the fire in one great leap, and he had Pierre by the collar of his shirt, and was shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. His eyes blazed into those of the bully, who made not the slightest effort to strike.

“Must I teach you yet another lesson?” the brute-breaker asked. “I say to you as I have said to the others—you must be gone in the morning. You pollute the clean woods while you remain in them. Why did I beat you down and shame you before the men your own camp, not even giving you the doubtful honor of a calk-mark on the face? Because you ill-treated native men and were not a man where their women were concerned! I say to you, and to all these men here, as I have said to the other bullies—a great man’s strength is God-given for good purposes. It should make him a protector of the weak, and not an assailant of them. And those who misuse their strength should be punished. That is my creed. That is why I break brutes.”

Pierre crept back a few steps, and those about the fire stirred a bit and looked up at Louis Grantaire.

“It is not seemly that a man should

make others call him master,” he went on, “but it is necessary at times. When a man misuses his God-given strength he should be shown the error of his ways. Perhaps you wonder concerning my importance that I should take upon myself this lesson-giving. If so, you must wait until another time for your answer. You men would do well to see that these others quit Bossuet. They contaminate you with their presence, for you are honest and hardworking and true men of the woods.”

Then Louis Grantaire turned his back, showing he felt not a particle of fear, and walked deep into the shadows, and so disappeared. There were few words spoken until they saw his distant fire flare up, and knew that he was at his camp again and had flung fresh fuel on the embers.

Even then little was said concerning his visit and what had transpired, but many a man sitting near the fire remarked to himself that the brute-breaker had certainly put the fear of the hereafter in the hearts of the bullies, and by that token must be somewhat of a man!

The members of the crew remained away from the bunk-house for the time being, for the bullies had gone there, and they were bad men to face now, when an ill-chosen word might bring forth a blow.

Inside the long, low cabin, three men were gathered around the bunk of Navet.

"You do not understand," Norres said.

"No, m'sieu', and my good friend, you do not understand," added Pierre, shaking his head.

"Are you men?" Baptiste demanded. "Do you run and jump over a stick when this brute-breaker snaps his fingers? Do you roll up your blankets and quit good work and fine grub because he demands it? I certainly cannot understand that."

"The man is not human," Leblanc offered. "Have you ever heard of me refusing to face a man before?"

"Is this one so great, then?" Baptiste sneered.

"Listen, m'sieu', and my very good friend," Pierre put in. "This man has a different way with him. You cannot understand the ignominy of it! It is not that he merely beats one's face and breast and hurls him to the ground; he breaks a man's spirit also. I know, m'sieu'! He had me down, and I waited to feel the calks in my face, but he did not grant me that honor. He pulled me upon my feet and made me fight again, and yet again he hurled me to the ground. Repeatedly, m'sieu', he lifted me up and called me baby, and forced me to fight. He did that until I—I, Pierre, who never before turned from a man—was whimpering like a baby and begging him to let me go. And when he did I crept away like a cur and hid myself in the forest. It was the shame of it—the men watched! I could not hold

up my head. To look into his eyes now, m'sieu', is to remember the feeling I had then. The man is a devil, and you cannot stand up to him!"

"Pierre speaks the truth," Leblanc declared. "I feel ashamed when this man looks at me."

"And I tremble at sight of him," Norres admitted. "It is something that I cannot understand."

"Then you are going to leave?" sneered Baptiste Navet.

"Yes," they answered.

"By Heaven, I wish this leg of mine was healed. A curse on you, Leblanc, for causing its break! When I am whole again, I shall stand up to this brute-breaker and show him what a man can do. He will get no whimper out of me!"

"You do not understand," Norres said. "And you never will understand until he has broken you."

"He shall have the chance when my leg is healed. You are going to-night?"

"Within five minutes," Leblanc said. "We have arranged it. We cannot remain and face such misery again."

"Ah!" Baptiste gasped.

"So you may never be able, Navet, to stand up to this man. The fool sleeps beside a fire a short distance up the river."

"What is the plan?" Navet asked.

"It is not well for any one of us to know too much, then we will not be able to answer questions later if any are asked. One by one we shall leave the bunk-house. To-morrow morning we

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

shall meet at the head of the rapids deserted of God. If anything happens between now and then, who shall say the name of the man that caused it?"

"It is an excellent plan," Baptiste Navet admitted. "But I would rather that you left this brute-breaker to me. In another week, say, I'll be able to walk."

"It will be another month, m'sieu', and my very good friend, before you can put foot to the ground," Pierre told him. "And can we endure to let this Louis Grantaire exist that long?"

There was no more to be said then, for some of the men began approaching the bunk-house to retire for the night. Leblanc threw his blanket roll over one shoulder and slipped out into the shadows, and so was gone. Pierre waited a few minutes, then followed. Edouard Norres filled and lighted his pipe, puffed at it slowly a few times, gripped Baptiste Navet by the hand, and went the way of the other two. The darkness of the forest swallowed them up.

CHAPTER X. EVENTS OF THE NIGHT.

LEBLANC plunged into the dense woods at the edge of the clearing and turned away from the river. He adjusted his pack so that it would not hamper him, and held his rifle in the crook of his right arm.

It had just occurred to Leblanc that

Louis Grantaire had shamed him before all the men of Bossuet, and it did not soothe his troubled breast or ruffled feelings that he had shamed the other bullies also; he told himself that such a thing could be wiped out only in blood, and that his satisfaction would be greater if he did the thing alone.

It had been understood among them that each man was to have a certain amount of time, and Leblanc, being the first to leave the bunk-house, realized that he would have a couple of hours in which to do what he had planned. At the end of that time, if he had not been successful, Pierre would have a chance, and after Pierre, Norres. If all failed, then they would cease to think of self-protection from the law and would combine forces against the brute-breaker.

Leblanc made his way through the woods like a man who knows and understands the forest. Scarcely any noise did he make, though it was so dark that he could not see a pace before him. He seemed to be able to see at night like a wild beast.

When he was some distance from the river, he turned toward the north and traveled parallel to the stream, and so approached the neighborhood of Louis Grantaire's camp. Opposite it, he turned toward the roaring river again.

And as he journeyed his rage at the man increased, until the lust of open murder filled his soul. He no longer thought of fair play; he thought only of

making the brute-breaker pay the price. To his mind there came remembrance of the day when Grantaire had beaten him before the men of his own camp and sent him away, an outcast. He did not trouble to tell himself that he deserved it; such men seldom do. It was not a question of the brute-breaker being in the right; it was only a question of conquering him.

Like a shadow he slipped through the dark woods, and finally came to where he could see the reflection of Grantaire's fire. He was more cautious now, for perhaps the brute-breaker knew the woods well, too, and could detect the presence of a human being even in the silence. He crept through the brush, his rifle held ready, stopping every few feet to listen, and after a time he reached the crest of a little hillock from where he could see the brute-breaker's camp.

Leblanc wondered at Louis Grantaire for a fool. Did the man believe he was safe because he had shamed the bullies before the men of Bossuet? For he had heaped fuel on his fire until the flames danced feet high in the air and made it as light as day for some distance around his camp, and he was stretched on the ground before the blaze, a picture of peace and contentment.

Leblanc stretched himself on the crest of the hillock and estimated the range, which he took to be a hundred yards. He put the rifle in front of him,

and glanced at the distant camp. He shivered a bit through fear, and tried to tell himself that it was not fear of the brute-breaker he felt, but some chagrin at so picking off a defenseless man.

He peered through the sights, but it seemed that his hands trembled and he could not hold the weapon still, and so he cursed softly to himself, and dug rests in the ground, and forced his forearm to be quiet. Once more he glanced through the sights, until the gun was trained on the man before the fire. But it seemed that he was unable to pull the trigger.

He cursed himself again for a weak fool, and tried to think of how the brute-breaker had shamed him, believing that his rage would increase so that he could do this unmanly thing. Once more he looked through the sight—and pulled the trigger.

It seemed to Leblanc that his rifle roared like a great cannon and shattered the silence of the nocturnal forest, sending a million echoes through the woods. It seemed to him that men of law and order in far-away Quebec and Montreal must have heard that shot.

He shivered, and glanced quickly around him into the dark. It was as if he expected an officer to reach out and put hand on his shoulder. But he had seen that body down by the fire jump a short distance from the ground, and he knew that his aim had not failed, and that his shot had gone home.

Fear and dread claimed him for a

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

few minutes, and then he told himself that the brute-breaker was dead and would shame no more bullies, and that there was nothing of which to be afraid. There would be no trouble from the law. Men might make a guess, but they would remain silent. And who was this Louis Grantaire, anyway, but an unknown that perhaps did not have a friend in all the world, and concerning whose disappearance nobody would question?

Leblanc got up, put his pack over his shoulder again, and crept cautiously down the side of the hillock toward the fire. He had a feeling that he wanted to make sure the brute-breaker was dead. If he was, Leblanc wanted to sneer at the dead face contorted with the shock of sudden and unexpected dissolution; and perhaps the soul of Louis Grantaire, hanging about the body, would understand that sneer and Leblanc be avenged the more.

When he had come within fifty yards of the fire, Leblanc stopped. He could see no movement, but he held his rifle ready as he crept on, for he did not wish to find that Louis Grantaire had been playing dead and see him jump up and offer fight.

Seventy-five feet from the fire, he stopped again. For some time he watched, but could detect no move. He began to doubt the wisdom of going nearer. It was enough that the brute-breaker was dead. He would go on to the head of the rapids and wait there for

the other bullies.

Having reached this decision, he turned to continue his journey—and looked into the eyes of Louis Grantaire!

Leblanc uttered a cry of fear and dropped rifle and pack. His knees knocked together, his arms trembled, it seemed as if his breath was choking him. He would have turned and fled, but his feet refused to obey the commands of his mind, and also Louis Grantaire put a hand forward and grasped him by the throat.

“So you have been shooting holes into the dummy I left by the fire, m’sieu’?” Grantaire asked, a cold threat in his voice.

Leblanc made no answer. He knew now that it was not a ghost that confronted him, and realized what mistake he had made, and felt he would rather it had been a ghost than the brute-breaker in the flesh.

“Not only are you a bully who mistreats the helpless,” said Louis Grantaire, “but also you are now a renegade and no true man of the woods, for you have attempted murder from a distance, without standing up to a man and giving him his chance. That means, also, that you are a coward. What punishment shall I give you?”

Leblanc, crazed with fear now, and remembering how this man had handled him before, tried to break away, but Louis Grantaire merely grasped his throat tighter and jerked him forward. Then he struck, with the palm of his

hand, and his fingers cracked again Leblanc's cheek, and the bully went white at the ignominy of it.

"Do you wish to fight me as man to man?" Louis Grantaire demanded.

"N-no, m'sieu'!"

"If I let you go, you will hasten on through the forest and not loiter in the vicinity of Bossuet?"

"Yes, m'sieu'!"

"You realize that you are to leave this part of the country, that you are not to apply for work at any of the camps controlled by M. Pretot?"

"I understand, m'sieu'!"

"Then slink away, and use speed when once you are away from this spot. And to make you remember just what sort of a contemptible thing you are, take these along with you!"

And then Louis Grantaire let go Leblanc's throat, and slapped him first with one hand and then with the other, until Leblanc's head rocked.

"Of course, you will hate me for this," the brute-breaker said, "and I would not have it any other way. It is a compliment for a man to be hated by such as you. Go!"

Leblanc picked up pack and rifle, hung his head, and hurried on through the woods. He heard the brute-breaker's laughter ringing after he had gone.

Pierre heard it, too.

After leaving the bunk-house, Pierre had gone a short distance into the woods, and had stopped beside a creek to wait, according to the arrangement.

The bullies had drawn lots to see which would leave first, and so have the first chance, and Pierre still was surly because he had drawn no better than second.

It was understood that he was to wait for the space of two hours, and so he made himself comfortable and allowed his rage against Louis Grantaire to boil. It seemed an age before he heard Leblanc's shot, and it brought him to his feet instantly, listening.

Leblanc had done the work, he supposed, and he could only glory in the fact that the brute-breaker was dead, and not because he had had any part in it. He swung his pack to his shoulders, picked up his rifle, and started on slowly through the dark woods, intending to reach the head of the rapids as soon as possible.

Then it came to him that it might be pleasant to approach Grantaire's camp and be sure that there was a dead body there. After all, he was not certain that the shot had been fired by Leblanc; perhaps it had been fired by the brute-breaker, and Leblanc now was dead because of it.

He hurried as much as he could without making any noise. He had come to within a hundred yards of Grantaire's fire when he heard the brute-breaker laugh.

Pierre knew that ringing laugh, for it was one of victory, of triumph, and he had heard it before. It seemed to freeze the blood in his veins; yet it meant that

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Leblanc had failed, and that there still was a possible chance for Pierre to have vengeance.

He went forward until he could see the leaping fire, and what he took to be Louis Grantaire stretched beside it. As Leblanc had done, he wondered at the foolhardiness of the man to keep so in the light. He lowered his rifle and glanced through the sights, and then decided that he wanted to get nearer, so that there would be no danger of missing. It had been whispered that Grantaire was swift and sure with the pistol that swung at his hip.

On he went through the woods, getting more toward the river so that the reflection of the flames would not be in his eyes. He knelt and aimed carefully, and his finger touched the trigger, ready to press it and send the bullet on its way.

But the shot never was fired. Two hands came out of the darkness, and one of them grasped the rifle and tore it away, and the other clasped Pierre's throat. He tried to spring to his feet, a sudden fit of fear upon him, but could not.

"So you, too, have turned murderer!" Louis Grantaire's voice came out of the dark.

Pierre struggled to get up, and a strong arm aided him. And then a fist crashed into his face, and he struck out wildly, but seeming to hit nothing except thin air. Repeatedly he felt blows on his face, and on his breast. Then

came a severe, ringing slap.

The brute-breaker seized him and pulled him through the brush until they reached a spot where there was some light.

"So you would murder me?" he said.

"Did you not shoot Leblanc?"

"I did not. Leblanc shot at the dummy by the fire, and afterward I found him in the woods. I slapped his face and sent him on his way, as I shall slap yours. Do you want to stand up to me again as man to man?"

Pierre did not. Once before he had known the anguish of it, the deep misery of a broken and defeated man. And in his heart he knew that there was no possibility of beating Louis Grantaire. The man was too strong, and too clever with his fists; and this time Grantaire might not neglect to use his boot-calks.

"On your way!" the brute-breaker exclaimed. "Remember, I can see in the dark. Do not loiter around my camp, nor around Bossuet. Leave the clean woods, for you defile them. Go!"

And Pierre went, vowing vengeance in his heart and knowing at the same time that he did not have the courage to take it, nor the ability. He shouldered his pack, and once he sobbed, and then he found the path that led to the carry around the rapids, and rushed up it as if he had seen a ghost. He did not pretend to understand the feeling that possessed him; he knew only that, for the time being, he wanted to get as far from

Louis Grantaire as possible.

Edouard Norres, of course, did not know these things. Crouched in the woods awaiting his turn, he, too, had heard Leblanc's shot, and afterward the brute-breaker's laughter. He puffed at his pipe and wondered whether Leblanc was dead, and whether Pierre, in his turn, had attacked and overcome the brute-breaker, and if he would have a chance himself to even accounts with the man.

When the proper time arrived, he left his place of seclusion and slipped quietly through the woods toward Louis Grantaire's fire. He, too, saw the dummy, and since it did not move, he believed it to be the dead body of Grantaire, and imagined that Pierre had succeeded with the knife where Leblanc had failed with a rifle.

Determined to make sure, he circled the fire, dropped his pack on the ground and approached, his rifle held in readiness. The dummy was in such a position that he could not see the face, and he began to feel sure that here was stretched a dead brute-breaker. He walked closer, until he was within the circle of light cast by the fire.

"Drop the gun!" said a voice behind him.

He whirled around, fear clutching his heart. Louis Grantaire stood within ten feet of him, and his right hand was perilously near the butt of the pistol. Edouard Norres would have liked to have thrown up the rifle and fired, but

dared not risk the chance.

"It is an excellent dummy," Grantaire said, smiling a bit and nodding at the figure beside the fire. "You were about to gaze upon my tender remains, eh, m'sieu'?"

It came to Edouard Norres suddenly that this man had made away with both Leblanc and Pierre, and that he would be the next. Whereas fear had given Leblanc a momentary paralysis, it gave to Edouard Norres wings. He screeched and whirled around, and darted into the dark. Like a wild thing he ran, expecting to hear the foot-beats of Louis Grantaire behind him, expecting every instant to feel a great hand clutching him by the throat.

Far behind him, Louis Grantaire chuckled, threw more fuel on the fire and hurled the dummy into it, and went back a small distance into the woods to remain on guard for further trouble.

"So much for that!" he told himself.

CHAPTER XI. THE LONG WAIT.

BAPTISTE NAVET heard the men talking in the morning, of course, and so he discovered that Louis Grantaire still was at his camp a short distance from the clearing, and he knew that in some manner all the three bullies had failed.

After the men had gone into the woods to do their work, Navet raged to himself, cursed the broken leg that kept

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

him in his bunk, and wondered what had happened to his friend Pierre, and Leblanc and Norres. He began to think that the three bullies were made of inferior stuff, for he could not understand their fear of the brute-breaker, and least of all could he understand their failure to get rid of him.

Bossuet visited him that morning, but the superintendent knew nothing beyond the fact that Louis Grantaire still maintained his camp near the river and certainly was alive, since the Indians had seen him catching fish. He knew nothing concerning the three missing bullies except that the brute-breaker had ordered them away and that they had gone, which angered Jacques Bossuet somewhat, since the bullies were good men in the woods and he was striving that season to make a record cutting.

Louis Grantaire spent the entire day in making his temporary camp a permanent one, erecting a rude shelter to protect him in case there was a high wind or it rained. He caught many fish, and salted some of them away to vary the diet of fresh ones. It was not the correct time of the year to shoot game. It appeared that the brute-breaker had salt meat and meal, tea and sugar, and so he must have gone as far as the nearest settlement during the month he had been away.

He did not approach the fire at Bossuet that night, and none of the men

went near his camp. Whether the brute-breaker slept in it or went deep into the woods where he would have security from attack, the men of Bossuet did not guess; the fact of the matter was that he slept, and soundly, inside his shelter, seeming to know that none of the bullies would approach and attack him.

On the second day, Baptiste Navet had Bossuet move him to an improvised bunk near a window, where he could look out across the clearing and up the river toward the rapids, and from where he could see the brute-breaker going about his camp. All day he raged at his broken leg that kept him from combat. The waiting was difficult for Baptiste Navet.

Early in the afternoon, before Bossuet and the cook returned from the woods with the empty food-wagon, Navet saw Louis Grantaire leave his camp and walk down the river toward the clearing.

He glanced toward Bossuet's cabin, but he continued toward the bunk-house, and Navet managed to get his rifle near him, where he could use it if he had need, yet knowing as he did so that Louis Grantaire would not attack an unarmed man.

The brute-breaker kept on until he stood inside the bunk-house door, blinking because he had come in out of the strong light. When he saw Baptiste Navet, he grinned.

"Do not move, m'sieu', I beg of you," he said. "I was informed that you

had broken a leg, and thought perhaps you remained in your bunk. I came to ease your mind concerning your friends. There are no lifeless bodies in the forest, as far as I know. I merely slapped their faces and sent them on their way.”

“Were I able to stand on my two feet, m’sieu’, there would be one who would not run away,” Baptiste said.

“I do not doubt it. You are courageous, m’sieu’. No cat fears the fire until he has had his paws burned. A man scoffs at the poisoned ivy until it once has blistered his face and hands. You catch my meaning?”

“It is easy to taunt a man who is on the flat of his back,” said Baptiste Navet.

“Pardon, m’sieu’. I shall withhold my taunts until you are able to stand—and run.”

“M’sieu’!”

“Do not grow angry, I beg of you. It will cause a fever, which you would do well to avoid.”

“It seems peculiar to me,” said Baptiste, “that you ran away the night before the day I had promised myself to thrash you, and returned the morning after the night I broke my leg. It smacks of cowardice, m’sieu’.”

“It is easy for a man on the flat of his back to taunt a well one, knowing the well one will not strike a cripple,” Grantaire reminded him.

“Now I beg your pardon, m’sieu’. We shall call it quits. Why are you here

to pester me?”

“Because I have overheard certain of the men talking. I understand you are possessed by anxiety for fear I may disappear before you are healed, and so you will not have a chance to come to a clash with me. Anxiety is no fit emotion for a man with a broken leg. I am come to bring you the intelligence that I remain in my camp until you are well. In fact, that is one of my principal reasons for waiting here at Bossuet.”

“You have other reasons?”

“Several of them, none of which concern you, m’sieu’. Rest easy, I beg of you. When you are healed, you will find me waiting.”

With that, he bowed with much ceremony, and was gone before Baptiste Navet could think of a reply.

Navet watched him start across the clearing toward the river, and promised himself that there would be one great fight when his leg was healed. He did not know it, of course, but Louis Grantaire was grinning, and talking to himself.

“Not a bad fellow in some ways, that Navet,” he said. “But he is a scoundrel for all that—he attacked a helpless cripple boy. And his heart is the heart of a bully, and I have promised myself to rid M. Pretot’s camps of all such.”

And then he glanced up and saw that Annette Bossuet had left her father’s cabin and was walking so that she would intercept him. The smile left his face, but he could not keep the twinkle

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

from his eyes as he watched her approach. A perfect picture she made, with her black hair and flashing eyes, her trim waist and ankles, her little, perfectly-moulded arms and shoulders. Louis Grantaire felt that he could have taken her into his embrace and crushed the very life out of her in love.

She stopped directly in his path, and he pretended to be glancing across the river.

“M’sieu’,” she said.

He did not answer, of course, but continued walking along the path, though he wanted to take off his hat and bow, and tell her that he was hers to command.

“M’sieu’!” she called, louder now, and taking a step toward him.

Still the brute-breaker remained silent, and when he came to her he turned aside a little, and so went around her and continued along the path.

“Wait, m’sieu’! I wish you to speak to me.”

“Ah!” Louis Grantaire whirled as swiftly as a man can and maintain his balance, and his face was wreathed in smiles, and he held his hat in his hand. “You have said it, mademoiselle—heaven be praised! ’Tis the sweetest music ever I have heard—your request that I speak with you. I had hoped you would regret your foolish order of some time since.”

“It is only because I desire information,” she said, trying hard to appear angry. “I wish to know what has

become of Jean the Cripple, for I love the boy.”

“Then he is, indeed, a fortunate youth, mademoiselle.”

“You are not answering me.”

“I give you my word of honor, mademoiselle, that he has come to no harm, and that he shall return one day. I told your father as much. More, I cannot tell you, or any one, at this time. There are certain reasons for it. But, believe me, when I say that you will not regret his absence when once you see him again.”

“That is all you have to say, m’sieu’?”

“Regarding Jean the Cripple—yes. But there are other topics—”

“Of a truth! Why do you remain near our place when my father will not give you work?”

“I have promised Baptiste Navet to remain here until he is able to face me as man to man.”

“So you may beat him? So you may cripple him forever?”

“Mademoiselle, I have beaten many strong men, but never have I crippled one yet,” Louis Grantaire said, and there was a tone in his voice that made her seem ashamed.

“Pardon, m’sieu’,” she said. “I have heard, indeed, that you never use the calks of your boots. But why should you take it upon yourself to beat men? Those three bullies—I have heard the story—you whipped them so that they hung their heads for shame. It wrecked

their fair manhood, m'sieu'. And what do you gain by it?"

"Mademoiselle, they deserved what they got. One was a beater of helpless men. Another insulted and wronged Indian women. The third wrecked the fair manhood of natives who could not stand up to him. Such men do not belong in the clean woods, mademoiselle."

"And Baptiste Navet?"

"He misused Jean, did he not? He made the boy's life miserable. He is not as bad as some of the others, mademoiselle, but he is of the type. The camp bully must go—I have said it! If two men have their little differences, let them come to blows and settle it in a man's way; but it is wrong for a man to beat up other men when the mood moves him just because it is so that he can. Strength is God-given, and should be used to protect the weak!"

"I think that I understand a little," she said.

"And can we not be friends now, mademoiselle? Have you not forgiven me that I danced with you against your will? Did you not, in truth, enjoy the dance?"

Annette Bossuet remembered that she had, and the red flamed into her face as she thought of it, and Grantaire smiled a little. All might have gone well then if Annette had not seen the smile. Was this brute-breaker a fool that he always smiled and laughed at the wrong time when speaking to women? Did

Annette but know it, it demonstrated one thing that should have pleased her—it showed that he had been little around women.

But because of the smile she saw, anger flashed into her eyes again, and she gave him a look calculated to freeze the blood in his veins.

"I despise you!" she said.

Then she turned around and hurried back toward the cabin. Louis Grantaire chuckled as he watched her go. When she had disappeared through the door he went on to his camp to stretch himself on the bank of the river there and puff at his pipe and dream.

And so the long wait began, for, though Baptiste Navet's leg mended as swiftly as could be expected, still every day seemed an age with him. Now and then Louis Grantaire would go to the bunk-house at noon and ask Navet how soon he thought the battle could be staged, at which Navet cursed roundly. And frequently he met Mlle. Annette, and had the pleasure of seeing her turn up her little nose at him; and always he laughed.

And then there came a day when an Indian came down the river and had speech with Navet. He bore a message from Pierre, from Leblanc and Edouard Norres, and the gist of the message was that they were determined still to have revenge on the brute-breaker, and were waiting only for Navet's leg to heal so that he could share the sweetness of their revenge. On that same day

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Grantaire paid him visit, and Baptiste Navet laughed in his face.

“There shall come a time!” he warned.

And on that same day Grantaire met Annette in the path again, and swept off his hat.

“A good day to you, mademoiselle,” he said politely.

“Good day to you, m’sieu’,” she was fair enough to answer.

“You still are angry with me, mademoiselle?”

“Does one get angry at a loon?” she demanded, looking at him frankly, the dimples playing about her cheeks.

Grantaire took the dimples for peace-signs.

“I will try my best not to anger you, if you will give me the courtesy of your company for a short time,” he said. “It grows lonesome in my camp. Sometimes at nights I creep to the edge of the clearing and listen to the talk of the men. It is not a pleasure, I assure you, to be ignored. What have I done to deserve it?”

Annette repeated that question to herself, and replied that she could not think. If it came to that, this man had done nothing except beat bullies who had needed beating. Mlle. Annette could not explain to herself why she had flouted him. The little incident of the dance did not seem cause enough when she considered it now. And she knew what lonesomeness meant. She had not known until recently, but she had felt it

now and then the past month.

“If you are very good,” she said, “you may sit here on this rock and talk with me for a time—say half an hour.”

They sat down side by side and spoke of many things, though she noticed at first that Louis Grantaire spoke little concerning himself. They discussed the forest and the birds and the river and the fish, saying many words that were meaningless in themselves, seemingly pleased and satisfied that they made some sort of a noise. The half-hour passed before they knew it, and another hour followed and passed, and still they talked. Annette Bossuet’s face was a delicate glow now, and Louis Grantaire was smiling continually and bending very close to her.

Half a dozen times Annette felt that she should return to her father’s cabin, and presently she forgot all about it. She told Louis Grantaire of her life in the woods, and of her dear mother’s death, and of how good her father was to her.

From the window of the bunk-house Baptiste Navet witnessed all this, and when Bossuet returned with the food-wagon, Baptiste called to him. The pair down by the river did not hear.

Baptiste Navet made it a great deal worse than it was, naturally, hating the brute-breaker, and being jealous in the bargain. And so Annette and Louis Grantaire suddenly found Jacques Bossuet standing in front of them, his fists on his hips and a look of thunder in

his face.

"Annette, go to the cabin!" he commanded. "And you, m'sieu', I have some things to say to you!"

Grantaire got up and aided the girl to her feet, and thus they faced Bossuet. The smiles were gone from the brute-breaker's face, and in the girl's there was a look of wonder. And then she realized how long she had been talking to Grantaire, for she saw that the sun hung low over the river, and her face flamed again, and she turned and ran toward the cabin like a startled fawn.

"Well, m'sieu'?" Louis Grantaire said.

"What do you mean by sitting here with my daughter for hours?"

"We were but talking, m'sieu'."

"The wise man confounding an innocent girl with guileful phrases, m'sieu'?"

"I give your daughter credit for being a good and sweet woman, even though you, being her father, will not," said Louis Grantaire. "Besides, m'sieu', there was nothing wrong in our talk."

"Do not attempt your guileful phrases on me," Bossuet replied. "I was not born yesterday. I have allowed you to camp on the shore of the river when you have no business here—"

"Allowed me! Do you, then, own all these broad acres? Are you seignior here?"

"I am the superintendent of this camp, and the broad acres belong to M. Pretot."

"Then let M. Pretot say whether I am welcome."

"As you very well know, M. Pretot is a smug gentleman who sits at his desk in Montreal and gathers in the dollars for which we work. He knows little of what goes on in this locality except as to the log-cutting. I stand in the case of his representative, and my word here is law."

"Indeed, m'sieu'? And what is the law?"

"That you pack up and get out, m'sieu'. Float your canoe and go down the river, or put it on your back and carry it around the rapids, and so go up the river; I care not in what direction, so long as you go—and to-night."

"Because I have talked to your daughter as a gentleman speaks to a lady?"

"You have my orders, m'sieu', and it is not necessary for me to state my reasons. If you are not gone by sundown, I set my men upon you! I have two score bully boys; I scarcely think you will break all of them at once."

"That is your final word?" Grantaire asked.

"It is."

"Then let me say, m'sieu', that your men will find me at my camp at any time after sunset."

Louis Grantaire whirled around on one heel and started up the narrow path, and he whistled as he went.

"There never was such a man!"

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Bossuet told himself; but he was determined to carry out his threat.

CHAPTER XII. A LION UNCHAINED.

IN the cabin Bossuet faced his daughter again. Her face was still flushed, and there was anger in her father's.

"What is the meaning of your long conversation with the stranger?" he demanded.

"There was no special meaning, my father. We spoke of many things."

"Of love?"

"No," she said, her face flaming red, "though I should not have minded very much had he."

"Is this my daughter?" Bossuet cried. "Who is this man? He is a stranger, and his actions are mysterious. What has he done with little Jean? Why does he remain near Bossuet when I have no work for him?"

"I know none of those things, my father, and yet it seems to make little difference."

"If you are thinking of love and of mating, there is Baptiste Navet, a good and strong man who has been here with us for years."

"Baptiste Navet!" she stormed. "He is a bully. He uses his God-given strength to abuse the helpless instead of to protect the weak! I should die before I'd go to the priest with Baptiste Navet! Oh, my father, do not make me do so!

By the memory of my mother, do not force me to do this thing!"

"And this Louis Grantaire?"

"I feel that I like him, my father. He is a man to be trusted, I am sure."

"There are many sad girls in the world who have trusted men."

"And many sad men, no doubt, who have trusted women," Annette replied.

"Let us have an end of it," her father said. "I have ordered him away. As for Baptiste Navet, you need not wed him unless it is in your heart."

He said no more then, but went about his business. Evening came, and the men were in from the woods waiting for the night meal, laughing and shouting to one another, and asking Baptiste Navet how the leg was getting.

The great fire was kindled even before they ate; and when they had finished eating, Jacques Bossuet went out into the clearing and looked up the river, to find that Louis Grantaire's fire was blazing, too, and that he was sitting before it. Bossuet went down to his men.

"Attention, bullies!" he said. "You see that man they call the brute-breaker? I have ordered him away—he was to have been gone by sunset. He has disobeyed my order. Go, you, and send him away. I care not how you make him go, so that you do it with your hands. There are to be no firearms used, and no knives, for I would not have a murder in M. Pretot's woods. Go!"

They greeted the command with a cheer, for they were eager to chase the brute-breaker away, not that they held any special animosity for him, but because they felt it would cast credit upon them. Baptiste Navet writhed and cursed in his bunk, thinking they would be successful and that he would not have his clash with this man.

Some of them carried firebrands as they started along the shore of the river. They shouted until the forest rang with the echoes, and boasted loudly, full two score of them sent out to drive one man away.

They saw his fire, and the man sitting before it puffing at his pipe. As they drew nearer they grew quiet, wondering how to approach him, each willing to be of the mob but afraid to lead it.

A hundred feet from him they were now—seventy-five—fifty! And suddenly Louis Grantaire stood to his feet and knocked the ashes out of his pipe deliberately, and faced them, his hands at his sides.

“What is it, children?” he asked.

One of them answered:

“M. Bossuet orders that you leave this part of the country. We have come to see his order carried out.”

“How many are there of you? About forty; eh? It is not enough! Go back to your beds, my children.”

“Are you going at once, and in peace, or must we force you to go?” their spokesman asked.

“I am not going at once, and you are not going to force me,” he replied. “I wish you would run away. I was thinking and you bothered me. In all these broad woods cannot a man find a spot where he may think without annoyance?”

“You must go, m’sieu’! If you do not do so willingly, then we shall be forced to wreck your camp and smash your canoe, and perhaps mark your face a bit, and see you on your way.”

“Who made that brave speech?” the brute-breaker asked. “I cannot see, for he remains behind in the dark. Let him step forward and say it to my face.”

They gathered close together and held consultation for a time, trying to decide just how to do it. Louis Grantaire remained standing before them, watching them carefully.

They decided upon a sudden rush. They turned toward him, and one began to speak, and suddenly the forty hurled themselves forward through the brush.

Louis Grantaire did not await their arrival. His right hand whipped the pistol from the holster, and he fired three times, and rapidly, into the air. The charge stopped as suddenly as it had begun. And in that instant the brute-breaker was among them.

He seized the nearest man, held him above his head for a moment, and then hurled him into the midst of the throng. His pistol spoke again, and this time it kicked up the dirt at another man’s feet. Some of those in the rear turned and

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

ran. Those in front, fearful of being deserted and having to face the brute-breaker alone, hesitated one moment longer and then followed. A bullet whistled over their heads. Their speed increased.

Gasping, panting, they reached the clearing where Jacques Bossuet was waiting to receive them. He knew what had happened, and there was rage in his heart.

“Well?” he asked.

“He—would not go!” one of them replied.

It was futile to curse at them. Bossuet felt helpless. He gave them one look that seemed to stamp them cowards, and then he went back to his cabin.

And in the morning Louis Grantaire caught and cooked and ate his fish as though nothing whatever had happened. But he was alert, for all that. All Bossuet had turned against him now. He decided that it would be better, for the time being, to take what sleep he could in the daytime, and be on guard at night when the men were in from the woods.

Again the endless days began to pass. He did not see Annette except from a distance, for she was keeping close to her father’s cabin by his order. And he knew that Baptiste Navet was on his feet at last, for he saw him walking with a crutch.

One afternoon he walked slowly along the river until he met Baptiste at the edge of the clearing.

“We have a score to settle, m’sieu’,” Baptiste said, “and the date of settlement approaches.”

“Do you not fear it?” Grantaire asked.

“When I was created they were forgetful, and left fear out of me,” Baptiste boasted.

“And put in an overdose of meanness,” said the brute-breaker. “It led you to abuse cripples.”

“There will be another cripple soon!”

“I do not doubt it. How do you expect to make a living after you are crippled, m’sieu’?”

Baptiste spat at him, so great was his anger, and hobbled away on his crutch. For the next five days, while his leg grew strong, he spent his time in cursing the existence of the brute-breaker. He went to the Bossuet cabin often, and tried to speak to Annette, but she always evaded him.

For Annette was in no pleasant mood these days. She watched Louis Grantaire from a distance, and longed to speak to him again, and began to feel he had spoken correctly when he had said that it might come to love between them. And Baptiste Navet, watching her as closely as he could, sensed her mood and the cause of it and raged.

He began to fear that Annette would leave her father’s house for the uncertain camp of the stranger, for he knew women are queer where love is concerned. He rejoiced that his leg was

almost as good as new, and told himself that it would be in another week. He had thrown away his crutch, and his limp was gone. It had not been a very bad break.

One morning an Indian came to him out of the forest with the word that the bullies were encamped near the head of the rapids. And Baptiste Navet sent back word that he was healed, and that he would join them the next day but one. He had something to do first, he said.

When Jacques Bossuet returned with the food-wagon that afternoon he found Baptiste waiting.

"I have some things to say," Navet declared. "Some time since I told you that I wanted your daughter for my wife, and you put me off by saying that a man should win his woman. Now she pretends that she does not like me. I think it is because this stranger who calls himself the brute-breaker has turned her against me. There is but one thing to be done—send for the priest and see us married."

"My daughter does not wish it," Jacques Bossuet replied. "I have spoken to her concerning the subject, and she has declared that she will not have you for a husband."

"It is for her father to command!"

"And her father refuses, m'sieu'. I shall do nothing to wreck my little daughter's happiness."

"It is foolish to humor a mere woman so, m'sieu'! She does not know

what is best for her. She will be happy once we are man and wife."

"She has said otherwise, and her decision is final in this matter. I will not urge her, Baptiste Navet."

"It has come to this," Baptiste said, lifting up his chest and trying to speak in an important manner, "that you send for the priest and marry your daughter to me, or I am man of yours no longer!"

"What is this?" Bossuet cried. "You speak so to me? You presume to tell me that I must do thus and so? I am your superintendent! And from this moment you are no man of mine! Get your blankets—and go! You are well. You have been a well man this past week, your leg as strong as ever it was. I think you have refused to admit it since Louis Grantaire still waits for you at the edge of the woods."

"M'sieu'!" Baptiste Navet cried in a voice of thunder, his face livid. "By the heaven above, but I shall show you! So I am turned off, am I?"

"For your insolence—yes!"

"Then I say that I shall have my revenge upon you as well as upon this brute-breaker! And I shall have your daughter! I swear it, m'sieu'! You have unchained a wild lion by turning me off!"

CHAPTER XIII. A HUMAN DONKEY.

NOW it happened that the Indian who

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

fetches news to Baptiste Navet that the bullies were camped at the head of the rapids was one of those beaten by Leblanc; and this Indian had seen Leblanc broken by Louis Grantaire, and he was grateful.

He loitered around Bossuet for a time, and soon after Baptiste Navet discovered that he was a man of Bossuet no longer the native appeared suddenly before the brute-breaker as he caught fish from the bank of the river.

For several minutes the Indian sat on a rock and watched the process of fish-catching, and then he grunted in a manner that indicated he wished to speak. Louis Grantaire glanced at him and put aside the fishing-rod. He could tell by that one glance that this was to be a matter of extreme Indian ceremony.

"What does my brother wish?" he asked.

"The strong white man does well to call me brother," the native replied, "for though I am not his brother in blood, yet I am in feeling. The strong white brother has beaten the man who wronged me often. It is true that by giving the beating he defeated my own plan to stick a knife in this man's back, yet I have a strong feeling in my breast for my white brother."

Louis Grantaire interpreted that to himself as it was spoken in the native's language, with which he was reasonably familiar.

"Say on!" he ordered.

"I have heard how my white brother

went the length and breadth of the land and whipped other strong men who did things known to be wrong, and I have rejoiced in his victories. My heart has sung at news of each beating. I have longed to smoke a pipe of friendship with my white brother."

"Oh! You want a smoke? Why didn't you say so some minutes ago?" Grantaire demanded.

He handed over a pipe he kept especially for Indians, and his tobacco-pouch, and he loaded his own pipe, and soon they were puffing together. But Grantaire did not pick up the fishing-rod again; he knew that the Indian had something yet to impart. And he knew, also, that the native would speak in his own good time, and after his own manner, and would not be quickened.

"My white brother has many foes," the native said after a time, grunting as he puffed at the pipe.

"Even so," said Grantaire, smiling a bit.

"They gather even now to work a mischief upon him."

"They do; eh? This is indeed news. But I suppose I could not find out just what they are doing."

The Indian took the pipe from his lips and looked at the brute-breaker in amazement.

"That is what I have come to tell my white brother," he said in some disgust. "I supposed my white brother knew that."

"Your white brother is dense at

times," replied Grantaire, turning to glance up the river so the other would not see the twinkle in his eyes and take offense. "Say on!"

"Perhaps you speak truth. Often those who are strong in body are not quick in mind. And sometimes it is but the other way. It is so with me."

"I see; you have a nimble mind but are wanting in bodily strength. I understand. Say on!" Grantaire wondered whether the native ever would come to the point.

"At the head of the rapids deserted of God," the Indian said after a few more pulls at the pipe, "there is a small valley which has but one entrance."

"I know the place."

"There is a creek of sparkling water, and many fish, and wood for fires. It is an excellent place for a camp."

"It is," said Grantaire.

"Men are camped there now, white brother. One of them is Pierre, who used to beat me and annoy my women. Another is the giant called Norres. Still another is named Leblanc. They have been camped there for many days. And to-day they sent me with a message to Baptiste Navet here at Bossuet."

"What was the message?"

"That they were ready now to strike at the brute-breaker. This Baptiste Navet sends me back with word that he will join them to-morrow and aid them in doing you a mischief. But I think he will go before."

"How so?"

"He has had certain words with Jacques Bossuet. It appears that this Baptiste Navet wishes the daughter of Bossuet for a squaw, and he demanded her of her father. This Bossuet told him that such a thing could not be. I know not the reason—perhaps because Baptiste Navet has neither ponies nor is a great hunter. However, they had a quarrel, and Jacques Bossuet ordered Baptiste Navet away, saying that he was no longer man of his."

"He went?" Grantaire asked, his heart pounding at his ribs.

"Less than an hour ago he went. He had his blankets and his rifle. I heard him have speech with this Jacques Bossuet, and he said that after the brute-breaker had been broken he would return and take the girl, whether the father wished it or not. That is all, white brother. I have spoken. I go now to carry the answer of this Baptiste Navet to the men at the head of the rapids."

"I thank you for the information you have given me," Grantaire said. "You may keep the pipe; and here is a pouch of tobacco for my red brother."

"I give you thanks. It is good tobacco. My eyes shall be open after I have delivered my message, and perhaps I may earn another pouch of tobacco."

Grantaire watched him go into the woods, and for a time he sat on the rock and looked out over the tumbling, roaring water, thinking deeply. Things had come to a climax, he felt. The long

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

wait was at an end. Either he put down the bullies forever now, else he went down himself. He felt that there were many decisions to be made within the next day or so.

It took an hour's thinking for him to make up his mind regarding the things to be done, and then he noticed that the sun was sinking, and from the clearing came the shouting of Bossuet's men as they came in from the woods.

They had finished the cutting that day, and early in the morning they would move several miles back along the creek, where there was a temporary camp, and there they would remain for some considerable time, Jacques Bossuet dividing his days between them and the home-camp on the river.

Louis Grantaire knew of this, for he had heard the men speaking of it the night before; and he knew that, if what the Indian had said about Baptiste Navet was true, it would be dangerous for Bossuet to be alone at the home-camp with his daughter and only a few Indian servants, and that it would be doubly dangerous for Annette, if he went with his men up the creek to get them settled.

He waited until the men were eating, and then he left his camp and hurried toward the clearing, and went straight to Bossuet's cabin. He knocked on the door, and then stood back a few feet, so that when Bossuet opened it the path of light showed him clearly the identity of his visitor.

"Well, m'sieu'?" Bossuet asked coldly.

"A word with you outside, Bossuet."

Bossuet closed the door behind him and approached the brute-breaker warily, half expecting treachery, and telling himself at the same time that the thought was unworthy.

"I have understood," said Grantaire, "that you have discharged Baptiste Navet and sent him away."

"It is true, though I fail to understand how it can be any concern of yours."

"In itself it is not. But this Navet will hold enmity toward you, no doubt, and he is a strong man, and a mean one when aroused, as one can tell by looking into his face. I understand, also, that you move your crew in the morning. Have you thought that your men will be some miles away, and that you will be at the mercy of this Baptiste Navet?"

"I fail to see the danger, m'sieu'."

"Name of a name! Are you blind? You have a daughter, have you not? Has not Navet sworn to have her? Shall you go away into the woods and leave her unprotected?"

"I am able to protect those looking to me for protection, and without any assistance from unknowns," Bossuet said. "You will please me if you quit the vicinity of Bossuet."

"They say a donkey is stubborn," Grantaire remarked. "Your ears are not overlong, yet you reveal certain other qualities."

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"I do not relish your insulting words."

"Pardon, m'sieu'! I am but trying to bring you to a realization of the situation."

"And to ask for the position of protector of my daughter?" Bossuet sneered.

"Not so, m'sieu'. Were I to be here to-morrow and the day following, I'd make it my business to afford her protection without as much as asking your leave. I would do the same for any woman."

"Then you are leaving, m'sieu'?"

"I am going as far as the head of the rapids deserted of God. The three bullies are encamped there, and they have planned to wipe me off the face of the earth. Instead of awaiting their attack, I go to surprise them. A battle is the better for being over sooner. I suppose I'll have the chance now to meet the redoubtable Baptiste Navet."

"Whatever else I may think of you, at least I admire your courage," Jacques Bossuet said. "Is it not foolhardy to meet four bullies?"

"Perhaps; it also is necessary. I ordered them to leave the clean woods, and they have disobeyed."

"I ordered you to leave Bossuet and you disobeyed."

"That is quite another matter. I have good reasons for remaining in this vicinity, and the bullies have not."

"May I ask your reasons, m'sieu'?"

"For one thing, I await the return of

Jean the Cripple. I told you that he would return, but you seemed to doubt me. For another, I shall have some small business to transact soon. For the third, m'sieu', I love your daughter."

"M'sieu'? You dare say this to me?"

"Why not? I am an honorable man. At least, I do not demand her hand of you, as Baptiste Navet did. I would not have her, or any woman, unless she told me with her own lips that she loved me, and that she wished me for her man."

"It pleases me to have you remain away from my daughter. At the same time, and also, I thank you for having the welfare of mine at heart. Go and fight your bullies, and may you have success. But leave me to attend to mine own affairs. I have no need of your protection, and neither has my Annette."

"I did not mean to offer it. I was merely going to suggest that it might be an excellent thing to keep a part of your men in the vicinity of Bossuet until I have dealt with the bullies."

"I can attend to my own business, m'sieu'. My men are engaged to get out logs; they are not soldiers."

"Jacques Bossuet, I apologize to all donkeys, whatever their age or worldly position. Never again shall I call the breed stubborn. I never have seen stubbornness until now!"

With that Louis Grantaire whirled around on one heel and started across the clearing; and he walked briskly until he had arrived at his own camp again.

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

CHAPTER XIV. THREE AGAINST ONE.

ANNETTE BOSSUET had heard the entire conversation, not having been beyond putting her small ear against a crack in the door, and now she found herself the prey of conflicting emotions. She felt a little fear because of what Baptiste Navet had threatened, and she felt proud of her father for saying that he could care for himself and his; she was greatly proud of the fact that such a man as the brute-breaker should concern himself about her, though she felt it her woman's right, and she feared for him because of what he intended to do.

But when her father came into the cabin again she was at a corner watching the old squaw wash the dishes, and she had nothing to say. Nor did her father say anything about Louis Grantaire's visit, for he had to go down to the bunk-house and see that everything was ready for an early start in the morning.

That night before she crept into bed Annette Bossuet said a little prayer for the welfare of the brute-breaker, and afterward she remained awake for several hours thinking of him. She never had forgotten her conversation with him, interrupted by her father, and she had grieved because there had been no chance to talk with him again. She regretted that she ever had declared she

hated and despised him, for she knew now that the brute-breaker had her heart in his keeping. And he had said to her father that he would wed no woman until he heard from her own lips that she loved him! Annette could feel the words bubbling on the tip of her tongue, but she knew that speaking them would be a difficult task.

Finally she fell asleep, wondering what the brute-breaker was doing. As a matter of fact he was walking slowly through the woods along the roaring river, taking care to be in no haste.

After his return from the Bossuet cabin he had packed his things and then extinguished his fire, being careful to leave not the smallest spark as became a good man of the forest.

He had carried his belongings to a tiny cave near by, and had stored them there, and had hidden his canoe in the tall ferns some distance back from the stream.

Then, with his pistol swinging at his hip and his rifle in the crook of his left arm, he started toward the head of the rapids. He did not smoke now, for this was war, and he knew the glow of a pipe and the odor of tobacco smoke might bring his enemies down upon him.

Often he stopped to rest, generally sitting on some huge rock and watching the river tumbling in the fitful light of the moon. At times it was as light as day, and at other times the moon went behind a cloud-bank, and it became so

dark a man could not see the length of a pace before him.

It was within an hour of dawn when he reached the head of the rapids, though the actual distance was not more than a mile, for he had taken his time. He turned away from the stream and sought the little valley the Indian had mentioned. In reality it was no valley at all, only a deep depression in the earth, about fifty yards wide and twice as long.

There was no way of entrance or exit except one, toward the river, unless a man sought to climb a distance of almost a hundred feet in a fashion almost perpendicular.

Louis Grantaire did not walk in at the entrance. He went around it and reached the crest of a knoll, from which he could see the entire little valley when daylight came. A creek ran through it, and there was thick brush and numbers of trees to furnish cover.

He could see the steady glow of a fire in the distance, and knew that he had found the bullies' camp. He loaded and lighted his pipe now, and puffed at it comfortably, for he was not so much afraid of an enemy creeping upon him and catching him unawares.

The first streak of dawn came into the sky over the forest, and Louis Grantaire got down behind a log in the high ferns, taking a position of much security. He saw the three bullies washing their faces and hands in the creek, and wondered to find that

Baptiste Navet had not joined them. He would have to be cautious if Navet was not in the little valley.

It grew lighter, and he could see them plainly. Big Leblanc was oiling a rifle; Pierre was fastening a pack; Edouard Norres was putting a teapot over the fire.

Grantaire rested his rifle against the log, aimed well, and pulled the trigger. The teapot sprang into the air and fell to one side of the fire, a hole through the two sides of it. The three men stood for an instant, as if paralyzed, and then darted for cover.

They had not been able to tell from which direction the shot had come, nor could they guess who had fired it. They did not believe the brute-breaker knew they were near Bossuet. Each in a place of safety in the woods, they waited, breathlessly, watching for a second shot, wondering who was upon them.

"It was that rascal Baptiste Navet," Norres declared. "He has arrived from Bossuet and seeks to frighten us."

"He has cost us a good teapot," said Leblanc.

"I do not think that it was a shot at all," Pierre said.

"What was it, then?" Norres asked.

"Something in the pot exploded, m'sieu'. Or maybe there was a cartridge in the fire."

"That is it—there was a cartridge in the fire!" Leblanc said. "If it had been a man shooting at us he would have showed himself by now. We are fear-

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

stricken fools!”

“The brute-breaker—” Norres began.

“Is safe at his camp near Bossuet. Did not the Indian tell us so? It was not the brute-breaker.”

Norres, showing more bravery than the others, crept forth and walked once around the fire. He picked up the teapot and regarded the holes in it. He decided that they could not have been made by a cartridge in the fire.

He held it up to show to the others. And again a bullet came from somewhere and struck the teapot, and this time it was dashed from Norres’s hands. He dived into the woods, forgetting his rifle.

“It is that fool, Baptiste Navet!” Leblanc declared again. “He is proud of his ability with a long rifle. Let us remain hidden until he comes down the path, and then fire past his head and have some of the amusement ourselves.”

So they remained hidden, making not the slightest move for several minutes, and then Leblanc changed his position and so moved the tall ferns, and had a bullet whistle past his head for his pains.

And then there came a fusillade of bullets, tearing into the high ferns and whistling among the trees, shot following shot with clocklike precision, so that they did not know whether it was one man firing or many men trying to make it appear as one. Neither could

they see any smoke and so judge from what direction the shots were coming, for they dared not lift their heads.

The bombardment did not endure for long. And when it ceased they spoke to one another in whispers, asking the meaning of it.

“It is the brute-breaker!” said Norres.

“It is that fool, Baptiste Navet!” Leblanc declared.

For a full hour, then, there was no shooting. They decided that the unknown marksman had given up and gone away, or else feared to show himself. They crept out to the fire, one by one, and after some hesitation ate their breakfast, except that they had no tea. When they had finished they put their packs on their backs and started toward the mouth of the valley.

They had decided to go quite near Louis Grantaire’s camp, and there complete their plans as to how they were to overcome him. A rifle shot from a distance seemed the most popular plan. First, they would go to the head of the rapids and await Baptiste Navet.

Still wondering about the unknown marksman, they hurried down the creek toward the mouth of the little valley. No more shots greeted them, and so they decided that it had indeed been Baptiste Navet, and that they would find him waiting when they reached the river.

They came to a giant boulder that obstructed the path, and walked around it. And they saw Louis Grantaire

standing beside the creek less than fifty feet away, his rifle in the crook of his left arm, and his right hand caressing the butt of his pistol.

“Do not move!” commanded the brute-breaker. “The first man who attempts to use his rifle dies.”

They were forced to obey him. They had heard certain tales of the man’s prowess with a pistol, and did not care to question it just now. Like so many wooden men they stood up against the boulder and looked at him, fear and hatred mingled in their hearts.

“I gave you orders to leave the country!” Louis Grantaire said. “Instead of doing that you remain to plot my death! I have come to punish you!”

None of them dared to make reply. They continued to stare at him, as if hypnotized, wondering what he was about to do, speculating as to whether they would have a chance to conquer him.

“Leblanc, throw your rifle in the creek!” the brute-breaker commanded now. He jerked his pistol out of its holster and held it loosely in his hand, and his eyes seemed to flash fire.

Leblanc gave a gasp that sounded like a sob, hesitated a moment, regarded the brute-breaker’s eyes, and threw his new rifle into the creek.

“Now you, Norres!”

“It is a new weapon—”

“Throw it into the creek!”

Norres complied. There was nothing else to be done. He was just far enough

away so that they could not rush him without at least one of them going down with a bullet in his body.

“Pierre!”

Pierre had been waiting for the command. His attitude was one of submission, but his brain was seething. He swung his rifle around, as if to toss it into the water, but, instead, he raised the muzzle quickly and fired.

It seemed that Louis Grantaire fired the pistol at the same moment. Pierre’s bullet sang into the trees, and that from the pistol struck the bully in the right forearm and broke the bone. The man screeched because of the sudden blow and fell back.

“Let that teach all of you to obey and try no tricks!” Louis Grantaire said. “Now it has come to my mind that I must teach all of you another lesson. I have certain work to do, and I cannot have you loitering around planning to put a bullet through me while I sleep. Is there one among you who wishes to stand up to me?”

None made answer. Each of the three, even Pierre, whose broken arm left him out of it, remembered what had happened before on such an occasion, and told himself he would rather suffer the tortures of the damned than face such a man!

“But there must be a lesson!” Grantaire said. “There must be something that will assure me you will leave the country.”

“I’ll leave—I’ll leave!” Edouard

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

Norres cried.

It was the breaking point; all of them shouted that they would leave, and that M. Pretot's woods would see them no more.

"Your words are not those of men of honor," Louis Grantaire told them. "You promised once before to leave and did not. There is not one of you but what has said I beat you because good fortune was with me when we fought; all of you have boasted that you are better in the woods than I am. I have a plan regarding the lesson to be taught. You will walk one behind the other and approach me."

They fell into line and walked as he directed, and when they came to the mouth of the little valley he halted them.

"You will march directly to the shore of the river," he said. "I have rifle and pistol, remember, and will fire at the first man who attempts to escape. Straight to the river, where your three canoes are hidden. I found them before daybreak."

It was not a very long distance, and they covered it quickly, the three wondering what was to befall them when the river was reached.

"You have defiled the woods, and it is for the woods to teach you the lesson," said Louis Grantaire then, "—for the woods and the river and all Mother Nature. Also, you have said that you are as good men as I. It is my pleasure that you ride down the rapids

deserted of God."

A chorus of shrieks answered him. They knew those rapids and had heard tales of men lost there, and none of them ever had possessed the courage to attempt to run them. And they knew that the brute-breaker had.

They shouted that it was certain death, and he gave them their choice—either they should run the rapids or stand up to him as man to man and take their medicine.

"I'll stand up to you!" Edouard Norres cried.

His voice trembled as he spoke, and he seemed to know what would happen if he carried out his plan, but it was better than running the rapids deserted of God.

Louis Grantaire threw his rifle aside and buckled his pistol-belt closer around his waist.

"It is to be a fair fight!" he announced; and they nodded their heads in assent.

"If a man fights foul he shall answer to me, and my vengeance will be terrible!" the brute-breaker said.

And then Edouard Norres was upon him.

The bully fought as if for life now. He could not hope that Louis Grantaire would refuse to use the calks of his boots if he won this time. Like a maniac he charged and sent Grantaire reeling backward with the mere force of his rush. The other bullies cheered him on.

Edouard Norres fought with twice

the desperation that he had that other time when Grantaire was victor. He even surprised the brute-breaker a bit, and he marked his face. And then they were standing toe to toe and exchanging blows that thudded, Norres cursing and Louis Grantaire laughing at him.

Pierre crouched against a clump of brush; Leblanc was on his feet, nearly doubled over, watching the combat, hoping that Norres would get in a telling blow. He looked over at Pierre and nodded his head.

And then, before Grantaire could draw his pistol, the three of them were upon him, trying to bear him to the earth. He struck Pierre on the broken arm, and that bully retreated, whimpering with pain. And the brute-breaker had his two hands filled with the others.

Either was almost a match for him; when they combined forces he was at a disadvantage.

"You are foul!" he cried. "You have used treachery, and I shall punish!"

He hurled Norres from him and struck Leblanc a terrific blow in the face. Pierre was shrieking something, but the others gave him no attention. They wanted to come to a clinch with Louis Grantaire again before he had time to draw the pistol; and they succeeded.

And Norres grasped the pistol now, but it was knocked from his hand, and he could not leave to regain it, for Leblanc could not handle the brute-

breaker alone. Once more Grantaire hurled the pair from him, and made an effort to regain the pistol himself.

And then there was an explosion a few feet behind him, and a hot bullet scraped his cheek, bringing the blood and stinging him. He saw that Pierre had crept to his rifle and had fired the treacherous shot.

He turned madman then. There were three against him, and they fought to kill. They had planned his murder. They were trying their best to accomplish it.

He hurled himself aside and grasped Leblanc by the throat, disregarding Pierre utterly. He shielded his body with that of Leblanc and backed toward the pistol. Edouard Norres rushed in, and Grantaire let Leblanc go for an instant and whirled upon the new foe. He struck the man in the face so that he reeled, and was upon the pistol. He whirled and fired, and Pierre's left arm dangled at the wrist.

"Let us see you fire treacherously now!" Louis Grantaire cried.

He had both pistol and rifle now, but he did not fire at any of them. He drove them before him again down to the river. There he faced them, and turned for a moment to throw rifle and pistol into the stream.

"We stand equal now—no weapons!" he cried. "Three men you are, and you scarce are equal to me! And now I shall break you with my bare hands, and after that I may use the boot-calks! For you are too foul to live unless

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

marked for all men to know! When you have enough—there are the canoes and the rapids!”

And then he was in their midst like a whirlwind, knowing that he would suffer none at the hands of Pierre, but that the other two would use every effort to overcome him. It was a battle for life in truth now. But the two could not stand against his anger.

Back he battered them, first one and then the other, back toward the canoes and the boiling river. It was more than a human could stand. They began whimpering; they put their hands before their faces, and he beat them so. Foot by foot they backed toward the water, where Pierre already was crouching. The punishment was tearing the life out of them.

Mechanically they made one last effort when they reached the shore. For an instant they rallied and showered blows upon the head of the brute-breaker, and he did not even take the trouble to guard them off so eager was he to give blows in exchange. Again he battered them, drove them back, until they were standing with their feet in the water.

“There are the canoes—and the rapids!” he cried.

Leblanc gave a cry of agony and turned. He dashed for a canoe. Edouard Norres ran to another, Louis Grantaire at his heels hammering at him. Pierre, whimpering with pain, sprang into that which Leblanc had seized.

The brute-breaker followed them into the water. They tumbled into their canoes as he rushed upon them, churning the water to spray. He followed until the rush of the current almost sent him down; and then he stopped.

A cry of anguish came to his ears. Already the river had caught the canoes. Already they were whirling down the boiling stream like mad things—the men in them working frantically at their paddles.

Louis Grantaire staggered ashore and looked after them. He reeled because of his weakness and sank upon the ground. He watched the two canoes until they looked as small as bobbing stumps in the water. And then, already somewhat rested, and knowing that he should wash the blood from his face and hands, he got up and turned toward the creek.

And Annette Bossuet came rushing out of the woods toward him!

CHAPTER XV. READY FOR THE PRIEST.

SHE was stretching out her arms to him, her black hair was hanging down her back, she gasped for breath, and there was terror in her eyes. Louis Grantaire hurried forward and caught her as she stumbled into his arms.

“You—you are alive!” she cried.

“If it please you, mademoiselle.”

ALL-STORY WEEKLY

"I was afraid I would not find you, or that I would find you dead. I listened at the door last night, and I knew that you were coming here. And so I ran the mile or more through the woods as swiftly as I could to reach you."

"You were afraid for me?" he asked. "And how could you have helped, little one?"

"Afraid for you—yes. But that is not all. You must come back with me—back to Bossuet."

"Why?"

"There is danger at Bossuet. My father went out with the men this morning, and Baptiste Navet has been there. I saw him coming and slipped into the woods, for I fear him, m'sieu'! He beat the old squaw because she could not tell where I was hiding. I can hear her screams ringing in my ears yet, m'sieu'! Baptiste Navet had been drinking liquor, I think. And then he took a whip and began beating our Indians, and one of them got away and started running through the woods for my father. But he cannot reach Bossuet for a long time.

"I heard Baptiste Navet screaming that he would find me and carry me away, and that he would kill my father and burn all our buildings. I watched as he set fire to the bunk-house, and then I started for you. Will you please help us, m'sieu', even if my father was unkind to you?"

"Help you?" he cried. "Help you, mademoiselle? You have but to

command. My heart has been filled with love of you these many days."

"And I love you, too," she confessed.

He picked her up in his arms and began running toward the river.

"You know nothing of me," he said. "I may be base."

"Never that, m'sieu'!"

"I am an unknown, perhaps a nobody!"

"But I love you!"

"I may be a worthless wretch!"

"Yet I love you!"

He kissed her passionately so that she closed her eyes and nestled close against his breast as he ran, and her face flamed red again, but she was happy. And then he put her down on the ground.

"There is but the one way, mademoiselle," he said. "Baptiste Navet can burn buildings and slay Indians in a short space of time. And your father may return quickly and Navet harm him. So I must, once more, ride the rapids deserted of God. Maybe God does not desert them any longer—who knows?"

"I think that He does not," she said.

"Already have I sent three men down them this day, though they went of their own free will. One more kiss, mademoiselle, and then I must go. Rest—and walk back through the woods."

He hurled the remaining canoe into the water and turned for his kiss.

"But I ride with you!" she said. "I

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

am afraid for you to go alone!”

“There is grave danger!”

“I love you, m’sieu’. Rather would I undergo danger with you than let you go alone. That is the true wife’s part, I have heard.”

She blushed at the word. But Louis Grantaire shook his head.

“And maybe, if I go, you will be doubly careful,” she said.

And then she had jumped into the canoe!

The water caught it, whirled it around, sent it dashing away from the shore and into the middle of the current.

Annette Bossuet crouched beneath the brute-breaker’s feet, holding her hands over her eyes. Now that she was in the midst of the seething water she did not feel so brave, and so she prayed desperately for strength, and that they might win through.

She opened her eyes once and saw frowning rocks seeming to dash past them. The roar of the river was in her ears, a hungry roar like that of a ravenous beast.

Above her, Louis Grantaire worked as never had man worked before. His heart sang because of the love he had won, and yet fear clutched at it now and then. Once he looked ahead, thinking perhaps he might see a black speck that would indicate those who had gone before, but he saw nothing except the churning water and the spray and the black rocks that threatened destruction.

They were half-way through the

peril now. Twice they shipped water, and Annette’s dress was drenched. Now they were in the dangerous narrow space where so many men had come to grief. From the corner of his eye Louis Grantaire saw the ruins of a canoe on the shore, and something bulky and dark beside it and he knew where one of the bullies had gone.

Then a whirlpool caught them, and all his skill could not prevent the canoe making the dizzying journey. But he won out of it, and they dashed on.

He could see Bossuet now, and saw that the bunk-house was burning, and that smoke was pouring from the Bossuet cabin. He saw Indians running toward the woods, and in the center of the clearing was a huge man who waved a firebrand.

He steeled himself for the last fifty yards, narrowly averting disaster half a score of times. He felt Annette clutching at one of his legs. And then he lifted his paddle and stooped to pat her on the head, as he might have a child, and she heard his voice, wonderfully soft:

“God is in the rapids this day, beloved! We have won through!”

She raised her head, and he saw that there were tears on her cheeks and in her eyes, but she smiled for all that. And now Louis Grantaire began paddling swiftly toward the shore. He wanted to land, if possible, before Baptiste Navet saw him.

But Navet whirled around and saw. He shrieked his rage, and ran with his

firebrand to a storehouse, as if determined to do all the damage possible before clashing with the brute-breaker. And the heart of Louis Grantaire filled with rage because of this wanton destruction. He drove the canoe to the shore like a madman, helped Annette from it, and charged up the bank without the loss of a second.

“Ho, Baptiste Navet! Ho, bully!” he cried. “Here is your chance! Stand up to me as man to man! Your friends have been whipped and afterward claimed by the rapids. And it is your turn now! Turn, beater of crippled boys! Turn, tormentor of women, scum of the forest, besmircher of the honest woods! Turn and fight—you coward!”

Baptiste Navet dropped the firebrand and roared his rage and came with a rush. Louis Grantaire stopped him with a blow. Liquor had sapped some of Navet’s strength and cunning, but had given him a fierce recklessness in their stead; his earlier battle and the strain of running the rapids had undermined Louis Grantaire’s prowess; they were about an even match.

Yet not even, either, for out of the corners of his eyes the brute-breaker saw Annette Bossuet kneeling and watching the fight, her face pale through fear for him, and the sight gave him courage.

Now they stood face to face and exchanged blows, both scorning to use a guard or to retreat for better advantage. Louis Grantaire made no sound in this

battle, though Navet roared obscene oaths. The Indians crept from the forest to watch, realizing what it meant. On three sides of them crackled the flames Baptiste Navet had started.

Navet was like a madman. He beat Grantaire back a pace. He rushed him, tried to hurl him down, grasped him in his strong arms, but felt them torn away and a great blow in his face. Blood blinded him, but he still had his strength. It began to look as if the brute-breaker had attempted too much this day.

“Louis! Louis!”

The call reached Grantaire’s ears, and he knew it was Annette speaking his name for the first time. His heart began to sing again, and the heaviness seemed to leave his arms. He fought Baptiste Navet back to the center of the clearing, gave him two blows for one, picked the man up and hurled him hard upon the ground, and then stood calmly aside and waited until he was upon his feet again. He knew now that he was to be the victor.

And then Baptiste Navet learned what the other bullies had told him and at which he had scoffed—how this man refused to use boot-calks, but had a sterner method; how he forced a man to stand again and again and fight until he had no spirit left and stretched himself on the ground, whimpering like a baby.

Time and time again Louis Grantaire knocked him down, and waited for him to rise; and always there was another

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

shower of blows waiting for him. His face was like a piece of raw beef; his chest was sore; his knuckles were raw and bleeding. When he tried to gain time by remaining on the ground, Louis Grantaire picked him up by the shirt collar, and held him so and crashed a fist into his face.

“Fight, bully! Fight, coward!” he cried.

Baptiste Navet was a whimpering wretch now. He began to beg for the beating to cease; but Louis Grantaire knew what manner of lesson must be taught a bully. He continued to beat him down, lift him up, force him to try to fight. Navet put his arms before his face and bent forward to protect his breast. He cried and begged for mercy. The boot-calks in the face would have been better than this.

And then there came an end to his punishment for the time being. Louis Grantaire swung his arm with all his strength, his fist caught the bully on the point of the jaw, there was a crack as when a great tree falls—and Baptiste Navet fell like a great tree, stiff and straight, crashed to earth a bruised and beaten and senseless thing!

Grantaire reeled away from him. He scarcely could see. Blood was in his eyes and he was exhausted. But he felt an arm clasp his big waist, and looked down into a proud little face, and heard the voice he loved most of all in the world say:

“I knew you’d do it, Louis! I knew

you’d do it!”

And then he sank to the ground, and Annette Bossuet went down on her knees and crooned to him, and called to some of the Indians to fetch water with which to wash his bruised face.

Jacques Bossuet found them so. He came from the forest on one of the mules used to haul the food-wagon, his face white with anger because of the destruction he saw on every side. He sprang to the ground and walked over to them grimly, regarded Navet’s senseless body, and then looked at Louis Grantaire and his daughter.

“I told you, m’sieu’,” the brute-breaker said. “But you were a stubborn donkey!”

“What have you done?” Bossuet cried.

“He has whipped the three bullies and sent them down the rapids, where they went rather than face him more, my father!” Annette said with some pride. “And he came down the rapids with me in the canoe, and has beaten Baptiste Navet, who burned our buildings and threatened violence to me! And now he is exhausted and sore with wounds—and I love him and will be his wife!”

“A woman will have her way!” Jacques Bossuet said, and threw wide his hands in a gesture of resignation. “I must send an Indian for the men; they must rebuild the cabins. As for you, m’sieu’, I am truly grateful, and I ask you to treat my daughter well. I shall

send for the priest, also.”

But there was no need to send for the priest. Around the lower bend of the river there came two canoes, and those at Bossuet looked at them in wonder. Indians were at the paddles, and there were passengers, too. They dashed to the shore and landed.

And first to touch the earth was a man-boy who cried out in joy and ran quickly across the clearing toward Louis Grantaire—a boy who ran!

“M’sieu’! M’sieu’!” he cried. “Here I am! Here is Jean! This long time I have been wanting to see you, m’sieu’, for ’twas you made my leg straight again. I can run—see! I can dance! Now I shall become a man!”

He was upon them then, dancing before them, trying to kiss Louis Grantaire’s bruised and battered face, not seeming to notice that there had been a fight.

“It is little Jean!” Annette cried.

“Of course, mademoiselle!” the boy replied. “Louis Grantaire sent me to the great city and the doctors healed my leg. All my life I shall thank him! The good priest came up the river with me to see me safely home! I think I have tried him sorely with my impatience!”

“What miracle is this?” Jacques Bossuet asked, looking at all of them in bewilderment.

“A miracle of surgery,” the good priest replied.

“It was scarcely a miracle,” Grantaire said, trying to get upon his

feet and lift Annette with him. “I thought the boy’s leg could be straightened, and I sent him to the city.”

And then he stepped forward suddenly, for Baptiste Navet was conscious again and sitting up on the ground.

“Baptiste Navet,” he said, “once you made the remark that you would leave the woods when Jean the Cripple had a straight leg. His leg is as good as any boy’s now, as you well can see. And you will keep your word, or have another lesson from my hands. Are you as bad as the others? Or are you possessed of a spark of manhood remaining and keep to your word?”

“I keep my word,” Navet said. “Within the hour I go down the river!”

And he crawled away to bathe his wounds, and they let him go.

“But I do not understand yet,” Bossuet cried. “You say you thought the boy’s leg could be straightened—”

“Once I had a mind to become a doctor and studied a bit,” Louis Grantaire said. “But something else came up, and I decided the profession could get along very well without me.”

“But the money! It costs a fortune to send a boy to a city and engage doctors!”

Louis Grantaire laughed, and the good priest stepped forward.

“Money?” he said. “The man has more than he could spend, more than a score of men could spend. Do you not know his name?”

THE BRUTE-BREAKER

“Louis Grantaire,” said Bossuet.

“Louis Grantaire Pretot,” said the good priest. “He is seigneur of all these broad acres, and has been for a year, since his father died.”

“And I love the woods, and so I gave up trying to be a doctor and took my inheritance,” the brute-breaker said. “I came here myself to find whether I had honest superintendents, and to learn many things. I wanted to swing an ax on my own property. And I found that men earning money from me were using their God-given strength to assault the weak instead of protecting them, and I was obliged to correct that. For the green forest must be kept clean, and

always will be clean unless men pollute it. I have found you efficient and honest, Jacques Bossuet, and you are to be the general manager of all my camps.”

“You—a grand seigneur!” Annette gasped, trying to pull away from him.

“To some persons, doubtless,” the brute-breaker replied. “But to you I am but the man who is to be your husband; and wives have a way of scolding their husbands, I have been told. Are you ready to begin the scolding, beloved? Here is the priest.”

“There will be no scolding—never!” she said, her face flushing once more. “But I am ready for the priest!”