

BENOIT CASTAIN

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Benoit Castain by Marcel Prévost & Arthur C. Richmond

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BENOIT CASTAIN



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I

I HAD never seen Benoit Castain before the present war. Yet we might easily have met, for his father, Monsieur Castain, or the "Widower" as he is called, has been for some years manager of an estate near mine at the point where the departments of Gers, Landes, and Lot et Garonne touch and intermingle. Castain is reputed to be capable and honest, but also somewhat selfish and tyrannical. Our relations were restricted to formal exchanges of conversation on market days, at meetings of the local authority, or on the occasion of the trial of a new piece of agricultural machinery—a sulphur-dusting apparatus, or a new kind of plough or automatic sower—an event which always attracts every

farmer and manager of an estate in the neighbourhood.

But young Castain never attended market, meeting, or experiments. At the age of eighteen, after easily obtaining his diploma as a secondary school teacher, he was sent to Saxony by his father, who intended him to follow an agricultural career. "You see, sir," said Castain, "for matters requiring organisation no one is equal to the Germans. And agriculture is a matter of organisation."

Immediately after his return from Germany the young man served his term of military service in the artillery, in one of the eastern fortresses; but when he had completed his two years and reached the rank of bombardier, he re-enlisted.

His father was astounded.

"Can you believe it? A well-educated young fellow, who knows more about farming than I do; who can speak German like the Crown Prince; who can write like a professor (it seems that he used to write verses at school), now wants to go and be a soldier!

I argued with him, but he is more obstinate even than I am. The working of a gun interests him more than that of the last model of a threshing-machine. And to think of how he could have helped me here. . . .”

In short, in the space of five years Benoit hardly spent five days at home, and never at a moment when I happened to be there.

About three months after the outbreak of war, I received a note from M. Castain in the entrenched camp of Paris, where I was then stationed. He wrote substantially as follows :

“My son has been wounded for the second time, and promoted quartermaster on the field of battle, quite near Epernay, and is now in Auxiliary Hospital No. 15 at Versailles. I cannot leave here, for, what with no servants and almost no horses left to work with, it is as much as I can do to keep things going on the estate. If what I hear is true, you are serving near Versailles; you would do me a great service if you

would go and see Benoit. He does not complain; he assures me that his second wound, which is in his head (the first one was in his right leg), is practically healed, but his letters are so depressed that I do not know what to make of it. I cannot help thinking that the boy is hiding something from me, and I feel uneasy about him."

As soon as I was free, I went to Versailles, after sending word to Benoit the evening before to say that I was coming. No. 15 Auxiliary Hospital is installed in a former convent of the Redemptionists, not far from Trianon. Two or three very young men met me at the door; I followed one of them through long, well-polished passages; we passed several rosy, round-cheeked nurses dressed in white, making room as we did so on the strip of linoleum. My guide stopped before a door on the first floor, numbered 21 on a little porcelain shield. He opened it, ushered me in, and left me. I was alone with young Castain.

He was evidently profoundly touched by