

SPRING TIME

Novelized by PORTER EMERSON BROWNE From the Play of the Same Name by Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson

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Chapter 2

SIXTY years had come and had gone since the birth of M. de Valette. They had been years of joy, years of sorrow, years of wealth, years of poverty. But alike they had failed to move him from that which he was—a De Valette. A De Valette, you must know, is a De Valette, and when one has said that one has said all. And now he stood in the doorway, tall, erect, quiet, commanding, possessing in all its fullness the innate dignity mothered of birth, fathered of pride, a spare, unbending figure dressed plainly in black, with emerald stock, collar and wristbands. His hair was gray, yet his eyebrows were still in their primal black.

Father O'Mara turned and bent to his quiet greeting. To Louise turned the master.

"You have the candles for the chapel?" he asked.

"Yes, M. de Valette, all of them."

"There are sixty-three?"

The old servant paused hesitatingly. She said:

"Miche, I think Christian was not as old as he looked. He had to me the air of being not more than forty-four."

"Which means," stated M. de Valette, "that you have but forty-four candles."

"Miche," cried Louise exultingly, "M. de Valette looks for others."

"That will not do. We must have no burnt ones. Throw out those that are burnt."

Louise raised her hands protesting.

"But, M. de Valette—"

"Go to the village and buy more. Take the box. See that it is filled. You know where the money is kept."

She made a gesture of impatience, but the master stood before her inexorable. Slowly she opened the drawer in the table. She took therefrom a few coins of small denomination.

"It is the last," she whispered—"the very last."

He said simply:

"Have the box filled." He turned from her, saying to the priest:

"Father O'Mara."

The latter turned.

"Touching the matter of masses for old Christian"—he began, but M. de Valette interrupted him.

"It is in regard to another ceremony that I wish to instruct you. One of the quick, it is, not of the dead."

O'Mara said, smiling:

"I have but christenings and weddings. I apprehend that this is not a christening."

"A marriage, Father O'Mara."

"Your sister, Mlle Marguerite, has descended at last?" exclaimed the priest in apparent surprise.

The other shook his head.

"My sister has not descended," he returned.

"But," cried O'Mara, "it is not your daughter—not Little Madeleine?"

"And why not?"

The priest queried slowly:

"Has she done with her dolls?"

"Mlle de Valette," stated the other evenly, "is seventeen."

"Seventeen?" returned O'Mara lightly. "All of that? She carries her years easily."

"Her betrothed is here," said De Valette, unheeding. "I wish to present you." He turned. Through the open door he could see his sister gathering candles from the dull sconces by the fireplace.

"My sister," he called, and then, "My sister will ask M. Raoul de Valette if he will do me the honor of his presence here?"

O'Mara, list buried in hand, was looking at him, his gray eyes half closed.

He said, at length, slowly:

"Upon my soul, M. de Valette, you take my breath! Little Madeleine betrothed?"

De Valette smiled a little, his fingers playing with the cover of his snuffbox.

"An arrangement of many years," he said. "M. Raoul de Valette is my cousin."

"And?" queried the priest slowly. "Madeleine adores him?"

"That will be her duty when she shall know him."

"She has never seen him?"

De Valette replied:

"This is M. de Valette's first visit here. He came late last night. They are to be presented to each other today."

"And?" persisted the priest, "she is doled? She accepts this betrothal to one she has never seen?"

De Valette smiled a little. Surely this good priest knew little of him and of his.

"Could there be any question of that?" he asked. "It is so that the demoiselles De Valette are brought up. She has always understood the arrangement."

The good priest shrugged his shoulders a little. He said:

"Eh, I have known young ladies of seventeen to make their own arrangements."

"They were not ladies of this family," Father O'Mara returned. De Valette quietly. "Madeleine has never even seen a young man of her own class. The first, my cousin, is to be her husband."

The good priest said no word. He raised his eyebrows. There came within his glance an approving figure. It was of a man of thirty-five or so, a



with graying hair elaborately arranged and well turned calves set off with stockings of black silk. His coat was of dark, rich material, his waistcoat white with stripes of yellow, and his stock was of white silk, while his collar, frills and wristbands were of delicate cambric. With head erect, chin held high, he sauntered toward them slowly, indolently.

Father O'Mara watched him closely. He was wont to read men by their faces, yet here was one that puzzled him. He was worried a little, but nothing of his features might have shown.

Entering the room, M. Raoul de Valette turned to his cousin, bowing elaborately.

"At your command, behold me!" he said. His voice was well modulated. It was a voice that, even as his face, puzzled.

De Valette turned to the priest, then back to his cousin.

"M. Raoul de Valette, I have the honor to present to you Father Joseph O'Mara, abbe of this parish."

Raoul acknowledged the introduction with formality, the priest with dignity. O'Mara said:

"You are of the younger branch of the family, I believe, sir?"

"Merely the cadet," Raoul returned.

"None the less of purest strain," asserted De Valette. "M. Raoul de Valette is the namesake of that other Raoul de Valette whose portrait hangs yonder"—he indicated to where upon the wall rested a time dimmed flange of glass—"to my mind the greatest of our ancestors."

Raoul threw back his head, lifting clean lined brows, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Eh, but with respect, my cousin," he protested. "It was he who lost us our estate in France."

De Valette said quickly, gravely:

"But he saved the fair fame of his sister, whom a king of France desired too greatly to honor. He put an ocean between her and the king's pursuit. We lost the estates in Normandy, but we kept the good name of our women." He stood a moment, contemplating in silence the scroll upon the bottom of the old frame wherein lay the portrait of him who had done these things. He said, at length, slowly: "Untarnished! That is the motto of De Valette. We keep our women sacred. And that is our proudest tradition—not even the breath of a king."

Raoul, gazing disinterestedly at the point of his shining pump, said lightly:

"The world knows that, my cousin."

De Valette turned to him abruptly.

"Raoul," he said slowly, gravely, "you are to receive a bride whose every moment since her babyhood has been guarded, protected and cloistered from the world—from all knowledge of that noisome beast, the world. She comes to you in that white innocence which is the immortal heritage of the demoiselles De Valette."

Raoul said softly:

"A jewel never taken from its casket."

"Ah, not a jewel," asserted O'Mara, rising; "not a jewel, M. Raoul, for,

though they shine to dazzle you, jewels are hard. Of Madeleine I never know which she is the more—a flower or a child. Perhaps you will decide that for me when you meet her."

Raoul said, smiling, "I grow a little impatient for the moment, sir."

"The moment, cousin, is at hand," said De Valette.

"Not quite yet," declared O'Mara. "I passed Madeleine an hour ago deep in the woods."

"On her way home?" asked De Valette quickly.

Father O'Mara shook his head. His gray eyes twinkled.

"No," he returned slowly. "I believe she was chasing a butterfly."

Chapter 3

TO the ears of the three men sitting in the great, time dulled room came the space softened strains of life and drum. They came even as Father O'Mara was protesting the safety of the woods.

De Valette said:

"Hear them! The woods nor anywhere is safe with these cursed Americans about. The village is full of them today—backwoodsmen, ruffians—all manner of canaille!"

In response to unspoken interrogation from Raoul de Valette, Father O'Mara explained:

"They're recruiting a company in the village and hereabouts," he said, "for this everlasting second war of theirs with England. They march tonight."

"They make ready, then," queried Raoul, "for the great battle down the river under their chief, eh—how do they call that name of a barbarian?—Andrew Jackson? Eh, but they are horribly afraid, these Americans! They are hiding behind bags of sand down there above New Orleans. The English will annihilate them. Observe the impudence of that vile music. Tomorrow it will be the squeak of a mouse. Ha, how they will run! These Americans," he declared, with an air of finality, "are beasts."

Father O'Mara protested:

"Ah, but we must not be bitter, not even toward Americans."

"It is a virtue to hate them," declared Raoul. "Heaven loves us for it."

"Heaven hated us when that traitor Bonaparte sold this beautiful new France to them," De Valette, who spoke, spoke with deep bitterness. "Now they descend upon us in hordes—peasants, low born men, rascals who work with their own hands."

Raoul said lightly:

"It is a curse that will pass. These Americans are cunning, but not intelligent. Intelligence is a monopoly of

gentlemen, and the good God knows that the Americans are not gentlemen. They cannot endure. They move too fast. The English will drive them out for us. Imitate me, my cousin, and despise the Yankees lightly."

"Your parish has not known the invasion like mine," asserted De Valette darkly. "You have not seen everything you have met away before this course of Yankee locusts. Before the Americans came my acres stretched halfway to the river. The overseers stole, but what of that? There was plenty there. Then came the Americans, a thrice accursed family of Yankees, who took up land from my boundaries. Their overseers did not steal from them. They were their own overseers. They counted their pence. They lived like tradesmen. They made two stalks of cane grow where my overseers grew one. They undersold my crop. What could I do? That family grew rich, and I grew poor. They began to buy. I had to sell. Acre by acre they have absorbed my land—eaten it up. And now what have I left of all Valette? This house and the chapel yonder—that is all. You say these Americans will pass, Raoul? What, when one family alone has taken all this from me? And even that is not enough for them. Yesterday I heard that this vulture—this Yankee, Roderick Steele—has taken a fancy to my poor mansion itself and intends to purchase it. Let him dare to make the offer."

The squeak of life and the mutter of drum had come yet louder. Raoul rose to his feet.

"Hark!" he cried. "That dirty eagle of theirs, does he come to crow



like a rooster on your very threshold, my cousin?"

"He has insolence enough," said De Valette grimly.

Of a sudden came from outside the sound of a woman's voice in song—a song that matched in melody the air of life and drum and that gave it words as well; came with it the sound of dancing feet and the clinking of tambourine.

"What's this?" cried Father O'Mara. He rose to his feet and went to the door, throwing it open. As he did so there dashed into the room a woman. Laughing, head held high, she pi-

rouetted across the floor, finishing song and dance together, and, with a flourish of the tambourine, she stood gazing in mocking merriment upon the three men.

A strange, wild, dark woman she was, with full, insolent red lips, great black eyes and figure graceful and sinuous and lithe. A colored handkerchief was wound turbanwise around the loose masses of her black hair. She wore a skirt of vivid red, and her rounded arms were bare to the elbow. Large gold ear ornaments she had, and many rings upon her fingers, and her shoes were dust laden.

At De Valette she looked and at the priest. But upon Raoul she looked longer. He turned a little. She laughed.

"Who are you?" demanded De Valette coldly.

"Men call me L'Acadienne—and other things," she said. She looked again at Raoul, and again she laughed. She went on: "Eh, then, messieurs! A little silver to carry on the war? Charity for the wounded, eh?"

O'Mara asked quickly:

"What are you doing here, my girl?"

"Me?" she asked. "I'm a wanderer, M'sieur L'Abbe. Today I find your village and some soldiers. I dance for them. Shall I dance for you, messieurs? Her dark eyes flew to Raoul. She said, with mocking laugh: "Here is one who would like it. No? His face is so kind." She turned to him deliberately. "Shall I dance for you, m'sieur?"

He answered quickly:

"No."

Came from outside a hail. De Valette turned.

"Do they summon me?" he demanded. He started swiftly toward the door. But ere he could reach it there had walked into the room a tall man of bone and blood and sinew, clad in the dress of a woodsman. A powderhorn was slung over his shoulder, and he carried in his hand a long barreled rifle. At his heels there followed a shrinking youth of twenty—a youth with a great shock of straw colored hair and scared eyes, who carried awkwardly a gun that reached from feet to neck.

The first of the two with long strides advanced to the center of the room, surveying coolly those therein.

"I'm Wolf!" he cried. His voice was deep and resonant, his manner the loose, independent swagger of those who fear not and are feared. "I'm Wolf," he repeated. "I want recruits—volunteers to serve in General Jackson's army. Who'll strike one blow for liberty? Who'll join Wolf's sharpshooters? I'll promise you fighting enough within twenty-four hours."

De Valette turned upon him coldly, haughtily.

"Sooner, sir," he said grimly, "if I had any dogs left in the kennels of Valette."

"So, ho!" cried Wolf, unperturbed. "Frenchie, are you? No one here to come and help us lick the British?"

To be Continued Next Week.

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