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# Ten Tales

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 Publio

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Minden jog fenntartva!

### THE CAPTAIN'S VICES.

**A small village. The text reads 'The Captain's Vices.' A group of five geese, walking down the left side of the page.**

#### I.

It is of no importance, the name of the little provincial city where Captain Mercadier—twenty-six years of service, twenty-two campaigns, and three wounds—installed himself when he was retired on a pension.

Two more geese, strolling in the grass across the bottom of the page. It was quite like all those other little villages which solicit without obtaining it a branch of the railway; just as if it were not the sole dissipation of the natives to go every day, at the same hour, to the Place de la Fontaine to see the diligence come in at full gallop, with its gay cracking of the whips and clang of bells.

It was a place of three thousand inhabitants—ambitiously denominated souls in the statistical tables—and was exceedingly proud of its title of chief city of the canton. It had ramparts planted with trees, a pretty river with good fishing, a church of the charming epoch of the flamboyant Gothic, disgraced by a frightful station of the cross, brought directly from the quarter of Saint Sulpice. Every Monday its market was gay with great red and blue umbrellas, and countrymen filled its streets in carts and carriages. But for the rest of the week it retired with delight into that silence and solitude which made it so dear to its rustic population. Its streets were paved with cobble-stones; through the windows of the ground-floor one could see samplers and wax-flowers under glass domes, and, through the gates of the gardens, statuettes of Napoleon in shell-work. The principal inn was naturally called the Shield of France; and the town-clerk made rhymed acrostics for the ladies of society.

Captain Mercadier had chosen that place of retreat for the simple reason that he had been born there, and because, in his noisy childhood, he had pulled down the signs and plugged up the bell-buttons. He returned there to find neither relations, nor friends, nor acquaintances; and the recollections of his youth recalled only the angry faces of shop-keepers who shook their fists at him from the shop-doors, a catechism which threatened him with hell, a school which predicted the scaffold, and, finally, his departure for his regiment, hastened by a paternal malediction.

For the Captain was not a saintly man; the old record of his punishment was black with days in the guard-house inflicted for breaches of discipline, absences from roll-calls, and nocturnal uproars in the mess-room. He had often narrowly escaped losing his stripes as a corporal or a sergeant, and he needed all the chance, all the license of a campaigning life to gain his first epaulet. Firm and brave soldier, he had passed almost all his life in Algiers at that time when our foot soldiers wore the high shako, white shoulder-belts and huge cartridge-boxes. He had had Lamoricière for commander. The Due de Nemours, near whom he received his first wound, had decorated him, and when he was sergeant-major, Père Bugrand had called him by his name and pulled his ears. He had been a prisoner of Abd-el-Kader, bearing the scar of a yataghan stroke on his neck, of one ball in his shoulder and another in his chest; and notwithstanding absinthe, duels, debts of play, and almond-eyed Jewesses, he fairly won, with the point of the bayonet and sabre, his grade of captain in the First Regiment of Sharp-shooters.

Captain Mercadier—twenty-six years of service, twenty-two campaigns, and three wounds—had just retired on his pension, not quite two thousand francs, which, joined to the two hundred and fifty francs from his cross, placed him in that estate of honorable penury which the State reserves for its old servants.

His entry into his natal city was without ostentation. He arrived one morning on the imperiale of the diligence, chewing an extinguished cigar, and already on good terms with the conductor, to whom, during his journey, he had related the passage of the Porte de Fer; full of indulgence, moreover, for the distractions of his auditor, who often interrupted the recital by some oath or epithet

addressed to the off mare. When the diligence stopped he threw on the sidewalk his old valise, covered with railway placards as numerous as the changes of garrison that its proprietor had made, and the idlers of the neighborhood were astonished to see a man with a decoration—a rare thing in the province—offer a glass of wine to the coachman at the bar of an inn near by.

He installed himself at once. In a house in the outskirts, where two captive cows lowed, and fowls and ducks passed and repassed through the gate-way, a furnished chamber was to let. Preceded by a masculine-looking woman, the Captain climbed the stair-way with its great wooden balusters, perfumed by a strong odor of the stable, and reached a great tiled room, whose walls were covered with a bizarre paper representing, printed in blue on a white background and repeated infinitely, the picture of Joseph Poniatowski crossing the Elster on his horse. This monotonous decoration, recalling nevertheless our military glories, fascinated the Captain without doubt, for, without concerning himself with the uncomfortable straw chairs, the walnut furniture, or the little bed with its yellowed curtain, he took the room without hesitation. A quarter of an hour was enough to empty his trunk, hang up his clothes, put his boots in a corner, and ornament the wall with a trophy composed of three pipes, a sabre, and a pair of pistols. After a visit to the grocer's, over the way, where he bought a pound of candles and a bottle of rum, he returned, put his purchase on the mantle-shelf, and looked around him with an air of perfect satisfaction. And then, with the promptitude of the camp, he shaved without a mirror, brushed his coat, cocked his hat over his ear, and went for a walk in the village in search of a café.

## II.

It was an inveterate habit of the Captain to spend much of his time at a café. It was there that he satisfied at the same time the three vices which reigned supreme in his heart—tobacco, absinthe, and cards. It was thus that he passed his life, and he could have drawn a plan of all the places where he had ever been stationed by their tobacco shops, cafés, and military clubs. He never felt himself so thoroughly at ease as when sitting on a worn velvet bench before a square of green cloth near a heap of beer-mugs and saucers. His cigar never seemed good unless he struck his match under the marble of the table, and he never failed, after hanging his hat and his sabre on a hat-hook and settling himself comfortably, by unloosing one or two buttons of his coat, to breathe a profound sigh of relief, and exclaim,

“That is better!”

His first care was, therefore, to find an establishment which he could frequent, and after having gone around the village without finding anything that suited him, he stopped at last to regard with the eye of a connoisseur the Café Prosper, situated at the corner of the Place du Marché and the Rue de la Pavoisse.

It was not his ideal. Some of the details of the exterior were too provincial: the waiter, in his black apron, for example, the little stands in their green frames, the footstools, and the wooden tables covered with waxed cloth. But the interior pleased the Captain. He was delighted upon his entrance by the sound of the bell which was touched by the fair and fleshy dame du comptoir, in her light dress, with a poppy-colored ribbon in her sleek hair. He saluted her gallantly, and believed that she sustained with sufficient majesty her triumphal place between two piles of punch-bowls properly crowned by billiard-balls. He ascertained that the place was cheerful, neat, and strewn evenly with yellow sand. He walked around it, looking at himself in the glasses as he passed; approved the panels where guardsmen and amazons were drinking champagne in a landscape filled with red holly-hocks; called for his absinthe, smoked, found the divan soft and the absinthe good, and was indulgent enough not to complain of the flies who bathed themselves in his glass with true rustic familiarity.

Eight days later he had become one of the pillars of the Café Prosper.

They soon learned his punctual habits and anticipated his wishes, while he, in turn, lunched with the patrons of the place—a valuable recruit for those who haunted the café, folks oppressed by the tedium of a country life, for whom the arrival of that new-comer, past master in all games, and an admirable raconteur of his wars and his loves, was a true stroke of good-fortune. The Captain himself was delighted to tell his stories to folks who were still ignorant of his repertoire. A rotund man with small mustache stands with his hands in his pockets. There were fully six months before him in which to tell of his games, his feats, his battles, the retreat of Constantine, the capture of Bou-Maza, and the officers' receptions with the concomitant intoxication of rum-punch.

Human weakness! He was by no means sorry, on his part, to be something of an oracle; he from whom the sub-lieutenants, new-comers at Saint-Cyr, fled dismayed, fearing his long stories.

His usual auditors were the keeper of the café, a stupid and silent beer-cask, always in his sleeved vest, and remarkable only for his carved pipe; the bailiff, a scoffer, dressed invariably in black, scorned for his inelegant habit of carrying off what remained of his sugar; the town-clerk, the gentleman of acrostics, a person of much amiability and a feeble constitution, who sent to the illustrated journals solutions of enigmas and rebuses; and, lastly, the veterinary surgeon of the place, the only one who, from his position of atheist and democrat, was allowed to contradict the Captain. A bearded man wearing glasses sits with a glass before him. This practitioner, a man with tufted whiskers and eye-glasses, presided over the radical committee of electors, and when the curé took up a little collection among his devotees for the purpose of adorning his church with some frightful red and gilded statues, denounced, in a letter to the *Siècle*, the cupidity of the Jesuits.

The Captain having gone out one evening for some cigars after an animated political discussion, the aforesaid veterinary grumbled to himself certain phrases of heavy irritation concerning "coming to the point," and "a mere fencing-master," and "cutting a figure." But as the object of these vague menaces suddenly returned, whistling a march and beating time with his cane, the incident was without result.

In short, the group lived harmoniously together, and willingly permitted themselves to be presided over by the new-comer, whose white beard and martial bearing were quite impressive. And the small city, proud of so many things, was also proud of its retired Captain.

### III.

Perfect happiness exists nowhere, and Captain Mercadier, who believed that he had found it at the Café Prosper, soon recovered from his illusion.

For one thing, on Mondays, the market-day, the Café Prosper was untenable.

From early morning it was overrun with truck-peddlers, farmers, and poultrymen. Heavy men with coarse voices, red necks, and great whips in their hands, wearing blue blouses and otter-skin caps, bargaining over their cups, stamping their feet, striking their fists, familiar with the servant, and bungling at billiards.

When the Captain came, at eleven o'clock, for his first glass of absinthe, he found this crowd gathered, and already half-drunk, ordering a quantity of lunches. His usual place was taken, and he was served slowly and badly. The bell was continually sounding, and the proprietor and the waiter, with napkins under their arms, were running distractedly hither and thither. In short, it was an ill-omened day, which upset his entire existence.

Now, one Monday morning, when he was resting quietly at home, being sure that the café would be much too full and busy, the mild radiance of the autumn sun persuaded him to go down and sit upon the stone seat by the side of the house.

A dapper man with top hat and cane talks with a wretched-looking girl with a wooden leg. Three geese are nearby.

He was sitting there, depressed and smoking a damp cigar, when he saw coming down the end of the street—it was a badly paved lane leading out into the country—a little girl of eight or ten, driving before her a half-dozen geese.

As the Captain looked carelessly at the child he saw that she had a wooden leg.

There was nothing paternal in the heart of the soldier. It was that of a hardened bachelor. In former days, in the streets of Algiers, when the little begging Arabs pursued him with their importunate prayers, the Captain had often chased them away with blows from his whip; and on those rare occasions when he had penetrated the nomadic household of some comrade who was married and the father of a family, he had gone away cursing the crying babies and awkward children who had touched with their greasy hands the gilding on his uniform.

But the sight of that particular infirmity, which recalled to him the sad spectacle of wounds and amputations, touched, on that account, the old soldier. He felt almost a constriction of the heart at the sight of that sorry creature, half-clothed in her tattered petticoats and old chemise, bravely running along behind her geese, her bare foot in the dust, and limping on her ill-made wooden stump.

The geese, recognizing their home, turned into the poultry-yard, and the little one was about to follow them when the Captain stopped her with this question: