

**THE ABBÉ
CONSTANTIN**

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The Abbé Constantin by Ludovic Halévy

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LUDOVIC HALÉVY

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Albe Constantin

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CHAPTER I.

WITH a step still valiant and firm an old priest walked along the dusty road in the full rays of a brilliant sun. For more than thirty years the Abbé Constantin had been Curé of the little village which slept there in the plain, on the banks of a slender stream called La Lizotte.

The Abbé Constantin was walking by the wall which surrounded the park of the castle of Longueval; at last he reached the entrance gate, which rested high and massive on two ancient pillars of stone, enbrowned and gnawed by time. The Curé stopped, and mournfully regarded two immense blue posters fixed on the pillars.

The posters announced that on Wednesday, May 18, 1881, at one o'clock P. M., would

take place, before the Civil Tribunal of Souvigny, the sale of the domain of Longueval, divided into four lots.

1st. The castle of Longueval, its dependencies, fine pieces of water, extensive offices, park of one hundred and fifty hectares in extent, completely surrounded by a wall, and traversed by the little river Lizotte. Valued at six hundred thousand francs.

2d. The farm of Blanche-Couronne, three hundred hectares, valued at five hundred thousand francs.

3d. The farm of La Rozeriaie, two hundred and fifty hectares, valued at four hundred thousand francs.

4th. The woods and forests of La Mionne, containing four hundred and fifty hectares, valued at five hundred and fifty thousand francs.

And these four amounts added altogether at the foot of the bill gave the respectable sum of two millions and fifty thousand francs.

Then they were really going to dismember this magnificent domain, which, escaping all mutilation, had for more than two centuries always been transmitted intact from father to son in the family of Longueval. The placards

also announced that after the temporary division into four lots, it would be possible to unite them again, and offer for sale the entire domain, but it was a very large morsel, and to all appearance no purchaser would present himself.

The Marquise de Longueval had died six months before ; in 1873 she had lost her only son, Robert de Longueval ; the three heirs were the grandchildren of the Marquise,—Pierre Hélène, and Camille. It had been found necessary to offer the domain for sale, as Hélène and Camille were minors. Pierre, a young man of three and twenty, had lived rather fast, was already half ruined, and could not hope to redeem Longueval.

It was midday. In an hour it would have a new master, this old castle of Longueval ; and this master, who would he be ? What woman would take the place of the old Marquise in the chimney corner of the grand salon, all adorned with ancient tapestry ?—the old Marquise, the friend of the old priest. It was she who had restored the church ; it was she who had established and furnished a complete dispensary at the vicarage under the care of Pauline, the Curé's servant ; it was she who,

twice a week, in her great barouche, all crowded with little children's clothes and thick woollen petticoats, came to fetch the Abbé Constantin to make with him what she called "la chasse aux pauvres."

The old priest continued his walk, musing over all this;—then he thought too—the greatest saints have their little weaknesses—he thought too of the beloved habits of thirty years thus rudely interrupted. Every Thursday and every Sunday he had dined at the castle. How he had been petted, coaxed, indulged! Little Camille—she was eight years old—would come and sit on his knee and say to him:

"You know, Monsieur le Curé, it is in your church that I mean to be married, and grand-mamma will send such heaps of flowers to fill, quite fill the church—more than for the month of Mary. It will be like a little garden—all white, all white, all white!"

The month of Mary! It was then the month of Mary. Formerly at this season the altar disappeared under the flowers brought from the conservatories of Longueval. None this year were on the altar, except a few bouquets of lily-of-the-valley and white lilacs in

gilded china vases. Formerly, every Sunday at high mass, and every evening during the month of Mary, Mademoiselle Hébert, the reader to Madame de Longueval, played the harmonium given by the Marquise. Now the poor harmonium, reduced to silence, no longer accompanied the voices of the choir or the children's hymns. Mademoiselle Marbeau, the post-mistress, would with all her heart have taken the place of Mademoiselle Hébert, but she dared not, though she was a little musical. She was afraid of being remarked as of the clerical party, and denounced by the Mayor, who was a Freethinker. That might have been injurious to her interests, and prevented her promotion.

He had nearly reached the end of the wall of the park, that park of which every corner was known to the old priest. The road now followed the banks of the Lizotte, and on the other side of the little stream stretched the fields belonging to the two farms; then, still farther off, rose the dark woods of La Mionne.

Divided! The domain was going to be divided! The heart of the poor priest was rent by this bitter thought. All that for thirty years had been inseparable, indivisible, to him.

It was a little his own, his very own, *his* estate, his great property. He felt at home on the lands of Longueval. It had happened more than once that he had stopped complacently before an immense cornfield, plucked an ear, removed the husk, and said to himself :

“Come! the grain is fine, firm, and sound. This year we shall have a good harvest!”

And with a joyous heart he would continue his way through *his* fields, *his* meadows, *his* pastures ; in short, by every chord of his heart, by every tie of his life, by all his habits, his memories, he clung to this domain whose last hour had come.

The Abbé perceived in the distance the farm of Blanche-Couronne ; its red-tiled roofs showed distinctly against the verdure of the forest. There, again, the Curé was at home. Bernard, the farmer of the Marquise, was his friend, and when the old priest was delayed in his visits to the poor and sick, when the sun was sinking below the horizon, and the Abbé began to feel a little fatigue in his limbs, and a sensation of exhaustion in his stomach, he stopped and supped with Bernard, regaled himself with a savory stew and potatoes, and emptied his pitcher of cider ; then, after sup-