

**TALES FROM "BLACKWOOD":
BEING THE MOST FAMOUS SERIES
OF STORIES EVER PUBLISHED,
ESPECIALLY SELECTED FROM THAT
CELEBRATED ENGLISH PUBLICATION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649717613

Tales from "Blackwood": Being the Most Famous Series of Stories Ever Published, Especially Selected from that Celebrated English Publication by H. Chalmers Roberts

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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Selected by

H. CHALMERS ROBERTS



NEW YORK
Doubleday, Page & Company
1905

M. S. W.

CONTENTS

SERIES I

VOLUME III

	PAGE
A French Speculation	I
LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE	
Rufus Hickman of St. Botolph's	45
LORD WELLWOOD (HON. H. J. MONCRIEFF)	
Hans Preller; A Legend of the Rhine Falls	90
C. L. LEWIS	
The Puerto de Medina	117
MAURICE KINGSLEY	
Jack and Minory	144
COL. ALFRED HARCOURT	

TALES FROM "BLACKWOOD."

A FRENCH SPECULATION.

BY THE HON. LADY MARGARET MAJENDIE.

CHAPTER I.

IT was a bright Sunday afternoon in the early spring, and all the little world of Blois was disporting itself on the promenade by the side of the river Loire. The scene was very gay: under the long line of trees a band of stringed instruments was labouring through an elaborate valse. The performers were amateurs: they belonged to a choral society got up by the organist of the cathedral, among the young and enterprising *bourgeoisie*; and the affair had proved a great success. As they played now, the admiring eyes of mothers, sisters, and pretty cousins were on them, and they did their best

and looked their best, as became their important position!

A little apart from the band sat groups of elder ladies, chatting among themselves, watching their portly husbands and slim daughters promenading round the musicians; among them little children trotting about, daintily dressed, and *bonnes* with large white coifs on their heads and knitting in their hands. Over all, the sunny sky of France, blue, bright, and gay, smiling through the tender green of the young foliage, and reflecting itself beautifully in the fair river.

Truly they seemed a happy and contented people these honest *bourgeois* of the old town, full of their own concerns, and apparently well satisfied to be so. Among a group of *gros papas* who stood chattering together, and leaning on the parapet, stood two men, both of whom seemed graver than the others. The elder of the two was a man of some importance in the town, the owner of a well-known and popular inn "La Pie Blanche." No one was more respected than Monsieur Auguste Benoit; he and his family were most highly considered. Monsieur Benoit was about the average height of the French *bourgeois*, a liberal five-foot five; he was stout, or rather round; his prominent waistcoat was adorned by a huge gold watch-chain; he wore a massive ring set with a carbuncle on the first finger of his right hand; his hands were fat and dimpled, and tapered to finely-

J. G. V. N.

pointed fingers. Monsieur Benoit's face was good-nature and *bonhomie* itself; it was round and large, smooth shaven but for the black moustache. He was bald on the top of his head; the hair behind was black as jet, and so close cut as to throw two large thin ears into loud relief. His ample double chin rested on a black satin cravat. His dress, from that cravat to the tartan trousers in folds on the hips, and tapering to the very small high-heeled boots, was perfection. Such was Monsieur Benoit on the promenade on Sunday, but to-day the shade of gravity sat on him in an unwonted manner.

Monsieur Benoit's companion was a man who might have been any age between thirty-five and fifty. He belonged to a different type altogether from his friend: he was tall, and very thin; his hair was fair and sprinkled with grey; he wore a short, fair beard, which partly concealed the restless movements of an eager, mobile mouth; his eyebrows also were constantly moving, and his eyes restless, bright, and searching; he was, despite this unrestfulness, a handsome man, with straight features and a well-made figure. He was Monsieur Legros, formerly a highly successful *avocat*, now retired upon his laurels, with his money invested in a new and startling investment. That restlessness was the restlessness of speculation; in his little office, in old days of hard work, Legros had been a much calmer man.

That such a man as Camille Legros ever had time

or thought to spare for matrimony, was an astonishment to his acquaintance; but so it was. Affairs of importance had taken him to Blois, where he had hired a room in "La Pie Blanche." Madame Benoit herself always presided at the head of the *table d'hôte*, and on her right hand sat her daughter, Mademoiselle Blanche, so named, people said, after the celebrated "Pie." Before Monsieur Legros had dined three times at *table d'hôte* he had determined to make Blanche his wife. He was a man who, during a busy life, had hardly given a passing thought to women. He was, like most Frenchmen, a devoted son to his widowed mother; but perhaps it was his experience of her that had so completely lowered his conception of what a woman should be, that he expected in a wife a pretty nonentity—a creature not to trust or to share his confidence, but a useful housekeeper, and a credit to his taste in good looks. He was not in love with Blanche Benoit: he did not know what love was; and he demanded her from her father with a strong sense of the good match he was offering her, and that the obligation would be all on their side. Monsieur Benoit demanded a fair statement of his proposed son-in-law's finances before he would agree to the betrothal. It was given. Camille Legros was too absolutely confident in the success of his great schemes to conceal anything. Benoit was impressed by the size of the fortune, but somewhat startled by hearing that it was all invested in one vast specula-

tion, the building of a little fashionable watering-place that was to rival Dieppe, Dinard, or Etretat in its attractions.

"You are sure—you are quite sure that the situation is one that will be popular?" asked the inn-keeper, anxiously.

"Sure! I am certain," cried Legros, shrugging up his shoulders and tapping the map over which they were bending with the back of his hand. "What more can one wish? The air is magnificent; an unbroken *plage* of hard sand; the view exquisite; in the neighbouring inland town advantages of education, of market, of medical attendance; the railway has agreed with me, for a consideration, to run an additional train from Paris; there are quarries close at hand, from which I draw my stone—it is well adapted to building purposes; labour is cheap just now; I have capital,—what more can one desire?"

"It sounds well," said Monsieur Benoit, musingly. He was dazzled by the talk, by the ready money, by the certainty of Legros; and after a conference with Madame Benoit—for he did not share his future son-in-law's views about women—they agreed to give him their only child.

Blanche was told, and was quite satisfied; she had not thought much of the future, leaving it with perfect confidence in her parents' hands; so she was neither surprised nor disconcerted when Monsieur Legros was presented to her as her future husband;