

LEVER CHARLES JAMES

THE CONFESSIONS OF
HARRY LORREQUER —
VOLUME 4

Charles Lever
The Confessions of Harry
Lorrequer — Volume 4

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Содержание

CHAPTER XXIV.	4
CHAPTER XXV.	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	26

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CHAPTER XXIV.

THE GEN D'ARME

I had fortunately sufficient influence upon my fair friends to persuade them to leave Calais early on the morning following; and two hours before Kilkee had opened his eyes upon this mortal life, we were far upon the road to Paris.

Having thus far perfectly succeeded in my plot, my spirit rose rapidly, and I made every exertion to make the road appear short to my fellow-travellers. This part of France is unfortunately deficient in any interest from scenery; large undivided tracts of waving cornfields, with a back-ground of apparently interminable forests, and occasionally, but rarely, the glimpse of some old time-worn chateau, with its pointed gable and terraced walk, are nearly all that the eye can detect in the intervals between the small towns and villages. Nothing, however, is "flat or unprofitable" to those who desire to make it otherwise; good health, good spirits, and fine weather,

are wonderful travelling companions, and render one tolerably independent of the charms of scenery. Every mile that separated me from Calais, and took away the chance of being overtaken, added to my gaiety, and I flatter myself that a happier party have rarely travelled that well frequented road.

We reached Abbeville to dinner, and adjourned to the beautiful little garden of the inn for our coffee; the evening was so delightful that I proposed to walk on the Paris road, until the coming up of the carriage, which required a screw, or a washer, or some such trifle as always occurs in French posting. To this la chere mamma objected, she being tired, but added, that Isabella and I might go on, and that she would take us up in half an hour. This was an arrangement so very agreeable and unlooked for by me, that I pressed Miss Bingham as far as I well could, and at last succeeded in overcoming her scruples, and permitting me to shawl her. One has always a tremendous power of argument with the uninitiated abroad, by a reference to a standard of manners and habits totally different from our own. Thus the talismanic words — "Oh! don't be shocked; remember you are in France," did more to satisfy my young friend's mind than all I could have said for an hour. Little did she know that in England only, has an unmarried young lady any liberty, and that the standard of foreign propriety on this head is far, very far more rigid than our own.

"La premiere Rue a gauche," said an old man of whom I inquired the road; "et puis," added I.

"And then quite straight; it is a chaussee all the way, and you cannot mistake it."

"Now for it, mademoiselle," said I. "Let us try if we cannot see a good deal of the country before the carriage comes up."

We had soon left the town behind and reached a beautifully shaded high road, with blossoming fruit trees, and honeysuckle-covered cottages; there had been several light showers during the day, and the air had all the fresh fragrant feeling of an autumn evening, so tranquillizing and calming that few there are who have not felt at some time or other of their lives, its influence upon their minds. I fancied my fair companion did so, for, as she walked beside me, her silence, and the gentle pressure of her arm, were far more eloquent than words.

If that extraordinary flutter and flurry of sensations which will now and then seize you, when walking upon a lonely country road with a pretty girl for your companion, whose arm is linked in yours, and whose thoughts, as far you can guess at least, are travelling the same path with your own — if this be animal magnetism, or one of its phenomena, then do I swear by Mesmer, whatever it be, delusion or otherwise, it has given me the brightest moments of my life — these are the real "winged dreams" of pleasures which outlive others of more absorbing and actual interest at the time. After all, for how many of our happiest feelings are we indebted to the weakness of our nature. The man that is wise at nineteen, "*Je l'en fais mon compliment*," but I assuredly do not envy him; and now, even now, when

I number more years than I should like to "confess," rather than suffer the suspicious watchfulness of age to creep on me, I prefer to "go on believing," even though every hour of the day should show me, duped and deceived. While I plead guilty to this impeachment, let me show mitigation, that it has its enjoyments — first, although I am the most constant and devoted man breathing, as a very cursory glance at these confessions may prove, yet I have never been able to restrain myself from a propensity to make love, merely as a pastime. The gambler that sits down to play cards, or hazard against himself, may perhaps be the only person that can comprehend this tendency of mine. We both of us are playing for nothing (or love, which I suppose is synonymous;) we neither of us put forth our strength; for that very reason, and in fact like the waiter at Vauxhall who was complimented upon the dexterity with which he poured out the lemonade, and confessed that he spent his mornings "practising with vater," we pass a considerable portion of our lives in a mimic warfare, which, if it seem unprofitable, is, nevertheless, pleasant.

After all this long tirade, need I say how our walk proceeded? We had fallen into a kind of discussion upon the singular intimacy which had so rapidly grown up amongst us, and which years long might have failed to engender. Our attempts to analyse the reasons for, and the nature of the friendship thus so suddenly established — a rather dangerous and difficult topic, when the parties are both young — one eminently handsome, and the other disposed to be most agreeable. Oh, my dear young friends

of either sex, whatever your feelings be for one another, keep them to yourselves; I know of nothing half so hazardous as that "comparing of notes" which sometimes happens. Analysis is a beautiful thing in mathematics or chemistry, but it makes sad havoc when applied to the "functions of the heart."

"Mamma appears to have forgotten us," said Isabella, as she spoke, after walking for some time in silence beside me.

"Oh, depend upon it, the carriage has taken all this time to repair; but are you tired?"

"Oh, by no means; the evening is delightful, but — "

"Then perhaps you are ennuyee," said I, half pettishly, to provoke a disclaimer if possible. To this insidiously put quere I received, as I deserved, no answer, and again we sauntered on without speaking.

"To whom does that chateau belong, my old friend?" said I addressing a man on the road-side.

"A Monsieur le Marquis, sir," replied he.

"But what's his name, though?"

"Ah, that I can't tell you," replied the man again.

There you may perceive how, even yet, in provincial France, the old respect for the aristocracy still survives; it is sufficient that the possessor of that fine place is "Monsieur le Marquis;" but any other knowledge of who he is, and what, is superfluous. "How far are we from the next village, do you know?"

"About a league."

"Indeed. Why I thought 'La Scarpe' was quite near us."

"Ah, you are thinking of the Amiens road."

"Yes, of course; and is not this the Amiens road?"

"Oh, no; the Amiens road lies beyond those low hills to the right. You passed the turn at the first 'barriere'."

"Is it possible we could have come wrong?"

"Oh, Mr. Lorrequer, don't say so, I entreat of you."

"And what road is this, then, my friend?"

"This is the road to Albert and Peronne."

"Unfortunately, I believe he is quite right. Is there any crossroad from the village before us now, to the Amiens road?"

"Yes; you can reach it about three leagues hence."

"And we can get a carriage at the inn probably?"

"Ah, that I am not sure of — . Perhaps at the Lion d'or you may."

"But why not go back to Abbeville?"

"Oh, Mrs. Bingham must have left long since, and beside you forget the distance; we have been walking two hours."

"Now for the village," said I, as I drew my friend's arm closer within mine, and we set out in a fast walk.

Isabella seemed terribly frightened at the whole affair; what her mamma might think, and what might be her fears at not finding us on the road, and a hundred other encouraging reflections of this nature she poured forth unceasingly. As for myself, I did not know well what to think of it; my old fondness for adventure being ever sufficiently strong in me to give a relish to any thing which bore the least resemblance to one. This I now

concealed, and sympathised with my fair friend upon our mishap, and assuring her, at the same time, that there could be no doubt of our overtaking Mrs. Bingham before her arrival at Amiens.

"Ah, there is the village in the valley; how beautifully situated."

"Oh, I can't admire any thing now, Mr. Lorrequer, I am so frightened."

"But surely without cause," said I, looking tenderly beneath her bonnet.

"Is this," she answered, "nothing," and we walked on in silence again.

On reaching the Lion d'or we discovered that the only conveyance to be had was a species of open market-cart drawn by two horses, and in which it was necessary that my fair friend and myself should seat ourselves side by side upon straw: there was no choice, and as for Miss Bingham, I believe if an ass with panniers had presented itself, she would have preferred it to remaining where she was. We therefore took our places, and she could not refrain from laughing as we set out upon our journey in this absurd equipage, every jolt of which threw us from side to side, and rendered every attention on my part requisite to prevent her being upset.

After about two hours' travelling we arrived at the Amiens road, and stopped at the barriere. I immediately inquired if a carriage had passed, resembling Mrs. Bingham's, and learned that it had, about an hour before, and that the lady in it had been

informed that two persons, like those she asked after, had been seen in a caleche driving rapidly to Amiens, upon which she set out as fast as possible in pursuit.

"Certainly," said I, "the plot is thickening; but for that unlucky mistake she might in all probability have waited here for us. Amiens is only two leagues now, so our drive will not be long, and before six o'clock we shall all be laughing over the matter as a very good joke."

On we rattled, and as the road became less frequented, and the shadows lengthened, I could not but wonder at the strange situations which the adventurous character of my life had so often involved me in. Meanwhile, my fair friend's spirits became more and more depressed, and it was not without the greatest difficulty I was enabled to support her courage. I assured her, and not altogether without reason, that though so often in my eventful career accidents were occurring which rendered it dubious and difficult to reach the goal I aimed at, yet the results had so often been more pleasant than I could have anticipated, that I always felt a kind of involuntary satisfaction at some apparent obstacle to my path, setting it down as some especial means of fortune, to heighten the pleasure awaiting me; "and now," added I, "even here, perhaps, in this very mistake of our road — the sentiments I have heard — the feelings I have given utterance to — " What I was about to say, heaven knows — perhaps nothing less than a downright proposal was coming; but at that critical moment a gen-d'arme rode up to the side

of our waggon, and surveyed us with the peculiarly significant scowl his order is gifted with. After trotting alongside for a few seconds he ordered the driver to halt, and, turning abruptly to us, demanded our passports. Now our passports were, at that precise moment, peaceably reposing in the side pocket of Mrs. Bingham's carriage; I therefore explained to the gen-d'arme how we were circumstanced, and added, that on arriving at Amiens the passport should be produced. To this he replied that all might be perfectly true, but he did not believe a word of it — that he had received an order for the apprehension of two English persons travelling that road — and that he should accordingly request our company back to Chantraine, the commissionaire of which place was his officer.

"But why not take us to Amiens," said I; "particularly when I tell you that we can then show our passports?"

"I belong to the Chantraine district," was the laconic answer; and like the gentleman who could not weep at the sermon because he belonged to another parish, this specimen of a French Dogberry would not hear reason except in his own "commune."

No arguments which I could think of had any effect upon him, and amid a volley of entreaty and imprecation, both equally vain, we saw ourselves turn back upon the road to Amiens, and set out at a round trot to Chantraine, on the road to Calais.

Poor Isabella, I really pitied her; hitherto her courage had been principally sustained by the prospect of soon reaching Amiens; now there was no seeing where our adventure was to end. Besides

that, actual fatigue from the wretched conveyance began to distress her, and she was scarcely able to support herself, though assisted by my arm. What a perilous position mine, whispering consolation and comfort to a pretty girl on a lonely road, the only person near being one who comprehended nothing of the language we spoke in. Ah, how little do we know of fate, and how often do we despise circumstances that determine all our fortunes in the world. To think that a gen-d'arme should have any thing to do with my future lot in life, and that the real want of a passport to travel should involve the probable want of a licence to marry. Yes, it is quite in keeping, thought I, with every step I have taken through life. I may be brought before the "maire" as a culprit, and leave him as a Benedict.

On reaching the town, we were not permitted to drive to the inn, but at once conveyed to the house of the "commissaire," who was also the "maire" of the district. The worthy functionary was long since in bed, and it was only after ringing violently for half an hour that a head, surmounted with a dirty cotton night-cap, peeped from an upper window, and seemed to survey the assemblage beneath with patient attention. By this time a considerable crowd had collected from the neighbouring ale-houses and cabarets, who deemed it a most fitting occasion to honour us with the most infernal yells and shouts, as indicating their love of justice, and delight in detecting knavery; and that we were both involved in such suspicion, we had not long to learn. Meanwhile the poor old maire, who had been an employe in the

stormy days of the revolution, and also under Napoleon, and who full concurred with Swift that "a crowd is a mob, if composed even of bishops," firmly believed that the uproar beneath in the street was the announcement of a new change of affairs at Paris, determined to be early in the field, and shouted therefore with all his lungs — "vive le peuple" — "Vive la charte" — "A bas les autres." A tremendous shout of laughter saluted this exhibition of unexpected republicanism, and the poor maire retired from the window, having learned his mistake, covered with shame and confusion.

Before the mirth caused by this blunder had subsided, the door had opened, and we were ushered into the bureau of the commissaire, accompanied by the anxious crowd, all curious to know the particulars of our crime.

The maire soon appeared, his night-cap being replaced by a small black velvet skull-cap, and his lanky figure enveloped in a tarnished silk dressing-gown; he permitted us to be seated, while the gen-d'arme recounted the suspicious circumstances of our travelling, and produced the order to arrest an Englishman and his wife who had arrived in one of the late Boulogne packets, and who had carried off from some banking-house money and bills for a large amount.

"I have no doubt these are the people," said the gen-d'arme; "and here is the 'carte descriptive.' Let us compare it — 'Forty-two or forty-three years of age.'"

"I trust, M. le Maire," said I, overhearing this, "that ladies do

not recognize me as so much."

"Of a pale and cadaverous aspect," continued the gen-d'arme.

Upon this the old functionary, wiping his spectacles with a snuffy handkerchief, as if preparing them to examine an eclipse of the sun, regarded me fixedly for several minutes, and said — "Oh, yes, I perceive it plainly; continue the description."

"Five feet three inches," said the gen-d'arme.

"Six feet one in England, whatever this climate may have done since."

"Speaks broken and bad French."

"Like a native," said I; "at least so said my friends in the chaussee D'Antin, in the year fifteen."

Here the catalogue ended, and a short conference between the maire and the gen-d'arme ensued, which ended in our being committed for examination on the morrow; meanwhile we were to remain at the inn, under the surveillance of the gen-d'arme.

On reaching the inn my poor friend was so completely exhausted that she at once retired to her room, and I proceeded to fulfil a promise I had made her to despatch a note to Mrs. Bingham at Amiens by a special messenger, acquainting her with all our mishaps, and requesting her to come or send to our assistance. This done, and a good supper smoking before me, of which with difficulty I persuaded Isabella to partake in her own room, I again regained my equanimity, and felt once more at ease.

The gen-d'arme in whose guardianship I had been left was a

fine specimen of his caste; a large and powerfully built man of about fifty, with an enormous beard of grizzly brown and grey hair, meeting above and beneath his nether lip; his eyebrows were heavy and beetling, and nearly concealed his sharp grey eyes, while a deep sabre-wound had left upon his cheek a long white scar, giving a most warlike and ferocious look to his features.

As he sat apart from me for some time, silent and motionless, I could not help imagining in how many a hard-fought day he had borne a part, for he evidently, from his age and bearing, had been one of the soldiers of the empire. I invited him to partake of my bottle of Medoc, by which he seemed flattered. When the flask became low, and was replaced by another, he appeared to have lost much of his constrained air, and seemed forgetting rapidly the suspicious circumstances which he supposed attached to me — waxed wondrous confidential and communicative, and condescended to impart some traits of a life which was not without its vicissitudes, for he had been, as I suspected, one of the "Garde" — the old garde — was wounded at Marengo, and received the croix d'honneur in the field of Wagram, from the hands of the Emperor himself. The headlong enthusiasm of attachment to Napoleon, which his brief and stormy career elicited even from those who suffered long and deeply in his behalf, is not one of the least singular circumstances which this portion of history displays. While the rigours of the conscription had invaded every family in France, from Normandie to La Vendee — while the untilled fields, the ruined granaries, the

half-deserted villages, all attested the depopulation of the land, those talismanic words, "l'Empereur et la gloire," by some magic mechanism seemed all-sufficient not only to repress regret and suffering, but even stimulate pride, and nourish valour; and even yet, when it might be supposed that like the brilliant glass of a magic lantern, the gaudy pageant had passed away, leaving only the darkness and desolation behind it — the memory of those days under the empire survives untarnished and unimpaired, and every sacrifice of friends or fortune is accounted but little in the balance when the honour of La Belle France, and the triumphs of the grand "armee," are weighted against them. The infatuated and enthusiastic followers of this great man would seem, in some respects, to resemble the drunkard in the "Vaudeville," who alleged as his excuse for drinking, that whenever he was sober his poverty disgusted him. "My cabin," said he, "is a cell, my wife a mass of old rags, my child a wretched object of misery and malady. But give me brandy; let me only have that, and then my hut is a palace, my wife is a princess, and my child the very picture of health and happiness;" so with these people — intoxicated with the triumphs of their nation, "tete monte" with victory — they cannot exist in the horror of sobriety which peace necessarily enforces; and whenever the subject turns in conversation upon the distresses of the time or the evil prospects of the country, they call out, not like the drunkard, for brandy, but in the same spirit they say — "Ah, if you would again see France flourishing and happy, let us once more have our

croix d'honneur, our epaulettes, our voluntary contributions, our Murillos, our Velasquez, our spoils from Venice, and our increased territories to rule over." This is the language of the Buonapartiste every where, and at all seasons; and the mass of the nation is wonderfully disposed to participate in the sentiment. The empire was the Aeneid of the nation, and Napoleon the only hero they now believe in. You may satisfy yourself of this easily. Every cafe will give evidence of it, every society bears its testimony to it, and even the most wretched Vaudeville, however, trivial the interest — however meagre the story, and poor the diction, let the emperor but have his "role" — let him be as laconic as possible, carry his hands behind his back, wear the well-known low cocked-hat, and the "redingote gris" — the success is certain — every sentence he utters is applauded, and not a single allusion to the Pyramids, the sun of Austerlitz, l'honneur, et al vieille garde, but is sure to bring down thunders of acclamation. But I am forgetting myself, and perhaps my reader too; the conversation of the old gen-d'arme accidentally led me into reflections like these, and he was well calculated, in many ways, to call them forth. His devoted attachment — his personal love of the emperor — of which he gave me some touching instances, was admirably illustrated by an incident, which I am inclined to tell, and hope it may amuse the reader as much as it did myself on hearing it.

When Napoleon had taken possession of the papal dominions, as he virtually did, and carried off the pope, Pius VI, to Paris,

this old soldier, then a musketeer in the garde, formed part of the company that mounted guard over the holy father. During the earlier months of the holy father's confinement he was at liberty to leave his apartments at any hour he pleased, and cross the court-yard of the palace to the chapel where he performed mass. At such moments the portion of the Imperial Guard then on duty stood under arms, and received from the august hand of the pope his benediction as he passed. But one morning a hasty express arrived from the Tuilleries, and the officer on duty communicated his instructions to his party, that the apostolic vicar was not to be permitted to pass, as heretofore, to the chapel, and that a most rigid superintendence was to be exercised over his movements. My poor companion had his turn for duty on that ill-starred day; he had not been long at his post when the sound of footsteps was heard approaching, and he soon saw the procession which always attended the holy father to his devotions, advancing towards him; he immediately placed himself across the passage, and with his musket in rest barred the exit, declaring, at the same time, that such were his orders. In vain the priests who formed the cortege addressed themselves to his heart, and spoke to his feelings, and at last finding little success by these methods, explained to him the mortal sin and crime for which eternal damnation itself might not be a too heavy retribution if he persisted in preventing his holiness to pass, and thus be the means of opposing an obstacle to the head of the whole Catholic church, for celebrating the mass; the soldier remained firm and unmoved,

the only answer he returned being, "that he had his orders, and dared not disobey them." The pope, however, persisted in his resolution, and endeavoured to get by, when the hardy veteran retreated a step, and placing his musket and bayonet at the charge, called out "au nom de l'Empereur," when the pious party at last yielded and slowly retired within the palace.

Not many days after, this severe restriction was recalled, and once more the father was permitted to go to and from the chapel of the palace, at such times as he pleased, and again, as before, in passing the corridor, the guards presented arms and received the holy benediction, all except one; upon him the head of the church frowned severely, and turned his back, while extending his pious hands towards the others. "And yet," said the poor fellow in concluding his story, "and yet I could not have done otherwise; I had my orders and must have followed them, and had the emperor commanded it, I should have run my bayonet through the body of the holy father himself.

"Thus, you see, my dear sir, how I have loved the emperor, for I have many a day stood under fire for him in this world, 'et il faut que j'aïlle encore au feu pour lui apres ma mort.'."

He received in good part the consolations I offered him on this head, but I plainly saw they did not, could not relieve his mind from the horrible conviction he lay under, that his soul's safety for ever had been bartered for his attachment to the emperor.

This story had brought us to the end of the third bottle of Medoc; and, as I was neither the pope, nor had any very decided

intentions of saying mass, he offered no obstacle to my retiring for the night, and betaking myself to my bed.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE INN AT CHANTRAINE

When contrasted with the comforts of an English bed-room in a good hotel, how miserably short does the appearance of a French one fall in the estimation of the tired traveller. In exchange for the carpeted floor, the well-curtained windows, the richly tapestried bed, the well cushioned arm-chair, and the innumerable other luxuries which await him; he has nought but a narrow, uncurtained bed, a bare floor, occasionally a flagged one, three hard cane-bottomed chairs, and a looking-glass which may convey an idea of how you would look under the combined influence of the cholera, and a stroke of apoplexy, one half of your face being twice the length of the other, and the entire of it of a bluish-green tint — pretty enough in one of Turner's landscapes, but not at all becoming when applied to the "human face divine." Let no late arrival from the continent contradict me here by his late experiences, which a stray twenty pounds and the railroads — (confound them for the same) — have enabled him to acquire. I speak of matters before it occurred to all Charing-Cross and Cheapside to "take the water" between Dover and Calais, and inundate the world with the wit of the Cider Cellar, and the Hole in the Wall. No! In the days I write of, the travelled were of another genus, and you might dine at Very's or have your

loge at "Les Italiens," without being dunned by your tailor at the one, or confronted with your washer-woman at the other. Perhaps I have written all this in the spite and malice of a man who feels that his louis-d'or only goes half as far now as heretofore; and attributes all his diminished enjoyments and restricted luxuries to the unceasing current of his countrymen, whom fate, and the law of imprisonment for debt, impel hither. Whether I am so far guilty or not, is not now the question; suffice it to say, that Harry Lorrequer, for reasons best known to himself, lives abroad, where he will be most happy to see any of his old and former friends who take his quarters en route; and in the words of a bellicose brother of the pen, but in a far different spirit, he would add, "that any person who feels himself here alluded to, may learn the author's address at his publishers." "Now let us go back to our muttons," as Barney Coyle used to say in the Dublin Library formerly — for Barney was fond of French allusions, which occasionally too he gave in their own tongue, as once describing an interview with Lord Cloncurry, in which he broke off suddenly the conference, adding, "I told him I never could consent to such a proposition, and putting my chateau (chapeau) on my head, I left the house at once."

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning, as accompanied by the waiter, who, like others of his tribe, had become a kind of somnambulist ex-officio, I wended my way up one flight of stairs, and down another, along a narrow corridor, down two steps, through an antechamber, and into another corridor, to No.

82, my habitation for the night. Why I should have been so far conducted from the habitable portion of the house I had spent my evening in, I leave the learned in such matters to explain; as for me, I have ever remarked it, while asking for a chamber in a large roomy hotel, the singular pride with which you are ushered up grand stair-cases, down passages, through corridors, and up narrow back flights, till the blue sky is seen through the sky-light, to No. 199, "the only spare bed-room in the house," while the silence and desolation of the whole establishment would seem to imply far otherwise — the only evidence of occupation being a pair of dirty Wellingtons at the door of No. 2.

"Well, we have arrived at last," said I, drawing a deep sigh, as I threw myself upon a ricketty chair, and surveyed rapidly my meagre-looking apartment.

"Yes, this is Monsieur's chamber," said the waiter, with a very peculiar look, half servile, half droll. "Madame se couche, No. 28."

"Very well, good night," said I, closing the door hastily, and not liking the farther scrutiny of the fellow's eye, as he fastened it on me, as if to search what precise degree of relationship existed between myself and my fair friend, whom he had called "Madame" purposely to elicit an observation from me. "Ten to one though," said I, as I undressed myself, "but they think she is my wife — how good — but again — ay, it is very possible, considering we are in France. Numero vingt-huit, quite far enough from this part of the house I should suppose from

my number, — that old gen-d'arme was a fine fellow — what strong attachment to Napoleon; and the story of the pope; I hope I may remember that. Isabella, poor girl — this adventure must really distress her — hope she is not crying over it — what a devil of a hard bed — and it is not five feet long too — and, bless my soul, is this all by way of covering; why I shall be perished here. Oh! I must certainly put all my clothes over me in addition, unfortunately there is no hearth-rug — well, there is no help for it now — so let me try to sleep — numero vingt-huit."

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