



De Hartevel's fury turned upon his wife. "What have you to say? . . . Explain!"

The Kennel

By Maurice Level

Illustrated by Harry Townsend

AS TEN o'clock struck, M. de Hartevel emptied a last tankard of beer, folded his newspaper, stretched himself, yawned, and slowly rose.

The hanging lamp cast a bright light on the tablecloth, over which were scattered piles of shot and cartridge wads. Near the fireplace, in the shadow, a woman lay back in a deep armchair.

Outside, the wind blew violently against the windows, the rain beat noisily on the glass, and from time to time deep bayings came from the kennel where the hounds had struggled and strained since morning.

There were forty of them: big mastiffs with ugly fangs, stiff-haired griffons of Vendée, that flung themselves with ferocity on the wild boar on hunting-days. During the night their sullen bayings disturbed the countryside, evoking response from all the dogs in the neighborhood.

M. DE HARTEVEL lifted a curtain and looked out into the darkness of the park. The wet branches shone like steel blades; the autumn leaves were blown about like whirligigs and flattened against the walls. He grumbled:

"Dirty weather."
He walked a few steps, his hands in his pockets, stopped before the fireplace, and with a kick broke a half-consumed log. Red embers fell on the ashes; a flame rose, straight and pointed.

Madame de Hartevel did not move. The light of the fire played on her face, touching her hair with gold, throwing a rosy glow on her pale cheeks; and, dancing about her, cast fugitive shadows on her forehead, her eyelids, her lips.

The hounds, quiet for a moment, began to growl again; and their bayings, the roaring of the wind and the hiss of the rain on the trees made the quiet room

seem warmer, the presence of the silent woman more intimate. Subconsciously this influenced M. de Hartevel. He touched his wife's shoulder:

"It is ten o'clock. Are you going to bed?"

She said "Yes," and left her chair, as if regretfully.

He hesitated, his heels against the fender, and, without looking at her, asked in a low voice:

"Would you like me with you?"

"No—thank you."

Frowning, he bowed. "As you like."

His shoulders against the mantelshelf, his legs apart, he watched her go. She walked with a graceful, undulating movement, the train of her dress moving on the carpet like a little flat wave. A surge of anger stiffened his muscles.

WHEN the door had shut and the sound of steps died away in the corridor, he went to his room, lay down, took a book, and tried to read.

The rain hissed louder than ever. The wind roared in the chimney, out in the park, branches were snapping from the trees. The hounds bayed without ceasing; their howling sounded through the creaking of the trees, dominating the roar of the storm; the door of the kennel strained under their weight.

He opened the window and shouted:

"Down!"

For some seconds they were quiet. He waited. The wind that drove the rain on his face refreshed him. The barking began again. He banged his fist against the shutter, threatening:

"Quiet, you devils!"

There was a singing in his ears, a whistling, a ringing; a desire to strike, to ransack, to feel flesh quiver under his fists took possession of him. He roared, "Wait a moment!" slammed the window, seized a whip, and went out.

HE STRODE along the corridors with no thought of the sleeping house till he got near his wife's room, when he walked slowly and quietly, fearing to disturb her sleep. But a ray of light from under her door caught his lowered eyes. He listened. . . . The light went out. . . . He stood motionless and, suddenly impelled by a suspicion, he called softly: "Marie Thérèse!"

No reply. He called louder. Curiosity, a doubt that he dared not formulate, held him breathless. He gave two sharp little taps on the door. A voice inside asked:

"Who is there?"

"I. Open the door. . . ."

A whiff of warm air laden with various perfumes and a suspicion of ether passed over his face.

The voice asked:

"What is it?"

He walked in without replying. He felt his wife standing close in front of him. Her breath was on him; the lace of her dress touched his chest. He felt in his pocket for matches. Not finding any, he ordered:

"Light the lamp!"

SHE obeyed, and as his eyes ran over the room he saw the curtains drawn closely, a shawl on the carpet, the open bed, white and very large; and in a corner, near the fireplace, a man lying across a long rest-chair, his collar unfastened, his head drooping, his arms hanging loosely, his eyes shut.

He gripped his wife's wrist:

"Ah! Then this is the reason you turn your back on me!"

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She did not shrink from him, did not move. No shadow of fear passed over her pallid face. She only raised her head, murmuring:

"You are hurting me."

He let her go and, bending over the inert body, his fist raised, cried:

"And—what a lover! Our friend. . . . Almost a son to us."

She interrupted him:

"He is not my lover."

He burst into a laugh:

"Ah! Ah! You expect me to believe that!"

He seized the collar of the recumbent man, and lifted him up. But when he saw the livid face, the half-opened mouth showing the teeth and gums, when he felt the strange chill of the flesh that touched his hands, he started and let go. The body fell back heavily on the cushions, the forehead beating twice against a chair. His fury turned upon his wife.

"What have you to say? . . . Explain!"

"It is very simple," she said. "I was just going to bed when I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor—uncertain steps, faltering—and a voice begging. . . . Open the door. . . . open the door. . . . I thought you might be ill. I opened the door. Then he came, or, rather, fell into the room. . . . I knew he was subject to heart-attacks. . . . I laid him there. . . . I was just going to bring you when you knocked. . . . That's all."

BENDING over the body, and apparently quite calm again, he asked, every word pronounced distinctly:

"And it does not surprise you that no one heard him come in?"

"The hounds bayed."

"And why should he come here at this hour of the night?"

She made a vague gesture.

"It does seem strange. But—I can only suppose that he felt ill and that—quite alone in his own house—he was afraid to stay there—came here to beg for help. . . . In any case, when he is better—as soon as he is able to speak—he will be able to explain. . . ."

M. de Hartevel drew himself up to his full height, and looked into his wife's eyes.

"It appears we shall have to accept your supposition, and that we shall never know exactly what underlies his being here to-night—for he is dead."

She held out her hands and stammered, her teeth chattering:

"It's not possible. He is—"

"Yes—dead."

He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then went on in an easier voice:

"After all, the more I think of it, the more natural it seems. . . . Both his father and his uncle died like this, suddenly. Heart disease is hereditary in his family. A shock—a violent emotion—We are weak creatures at best. . . ."

HE DREW an armchair to the fire, sat down, and, his hands stretched out to the flames, continued:

"But, however simple and natural the event in itself may be, nothing can alter the fact that a man has died here during the night. . . . Is that not so?"

She hid her face in her hands and made no reply.

"And if your explanation satisfies me, I am not able to make others accept it. The servants will have their own ideas, will talk. That will be dishonor for you, for me, for my family. . . . That is not possible. We must find a way out of it—and I have already found it. . . . With the exception of you and me, no one knows, no one will ever know what has happened in this room. No one saw him come in. . . . Take the lamp and come with me."

He seized the body in his arms and ordered:

"Walk on first."

She hesitated as they went out of the door.

"What are you going to do?"

"Leave it to me. . . . Go on."

Slowly and very quietly they went toward the staircase, she holding high the lamp, its light flickering on the walls, he carefully placing his feet on stair after stair. When they got to the door that led to the garden, he said:

"Open it without a sound."

A GUST of wind made the light flare up. Beaten on by the rain, the glass burst, and fell in pieces on the threshold. She placed the extinguished lamp on the soil. They went into the park. The gravel crunched under their steps and the rain beat upon them. He asked:

"Can you see the walk? . . . Yes? . . . Then come close to me. . . . Hold the legs. The body is heavy."

They went forward in silence. M. de Hartevel stopped near a low door, saying:

"Feel in my right-hand pocket. There is a key there. . . . That's it. Give it to me. Now let the legs go. . . . It is as dark as a grave. . . . Feel about till you find the keyhole. . . . Have you got it? . . . Turn."

Excited by the noise, the hounds began to bay. Madame de Hartevel started back.

"You are frightened? . . . Nonsense. . . . Another turn. . . . That's it. . . . Stand out of the way."

With a thrust from his knee he pushed open the door. Believing themselves free, the hounds bounded against his legs. Pushing them back with a kick, suddenly, with one great effort, he raised the body above his head, balanced it there a moment, flung it into the kennel, and shut the door violently behind him.

BAYING at full voice, the beasts fell on their prey. A frightful death-rattle, "Help!" pierced their clamor, a terrible cry, superhuman. It was followed by violent growlings.

An unspeakable horror took possession of Madame de Hartevel; a quick flash of understanding dominated her fear and, her eyes wild, she flung herself on her husband, digging her nails in his face as she shrieked:

"Fiend! He wasn't dead! . . ."

M. de Hartevel pushed her off with the back of his hand, and standing straight up before her, jeered:

"Did you think he was!"

SOMETHING sent that burglar rushing, iron-stricken, from the house. What could it have been? Don't miss "The Empty House," by Maurice Level—in next month's Heart's.
