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Turgenev Wallace Fonatne Sydon Freud Schlegel  
Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
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Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Wilde Gleim Vulpius  
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# **The Frontier**

Maurice Leblanc

# Imprint

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series.

Author: Maurice Leblanc

Cover design: toepferschumann, Berlin (Germany)

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg (Germany)

ISBN: 978-3-8491-7210-7

[www.tredition.com](http://www.tredition.com)

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# THE FRONTIER

## PART I

### CHAPTER I

#### A HEAD BETWEEN THE BUSHES

"They've done it!"

"What?"

"The German frontier-post ... at the circus of the Butte-aux-Loups."

"What about it?"

"Knocked down."

"Nonsense!"

"See for yourself."

Old Morestal stepped aside. His wife came out of the drawing-room and went and stood by the telescope, on its tripod, at the end of the terrace.

"I can see nothing," she said, presently.

"Don't you see a tree standing out above the others, with lighter foliage?"

"Yes."

"And, to the right of that tree, a little lower down, an empty space surrounded by fir-trees?"

"Yes."

"That's the circus of the Butte-aux-Loups and it marks the frontier at that spot."

[Pg 4]

"Ah, I've got it!... There it is!... You mean on the ground, don't you? Lying flat on the grass, exactly as if it had been rooted up by last night's storm...."

"What are you talking about? It has been fairly felled with an axe: you can see the gash from here."

"So I can ... so I can...."

She stood up and shook her head:

"That makes the third time this year.... It will mean more unpleasantness."

"Fiddle-de-dee!" he exclaimed. "All they've got to do is to put up a solid post, instead of their old bit of wood." And he added, in a tone of pride, "The French post, two yards off, doesn't budge, you know!"

"Well, of course not! It's made of cast-iron and cemented into the stone."

"Let them do as much then! It's not money they're wanting ... when you think of the five thousand millions they robbed us of!... No, but, I say ... three of them in eight months!... How will the people take it, on the other side of the Vosges?"

He could not hide the sort of gay and sarcastic feeling of content that filled his whole being and he walked up and down the terrace, stamping his feet as hard as he could on the ground.

[Pg 5]

But, suddenly going to his wife, he seized her by the arm and said, in a hollow voice:

"Would you like to know what I really think?"

"Yes."

"Well, all this will lead to trouble."

"No," said the old lady, quietly.

"How do you mean, no?"

"We've been married five-and-thirty years; and, for five-and-thirty years, you've told me, week after week, that we shall have trouble. So, you see...."

She turned away from him and went back to the drawing-room again, where she began to dust the furniture with a feather-broom.

He shrugged his shoulders, as he followed her indoors:

"Oh, yes, you're the placid mother, of course! Nothing excites you. As long as your cupboards are tidy, your linen all complete and your jams potted, you don't care!... Still, you ought not to forget that they killed your poor father."

"I don't forget it ... only, what's the good? It's more than forty years ago...."

"It was yesterday," he said, sinking his voice, "yesterday, no longer ago than yesterday...."

"Ah, there's the postman!" she said, hurrying to change the conversation.

[Pg 6]

She heard a heavy footstep outside the windows opening on the garden. There was a rap at the knocker on the front-door. A minute later, Victor, the man-servant, brought in the letters.

"Oh!" said Mme. Morestal. "A letter from the boy.... Open it, will you? I haven't my spectacles.... I expect it's to say that he will arrive this evening: he was to have left Paris this morning."

"Not at all!" cried M. Morestal, glancing over the letter. "Philippe and his wife have taken their two boys to some friends at Versailles and started with the intention of sleeping last night at the Ballon de Colnard, seeing the sunrise and doing the rest of the journey on foot, with their knapsacks on their backs. They will be here by twelve."

She at once lost her head:

"And the storm! What about last night's storm?"

"My son doesn't care about the storm! It won't be the first that the fellow's been through. It's eleven o'clock. He will be with us in an hour."

"But that will never do! There's nothing ready for them!"

She at once went to work, like the active little old woman that she was, a little too fat, a little tired, but wide-awake still and so methodical, so orderly in her ways that she never made a [Pg 7] superfluous movement or one that was not calculated to bring her an immediate advantage.

As for him, he resumed his walk between the terrace and the drawing-room. He strode with long, even steps, holding his body erect, his chest flung out and his hands in the pockets of his jacket, a blue-drill gardening-jacket, with the point of a pruning-shears and the stem of a pipe sticking out of it. He was tall and broad-shouldered; and his fresh-coloured face seemed young still, in spite of the fringe of white beard in which it was framed.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "what a treat to set eyes upon our dear Philippe again! It must be three years since we saw him last. Yes, of course, not since his appointment as professor of history in Paris. By Jove, the chap has made his way in the world! What a time we shall give him during the fortnight that he's with us! Walking ... exercise.... He's all for the open-air life, like old Morestal!"

He began to laugh:

"Shall I tell you what would be the thing for him? Six months in camp between this and Berlin!"

"I'm not afraid," she declared. "He's been through the Normal School. The professors keep to their garrisons in time of war."

"What nonsense are you talking now?"

[Pg 8]

"The school-master told me so."

He gave a start:

"What! Do you mean to say you still speak to that dastard?"

"He's quite a decent man," she replied.

"He! A decent man! With theories like his!"

She hurried from the room, to escape the explosion. But Morestal was fairly started:

"Yes, yes, theories! I insist upon the word: theories! As a district-councillor, as Mayor of Saint-Élophé, I have the right to be present at his lessons. Oh, you have no idea of his way of teaching the history of France!... In my time, the heroes were the Chevalier d'Assas, Bayard, La Tour d'Auvergne, all those beggars who shed lustre on our country. Nowadays, it's Mossieu Étienne Marcel, Mossieu Dolet.... Oh, a nice set of theories, theirs!"

He barred the way to his wife, as she entered the room again, and roared in her face:

"Do you know why Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo?"

"I can't find that large breakfast-cup anywhere," said Mme. Morestal, engrossed in her occupation.

"Well, just ask your school-master; he'll give you the latest up-to-date theories about Napoleon."

"I put it down here, on this chest, with my own hand."

[Pg 9]

"But there, they're doing all they can to distort the children's minds."

"It spoils my set."

"Oh, I swear to you, in the old days, we'd have ducked our school-master in the horse-pond, if he had dared.... But, by Jove, France had a place of her own in the world then! And such a place!

... That was the time of Solferino!... Of Magenta!... We weren't satisfied with chucking down frontier-posts in those days: we crossed the frontiers ... and at the double, believe me...."

He stopped, hesitating, pricking up his ears. Trumpet-blasts sounded in the distance, ringing from valley to valley, echoing and re-echoing against the obstacles formed by the great granite rocks and dying away to right and left, as though stifled by the shadow of the forests.

He whispered, excitedly:

"The French bugle...."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, there are troops of Alpines manoeuvring ... a company from Noirmont.... Listen ... listen.... What gaiety!... What swagger!... I tell you, close to the frontier like this, it takes such an air...."

She listened too, seized with the same excitement, and asked, anxiously:

[Pg 10]

"Do you really think that war is possible?"

"Yes," he replied, "I do."

They were silent for a moment. And Morestal continued:

"It's a presentiment with me.... We shall have it all over again, as in 1870.... And, mark you, I hope that this time ..."

She put down her breakfast-cup, which she had found in a cupboard, and, leaning on her husband's arm:

"I say, the boy's coming ... with his wife. She's a dear girl and we're very fond of her.... I want the house to look nice for them, bright and full of flowers.... Go and pick the best you have in your garden."

He smiled:

"That's another way of saying that I'm boring you, eh? I can't help it. I shall be just the same to my dying day. The wound is too deep ever to heal."

They looked at each other for a while with a great gentleness, like two old travelling-companions, who, from time to time, for no particular reason, stop, exchange glances or thoughts and then resume their journey.

He asked:

"Must I cut my roses? My Gloires de Dijon?"

[Pg 11]

"Yes."

"Come along then! I'll be a hero!"

\*\*\*

Morestal, the son and grandson of well-to-do farmers, had increased his fathers' fortune tenfold by setting up a mechanical saw-yard at Saint-Élophe, the big neighbouring village. He was a plain, blunt man, as he himself used to say, "with no false bottom, nothing in my hands, nothing up my sleeves;" just a few moral ideas to guide his course through life, ideas as old and simple as could be. And those few ideas themselves were subject to a principle that governed his whole existence and ruled all his actions, the love of his country, which, in Morestal, stood for regret for the past, hatred of the present and, especially, the bitter recollection of defeat.

Elected Mayor of Saint-Élophe and a district-councillor, he sold his works and built, within view of the frontier, on the site of a ruined mill, a large house designed after his own plans and constructed, so to speak, under his own eyes. The Morestals had lived here for the last ten years, with their two servants: Victor, a decent, stout, jolly-faced man, and Catherine, a Breton woman who had nursed Philippe as a baby.

[Pg 12]

They saw but few people, outside a small number of friends, of whom the most frequent visitors were the special commissary of the government, Jorancé, and his daughter Suzanne.

The Old Mill occupied the round summit of a hill with slopes shelving down in a series of fairly large gardens, which Morestal cultivated with genuine enthusiasm. The property was surrounded by a high wall, the top of which was finished off with an iron trellis bristling with spikes. A spring leapt from place to place and fell in cascades to the bottom of the rocks decked with wild flowers, moss, lichen and maiden-hair ferns.

\*\*\*

Morestal picked a great armful of flowers, laid waste his rose-garden, sacrificed all the Gloires de Dijon of which he was so proud

and returned to the drawing-room, where he himself arranged the bunches in large glass vases.

The room, a sort of hall occupying the centre of the house, with beams of timber showing and a huge chimney covered with gleaming brasses, the room was bright and cheerful and open at both fronts: to the east, on the terrace, by a long bay; to the west, by two windows, on the garden, which it overlooked from the height of a first floor.

[Pg 13]

The walls were covered with War Office maps, Home Office maps, district maps. There was an oak gun-rack with twelve rifles, all alike and of the latest pattern. Beside it, nailed flat to the wall and roughly stitched together, were three dirty, worn, tattered strips of bunting, blue, white and red.

"They look very well: what do you say?" he asked, when he had finished arranging the flowers, as though his wife had been in the room. "And now, I think, a good pipe ..."

He took out his tobacco-pouch and matches and, crossing the terrace, went and leant against the stone balustrade that edged it.

Hills and valleys mingled in harmonious curves, all green, in places, with the glad green of the meadows, all dark, in others, with the melancholy green of the firs and larches.

At thirty or forty feet below him ran the road that leads from Saint-Élophé up to the Old Mill. It skirted the walls and then dipped down again to the Étang-des-Moines, or Monks' Pool, of which it followed the left bank. Breaking off suddenly, it narrowed into a rugged path which could be seen in the distance, standing like a ladder against a rampart, and which plunged into a narrow pass between two mountains wilder in appearance and rougher in outline than the ordinary Vosges landscape. This was the Col du Diable, or Devil's Pass, situated [Pg 14] at a distance of sixteen hundred yards from the Old Mill, on the same level.

A few buildings clung to one of the sides of the pass: these belonged to Saboureux's Farm. From Saboureux's Farm to the Butte-aux-Loups, or Wolves' Knoll, which you saw on the left, you could

make out or imagine the frontier by following a line of which Morestal knew every guiding-mark, every turn, every acclivity and every descent.

"The frontier!" he muttered. "The frontier here ... at twenty-five miles from the Rhine ... the frontier in the very heart of France!"

Every day and ten times a day, he tortured himself in this manner, gazing at that painful and relentless line; and, beyond it, through vistas which his imagination contrived as it were to carve out of the Vosges, he conjured up a vision of the German plain on the misty horizon.

And this too he repeated to himself; and he did so this time as at every other time, with a bitterness which the years that passed did nothing to allay:

"The German plain ... the German hills ... all that land of Alsace in which I used to wander as a boy.... The French Rhine, which was my river and the river of my fathers.... And now *Deutschland ... Deutsches Rhein....*"

A faint whistle made him start. He leant over towards the staircase that climbed the terrace, a [Pg 15] staircase cut out of the rock, by which people coming from the side of the frontier often entered his grounds so as to avoid the bend of the road. There was nobody there nor anybody opposite, on the roadside slope all tangled with shrubs and ferns.

And the sound was renewed, discreetly, stealthily, with the same modulations as before.

"It's he ... it's he ..." thought M. Morestal, with an uncomfortable feeling of embarrassment.

A head popped from between the bushes, a head in which all the bones stood out, joined by prominent muscles, which gave it the look of the head of an anatomical model. On the bridge of the nose, a pair of copper-rimmed spectacles. Across the face, like a gash, the toothless, grinning mouth.

"You again, Dourlowski...."

"Can I come?" asked the man.

"No ... no ... you're mad...."

"It's urgent."

"Impossible.... And besides, you know, I don't want any more of it. I've told you so before...."

But the man insisted:

"It's for this evening, for to-night.... It's a soldier of the Börswellen garrison.... He says he's sick of wearing the German uniform."

"A deserter.... I've had enough of them.... Shut up and clear out!"

[Pg 16]

"Now don't be nasty, M. Morestal.... Just think it over.... Look here, let's meet at four o'clock, in the pass, near Saboureux's Farm ... like last time.... I shall expect you.... We'll have a talk ... and I shall be surprised if ..."

"Hold your tongue!" said Morestal.

A voice cried from the drawing-room:

"Here they come, sir, here they come!"

It was the man-servant; and Mme. Morestal also ran out and said:

"What are you doing here? Whom were you talking to?"

"Nobody."

"Why, I heard you!..."

"No, I assure you...."

"Well, I must have imagined it.... I say you were quite right. It's twelve o'clock and they are here, the two of them."

"Philippe and Marthe?"

"Yes, they are coming. They are close to the garden-entrance. Let's hurry down and meet them...."

[Pg 17]

## CHAPTER II

### THE GIRL WITH THE BARE ARMS

"He hasn't changed a bit.... His complexion is as fresh as ever.... The eyes are a little tired, perhaps ... but he's looking very well...."

"When you've finished picking me to pieces, between you!" said Philippe, laughing. "What an inspection! Why don't you give my wife a kiss? That's more to the point!"

Marthe flung herself into Mme. Morestal's arms and into her father-in-law's and was examined from head to foot in her turn.

"I say, I say, we're thinner in the face than we were!... We want picking up.... But, my poor children, you're soaked to the skin!"

"We were out all through the storm," said Philippe.

"And what do you think happened to me?" asked Marthe. "I got frightened!... Yes, frightened, like a little girl ... and I fainted.... And Philippe had to carry me ... for half an hour at least...."

"What do you say to that?" said Morestal to [Pg 18] his wife. "For half an hour! He's the same strong chap he was.... And why didn't you bring the boys? It's a pity. Two fine little fellows, I feel sure. And well brought up too: I know my Marthe!... How old are they now? Ten and nine, aren't they? By the way, mother got two rooms ready. Do you have separate rooms now?"

"Oh, no," said Marthe, "only down here!... Philippe wants to get up before day-break and ramble about the roads ... whereas I need a little rest."

"Capital! Capital! Show them to their rooms, mother ... and, when you're ready, children, come down to lunch. As soon as we've finished, I'll take the carriage and go and fetch your trunks at Saint-Élophé: the railway-omnibus will have brought them there by this time. And, if I meet my friend Jorancé, I'll bring him back with me. I expect he's in the dumps. His daughter left for Lunéville this morning. But she said she had written to you...."

"Yes," said Marthe, "I had a letter from Suzanne the other day. She didn't seem to like the idea, either, of going away...."

\*\*\*

Two hours later, Philippe and his wife settled themselves in two pretty, adjoining bedrooms on [Pg 19] the second floor, looking out

on the French side. Marthe threw herself on her bed and fell asleep almost immediately, while her husband, with his elbows on the window-sill, sat gazing at the peaceful valley where the happiest days of his boyhood had been spent.

It was over yonder, in the straggling village of Saint-Éloph-la-Côte, in the modest dwelling which his parents occupied before they moved to the Old Mill. He was at the boarding-school at Noirmont and used to have glorious holidays playing in the village or roaming about the Vosges with his father: Papa Trompette, as he always called him, because of all the trumpets, bugles, horns and cornets which, together with drums of every shape and kind, swords and dirks, helmets and breast-plates, guns and pistols, were the only presents that his childhood knew. Morestal was a little strict; a little too fond of everything that had to do with principle, custom, discipline, exactness; a little quick-tempered; but, at the same time, he was the kindest of men and had no difficulty in winning his son's love, his frank and affectionate respect.

Their only quarrel was on the day when Philippe, who was then in the top form, announced his intention of continuing his studies after he had passed his examination and of entering the Normal School. The father's whole dream was shattered, his great [Pg 20] dream of seeing Philippe in uniform, with his sword at his side and the gold braid on the sleeve of his loose jacket.

It came as a violent and painful shock; and Morestal was stupefied to find himself faced by an obstinate, deliberate Philippe, a Philippe wholly master of himself and firmly resolved to lead his life according to his own views and his own ambitions. For a week on end, the two argued, hurt each other's feelings, made it up again, only to fall out once more. Then the father suddenly yielded, in the middle of a discussion and as though he had all at once realized the futility of his efforts:

"You have made up your mind?" he cried. "Very well! An usher you shall be, since that is your ideal; but I warn you that I decline all responsibility for the future and that I wash my hands of anything that happens."

What happened was simply that Philippe's career was swift and brilliant and that, after a probationary term at Lunéville and another

at Châteauroux, he was appointed professor of history at Versailles. He then published, at a few months' interval, two remarkable books, which caused much heated controversy: *The Idea of Country in Ancient Greece* and *The Idea of Country before the Revolution*. Three years later, he was promoted to Paris, to the Lycée Carnot.

[Pg 21]

Philippe was now approaching his fortieth year. Day-work and night-work seemed to have no effect upon his sturdy highland constitution. Possessing a set of powerful muscles and built on the same strong lines as his father, he found rest and recreation from study in violent exercise, in long bicycle-rides into the country or through the woods on the outskirts of Paris. The boys at the school, who held him in a sort of veneration, told stories of his exploits and his feats of strength.

With all this, a great look of gentleness, especially about the eyes, a pair of very good, blue eyes, which smiled when he spoke and which, when at rest, were candid, childish almost, filled with dreams and kindness.

By this time, old Morestal was proud of his son. On the day when he heard of his nomination to Carnot, he wrote, frankly:

"Well done, my dear Philippe! So you're prospering now and in a fair way to obtain anything you like to ask for. Let me tell you that I am not in the least surprised, for I always expected that, with your great qualities, your perseverance and your serious way of looking at life, you would win the place which you deserved. So, once more, well done!

"I confess, however, that your last book, on the [Pg 22] idea of country in France, puzzled me not a little. I know, of course, that you will not change your opinions on this subject; but it seems to me that you are trying to explain the idea of patriotism as due to rather inferior motives and that this idea strikes you not as natural and inherent to human societies, but as though it were a momentary and

passing phase of civilization. No doubt I have misunderstood you. Still, your book is not very clear. You almost appear to be hesitating. I shall look forward eagerly to the new work, on the idea of country in our own times and in the future, which I see that you are announcing...."

The book to which Morestal alluded had been finished for over a year, during which Philippe, for reasons which he kept to himself, refused to deliver the manuscript to his publishers.

\*\*\*

"Are you glad to be here?"

Marthe had come up and folded her two hands over his arm.

"Very," he said. "And I should be still more pleased if I had not that explanation with my father before me ... the explanation which I came down here to have."

[Pg 23]

"It will be all right, my own Philippe. Your father is so fond of you. And then you are so sincere!..."

"My dear Marthe," he said, kissing her affectionately on the forehead.

He had first met her at Lunéville, through M. Jorancé, who was her distant cousin; and he had at once felt that she was the ideal companion of his life, who would stand by him in hours of trouble, who would bear him comely children, who would understand how to bring them up and how, with his assistance and with his principles, to make sturdy men of them, worthy to bear his name.

Perhaps Marthe would have liked something more; perhaps, as a girl, she had dreamt that a married woman is not merely the wife and mother, but also her husband's lover. But she soon saw that love went for little with Philippe, a studious man, much more interested in mental speculation and social problems than in any manifestation of sentimental feeling. She therefore loved him as he wished to be loved, stifling within herself, like smothered flames, a whole throbbing passion made up of unsatisfied longings, restrained ardours and needless jealousies and allowing only just so