

## The Spider's Web.

A STORY FOR CHILDREN : FROM THE FRENCH OF JACQUES NORMAND.



"SUDDENLY THERE CAME A KNOCK AT THE DOOR."



AT that time my aunt Herminie, fatherless and motherless, was living in the old abbey of Mauvoisin, near Corbeil, which was disaffected and had become very national.

It was during the Reign of Terror, and she was nearly twenty years old. She was there with two old ladies, Madame Maréchal and Madame Badouillet: the former tall and thin, the latter little, stout, and one-eyed. One evening—but it will be better to let Aunt Herminie tell the tale herself. I fancy I can hear her now, relating this story which excited me so, the story which I was continually asking her to repeat.

The story? You wish me to repeat it once more, my child? Well, it was in *those* days. That evening we were sitting by the fire: Madame Maréchal and I were chatting, Madame Badouillet had fallen asleep. It was about ten o'clock; outside it was very windy—blowing hard. Oh! I remember it well. Suddenly, there came a knock at the door.

I must tell you first of all that a troop of soldiers, about a hundred, had arrived during the day. The officer in command, a big red-headed fellow, had shown us a paper, an order to billet them. They had

taken up their quarters in the chapel, and had passed the day there, eating, drinking, singing, and playing cards. They made a dreadful din. They all calmed down when evening came, and were all sleeping in groups.

You will understand, little one, that it was not very reassuring for three lone women to be near such people. Madame Maréchal's husband was away, Madame Badouillet was a widow, and I an orphan; so we bolted ourselves in the little room on the ground floor which was situated between the high road and the chapel, and that's where we were when the knock came, as I have just told you.

Madame Badouillet woke up with a jump, and we all three looked straight at each other with frightened eyes. A moment passed and there was another knock—louder this time. We had a good mind to sham deafness, as you may imagine, but joking was dangerous in those days. If you refused hospitality to patriots, you were regarded as a "suspect," as they called it, and then—the guillotine! It was all over with you in no time.

Madame Maréchal began to recite her prayers; Madame Badouillet shook in every limb; besides, I was the youngest, so I ought to open the door.

I found some men at the door, with large hats, making quite a black group on the roadway. They looked harassed, and their boots were covered with dust. My first impulse was to shut the door in their faces, but one of them made a step forward, stretched out his hand, and said in a low, shaking voice:—

"Shelter, citoyenne, give us shelter for the night. We are dropping with fatigue—have pity upon us!" And these last words were repeated in a murmur by the group of men.

"Who are you?"

"Fugitives—deputies of the Gironde—we are pursued, save us!"

They were Girondins! You will know one day, my child, what that meant. It is enough now for you to know that they were poor fellows flying from Paris, pursued by the Montagnards, that is, by their enemies.

"Wretched men," I replied, "go away! The chapel is full of soldiers. If you come in you are lost!"

They hesitated a moment; then a pale young man, quite a youth, who was leaning upon the arms of two of his comrades, murmured feebly:

"Walk again! I cannot go a step farther. Go on, comrades; save yourselves and leave me here. I prefer to die!"

They were brave fellows, those Girondins. They would not hear of abandoning the poor young fellow.

"Is there no other place but the chapel where we could rest for two hours—just for

two hours only?" asked the one who had already spoken to me.

"None but this room," I answered, standing a little aside; "and the chapel has no way out but that door (I pointed to the middle door), so the soldiers pass through here to enter or go out. Let them see you, and you are lost!"

Great dejection was apparent in the face of the poor man. I could see it plainly, for it was a clear night and as light as day.



"HAVE PITY UPON US!"

"Adieu, citoyennes," he said simply. "The district is full of people who are pursuing us. Pray that we may escape them!" Then, turning to his companions, he said in a low voice, "Onward!"

Well, my child, I was quite upset; my heart was rent at the sight of their distress. I understood all that they had suffered, and all they would yet suffer. I looked at their drooping shoulders, at their bruised feet.

Certainly, by sending them away I was shielding us three from danger, because in helping them I was making myself their accomplice, and exposing myself and my companions to severe punishment. Yes, I understood all that, but pity conquered prudence; a kind of fever seized me, and just as they were moving away—

"Listen," I whispered to them; "there might perhaps be a way to help you, but it would be very risky, very daring."

They drew near eagerly, anxiously, with heads bent forward. Behind me I could hear the trembling voices of Madame Badouillet and Madame Maréchal as they whispered to each other, "What is she talking about? What is she saying?" But that mattered little to me.

"At the other end of the chapel, above the altar," I continued, "there is a granary for storing fodder. Once there, you would be all right, but to get there——"

"Speak, speak!"

"You would have to follow a narrow passage, a sort of overhanging cornice, the whole length of the wall—and just over the sleeping soldiers. If they hear the least noise, should one of them wake up——!"

"Who will lead us?"

"I will!"

I have already told you, my child, that I was in a fever, that I was no longer master of myself; I was acting as if in a dream. To save them had become my sole aim. They took counsel briefly among themselves, while Madame Badouillet continually pulled at my skirts and called me mad. Oh! I remember it all as if I were going through it now!

"Thanks, citoyenne, for your devotion. We will accept the offer!"

I left the door and they entered noiselessly, on tip-toe. There were about a dozen; their clothes were torn and their fatigue was extreme. I told my two companions to keep watch at the door of the chapel, and turned at once to the fugitives.

"You see those steps leading to the ledge?" I asked them. "Well, I am going to ascend them. When I reach the top I will open the door and look into the interior of the chapel, and if the moment is favourable I will give you a sign. You will then ascend and follow me along the wall to the granary. Once there—if God allows us to get there!—you will rest yourselves. I will come to you when the soldiers are gone—they ought to leave at daybreak. You understand?"

All this was uttered rapidly in a low voice; then, positively, I felt as if I were lifted from the ground, as if impelled by some superior will. I felt deep commiseration for these men, unknown to me only a few minutes before; I felt a protecting sentiment towards them which elated me. To save them I would have thrown myself in front of the cannon's mouth, or have rushed upon the bayonet's point. And I, mite that I was, seemed suddenly endowed with extraordinary strength and energy. Madame Badouillet was right, I was positively mad.

I mounted the stairs, opened the door just a little, and looked in. The soldiers were asleep in groups, their heads resting on their knapsacks, their forms making dark spots on the white stones of the chapel. Occasionally one would turn over with a grunt. A slight murmur of breathing came from this human mass. In the corners the guns were stacked; outside, the wind howled in fury. A ray of light from the moon shone through a side window, lighting up one side of the nave, while the other side—luckily, the side where the ledge was—remained quite dark. To get to the door of the granary—dimly visible, like a dark spot, along the narrow ledge, along the wall at about twenty feet from the sleepers—would be the work of a few seconds in reality, yet these few seconds would seem an age.

And now came the reaction; the excitement of the first few minutes was over, and a dreadful feeling of depression came over me as I saw myself face to face with the reality, and understood the almost childish temerity of my plan. I was seized with a mad desire to tell the Girondins that it was impossible to do it; that the soldiers were waking up; that they must fly at once. Then I became ashamed of my cowardice, and, turning towards the men who were watching me from below with uneasy glances, I gave the sign to ascend.

They obeyed, and the first one was soon by my side. I made a sign to keep silence—as if they needed it, poor men!—then I stepped upon the ledge.

What a journey it was! I shall never forget it. I can feel myself now, moving forward on tip-toe, my left hand lightly touching the cold wall, my right hand in space, fearing every instant to lose my balance, or to knock against some stone, some little heap of dirt and pieces of wall, the falling of which would have roused the

soldiers who were sleeping below, so close to us. And behind me I can still feel the dumb presence of those creatures who were following me, risking their life with mine. We glided along the ledge like a troop of sleep-walkers, holding our breath, treading

At length, after a few minutes, terribly long minutes they seemed, I reached the goal. I seized the key which was still in the door, turned it, pushed the door—and then I thought we were lost!

Nobody had had occasion to go to the granary for a long time, so that the hinges had become rusty; and as I pushed it open it gave out a creaking sound, which went all over the chapel, and sent an icy chill through me.

"What's the matter up there?" growled a soldier, with an oath.

I stood up straight, all of a shake, and I perceived the fugitives, pale, motionless, and standing as closely as possible to the wall. It seemed as if our last hour had come. Luckily, it was very windy, as I have said, and at that very instant a strong gust shook the roof of the chapel.

"Go to sleep, and rest easy, you great fool! It's the wind!" answered another voice.

The first soldier listened again for a brief space, then stretched himself, and went to sleep. We were saved—at least for the moment.

The door was only half open, but it was enough to enable us to squeeze in. This I did when silence was completely restored

with extraordinary carefulness, the eyes of each one fixed upon the one who preceded him, all making with beating hearts for that little door which grew larger as we approached it—and it was I who was leading them!

Having reached this exciting point, Aunt Ninie stopped and looked at me to judge the effect. She ought to have been pleased, for I was sitting on the edge of my chair, my eyes out of my head, with open mouth, listening with never-failing interest to a story which I had heard so many times. "What then?" I asked.

below, and the others followed one by one, easily enough generally, without being obliged to open the door any further. This was very important, for another creak would certainly have done for us.

You cannot imagine the joy and gratitude of those men when once they were all gathered in the granary. They wept, went down on their knees, and kissed the hem of my dress. One would have thought that I had finally saved them; but, alas! the danger was still there, terrible and threatening.

"Rest," I said to them; "stretch yourselves upon the straw. Here you are fairly



"WE GLIDED ALONG THE LEDGE."

safe—for the time being, at least. As soon as they are gone you will have nothing more to fear, and you can go away in your turn. Now rest yourselves and sleep, and count on me if any new danger menaces you."

I left them and passed through the door, leaving it as it was. Of course it would have been better to shut it, but that was impossible on account of the noise it would have made.

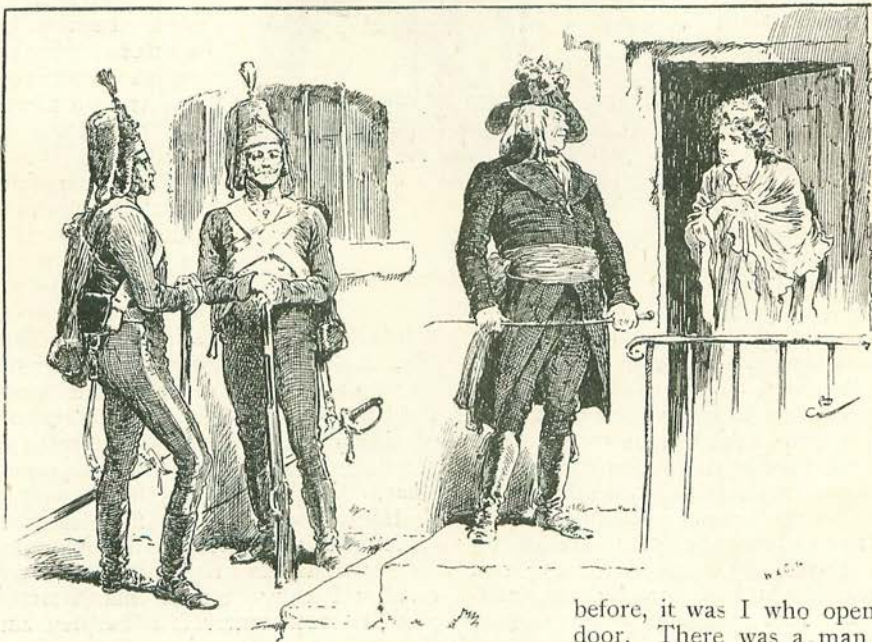
My return journey along the ledge was performed without incident. Alone, I felt lighter, more skilful, and slipped along like a mouse. At the end of a few seconds I was back in the room, where the two ladies anxiously awaited me.

Each one received me in a different way. Madame Maréchal, severe and sharp, reproached me cruelly, saying that *that* was not the way to behave: it was risking my life and theirs—that I ought to have left them outside—that I was a fool, &c. Madame Badouillet, on the contrary, approved what I had done, and defended me, saying that nobody could reject the prayer of the

So we sat down again, commenting in a low voice upon the unforeseen and terrible events which had come upon our hitherto peaceful existence. And it was really a dreadful situation. All these men, enemies, so near to each other; what might happen if the fugitives were discovered! It was frightful, so much so that Madame Maréchal proposed that we should run away, out in the night, across the fields to Corbeil, leaving the men to settle matters amongst themselves as best they could—that was her expression. Madame Badouillet and I rejected this proposal with indignation, and we remained there whispering to each other, and longed for the end of this interminable night.

The first streaks of dawn began to appear, and we felt within reach of the moment when our anxiety would end. Suddenly we heard the gallop of horses on the roadway. What now? We listened. The horses stopped, and we heard a noise of voices. Everybody seemed to be paying us a visit that night.

Then came a knock as before; and, as



"IT WAS I WHO OPENED THE DOOR."

fugitives—it would have been infamous. And this good woman pressed me to her heart, and, pleased to see me back again, kissed me, while she wiped away the tears from her one eye.

before, it was I who opened the door. There was a man before me, surrounded by several husars who had dismounted.

"They are here, eh, citoyenne?" asked the man, who was not a soldier, but doubtless some Government agent. He was stout, and appeared out of breath through having come so rapidly.

I started, but soon recovered my *sang-froid*. "Here! Who?"

"You know well enough. Those rascally Girondins!"

"There is nobody here but the soldiers who arrived yesterday, as you probably know."

"That's what we intend to find out."

He motioned to one of the men to hold his horse, and dismounted painfully, giving a grunt of satisfaction when he reached the ground. He was certainly not accustomed to that sort of exercise. He was attired in black, with big boots, and feathers in his hat. His round, white face seemed good-natured at first sight, but the look of his little sunken eyes was false and cruel.

He entered, followed by two hus-sars, and went straight towards the chapel. As soon as he was perceived, there was a great stir; the mass of soldiers began to move with a noise of swords and guns upon the stones, and everybody was soon on foot. The officer in charge came forward and saluted the new-comer, and we understood that this fat man was an important personage.

A conversation in a low voice took place between them. Standing near the door, we tried our hardest to hear what was said, but in vain; we could only guess from the gestures that the agent was interrogating the captain, and that the latter was replying in the negative. We feared to see them raise their heads and perceive the half-opened door above. This little door seemed enormous now, as if everybody must see it.

However, it was not so, for the agent, finishing his conversation with the captain, came up to me, and with that cunning look which boded no good, he said, "So you are quite sure, *citoyenne*, that there is nobody here but these men?"

He pointed to the soldiers, who were about to brush themselves and put themselves in order. I looked him in the face and replied, "Nobody!"

He put that same question to Madame Badouillet, who bravely made the same reply. Then it was Madame Maréchal's turn. I thought she was going to betray us, and I gave her a fierce look. She hesitated a moment; then, with her eyes on the ground, she stammered, "I do not know—I have been asleep—I have heard nothing."

"Well, *I* know more about it than *you*," said the agent. "Some peasants have assured me that the Girondins came in here, that they have passed the night here, and that they are here still. Is it true?"

We all were silent.

"Now just think well about it, *citoyennes*. You know what you are exposing yourselves to by hiding these traitors?"

It was terrifying to be thus questioned in the midst of men who were watching us closely, and whose looks seemed to

pierce our very souls. I felt that Madame Maréchal was giving way, that all was lost. Her lips moved, she was about to speak. I did not give her the time to do so, and putting a bold face on the matter, I replied:

"Since you doubt us, *citoyen*, search the place. I will lead you wherever you like."

He hesitated, thrown off the scent by my effrontery, and I thought he was going to give up all idea of pursuit, when a voice cried, "It is my opinion that if any little plot has been contrived, it has been done up there."

A soldier, doubtless the one who had woke up in the night, pointed with an evil look to the ledge and the granary door. All eyes were raised, and my legs trembled under me. I thought of the unfortunate men who were behind that door, without



"A CONVERSATION TOOK PLACE BETWEEN THEM."

weapons, without any possible means of defence, listening to what was said. I cursed myself for having yielded to their prayer, and having sheltered them. Outside they would have been in just as great danger, but it would not have been my fault. They could have fought, run away, anything; but there they were through my fault! It was horrible, and I thought I should go mad.

After questioning the soldier—oh, I could have killed him, the wretch!—the agent turned towards me.

"Well, citoyenne, as you propose it, you shall act as our guide. Lead us to that door up there; it's a granary, I suppose?"

I nodded. I could not speak, my throat was too dry.

"A few men follow me! On!"

That was a most terrible moment, my child. I had to summon all my strength to keep from swooning. I drew myself up, however, and went towards the staircase which led to the ledge, that staircase which I had ascended with the fugitives a few hours before. The agent came next, then the captain and several soldiers.

What could I hope for in obeying the order? It would require a miracle to save the Girondins. But I had fought it out to that point, and I would fight it out to the end. And, frankly speaking, I scarcely knew what I was doing, I was acting unconsciously—I had been told to go there, and I was going, that's all!

I soon reached the ledge, the agent following painfully on account of his corpulence. Heseemed,

moreover, very clumsy, and his fat body embarrassed him much. When he reached the top of the staircase and saw the ledge, on which I had already advanced a step or two, he hesitated.

"Oh! oh! it is very narrow!" he murmured.

Then he saw that all the soldiers were looking at him from below, and, stung by their looks, he followed me slowly, supporting himself against the wall, stepping with infinite caution. Really, if the situation had not been so dreadful it would have been grotesque.

Two questions swam in my head. What should I do? Should I run rapidly forward and join the unfortunate men and die with them? Or should I throw



"LOOK! SPIDERS' WEBS!"

myself down on the stones and kill myself?

Still, I went on slowly, slowly, expecting every minute to see the door shut by the poor fellows as a frail and useless obstacle to a certain capture; and I was so interested in their fate that I forgot my own danger.

We had reached the centre of the ledge when suddenly the agent stopped, and, turning towards those who followed, said: "Look! spiders' webs!" and he pointed to the entrance of the granary.

And, in fact, by a providential chance, a large spider's web, torn when I opened the door, had remained hanging on the woodwork; and the insect had, during the few hours of the night, partly repaired the damage. The fresh threads crossed the whole space of the opening, and nobody could imagine for a moment that men had passed through that space that very night without breaking the whole of the web. Yes, my child, a spider, a simple spider, had done it. But one cannot help thinking that the good God had something to do with it.

"It is useless to go further," said the agent.

Between you and me I believe the fat fellow was not sorry at heart, for he was dreadfully afraid of

rolling down below, and pride alone had sustained him.

There is little need to say more. The Girondins were saved, and I with them. The agent went off, followed by his hussars; and the other soldiers marched away soon afterwards.

As soon as the chapel was empty I ran to the granary. It is not necessary to tell you with what protestations of gratitude I was received. One second more, and, as I had expected, they would have shut the door, which would have been fatal; but Providence willed it otherwise.

We gave them something to eat, and they remained all the day with us; for it would have been imprudent to have left before night. When night came they left us, after having thanked me much more than I deserved. I had done my duty—nothing more.

We followed them with our eyes upon the road as long as we could. Then they disappeared in the darkness.

Did they escape? Were they discovered, and killed on their way? I have never heard. But I have rejoiced all my life that I, delicate as I am, was able to go through so much without breaking down. Madame Badoillet and Madame Maréchal were both ill afterwards.

And that is my story.

