



AN EPISODE OF THE
FRANCO-GERMAN WAR.

A STORY FOR CHILDREN.
BY MINNIE MORTIMER.



I.

AND may I not fight the Prussians, papa? I am strong enough, I know—and a big boy, too!”

“Hush, hush. What idle talk is this? Fight the Prussians? A fine idea! What could a little boy like you do in a great war? Tut, tut, child, don’t talk nonsense. Come, drill your soldiers!”

Here Captain Etienne Maury picked up some miniature wooden soldiers, which were lying scattered about the floor, and proceeded to place them side by side—bolt upright—on the table. But his little son did not appear to be interested in the toys—Etienne could see that the child’s lips were quivering, and that his large, blue eyes were filling with tears. Then, drawing him gently to his side, Maury caressed him tenderly.

“What is the matter, my little Pierre? There, now, don’t cry—why, that is not manly!”

“I want—I want”—began Pierre, between his sobs—“I want to fight the Prussians!”

“Well, well, never mind—you shall become a soldier all in good time,” replied his father. Then he turned to the child’s mother, who was busily preparing the mid-day meal: “What do you think of our

son? Is he not promising? He has ambition, eh?”

Madelon said nothing, but shrugged her shoulders and glanced at her husband and sighed. Since war had broken out between France and Germany, she had not seen him until to-day—when it chanced that the general commanding the district had ordered Maury’s regiment to Harville to meet an expected attack of the Prussian advanced guard, on the march to Paris. Captain Maury, on learning that his duty brought him near his home for the first time since the terrible reverse of Sedan, was naturally overjoyed at the prospect of embracing his wife and children, who were no less delighted when the long-absent one sent them a message from camp that he had obtained leave of absence for a few hours, and would soon clasp the dear ones in his arms. Until the outbreak of hostilities, the married life of the young officer had been one of unclouded happiness. He was devotedly attached to his sweet and gentle wife, whilst his love for their two children amounted almost to idolatry. Little Pierre we have already seen; let us now briefly describe his sister, Dorothee, the boy’s junior by nearly two years.

Dorothee was tall for her age. She was not what is called pretty, but her face indicated intelligence and perhaps self-will. Her large, sad eyes might have belonged to one of much greater age and experience, who had seen scarcely aught but the dark side of life, rather than to a little girl of scarcely seven years. But Dorothee was a strange child, and by no means easy to comprehend. She had few companions or playmates of her own age, and showed no interest in the favourite fancies of other children.

Her walks were usually taken alone, and her greatest pleasure was to seek out a solitary nook, where she often remained alone for hours, absorbed in some weird fairy tale or story of enchantment. When her father had returned home so unexpectedly after his long absence, Dorothée's delight was unbounded for the first few moments of his presence; but if the truth must be told, she soon withdrew quietly into a corner and gave herself up to her thoughts. She understood but vaguely why "papa" had been away so long—and hitherto had made no effort to penetrate the mystery of "fighting the Prussians," of which she had heard so much during his protracted absence. But now she suddenly became curious to know what it all meant. Why should her father fight the Prussians? Why could he not leave such pugnacious proceedings to other men, and stay at home?

"Papa," said she, "will the Prussians kill you?"

Etienne, who had been carefully aiding Pierre to arrange his soldiers in their little box, glanced at Dorothée with contracted brow.

"I cannot say, darling," he replied, slowly. "I hope that God will spare me to you many years."

"What a question to ask of your father!" exclaimed Madelon, indignantly—alarmed at the bare idea of losing her husband.

"Well, why can't papa stay here—why should he fight?" demanded the little one.

"Don't talk of things you do not understand, child," returned her mother. "Come and drink your soup—you are certainly growing too curious—that is an ugly fault!"

And Dorothée, with a wondering look, drew her chair up to the table and began her meal in silence.

Outwardly, she appeared to be cold and unconcerned. Inwardly, her little heart was troubled about "papa." Would he die? He had remained unharmed as yet, but perhaps the Prussians would kill him before long! No, she would not ask him again—she did not like to. Should she climb upon his knee and tell him how much she loved him? No—she was too proud to betray her feelings. Her question: "Will the Prussians kill you?" had certainly damped her parents' spirits. Dorothée could see that her father was troubled, and that her mother appeared anxious—why, there were even tears in her eyes! "It is all my fault," thought the little girl, and she felt sorry and ashamed, but dared not admit the fact.

"Papa will never love me again," she

mused, sadly; "perhaps he doesn't want me here—he will forget all about Dorothée—and he won't kiss me 'good-bye' before he leaves us." Then the child quietly stole away, and crept softly upstairs. Throwing herself upon the cot in her own little room, she sobbed bitterly for a long time, until at last, exhausted by her grief, she fell fast asleep.

II.

WHEN Dorothée awoke, she was surprised to find that the daylight had faded, for the room was wrapped in darkness. She was in bed, too—and clothed in her night-dress.

"Mamma must have undressed me," thought she. Then she sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Why, papa has surely gone! And I never bade him good-bye. Ah, but that is my own fault."

She sprang from her bed, and groping her way towards the door opened it softly. How silent everything seemed! They must have gone to bed. Yes, she could hear heavy breathing proceeding from her mother's sleeping-room.

"Then it is late," thought Dorothée.

At that moment, a neighbouring church clock began to strike the hour. The child listened attentively. It was eleven o'clock. She returned to her room, lit the candle on the mantelshelf, and softly drew aside the window curtains. Peering into the street below, she could just discern that all was dark and silent.

"So papa has gone, without saying good-bye to me. Why didn't he come and wake me? Perhaps I shall never see him again—the cruel Prussians may kill him."

Tears filled her eyes. She turned and picked up a little picture of her father, and pressed it to her lips.

"Oh, that I could really kiss him!" sighed Dorothée.

Struck by a sudden impulse, she gently closed the curtains and commenced to dress herself hastily.

This occupied but a few minutes. Then mounting a chair, she unhooked her hood and cloak, which hung upon the door. Carefully placing the miniature in the bosom of her dress, she extinguished the light, and with many precautions crept downstairs and left the house, after unbolting the street door with some difficulty.

Dorothée had made up her mind to find "papa," at all hazards, and to press a kiss upon his lips.

On she hurried through the darkness. Though she knew where her father's regiment was encamped, she was ignorant of the way thither.

"My good angel will surely guide my steps," thought the child, while onward she wandered—she knew not where. At length Dorothée found herself in the open country, apparently in a field, hedged in with waving bushes, which sighed and moaned in the night breeze. She did not dream that she was but a few yards from where the French had pitched their tents.

Suddenly the little girl heard stealthy footsteps behind her. A fear which she could not account for seized her, and spying a bush close by, she crouched behind it, trembling from head to foot. She peered cautiously through its branches and beheld a tall, dark figure approaching. As it drew nearer, she quickly noted that it was a man, and resembled her father in stature—so much, indeed, that she sprang forward, crying out in glad tones:—

"Papa, papa, c'est toi ! c'est toi !"

Dorothée rushed eagerly into the arms extended to her, but drew back surprised and disappointed, when a stranger's voice addressed her:—

"What art thou doing here at this time of night, little one?"

His tone was gruff, though not unkindly. The child hesitated a moment.

"Who are you?" she asked, at length; "a soldier! like papa?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And do you belong to papa's regiment?" she demanded.

The other muttered to himself something in a language unintelligible—to Dorothée, and then replied:—

"Most assuredly."

"Please take me to papa, then, because I want to kiss him good-bye. You see," she continued, sadly, "I was asleep when he left us, and he forgot all about me, I know."

"Oh, I don't think so," returned the stranger. "Why do you wish to kiss him? You love him so dearly—eh?"

"Yes," eagerly assented Dorothée, "and if I don't see him to-night, perhaps I shall never kiss him again."

"Eh? What's that? Well, and pray, why not?"

"Because the Prussians may kill him!"

The other stroked the child's soft cheek—he was troubled evidently, for he shook his head sadly and murmured:—

"Poor little one—poor little one!"

Dorothée burst into tears.

"There now, don't cry," he continued. "I advise you to run home as fast as you can."

"No, no, I want to find papa—I must kiss him. Oh, monsieur, I beseech you to take me to him!"

"That is impossible. For I have an important message to deliver in quite another direction—and I must hasten there at once. The duty of a soldier, you know, is to obey. Now listen: Run home quickly and let *me* bear the kiss to your father. I shall return to the spot where he is stationed, early to-morrow morning—and therefore can easily deliver your message of love. Come, what do you say to that?"

"If you will promise," began Dorothée, reluctantly.

"Yes, yes; you may trust me. What is your father's name?"

"Etienne Maury."

"Describe him."

"Why, you know him, don't you?"

"Well—no; you see, I am a stranger in his regiment comparatively, and I haven't yet had time to look about me and to recognise the different faces."

"I have a picture of him," said Dorothée.

"Good! Give it to me—or lend it, and I will show it to your father to-morrow."

"And will you kiss him for me?"

"That, I promise."

The soldier then lifted the child in his arms, and she entwined her own around his neck; then, softly kissing his cheek, she said:—

"Take care of papa; don't let the Prussians kill him."

Again she pressed her lips to his cheek—and felt that it was wet with tears.

"Why do you cry?" she asked.

"Poor little one!" he replied, in a broken voice; "tell me, what is your name?"

"Dorothée."

"Then, dear little Dorothée, run home quickly. Do you know your way? Where do you live?"

The child told him.

"Part of the distance lies in my direction, so you may come with me."

Clasping her still in his arms, the soldier strode on, and when they drew near the town he placed her gently on her feet, and left her.

He continued his way with a heavy heart, and carrying the miniature.

"What is to be done?" he asked himself.

"It is my duty to report their whereabouts."



"TAKE CARE OF PAPA."

Perhaps, though, one of my comrades may save me the unpleasant task. Poor little one! She did not guess into whose hands she had fallen, nor that she had unconsciously betrayed her father and his companions. No, no, I must inform my commander—besides, I have promised to deliver his child's kiss to this Maury. What!—to my enemy? Well, for all that, I will endeavour to prove true to my word. 'Take care of papa; don't let the Prussians kill him.' Poor child! poor child!"

He passed his hand across his eyes, for they were moist with tears. You can guess now that this soldier was an enemy to the French—in fact, a Prussian. He and several of his comrades had been sent hither by one of the German commanders as spies. A division of the invading army was near at hand, and the general in command had given orders to reconnoitre the French detachment encamped in the vicinity, with the intention of attacking them the next

morning at dawn. Fritz Grau—the soldier with whom we have become acquainted—had arranged with his fellow-scouts that each should choose a different direction, and meet at midnight at the spot where they were about to part. He did not dream that such speedy success would fall to his dangerous mission, and when Dorothee had unconsciously given him the information he required, he was delighted. But afterwards he became touched to the heart, especially when the child had said:—

"Take care of papa; don't let the Prussians kill him."

"I will take care of him—God grant!" he exclaimed, at length.

When he met his comrades at the agreed rendezvous one of their number hailed him as follows:—

"Grau—all is well! The French are discovered, thanks to myself!"

"Excellent on your part!" ejaculated Fritz, but he did not inform them of his adventure—and was secretly thankful that another should bear the information he had obtained at the risk of his life.

The German spies, after having exchanged a few whispered words, went their way in silence, each engrossed with his own thoughts. Meanwhile, Dorothee had arrived home safely, finding, to her joy, that the door had not been closed during her absence. She entered the house softly, and creeping to her room, went silently to bed—but did not fall asleep until daylight.

III.

EARLY the following morning, the French were surprised by the enemy. Fritz Grau, it must be mentioned, had managed to take a hasty glance at the photograph, when Maury's every feature became speedily impressed on his mind. He had then hidden the picture about his person.

The skirmish proved fierce indeed, and promised to end disastrously for the French, attacked by overwhelming numbers. They saw this, but did not lose heart. Grau, being in the foremost ranks, searched intently amongst the French soldiers nearest his gaze, hoping to perceive Maury, but he did not, much to his disappointment. At last, however, he discovered him in the thickest of the fray, fighting desperately. The recognition was instantaneous. He saw that the young officer was making havoc among the Prussians, of whom several had already fallen by his hand. After some time, Fritz

managed to advance a few paces nearer Etienne. At this juncture Maury mortally wounded Grau's nearest comrade. The brave Frenchman was now in his (Fritz's) power—the Prussian could have shot him then and there, but he thought of Dorothee and spared him, though only to fall the next instant—yes, shot down by Maury! As he fell, never to rise again, Etienne could see that he wished to speak with him. He hesitated a moment, then he knelt beside the dying man.

"Bend down," murmured Grau, faintly; "there is but short time for an explanation. I wish to give you a message of love from your little daughter, Dorothee. Last night she pressed a kiss for you upon my cheek—I have promised to deliver it."

Wonderingly, Maury allowed the Prussian to carry out his desire, the desire of his child, too.

"Ah, I am satisfied. Unbutton my coat—your picture is hidden there; I must return it you."

Etienne obeyed the dying soldier, and drew the photograph from its hiding-place. There was no time to ask the questions which hung upon his lips—the Prussian was dying. The next instant, he fell back lifeless, and Maury reverently closed the eyes of the dead, breathing a prayer for the departed soul.

At noon, the French troops marched joyfully back to the town. The Prussians had suffered a complete repulse, and had lost half their men, while the other side had incurred

comparatively little loss. Etienne was among the victorious throng, with not even so much as a scratch. But his thoughts were more with Fritz than with the glory of victory. He was puzzled somewhat, and longed to see his little daughter again—more than any other member of his family.

When Etienne Maury at last returned home, he gathered from Dorothee the story of her meeting with the soldier. She told him all—and was astonished when her father informed her that the stranger was a Prussian.

"But no enemy, papa," she said; "he faithfully kissed you for me, as he promised, and gave you the photograph. You will love me a little more now, won't you?"

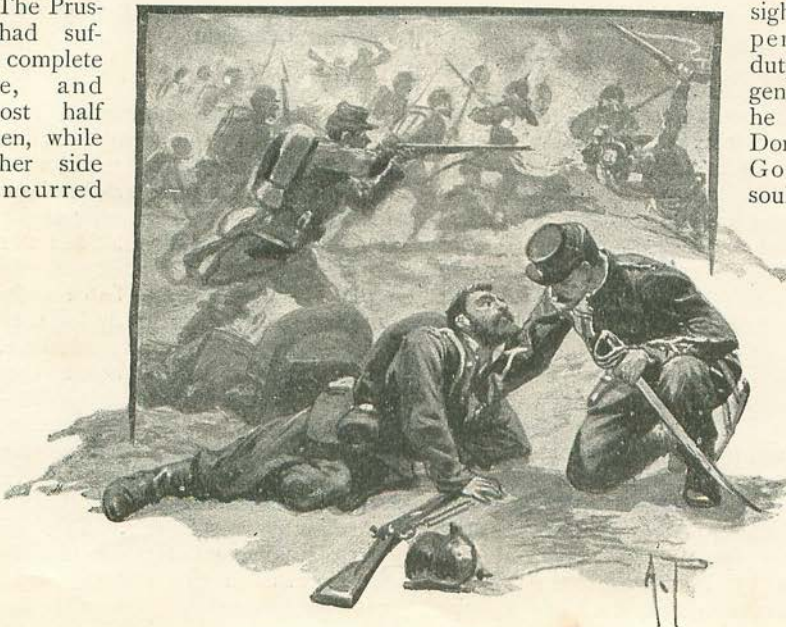
Etienne did not answer, but he folded the child in his arms and covered her with caresses.

"Pierre and Dorothee shall receive an equal share of papa's love," he answered, at length. Then he continued: "My little daughter perhaps is not aware that she betrayed her father to the Prussians?"

"Did I?" she exclaimed, with wide-opened eyes.

"There, never mind, you are too young to understand such serious things." He had guessed that Fritz was a spy.

"Poor fellow!" he sighed, "he only performed his duty. His was a generous heart: he proved it by Dorothee's kiss. God rest his soul!"



"ETIENNE OBEYED THE DYING SOLDIER."