

The Prisoners.

FROM THE FRENCH OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT.



HERE was no sound in the forest except the slight rustle of the snow as it fell upon the trees. It had been falling, small and fine, since mid-day; it powdered the branches with a frosty moss, cast a silver veil over the dead leaves in the hollow, and spread upon the pathways a great, soft, white carpet that thickened the immeasurable silence amid this ocean of trees.

Before the door of the keeper's lodge stood a bare-armed young woman, chopping wood with an axe upon a stone. She was tall, thin and strong—a child of the forest, a daughter and wife of game-keepers.

A voice called from within the house: "Come in, Berthine; we are alone to-night, and it is getting dark. There may be Prussians or wolves about."

She who was chopping wood replied by splitting another block; her bosom rose and fell with the heavy blows, each time she lifted her arm.

"I have finished, mother. I'm here, I'm here. There's nothing to be frightened at; it isn't dark yet."

Then she brought in her fagots and her logs, and piled

them up at the chimney-side, went out again to close the shutters—enormous shutters of solid oak—and then, when she again came in, pushed the heavy bolts of the door.

Her mother was spinning by the fire, a wrinkled old woman who had grown timorous with age.

"I don't like father to be out," said she. "Two women have no strength."

The younger answered: "Oh, I could very well kill a wolf or a Prussian, I can tell you." And she turned her eyes to a large revolver, hanging over the fire-place. Her husband had been put into the army at the beginning of the Prussian invasion, and the

two women had remained alone with her father, the old game-keeper, Nicholas Pichou, who had obstinately refused to leave his home and go into the town.

The nearest town was Rethel, an old fortress perched on a rock. It was a patriotic place, and the townspeople had resolved to resist the invaders, to close their gates and stand a siege, according to the traditions of the city. Twice before, under Henry IV. and under Louis XIV., the inhabitants of Rethel had won fame by heroic defences. They would do the



"COME IN, BERTHINE."

same, this time ; by Heaven, they would, or they would be burned within their walls.

So they had bought cannons and rifles, and equipped a force, and formed battalions and companies, and they drilled all day long in the Place d'Armes. All of them—bakers, grocers, butchers, notaries, attorneys, carpenters, booksellers, even the chemists—went through their manœuvres in due rotation at regular hours, under the orders of M. Lavigne, who had once been a non-commissioned officer in the dragoons, and now was a draper, having married the daughter and inherited the shop of old M. Ravaudan.

He had taken the rank of major in command of the place, and all the young men having gone to join the army, he enrolled all the others who were eager for resistance. The stout men now walked the streets at the pace of professional pedestrians, in order to bring down their fat, and to lengthen their breath ; the weak ones carried burdens, in order to strengthen their muscles.

The Prussians were expected. But the Prussians did not appear. Yet they were not far off ; for their scouts had already twice pushed across the forest as far as Nicholas Pichou's lodge.

The old keeper, who could run like a fox, had gone to warn the town. The guns had been pointed, but the enemy had not shown.

The keeper's lodge served as a kind of outpost in the forest of Aveline. Twice a week the man went for provisions, and carried to the citizens news from the outlying country.

He had gone that day to announce that a small detachment of German infantry had stopped at his house, the day before, about two in the afternoon, and had gone away again almost directly. The subaltern in command spoke French.

When the old man went on such errands he took with him his two dogs—two great beasts with the jaws of lions—because of the wolves who were beginning to get fierce ; and he left his two women, advising them to lock themselves into the house as soon as night began to fall.

The young one was afraid of nothing, but the old one kept on trembling and repeating : "It will turn out badly, all this sort of thing. You'll see, it will turn out badly."

This evening she was more anxious even than usual.

"Do you know what time your father will come back?" said she.

"Oh, not before eleven for certain. When he dines with the Major he is always late."

She was hanging her saucepan over the

fire to make the soup, when she stopped short, listened to a vague sound which had reached her by way of the chimney, and murmured :—

"There's someone walking in the wood—seven or eight men at least."

Her mother, alarmed, stopped her wheel and muttered : "Oh, good Lord ! And father not here !"

She had not finished speaking when violent blows shook the door.

The women made no answer, and a loud guttural voice called out : "Open the door."

Then, after a pause, the same voice repeated : "Open the door, or I'll break it in."

Then Berthine slipped into her pocket the big revolver from over the mantelpiece, and having put her ear to the crack of the door, asked : "Who are you?"

The voice answered : "I am the detachment that came the other day."

The woman asked again : "What do you want?"

"I have lost my way, ever since the morning, in the forest, with my detachment. Open the door, or I will break it in."

The keeper's wife had no choice ; she promptly drew the great bolt, and pulling back the door she beheld six men in the pale snow-shadows—six Prussian men, the same who had come the day before. She said in a firm tone : "What do you want here at this time of night?"

The officer answered : "I had lost my way, lost it completely ; I recognised the house. I have had nothing to eat since the morning, nor my men either."

Berthine replied : "But I am all alone with mother, this evening."

The soldier, who seemed a good sort of fellow, answered : "That makes no difference. I shall not do any harm ; but you must give us something to eat. We are faint and tired to death."

The keeper's wife stepped back.

"Come in," said she.

They came in, powdered with snow and with a sort of mossy cream on their helmets that made them look like meringues. They seemed tired, worn out.

The young woman pointed to the wooden benches on each side of the big table.

"Sit down," said she, "and I'll make you some soup. You do look quite knocked up."

Then she bolted the door again.

She poured some more water into her saucepan, threw in more butter and potatoes ; then, unhooking a piece of bacon that hung in the chimney, she cut off half, and added



"THEY CAME IN, POWDERED WITH SNOW."

that also to the stew. The eyes of the six men followed her every movement with an air of awakened hunger. They had set their guns and helmets in a corner, and sat waiting on their benches, like well-behaved school children. The mother had begun to spin again, but she threw terrified glances at the invading soldiers. There was no sound except the slight purring of the wheel, the crackle of the fire, and the bubbling of the water as it grew hot.

But all at once a strange noise made them all start—something like a hoarse breathing at the door, the breathing of an animal, deep and snorting.

One of the Germans had sprung towards the guns. The woman with a movement and a smile stopped him.

"It is the wolves," said she. "They are like you; they are wandering about, hungry."

The man would hardly believe, he wanted to see for himself; and as soon as the door was opened, he perceived two great grey beasts making off at a quick, long trot.

He came back to his seat, murmuring: "I should not have believed it."

And he sat waiting for his meal.

They ate voraciously; their mouths opened from ear to ear to take the largest of gulps;

their round eyes opened sympathetically with their jaws, and their swallowing was like the gurgle of rain in a water pipe.

The two silent women watched the rapid movements of the great red beards; the potatoes seemed to melt away into these moving fleeces.

Then, as they were thirsty, the keeper's wife went down into the cellar to draw cider for them. She was a long time gone; it was a little vaulted cellar, said to have served both as prison and hiding-place in the days of the Revolution. The way down was by a narrow winding stair, shut in by a trap-door at the end of the kitchen.

When Berthine came back, she was laughing, laughing slyly to herself. She gave the Germans her pitcher of drink. Then she too had her supper, with her mother, at the other end of the kitchen.

The soldiers had finished eating and were falling asleep, all six, around the table. From time to time, a head would fall heavily on the board, then the man, starting awake, would sit up.

Berthine said to the officer: "You may just as well lie down here before the fire. There's plenty of room for six. I'm going up to my room with my mother."

The two women went to the upper floor. They were heard to lock their door and to walk about for a little while, then they made no further sound.

The Prussians stretched themselves on the stone floor, their feet to the fire, their heads on their rolled-up cloaks, and soon all six were snoring on six different notes, sharp or deep, but all sustained and alarming.

They had certainly been asleep for a considerable time when a shot sounded, and so loud that it seemed to be fired close against the walls of the house. The soldiers sat up instantly. There were two more shots, and then three more.

The door of the staircase opened hastily, and the keeper's wife appeared, barefooted, a short petticoat over her nightdress, a candle in her hand, and a face of terror. She whispered: "Here are the French—two hundred of them at least. If they find you here, they will burn the house. Go down, quick, into the cellar, and don't make a noise. If you make a noise, we are lost." The officer, scared, murmured: "I will, I will. Which way do we go down?"

The young woman hurriedly raised the narrow square trap-door, and the men disappeared by the winding stair, one after another going underground, backwards, so as

to feel the steps with their feet. But when the point of the last helmet had disappeared, Berthine, shutting down the heavy oaken plank, thick as a wall, and hard as steel, kept in place by clamps and a padlock, turned the key twice, slowly, and then began to laugh with a laugh of silent rapture, and with a wild desire to dance over the heads of her prisoners.

They made no noise, shut in as if they were in a stone box, only getting air through a grating.

Berthine at once re-lighted her fire, put on her saucepan once more, and made more soup, murmuring: "Father will be tired to-night."

Then she sat down and waited. Nothing but the deep-toned pendulum of the clock went to and fro with its regular tick in the silence. From time to time, the young woman cast a look at the dial—an impatient look, which seemed to say: "How slowly it goes!"

Presently she thought she heard a murmur under her feet; low, confused words reached her through the vaulted masonry of the cellar. The Prussians were beginning to guess her trick, and soon the officer came up the little stair, and thumped the trap-door with his fist. Once more he cried: "Open the door."

She rose, drew near, and imitating his accent, asked: "What do you want?"
"Open the door!"
"I shall not open it."

The man grew angry.

"Open the door, or I'll break it in."

She began to laugh.

"Break away, my man; break away."

Then he began to beat, with the butt end of his gun, upon the oaken trap-door closed over his head; but it would have resisted a battering-ram.

The keeper's wife heard him go down again. Then, one after another, the soldiers came up to try their strength and inspect the fastenings.



"THE MEN DISAPPEARED BY THE WINDING STAIR."

But, concluding no doubt that their efforts were in vain, they all went back into the cellar and began to talk again.

The young woman listened to them ; then she went to open the outer door, and stood straining her ears for a sound.

A distant barking reached her. She began to whistle like a huntsman, and almost immediately, two immense dogs loomed through the shadows, and jumped upon her with signs of joy. She held them by the neck, to keep them from running away, and called with all her might : "Holloa, father !"

A voice, still very distant, answered : "Holloa, Berthine !"

She waited some moments, then called again : "Holloa, father."

The voice repeated, nearer : "Holloa, Berthine."

The keeper's wife returned : "Don't pass in front of the grating. There are Prussians in the cellar."

All at once the black outline of the man showed on the left, where he had paused between two tree-trunks. He asked, uneasily : "Prussians in the cellar ! What are they doing there ?"

The young woman began to laugh.

"It is those that came yesterday. They got lost in the forest ever since the morning ; I put them in the cellar to keep cool."

And she related the whole adventure ; how she had frightened them with shots of the revolver, and shut them up in the cellar.

The old man, still grave, asked : "What do you expect me to do with them at this time of night ?"

She answered : "Go and fetch M. Lavigne and his men. He'll take them prisoners ; and won't he be pleased !"

Then Father Pichou smiled : "Yes ; he will be pleased."

His daughter resumed : "Here's some soup for you ; eat it quick and go off again."

The old keeper sat down and began to eat his soup, after having put down two plates full for his dogs.

The Prussians, hearing voices, had become silent.

A quarter of an hour later,

Pichou started again. Berthine, with her head in her hands, waited.

The prisoners were moving about again. They shouted and called, and beat continually with their guns on the immovable trap-door of the cellar.

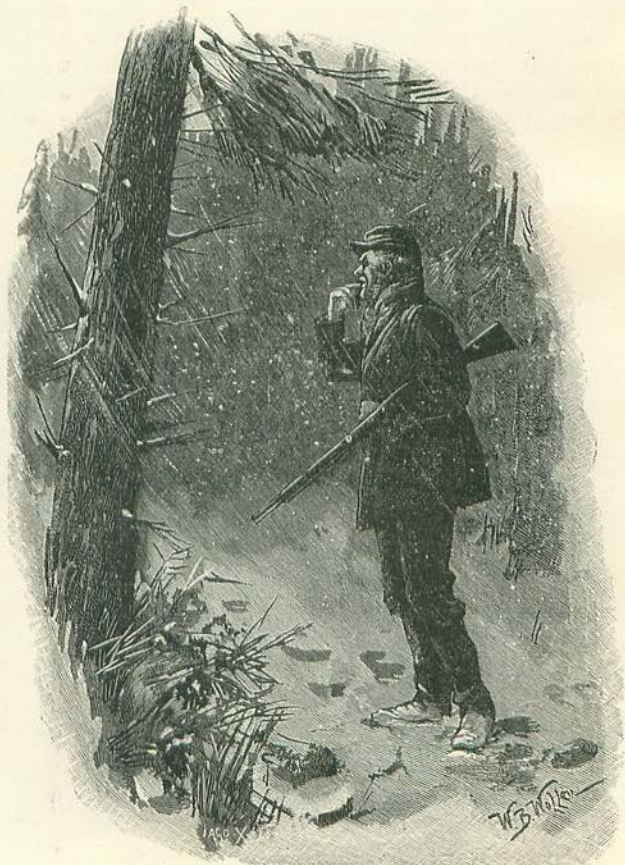
Then they began to fire their guns through the grating, hoping, no doubt, to be heard if any German detachment were passing in the neighbourhood.

The keeper's wife did not stir ; but all this noise tried her nerves, and irritated her. An evil anger awoke in her ; she would have liked to kill them, the wretches, to keep them quiet.

Then, as her impatience increased, she began to look at the clock and count the minutes.

At last the hands marked the time which she had fixed for their coming.

She opened the door once more to listen for them. She perceived a shadow moving cautiously. She was frightened, and screamed. It was her father.



"HE GAVE A LONG, STRIDENT WHISTLE."

He said: "They sent me to see if there's any change."

"No, nothing."

Then he in his turn gave a long, strident whistle into the darkness. And soon, something brown was seen coming slowly through the trees—the advance guard composed of ten men.

The old man kept repeating: "Don't pass before the grating."

And the first comers pointed out the formidable grating to those who followed.

Finally, the main body appeared, two hundred men in all, each with two hundred cartridges.

M. Lavigne, trembling with excitement, posted them so as to surround the house on all sides, leaving, however, a wide, free space round the little black hole, level with the earth, which admitted air to the cellar.

Then he entered the dwelling and inquired into the strength and position of the enemy, now so silent that it might be thought to have disappeared, flown away or evaporated through the grating. M. Lavigne stamped his foot on the trap-door and called: "Mr. Prussian officer!"

The German did not reply.

The Major repeated: "Mr. Prussian officer!"

It was in vain. For a whole twenty minutes he summoned this silent officer to capitulate with arms and baggage, promising him life and military honours for himself and his soldiers. But he obtained no sign of consent or of hostility. The situation was becoming difficult.

The soldier-citizens were stamping their feet and striking wide-armed blows upon their chests, as coachmen do for warmth, and they were looking at the grating with an ever-growing childish desire to pass in front of it. At last one of them risked it, a very nimble fellow called Potdevin. He took a start and ran past like a stag. The attempt succeeded. The prisoners seemed dead.

A voice called out: "There's nobody there."

Another soldier crossed the space before the dangerous opening. Then it became a game. Every minute, a man ran

out, passing from one troop to the other as children at play do, and raising showers of snow behind him with the quick movement of his feet. They had lighted fires of dead branches to keep themselves warm, and the flying profile of each *Garde-National* showed in a bright illumination as he passed over to the camp on the left.

Someone called out: "Your turn, Maloison."

Maloison was a big baker whom his comrades laughed at, because he was so fat.

He hesitated. They teased him. Then, making up his mind, he started at a regular breathless trot which shook his stout person. All the detachment laughed till they cried. They called out: "Bravo, Maloison!" to encourage him.

He had gone about two-thirds of the distance when a long flame, rapid and red, leapt from the grating. A report followed, and the big baker fell upon his nose with a frightful shriek.

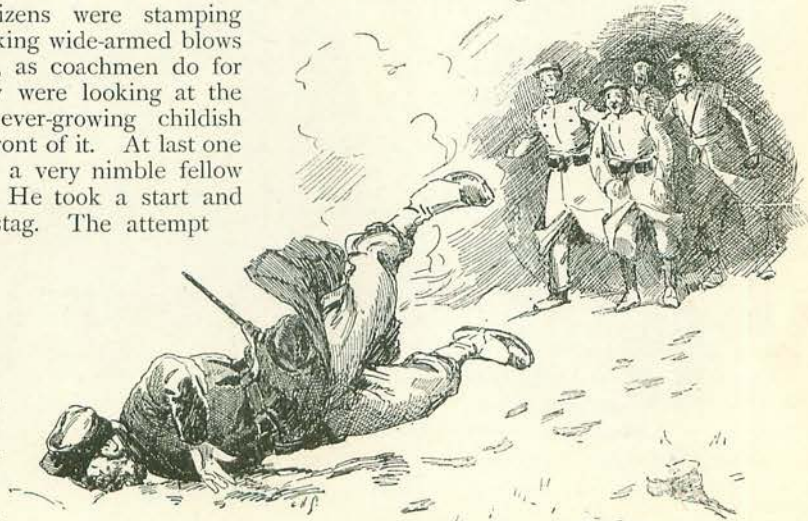
No one ran to help him. Then they saw him drag himself on all fours across the snow, moaning, and when he was beyond that terrible passage he fainted. He had a bullet high up in the flesh of the thigh.

After the first surprise and alarm there was more laughter.

Major Lavigne appeared upon the threshold of the keeper's lodge. He had just framed his plan of attack, and gave his word of command in a ringing voice: "Plumber Plumchet and his men!"

Three men drew near.

"Unfasten the gutters of the house."



"THE BIG BAKER FELL UPON HIS NOSE."

In a quarter of an hour some twenty yards of leaden gutter pipe were brought to the Major.

Then, with innumerable prudent precautions, he had a little round hole bored in the edge of the trap-door, and having laid out an aqueduct from the pump to this opening, announced with an air of satisfaction: "We are going to give these German gentlemen something to drink." A wild cheer of admiration burst forth, followed by shouts of delight and roars of laughter. The Major organized gangs of workers, who were to be employed in relays of five minutes. Then he commanded: "Pump!"

And the iron handle having been put in motion, a little sound rustled along the pipes and slipped into the cellar, falling from step to step with the tinkle of a waterfall, suggestive of rocks and little red fishes.

They waited.

An hour passed; then two, then three.

The Major walked about the kitchen in a fever, putting his ear to the floor from time to time, trying to guess what the enemy was doing and whether it would soon capitulate.

The enemy was moving now. Sounds of rattling, of speaking, of splashing, could be heard. Then towards eight in the morning a voice issued from the grating: "I want to speak to the French officer."

Lavigne answered from the window, without putting out his head too far: "Do you surrender?"

"I surrender."

"Then pass out your guns."

A weapon was immediately seen to appear out of the hole and fall into the snow; then a second, a third—all; and the same voice declared: "I have no more. Make haste. I am drowned."

The Major commanded: "Stop."

And the handle of the pump fell motionless.

Then, having filled the kitchen with soldiers, all standing armed, he slowly lifted the trap-door.

Six drenched heads appeared, six fair heads with long light hair, and the six Germans were seen issuing forth one by one, shivering, dripping, scared.

They were seized and bound. Then, as a surprise was apprehended, the troops set out in two parties, one in charge of the prisoners, the other in charge of Maloison, on a mattress, carried on poles.

Rethel was entered in triumph.

M. Lavigne received a decoration for having taken prisoner a Prussian advance-guard; and the fat baker had the military medal for wounds received in face of the enemy.



"THE SIX GERMANS WERE SEEN ISSUING FORTH."