

## CHAPTER VI

ALL that day we were in a state of fear, Grédél alone was afraid of nothing; she came in and out, bringing us the news of Rothalp.

Many people from Tugwiller, Neuwiller, Dosenheim, passed through the village with carts full of furniture, bedding, mattresses, all in confusion, shouting, calling to each other, whipping their horses, turning round to see if the Uhlans were not at their heels; it was the general flight before the deluge. These unhappy beings had lost their heads. They said that the Prussians were taking possession of all the boys of fifteen or sixteen to lead their horses or carry their bags.

Two soldiers of the line who passed about twelve were still carrying their rifles; they were white with dust. I called them in, through the window, and gave them a glass of wine. They belonged to the 18th, and told us that their regiment no longer existed; that all their officers were killed or wounded; that another regiment, I cannot remember which, had fired upon them for a long time; that at last ammunition was wanting; that at the fort of La Petite Pierre the garrison had refused to receive them; and that the 5th army corps, commanded by General

de Faily, posted in the neighborhood of Bitche, might have come in time to fall into position; and a good deal more besides.

These were brave men, whose hearts had not failed them. They started again in the direction of Phalsbourg, and we wished them good luck.

In the afternoon Marie Anne came to see us. Her husband had started for the town early, saying that nothing positive could be learned in our place; that the soldiers saw nothing but their own little corner of the battle-field, without troubling themselves about the rest, and that he would learn exactly down there if we had any hope left.

George was to return for dinner; but at seven o'clock he was not home yet. His wife was uneasy. Bad news kept coming in; peasants were arriving from Neuwiller, who said that the Prussians were already marching upon Saverne, and were making requisitions as they went. The peasants were flying to Dabo in the mountains; the women, through force of habit, were telling their beads as they walked; whilst the men, great consumers of eau-de-vie, were flourishing their sticks, and looking in their rear with threatening gestures, which did not hinder them from stepping out rapidly.

One of these men, whom I asked if he had seen the battle, told me that the dead were heaped up in the fields like sacks of flour in my mill. I think he was inventing that, or he had heard it from others.

Night was coming on, and Cousin Marie Anne was going home, when all at once George came in.

"Is my wife here, Christian?" he asked.

"Yes; you will sup with us?"

"No; I have had something to eat down there. But what sights I have seen! It is enough to drive one mad."

"And Jacob?" asked my wife.

"Jacob is learning drill. He got a rifle the day before yesterday, and to-morrow he will have to fight."

George sat down in the window-corner while we were at supper, and he told us that on his arrival at Phalsbourg, about six in the morning, the gate of France had just been opened, but that that of Germany, facing Saverne, remained closed; that in that direction from the outposts to Quatre Vents, nothing was to be seen but fugitives, calling, and firing pistol-shots to get themselves admitted; that he had had time to put up his horse and cart at the Ville de Bâle, and to go upon the ramparts to witness this spectacle, when at the same instant the drawbridge fell, and the crowd of Turcos, Zouaves, foot-soldiers, officers, generals, all in a confused mass, had rushed through the gate; in the whole number, he had seen but one flag, surrounded by about sixty men of the 55th, commanded by a lieutenant; the rest were mingled together, in hopeless confusion, the most part without arms, and under no sort of discipline;

they had lost all respect for their chiefs. It was a rout—a complete rout.

He had seen superior officers invaded at their own tables under the tent of the Café Meyer, by private soldiers, and veterans throwing themselves back in their chairs with elbows squared in the presence of their officers, looking defiantly upon them, and shouting, "A bottle!" The waiters came obsequiously to wait upon them for fear of a scene, whilst the officers pretending to hear and see nothing, seemed to him the worst thing he had seen yet. Yet it was deserved; for these officers—officers of rank—knew no more about the roads, paths, streams and rivers of the country than their soldiers, who knew nothing at all. They did not even know the way from Phalsbourg to Sarrebourg by the high-road, which a child of eight might know.

He had heard a staff-officer ask if Sarrebourg was an open town; he had seen whole battalions halting upon that road, not knowing whether they were right.

We should ourselves see these deplorable things next day, for our retreating soldiers did nothing but turn and turn again ten times upon the same roads, around the same mountains, and ended by returning to the same spot again so tired, exhausted, and starved, that the Prussians, if they had come, would only have had to pick them up at their leisure.

Yet George had one moment's satisfaction in this melancholy disorganization; it was to see, as he told

us, those sixty men of the 56th halt in good order upon the *place*, and there rest their flag against a tree. The lieutenant who commanded them made them lie on the ground, near their rifles, and almost immediately they fell asleep in the midst of the seething crowd. The young officer himself went quietly to sit alone at a small table at the café.

"He," said my cousin, "had a map cut into squares, which he began to study in detail. It gave me pleasure to look at him; he reminded me of our naval officers. He knew something! And whilst his men were asleep, and his rescued flag was standing there, he watched, after all this terrible defeat. Colonels, commanders, were arriving depressed and wearied; the lieutenant did not stir. At last he folded up his map and put it back into his pocket, then he went to lie down in the midst of his men, and soon fell asleep too. He," said my cousin, "*was* an officer! As for the rest, I look upon them as the cause of our ruin: they have never commanded, they have never learned. There is no want of able men in the artillery and engineers; but they are only there to do their part: they command only their own arm, and are compelled to obey superior orders, even when those orders have no sense in them."

One thing which made my cousin tremble with anger, was to learn that the Emperor had the supreme command, and that nothing might be done without taking his Majesty's instructions at head-

quarters: not a bridge might be blown up, not a tunnel, before receiving his Majesty's permission!

"What is the use of sending or receiving despatches?" said George. "I only hope our *honest man* will be found to have given orders to blow up the Archeviller tunnel, or the Prussians will overrun the whole of France; they will convey their guns, their munitions of war, their provisions, and their men by railway, whilst our poor soldiers will drag along on foot and perish miserably!"

Listening to him our distress increased more and more.

He had seen in the place a few guns saved from capture, with their horses fearfully mangled, and already so thin with overwork, that one might have thought they had come from the farthest end of Russia. And all these men, coming and going, laid themselves down in a line under the walls to sleep, at the risk of being run over a hundred times.

The doors and windows of all the houses were open; the soldiers might be seen densely crowded in the side streets, the passages, the rooms, the vestibules and yards, busily eating. The townspeople gave them all they had; the poorest shed tears that they had nothing to give, so many poor wretches inspired pity; they were so commiserated that they had been beaten. In richer houses they were cooking from morning till night; when one troop was satisfied another took their place.

George, relating these things, had his eyes filled with tears.

"Well, there are a good many kind people in the world yet," said he. "Very soon those poor Phalsbourgers, when they are blockaded, will have nothing to put into their own mouths; their six weeks' victuals are already consumed, without mentioning their other provisions. Compared with these poor townspeople, we peasants are selfish monsters."

He fixed his eyes upon us, and we answered nothing. I had already driven our cows into the wood, with the flocks of the village. Doubtless he knew of it! But surely we must keep something to eat! George was right; but one cannot help thinking of the morrow: those who do not are sure to repent sooner or later.

Well, well—all the same, it was very fine of these townspeople; but they have suffered heavily for it: during four months the officer in command kept everything for his soldiers, and took away from the inhabitants all that they had whether they were willing or not.

I do affirm these things. People will take them for what they are worth; but it is only the simple truth! What afflicted us still more was to hear what George had to tell us of the battle.

In the midst of that great crowd he had long sought for some one to tell him all about it. At last the sight of an old sergeant of *chasseurs-à-pied*, thin and tough as whip-cord, his sleeve covered with

stripes, and with a bright eye, made him think: "There's my man! I am sure he has had a clear insight into things; if he will talk to me, I shall get at the bottom of the story."

So he had invited him into the inn, to take a glass of wine. The sergeant examined him for a moment, accepted, and they entered together the Ville de Bâle at the end of the court, for all the rooms were full of people; and there, eating a slice of ham and drinking a couple of bottles of Lironcourt, the sergeant having his heart opened, and receiving, moreover, a cent-sous piece, had declared that all our misfortunes arose from two causes: first, that a height on the right had not been occupied, whence the Germans had made their appearance only about twelve o'clock, and from which they could not be dislodged because they commanded the whole field of battle; and because their artillery, more numerous and better than ours, searched us through and through with shell and grape; their practice was so admirable that it was no use falling back, or bearing to the right or the left: at the first shot their balls fell into the midst of our ranks. We have since heard that the heights to which the sergeant referred were those of Gunstedt.

He then told George that the 5th corps, commanded by De Failly, which was expected from hour to hour, never appeared at all; that even if he had come, we probably should not have won the battle, for the Germans were three or four to one—but

that we might have effected a retreat in good order by Niederbronn upon Saverne.

This old sergeant was from the Nièvre; George has often spoken to me of him since, and told me that, in his opinion, he knew much more than many of MacMahon's officers; that he possessed good sense, and had a clear perception of things. George was of opinion that, with a little training, many Frenchmen of the lower ranks would be found to possess military genius, and that they might be confidently relied upon; but that our love of dancing and plays had done us harm, since it was supposed that good dancers and good actors would be able men: which would be the cause of our ruin if we did not abandon such notions.

My cousin told me many other things that evening which have escaped my memory; our terrible anxiety for the future prevented me from listening properly. But all the misfortunes in the world have not the power of depriving a man of sleep; though for the last two days we had never slept. George and his wife went home about ten, and we went to bed.

Next day I had to celebrate the marriage of Chrétien Richi with his first cousin Lisbette; notice had been given for a week, and when invitations are sent out such things cannot be postponed. I should have liked to be carrying my hay and straw into the wood, for cattle cannot live upon air; and as I was pressed for time, I sent for Placiard to take my place. But

he could nowhere be found; he had gone into hiding like all the functionaries of the Empire, who are always ready to receive their salaries and to denounce people in quiet times, and very sharp in taking themselves off the moment they ought to be at their posts.

At ten o'clock, then, I was obliged to put on my sash and go; the wedding party were waiting, and I went up into the hall with them. I sat in the arm-chair, telling the bridegroom and bride to draw near, which of course they did.

I was beginning to read the chapter on the duties of husband and wife, when in a moment a great shouting arose outside: "The Prussians! the Prussians!" One of the groomsmen, with his bunch of roses, left; Chrétien Richi turned round, the bride and the rest looked at the door; and I stood there, all alone, stuck fast with the clerk, Adam Fix. In a moment the groomsman returned, crying out that the people of Phalsbourg were making a sortie into the wood to lift our cattle; and that they were coming too to search our houses. Then I could have sent all the wedding-party to Patagonia, when I fancied the position of my wife and Grédel in such a predicament; but a mayor is obliged to keep his dignity, and I cried out: "Do you want to be married? Yes or no?"

They returned in a moment, and answered "Yes!"

"Well, you *are* married!"

And I went out while the witnesses signed, and ran to the mill.

Happily this report of a sortie from Phalsbourg was false. A gendarme had just passed through the village, bearing orders from MacMahon, and hence came all this alarm.

Nothing new happened until seven in the evening. A few fugitives were still gaining the town; but at nightfall began the passage of the 5th army corps, commanded by General de Failly.

So, then, these thirty thousand men, instead of descending into Alsace by Niederbronn, were now coming behind us by the road to Metz, on this side of the mountains. They were not even thinking of defending our passes, but were taking flight into Lorraine!

Half our village had turned out, astonished to see this army moving in a compact mass, upon Sarrebourg and Fénétrange. Until then it had been thought that a second battle would be fought at Saverne. People had been speaking of defending the Falberg, the Vachberg, and all the narrow, rock-strewn passes; the roads through which might have been broken up and defended with abatis, from which a few good shots might have kept whole regiments in check; but the sight of these thousands of men who were forsaking us without having fought—their guns, their mitrailleuses, and the cavalry galloping and rolling in a cloud along the highway,

to get farther out of the enemy's reach—made our hearts bleed. Nobody could understand it.

Then a poor disabled soldier, lying on the grass, told me that they had been ordered from Bitche to Niederbronn, from Niederbronn to Bitche, and then from Bitche to Petersbach and Ottwiller, by dreadful roads, and that now they could hold on no longer: they were all exhausted! And in spite of myself, I thought that if men worn out to this degree were obliged to fight against fresh troops continually reinforced, they would be beaten before they could strike a blow! Yes, indeed, the want of knowledge of the country is one of the causes of our miseries.

Grédel, Catherine, and I, returned to the mill in the greatest distress.

It had at last begun to rain, after two months' drought. It was a heavy rain, which lasted all the night.

My wife and Grédel had gone to bed, but I could not close my eyes. I walked up and down in the mill, listening to this down-pour, the heavy rumbling of the guns, the pattering of endless footsteps in the mud. It was march, march—marching without a pause.

How melancholy! and how I pitied these unhappy soldiers, spent with hunger and fatigue, and compelled to retreat thus.

Now and then I looked at them through the window-panes, down which the rain was streaming. They were marching on foot, on horseback, one by

one, by companies, in troops, like shadows. And every time that I opened the window to let in fresh air, in the midst of this vast trampling of feet, those neighings, and sometimes the curses of the soldiers of the artillery-train, or the horseman whose horse had dropped from fatigue or refused to move farther, I could hear in the far distance, across the plain two or three leagues from us, the whistle of the trains still coming and going in the passes.

Then noticing upon the wall one of those maps of the theatre of war which the Government had sent us three weeks ago, and which extended from Alsace as far as Poland, I tore it down, crumpled it up in my hand, and flung it out. Everything came back to me full of disgust. Those maps, those fine maps, were part of the play; just like the conspiracies devised by the police, and the explanations of the sous-préfets to make us vote "Yes" in the Plébiscite. Oh, you play-actors! you gang of swindlers! Have you done enough yet to lead astray your imbecile people? Have you made them miserable enough with your ill-contrived plays?

And it is said that the whole affair is going to be played over again: that they mean to put a ring through our noses to lead us along; that many rogues are reckoning upon it to settle their little affairs, to slip back into their old shoes and get fat again by slow degrees, humping their backs just like our curé's cat when she has found her saucer again after having taken a turn in the woods or the gar-

den: it is possible, indeed! But then France will be an object of contempt; and if those fellows succeed, she will be worse than contemptible, and honorable men will blush to be called Frenchmen!

At daybreak I went to raise the mill-dam, for this heavy rain had overflowed the sluice. The last stragglers were passing. As I was looking up the village, my neighbor Ritter, the publican, was coming out from under the cart-shed with his lantern; a stranger was following him—a young man in a gray overcoat, tight trousers, a kind of leather portfolio hanging at his side, a small felt hat turned up over his ears, and a red ribbon at his button-hole.

This I concluded was a Parisian; for all the Parisians are alike, just as the English are: you may tell them among a thousand.

I looked and listened.

"So," said this man, "you have no horse?"

"No, sir; all our beasts are in the wood, and at such a time as this we cannot leave the village."

"But twenty francs are pretty good pay for four or five hours."

"Yes, at ordinary times; but not now."

Then I advanced, asking: "Monsieur offers twenty francs to go what distance?"

"To Sarrebourg," said the stranger, astonished to see me.

"If you will say thirty, I will undertake to convey you there. I am a miller; I always want my horses; there are no others in the village."

"Well, do; put in your horses."

These thirty francs for eight leagues had flashed upon me. My wife had just come down into the kitchen, and I told her of it; she thought I was doing right.

Having then eaten a mouthful, with a glass of wine, I went out to harness my horses to my light cart. The Parisian was already there waiting for me, his leather portmanteau in his hand. I threw into the cart a bundle of straw; he sat down near me, and we went off at a trot.

This stranger seeing my dappled grays galloping through the mud, seemed pleased. First he asked me the news of our part of the country, which I told him from the beginning. Then in his turn he began to tell me a good deal that was not yet known by us. He composed gazettes; he was one of those who followed the Emperor to record his victories. He was coming from Metz, and told me that General Frossard had just lost a great battle at Forbach, through his own fault in not being in the field while his troops were fighting, but being engaged at billiards instead.

You may be sure I felt that to be impossible; it would be too abominable; but the Parisian said so it was, and so have many repeated since.

"So that the Prussians," said he, "broke through us, and I have had to lose a horse to get out of the confusion: the Uhlans were pursuing; they followed nearly to a place called Droulingen."

"That is only four leagues from this place," said I. "Are they already there?"

"Yes; but they fell back immediately to rejoin the main body, which is advancing upon Toul. I had hoped to recover lost ground by telling of our victories in Alsace; unfortunately at Droulingen, the sad news of Reichshoffen,\* and the alarm of the flying inhabitants, have informed me that we are driven in along our whole line; there is no doubt these Prussians are strong; they are very strong. But the Emperor will arrange all that with Bismarck!"

Then he told me there was an understanding between the Emperor and Bismarck; that the Prussians would take Alsace; that they would give us Belgium in exchange; that we should pay the expenses of the war, and then things would all return into their old routine.

"His Majesty is indisposed," said he, "and has need of rest; we shall soon have Napoleon IV., with the regency of her Majesty the Empress, the French are fond of change."

Thus spoke this newspaper-writer, who had been decorated, who can tell why? He thought of nothing but of getting safe into Sarrebourg, to catch the train, and send a letter to his paper; nothing else mattered to him. It is well that I had taken a pair of horses, for it went on raining. Suddenly we came upon the rear of De Faily's army; his guns,

\* Called generally by us, the Battle of Woerth.

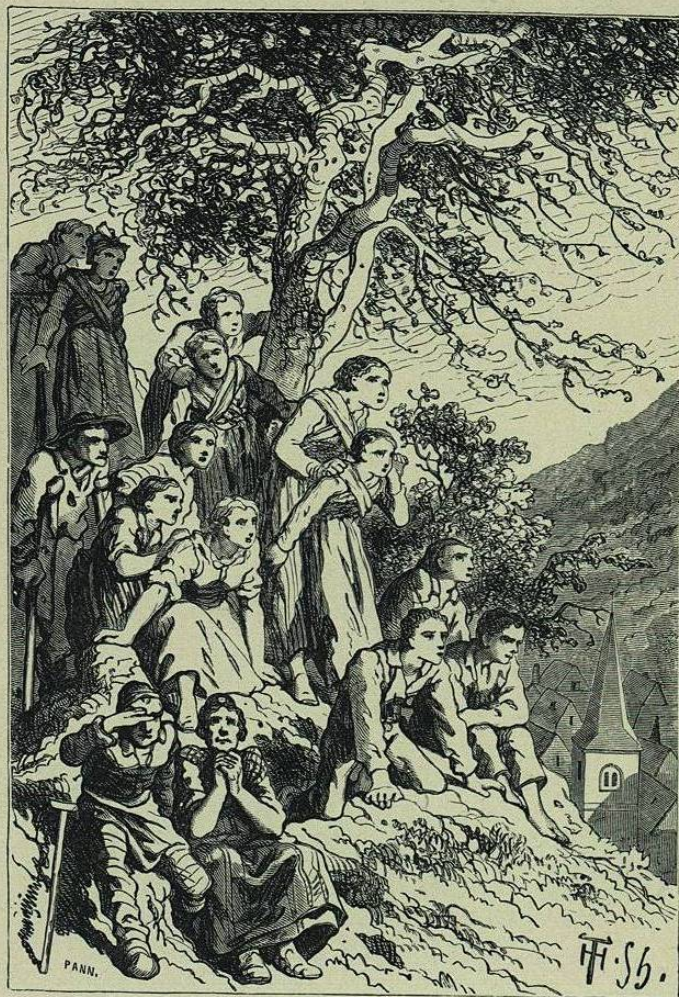


powder-wagons, and his regiments so crowded the road, that I had to take to the fields, my wheels sinking in up to the axle-trees.

Nearing Sarrebourg, we saw also on our left the rear of the other routed army, the Turcos, the Zouaves, the chasseurs, the long trains of MacMahon's guns; so that we were between the two fugitive routs: De Faily's troops, by their disorder, looked just as if they had been defeated, like the other army. All the people who have seen this in our country can confirm my account, though it seems incredible.

At last, I arrived at the Sarrebourg station, when the Parisian paid me thirty francs, which my horses had fairly earned. The families of all the railway *employés* were just getting into the train for Paris; and you may be sure that this Government newspaper-writer was delighted to find himself there. He had his free pass: but for that the unlucky man would have had to stay against his will; like many others who at the present time are boasting loudly of having made a firm stand, waiting for the enemy.

I quickly started home again by cross-roads, and about twelve I reached Rothalp. The artillery was thundering amongst the mountains; crowds of people were climbing and running down the little hill near the church to listen to the distant roar. Cousin George was calmly smoking his pipe at the window, looking at all these people coming and going.



THE ARTILLERY WAS THUNDERING AMONGST THE MOUNTAINS.

"What is going on?" said I, stopping my cart before his door.

"Nothing," said he; "only the Prussians attacking the little fort of Lichtenberg. But where are you coming from?"

"From Sarrebourg."

And I related to him in a few words what the Parisian had told me.

"Ah! now it is all plain," said he. "I could not understand why the 5th corps was filing off into Lorraine, without making one day's stand in our mountains, which are so easily defended: it did really seem too cowardly. But now that Frossard is beaten at Forbach, the thing is explained: our flank is turned. De Failly is afraid of being taken between two victorious armies. He has only to gain ground, for the cattle-dealer David has just told me that he has seen Uhlans behind Fénétrange. The line of the Vosges is surrendered; and we owe this misfortune to Monsieur Frossard, tutor to the Prince Imperial!"

The school-master, Adam Fix, was then coming down from the hill with his wife, and cried that a battle was going on near Bitche. He did not stop, on account of the rain. George told me to listen a few minutes. We could hear deep and distant reports of heavy guns, and others not so loud.

"Those heavy reports," said George, "come from the great siege-guns of the fort; the others are the

enemy's lighter artillery. At this moment, the German army, at six leagues from us, victorious in Alsace, is on the road from Woerth to Siewettler, to unite with the army that is moving on Metz; it is defiling past the guns of the fort. To-morrow we shall see their advanced guard march past us. It is a melancholy story, to be defeated through the fault of an imbecile and his courtiers; but we must always remember, as a small consolation, to every man his turn." He began again to smoke, and I went on my way home, where I put up my horses. I had earned my thirty francs in six hours; but this did not give me complete satisfaction. My wife and Grédel were also on the hill listening to the firing; half the village were up there; and all at once I saw Placiard, who could not be found the day before, jumping through the gardens, puffing and panting for breath.

"You hear, Monsieur le Maire," he cried—"you hear the battle? It is King Victor Emmanuel coming to our help with a hundred and fifty thousand men!"

At this I could no longer contain myself, and I cried, "Monsieur Placiard, if you take me for a fool, you are quite mistaken; and if you are one, you had better hold your tongue. It is no use any longer telling these poor people false news, as you have been doing for eighteen years, to keep up their hopes to the last moment. This will never more bring tobacco-excise to you, and stamp-offices

to your sons. The time for play-acting is over. You are telling me this through love of lying; but I have had enough of all these abominable tricks; I now see things clearly. We have been plundered from end to end by fellows of your sort, and now we are going to pay for you, without having had any benefit ourselves. If the Prussians become our masters, if they bestow places and salaries, you will be their best friend; you will denounce the patriots in the commune, and you will have them to vote plébiscites for Bismarek! What does it matter to you whether you are a Frenchman or a German? Your true lord, your true king, your true emperor, is the man who pays!"

As fast as I spoke my wrath increased, and all at once I shouted: "Wait, Monsieur l'Adjoint, wait till I come out; I will pay you off for the Emperor, for his Ministers, and all the infamous crew of your sort who have brought the Prussians into France!" But I had scarcely reached the door, when he had already turned the corner.