

CHAPTER IX

ON the 29th of September, a Prussian vague-mestre* brought me some proclamations with orders to make them public.

These proclamations declared that we were now part of the department of La Moselle, and that we were under a Prussian prefect, the Count Henkel de Bonnermark, who was himself under the orders of the Governor-General of Alsace and Lorraine, the Count Bismarck-Bohlen, provisionally residing at Haguenau.

I cannot tell what evil spirit then laid hold of me; the Landwehr had brought us the day before the news of the capitulation of Strasbourg; I had been worried past all endurance by all the requisitions which I was ordered to call for, and I boldly declared my refusal to post that proclamation: that it was against my conscience; that I looked upon myself as a Frenchman still, and they need not expect an honest man to perform such an errand as that.

The vague-mestre seemed astonished to hear me. He was a stout man, with thick brown mustaches, and prominent eyes.

* The person in command of a wagon train—also an Army letter-carrier.

“Will you be good enough to write that down, M. le Maire?” he said.

“Why not? I am tired out with all these vexatious acts. Let my place be given to your friend, M. Placiard: I should be thankful. Let him order these requisitions. I look upon them as mere robbery.”

“Well, write that down,” said he. “I obey orders: I have nothing to do with the rest.”

Then, without another thought, I opened my desk, and wrote that Christian Weber, Mayor of Rothalp, considered it against his conscience to proclaim Bismarck-Bohlen Governor of a French province, and that he refused absolutely.

I signed my name to it, with the date, 29th September, 1870; and it was the greatest folly I ever committed in my life: it has cost me dear.

The vague-mestre took the paper, put it in his pocket, and went away. Two or three hours after, when I had thought it over a little, I began to repent, and I wished I could have the paper back again.

That evening, after supper, I went to tell George the whole affair; he was quite pleased.

“Very good, indeed, Christian,” said he. “Now your position is clear. I have often felt sorry that you should be obliged, for the interest of the commune and to avoid pillage, to give bonds to the Prussians. People are so absurd! Seeing the signature of the mayor, they make him, in a way, respon-

sible for everything; every one fancies he is bearing more than his share. Now you are rid of your burden; you could not go so far as to requisition in the name of Henkel de Bonnermark, self-styled prefect of La Moselle; let some one else do that work; they will have no difficulty in finding as many ill-conditioned idiots as they want for that purpose."

My cousin's approbation gave me satisfaction, and I was going home, when the same *vaguemestre*, in whose hands I had placed my resignation in the morning, entered, followed by three or four *Landwehr*.

"Here is something for you," said he, handing me a note, which I read aloud:

"The persons called Christian Weber, miller, and George Weber, wine-merchant, in the village of Rothalp, will, to-morrow, drive to Droulingen, four thousand kilos of hay and ten thousand kilos of straw, without fail. By order—FLOEGEL."

"Very well," I replied. For although this requisition appeared to me to be rather heavy, I would not betray my indignation before our enemies; they would have been too much delighted. "Very well, I will drive my hay and my straw to Droulingen."

"You will drive it yourself," said the *vaguemestre*, brutally. "All the horses and carts in the village have been put into requisition; you have too often forgotten your own."

"I can prove that my horses and my carts have

been worked oftener than any one's," I replied, with rising wrath. "There are your receipts; I hope you won't deny them!"

"Well, it doesn't matter," said he. "The horses, the carts, the hay and straw are demanded; that is plain."

"Quite plain," said Cousin George. "The strongest may always command."

"Exactly so," said the *vaguemestre*.

He went out with his men, and George, without anger, said, "This is war! Let us be calm. Perhaps our turn will come now that the *honest man* is no longer in command of our armies. In the meantime the best thing we can do, if we do not want to lose our horses and our carts besides, will be to load to-night, and to start very early in the morning. We shall return before seven o'clock to supper; and then they won't be able to take any more of our hay and straw, because we shall have none left."

For my part, I was near bursting with rage; but, as he set the example, by stripping off his coat and putting on his blouse, I went to wake up old Father Offran to help me to load.

My wife and Grédel were expecting me: for the *vaguemestre* and his men had called at the mill, before coming to George's house, and they were trembling with apprehension. I told them to be calm; that it was only taking some hay and straw to Droulingen, where I should get a receipt for future payment.

Whether they believed it or not, they went in again.

I lighted the lantern, Offran mounted up into the loft and threw me down the trusses, which I caught upon a fork. About two in the morning, the two carts being loaded, I fed the horses and rested a few minutes.

At five o'clock, George, outside, was already calling "Christian, I am here!"

I got up, put on my hat and my blouse, opened the stable from the inside, put the horses in, and we started in the fresh and early morning, supposing we should return at night.

In all the villages that we passed through, troops of Landwehr were sitting before their huts, ragged, with patched knees and filthy beards, like the description of the Cossacks of former days, smoking their pipes; and the cavalry and infantry were coming and going.

Those who remained in garrison in the villages were obliged by their orders to give up their good walking-boots to the others, and to wear their old shoes.

Mounted officers, with their low, flat caps pulled down upon their noses, were skimming along the paths by the road-side like the wind. In the old wayside inns, in the corners of the yards the dung-hills were heaped up with entrails and skins of beasts: hides, stuffed with straw, were hanging also from the banisters of the old galleries, where we

used to see washed linen hanging out to dry. Misery, unspeakable misery, and gnawing anxiety were marked upon the countenances of the people. The Germans alone looked fat and sleek in their broken boots; they had good white bread, good red wine, good meat, and smoked good tobacco or cigars: they were living like fighting-cocks.

At a certain former time, these people had complained bitterly of our invasion of their country, without remembering that they had begun by invading ourselves. And yet they were right. At the close of the First Empire, the French were only fighting for one man; but the Germans had since had their revenge twice, in 1814 and 1815, and for fifty years they had always been coming to us as friends, and were received like brothers: we bore no malice against them, and they seemed to bear none against us; peace had softened us. We only wished for their prosperity, as well as for our own; for nations are really happy only when their neighbors are prospering: then business and industry all move hand in hand together. That was our position! We said nothing more of our victories; we talked of our defeats, so as to do full justice to their courage and their patriotism; we acknowledged our faults; they pretended to acknowledge theirs, and talked of fraternity. We believed in their uprightness, in their candor and frankness: we were really fond of them.

Now hatred has arisen between us.

Whose the fault?

First, our stupidity, our ignorance. We all believed that the Plébiscite was for peace; the Ministers, the préfets, the sous-préfets, the magistrates, the commissioners of police, everybody in authority confirmed this. A villain has used it to declare war! But the Germans were glad of the war; they were full of hatred, and malice, and envy, without betraying it: they had long watched us and studied us; they endured everlasting drill and perpetual fatigue to become the strongest, and sought with pains for an opportunity to get war declared against themselves, and so set themselves right in the eyes of Europe. The Spanish complication was but a trap laid by Bismarck for Bonaparte. The Germans said to one another: "We have twelve hundred thousand men under arms; we are four to one. Let us seize the opportunity! If the French Government take it into their heads to organize and discipline the Garde Mobile, all might be lost. . . . Quick, quick!"

This is the uprightness, frankness, and fraternity of the Germans!

Our idiot fell into the trap. The Germans overwhelmed us with their multitudes. They are our masters; they hold our country; we are paying them milliards! and now they are coming back, just as before, into our towns and cities in troops, smiling upon us, extending the right hand: "Ha! ha! how are you now? Have you been pretty well all this

long while? What! don't you know me? You look angry! Ah! but you really shouldn't. Such friends, such good old friends! Come, now! give me a small order, only a small one; and don't let us think of that unhappy war!"

Faugh! Let us look another way; it is too horrible.

To excuse them, I say (for one must always seek excuses for everything) man is not by nature so debased; there must be causes to explain so great a want of natural pride; and I say to myself—that these are poor creatures trained to submission, and that these unfortunate beings do as the birds do that the birdcatcher holds captives in his net; they sing, they chirp, to decoy others.

"Ah! how jolly it is here! how delightful here in Old Germany, with an Emperor, kings, princes, German dukes, grand-dukes, counts, and barons! What an honor to fight and die for the German Fatherland! The German is the foremost man in the world."

Yes. Yes. Poor devils! We know all about that. That is the song your masters taught you at school! For the King of Prussia and his nobility you work, you spy, you have your bones broken on the battle-field! They pay you with hollow phrases about the noble German, the German Fatherland, the German sky, the German Rhine; and when you sing false, with rough German slaps upon your German faces.

No; no! it is of no use; the Alsacians and the Lorrainers will never whistle like you: they have learned another tune.

Well! all this did not save us from being nipped, George and me, and from being made aware that at the least resistance they would wring our necks like chickens. So we put a good face upon a bad game, observing the desolation of all this country, where the cattle plague had just broken out. At Lohre, at Ottviller, in a score of places, this terrible disease, the most ruinous for the peasantry, was already beginning its ravages; and the Prussians, who eat more than four times the quantity of meat that we do—when it belongs to other people—were afraid of coming short.

Their veterinary doctors knew but one remedy; when a beast fell ill, refused its fodder, and became low-spirited, they slaughtered it, and buried it with hide and horns, six feet under ground. This was not much cleverer than the bombardment of towns to force them to surrender, or the firing of villages to compel people to pay their requisitions. But then it answered the purpose!

The Germans in this campaign have taught us their best inventions! They had thought them over for years, whilst our school-masters and our gazettes were telling us that they were passing away their time in dreaming of philosophy, and other things of so extraordinary a kind that the French could not understand the thing at all.

About eleven we were at Droulingen, where was a Silesian battalion ready to march to Metz. It seems that some cavalry were to follow us, and that the requisitions had exhausted the fodder in the country, for our hay and straw were immediately housed in a barn at the end of the village, and the major gave us a receipt. He was a gray-bearded Prussian, and he examined us with wrinkled eyes, just like an old gendarme who is about to take your description.

This business concluded, George and I thought we might return at once; when, looking through the window, we saw them loading our carts with the baggage of the battalion. Then I came out, exclaiming: "Hallo! those carts are ours! We only came to make a delivery of hay and straw!"

The Silesian commander, a tall, stiff, and uncompromising-looking fellow, who was standing at the door, just turned his head, and, as the soldiers were stopping, quietly said: "Go on!"

"But, captain," said I, "here is my receipt from the major!"

"Nothing to me," said he, walking into the mess-room, where the table was laid for the officers.

We stood outside in a state of indignation, as you may believe. The soldiers were enjoying the joke. I was very near giving them a rap with my whip-handle; but a couple of sentinels marching up and down with arms shouldered, would certainly have passed their bayonets through me. I turned pale,

and went into Finck's public-house, where George had turned in before me. The small parlor was full of soldiers, who were eating and drinking as none but Prussians can eat and drink; almost putting it into their noses.

The sight and the smell drove us out, and George, standing at the door, said to me: "Our wives will be anxious; had we not better find somebody to tell them what has happened to us?"

But it was no use wishing or looking; there was nobody.

The officers' horses along the wall, their bridles loose, were quietly munching their feed, and ours, which were already tired, got nothing.

"Hey!" said I to the *feld-weibel*, who was overlooking the loading of the carts; "I hope you will not think of starting without giving a handful to our horses?"

"If you have got any money, you clown," said he, grinning, "you can give them hay, and even oats, as much as you like. There, look at the sign-board before you: 'Hay and oats sold here.'"

That moment I heaped up more hatred against the Prussians than I shall be able to satiate in all my life.

"Come on," cried George, pulling me by the arm; for he saw my indignation.

And we went into the "Bay Horse," which was as full of people as the other, but larger and higher. We fed our horses; then, sitting alone in a corner,

we ate a crust of bread and took a glass of wine, watching the movements of the troops outside. I went out to give my horses a couple of buckets of water, for I knew that the Germans would never take that trouble.

George called to him the little pedler Friedel, who was passing by with his pack, to tell him to inform our wives that we should not be home till to-morrow morning, being obliged to go on to Sarreguemines. Friedel promised, and went on his way.

Almost immediately, the word of command and the rattle of arms warned us that the battalion was about to march. We only had the time to pay and to lay hold of the horses' bridles.

It was pleasant weather for walking—neither too much sun nor too much shade; fine autumn weather.

And since, in comparing the Germans with our own soldiers as to their marching powers, I have often thought that they never would have reached Paris but for our railroads. Their infantry are just as conspicuous for their slowness and their heaviness as their cavalry are for their swiftness and activity. These people are splay-footed, and they cannot keep up long. When they are running, their clumsy boots make a terrible clatter; which is perhaps the reason why they wear them: they encourage each other by this means, and imagine they dismay the enemy. A single company of theirs makes more noise than one of our regiments. But

they soon break out in a perspiration, and their great delight is to get up and have a ride.

Toward evening, by five o'clock, we had only gone about three leagues from Droulingen, when, instead of continuing on their way, the commander gave the battalion orders to turn out of it into a parish road on the left. Whether it was to avoid the lodgings by the way, which were all exhausted, or for some other reason, I cannot say.

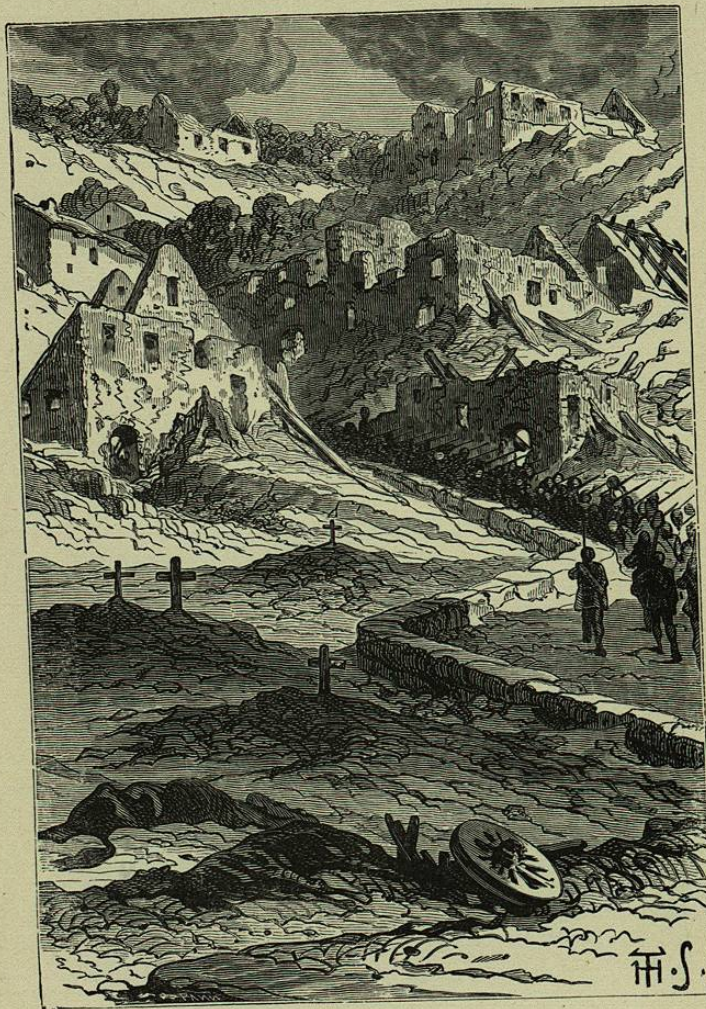
Seeing this, I ran to the commanding officer in the greatest distress.

"But in the name of heaven, captain," said I, "are you not going on to Sarreguemines? We are fathers of families; we have wives and children! You promised that at Sarreguemines we might unload and return home."

George was coming, too, to complain; but he had not yet reached us, when the commander, from on horseback, roared at us with a voice of rage: "Will you return to your carts, or I will have you beaten till all is blue? Will you make haste back?"

Then we returned to take hold of our bridles, with our heads hanging down. Three hours after, at nightfall, we came into a miserable village, full of small crosses along the road, and where the people had nothing to give us; for famine had overtaken them.

We had scarcely halted, when a convoy of bread, meat, and wine arrived, escorted by a few hussars. No doubt it came from Alberstoff. Every soldier



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received his ration, but we got not so much as an onion: not a crust of bread—nothing—nor our horses either.

That night George and I alone rested under the shelter of a deserted smithy, while the Prussians were asleep in every hut and in the barns, and the sentinels paced their rounds about our carts, with their muskets shouldered; we began to deliberate what we ought to do.

George, who already foreboded the miseries which were awaiting us, would have started that moment, leaving both horses and carts; but I could not entertain such an idea as that. Give up my pair of beautiful dappled gray horses, which I had bred and reared in my own orchard at the back of the mill! It was impossible.

“Listen to me,” said George. “Remember the Alsacians who have been passing by us the last fortnight: they look as if they had come out of their graves; they had never received the smallest ration: they would have been carried even to Paris if they had not run away. You see that these Germans have no bowels. They are possessed with a bitter hatred against the French, which makes them as hard as iron; they have been incited against us at their schools; they would like to exterminate us to the last man. Let us expect nothing of them; that will be the safest. I have only six francs in my pocket; what have you?”

“Eight livres and ten sous.”

“With that, Christian, we cannot go far. The nearer we get to Metz, the worse ruin we shall find the country in. If we were but able to write home, and ask for a little money! but you see they have sentinels on every road, at all the lane ends: they allow neither foot-passengers, nor letters, nor news to pass. Believe me, let us try to escape.”

All these good arguments were useless. I thought that, with a little patience, perhaps at the next village, other horses and other carriages might be found to requisition, and that we might be allowed quietly to return home. That would have been natural and proper; and so in any country in the world they would have done.

George, seeing that he was unable to shake my resolution, lay down upon a bench and went to sleep. I could not shut my eyes.

Next day, at six o'clock, we had to resume the march; the Silesians well-refreshed, we with empty stomachs.

We were moving in the direction of Gros Tenquin. The farther we advanced, the less I knew of the country. It was the country around Metz, le pays Messin, an old French district, and our misery increased at every stage. The Prussians continued to receive whatever they required, and took no further trouble with us than merely preventing us from leaving their company: they treated us like beasts of burden; and, in spite of all our economy, our money was wasting away.

Never was so sad a position as ours; for, on the fourth or fifth day, the officer, guessing from our appearance that we were meditating flight, quite unceremoniously said in our presence to the sentinels: “If those people stir out of the road, fire upon them.”

We met many others in a similar position to ours, in the midst of these squadrons and these regiments, which were continually crossing each other and were covering the roads. At the sight of each other, we felt as if we could burst into tears.

George always kept up his spirits, and even from time to time he assumed an air of gayety, asking a light of the soldiers to light his pipe, and singing sea-songs, which made the Prussian officers laugh. They said: “This fellow is a real Frenchman: he sees things in a bright light.”

I could not understand that at all: no, indeed! I said to myself that my cousin was losing his senses.

What grieved me still more was to see my fine horses perishing—my poor horses, so sleek, so spirited, so steady; the best horses in the commune, and which I had reared with so much satisfaction. Oh, how deplorable! . . . Passing along the hedges, by the roadside, I pulled here and there handfuls of grass, to give them a taste of something green, and in a moment they would stare at it, toss up their heads, and devour this poor stuff. The poor brutes could be seen wasting away, and this pained me more than anything.

Then the thoughts of my wife and Grédel, and their uneasiness, what they were doing, what was becoming of the mill and our village—what the people would say when they knew that their mayor was gone, and then the town, and Jacob—everything overwhelmed me, and made my heart sink within me.

But the worst of all, and what I shall never forget, was in the neighborhood of Metz.

For a fortnight or three weeks there had been no more fighting; the city and Bazaine's army were surrounded by huge earthworks, which the Prussians had armed with guns. We could see that afar off, following the road on our right. We could see many places, too, where the soil had been recently turned over; and George said they were pits, in which hundreds of dead lay buried. A few burnt and bombarded villages, farms, and castles in ruins, were also seen in the neighborhood. There was no more fighting; but there was a talk of *frances-tireurs*, and the Silesians looked uncomfortable.

At last, on the tenth day since our departure, after having crossed and recrossed the country in all directions, we arrived about three o'clock at a large village on the Moselle, when the battalion came to a halt. Several detachments from our battalion had filled up the gaps in other battalions, so that there remained with us only the third part of the men who had come from Droulingen.

After the distribution of provender, seeing that

the officers' horses had been fed, and that they were putting their bridles on, I just went and picked up a few handfuls of hay and straw which were lying on the ground, to give to mine. I had collected a small bundle, when a corporal on guard in the neighborhood, having noticed what I was doing, came and seized me by the whiskers, shaking me, and striking me on the face.

"Ah! you greedy old miser! Is that the way you feed your beasts?"

I was beside myself with rage, and had already lifted my whip-handle to send the rascal sprawling on the earth, when Cousin George precipitated himself between us, crying: "Christian! what are you dreaming of?"

He wrested the whip from me, and whilst I was quivering in every limb, he began to excuse me to the dirty Prussian; saying that I had acted hastily, that I had thought the hay was to be left, that it ought to be considered that our horses too followed the battalion, etc.

The fellow listened, drawn up like a gendarme, and said: "Well, then, I will pass it over this time; but if he begins his tricks again, it will be quite another thing."

Then I went into the stable and stretched myself in the empty rack, my hat drawn over my face, without stirring for a couple of hours.

The battalion was going to march again. George was looking for me everywhere. At last he found