

"Yes, I can see that, and your hand is as cold as ice. Go home, child, and have a long night's rest. This sort of work is very trying until one gets hardened to it. Fortunately I have no lack of assistance. If you do not feel better to-morrow morning take another twenty-four hours off duty. You are likely to want all your strength and nerve on Monday if this affair comes off in earnest, which I own I am inclined to doubt, for, so far, there has been no shadow of earnestness about anything since the siege began."

CHAPTER XII.

THE Franc-tireurs des Écoles had marched out beyond the walls when the order came that the affair was postponed, and that they would not be required till the following day, when they were to parade at daybreak. There was much indignation at the change and all sorts of causes were suggested for it. One rumor was to the effect that the pontoon bridges for crossing the river were of insufficient length. Others said that the train of provisions that was to accompany the force after it had cut its way through the Prussians was not ready. One rumor was to the effect that the Prussians had been apprised by spies of Trochu's intentions and had massed heavy bodies of men at the threatened point. The most generally received opinion was that Trochu's object had been only to make a demonstration on this side of Paris, with the object of deceiving the Prussians and inducing them to weaken their lines at other points, and that the real attack would be made in another direction altogether.

"It is a nuisance whichever way it is," Cuthbert said, as, after the corps was dismissed, he walked back with a group of his friends, "it is a mistake too. We had all got ourselves up to boiling heat, and had made up our minds to go through with it, and this delay is like a dash of cold water. Of course it is the same with the rest of the force. One hates being humbugged, and it makes one doubt whether our generals know their business. Well, there is one thing, the delay won't be a

long one; it is eight o'clock now, and as we must be up by six, I shall turn in at once and get a good sleep. Be sure and don't forget your flasks in the morning. The weather gets colder and colder."

The next morning, however, the men were again dismissed after parade, and told they were to fall in again at daybreak next day. There was a feeling of restlessness and disquiet throughout Paris. The town was placarded with proclamations of Trochu and Ducrot. The latter was a sort of valedictory letter to Paris, saying that he was going out to conquer or to die, and that if defeated, he would never return to Paris alive. It was evident by their tone that at the time the proclamations were penned it was intended that the battle should take place on that day, and that the delay was consequent upon a breakdown in the arrangements and was not the result of any fixed plan.

Paris for once was serious. Special services were held in all the churches and these were thronged by citizens and soldiers. Cuthbert went to the building where a few of the English residents attended service throughout the siege. Mary Brander was not present, but as she had said the day before that she would be on duty for twenty-four hours, he had not expected to see her.

In the afternoon he went to a restaurant and dined fairly well, indulging himself in all the luxuries obtainable, and then returned and spent the evening with René and Pierre. The next morning, when he dressed himself for parade, he took the precaution of putting on as many articles of underclothing as he could button his tunic over. This time there was no mistake in the orders, as not a few of those who fell in had hoped in their hearts might be the case. As soon as the corps was formed up and their arms and ammunition-pouches examined, the word was given and they marched away towards the gate of Charenton and issued out. Many bodies of troops were converging upon it and the other gates on that side of the city, with trains of ammunition and supply wagons, and there was a delay of an hour before they could pass out. The greater part of the force had left the city on the two previous days, and a

hundred thousand men under Ducrot were massed in the Bois de Vincennes and between that point and the neck of the loop formed by the Marne.

The Franc-tireurs were halted near Charenton, and learning that the attack would not take place till night, the colonel took possession of an empty barn near the village. The men piled their arms outside and made themselves as comfortable as they could. Now that there was no longer any doubt that an engagement would take place in a few hours the natural light-heartedness of the students revived. All had brought with them a good store of provisions in their haversacks, and each man carried a thick blanket besides his military cloak. Many of them had, in addition to their flasks, slipped a bottle of wine into their haversacks, and a meal was joyously partaken of, after which pipes were lighted, and with their blankets wrapt round their legs, all were inclined to agree that campaigning even in winter had its pleasures.

"We are a deal better off than most of the troops," Cuthbert said to Arnold Dampierre, "it must be bitter in the snow out in the woods, and it will be worse when it gets dark."

"It is better for all than it was for our fellows in the South," Dampierre said. "We have warm clothes and plenty to eat. They were in rags and often well-nigh starving."

"Yes, that must have been a very rough business. It is a great advantage that we are Franc-tireurs and therefore free, to a great extent, to follow our own devices. I heard the colonel say that when he had applied for orders he was told that none would be given to detached corps like his, but that now, as at other times, they must make themselves useful when they saw an opportunity. The line are to cross first, then the mobile, and then the active battalions of the National Guards. If I judge the colonel rightly he will manage to put us somewhere in front. We stand well after that affair at Bourget, so I have no doubt he will get us across one of the bridges as soon as the line are over."

Soon after four o'clock it began to get dusk.

The colonel, who had been away endeavoring to find out

what was the general plan of operations, returned soon after. The officers gathered round him.

"Pontoon bridges will be thrown across the river on both sides of the loop. The pontonniers will set to work on them when it is dark. I fancy the real attack will be through Champigny, and that on the other side will be more of the nature of a false alarm; so we will go with the main force. There are some strong batteries erected in the loop which will prepare the way for us and a big train of field-guns. The troops will begin to cross at early daylight, so we can't do better than remain where we are until five o'clock. Then we will go and take our place near one of the bridges and slip across as soon as we see an opportunity. With such a mass of troops to move, there are sure to be delays in bringing the regiments up, and the first that occurs, we will slip in and get over. The men may as well lie down at once and get a good night."

It needed somewhat close packing for the men to rest themselves, but the crowding was more than counter balanced by the warmth, and it was not long before all were asleep. At one o'clock in the morning, they were awakened by a tremendous cannonade. All the forts round Paris had suddenly opened fire upon the German positions. Believing that the enemy must have obtained a knowledge of the approaching sortie and were anticipating it by assaulting the forts, the colonel ordered the men to stand to their arms. In an hour the firing ceased and all was quiet again. The men, with a little grumbling at being taken out and chilled in the night air, returned to the barn. At four o'clock they were again aroused by the fire being resumed.

"We may as well be off, lads," the colonel said, "we have some distance to march, and it is not worth while to turn in again."

Between the reports of the guns a dull rumbling sound could be heard.

"The artillery and train are on the move," Cuthbert said to René, who was next to him in the ranks, "so we shall not be too soon if we are to take our share in the early part of the fighting."

They left the main road and followed the fields, as many of them were well acquainted with the country, and they had no difficulty in keeping in the right direction. The men marched at ease, each picking his way as best he could across the ground, which was broken up into small enclosures and gardens. They halted outside a village on the banks of the Marne where one of the pontoon bridges had been thrown across. Here they piled arms and endeavored to keep themselves warm by stamping their feet and swinging their arms.

Soon after morning dawned, heavy firing broke out suddenly behind them. The colonel had learnt at Charenton that General Vinoy, with 15,000 men, was to advance from between the southern forts to attack Ville Juif and the heights of Mesly, so as to induce a concentration of the enemy in that direction, and so to diminish the difficulties of the main advance.

For a time there was a sound of cannon only, then came a crackle of musketry telling that the advance had begun. The battery on the commanding position of St. Maur opened in earnest, and was aided by several batteries of field artillery, the din being now incessant. Gradually the rattle of musketry became fainter, showing that the French were driving the enemy back, and a mounted officer riding past told them that Montmesly was taken. The news raised the spirits of the soldiers to the highest point, and their impatience was becoming almost uncontrollable, when the order arrived for them to advance, and the troops at once began to cross the six pontoon bridges that had been thrown at different points across the Marne.

"There is no hurry, mes braves," the colonel said, as the Franc-tireurs stamped with impatience as they saw the columns crossing the river, while they remained in enforced inactivity. "At first the troops will carry all before them as Vinoy's men have done. The fighting will only commence in earnest when the Prussians bring up their supports. We shall be in time for that, never fear. We ought to have begun at daybreak," he growled, in a low voice, to the major, "four precious hours have been wasted. By this time we ought to have gained at

least three or four miles of ground; in that case we might have been through the Prussian lines before sunset. Every hour in these short days is of importance."

Presently the roll of musketry showed that the French skirmishers were engaged with the German outposts. The Franc-tireurs had by this time moved down close to the bridge; but it was not until midday that they were able to cross; then the colonel, taking advantage of a short delay on the part of one of the regiments to come up to the bridge, pushed the men across, and leaving the road took them forward at the double. By this time the roar of battle was unbroken. The batteries along the heights behind them, the forts, and the field-guns in advance were all hard at work, the shell flying over the heads of the advancing troops and bursting in the villages held by the Germans. In front, the rattle of musketry was deafening. Champigny, they learned from a wounded soldier who was making his way to the rear, had been carried, and the troops there had pushed some distance forward, but on the left Villiers-la-Desert was found to be too strongly fortified to be taken. The French batteries were, however, raining shell upon it.

As the Franc-tireurs approached Champigny they saw that the place had not been taken without a severe struggle. The bodies of French soldiers strewed the ground thickly, and as they passed through the streets, the Saxon uniforms were mingled with those of their assailants. The corps pushed forward until they ascended the low hills behind the village. Here they found the French troops halted. It was evident Ducrot did not intend to advance further until joined by the whole of his command.

"This is pure madness," the colonel said; "by to-morrow we shall have fifty thousand Germans in front of us. If Ducrot hasn't got his whole force, and his train and ambulances up, he might at least carry Villiers by assault. Of course it could not be done without loss, but what have we come out for but to fight. We cannot advance as long as they hold that place, for when their supports come up, as you may be sure they will do ere long, they can pour out from there and take us in the rear,

However, we may as well go forward to the skirmishing line. We will work down by the right. If the German supports come up they are likely to advance that way, and as I hear no firing in that quarter, we may find some spot unoccupied by the line."

The order was given, and the corps marched off, and presently took up their position between the river and the French regiment forming the extreme right flank of the advance. In extended order and taking advantage of every inequality of the ground, they pushed on, and after advancing a quarter of a mile, were brought to a standstill by a sudden outbreak of musketry fire at various points along the crest of a slight rise some six hundred yards in front of them. Taking cover behind a low wall running at right angles to the river, they opened a dropping fire in return. This, however, was at once stopped by the colonel, who himself went along the line.

"Don't throw away a shot, lads," he said, "you may want every cartridge before you have done. It will be time enough to begin when they show in force over that crest."

There was no more for the men to do than there had been when they were waiting for their turn to cross the bridge, but they were satisfied, now they were in the front line, and within shot of the enemy. The march had set their blood in circulation, and while two or three of each company kept a keen lookout over the top of the wall, the others laughed and joked, after first employing themselves in knocking holes through the wall, a few inches above the ground, so that they could lie and fire through if the enemy advanced. The musketry fire had almost ceased away to their right, and they hoped that Vinoy had established himself well out in that direction. Various were the conjectures as to why the advance had ceased on their own side. Some conjectured that Trochu's plan consisted only in crossing the river and then marching back again in order to accustom the troops to stand fire. One suggested that the general had come out without ink or paper with which to write his grandiose proclamations to the Parisians, and they were waiting until it had been fetched from his office.

"What do you think, Henri?" René asked the lieutenant,

"I should say," he said, gravely, "that when our advance came upon the real Prussian line of defence, they found it too strong to be carried. They must have known that they could never hold Champigny under the fire of our guns and forts, and used it only as an outpost. Of course it is from this side they would think it likely that we should try to break out, and they would certainly erect batteries to command all the roads. They have had nothing else to do for the last ten weeks."

"I have no doubt that is partly the reason, Henri," Cuthbert said, "but I think it may be principally due to the fact that Ducrot can't get his troops across the river. Even with a well-organized army and a good staff, and commanding officers who all know their duty, it is a big job to get a hundred thousand men, with artillery, ambulances, and trains across a river. Here, with the exception of Ducrot himself and a few of the line officers, nobody knows anything about the matter. By what we saw, I should think there are not more than twenty thousand men across the river, and the confusion on the other side must be frightful. We ourselves saw that the street of that village was absolutely choked up with wagons, and I have no doubt all the roads are the same. Of course they never ought to have moved forward at all till all the troops were over. If Trochu really meant to break out, the north is the side where he should have tried. The whole force could have been massed between the walls and St. Denis and have been marched in regular order against the Prussians, with the field-batteries at intervals and the trains following at a proper distance on the various lines of roads.

"I hope that is his plan still, and that this attack from the South is only a feint to draw as many of the Germans as possible over to this side. We have a tremendous advantage in having this short line to march across. If Trochu were to send the train off at once, while we recrossed and followed as soon as it was dark, the whole army might be outside the northern wall before morning. To-morrow we might get into position for attack, make all the arrangements, and advance far enough to dash forward at their lines as soon as it is light next day, and

with Ducrot's and Vinoy's force united, we ought to go right through them. We should have 115,000 men, and I don't suppose they could oppose us with a third of that number. However strong their positions, we ought to be able to carry them if we went at them with a rush. Besides, we should have the guns at the northern forts to help us. At any rate, after this delay here, I consider the idea of any further advance in this direction to be out of the question. By to-morrow morning they may have a hundred thousand men facing us, and if we don't recross to-night, we may find it very difficult business to do so to-morrow."

"We have got the batteries and forts to cover us," Henri Vaucour said. "The Germans could never advance against us in force under their fire."

"I hope we are going to cross this evening, if we are going to cross at all," Pierre Leroux said. "It is cold enough now, but if we are going to pass the night here, it will be bitter."

"There are those houses by the river, we are a good deal nearer to them than any other troops," Arnold Dampierre said; "they will hold us if we pack in pretty closely."

As the afternoon wore on, the colonel sent two officers to inspect the houses, which were all found to be empty. As soon as he received the report, he sent twenty men off with orders to cut down hedges and form fagots, and then to light fires in each room. There was no further movement. A heavy musketry fire was kept up far away to the left, and the batteries occasionally fired heavily; but all idea of movement was evidently abandoned for the day, and the enemy were not in sufficient force to take the offensive.

As soon as it became dark, therefore, half a company were left on guard at the wall, and the rest of the corps marched off to the houses. Roaring fires were blazing in every room, for some fruit trees had been cut down and split up into logs. The party on guard were to be relieved every two hours. As soon as the men were bestowed in their quarters, the major went off to discover, if possible, what had been the result of the

fighting on the other side of the loop. It was two hours before he returned, and the news he brought was dispiriting.

"I have been up to Creteil," he said, "and have learnt from the people there who saw the whole affair what has happened. The advance was good. We swept the Germans at first before us, and for a time our fellows made a stand on the crest of Montmesly. But the enemy were reinforced and drove us down the hill again. Then came a disgraceful panic. The soldiers who had fought fairly at first, became a mob; the mobile, who had not done as well as had been expected, were worse. There was a battalion of the National Guard of Belleville, and the scoundrels ran without firing a shot. At Creteil the men absolutely fought to get through the street. It was disgraceful. I hear that further to the right the line did better, and that we still hold Ville Juif and other villages well in advance of our old position. That is all I could learn. They say our losses have been pretty heavy; at any rate Creteil is full of wounded, and the ambulances are taking them into Paris. There is great confusion on the other side of the river. The roads are all choked with the wagon-trains. Nobody has got any orders, nobody knows what is going to be done, no one knows where Ducrot or Trochu are. It is enough to make one tear one's hair to see such confusion and mismanagement."

The night passed off quietly. The next day, to the surprise of everyone, things remained unchanged. No effort was made to pass the baggage-train over the bridges. A portion of the troops had been put under canvas the first evening, and save for the dead still lying about, the broken arms, the stains of blood, and the parties engaged in carrying the wounded across the river to the ambulance wagons, and others burying the dead, the scene differed little from an ordinary encampment. The troops laughed and jested round the camp-fires, and occupied themselves with their cooking; the horses that had been killed were already but skeletons, the flesh having been cut off for food. The advance parties had been called in, and a barricade thrown up just beyond Champigny, where the advance guard occasionally exchanged shots with the Prussians a few

hundred yards away. Strong parties were at work erecting a series of earthworks on the hill.

The Franc-tireurs fell back from the position they had held the night before, and established themselves in a few houses, half roofless and shattered by shell, between Champigny and the river. Most of the houses in the long straggling street of Champigny bore marks of the conflict that had raged there before the Saxons had been driven out. Fortunately large stores of straw were found in the village, and these added much to the comfort of the troops, and the Franc-tireurs carried off a good many trusses to their quarters. Considerable amounts of other stores were also discovered there, and were thoroughly appreciated by the soldiers after their restricted rations.

They smoked their pipes that evening feeling thankful that as they lay behind Champigny there was no occasion for them to turn out on outpost duty.

"They say we shall fight again to-morrow for certain," René said.

"I think it likely we shall, René, but I should be inclined to bet ten to one, that it is the Prussians who will attack. They will have had forty-eight hours to mass their forces here, and will be fools if they don't take advantage of the opportunity we have been good enough to give them."

Day was just breaking when a sharp rattle of musketry broke out. The Franc-tireurs sprang to their feet.

"I should have won my bet, René, if you had taken it," Cuthbert exclaimed, as he slung his cartridge-box over his shoulder. "They are on us all along the line."

In less than a minute the rattle of musketry swelled into a continuous roar, above which came the boom of cannon and the explosion of shells in and around Champigny. Just as the corps was formed up, the heavy guns in the battery of St. Maur behind them opened fire, their deep roar sounding loud above the sharp explosion of the Prussian field-guns. As they advanced at the double towards the village, they could see a mob of panic-stricken men rushing from the front.

"The cowards, the vile cowards!" broke from the lips of the

men, and as some of the fugitives ran past them, they saluted them with yells and cries of contempt. Fully five thousand panic-stricken men were in wild flight, all rushing towards the bridge.

"If I were the commander of St. Maur," René said, "I would turn my guns upon these cowards. They are greater enemies to France than are the Prussians."

"Forward, my children," shouted the old colonel, "let us show them that there are still some Frenchmen ready to fight and die for their country."

The officer in command of St. Maur, and the general on the spot, were equal to the situation. Seventy or eighty field-pieces were massed round the redoubt, and a tremendous fire opened upon the Prussian batteries out on the plain, while a strong guard was sent down to the end of the bridge to bar the way to the mob of fugitives. The Germans had already obtained possession of the other end of the village when the Franc-tireurs entered it, but a small body of troops were standing firm. Some barricades thrown up across the street were manned, and from these and from every house they replied to the fire of the advancing Prussians. But the latter were still pushing on, wresting house by house from their hands, while a hail of shell from the German batteries fell upon the part of the village still held by the French. As the Franc-tireurs advanced the colonel ordered one company to wheel off on either hand to occupy the gardens behind the houses, and so prevent the enemy from taking the defenders in the rear. He himself pressed forward down the street to aid the soldiers at the barricades.

The sun had by this time risen, and its light, glinting on the Prussian helmets, showed strong bodies advancing down the slopes into the village. The woods on either hand were still held by the French, but the irregular fire showed that they were not in strong force. The din was terrific, three or four of the French mitrailleuses were adding to the roar, and sending streams of bullets into the advancing Germans. Nerved by the desperation of the situation, and fiercely angered at the

cowardice of their countrymen, the young artists of Cuthbert's company dashed forward, climbing walls, bursting through hedges, burning with eagerness to meet the foe.

The Prussian shells were bursting all round, bullets sang above and around them, the rattle of musketry grew louder and fiercer, but there was not a moment's check until François des Valles shouted to them to halt behind a low wall. The enemy were but a hundred yards away, pressing forward through the gardens.

"Steady men, steady," he shouted. "Lie down for a minute to get breath, then let every other man open fire, but don't throw away a shot. Let the others try and get some stones out of the wall and make loop-holes."

As yet they had not been seen by the Germans, and these were but fifty yards away in a thick line of skirmishers, when Des Valles gave the word, and the Franc-tireurs, rising on one knee and resting their muskets on the wall, opened a steady fire upon them. Many fell, and taken by surprise the rest ran back to a wall some thirty yards in rear and thence opened a heavy fire.

"Lie down, lads," Des Valles shouted, and all set to work to loop-hole the wall. "Don't show your heads above it, unless they advance again. All we have got to do is to hold our ground."

CHAPTER XIII.

By the aid of their sword-bayonets the Franc-tireurs soon pierced the wall, and lying at full length a yard apart, replied to the enemy's fire. Through the smoke they could just make out the upper line of the wall, and as the Prussians stood up to fire picked them off. Henri Vaucour crept along the line urging the men to fire slowly.

"They will advance presently," he said. "You can tell by the fire that they are getting thicker and thicker. We must check their rush."

Five minutes later there was a deep cheer and a crowd of

dark figures leaped over the wall. A flash of fire ran along the line of defenders, and then as fast as the Chassepots could be reloaded a rolling fire broke out. So heavy was it that before crossing a third of the intervening space the Germans wavered, hesitated, and then ran back to their shelter.

"Bravo! bravo!" Des Valles shouted, springing to his feet in his excitement, but as he spoke the enemy's fire broke out again, "Vive la France!" he shouted, and then fell heavily backwards.

His fall was noticed only by those nearest to him, for the Franc-tireurs were all busy. The rattle of musketry in the houses to their right showed that the French were still holding their own.

The Germans were apparently waiting for reinforcements before they attempted another rush against the position held by their invisible foes. They in turn loop-holed the wall they held and the musketry duel continued. Between the walls were two lines of low hedges, but the leaves had fallen and each party could see the loopholes through which their opponents fired. Henri Vaucour, who was now in command, ordered half the men to crawl back to the next wall some fifty paces in the rear and to loop-hole that.

"The next time they come," he said, "they will be too strong for us and we must fall back." The remainder of the men he placed near the two ends of the wall, so that as they fell back their comrades behind could open their fire and so cover their retreat. It was another quarter of an hour before the Germans made a move. Then a great body of men sprang over the wall. Forty rifles were discharged simultaneously, then Henri's whistle rang out. The men leaped to their feet, and at the top of their speed ran to the wall behind them, from which their comrades were pouring a stream of fire into the Germans. Several fell as they ran, the rest on gaining the wall threw themselves over, and as soon as they had reloaded joined its defenders. The Germans, however, were still pressing on, when they were taken in flank by a heavy fire from the back of the houses held by the French, and they got no farther than the