

CHAPTER V.

LE BOURGET. VICTIMS OF THE WAR. BROTHER
NÉTHELME. HIS DEATH AND OBSEQUIES.

"Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord."

As the army of the Loire had been defeated and dispersed, and the provincial armies were also defeated by the Prussians and forced to retreat, Paris could get no aid from them in that fatal war, entered into without preparation, and without any friendly power to assist.

The winter was exceptionally severe. The army of Paris had lost a number of its marine and other officers. Still, it was necessary that another attempt should be made against the besieging forces, who did not dare to advance, and whose policy it was, by waiting, to reduce the city by starvation.

General Trochu decided on the battle of Bourget, in the hope of measuring his infantry with that of the Prussians. Again the Prussians only opposed the French with artillery. The latter, unable to reach the Prussians, had to suffer a night of intense cold without shelter. The minister of war reported nine hundred frozen in the trenches.

In the engagements at Champigny, excepting the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the service of the wounded left much to be wished for; the most defective part was that of the organization of litter-carriers. The example of the Brothers struck every one. It was, thenceforward, deemed necessary to walk in their footsteps, and to form a well-

disciplined legion of stretcher-carriers, obeying the orders of their commanding officers, instead of acting, as hitherto, only on the impulse of the moment.

This body, being duly organized on the model of the Brothers, there was great activity in the ambulance service all of the 21st of December. The departure was fixed for four A. M.

The rendezvous was at six, at the barrier of La Villette. Thirty Brothers, half from the Mother-house, half from the St. Nicholas establishment, had set out the day before, at eight P. M., under the direction of Brother Clementis. They passed the night at St. Denis, in a house on the banks of the Seine; the next day, when the battle commenced, they directed their course to Courneuve.

The other Brothers appointed for the service, to the number of one hundred and fifty, assembled at five o'clock in the morning, on the Quai d'Orsay, near the Champ-de-Mars, with the cold six degrees below zero. At a sign from Brother Philippe, who in person directed the movement, they entered the ambulance wagons in order. Brother Philippe's able assistant attended them. At the barrier they were received by Inspector-General Wolf, and some other gentlemen of the ambulance service. They directed their course in silence towards the field of action, while shot and shell fell thick around. The presence of the Brothers cheered and encouraged the soldiers; they knew if they fell they would not be abandoned. Near them, on the same line, were devoted friends who would snatch them from death, carry them to a place of shelter, take care of them and cure them, if they could be cured, or would soothe and soften the anguish of their last moments.

The first detachment of the Brothers had advanced in

the direction of Bourget at nine o'clock in the morning. On either side of the Brother Director who led them was a Dominican father.

The cortége set out from Courneuve; the flag of the Geneva convention was carried in front by a Brother. By the direction of the officers, they went forward to take up the wounded; no soldiers accompanied the Brothers in their march. The firing had ceased on the side of the French, but they had only advanced a little way when a volley from the Prussian troops burst right in front of the ambulance party. The Brother who carried the first stretcher was struck; the ball passed under the left shoulder and penetrated the lung. The wounded man fell bleeding into the arms of his brethren, who placed him on the stretcher he had been carrying. They retraced their steps with their precious burden, passing through the ranks of the reserve corps; the soldiers were moved to tears at the sight of this new martyr to charity, whose name was J. B. Baffie, in religion, Brother N  thelme. Brother Clementis had him conveyed to the ambulance of the Legion of Honor, at St. Denis. The ball could not be extracted, and from the first examination of the wound the doctors lost all hope. When told his condition, he was calm and perfectly resigned to the will of God. As soon as Brother Philippe heard the news, he hastened to St. Denis to see him. Brother N  thelme was grateful for this visit and the deep interest taken in him; also for his removal to the Brothers' house at St. Denis, where he received all possible attention. Brother N  thelme was a professor of the first division in the well-known schools of St. Nicholas, Vaugirard street. There were thirty-eight of the Brothers of this establishment among the litter-carriers.

When the Paris Brothers heard that one of their number was mortally wounded, they thanked God for being permitted to have some little share in the sacrifices and expiations of the country.

Another Brother was wounded. As he staggered, another stretcher-carrier sprang towards him.

"It is nothing," he said; "go where you are more needed."

Some one asked his name.

"What matter is it?" he answered. "I am discharging a duty here which God is to reward, and not human praise."

At the moment when Brother N  thelme was struck, a bullet tore the robe of one of his companions: another pierced the flag; the international laws were not respected.

The Brothers were held up as models for the stretcher-carriers of the several administrations.

At Drancy, on the 21st of December, the director of a squad of stretcher-carriers learned that the Brothers were at the front line of the action. He took his men there, too, and ranged them beside the cannon which was placed in the battery.

Some of the men grumbled; they wanted to pick up the wounded, but not till after the battle, so that they might not risk their own lives. Their leader pointed to the Brothers, where they calmly and imperturbably awaited the opportunity of devoting themselves, without fear of shot or shell.

"How is our dear patient?" asked Dr. Ricord of the Brother Superintendent. The patient referred to was Brother N  thelme.

"Very ill, doctor—he is no better."

The doctor was touched, accustomed though he was to sorrow.

"Oh, I regret it! I regret it," he exclaimed; "one like him

to be cut off in his prime! So good, so talented, so useful! Oh, we can't spare him. We have need of him; France needs him; you require him." So speaking, he impatiently wiped the tears from his eyes.

"We love him too," said Brother Assistant, gently touching the doctor's arm; "we shall miss him; but we dare not regret him. His life has been sacrificed for the good of others; his death will usher him into endless joys. Blessed youth! glorious will be his reward."

Brother Assistant reverently raised his eyes, and on his face, framed as with an aureola by his snowy hair, rested a look of unutterable peace.

The doctor, standing before him, bowed his head. He felt he was in the presence of one whose holiness raised him infinitely above him.

A Brother came in, and spoke to Brother Assistant about the earnest desire of some of the Brothers to go to the battle-field as stretcher-carriers.

"The fate of Brother N  thelme does not damp their ardor," observed the doctor.

"No," returned the Brother; "the mortal wound of Brother N  thelme increases their enthusiasm. They are more eager than ever to go to the battle-field to take up the wounded and suffer for God and their country. They would willingly give their lives to save one poor soldier from death."

"How admirable you all are!" exclaimed the doctor. "Tell Brother Philippe, and all your Brothers, that we thank you in our own name and in the name of France."

Doctor Ricord afterwards repeatedly declared that the Brothers were men who did good for its own sake, regardless of fame; that they knew how to carry true fraternity and love of country even to heroism.

During the three days which elapsed from the 21st till the 24th of December, Brother Néhelme, though suffering intensely, never for a moment lost his serenity of soul nor his presence of mind. No pain could cool the ardor of his piety; no complaint, no word of regret, escaped his lips.

Whilst his Brothers exhorted him to unite his sufferings with those of his Divine Master, his glance rested on the crucifix placed before him; then he raised to heaven those eyes which burned with desire to see God.

Some hours before his death, he was seized with delirium, during which he spoke aloud to his pupils, fancying they were around him, exhorting them to prepare themselves well for the visit to the Child Jesus.

When he had breathed his last, a Brother closed his eyes. His face was so life-like that it was hard to believe him dead. Life had ceased almost unperceived. The beauty of holiness illumined his face. His was the death of the just, spoken of in Holy Writ.

After the first service in the church of St. Denis, Brother Néhelme's body was conveyed to Paris, to the St. Nicholas establishment, where it remained a whole day exposed on a catafalque.

On the morning of the 26th, a vast concourse of people, of all classes, with grave, collected mien, assembled in Vaugirard street, and in front of the St. Nicholas establishment. In that vast multitude were seen children, sad and silent, wondering lookers-on from among the common people, national guardsmen drawn from the ramparts, mobile guards, poor women clad in mourning, doubtless remembering how their children were loved and cared for in that house; priests, religious of various Orders: all crowding into the great court-yard, each one bowing down before a modest coffin,

and throwing some drops of holy water upon it as they passed along.

Around the coffin, on which were laid the black robe of the pious victim, and the badge of the red cross, stood the principal dignitaries of the Institute, the directors, and a great number of Brothers, in prayer.

All along the route to the church of St. Sulpice, the multitude continued to increase. The funeral procession was most imposing.

Brother Philippe and assistants were the chief mourners. A most touching feature in the long procession was the appearance of the children of the St. Nicholas schools, who walked with edifying recollection after the remains of one of their most beloved teachers, the heroic young martyr of charity. It were too long to enumerate here all the noble and official personages who assisted at the last solemn rites, and joined in paying the final tribute to the memory of this brave and gentle Christian Brother.

The Little Martyrs of St. Nicholas.

After a siege of over three months, the Prussians commenced bombarding the French forts on the 30th of December, and the week following, those of Paris. A rain of projectiles of enormous weight, used for the first time in the history of sieges, was thrown on that part of Paris which extends from the Invalides to the Museum. The firing continued day and night, without intermission, and with such fury that, on the night of the 8th and 9th of January, in the part of the city situated in the vicinity of the Luxembourg, a shell fell about every two minutes. The hospitals, though crowded with wounded, schools, museums and libraries, prisons, churches, and private houses, were struck; some victims were struck

in the streets, others in bed; children in their mothers' arms were often killed outright. The Brother Director of the St. Nicholas establishment, learning that the bombardment had commenced on the eastern side, wrote to all the parents, requesting such as feared for their children's welfare to take them away. Two hundred were removed on the 8th, but the balance preferred the safety of the establishment to any home protection. Provisions becoming very scarce in the city, great numbers were dying of hunger; the pupils of St. Nicholas's school had to submit, like every one else, to the fixed share of food. However, the careful foresight of the Brothers, and the donations of some benefactors, preserved the children from actual want. Thus it was that many parents left their children with the Brothers, that they might escape, if not the horrors of the bombardment, at least the torments of cold and hunger.

The Brother Director took every possible precaution against accidents. The windows were carefully stuffed with mattresses; pails of water were placed in every apartment of the house, in case of fire.

During the night of the 9th and 10th, the roar of the bombardment was terrible around the Brothers' establishment. The pupils, to the number of one thousand, were being removed from the dormitories to the cellars for safety. A few moments more, and all would have been saved. Suddenly, a shell burst through the roof, tearing through three floors of the house. In the first dormitory that shell caused such havoc, that the news next day drew a cry of horror and dismay from all Paris. Four pupils were killed, several were wounded, and one died in a few hours, after having received the last sacraments, with the piety and resignation of a little martyr. Another of the wounded children died of the effects

of his injuries on the 14th of January. On the 11th of January, at nine o'clock, the obsequies of the victims of St. Nicholas's school were celebrated in the church of Notre Dame-des-Champs. They were attended by a great crowd of rich and poor, all of whom pressed eagerly around the little coffins. Tears were in every eye.

M. Jules Favre, vice-president of the Provisional Government, arrived during the service. Abbé Duchesne, pastor of the parish, delivered a touching discourse. The final absolution being pronounced and the funeral procession formed, M. Jules Favre placed himself in front of the hearse, behind the officiating priest, who walked between two lines formed on either side by the pupils of St. Nicholas's school, and a numerous detachment of the 83d battalion of the National Guards, and led the way to the cemetery of Montparnasse.

In the cemetery, M. Jules Favre spoke a few impressive words, after which M. Leroy, in the name of all present, thanked the Minister for his presence in the cemetery to which the municipality had so lately conveyed the mortal remains of Brother N  thelme, one of the teachers of the institution whose pupils had been so cruelly struck. He reminded his hearers of the courage and manly virtues which make the great citizen, and which can alone give glory and security to France in the future.