

## ON THE HILL SIDE.

### HOW THE FRENCH SOLDIER DEALS WITH SPIES.

(By WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON, in  
the "Westminster Gazette.")

A soldier comes out from behind a pine tree, with rifle and fixed bayonet.

"Ou allez-vous" he says, stepping before me, and dropping his bayonet point a little towards me.

"Je vais me promener," I reply, smiling, and anticipate his next demand by pulling out my case, and displaying my special permit, also various other papers and an officially stamped photograph, which proves my identification with the name upon the special permit.

"Monsieur, permit me," says the soldier suddenly, in very fair English. "Monsieur is Engleesh? I shake you by ze hand with ver' great pleasure." We "shake" with enormous empressement, and I compliment him upon his English.

He smiles, gratified, and disclaims with great modesty. He beckons me back among the trees. "One comes!" he says. "Ssh! Ze woods here have been many times set in flames. We have suspect these be done with intention."

"How? Why?" I ask, whispering to his whisper. "Ze forts," he says softly, staring keenly down the narrow path among the trees. "Ze trees have act as a mask. We have suspect zat spies have set ze lights. We watch, moonch. . . . One comes ver' near. Hark! You stay here when I go challenge."

"Right!" I whisper.

"You see him," he asks, a moment later. "Zere by ze coulver" . . . ssst.

He ceased his whisper abruptly, and we both bent forward together. A hundred yards down the narrow path, among the pines, a man, in a workman's blue blouse, is standing, looking quietly in every direction.

Suddenly he takes a couple of steps in among the trees, and for a few moments I cannot see him; but the soldier turns to me and signs for absolute silence, laying his forefinger on his lips, his eyes shining.

He begins to tiptoe down among the trees, keeping a few paces away from the path. I am following. As we go down, a step at a time, noiselessly on the pine-needles, there sounds a very soft whistle below, which is answered immediately from somewhere to the left, and further down the slope of the pine-covered hill.

We take a few more steps, in utter silence. Then pause and listen. The soldier makes a queer excited gesture, throwing up his left hand, to make sure that I do not move. I hear the sound now, a soft and cautious scraping of earth.

The sentry begins to go forward again, and suddenly we open out a vista, long and narrow, among the trees. Seeming far away, perhaps two hundred, perhaps two hundred and fifty yards downhill, a figure is lying on its stomach, its face close to the earth. Near to the head there is what appears, at the distance, to be a small box.

"Arrre!" mutters the soldier, under his breath, and slips down on to his face, behind a big pine, waving frantically with one hand to his rear for me to do likewise.

The sound of something scraping softly at the earth continues. It is now on our right front, and, suddenly, I see the man we have already seen. He is about 40 yards away, kneeling down. He is lifting something which looks like a narrow slab of stone. He is stooping now into some cavity which he has just laid open. He takes a pair of wire-cutters from his pocket, and I hear the snick, distinctly, as he cuts through something in the cavity.

The sound catches the hearing of the soldier, and he glances to his right swiftly. I hear the half-hissed "Arrre!" again, as he sees the second man. Then, suddenly, he pushes his rifle forward, and there comes a slight snicking sound.

Far down the hill side, at the end of the narrow vista among the trees, the second man has knelt up suddenly. So utter is the silence that I can hear his plainly as he coughs. He begins to haul on something, and I realise suddenly the meaning of the whole incident that I am watching. The two men have located the underground private telephone wire, going up to the — Fort. They have been tapping it for any news they might pick up, and now they are removing a couple of hundred metres of wire bodily; after which, no doubt, they will replace the slabs which roof in the underground channel, and smooth back the earth and pine-needles over the two disturbed places.

The soldier is methodical. He takes the distant man first. Kneeling there behind him, I watch, with a growing thrill and tension of tragedy and sickness, his sunburnt cheek cuddle against the stock of his rifle. Then, very slowly it seems to me, in that quite dreadful moment, his stubby, cigarette-stained forefinger crooks back gently on the trigger. It is horrible to kneel there behind him, and realise that the slowly crooking of that cigarette-stained finger is literally the finger of Death to the man down the long vista of trees.

"Cr-rack!" comes the sharp, snapping bang of the weapon, and the man down the vista of trees gives a queer little jump, and then turns right round, quickly, and looks behind him. And, thus looking, and seeming unaware that he is the person who has been shot, his heart stops, and he rolls over quite easily and gently, on his side—a merciful enough death, as these violent deaths go.

And then, as I stare, the rifle goes cr-rack again, and I jump; for I am still looking at the silent figure down the vista of trees.

But the soldier has been attending to his business, and has snapped off a second shot (less well aimed than the first, because of the sudden need for haste), at the nearer man for the man had started to bolt. And because the shot was hastily aimed the second death is as unmerciful as the first was merciful.

An examination of both bodies shows that the men are German spies, in possession of "cyphered" information that would, no doubt, prove very helpful to our enemies. They are also armed, each with Mauser automatic pistols.