

PRISONERS OF WAR

SILENCE reigned in the forest save for the faint whisper of the snow as it fell upon the trees. It had been falling since midday in fine flakes, which coated the branches with a film of powdery snow and covered the dead leaves of the undergrowth with a delicate mantle of silver; it spread a great fleecy white carpet over the roads and intensified the boundless silence of this vast expanse of trees.

Before the door of a forester's hut a girl with bare arms was cutting wood on a stone with an axe. She was tall, slim and strongly built, the very picture of a forester's daughter or wife.

A voice from inside shouted:

'We're all alone this evening, Berthine; better come in, it's getting dark and there'll likely be Prussians and wolves prowling round.'

The girl replied as she went on splitting a log with powerful strokes, her breast lifting with every movement of her upraised arms:

'I've just finished, Mother; I'm all right, don't get the wind up; it's still light.'

She carried in her faggots and logs and stacked them round the fireplace, came out again and closed the huge solid oak shutters; finally, going in again, she shot the heavy bolts of the door.

Her mother was spinning by the fire, a wrinkled old woman, grown nervous in her old age.

'I don't like it', she said, 'when your father's out. Two women ain't no good.'

The girl replied:

'Oh! I'm quite capable of killing a wolf, or a Prussian, as far as that goes,' and she glanced at a big revolver hanging up above the fireplace.

Her husband had been called up for the army in the early days of the Prussian invasion and the two women had been left alone with the father, the old forest warden, Nicolas Pichon, usually called

Spindleshanks, who had stubbornly refused to leave his house and move into the town.

The nearest town was Rethel, once a walled fortress perched on a rock. They were patriotic Frenchmen there and the shopkeepers had decided to resist the invaders, to shut the gates and stand a siege in accordance with the traditions of the place. Twice already, in the reigns of Henri IV and Louis XIV, the citizens had won fame by their heroic defence. Damn it all! they would do the same again or see the town burnt over their heads!

So they had acquired some artillery and rifles, equipped a volunteer force, formed battalions and companies, and they used to drill every day on the barrack square. Everyone, bakers, grocers, butchers, notaries, lawyers, carpenters, booksellers, even chemists took it in turns at fixed times to parade under the command of M. Lavigne, once an N.C.O. of dragoons, now a haberdasher, having married the daughter and inherited the business of M. Ravaudan, Senior.

He had assumed the rank of Town Commandant and, as every man of military age had gone, he had enrolled all the rest, who were now training to defend themselves. Those who were fat always moved about the town at the double to get down their weight and improve their wind; those who were weaklings carried heavy loads to develop their muscles.

And they waited for the Prussians. But the Prussians did not appear. They were not far away, however. Twice already their patrols had pushed through the forest as far as the forester's hut, where Nicolas Pichon, alias Spindleshanks, lived.

The old warden, who could run like a fox, had gone to warn the town. The guns were laid but the enemy never appeared.

Spindleshanks' hut was used as a forward observation post in the forest of Aveline. The forester went in twice a week to get provisions and kept the shopkeepers in the town informed of what was going on outside.

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That day he had gone off with the news that a small German

infantry detachment had stopped at his house two days before at about two o'clock in the afternoon, moving on almost immediately. The N.C.O. in charge spoke French.

When the old man went off like this, he always took with him his two dogs, two great bull-dogs with jowls as powerful as a lion's, for fear of the wolves which were beginning to get dangerous, and he left the two women behind, warning them to barricade themselves in the house at nightfall.

The girl did not know what fear was 'but the old woman was in a continual state of nerves and kept on repeating:

'I'm sure something's goin' to happen – you see if it don't.'

That evening she was even more jumpy than usual.

'D'you know what time your Dad'll be back?' she said.

'Oh! not before eleven anyway. When he has dinner with the Major, he's always late home.'

She was hanging up the pot over the fire, when suddenly she stopped, listening to a faint sound which came down the chimney.

She whispered:

'There's people in the wood coming this way, seven or eight of 'em at least.'

Her mother stopped her spinning-wheel in a panic and stammered:

'Oh God! and Dad's not here!'

She hadn't finished speaking when a violent banging made the door shake.

As the women remained silent, a loud guttural voice shouted:

'Oben de toor!'

Then after a moment's pause the same voice went on:

'Oben de toor or I'll pash it in!'

Berthine slipped the big revolver over the chimney-piece into the pocket of her skirt and, putting her ear close to the door, she asked: 'Who are you?'

The voice replied:

'We're the patrol that was here a day or two back.'

The girl answered:

'What do you want?'

'I've been lost in the forest since this morning with my batrol. Oben de toor or I'll pash it in.'

The girl had no choice; she quickly slid back the ponderous bolt and opening the heavy door she saw in the dim half-light from the snow six men, six Prussian soldiers, the same ones that had been there before. She spoke in a determined tone of voice:

'What do you want here at this time of night?'

The N.C.O. repeated in his guttural French:

'I'm lost, hopelessly lost; I've had noting to eat since preakfast, no more have my men.'

Berthine replied:

'I'm here all alone with Mother this evening.'

The soldier, who seemed a good sort, went on:

'That doesn't matter; I shan't to you any harm but you must give us something to eat. We're starving and dead peat.'

The girl stood back:

'Come in,' she said.

They came into the house, plastered with snow; the soft film of powdery snow on their helmets made them look like meringues, and they were obviously tired, at the end of their tether, in fact.

The girl pointed to the wooden benches on both sides of the big table:

'Sit down,' she said. 'I'll make you some stew; you do look done in.'

And she bolted the door again.

She put some more water in the pot and added another lump of butter and some potatoes and, unhooking a side of bacon that was hanging in the chimney, she cut off half of it and threw it into the soup.

The six soldiers followed her every movement with the hungry eyes of starving men. They had stacked their rifles and helmets in one corner and waited like well-behaved children on their benches in a school.

The old woman had gone back to her spinning with frequent timid glances at the invaders. The only sounds were the gentle

purring of the spinning-wheel, the crackling of the fire and the bubbling of the boiling water.

Suddenly a strange noise made everybody start, a sort of throaty snuffling at the bottom of the door, the loud hoarse breathing of some animal.

The German N.C.O. had leapt towards the rifles. The girl stopped him with a gesture, smiling:

'Wolves!' she said. 'They're like you, they prowl about and they're hungry!'

The man was incredulous and wanted to see for himself, and, as soon as the door was opened, there were two great grey forms disappearing at a fast loping trot. He went back to his seat, murmuring:

'Well, I wouldn't have believed it!'

And he waited for the stew to be ready.

They ate ravenously, their mouths gaping from ear to ear so as to admit the maximum amount of food; their eyes opened wide in time with their jaws and a noise like the gurgling of water in a gutter-pipe issued from their throats as they guzzled.

In silence the two women watched the rapid movement of the full red beards, into which the potatoes seemed to be sucked as the hirsute apertures opened and closed.

As they were thirsty, the girl went down into the cellar to draw them some cider. She was some time down there; it was a small vaulted cellar which during the Revolution had been used as a prison and as a hiding place, too, it was said. Access was by a narrow winding stair, closed by a trap-door at one end of the kitchen.

When Berthine returned, she was chuckling quietly to herself as if at some private joke, as she handed the jug of cider to the Germans. Then she ate her own supper with her mother at the other end of the kitchen.

The soldiers had finished their food and were all beginning to doze round the table. From time to time a head would fall with a thud on to the table and its owner would wake with a start and sit up.

Berthine said to the N.C.O.:

'You can lie down in front of the fire; there's heaps of room for all the lot of you, Lord knows. Mother and I are going up to our room.'

And the two women went upstairs. The Germans heard them lock their door and walk about for a bit; afterwards there was silence.

The Prussians lay down on the stone floor with their feet to the fire and their heads resting on their rolled-up greatcoats. Soon all six were snoring in impressive concert in six different keys from treble to bass.



They must have been asleep for some time, when a shot rang out, so loud that one would have said it had been fired quite close to the walls of the house. The soldiers sprang up. But two more shots were heard, followed by three others.

The door of the first floor room burst open and the forester's daughter appeared barefooted, in her chemise and petticoat, holding a candle, with an air of consternation. She stammered:

'The French are here – two hundred of 'em at least! If they find you, they'll burn down the house. Get down into the cellar as fast as you can and keep quiet. If you make a sound, we're lost.'

The N.C.O., thoroughly frightened, murmured:

'Right ho! Right ho! Where's the way town?'

The girl hurriedly lifted the small square trap-door and the six men went down the narrow winding stair and disappeared into the bowels of the earth, going backwards in order to feel each step with their feet.

But, when the spike of the last helmet had gone, Berthine dropped the heavy oak trap-door, which was thick as a wall and tough as steel, held in place by hinges and a regular prison cell lock, and, as she gave a double turn to the key, she began to laugh quietly to herself, so pleased that she wanted to indulge in a wild dance of joy above the heads of her prisoners.

They didn't make a sound, enclosed as it were in a solid stone box, with only an iron-barred ventilation hole.

Berthine immediately lit the fire again and put on the pot to make some more soup, murmuring:

'Dad'll be tired to-night.'

Then she sat down and waited.

The regular tick of the pendulum of the grandfather clock was the only sound in the stillness.

From time to time the girl glanced at the clock impatiently, as if to say:

'Time's going mortal slow.'

But soon she thought she heard the murmur of voices under foot. Low faint whispering came to her through the vaulted stone roof of the cellar. The Prussians were beginning to guess her trick and soon the N.C.O. came up the narrow stair and hammered on the trap-door with his fist. Once more he shouted:

'Oben de toor!'

She went over to the opening in the floor and said, imitating his German accent:

'What to you want?'

'Oben de toor.'

'Not on your life!'

The man lost his temper:

'Oben or I'll pash in the door!'

She began to laugh:

'Bash away, lad, bash away!'

He began to batter at the oak trap over his head with his rifle butt. But it would have stood up to the blows of a battering ram.

The forester's daughter heard him go down again, and presently the soldiers came up one after the other to try their strength and examine the fastening. But, no doubt, realizing that their efforts were in vain, they all went down again into the cellar and began talking among themselves.

After listening for a time the girl went and opened the outside door and strained her ears for any sound in the darkness.

At last she heard a bark in the distance. Immediately she gave a hunter's whistle and almost at once two huge dogs emerged from the darkness and gambolled round her. She seized them by the

scruff of the neck and held them quiet. Then she shouted as loud as she could:

'Hullo! Dad!'

A voice, still some distance away, answered:

'Hullo! Berthine!'

She waited a minute or two and called again:

'Hullo! Dad!'

The voice, now quite near, replied:

'Hullo! Berthine!'

The girl went on:

'Don't pass in front of the ventilation hole; the cellar's full of Prussians.'

Suddenly the tall figure of a man was silhouetted between two tree-trunks on the left, standing still. He asked anxiously:

'Prussians in the cellar? What on earth are they up to there?'

The girl began to laugh again:

'They're yesterday's lot. They got lost in the forest. I put 'em to cool their heels in the cellar.'

And she told her story, how she had scared them with revolver shots and shut them up in the cellar.

The old man, practical as always, asked:

'Well, what d'you want me to do with 'em now?'

She replied:

'Go and fetch M. Lavigne with his men. He can take 'em prisoner. He'll be as pleased as Punch!'

And old Pichon answered with a smile:

'You bet he will.'

His daughter went on:

'Here's your soup; eat it up quick and get a move on.'

The old warden sat down and began to eat his soup after putting down on the floor two full plates for his dogs.

The Prussians, hearing voices, kept quiet.

A quarter of an hour later Spindleshanks set off again. And Berthine waited, her head in her hands.

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The prisoners were beginning to move about again. They shouted

and called, banging angrily on the unyielding trap-door with their rifle butts. Next they started firing out of the ventilation hole, hoping no doubt to attract the attention of any German patrol in the neighbourhood.

The forester's daughter didn't stir; but all this noise irritated her and got on her nerves. A wave of cold anger came over her; she could have murdered the lot of them, the blighters, just to make them keep quiet!

Finally, with growing impatience, she kept her eyes on the clock, counting the minutes.

Her father had been gone an hour and a half; he must have reached the town by now. She imagined him telling his story to M. Lavigne, who went pale with excitement and rang for his servant to bring his uniform and his arms. She seemed to hear the drummer hurrying along the streets. Frightened heads were thrust out of the windows. Now the citizen-soldiers were coming out of their houses, hardly dressed, out of breath, fastening their belts, making their way at the double to the Major's house.

Soon the detachment, with Spindleshanks at their head, would march off in the darkness through the snow in the direction of the forest. She looked at the clock:

'They should be here in an hour.'

Nervous impatience was getting the better of her. Every minute seemed an hour.

The time would never pass!

At last the hands of the clock pointed to the hour she had fixed in her mind for their arrival. And she opened the door again to listen. She saw a dim figure walking carefully. She cried out in terror. It was her father.

He said:

'They've sent me on to make sure nothing's changed.'

'No, nothing.'

Thereupon he gave a long shrill whistle in the darkness. And soon a dark mass became visible, moving slowly among the trees; it was the reconnoitring section of ten men.

Spindleshanks kept repeating:

'Don't go in front of the ventilation hole.'

And the early arrivals pointed out the dangerous spot to the late comers.

At last the main body appeared, two hundred men in all with two hundred cartridges apiece.

M. Lavigne, fussing about excitedly, posted them so as to surround the house completely, leaving a broad space unoccupied in front of the little dark hole on ground level which admitted air to the cellar.

After that he went into the house to obtain details of the strength and attitude of the enemy, who were now so quiet that they might have disappeared and melted into thin air through the ventilation hole.

M. Lavigne stamped on the trap-door and shouted:

'The Prussian Officer in command!'

No answer from the German.

'The Prussian Officer in command!'

But it was no good. For twenty minutes he called on this officer, who remained dumb, to surrender with arms and equipment, promising him and his men their lives and the honours of war. But he could elicit no sign either of consent or hostile intentions. The situation was getting awkward.

The citizen soldiers were stamping their feet in the snow, swinging their arms like cab-drivers to keep warm, and they could not take their eyes off the ventilation hole, conscious of an increasing childish desire to pass in front of it.

At last one of them took a chance, a man called Potdevin who was very fast. He took a run and dashed across like a stag. His venture was successful. The prisoners gave no sign of life.

A voice shouted:

'I don't believe there's anybody there!'

And another soldier bolted across the empty space in front of the dangerous aperture. So it became quite a game. Every minute someone sped across from one side to the other like children playing Prisoners' Base, throwing up clouds of snow as he ran at full speed. To keep warm they had started big fires of dead wood which lit up

the running figure of each National Guard as he rapidly transferred himself from the party on the right to that on the left.

Somebody shouted:

'Your turn, Maloison!'

Maloison was a portly baker, the size of whose stomach was a permanent source of jokes to his friends.

He hesitated. They taunted him. Finally he made up his mind and went off at a slow dignified double, being short of breath, his great belly wobbling from side to side.

The whole company were convulsed with laughter. They encouraged him with shouts:

'Well done, Maloison!'

He had got about two-thirds of the way across when there was a flash of swift red flame from the ventilation hole; a shot rang out and the huge baker pitched forward on his nose with a scream of terror.



No one went to his assistance. Presently they saw him dragging himself along in the snow on all fours and when he got across the dangerous area he fainted.

He had got a bullet high up in the fat part of the thigh.

After the first shock of surprise and terror they began to laugh over the incident.

But Major Lavigne appeared at the door of the forester's hut. He had at last decided on his plan of campaign. He gave his orders in ringing tones:

'Planchut and his plumber's mates this way!'

Three men stepped forward.

'Take down the gutter-pipes from the house!'

In a quarter of an hour they had brought twenty yards of piping to the Major.

Next, with infinite precautions, he had a small hole made in the edge of the trap-door, and after rigging up a pipe-line from the pump to this aperture he announced with the air of a man supremely pleased with himself:

'Now we'll stand our friends the Germans a little drink!'

A wild cheer expressed everyone's admiration of this happy idea, followed by shouts of joy and roars of laughter. The Major organized working parties to relieve each other every five minutes and at last gave the order:

'Pump away!'

When the iron pump-handle had begun to work, a gurgle was heard inside the pipes and soon water began to fall into the cellar, from step to step, splashing like a miniature waterfall in a goldfish pond. They waited.

An hour passed, then two, then three.

The Major stamped up and down the kitchen in a state of feverish excitement, putting his ear to the floor from time to time in an attempt to guess what the enemy were doing, wondering if they were going to surrender.

At last they began to move about. They could be heard shifting the barrels, talking and splashing about.

Finally about eight o'clock in the morning a guttural voice was heard from the ventilation hole:

'I want to speak to the French Officer in command.'

Lavigne answered from the window, being careful not to put his head too far out.

'Do you surrender?'

'Yes, I surrender.'

'Pass out your rifles.'

Without a moment's delay a rifle was pushed out of the hole, followed by a second and a third, till they were all there lying in the snow.

And the same voice said:

'That's the lot; make haste; I'm trowied.'

The Major gave the order:

'Stop pumping!'

The pump-handle dropped motionless. After packing the kitchen with men, with rifles at the ready, he gingerly raised the oak trap-door.

Four heads appeared, soaked, four fair heads with tow-coloured

hair, and they saw the six Germans climb out one after the other, shivering, dripping, terrified.

They were seized and bound, and at once, fearing a possible surprise attack, the Frenchmen started back in two parties, one escorting the prisoners, the other carrying Maloison on a mattress supported on poles.

M. Lavigne was awarded a decoration for capturing a German patrol and the portly baker got the Military Medal for a wound received in action.