



BERTHINE'S PRISONERS

(Continued)

It would have resisted the assault of a catapult. The forest-girl heard him go down and the soldiers came up the ladder one by one to examine the lock, but decided that it would be useless to attempt to break it. Then they returned and talked the matter over among themselves.

The young woman listened, but hearing nothing, went outside to await her father. A distant barking reached her ears. She whistled like a huntsman, and two enormous dogs sprang out of the shadows and played at her feet. She seized them, by the collar to prevent them from running away, and called aloud, "Ohe, papa!"

A voice from the forest answered, "Ohe, Berthine!"

She waited a little while and again called out, "Ohe, papa!—and the response came again, "Ohe, Berthine."

Then she came to him in a voice of warning, "Don't pass too near the air-hole! There are Prussians in the cellar." Presently the tall figure of the forester was visible on the left, standing out plainly against the trunks of the trees.

He asked with anxiety, "Prussians in the cellar? What do you mean?"

The young woman laughed joyously. "They are the same who passed yesterday. They were lost in the forest, and I have put them in the cellar to cool."

She proceeded to relate the story of the capture—how she had frightened them by the shots from the revolver, and had induced them to hide in the cellar which was now their prison.

The old father, still uneasy, asked—"And what do you expect me to do at this hour?"

"Go and bring Monsieur Lavigne and his soldiers. He will be so delighted!"

The father smiled. "Yes, he will be pleased enough."

Berthine brought his supper, and bade him eat and then depart to the village. The old guard seated himself and began his supper, first filling two bowls for the dogs. The Prussians, hearing voices, remained silent. In a quarter of an hour, the old man had gone, and Berthine sat down again to await him.

The Prussians were becoming restless. They called, they shouted, and beat the door with terrific blows with the ends of their muskets. Then they began firing—shot after shot through the air-hole, hoping to attract some passing squad or scouts.

Berthine did not move, but the noise annoyed and irritated her. A tempest of rage awakened in her; she would like to have murdered them, the rascals!—if only to make them keep silent. As her impatience increased, she began watching the clock, to count the minutes. Her father had been gone an hour and a half. He had reached the village. She fancied

that she could see him as he told the story to Monsieur Lavigne, who grew pale with emotion and hastily summoned the maid to bring his uniform and arms. She seemed to hear the drummer running through the streets. She saw the alarmed faces appear at the windows, and then the soldier-citizens hurrying forth, half-clad, from their homes, breathless, buckling their belts, and keeping their military step, while they hastened to the house of the commandant.

Then the troop, with the old guard Pinchon at the head, marched forth in the night, amid the snow, into the forest. Berthine still watched the clock.

"They will be here in an hour."

A nervous impatience was overwhelming her. The minutes appeared interminable. "How terribly long they were!"

At last the time which she had fixed for them to appear with her father had arrived. She opened the door and listened. A shadow marched cautiously toward her. She gave a cry of joy. It was her father.

"They have sent me to see if there is any change."

"No, father."

He disappeared again into the darkness of the forest and gave a shrill whistle, which echoed back and forth among the great branches. Something brown came from under the trees slowly. It was the advance-guard composed of ten men. The forester warned them to beware of the air-hole. Each squad in turn warned those who followed, until the entire troop of 200 men appeared, carrying 200 guns. Monsieur Lavigne, agitated and trembling, disposed of his men in a fashion to entirely surround the house, leaving a large space in front of the most formidable air-hole, on a level with the ground. Then he went inside the house to discover the strength and attitude of the enemy, who had suddenly become so silent, that one might believe they had vanished through the air-hole.

Monsieur Lavigne stamped upon the trap-door and called out, "Monsieur l'officier Prussien!"

The German did not reply. The commandant repeated, "Monsieur l'officier Prussien!"—but he called in vain.

For twenty minutes he summoned these silent men to give themselves up, with their arms, promising them their lives and all military honors for the officer and his men. But he received no sign either of consent or of hostility. The situation was becoming difficult. The citizen-soldiers were marching over the snowy ground, back and forth, beating their arms across their shoulders like coachmen, in order to keep warm. They watched the air-hole, with an increasing and inexplicable desire to pass near it. One or two did pass perilously near it. One very agile fellow made a leap and sprang past the dangerous spot.

There was no result. The prisoners acted like dead men. They made absolutely no movement. A voice cried out, "There is no one there." Then another soldier ventured to pass the hole, and then another, until it became a sort of play for them. They made the snow fly from their heels as they ran, shaking their feet. They had built a great fire out of the dead wood from the forest, and when running they were in the full rays of the light. Some one called to the fat baker, whose figure was the ridicule of the village, "Now you try it, Malverson."

He hesitated, and they tormented him until he, too, set out to make the dash past the air-hole of the cellar, with a regular gymnastic step, his large body shaking.

The whole detachment laughed until tears came and all cried "Bravo, bravo." He had finished two-thirds of his journey, when a long flame shot out of the air-hole, red and blinding. There was a deafening sound, and the enormous baker fell with a howl, flat on his nose. No one ran to his assistance, and he managed to drag himself in the snow, groaning, until he escaped the danger line, when he fainted. A ball had entered the calf of his leg.

After the first shock and surprise they all laughed again; but the commandant approached from the door of the forester's hut, to order a new plan of attack. He shouted in a shrill voice for the plumber and his workmen.

Three men approached. "Take down the gutter-pipe from the house."

In a quarter of an hour they had taken down twenty metres of pipe from the house, and had inserted it, with many precautions against surprise, into a narrow opening of the air-hole, then they conducted the water from the hydrant through the pipe, and Monsieur Lavigne announced that he was going to offer the Prussians a drink of water.

A wild cry of admiration greeted the commandant, followed by peals of laughter. The Frenchmen pumped in the water, turn by turn. The iron wheel was set in motion, and presently there was a sound of water flowing and falling in cascades into the cellar. Several hours passed, the commandant marching up and down, growing very impatient, pressing his ear to the trap-door to discover what the prisoners were doing down below, and asking from time to time if they were ready to surrender.

At last there was a murmur from the enemy, followed by a shaking of the barricade, and toward eight o'clock a voice was heard coming through the aperture, an unmistakable German voice speaking with a strong German accent.

"I would like to say something to the commanding officer."

Lavigne answered from the window, without going too near, "Do you surrender?"

"I surrender."

"Then pass the guns outside."

One gun was passed through the hole, then another, each falling in the snow, until all six were delivered. Then the same voice said, "I have no more. Hurry! We are drowning."

The commandant ordered the pumps to be stopped, and filling the kitchen with soldiers, armed from head to foot, he slowly and carefully raised the trap-door. Four damp heads appeared, four blond, dripping heads, and four pale faces; then two more, until the six shivering Germans stood before them, with wet uniforms, chattering teeth, and subdued mien.

They were seized and handcuffed, and fearing a surprise, they set out, marching double-quick in two squads, one in charge of the prisoners and the other carrying the wounded baker on a mattress.

They entered the village of Berthel, triumphant. Monsieur Lavigne was decorated for having captured an advance-guard of the Prussians; the fat baker was presented with a medal for wounds received before the enemy; and Berthine, the forester's daughter, received—nothing!

Careers of Eminent Men.

George Washington was commander-in-chief of the army at the age of 43; Cromwell entered upon his remarkable career at 29; Napoleon conquered Italy before he was 30; Gladstone was a member of Parliament at 23; Macaulay began his literary career at 20; Columbus started out on his voyage of discovery at 36; Frederick the Great began the thirty years' war at the age of 30; and Blackstone had finished his commentaries before he was 35.

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