

The People's Press.

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PUBLISHERS AND PROPRIETORS.

TERMS—CASH IN ADVANCE.
One copy, one year, \$2 00
" " six months, 1 00
" " three months, 75

Select Miscellany.

The Condemned Sentinel.

BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

A cold, stormy night, in the month of March, 1807, Marshal Lefebvre, with twenty-seven thousand French troops, had invested Dantzic, which city was garrisoned by seventeen thousand Russian and Prussian soldiers; and these, together with twenty or thirty thousand well armed citizens, presented nearly double the force which could be brought to the assault. So was needed of the most vigilant and brave part of the sentinels, for a desperate sortie from the garrison, made unawares, might have proved calamitous.

At midnight Jerome Dubois was placed upon one of the most important posts in the advance line of pickets, it being upon a narrow strip of land raised above the marshy flat, called the peninsula of Noirmur. For more than an hour he paced his lonesome beat without hearing anything more than the moaning of the wind and the driving of the rain. At length, however, another sound broke upon his ear. He stopped and listened, and presently called, "Who is there?"

The only answer was a moaning sound. He called again, and this time he heard something like the cry of a child; and pretty soon an object came towards him out from the darkness. With a quick, emphatic movement he brought his rifle to the charge, and ordered the intruder to halt.

"Mercy!" exclaimed a childish voice. "Don't shoot me! I am Natalie. Don't you know me?"

"Grand Dieu!" cried Jerome, elevating the muzzle of his piece, and taking a step forward. "It is our little daughter?"

"Yes, and you are good Jerome. Oh, you will come and help mama! Come! come! come—she is dying!"

It was certainly Natalie, a little child only eight years old, daughter of Lisette Vaillant. Lisette was the wife of Pierre Vaillant, a sergeant in Jerome's own regiment, and was with the army in capacity of nurse.

"Par Dieu!" low in this, my child," said Jerome, blowing the butt of his musket to the ground, and taking the little one by the arm. "What is it about your mother?"

"Oh! good Jerome, you can hear her now. Hark!"

The sentinel bent his ear to the ground, but could hear only the wind and the rain.

"Mama is in the dreadful pain," he said, "and is dying. She is not far away. Oh, when hear her crying?"

By degrees Jerome gathered from Natalie that her father had taken her out with him in the morning, and that in the evening when the storm came on, her mother came after her.

The sergeant had offered to send a man back to camp with his wife, but she refused to go, saying she would rather die than be separated from her child. The way however had become dark and uncertain, and she had lost the path, wandered off to the edge of the morass, where she sank into the soft mud.

"Oh, good Jerome," cried the little one, seizing the man's hand, "you can hear her? She will die if you do not come and help her."

At that moment the sentinel fancied he heard the wail of the unfortunate. What should he do? Lisette, the good, the beautiful, the tender-hearted Lisette, was in mortal danger, and it was in his power to save her. It was not in his heart to witness the death of the child. He could go and rescue the nurse, and return to his post without detection. At all events, he could not refuse the childish pleader.

"Give me your hand, Natalie. I'll go with you."

With a cry of joy the child sprang to the soldier's side, and he, with a start, perceived that she had hurried him along towards the place where she had left her mother. It seemed a long distance to Jerome, and once he stopped as though he would turn back. He did not fear death; but he feared dishonor.

"Hark!" uttered the sentinel, and plainly heard the voice of the suffering woman calling for help. He hesitated no longer. On he hastened, through the storm, and finally found Lisette sunk to her knees in the soft morass. Fortunately a tuft of long grass had been within her reach, by which means she had held her head above the fatal mud. It was no easy matter to extricate her from the mire pit, as the workman had to be very careful that he did not himself lose his footing. At length, however, she was drawn forth, and Jerome led her towards his post.

"Who comes there?" cried a voice from the gloom.

"I am," gasped Jerome, stopping and trembling from head to foot.

"What is it?" asked Lisette.

"Grand Dieu!" I have been longer away than I thought," answered the soldier. "It took me a long time to get you out."

"Who comes there?" repeated the voice.

Jerome heard the clink of a musket lock, and he knew that a sentinel had been stationed at the post he had left. The relief had come while he had been absent.

"Friends, with the countersign!" he answered, to the last call of the new sentinel.

He was ordered to advance, and when he had given the countersign he found himself in the presence of the sentinel of the guard. In a few hurried words he told the permission was granted the officer to rest where it was; but there were others present—some of the sentinels who had been relieved—and with so many such a secret would not be safe. Jerome did not even think of such a thing; but he was farther than his musket obeyed without a murmur, and silently accompanied the officer to the camp, where he was put in chains, and placed under guard.

On the following morning Jerome Dubois was brought before a court martial charged with having deserted his post. He confessed that he was guilty, and the permission was granted him to tell his own story.

He told how the little child had fallen upon him in the storm, and how she pleaded for her dying mother. At first he had resisted the impulse—he would have died readily to save Lisette, but he feared dishonor. The child still pleaded, and finally he thought of the poor woman—the woman who had done so much for the comfort of his regiment—suffering the tortures of a lingering death in the dreadful morass, was more than he could bear. He had not meant to be gone long; he had not known how away he was; but he was farther than he expected. He knew he had done wrong, but might not the peculiarity of the circumstances be allowed to mitigate the offence. Was there a true hearted man in the regiment who would not have done the same, similarly situated?

The court could do nothing but pass sentence of death; but the members thereof signed a petition praying that Jerome Dubois might be pardoned; and this petition was sent to the

chief of the brigade, and through him to the chief of division, by whom it was endorsed, and sent up to the marshal.

Lefebvre was kind and generous to his soldiers almost to a fault, but he could not overlook so grave an error as that which had been committed by Dubois. The orders given to the sentinel had been very simple; and foremost, of very necessity, was the order forbidding him to leave his post until properly relieved. To a certain extent the safety of the whole army rested upon the shoulders of the man, at night were posted nearest the lines of the enemy.

"I am sorry," said the gray haired old warrior, as he folded up the petition and handed it back to the officer who had presented it. "I can't see him, and listen to one half of his story. I might pardon him; and that must not be done. Let him die that thousands may be saved."

The time fixed for the execution of Dubois was the morning succeeding the day of his trial. The result of the interview with Marshal Lefebvre was made known to him, and he was not at all disappointed. He blamed no one, and was only sorry that he had not died upon the battle field.

"I have tried to be a good soldier," he said to his captives, who came to visit him after the marshal's decision was known, "and I have intended to do my duty. I know that according to military rules I must die, but I hope that my companions will remember me with kindness and compassion. I feel that I have done no crime that should leave a stain upon my name."

The captain took his hand, and assured him that his name should be held in respect, and that his memory should be held in love.

Towards evening Pierre Vaillant, with his wife and child, were admitted to see the prisoner. This was a visit which Jerome had long and gladly had dispensed with, as his feelings were already wrought up to a pitch that almost unmanned him; but he braced himself for the interview, and would have stood it like a hero had not little Natalie, in the eagerness of her love and gratitude, thrown herself upon his bosom and offered to die in his stead. This tipped the trembling cup, and tears flowed freely. Pierre and Lisette knew not what to say. They wept, and they prayed; and they would have willingly died for the noble fellow who had been thus condemned; but alas! they could give him no help.

Later in evening came a companion who if he lived, would at sometime return to Jerome's boyhood home. First, the condemned thought of his widowed mother, and he sent her a message of love and devotion. Then he thought of a brother and sister. And finally he thought of the bright-eyed maid, whose vineyard stood upon the banks of the Suzzon—one whom he had loved with a love such as only great hearts can feel.

"Oh, my God!" he cried, bowing his head upon his clasped hands, "you need not tell them a thing, but if it is possible, let them believe that I fell in battle."

His companion promised that he would do all he could; and if the truth could not be kept back, it should be so faithfully told that the name of Jerome Dubois should not bear dishonor in the minds of those who had loved him in their days.

Morning came, dull and gloomy, with driving sleet and snow, and at an early hour Jerome Dubois was led forth to meet his fate. The place of execution had been fixed upon a barren spot towards the sea, and thither his division was being marched to witness the fearful punishment. They had gained not more than half the distance when the sound of a strange commotion broke upon the wintry air, and very shortly an aide-de-camp came dashing to the side of the chief of the brigade, with the cry:

"A sortie! A sortie! The enemy are out in force. Let this thing be stayed. The marshal directs that you face about and advance upon the peninsula!"

In an instant all was changed in that division, and the beginner, who had temporary command, thundered forth his orders for the counter-march. The gloom was dissipated, and with glad hearts the soldiers turned from thoughts of the execution of a brave comrade to thoughts of meeting the enemy; for already the sound of a battle was heard upon the out-posts and they were well armed. The Russian and Prussian had decided to make an attack, it would be in full force and of a desperate character.

"What shall we do with the prisoner?" asked the sergeant who had charge of the guard.

"Lead him back to the camp," said the captain.

The direction was very simple, but the execution thereof was not so easy; for he had to lead the words escaped the captain's lips when a squadron of Prussian cavalry came dashing directly towards them. The division was quickly formed into four hollow squares, while the Russian and Prussian found themselves obliged to flee.

"In God's name," cried Jerome, "cut my bonds, and let me die like a soldier!"

The sergeant quickly cut the cord that bound his elbows behind him, and then dashed towards the point where his own company was stationed. The rattle of musketry had commenced, and the Prussians were vainly endeavoring to break the squares of the French. Jerome Dubois looked about him for some weapon with which to arm himself, and presently he saw a Prussian officer, not far off, reeling in his saddle as though he had been wounded. With a quick bound he reached the spot, pulled the dying officer from his seat, seized the heavy sabre, leaped into the empty saddle, and dashed away from a full platoon of the enemy that was charging down towards him.

Dubois was fully resolved that he would sell his life on that day—sell it in behalf of France—and sell it as dearly as possible. But he was not needed where he was. He knew that the Prussians could not break those hollow squares, so he rode away thinking to join the French cavalry, with whom he could rush into the deepest danger. Supposing that the heaviest fighting must be upon the Nebrung, he reined his horse in that direction, and when he reached it he found that he had not been mistaken. Upon a slight eminence towards Heigelsburg the enemy had planted a battery of heavy guns, supported by two regiments of infantry, and already, with shot and shell, immense damage had been done.

Lefebvre rode up shortly after this battery had opened fire, very quickly made up his mind that it must be taken at all hazards.

"Take that battery," he said to a colonel of cavalry, "and the battle is ours."

Dubois heard the order, and saw the necessity. Here was danger enough, surely; and determined to be the first at the battery, he kept as near to the leader as he dared to. Half the distance had been gained when from the hill came a storm of iron that plowed deeply into the ranks of the French.

The colonel fell, his body literally torn to pieces by a shell that exploded against his bosom. The point upon the peninsula now reached by the head of the assaulting column was not more than a hundred yards wide, and it was literally a path of death, as the fire of twelve heavy guns rained upon it. The colonel, and his officers, and very soon three other officers went down, leaving the advance without a commissioned leader. The way was becoming blocked up with dead men and dead horses, and the head of the column stopped and wavered.

Lefebvre, from his elevated post, saw this, and his heart throbbed painfully. If that column were routed, and the Russian infantry charged over the peninsula.

But—see! A man in the uniform of a French private, mounted upon a powerful horse captured in the trapping of a Prussian staff officer, with his head bare, and a bright sabre swinging in his hand, rushes to the front, and urges the column forward. His words are fiery, and his look is earnest. "For France and for Lefebvre!" the strange horseman cries, waving his sword aloft, and pointing towards the battery. "Our father will weep if we lose this day!"

The brave trooper, thus led by one who feared not to dash forward where the shot fell thick and fast, gave an answering shout, and pressed on, caring little for the rain of death so long as they had a living leader to follow. Hoping that he might take the battery, and yet avoiding death, Jerome Dubois spurred on. The bursting shells threw the dirt in clouds about him, and the plunging shot, plowed up the earth deep furrows, and pressed on so long as they had a living leader to follow. Hoping that he might take the battery, and yet avoiding death, Jerome Dubois spurred on. The bursting shells threw the dirt in clouds about him, and the plunging shot, plowed up the earth deep furrows, and pressed on so long as they had a living leader to follow. Hoping that he might take the battery, and yet avoiding death, Jerome Dubois spurred on. 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