

THE ROMANCE OF A JESUIT.

From the French of De Bongny d'Hagerne.
CHAPTER XIV.

The Sume and Oise battalion was, just then, in the vicinity of Pontarlier, at the village of Arcor on the river Doube. It took the road to Verrieres but, after a few hours march the commandant perceived that the numerous troops that had already passed that way had consumed all the provisions that might still have been found at the adjacent villages and farm-houses. The men had had nothing to eat since the day before and no distribution of food could be looked for from the Commissariat.

Meynaudier took counsel with his officers and it was decided that the detachment should turn off to the left and take a cross road leading to Etrache across the mountain.

After marching for an hour, some shots fired from the neighbouring heights threw the ranks into disorder. The commandant, aided by de Tralin, succeeded for a time in restoring order, but, at a turn of the road, a fresh discharge of musketry stretched many poor fellows lifeless and the disorder became general. The commandant seeing how impossible it was to continue a regular march, gave the officer orders to disperse and to try and get groups of men together and lead them to an appointed spot.

That evening but one hundred men were got together; the rest had wandered right and left. The commandant himself was worn out with fatigue and suffering; his horse had been killed under him and the ball which had killed the poor animal had also wounded the rider in the foot and he had had to walk on this lame foot all day.

The rallying point that had been fixed on was a wild gorge in the depths of the woods where nothing was to be had. The officers and men were spent with fatigue and hunger, three feet of snow covered the earth, and an icy wind penetrated to the very bones of the ill-clad soldiers. Lighting a fire was out of the question since the smoke might have betrayed the presence of this handful of French to their German adversaries. A few hours repose was imperative and the officers decided that later in the night the march must be resumed. A solemn silence reigned around and the commandant, who was gazing at the horizon all round in hopes of finding some issue from his difficult position, overheard the following whispered conversation:

"Did you see St. Ignatius stealing away?"

"No," replied another voice.

"Whilst the commandant was consulting the other officers, he got up on yonder rock and thence disappeared on the other side of the mountain."

"I suppose he has gone to get a good supper with some of the priests in the villages."

"Perhaps; but I think it more probable that he has gone to the Prussians and told them that there are a hundred Frenchmen here whom they can easily capture."

The commandant approached the soldiers and demanded of whom they were speaking.

"Of the almoner, sir."

"And you call the priest St. Ignatius and dare to accuse him of denouncing us to the Prussians? Saireblou! were we not in our present unfortunate position I would put you both in prison to teach you how to speak. You have known me for a long time and you know I am not more devout a Catholic than anyone else: you know I have hardly spoken to this chaplain, but I have watched him closely and can testify that since he joined us he has been devoted to our welfare and to his duty."

"Possibly, sir; but still he has stolen away without leave."

"What do you know about that? Am I accountable to such as you? Remember: the almoner ranks as an officer, and I will never permit an officer under my command to be insulted."

One of the soldiers muttered: "fortunately there is neither prison nor police station here."

Though he spoke low the commandant heard what he said, and, drawing a revolver from his pocket, pointed it at the soldier saying "If there be no prison, yet I have this revolver and unless you are silent I will shoot you."

The soldier was silenced and the commandant perceiving de Tralin took his arm and walked aside with him. Together they discussed the terrible state of affairs and de Tralin asked and obtained permission to absent himself for a couple of hours to reconnoitre the road and search for some village or farm where provisions for the starving soldiers could be obtained.

Hastily taking leave of each other, the adjutant-major plunged knee-deep into the snow whilst the commandant continued his watch, for till his men were saved he declined taking any repose.

Thus passed two hours of cruel mental and physical suffering to Meynaudier for his wound had begun to swell, and was very painful. No sentinel had been posted and the men were reposing on the ground as best they could. Captain de Tralin did not return at the end of the two hours and nothing had been seen of the Jesuit, who, as the soldiers had truly said, had asked no leave of absence.

At length a dark form was descried against the snow and de Tralin appeared. He was the bearer of bad news. The path they had taken led only to the woods and they would have to retrace their steps. Nor had he seen or heard anything of Father Durand. The two officers knew not how to extricate their soldiers from the terrible position in which they found themselves, and they also apprehended difficulty with the men, for fatigue and hunger had driven the poor fellows nearly to despair and they were besides under the impression that they had been betrayed.

At length the cry "to arms" was heard and the whole camp was instantly afoot. The adjutant-major was the first to recognize the cause of the alarm, and to perceive Father Durand accompanied by a peasant, both of whom were heavily laden. There were a few moments of utter disorder, some soldiers hastily loading their guns, others running wildly in every direction believing they had been surprised by the enemy, others again crying aloud: "Bread! bread! we are saved."

The commandant ordered silence and questioned the Jesuit, who had brought fifteen loaves, all he could find. These loaves Meynaudier commanded to be equally divided amongst them all, share and share alike, for, as he said, hunger made all men equals.

Whilst the poor fellows were devouring the bread, which seemed to have fallen from Heaven, the commandant was astonished on perceiving the soldier who had accused the almoner, standing beside the good priest, to whom he had at once frankly confessed his fault and by whom he had been promptly forgiven, since, as Father Durand observed, suffering had nearly driven the soldiers mad. And now, said the commandant, smiling, I must ask the almoner, who absented himself without leave, to give me an account of himself. "Whence did you procure this bread?"

"From an out of the way farm-house. An hour before arriving here, I had remarked a road leading into a narrow gorge, and the untrodden snow showed me that no detachment had passed that way. I also thought there must be a valley, probably inhabited, in that direction. I had thought of advising you to take the battalion in that direction but I abstained from doing so for fear of having to make our poor exhausted soldiers march several leagues uselessly. I therefore started off alone to verify my discovery and regret having been so long absent. The snow and darkness caused me to stray from my path, and I several times fell into ravines and had great difficulty in getting out of them. However, God rewarded my efforts, I found the valley and at length arrived at the farm, where I was well received by the good peasants, who gave me all the bread they had, and, since the load was too heavy for one man, one of these brave fellows came to help me."

"How can I thank you, said the commandant," then taking the Jesuit's hands in his own he added in a low voice: "Charles Durand, thank you, you have a noble heart."

The almoner was more affected than he cared to show and pressing his old friend's hand said:

"I have not told you all, nor how fully those good people sympathize with us. They offer shelter for the whole night to all our battalion and they are preparing large boilers full of soup to complete the supper of which we have brought only