

One afternoon, while he was sitting in his usual place, with his crooked legs bent up under him, looking forth on the hot little square in front of the house, he suddenly heard a great noise of drums that called the long roll. He raised his head.

He saw the people who were going by stop and stare at each other. Presently a lancer on horseback came galloping down the paved street. He was covered with dust, and his horse's sides and neck were slicked with foam. Society had he gone by when Victor's father came running in from his work with his hands all red, just as he had taken them from the dye pot, and crying:

"The Germans are coming! the Germans are coming!"

His wife said:

"What, then? they will not kill us, we are safe enough."

"Indeed, we are not, mother," cried the dyer. "They will seize us as prisoners, steal all our food and furniture, and perhaps burn our house over our heads. We are ordered by the mayor to go instantly within the city gates, and I am commanded to join the soldiers."

Without Victor beheld the people hastening with all speed through the city gate, carrying in their arms their most valuable things, such as trunks, vases, clocks, and old chairs, and he could not help laughing at their haste and fright.

"Come, Victor," said his mother, you had better climb upon your father's back, and he will take you to Aunt Therese's house, where you will be entirely safe."

"No, no," cried Victor; "I can walk with my crutches. Each of you take something that you would not like to lose, and I will follow behind."

The dyer and his wife were accustomed to obey the cool-headed child, and they accordingly did as he directed.

In ten minutes more they were in the street, and the little cottage-door was locked, and the shutters closed.

Victor bade adieu to his blooming roses, and hobbled away between his father and mother toward the city gate. But all this tumult was useless; there were very few soldiers in the place, and defence was out of the question.

The mayor had been advised that a regiment of Germans were within three hours' ride of the town, and at first he thought of resisting them, but now he determined to surrender the city if he were asked to do so.

Meanwhile he sent despatches by messenger and telegraph to the nearest portions of the French army, begging them to come to his assistance.

In a little while Victor was safely placed in his aunt's house, and he took a position where he could see all that went on.

Everything and everybody was in a bustle. Men and women ran hither and thither. The shutters of the shops were being put up; drums were beating, bells were ringing, and soldiers were marching to and fro.

But great things took place in another hour.

Victor beheld, to his intense astonishment, half-a-dozen men in blue coats, and with blue cloth caps on their heads, ride at a rapid gallop down the street with their lances glistening in the sun. They had brown faces, yellow beards, and they looked strong and vigorous.

These were the advance of the much-dreaded Germans.

People fled shrieking before them, and the Germans broke out into shouts of laughter to see them run to their houses like rabbits.

But by-and-by there was heard the roll of drums, and the ground trembled under a heavy tread, and Victor soon beheld a regiment of foot-soldiers come down the street. They were not very neat looking men. They all had blankets slung over their shoulders, and they were all spattered with mud.

The regiment halted a little way off, and the men stacked their arms, making them rattle on the pavement. Then they began to build camp fires in the street, and to light their long pipes.

Pretty soon they began to set guards all about the streets, and in a little while three tall officers came around, and knocked at all the doors, and forbade the using of lights in the house at night, and ordered that no one go abroad after eight o'clock. If lights were found in a house everybody would be arrested and severely punished.

"What does that mean, mother?" asked Victor, with burning cheeks.

"Why can't we have lights?"

"Because they will suspect us of making signals to our army in the distance," said the mother; while Victor's little fist shut up tight with rage.

Everything was so strange when it became dark! Not a window showed a candle. In the streets a few embers were burning, and by their light Victor could see the soldiers, with their long coats down to their heels, and their shining helmets, walking to and fro, and hear their strange talk, and loud, hoarse laughter.

There seemed to be soldiers everywhere. Drums were heard on all hands, and the rattle of wheels came from all quarters.

People began to ask: "Where are our soldiers? Why don't they come and fight these invaders? Are they afraid of them?"

In a little while some more soldiers knocked at the door, and said that they wanted two mattresses, a quart of milk, and an armful of fire-wood. They had a cart at the door, and they had made collections from every house.

The dyer protested, but it was no good. Besides taking the bedding and the wood and the milk, they made the dyer go with them.

Victor cried out from his dark corner:

"How dare you take my father away, you cowards! If I were strong I'd shoot you!"

At this the soldiers raised their lanterns above their heads, and beheld Victor sitting upright in his chair, looking very furious. They saw that he was a cripple, and therefore they went on with their work as if he were not there, and had said nothing.

This made him more enraged than ever, and he resolved to do what he could to hurt them.

He beheld them take away the goods, and he heard his mother weeping in the silent room after they were gone.

Now, the mayor was not a dull man. He had had his power taken out of his hands; his town had been overrun, and he had devised a plan to capture these intruders.

A short time after the soldiers had gone, a soft knock came to the door, and it was cautiously opened by Aunt Therese.

In walked two gentlemen. Said one of them:

"I am the mayor. I want to speak to this gentleman in private, and we cannot talk in the street in safety, and I should like to sit in your room for a moment, if there is no one here."

"No," said Aunt Therese, forgetting Victor for the moment, "there is no one here but me, and you are welcome. I will go away."

"Thank you," said the mayor. The two gentlemen immediately began to discuss something.

It appeared that there had approached on the south side of the town two regiments of French soldiers, and they were hidden in the woods about two miles off. On the other side of the town were two more regiments, about the same distance off. Now, when all was ready for both parties to advance, it had been agreed that some signal should be given.

Therefore it was arranged that a single light should be displayed in two windows, one on the north side of the city, and one on the south side. It had been arranged how to show the light on the north side; but the question was, how was it to be shown on the south side?

This was the puzzle.

"I'll do it," said Victor in a whisper.

The two gentlemen uttered exclamations of surprise, and asked Victor if he had heard all.

"Yes," said Victor, "I have, and I know just what to do. My father's house is just outside of the south gate, and it has a dormer-window in the garret that is very high. I can go there and make the signal, and no one will be the wiser."

"But the guards!" said the mayor.

"Oh! I can get past them," said Victor. "I can be shy when I choose."

"And it will be dangerous."

"I don't mind that. All that I want to know is, when is the light to be shown?"

"Directly," responded the mayor; "as soon as possible. The light on the northern side is already shining. I suppose the soldiers are marching now."

Then he began to whisper to his friend.

They quickly agreed that it would be wrong to trust such an errand to a child, and they both arose, and went to the next room to find if there was any one present who was fit to undertake the task. They closed the door.

"They won't let me go," said Victor. "They think I am too small. We'll see about that."

He crept out of his chair, and noiselessly took his crutches and his cap, and crossed the room.

He got to the entry. He opened the front door, and peered out. It was very dark. He saw no one. He emerged carefully upon the step, closed the door, and hobbled cautiously away.

Victor made his way very cautiously. He knew if he was caught he would be detained as a prisoner at once. Now he hid behind a flight of steps, now behind a statue, now behind a cart, and a barber's pole. He dodged here and there, always with his eyes open.

He came to the gate. There were three sentinels here. There was one on each side, and one in the very centre. The gate was open. Here was a perplexity. How could he pass these guards? He reflected. If he could only get them all on one side, then he might succeed in escaping. How was he to do this?

He suddenly lit upon an idea. He felt around on the ground for a stone.

He found one. He then silently stood up, and threw it with all his force against a window in a grocer's shop on the other side of the street.

There was a great crash. Instantly the three soldiers cocked their muskets, and ran thither.

The coast was clear. Victor sprang along with his crutches, passed the critical spot, and in another moment he was before his own house.

He had been given the key by his father when they had left the place in the afternoon, and he now drew it from his pocket and entered the little door.

He stopped a moment to smell the sweet air, and then went in and locked the door behind him. Then he breathed freely.

He felt his way to the cupboards, and took from them four candlesticks. Then he went up the first flight of stairs. These stairs had a door at the top, and Victor, with great difficulty, pushed several pieces of furniture against it, so that it could not be opened. Then he proceeded to the garret. He barricaded this door also.

He was now alone in the top of the house. Far, far above him was the roof, which came to a point forty feet overhead. Seventy feet over his head was the dormer window he had told the mayor of. Any one could reach this window by going up a ladder. Victor laid his crutches down, and began to work himself up this awkward pair of steps.

He had to toil, for his weak limbs could scarcely support him; but he finally succeeded, and rested on the platform beside the window.

Then he produced his tallow candles and the candlesticks and a box of lucifer matches. He arranged the candles in a row. Then he thought he would look out of the window before he lit them. He cautiously raised the sash.

The air was cool. In the daytime one could see from here a most beautiful valley filled with villages, and watered with beautiful streams, but now Victor could see nothing. He heard, however, many things. First, the sound of voices in the street, then the sound of rattling waggons, then the trampling of horses and the calls of the drivers. Now and then there would come a drum beat, and now and then the ring of some musket butt, as it came down upon the pavement.

"Ah," said Victor, "these Germans are away out there, are they? I shouldn't wonder if they fired at me." He looked around. No, not a light was to be seen. It was a critical moment. Victor well might have quailed. When he lighted his candles the soldiers would rush into the house (if they could) and he would be terribly treated. Perhaps they would shoot him.

Still, he trembled. He felt a cold perspiration come out of his skin. He shut down the window. Then he took a match in his shaking hand, and tried to strike it. It broke. Then he tried another, but it went out. He tried a third. It burned well.

He lit the first candle, then the second, then the third. He could not light the fourth because the wick was cut off close. There was now a bright glare of light streaming out of the window. Victor heard his heart go thump! thump! He drew back as far as he could. He was waiting. All was silent.

A few seconds passed. Then the light was discovered. A crash of the