

## Here's Something Worth Reading.



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**H. N. HUNT**  
190 Dundas Street, W.

## The Leaf in the Storm.

The daybreak came, gray, cheerless, cold. A dense fog, white and raw, hung over the river; in the east, where the sun, they knew, was rising, they could only see the livid light of the still towering flames and pillars of black smoke against the leaden clouds.

"We will let them come and go in peace if they will," murmured old Mathurin. "What can we do? We have no arms—no powder, hardly—no soldiers—no defense."

"Nothing," said Bernadou, but he straightened his tall limbs, and in his grave blue eyes a light gleamed.

Reine Allix looked at him as she sat in the doorway of her house. "Thy hands are honest, thy heart pure, thy conscience clear. Be not afraid to die if need there be," she said to him.

He looked down and smiled on her. Margot clung to him, a passion of weeping. He clasped her close and kissed her softly, but the woman who read his heart was the woman who held him at his birth.

By degrees the women pressed timidly back into the houses, hiding their eyes so that they should not see that horrid light against the sky, whilst the starving children clung to their breasts or to their skirts, wailing aloud in terror. The few men there were left—for the most part of them very old or else mere striplings—gathered together in a hurried council. Old Mathurin, the miller, and the patriots of the wine shop were agreed that there could be no resistance whatever might befall them—that it would be best to hide such weapons as they had and any provisions that still remained to them, and yield up themselves and their homes with humble grace to the dire foe.

"If we do otherwise," they said, "the soldiers will surely slay us, and what can a miserable hamlet like this achieve against cannon and steel and fire?"

Bernadou alone raised his voice in opposition. His eye kindled, his cheek flushed, his words for once sprang from his lips like fire.

"What!" he said to them, "shall we yield up our homes and our wives and our infants without a single blow? Shall we be so vile as to truckle to the enemies of France, and show that we can fear them? It were a shame, a foul shame; we were not worthy of the name of men. Let us prove to them that there are people in France who are not afraid to die. Let us hold our own so long as we can. Our muskets are good, our walls strong, our woods in this weather more than a wall; such in and swallow them if only have tact to drive them there. Let us do what we can. The camp of the franc-tireurs is but three leagues from us. They will be certain to come to our aid. At any rate, let us die bravely. We can do little—that may be. But if every man in France does that little that he can, that little will be great enough to drive the invaders off the soil."

Mathurin and the others screamed at him and hooted.

"You are a fool!" they shouted. "You will be the undoing of us all. Do you not know that one shot fired—nay, only flames—let us only take heed to the clear of the first—the last must rage as God wills."

But they screamed and mouthed and hissed at him.

"Oh, yes! fine talk, fine talk! See your own roof in flames if you will; you shall not ruin ours. Do what you will with your own neck. Keep it erect or hang by it, as you choose. But you have no right to give your neighbors over to death, whether they will or no."

He strove, he pleaded, he conjured, he struggled with them half the night, with the salt tears running down his cheeks, and all his gentle blood burning with righteous wrath and loathing shame, stirred for the first time in all his life to a rude, simple, passionate courage. But they were not persuaded. Their gold pieces hidden in the rafters, their few feeble sheep starving in the folds, their own miserable lives, all hungry, woe-begone and spent in daily terrors—they were still dear to them, and they would not imperil them. They called him a madman; they denounced him as one who would be their murderer; they threw muskets on him and demanded his money to bury it with the rest under the altar in the old chapel on the hill.

Bernadou's eyes flashed; his breast heaved; his nerves quivered; he shook them off and strode a step forward.

"As you live," he muttered, "I have a mind to fire on you, rather than let you live to shame yourselves and me!"

Reine Allix, who stood by him silent all the while, laid her hand on his shoulder.

"My boy," she said, in his ear, "you are right and they are wrong. Yet not dissension between brethren open the door for the enemy to enter thereby into your homes. Do what you will with your own life, Bernadou—it is yours—but leave them to do as they will with theirs. You cannot make sheep into lions, and let not the first blood shed here be a brother's."

Bernadou's head dropped on his breast.

"Do as you will," he muttered to his neighbors. They took his musket from him, and in the darkness of the night stole silently up the wooded chapel hill and buried it, with all their other arms, under the altar where the white Christ hung.

"We are safe now," said Mathurin, the miller, to the patriots of the tavern. "Had that madman had his way, he had destroyed us all."

Reine Allix softly led her grandson across his own threshold, and drew his head down to hers and kissed him between the eyes.

"You did what you could, Bernadou," she said to him. "Let the rest come as it will."

Then she turned from him and flung her cloak over her head and sank down, weeping bitterly, for she had lived through 83 years only to see this agony at the last.

Bernadou, now that all means of defense were gone from him, and the only thing left to him to deal with was his own life, had become quiet and silent without hope, as was his habit. He would have fought like a mastiff for his home, but this they had forbidden him to do, and he was passive and without hope. He shut to his door, and sat down with his hand in that of Reine Allix and his arm around his wife.

"There is nothing to do but to wait," he said sadly.

The day seemed very long in coming. The firing ceased for awhile; then its roll commenced afresh and grew nearer the village. Then again all was still. At noon a shepherd staggered into the place, pale, bleeding, bruised, covered with mud, his eyes wild. He told them, he had forced his way to the trooper's saddle, and had dragged him with them until he was half dead with fatigue and pain. At night he had broken from them and had fled; they were close at hand, he said, and had burned the town from end to end because a man had fired at them from a house-top. That was all he knew.

Bernadou, who had gone out to hear his news, returned into the house and sat down, and hid his face within his hands.

"If I resist you are all lost," he muttered. "And yet to yield like a cur!"

It was a piteous question, whether to fight the instinct in him and see his birthplace in flames and his family slaughtered for his lack of courage, or to let the manhood in him and let himself as a coward for evermore?

Reine Allix looked at him, and laid her hand on his bowed head, and her voice was strong and clear as music: "Fret not thyself, my beloved. When the moment comes, then do as thine own heart and the whisper of God in it bid thee."

A great silence answered her: it was the first time since his earliest infancy that she had ever heard it from Bernadou.

It grew dark. The autumn day died. The sullen clouds dropped scattered rain. The red leaves were blown in millions by the wind. The little houses on either side the road were dark, for the dwellers in them dared not show any light that might be a star to allure to them the footsteps of their foes. Bernadou sat with his arms on the table, and his head resting on them. Margot nursed her son; Reine Allix prayed.

Suddenly in the street without there was the sound of many feet of horses and of men, the shouting of angry voices, the splashing of quick steps in the watery ways, the screams of women, the flash of steel through the gloom.

Bernadou sprang to his feet, his face pale, his blue eyes dark as night.

"They are come," he said under his breath. It was not fear that he felt, nor horror; it was rather a passion of love for his birthplace and his nation—a passion of longing to struggle and to die for both. And he had no weapon.

He drew his house door open with a steady hand and stood on his own threshold and faced these, his enemies. The street was full of them—some mounted, some on foot; crowds of them swarmed in the woods and on the roads. They had settled on the village as vultures on a dead lamb's body.

It was a little, lowly place; it might well have been left in peace.

It had had no more share in the war than the victor's tomb, but it came in the victor's way, and their mailed heels crushed it as they passed. They had heard that arms were hidden there, and they had swooped down on it and held it hard and fast. Some were told off to search the houses; some to ransack the dwellings; some to seize such food and drink as they could find there; and some to bury it with the rest under the altar in the old chapel on the hill.

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