

A Soldier's Story

*This Story is nearly verbatim, as related by a Soldier of the Marine Infantry
whilst Infirmier to the Ambulance Anglaise at Orléans*

You would like to hear my story, madame? Well, there is not much to tell. I was born at Gironville — that is in Lorraine. My father was a farmer there. What a pretty little house we had! There was a courtyard and a garden. Such flowers grew there; and the vines seemed to flourish better than anywhere in the neighbourhood. It was such a merry village, too! On fête-days, after mass, we danced with the neighbours' daughters, and the good curé looked on and bade us enjoy ourselves to-day, for we must work hard to-morrow. But I was always a rover. I was not contented, even then. I wanted to see large cities and distant countries. One day came the conscription, my name was drawn.

“Baptiste,” said my father, “thou shalt not leave us; here is the money for a substitute.” But I wished to go. My mother wept and my sister clung to me, saying: “Stay with us, Baptiste; thou must dance at my wedding; thou knowest that it is to be on the fête day of St. John.”

But I would not listen. “Let me go,” I said, “I shall see many things; I shall come back a *décoré*; I cannot stay here; I am weary of the fields and the vineyards.”

Well, I went, and I was sent to join the marine infantry. When I had learned my duties I was put on board ship, and we went to Cochin China. That is an old story now. We gained some honour there, and they gave us medals. This is one I am wearing. At last, after some years, we came back; they gave me leave of absence, and I went home to Lorraine. How my heart beat as I walked along the road that led to the village! It was many miles from a railroad station, so that it was sunset before I saw the church spire. I was a boy when I left, I was a man now, and though I passed several acquaintances going home from work, they did not know me. At last I came quite near. I saw the curé coming up the street, he stopped to speak to an old woman, and with her was a very pretty girl, just about eighteen.

I went up to him. “*Mon père*,” said I, “don't you know me?”

“I should know that voice,” said M. le curé; “but surely — yes, it is Baptiste!” The good man seized my hand. “They are all well at the farm, Baptiste; the sight of thee will gladden their hearts. And here is Madeleine; dost thou not remember Madeleine?”

Now I had left Madeleine quite a little child, and here was a tall young woman, with eyes like the stars.

“Yes, Baptiste,” said the old woman, “thou rememberest me? I am Jeanne Leblanc, and this is my poor boy's daughter Madeleine. Ah! thou art luckier than he; he left his bones in the Crimea.”

We all went up together to the farm. It was spring-time, and it was a happy time. I need not say how many a long ramble Madeleine and I had in the woods and fields.

My sister was married and happy, and she said to me: “In two years, Baptiste, thy time will be up, then thou must come back to Gironville, and Madeleine will be my sister. Is it not so?”

It seemed then as if nothing could go wrong with us, and when I left Gironville to go back to Toulon, Madeleine was my affianced. In July we were ordered to be ready to embark for Algeria, but then came rumours of war; at last it was declared, and our battalion was ordered to join Marshal MacMahon's army. We came up from the south to Paris by rail; and were sent on the same way to Sédan. It was the 28th of August when we joined. Before we left Toulon we had heard of the battle near Metz. I knew the Prussians were in Lorraine, but I could hear nothing from my village, and I had a heavy heart as we mustered outside the station and marched into Sédan. The town looked very gay — full of officers and soldiers; a band was playing in the Place Turenne, for one of the generals and his staff were dining at the Hotel Croix d'Or close by. We halted here for half an hour and fell out, and I went with Corporal Michel into an *auberge* to get a *chopine* of wine. There were many *sous-officiers* there, and they all looked anxious, and some were speaking angrily.

“What news, *mes braves*?” said Corporal Michel.” When shall we pay these Prussians the debt we owe them already?”

“Never, say I, “and an old soldier came up as he spoke, and shook Michel's hand.

“What makes thee say that?” said Michel.

“Because we shall stay here and be caught in this valley, like rats in a trap.”

“But I don't understand,” I said. “Why stay here at all, then?”

“Thou wilt soon see, *mon garçon*,” said the old sergeant; “our colonels and captains must say ‘Adieu’ to the fine ladies from Paris, so they give a ball to-night. *Sacré!*” and he ground his teeth, “to-night! when we should be marching on and on, out of this hole!”

It was all true; before we left the town we saw the carriages full of fine company going to the *Hôtel de Ville*, and even while they were beginning to dance some peasants came in and told us how fast the Germans were coming on. All that night we camped out between Balan and Bazeilles. There we stayed the next day. On the 30th we were ordered to be ready to move on, but we did not stir, though all the day we heard heavy firing some distance off. In the afternoon, as we were lying in the shade of the trees, smoking our pipes, we saw soldiers by twos and threes come running up the road, and then they came thicker and thicker. We spoke to one of them, and he said they had been fighting all day in front, but were obliged to retreat; there were many prisoners taken, and the Prussians would be there next day. We knew our turn was come, so we looked to our rifles, and some who had bad consciences confessed to the chaplain; but for me, I had nothing on my heart but sorrow for my people and Madeleine, and that was no sin I knew.

After sunset we moved on to Bazeilles. It was a pretty little town, neat and clean, white stone houses and gardens about them, and vines trailing round the windows, and even climbing over the roofs. Most of the people had left and gone into Sédan, so we had the place pretty well to ourselves. Next day — but all the world knows how we fought! The Bavarians came on like tigers; just at the entrance of the town we met them. We should have beaten them back, but we were shot down by hundreds, not by them, but by our own men. Our unlucky blue jackets and caps were like those of the Prussians, and in the smoke and confusion they took us for enemies. We had to give in, and we retreated through the street. We left our wounded there; we could not take them with us, and we thought they would be safe in the *mairie*.

You know the rest, madame. We were near Balan when we heard. Bazeilles was retaken; but we were so few that we were useless now. All day the fighting went on not far off. It was late in the afternoon when there came a sudden rush. Officers were galloping down the road, making for Sédan. We saw smoke and flame rising high in the air from Bazeilles, and we heard the Prussian guns louder

and louder. We seemed to melt into a mob; men lost their regiments, officers lost their men. There was no one to command us.

“Baptiste,” said one of my comrades “it is over; let us get into Sédan; if we stay here we shall be shot or taken prisoners.”

I looked round, there was no one to say “go” or “stay,” so shouldered my rifle and we went towards the town; but when we came to the first drawbridge it was so crowded we could not pass. I saw a Zouave drop from it, swim the ditch, and climb up the green parapet on the other side. I took the hint and followed him; but just as I let myself down into the water there was a greater crush than ever on the bridge. An officer was riding a spirited horse, it took fright, and fairly leaped over the parapet into the ditch below; both man and horse were stunned, and there they lay at the bottom. I should have tried to catch hold of the officer, but as I did so the men began to jump off the bridge on either side, in numbers; many were killed by the fall, I think; but I found I must get over and out if I would save my life. I could not keep hold of my rifle, so I let it go and swam. I reached the other side and climbed up. I crossed the second ditch in the same way, and got down from the parapet into the street behind it. I made my way to the Place Turenne; but it was difficult, the streets were so full. Many wounded were being carried along, and many were lying about trampled over by the mob. Just as I turned into the Place, I heard a voice calling me; it came from near a clump of trees opposite the hotel. I turned, and there I saw Corporal Michel, his head bound up with his blue neck-handkerchief, and his arm all bleeding and broken; he had made a sort of sling for it, with a belt.

“Baptiste, my boy,” said he, “if I could get a surgeon to bind me up, we might get away; the frontier is near.” At that moment a shell fell in the street hard by, and burst; the confusion was dreadful; I knew not what to do. As I looked round, I saw a young man with the red-cross band on his arm. I called to him, he came up, and seeing Michel, asked if he could walk, for if so, he had better go up to the great barrack on the hill — the Caserne Asfelde. There were English surgeons there, and the Prussians would not interfere with them. So we lifted up Michel; the young man was on one side and I on the other; he was wounded in the left leg, too, and we had nearly to carry him. We went across the Place and down a side street. The Prussians were firing very fast from the hills close around, but very few shot fell in the town. We went on steadily, the poor corporal trying not to groan, till we took a turn to the right of the street, and came up a steep road; there

was a drawbridge and we crossed it, and we were in a great sort of square, with the barrack in front of us. The place was crowded with Zouaves; but they were throwing down their arms and making for the town. The Prussian balls fell very fast here, but we got Michel to the door, and there were two or three surgeons in aprons, dressing the men as they came up.

“Monsieur,” said I to one of them, “will you look at my corporal?”

The good young fellow directly took Michel by the arm and helped him into a long corridor full of wounded. Then he and another looked at the poor fellow's wounds, and the first spoke to me in French — very good French, too — but the English are so clever, they speak all languages:

“*Mon garçon*,” he said, “the corporal must stay here.”

“Never, monsieur,” said Michel, “to be made prisoner and sent to their detestable Germany.”

“*Mon ami*,” said the young surgeon, again, “you will be a dead man in forty-eight hours if you go.”

“Corporal,” I said, “stay here; the war will not last for ever; better be a prisoner than dead. These gentlemen are good; I leave thee in their care.” So it was settled. I embraced my poor corporal once more and went back to the town to try and get out of it, the nearest way to the frontier. It was useless. The Prussians were all round. The streets were crowded all night; at midnight we heard the town had surrendered, and what was worse, the Emperor and his army. I never saw him all that time. I never wish to see him again. Why did he not put himself at the head of us and let us cut our way through? We were eighty thousand unwounded men! His uncle would have done it. He is no real Bonaparte. Next day, early, the Prussians came in. French officers came round and ordered us to march out over the bridge the other end of the town from Balan, and to give up our arms. I had none to give up; but thousands of men, in rage and despair, flung their rifles into the ditch. Outside the town we were taken in charge by Prussian guards and marched to an island on the Meuse. There we were crowded together. Many of us had had nothing to eat all that day, and it was now getting late in the afternoon. I had bought a loaf of bread in the town, and I had half of it still in my knapsack, so I was better off than the rest. It rained harder than I ever saw it rain before, and there was no shelter. There was one small cottage on the island, some officers had that, and the first comers had taken possession of the yard and were crouched under the

wall. Outside it, more men were lying close to each other, to try and get a little warmth and shelter.

It was such a long night; we were wet through in half an hour; we hoped the Prussians would give us some soup for supper, but none came. I lay down on the driest spot I could find, for the island was only a sort of marsh, and tried to sleep, but I could not. I felt so miserable, and when I sat up and looked round, and heard the challenge of the Prussian sentinels, I knew I was a prisoner, and I put my head in my hands and cried like a baby. "My poor Madeleine," I thought, "where is she? Shall I ever see her again?"

At last I slept, and when I woke it was daylight. We had no breakfast served to us, and I had eaten my bread. I was wet and hungry, and it rained as hard as ever. All day we waited and hoped for food; none came, and by evening we were faint from want of it. The ground was trampled into soft mud, and in this I lay down, and it kept me a little warm; the smell was dreadful; the river on each side was full of corpses of men and horses, and we kept as far from the edge as we could. Next morning, still nothing to eat; I felt I must die if this went on; I resolved to look round and see if there was no way of escaping. I missed several men I had spoken to the last two days, and a *chasseur d'Afrique* told me they were gone, and he intended to try and get away at dark. I knew if I delayed I should be too weak to try it, and I made up my mind to go too.

But many were dying of hunger that day. I saw, myself, some Zouaves drag a dead horse out of the river and begin to eat his entrails. I felt so sick, I could not look at them. As I turned away, I saw a rush made to the little bridge over the Meuse. There were two English gentlemen there giving away some biscuits; I ran up to them and forced my way through and I got a biscuit. They gave away every one they had, and promised to write to the Prussian general to send us some soup. Even this biscuit, though it was small, did me good, and when night came I was ready to try and get away, for the island was too horrible. I dare not think of it even now; I see it in dreams sometimes.

It was a very dark night; I laid down my knapsack to leave it there. I took out the letters from my father and Madeleine, and put them inside my jacket, and then I stole away to the side farthest from the bridge, and slipped quietly into the water. There was so much talking and shouting on the island. that I was pretty sure not to be heard. I struck out, and reached the other shore. I heard the tread of the

sentinel, and I waited, lying against the bank till he had passed; and then I got up, and, thanks to the darkness and the rain, I was invisible a few yards off.

I kept clear of the town, and went away towards Mézieres, that is about ten miles farther. I walked all night, resting here and there, and at daybreak I found I was close to the gate of the town. I went in, and to the house of the commandant. There I found several who had got away as I had done. We had some good soup, some bread and wine, and in the afternoon were sent by train to Lille, from whence I went to Tours and rejoined my battalion, some of whom were quartered there.

There is very little more to tell. We were at the battle of Coulmiers and then came on to Orléans. We fought at Beaune le Roland, and we drove back the Prussians; but there were traitors there, and we were ordered to fight in retreat when we had beaten the enemy. Then came the battle round Orléans. At five o'clock on that Sunday I was in the last trenches. I don't know where the Mobile officers were — dining in Orléans I heard — the poor boys were all in confusion; my captain tried to rally them and keep them steady, and just as he sprang up, waving his sword, a rifle-bullet struck him and he fell dead at my feet. I took his sword and his Cross of Honour and his pocketbook, to send them back to his wife, and as I stooped over him a bullet struck me in the side, and I fell.

When I recovered I was alone with the dead and dying. I struggled up and found my way behind the houses of the faubourg Bourgogne close by. Across the vineyards I saw an English flag, so I crawled along till I reached the door. I found it was an ambulance; my wound was dressed, and I slept from sorrow and fatigue. Madame, you know the rest. Thanks to my being made *infirmier* I escaped being sent to Prussia, and now the peace has come, and to-day, look, here is a letter from Madeleine. All are well at Gironville, they had no fighting near there; but they are very poor and miserable now, and they are Prussians; my poor, poor Lorraine! I shall go back to my village, the good curé shall marry me to my own true Madeleine, and then we will go, all of us — father, mother, and all — away to Algeria, for Prussians we will not be, and if God sends us children they shall be born French. That is all I have to tell, madame, and I hope you are not tired of listening to Baptiste's story.

E. M. P.