

The Child Spy.

His name was Stenne, little Stenne they called him. He was a gambler of Paris, pale and thin, who might have been 30 years old, perhaps 35; one can never tell the age of these children. His mother was dead; his father, an old soldier, patrolled a square in the neighborhood of the Temple, Babouin, nurses, old women, all those helpless persons who run the risk of being trampled on in the crowded streets, knew Pere Stenne, and loved him, too. They knew that that fierce moustache, the terror of dogs and pickpockets, concealed lips that could smile, and that it was possible that smile one had only to say:

"How is your little boy today?"
"And how he loved that little boy!"
Eow around he was when in the evening the little fellow came to join his mother and the two grandmothers to get together, greeting everyone they met.

With the siege, everything was changed. Pere Stenne's square was closed to the public. He was compelled to keep a constant lookout, without his pistol for his son. When he spoke of the Prussians his moustache was a sight to see. Little Stenne did not find the new life so disagreeable, however. A siege! That meant fun for gamblers. No school, no duties, vacation all the time, and the streets as freely as on gala days. The boys stayed out of doors, running about until night. He followed the detachments of troops to the fortifications, choosing those which had good music; he was very particular on that point. At other times he watched them at their drill.

The most interesting of all, though, were the games of chance the Breton troops made popular at this time. When little Stenne was not at the ramparts or at the shops you would be sure to find him watching a card being dealt at the Place du Chateau d'Eau. He never played it; it took too much money. He contented himself with watching the others, and with such expression! One in particular, a great fellow with a blue coat, who had only 100-sou pieces, won his admiration. When this boy ran one could hear the coins rattle in his pocket.

One day, as little Stenne was stooping down to pick up a piece which had rolled under his feet, the fellow said in a low voice:

"That makes you squint, hey? Well, if you want me to, I will tell you where to get plenty of them."

The offer was accepted, and, leading Stenne aside, he asked the boy to go with him to all French newspapers to the Prussians, adding that they could make 20 francs a trip. Stenne indignantly refused, and for three days he remained away from the place. Three dreadful days; he could neither eat nor sleep. At night he seemed to see the pale of soldiers at the foot of his bed, and the 100-sou pieces gleaming in the faint light. The temptation proved too strong. The fourth day he returned to the gaming place, saw the big fellow, and agreed to go with him.

They set out one snowy morning with rucks on their shoulders, and the papers hidden under their jackets. When they reached the Flanders gate it was scarcely daylight. The large boy took little Stenne's hand, and, approaching the guard, who had just opened the gate kindly manner, he said, in a whispering tone: "Please let us pass, kind sir. Our mother is sick and our father is dead. We are going to see if we can find some potatoes in the field outside."

He even showed his rucks, much ashamed, hung his head. The sentinel looked at them for a moment, then, glancing at the deary white road, he said, "Pass on quickly," and then they were on their way to Aubervilliers. How the big fellow laughed! "Confessing, as in a dream, little Stenne saw the factories transformed into barracks, the tall chimneys, piercing the fog, partially broken off. From time to time they came upon sentinels, officers who were smoking, the houses with fields, and little tents, and with snow, standing before dying fires. The large boy knew the way and went across the fields, being careful to avoid the military outposts. Notwithstanding his precautions, they suddenly came upon a squad of soldiers. The troops were partly hidden in a ditch which bordered the Sissonais railroad. This time they were not allowed to pass so readily, though the large boy told his story in the most pathetic manner. While he was weeping, an old, white-haired sergeant came out of one of the little tents and said:

"Don't cry, little fellow; we will let you go to hunt for your potatoes. But come in first and give your mother a bit; the little one looks frozen."

Alas! It was not the cold that made little Stenne shiver so. It was fear and shame. Inside the tent they found soldiers huddled together around a little fire, holding biscuits on the points of their bayonets. They made room for the children, and gave them a drop of their warm coffee; while they were drinking it an officer appeared at the door, called the sergeant, and, after a few words with him in a low tone, went quickly away.

"Boys," said the sergeant on re-entering, "there will be fun tonight. We have found out the Prussian counter-spy. I believe at last we are to capture this cursed Bourgeois."

Then followed an explosion of bayonets and shouts. The soldiers danced and flourished their bayonets. Taking advantage of the tumult the boys slipped away. On leaving the trench they saw before them a plain bordered one side by a long, white wall, defaced by bullet-holes. It was toward this that they directed their footsteps, stopping often, as if picking up potatoes.

"Let us go back when we get to the wall," said Stenne.

The other boy only shrugged his shoulders and went steadily forward. All at once they heard a click and saw a gun pointed at them.

"Crouch down!" whispered the large boy, throwing himself on the ground. Once down he whistled; another whistle answered. They then rose and went up to the fortification. Over the wall they saw two yellow moustaches under army military caps. The large boy jumped down beside the Prussians. "This is my brother," he said, pointing to his companion. Stenne was so little that, on seeing him, the Prussian began to laugh, and he was obliged to take him by the arm to help him over the rampart.

Behind the wall were earthworks, fallen trees and great black ditches. In each ditch were the same yellow moustaches, which laughed as the little fellows went past. In one corner was a house protected by franks of trees. The lower story was filled with soldiers playing cards, while soup was cooking over a roaring fire. How good it smelled, and what a contrast to the camp of the French riflemen. In the upper story were the officers. They had champagne to drink and a piano to play on.

When the little Parisians entered they were greeted with shouts of joy. They delivered their papers to the enemy, that their conquer might be honored. The large boy amused them by his old language and his low wit. They laughed hysterically, repeating his expressions, fairly rolling in the Prussian mire that was thus brought to them.

Little Stenne would have liked to talk, too, to show that he was not stupid, but something seemed to choke him. In front of him, standing apart from the others, was an old Prussian who seemed to be trying to read his thoughts as the soldier's eyes never moved from his face. There were tenderness and reproach in the gaze, as if the man had a boy about Stenne's age, and as if he would have said:

"I would rather die than see my son in such a business!"

The poor boy felt as if a hand clutched his heart so that it could no longer beat. To escape from his torture he drank a great deal of wine. Soon everything seemed to be going round and round. In the distance he heard his companion ridiculing the national guard, mimicking their drill and going through other drollery. At last the boy lowered his voice, the officers became serious. The wretch was about to force his way through the attack to be made that night. Stenne suddenly realized what was going on and called out:

"Not that! Not that!"

When the large boy replied with a laugh and went on, before he had finished his wine, he saw the Prussian officers and exclaimed:

"Leave at once!"

Then they began talking rapidly among themselves in German, while the large boy looked as if he were about to faint. In the distance he heard his companion ridiculing the national guard, mimicking their drill and going through other drollery. At last the boy lowered his voice, the officers became serious. The wretch was about to force his way through the attack to be made that night. Stenne suddenly realized what was going on and called out:

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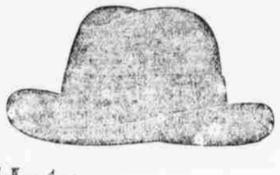
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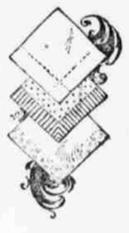
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