# Robert Helmont

by Alphonse Daudet

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ROBERT HELMONT: DIARY OF A RECLUSE, 1870-1871 ***

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ALPHONSE DAUDET

## Robert Helmont DIARY OF A RECLUSE

1870–1871

TRANSLATED BY

LAURA ENSOR

Civilians leaving their homes

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY PICARD AND MONTÉGUT

LONDON GEORGE ROUTLEDGE AND SONS, Limited Broadway, Ludgate Hill
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Country Scene

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# PREFACE

While spending a day in the country on one of those pretty green islets that are dotted about in clusters on the Seine between Champrosay and Soisy, and wrestling with a friend, my foot slipped on the damp grass, and I broke my leg. My unfortunate love for athletic and violent exercise has already played me so many ugly tricks, that I should probably have forgotten this accident, as I have others, but

for its precise and memorable date: the 14th of July 1870! . . . I still see myself at the close of that sad day, lying on the sofa in the former studio of Eugène Delacroix, whose small house on the borders of the forest of Sénart we were then occupying. When my leg was stretched out, I hardly suffered, for already I felt the vague restlessness of increasing fever, exaggerating the sensation and heat of the stormy atmosphere, and enveloping all around me in a misty cloud, as it were, of shimmering gauze. To the accompaniment of the piano they were singing the choruses of Orphée, and no one, not even I, suspected how serious was my condition. Through the wide-open bay window in the studio came the sweet breath of the jasmine and roses, the beat of the night-moths, and the quick flashes of lightning showing up, above the low garden walls, the sloping vineyards, the Seine, and the rising ground opposite. Suddenly the stillness was broken by the sound of a bell; the evening papers are brought in and opened, and voices broken by emotion, anger, or enthusiasm exclaim: “War is declared!”

From this moment nothing remains to me but the feverish recollection of a state of languor lasting six weeks; of six weeks of bed, of splints, of cradle and plaster case, in which my leg seemed imprisoned in company with thousands of tormenting insects. During that hot summer, so exceptionally stormy and scorching, this inaction full of agitation was dreadful, and my anxiety, increased by the accounts of the public disasters which filled the papers that covered my bed, added to my restlessness and sleeplessness. At night the rumble of the distant trains disturbed me like the tread of endless battalions, and by day, pale and sad faces, scraps of conversations overheard in the road or at the neighbour’s, through my open window: “The Prussians are at Châlons, mother Jean,” and the vans at every moment raising clouds of dust in the quiet little village, lent a mundane and sinister echo to my perusal of “the news of the war.” Soon we were the only Parisians left at Champrosay, left alone with the peasants, obstinately attached to the land, and still refusing to admit the idea of an invasion. Directly I could leave my couch and be

moved, our departure was decided.

Never shall I forget my first outing in the little old-fashioned garden, filled with the perfume of ripe peaches and fading roses. Around me, poor invalid that I was, seated on the steps of a ladder laid against the fruited wall, they were hurrying on the departure, loading the vans, gathering the fruit and flowers in the unconscious preoccupation of leaving nothing for the enemy; even the child, with its arms full of toys, picking up a little spade forgotten in the grass.

As for me, I inhaled the fresh air with delight; and with an emotion caused by my weak state and my returning health, I gazed at the grey house, and at the red flowers covering the Virginian jessamine interwoven round the bay window of the studio. I thought of the happy hours, so soft and tranquil, spent there the last three years, the hearty laughter, the æsthetic discussions so thoroughly in harmony with the little home, full of the memories of a great artist. Should we ever behold again the sunny path so often slowly paced with short and chatty steps, the verandah where we sat in the fine June evenings, in the brightness of a flowery Spanish broom which, ball-shaped, seemed like an enormous lustre lighted up in the fading twilight, the richness of its golden colour deepening as the light decreased!

The family omnibus was filled up and loaded, all our cherished ones tightly pressed against each other, the child’s toys side by side with the parrokeet’s cage, the bird scared by the sharp-pointed ears of a favourite greyhound: we started, passing first through the little village with its closed and silent villas. The peasants still held out, although disturbed at the departures, watching them from their doorways with tears rising in their eyes, and a certain uneasiness depicted in the stolid cupidity of their countenances. What a return to Paris! The highway crowded with men and beasts, the sheep running loose between the wheels, the green of the market-gardeners’ carts mingling with the piled-up furniture in the vans. On the railway embankment, which lay on one side of our road, trucks upon trucks extending in interminable

rows, halting and whistling calls, which were answered and re-echoed on the distant line. And then at last the octroi, where the belated droves of cattle and people and vehicles are accumulated before the too narrow gateway, and—for me a novel sight—men of the National Guard mixed with the customs officers—a Parisian militia, full of zeal and good nature, whose bayonets shine amidst the crowd and in the sunshine on the slopes of the fortifications, now heightened by gabions and bristling with guns.

A few days later I again journeyed to Champrosay, but the road no longer presented the same aspect. The approach of the enemy, so long threatened and now imminent, could be felt by the deserted state of the suburbs, and the care displayed by our main-guards. Endless formalities were required in order to pass through. Amongst the loitering peasants might be seen the prowling figures of suspicious-looking spies, recalling the sinister plunderers of the battlefields; and the solitude, the agonised expectation of the districts I passed through—Villeneuve-Saint-Georges, Draveil—abandoned and silent, imparted a mystery to the very windings of the road, where one almost expected to see the shadow of an Uhlan vidette on the watch. Champrosay, with its solitary street bordered on each side by villas, seemed to grow larger in the death-like stillness: “Vasta silentio,” as Tacitus says. Glimpses of parks, caught sight of through the iron gates, a background of dark shrubberies in the distance, flower-beds glowing in the brightness of a September day, here and there a circle of garden chairs on a terrace, forgotten like the idle talk that has melted into thin air, garden tools leaning against the palings, all spoke of a rural existence hastily interrupted, a precipitate flight, the sudden surprise, in the midst of its life, of a small Pompeï, whose last hour has struck. But Nature, ever the same, was nevertheless undergoing a change; the broken bridge at Ris, that had been blown up, and whose loosened chains dipped into the water, transformed the landscape, isolating on each side of the river the two little districts hitherto united by the traffic to and fro over the toll-bridge. From all these scenes uprose the agonising sensation

of a great catastrophe, rendered more striking by the magnificent sun of an exceptionally fine season.

At the same moment, as I closed behind me the door of our now deserted dwelling, an aged peasant, old Casaquet, came out of a neighbouring house. When all the others had taken flight and run away, he alone obstinately refused to take refuge in Paris, where his family had settled themselves as best they could. “I’m much too old!” he said; and he had some potatoes, a little wine, a few hens, not to speak of the grunting porker he kept under his roof. I proposed bringing him away to rejoin his people. But he stubbornly stuck to his words: “I’m much too old!”

The recollection of this old Robinson Crusoe, the last living being I had seen at Champrosay, often crossed my mind during the terrible cold and famine of the siege. What had become of him, and of the whole village, which I pictured to myself burning and blazing; our house, our books, the piano, everything tarnished, broken, and laid waste by the invasion, like the suburban regions of Nogent, Champigny, Petit-Bry, and Courneuve, among whose sad ruins, villas with broken stairways and half-hanging shutters, I wandered every day? . . .

But no! When the war was over, and when, towards the end of the Commune, Paris becoming untenable, we came and took refuge at Champrosay, I had the pleasant surprise of finding almost everything in its habitually peaceful condition, with the exception of a few country-houses that the marauders had searched, and where they had, from pure love of destruction, destroyed the wainscoting and broken all the windows. The German army had passed through, but never made any lengthened stay. Hidden behind a clump of acacias, Delacroix’s house had been even more protected than others, and in the garden awakening in beauty to the smile of spring, I could breathe freely for the twofold deliverance from the siege and from the winter. I was walking along the flower borders, when old Casaquet’s face peered over the garden wall, and he beamed upon me with his old wrinkled visage. Over him, too,

the invasion had passed without leaving a trace. “I didn’t suffer too much . . . ” he said, twinkling his eyes, and standing on a ladder with his elbows resting on the trellis; and then he related how he had borne this period of exile and solitude. It had been a real time of feasting. There were no keepers in the forest, he cut as much wood as he liked (a treasure much coveted by the peasant); with a few poachers who had taken refuge at the Hermitage he snared roedeer and pheasants; and whenever an isolated Prussian, an orderly or straggler, was found in the vicinity of the quarries, he was quietly and quickly despatched. During four months he lived without any other news from Paris but the sound of the distant cannonading, and the occasional sight of an inflated balloon floating beneath the dark sky.

Meeting with Casaquet again This quiet, ant-like existence on the surface of the earth amidst the overthrow of a world was most extraordinary. I too could have lived there like the old peasant, reduced to the same expedients of primitive life; and this different view of war appeared to me an appropriate setting for a melancholy picture of the invasion. That very evening I began in the large studio taking notes for “Robert Helmont’s Diary of a Recluse;” while the passing to and fro under my windows of the German cavalry patrols, still encamped on the edge of the country, the clashing of swords and jingling of curb-chains, the rough Saxon voices harshly raised in command, mingled with the thunder of the cannons. All this indeed formed part of “my diary.” My feelings were still more excited on the following day by all the sad details of the military occupation—the roads dark with troops, the halting and the bivouacking by the side of the ditches. To escape from the humiliating sensations of the vanquished, I wandered into the woods, lovely in this month of April: a tender green clothed the branches of the trees, the grass was gemmed with the bloom of wild hyacinths, and the warbling of the birds and the song of the nightingale were interrupted by the distant tearing sound of the mitrailleuse. Sometimes, at the turn of a quiet path, I saw coming toward me under the arching boughs, a sentimental Saxon colonel, slowly pacing on his charger the lanes and

trysting-places cherished by Louis XV. and Madame de Pompadour. Then I plunged into the recesses of the deepest thickets, for these encounters gave me a revulsion of feeling which I can hardly explain. It was thus that I lived the diary of Robert Helmont at the same time that I wrote it.

This little book was published by Dentu in the Musée Universal of 1873; but it met with little success. It told no story, and contained no interesting or continued narrative; it was merely a succession of landscapes, portraying the melancholy of our invaded summer haunts. In the new edition of my complete works published by Dentu-Charpentier, “Robert Helmont” is placed at the end of the second volume of “Jack,” and it finds there its proper place, describing as it does the same forest of Sénart, the Hermitage, and the Pacôme Gate, where I knew the hero of my novel “Jack,” and recalling to life a few of the same characters.

Abandoned garden chairs

Rural scene

The Hermitage, September 3rd.

It is six weeks yesterday since I broke my leg. It happened on the very day war was declared. While M. de Grammont was exciting so much tumult and enthusiasm in the Senate, I myself, on returning from net-fishing in the Seine, stumbled over a stake hidden in the grass at the edge of the river, and was brought home to my Hermitage in the forest of Snart in a woodcutter’s cart . . .

I went out this morning for the first time after fifty days of fever and suffering, increased by the news of the war. I had nightmares of distant battles, and the sinister despatches from Forbach and Reischhoffen remain mixed up in my mind with the pain of my wound, the heat of the plaster casing, and that restless inactivity which is the most cruel of all tortures. At last it is over! After having seen nothing for so long but the tops of the trees, and those great stretches of blue sky of which the monotony is only broken by passing wings, I felt quite happy at putting my feet to the ground

and getting down my stairs with faltering steps. But how weak I was! My head swam round. From having remained so long in the same position, my leg had forgotten its proper balance and functions. It seemed no longer part of myself, as if I were no longer master of it. However, with slow steps, and the extreme nervousness which augments one's weakness, I was able to get to the poultry-yard and push open its little latticed door, half buried in the tall grass. Even this gave me a thrill of pleasure! During my absence, my neighbour, the keeper's wife, has taken good care of all this little family, who watch me with an astonished, bright, and familiar gaze. The rabbits come tumbling over each other to the edge of their hutches, with their ears pricked up and quivering. The hens go on with their ceaseless pecking in the grass, making sharp sounds like those of little pickaxes. The cock, more demonstrative, flaps his large wings with a resounding "cock-a-doodle-do."

Robert up and about again Presently I returned and seated myself on the old, worn, green-coloured stone bench, which, with the wall full of gaps and two or three apple-trees covered with moss, date from the time when my house and the orchards surrounding it were part of an old monastery built in the middle of the forest . . . Never had my garden appeared so beautiful to me. The fruit-trees against the wall, rather stripped of their leaves, were laden with ripe peaches and golden bunches. The currant-bushes, spread out in thin clumps, were dotted here and there with sparks of red; and under the autumn sun, that ripens each berry, bursts each pod, and sheds each grain, the sparrows pursued one another with unequal flights, while youthful twitterings among them show how their numbers have been increased by the young broods. From time to time the heavy flight of a pheasant passed over the ruined wall, alighting in a field of buckwheat. At the top of a tall tree a squirrel was playing and cracking nuts. The gentle heat which pervaded the whole scene threw a wonderful feeling of repose over this little rustic corner. I had forgotten the Prussians and the invasion . . . Suddenly the keeper and his wife came in. It was astonishing to see old Guillard at the Hermitage in the daytime—he, the constant

rover of the forest! I understood that there must be fresh news.

“Read that, Mr. Robert, said the good man”

—Read that, Mr. Robert . . . said the good man.

And drawing from beneath his thick velveteen waistcoat a copy of the National, crumpled and awkwardly folded by hands little accustomed to deal with papers, he held it out to me with an air of dismay. On the first sheet, bordered in black, were the sinister words: “The French army has capitulated.” I could not read any farther . . .

. . . Dazed, with closed eyes, for the space of five minutes I seemed to see nothing but those few words, surrounded by flashes of light and colour, as if I had read them on a white wall in the full glare of the sun. Alas! there was therefore no hope. The last barrier had broken down. It was the invasion, the mighty one . . . The keeper thinks that in eight days the Prussians will be here.

—Ah, my dear sir, you should see the block on the roads. Between this and Paris there is a mob of cattle and vehicles. Every one is packing up and flying. Champrosay is empty; Farmer Goudeloup is the only person who will not hear of leaving. He has sent away his wife and children, loaded his two guns, and is ready.

Civilians evacuating their homes

—And you, Guillard, what do you intend doing?

—I, sir? I shall do the same as Goudeloup. Our chiefs have forgotten to leave us any orders. I shall take advantage of that to remain at my post, and watch my woods up to the last moment. When the Prussians come, we will barricade ourselves in the Hermitage; for I suppose, with your bad leg, you will not think of leaving. And then, if we are attacked—well, we will defend ourselves. You will fire through the windows; I shall guard the Pacôme Gate, and Mother Guillard will load the guns . . . Won’t you, mother? . . .

Robert, after hearing the bad news

Good fellow! It warmed my heart to hear him. In spite of his sixty years, the Indian, as they call him about here, with his high stature, wide shoulders, and bright eyes full of mischief and life, is still a fine-looking soldier. I thought, as I looked at him, that with such a companion there might indeed be something to do. By lying in ambush on the outskirts of the forest he knows so thoroughly, we could demolish a few passing Prussians. But then the sensation of my weakness, of my useless condition, suddenly came back to me and overwhelmed me.

After the keeper and his wife had taken leave of me, I remained all alone, seated on my bench, buried in thought. What a state of misery is mine! To feel that craving for action and vital energy that comes on at the approach of danger, and not to be able to take ten steps in my garden. How much longer will this last? The doctor says I must expect at least two months of it. Two months! Ah! how dreadful . . . The air was getting chilly, my leg was hurting me. I went in and dined sadly. After dinner the keeper came—as he has done every evening since my accident—to smoke a pipe with me. He is more than ever determined to remain at the Hermitage. While he was telling me all his plans and schemes of defence, I heard in the distance, through the open window, the usual sounds of twilight; the wheels creaking in the ruts, the rumbling of the train, the rustling of the leaves in the thickets; and at moments another sound, as of all these blended together and increasing in volume, seemed to rise from the ground, following the course of the river and little hills on the horizon, to grow gradually louder and louder. It was like the tramp of an army on the march, hurrying on in the fading light to find their halting-place, while the first rays of moonlight fall on the barrels of the guns and the gilded spikes of the helmets . . .

Suddenly a dull report on a level with the earth made us start. Mother Guillard, who was clearing away my modest repast, felt the pile of plates she was carrying shake in her hands.

—They have blown up the bridge at Corbeil! . . . said the keeper.

The pretty country village, where I had so often breakfasted before a day's shooting, seemed to be sixty miles farther away . . . For a moment we all three looked blankly at each other. At last old Guillard rose from his seat, took up his gun and his lantern, muttering between his teeth:

—I am going to close the Pacôme gate, he said, with an heroic gesture.

Close the Pacôme gate! It seemed easy to say; and yet I fancy the good fellow will find some difficulty in doing it. For the last century the old door of the cloister has been ajar; the forest has taken advantage of the aperture to slip through, and the indiscreet brambles have climbed in by all the cracks of its disjointed planks. If we have to undergo a siege, I do not rely much on that gate.

The Corbeil bridge

The Hermitage

September 5th.

. . . Long had I sought a solitary corner, not too far away from Paris, and yet not much frequented by Parisians. One day, while crossing the forest of Sénart, I discovered the Hermitage, and for the last ten years I have spent all my summers there. It was a monastery of "Cordeliers," burnt down in '93. The four principal walls remain standing, but mouldering and crumbling at intervals, making on the turf, heaps of red stone quickly re-clothed by a rich and luxuriant vegetation: poppies, barley, stiff-growing plants with regular and pointed leaves, are divided by the stones like inlaid metal-work. One gateway looks on the road; the other, that famous Pacôme gate, opens on to the wooded thickets and the little hidden paths, full of balsam and wild mint, where, on a misty morning, I have often fancied I saw disappear, the hood of some old monk gathering wild herbs. Here and there along the wall, low postern gates, disused for many a century, send through the darkness of the forest long rays of light, as if the cloister contained all the sunlight of the

woods.

Gateway to the Hermitage

Inside is waste land, with burnt-up grass, little gardens belonging to the peasants, some orchards divided by trellis-work, and two or three houses built of that red stone that is found in the quarries of the wood.

Robert’s workroom in the Hermitage

The forester lives in one of these houses, the other is never let. Mine, a kind of irregular and curious turret, is chiefly remarkable for the Virginian creeper that completely covers it. I have cut away just enough of it to be able to open my windows. Leaving untouched the great worm-eaten beams in the kitchen and the worn step on the threshold, I contented myself with heightening a hayloft under the roof, replacing the walls by glass, and thus making a beautiful studio, where my only neighbours are the nests of the wood-pigeon and magpie swaying to and fro on the top of the trees.

When I am there, the forest surrounds me like an ocean, with the swell of the foliage, the ebb and flow of the breezes, the murmuring softness of a calm. On a summer’s afternoon, at the hour of silent and slumbering heat, a bumble-bee comes by regularly, dashes against my half-open window-pane, whose brightness attracts him, then like a rebounding ball goes off, shaking the golden dust from his big wings, and disappears amongst the honey-scented bushes of privet. This bee is my clock. When he passes by I say: “Ah, it is two o’clock.” And I am right . . .

It is, in fact, a wonderful nook for work, and where my best pictures have been painted. And how I love it, this old Hermitage! For the last ten years I have been adorning it to the best of my ability. I have brought there what I call my treasures—my books, my sketches, my etchings, and some old armour . . . And now I should have to leave all this, abandon my home, to these robbers. And what for? To go and shut myself up in Paris . . . But as I cannot walk, of what use should I be

to them there? They have too many useless mouths to feed already . . .

Well, no! Decidedly the fellow is right. We must not go away from here, . . . Pro aris et focis! . . .

Not being able to defend my country, the least I can do is to defend my hearth.

Fowl pecking in the yard

. . the keeper came in to my room.

September 6th.

This morning the keeper came into my room. He wore his full-dress uniform, as on the 15th of August: green tunic, peaked cap, cross-belt, hunting-knife, and he had an air of importance befitting the solemnity of his appearance.

—There is bad news, he said, taking up a position by the side of my bed . . . All the wood-rangers are recalled to Paris in order to be enrolled with the customs officers. We are starting almost immediately.

Honest old Guillard! He appeared somewhat agitated while talking to me, and I was myself rather disturbed by the sudden announcement of this departure. I hurriedly dressed, and we went downstairs. On the road below was the head-keeper, with about twenty foresters and keepers—the whole of the staff on duty in the forest. Then came the women, children, and pointers, and two large carts laden with furniture, rabbit-hutches, and chickens tied up by the legs. The door of the house was wide open, and Mother Guillard moved to and fro inside, seeking what she must leave or take, as the conveyances were full, and the first-comers had taken up all the available space. The perplexity of the poor housewife was a sight to see, as she ran from one piece of furniture to another, dragging a heavy cupboard to the door, then leaving it there, forgetting the most useful things, but lading herself with those of no value, except that they were souvenirs: the old clock with its glass shade, some marvellous portraits, a hunting-horn, a distaff, all of them covered with dust—that excellent dust that clings to family relics, and of which each particle speaks of youth

and the happy days gone by.

—I trust you are not going to remain here, Mr. Robert, the good woman called out as she crossed the orchard . . . You shall be put on a cart.

And in order to convince me more thoroughly:

—In the first place, if you remain here, who will cook for you?

In reality the good creatures were rather ashamed of leaving me behind. Their departure, although involuntary, seemed to them somewhat of a betrayal on their part. I tried to reassure them on my account, and to reassure myself at the same time. After all, who knows? The Prussians may not come so far. Moreover, the Hermitage is in the heart of the forest, and out of the line of march. There was therefore not the slightest danger to be apprehended. At most a few days of solitude, and that did not alarm me.

Seeing me so thoroughly determined, the keeper pressed my hand.

—Good luck, Mr. Robert . . . My wife will leave you our keys. You will find wine and potatoes in the cellar. Take what you choose. We will settle on our return home . . . And now, good mother, let us start; and above all, you know what I said to you; try not to cry.

She, however, nearly broke down. On turning the key for the last time in the lock, her hand shook. She compressed her lips . . . At that moment a formidable hee-haw! echoed through the Hermitage. The keeper and his wife looked at each other in consternation.

—It is Colaquet! . . . What is to become of him?

Colaquet, the donkey The unfortunate Colaquet, whom they had forgotten in the hurry of departure, was their donkey, a pretty little grey donkey, with a bright and artless look. A few days before, it had been bitten on the muzzle by a viper, and it had been turned out to graze in a little field of after-grass; and there he was, looking

at his masters going away, leaning his swollen head, which gave him the appearance of one of the beasts of the Apocalypse, over the hedge.

How could they take him? He would die on the road, and yet the veterinary surgeon had promised to cure him. The fate of the poor animal, rather resembling my own, touched my heart.

. . the keeper pressed my hand.

I promised to take care of Colaquet, and to put him into the stable every night. The good people thanked me, and we parted.

Mother Guillard leaving her home A sad parting! The carts, heavy and overloaded, slowly followed the wide forest road, grinding on the pebbles as they went along. The children were running on each side, excited by the unexpected journey. The men, in single file, skirted the edge of the wood, their guns on their shoulders, all of them old soldiers, well trained and disciplined. Behind them the dogs followed, hanging their heads uneasily, hardly straying even to listen to the flight of a hen-pheasant, or to sniff the trace of a rabbit. Domestic animals do not like changing their quarters, and these were following in the track of the carts, now become their wandering homes. Mother Guillard came last, holding in her hand her magpie’s large cage, and from time to time looking back.

Seated on the curbstone near the principal entrance, I watched them till the whole party disappeared from my sight in the narrowing perspective of the road. I saw the last glance on the gun-barrels, I heard the grinding of the last wheel, and the dust of the highway swallowed them up in a cloud . . .

It was all over. I was alone. This thought has given me an unaccountable sensation of uneasiness.

Looking along the empty road

Robert alone in the Hermitage garden

September 7th, 8th and 9th.

This new kind of life would not be without its charm, were it not disturbed by a sensation of anxiety, of uneasiness, of constant expectation, suspending all thought, and rendering all artistic work an impossibility. I can only undertake those trivial occupations, those necessary details of everyday life, of which I have always had such a horror, and to which I must resign myself now that I am my own servant. Shall I confess it? These trifles do not really weary me very much, and I understand recluses amusing themselves by carving roots or weaving baskets. Manual labour is a good means of regulating life for those who have too much leisure and liberty. Therefore every morning I begin by paying a visit to the poultry-yard, and when I feel the warmth of an egg in the straw, I am happy. Then, walking slowly, and leaning on a stick, I go round the garden, picking the ripe fruit; and from the long, dry, sunburnt stalks I gather the beans, whose pods burst open and shed their contents through my fingers. It is laughable to see me seated in front of my door, cutting up the bread for my soup, or washing my salad in a bucket. All these things give me rather a childish comfort; but is not convalescence itself like childhood?—a fresh beginning of life.

In order to avoid going up and down the broken and irregular steps of the staircase, I have placed my bed in the large room on the ground floor, which therefore answers the purpose of drawing-room, bed-room, and kitchen. In this very mild weather, the door leading into the garden remains wide open all day. I hear the noise of the hens, always busy and cackling, their little claws pattering on the sand and scratching up the straw. Next door, in the keeper’s small field, I see poor Colaquet stretched out, shaking off the flies, and, with the idleness of an invalid, lolling out his tongue in front of him on the meadow, all purple with the thousand clusters of lucern. When evening comes on, with some difficulty he approaches the fence that divides us. I also drag myself there. I bathe his wound, renew the water, throw a rug over his back for the night, and he thanks me by shaking his long ears.

What really distresses me in my present state of suffering is having to fetch water from the old convent well, just at the end of the enclosure.

When I reach it, I am obliged to sit down for a moment on the edge of the cracked stonework, overgrown by rank weeds. The ornamental wrought ironwork, of an elegant and ancient style, appears, under the rust that tarnishes it, like climbing tendrils laid bare by the autumn. This melancholy is in complete harmony with the deep silence of the Hermitage, and the atmosphere of loneliness that surrounds me . . . The bucket is heavy. On returning I stop two or three times. Over there, at the far end, there is an old door that the wind keeps slamming. The noise of my footsteps echoes, and troubles me . . .

Oh, solitude! . . .

Robert plodding back with the bucket

Robert breakfasting on the lawn

September 10th.

. . . I had just finished breakfasting on the lawn—on my word, an excellent breakfast too!—fresh eggs, and grapes gathered from my beautiful purple vine. I was sitting there, idly dreaming, basking in the light, warmth, and silence, very busy looking at the smoke of my pipe and at my painted plates, on which a stray wasp was furiously attacking the emptied stalks. Around me on that clear autumn day, under a deep and pure blue sky, even more beautiful than the summer skies so often veiled and dimmed by hot mists, I felt the same hush of Nature, the same all-pervading sense of peace . . . When suddenly a formidable explosion in my immediate vicinity shook the house, rattled the windows, and stirred the leaves, sending forth on all sides the sound of wild flutterings, screams, alarms, and galloping . . . This time it was not the bridge at Corbeil that was blown up, but our own, our little bridge at Champrosay. It meant: “The Prussians are here!” Immediately my heart stood still, and a veil seemed to pass over the sunlight. Then the thought crossed my mind that to-morrow,

this evening maybe, the forest roads would be invaded, darkened by these wretches; that I should be compelled to bury myself alive, and never stir out again. And I longed to see once more my beloved forest, of which I had been deprived for the last two months.

The lanes in the woods were lovely, widened by freedom from the long summer weeds, and showing at the top, through the young branches, a long ray of light. At the cross-roads, bathed in sunlight, the faded pink heather was flowering in tufts; and in the thickets, among the black stems, like a small forest beneath a large one, the ferns displayed their microscopic trees with their peculiar foliage. What a silence! Generally a thousand vague sounds greeted me from afar: the trains passing by and marking the distant horizon, the digging of the quarrymen, the cart-wheels slowly turning in the ruts, the strident call-whistle of the gang. And to-day, not a sound—not even that perpetual murmur which seems like the breathing of a slumbering forest—that stir of the leaves, that humming of the insects, that pretty "frrrt!" like the unfolding of a fan, made by birds among the foliage. It seemed as if the loud report just now had stupefied all Nature.

Slightly weary, I had seated myself under a thick oak-tree, when I heard a rustling in the branches. At last! . . . I expected to see a hare or a roedeer scamper across the path; but through the parted bushes, about ten paces from me on the road, jumped a big fellow, dressed all in black, with his gun on his shoulder, a revolver in his belt, and his head covered by a large Tyrolese hat. I was startled. I thought it was some Bavarian or Saxon rifleman. It was, however, a Parisian franc-tireur. At that time there were some twenty of them in the forest, retreating day by day before the Prussians, lying in ambush to watch their line of march, and to knock over from time to time an Uhlan of the advance-guard. While the man was talking to me, his comrades, coming out of the coppice, joined us. They were nearly all old soldiers, working-men from the faubourgs of Paris. I took them back to the Hermitage, and made them drink a few bottles of wine.

The blown bridge of Champrosay

They told me the Prince of Saxony's division had reached Montereau, one stage distant from here. I learnt also from them about the defensive operations begun round Paris—the organisation of the troops; and to hear them speak with such calm, such confidence, and especially hearing their Parisian accent, warmed my heart. Ah, brave fellows! if I could only have gone off with them, stuck on my head their ridiculous headgear, and fought in their ranks, under the walls of the good city! . . . But, alas! to have walked merely twenty steps in the woods had swollen my leg, and I was in pain. Ah, well! I was grieved when they left me. They are probably the last Frenchmen that I shall see for some time . . .

They left at dusk, cheered by my sour wine. I gave them a hen, . . . they carried off four . . .

Robert meets the first franc-tireur

. . they carried off four

Colaquet grazing

September 11th.

No news.

September 12th.

Still no news. What can be going on? Are they forced to retire? Really, this suspense is unbearable.

September 13th.

I have only bread enough for two days. I found this out in the morning, on opening the chest where Mother Guillard placed my week's provisions—six large floury and golden loaves, that she baked for me every Sunday. What shall I do? I have, it is true, an oven and a kneading-trough, but not an atom of flour. Perhaps I should find some at the farm at Champrosay, if Goudeloup has remained there as he intended.

But how can I get so far in my present weak condition? Seated on my garden bench in front of my door, I was absorbed in these melancholy thoughts, when I heard the sound of an animal galloping in the keeper's field. It was Colaquet. Colaquet, generally so lazy, was gambolling round the orchard, kicking up little tufts of grass with his hoofs and rolling over on his back, with a feeling of satisfaction and pleasure in living. In two bounds he came at my call, and leant his head, no longer swollen, but now of normal size, on the wooden trellis; the rapid motion of his long ears, whose language I am beginning to understand, telling me of his happiness at being free and delivered from his pain and infirmity. Lucky Colaquet! he is cured before I am; and while I looked at him with an envious eye, I remembered that there—over there, under the shed—was an old conveyance that Guillard formerly used on fête-days to drive parties of Parisians through the forest. If I harnessed Colaquet, we might go and fetch some flour . . . So I set to work rummaging under the shed. Amongst the rusty pickaxes, hay-rakes, and dilapidated harrows I finally discovered a worm-eaten spring-cart, forgotten and unused, its two shafts lying on the ground. By means of some pieces of rope and a few nails I put it into a tolerable state of repair. It occupied me till the evening; but what an interesting piece of work! I was amused in turning over those old nails, those worn-out pegs. Once or twice I surprised myself by whistling over my work. Pretty cool, considering I was expecting the Prussians . . . Now everything is ready, the cart and the team. To-morrow morning, if in the meanwhile nothing happens, we shall start for Champrosay!

The old spring-cart

The farm work-shop

On the road to Champrosay

September 14th.

I have made a compact with myself to keep a very exact diary of the strange and

terrible life I have been drawn into; if I have many days as exciting and tragic as this, I shall never be able to live through them. My hand shakes, my brain is on fire. However, I must make the attempt . . .

At first starting all went well. The weather was beautiful. I had placed a bundle of hay in the cart, and although Colaquet's eyelids were still swollen from the bite, he managed to take us tolerably straight—he had so often made this journey, carrying bundles of linen to the riverside. In spite of the slight jolting, I found the drive delightful. Not the point of a helmet nor the glitter of a gun-barrel to be seen. Only, on arriving at Champrosay, the deep silence that had so impressed me in the woods appeared still more striking. The peasants' cottages hardly seemed to me the same: no pigeons on the roofs, the doors closed, and the courtyards deserted. The silent belfry of the little church, with its defaced dial, stood above like a faithful guardian. Farther on, all the villas along the road, their grounds extending to the forest, were also carefully shut up. Their summer wealth of flowers continued to bloom, and, under the shade of the clipped trees, the yellow sandy paths were but lightly strewn with a few dead leaves. Nothing could give a more vivid idea of sudden departure and flight than the sight of these deserted houses, decked out as usual behind their high iron gates. There seemed still a kind of quiver and warmth of life; and at times, at the turn of the path, visions rose up in my mind of straw hats, upraised parasols, and of goats tethered on the grass-plots in their accustomed place.

Colaquet managed to take us tolerably straight

What, however, really seemed deathlike was the road, the highroad to Corbeil, that I had left so full of life, with a continual flow of vans, mail-coaches, market-gardeners' carts, perambulating poultry-yards full of cackle and prattle; carriages borne along through the whirlwind of their own speed, on which float, even in the calmest weather, the veils and ribbons of the occupants; and the tall waggons laden with fresh hay and scythes and pitchforks, casting long shadows

across the road. And now nothing and no one. In the filled-up ruts the dust has the still look of fallen snow, and the two wheels of my spring-cart glide on noiselessly. At the end of the village the farm appears in the distance, closed, and silent from the foot of its walls to the highest tile of its tall dark roof. Has Goudeloup also taken flight? . . . Here I am before the gateway. I knock—I call. A window above the dairy opens cautiously, and I see the cunning, somewhat unkempt head of the farmer appear, with his untrimmed beard, and his small round, suspicious eyes hidden under bushy eyebrows.

—Ah! it is you, Mr. Robert . . . Wait a moment. I am coming down.

Goudeloup appears at a window

Together we enter the little, low room where the carters, harvesters, and threshers usually come in the evening to receive their day's pay. In a corner I perceive two loaded guns.

—You see, says Goudeloup, I am ready for them . . . If they leave me alone, I shall not stir . . . But if they are imprudent enough to meddle with the farm . . . Let them beware!

The shattered Champrosay bridge

We were talking in low tones, as if in an enemy's country. He let me have a few loaves and a sack of flour; then having loaded my cart, we parted, promising each other soon to meet again, . . . Poor man!

Before returning home, no traces of Prussians being visible, I was tempted to go down the lane which passes under the walls of the farm and leads to the Seine. It was the whim of an artist. A river is the soul of a landscape. Animating the scene with its ceaseless movement, it gives life to all the changes of the day, and imparts grandeur to Nature by the reflection of its mirrored banks, and of glowing sunsets sinking into tranquil depths of liquid fire. Now its water faithfully reflects the surrounding melancholy. The shattered bridge, the crumbling piers piled up on

either side in white heaps of stone, the iron chains dangling in the river, all this seems like a great rent in the landscape, the cruel work of the invader. No boats, no rafts—the river has returned to its wild, natural state, its surface furrowed by unfettered currents and swirling pools eddying round the ruins of the broken bridge, and bearing on its way nothing but drifting tufts of grass and roots, on which the water-wagtail, wearied out with its long flight, abandons itself to the course of the stream. On the slopes of each bank the corn and vines still stand, and the newly-mown fields are yet overshadowed by the high haycocks; a whole harvest lost and left to its fate . . .

I had stood there for a moment looking at this scene of disaster, when I heard two shots, followed by shrieks and groans, which seemed to come from the direction of the farm. I hastened to see what was the matter, and as I approached the cries of "Help—Help" were redoubled. I recognised the voice of the farmer amongst others raised in anger, a hideous jargon of sound. I whip up Colaquet, but the hill is steep and Colaquet moves not. One would almost say he was afraid. He lays back his ears and runs up against the wall; besides this, the road takes a turn, and I cannot see what is taking place on the highroad above. Suddenly, through a breach in the wall that the fall of the neighbouring bridge has made, as if expressly for me, the whole interior of the farm comes into view: the yard, the sheds, men, horses, helmets, long lances, flour sacks burst open, an unhorsed cavalry soldier lying before the well at full length in a pool of blood, and the unfortunate Goudeloup, pale, scared, a hideous object, howling and struggling between two gigantic Uhlans, who have tied a rope round his neck, and are about to swing him up by the pulley outside his hayloft. It is impossible to describe my sensations. I am filled with feelings of indignation, pity, horror, and anger . . . I forget that I am wounded and unarmed. I prepare to spring over the breach and throw myself on these wretches . . . But my foot slips . . . I hear something like the snap of a stick in my leg, followed by horrible pain. Everything goes round with me, the yard, the sheds, the pulley . . .

Uhlans hanging Goudeloup

When I recovered consciousness, I was lying stretched on the hay in my cart before the gate of the Hermitage. The sun was setting and the wood was still. Colaquet was quietly nibbling the grass from out of the cracks in the wall. How had I got home? How had I been able to avoid the Uhlans, who swarmed on the highway. Perhaps Colaquet had the idea of coming across country and reaching the forest by the quarry road? . . . And, in truth, the good creature proudly tossed his head and moved his ears, as if to say, “I have saved you from a dangerous pass!” . . . I was in great pain, and it really required some courage to step out of the cart, unharness the donkey, and go into the house. I thought I had for the second time broken my leg. However, after an hour’s rest, I was able to rise, take a little food, and write these few pages. The pain is already less sharp, and nothing remains but a great weariness . . . Nevertheless, I do not think I shall sleep much to-night. I know they are prowling around me, that they are still there, and I have seen them at work . . . Oh! that unfortunate peasant, murdered in his farmyard, dragging himself, clutching at the walls! . . .

Gate at the Hermitage

Prussians on the march

September 20th.

From the four corners of the horizon, in the murmur of the distant road, which the passing wind quickly snatches up and bears to my ears, there is a ceaseless and confused rumbling, a noise as of the heavy and monotonous sound of waves, which, enveloping the whole forest, slowly flows on towards Paris, to die away at the point where the wide roads are lost in the immense encompassing zone. Till now the inundating masses have spared me, and here I remain cowering in the Hermitage, listening to the advancing tide, like a shipwrecked man on a rock surrounded by the sea.

Cavalry patrols close by

Luckily for me, if the country is invaded, it is not yet regularly occupied by the troops. They pass through and do not make any stay. Nevertheless, two or three times I have heard at night the cavalry patrols skirt the walls of the Hermitage. Often, when the shooting season was near, the forest rangers would thus pass by, pausing for an instant under the gateway to call out a loud “Good-night” to the keeper’s little home. The dogs would bark and sniff at the kennel railings, then a door opened, and old Guillard brought out a large jug of sparkling wine, in which a ray of moonlight danced, and without dismounting they drank it down. How different from these ghostly patrols, whose very approach makes my heart beat! They pass by in silence. Only from time to time the clink of a sword, the neigh of a horse, a few low-spoken words in a harsh and barbarous language, jar on the stillness of the air. This effectually drives away sleep for the rest of the night.

“Old Guillard brought out a large jug of sparkling wine.” In the daytime the clear, shrill notes of the bugles come in gusts to the little garden, with the beating of dull and discordant drums, marking the tune in a jerky, singular rhythm, which seems to accompany a cannibal’s war-dance. It is to the sound of these barbarous drums that all the northern races, the Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, are advancing over our magnificent roads of the Ile-de-France, the glorious autumn weather dazzling them by the unaccustomed brilliancy of its sun and sky. During this time I live as unobtrusively as possible. I no longer light my fire, in order to avoid the smoke which gives light and life to the roof. I do not even go out into the orchard. I am sure that already the grass is growing across my threshold, and that the invading forest is hemming me closely in. Lastly, by way of precaution, I have killed my cock. That was a cruel sacrifice. I like that abrupt awakening at dawn, that call to life and work, which the cock gives forth to the surrounding country, drawing himself up for the battle with a great flapping of wings. But the Prussians might have heard him . . . Now I have only three or four quiet and silent hens in my poultry-yard, and a few

rabbits, who are not likely to betray me.

. . I have killed my cock

Robert writing by the light of a small fire

September 21st, 22d, and 23d.

I am writing this at night, by the glimmer of a small turf-fire—a sort of brazier burning on the flags in a corner of the room. I have neither oil nor candles. It is raining. On all sides of the Hermitage I hear the water streaming over miles of foliage. The wind blows. My revolver and a gun loaded with buckshot are ready by my side, and I await the return of the ruffians, for they have already been here.

Their first visit took place three days ago, in the afternoon of the 21st. The sound of heavy steps on the pavement of the cloister made me peep out of my attic window, and I saw five or six hulking fellows in forage-caps, with ruddy faces and low, brutal countenances, like those of Goudeloup's murderers. They spoke in hushed voices, timidly advancing, like cowardly plunderers. If I had been able to fire at them, I should have put them to flight, but once the alarm given, they would return in greater numbers. I waited. Owing to the neglected look of the house, and thanks to the vines and ivy, that gave it the aspect of a ruin, the ruffians have passed by without stopping. And yet the last of them bent down for a moment to the keyhole. Standing behind my door, revolver in hand, I heard his breathing while I held my own breath. Perhaps he had caught sight of the glimmer of the dying cinders of my fire. However that may be, the wretch did not go away, and began to rummage in my keyhole with his bayonet. Fortunately his comrades called out to him:—Hartmann . . . Hartman . . .

Enemy soldier trying the keyhole

He went off to rejoin them, and I was able to look into the enclosure through the attic window.

"They began drinking out of their caps.

They had just broken open the door of the keeper's house. Poor mother Guillard! it was indeed lost trouble to have given me her key. Soon after, shouts of joy told me that they had discovered the cellar. They brought out a barrel of wine into the orchard, so as to drink it more at their ease, and hoisted it on to a wide stone bench. Having staved in the barrel, they began drinking out of their caps and hands, shouting and jostling each other. The bent heads disappeared in the cask, and came out smeared with dregs, while others greedily took their place. The thin new wine, made of small, sour black grapes, soon intoxicated all these beer-drinkers. Some of them sang and danced round the barrel, while the others re-entered the keeper's house, and as they found nothing tempting there to satisfy their craving for pillage, they threw the furniture out of the window, and set fire to a walnut cupboard, whose dry and time-worn shelves blazed up like a bundle of straw. At last they went off, reeling through the driving rain. In front of the gateway there was a quarrel. I saw the flash of bayonets, a man fall heavily into the mud and rise up again covered with blood, his uniform all stained with the yellow-coloured soil of the quarries. And to think that France is at the mercy of these brutes! . . .

The next day the same party returned. I understood by that, they had not mentioned their windfall, and I was a little reassured. However, I am a complete prisoner. I dare not stir from the principal room. Near at hand, in a little wood-shed, I have fastened up Colaquet, whose galloping might have betrayed me. The poor animal patiently bears his captivity, sleeps part of the day, and at times gives himself a good shake, surprised at the loss of his freedom . . . At dusk the Prussians depart, more intoxicated than on the evening before.

To-day I have seen no one. But the cask is not yet empty, and I expect them again.

Plundered wine-barrels

Prussians firing on Paris

September 24th.

. . . This morning a furious cannonading is taking place. They are fighting before Paris. The siege is begun. It has given me a feeling of pain and anger impossible to describe. They are firing on Paris, the wretches! It is the intellect of the whole world that they attack. Oh, why am I not there with the others? . . .

Instantaneously all yesterday's apprehensions have vanished. I became ashamed of my mole-like existence. For the last week I have drunk nothing but the water from the cistern, but now, I hardly know wherefore, I went out on purpose to fill my jug at the cloister well, and it seemed to do me good to run some kind of risk. I looked into the Guillards' house as I passed by, and my anger increased at the sight of this humble home ruthlessly pillaged, the furniture destroyed and burnt, the window-panes broken. I could not help thinking of the fate of Paris if they enter it . . .

Robert peering through his window I had just closed my door when I heard footsteps in the enclosure. It was one of those rascals who came the other day, the identical one who had so long rummaged at my lock. He looked if there was any wine left in the cask, and then, having filled his flask, began drinking, sprawling at full length on the stone bench, his head resting on his hands. He sang while drinking; his young fresh voice rang through the cloister with a song about the month of May, in which the words—Mein lieb, lieb Mai—were constantly repeated. He was just opposite my attic window, within easy reach of my revolver. I looked at him for a long time, asking myself if I should kill him. In the direction of Paris the cannon still thundered, filling my heart with terrible anguish . . . After all, perhaps by killing this fellow I should be saving some of my own people now fighting on the ramparts . . .

Soldier drinking and singing

I do not know whether my unseen glance and the intense hatred I was feeling towards him, did not at last disturb him and put him on his guard; but all of a sudden he raised his head, a head covered with thick bristling hair, the eyes of an albino,

and red moustaches, showing a grinning set of cruel-looking teeth. For one moment he threw a suspicious glance around him, and having rebuckled his belt and refilled his flask, he went off. As he passed in front of my window, I had my finger on the trigger. Well, no; I could not do it. To kill for the sake of killing, with such certainty, and so little personal danger, was beyond me. It is not such an easy thing as one fancies, to take a fellow-creature's life in cold blood.

Once outside the precincts of the Hermitage, and having shaken off his undefined sensation of fear, the rascal again took up his song, and I heard him getting farther and farther away, giving forth to the forest his "Mein lieb, lieb Mai . . ."

Sing away, sing away, my lad! you have had a narrow escape of never seeing again your sweet month of May . . .

Soldier walks off singing

The approach of Autumn

October . . .

What day, what date can it be? I have completely lost count. My brain is all confused. Yet it seems to me that it must be October. The monotonous days get shorter and shorter, the wind colder, and the foliage of the large trees around me becomes thinner at each gust of wind. The sound of incessant cannonading in the direction of Paris, makes a lugubrious accompaniment to my everyday life, a deep, low bass, always mingling in my thoughts. I think the Prussians must have their hands full over there, for my marauders have not reappeared. I no longer even hear the long, slow rumbling of the ammunition waggons, nor the rolling of drums, which used to resound on the roads outside the forest. So I have again lighted the fire in the large room, and I walk openly about in the orchard.

From day to day the difficulties of life increase. I have nothing left, neither bread, wine, nor lamp-oil. A month ago, with the sunshine, the house well aired, and the comfort of warmth, these privations were bearable, but now they seem very hard. In

the poultry-yard there are only two hens left; always hiding under the rafters to escape the continual driving rain. I make faggots with the branches of the fruit-trees, which, brittle and no longer protected by their leaves, snap off and fall to the ground. The apple-trees have golden moss, the plum-trees long streaks of light-coloured gum under their resinous bark, and they make large, bright fires, throwing a sunshine into their warmth. I have also gathered the last apples, all reddened by the breath of the first frost, and I have made a poor kind of cider, which I drink instead of wine. With my bread I have been less successful. I tried, with the unfortunate Goudeloup's flour, to knead some dough in the bottom of a cupboard drawer which I used as a trough; and then, under the ashes on the bricks, I made as well as I could, thick cakes, of which the outsides were burnt, and the insides hardly done enough. They reminded me of those little round bits of dough that, as a child, I held in the tongs, and made into rolls about the size of a lozenge.

From time to time I get a windfall. For instance, the other day, as I was rummaging in the keeper's house, I found on a damp and mouldy cupboard shelf a few bottles of walnut-spirit that had been overlooked by the plunderers; and another time I found a large sack, which I opened with a beating heart, thinking it contained potatoes. I was quite startled on pulling out from it magpies' beaks, vipers' heads, dry and dust-coloured, squirrels' tails, with their bushy red fur, and field-mice's tails, as delicate as silken twist. These are the keeper's perquisites, as they are given so much for the head and tail of destructive animals. They therefore keep these trophies of the chase very carefully, as they are paid for them by Government once a month.

—It always buys tobacco, as good old Guillard used to say.

Robert exploring cupboards I must confess that at this moment I would willingly have given up all these old bones in exchange for a few rolls of tobacco. I have only enough to last me two or three days, and that is really the only privation I dread. To me the forest is an inexhaustible larder. When my poultry-yard is empty, I shall be

able to snare some of those fine cock-pheasants that come round the Hermitage to pick up the grains of buckwheat hidden in the wet soil. But tobacco! tobacco! . . .

I read a little, and have even tried to paint. It was a few mornings ago, in the light of a beautiful red sun, shining through the air thick with mist; under the shed was a heap of apples, tempting me by their lovely colouring of all shades, from the tender green of young leaves to the ardent glow of autumnal foliage. But I was not able to work for long. In a few minutes the sky became overcast. It was raining in torrents. And large flocks of wild geese, with outstretched necks and beating against the wind, passed over the house, announcing a hard winter and the approach of snow by the white down shaken from their wings.

Robert working on a picture

Wild geese over the house

Deserted roads in Champrosay

The same month . . .

To-day I made a long expedition to Champrosay. Reassured by the stillness around me, I harnessed Colaquet in good time, and we started. Failing the sight of a human face, I longed to gaze on roads and houses.

Damaged door in house I found the country as deserted and silent, and far more dreary than before. The Prussians have only passed through, but they have left their mark everywhere. It seemed the very picture of an Algerian village after a swarm of locusts, a bare, devastated, devoured, and riddled scene; the houses with doors and windows all wide open, even to the little iron gates of the kennels and the latticed shutters of the rabbit-hutches. I went into some of the houses . . . Our peasants are rather like the Arabs. They are seen in the fields, in the courtyards, on their thresholds, but they do not often admit a Parisian inside their doors. Now I could thoroughly search into these unknown lives, these forsaken homes. Their habits still clung to them, and could be traced in the mantelpieces dark with soot, the hanging

ropes in the courtyards where the washing is dried, the now empty nails driven into the walls, and on the walnut table, by the marks idly cut with a knife, and the notches made between each mouthful. All those village households were alike—I came upon one, however, that possessed one luxury more than the others—a parlour, or at least what was intended for a parlour. In a small brick-floored room behind the kitchen, a green paper had been put up, coloured glass had been let into the window, and a pair of gilt fire-dogs, a round tea-table, and a large arm-chair covered with worn chintz, had been placed in it. The ambition of a peasant's lifetime could be felt there. Certainly that man had said to himself, "When I shall be old, when I shall have slaved and laboured hard, I will become a bourgeois. I will have a parlour like the mayor, and a comfortable arm-chair to sit in." Poor devil! They have made a fine mess of his parlour!

A parlour in an abandoned house

I left Champrosay sad at heart. The desolation of those abandoned houses had struck and chilled me like the cold damp falling from the walls of a cellar. Instead of going straight hack to the Hermitage, I went a long way round by the woods. I felt a craving for air and Nature.

Unluckily all this side of the forest bears an aspect of wildness and neglect, which is not very inspiriting. Old and now unused quarries have left there piles of rocks, and a scattering of pebbles, which make the soil both dry and barren. Not a single blade of grass is to be seen on the paths. Wild stocks, brambles, and ivy alone spring up from out of these large gaping holes, clinging by all their roots to the uneven edges of the stones, and through the bare and interwoven branches, the quarries appear still deeper. For a short time we had been winding our way among the rocks. Suddenly Colaquet stopped short, and his ears began to tremble with fear. What is the matter with him? I lean forward and look . . . It is the body of a Prussian soldier that has been pitched down head-foremost into the quarry. I must confess it gave me a

shudder. Had it been on the highway or in the plain, this corpse would not have horrified me so much. Where there are so many soldiers and so many guns, the probability of death seems ever present; but here in this hollow, in this out-of-the-way part of the wood, it bore an appearance of murder and mystery . . . Looking more attentively, I thought I recognised my robber of the other day, he who was singing so lustily about the month of May. Has he been killed by a peasant? But where could the peasant have come from? There is nobody left at Champrosay, Minville, or the Meillottes. More probably it is the result of some drunken quarrel between comrades, like the one I saw from the windows of the Hermitage . . .

I went home very quickly; and all through the evening I was haunted by the idea that my only guest, my only companion in the whole of the dreary forest, was that dead body stretched out on the red sand of the quarries . . .

Overgrown quarry

Robert gathering wood

Unknown date . . .

It is raining—it is cold. The sky is dark. I go to and fro in the Hermitage, tying up faggots and making bread, while the cannon thunders incessantly, and by a strange phenomenon disturbs the earth even more than the air. With my prison labour, my selfish and silent life in the midst of such a terrible drama, I compare myself to an ant, busily groping about on the surface of the soil, deaf to the sounds of humanity around it, all too great for its insignificance, and which surround without troubling it. From time to time, to divert my thoughts, I take a journey to Champrosay without any fear of meeting the Prussians, who have decidedly abandoned the Corbeil road, and are making their descent on Paris by way of Melun and Villeneuve-Saint-Georges. Once or twice, however, a horse’s gallop obliged me to take refuge in some shed, and I saw a rapid and hurried bearer of despatches riding across the country as if merely to unite it to headquarters, to take possession of the

road, and mark it with the hoofs of the Prussian horses.

This deserted village, with its wide-open houses, interests and charms me like a sort of Pompeii. I wander through and examine it. I amuse myself by reconstructing the lives of these absent ones . . .

Prussian despatch rider

Champrosay washing-pond

Another day . . .

. . . Something strange is going on around me. I am not alone in the forest. There is evidently some one hiding near here, and some one who kills. To-day, in the washing-pond of Champrosay, I found a second corpse. A Saxon was stretched out there, only his fair head visible above the water, lying on the damp stone ledge. Moreover, he was well hidden away, thrust into oblivion in this small pond surrounded by brushwood, as securely as that other one over there, in the quarry in the wood. I had by chance taken Colaquet to drink there. The sight of that long, motionless body startled me. Were it not for the pool of blood which stained the stones round his head, and mingled with the reflection of the purple sunset in the water, it might have been supposed that he was asleep, so quiet and peaceful were his features. I have often noticed that expression on the face of the dead. For the space of a brief moment there is something about them more beautiful than life: a solemn peace, a breathless slumber, a renewal of youth in the whole being, which seems like a pause between the agitations of life and the surprises of the unknown world opening before them.

Colaquet about to drink While I was contemplating the unfortunate creature, night began to close in. In the clear and mellow twilight a great softness reigned over everything. The roads, already lighter than the sky, stretched out straight and regular. The forest spread out in dark masses, and beneath me a small vineyard path was faintly lighted up by a ray of moonlight. Over all Nature, reposing after the

day's labour—on the silent fields, the hushed river, the peaceful landscape gently fading into night—there was the same calm, the same grand peace that rested on the face of the dead soldier.

Saxon corpse in the pond

River scene in the park

Another day.

. . . Between Champrosay and the Meillottes, in the middle of a park which skirts the Seine, there stands a mansion built in the style of Louis XV. of the period of the Marquis d'Etiolles and Madame de Pompadour. Two thick straight rows of trees slope down to the river, showing, in summer-time, at the end of the arch of green foliage, a mirror of blue water blended with a blue sky. All the darkness of the old avenues seems to escape through these two vistas of light. At the entrance near the gates, a wide moat surrounding the lawns, a circle of moss-covered lime-trees and curbstones grazed by carriage-wheels, all combine to show the antiquity of this quiet old place. A fancy took me, and the other day I went in there.

By a winding path I reached the front of the steps. The doors were open, the shutters broken. On the ground-floor, in the large drawing-rooms, where the walls were all covered with white carved panels, not a single piece of furniture was left. Nothing but straw, and on the façade, between the stone carving of the balconies, were fresh marks and scratches, showing how the furniture had been thrown out through the windows. The billiard-room only was untouched. The Prussian officers are like our own, they are very fond of playing billiards. Only these gentlemen had amused themselves by making a target of a large mirror, and with its scratches, its chipped fragments, its small round holes looking black in the light, the mirror seemed like a frozen lake cut and furrowed by sharp skates. Inside, the wind rushed through the large windows battered down by bayonets and butt-ends of rifles, scattering and sweeping in the dead leaves on to the floors. Outside, it dashed under the

green-leafed aisle, rocking a forgotten boat on the pond, full of broken twigs and golden-coloured willow-leaves.

I walked to the end of the avenues. There, at the end of the terrace, is a summer-house of red bricks overlooking the river; it is buried in the trees, and the Prussians have probably not seen it. The door, however, is ajar. I found a little sitting-room inside, hung with a flowery chintz, which seemed the continuation of the Virginian jasmine climbing through the latticed shutters; a piano, some scattered music, a book forgotten on a bamboo stool in front of the view over the Seine, and in the mysterious light of the closed shutters, the elegant and refined portrait of a woman looked out of a golden frame. Wife or maiden, who can tell? Dark, tall, with an ingenuous look, an enigmatic smile, and eyes the colour of thought—those Parisian eyes that change with each passing emotion. It is the first face I have seen for two months, and is so living, so proud, so youthful in its seriousness! The impression this picture has caused me is singular . . . I dreamt of the summer afternoons that she had spent there, seeking the solitude and freshness of this corner of the park. The book, the music, spoke of a refined nature; and there lingered in the twilight of this little nook a perfume of the past summer, of the vanished woman, and of a tender grace left only in the smile of the portrait.

Mansion in the park

Portrait in summer-house Who is she? Where is she? I have never seen her. I shall in all probability never meet her. And yet, without knowing wherefore, I feel less lonely as I gaze at her. I read the book which she was reading, made happy by its being marked. And since then, not a day passes without my thinking of her. It seems to me that if I had this portrait here, the Hermitage would be less desolate, but to complete the charm of the face, one ought also to have the climbing jasmine of the summer-house, the rushes at the water’s edge, and the little wild plants of the moat, whose bitter aroma comes back to me as I write these lines.

Sitting-room containing portrait

Dead Prussian in ditch

One evening, on returning home.

. . . Found another dead Prussian. This one was lying in a ditch by the side of the road. That makes the third . . . And always the same wound, a horrible gash at the nape of the neck . . . It is almost like a signature of the same hand.

But who can it be? . . .

River scene

Robert spit-roasting a hen-pheasant

November 15th.

. . . This is the first time for many a day that I can put down a date in my diary, and make out a little order in this bewilderment of monotonous days. My whole existence is changed. The Hermitage no longer seems so silent and sad; there are now long, low conversations by the ash-covered fire with which we fill the chimney at night. The Robinson Crusoe of the forest of Sénart has found his man Friday, and under the following circumstances.

One evening last week, between eight and nine o'clock, while I was roasting a fine hen-pheasant on a turnspit of my own invention, I heard the report of a gun in the direction of Champrosay. This was so unusual that I listened very attentively, ready to extinguish my fire and put out the little glimmer which might betray me. Almost immediately, hurried footsteps sounding heavy on the gravelled road, approached the Hermitage, followed by barking of dogs and furious galloping. It gave me the idea of a hunted man pursued by horsemen and chased by furious dogs. Shivering, and seized by the living terror I felt drawing near, I half opened my window. At that instant a man rushed across the moonlit orchard, and ran towards the keeper's house with an unerring certainty that struck me. Apparently he was well acquainted with

the place. He had passed so rapidly that I could not distinguish his features; I only saw a peasant's blue smock all gathered up in the agitation of a wild flight. He jumped through a shattered window into the Guillards' house, and disappeared in the darkness of the empty dwelling. Immediately behind him a large white dog appeared at the entrance of the cloister. Thrown out for a minute, he remained there, slowly wagging his tail and sniffing, and then stretched himself out at full length in front of the old gateway, baying in order to call the attention of the pursuers. I knew the Prussians often had dogs with them, and I expected to see a patrol of Uhlans . . . Odious animal! with what pleasure would I have strangled it, if it had been within reach of my grasp. I already saw the Hermitage invaded, searched, my retreat discovered; and I felt angry with that unfortunate peasant for having sought refuge so near me, as if all the forest were not large enough. How selfish fear makes us! . . .

"At that instant a man rushed across the moonlit orchard."

Fortunately for me, the Prussians were probably not very numerous, and the darkness and the unknown forest frightened them. I heard them call in their dog, who kept up in front of the gate, the continual howl and whimpering of an animal on the track. However, he at last went off, and the sound of him bounding through the brushwood and over the dead leaves died out in the distance. The silence that followed appalled me. A man was there, opposite to me. Through the round opening of my attic window, I tried to peer into the darkness. The keeper's little house was still silent and gloomy, with the black apertures of its dreary windows in the white wall. I imagined the unhappy man hiding in a corner, benumbed with cold and perhaps wounded. Should I leave him without help? . . . I did not hesitate long . . . But just at the moment when I was gently opening my door, it was violently pushed from the outside, and some one burst into the room.

Dog waiting at doorway —Don't be afraid, Mr. Robert. It is I . . . It is Goudeloup . . .

It was the farmer of Champrosay, he whom I had seen with the rope round his neck, ready to be swung up in his farmyard. I recognised him at once in the firelight; and yet there was something different about him. Pale and emaciated, his face hidden by an unkempt beard, his sharp glance and tightened lips made a very different being of the well-to-do, cheerful farmer of former days. With the end of his smock, he wiped the blood off his hands.

—You are wounded, Goudeloup?

He laughed significantly.

—No—no . . . I have just been bleeding one of them on the road. Only this time I had not a fair chance. While I was at work, some others came up. Never mind! He will never get up again.

And he added, with a short, fierce laugh which showed his wolfish-looking teeth:

—That makes the fifteenth that I have laid low in two months . . . I think that is pretty well for one man alone, and with no other weapon but this.

He drew forth from under his smock a pair of pruning-shears—those large kind of scissors that gardeners use to cut rose-trees and shrubs. I had a shudder of horror at the sight of the assassin’s tool, held by that bloody hand; but I had been so long silent, and deprived of all intercourse with human beings, that, the first feeling of repulsion overcome, I made the unfortunate creature welcome to a place at my table. There, in the comfortable atmosphere of the room, by the heat of the faggots, at the smell of the pheasant, which was becoming brown before the flame, his wild-beast expression seemed to soften. Accustomed to the darkness of the long nights, he blinked his eyes a little while he related his history to me in a quiet tone.

Pruning shears —You thought I was hanged, Mr. Robert; well, I thought so myself. You must know that when the Uhlans arrived at the farm, I first tried to defend myself, but they did not even give me time to fire my second gun. No sooner was the first shot fired than the gates were forced open, and thirty of these robbers threw

themselves on to me. They put the granary rope round my neck and up I went . . . For the space of a moment, giddy at no longer feeling the ground under my feet, I saw everything reeling around me: the farm, the sheds, the kennels, those big red faces which laughed at the sight of me; and you also, whom I caught sight of through the gap in the wall, looking as white as a ghost. It seemed like a nightmare! . . . Suddenly, while I was struggling, the idea flashed across my mind, I know not why, to make the Freemason's signal of distress. I learned that in my youth, when I belonged to the lodge of the Grand Orient. Immediately the wretches loosened the rope, and I found myself on the ground once more. It was their officer—a stout man with black whiskers—who had me taken down only on account of my sign.

Robert meeting Goudeloup

"—You are a Freemason," said he, in a low tone, and in excellent French. "I am also one . . . and I would not refuse to help a brother who appealed to me . . . Be off, and let me see you no more! . . ."

I left my own home hanging my head like a beggar. Only I did not go far, you may believe. Hidden among the ruins of the bridge, living on raw turnips and sloes, I was present at the pillage of my goods; the emptied granaries, the pulley creaking all day long to lower the sacks, the wood burning in the open yard in large fires, round which they drank my wine, and my furniture and my flocks going of by degrees in every direction! And when at last nothing remained, after setting fire to the house, they went off, driving and whipping my last cow before them. That evening, when I had been round my ruins, when, thinking of my children, I realised that in my whole life long I should never make enough to restore my property, even if I killed myself with work, I became mad with rage. The very first Prussian I met on the road I sprang upon like a wild beast and cut his throat with this . . .

From that moment I had but one idea—to hunt down the Prussians. I remained in ambush night and day, attacking the stragglers, the marauders, the despatch-bearers,

the sentinels. All those I kill I carry to the quarries or throw into the water. That is the tedious part. Otherwise they are as gentle as lambs. You can do what you will with them . . . However, the one this evening was more tough than the others, and then that fiendish dog gave the alarm. And now I must remain quiet for a time, and with your permission, Mr. Robert, I will remain a few days with you . . .

While he was speaking, his countenance resumed the sinister expression and peculiar intensity that these fearful night-watches had imparted to it. What a terrible companion I am going to have! . . .

Goudeloup hunting his prey

Prussian patrol

November 20th.

We have just spent a most dreadful week. During eight days, the Prussian patrols have unceasingly passed backwards and forwards through the forest. They skirted the walls of the Hermitage, and even entered the enclosure, but the state of the keeper’s little house, left wide open and abandoned; the ivy and brambles giving such a dilapidated appearance to my own, protected us. My companion and myself carefully remained inside the whole time, deadening our steps across the room, lowering our voices by the hearth, and only making a small fire at night.

Jug This time, had we been discovered, it meant death, and I felt rather annoyed with Goudeloup for having made me his accomplice by coming to take refuge here. He understood my feelings, and offered several times to go and seek another shelter; but I would not consent to this. To show his gratitude for my hospitality, he renders me a lot of little services. Very obliging, very clever in all the practical details of life, about which I am so ignorant, he has taught me to make bread that is eatable, real cider, and candles. It is a pleasure to see him busy all day long, restricting his faculty for work and order, which he formerly exercised on a wider scale in the management of his large farmstead and seventy-five acres of land, and adapting

himself to the confined space of our only room. Gloomy and silent, moreover, and sitting motionless for hours in the evening, his head buried in his hands, like all inveterate workers with whom overwrought physical life absorbs the moral being, I could not help sometimes smiling when I noticed that, notwithstanding the tragical circumstances surrounding us, he kept up his habit of prolonged meals and pauses between each mouthful. Such as he is, the fellow interests me. He is the true peasant in all his native brutality. His land, his goods, are far more precious to him than his country or his family. He unconsciously utters the most monstrous sentiments. If he is so bent on revenge, it is only because the Prussians have burnt down his farm, and the horrors of the invasion only rouse him when he thinks of his lost harvest, and his fields left untilled and unsown.

Goudeloup sitting despondent

Goudeloup's derelict farm

Discussion with Goudeloup

November 22nd . . .

We had a long conversation to-day. We were in the shed seated across a ladder, and, in spite of the coldness of the damp air which came to us from the forest all laden with the smell of moist wood and damp earth, we felt as much pleasure in breathing it as two dormice coming forth from their holes. Goudeloup was smoking a curiously-shaped pipe he has made out of a snail's shell, and he did so with an exaggerated appearance of satisfaction and content not devoid of mischief. In spite of my longing to smoke, I have already several times refused to use his tobacco, well knowing how it has been procured, and always expecting to see some shreds of the blue cloth of which the Prussian uniforms are made. As he caught me sniffing the delightful fragrance of tobacco, which tantalised me, he said, with that cunning smile of the peasant which puckers up their eyes, leaving their lips thin and crafty:

—Well! come! you won't smoke? . . .

Myself.

No, thank you. I have already told you I do not wish for any of your tobacco.

Goudeloup.

Because I have taken it out of their pockets? Yet I had every right to do so. They have robbed me enough, for me to be able to rob them also, and a few handfuls of bad tobacco won't pay for all my corn and oats . . .

Myself.

With this difference, that these people have given you your life, whereas you . . .

Goudeloup.

Yes, it is true they have given me my life, but they have burnt down my farm—my poor farm! I built it myself . . . and my beasts and my harvest, fifteen acres of crops! It was all insured against hail, fire, and lightning; but who would have thought that, so near Paris, with all the taxes we pay to have good soldiers, I ought to have insured myself against the Prussians? Now I have nothing left. Are not such catastrophes worse than death? . . . Ah yes, the wretches; they gave me my life! They gave it me to beg from door to door with my wife and children. Don't you see that when I think of all this, a furious passion seizes me, and a thirst for blood, for . . .

Goudeloup waiting and watching

Myself.

What, you have not killed enough? . . .

Goudeloup.

No, not enough yet . . . I must even make a confession, Mr. Robert. You are an easy-going man; you have received me kindly, and a chimney-corner like yours is not to be despised in this weather. And yet, all the same, there are moments when I am weary of being here. I want to escape, to begin lying in wait by the roadside

again. It is such fun waiting for one of those thieves to pass; to watch for him, dog his footsteps, and say to oneself, “Not yet . . .” and then, quick, you jump on him and finish him . . . Another one who will not eat up my corn!

Myself.

You, whom I have known so quiet and gentle, how can you talk like that without showing the least feeling?

Goudeloup.

One would think there was an evil spirit within me that the war has called forth . . . But I must say that the first time it happened, I was startled myself. It was that transport soldier I met the evening of my misfortune. I struck with all my might at the uniform, hardly realising there was a man inside it; then, when I felt that huge form give way and the warm stream of blood inundate me, then I was afraid. But remembering directly the torn and ripped-up sacks of flour lying in my yard, I again became desperate.

Myself.

As you bear them such a grudge, why do you not try to get back into Paris, or to rejoin the armies in the provinces? You could then fight openly, and kill the Prussians without treachery in the battles.

Goudeloup.

Join the army, Mr. Robert? . . . But I am not a soldier! My parents paid dearly enough to prevent my being one . . . I am a peasant, an unhappy peasant, who revenges himself, and requires no one to help him.

Goudeloup killing a Prussian

While he spoke I saw reappear in him the wild beast I had admitted the other evening. The mad glare seemed to return to his eyes. His lips were compressed. His fingers convulsively sought a weapon . . .

Unknown image

Goudeloup leaves

November 28th.

He is gone. I ought not to be astonished. The wretch was tired of having nothing to kill. After promising to come sometimes at night and knock at my door, he plunged into the shadows, less black than himself. Well, brutal as he was, I regret him. Solitude brings with it, after a time, a feeling of torpor, a numbness of the whole being, which is really unwholesome. Words seem to start fresh thoughts. By dint of talking to this peasant of patriotism and self-sacrifice, I have re-awakened in myself all that I was desirous of inspiring in him. I feel quite differently now. And then my recovery, the sensation of returning strength, which increases from day to day . . . I long for action and battle . . .

Unknown image

The forest under snow

November 30th. December 1st and 2nd.

It is bitterly cold. Through the dryness of the earth and atmosphere the cannonading round Paris re-echoes still louder. I have never heard anything to equal it. It must be a real battle. At moments I fancy the sounds draw nearer, for I can make out the platoon-firing and the horrible rending noise of the mitrailleuse. All around here there seems a general commotion, as it were the rebounding sound of the battle. On the road to Melun troops are continually moving. On the road to Corbeil scared despatch-bearers gallop by furiously . . . What can be taking place? . . . In spite of the cold, I go and wander about, seeking the forest paths, where the cannonading is more distinctly heard . . .

At times I have a dream of Paris leaving its imprisoning ramparts, of the French troops arriving here, of the forest of Sénart full of French uniforms, and of I myself joining their ranks to drive out the Prussians and reconquer France . . .

Prussian lancer

Bavarian troops drilling

December 5th.

The incessant cannonading of the last few days has been succeeded by a deathlike stillness. What is going on? I am fearfully anxious. If Paris had sallied forth from her walls and were now marching on the roads, the disbanded and repulsed Prussians would fill the country and constantly change their bivouacs. But no. Ever since yesterday I have scoured the twelve miles of forest which hem me in like a wall on all sides; in vain I scrutinise the lanes around, they are as silent and lonely as usual. Through the trees, in the distance, I saw near Montgeron a company of Bavarians drilling in the open part of a wide plain. Mournfully drawn up in line under the lowering and lurid sky, they trod with resigned melancholy through the mud of this uncultivated and barren land . . . Evidently Paris has not yet made a successful sortie, but it has not capitulated either, for these soldiers presented too pitiful an appearance to be conquerors.

Overhead, circling clouds of rooks fly by towards the great city, cawing and alighting on the rising ground. Never had I seen so many, even in the peaceful winter, when all France is sown with wheat. This year it is another kind of seed which attracts them.

Image of baron land

“—it was a balloon.”

Balloon overhead

December 6th.

Thank Heaven! Paris still holds out, and is likely to do so. I had a delightful proof of this. This morning I was by the cloister well when I heard quick firing in the direction of Draveil. Almost immediately a peculiar sound, like the flapping of a sail

at sea and the straining of the stretched rigging, passed through the air above me. It was a balloon, a fine yellow balloon, very apparent against the darkness of the clouds. From where I stood it seemed to float over the tree-tops, although in reality it was far above. I cannot describe how the slender texture of this silken balloon, whose netting I could distinctly see, stirred and filled me with enthusiasm. I remembered that above all this conquered France, the soul of Paris still soared, a living strength more powerful than all the Krupp cannons together, and I, a Parisian, felt proud of it. I felt inclined to cry, to shout, to call out. I threw my arms out towards the black, motionless specks at the edge of the car, two human lives, tossed about by all the currents of heaven, far above the rivers that may drown them, the precipices where they may be dashed to pieces, and the Prussian armies, which must look from that height like immense overrunning ant-heaps on the surface of the earth . . . A light powdery line became visible under the balloon. I heard the sound of scattered sand among the branches, and the vision was lost among the clouds.

Man looking up

A roadside cross

December 9th.

What am I doing here? I am really becoming ashamed of my useless life . . . I had to bake some bread to-day, and could not summon up courage to do it. All the little details in which I used to take pleasure, like those egotists in disguise—recluses and hermits—I now find despicable. I am completely cured, only an occasional pain on very cold days. My duty is on the ramparts with the others . . . But how can I manage to rejoin them? It appears that the investment is very close, and the sentinels are placed within rifle-shot of each other. If I had only a companion, some countryman who knows the roads well. My thoughts fly to Goudeloup. I ought not to have allowed him to leave me. Who knows where he may be now? Perhaps strung up to some roadside cross, or dead from cold at the bottom of a quarry. However,

the other evening, towards the Meillottes, I heard a cry—nothing but a cry, but a terrible cry, long and despairing, like a wail; and it flashed across me, “Goudeloup is there!” . . . Ah, yes! that man is a murderer; but at any rate he acts; he satisfies brutally the thirst for vengeance and justice which is in him. As for me, I warm myself and sleep. Which of us two is the most contemptible?

Body in the snow

Deserted street in Champrosay

December 10th.

Returned to Champrosay in bitter cold weather. The houses along the roadside, with all their dark, empty windows, looked like sad and blind beggars. I visited again the park, the summer-house at the waterside, and the smiling portrait which inhabits it. The cold air had not dimmed the peaceful face, nor the soft shades of the summer dress. Only the glance seemed to me more stern and severe, as if it contained a reproach. On the very threshold I understood I was no longer welcome. Cautiously I closed the door again, and went down the frozen, moss-covered steps . . . And all through the night the clear gaze of that fair Parisian remorselessly haunted me.

Robert investigating Champrosay house

“I found a pigeon.”

Across the rooftops

December 11th.

This morning, on going to take up the snares at the end of my garden, I found a pigeon. It astonished me. Tame pigeons do not remain on deserted roofs, and till now I had only caught wood-pigeons. This one was really a tame pigeon, plump, with pink claws and back, and brown and white wings. The wire had not maimed it; it was merely numbed with cold. I brought it in to the fire, and there, as I held it in both hands—for, like a tame creature, it made not the slightest struggle—I

discovered some printed numbers on one of its wings, 523, and lower down, Société de l'Espérance. Then under the feathers I found a quill rather thicker than the others, and rolled up, fastened to it, a tiny sheet of very thin paper. I had caught a carrier-pigeon! Did it come from Paris or the provinces? Was it the messenger of victory or defeat, good or bad news? . . . For a long time I gazed at it with almost superstitious awe. Let loose in the room, he quietly went about pecking between the tiles. By degrees his feathers puffed out in the warmth and his strength returned. Then I opened the window wide, and placed him on the sill. He remained there a moment looking up at the sky, stretching out his neck, trying to find his bearings. At last he rose straight into the air, and having reached a certain height, white against the surrounding gloom, he sharply turned towards Paris. Ah! if I could only take the same road . . .

Bird

Preparations for travelling

December 15th.

It is all settled. We leave to-morrow. I say "we," because Goudeloup has returned. He came back yesterday in the dusk, more emaciated, more terrible than before. The wretched man is now at his twenty-first! . . . Nevertheless the thirst for blood is beginning to be satiated; moreover, he is closely pursued, and the nightly ambush has become most difficult. I therefore had little trouble in deciding him to attempt an expedition to Paris with me. We shall start to-morrow in my boat, which is lying out on the Seine, moored under the willows on the banks. It is Goudeloup's idea. He thinks that on a very dark night we shall be able to get by to the Port-à-l'Anglais, and then, by creeping along the towing-path, reach the first French barricade. We shall see . . . I have prepared my revolver, some rugs, two or three loaves, and a large flask of brandy.

The enterprise is certainly full of danger; but since I have made up my mind to

attempt it, I feel calmer. Instead of making me anxious, the sound of the cannon round Paris electrifies me. I feel as if it were calling me; and each time it thunders, I am inclined to answer, “We are coming.” I fancy the portrait in the summer-house smiles at me from its gilt frame, and wears again its calm and placid aspect . . . I have but one regret in quitting the Hermitage: what will become of my poor Colaquet? I leave the stable-door open for him to seek his subsistence in the forest. I pile up near him my last bundles of straw, and while I make these preparations I avoid meeting his astonished, kind eyes, which seem to say reproachfully, “Where are you going?”

. . . And now, on my table, opened at this unfinished page, I abandon my diary with these last words, which will probably end it: We are off to Paris!

The moonlit river

Creeping through the forest.

The return journey.

Written groping in the dark.

I have returned . . . Goudeloup is dead . . . Our journey has failed.

December 26th.

Ten days! I have only been absent ten days. It seems to me that the multitude of scenes and shadows, the confused and terrible sensations I have brought back from my short journey, are enough to fill several existences. Now that I have returned to the confined space of my Hermitage, all these memories haunt and torment me,—I must try and write them down merely to rid myself of them.

Commencing the outward journey

We started on the night of the sixteenth. A very cold night, without stars, lighted up only by a white sprinkling of hoar-frost. The frosted trees looked like hawthorn bushes flowering before their leaves break forth. We passed through Champrosay, as

dismal and silent as the hoar-frost which was falling and lying on its cold roofs, instead of gently melting round the water-spouts by the warmth of the lighted fires. Not a Prussian was to be seen on the horizon, and this was fortunate, as our two outlines stood out distinctly in the great bare plain. I found my boat in a little creek hidden between the banks. It was a very lightly-built Norwegian boat. Having wrapped some rags round the oars, we pushed off noiselessly on the lonely river, knocking now and then against the icicles which float on the surface of the water like blocks of crystal. Many a time, in preceding years, I had embarked on nights as dark and cold to set or visit my night-lines. But what life there was on the river around me! A somewhat mysterious, dreamy sort of life, full of the silence of universal slumber. Long wood rafts, with their fires lighted fore and aft, and shadows standing near the helm, slowly go down towards Paris, gliding by through all the forest shade, and entering Bercy at break of day, in the full glare of a noisy and crowded thoroughfare. On the banks, waggons passed along, the night express train gliding along through the windings of the railway track, like a serpent with eyes of fire. And I pondered over all the sad or joyful motives that set all these people in motion . . . At intervals, by the side of the river, which nearly bathed their walls, the lock-keeper’s house, the ferrymen’s hut, the boatmen’s public-houses, threw the glimmer from their dimmed windows over the still water.

Wood rafts of former times

To-day there is nothing of all this. We have a new river before us, black and solitary, disturbed by all those broken bridges, which change the currents. However, by a few strokes of the oar I was able to direct our little bark, and keep it near enough to the middle of the stream to avoid the submerged islands marked out by the dipping willows . . .

“We crossed a heavy punt.”

—All goes well . . . said Goudeloup in a low voice.

At that moment the noise of an oar thrown into a boat, came from the bank, and a powerful southern voice called through the night:

—Come, ferryman, make haste! . . .

—It is the Draveil doctor, whispered my companion.

I too had recognised the kindly voice, that is heard day and night on highroads and byeways, always encouraging and always hurried. How did he come there? Had he therefore stayed at Draveil? . . . I should have liked to have called out to him: “Good-night, Doctor!” But a moment’s reflection stopped me. A lucky thought, in truth; for directly after we crossed a heavy punt, with a lantern in the bow, passing over from one side of the river to the other; and I saw by the side of dear Doctor R— in his old felt hat, weather-beaten by all the storms of Seine and Oise, some shining helmets.

Approaching the railway bridge

By rare good fortune we were beyond the rays of their lantern, which deepened the shadow through which our boat was gliding, and we passed by unseen. No less danger awaited us a little farther on—the railway bridge, of which three arches were blown up, blocking the river with its gigantic remains. I really hardly know how we were able to get through this fearful barrier in the dark, without being swamped or dashed to pieces. At Port-Courcelles we had the same fear. The enormous gnarled willows of the two islets became in the night so many shoals, that we narrowly escaped. At last we reach Ablon and its lock. Here the cannon round Paris resounds clear and terrible, sending forth at each instant the red flash of its thunder . . . We ought to have expected it: the lock is closed. Fortunately our boat is light, and together we shall be able, as I have so often done, to hoist it on to the bank, and carry it over to the other side of the barrier. We land at the little steps where the innkeeper of Ablon skins his eels on summer days, and where the fishermen sit patiently with their rods, bathed in sunshine from the top of their boating-hats down

to their shoes of untanned leather. It is astonishing how a feeling of danger changes the whole aspect of things! . . . When nearly at the top of the steps, I perceived against the darkness, ten paces from me, a sentry on his beat, pacing up and down the quay. Lower down, the lock-keeper's house, turned into a Prussian outpost, has all its windows lighted up. I wish to go down quickly, re-embark, and gain the other bank; but Goudeloup will not listen to me. His eyes remain obstinately fixed on that shadow which looms through the fog, and whistles while trampling above us. I try to drag him away. He escapes, makes one bound . . . I hear a dull sound, a smothered cry, the rattle of arms, and the heavy fall of a man.

The wrecked railway bridge —Twenty-two! . . . says Goudeloup, slipping, quite out of breath, down the slope.

But the unfortunate soldier, that he has left stretched out by the river-side, has found strength before dying to fire his gun. The sharp report rouses both banks of the river. Impossible to land. We quickly push out into the middle of the stream, and row hard up the river. It is all like a bad dream. The wind and current, everything is against us. A boat pushes off from the lock, coming straight at us, lighted by a torch which dips up and down as it watches for us, while another boat approaches us in a contrary direction.

—To the dredger . . . whispers Goudeloup in my ear.

On the steps by the lock

Near us, moored some fifty or sixty feet from the shore, a dredging-boat reared its black mass above the water, with its barrels and bucket-chain to clear away the sand. The Seine was very high, and the water half covered it, dashing against its bows with vehemence.

We board her, but in our haste to take refuge on this wreck we forget to fasten our boat, which floats off with the rugs and provision it contains. This saves us. Five minutes later a formidable "hurrah" tells us the Prussians have just found our boat.

Seeing it empty, they must have thought we were drowned, engulfed; for a few moments after, the torches returned to the shore, and the whole river resumed its silence and darkness . . .

Swimming to the dredger

The dredger on which we found ourselves was a complete wreck—a curious shelter, crackling and creaking all over, and furiously lashed by the waters. On the deck, covered with splinters of wood and pieces of cast iron, the cold was intolerable. We were obliged to take refuge in the engine-room, to which the water happily had not yet penetrated. It would soon, however, reach it, for in several places the sides of the room were cracked almost down to the level of the waves, and we found ourselves lighted by the leaden reflection of the darkness on the water. What gloomy hours we spent there! Hunger, fear, and the terrible cold numbing our limbs with a feeling of drowsiness against which we were obliged to struggle . . . All around, the water seethed, the wood groaned, the bucket-chain creaked in its rustiness, and aloft, above our heads, something like the rag of a drenched flag flapped in the wind. We impatiently waited for daybreak, not knowing exactly what distance separated us from the land, nor how we should be able to reach it. In our fitful slumbers, broken as they were by anxious thoughts of escape, the shaking of the dredging-boat and the sound of the water surrounding us, gave me at times the impression of a long voyage and a stormy night at sea . . .

When through the holes in the room, which were blackened and torn as if by a bombardment, we saw the river catch the first light of a sullen winter’s morning, we tried to make out our position. The slopes of Juvisy commanded the farther bank, rising above the fog, which its tall trees pierced with their bare tops. On the opposite shore, eighty or a hundred feet beyond the dredger, lay the flat, bare plains of Draveil, stretching away into the far distance, without trace of a soldier on them. Evidently that was the side we could escape by. The anticipation of a cold bath, in

the month of December, in that deep, foaming, and swift-running water, was rather terrifying. However, the iron chain that moored the dredger to the bank was happily still fastened to its ring, and we had the resource left of clinging to it and being guided by it. While we were discussing this, a cannon was fired off rather close at hand, from the heights of Juvisy, followed up immediately by the whistle of a shell and its splash in the water near us. A few seconds later, before we had recovered from our astonishment, a second shell fell near the dredger. Then I understood the flag, the splinters of wood, the pieces of cast iron, and the smell of burnt powder we had noticed in the cabin. The Prussians were using the old dredger as a target for their cannons. It was absolutely necessary to quit at once. The cold and the dangers of the river sank into insignificance. Forward we must go. I seized hold of the chain with both hands and lowered myself rapidly into the river, Goudeloup following me. Our fingers were skinned by the chafing iron: we advanced but slowly, numbed by the current and the icy water. A fresh cannon-shot redoubles our energy. Look out! Here comes the shell. This time it falls full on the iron-plated front of the dredger, bursts, and covers us with the wreckage. I hear behind me a deep sigh . . . No, never shall I forget the last agonising motion of that chain, which I felt move, struggle for a second, and then rise up quickly in the water, loose, free, and light in my hands . . .

They get into the river again I turned round; no one to be seen. Nothing but a mass of blood floating away on the stream. The unfortunate fellow must have been struck on the head and killed on the spot . . . A feeling of intense despair overcame me. My companion slaughtered beside me, and I helpless to succour him . . . A little more and I too must have let go the chain; but the instinct of life won the day, and a few minutes later I landed on the bank, but to get no farther. After a dozen steps, overcome by the anxiety, fatigue, and terrible cold which penetrated through all my wet clothes, I dropped down by the roadside on the dry grass of a ditch. The well-known trot of a horse, the roll of an old cabriolet, and the kind voice of Doctor R— drew me from my lethargy.

—What! it is you? . . . What are you doing there?

Quick as lightning, he wrapped me up in his cloak, hid me in the straw under the apron of the carriage, and set off in the direction of Draveil, where the excellent man has turned his house into a hospital. From the cabriolet I passed into the coach-house. There, dry clothes and a few glasses of hot grog soon revived me. I remained there till nightfall, without daring to move, understanding very well, although the Doctor had never told me, the risk he was incurring by receiving me. The house was full of soldiers and hospital attendants. Military boots resounded on the pavement of the small courtyard. And all around, the loud laughter, the swords clashing, and the harsh German speech, still more accentuated by its insolent tone. I heard all this with my eyes shut, stupefied by the sensation of comfort, with a vague recollection of past danger and of the cold river, and poor Goudeloup's heart-rending groan ringing in my ears.

At night the Doctor came to set me free, and took me to the room generally occupied by his grandchildren, whom he had sent away on the approach of the Prussians. It was there that I awoke the next morning. After the horrible scenes of the previous day, those three little cribs, with white muslin curtains round them, the children's toys lying scattered on the floor with their lesson-books, even the faint medicinal smell that came from a cupboard in which the Doctor kept some drugs, everything calmed and soothed my over-excited nerves. In a neighbouring yard a cock crowed and a donkey began braying. The village seemed to awaken. Suddenly a bugle-call, rudely jarring on these peaceful sounds, recalled the sad reality. Then there was coming and going to and fro; doors banged . . . I drew near the window. The Doctor's house looked into the street, over the flower-beds of a narrow strip of garden in front of it. Every one knew his house, with its round brass bell-knob standing out brightly on the freshly white-washed wall; and the furniture in the little parlour, which could be seen on the ground-floor, gave it an appearance of homely comfort. Hidden behind the closed blinds, I saw the street full of men in forage-caps

falling into line, calling, numbering each other, ready to start. Among the caps, several Bavarian helmets appeared. These were quartermasters running from house to house, chalking down the numbers on the doors, preparing quarters for the advancing forces. Soon the departing regiment moved off to the sound of their drums, while opposite, at the entrance to the village, the Bavarian buglers noisily entered. During the last three months the unhappy village had been in this condition. The straw of the encampments had not time to grow cold between the departure of one regiment and the arrival of another . . .

Being picked up by the Doctor

The Doctor, who just then came into the room, made me leave the window.

—Take care, Mr. Robert; do not show yourself. There is at the Commandatur a list of the inhabitants who have remained in the country, and we are all closely watched. After eight o'clock in the evening, nobody except myself is allowed to go outside their house . . . So many Prussians have been murdered in the neighbourhood! Draveil pays the penalty. Their requisitions are three times heavier here than elsewhere. The least word, and they imprison; the slightest show of rebellion, and they shoot. Our unhappy peasants are terrified. They spy and inform about each other; and if one of them perceived that I was hiding some one in my house, he would be capable—to spare himself a requisition—of warning the Commandatur. What would be the fate of both of us, I can easily imagine . . .

He was so afraid of any imprudence on my part, poor dear Doctor, that all the time I stayed in his house he kept the key of my room in his pocket. The latticed shutters and closed windows threw a prison gloom over my room, that only gave me light enough to read by. I had medical works, a few odd volumes translated from the Panckoucke series, and from time to time a copy of a French paper published by the Prussians at Versailles. That also was written in a foreign kind of French, and our real or imaginary defeats were sneeringly described with coarse and stupid jokes.

When I could no longer read, I looked out through the blinds into the street—the real old-fashioned street of a country town. Straight rows of houses with little gardens and a pavement in front, the spaces between them filled with a trellis-work of branches, or the trunk of a great elm, and a background of plain and vineyard scarcely hidden by the low roofs. Then sheds and stables, a fountain spouting out of an old wall, the large gateway of a farm, side by side with the notary's white and clean little house, ornamented with escutcheons. And over all the cruel blight of the invasion. Knitted jerseys drying on the iron gates and on the shutters. Large pipes protruding from every window, and military boots. Never had I heard the sound of so many boots . . . Opposite my window was the Commandatur. Every day peasants were brought in, urged along by butt-ends of rifles or the scabbards of swords. The women and children followed weeping, and while the man was dragged inside, they remained at the door explaining their case to the soldiers, who, with closed lips, listened disdainfully or else laughed with a stupid brutal laughter. No hope of pity or justice. All depended on the caprice of the conqueror. They were so well aware of it, these unfortunate peasants, that they hardly dared stir out or show themselves, and when they did venture into the street, it was heart-rending to see them creeping under the walls, glancing out of the corner of their eyes, bowed down, obsequious and servile, like Eastern Jews.

It was a cruel sight to see the ambulances stop at our door in the wind, cold, rain, and snow; to hear the groans of the sick and wounded being removed from the carts and borne in helpless. When evening came, to end the long melancholy days, the Prussian bugles sounded the retreat under the leafless elm trees, with its slowly marked time, and its last three notes thrown out like the weird screech of a night-bird at the approach of night. This was the moment when the Doctor, muddy and tired, entered my room. He himself brought my food, and, with his usual good nature, told me all he had done—about his visits, the hearsays from Paris and from the provinces, about the sick people brought to him, and his disputes with the

Prussian major, who was his colleague in command of the hospital, and whose German pedantry annoyed and exasperated him. We talked in sad low tones, and then the kind man bade me good-night. Once more alone, I softly opened my window to breathe the fresh air for a few minutes. In spite of the bitter cold, it did me good. In its peaceful slumbers the country seemed to return to its former condition and resumed the aspect of its happier days. But soon the step of a patrol, the groan of a wounded man, the sound of the cannon thundering on the horizon, brought me back to the reality, and I retired into my prison, full of hatred and anger. At the end of a short time this cellular kind of existence in the midst of the army of occupation became intolerable. Having lost all hope of entering Paris, I regretted my Hermitage. There, at least, I had solitude and Nature. I was not tempted there, as I was here, to interfere in the injustices, brutalities, and constant vexations going on in the street, thereby running the risk of compromising my kind host. Therefore I resolved upon leaving.

Robert, peering from his window

To my great surprise, the Doctor did not even try to dissuade me from my project.

—You are quite right, he said quietly; you will be safer over there.

Since, on reflection, I have always fancied that some neighbour may have seen me behind the lattice, and that my host, although he would not admit it, feared they would betray me. We therefore decided that I should leave Draveil the next day, in the same manner in which I arrived. When it was quite dark, I went down into the stable. I hid myself in the straw of the cabriolet, the Doctor’s cloak was thrown over me, and we started off. The journey was accomplished without accident. Every hundred and fifty or two hundred yards was a sentry-box erected by the roadside at the expense of the district.

—Wer da? challenged the sentry, cocking his rifle.

The Doctor answered:

—Lazareth!

And the little gig continued its jingling rattle over the stones. At the edge of the forest he stopped. The road was clear. I hastily jumped out.

—Take this, said the kind man, holding out a basket full of food and bottles . . . Shut yourself up, and do not stir out . . . I will come and see you soon.

Thereupon he whipped up his horse, and I threw myself into the thicket. A quarter of an hour later, I was at the Hermitage.

Being challenged by a sentry

Hungry birds come for food

January 3rd.

. . . A fine drifting snow has been falling for the last few days. The forest is completely covered. Around me the silence was so deep that I could even hear the fall of the thickening flakes. It is impossible to go out. I watch the snow falling from the murky sky and whitening all things. The famished birds come to my very doorstep. The roedeer have taken refuge in the stable in place of my poor Colaquet, of whom I have heard nothing…

Deer sheltering in the stable

“They blew out his brains with a revolver.”

Robert hears bad news from the Doctor

January 10th.

. . . The Doctor came to see me. Bad news: Paris still shut up, disasters in the provinces! The conquerors, worn out by such a tardy victory, redouble the humiliations and brutalities . . . At Draveil, on Christmas night, five or six Bavarians, after sitting up late drinking with old Rabot, the forester, in a public-house, blew out his brains with a revolver. The unhappy man’s brother, who lived opposite, ran in on hearing the report of the shot, and in his turn fell mortally

wounded. Another man of the same family was seriously wounded. The wretches would have massacred all comers! The affair created a great sensation: a fictitious inquiry was made, and concluded by the district of Draveil being condemned to pay an indemnity of sixteen hundred pounds to the Bavarians! . . .

Bavarian preparing for the party

Game-shooting party in the forest

January 15th.

. . . This morning the Prince of Saxony’s staff had a large shooting-party in the forest. On hearing the firing so near me, I was seized with a terrible anxiety. I thought it was the arrival of some French advanced-guard; but from the windows of the studio overlooking the woods, I saw between the leafless branches, crowds of beaters wearing the Saxon forage-caps running and shouting through the thickets, while plumed and gilded sportsmen watched at every turn of the drives. In the circle round the Great Oak an enormous bivouac-fire blazed in front of a tent. Here, called by a flourish of trumpets, the shooters came to breakfast. I heard the clinking of glasses, the uncorking of bottles, and the cheering of the revellers. Then the slaughter of deer and pheasants recommenced. Ah! if old Guillard had been there! he who kept such an account of his game, watched over his coveys and his rabbit-holes, knew the favourite haunts of the deer. How he would have grieved to see this sacrilege! The bewildered birds knew not where to seek safety from the cruel guns. The startled hares and rabbits ran under the legs of the sportsmen, and in the midst of all the confusion a wounded deer took refuge in the courtyard of the Hermitage. The eyes of hunted animals have a look of piteous astonishment which is truly heart-rending. This one excited my compassion, pressing against the low wall round the well, sniffing the air, and pawing the ground with its little bleeding feet. My indignation redoubled against the plundering race that swarmed over vanquished France with the voracity of locusts, destroying its vineyards, its houses, its

cornfields, its forests, and, when the country was laid bare, exterminating even the game, leaving nothing alive.

“I heard the clinking of glasses.”

I shall never forget that day’s sport in the midst of the war, under that dark, lowering sky, with the landscape whitened with hoar-frost, and the glitter of the gold on the helmets and the hunting-horns passing beneath the branches; while the galloping of the horses, the who-hoops of the men, reminded me of the Black Huntsman in the German ballads. At dusk, lines of carts came to gather up from the edge of the roads all the wounded and dying game. It was like the evening after a battle.

Taking home the day’s spoils

Depressed troops after the capitulation.

January 19th.

…They have fought all day under the walls of Paris. But the noise of the mitrailleuses was not so distinct as on the 2nd of December. There was something in the sound of that distant battle which gave me the impression of lassitude and discouragement.

January 30th.

…All is over. Paris has capitulated. The armistice is signed.

Abandoned equipment

## LAST LEAFLETS.

Robert finishing his Diary

I end here my diary, in which I have tried to give the experiences of my five months of solitude. To-day I returned to Draveil in the Doctor’s carriage, but without hiding this time. The roads were full of peasants returning home. Many are already at work again on the land. All faces are sad, but no complaints are heard. Is it fatalism or

resignation?

The Prussians still occupy the village, enforcing their triumph with cool insolence. They, however, appear less brutal with the inhabitants. I saw some walking about hand-in-hand with little children. It was like the beginning of a return to their forsaken hearths, to their sedentary lives, so long disturbed by this war . . . When I came home in the evening, I saw on the doorstep of the keeper's house, old Guillard's widow, dressed in deep mourning and hardly recognisable. Poor woman! her husband dead and her home a wreck. Her misfortunes are complete. I heard her weeping as she tried to put in order the remains of her household goods.

Papers Silence reigns at the Hermitage. It is a clear night and the air is balmy. Already the presence of spring is beginning to be felt under the fast melting snow. The forest will soon bud forth, and I shall watch to see the grass blades pushing aside the dead leaves. From the distant quiet plains rises a misty vapour like the smoke of an inhabited village; and if anything can impart consolation after a cruel war, it is this repose of all Nature and mankind, this universal calm which rests upon a shattered country—a country recruiting its strength by sleep, forgetful of the lost harvest in preparing for that of the future!

Commencing tilling the fields

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