

THERESA DUROC  
BY  
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The city was ringed about with walls of fire. By night it presented a terrible aspect to those who could gain a safe vantage ground out of range of the batteries, and watch for awhile the fearful glare from them, as the fiery missiles were sent hurtling forth, charged with their errand of death and destruction. And even if the batteries were silent there was generally some terrible glow of fire in the sky, for almost every day a conflagration broke out in some portion of the city, and the terrified inhabitants never knew from day to day whose turn might not come next.

Theresa lived with her widowed mother in one of those large houses common in all great cities, where the poor were herded together at close quarters, and in days like these had to suffer many privations, as well as all the nameless terrors which beset men's hearts at such a time. Some of their neighbours had fled before the encompassing army shut in the city; but Theresa and her mother remained. For they knew not where else to go. And if Pierre, away fighting for his country, should be recalled by the exigencies of war, and the siege should suddenly be raised by help from without, where would the poor boy find them, if not in the old home?

"The good God will care for us and protect us, if we trust ourselves to Him," the Widow Duroc had said; and, whilst others collected their few possessions and quitted the city, she and her daughter remained in the almost deserted house.

It was necessary for them to remain, if possible, as it was in the city that Theresa's work lay. She went daily to one of the shops where fine starching and ironing was done, and, with the money she earned in this way, she had kept the little home comfortable for some time. Her mother was a cripple, and could only do a little needlework when she was able to procure it. Sometimes Theresa was enabled to bring her home some from the shop, but for the rest they were dependent upon the earnings of the girl. If they were to seek to fly the city they had nowhere to go, and would lose their only means of support. It seemed better to remain and risk the peril within the walls than fly they knew not where.

And now they were fast shut in, and had grown so well used to the booming of the guns or the sharp scream of the shell hurtling through the air, that they spoke and moved in the midst of the tumult as quietly as they had done before it began. Indeed, sometimes, when for a night, or for part of a day, the batteries became suddenly silent, the stillness would seem almost more awful than the roar that had gone before. It would cause them to awake from sleep with a start, or to stop suddenly in what they were saying or doing, and always the question arose in the heart, or to the lips:

"What is it that has happened? Has the city fallen?"

The tall house in which they lived was far more silent and empty now than it had been before the siege began. The authorities had encouraged all those who were able, to depart before escape should be impossible. They foresaw that food was likely to become scarce, and the fewer useless mouths there were to fill the better for all. But those who had sons, or husbands, or brothers in the army were suffered to remain, as were all who could not leave without suffering heavily; and it was known to Theresa, from what she heard spoken about her, that should famine threaten, and the city be put upon rations, she and her mother would be entitled to receive a share, as being among those whose bread-winner was with the army.

But at first there seemed little fear of this, and Theresa's work went on as before. The tall house where they lived was not in range of any of the batteries, and though their hearts were often torn by fear for others, and by sorrow for their beautiful buildings being so

sorely shattered and ruined, they themselves did not suffer, and they grew accustomed to the conditions which had seemed at first so strange and terrible.

But day after day passed by, and the days lengthened into weeks, and still the hoped-for relief did not come; those within the beleaguered city only heard whispers from the world without, and knew not what was passing there.

"If only our Pierre could get a letter to us!" the widow would say, again and again; "then we should know how it was faring with him and with the army."

Theresa going daily to her work heard all the flying rumours which reached the city; but she did not speak of them always to her mother, for she knew not how much or how little to believe, and she feared either to buoy her up by false hopes, or to crush her with needless fears.

Gay Paris is slow to believe in disaster, or to credit that the arms of France can meet with any severe reverse. Each generation is as full of hopeful confidence as the one that has gone before, as full of enthusiasm and patriotic fervour, as little disposed to believe in misfortune.

"The victorious army will march to our relief!" was the cry that was always finding expression. "A little more patience—only a little more!—and these accursed foes will be flying before our brave *garçons* of soldiers like chaff before the wind."

And nobody believed this more implicitly than Theresa for a long, long time. The soldiers would come, and Pierre with them. They would see them marching in, in all the bravery of their gay trappings. Oh, what a day that would be! How the bells would ring, and the guns salute, and the people go mad with joy! She lived through the experience a hundred times a day as she stood at her ironing-table and worked at her piles of snowy linen. But the sullen boom of the guns was still the accompaniment of all her musings. And every week as it passed brought home to her heart the conviction that things were not going well: that the lines of the enemy were being drawn ever closer and closer: that there could not be good news from the outer world, else surely it would be noised abroad with acclamation.

But soon a trouble was to fall upon her for which she was quite unprepared. Fires had become sadly common in the city. A glare in the sky was such an ordinary sight that it scarcely aroused any interest or speculation, save in the immediate neighbourhood where it occurred. Soldiers and citizens were always on the alert to put it out wherever a conflagration occurred, and often the flames were speedily extinguished. Nevertheless, the number of burnt and uninhabitable houses was becoming daily larger, and persons were removing their goods and furniture from those streets where the danger threatened into safer localities; so that the house where the Durocs lived had already been invaded by various newcomers, seeking an asylum from the storm of shot and shell.

Theresa, however, knew little or nothing of their new neighbours. She was busy with her work by day, and her mother did not get about easily enough to learn much of those who had arrived in this sudden fashion. They were of the class that, in the English phrase, preferred to "keep themselves to themselves."

One morning Theresa started forth to her work as usual, and, after taking the accustomed turnings, found herself in the familiar street. But once there she stopped short and rubbed her eyes. For what did she see? The whole side of the street, where her workshop had stood, lay a mass of smoking ruins; and the people from the opposite houses were hurrying away, carrying their goods and chattels with them.

The terrible news was passing from mouth to mouth. A new battery had been opened. A new portion of the city was in peril. People small and great were hastening away before

another fusillade should shatter the remaining part of the quarter. Theresa stood gazing in great dismay at what she saw. Where was her occupation now? Where was her kindly employer whom she had served so long?

Even as she asked herself the question a woman from an adjacent house, well known to Theresa, came hurrying out, the tears raining down her face.

"Alas! alas! little one, she is dead—God rest her soul!—buried beneath the fall of the house in the dead of night! Ah, those accursed Germans! What have they not to answer for? Our good neighbour Clisson!—so kindly, so merry, so ready to lend a helping hand. And thou, my poor child—what wilt thou do? Everything swept away in one night! And who knows whose turn may come next?"

Theresa was indeed dismayed for herself as well as for others. The terrible fate of her kind mistress cut her to the heart; but when that shock had passed by, there came the other thought suggested by the kindly neighbour. What was to become of her and her mother, now their only means of support was taken from her?

"Thou wilt have to apply for rations as others do," said her friend, with a look into the troubled face. "Courage, little one! These black days cannot last for ever! We shall soon see those *canaille* of Prussians flying helter-skelter before our brave *garçons*. The good God will hear our prayers and will send us succour. It will only be for a time, and then our beautiful city will be gayer and more beautiful than ever!"

But Theresa had heard words like these too often to put the old faith in them. Her heart was heavy as lead within her. She was revolving many plans by which she might still earn something and support her mother. But the price of food was rising so fearfully that already she scarcely knew how to keep the wolf from the door; she knew, too, that her mother desired, if possible, not to be forced to send for the doled-out rations from the great Government building; and no one could more desire to be spared the task of fetching it daily than Theresa herself.

She had heard what that meant from others. The long, long, weary wait in the daily increasing crowd; the hustling and the jostling before one could get a place in the *queue*; the bitter cold often to be faced when the wind blew down upon the crowd; the peril, sometimes, of having the hardly earned food snatched away in some back street by a hungry ragamuffin before ever it had reached its destination.

All this Theresa knew that she would have to face if they lost all other means of support. And, moreover, for her was another great danger: to reach the quarter of the city where the food was doled out, she would be forced to cross a wide boulevard that was swept from end to end by the guns of a battery, and each time that she went she would have to take her life in her hands, as it were.

"But mother must never know that," she said to herself, as she thought of these things. "She is fearful enough as it is of having me go about the streets. She must never know that, else she would not enjoy a moment's peace. Perhaps the good God will save me from it. Perhaps I shall get work elsewhere. And if I must go—for mother's sake—I must pray to Him to keep me safe, as so many are kept who have to go day by day."

Theresa's search after regular employment was not successful. There was so little doing in the city now, and, with food at famine prices, all were saving their money, as far as possible, for the bare necessities of life. For a few weeks the girl was able to earn just sufficient to enable them to keep body and soul together, by jobbing about here and there, turning her hand to any sort of work so long as she might earn a trifle by it.

But the day came at last when she could no longer find any one to employ her. Every one told the same tale—it took all they knew to keep the wolf from the door. Money was scarce; food was scarcer. Larger crowds were daily going to the places where the rations were doled out. Theresa made up her mind as she lay in bed one night, that she must go there, too, on the morrow.

For several days this conviction had been growing upon her; and her nights had been restless and broken, partly through anxiety and trouble of mind, partly because she was really in need of more food, having pinched herself to supply her mother, professing that she got enough to eat at the houses where she worked—a profession that was by no means the literal truth.

"Yes, I will go to-morrow," said Theresa to herself. "It is foolish to be afraid. Others do it, and so must I; and mother must never, never know how I dread the thought. I will ask the good God to make me brave."

And having thus made up her mind, Theresa turned over and slept more soundly and peacefully than she had done for many nights before, rising with a cheerful courage on the morrow.

"Alas, my child!—but if it must be, it must. I would that I could go, for thou art over-young to bear so much fatigue."

"Nay, mother; it is right for the young to spare the old, and the strong the weak. I shall be long gone, I fear. There are so many now to serve; but be not afraid; it will be no more than a day's work, and I will bring thee the food in the evening."

So, with a smile on her face and a brave and cheerful aspect, she took her basket and set off, first to get her order and then the much-needed food.

There was a deal of jostling and pushing and hustling before Theresa could present her claim; but when she showed how her brother was fighting in the army, and her father was dead, it was instantly allowed.

"How many are you?" asked the official, in his quick, peremptory tones, for everything was hurried through as quickly as possible. Without a thought, Theresa answered:

"Three."

A ticket was thrust into her hands, and she was passed out to make way for others, and only when she was in the street once more, hastening along towards the other great building, did she realise that she should have said, "Two"; for, though they always thought and spoke of Pierre as one of them, he was not entitled to the rations within the city.

The girl paused and hesitated; but she saw that it would be impossible to go back. She looked down at the paper in her hand, and a rather longing gleam came into her eyes.

"I am so hungry; I could well eat two portions," she said; but almost at once she shook her head with resolute gesture, and spoke out half aloud: "But no—that would be wrong; that would be like stealing. I know what we will do. We will set aside Pierre's portion each day, and we will give it to some poor hungry creature who may not be able to get to the dépôt. There must surely be many such in the city. I will find out one such, and she or he shall be fed every day, for the order cannot be changed now. I think that is what the good God would like me to do. Perhaps it was His will that I made that mistake, His eye looks down and sees all."

Full of this thought, Theresa hastened on through the streets and quickly reached that dangerous spot which she had so feared to pass. But to-day the great guns were silent; there was no peril to be feared; and, with a happy smile upon her face, she ran across,

thinking within her heart that it seemed almost as though an angel were watching over her and making her task easy.

Another piece of good fortune befell her, in that a second place had been recently opened for the distribution of rations, in order to meet the increasing demand. Theresa heard of this from a woman hurrying away with her basket, and, instead of pushing into the larger crowd, she joined the smaller one, and being served far more quickly than she had thought possible, hurried home with a very light heart.

"It was not half so bad as I thought and feared," cried Theresa, putting down her basket, and sinking into a chair. "Oh, yes, to be sure, I am tired; but then what of that? We have food to eat, and a certainty of more when that is done. And now, my mother, I must tell thee of my plan. I think thou wilt be pleased that I should carry it out. The good God has taken such care for us, that I think He would have us take thought for others."

So Theresa, rising and opening her basket, carefully divided the food into three portions, and, notwithstanding the fact that she could well have consumed the double portion, after her long fasting and wearying day, she set it smilingly aside, and told her mother how it was "Pierre's dole," and must not be eaten by them, but given to some one in greater need.

There is sometimes more heroism in an act of such self-sacrifice than in one of those deeds at which all the world exclaims; but Theresa had no thought of being brave as she laid her plan before her mother, nor did the widow praise her daughter. She took the girl's view that the ration was not theirs, and must be passed on to somebody else.

"And, indeed, my child, we shall not have far to go, for, in truth, I have begun to fear that those two old ladies up above us in the attic must be well-nigh starving by this."

"What old ladies?" asked Theresa eagerly, as she set to work with keen-set appetite upon her own portion.

"Ah, thou hast not seen them, like enough. I hear that the mistress is called Madame de Berquin, and that she is of very good family; but she has been ruined by this cruel siege, her house shattered, supplies cut off, and she knows not where to turn. She and her old servant sought refuge here a few weeks back, and I think they had money then, for the servant went forth daily and came back with a basket. I would see her pass and give her a good day, and she stopped once or twice just to take breath and speak a few words, which is how I came to know that little about them; but I have not seen her these last days, and I cannot well get up the stairs. So thou shalt go, and take with thee some of this hot coffee and the food. It may be they are in sore need. My heart has been sad for them before, but what could I do?"

Theresa almost forgot her own hunger in her eagerness to pay this visit; and, taking in the can some of the fragrant coffee, steaming hot, she put the rest of the food in the basket and ran lightly upstairs with her load.

At the door she knocked; the old servant opened it a little way and looked suspiciously forth. All at once it seemed to Theresa that it might not be quite easy to get old Madame de Berquin to accept the food of which she stood in such sore need.

"What do you want?" asked old Jeanne suspiciously.

"I have brought Madame de Berquin's rations," answered Theresa, with a sudden inspiration. "You know the city is on rations now, and, as we live in the same house, I thought I might fetch Madame's with ours. It is not very much, I fear, but——"

The old woman opened the door wider and beckoned Theresa in. Something in the white, drawn face of the servant went to the girl's heart! her aspect, and that of the attic itself, bespoke the direst poverty. Madame de Berquin lay upon the bed; she looked almost like a corpse to the girl; her eyes dilated with fear.

"She is not dead, but she would soon have died," said the old woman. "I was praying it might be soon for both of us. She will not let me fetch the rations; she will not have her name set down for a dole. How did you get it from her?" and despite the almost wolfish hunger in her eyes, old Jeanne seemed disposed to push the food away.

"I did not give your name; I did not know it," answered Theresa simply. "I just got some with ours. They are in a great hurry at the office. They do not ask many questions."

"Then may the saints and the good God reward you!" cried the old woman, with a sob in her voice; "for verily I thought to see my dear mistress perish of want before my eyes!"

Now, however, with Theresa's assistance, she raised the prostrate figure, and Madame de Berquin revived as the hot, fragrant coffee passed her lips. They gave her morsels of bread soaked in it. They fed her gradually, as an infant is fed, until the light began to come back into her eyes and the grey pallor of her cheeks to change to something more lifelike.

"I shall come again to-morrow and bring some more," whispered Theresa, as she slipped away at last; and the look which the old woman gave her was reward enough.

But all days were not such good ones for Theresa as this one had been. Sometimes she was in terrible fear as she went her way, for the bullets seemed to be whizzing in the air about her, and the sounds of fearful explosions all round made her doubt whether she should escape with her life. And the long, long waiting in the biting cold, and the perils she encountered from daring little gamins or ill-conditioned men, made her daily journey a growing terror to her. But the thought of the crippled mother and those two patient old women upstairs, all dependent upon her for the food which kept life in them, nerved her to conquer her fears and to persevere, in spite of all the dangers she had to face.

Then came the day when her bravery met with an unexpected reward. She was waiting to cross that terrible boulevard. She had been waiting long, and still she dared not face the peril. She heard the bullets biting the stones, and a shell had exploded in the centre of the road just as she came up. She began to fear that she was losing her nerve, that she was growing less brave rather than more, when suddenly she was held riveted to the spot by the sight of a boy, about seven or eight years old, dressed as a gentleman's child, who came running along gaily, rather as though he had escaped from restraint, and dashed into the middle of the broad roadway. Then suddenly he threw up his hands, gave a quick cry, and fell forward.

Theresa forgot everything in the sight of the child's peril. Dashing forward, she caught him up in her arms, dropping basket and can and everything, and staggered across the road with him, just as a pale-faced gentleman, in semi-military dress, came rushing up in a terrible state of anxiety and excitement.

"Etienne, Etienne, what hast thou done?"

The little boy had given forth one lusty yell at the sight of blood on his tunic, but a hasty survey satisfied the father that it was a scratch rather than a wound the child had received, and the colour began to come back to his face.

"My brave girl," he said, turning to Theresa, "how can I thank you for this great service? Do you know that scarcely had you snatched up the boy and got him away than the ground where he was lying was torn up by some fragments of a shell? Had he lain there a few seconds longer he must have perished!"

"Ah, how glad I am I was there just then," said Theresa simply.

"Were you not frightened, my child? Did you not know the peril of passing that street?"

"Oh, yes; I know. I am rather frightened, but I have to go by every day to get food. I must be going now, or I shall lose my turn."

"Nay, nay; come back with me, and my wife shall fill the basket to-day," answered the gentleman, with a kindly authority that the girl could not resist; and, as she walked beside him, Etienne, proud of his adventure and his little hurt, hanging to his father's hand, Theresa found herself closely questioned as to herself and her circumstances, and heard a wondering exclamation pass the gentleman's lips as she spoke the name of Madame de Berquin.

That day saw the end of Theresa's troubles about food; for, from thenceforward till the close of the siege, General Varade, whose little son she had saved, made the care of her and her mother and of Madame de Berquin his especial task. He knew something of the history and family of the latter, came to see her, and would have moved her into better quarters had she wished it; but she had grown so fond of Theresa and her mother that until better days should come she preferred to remain where she was.

"It is to thy bravery, my child, that we owe all this," she once remarked; and Theresa, looking quite astonished, answered:

"Oh, Madame, I was never brave. I was always scolding myself for being such a coward!" But others when they heard these words smiled.

***Free***editorial 