

# The Scarlet Scarf

By Anna Leach

THERE was a hush through all the big Paris house. The head of it, the banker Vernuil, had been so busy for days that he could hardly come home. The servants had all fled to the upper windows where they dared to peep out at the soldiers passing by, and I fear that Mademoiselle, "Old Mam'zel," was not far behind them for all her gray curls.

It was the beginning of the Franco Prussian war, and France was high with hope and eager to show her bravery and strength. But the household was not all at the top of the house watching the troops. In a corner of the great drawing room, between a gilt screen and a window, Lieutenant Vernet, in his marching uniform, was saying good-by to Lucille. They were betrothed lovers, but it was nobody's intention that they should see each other like this alone.

It was a very tender good by.

"You may be killed," Lucille said, and shuddered against the new uniform, gay with braid and buttons.

"I wish you could have married me before I went," Vernet said. "Then if I had died you would have had my name, and the fortune I have to leave." But Lucille put her hand over his mouth, and tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh, never mind, sweetheart," Vernet laughed. "It is not going to be as bad as that. It is going to be a lucky war, soon over. We will be in Berlin before anybody can think. That is the way when France wars with Germany." And he looked over her head with its curls tucked up in the back *à la* Empress Eugenie, at the bronze bust of the great Napoleon which

stood on a pedestal near by. He had humiliated Prussia! There was a discreet cough at the door, but the lovers did not hear it.

"But if you had married me first," Vernet said, "you might have come to me sometimes."

"If you were wounded I would come any way," the young girl said passionately.

"Your father would never bring you."

"I would come alone then——"

Again that cough at the door, and she turned hastily to see her father's Swiss servant. "I would bring Henri with me," she added. "and come to you."

And that little sentence it was which made all the trouble!

Lucille wrapped a scarlet scarf about her head and went up stairs with the rest of the family to see Vernet pass by with his sturdy infantry; and her black eyes peering out of the rich folds, with the Swiss standing respectfully behind her, was his last sight of her.

Two months later he lay wounded in a little hut near Arnheim.

The Germans were not far away. The two armies, or at least that part of the two armies which were protecting the borders here by Arnheim, were hardly strong enough for a pitched battle, but they were continually skirmishing, and it was in one of these skirmishes that Vernet had been wounded. Back and forth the two lines would go. Sometimes one would hold a position, and again it would be the other. Until Vernet, who had been promoted one step in rank, had been wounded, he had

held the village and most of the outlying farms; but in the demoralization surrounding his fall, when his men thought that he was killed, they had rushed to him, been driven back by the Germans, and only rallied in time to save themselves from utter rout.

Vernet hardly realized it all. He was half delirious with pain and weakness and bad care, for the Red Cross nurses were not able to cover the whole frontier and to keep a staff wherever there was a little line of men struggling.

As Vernet lay in his hut he talked in his restless sleep, and it was always of Lucille. She had said that she would come, and his disordered brain remembered her promise. Sometimes he would imagine that he was talking to her.

"Go back! Go back!" he would say. "You must not come here. This is no place for you, in an armed camp. They should not have let you come even if you did promise. Put back your scarlet scarf, and let me see your face," he would say over and over. "Let me see your pretty black eyes. But you must not stay. You will be killed." Then in his pain he would call her to his side.

One day a sergeant, a big, awkward fellow, came into the lieutenant's room and stood against the corner of the fireplace.

"What is it?" Vernet asked weakly from the shelf-like bunk where he lay. It hurt him to open his eyes and look about him. The place was a picture of disorder.

The man held his cap in his hands and twisted it nervously.

"I have brought you a cook, sir," he said.

"A cook? What have we to cook?"

"We can find something to cook, and I thought she might tidy up a bit."

"She?"

"Yes, sir."

"A woman?"

"Yes, sir. She was a friend of mine when we were in the village. She kept the inn——"

"And you have been seeing her—a woman of the enemy."

The big sergeant flushed all over his dark face. He was a carter from near Paris, and he could look on no woman exactly in the light of an enemy.

"She brought us food; most of what we have been able to give you. She brought it to the sentry and went back."

"And now she has come to stay?"

"She said it was a shame so handsome a young man should die for want of nursing."

Vernet laughed weakly.

"That doesn't sound much like a German woman, does it? I suppose you have taught her some French tricks. How do I know she will not come in, discover our strength, and——"

The big man grinned.

"They know every man we have already."

"That is true," Vernet replied, and then after a moment's glance about at the horrible disorder, he told the man he might bring the woman in.

She was a comfortable looking middle aged creature, who set Vernet's fears at rest at once. She certainly was a great comfort. She had a semblance of order about him in no time, and had warmed some of the broth she had brought. At night when his restless, talkative sleep began, he was vaguely conscious that a woman sat beside him. Sometimes he would think that it was Lucille, and tell her again that she must go away, that it was dangerous for her to be there, and he would beg her to take down the red scarf.

The woman stole softly to the door of the hut where the sergeant waited.

“Who is Lucille?” she whispered:

“His sweetheart. He has talked of nothing else. Evidently she promised to come to him if he were wounded, and he fears she may if she hears it. We will be re——” And then, gallant as he was to the comfortable innkeeper who had been filling his stomach with dainties for the past month, he remembered that after all she was an enemy, and turned away his head, and did not see the look, swift as lightning, that went over the woman’s face.

“Reinforcements, of course. They must take the village again, I suppose. Ah!” And she went back to the bedside of the young officer, and sat knitting while she listened.

The next morning she returned to her inn to get more food!

It was late in the afternoon when she came running back; as she flew past the sentry who knew her, she panted, and sank behind a little embankment, just as a bullet came whizzing by.

“They tried to kill me,” she gasped. “They say I am a traitor.”

Under her skillful nursing the young man rapidly improved. Despatches came to him, and he arose and dressed and walked about the camp, giving orders. Evidently something was about to happen. The German woman appeared to see nothing but her pots and her knitting.

The despatches were of the gravest importance. It had happened in the fortunes of war, that Arnheim had come to be one of the strategic points, and the French were on their way to occupy it in numbers. They might be expected in two days. The Germans had not discovered their movements, and the whole country would be in the hands of the French before they did. Vernet was simply to have his men ready to join the main array.

It was early morning, gray and soft

and lovely, when Vernet awoke and saw the German woman standing over him. She held something red in her hands.

“Sir,” she said in an agitated fashion, “I was told to give you this.”

It was a scarlet scarf.

Vernet sprang to his feet, and reached for his uniform coat. He slept half dressed in those days.

As he took it in his hands he felt that he was dreaming. He had dreamed so much of a scarlet scarf, and had felt it melt away in his hands as he awoke.

This was real.

“Where did you get it?”

“Sh-h!” the woman said, whispering. “There is a young lady—a delicate, beautifully dressed young lady—a Parisian, with such beautiful black eyes—”

“Yes—yes. Where?”

“In the farm house beyond the village, Last night I felt that I must have some eggs and broth for you to grow strong on, and as I cannot go back to my own home I went to the house of my cousin. There, kept a close prisoner, was the lovely young lady. She was crying and begging to come to you. She had heard that you were wounded. She implored that you would rescue her. She sent the scarf! Oh, those horrible men!” There was tragedy in the woman’s tones. “If they are my countrymen they are only soldiers—and a young girl! She said her name was Lucille!”

Vernet gave a cry that was like that of an enraged lion.

Lucille, his tender pretty little Lucille, at the mercy of the Germans! He was out of the hut, giving orders, calling to his men, in an instant. There was not a moment to lose.

The soldiers did not know what happened. They only knew that they were

ordered to retake the village they had lost, and that they were only too ready to try it.

Rapidly they formed" and rushed around the hill. They could probably surprise the Germans. It was early. Their arms would be down while they cooked their breakfasts. They could see the smoke rising everywhere. But evidently the Germans did not lay down their arms even to cook. They met the French in their full strength, and as they had houses to fight from, it seemed that they had only to cut the Frenchmen to pieces.

But the Frenchmen thought differently. Each man seemed to be a dozen, and the pale, tall lieutenant appeared to bear a charmed life. Bullets could not reach him. Like tigers, the wiry, brave little Frenchmen sprang at their heavier, better drilled enemy, and carried everything before them. They swept through the village like a storm, firing the houses, leaving a trail of destruction behind them, fighting in the smoke like demons, and here, there, everywhere, was the young lieutenant, who seemed to have a voice at every man's elbow, spurring him on.

They pushed the Germans out before them, and they fell back, joining others behind. It seemed to Vernet, as he came out on the hilltop behind the village and looked down at the farm house where Lucille was, that the country was full of Germans. They had been reinforced. They were pouring in. He could see them far away, coming, coming—an army.

But fire was in his soul. He sprang out before his handful of men and lifting his sword, shouted,

"The farm house must be taken!"

And like an avalanche, they rushed down the hill, and poured into the doors. Shot and shell mowed down the men, but the ragged remnant kept on. A murderous fire belched forth from the windows, but

nothing stopped them. The farm house was taken!

When Vernet looked about him he was dazed. The place was stripped of furniture and made into a sort of arsenal. There was no sign of a woman there. There were only two rooms and they were filled with French soldiers, standing at the windows now, and fighting.

Vernet felt his knees giving way under him. Excitement, the determination to rescue Lucille, had kept him up, but now she was gone. He heard the approaching army of the enemy. They were in a trap. He saw it all. The German woman had betrayed them to their death. His little band would be literally and entirely wiped out. He would be known as a fool. Killed and a fool!

Suddenly a mighty cheer went up from the throats of his men, and as he turned his dazed eyes toward the hill he saw the French, the real army, rushing down behind him. The reinforcements had come. He gave a cry, staggered and fell, the blood gushing from the old wound in his shoulder.

When he became conscious after the fever which set in, the real Lucille sat by his bedside in the Red Cross hospital, and his general was there to tell him what a brave man and great strategist he was.

"If it had been an hour later, that hill would never have been ours. You struck in the nick of time, and you are going to get the cross of the Legion for it.

"To be sure," he went on, "you had to take chances. We might have been delayed. But your coup succeeded, and will be put down as one of the great points of this war. You should be proud of him," the general patted Lucille on the shoulder. Vernet could only smile weakly, and look contented.