

# The Attack on the Mill.

BY EMILE ZOLA



Of twenty years Father Merlier had been Mayor of Rocreuse. When he married Madeleine Guillard, he had only his two arms, but Madeleine brought him the mill for a dowry.

His wife was now dead and he lived alone with his daughter Francoise. Merlier was a fine-looking old man, a tall, silent figure, who never laughed, but nevertheless he was gay at heart. He was chosen Mayor because of his money, and also because he married people in such handsome fashion.

Francoise Merlier was eighteen years old. She had black hair, black eyes, and fresh rosy colour. Still she was not one of the beauties of the country. The quiet ways of her father had made her wise beyond her years. If she laughed it was for the pleasure of others. At heart she was serious.

Naturally from her position she was courted on every side. But when she made her choice all her little world wended.

On the other side of the Moselle lived a great fellow named Dominique Penquer. He was not of Rocreuse. He came from Belgium ten years before, as the heir of an uncle who owned a little ground on the edge of the forest of Gagny, opposite Merlier's mill. He had meant to sell his land and go back. Instead he remained, charmed by the country, he said. Then he raised vegetables, hunted, fished and lay on the grass and slept when other people worked.

The peasant scolded explain such an idle life only by the suspicion that he poached at night. The young girls sometimes undertook his defence because he was good to look upon, simple and tall as a poplar, with blonde hair and beard, that shone like gold in the sun. Now one fine morning Francoise told her father that she loved Dominique, and would marry nobody else.

Father Merlier looked as if he had received a stroke. He said nothing, according to his custom, but he was silent for a week. Francoise was silent also. Then one evening, without saying anything, he brought Dominique to the house. Francoise too said nothing, but made a place for him at the table, and her smile reappeared. The next morning father Merlier went to see Dominique at his hut; the two men talked together. No one knew what they said, but after that father Merlier treated Dominique as a son.

All Rocreuse was astounded; the women chattered greatly over the folly of Father Merlier. In the midst of all this Francoise and Dominique looked at each other with smiling tenderness. Father Merlier had as yet said nothing of marriage, and both respected his silence. Finally, one day toward the middle of July he set three tables in the middle of the court and asked his friends to sup with him. Then when the guests rose with glass in hand, Father Merlier, raising his voice, said:

'It is with pleasure that I announce to you that Francoise is to marry that great fellow there, on the day of Saint Louis.'

All laughed and drank merrily. Then Father Merlier raised his voice again:

'Dominique, embrace your fiancee.'

Blushing the two embraced one another, and the guests laughed still louder.

When the cake was finished and the guests gone an old peasant spoke of the war the Emperor had declared against Prussia.

'Bah,' said Father Merlier with the egotism of a happy man, 'Dominique is a foreigner, it doesn't concern him. If the Prussians come he will be here to defend the wife.'

The idea that the Prussians might come seemed a good joke. If they did come a well-directed stroke on their flank, and that would end it.

'I have already seen them. I have already seen them,' muttered the old peasant in a thick, low voice.

A moment's silence and they drank again. Francoise and Dominique heard nothing. They sat behind the others, hand in hand, lost in the shadows that no eyes could pierce.

A month later, on the eve of St. Louis, the Prussians had beaten the Emperor, and were making forced marches toward Rocreuse.

'They are at Torniere; they are at Novelles; thus each day believing that each night they would fall upon the village and swallow it up.'

The night before there had been an alarm, the women fell on their knees, and made the sign of the cross; then they saw the red trousers and opened their windows. It was a French detachment, whose captain had remained at the mill talking with Father Merlier.

The Captain went about the mill and studied the country with his glass. Merlier went out with him and seemed to give advice. Then the captain posted soldiers behind the walls and the trees, and camped the detachment in the court of the mill. When Merlier came back they questioned him. Was there to be a fight? He nodded his head slowly without speaking. 'Yes, there was to be a fight.'

Francoise and Dominique were then in the court and watched him. He finished by taking out his pipe, and said:

'Ah, my poor children, to-morrow you were to have been married.'

Dominique, with tight lips and angry forehead, stood with eyes fixed on the forest of Gagny, that he might see the moment the Prussians arrived: Francoise, pale and serious, went and came, giving the soldiers what they needed.

The Captain was delighted. 'You have a fortress,' he said; 'we can hold it until evening. They are late.'

The miller remained grave. He saw his mill burning like a torch. He did not complain. That was useless. All he said was:

'You ought to hide the boat behind the wheel. It may serve you.'

The Captain was a fine-looking fellow, forty years old. The sight of Francoise and Dominique pleased him. He seemed to have forgotten the approaching struggle. He followed Francoise with his eyes, and his manner showed that he thought her charming. Then turning toward Dominique:

'You are not in the army, my boy?'

'I am a foreigner,' replied the young man.

The Captain did not appear to accept this reason; he smiled, Francoise was more agreeable company than a rifle. Seeing this Dominique said:

'I am a foreigner, but I can hit an apple at 500 yards. There is my gun behind you.'

'It will be of use,' replied the Captain.

Francoise approached trembling, and Dominique took her hand in his with a protective air. The Captain smiled again, but said nothing. Seated there, his sword between his knees, his eyes far away he seemed to dream.

Then the sound of a firing broke the silence.

The Captain sprang to his feet, the soldiers left their plates of soup, and in a few seconds all were at their posts. From the forest of Gagny arose a slender thread of smoke. The firing continued and grew heavier.

Francoise and Dominique clasped one another, screened by a high wall. A little soldier behind an old boat, firing and hiding while he reloaded his gun, interested them by his droll movements until they laughed. Then as he raised his head to fire again, he gave a cry and rolled convulsively into a ditch. It was the first death. Francoise shuddered and clung to Dominique in nervous terror.

'Don't stay here,' said the Captain. 'You are under fire.'

An oak tree shivered overhead, but they did not move when the firing ceased and they heard only the ripple of the Moselle.

Father Merlier looked at the Captain with astonishment. 'Have they finished?'

'Don't deceive yourself, they are preparing to attack. Get inside.'

He had scarcely finished when a shower of leaves fell from the oak. They had fired too high. Dominique drew Francoise closer to him. 'Come, children, hide in the cellar. The walls are thick,' urged the miller.

They did not heed him, but went into the great room of the mill; here a dozen soldiers were waiting behind the closed shutters. The outpost had not been driven in. The idea was to gain time. The firing continued; an officer reported. The Captain drew out his watch:

'Two hours and a half: we must detain them four hours longer.'

They shut the great doors of the court and prepared for determined resistance. The Prussians had not yet crossed the Moselle.

Then the firing ceased. At high noon the mill seemed dead. Every shutter was closed and not a sound came from within.

Then the Prussians showed themselves beyond the woods of Gagny. As they grew bolder the soldiers in the mill prepared to fire.

'No,' said the Captain, 'let them come nearer.'

The Prussians looked anxiously at the old mill, silent, gloomy, with closed shutters; then boldly advanced. As they crossed the meadow, the officer gave the word.

The air was filled with the rattle of shots. Francoise clapped her hands to her ears. When the smoke had cleared away, Dominique saw two or three soldiers on their backs in the middle of the field. The others had hid behind the poplars. The siege had begun.

For an hour bullets rattled against the mill. From time to time the Captain consulted his watch, and as a ball pierced the shutter and lodged in the ceiling, he murmured:

'Four hours. We can never hold it.'

Little by little the mill yielded to the terrible firing. A shutter fell in the water, pierced like lace-work. They replaced it by a mattress.

At each round Merlier exposed himself to see the blow given his old mill. All was over. Never again would it wheel turn. Dominique begged Francoise to hide, but she refused to leave him; she was seated behind an old oak cupboard that protected her. Then a ball pierced it, and Dominique, gun in hand, placed himself before her.

'Attention,' cried the captain suddenly.

A dark mass appeared out of the wood. Then a formidable fire opened. Another shutter dropped and the balls entered. Two soldiers fell, a third was wounded; he said nothing, but fell over the edge of the table, with eyes fixed and staring. In the face of the dead, Francoise, dumb with horror, pushed back her chair mechanically, and sat down on the floor, near the wall.

'Five hours,' said the captain. 'Let us hold on. They are going to cross the river.'

At this moment Francoise cried out. A spent ball struck her on the forehead: some drops of blood flowed.

Dominique saw it. Then going to the window for the first time he fired. He did not stop, but loaded and fired, unmindful of everything else, except when once he cast a glance at Francoise.

As the Captain had foreseen, the Prussians were crossing the river behind the poplars; one too bold fell pierced by a ball from Dominique's gun. The Captain, who had watched him, was astonished, and complimented the young man. But Dominique heard nothing. A ball struck his shoulder, another bruised his arm, still he kept on.

The position seemed no longer tenable, a last discharge shook the mill. But the officer only repeated:

'We must hold it another half-hour.'

Now he counted the minutes, but kept his amiable air, smiling at Francoise, to reassure her. Then he took a gun from a dead soldier and fired.

There were now but four soldiers left in the room. The Prussians were on the brink. Still the Captain waited. An old sergeant ran in.

'They are going to take us from the rear.'

The Captain took out his watch.

'Five minutes more—they cannot get here before.'

At six o'clock precisely the Captain gave the order to retreat. The men filed out of the little door into the street.

Before leaving the Captain saluted the miller and said:

'Announce them; we will return.'

Meanwhile Dominique remained alone in the mill, still firing, hearing nothing, comprehending nothing. He only knew that he must defend Francoise. With each charge he killed a man. Suddenly there was a great noise; the Prussians rushed in from behind. He fired once more and they fell upon him with his gun smoking in his hand. Four men held him, an unknown language roared around him. Francoise fell on her knees before them in supplication. An officer entered and took him prisoner. After some words in German with the soldiers he turned to Dominique and said roughly in very good French:

'You will be shot in two hours.'

This had been the order issued by the Commander-in-chief of the Prussian forces against peasants who might be found defending their firesides.

The officer, a large man, fifty years old, briefly questioned Dominique.

'Do you belong here?'

'No, I am a Belgian.'

'Why did you take up arms? This does not concern you.'

Dominique did not answer. Then the officer saw Francoise standing near; the mark of her wound showed a red bar across her pale forehead. He looked at the young couple, first at one, then the other, and seemed to understand.

'You do not deny having fired?'

'I did all I could do,' said Dominique, tranquilly.

This avowal was useless; he was black with powder, covered with sweat, and a few drops of blood trickled from his shoulder.

'Very well,' said the officer. 'You will be shot in two hours.'

Francoise did not weep. She clasped her hands and raised them with a gesture of mute despair. The officer noticed this. Two soldiers led Dominique away. The young girl fell on a chair and began to weep. The officer still watched her, then spoke.

'Is this your young brother? She shook her hand. He was silent and serious, then spoke again.

'Has he lived here long?'

'Yes.'

'Then he ought to be familiar with the neighbouring woods.'

'Yes, monsieur,' she said, looking at him with surprise. He added nothing more, but turned on his heels and asked for the mayor of the village.

Francoise took hope, and ran to find her father.

The miller, as soon as the firing had ceased, went to look at his wheel. He adored Francoise, he had a little liking for Dominique, his future son-in-law, but his wheel was dear to him.

As soon as he knew his two children were safe, he thought of his other cherished one. Now he bent over the great carcass of wood and studied its wounds with a bewildered air. Five paddles were gone. The centre was perforated with bullets. He pushed his finger in the trough of the balls to measure their depth. He was wondering how he could ever repair this destruction. Francoise found him melancholy among the ruins.

'Father,' said she, 'they want you.'

She was still weeping, and related to him what had passed. Father Merlier shook his head, 'They do not shoot people like that, I will go see.' He re-entered the mill with a silent peaceable air.

The officer asked for some food for the men. Merlier told him that they would obtain nothing by violence, but if left to him he would see that they got it. The officer was at first angry, but recovered himself before the few decisive words of the old man, and asked, 'What are those woods yonder?'

'The woods of Sauval.'

'What is their extent?'

The miller looked at him steadily.

'I do not know.'

Then he went away. An hour after they brought in the levies of food. Night came on. Francoise followed anxiously the movements of the soldiers. Toward 7 o'clock her sufferings were horrible. She saw the officer enter the room where Dominique was confined. He stayed there a quarter of an hour, and she heard their excited voices. Then he came out, gave an order in German, and a squad of twelve soldiers with guns ranged themselves in the court; she began to shiver; she thought she was dying. The execution was then to take place. The soldiers remained ten minutes. The voice of Dominique was heard in a steady tone of refusal. Then the officer came out again banging the door.

'Very well, reflect. I will give you till to-morrow.'

With a gesture he dismissed the men. Francoise remained stupefied.

Father Merlier, who continued smoking his pipe, looked at the file of men curiously; then taking Francoise tenderly by the arm, led her into her room.

'Be tranquil,' said he, 'try and sleep. To-morrow will be another day and we shall see.'

Francoise did not sleep; she sat a long time on her bed, listening to the noises without. The German soldiers sang and laughed. But what concerned her most were the sounds in the room beneath, where Dominique was confined. She lay down on the floor and put her ear to the plank. She