

**THE FRENCH
PRISONERS, A
STORY FOR BOYS**

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The French Prisoners, a Story for Boys by Eduard Bertz

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EDUARD BERTZ

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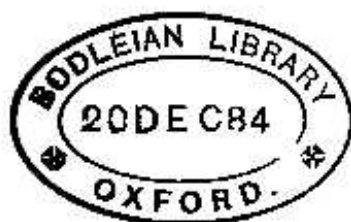
BY
EDWARD BERTZ

'To dream of peace amidst a world in arms.'

WARRICK.

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THE FRENCH PRISONERS.

CHAPTER I.

'The sound of war
Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me.'
COWPER (*Task*, iv.)

THE berries were red on the mountain-ashes that spread their branches over the village street, for it was high summer tide. Before the yard gate of the Vicarage an old man was standing, looking down the road. 'There they are at last!' he exclaimed, talking to Mr. Enderlein, the parson of Bockelow, who sat with a book under the vine-covered porch, and lifting his thin old hand in welcome.

Two lads came marching along the shady avenue, waving their light-coloured schoolboy caps, and nodding merrily to the village people who greeted them from their cottage doors. Over their shoulders they carried knapsacks, and strong buck-

thorn sticks were in their hands, for they were just returning from a walking tour through the Thuringia mountain forests.

It was at the end of the summer holidays of 1870. In Germany, where the mental drill of schoolboys is regarded as a kind of gymnastic exercise, and every classical public school is called a gymnasium, the merciful rulers in the educational council interrupt, in the heat of the dog days, those brain athletics of their pupils by four weeks' vacations, which close with the first week in August.

This year the holidays had witnessed the outbreak of the Franco-German war. It was peace when the boys threw off for a season the yoke under which they had been sweating, and laid away the ancient classics for a full month's sleep on dusty shelves. Now, when they were about to resume their study of the Peloponnesian war and of Caesar's tactics, there was the noise and enthusiasm of real war all around them.

On their journey they had first met with the glorious news that the whole German nation was rising in arms to defend their homesteads and the honour of their country against threatened invasion. They were full of all the great things they had seen

and heard on their tour, and eager to tell their father, who had risen from his seat under the porch, and had called to his wife that the boys had arrived. Smiling, the parents rested their pleased looks on the flushed young faces, and listened to their story, while, as the first refreshment and welcome home, cooling curded milk, with grated brown bread and sugar, was set before them on the porch table.

'Oh, Jockel, whom do you think we met on the line? Can you guess?' Fritz, the younger of the two brothers, in his clear ringing voice, eagerly said to the old man, who had also come to the verandah and shaken hands with them.

'Met? have you met him? Is it Wilhelm?' he asked, looking anxiously into the boy's blue eyes.

'Yes, it was he, your own grandson,' Fritz replied. 'It was in Halle, where we passed a full day, for all the trains were going westward; we couldn't get on. There we saw him in the station, and spoke to him, and he sent you his best love, and said he wouldn't forget that his grandfather is a veteran of Waterloo.'

'No, that he won't forget,' the old man said. 'He's a brave lad, and many's the time I've told him how, on that grand, terrible day, while the streaming rain was knocking upon our big, hollow casques, we

marched along with old Blücher, through mud and mire, to join the English, who were fighting under the Duke of Wellington. Oh, how tired we were, how exhausted and ready to fall down on the spot! "It won't do, it won't do!" we groaned again and again, and always there came old Blücher's reply: "But it must do, boys, it must do! Is not Wellington waiting for us? Did not I promise to join him?" And then we knew that it was his honour, and our own honour, that was at stake, and we took new courage, and so we reached the battlefield. Dear me, what a dance it was! A ball just tore the helmet from off my head—I never saw it again. But that didn't matter, I fought bare-headed, that kept me cool. Three furious charges of Napoleon the English had withstood, and now our men helped them to finish the victory, and old Blücher and Wellington shook hands and thanked the Lord of Mercy. Oh my! now it's the same enemy again hungering after the hams in our smoking-chambers. Didn't he get enough fifty years ago? But never mind, our lads are as good as we old ones were, and Wilhelm won't forget it, oh no, not he!

'No, Jockel, not he!' confirmed Hans, the elder boy, looking with admiration upon the tottering old

warrior. 'You should just have seen how glad he was, and heard him shouting "Hurrah!" when the train started. Oh, how many waggons rolled past us, laden with horses, with cannons, with baggage, with provisions, and, the best of all, those thousands and thousands of singing jubilant soldiers! What fine, buoyant, strapping fellows they were! I could see there was no doubt in their hearts that they were going to victory, and I don't believe they ever thought of wounds and death; or, if they did, they didn't fear them!'

'How terrible it all seems!' the lady said, holding the hand of her younger son. 'I always see before me all those poor mothers who are now trembling for their sons. Oh, children, how thankful I am that you are still too young to take part in this cruel, cruel war!'

'Thankful, mamma?' Hans exclaimed. 'And cruel you call that glorious struggle that has in a day created a united German people? No, wherever we went everybody was joyful, and said all jealousy of the different tribes in north and south of our country was now for ever banished. I am not thankful for one, and I'll just tell you: we went to one of the officers in the train by which Wilhelm steamed away,