

**IN GERMAN HANDS: THE
DIARY OF A SEVERELY
WOUNDED PRISONER**

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In German Hands: The Diary of a Severely Wounded Prisoner by Charles Hennebois & Ernest Daudet

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CHARLES HENNEBOIS & ERNEST DAUDET

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THE DIARY OF A SEVERELY WOUNDED
PRISONER

BY
CHARLES HENNEBOIS

WITH A PREFACE BY
ERNEST DAUDET

E. P. DUTTON & CO.
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PREFACE

ON August 24, 1915, I received a letter in the country, where I was then staying, from a *dépôt* for convalescent soldiers in the South. I will make it the exordium of this preface, for it will tell better than I could myself the circumstances in which I made the author's acquaintance. It ran as follows :

“ Mon cher Maître,—Do you still remember the young aspirant to a literary career for whom you got a post as reader in the Plon printing press at Meaux ? Up to the present year, I have always sought to express my lasting gratitude by the modest card I have sent you every first of January. This year I was unable to send it, and I must make my excuses.

“ I enlisted as a volunteer for the duration of the war, and was severely wounded on October 12, 1914, before Saint-Mihiel. The Germans picked me up on the 16th, amputated my leg, and took me to Metz. On New Year's Day I was in a Boche hospital at Metz-la-Pucelle ; and as might have been expected

my executioners—the word is not too severe—would not allow me to write. Now that I am back in France, where I returned on July 21st of this year, minus a leg and in despair at being unable to fight any more, I recall the kindness with which, three years ago, you received the modest beginner, the young apprentice in versifying.

“I have brought back with me from Germany a diary of my experiences in the field and in captivity, which I have not courage to offer to any Parisian publisher in these troubled times. But I thought that you would perhaps do this generous action; and therefore, as soon as I have made a fair copy of my manuscript I will venture to send it to you, if you will allow me, and to beg you for a short preface.”

This letter was signed “Charles Hennebois.” The incident it recalled was still fresh in my memory. I remembered a young man, gay and attractive of mien, entering my study one morning with two volumes under his arm, and modestly excusing himself for venturing to ask me to read them and give my opinion of them; further, to help him to find a situation which would secure his little household from want—he had lately married—and enable him to devote his leisure to poetry and the literary

work which seemed at that time the goal of his ambitions.

Everything about him interested me, and moreover, remembering the help I myself received when I arrived in Paris, poor and obscure, I have always tried to be friendly to young people when they have done me the honour of applying to me.

There was a great deal of talent in the two volumes brought me by Charles Hennebois. He had called one *La Veillée ardente*, and the other *La Loi de vivre*; had they not been published by a provincial firm, and written by an unknown poet lacking any connexion with the Parisian press, they would certainly have attracted attention. As I have said above, I was greatly interested in him, and I was happy enough to be able to procure him the means of livelihood he needed. His conduct at the outbreak of the war, his voluntary enlistment when he had been discharged, his bravery, the simplicity with which he spoke of his misfortune, the patriotism I felt still vibrating in him, and finally, the perusal of his diary, naturally increased the sympathy I had felt for him from the beginning. On my recommendation my dear friends and publishers, Plon-Nourrit, whose *employé* he had been, agreed

to publish his book, and my other friend, Edouard Trogan, the editor of the *Correspondant*, gave him hospitality in his great periodical. Finally, my *protégé* asked me to write the preface to his journal, and here it is.

Among all the innumerable books inspired by the war, I do not think there is any more moving than this. Descriptions of battle and the incidents of these bloody struggles occupy little place in it ; on the other hand, we follow a tragic sequence of the painful impressions a vanquished combatant feels, when Fortune snatches his weapons from his hands, and seems bent on his destruction. Charles Hennebois had only been at the front a week when he fell with a shattered leg ; for four days he lay on the ground without any help, and during those hours of unspeakable suffering, it was a miracle he was not murdered, for at such moments the victorious Germans are merciless to the unhappy wounded left within their reach.

“ Some of those wounded the previous day,” he writes, “ called out to them, begging for water ; the Germans finished them off with the butt-ends of their rifles or with their bayonets, and then robbed them.”

No one will contest the sincerity of this testimony, and the same may be said of all the

martyrology which forms our wounded man's journal. Directly he was brought into the ambulance station, a German surgeon, as if anxious to be rid of him, decided that his leg must be amputated; this was done; when his wound was examined again at another hospital to which he was transported, he heard the head surgeon declare that he could have saved that leg, if he had been present, and after asking the name of the place where the operation had been performed, he muttered:

"I will go and see about it to-morrow; there is too much slashing there; I must inquire into this business."

It is not only by scenes of this kind that German barbarity is revealed, but also by things the prisoner saw and heard in the course of his captivity. Episodes even more significant and suggestive follow one upon the other in his narrative, interspersed with portraits of persons in whose souls flashes of compassion and generosity are rare. The one or two faces with a benevolent expression are heavily counterbalanced by many full of malice, and hatred gleams in most of the eyes, sometimes manifesting itself in a revolting fashion. The German savages seem to have avenged themselves on the French wounded for their failure to conquer Paris.