

The Parcel

By Mrs. Belloc Lowndes

The fat German Landsturmer, Gustav Shenck—at once so much and so little a soldier—toiled up the steep central street of Douvenay, the Champagne village where were quartered General Prince Botho von Bedingen and his Staff.

Shenck was Chief Military Postman of the Staff, and as such felt himself to be an important personage. But the work his position entailed was onerous to one who was stout and short of breath.

This morning he was laden and overladen with the well-filled bags of the Field Post Service. They had been adjusted on to his shoulders, placed over his arm, one even hung about his neck by his zealous subordinates. And the bags, in addition to postcards and letters, contained parcels—quantities of parcels—for the most part filled with *delicatessen*, humble and luxurious, according to whether they were for officers or men.

Gustav Shenck's load was heavy, and his heart was heavy too; for he himself had received a letter from home to-day, and it said that things were not going well in Saxony, that life was getting, even now, in these early weeks of war, more difficult every day. True, all through the letter there was the insistent hope and belief that soon glorious victory would send the warriors of Germany home to their hearths, each with his share of a huge indemnity wrung from wealthy France. But as he read those words of cheer, the Landsturmer had shaken his head. There were curious rumours current, even in quiet Douvenay—persistent rumours that there had been some kind of defeat and halt just before Paris, and that all was not quite as well with the prospects of a quick campaign as every one had been led to expect would be the case.

Still, Shenck was a kindly, easy-going fellow, and he had a smile and a nod for most of the grey-clad soldiers who came hurrying out of the houses on either side of the village street. The French inhabitants of Douvenay kept, as much as was possible, out of sight, though certain of their small children played about on the sun-splashed cobbles. With these the Saxon Field-Postman was on very kindly terms. Indeed, his heart sometimes yearned toward these little creatures who were, as he well knew, destined to become German; for this lovely backwater village was in the heart of that smiling, opulent province of Champagne which the Kaiser intended to keep after the war. That being so, it seemed indeed a pity that these same children's mothers and grandmothers—their fathers were far away fighting, and their grandmothers had mostly fled from the place at the approach of the dreaded enemy—should be so sulky, in some cases so disagreeable, to the Germans now in peaceful occupation of their homes.

On Shenck trudged, up the sunny street. And then, gradually, his face cleared, for he was approaching a spot where he knew himself sure of courtesy, and even of something better than courtesy, of a smiling welcome.

Standing well back from the paved roadway, behind a high iron gate, above which swung a big gilt bell, was a delightful looking house, running partly round a spacious courtyard. Built of red brick, now faded to a delicate rose pink, the walls, though it was late September, were wreathed with white and yellow flowering climbers; and in the courtyard stood six green tubs filled with miniature orange trees. This was La Maison Bissonet, the property of Léon Bissonet, Mayor of Douvenay, in peace times a prosperous, and even in a modest way a famous, nurseryman. It was

in La Maison Bissonet that General Prince of Bedingen, a veteran of 1870, had fixed his own quarters, instead of in the rat-beridden, un-lived-in Château outside the village.

Shenck rang the bell, and a moment later Madame Bissonet came across the flagged courtyard. She threaded her way quickly among the shining green boughs of the little orange trees; and as she came forward, smiling, she made a charming picture in her red and white check gown, and large, clean, white apron. Though she had a married daughter, and was close on forty, Madame Bissonet was still a very pretty woman. The colour came and went in her rounded cheeks, her eyes were bright and dark, her hair abundant, her teeth small and white. But then the Mayoress of Douvenay was by birth a *Parisienne*, and her husband, very absurdly, or so most of his old friends and neighbours thought, allowed her to lead the life of a *bourgeoise*. Till the outbreak of war, Madame Bissonet had always had a resident servant.

As she came up to the gate with a key in her hand, she made a pantomimic gesture, and called out—of course in French—“Nothing for me, eh?” and the German shook his head, gaily. It was now quite an old joke between them, renewed at least once, sometimes twice, each day. Thanks to their good-natured Prince-billet, the Mayor of Douvenay and his wife enjoyed many little privileges, but that of receiving news from the outside world was not among them. The letters and parcels which were left in such prodigal numbers at La Maison Bissonet were all, of course, for the General, and for the two aides-de-camp who shared his pleasant quarters.

Madame Bissonet’s guest—for so he courteously termed himself—was not only a distinguished, if aged, warrior, he was also one of the most popular bachelor hosts of Berlin; and it was believed by his Staff that most of his letters and parcels came from fair ladies who were mindful of favours past, as well as of favours to come.

The Prince was a burly, open-handed old fellow, bearing well his sixty-six years of life; and the Bissonets might well account themselves fortunate in having him in their house. His hostess, on her side, made him thoroughly comfortable, and he often secretly wished he had such a woman to look after his household in Berlin!

And now, as she held out her large, white apron, she was still smiling—smiling as few Frenchwomen ever smiled in those days. But Madame Bissonet was a fortunate woman. No one belonging to her was in the fighting line, and her only child, a daughter, had married last spring a Parisian who worked in the War Office; and thus was among the non-combatants of France.

But though, following the French fashion, her daughter is mentioned first in her affections, Madame Bissonet’s child did not count in her life as did that child’s father, Leon Bissonet. Most Frenchwomen are mothers first and lovers a long way after; but that was not so with this Frenchwoman.

Prince von Bedingen, who had all your old bachelor’s softness of heart, had been touched, as well as amused, by the passionate affection his host and hostess bore one another. They were more like bride and bride-groom than an old married couple. When she heard her husband’s heavy footsteps—Leon was twelve years older than his Louise—Madame Bissonet’s eyes would brighten, the colour would come into her cheeks, and her confident, rather hard manner would melt away into tenderness.

The Mayor of Douvenay was a fine type of yeoman Frenchman, but he had aged very much in the last few weeks, and there were lines of stern endurance on his face. In every way he was unlike his clever, eager, happy looking wife. It was not that Madame Bissonet did not care for her country, it was rather that she had that touching, one may almost call it that sublime, confidence in France which most Frenchwomen have. She believed that her country could be

trusted to take care of itself, and, as we know, she was to be justified of her confidence. But her whole heart was wrapped up in her husband and in her home; and these two were safe.

She locked the great gate again on the broadly smiling Military Postman, and, walking more slowly, for her apron was now full of letters and parcels, she made her way back into her large, cheerful looking kitchen, bright with its gleaming *batterie de cuisine*; and emptied out the contents of her apron on to her wide, well-scrubbed table.

The Prince had gone off yesterday on a three days' visit to a brother General's Headquarters, and though it was absurd to say so even to oneself, Madame Hissonet found she quite missed her bluff old enemy. He was so polite, so—well yes, so gallant, to this happy-natured, pretty Frenchwoman! He had actually gone to the trouble to arrange that during his absence his two young aides-de-camp should be elsewhere, so that the Mayor of Douvenay and his wife should have these three days alone together.

Madame Bissonet looked with fleeting curiosity at the letters addressed in the German script she was getting to know so well, and also, more carefully, at the addresses inscribed on the well-packed parcels. Then she smiled again. The Prince had said, doubtless in joke, that *she* should have a parcel some day! That he would arrange to have one specially sent to her by the Military Field Post.

She sat down for a few minutes. It was pleasant to feel that there was no one in the house, and that she and her husband would have a quiet, undisturbed hour in which to eat their *déjeuner*. They were going to have a piece of cold veal, a salad and a mayonnaise sauce. The sauce was already made, and the salad was draining in the larder. . . .

The bell above the gate clanged out. Very quietly—for she did not suppose it could be anything of consequence—Madame Bissonet opened the door giving on to the courtyard. Then she gave a little cry of surprise and welcome, for she saw that her husband, her Leon, stood outside, although he was not due home for another hour. He always spent the whole morning, from eight o'clock onward, in the rather shabby building, low down in the village, which was the Maine of Douvenay.

Even before she reached the gate he called out: "I've got to go to Chandlieu to-day!" Then he stopped, for Leon Bissonet was a man of few words.

She opened the gate, and together, she with her plump little hand on his coat sleeve, they walked toward the house.

The Mayor of Douvenay was a tall man, with fine, regular features, and though he looked his full age of fifty-two, there was no lack of decision on his face, or of strength in his firm footsteps.

Leon Bissonet had been only eight years old in 1870, but he well remembered all that had happened then; and though he had said nothing of it to his wife, when the Prussian General, his Staff, and some eight hundred men had ridden into Douvenay three weeks ago, it was as if death had suddenly overshadowed his soul—death, with no hope of resurrection. He was, of course, dully aware that things might have been much worse than they were, but, even so, the hours he spent down at the Maine were punctuated by many disagreeable and painful incidents, of which he said nothing to his wife. The Prince's subordinates were not so courteous and well-bred as the Prince himself, and more than one of the German officers had taken a violent dislike to the unsmiling Mayor, and took pleasure in being as insolent and as insulting to him as they dared be. The fact that the Prince now happened to be absent from Douvenay had already made a difference for the worse, and the Frenchman had welcomed the official summons, couched in the curious archaic French in which all German proclamations in France were then couched,

commanding his presence at Chandlieu, a market town some twelve miles away. He had already been sent for there within three days of the occupation of his village, but on that occasion the Prince had placed a military motor at his disposal. The business concerning which the Mayor of Douvenay had been summoned, on that first occasion, had been the requisition of a certain amount of cattle; and the German Quartermaster, if abrupt, had not been uncivil. Leon Bissonet supposed that it was something of the same kind now, and he actually looked forward to the change of thought and scene. But this time, instead of being conveyed in one of the Prince's motors, he was to go there on a lorry. That would take rather longer, but it was all one to him.

It was not all one to Madame Bissonet: "What a pity the Prince is away, *he* would have given you a car. It will be a hot, tiring journey." She was looking at him anxiously, wondering, with a flutter of the heart, whether that slow-moving, military stores lorry, was likely to pass across any of the danger zone; that zone where the French shells did such constant and such deadly harm to passing German convoys and ammunition wagons. She hoped the lorry would start after dark. But that hope was disappointed.

"I have to start in an hour," he said slowly, "so I've brought up the keys of the Maine. I'd better have something to eat, a bit of bread and cheese will do, and then I'll go up and dress."

She put out the nice *déjeuner* she had looked forward to sharing with him; and then she went upstairs, and busied herself putting out her husband's best clothes. The black suit he had bought new when he had been elected Mayor of his native village, and which he wore at funerals, at weddings, and at christenings, was laid by her across a chair; and after a moment's hesitation, she chose the white waistcoat in which he always celebrated a civil marriage. Then, very carefully, she brushed his top hat.

Madame Bissonet had all your true Frenchwoman's pride in, and love of, her bedroom. It was a large, sunny room with four windows, and overlooked the nursery garden which stretched for many acres behind the house. When she was very young, at a time of her girlhood which she never cared to remember, a gentleman who was a famous artist, as well as a Parisian, had declared that yellow was her colour. And so, although in France yellow is supposed to be unlucky, fine old yellow brocade curtains looped up the large, low bed which was sunk back in a recess of the wall; and the same brocade, an *épave* from a sale held at the Château about the time of the Leon Bissonets' romantic wedding—for theirs, unlike most French village weddings, had been a romantic wedding—also covered the comfortable, First Empire arm-chairs, and the uncomfortable, narrow, Empire sofa, which was an object of luxury, not of use.

At the head of the bed, under the crucifix and the bit of blessed box which Madame Bissonet had brought back from church last Palm Sunday, hung her wedding wreath, in a concave glass frame. And set crosswise from one of the windows, was a large, plain writing-table. It was at that writing-table that Leon Bissonet liked to make his accounts, and to do any other writing work that he did not care should be interrupted by inquisitive friends and neighbours downstairs. Standing on rockers, close to the writing-table, was the curious, old-fashioned rosewood cradle in which the daughter of the house had lain eighteen years ago.

Long since Madame Bissonet had wished to put the cradle tidily away; more recently she had laughingly suggested that it should accompany the newly-married couple to their Paris home; but each time Leon Bissonet had shaken his head. He liked to see the cradle where it was. As he bent over his writing-table, making out his bills, he had only to look up and give a little glance aslant, to be carried back to the time when he was by far the proudest husband, as well as the happiest father, in Douvenay.

But since the outbreak of war there had been no accounts to make out, so the writing-table was now never used. To-day, however, Madame Bissonet, after putting out her husband's best clothes, sat down there, and hurriedly wrote a letter.

Having eaten his frugal luncheon, the Mayor of Douvenay came upstairs, treading heavily through the empty house.

His wife stayed with him while he dressed, and they discussed, or rather she discussed, his visit to Chandlieu. It was in that prosperous country town that much of the produce of their nursery garden had always been disposed of, in the days that already seemed so long ago; and Madame Bissonet began wondering whether Leon would have time to go and see some of the wives and daughters of their old clients, for their clients almost to a man had gone, either to their regiments, or in flight before the incoming tide of the German invasion.

At last the Mayor, looking every inch a Mayor, was ready, his hat in his hand, and smiling—smiling down at his wife as he never smiled at any one else. And she, on her side, jumped up from the chair on which she had been sitting, and, running up to him, threw her arms round his neck and kissed him—kissed him—kissed him: “Good-bye, my darling,” she said, and suddenly ran to the writing-table, while he stared at her perplexed.

From under the thin, pink blotting-paper, covered with its greying marks of long-dried ink, she drew out an envelope addressed to their daughter in Paris, and came and put it in his hand. “You may have a chance of getting this through—” her voice dropped instinctively, though they were alone in the house. “She must be fretting about us sadly, poor child.”

A look of doubt flitted over his face. “You've been careful?” he murmured.

“But yes!” she still spoke under her breath. “I've told her nothing—only that we are well, and—and well treated. But I expect you'll have to bring the letter back. It isn't likely that you'll again have such a chance as you had last time.” And she sighed. Last time a Chandlieu lady, who was a very old friend as well as a client, had offered to carry a letter through to Paris. But there had been no opportunity of getting the letter written.

They walked down the shallow, slippery, walnut-wood staircase which was one of the features of the old French dwelling which Prince von Bedingen most loudly admired.

The house was full of sunny stillness, and of a peace which, to Leon Bissonet, was very agreeable. Unlike his wife, he hated the presence of the good-natured, burly German Prince. To him that presence was a pollution of the homestead where he and his father had been born. That a Prussian soldier, however courteous, however carelessly good-humoured, should occupy even that portion of the large, roomy old house which he and his wife never used was hateful to him. But then the Mayor of Douvenay had very little imagination. He never told himself, as did his wife often, that but for the Prince's presence there their house might have been filled, from top to bottom, as were others in the village, with a rough soldiery, commanded by officers who, if not rough, were yet often insolently discourteous to their French hosts.

Though he was glad to be away, even for a day, from the Maine, and from odious exactions and unreasonable demands, Leon Bissonet was sorry that his absence was to take place on one of the few days when he and his wife were to have solitary possession of their house. Madame Bissonet had never really made friends with any of the village women, and there was not one among them whom she would care to ask to come in and keep her company. If his business should keep him away over night—it had done so the last time he had gone to Chandlieu—then his wife would spend the night alone in the house. Fortunately she was not a nervous woman.

As they walked through into the kitchen he pulled out his large, old-fashioned turnip watch. It was ten minutes to twelve, and at twelve the motor lorry was to start from the Grande Place, down in front of the church.

They walked across the courtyard, and *le maître de céans*, as she sometimes fondly styled him, said something commendatory concerning the healthy condition of the orange trees; a condition which owed much to Madame Bissonet's careful washing of the orange leaves, and wise watering of the sturdy little shrubs. All their able-bodied gardeners had, of course, left Douvenay on the first day of war; and they had now only two old dodderers, who were more trouble than they were worth.

She unlocked the gate, and together they passed through into the roadway. There he bent and kissed her upturned face, and as he turned and started walking down the street, and as she watched his tall figure growing smaller, she told herself that Leon still looked a young and vigorous man, even in those aging black clothes he was wearing to-day. He had last worn them at the Mass which had been said for the soul of the first soldier from Douvenay fallen in the war; that was only six weeks ago, but Madame Bissonet had lost count of time, and it seemed much longer ago than that.

Slowly she went through into her own domain. Then turning round, she locked the great gate, which during the whole of her married life had always stood open, night as well as day, excepting during the *Vendanges*. During the merry days when the grapes are being gathered, the young folks are apt to get a little noisy and prudent householders shut and lock their gates.

The courtyard seemed very empty to Madame Bissonet, but when she went into the house, and the warm smell of some hot jam, simmering on her big steel *fourneaux*, met her nostrils, she felt less forlorn; also, emotion makes a healthy woman hungry, and Madame Bissonet began to feel that it would be pleasant to sit down and eat some *déjeuner*.

As she ate what Leon had left of the cold veal and the excellent mayonnaise sauce, she planned out her afternoon's work. Madame Bissonet never allowed the woman who came in for two hours each morning to help with the rough work of the house to enter the Prince's rooms; for she was shrewd enough to know that if she always did them herself, trouble was far less likely to arise. Both the Prince and his aides-de-camp were extraordinarily suspicious. They scented a spy, or at least a purveyor of information, in every woman, almost in every child, of Douvenay. It was a peculiarity which puzzled the Frenchwoman and made her feel a little contemptuous of her alien guests.

The afternoon went by, quietly, busily; and about five o'clock she went out into the great nursery garden, now full of autumn scents and brilliant colouring. In normal times, this was the busiest fortnight of the year, but now there was, of course, nothing doing; and the two old men who began their day's work at five in the morning, had gone home, aware that their employer was away. Madame Bissonet, who had taken with her a pair of garden shears, cut herself some of the late blooming roses. Then she went indoors again, and ate her solitary supper. She had not cared to cook a proper dinner for herself, as she would have done if her husband had been at home; she had only warmed up the *pot-au-feu*.

It was now that she yearned for her Leon's presence, and also, though she was a little ashamed of the fact, she missed the Prussian Prince, and the stir and bustle of his presence in the other half of the house.

When at last she did go up to bed, she did not fall at once into a sound, healthy sleep as she was wont to do. Instead she slipped off into fitful snatches of slumber, broken by anxious dreams; and for the first time for many years she dreamt of her youth.

Madame Bissonet had not always been in her present and secure position. She was now thirty-nine, and the first half of her life had been very unhappy; so unhappy indeed that she never willingly allowed her thoughts to go back to that time. But to-night, when she woke from that queer, vivid dream, painful old memories crowded in on her. Memories of a neglected, sordid childhood, spent with a foster-mother in one of the poorer quarters of Paris; where, much too soon, she had learnt that she was nameless, fatherless and motherless; though both unknown father and mother were probably alive, for a good sum of money was paid monthly for her support. Then, when she was twelve years old, the payments had stopped, and she had been sent to a national industrial school. From there, four years later, into small service, as a *bonne à tout faire*, to an old childless couple who had finally bought a small house at Douvenay. Her prettiness and intelligence had endeared her to these people, and they had begged her to accompany them. Out of sheer good nature, she had said she would come and see how she liked the country.

And then a miracle happened. Leon Bissonet, the best looking, as well as the one eligible, bachelor in Douvenay, fell in love at first sight with the Parisians' pretty maid. He was then nine-and-twenty, she eighteen, and the struggle with his parents had lasted two whole years.

Under her bedclothes, under her fine linen sheet and light, warm blanket, Madame Bissonet clenched her hands as she remembered the fierce anger and surprise with which Leon's father and mother had learnt that their cherished son was courting, *pour le bon motif*, a penniless servant, instead of one of the two well-dowered girls on whom they had fixed their minds.

Even now, it is not easy for a Frenchman to marry without his parents' consent, and in those days, twenty-two years ago, it was almost impossible.

But Leon Bissonet, with his dogged, secretive, passionate nature, had achieved the impossible. And when they had given way, both father and mother, with characteristic French good sense, had taken their daughter-in-law to their hearts. Indeed, before her death, Madame Bissonet mere, as she had come to be called, acknowledged that her Leon could not have found a wife more suited to him; or one doing her duty better in the way of life to which she had been so surprisingly called. But not even she suspected how well the two were mated, and how deliciously close was that union, at once so selfish and so selfless, only known to elect lovers.

All through the next day, Madame Bissonet listened for the bell which should herald her husband's return. It was trying not to know, even to an hour, when he was coming back. But she remembered that last time he had had to sleep at Chandlieu.

The loneliness of that long day was only broken by the two brief calls of the Field Postman, bearing his usual mass of letters and parcels for the Prince.

The second night Madame Bissonet slept well and soundly, and she awoke with the happy belief that Leon would certainly come back to-day—Leon, and very probably the Prince also.

Once more she and the village woman cleaned and scrubbed what was already well scrubbed and cleaned; and all through the morning she concerned herself with cooking one of those complicated, rather rich dishes in which the Champagne housewife delights. This was a hare *en giblotte*, which must be started early in the morning if it is to be really worth eating by noon. The advantage of this dish was that if Leon did not come till the afternoon it would be just as nice warmed up for his dinner as if served at midday. That thought consoled Madame Bissonet when the hour of *déjeuner* sped by without bringing her husband.

About one there came a note to La Maison Bissonet, stating that the Prince would be back that same afternoon, rather late. For a moment she was sorry, not for her own sake, but for Leon's. Leon would have liked a quiet night alone in their house. She choked down a sigh, and read

again the formal message. It was typewritten, and Madame Bissonet, though she had seen examples of the work produced by "the writing-machine," as it is called in France, was yet sufficiently unfamiliar with it to look twice at the blue paper.

"Madame Bissonet is informed that his Highness, General-Prince Botho von Bedingen, will reach her house this afternoon about six o'clock."

At two o'clock Madame Bissonet went to her room. She lay down on her bed, for she wished to be well and lively this evening. She was rather surprised at herself, for she very seldom lay down in the daytime; but there seemed nothing left to do, and somehow she did not think her husband would be back before six o'clock.

He and the Prince would probably arrive much about the same time.

She had been asleep, how long? Half an hour, an hour, in deep, dreamless slumber, when she heard the bell above her gate clinging, rather insistently.

She leaped to the floor, and thrust her feet—she had small, pretty feet—into her slippers, and ran downstairs. Of course it was Leon—Leon at last!

And then she felt a pang of sharp disappointment. For it was not Leon after all. Instead of the Mayor of Douvenay's lean, virile figure, there stood outside the gate the stumpy form of the German Field-Postman, holding a bulky-looking parcel in his arms.

The poor old Landsturmer's face looked grey with fatigue. This was the third time he had been to her house that day, and Madame Bissonet told herself indignantly that those haughty Prussian officers down there, in the house on the Grande Place they used as headquarters, were cruelly uncaring of their men.

Madame Bissonet opened the gate a little way, and held out her arms for the parcel; for it was much too big and bulky to fit into her apron. Then she smiled, a trifle mechanically, for she felt heavy-hearted and tired herself. But there came no answering smile from Gustav Shenck, and filled with a sudden, kindly compunction, the Frenchwoman made the grey-clad soldier a quick sign to stay where he was. Laying the large parcel on the ground, she ran indoors, and brought him out a tumbler filled with the light, sweet champagne which in those parts costs only a few pence a bottle.

He gulped it down to the last drop. And then his bulging, fat-rimmed eyes actually filled with tears, as he muttered "*Danke, danke!*" and turned on his heel.

She stooped, picked up the parcel, brought it into her kitchen, and placed it on the table. bending over it, she suddenly grew rather pink; she saw that it was addressed to "Madame Leon Bissonet, Maison Bissonet, Douvenay." And that, though there were stamped deeply on the spongy white paper which formed the covering, the various queer black marks of the German Army Field-Post.

Women are unreasonable creatures. Yesterday the fact that the Prince had remembered his promise would have given Madame Bissonet pleasure, but now, today, she felt a little vexed. For one thing, it had never occurred to her that he would go and buy her something in the way of wearing apparel; yet that was what he evidently had done. What she had half expected, what he had actually implied he would do, was to have a cake, made by his own cook, sent to her from far off Berlin. Madame Bissonet did not trust German taste, neither was she minded to accept a real present from the German General.

She looked around a little nervously, forgetting for the moment that the gate was locked. She hoped she would have time to undo the parcel, and put its contents away, before her husband came in.

In her haste she took up the long, keen-edged knife with which she had divided up the hare that morning; and which the woman, after cleaning it, had not put away. With it she cut the stout cords which bound the parcel, criss-cross wise.

And then, as she pushed back the stiff outer paper covering of her parcel, there came over Madame Bissonet a sick feeling of fear; for she had caught sight of a piece of stuff which was strangely like the lining of the coat which her husband had been wearing, when he left her two days ago.

With fingers which her brain had to drive to their easy task, for all sensation had left them, she removed the inner sheet of paper. . . .

Yes—there was no mistake possible now. Neatly folded, in as small a bulk as was possible, were her husband's clothes. The coat, arranged queerly inside out, lay on the top; under it were the waistcoat, the trousers, the braces, the collar too, and his black tie. The shirt, however, was lacking, and so were Leon's boots and socks, and his tall hat.

She began lifting the things, one after the other, to that part of the kitchen table which was clear, and suddenly she espied, pinned to the trousers, a piece of paper. It was folded, and when she unfolded it she saw that it was covered with several lines of typewriting; just as had been the message she had received concerning the Prince's return. But this time the superscription was slightly different in its wording, for what ran across the top lefthand corner of that oblong piece of paper read:

MADAME VEUVE BISSONET,
Maison Bissonet,
Douvenay.

What a strange, what a horrible mistake, for some stupid German Landsturm clerk to have made! Still, she waited a moment before she forced her eyes to read the lines which ran below that incorrect address:

“Madame, you are informed that your spouse, Leon Bissonet, Mayor of Douvenay, was found to have concealed about his person a letter addressed to a woman in Paris, giving information as to the whereabouts of General Prince Botho von Bedingen and his Staff. He was court-martialled last night, September 28th, condemned to death, and duly executed this morning, September 29th. He was buried in his shirt. His hat has been mislaid, his boots and socks have been requisitioned for a French civilian prisoner. Herewith please find the rest of his garments. His watch, and the money found on his person, will be returned to you in due course.”

Madame Bissonet was still staring down at the piece of paper in her hand when there came a stir, the sound of two motors stopping in the street outside, and a confused babel of laughter and talk.

The bell rang—an insistent, impatient peal. But the woman standing in the kitchen of La Maison Bissonet did not stir. She stayed exactly where she was, and not a muscle moved. Again the bell above the locked gate rang out, very loudly this time, as if strong, eager hands were tugging at the steel chain-pull outside.

Suddenly she let go the piece of paper, and it fluttered on to the floor. Then she put out a hand which trembled convulsively and stroked her husband's coat.

There was a pause, a long, long pause, and then there burst on her ears queer, scrambling sounds, and then a thud. This meant that some one had been hitched up on to the wall by the side

of the gate, and slipping down the roof of one of the outbuildings, had jumped down into the courtyard.

A moment later the Prince's body-servant, a young Coburger, with whom Madame Bissonet had always been on friendly terms, opened wide the kitchen door.

He stared at the woman within with slow-growing astonishment. Though unobservant, as all young, happy, prosperous people are unobservant, he yet felt amazed to see the change that three days had wrought to Madame Bissonet's appearance. She no longer looked pretty, or even healthy. Her eyes were bloodshot, her face white with a dreadful pallor, and though her lips moved, she did not speak.

He told himself that something had evidently upset her. Short as was that youth's experience of war, he had seen many amazing things in the last few weeks, and now his business was to unlock the gate.

"The key!" he said hurriedly. "The key, Madame! His Highness is outside, and has already waited too long."

She fumbled blindly at her waist, and at last handed him the key.

A moment later, the noises caused by a number of men clattering across the courtyard penetrated Madame Bissonet's brain. She knew, subconsciously, that they were making their way to the front door of the house. But all that was left working of her shattered mind was set on remembering the exact wording of the letter which had been written in such careless haste, and which, against his better judgment, she had made her husband take with him to Chandlieu. Yes, she remembered now that she had written down the fact of this Prussian Prince-General being in their house. It was that one sentence which had made her Leon's murderess.

And then there came over the distraught woman an intense, scarcely sane, hatred of Prince Botho von Bedingen. As in a flash, there came back to her something he had said with a jovial laugh only this last week. A French aeroplane had come whirling overhead, and he had exclaimed: "It's a good thing for you, Madame, that our friend up there does not know that a Prussian General and his Staff is in La Maison Bissonet, or there would soon not be much left of your house!"

Unseen by him, she had shaken her head gaily, for Madame Bissonet had never set on her courteous enemy the exaggerated military value he had evidently set on himself, and which she now believed had been the determining cause of—her brain refused to finish the sentence.

A shadow fell athwart the kitchen, and turning round, she saw the Prince's burly form filling up the doorway. He was laughing, that round, guttural laugh, which Germans laugh; and he came forward and stood inside the kitchen, all unknowing of the hideous tragedy in which he had been an unknowing participant.

"Well, Madame, I hope you have something good for my dinner! I have missed your cooking the last three days, and—" Madame Bissonet never knew that what the Prince was going to say was simply: "and I hear your husband has been away. If I had known that, I would have picked him up when driving through Chandlieu and brought him home," for when he began speaking, she with her right hand behind her back, had been stealthily feeling under the stiff, rustling paper for the long, pointed knife with which she had cut the string of her parcel. .

As the Prince uttered the word "and" she whipped her hand round and sprang at him with a hoarse, vengeful cry of rage and anguish.

So sudden, so forceful, was the impact that he was sent reeling back against the wall; and the two men who rushed into the kitchen a few moments later were put to it to withdraw the knife from out the frightful wound.

Going on for two years now, Madame Bissonet has been confined in the criminal lunatic asylum at Zell, Hanover. But she is within sight of the end of her troubles, for very soon she will be quite mad.