

The Prisoners

Antonia Warren

Antonia Warren, who received the M.D. degree from the University of Zürich, practiced for ten years as a country doctor in upper New York State, the experience of which led to a book of short stories, first appeared in *Modern Age* (Summer 1977) with a story entitled "Three Girls." The short story she has contributed to this issue of the journal, "The Prisoners," in its subtlety, poignancy, pathos, and sympathy, has literary distinctions that earn it a place among some of the finest writings in the literature of both World Wars. Her late husband, the renowned and much revered teacher and critic Austin Warren, a continuator of the New England tradition, was among the earliest contributors to *Modern Age*. No less than her husband, Mrs. Warren has unfailingly upheld the humane values and the moral measure that enhance the dignity of literature and the dignity of life. These selfsame qualities radiate in "The Prisoners."

AT THE END OF THE LAST of those human experiments in self-destruction called World Wars, I found myself in a town on the Atlantic where the experiment had worked remarkably well. Its center, within a ring of old fortress walls, was totally destroyed; only in the outlying quarters some habitable houses still stood. The walls of the huge harbor were broken in many places, partly from bombing, partly from dynamiting by the retreating Germans.

I was one of a Red Cross group who came to help. We brought our own barracks and put them up in an empty lot, empty, that is, of the two houses that had stood there—their rubble still covered the ground. We cleared the lot with the help of city workers and put up the prefabricated barracks that had traveled with us from Switzerland. After the barracks were ready we started to col-

lect children who needed care and looked after them in a kind of nursery-kindergarten-hospital, where we provided food, medical help, daycare, and toys.

We were, of course, very busy and for several weeks the destroyed center of the city was nothing but a ragged, ruined skyline to me, to be visited at a time of more leisure. That time came on Easter Sunday morning. Most of our children stayed home on that day and there was very little for me to do—I was the physician of our group. So I set out, into a windy, sunny morning, between houses half-broken but still inhabited, along the patched up, smoke-blackened city hospital, until I reached the wall of the old inner city.

Master Vauban himself had built that wall; it still partly stood, veteran of many wars, not even downed by this one, but certainly breached. The breach through

which I entered was flanked like a gate, not by stone pillars but by two trees, one left, one right. Their bare crowns were strangely gnarled and twisted: they were the roots, strangers to air and sun, while their rightful element, the earth, was taken up by the dead crowns—some bomb blast had turned the trees upside down and made them into fit pillars for that hole in Vauban's wall.

I walked between the two dead trees into the dead city, expecting a great stillness inside; but I stepped instead into a world of clanging noise where dead matter made its moan all around me. A whomping belly sound seemed to issue from a bathtub that hung suspended on the broken upper floor of a frontless house; a sharp whistle to come from a pipe that viciously hit my ankle. Everywhere there was the clattering and banging and shrieking in the wind, of formless and useless matter.

The wind tore at me as well from all sides and I stepped for shelter inside a courtyard with a bit of wall left on all four sides. I sat down on a pile of rubble and started to listen to the moaning matter around me—listen with closed eyes, for this was the hour of sound.

When I opened my eyes again I saw a man standing in the middle of the yard. He waved towards a window and a woman waved back at him. They seemed rather strange-looking and it took me a while to realize that they were both transparent. Transparent, but clearly visible, whereas a child I saw running through the yard could hardly be seen, he was more like a moving shadow. A young girl, walking towards me (quite pretty) had a little more substance. There was a flirtatious pucker on her face, not for me, but for a male shadow who stood in a blasted doorway. She floated right through me, they stretched their arms towards each other and vanished.

I went slowly back to the street, and there I saw more people. Some could

barely be apprehended, others were almost solid in appearance. The most solid of them all was a tall thin woman, dressed in the dark blue uniform and hat of the ladies of the French Red Cross. She walked with a purposeful, long stride and I saw her stop in front of a door that led into the still-standing first floor of an otherwise ruined house. She was so reassuringly solid that I hastened after her.

"Please, Madame," I said, but she melted through the door without answering. So I knocked.

"Come in," said a man's voice.

The door led into a fairly large room. Four walls and a ceiling, everything cracked, but habitable and furnished. A table, two chairs, a bed in a corner, a stove. At the table sat an old man with a serious, kind face, but there was no lady.

"Please, sir," I said, "are you real?"

"Yes, I am," his voice was calm and unsurprised.

"Where has the lady gone?"

"Into her room next door to rest."

I must have looked my surprise because I knew there was no next door, only ruins. He smiled and pointed to the second chair. "Do please sit down, monsieur, all this must seem very strange to you."

There was a square hole towards the street in one of the walls, once a window; through it we saw a fairly substantial male shadow.

"Pierre," muttered the old man, "still quite strong. But none of them is as strong as Madame!"

"What do they want? What makes them so different in substance?"

"Most died in the bombardment, so many unfinished lives,"—he talked to himself rather than to me—"so many suddenly cut off. What do they want? I don't know. Some are weak, some are strong, as they were in life. There goes one, ah, what a man!"—he got up and bowed to a portly shadow in black: "M. le

Maire, my deepest respect. How many did he save from deportation! And that one," he pointed to another substantial, but slinky-looking male figure, "how many did he betray to save his own skin. The human race—va!"

"And Madame?" I asked.

"Madame! She waits for the return of M. Gaston. But *docteur*, you see, I know who you are, you need a little refreshment. We must seem strange to you, I and my friends."

He went to a kind of wall cupboard and brought out a venerable looking bottle with a magic name on the label.

"Cognac!" I whispered.

"This comes from the last castle Madame inherited," said my host while he poured some into a chipped cup for each of us.

"The last castle?"

"Yes. I well remember how she got the news. We were sitting in this room, Madame and I. The house was still standing above us, but we had very little fuel, so we sat by the cook stove. I also slept here, Madame slept in the next room (it is now ruined). Forgive me if I ramble a little, where was I? Oh yes, the castle. One of the young members of the Resistance who slipped in and out of town, came to tell us that Madame's aunt had died and been buried in the country.

"...and now Bébert," she said to me, after the messenger had left, "we have three castles."

"Madame often said 'we,' meaning us two. We were the only survivors of the family, unless," he sighed, "M. Gaston is still alive. Not that I am 'family,' but I served under Madame's father, or rather, her mother. Her father was killed in that other big war, when she and her brothers were still children. I have more or less helped to bring them up, and I went with Madame when she got married. The wedding was held at the very castle this cognac comes from and old Miss Eulalie, the aunt, arranged it all, and paid for it,

too. The family were never rich, but they always helped each other out. Madame's husband was a career officer, like her father; indeed Madame herself could have been a career officer, she was so tall, and straight, and fearless. They had two sons....," tears began to roll down the old man's face.

"Pardon, *docteur*," he said after a while, "I always had to do all the crying. Madame never cried, at least, I never saw her. I only saw her kneel at her *prie-dieu* when things went hard with us, but her back was straight and her head unbent—not like a crying woman's."

"Tell me about the third castle, please," I said, and after a sip of cognac he went on:

"Yes," Madame said, "now we have three castles, Bébert" (my name is Albert, but they all called me Bébert), "and we have no money to pay the taxes, and we have no fuel to heat them, we have no means to fight the mice and cockroaches even, and we have no transportation to go to them—yes, we have too! Tante Eulalie's castle is not far away and we have sound legs. We will walk there and pay our respects at her grave. There is also some fine cognac hidden in her cellar. We will get it and give it to those brave ones." She pointed to the door where the young Resistance member had disappeared.

"Soon after that day we walked to the castle, Madame and I. We had passed word to the Resistance and a couple of our young friends stood ready to help us empty the cellar. They distributed the bottles among the sick and wounded who were in hiding. A couple we kept ourselves.

"The same Tante Eulalie's name was also connected with the news of Mr. Gaston's safe arrival in England—after Dunkirk, that was. M. Gaston was the younger son. Poor Madame! A husband and two sons, all going to war. The colonel, her husband—well, it was his job. M.

Loic, the elder son, who had a strong vocation for the priesthood and was about to enter Seminary, went as an ambulance driver. M. Gaston, always a daredevil, wanted to be an aviator.

"Each took me aside, before he left.

"'Bébert,' said the Colonel, embracing me, 'Madame may lose us all. Take care of her!'

"And M. Loic: 'Bébert, it is not very likely that both of us brothers will come back. Let us hope it will be Gaston, France will need men like him. Take care of maman, Bébert!'

"And M. Gaston: '*On les aura*, Bébert, *on les aura!* but in the meantime, take care of *maman*.'

"Thus they left.

"Madame started her Red Cross work in the city and we moved into this house—we had lived in the country before the war. Sometimes one of our soldiers came home—once all three together. It was the '*Drôle de Guerre*, 'the 'Phony War,' as the Americans called it. We knew it wouldn't last and it was over soon enough. The Germans invaded France—and lists of names began to arrive: *Mort pour la France*. They came to many and one felt for them—but when it's your own, monsieur...." He stopped a while, his head low, then went on: "First Loic de St. Armand, Medical Corps, at the Belgian frontier; then Georges de St. Armand, Colonel, near Arras. But nothing about Gaston de St. Armand. We hoped that he had reached England and that some day we might hear about him, during the forbidden broadcasts from across the Channel we all so eagerly listened to. The names were so disguised that the Germans, who of course also listened, could not recognize the bearer, and retaliate on the family. Hidden under blankets, with our ears close to the dangerous radio, we hoped and waited—and one night we heard it: 'Gaston, great nephew of Eulalie, greets Pepin; we repeat: Gaston, great nephew of Eulalie....'

"Madame got up slowly and walked to her *prie-dieu*.

"The message was a double one. It told us that M. Gaston was safe in England and that he was training with the Air Force—Pepin had been the name of his pet pigeon.

"After this we waited again. Madame worked hard at the Red Cross center; I had my hands full, feeding us and our guests, many of them hunted and in hiding—but that does not belong here. Where was I, monsieur?"

"M. Gaston joined the Air Force," I helped him.

"Yes. Thank you. Ah, here is one of the most solid shadows."

He pointed to a fairly visible but terribly emaciated looking figure that lingered in front of the window.

"Jacquot," said my old friend gently, "go to rest! Start fading away. The Germans are getting their punishment, all they deserve. Get some peace, Jacquot!"

"I keep trying to reach them, *docteur*," he said, turning to me again, "although I know they don't hear me. By and by, though, they seem to lose hold of things terrestrial, and they fade away. There are so many more than usual today. Easter must have brought them back. Jacquot here is still so strong because of his hatred. They deported his son and when he cursed them they imprisoned him. It was actually through him that Madame got word that the prisoners were going hungry.

"Poor fellows—there were not many of them, about twenty, we heard. Some were waiting for deportation as laborers, some were suspected of contact with the FFI, there may have been a thief or two....

"The Germans didn't have much food left for themselves, let alone for the prisoners. We were actually better off than the occupation troops. We had friends and relatives in the country, there was always something coming in: a little flour,

a chicken, the odd egg—all carefully hidden away.

"We knew that the invasion of Europe was coming and we played a waiting game, but for the prisoners the wait might be too long. Also the Allies were frequently bombing our town to get at the German submarine base in the harbor—you know, it was they, our friends, who ironically had to cause much of this destruction. And in all that confusion and fear who thought of helping the prisoners? Certainly not the Germans, but would they let us do it? It was Jacquot, as I said, who got word of the prisoners' plight to the Red Cross. For three days, now, they had had scarcely any food.

"On the day Jacquot sent that message we got other news, too,—from England. M. Gaston had some time before managed to get word to us that he was well and that he took part in bombing sorties on the Reich. But the news we got today were not from him, they were from a fellow pilot. M. Gaston had been shot down but seen to bail out. He might be a prisoner.

"We sat here, in this kitchen, when the messenger from the underground knocked softly at the door, slipped a piece of paper to me, and was gone before I had closed the door again. Madame read the paper, put it on the table and went to her *prie-dieu*. When she got up again she looked as though she had left half her bodily substance there.

" 'Bébert,' she said to me, who was weeping her tears for her, 'I am going to feed the prisoners.'

" 'I'll help,' I managed to say, and she nodded.

" 'I'll get permission from the commandant and introduce you as my assistant.'

"We set out for the Commandant's office, Madame wearing her men's shoes (the only shoes available outside the black market, which she and all the other Red Cross ladies were too proud to use),

and her Red Cross uniform of coarse wool, but she carried herself with the assurance of an old aristocrat.

"The German commander was an invalid, who walked with help of a stick, on a shortened, but still painful leg. He looked a proud man, ice-cold and unapproachable, reputed to be chafing under his role as a jailer, unable to serve at the front.

"Madame's Red Cross uniform gained us admittance to the Commandant's office after only a short wait. He sat at his desk, his face cold and haughty, but when he saw the upright lady, standing so proud in her heavy boots, he rose, leaning on his stick.

"Madame did not plead, after introducing me as her helper, she simply stated what she planned to do: get daily rations to the prisoners and distribute them herself. (This was dangerous ground, for it implied our knowledge that not all the scant food reached the prisoners—the jailers took their cut.)

When Madame had finished, they stood, victor and vanquished, the proud French woman, dressed in coarse wool, the haughty German in good cloth, well groomed, ribbons of bravery on his chest. Their eyes fought the battle of wills, and hers won.

" 'I can of course allow you only a short time each day, during which the guards will be doubled. A half hour at twelve noon.'

" 'Thank you, M. le Commandant.'

"She bent her head slightly and he gave her a cold, correct salute, but when I opened the door for Madame, I looked back at him and saw the strangest expression on his face: surprise, shame, anger, admiration? I shall never know.

"We started our work the following day.

"Ah, *docteur*, they were a sorry lot in that prison, some barely able to stand up. One of them—you have just seen him: Jacquot, a living skeleton, but burn-

ing with hatred—came to help me with the distribution of the food. Each man strangely had a plate and spoon.

“‘Yes,’ growled Jacquot, ‘they are methodical, the Germans. No food, but each of us has to account for his mess gear.’

“Madame, in the meantime, leaned against the wall, looking more spent than those she had come to help.

“‘Your time is up,’ said the turnkey who had let us in—an old Frenchman who did as much as he could for the prisoners, which mostly meant he didn’t make things worse for them—and added, softly, to Madame: ‘God bless you!’

“That seemed to give her back her strength and she turned to the prisoners:

“‘I shall be back again tomorrow. *Bon courage!*’

“As we walked through the prison door the air raid siren started.

“‘Walk slowly,’ said Madame, and as the flak began its staccato and the first bombs to fall, we walked across the square, Madame and I, unhurried and head high. We knew the prisoners watched us through their bars (no shelter for them!) and our slow walk told them that Madame would be back, no matter what—even if there was an air raid during the half hour allowed her.

“And come she did. When the Red Cross Center was hit, we salvaged what supplies we could and prepared our food—mostly a thick bean soup from the Red Cross stores, and the coarse black bread of wartime—in a half ruined, but still usable house. Occasionally we managed some fruit or vegetable, brought in from the country at night.

“Yes, monsieur, she came, and every step she did was for Gaston and every time she braved an air raid and faced death, it was for him. To her these hungry, angry, helpless men were but one son. Her life for his: I am sure she bargained with the Deity when she knelt in

prayer. It was that which wore her to a shadow, more than the daily, weary trek to the prison.

“All I could do was to stand by and help her failing strength. Her willpower and her faith—and maybe her defiance—did the rest. And as she offered her life, it was finally accepted; whether her sacrifice was accepted as well, I don’t know. I still have no word from M. Gaston.

“On the evening before her death she put her hands on my shoulders. ‘I have a feeling, *mon vieux* Bébert, that I shall soon have to go now. But whatever happens, I shall be here with you to wait for Gaston.’

“Our house was hit on the following day. She was in the room over there and instantly killed. I was in the kitchen and remained unharmed. Bombs act like that. And if you wonder what happened to the prisoners—the prison, too, was hit. Some escaped, some were killed, I don’t know....”

After that, Bébert and I sat silent, while fewer and fewer shadows appeared at the window and finally no more came. And as the eyes saw less, the ears heard more: I became again aware of the rattling and shrieking formlessness around. I rose carefully, not to disturb the old man, whose spirit seemed almost to have followed those others. But he looked up and smiled at me:

“*Merci, docteur,*” he said softly, “it was good not to be alone with them. There were so many today, on this Easter day.”

I walked through the dusk, through the moaning and clattering useless matter, between the two upturned, cursed trees at Vauban’s wall, and left the old city to its dead....

Several weeks after that Easter Sunday the war in Europe was over—we got official word on a day in early May: the War was won, France was on the side of the victors, hence we must celebrate Victory!

How do you celebrate victory in a destroyed city? There were no bells—they had long since fallen from their belfries. The voices of peace were silenced, so we celebrated with the voices of war. There was a battleship in the harbor: she shot off her guns; there were air raid sirens still working: they screamed; one or two dilapidated railroad engines stood idle: they worked up steam and joined the sirens with their whistles; there was much dead metal everywhere: the children tied pieces together and dragged them noisily over rubble and broken pavement. Thus shooting, screaming, whistling and clanking we celebrated PEACE....

Soon afterwards, prisoners of war and deported laborers began to be repatriated. Lists of those expected to arrive were posted daily on a large blackboard at the half-ruined, but still workable railroad station. Every afternoon a train rolled in slowly—old coaches over uncertain roadbed—awaited by silent and anxious relatives or friends: silent until

they recognized among the pale, weeping, or just staring, passengers the one they sought. Some walked, some were on stretchers, and some never arrived—they had died *en route*.

I often went to the station to see them come home and I always saw Bébert among those waiting; like many others he came daily on the off chance that the list had been incomplete—it often was. We nodded to each other, but he never came close to speak to me—he did not wish to mix his world with mine.

When Gaston de St. Armand arrived, I recognized him instantly. Tall, gaunt, and erect, he walked like his mother and something dark blue he wore made the likeness even more striking. His eyes were not on the weeping old man who pushed his way towards him, they were widely and intently looking towards the back of the crowd. I knew, he saw a figure there, another dark blue uprightness, waiting for him—and as he walked towards it, it slowly disappeared.