

Jean Desprez

Country Joe McDonald

Oh, ye whose hearts are resonant, and ring to War's romance,
Hear ye the story of a boy, a peasant boy of France,
A lad uncouth and warped with toil, yet who, when trial came,
Could feel within his soul upleap and soar the sacred flame;
Could stand upright, and scorn and smite, as only heroes may:
Oh, hearken! Let me try to tell the tale of Jean Desprez.

With fire and sword the Teuton horde was ravaging the land,
And there was darkness and despair, grim death on every hand;
Red fields of slaughter sloping down to ruin's black abyss;
The wolves of war ran evil-fanged, and little did they miss.
And on they came with fear and flame, to burn and loot and slay,
Until they reached the red-roofed croft, the home of Jean Desprez.

"Rout out the village one and all!" the Uhlan Captain said.
"Behold! Some hand has fired a shot. My trumpeter is dead.
Now shall they Prussian vengeance know; now shall they rue the day,
For by this sacred German slain, ten of these dogs shall pay."
They drove the cowering peasants forth, women and babes and men,
And from the last, with many a jeer the Captain chose he ten.
Ten simple peasants, bowed with toil, they stood, they knew not why,
Against the grey wall of the church, hearing their children cry;
Hearing their wives and mothers wail, with faces dazed they stood.
A moment only ... Ready! Fire! They weltered in their blood.

But there was one who gazed unseen, who heard the frenzied cries,
Who saw these men in sabots fall before their children's eyes;
A Zouave wounded in a ditch, and knowing death was nigh,
He laughed with joy: "Ah! here is where I settle ere I die."
He clutched his rifle once again, and long he aimed and well ...
A shot! Beside his victims ten the Uhlan Captain fell.

They dragged the wounded Zouave out; their rage was like a flame.
With bayonets they pinned him down, until their Major came.
A blond, full-blooded man he was, and arrogant of eye;
He stared to see with shattered skull his favorite Captain lie.
"Nay do not finish him so quick, this foreign swine," he cried;
"Go nail him to the big church door: he shall be crucified."

With bayonets through hands and feet they nailed the Zouave there

And there was anguish in his eyes, and horror in his stare;
"Water! A single drop!" he moaned, but how they jeered at him,
And mocked him with an empty cup, and saw his sight grow dim;
And as in agony of death with blood his lips were wet,
The Prussian Major gaily laughed, and lit a cigarette.

But mid the white-faced villagers who cowered in horror by,
Was one who saw the woeful sight, who heard the woeful cry:
"Water! One little drop, I beg! For love of Christ who died ..."
It was the little Jean Desprez who turned and stole aside;
It was the little barefoot boy who came with cup abrim
And walked up to the dying man, and gave the drink to him.

A roar of rage! They seize the boy; they tear him fast away.
The Prussian Major swings around; no longer is he gay.
His teeth are wolfishly agleam; his face all dark with spite:
"Go shoot the brat," he snarls, "that dare defy our Prussian might.
Yet stay! I have another thought. I'll kindly be, and spare;
Quick! give the lad a rifle charged, and set him squarely there,
And bid him shoot, and shoot to kill. Haste! make him understand
The dying dog he fain would save shall perish by his hand.
And all his kindred they shall see, and all shall curse his name
Who bought his life at such a cost, the price of death and shame."

They brought the boy, wild-eyed with fear; they made him understand;
They stood him by the dying man, a rifle in his hand.
"Make haste!" said they, "the time is short, and you must kill or die."
The Major puffed his cigarette, amusement in his eye.
And then the dying Zouave heard, and raised his weary head:
"Shoot, son, 'twill be the best for both; shoot swift and straight," he said.
"Fire first and last, and do not flinch; for lost of hope am I;
And I will murmur: Vive La France! and bless you ere I die."

Half-blind with blows the boy stood there, he seemed to swoon and sway;
Then in that moment woke the soul of little Jean Desprez.
He saw the woods go sheening down, the larks were singing clear;
And oh! the scents and sounds of spring, how sweet they were! how dear!
He felt the scent of new mown hay, a soft breeze fanned his brow;
O God! the paths of peace and toil! How precious were they now.

The summer days and summer ways, how bright with hope and bliss!
The autumn such a dream of gold ... and all must stand in this:
This shining rifle in his hand, that shambles all around;
The Zouave there with a dying glare; the blood upon the ground;
The brutal faces round him ringed, the evil eyes aflame;

That Prussian bully standing by, as if he watched a game.
"Make haste and shoot," the Major sneered; "a minute more I give;
A minute more to kill your friend, if you yourself would live."

They only saw a bare-foot boy, with blanched and twitching face;
They did not see within his eyes the glory of his race;
The glory of a million men who for fair France have died,
The splendor of self-sacrifice that will not be denied.
Yet ... he was but a peasant lad, and oh! but life was sweet ...
"Your minute's nearly gone, my lad," he heard a voice repeat.
"Shoot! Shoot!" the dying Zouave moaned; "Shoot! Shoot!" the soldiers said.
Then Jean Desprez reached out and shot ... the Prussian Major dead!

Lyrics submitted by Leandra.

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