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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

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XII.

But, as Sergeant Pinto said, all we had yet seen was but the prelude to the ball; the dance was now about to commence.

The sergeant had formed a particular friendship for me, and on the eighteenth, on relieving guard at the Warthan gate, he said:

'Fusilier Bertha the Emperor has arrived.' I had yet heard nothing of this, and replied respectfully:

'I have just seen the sapper Merlin, sergeant, who was on duty last night at the general's quarters, and he said nothing of it.'

Then he, closing his eye, said with a peculiar expression:

'Everything is moving; I feel his presence in the air; you do not yet understand this, conscript, but he is here; everything says so. Before he came, we were lame, crippled; but a wing of the army seemed able to move at once. But now look there, see those couriers galloping over the road; all is life. The dance is beginning; the dance is beginning! Kaiserlika and the Cossacks do not need spectacles to see that he is with us; they will feel him presently.'

And the sergeant's laugh rang hoarsely from beneath his long moustaches; and he was right, for that very day, about three in the afternoon, all the troops stationed around the city were in motion, and at five we were put under arms.—The Marshal Prince of Moskowa entered the town surrounded by the officers and generals who composed his staff, and, almost immediately after, the grey-haired Sunham followed and passed us in review upon the Place. Then he spoke in a loud, clear voice so that every one could hear.

'Soldiers,' said he, 'you will form part of the advanced guard of the third corps. Try to remember that you are Frenchmen. Vive l'Empereur.'

All shouted 'Vive l'Empereur' till the echoes rang again, while the general departed with Col. Zapsel.

That night we were relieved by the Hessians, and left Erfurt with the Tenth hussars and a regiment of chasseurs. At six or seven in the morning we were before the city of Weimar, and saw the sun rising on its gardens, its churches, and its houses, as well as on an old castle to the right. Here we bivouacked, and the hussars went forward to reconnoitre the town.—About nine, while we were breakfasting, suddenly we heard the rattle of pistols and carbines. Our hussars had encountered the Russian hussars in the streets, and they were firing on each other. But it was so far off that we saw nothing of the combat.

At the end of an hour the hussars returned, having lost two men. Thus began the campaign.

We remained five days in our camp, while the whole third corps were coming up. As we were the advanced-guard, we started again by way of Sulza and Warthan. Then we saw the enemy; Cossacks who kept ever beyond the range of our guns, and the further they retired the greater grew our courage.

But it annoyed me to hear Zebede constantly exclaiming in a tone of ill humor:

'Will they never stop? never make a stand.'

I thought that if they kept retreating we could ask nothing better. We would gain all we wanted without loss of life or suffering.

But at last they halted on the further side of a broad and deep river, and I saw a great number posted near the bank to cut us to pieces if we should cross unsupported.

It was the twenty-ninth of April, and growing late. Never did I see a more glorious sunset. On the opposite side of the river stretched a wide plain as far as the eye could reach, and on this, sharply outlined against the sky, stood horsemen, with their shakos drooping forward, their green jackets, little cartridge-boxes slung under the arm, and their sky blue trousers; behind them glittered thousands of lances, and Sergeant Pinto recognized them as the Prussian cavalry and Cossacks. He knew the river, too, which, he said was the Saale.

We went as near as we could to the water to exchange shots with the horsemen, but they retired, and at last disappeared entirely under the blood red sky. We made our bivouac along the river, and posted our sentries. On our left was a large village; a detachment was sent to it to purchase meat; for since the arrival of the emperor we had orders to pay for everything.

During the night other regiments of the division came up; they, too, bivouacked along the bank, and their long lines of fires, reflected in the ever-moving waters, glared grandly through the darkness.

No one felt inclined to sleep. Zebede, Klipfel, Furst, and I messed together, and we chatted as we lay around our fire.

'To-morrow we will have it hot enough, if

we attempt to cross the river. Our friends in Phalsbourg, over their warm suppers, scarcely think of us lying here, with nothing but a piece of cow beef to eat, a river flowing beside us, the damp earth beneath, and only the sky for a roof, without speaking of the sabre-cuts and bayonet-thrusts our friends yonder have in store for us.'

'Bah,' said Klipfel; 'this is life. I would not pass my days my days otherwise. To enjoy life we must be well to-day, sick to-morrow; then we appreciate the pleasure of the change from pain to ease. As for shots and sabre-strokes, with God's aid, we will give as good as we take.'

'Yes,' said Zebede, lighting his pipe, 'when I lose my place in the ranks, it will not be for the want of striking hard at the Russians!'

So we lay wretched for two or three hours.—Leger lay stretched out in his great coat, his feet to the fire, asleep, when the sentinel cried:

'Who goes there?'

'France!'

'What regiment?'

'Sixth of the Line.'

It was Marshal Ney and General Brenier, with engineer and artillery officers, and guns.—The marshal replied 'Sixth of the Line,' because he knew beforehand that we were there, and this little fact rejoiced us and made us feel very proud. We saw him pass on horseback with General Sunham and fire or six other officers of high grade, and although it was night we could see them distinctly, for the sky was covered with stars and the moon shone bright; it was almost as light as day.

They stopped at a bend of the river and posted six guns, and immediately after a pontoon train arrived with oak planks and all things necessary for throwing two bridges across. Our hussars scoured the banks collecting boats, and the artillerymen stood at their pieces to sweep down any who might try to hinder the work.—For a long while we watched their labor, while again and again we heard the sentry's 'Que vive!' It was the regiments of the third corps arriving.

At daybreak I feel asleep, and Klipfel had to shake me to arouse me. On every side they were beating the reveille; the bridges were finished, and we were going to cross the Saale. A heavy dew had fallen, and each man hastened to wipe his musket, to roll up his great coat and buckle it on his knapsack. One assisted the other, and we were soon in the ranks. It might have been four o'clock in the morning, and everything seemed grey in the mist that arose from the river. Already two battalions were crossing on the bridges, the officers and colors in the centre. Then the artillery and caissons crossed.

Captain Florentin had just ordered us to renew our primings, when General Sunham, General Chemineau, Colonel Zapsel, and our commandant arrived. The battalion began its march. I looked forward expecting to see the Russians coming on at a gallop, but nothing stirred.

As each regiment reached the further bank it formed square with ordered arms. At five o'clock the entire division had passed. The sun dispersed the mist, and we saw, about three-fourths of a league to our right, an old city with its pointed roofs, slated clock-tower, surmounted by a cross, and further away, a castle; it was Weissenfels.

Between the city and us was a deep valley.—Marshal Ney, who had just come up, wished to reconnoitre this before advancing into it. Two companies of the Twenty-seventh were deployed as skirmishers and the squares moved onward in common time, with the officers, sappers, and drums in the centre, the cannon in the intervals and the caissons in the rear.

We all mistrusted this valley—the more so since we had seen, the evening before, a mass of cavalry which could not have retired beyond the great plain which lay before us. Notwithstanding our distrust, it made us feel very proud and brave to see ourselves drawn up in our long ranks—our muskets loaded, the colors advanced, the generals in the rear full of confidence—to see our masses thus moving onward without hurry, but calmly marking the step; yes, it was enough to make our hearts beat high with pride and hope. And I thought the enemy might still retire and no blood be spilt, after all.

I was in the second rank, behind Zebede, and from time to time I glanced at the other square which was moving on the same line with us, in the centre of which I saw the marshal and his staff, all trying to catch a glimpse of what was going on ahead.

The skirmishers had by this time reached the ravine, which was bordered with brambles and hedges. I had already seen a movement on its further side, like the motion of a corn field in the wind, and the thought struck me that the Russians, with their lances and sabres, were there, although I could scarcely believe it. But when our skirmishers reached the hedges, the fusillade began, and I saw clearly the glitter of

their lances. At the same instant a flash like lightning gleamed in front of us, followed by a fierce report. The Prussians had their cannon with them; they had opened on us. I know not what noise made me turn my head, and there I saw an empty space in the ranks to my left.

At the same time Colonel Zapsel said quietly:

'Close up the ranks.'

And Captain Florentin repeated:

'Close up the ranks.'

All this was done so quickly that I had no time for thought. But fifty paces further on another flash shone out: there was another murmur in the ranks—as if a fierce wind was passing—and another vacant space this time to the right.

And thus, after every shot from the Prussians, the colonel said, 'Close up the ranks; and I knew that each time he spoke there was a breach in the living wall. It was no pleasant thing to think of, but still we marched on towards the valley. At last I did not dare to think at all, when General Chemineau, who had entered our square, cried in a terrible voice:

'Halt!'

I looked forward, and saw a mass of Prussians coming down upon us.

'Front rank, kneel. Fix bayonets. Ready!' cried the general.

As Zebede knelt, I was now, so to speak, in the front rank. On came the line of horses, each rider bending over his saddle bow, with sabre flashing in his hand. Then again the general's voice was heard behind us, calm, tranquil, giving orders as coolly as on parade:

'Attention for the command of fire! Aim! Fire!'

The four squares fired together: it seemed as if the skies were falling to the crash. When the smoke lifted, we saw the Prussians broken and flying; but our artillery opened, and the cannon balls sped faster than they.

'Charge!' shouted the general.

Never in my life did such a wild joy possess me. On every side the cry of *Vive l'Empereur!* shook the air, and in my excitement I shouted like the others. But we could not pursue them far, and soon we were again moving calmly on. We thought the fight was ended; but when without two or three hundred paces of the ravine, we heard the rush of horses, and again the general cried:

'Halt. Kneel. Charge bayonets!'

On came the Prussians from the valley like a whirlwind: the earth shook beneath their weight; we heard no more orders, but each man knew that he must fire into the mass, and the fire firing began, rattling like the drums in a grand review. Those who have not seen a battle can form but little idea of the excitement, the confusion, and yet the order of such a moment. A few of the Prussians reared us; we saw their forms appear a moment through the smoke, and then saw them no more. In a few moments more the ringing voice of General Chemineau arose, sounding above the crash and rattle:

'Cease firing.'

We scarcely dared obey. Each one hastened to deliver a final shot; then the smoke slowly lifted, and we saw a mass of cavalry ascending the further side of the ravine.

The squares deployed at once into columns: the drums beat the charge; our artillery still continued its fire; we rushed on, shouting—

'Forward! forward! Vive l'Empereur!'

We descended the ravine, over heaps of horses and Russians; some dead, some writhing upon the earth, and we ascended the slope toward Weissenfels at a quick step. The Cossacks and chasseurs bent forward in their saddles, their cartridge-boxes dangling behind them, galloping before us in full flight. The battle was won.

But as we reached the gardens of the city, they posted their cannon, which they had brought off with them, behind a sort of orchard, and reopened upon us, a ball carrying away both the axe and head of the sapper Merlin. The corporal of sappers, Throne, had his arm fractured by a piece of the axe, and they were compelled to amputate his arm at Weissenfels. Then we started towards them on a run, for the sooner we reached them the less time they would have for firing.

We entered the city at three places, marching through hedges, gardens, hop fields, and climbing over walls. The marshals and generals followed after. Our regiment entered by an avenue bordered with poplars, which ran along the cemetery, and as we debouched in the public squares, another column came through the main street.

There we halted, and the marshal, without losing a moment, dispatched the Twenty-seventh to take a bridge and cut off the enemy's retreat.—During this time the rest of the division arrived, and was drawn up in the square. The burgo-master and councillors of Weissenfels were all ready on the steps of the town hall to bid us welcome.

When we were reformed, the Marshal Prince of Moskowa passed before the front of our battalion and said joyfully:

'Well done! I am satisfied with you! The emperor will know of your conduct!'

I could not help laughing at the way we ran on the guns. General Sunham cried:

'Things go bravely on!'

He replied:

'Yes, yes; but in blood; in blood!'

The battalion remained there until the next day. We were lodged with the citizens, who were afraid of us and gave us all we asked. The Twenty-seventh returned in the evening and was quartered in the old chateau. We were very tired. After smoking two or three pipes together, chatting about our glory, Zebede, Klipfel, and I went together to the shop of a joiner on a heap of shavings, and remained there until midnight, when they beat the reveille. We rose; the joiner gave us some brandy, and we went out. The rain was falling in torrents. That night the battalion went to bivouac before the village of Clepen, two hours march from Weissenfels.

Our detachments came and rejoined us. The emperor had arrived at Weissenfels, and all the third corps were to follow us. We talked only of this all the day; but the day after, at five in the morning, we set off again in the advance.

Before us rolled a river called the Rippach. Instead of turning aside to take the bridge, we forded it where we were. The water reached our waists; and I thought how terrible this would have seemed to me when I was so much afraid of taking cold at Monsieur Goulden's.

As we passed down the other bank of the river in the rushes, we discovered a band of Cossacks observing us from the heights to the left. They followed slowly, without daring to attack us, and so we kept on until it was broad day, when suddenly a terrific fusillade and the thunder of heavy guns made us turn our heads toward Clepen. The commandant, on horseback, looked at us over the reeds.

The sounds of conflict lasted a considerable time, and Sergeant Pinto said:

'The division is advancing; it is attacked.'

The Cossacks galloped, toward the fight, and at the end of an hour disappeared. Then we saw the division advancing in column in the plain to the right, driving before them the masses of Russian cavalry.

'En avant! Forward!' cried the commandant.

We ran, without knowing why, along the river bank, until we reached an old bridge where the Rippach and Gruna met. Here we were to intercept the enemy; but the Cossacks had discovered our design, and their whole army fell back behind the Gruna, which they forded, and the division rejoining us, we learned that Marshal Besieres had been killed by a cannon ball.

We left the bridge to bivouac before the village of Gorscheu. The rumor that a great battle was approaching ran through the ranks, and they said that all that had passed was only a trial to see how the recruits would act under fire.—One may imagine the reflections of a thoughtful man under such circumstances, among such hard-brained fellows as Furst, Zebede, and Klipfel, who seemed to rejoice at the prospect as if it could bring them aught else than bullet-wounds or sabre cuts. All night long I thought of Catherine, and prayed God to preserve my life and my hands, which are so needful for poor people to gain their bread.

XIII.

We lighted our fires on the hill before Gross-Gorscheu and a detachment descended to the village and brought back five or six old cows to make soup of. But we were so worn out that many would rather sleep than eat. Other regiments arrived with cannon and munitions. About eleven o'clock there were from ten to twelve thousand men there and about two thousand more in the village—all Sunham's division. The general and his ordnance officers were quartered in an old mill to the left, near a stream called Floss-Graben. The line of sentries were stretched along the base of the hill a musket shot off.

At length I fell asleep, but I awoke every hour, and behind us, towards the road leading from the old bridge of Poserna to Lutzen and Leipzig, I heard the rolling of wagons, of artillery and caissons, rising and falling through the silence.

Sergeant Pinto did not sleep; he sat smoking his pipe and drying his feet at the fire. Every time one of us moved, he would try to talk and say:

'Well, conscript?'

But they pretended not to hear him, and turned over, gazing, to sleep again.

The clock of Gross-Gorscheu was striking six when I awoke. I was sore and weary yet.—Nevertheless, I sat up and tried to warm myself, for I was very cold. The fires were smok-

ing and almost extinguished. Nothing of them remained but the ashes and a few embers. The sergeant, erect, was gazing over the vast plain where the sun shot a few long lines of gold, and, seeing me awake, put a coal in his pipe and said:

'Well, fusilier Bertha, we are now in the rear guard.'

I did not know what he meant.

'That astonishes you,' he continued; 'but we have not stirred, while the army has made a half-wheel. Yesterday it was before us in the Rippach; now it is behind us, near Lutzen; and, instead of being in the front, we are in the rear; so that now,' said he, closing an eye and drawing two long pulls of his pipe, 'we are the last, instead of the foremost.'

'And what do we gain by it?' I asked.

'We gain the honor of first reaching Leipzig, and falling on the Prussians,' he replied. 'You will understand this by and by, conscript.'

I stood up, and looked around. I saw before us a wide, marshy plain, traversed by the Gruna-Bach and the Floss-Graben. A few hills arose along these streams, and beyond ran a large river, which the sergeant told me was the Elster. The morning mist hung over all. We saw no fires on the hills save those of our division; but the entire third corps occupied the villages scattered in our rear, and headquarters were at Kaysa.

At seven o'clock the drums and the trumpets of the artillery sounded the reveille. Ammunition wagons came on, and bread and cartridges were distributed. Two cantinieres arrived from the village; and, as I had yet a few crowns remaining, I offered Klipfel and Zebede a glass of brandy each, to counteract the effects of the fogs of the night. I also presumed to offer one to Sergeant Pinto, who accepted it, saying that bread and brandy warmed the heart.

We felt quite happy, and no one suspected the horrors the day was to bring forth. We thought the Russians and the Prussians were seeking us behind the Gruna-Bach; but they knew where we were. And suddenly, almost ten o'clock, General Sunham, mounted, arrived with his officers. I was sentry near the stacks of arms and I think I can now see him, as he rode to the top of the hill, with his grey hair and white bordered hat; and as he took out his field glass, and, after an earnest gaze, returned quickly, and ordered the drums to beat the recall. The sentries at once fell into the ranks, and Zebede, who had the eyes of a falcon, said:

'I see yonder, near the Elster, masses of men forming and advancing in good order, and others coming from the marshes by the three bridges. We are lost if all those fall upon our rear!'

'A battle is beginning,' said Sergeant Pinto, shading his eyes with his hands, 'or I know nothing of war. Those beggarly Prussians and Russians want to take us on the flank with their whole force, as we defend on Leipzig, so as to cut us in two. It is well thought of on their part. We are always teaching them the art of war.'

'But what will we do?' asked Klipfel.

'Our part is simple,' answered the sergeant. 'We are here twelve to fifteen thousand men, with old Sunham, who never gave an enemy an inch. We will stand here like a wall, one to six or seven, until the emperor is informed how matters stand, and sends us aid. There go the staff-officers now.'

It was true; five or six officers were galloping over the plain of Lutzen toward Leipzig.—They sped like the wind, and I prayed God to have them reach the emperor in time to send the whole army to our assistance; for there is something horrible in the certainty that we are about to perish, and I would not wish my greatest enemy in such a position as ours was then.

Sergeant Pinto continued:

'You will have a chance now, conscripts; and if any of you come out alive, they will have something to boast of. Look at those blue lines advancing, with their muskets on their shoulders, along Floss-Graben. Each of those lines is a regiment. There are thirty of them. That makes sixty thousand Prussians, without counting those lines of horsemen, each of which is a squadron. Those advancing to their left, near the Rippach, glittering in the sun, are the dragoons and cuirassiers of the Russian Imperial Guard. There are eighteen or twenty thousand of them, and I first saw them at Austerlitz, where we fixed them finally. Those masses of lances in the rear are Cossacks. We will have a hundred thousand men on our hands in an hour. This is a fight to win the cross in!'

'Do you think so, sergeant?' said Zebede, whose ideas were never very clear, and who already imagined he held the cross in his fingers, while his eyes glittered with excitement.

'It will be hard to hand,' replied the sergeant; 'and suppose that, in the mêlée, you see a colonel or a flag near you, spring on him or it; never mind sabres or bayonets; seize them, and then your name goes on the list.'