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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

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VIII.

That same day we went as far as Bitché; the next, to Hornbach; then to Kaiserslautern. It began to snow again.

How often during that long march did I sigh for the thick cloak of Monsieur Goulden, and his double-soled shoes.

We passed through innumerable villages, sometimes on the mountains, sometimes in the plains. As we entered each little town, the drums began to beat, and we marched with heads erect, marking the step, trying to assume the mien of old soldiers. The people looked out of their little windows, or came to the doors, saying, 'There go the conscripts.'

At night we halted, glad to rest our weary feet—I, especially. I cannot say that my leg hurt me, but my feet! I had never undergone such fatigue. With our billet for lodging we had the right to a corner of the fire, but our hosts also gave us a place at the table. We had nearly always buttermilk and potatoes, and often fresh lard on a dish of sauerkraut. The children came to look at us, and the old women asked us from what place we came, and what our business was before we left home.

The young girls looked sorrowfully at us, thinking of their sweethearts, who had gone five, six, or seven months before. Then they would take us to the son's bed. With what pleasure I stretched out my tired limbs! How I wished to sleep all our twelve hours' halt. But early in the morning, at daybreak, the rattling of the drums awoke me. I gazed at the brown rafters of the ceiling the window panes covered with frost, and asked myself where I was. Then my heart would grow cold, as I thought that I was at Bitché—at Kaiserslautern—that I was a conscript; and I had to dress fast as I could, catch up my knapsack, and answer the roll call.

'A good journey to you,' said the hostess, awakened so early in the morning.

'Thank you,' replied the conscript. And we marched on.

Yes! a good journey to you! They will not see you again, poor wretch. How many have followed the same road!

I will never forget how at Kaiserslautern, the second day of our march, having unstrapped my knapsack to take out a white shirt, I discovered beneath, a little pocket, and opening it I found fifty four francs in six-*livre* pieces. On the paper wrapped around them were these words, written by Monsieur Goulden:

'While you are at the wars, be always good and honest. Think of your friends and of those for whom you would be willing to sacrifice your life, and treat the enemy with humanity that they may so treat our soldiers. May heaven guide you, and protect you in your dangers!—You will find some money inclosed; for it is a good thing, when far from home and all who love you, to have a little of it. Write to us as often as you can. Embrace you, my child, and press you to my heart.'

As I read this, the tears forced themselves to my eyes, and I thought, 'Thou art not wholly abandoned, Joseph; fond hearts are yearning toward you. Never forget their kind counsels.'

At last, on the fifth day, about five o'clock in the evening, we entered Mayence. As long as I live I will remember it. It was terribly cold. We had begun our march at early dawn, and, long before reaching the city, had passed through villages filled with soldiers—cavalry, infantry, dragoons in their short jackets—some digging holes in the ice to get water for their horses, others dragging bundles of forage to the doors of the stables; powder wagons, carts full of caisson-balls, all white with frost, stood on every side; couriers, detachments of artillery, pontoons-trains were coming and going over the white ground; and no more attention was paid to us than if we were not in existence.

Captain Vidal, to warm himself, had dismounted and marched with us on foot. The officers and sergeants basted us on. Five or six Italians had fallen behind and remained in the villages, no longer able to advance. My feet were sore and burning, and at the last halt I could scarcely rise to resume the march. The others from Phalsbourg, however, kept bravely on.

Night had fallen; the sky sparkled with stars. Every one gazed forward, and said to his comrade, 'We are nearing it! we are nearing it!' for along the horizon a dark line of seeming cloud, glittering here and there with flashing points, announced that a great city lay before us.

At last we entered the advanced works, and passed through the zig-zag earthen bastions.—Then we dressed our ranks and marked the step, as we usually did when we approached a town. At the corner of a sort of *demi-lune* we saw the frozen fosse of the city, and the brick ramparts towering above, and opposite us an old, dark

gate, with the draw-bridge raised. Above stood a sentinel, who, with his musket raised, cried out:

'Who goes there?' The captain, going forward alone, replied: 'France!'

'What regiment?' 'Recruits for the Sixth of the Line.' A silence ensued. Then the draw-bridge was lowered, and the guard turned out and examined us, one of them carrying a great torch. Captain Vidal, a few paces in advance of us, spoke to the commandant of the post, who called out at length:

'Whoever you please.' Our drums began to beat, but the captain ordered them to cease, and we crossed a long bridge and passed through a second gate like the first. Then we were in the streets of the city, which were paved with smooth round stones. Every one tried his best to march steadily; for, although it was night, all the inns and shops along the way were open and their large windows were shining, and hundreds of people were passing to and fro as if it were broad day.

We turned five or six corners and soon arrived in a little open place before a high barrack, where we were ordered to halt.

There was a shed at the corner of the barrack, and in it a *cantiniere* seated behind a small table, under a great tri-colored umbrella from which hung two lanterns.

Several officers arrived as soon as we halted; they were the Commandant Gemaun and some others whom I have since known. They pressed our Captain's hand laughing, then looked at us and ordered the roll to be called. After that, we each received a ration of bread and billet for lodging. We were told that roll call would take place the next morning at eight o'clock for the distribution of arms, and then we were ordered to break ranks, while the officers turned up a street to the left and went into a great coffee house, the entrance to which was approached by a flight of fifteen steps.

But we, with our billets for lodging—what were we to do with them in the middle of such a city, and above all, the It is, who did not know a word either of German or French?

My first idea was to see the *cantiniere* round the umbrella. She was an old Alsatian, round and chubby, and, when I asked for the *Capougnier-Strasse*, she replied:

'What will you pay for?' I was obliged to take a glass of *eau-de-vie* with her; then she said:

'Look just opposite there; if you turn the first corner to the right, you will find the *Capougnier-Strasse*. Good evening, conscript.'

She laughed. Furst and Zebede were also billeted in the *Capougnier-Strasse*, and we set out, glad enough to be able to limp together through the strange city.

Furst first found his house, but it was shut; and while he was knocking at the door, I found mine, which had a light in two windows. I pushed at the door, it opened, and I entered a dark alley, whence came a smell of fresh bread, which was very welcome. Zebede had to go further on.

I called out in the alley: 'Is any one here?' Then an old woman appeared with a candle at the top of a wooden staircase.

'What do you want?' she asked. I told her that I was billeted at her house.—She came down—stairs, and, looking at my billet, told me in German to follow her.

I ascended the stairs. Passing an open door, I saw two men at work before an oven. I was, then, at a baker's, and this accounted for the old woman being up so late. She wore a cap with black ribbons; her arms were bare to the elbows; she, too, had been working, and seemed very sorrowful.

'You come late,' she said. 'We were marching all day?' I replied, 'and I am fainting with hunger and weariness.'

She looked at me and murmured: 'Poor child—poor child!'

'Your feet are sore?' she said; 'take off your shoes and put on these sabots.'

She put the candle upon the table and went out. I took off my shoes. My feet were blistered and bleeding, and pained me horribly, and I felt for the moment as if it would almost be better to die at once than to continue in such suffering.

This thought had more than once arisen to my mind in the march, but now, before that good fire, I felt so warm, so miserable, that I would gladly have laid myself down to sleep for ever, notwithstanding Catharine, Aunt Gredel, and all who loved me. Truly, I needed God's assistance.

While these thoughts were running through my head, the door opened, and a tall, stout man, gray-haired, but yet strong and healthy, entered. He was one of those I had seen at work below,

and held in his hands a bottle of wine and two glasses.

'Good evening,' said he gravely and kindly. I looked up. The old woman was behind him. She was carrying a little-wooden tub, which she placed on the floor near my chair.

'Take a foot-bath,' said she; 'it will do you good.' This kindness, on the part of a stranger, affected me more than I cared to show. I took off my stockings; my feet were bleeding, and the good old dame repeated, as she gazed at them:

'Poor child—poor child.' The man asked me whence I came. I told him from Phalsbourg in Lorraine. Then he told his wife to bring some bread, adding that, after we had taken a glass of wine together, he would leave me to the repose I needed so much.

He pushed the table before me, as I sat with my feet in the bath, and we each drained a glass of good white wine. The old woman returned with some hot bread, over which she had spread fresh, half melted butter. Then I knew how hungry I was. I was almost ill. The good people saw my eagerness for food; for the woman said:

'Before eating, my child, you must take your feet out of the bath.'

She knelt down and dried my feet with her apron before I knew what she was about to do. I cried:

'Good Heavens, madame; you treat me as if I were your son.'

She replied, after a moment's mournful silence: 'We had a son in the army.'

His voice trembled as she spoke. I thought of Catharine and Aunt Gredel, and could not speak again. I ate and drank with a pleasure I never before felt in doing so. The two old people sat gazing kindly on me, and, when I had finished, the man said:

'Yes, we have a son in the army; he went to Russia last year, and we have not since heard from him. These wars are terrible.'

He spoke dreamily, as if to himself, all the while walking up and down the room, his hands crossed behind his back. My eyes began to close, when he said suddenly:

'Come, wife. Good night, conscript.'

They went out together, she carrying the tub. 'God reward you,' I cried, 'and bring your son safe home.'

In a minute I was undressed, and, sinking on the bed, I was immediately buried in a deep sleep.

IX.

The next morning I woke at about seven o'clock. A trumpet was sounding the recall at the corner of the street; horses, wagons, and men and women on foot, were hurrying past the house. My feet were yet somewhat sore, but nothing to what they had been; and when I had dressed I felt like a new man, and thought to myself:

'Joseph, if this continues, you will soon be a soldier. It is only the first step that costs.'

The baker's wife had put my shoes to dry before the fire, after filling them with hot ashes, to keep them from growing hard. They were well greased and shining.

Then I buckled on my knapsack, and hurried out, without having time to thank those good people—a duty I intended to fulfill after roll-call.

At the end of the street—the Place—many of our Italians were already waiting, shivering around the fountain. Furst, Klipfel, and Zebede arrived a moment after.

Cañons and their caissons covered one entire side of the Place. Horses were being brought to water, led by Hussars and dragoons. Opposite us were cavalry barracks, high as the church at Phalsbourg, while around the other three sides rose old houses with sculptured gables, like those at Saverne, but much larger. I had never seen anything like all this, and while I stood gazing around, the drums began to beat, and each man took his place in the ranks, and we were informed, first in Italian and then in French, that we were about to receive our arms, and each one was ordered to stand forth as his name was called.

The wagons containing the arms now came up, and the call began. Each received a cartouche box, a sabre, a bayonet, and a musket.—We put them on as well as we could, over our blouses, coats, or great-coats, and we looked, with our hats, our caps, and our arms, like a veritable band of banditti. My musket was so long and heavy that I could scarcely carry it; and the Sergeant Pinto showed me how to buckle on the cartouche-box. He was a fine fellow, Pinto.

So many belts crossing my chest made me feel as if I could scarcely breathe, and I saw at once that my miseries had not yet ended.

After the arms, an ammunition-wagon ad-

vanced, and they distributed fifty rounds of cartridges to each man. This was no pleasant sagury. Then, instead of ordering us to break ranks and return to our lodgings, Captain Vidal drew his sabre and shouted:

'By file right—march.' The drums began to beat. I was grieved at not being able to thank my hosts for their kindness, and thought they would consider me ungrateful. But that did not prevent me from following the line of march.

We passed through a long winding street, and soon found ourselves without the glacis, and near the frozen Rhine. Across the river high hills appeared, and on the hills, old, gray, ruined castles, like those of Haut-Bas and Geroldseck in the Vosges.

The battalion descended to the river bank, and crossed upon the ice. The scene was magnificent—dazzling. We were not alone on the ice; five or six hundred paces before us was a baggage train on the way to Frankfort. Crossing the river, we continued our march through the mountains. Sometimes we discovered villages in the defiles; and Zebede, who was next to me, said:

'As we had to leave home, I would rather go as a soldier than otherwise. At least we shall see something new every day, and, if we are lucky enough ever to return, how much we will have to talk of.'

'Yes,' said I; 'but I would like better to have less to talk about, and to live quietly, toiling on my own account and not on account of others, who remain safe at home while we climb about here on the ice.'

'You do not care for glory,' said he; 'and yet glory is a grand thing.'

'Yes; the glory of fighting and losing our lives for others, and being called lazy idlers and drunkards when we get home again. I would rather have these friends of glory go fight themselves, and leave us to remain in peace at home.'

'Well,' he replied, 'I think much as you do; but, as we are forced to fight, we may as well make the most of it. If we go about looking miserable, people will laugh at us.'

Conversing thus, we reached a large river, which, the sergeant told us, was the Main, and near it, upon our road, was a little village. We did not know the name of the village, but there we halted.

We entered the houses, and those who could bought some brandy, wine, and bread. Those who had no money crunched their ration of biscuit, and gazed wistfully at their more fortunate comrades.

About six in the evening we arrived at Frankfort, which is a city yet older than Mayence, and full of Jews. They took us to the barracks of the Tenth Hussars, where our Captain, Foreman, and the two Lieutenants, Clavel and Bretnville, awaited us.

X.

At Frankfort I began to learn a soldier's duty in earnest. Up to that time I had been but a simple conscript. I do not speak merely of drill—that is only an affair of a month or two, if a man really desires to learn; but I speak of discipline—of remembering that the corporal is always in the right when he speaks to a private soldier, the sergeant when he speaks to the corporal, the sergeant-major when speaking to the sergeant, the second lieutenant when he orders the sergeant-major, and so on to the Marshal of France—even if the superior asserts that two and two make five, or that the moon shines at midday.

This is very difficult to learn; but there is one thing that assists you immensely, and that is a sort of placard hung up in every room in the barracks, and which is from time to time read to you. This placard presupposes everything that a soldier might wish to do, as, for instance, to return home, to refuse to serve, to resist his officer, and always ends by speaking of death or at least five years with a ball and chain.

The day after our arrival at Frankfort I wrote to Monsieur Goulden, to Catharine, and to Aunt Gredel. I told them that I was in good health, for which I thanked God, and that I was even stronger than before I left home, and sent them a thousand remembrances. Our Phalsbourg conscripts, who saw me writing, made me add a few words for each of their families. I wrote also to Mayence, to the good couple of the *Capougnier-Strasse*, who had been so kind to me, telling them how I was forced to march without being able to thank them, and asking their forgiveness for so doing.

That day, in the afternoon, we received our uniforms. Dozens of Jews made their appearance and bought our old clothes. The Italians had great difficulty in making these respectable merchants comprehend their wishes, but the Genoese were as cunning as the Jews, and their bargainings lasted until night. Our corporals received more than one glass of wine; it was policy to make friends of them, for morning and evening they taught us the drill in the snow-

covered yard. The *cantiniere* Christine was always at her post with a warm *uz-pan* under her feet. She took young men of good family into special favor, and the young men of good family were all those who spent their money freely. Poor fools! How many of them parted parted with their last *soix* in return for her miserable flutter! When that was gone, they were mere beggars; but vanity rules all, from conscripts to generals.

All this time recruits were constantly arriving from France, and ambulances full of wounded from Poland. Klipfel, Zebede, Furst, and I often went to see these poor wretches, and never did we see men so miserably clad. Some wore jackets which once belonged to Cossacks, crushed shakos, women's dresses, and many had only handkerchiefs wound around their feet in lieu of shoes and stockings. They gave us a history of the retreat from Moscow, and then we knew that the twenty-ninth bulletin told only truth.

These stories enraged our men against the Russians, and we longed for the war to begin again. I was at times almost overcome with wrath after hearing some tale of horror; and even the thought that these Russians were defending their families, their homes, all that man holds most dear, could scarcely recall me to a right frame of mind. We hated them for defending themselves; we would have despised them had they not done so. But about time an extraordinary event occurred.

You must know that my comrade, Zebede, was the son of the grave-digger of Phalsbourg, and sometimes between ourselves we called him 'Gravedigger.' This he took in good part from us; but one evening after drill, as he was crossing the yard, a Hussar cried out:

'Halloo, Gravedigger! help me to drag in these bundles of straw.'

Zebede, turning about, replied: 'My name is not Gravedigger, and you can drag in your own straw. Do you take me for a fool?'

Then the other cried, in a still louder tone: 'Conscript, you had better come, or beware!'

Zebede, with his great hooked nose, his gray eyes and thin lips, never bore too good a character for mischief. He went up to the Hussar and asked:

'What is that you say?'

'I tell you to take up those bundles of straw, and quickly, too. Do you hear, conscript?'

He was quite an old man, with mustaches and red, bushy whiskers. Zebede seized one of the latter, but received two blows in the face.—Nevertheless, a fist full of the whisker remained in his grasp, and, as the dispute had attracted a crowd to the spot, the Hussar shook his finger, saying:

'You will hear from me to-morrow conscript.'

'Very good,' returned Zebede; 'we shall see. You will probably hear from me too, veteran.'

He came immediately after to tell me all this, and I, knowing that he had never handled a weapon more warlike than a pick-axe, could not help trembling for him.

'Listen, Zebede,' I said; 'all that there now remains for you to do, since you do not want to desert, is to ask pardon of this old fellow; for those veterans all know some fearful tricks of fence which they have brought from Egypt or Spain, or some-where else. If you wish, I will lend you a crown to pay for a bottle of wine to make up the quarrel.'

But he, knitting his brows, would hear none of this.

'Rather than beg his pardon,' said he, 'I would go and hang myself. I laugh him and his comrades to scorn. If he has tricks of fence, I have a long arm, that will drive my sabre through his bones as easily as his will penetrate my flesh.'

The thought of the blows made him insensible to reason; and soon Chazy, the *maitre d'armes*, Corporal Flury, Klipfel, Furst, and Leger arrived. They all said that Zebede was in the right, and the *maitre d'armes* added that blood alone could wash out the stain of a blow; that the honor of the recruits required Zebede to fight.

Zebede answered proudly that the men of Phalsbourg had never feared the sight of a little blood, and that he was ready. Then the *maitre d'armes* went to see our Captain, Florentin, who was one of the most magnificent men imaginable—tall, well-formed, broad-shouldered, with regular features, and the Cross, which the Emperor had himself given him at Eylau. The captain even went further than the *maitre d'armes*; he thought it would set the conscripts a good example, and that if Zebede refused to fight he would be unworthy to remain in the Tenth Battalion of the Sixth of the Line.

All that night I could not close my eyes. I heard the deep breathing of my poor comrade as he slept, and I thought: 'Poor Zebede! another day, and you will breathe no more.' I shuddered to think how near I was to a man so near