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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

(From the Catholic World.)

Then I sallied forth with Catharine and Gredel, and we went to the town place, where the crowd was.

Catharine squeezed my arm. Aunt Gredel followed. Opposite the guard-house I saw the pedler Pinnacle afar off, his pack opened on a little table.

He waved a long black ribbon above his head, and I grew pale despite myself. But as we ascended the steps of the mairie, a conscript was just descending; it was Klippel, the smith of the French gate; he had drawn number eight, and shouted:

'The black for me, Pinnacle. Bring it here, whatever may happen.'

His face was gloomy, but he laughed. His little brother Jean was crying behind him, and said:

'No, no, Jacob! not the black? But Pinnacle fastened the ribbon to the smith's hat, while the latter said:

'That is what we want now. We are all dead, and should wear our own mourning.'

And he cried savagely: 'Vive l'Empereur!'

I was better satisfied to see the black ribbon on his hat than on mine, and I slipped quickly through the crowd to avoid Pinnacle.

We had great difficulty in getting into the mairie and in climbing the old oak stairs, where people were going up and down in swarms. In the great hall above, the gendarme Kelz walked about, maintaining order as well as he could, and in the council-chamber at the side, where there is a painting of Justice with her eyes blindfolded, we heard them calling off the numbers. From time to time a conscript came out with flushed face, fastening his number on his cap and passing with bowed head through the crowd, like a furious bull who cannot see clearly and who would seem to wish to break his horns against the walls. Others, on the contrary, passed pale as death. The windows of the mairie were open, and without were heard six or seven pieces playing together. It was horrible.

I pressed Catharine's hand, and we passed slowly through the crowd to the hall where Monsieur the Sous-Prefet, the Mayors, and the Secretaries were seated on their tribune, calling the numbers aloud as if pronouncing the sentence of death in a court of justice; for all those numbers were really sentences of death.

We waited a long while. It seemed as if there was no longer a drop of blood in my veins, when at last my name was called.

I advanced, seeing and hearing nothing; I put my hand in the box and drew a number. Monsieur the Sous-Prefet cried out:

'Number seventeen.'

Then I departed without speaking, Catharine and her mother behind me. We went out into the place, and the air reviving me, I remembered that I had drawn number seventeen.

Aunt Gredel seemed confounded. 'And I put something into your pocket, too,' said she, 'but that rascal of a Pinnacle gave you ill-luck.'

At the same time she drew from my coat-pocket the end of a cord. Great drops of sweat rolled down my forehead; Catharine was white as marble, and so we returned to Monsieur Goulden's.

'What number did you draw, Joseph?' he asked, as soon as he saw us.

'Seventeen,' replied Aunt Gredel, sitting down, with her hands on her knees. Monsieur Goulden seemed troubled for a moment, but he said instantly:

as the drawing was complete, the council of revision met, and a few days after came the orders to march. He did not do like those tooth-pullers who first show you their pincers and hooks and gaze for an hour into your mouth, so that you feel half dead before they make up their minds to begin work; he proceeded without loss of time.

A week after the drawing, the council of revision sat at the town hall, with all the mayors and a few notables of the country to give advice in case of need.

The day before Monsieur Goulden had put on his brown great coat and his best wig to go to wind up Monsieur the Mayor's clock and that of the Commandant. He returned laughing, and said: 'All goes well, Joseph. Monsieur the Mayor and Monsieur the Commandant know that you are lame; that is easy enough to be seen.— They replied at once, Eh, Monsieur Goulden, the young man is lame; why speak of him? Do not be uneasy; we do not want the infirm; we want soldiers.'

The words poured balm on my wounds, and that night I slept like one of the blessed. But the next day fear again assailed me; I remembered suddenly how many men full of defects had gone all the same, and how many others invented defects to deceive the council; for instance, swallowing injurious substances to make them pale; tying up their legs to give themselves swollen veins; or playing deaf, blind, or foolish. I had heard that vinegar would make one sick, and, without telling Monsieur Goulden, in my fear I swallowed all the vinegar in his bottle.— Then I dressed myself, thinking that I looked like a dead man, for the vinegar was very strong; but when I entered Monsieur Goulden's room, he cried out:

'Joseph, what is the matter with you? You are as red as a cock's comb.'

And, looking at myself in the mirror, I saw that my face was red to my ears and to the very tip of my nose. I was frightened, but instead of growing pale I became redder yet, and I cried out in my distress:

'Now I am lost indeed! I will seem like a man without a single defect, and full of health. The vinegar is rushing to my head.'

'What vinegar?' asked Monsieur Goulden. 'That in your bottle. I drank it to make myself pale, as they say Mademoiselle Selapp, the organist, does. O Heavens! what a fool I was.'

'That does not prevent your being lame,' said Monsieur Goulden; 'but you tried to deceive the council, which was dishonest. But it is half past nine, and Werner is come to tell me you must be there at ten o'clock. So, hurry.'

I had to go in that state; the heat of the vinegar seemed bursting from my cheeks, and when I met Catharine and her mother, who were waiting for me at the mairie, they scarcely knew me.

'How happy and satisfied you look!' said Aunt Gredel.

I would have fainted on hearing this if the vinegar had not sustained me in spite of myself. I went up stairs in terrible agony, without being able to move my tongue to reply, so great was the horror I felt with my folly.

Above, more than twenty-five conscripts who pretended to be infirm, had been examined and received, while twenty-five others, on a bench along the wall, sat with drooping heads awaiting their turn.

The old gendarme, Kelz, with his huge cocked hat, was walking about, and as soon as he saw me exclaimed:

'At last! At last! Here is one, at all events, who will not be sorry to go; the love of glory is shining in his eyes. Very good, Joseph; I predict that at the end of the campaign you will be corporal.'

'But I am lame,' I cried angrily. 'Lame,' repeated Kelz, winking and smiling; 'lame! No matter. With such health as yours you can always hold your own.'

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the door of the hall of the Council of Revision opened, and the other gendarme, Werner, putting out his head, called, 'Joseph Bertha.'

I entered, limping as much as I could, and Werner shut the door. The mayors of the canton were seated in a semi-circle, Monsieur the Prefet and the Mayor of Phalsbourg in the middle, in arm-chairs, and the Secretary Frelig, at his table. A Harberg conscript was dressing himself, the gendarme Descarnes helping him. This conscript, with a mass of brown hair falling over his eyes, his neck bare, and his mouth open as he caught his breath, seemed like a man going to be hanged. Two surgeons—the Surgeon-in-Chief of the Hospital, with another in uniform—were conversing together in the middle of the hall. They turned to me, saying, 'Take off your coat.'

I did so. The others looked on. Monsieur the Sous-Prefet observed: 'There is a young man full of health.'

These words angered me, but I nevertheless answered respectfully:

'I am lame, Monsieur the Sous-Prefet.' The surgeons examined me, and the one from the hospital, to whom Monsieur the Commandant had spoken of me, said:

'The left leg is short.' 'Bah,' said the other: 'it is sound.' Then placing his hand upon my chest he said: 'The conformation is good. Cough. I coughed as freely as I could; but he found me all right, and said again:

'Look at his color. How good his blood must be!'

Then I, seeing that they would pass me if I remained silent, replied: 'I have drunk vinegar.'

'Ah!' said he; 'that proves you have a good stomach; you like vinegar.'

'But I am lame,' cried I in my distress. 'Bah, don't grieve at that,' he answered; 'your leg is sound. I'll answer for it.'

'But that,' said Monsieur the Mayor, 'does not prevent his being lame from birth; all Phalsbourg knows that.'

'The leg is too short,' said the surgeon from the hospital; 'it is doubtless a case for exemption.'

'Yes,' said the Mayor; 'I am sure that this young man could not endure a long march; he would drop on the road the second mile.'

The first surgeon said nothing more. I thought myself saved, when Monsieur the Sous-Prefet asked:

'You are really Joseph Bertha?' 'Yes, Monsieur the Sous-Prefet,' I answered. 'Well, gentlemen,' said he, taking a letter out of his portfolio, 'listen.'

He began to read the letter, which stated that, six months before, I had bet that I could go to Laverne and back quicker than Pinnacle; that we had run the race, and I had won.

It was unhappily too true. The villain Pinnacle had always taunted me with being a cripple, and in my anger I laid the wager. Every one knew of it. I could not deny it.

While I stood utterly confounded, the first surgeon said: 'That settles the question. Dress yourself.' And, turning to the Secretary, he cried, 'Good for service.'

I took up my coat in despair. Werner called another. I no longer saw anything. Some one helped me to get my arms in my coat-sleeves. Then I found myself upon the stairs, and while Catharine asked me what had passed, I sobbed aloud and would have fallen from top to bottom if Aunt Gredel had not supported me.

We went out by the rear-way and crossed the little court. I wept like a child, and Catharine did too.

Monsieur Goulden knowing that Aunt Gredel would come to dine with us the day after the revision, had had a stuffed goose and two bottles of good Alsace wine sent from the 'Golden Sheep.' He was sure that I would be exempted at once. What was his surprise, then, to see us enter together in such distress.

'What is the matter?' said he, raising his silk cap from his bald forehead, and staring at us with eyes wide open.

I had not strength enough to answer. I threw myself into the arm chair and burst into tears. Catharine sat down beside me, and our sobs redoubled.

Aunt Gredel said: 'The robbers have taken him.' 'It is not possible,' exclaimed Monsieur Goulden, letting fall his arms by his side.

'It shows their villainy,' replied my aunt, and, growing more and more excited, she cried, 'Will a revolution never come again? Shall those wretches always be our masters?'

'Calm yourself, Mother Gredel,' said Monsieur Goulden. 'In the name of Heaven don't cry so loud. Joseph, tell me how it happened. They are surely in staken; it cannot be possible otherwise. Did Monsieur the Mayor and the hospital surgeon say nothing?'

Monsieur Goulden hearing this, looked grave; he bent his brows, and replied in a few moments:

'It is a misfortune, a great misfortune, for Joseph is really lame. They will yet find it out, for he cannot march two days without falling behind and becoming sick. But you are wrong, Mother Gredel, to speak as you do and give him bad advice.'

'Bad advice!' said I. 'Then you are for having people massacred too!'

'No,' he answered; 'I do not love wars, especially where a hundred thousand men lose their lives for the glory of one. But wars of that kind are ended. It is not now for glory and to win new kingdoms that soldiers are levied, but to defend our country, which had been put in danger by tyranny and ambition. We would gladly have peace now. Unhappily, the Russians are advancing; the Prussians are joining them; and our friends, the Austrians, only await a good opportunity to fall upon our rear. If we do not go to meet them, they will come to our homes; for we are about to have Europe on our hands as we had in '93. It is now a different matter from our wars in Spain, in Russia, and in Germany; and I, old as I am, Mother Gredel, if the danger continues to increase and the veterans of the republic are needed, I would be ashamed to go and make clocks in Switzerland while others were pouring out their blood to defend my country. Besides, remember this well, that deserters are despised everywhere; after having committed such an act, they have no kindred or home anywhere. They have neither father, mother, church, nor country. They are incapable of fulfilling the first duty of man—to love and sustain their country, even though she be in the wrong.'

He said no more at the moment, but sat gravely down.

'Let us eat,' he exclaimed, after some minutes of silence. 'Midday is striking. Mother Gredel and Catharine, seat yourselves there.'

They sat down, and we began dinner. I meditated upon the words of Monsieur Goulden, which seemed right to me. Aunt Gredel compressed her lips, and from time to time gazed at me as if to read my thoughts. At length she said:

'I despise a country where they take fathers of families after carrying off the sons. If I were in Joseph's place, I would fly at once.'

'Listen, Aunt Gredel,' I replied; 'you know that I love nothing so much as peace and quiet; but I would not, nevertheless, run away like a coward to another country. But, notwithstanding, I will do as Catharine says; if she wishes me to go to Switzerland, I will go.'

Then Catharine, lowering her head to hide her tears, said in a low voice:

'I would not have them call you a deserter.' 'Well, then, I will do like the others,' I cried; 'and as those of Phalsbourg and Dagsberg are going to the wars, I will go.'

Monsieur Goulden made no remark. 'Every one is free to do as he pleases,' said he, after a while; 'but I am glad that Joseph thinks as I do.'

Then there was silence, and toward two o'clock Aunt Gredel arose and took her basket. She seemed utterly cast down, and said:

'Joseph, you will not listen to me, but no matter. With God's grace, all will yet be well. You will return if he wills it, and Catharine will wait for you.'

Catharine wept again, and I more than she; so that Monsieur Goulden himself could not help shedding tears.

At length Catharine and her mother descended the stairs, and Aunt-Gredel called out from the bottom:

'Try to come and see us once or twice again, Joseph.'

'Yes, yes,' I answered, shutting the door. I could no longer stand. Never had I been so miserable, and even now, when I think of it, my heart chills.

From that day I could think of nothing but my misfortune. I tried to work, but my thoughts were far away, and Monsieur Goulden said:

'Joseph, lay labor aside. Profit by the little time you can remain among us; go to see Catharine and Mother Gredel. I still think they will exempt you, but who can tell? They need men so much that it may be a long time coming.'

I went then every morning to Quatre-Vents, and passed my days with Catharine. We were very sorrowful, but very glad to see each other. We loved one another even more than before, if that were possible. Catharine sometimes tried to sing as in the good old times; but suddenly she would burst into tears. Then we wept together, and Aunt Gredel would rail at wars which brought misery to every one. She said that the Council of Revision deserved to be hung; that they were all robbers, banded together to poison our lives. It soiced us a little

to hear her talk thus, and we thought she was right.

I returned to the city about eight or nine o'clock in the evening. When they closed the gates, and as I passed, I saw the small inns full of conscripts and old returned soldiers drinking together. The conscripts always paid; the others, with dirty police-caps cocked over their ears, red noses, and horse-hair stocks in place of shirt-collars, twisted their mustaches and related with majestic air their battles, their marches, and their duels. One can imagine nothing viler than those holes, full of smoke, cobwebs hanging on the black beams, those old swords and young men drinking, shouting, and beating the tables like crazy people; and behind in the shadow old Annette Schnapps or Marie Hering—her old wig stuck back on her head, her comb with only three teeth remaining, crosswise, in it—gazing on the scene, or emptying a mug to the health of the braves.

It was sad to see the sons of peasants, honest and laborious fellows, leading such an existence; but no one thought of working, and any one of them would have given his life for two farthings. Worn out with shouting, drinking, and internal grief, they ended by falling asleep over the table, while the old fellows emptied their cups, singing:

'His glory calls us on!'

I saw these things, and I blessed heaven for having given me in my wretchedness, kind hearts to keep up my courage and prevent my courage and prevent my falling into such hands.

This state of affairs lasted until the twenty-fifth of January. For some days a great number of Italian conscripts—Piedmontese and Genoese—had been arriving in the city; some stout and fat as Savoyards fed upon chestnuts—their great cocked hats on their curly heads; their linsay-woolsey pantaloons dyed a dark green, and their short vests a sort of wool, but brick red, fastened around their waists by a leather belt. They wore enormous shoes, and ate their cheese seated along the old marketplace. Others were dried up, lean, brown, shivering in their long cassocks, seeing nothing but snow upon the roofs and gazing with their large, black mournful eyes upon the women who passed. They were exercised every day in marching, and were going to fill up the skeleton of the sixth regiment of the line at Mayence, and were then resting for a while in the infantry barracks.

The captain of the recruits, who was named Vidal, lodged over our room. He was a square-built, solid, very strong-looking man, and was, too, very kind and civil. He came to us to have his watch repaired, and when he learned that I was a conscript and was afraid I should never return, he encouraged me, saying that it was all habit; that at the end of five or six months one fights and marches as he eats his dinner; and that many so accustom themselves to shooting at people that they consider themselves unhappy when they are deprived of that amusement.

But his mode of reasoning was not to my taste, the more so as I saw five or six large grams of powder on one of his cheeks, which had entered deeply, and as he explained to me that they came from a shot which a Russian fired almost under his nose. Such a life disgusted me more and more, and as several days had already passed without news, I began to think they had forgotten me, as they did Jacob, of Chevre-Hof, of whose extraordinary luck every one yet talks. Aunt Gredel herself said to me every time I went there, 'Well, well! they will let us alone after all!' When on the morning of the twenty-fifth of January, as I was about starting for Quatre-Vents, Monsieur Goulden, who was working at his bench with a thoughtful air, turned to me with tears in his eyes and said:

'Listen, Joseph! I wanted to let you have one night more of quiet sleep; but you must know now, my child, that yesterday evening the brigadier of gendarmerie brought me your marching orders. You go with the Piedmontese and Genoese and five or six young men of the city—young Klippel, young Loerig, Jean Leger, and Gaspard Zebede. You go to Mayence.'

I felt my knees give way as he spoke, and I sat down unable to speak. Monsieur Goulden took my marching orders, beautifully written, out of a drawer, and began to read them slowly. All that I remember is that Joseph Bertha, native of Dabo, Canton of Phalsbourg, Arrondissement of Sarrebourg, was incorporated in the sixth regiment of the line, and that he should join his corps the twenty-ninth of January at Mayence.

This letter produced as evil an effect on me as if I had known nothing of it before. It seemed something new, and I grew angry.

Monsieur Goulden, after a moment's silence, added:

'The Italians start to-day at eleven!'

Then, as if awakening from a horrible dream, I cried: