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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

(From the Catholic World.)

I looked through the dim night, and saw, fifty paces before me, Pinnacle, the peeler, with his huge basket, his otter skin cap, woolen gloves, and iron pointed staff.

This Pinnacle was the greatest rogue in the country. He had, the year before, a difficulty with Monsieur Goulden, who demanded of him the price of a watch which he undertook to deliver to Monsieur Anstett, the curate of Homert, and the money for which he put into his pocket, saying he had paid it to me.

But, although the villain made oath before the justice of the peace, Monsieur Goulden knew the contrary, for on the day in question neither he nor I had left the house.

Besides, Pinnacle wanted to dance with Catharine at a festival at Quatre-Vents, and she refused because she knew the story of the watch, and was, besides, unwilling to leave me.

The sight, then, of this rogue with his iron shod stick in the middle of the road did not tend to rejoice my heart. Happily a little path which wound around the cemetery was at my left, and, without replying, I dashed through it, although the snow reached my waist.

Then he, guessing who I was, cried furiously: 'Aha! it is the little lame fellow! Halt! halt! I want to bid you good evening. You came from Catharine's, you watch stealer.'

But I sprang like a hare through the heaps of snow; he at first tried to follow me, but his pack hindered him, and, when I gained the ground again, he put his hands around his mouth, and shrieked:

'Never mind, cripple, never mind! Your reckoning is coming all the same; the conscription is coming—the grand conscription of the one-eyed, the lame, and the hunch-backed. You will have to go, and you will find a place under ground like the others.'

He continued his way, laughing like the sot he was, and I, scarcely able to breathe, kept on, thanking heaven that the little story was so near me; for Pinnacle, who was known always to draw his knife in a fight, might have done me an ill turn.

In spite of my exertion, my feet, even in the thick shoes, were intensely cold, and I again began running.

That night the water froze in the cisterns of Phalbourg and the wines in the cellars—things that had not happened before for sixty years.

On the bridge and under the German gate the silence seemed yet deeper than in the morning, and the night made it seem terrible. A few stars shone between the masses of white cloud that hung over the city.

All along the street I met not a soul, and when I reached home, after shutting the door of our lower passage, it seemed warm to me, although the little stream that ran from the yard was frozen. I stopped a moment to take breath; then I ascended in the dark, my hand on the baluster.

When I opened the door of my room, the cheerful warmth of the stove was grateful indeed. Monsieur Goulden was seated in his arm chair before the fire, his cap of black silk pulled over his ears, and his hands resting upon his knees.

'Is that you, Joseph?' he asked without turning round.

'It is,' I answered. 'How pleasant it is here, and how cold out of doors. We never had such a winter.'

'No,' said he gravely. 'It is a winter that will long be remembered.'

I went into the closet and hung the cloak and mittens in their places, and was about to relate my adventure with Pinnacle, when he resumed:

'You had a pleasant day of it, Joseph.'

'I have had, indeed. Aunt Gredel and Catharine wished me to make you their compliments.'

'Very good, very good,' said he; 'the young are right right to amuse themselves, for when we grow old, and suffer, and see so much of injustice, selfishness, and misfortune, everything is spoiled in advance.'

He spoke as if talking to himself, gazing at the fire. I had never seen him sad, and I asked:

'Are you not well, Monsieur Goulden?'

'But he, without replying, murmured: 'Yes, yes; this is to be a great military nation; this is glory!'

them. The news came this afternoon. Oh! it is horrible, horrible!

I was silent. Now I saw clearly that we must have another conscription, as after all campaigns, and this time the lame would most probably be called. I grew pale, and Pinnacle's prophecy made my hair stand on end.

'Go to bed, Joseph; rest easy,' said Monsieur Goulden. 'I am not sleepy; I will stay here; all this unsettles me. Did you remark anything in the city?'

'No, Monsieur Goulden.'

I went to my room and to bed. For a long time I could not close my eyes, thinking of the conscription, of Catharine, and of so many thousands of men buried in the snow, and then a plotted flight to Switzerland.

About three o'clock Monsieur Goulden retired and a few minutes after, through God's grace, I fell asleep.

IV.

When I arose in the morning, about seven, I went to Monsieur Goulden's room to begin work; but he was still in bed, looking weary and sick.

'Joseph,' said he, 'I am not well. This horrible news has made me sick, and I have not slept at all. I will get up by and by. But this is the day to regulate the city clocks; I cannot go; for to see so many good people—people I have known for the last thirty years—in misery, would kill me. Listen, Joseph: take those keys hanging behind the door, and go. I will try to sleep a little. If I could sleep an hour or two, it would do me good.'

'Very well, Monsieur Goulden,' I replied; 'I will go at once.'

After putting more wood in the stove, I took the clock and mittens, drew Monsieur Goulden's bed curtains, and went out, the bunch of keys in my pocket. The illness of Father Melchior grieved me very much for a while, but a thought came to console me, and I said to myself: 'You can climb up the city clock tower, and see the house of Catharine and Aunt Gredel.'

Thinking thus I arrived at the house of Brainstein, the bell ringer, who lived at the corner of the little court, in an old, tumble-down barrack. His two sons were weavers, and in their old home the noise of the loom and the whistle of the shuttle was heard from morning till night. The grandmother, old and blind, slept in an arm chair, on the bark of which perched a magpie. Father Brainstein, when he did not have to ring the bell for a christening, funeral, or a marriage, kept reading his almanac behind the small round panes of his window.

The old man, when he saw me, rose up, saying:

'It is you, Monsieur Joseph?'

'Yes, Father Brainstein; I come in place of Monsieur Goulden, who is not well.'

'Very well; it is all the same.'

He took up his staff and put on his woollen cap, driving away the cat that was sleeping upon it; then he took the great key of the steeple from a drawer, and we went together, I glad to find myself again in the open air, despite the cold; for their miserable room was gray with vapor, and as hard to breathe in as a kettle; I could never understand how people could live in such a way.

At last we gained the street, and Father Brainstein said:

'You have heard of the great Russian disaster, Monsieur Joseph?'

'Yes, Father Brainstein; it is fearful!'

'Ah,' said he, 'there will be many a Mass said in the churches; every one will weep and pray for their children, the more that they are dead in a heathen land.'

We crossed the court, and in front of the tower-hall, opposite the guard house, many peasants and city people were already standing, reading a placard. We went up the steps and entered the church, where more than twenty women, young and old, were kneeling on the pavement, in spite of the terrible cold.

'Is it not as I said?' said Brainstein. 'They are coming already to pray, and half of them have been here since five o'clock.'

He opened the little door of the steeple leading to the organ, and we began climbing up in the dark. Once in the organ loft, we turned to the left of the bellows, and went up to the bells.

I was glad to see the blue sky and breathe the free air again, for the bad odor of the bats which inhabited the tower almost suffocated me. But how terrible the cold was in that cage, open to every wind, and how dazzlingly the snow shone over twenty leagues of country! All the little city of Phalsbourg, with its six bastions, three demilunes, two advanced works; its barracks, magazines, bridges, glacis, ramparts, its great parade ground, and little, well aligned houses, were beneath me, as if drawn on white paper. I was not yet accustomed to the height, and I held fast on the middle of the platform for fear I might jump off, for I have read of people having their heads turned by great heights. I did not dare go to the clock, and, if Brainstein had not

set me the example, I would have remained there, pressed against the beam from which the bells hung; but he said:

'Come, Monsieur Joseph, and see if it is right.'

Then I took out Monsieur Goulden's large watch which marked seconds, and I saw that the clock was considerably slow. Brainstein helped me to wind it up, and we regulated it.

'The clock is always slow in winter,' said he, because of the iron working.'

After becoming somewhat accustomed to the elevation, I began to look around. There were the oakwood barracks, the upper barracks, Big-bay, and lastly, opposite me, Quatre-Vents, and the house of Aunt Gredel, from the chimney of which a thread of blue smoke rose toward the sky. And I saw the kitchen, and imagined Catharine, in sabots and woollen skirt, spinning at the corner of the hearth and thinking of me. I no longer felt the cold; I could not take my eyes from their cottage.

Father Brainstein, who did not know what I was looking at, said: 'Yes, yes, Monsieur Joseph; now all the roads are covered with people in spite of the snow. The news has already spread, and every one wants to know the extent of his loss.'

He was right; every road and path was covered with people coming to the city; and, looking in the court, I saw the crowd increasing every moment before the guard house, and the mairie, and the post-office. A deep horror arose from the mass.

At length, after a long, last look at Catharine's house, I had to descend, and we went down the dark, winding stairs, as if descending into a well. Once in the organ-loft, we saw that the crowd had greatly increased in the church; all the mothers, the sisters, the old grandmothers, the rich, and the poor, were kneeling on the benches in the midst of the deepest silence; they prayed for the absent, offering all only to see them once again.

At first I did not realize all this; but suddenly the thought that if I had gone the year before, Catharine would be there praying and asking me of God, fell like a bolt on my heart, and I felt all my body tremble.

'Let us go, let us go!' I exclaimed, 'this is terrible.'

'What is?' he asked.

We descended the stairs under the great gate, and I went across the court to the house of Monsieur the Commandant Meunier, while Brainstein took the way to his house.

At the corner of the Hotel de Ville, I saw a sight which I shall remember all my life. There around a placard, were more than five hundred people, men and women crowded against each other, all pale and with necks outstretched, gazing at it as at some horrible apparition. They could not read it, and from time to time one would say in German or French:

'But they are not all dead. Some will return.'

Others cried out:

'Let us see it; let us get near it.'

A poor old woman in the rear lifted up her arms, and cried:

'Christopher! my poor Christopher!'

Others, angry at her clamor, called out to silence her.

Behind the crowd continued to pour through the German gate.

At length, Harmautier, the *sergent-de-ville*, came out of the guard house, and stood at the steps, with another placard like the first; a few soldiers followed him. Then a rush was made toward him, but the soldiers kept off the crowd, and old Harmautier began to read the placard, which he called the twenty-ninth bulletin, and in which the Emperor informed them that during the retreat the horses perished every night by thousands. He said nothing of the men.

The *sergent-de-ville* read slowly; not a breath was heard in the crowd; even the woman, who did not understand French, listened like the others. The buzz of a fly could have been heard. But when he came to this passage, 'Our cavalry was dismounted to such an extent that we were forced to collect the officers who yet owned horses to form four companies of one hundred and fifty men each. Generals rated as captains, and colonels as under officers'—when he read this passage, which told more of the misery of the grand army than all the rest, cries and groans arose on all sides; two or three women fell and were carried away.

It is true that the bulletin added, 'The health of his majesty was never better, and that was a great consolation. Unfortunately it could not restore life to three hundred thousand men buried in the snow; and so the people went away very sad. Others came by dozens who had not heard the news read, and from time to time Harmautier came out to read the bulletin.'

This lasted until night; still the same scene over again.

I ran from the place; I wanted to know nothing about it.

I went to Monsieur the Commandant's. Entering a parlor, I saw him at breakfast. He was an old man, but hale, with a red face and good appetite.

'Ah, it is you?' said he, 'Monsieur Goulden is not coming, then?'

'No, Monsieur the Commandant, the bad news has made him ill.'

'Ah, I understand,' he said, emptying his glass, 'yes, it is unfortunate.'

And while I was regulating the clock, he added:

'Bih! tell Monsieur Goulden that we will have our revenge. We cannot always have the upper hand. For fifteen years we have kept the drums beating over them, and it is only right to let them have this little morsel of consolation.—And then our honor is safe; we were not beaten fighting; without the cold and the snow, those poor Cossacks would have had a hard time of it. But patience; the skeletons of our regiments will soon be filled, and then let them beware.'

I wound up the clock; he rose and came to look at it, for he was a great amateur in clock-making. He punched my ear in a merry mood; and then, as I was going away, he cried as he buttoned up his over coat, which he had opened before beginning breakfast:

'Tell Father Goulden to rest easy, the dance will begin again in the spring; the Kalmucks will not always have winter fighting for them.—Tell him that.'

'Yes, Monsieur the Commandant,' I answered, shutting the door.

His burly figure and air of good humor comforted me a little; but in all the other houses I went to, at the Horwiches, the Frantz-Tonis, the Durlachs, everywhere I heard only lamentations. The women especially were in misery; the men said nothing, but walked about with heads hanging down, and without even looking to see what I was doing.

Toward ten o'clock there only remained two persons for me to see; Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlin, one of the ancient nobility, who lived at the end of the main street, with Madame Chamberlin d'Ecot and Mademoiselle Jeanne, their daughter. They were *emigrés* and had returned about three or four years before. They saw no one in the city, and only three or four priests in the environs. Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlin loved only the chase. He had six dogs at the end of the yard, and a two-horse carriage; Father Robert, of the Rue des Capucins, served them as coachman, groom, footman, and huntsman. Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlin always wore a hunting vest, a leather cap, and boots and spurs. All the towns called him the hunter, but they said nothing of Madame nor of Mademoiselle de Chamberlin.

I was very sad when I pushed open the heavy door, which closed with a pulley whose creaking echoed through the vestibule. What was then my surprise to hear, in the midst of general mourning, the tones of a song and harpsichord. Monsieur de la Vablerie was singing, and Mademoiselle Jeanne accompanying him. I knew not, in those days, that the misfortune of one was often the joy of others, and I said to myself, with my hand on the latch: 'They have not heard the news from Russia.'

But while I stood thus, the door of the kitchen opened, and Mademoiselle Louise, their servant, putting out her head, asked:

'Who is there?'

'I: is I, Mademoiselle Louise.'

'Ah, it is you, Monsieur Joseph. Come this way.'

They had their clock in a large parlor which they rarely entered; the high windows, with blinds, remained closed; but there was light enough for what I had to do. I passed then through the kitchen and regulated the antique clock, which was a magnificent piece of work of white marble. Mademoiselle Louise looked on.

'You have company, Mademoiselle Louise?' I asked.

'No, but monsieur ordered me to let no one in.'

'You are very cheerful here.'

'Ah! yes,' she said; and it is for the first time in years; I don't know what is the matter.'

My work done, I left the house, meditating on these occurrences, which seemed to me strange. The idea never entered my mind that they were rejoicing at our defeat.

Then I turned the corner of the street to go to Father Feral's, who was called the 'Standard-Bearer,' because, at the age of forty-five, he, a blacksmith, and for many years the father of a family, had carried the colors of the volunteers of Phalsbourg in '92, and only returned after the Zurich campaign. He had his three sons in the army of Russia, Jean, Louis, and

George Feral. George was commandant of dragoons; the two others, officers of infantry.

I imagined the grief of Father Feral while I was going, but it was nothing to what I saw when I entered his room. The poor old man, blind and bald, was sitting in arm-chair before the stove, his head bowed upon his breast, and his sightless eyes open, and staring as if he saw his three sons stretched at his feet. He did not speak, but great drops of sweat rolled down his forehead on his long, thin cheeks, while his face was pale as that of a corpse. Four or five of his old comrades of the times of the republic—Father Demarets, Father N'roi, old Paradis, and all old Froissard—had come to console him. They sat around him in silence, smoking their pipes, and looking as if they themselves needed comfort.

From time to time one or the other would say:

'Come, come, Feral! are we no longer veterans of the army of the Sambre and Meuse?'

Or:

'Courage, Standard Bearer! courage! Did we not carry the battery at Fleuries?'

But he did not reply; every minute he sighed, and the old friends made signs to each other, shaking their heads, as if to say:

'This looks bad.'

I hastened to regulate the clock and depart, for to see the poor old man in such a plight made my heart bleed.

When I arrived at home, I found Monsieur Goulden at his work bench.

'You are returned, Joseph,' said he.—'Well?'

'Well, Monsieur Goulden, you had reason to stay away; it is terrible.'

And I told him all in detail.

He arose. I set the table, and whilst we were dining in silence, the bells of the steeples began to ring.

'Some one is dead in the city,' said Monsieur Goulden.

'Indeed? I did not hear of it.'

Ten minutes after, the Rabbi Rose came in to have a glass put in his watch.

'Who is dead?' asked Monsieur Goulden.

'Poor old Standard Bearer.'

'What! Father Feral?'

'Yes near an hour ago. Father Demarets and several others tried to comfort him; at last, he asked them to read to him the last letter of his son George, the commandant of Jragoons, in which he says that next spring he hoped to embrace his father with a colonel's epaulettes. As the old man heard this, he tried to rise, but fell back with his head upon his knees. That letter had broken his heart.'

Monsieur Goulden made no remark on the news.

'Here is your watch, Monsieur Rose,' said he, handing it back to the rabbi; 'it is twelve o'clock.'

Monsieur Rose departed, and we finished our dinner in silence.

V.

On the eighth of January, a huge placard was posted on the town-hall, stating that the emperor would levy, after a *senatus-consultus*, as they said in those days, in the first place one hundred and fifty thousand conscripts of 1813; then one hundred *colottes* of the first call of 1812, who thought they had already escaped; then one hundred thousand conscripts of from 1809 to 1812 and so on to the end; so that every loop-hole was closed, and we would have a larger army than before the Russian expedition.

When Father Fouze, the glazier, came to us with this news, one morning, I almost fell through faintness, for I thought:

'Now they will take all, even fathers of families. I am lost!'

Monsieur Goulden poured some water on my neck; my arms hung useless by my side; I was pale as a corpse.

But I was not the only one upon whom the placard had such an effect: that year many young men refused to go; some broke their thumbs with pistols, so as not to be able to hold the musket; others, again, fled to the woods; they proclaimed them 'refractories,' but they had not *gens d'armes* enough to capture them.

The mothers of families took courage to revolt after a manner, and to encourage their sons not to obey the *gens d'armes*. They aided them in every way; they cried out against the emperor, and the clergy of all denominations sustained them in so doing. The cup was at last full.

The very day of the proclamation I went to Quatre-Vents; but it was not now in the joy of my heart; it was as the most miserable of unhappy wretches, about to be bereft of love and life. I could scarcely walk, and when I reached there I did not know how to announce the evil tidings; but I saw at a glance that they knew all, for Catharine was weeping bitterly, and Aunt Gredel was pale with indignation.

'You shall not go,' she cried. 'What have