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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

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XVII.

The battalion was commencing to descend the hill, opposite Leipzig, when we saw a staff-officer crossing the plain beneath, and coming at full gallop towards us. In two minutes he was with us; Colonel Lorain had spurred forward to meet him; they exchanged a few words, and the officer returned. Hundreds of others were rushing over the plain in the same manner, bearing orders.

'Head of column to the right!' shouted the colonel.

We took the direction of a wood, which skirts the Duben road some half a league. Once at its borders, we were ordered to re-prime our guns, and the battalion was deployed through the wood as skirmishers. We advanced, twenty-five paces apart, and each of us kept his eyes well opened, as may be imagined. Every minute Sergeant Pinto would cry out:

'Get under cover!'

But he did not need to warn us, each one hastened to take his post behind a stout tree, to reconnoitre well before proceeding to another. We kept on in this manner for ten minutes, and, as we saw nothing, began to grow more confident, when suddenly, one, two, three shots rang out. Then they came from all sides, rattled from end to end of our line. At the same instant I saw my comrade on the left fall, trying, as he sank to the earth, to support himself by the trunk of the tree behind which he was standing. This roused me. I looked to the right and saw, fifty or sixty paces off, an old Prussian soldier, with his long red mustaches covering the lock of his piece; he was aiming deliberately at me. I fell at once to the ground, and at the same moment heard the report. It was a close escape, for the comb, brush, and handkerchief in my shako were broken and torn by the bullet. A cold shiver ran through me.

'Well done! a miss is as good as mile!' cried the old sergeant, starting forward at a run, and I, who had no wish to remain longer in such a place, followed with right good-will.

Lieutenant Bretonville, waving his sabre, cried, 'Forward!' while, to the right, the firing still continued. We soon arrived at a clearing, where lay five or six trunks of felled trees, but not one standing, that might serve us for a cover. Nevertheless, five or six of our men advanced boldly, when the sergeant called out:

'Halt! The Prussians are in ambush around. Look sharp.'

Scarcely had he spoken, when a dozen bullets whistled through the branches, and, at the same time a number of Prussians rose, and plunged deeper into the forest opposite.

'There they go? Forward,' cried Pinto.

But the bullet in my shako had rendered me cautious: it seemed as if I could almost see through the trees, and as the sergeant started forth into the clearing, I held his arm, pointing out to him the muzzle of a musket peeping out from a bush, not a hundred paces before us.—The others, clustering around, saw it too, and Pinto whispered,

'Stay, Bertha; remain here, and do not lose sight of him, while we turn the position.'

They set off to the right and left, and I, behind my tree, my tree, my piece at my shoulder, waited like a hunter for his game. At the end of two or three minutes, the Prussian, hearing nothing, rose slowly. He was quite a boy, with little blonde moustaches, and a tall, slight, but well-knit figure. I could have killed him as he stood, but the thought of thus slaying a defenceless man froze my blood. Suddenly he saw me, and bounded aside. Then I fired, and breathed more freely as I saw him running, like a stag, toward the wood.

At the same moment, five or six reports rang out to the right and left; the sergeant, Zebede, Klipfel, and the rest appeared, and a hundred paces further on, we found the young Prussian upon the ground, blood gushing from his mouth. He gazed at us with a scared expression, raising his arm, as if to parry bayonet-thrusts, but the sergeant called gleefully to him:

'Fear nothing! Your account is settled.'

No one offered to injure him further; but Klipfel took a beautiful pipe, which was hanging out of his pocket, saying:

'For a long time I have wanted a pipe, and here is a fine one.'

'Fustier Klipfel!' cried Pinto indignantly, 'will you be good enough to put back that pipe? Leave it to the Cossacks to rob the wounded! A French soldier knows only honour!'

Klipfel threw down the pipe, and we departed, not one caring to look back at the wounded Prussian. We arrived at the edge of the forest outside which, among tufted bushes, the Prussians were pursued had taken refuge. We saw them rise to fire upon us, but they immediately lay down again. We might have remained there tranquilly, since we had orders to occupy

the wood, and the shots of the Prussians could not hurt us, protected as we were by the trees. On the other side of the slope we heard a terrific battle going on; the thunder of cannon was increasing, it filled the air with one continuous roar. But our officers held a council, and decided that the bushes were part of the forest, and that the Prussians must be driven from them. This determination cost many a life.

We received orders, then to drive in the enemy's tirailleurs, and as they fired as we came on, we started at a run, to as to be upon them before they could reload. Our officers ran, also, full of ardor. We thought the bushes ended at the top of the hill, and that then we could sweep off the Prussians by dozens. But scarcely had we arrived, out of breath, upon the ridge, when old Pinto cried:

'Hussars!'

I looked up, and saw the Colbacks rushing down upon us like a tempest. Scarcely had I seen them, when I began to spring down the hill, going, I verily believe, in spite of weariness and my knapsack, fifteen feet at a bound. I saw before me Pinto, Zebede, and the others, making their best speed. Behind, on came the hussars, their officers shouting orders in German, their scabbards clanking and horses neighing.—The earth shook beneath them.

I took the shortest road to the wood, and had almost reached it, when I came upon one of the trenches where the peasants were in the habit of digging clay for their houses. It was more than twenty feet wide, and forty or fifty long, and the rain had made the sides very slippery; but as I heard the very breathing of the horses behind me, without thinking of aught else, I sprang forward, and fell upon my face; another fusilier of my company was already there. We arose as soon as we could, at the same instant two hussars glided down the slippery side of the trench. The first, cursing like a fiend, aimed a sabre-stroke at my poor comrade's head, but as he rose in his stirrups to give force to the blow, I buried my bayonet in his side, while the other brought down his blade upon my shoulder with such force, that, were it not for my epaulette, I believe that I had been well-nigh cloven in two. Then he plunged, but as his point touched my breast, a bullet from above crashed through his skull. I looked around, and saw one of our men up to his knees in the clay. He had heard the oaths of the hussars and the neighing of the horses, and had come to the edge of the trench to see what was going on.

'Well, comrade,' said he, laughing, 'it was about time.'

I had not strength to reply, but stood trembling like an aspen leaf. He unfixed his bayonet and stretched the muzzle of his piece to me to help me out. Then I squeezed his hand, saying:

'You saved my life! What is your name?'

He told me that his name was Jean Pierre Vincent. I have often since thought that I should only be too happy to render that man any service in my power; but two days after, the second battle of Leipzig took place; then the retreat from Iltzau began, and I never saw him again.

Sergeant Pinto and Zebede came up a moment after. Zebede said:

'We have escaped once more, Joseph, and now we are the only Palsboarg men in the battalion. Klipfel was sabred by the hussars.'

'Did you see?' I cried.

'Yes; he received over twenty wounds, and kept calling to me for aid.' Then, after a moment's pause, he added, 'O Joseph, it is terrible to hear the companion of your childhood calling for help, and not be able to give it! But they were too many. They surrounded him on all sides.'

The thoughts of home rushed upon both our minds. I thought I could see grandmother Klipfel when she would learn the news, and this made me think too of Catharine.

From the time of the charge of the hussars until night, the battalion remained in the same position, skirmishing with the Prussians. We kept them from occupying the wood; but they prevented us from ascending to the ridge. The next day we knew why. The hill commanded the entire course of the Partha, and the fierce cannonade we heard came from Dombrowski's division, which was attacking the Prussian left wing, in order to aid general Marmont at Mockern, where twenty thousand French, posted in a ravine, were holding eighty thousand of Blucher's troops in check; while toward Wachau a hundred and fifteen thousand French were engaged with two hundred thousand Austrians and Russians. More than fifteen hundred cannon were thundering at once. Our poor little fusilade was like the humming of a bee in a storm, and we sometimes ceased firing, on both sides, to listen. It seemed as if some supernatural, infernal battle were going on; the air was filled with smoke; the earth trembled beneath our feet;

old soldiers like Pinto declared they had never seen anything like it.

About six o'clock, a staff-officer brought orders to Colonel Lorain, and immediately after a retreat was sounded. The battalion had lost sixty men.

It was night when we left the forest, and on the banks of the Partha—among caissons, wagons, retreating divisions, ambulances filled with wounded, all delirious over the two bridges—we had to wait more than two hours for our turn to cross. The heavens were black; the artillery still growled afar off, but the three battles were ended. We heard that we had beaten the Austrians and the Russians at Wachau, on the other side of Leipzig; but our men returning from Mockern were downcast and gloomy; not a voice cried *Vive l'Empereur!* as after a victory.

Once on the other side of the river, we marched on amid the din of the retreat from Mockern, and at length reached a burial ground, where we were ordered to stack arms and break ranks.

By this time the sky had cleared, and I recognized Schoenfeld in the moonlight. How often had I eaten bread and drunk white wine with Zuanier there at the Golden Sheaf when the sun shone brightly and the leaves were green around? But those times had passed! I sat against the cemetery wall, and at length fell asleep. About three o'clock in the morning, I was awakened.

It was Zebede. 'Joseph,' said he, 'come to the fire. If you remain here, you run the risk of catching the fever.'

I arose, sick with fatigue and suffering. A fine rain filled the air. My comrade drew me toward the fire which smoked in the drizzling atmosphere; it seemed to give out no heat; but Zebede having made me drink a draught of brandy, I felt at least less cold, and gazed at the fire on the other side of the Partha.

'The Prussians are warming themselves in our wood,' said Zebede.

'Yes,' I replied; 'and poor Klipfel is there too, but he no longer feels the cold.'

My teeth chattered. These words saddened us both. A few moments after, Zebede resumed:

'Do you remember, Joseph the black ribbon he wore the day of the conscription, and how he cried that we were all condemned to death, like those who had gone to Russia.'

I thought how Pinnacle had held out the black ribbon for me; and the remembrance, together with the cold, which seemed to freeze the very marrow in our bones, made me shudder. I thought Pinnacle was right; that I had seen the last of home, and I cursed those who had forced me from it.

At day-break, wagons arrived with food and brandy for us. The rain had ceased; we made soup, but nothing could warm me; I had caught the fever. I was not the only one in the battalion in that condition; three-fourths of the men were suffering from it; and, for a month before, those who could no longer march had lain down by the roadside weeping and calling upon their mothers like little children. Hunger, forced marches, the rain, and grief had done their work, and happy was it for the parents that they could not see the miserable end of their cherished sons.

As the light increased, we saw to the left, on the other side of the river, burnt villages, heaps of dead, abandoned wagons, and broken cannon, stretching as far as the eye could reach. It was worse than at Lutzen. We saw the Prussians deploy, and advance their thousands over the battle-field. They were to join with the Russians and Austrians and close the great circle around us, and we could not prevent them, especially as Bernadotte and the Russian General Benningsen had come up with twenty thousand fresh troops. Thus, after fighting three battles in the one day, were we, only one hundred thousand strong, seemingly about to be entrapped in the midst of three hundred thousand bayonets, not to speak of fifty thousand horse and two hundred cannon.

From Schoenfeld, the battalion started to rejoin the division at Kohlgarten. All the roads were lined with slow-moving ambulances, filled with wounded; all the wagons of the country around had been impressed for this service; and, in the intervals between them, marched hundreds of poor fellows with their arms in slings, or their heads bandaged—pale, crest-fallen, half-dead.

We made our way, with a thousand difficulties, through this mass, when, near Kohlgarten, twenty hussars, galloping at full speed, and with levelled pistols, drove back the crowd, right and left, into the fields, shouting as they pressed on:—

'The emperor! the emperor!'

The battalion drew up, and presented arms; and a few moments after, the *grenadiers à cheval* of the guard—veritable giants, with their great boots, their immense bear-skin hats, de-

scending to their shoulders and only allowing their mustaches, nose, and eyes to remain visible—passed at a gallop. Our men looked joyfully at them, glad that such robust warriors were on our side.

Scarcely had they passed, when the staff tore after. Imagine a hundred and fifty to two hundred marshals, generals, and other superior officers, mounted on magnificent steeds, and so covered with embroidery that the color of their uniforms was scarcely visible; some tall, thin, and haughty; others short, thick-set, and red-faced; others again young and handsome, sitting like statues in their saddles; all with eager look and flashing eyes. It was a magnificent and terrible sight. But the most striking figure among those captains, who for twenty years had made Europe tremble, was Napoleon himself, with his old hat and gray over-coat: his large, determined chin and neck buried between his shoulders. All shouted, '*Vive l'Empereur!*' but he heard nothing of it. He paid no more attention to us than to the drizzling rain which filled the air, but gazed with contracted brows at the Prussian army stretching along the Partha to join the Austrians.

'Did you see him, Joseph?' asked Zebede.

'I did,' I replied; 'I saw him well, and I will remember the sight all my life.'

'It is strange,' said my comrade; 'he does not seem to be pleased. At Wutzen, the day after the battle, he seemed rejoiced to hear our *Vive l'Empereur*, and the generals all wore merry faces too. To-day they seem savage, and nevertheless the captain said that we bore off the victory on the other side of Leipzig.'

Others thought the same thing without speaking of it, but there was a growing uneasiness among all.

We found the regiment bivouacked near Kohlgarten. In every direction camp fires were rolling their smoke to the sky. A dazzling rain continued to fall, and the men, seated on their knapsacks around the fires, seemed depressed and gloomy. The officers formed groups of their own. On all sides it was whispered that such a war had never before been seen; it was one of extermination; that it did not help us to defeat the enemy, for they only desired to kill us off, knowing that they had four or five times our number of men, and would finally remain masters.

Toward evening of the next day, we discovered the army of the north on the plateau of Breitenfeld. This was sixty thousand more men for the enemy. I can yet hear the maledictions levelled at Bernadotte—the cries of indignation of those who knew him as a simple officer in the army of the republic, who cried out that he owed us all—that we made him a king with our blood, and that he now came to give us the finishing blow.

That night, as we drew our lines still closer around Leipzig, I gazed at the circle of fires which surrounded us, and it seemed as if the whole world was built on our extermination.—But I remembered that we had the honor of bearing the name of Frenchmen and must conquer or die.

XIX.

In the midst of such thoughts, day broke.—Nothing was stirring yet, and Zebede said:

'What a chance for us, if the enemy should fear to attack us!'

The officers spoke of an armistice; but suddenly about nine o'clock, our couriers came galloping in, crying that the enemy was moving his whole line down upon us, and directly after we heard cannon on our right, along the Elster. We were already under arms, and set out across the fields toward the Partha to return to Schoenfeld. The battle had begun.

On the hills overlooking the river, two or three divisions, with batteries in the intervals, and cannon at the flanks, awaited the enemy's approach; beyond, over the points of their bayonets, we could see the Prussians, the Swedes, and the Russians, advancing on all sides in deep, never-ending masses. Shortly after, we took our place in line, between two hills, and then we saw five or six thousand Prussians crossing the river, and all together shouting, '*Vaterland! Vaterland!*' This caused a tremendous tumult, like that of clouds of rooks flying north.

At the same instant the musketry opened from both sides of the river. The valley through which the Partha flows was filled with smoke; the Prussians were already upon us—we could see their furious eyes and wild looks; they seemed like savage beasts rushing down on us. Then but one shout of '*Vive l'Empereur!*' smote the sky and we dashed forward. The shock was terrible; thousands of bayonets crossed; we drove them back, were ourselves driven back; muskets were clubbed; the opposing ranks were confounded and mingled in one mass; the fallen were trampled upon, while the thunder of artillery, the whistling of bullets, and the thick white smoke enclosing all, made

the valley seem the pit of hell, peopled by contending demons.

Despair urged us, and the wish to revenge our deaths before yielding up our lives. The pride of boasting that they once defeated Napoleon incited the Prussians; for they are the proudest of men, and their victories at Gross-Beeren and Katzbach had made them fools.—But the river swept away them and their pride! Three times they crossed and rushed at us.—We were indeed forced back by the shock of their numbers, and how they shouted then! They seemed to wish to devour us. Their officers, waving their swords in the air, cried, '*Vorwartz! Vorwartz!*' and all advanced like a wall with the greatest courage—that we cannot deny. Our cannon opened huge gaps in their lines, still they pressed on; but at the top of the hill we charged again, and drove them to the river. We would have massacred them to a man, were it not for one of their batteries before Mockern, which enfiladed us and forced us to give up the pursuit.

This lasted until two o'clock; half our officers were killed or wounded; the Colonel, Lorain, was among the first, and the Commandant, Gemenau, the latter; all along the river side were heaps of dead, or wounded men crawling away from the struggle. Some, furious, would rise to their knees to fire a last shot or deliver a final bayonet-thrust. The river was almost choked with dead, but no one thought of the bodies as they swept by in the current. The lines contending in the light reached from Schoenfeld to Grossdorf.

At length the Swedes and Prussians ceased their attacks, and started farther up the river to turn our position, and masses of Russians came to occupy the places they had left.

The Russians formed in two columns, and descended to the valley, with shouldered arms, in admirable order. Twice they assailed us with the greatest bravery, but without uttering wild beasts' cries, like the Prussians. Their cavalry attempted to carry the old bridge above Schoenfeld, and the cannonade increased. On all sides, as far as might could reach, we saw only the enemy massing their forces, and when we had repulsed one of their columns, another of fresh men took its place. The fight had ever to be fought over again.

Between two and three o'clock, we learned that the Swedes and the Prussian cavalry had crossed the river above Grossdorf, and were about to take us in the rear, a mode which pleased them much better than fighting face to face. Marshal Ney immediately changed front, throwing his right wing to the rear. Our division still remained supported on Schoenfeld, but all the others retired from the Partha, to stretch along the plain, and the entire army formed but one line around Leipzig.

The Russians, behind the road to Mockern, prepared for a third attack toward three o'clock; our officers were making new dispositions to receive them; when a sort of shudder ran from one end of our lines to the other, and in a few moments all knew that the sixteen thousand Saxons and the Wurtemberg cavalry, in our very centre, had passed over to the enemy, and that on their way they had the infamy to turn the forty guns they carried with them, on their old brothers-in-arms of Durutte's division.

This treason, instead of discouraging us, so added to our fury, that if we had been allowed, we would have crossed the river to massacre them. They say that they were defending their country. It is false! They had only to have left us on the Duben road; why did they not go then! They might have done like the Bavarians and quitted us before the battle; they might have remained neutral—might have refused to serve; but they deserted us only because fortune was against us. If they knew we were going to win, they would have continued our very good friends, so that they might have their share of the spoil or glory—as after Jena and Friedland. This is what every one thought, and it is why those Saxons are, and will ever remain, traitors; not only did they abandon their friends in distress, but they murdered them, to make a welcome to the enemy. God is just, and so great was their new allies' scorn of them, that they divided half Saxony between themselves after the battle. The French might well laugh at Prussian, Austrian, and Russian gratitude.

From the time of this desertion until evening, it was a war of vengeance that we carried on; the allies might crush us by numbers, but they should pay dearly for their victory!

At nightfall, while two thousand pieces of artillery were thundering together, we were attacked for the seventh time in Schoenfeld. The Russians on one side and the Prussians on the other poured in upon us. We defended every house. In every lane the walls crumbled beneath the bullets, and roofs fell in on every side. There were now no shouts as at the beginning of the battle; all were cool and pale with rage.