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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

(From the Catholic World.)

Those who have not seen the glory of the Emperor Napoleon, during the years 1810, 1811, and 1812, can never conceive what a pitch of power one man can reach.

When he passed through Champagne, or Lorraine, or Alsace, people gathered the harvest or the vintage would leave everything to run and see him; women, children, and old men would come a distance of eight or ten leagues to line his route, and cheer and cry, 'Vive l'Empereur, Vive l'Empereur!' One would think that he was a god, that mankind owed its life to him, and that, if he died, the world would crumble and be no more. A few old republicans might shake their heads and mutter over their wine that the Emperor might yet fall, but they passed for fools.

I was in my apprenticeship since 1804, with an old watchmaker, Melchior Goulden, at Phalsbourg. As I seemed weak and was a little lame, my father wished me to learn an easier trade than those of our village, for at Phalsbourg there were only wood-cutters and charcoal burners. Monsieur Goulden liked me very much. We lived on the first story of a large house opposite the 'Red Ox' inn, and near the French gate.

That was the place to see princes, ambassadors, and generals: come and go, some on foot, and some in carriages drawn by two or four horses; there they passed in embroidered uniforms, with waving plumes and decorations from every country under the sun. And in the highway what couriers, what baggage waggons, what powder trains, cannon, caissons, cavalry, and infantry did we see! Those were stirring times!

In five or six years the unkeeper, George, had made a fortune. He had fields, orchards, houses, and money in abundance; for all these people, coming from Germany, Switzerland, Russia, Poland, or elsewhere, cared little for a few handfuls of gold scattered upon their road; they were all nobles who took a pride in showing their prodigality.

From morning until night, and even during the night, the 'Red Ox' kept its tables in readiness. Through the long windows on the first story nothing was to be seen but great white tablecloths, glittering with silver and covered with game, fish, and other rare viands around which the travellers sat by side. In the yard behind, hessers neighed, postillions shouted, maid-servants laughed, coaches rattled.

Sometimes, too, people of the city stopped there, who in other times were known to gather sticks in the forest or work on the highway. But now they were commandants, colonels, generals, and had won their grades by fighting in every land on earth.

Old Melchior, with his black silk cap pulled over his ears, his weak eyelids, his nose pinched between great horn spectacles, and his lips tightly pressed together, could not sometimes avoid putting his magnifying-glass and punch upon the work bench, and throwing a glance towards the inn, especially when the cracking of the whips of the postillions awoke the echoes of the ramparts and announced a new arrival. Then he became all attention, and from time to time would exclaim:

'Hold! It is the son of Jacob, the slater, or of the old scold, Mary Ann, or of the cooper, Franz Lepel. He has made his way in the world; there he is, colonel and baron of the empire into the bargain. Why don't he stop at the house of his father who lives yonder in the Rue d's Capucins?'

But, when he saw them shaking hands right and left in the street with those who recognized them, his tone changed; he wiped his eyes with his great spotted handkerchief, and murmured: 'How pleased poor old Annette will be.— Good, good! He is not proud; he is a man.— God preserve him from cannon-balls!'

Others passed as if ashamed to recognize their birthplace; others went gayly to see their sisters or cousins, and everybody spoke of them. One would imagine that all Phalsbourg wore their crosses and their epaulettes; while the arrogant were despised even more than when they swept the roads.

Nearly every month *Te Deums* were chanted, and the cannon at the arsenal fired their salutes of twenty-one rounds for some new victory. During the week following every family was uneasy; poor mothers especially waited for letters, and the first that came, all the city knew of: the rumor spread like wildfire that such an one had received a letter from from Jacques or Claude, and all ran to see if it spoke of their Joseph or their Jean Baptiste. I do not speak of promotions or the official reports of deaths; as for the first, every one knew that the killed must be replaced; and as for the reports of deaths, parents awaited them weeping, for they did not come immediately; sometimes they never came, and the poor mother hoped on, saying, 'Perhaps our

boy is a prisoner. When they make peace, he will return. How many have returned whom we thought dead.'

But they never made peace. When one war was finished, another was begun. We always needed something, either from Russia or from Spain, or from some other country. The Emperor was never satisfied.

Often when regiments passed through the city, with their great coats pulled back, their knapsacks on their backs, their great gaiters reaching to the knee, and muskets carried at will; often when they passed covered with mud or white with dust, would Father Melchior, after gazing upon them, ask me dreamily:

'How many, Joseph, think you we have seen pass since 1804?'

'I cannot say, Monsieur Goulden,' I would reply, 'at least four or five hundred thousand.'

'Yes, at least,' he said, 'and how many have returned?'

'Then I understood his meaning, and answered: 'Perhaps they return by Mayence or some other route. It cannot be possible otherwise.'

But he only shook his head, and said: 'Those whom you have not seen return are dead, as hundreds and hundreds of thousands more will die, if the good God does not take pity on us, for the Emperor loves only war. He has already spilt more blood to give his brothers crowns than our Revolution cost to win the rights of man.'

The news set about our work again; but the reflections of Monsieur Goulden gave me some terrible reflections for thought.

It was true that I was a little lame in the left leg; but how many others with defects of body had received their orders to march notwithstanding.

These ideas kept running through my head, and when I thought long over them, I grew very melancholy. They seemed terrible to me, not only because I had no love for war, but because I was going to marry Catherine of Quatre-Vents. We had been in some sort reared together. Nowhere could he find a girl so fresh and laughing. She was fair-haired, with beautiful blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and teeth white as milk. She was approaching eighteen; I was nineteen, and Aunt Margrethe seemed pleased to see me coming early every Sunday morning to breakfast and dine with them.

It was I who took her to High Mass and Vespers; and on holidays she never left my arm, and refused to dance with the other youths of the village. Everybody knew that we would some day be married; but, if I should be so unfortunate as to be drawn in the conscription, there was an end of matters. I wished that I was a thousand times more lame; for at the time of which I speak they had first taken the unmarried men, then the married men who had no children, then those with one child; and I constantly asked myself, 'Are lame fellows of more consequence than fathers of families? Could they not put me in the cavalry?' The idea made me so unhappy that I already thought of fleeing.

But in 1812, at the beginning of the Russian war, my fear increased. From February until the end of May, every day we saw pass regiments after regiments—dragoons, cuirassiers, carabiniers, hussars, lancers of all colors, artillery, caissons ambulances, waggons, provisions, rolling on for ever, like the waters of a river. All flowed through the French gate, crossed the Place d'Armes, and streamed out at the German gate.

At last, on the 10th of May, in the year 1812, in the early morning, the guns of the arsenal announced the coming of the master of all. I was yet sleeping when the first shot shook the little panes of my window till they rattled like a drum, and Monsieur Goulden, with a lighted candle, opened my door, saying, 'Rise up, he is here.'

We opened the window. Through the night I saw a hundred dragoons, of whom many bore torches, entering at a gallop; they shook the earth as they passed; their lights glanced along the house-fronts like dancing flames, and from every window we heard the shouts of 'Vive l'Empereur!'

I was gazing at the carriage, when a horse crashed against the post to which the the butcher Klein was accustomed to fasten his cattle. The dragoon was thrown to the pavement, his helmet rolled in the gutter, and a head leaned out of the carriage to see what had happened—a large head, pale and fat, with a tuft of hair on the forehead; it was Napoleon; he held his hand up as if about taking a pinch of snuff, and said a few words roughly. The officer gallowing by the side of the coach bent down to reply; and his master took his snuff and turned the corner, while the shouts redoubled and the cannons roared louder than ever.

This was all that I saw. The Emperor did not stop at Phalsbourg, and when he was on the road to Saverne, the guns fired their last shot, and silence reigned once

more. The guards at the gate raised the draw-bridge, and the old watchmaker said:

'You have seen him?'

'I have, Monsieur Goulden.'

'Well,' he continued, 'that man holds all our lives in his hand; he need but breathe upon us and we are gone. Let us bless Heaven that he is not evil-minded; for if he were, the world would see again the horrors of the days of the barbarian kings and the Turks.'

He seemed lost in thought, but in a moment he added:

'You can go to bed again. The clock is striking three.'

He returned to his room, and I to my bed. The deep silence without seemed strange after such a tumult, and until daybreak I never ceased dreaming of the Emperor. I dreamed, too, of the dragoon, and wanted to know if he were killed. The next day we learned that he was carried to the hospital and would recover.

From that day until the month of September they often sang the *Te Deum*, and fired twenty-one guns for new victories. It was always in the morning, and Monsieur Goulden cried:

'Eh, Joseph. Another battle won. Fifty thousand men lost! Twenty-five standards, a hundred guns won. All goes well. It only remains now to order a new levy to replace the dead!'

He pushed open my door, and I saw him bald, in his shirt-sleeves, with his neck bare, washing his face in the wash bowl.

'Do you think, Monsieur Goulden,' I asked, 'in great trouble, that they will take the lame?'

'No, no,' he said kindly; 'fear nothing, my child, you could not serve. We will fix that.— Only work well, and never mind the rest.'

He saw my anxiety, and it pained him. I never met a better man. Then he dressed himself to go to wind up the city clocks—those of Monsieur the Commandant of the place, of Monsieur the Mayor, and other notable personages. I remained at home. Monsieur Goulden did not return until after the *Te Deum*. He took off his great brown coat, put his peruke back in its box, and again pulling his silk cap over his ears, said:

'The army is at Wilna or at Smolensk as I learn from Monsieur the Commandant. God grant that we may succeed this time and make peace, and the sooner the better, for war is a terrible thing.'

I thought, too, that if we had peace, so many men would not be needed, and that I could marry Catharine. Any one can imagine the wishes I formed for the Emperor's glory.

It was the 15th of September, 1812, that the news came of the great victory of the Moskowa. Every one was full of joy, and all cried, 'Now we will have peace! now the war is ended!'

Some discontented folks might say that China yet remained to be conquered; such war-joys are always to be found.

A week after, we learned that our forces were in Moscow, the largest and richest city in Russia, and then everybody figured to himself the booty we would capture, and the reduction it would make in taxes. But soon came the rumor that the Russians had set fire to their capital, and that it was necessary to retreat on Poland or to die of hunger. Nothing else was spoken of in the inns, the breweries or the market; no one could meet his neighbor without saying, 'Well, well, things go badly; the retreat has commenced.'

People grew pale, and hundreds of peasants waited morning and night at the post-office, but no letters came now. I passed and repassed through the crowd without paying any attention to it, for I had seen so much of the same thing. And besides, I had a thought in my mind which gladdened my heart and made everything seem rosy to me.

You must know that for six months past I had wished to make Catharine a magnificent present for her *fete* day, which fell on the 18th of December. Among the watches which hung in Monsieur Goulden's window was one little one of the prettiest kind, with a silver case full of little circles, which made it shine like a star. Around the face, under the glass, was a thread of copper and on the face were painted two lovers, the youth evidently declaring his love, and giving to his sweetheart a large bouquet of roses, while she modestly lowered her eyes and held out her hand.

The first time I saw the watch, I said to myself: 'You must not let that escape; that watch is for Catharine, and although you must work every day till midnight for it, she must have it.'

Monsieur Goulden, after seven in the evening, allowed me to work on my own account. He had old watches to clean and regulate; and, as this work was often very troublesome, old father Melchior paid me reasonably for it. But the little watch was thirty-five francs, and one can imagine how many hours at night I would have

to work for it. I am sure that, if Monsieur Goulden knew that I wanted it he would have given it me as a present, but I would not have let him take a farthing less for it; I would have regarded doing so something shameful. I kept saying, 'You must earn it; no one else must have any claim upon it.' Only for fear somebody else might take a fancy to buy it I put it aside in a box, telling father Melchior that I knew a purchaser.

Under these circumstances, every one can readily understand how all these stories of war went in at one ear and out at the other with me. While I worked I imagined Catharine's joy, and for five months that was all I had before my eyes. I thought how pleased she would look, and ask myself what she would say. Some times I imagined she would cry out, 'O Joseph, what are you thinking of! It is much too beautiful for me. No, no; I cannot take so fine a watch from you.' Then I thought I would force it upon her; I would slip it into her apron-pocket, 'Come, come, Catharine! Do you wish to give me pain? I could see how she wanted it, and that she spoke only to seem to refuse it. Then I imagined her blushing, with her hands raised, saying, 'Joseph, now I know indeed that you love me.' And she would embrace me with tears in her eyes. I felt very happy. Aunt Gradel approved of all. In a word, a thousand such scenes passed through my mind, and when I retired at night I said: 'There is no one as happy as you, Joseph. See what a present you can make Catharine by your lot; and she surely is preparing something for your *fete*, for she thinks only of you; you are both very happy, and, when you are married, all will go well.'

While I was thus working on, thinking only of happiness, the winter began, earlier than usual, towards the beginning of November. It did not begin with snow, but with dry, cold weather and strong frosts. In a few days all the leaves had fallen and the earth was hard as ice and all covered with hoar-frost; tiles, pavement, and window panes glittered with it. Fires had to be made to keep the cold out, and when the doors were opened for a moment, the heat seemed to disappear at once. The wood crackled in the stoves and burnt away like straw in the fierce draught of the chimneys.

Every morning I hastened to wash the panes of the shop window with warm water, and I scarcely closed it when a frosty sheen covered it. Without people ran pulling with their coat-collars over their ears and their hands in their pockets. No one stood still, and when doors opened, they soon closed.

I don't know what became of the sparrows, whether they were dead or living, but not one twittered in the chimneys, and, save the rattle and retreat sounded in the barracks, no sound broke the silence.

Often when the fire crackled merrily did Monsieur Goulden stop his work, and, gazing on the frost-covered panes, exclaim:

'Our poor soldiers! our poor soldiers!'

He said this so mournfully that I felt a choking in my throat as I replied:

'But, Monsieur Goulden, they ought now to be in Poland in good barracks; for to suppose that human beings could endure a cold like this, it is impossible.'

'Such a cold as this,' he said; 'yes, here it is cold, very cold, from the winds from the mountains; but what is this frost to that of the north of Russia and of Poland? God grant that they started early enough. My God! my God! the leaders of men have a heavy weight to bear.'

After the frosts so much snow fell that the couriers were stopped on the road toward Quatre-Vents. I feared that I could not go to see Catharine on her *fete* day; but two companies of infantry set out with pickaxes, and dug through the frozen snow a way for carriages, and that road remained open until the commencement of April, 1813.

Nevertheless, Catharine's *fete* approached day by day, and my happiness increased in proportion. I had already the thirty-five francs, but I did not know how to tell Monsieur Goulden that I wished to buy the watch; I wanted to keep the whole matter secret; and it annoyed me greatly to talk about it.

At length, on the eve of the eventful day, between six and seven in the evening, while we were working in silence, the lamp between us, suddenly I took my resolution, and said:

'You know, Monsieur Goulden, that I spoke to you of a purchaser for the little silver watch.'

'Yes, Joseph,' said he, without raising his head, 'but he has not come yet.'

'It is I who am the purchaser, Monsieur Goulden.'

Then he looked up in astonishment. I took out the thirty-five francs and laid them on the work-bench. He stared at me.

'But,' he said, 'it is not such a watch as that you want, Joseph; you want one that will fill

your pocket and mark the seconds. Those little watches are only for women.'

I knew not what to say.

Monsieur Goulden, after meditating a few moments, began to smile.

'Ah!' he exclaimed; 'good, good! I understand now; to-morrow is Catharine's *fete*. Now I know why you worked day and night. I shall take back this money; I do not want it.'

I was all confusion.

'Monsieur Goulden, I thank you,' I replied; 'but this watch is for Catharine, and I wish to have earned it. You will pain me if you refuse the money; I would as lief not take the watch.'

He said nothing more, but took the thirty-five francs; then he opened his drawer, and chose a pretty steel chain, with two little keys of silver-gilt, which he fastened to the watch. Then he put all together in a box with a rose-colored favor. He did all this slowly, as if affected; then he gave me the box.

'It is a pretty present, Joseph,' said he.— 'Catharine ought to deem herself happy in having such a lover as you. She is a good girl. Now we can take our supper. Set the table.'

The table was arranged, and then Monsieur Goulden took from a closet a bottle of his Metz wine, which he kept for great occasions, and we supped like old friends rather than as master and apprentice; all the evening he never stopped speaking of the merry days of his youth; telling me how he once had a sweetheart, but that, in 1792, he left home in the *levee en masse* at the time of the Prussian invasion, and that on his return to Fenebrange, he found her married—a very natural thing, since he had never mastered courage enough to declare his love. However, this did not prevent his remaining faithful to the tender remembrance, and when he spoke of it he seemed sad indeed. I recounted all this in imagination to Catharine, and it was not until the stroke of ten, at the passage of the rounds, which relieved the sentries on post every twenty minutes on account of the great cold, that we got two good logs in the fire, and at length went to bed.

The next day, the 18th of December, I arose about six in the morning. It was terribly cold; my little window was covered with a sheet of frost.

I had taken care the night before to lay out on the back of a chair my sky-blue coat, my trousers, my goat-skin vest, and my fine black cravat. Everything was ready; my well-polished shoes lay at the foot of the bed; I had only to dress myself; but the cold I felt upon my face, the sight of those window panes, and the deep silence without made me shiver in advance. If it were not Catharine's *fete*, I would have remained in bed until midday; but suddenly that recollection made me rush to the great stove, where some embers of the preceding night almost always remained among the cinders. I found two or three, and hastened to collect and put them under some split wood and two large logs, after which I ran back to my bed.

Monsieur Goulden, under the huge curtains, with the coverings pulled up to his nose and his cotton night-cap over his eyes, woke up, and cried out:

'Joseph, we have not had such cold for forty years. I never felt it so. What a winter we shall have.'

I did not answer, but looked out to see if the fire was lighting; the embers burnt well; I heard the chimney draw, and at once all blazed up. The sound of the flames was merry enough, but it required a good half hour to feel the air any warmer.

At last I arose and dressed myself. Monsieur Goulden kept on chatting, but I thought only of Catharine, and when at length, towards eight o'clock, I started out, he exclaimed:

'Joseph, what are you thinking of? Are you going to Quatre-Vents in that little coat? You would be dead before you accomplished half the journey. Go into my closet, and take my great cloak, and the mittens, and the double-soled shoes lined with flannel.'

I was so smart in my fine clothes that I reflected whether it would be better to follow his advice, and he, seeing my hesitation, said:

'Listen! a man was found frozen yesterday on the way to Wecham. Doctor Steinbremer said that he sounded like a piece of dry wood when they tapped him. He was a soldier, and had left the village between six and seven o'clock, and at eight they found him; so that the frost did not take long to do its work. If you want your nose and ears frozen, you have only to go out as you are.'

I knew, then, that he was right; so I put on the thick shoes, and passed the cord of the mittens over my shoulders, and put the cloak over all. Thus accoutred, I sallied forth, after thanking Monsieur Goulden, who warned me not to stay too late, for the cold increased toward night, and great numbers of wolves were crossing the Rhine on the ice.