

# BARLASCH OF THE GUARD

By Henry Seton Merriman

CHAPTER XXII.—(Continued.)

"Let us go on at once," interrupted Desiree, hastily.

Barlasch, crouching against the stove, glanced from one to the other beneath his heavy brows, wondering, perhaps, why they avoided looking at each other. "You will wait here," said d'Arragon, turning toward him, "until—until I return."

"Yes," was the answer. "I will lie on the floor here and sleep. I have had enough. I—"

Louis left the room to give the necessary orders. When he returned in a few minutes, Barlasch was asleep on the floor, and Desiree had tied on her hood again, which concealed her face. He drank a cup of coffee, and ate some dry bread, absent-mindedly, in silence.

The sound of bells, feebly heard through the double windows, told them that the horses were being harnessed. "Are you ready?" asked d'Arragon, who had not sat down; and in response Desiree, standing near the stove, went toward the door, which he held open for her to pass out as she passed him, she glanced at his face, and winced.

In the sleigh, she looked up at him as if expecting to speak. He was looking straight in front of him. There was, after all, nothing to be said. She could see his steady eyes between his high collar and the fur cap. They were hard and unflinching. The room was level now, and the snow beaten to a hard track like ice. d'Arragon put the horses to a gallop at the town gate and kept them at it.

In half an hour he turned toward her, and pointed with his whip to a roof half-hidden by some thin pines. "That is the inn," he said.

In the inn-yard he indicated with his whip two travelling-carriages standing side by side.

"Colonel d'Arragon is here?" he said to the cringing Jew who came to meet them; and the innkeeper led the way upstairs. The house was a miserable one, evil-smelling, sordid. The Jew pointed to a door and, cringing again, left them.

Desiree made a gesture telling Louis to go in first, which he did at once. The room was littered with trunks and boxes, and the Jew pointed to a chamber for greater safety.

On a narrow bed near the window a man lay huddled on his side. He turned and looked over his shoulder, giving a haggard face with a ten days' beard on it. He looked from one to the other in silence.

It was Colonel de Casimir.

CHAPTER XXIII.—

Through the Shoals.

I see my way, as birds their trackless way.

de Casimir had never seen Louis d'Arragon, and yet some dim resemblance to his cousin must have introduced the new-comer to a conscience not quite easy.

"You seek me, monsieur," he said, not having recognized Desiree, who stood behind her companion, in her furs. "I seek Colonel Darragon, and was told that he would find him in this room."

"May I ask why you seek him in this rather unceremonious manner?" asked de Casimir, with the ready insolence of his calling and his age. "He is here," said Desiree, with a gesture dismissing the subject, "I cannot tell you more. It is a woman's secret, monsieur, not mine. Will you deliver a letter for me at Dantzic, that is all I ask."

"I will give it to Madame Darragon to give to Mademoiselle Mathilde, if you like; I am not returning to Dantzic," he said, and Desiree shook his head.

"I am afraid that will not do," he said, doubtfully. "Between sisters, you understand."

"And he has no doubt right; this man of quick perception. It is not from our nearest relative that our dearest secret is usually withheld?"

"You cannot find another messenger," asked de Casimir, and the anxiety of his face was genuine enough.

"Ah, monsieur, I shall not forget it! I shall never forget it," said the sick man, quickly and eagerly. "The letter is there, beneath that sabretash. It is sealed and addressed."

Louis found his letter, and went toward the door, as he placed it in his pocket.

"Monsieur," said de Casimir, stopping him again. "Your name, if I may ask it, so that I may remember a countryman who has done so great a service."

"I am not a countryman; I am an Englishman," replied Louis. "My name is Louis d'Arragon."

"Ah! I know. Charles has told me, Monsieur le—"

The Emperor as it really happened; namely, that, owing to Colonel Darragon's illness, he transferred his task to me at Vilna. The Emperor will be indifferent, so long as the order has been carried out."

De Casimir turned to Desiree as likely to be more responsive than this dark-eyed stranger, who listened with so disconcerting a lack of comment or sympathy.

"So you see, madame," he said, "Charles will still get the credit of having carried out his most difficult task, and his name is done."

"When did you leave Charles at Vilna?" asked she.

De Casimir lay back on the pillow in an attitude which betrayed his weakness and exhaustion. He looked at the ceiling with listless eyes.

"It must have been a fortnight ago," he said, at length. "I was trying to count the days. We have lost all account of dates since quitting Moscow. One day has been like another—and all, terrible. Believe me, madame, it has always been in my mind that I was awaiting the return of your husband at Dantzic. I spared him all I could. A dozen times we saved each other's lives."

In six words Desiree could have told him all she knew; that he was a spy who had betrayed to death and exile many Dantzigers whose hospitality had been extended to him as a Polish officer; that Charles was a traitor who had gained access to her father's house in order to watch him—though he had honestly fallen in love with her. He was in love with her still, and he was her husband. It was this thought that broke into her sleep at night, that haunted her waking hours.

She glanced at Louis d'Arragon, and held her peace.

"Then, monsieur," he said, "you have every reason to suppose that if Madame Darragon is at Dantzic now, she will find her husband there."

De Casimir looked at d'Arragon, and hesitated for an instant. They both remembered afterward that moment of uncertainty.

"I have every reason to suppose it," replied de Casimir, at length, speaking in a low voice, as if fearful of being overheard by the stairs and speaker.

Louis waited a moment, and glanced at Desiree, who, however, had nothing more to say.

"Then we will not trouble you further," he said, going toward the door, which he held open for Desiree to pass out. He was following her when de Casimir called him back.

"Monsieur," cried the sick man, "monsieur, one moment, if you can spare it."

Louis came back. They looked at each other in silence, while he heard Desiree descend the stairs and speak in German to the innkeeper, who had been waiting there.

"I will be quite frank with you," said de Casimir, in that voice of confidential friendliness which so rarely fails in its effect. "You know that Madame Darragon has an elder sister, Mademoiselle Mathilde Sebastian?"

"Yes."

De Casimir raised himself on his elbows again, with an effort, and gave a short, half-shamefaced laugh which was quite genuine. "It was she, Mathilde and he, who had walked most circumspiciously, should both have been tripped up, as it were, by love."

"Eh," he said, with a gesture dismissing the subject, "I cannot tell you more. It is a woman's secret, monsieur, not mine. Will you deliver a letter for me at Dantzic, that is all I ask."

"I will give it to Madame Darragon to give to Mademoiselle Mathilde, if you like; I am not returning to Dantzic," he said, and Desiree shook his head.

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"Ah! I know. Charles has told me, Monsieur le—"

But d'Arragon heard no more, for he closed the door behind him.

He found Desiree awaiting him in the entrance hall of the inn, where a fire of pine-logs burnt in an open chimney. The walls and low ceiling were black with smoke, the little windows were covered with ice an inch thick. It was twilight in this quiet room, and would have been dark but for the leaping flames of the fire.

"You will go back to Dantzic," he asked, "at once?"

He carefully avoided looking at her, though he need not have feared that she would have allowed her eyes to meet his. And thus they stood, looking downward to the fire—alone in a world that heeded them not, and would forget them in a week—and make their choice of a life.

"Yes," she answered.

He stood thinking for a moment. He was quite practical and matter-of-fact; and the air of a man of business rather than one who deals in thoughts, and twists them hither and thither so that good is made to look ridiculous, and evil to seem reasonable, was not in him.

"The horses that brought you from Marienwerder will not be fit for the road till to-morrow morning," he said. "You cannot make it over to me," he replied. "Only the Emperor can do that. You can run away in the night, and the supreme command will devote on me the next morning."

"And," he said, "I have no doubt known to the learned reader. Let us, at all events, pretend that it is, and be true to our generation."

He stood side by side in silence for some minutes. He was still thinking of her journey—the dangers and the progress of the winter journey, through life, without landmark or light to guide her.

"And you?" she asked curiously.

He did not reply at once, but busied himself with his ponderous fur coat, to a red-brown by sun and snow, which he buttoned, as if bracing himself for the start. Beneath her lashes she looked sideways at the deliberate hands and the lean, strong face, burnt to a red-brown by sun and snow, which he buttoned, as if bracing himself for the start.

"You ship?" she asked, sharply.

"Yes," he answered, as the innkeeper called them, and their slight swayed them.

It was snowing now, and a whistling, fitful wind swept down the valley of the Vistula from Poland and the far Carpathians, and the snow was crouched low in the sleigh, and rendered talk impossible, had there been anything to say. But there was nothing.

They found Barlasch, asleep where they had left him in the carriage, on the floor against the stove. He roused himself with the quickness and completeness of one accustomed to brief and broken rest, and stood up, shaking himself in his clothes, like a dog with a heavy coat. He took no notice of d'Arragon, but looked at Desiree with questioning eyes.

"It was not the Captain," he asked. And Desiree shook her head. Louis was standing near the door giving orders to the landlady of the inn—a kind, Pomeranian, clean and stout. Desiree's comfort till the next morning.

Barlasch went close to Desiree, and nudging her arm with exaggerated cunning, whispered:

"Who was it?"

"Colonel de Casimir."

"With the two carriages and the treasure from Moscow?" asked Barlasch, looking at Louis out of the corner of one eye to make sure that he did not hear. It did not matter whether he heard or not, but Barlasch came of a peasant stock, and he stood up, money in a whisper. And when Desiree nodded, he cut short the conversation.

The hostess came forward to tell Desiree that her room was ready, kindly suggesting the clean and stout Pomeranian must need sleep and rest. Desiree knew that Louis would go on to Konigsberg at once. She wondered how she should ever see him again.

"Then between friends," said Barlasch, gruffly, "it is not necessary to smile—like that—when it is tears that are there."

Desiree laughed.

"Would you have me weep?" she asked.

"It would hurt one less," said Barlasch, attending to his horse. They were in the town now, and the narrow streets were crowded. Many sick and wounded were dragging themselves nearly alone, with few carts, drawn by starving horses, went slowly down the hill. But there was some semblance of order, and these men had the air of a regular, winding river in its discipline. Barlasch was quick to see this.

"It is the Fourth Corps—the Viceroy's army. They have done well. He is a soldier who commands them. Ah! there is one I know."

He threw the reins to Desiree, and in a moment he was out on the snow. A man, as old, it would seem, as himself, in uniform and carrying a musket, was marching past with a few men who seemed to be under his orders, though his uniform was long past recognition. He did not perceive, for some miles, that Barlasch was coming toward him, and then the process of recognition was slow. Finally, he laid aside his musket, and the two old men gravely greeted each other.

"Quite forgetful of Desiree, they stood talking together for twenty minutes. Then they gravely embraced once more, and Barlasch returned to the sleigh. He took the reins and urged the horses up the hill without commenting on his encounter, but Desiree could see that he had heard news.

The inn was outside the town, on the road that follows the Vistula, northward to Dirschau and Dantzic. The horses were tired and stumbled on the powdery snow, which was heavy, like

and, and of a sandy color. Here and there, by the side of the road, were great stains of blood and the remains of a horse that had been killed, and eaten raw. The faces of many of the men were smeared with blood, which had dried on their cheeks and caked there. Nearly all were smoke-grimed and had sore eyes.

At last Barlasch spoke, with the delicate air of one who has finally drawn up a course of action in a difficult position.

"He comes from my own country, that man. You heard us? We spoke together by pistol, I shall not see him again. He has a catarrh. When he coughs there is blood. Alas!"

Desiree glanced at the rugged face half-turned away from her. She was not naturally heartless; but she quite forgot to sympathize with the elderly soldier who had caught a cold on the retreat from Moscow; for his friend's grief lacked conviction. Barlasch had heard news which he had decided to keep to himself.

"Has he come from Vilna?" asked Desiree.

"From Vilna—oh, yes. They are all from Vilna."

"And he had no news," persisted she, "of Captain Darragon?"

"News—oh, no! He is a common soldier, and knows nothing of the officers on the staff. We are the same—he and I—poor animals in the ranks. A little gentleman rides up, all sabretash and gold lace. It is an officer of the staff. 'Go down into the valley and get shot,' he says. And—bon jour! we go. No—no. He has no news, my poor comrade."

They were at the inn now, and found the huge yard packed with sleighs and disabled carriages, and the stables overflowed with horses.

"I make over the command to you," he said, "Prince Eugene; and Napoleon's step-son made an answer which no man can hope to steer a clear course out of; a sailor, careful and intrepid. He had the air of being capable of that concentration of will which no man can hope to steer a clear course out of."

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# After Once Tasting

YOU WILL AGREE THAT IT IS THE MOST DELICIOUS. LEAD PACKETS ONLY. AT ALL GROCERS. HIGHEST AWARD—ST. LOUIS, 1904.

hind the curtain. Lisa had gone home to her native village in Samland in obedience to the Governor's orders. Sebastian had not been home all day. There was no news of him.

Barlasch, wiping the snow from his face, watched Desiree and made no comment.

CHAPTER XXIV. Mathilde Chooses. But strong is fate, O Love, Who makes, who mars, who ends.

Desiree was telling Mathilde the brief news of her futile journey, when a knock at the front door made them turn from the stairs where they were standing. It was Sebastian's knock. His hours had been less regular of late. He came and went without explanation.

"When he had freed his throat from his furs and laid aside his gloves, he glanced hastily at Desiree, who had kissed him without speaking, and behind her eyes he saw a gleam of mischief.

"And your husband?" he asked, curtly.

"It was not he whom we found at Thorn," she answered. "There was something in her voice—just behind her knock, sidelong glance at her—that caught his attention. He had changed lately. From a man of dreams, he had been transformed into a man of action. It is customary to designate a man of action as a hard man. Custom is the brick wall against which feeble minds come to a stand-still and hinder the progress of the world."

He was softened by action, through which his mental energy had found an outlet. But to-night he was his old self again—hard, scornful, incomprehensible.

"I have heard nothing of him," said Desiree.

Sebastian was stamping the snow from his boots.

"But I have," he said, without looking up.

Desiree said nothing. She knew that the secret she had guarded so carefully—the secret kept to herself and Louis—was hers no longer. In the silence of the next moments she could hear Barlasch breathing on his fingers, within the kitchen doorway, just behind her.

Mathilde made a little movement. She was on the stairs, and she moved nearer to the balustrade and held to it breathlessly. For Charles d'Arragon's secret was de Casimir's too.

"These two gentlemen," said Sebastian, slowly, "were in the secret service of Napoleon. They are hardly likely to return to Dantzic."

"Why not?" asked Mathilde.

"They dare not."

"I think the Emperor will be able to protect his officers," said Mathilde.

"But not his spies," replied Sebastian, coldly.

"Since they wore his uniform they cannot be blamed for doing their duty. They are brave enough. They would hardly avoid returning to Dantzic because—because they would have outwitted the Tugendbund."

Mathilde's face was colorless