

A Corsican Calls

By Frank M. O'Brien

The sun, after a long struggle with the smoky fog, slunk down on his course. The light changed to a dull grey, kindly shutting out the sight of red blotches on greenish-yellow grass, a hideous contrast. There were no sounds except those muffled clicks and snaps that tell when an army is going to rest for the night; few lights except those that gleamed from the tents of the great, far from the trenches where the silent spades were at work. Yet these lights were nearer to the spades and the shadowy trenches than is usual in modern warfare. The War Master had so willed it; it was to be his battle, with him in personal command.

Now he sat in a field tent, gazing down the trampled hill to the meadows where his hopes—for the day—had been realized. To-morrow? The general staff would take care of that in its usual wise way—if he approved its plans. None of his own personal staff was with him, for he had signaled, with that abrupt gesture known to all Europe, his wish to be alone. No human being was near, unless one could count as human the rigid figures of the Imperial Guard. These statues, formed in squares and lanes, were as still as the night. One of the lanes stretched from the front of the tent half-way down to the valley, where the roots of the clover raised their tentacles to sip the fertilizing blood.

This lane was a long, narrowing patch of haze for the moon had not yet risen to its vain task of trying to shine thru the murk. And in this lane, as the War Master watched with eyes that were focussed on nothing at all, something appeared. At first it seemed like a gray veil, floating in the outline of a human form. But it could be no human, for the War Master watched for a salute and listened for a challenge, but there was neither along the lane of the Guard. Then, perhaps, it was a shadow of one of the iron eagles that had been sweeping the sky for weeks? The War Master listened for the whirr of a motor, but none came to his ears. The eagles, or most of them, were nesting on the earth for the night, gorging themselves with news of what they themselves had accomplished from their heights.

And now, still without salute or challenge, the silent thing, less like a grey veil and more like the film of a man, came to the tent slowly and entered. Entered confidently, with the air of an equal, and bowed, but only from the neck and not from the hips. There was no mistaking the cut of the cloak and the cock of the hat, any more than there was mistaking the peculiar set of the head on the neck and shoulders. Nor could any one mistake the eyes, in which there was a wonderful, cold calmness.

The War Master's eyes were cold, too, returning the bow, but not so calm. A sneer, whether in word or look, is the easiest fashion of covering surprise—or alarm. The War Master did not rise.

"One of the Allies, I believe," he said.

"No," said the visitor in a dull voice, "say, rather, a neutral."

"Indeed!" said the War Master. "Is not Corsica loyal to France?"

"After a man's death," said the visitor, "his politics and fealties do not change; they merely disappear."

"I am pleased to hear that, Herr—" The visitor raised a shadowy hand in protest.

"M. Bonaparte, if you will, or even Mister. I became accustomed to hearing the latter title aboard the Bellerophon."

The War Master did not seem to be listening. He was watching his visitor narrowly.

"I wonder—" he began, and then ceased to speak.

"You wonder," said the visitor, smiling, "whether I am not real. I beg to assure your majesty that I am not real. I understand, of course, the trend

of your thoughts. It has occurred to you, as it would occur to most trained men under similar circumstances, that I might be some new output of the wizardry of war—an impalpable man, free to come and go among the tents of the enemy. I saw the brief flash of annoyance when it came into your mind that if there was any such deviltry possible your gentlemen of the laboratories should have discovered it first."

"Such," said the War Master, arrogantly, "is our custom."

"The speed of thought is one of the few human things at which I still may marvel," pursued the Corsican. "You revolved in your mind not only the possibility, but a dozen ways in which the magic might be used. There is nothing contra in the rules of war, I believe."

The War Master raised his brows in mock modesty.

"A dozen ways!" he repeated. "You flatter!"

"No," said the Corsican, "at least a dozen, perhaps a score. I know. I should have thought of fifty."

"With such talent," began the War Master, "your total of successes—"

"Let me save your voice," inter-

A patient smile crossed the face of the Corsican.

"We do little reading," he said.

"Perhaps," continued the War Master, recovering himself and his bearing, "you come to make a plea for the preservation of something that is historic. There will be plenty of things with 1914 written upon them as the beginning of their history."

"To us," said the Corsican, "years lose their numbers. The Pyramids are scarcely older than the Panama Canal."

The War Master turned upon his visitor with almost savageness.

"Who—who sent you?" he cried.

"Jan Bedanow," replied the Corsican. The War Master's shoulders, raised in suspense, fell to their normal angle.

"I do not remember him," he said.

"You never knew him," said the Corsican. "His name is not in any book that you have seen."

"You knew him?" asked the War Master, "in life?"

"I killed him," said the Corsican.

"I hanged his son at Lonéville because he would not guide us thru an ambushed valley. He was a peasant. His father was an old man, and bed-

is all—all there is—beyond—for one like you—or—"

"Or you," said the Corsican in his even tone. "It is all the same for all. The South American who kills with his blow-gun is on an even footing with the chancellor who kills with his pen. All the trappings and the titles remain here—for inheritance."

"But in a great cause—" began the War Master.

"I thought mine was one," said the Corsican, "nor was I alone in the opinion. Great cause was written red on the white road to Moscow—and back. But these are unimportant things. The important thing is my errand."

The War Master stood up.

"I shall not change my plans," he said stiffly.

"I do not ask you to," said the Corsican. "My business is not yours, but Jan Bedanow's."

"And that," said the War Master, "is what?"

"On the road near Effneau," answered the Corsican, "you will find at the cross roads beside the corner of the Grey Forrest, a little triangle of which there is a grave. It is the grave of Jan Bedanow's wife. When your majesty's troops pass that way they would naturally, owing to the width of the column, ride across this triangle of grass. They would, perhaps without meaning to, break down the wooden emblem—an emblem familiar to us both—which lies almost hidden in the weeds."

"Yes," said the War Master.

"What I ask, on behalf of Jan Bedanow, is that this be avoided."

"On the road near Effneau," repeated the War Master.

"Yes," said the Corsican, "you must pass it on your way to—" He did not speak the word, but his shadowy finger pointed to a place on the map. The War Master sprang back as if from a blow.

"How do you know," he cried, "that I am going there?"

The Corsican smiled wearily.

"I would have known," he said, "even if I did not come from where everything is known. I would have known because I knew, in the years ago, the minds of men who plan on paper. I would have known that you were going there. And I, at the other end, would have been waiting for you."

"Will they be ready for me tomorrow?" whispered the War Master.

The Corsican shrugged his shoulders. "Have they my mind?" he countered; "or even Wellington's?"

"But tell me!" cried the War Master. "It were better for the whole world—"

"The whole world!" mocked the Corsican. "A tiny, whirling thing on which there is nothing so important to me now as the grave of Jan Bedanow's wife. Good night, your majesty!"

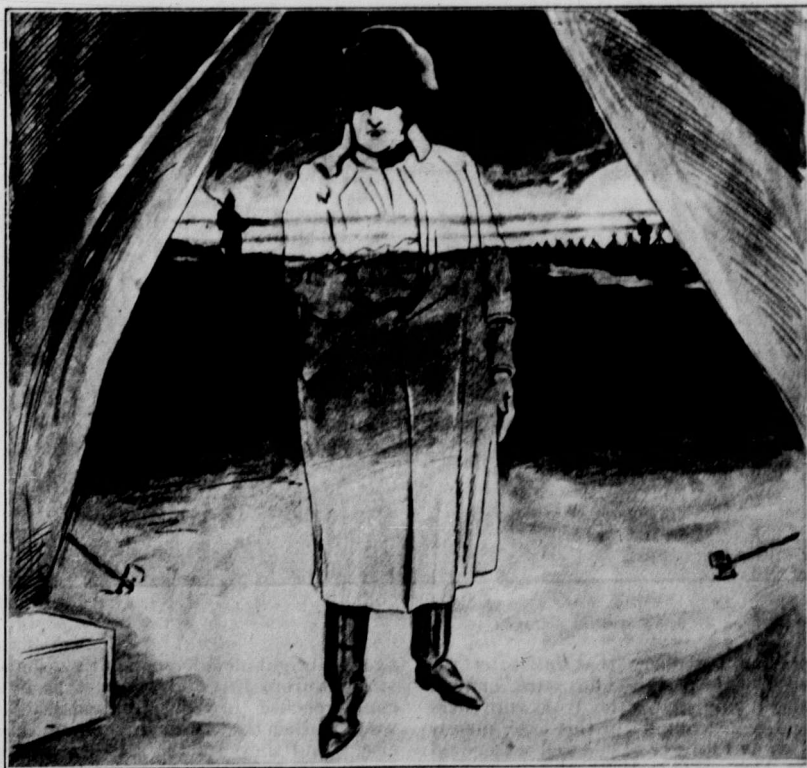
The tent flaps fluttered as he went. Now it was darker and the eye of the War Master could not follow. He seized the telephone.

"Von Zohn," he said to the marshal at the other end of the line, "I have decided to ride at the head of the column in the morning—at least as far as the corner of the Grey Forest."

Then he leaned back and let his gaze, once more unfocused, fall upon the lane of the Guard. The moonlight, seeping thru the disappearing haze, glowed feebly on the brass eagles of the helmeted giants.

"And that is all?" he muttered. "Nothing more than that? I wonder!"

Two Turkish torpedo boat destroyers were blown up on April 19 while passing thru a mine belt which Russian ships had succeeded in laying across the entrance to the Bosphorus, while the Turkish fleet was cruising in the Black Sea. The explosions caused by the destruction of the two Turkish boats gave warning to the remainder of the fleet, which was obliged to remain in the Black Sea because no mine sweepers were available.



"A grey veil floating in the outline of a human form."

posed the Corsican blandly. "You would remind me that where I ended in failure at that very spot you began with success. But I would remind you that any town is Waterloo where Waterloo is found."

"A ghostly warning," said the War Master, laughing. He had risen as if to end the interview. It was a habit, and he did not realize his error until he saw the Corsican smiling at it.

"No, not a warning," said the visitor. "It was idle chatter, mere words. But you see I have the whole evening for my errand. Perhaps I expected a more cordial meeting. I thought to be formal, as people were long ago."

"You were not famed for formality," suggested the War Master.

"I had no time for it," returned the Corsican a bit sadly. "But I have plenty now."

"Then you have the advantage of me," said the War Master. "What is your errand? To ask questions? Surely you have no doubt as to the door at which this thing must lie. Or have you read only the White Paper?" He had almost forgotten himself and his attitude.

ridden. The shock, administered by me, killed him."

"And now?" said the War Master.

"Now," said the Corsican, "Jan Bedanow sends me on the errand to you."

The War Master took a step forward. "You! You are at the beck and call of peasants' fathers?" he demanded.

"Where I come from," said the Corsican's even voice, "there are no peasants, no war masters, no first consuls."

"But this errand for Jan Bedanow," said the War Master.

"It will help me," replied the Corsican, "to repair the wrong. In another hundred years, or a thousand, or a million—as men count time—I may do something more, if occasion fortunately should arise, to make amends."

"I see," conceded the War Master. "And what of other—of other things which are in the histories?"

"Each in its turn," said the Corsican, "but Jan Bedanow's matter first."

The War Master leaned across the map-strewn pine table, his eyes aflame.

"You mean," he choked, "that that