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THE STORY OF A CONSCRIPT.

(From the Catholic World.)

We were covered with blood, and looked like butchers.

'Load!' cried the sergeant. Then I saw blood and hair on my bayonet, and I knew that in my fury I must have given some terrible blows.

We descended a little stair way which led to one of the gardens of Klein-Gorschen, and entering a house, the sergeant barricaded the door leading to the fields with a heavy kitchen table; then he showed us the door opening on the street, telling us that there lay our way of retreat.

The sergeant opened the window and fired at two or three Prussian hussars who were already advancing down the street. Zebede and the others standing behind him stood ready.

Beyond a column of the enemy were debouching from the road and marching on Klein-Gorschen. This column evidently designed cutting off our retreat on the village, but hundreds of dismounted soldiers like us had arrived, and were pouring in from all sides; some turning ever and anon to fire, others wounded, trying to crawl to some place of shelter.

The Prussians halted, and the firing ceased on both sides. Our squares and columns began to climb the hills again, opposite Starsiedel, and the defenders of the village rushed from the houses to rejoin their regiments.

But the battle was not yet over, for the Prussians, flushed with victory, were already making their dispositions to attack us at Kaya; reinforcements were hurrying to them, and it seemed that, for so great a general, the emperor had made a gross mistake in stretching his lines to Leyzig, and leaving us to be overpowered by an army of over a hundred thousand men.

As we were reforming behind Brenier's divisions, eighteen thousand veterans of the Prussian guard charged up the hill, carrying the shakos of our killed on their bayonets in sign of victory. Once more the fight began, and the mass of Russian cavalry, which we had seen glittering in the sun in the morning, came down on our flank; the sixth corps had arrived in time to cover it, and stood the shock like a castle wall.

We were retiring, when something passed along our front like a flash of lightning. It was Marshal Ney surrounded by his staff, and his eyes sparkled and his lips trembled with rage. In a second's time he had dashed along the lines, and drew up in front of our columns. The retreat stopped at once; he called us on, and, as if led by a kind of fascination, we dashed on to meet the Prussians, cheering like madmen as we went.

Our battalion was now in the second line, and the enemy's shot passed over our heads; but a horrible din made my flesh creep; it was the rattling of the grape-shot among the bayonets.

In the midst of shouts, orders, and the whistling of bullets, we again began to fall back over heaps of dead; our first divisions re-entered Klein-Gorschen, and once more the fight was hand to hand. In the main street of the village nothing was seen or heard but shots and blows, and generals fought sword in hand like private soldiers.

This lasted some minutes; we checked them again, but again they were re-enforced, and we were obliged to continue our retreat, which was fast becoming a rout. If the enemy forced us to Kaya, our army was cut in two. The battle seemed irretrievably lost, for Marshal Ney himself, in the centre of the square was retreating; and many soldiers, to get away from the mêlée, were carrying off wounded officers on their muskets. Everything looked gloomy, indeed.

I entered Kaya on the right of the village, leaping over the hedges, and creeping under the fences which separated the gardens, and was turning the corner of a street, when I saw some fifty officers on the brow of a hill before me, and behind them masses of artillery galloping at full speed along the Leipzig road. Then I saw the Emperor himself, a little in advance of the others; he was seated, as if in an arm chair, on his white horse, and I could see him well, beneath the clear sky, motionless and looking at the battle through his field-glass.

My heart beat gladly; I cried: 'Vive l'Empereur!' with all my strength, and rushed along the main street of Kaya. I was one of the first to enter, and I saw the inhabitants of the village, men, women, and children, hastening to the cellars for protection.

Many to whom I have related the foregoing have sneered at me for running so fast; but I can only reply that when Michel Ney retired, it was high time for Joseph Bertha to do so too. Klpfel, Zebede, Sergeant Pinto, and the others of the company had not yet arrived, when masses of black smoke arose above the roofs; shattered tiles fell into the streets, and shot buried themselves in the walls, or crashed through the beams with a horrible noise.

At the same time, our soldiers rush in through the lanes, over the hedges and fences, turning from time to time to fire on the enemy. Men of all arms were mingled, some without shakos or knapsacks, their clothes torn and covered with blood; but they retreated furiously, and were nearly all mere children, boys of fifteen or twenty; but courage is unborn in the French people.

The Prussians—led by old officers who shouted 'Forward! Forward!'—followed like packs of wolves, but we turned and opened fire from the hedges, and houses. How many of them bit the dust I know not, but others always supplied the places of those who fell. Hundreds of balls whistled by our ears and flattened themselves on the stone walls; the plaster was broken from the walls, and the thatch hung from the rafters, and as I turned for the twentieth time to fire, my musket dropped from my hand; I stooped to lift it but I fell too; I had received a shot in the left shoulder and the blood ran like warm water down my breast. I tried to rise, but all that I could do was to seat myself against the wall while the blood continued to flow, and I shuddered at the thought that I was to die there.

Still the fight went on. Fearful that another bullet might reach me, I crawled to the corner of a house, and fell into a little trench which brought water from the street to the garden. My left arm was heavy as lead; my head swam; I still heard the firing, but it seemed a dream, and I closed my eyes.

When I again opened them, night was coming on, and the Prussians filled the village. In the garden, before me, was an old general, with white hair, on a tall brown horse. He shouted in a trumpet like voice to bring on the cannon, officers hurried away with his orders. Near him, standing on a little wall, two surgeons were bandaging his arm. Behind, on the other side, was a little Russian officer, whose plume of green feathers almost covered his hat. I saw all this at a glance—the old man with his large nose and broad forehead, his quick glancing eyes, and bold air; the others around him; the surgeon, a little bald man with spectacles, and five or six hundred paces away, between two houses, our soldiers reforming.

The firing had ceased, but between Klein-Gorschen and Kaya I could hear the heavy rumble of artillery, neighing of horses, cries and shouts of drivers, and cracking of whips. Without knowing why, I dragged myself to the wall, and scarcely had I done so, when two sixteen pounders, each drawn by six horses, turned the corner of the street. The artillerymen beat the horses with all their strength, and the wheels rolled over the heaps of dead and wounded. Now I knew whence came the cries I had heard, and my hair stood on end with horror.

'Here!' cried the old man in German; 'aim

younder. between those two houses near the fountain.'

The two guns were turned at once: the old man, his left arm in a sling, canted over the street, and I heard him say, in short quick tones to the young officer as he passed where I lay:

'Tell the Emperor Alexander that I am in Kaya. The battle is won if I am re-enforced. Let them not discuss the matter, but send help at once. Napoleon is coming, and in half an hour we will have him upon us with his Guard. I will stand, let it cost what it may. But in God's name do not lose a minute, and the victory is ours.'

The young man set off at a gallop, and at the same moment a voice near me whispered:— 'That old wretch is Blucher. Ah, scoundrel! if I only had my gun.'

Turning my head, I saw an old sergeant, withered and thin, with long wrinkles in his cheeks, sitting against the door of the house, supporting himself with his hands on the ground as with a pair of crutches, for a ball had passed through him from front to side. His yellow eyes followed the Prussian general; his hooked nose seemed to droop like the beak of an eagle over this thick moustache, and his lock was fierce and proud.

'If I had my musket,' he repeated, 'I would show you whether the battle is won.'

We were the only two living beings among heaps of dead. I thought that perhaps I should be buried in the morning, with the others in the garden opposite us, and that I would never again see Catharine; and the tears ran down my cheeks and I could not help murmuring:

'Now all is indeed ended.'

The sergeant gazed at me and, seeing that I was yet so young, said kindly:

'What is the matter with you, conscript?'

'A ball in the shoulder, mon sergent.'

'In the shoulder. 'That is better than through the body. You will get over it.'

And after a moment's thought he continued:

'Fear nothing. You will see home again.'

I thought that he pined my youth and wished to console me; but my chest seemed crushed, and I could not hope.

The sergeant said no more, only from time to time he raised his head to see if our columns were coming. He swore between his teeth and ended by falling at length upon the ground, saying:

'My business is done. The villain has finished me at last!'

He gazed at the hedge opposite, where a Prussian volunteer was stretched, cold and stiff, the old sergeant's bayonet yet in his body.

It might have been six in the evening. I was cold and had dropped my head forward on my knees, when the roll of artillery called me again to my senses. The two pieces in the garden and many others posted behind them threw their broad flashes through the darkness, while Russians and Prussians crowded through the street. But all this was nothing in comparison to the fire of the French, from the hill opposite the village, while the constant glass showed the Young Guard coming on at the double-quick, generals and colonels on horseback in the midst of the bayonets, waving their swords and cheering them on, while the twenty-four guns the emperor had sent to support the movement thundered behind. The old wall against which I leaned shook to its foundations. In the street the balls moved down the enemy like grass before the scythe. It was their turn to close up the ranks. I paid no further attention to the sergeant, but listened to the inspiring strains of 'Vive l'Empereur!' ringing out in the monotonous silence between the reports of the guns.

The Russians and the Prussians were forced back: the shouts of our troops grew nearer.— 'The cannoniers at the pieces before me loaded and fired at their utmost speed, when three or four grape-shots fell among them and broke the wheel of one of their guns, besides killing two and wounding another of their men. I felt a hand seize my arm. It was the old sergeant.— His eyes were glazed in death, but he laughed scornfully and savagely. The roof of our shelter fell in; the walls bent, but we cared not, we only saw the defeat of the enemy and heard the nearer and nearer shouts of our men, when the old sergeant gasped in my ear:

'Here he is!'

He rose to his knees, supporting himself with one hand, while with the other he waved his hat in the air, and cried in a ringing voice:

'Vive l'Empereur!'

They were his last words; he fell on his face to the earth, and moved no more.

And I, raising myself too from the ground, saw Napoleon, riding calmly through the hail of shot—his hat pulled down over his large head—his grey great-coat open, a broad red ribbon crossing his white vest—there he rode, calm and imperturbable, his face lit up with the reflection from the bayonets. None stood their ground

before him; the Prussian artillerymen abandoned their pieces and sprang over the garden-hedge, despite the cries of their officers who sought to keep them back.

I saw no more, our victory was certain; and I fell like a corpse in the midst of corpses.

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When sense returned, all was silent around. Clouds were scudding across the sky, and the moon shone down upon the abandoned village, the broken guns, and the pale upturned faces of the dead, as calmly as for ages she had looked on the flowing water, the waving grass, and the rustling leaves. Men are but insects in the midst of creation: lives but drops in the ocean of eternity, and none so truly feel their insignificance as the dying.

I could not move from where I lay in the intensest pain. My right arm alone could I stir; and raising myself with difficulty upon my elbow, I saw the dead heaped along the street, their faces shining like snow in the moonlight. The sight thrilled me with horror, and my teeth chattered.

I would have cried for help, but my voice was no louder than that of a sobbing child. But my feeble cry awoke others, and groans and shrieks arose on all sides. The wounded thought success was coming, and all who could cried out loudly. And I heard, too, a horse neigh painfully on the other side of the hedge. The poor animal tried to rise, and I saw its head and long neck appear; then it fell again to the earth.

The effort I made reopened my wound, and again I felt the blood running down my breast. I closed my eyes to die, and the scenes of my early childhood, of my native village, the face of my poor mother as she sang me to sleep, my little room, with its niched Virgin, our old dog Pommer—all arose before my eyes; my father embraced me again, as he laid aside his axe at his return from work—all rose dreamily before me.

How little these poor parents thought that they were rearing their boy to die miserably far from friends, and home, and success! Would that I could have asked their forgiveness for all the pain I had given them! Tears rolled down my cheeks; I sobbed like a child.

Then Catharine, Aunt Gredel, and Monsieur Goulden passed before me. I saw their grief and tear when the news of the battle came.— Aunt Gredel running to the post office to learn something of me, and Catharine prayerfully awaiting her return, while Monsieur Goulden searched the gazette for intelligence of our corps. I saw Aunt Gredel return disappointed, and heard Catharine's sobs as she asked eagerly for me. Then a messenger seemed to arrive at Quatre-Vents. He opened his leathern sack, and handed a large paper to Aunt Gredel, while Catharine stood, pale as death, beside her. It was the official notice of my death! I heard Catharine's heart rending cries and Aunt Gredel's maledictions. Then good Monsieur Goulden came to console them, and all wept together.

Toward morning, a heavy shower began to fall, and the monotonous dripping on the roofs alone broke the silence. I thought of the good God, whose power and mercy are limitless, and I hoped that he would pardon my sins in consideration of my sufferings.

The rain filled the little trench in which I had been lying. From time to time a wail fell in the village, and the cattle, scared away by the battle, began to resume confidence and return. I heard a goat bleat in a neighboring stable.— A great shepherd's dog wandered fearfully among the heaps of dead. The horse, seeing him, neighed in terror—he took him for a wolf—and the dog fled.

I remembered all these details, for, when we are dying, we see everything, we hear everything, for we know that we are seeing and hearing our last.

But how my whole frame thrilled with joy when at the corner of the street, I thought I heard the sound of voices! How eagerly I listened! And I raised myself upon my elbow, and called for help. It was yet night; but the first grey streak of day was becoming visible in the east, and star off, through the falling rain, I saw a light in the fields, now coming onward, now stopping. I saw dark forms bending around it. They were only cold shadows. But others beside me saw the light; for on all sides arose groans and plaintive cries, so feeble that they seemed like those of children calling their mothers.

What is this life to which we attach so great a price? This miserable existence, so full of pain and suffering? Why do we so cling to it, and fear more to lose it than aught else in the world? What is it that is to come hereafter that makes us shudder at the mere thought of death? Who knows? For ages and ages all have thought and thought on the great question, but none have yet solved it. I, in my eagerness

to live, gazed on that light as the drowning man looks to the shore. I could not take my eyes from it, and my heart thrilled with hope. I tried again to shout, by my voice died on my lips. The pattering of the rain on the ruined dwellings, and on the trees, and the ground, drowned all other sounds, and, although I kept repeating, 'They hear us! They are coming!' and although the lantern seemed to grow larger and larger, after wandering for some time over the field, it slowly disappeared behind a little hill.

I fell once more senseless to the ground. When I returned to myself, I looked around. I was in a long hall, with posts all around. I was in a bed, and beside me was an old gray-mustached soldier, who, when he saw my eyes open, lifted up my head and held a cup to my lip.

'Well,' said he cheerfully, 'well! we are better.'

I could not help smiling as I thought that I was yet among the living. My chest and arm were still with bandages; I felt as if a hot iron were burning me there; but no matter, I lived!

I gazed at the heavy rafters crossing the space above me; at the tiles of the roof, through which the daylight entered in more than one spot; I turned and looked to the other side, and saw that I was in one of those vast sheds used by the brewers of the country as a shelter for their casks and wagons. All around, on mattresses and heaps of straw, numbers of wounded lay ranged; and in the middle, on a large kitchen table, a surgeon major and his two aids, their shirt-sleeves rolled up, were amputating the leg of a soldier, who was shrieking in agony. Behind them was a mass of legs and arms. I turned away sick and trembling.

Five or six soldiers were walking about, giving drink to the wounded.

But the man who impressed himself most on my memory was a surgeon with sleeves rolled up, who cut and cut without paying the slightest attention to what was going on around; he was a man with a large nose and wrinkled cheeks, and every moment flew into a passion at his assistants, who could not give him his knives, pinners, lint, or linen fast enough, or who were not quick enough sponging up the blood.

They had just laid out on the table a Russian carbineer, six feet in height at least; a ball had pierced his neck near the ear, and while the surgeon was asking for his little knives, a cavalry surgeon passed before the shed. He was short, stout, and badly pitted with the small-pox, and held a portfolio under his arm.

'Ha! Forel!' cried he cheerfully.

'It is Duchene,' said our surgeon, turning around. 'How many wounded?'

'Seventeen to eighteen thousand.'

Our surgeon left the shed to chat with his comrade; they conversed tranquilly, while the assistants sat down to drink a cup of wine, and the Russian rolled his eyes despairingly.

'See, Duchene; you have only to go down the street, opposite that well, do you see?'

'Very well indeed.'

'Just opposite you will see the canteen.'

'Very good; thank you; I am off.'

He started, and our surgeon called after him: 'A good appetite to you, Duchene!'

Then he returned to his Russian, whose neck he had laid open. He worked ill humoredly, constantly scolding his aids.

The Russian writhed and groaned, but he paid no attention to that, and at last, throwing the bullet upon the ground, he bandaged up the wound, and cried, 'Carry him off!'

They lifted the Russian from the table, and stretched him on a mattress beside the others; then they laid his neighbor upon the table.

I could not think that such horrors took place in the world; but I was yet to see worse than this.

At five or six beds from mine was an old corporal with his leg wound up. He closed one eye knowingly, and said to his neighbor, whose arm had just been cut off:

'Conscript, look at that heap! I will bet that you cannot recognize your arm.'

The other, who had hitherto shown the greatest courage, looked, and fell back senseless.

Then the corporal began laughing, saying: 'He did recognize it. It always produces that effect.'

He looked around self-approvingly, but no one laughed with him.

Every moment the wounded called for water. When one began, all followed, and the old soldier had certainly conceived a liking for me, for each time he passed, he presented the cup.

I did not remain in the shed more than an hour. A dozen ambulances drew up before the door, and the peasants of the country round, in their velvet jackets and large black slouched hats, their whips on their shoulders, held the horses by the reins. A picket of hussars arrived soon after, and their officer dismounting, entered and said: