BRIGADIER GERARD

BY

CONAN DOYLE

Tales from "The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard" and "Adventures of Gerard", selected and retold by

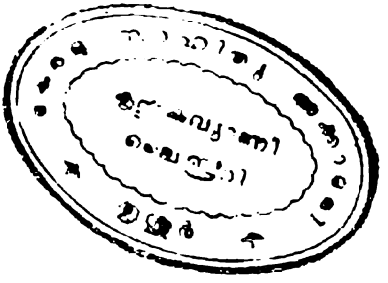
C. W. STEWART, M.A.

HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS
LAHORE ALLAHABAD

1929

Mr. & Mrs. T. B. Krishna Rao

588



STORIES RETOLD

XX
BRIGADIER GERARD

LIST OF VOLUMES IN THE SERIES.

RE. 1 EACH.

IVANHOE: SIR WALTER SCOTT. *By P. C. Wren.*

THE CLOISTER AND THE HEARTH: CHARLES READE. *By S. G. Dunn.*

GULLIVER'S TRAVELS: DEAN SWIFT. *By P. C. Wren.*

FORT AMITY: SIR A. QUILLER-COUCH. *By H. Malim.*

KING ARTHUR: STORIES IN PROSE FROM TENNYSON'S IDYLLS OF THE KING. *By H. Malim.*

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: CHARLES DICKENS. *By E. Smith.*

HEREWARD THE WAKE: CHARLES KINGSLEY. *By H. Martin.*

THE LAST DAYS OF POMPEII: LORD LYTTON. *By E. Tydeman.*

THE PRISONER OF ZENDA: ANTHONY HOPE. *By E. V. Rieu.*

KENILWORTH: SIR WALTER SCOTT. *By R. McG. Spence.*

BARNABY RUDGE: CHARLES DICKENS. *By A. C. Miller.*

STORIES FROM SCOTT'S POEMS: RETOLD IN PROSE. *By H. Malim.*

QUENTIN DURWARD: SIR WALTER SCOTT. *By C. W. Stewart.*

THE STORY OF AENEAS: RETOLD IN PROSE FROM VIRGIL'S AENEID. *By H. Malim.*

WESTWARD HO! CHARLES KINGSLEY. *By V. A. S. Stow.*

THE LEGEND OF MONTROSE: SIR WALTER SCOTT. *By C. W. Stewart.*

DON QUIXOTE: MIGUEL DE CERVANTES. *By N. L. Carrington.*

THE TALISMAN: SIR WALTER SCOTT. *By E. Smith.*

RUPERT OF HENTZAU: ANTHONY HOPE. *By E. V. Rieu.*

BRIGADIER GERARD: CONAN DOYLE. *By C. W. Stewart.*

The Publisher's thanks are due to Mr. John Murray for permission to reproduce these stories in their present form.

[see page 42.

"THE EMPEROR WAS BEFORE ME!"

Frontispiece.

BRIGADIER GERARD

BY

CONAN DOYLE

Tales from "The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard" and "Adventures of Gerard", selected and retold by

C. W. STEWART, M.A.

HUMPHREY MILFORD
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON BOMBAY CALCUTTA MADRAS
LAHORE ALLAHABAD

1929

PRINTED FROM PLATES BY M. N. KULKARNI
AT THE KARNATAK PRINTING PRESS
318 A, THAKURDWAR, BOMBAY. 2.

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

AN INTRODUCTION
TO
BRIGADIER GERARD
BY THE EDITOR

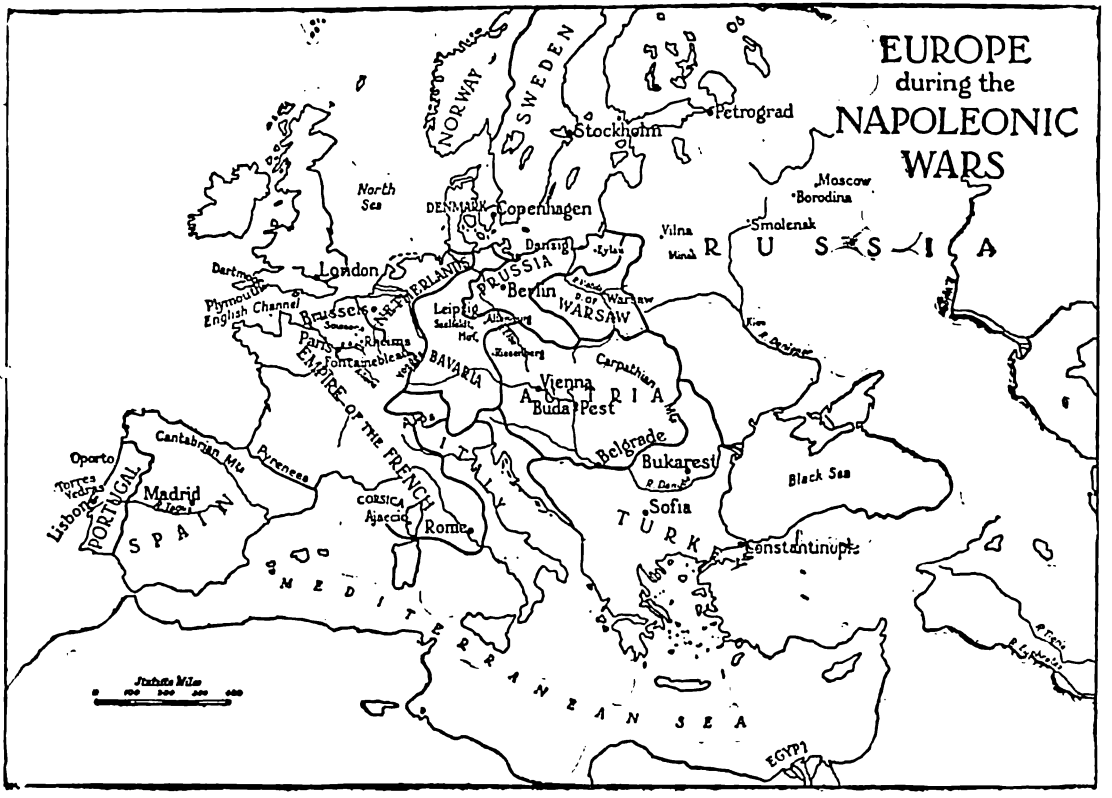
ON a summer's evening, about the year 1850, in an outlying quarter of Paris, an old man sat beside the porch of a little inn that fronted the trees of the public square. He sat at ease with his long legs outstretched, a pipe in his mouth and a glass of wine on the table at his elbow, gazing with interest at the passers-by, many of whom saluted him as an acquaintance. He looked a handsome old fellow as he gave a proud twist to the huge grey moustache that adorned his lean, weatherbeaten face, and he seemed to have plenty of vigour still, in spite of his seventy years. People in that part of the town knew him as Papa Gerard, an old retired soldier, who loved them to gather round him in an admiring group, men, women, and children, while he told them the wonderful adventures of his earlier days.

While still almost a boy, Papa Gerard had served his first campaign in Italy under the great military genius, Napoleon. That campaign was followed by twenty years of warfare, during which Napoleon raised himself to be the Emperor of France and kept all Europe in turmoil in his efforts to establish France as mistress of the continent. Italy, Spain, Austria, Belgium, Prussia, Poland, Russia, all these countries and others besides felt the inroads of Napoleon's troops; and Gerard, as an officer in the French cavalry, fought at one time or another in almost every country of western

Europe. Gradually the great rulers of Europe, including the King of England, drew together for the destruction of Napoleon, and his triumphant career was finally ended at the Battle of Waterloo. After that defeat Napoleon was banished to the island of Saint Helena, and, with his disappearance from France, the period of incessant war was brought to an end.

After Napoleon's downfall, Gerard, unwilling to serve the Emperor's successors, retired from the army. By the end of his service he had gained the command of a brigade of cavalry, and he was proud to carry with him into his retirement the military title of Brigadier.

It was more than twenty years later that Brigadier Gerard settled down in that quarter of Paris of which we have spoken, there to spend his old age. At first the neighbours regarded with awe the rugged veteran whose wrinkled face and limping walk made more real to them all they had heard of the terrors and hardships of war. But, seeing him constantly, they quickly learned his true character and they grew fond of old Papa Gerard, in spite of his overbearing ways. They were proud, too, to have living amongst them a man who had helped the great Napoleon to make history while they were still in their cradles. It became a custom in that part of the town for folk, after their day's work, to go and pay their respects to the Brigadier, who was sure to be sitting by the inn door at that time of day smoking his long pipe. There they would linger, for if the old man was in a talkative mood, he would tell them marvellous tales of his youth, while he was a gallant cavalry officer performing bold exploits in strange distant lands for France and the Emperor. Some of those tales form the contents of this book.


EUROPE
during the
NAPOLEONIC
WARS
NORWAY
SWEDEN
Stockholm
Petrograd
North Sea
DENMARK
Copenhagen
Moscow
Borodina
Smolensk
Vilna
RUSSIA
Danzig
London
NETHERLANDS
PRUSSIA
Berlin
Warsaw
DUCHY OF WARSAW
Plymouth
English Channel
Brussels
Leipzig
Paris
Fontainebleau
Rheims
BAVARIA
Carpathian Mts
Vienna
AUSTRIA
Buda Pest
EMPIRE OF THE FRENCH
ITALY
Belgrade
Bukarest
Black Sea
Cantabrian Mts
Pyrenees
Oporto
Lisbon
PORTUGAL
Madrid
SPAIN
CORSICA
Ajaccio
Rome
Sofia
TURKEY
Constantinople
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
EGYPT
Statute Miles

I

HOW THE BRIGADIER CAME TO THE CASTLE OF GLOOM

ALTHOUGH I was in full command of a brigade when the wars came to an end, and had every hope of soon being made general of a division, it is still rather to my earlier days that I turn when I wish to talk of the glories and the trials of a soldier's life. For you will understand that when an officer has many men and horses under him, he has his mind full of their food and quarters and training, so that even when he is not in the face of the enemy, life is a very serious matter for him. But when he is only a lieutenant or a captain, he has little to worry him, and needs to think of nothing except of enjoying a gallant life. That is the time when he is likely to have adventures, and it is often to that time I shall turn in my stories. So it will be to-night when I tell you of my visit to the Castle of Gloom, of the strange mission of Lieutenant Duroc, and of the horrible affair of the man who was known as the Baron Straubenthal.

You must know, then, that in the February of 1807, immediately after the taking of Danzig, Major Legendre and I were commissioned to bring four hundred remounts from Prussia into Eastern Poland.

The hard weather, and especially the great battle against the Russians at Eylau, had killed so many of the horses that there was some danger of our beautiful regiment, the Tenth of Hussars, becoming a battalion of infantry. We knew, therefore, both the Major and

I, that we should be very welcome at the front. We did not advance very rapidly, however, for the snow was deep, the roads were detestable, and we had only twenty men to assist us. Besides, it is impossible, when you have little food for your horses, to move them faster than a walk.

We crossed the Vistula and had got as far as Riesenberg, when Major Legendre came into my room in the inn with an open paper in his hand.

"You are to leave me", said he. "It is an order from General Lasalle; you are to proceed to Rossel instantly, and to report yourself at the head-quarters of the regiment."

No message could have pleased me better. I was already very well thought of by my superior officers. It was evident to me, therefore, that this sudden order meant that the regiment was about to see service once more, and that I was needed. So down I went, saddled my big black charger, Rataplan, and set off instantly upon my lonely journey.

The frosty morning air made Rataplan's great black limbs and the beautiful curves of his back and sides gleam and shine with every bound. Even now the rattle of a horse's hoofs upon a road, and the jingle of bridle chains which comes with every toss of its head, set my blood dancing through my veins. You can fancy, then, how I carried myself in my five-and-twentieth year—I, Etienne Gerard, the picked rider and the surest swordsman in ten regiments of hussars. Blue was our colour in the Tenth—a sky-blue jacket and cloak with a scarlet front—and it was said of us in the army that we could set a whole population running, the women towards us, and the men away.

It was a dismal season to ride through the poorest and ugliest country in Europe, but there was a cloudless

sky above, and a bright, cold sun, which shone on the huge snow-fields. My breath steamed in the frosty air, and Rataplan sent up two white streaks from his nostrils, while the icicles drooped from the side-irons of his bit. I let him trot to warm his limbs, and I myself had too much to think of to pay much attention to the cold. To north and south stretched the great plains, dotted with patches of trees. A few cottages were to be seen here and there, but it was only three months since the Grand Army had passed that way, and you know what that meant to a country. The Poles were our friends, it was true, but out of a hundred thousand men, only the Emperor's Guard carried food with them, and the rest had to live as best they might. It did not surprise me, therefore, to see no signs of cattle and no smoke from the silent houses. A scar had been left across the country where the great host had passed, and it was said that even the rats were starved wherever the Emperor had led his men.

By mid-day I had got as far as the village of Saalfeldt, but as I was on the direct road for Osterode, where the Emperor was wintering, and also for the main camp of the seven divisions of infantry, the highway was choked with carriages and carts. What with carts loaded with artillery ammunition and waggons and mounted messengers, and the ever-thickening stream of recruits and stragglers, it seemed to me that it would be a very long time before I should join my comrades. The plains, however, were five feet deep in snow, so there was nothing for it but to plod upon our way. It was with joy, therefore, that I found a second road which branched away from the other, leading through a fir-wood towards the north. There was a small inn at the cross-roads, and a patrol of Hussars were mounting their horses at the door. On

the steps stood their officer, a slight, pale young man, who looked more like a young priest than a leader of the devil-may-care rascals before him.

"Good-day, sir", said he, seeing that I pulled up my horse.

"Good-day", I answered. "I am Lieutenant Etienne Gerard, of the Tenth."

"I am Lieutenant Duroc, of the Third", said he.

"Newly joined?" I asked.

"Last week."

I had guessed it from his white face and from the way in which he let his men lounge upon their horses. It was not so long, however, since I had learned myself what it is like when a school-boy has to give orders to veteran troopers. It made me blush, I remember, to shout sharp commands to men who had seen more battles than I had years.

"May I ask whether you are going by this northern road?" I asked.

"My orders are to patrol it as far as Arensdorf", said he.

"Then I will, with your permission, ride so far with you", said I. "It is very clear that the longer way will be the faster."

So it proved, for this road led away from the army into a country which was given over to Cossacks and plundering bands, and it was as bare as the other was crowded. Duroc and I rode in front, with our six troopers clattering in the rear. He was a good boy, unspoiled as yet by the roughness of a soldier's life, and it pleased me to hear him prattle away about his sister and his mother at home in France. Presently we found ourselves at the village of Hayenau. Duroc rode up to the inn and asked to see the master.

"Can you tell me", said he, "whether the man

who calls himself the Baron Straubenthal lives in these parts ? "

The inn-keeper shook his head, and we rode upon our way. I took no notice of this, but when, at the next village, my comrade repeated the same question, with the same result, I could not help asking who this Baron Straubenthal might be.

" He is a man ", said Duroc, with a sudden flush upon his boyish face, " to whom I have a very important message to give."

Well, this was not satisfactory, but there was something in my companion's manner which told me that any further questioning would be disagreeable to him. I said nothing more, therefore, but Duroc would still ask every peasant whom we met whether he could give him any news of the Baron Straubenthal.

For my own part I was endeavouring, as a cavalry officer should, to form an idea of the main features of the country, to note the course of the streams, and to mark the places where there should be fords. Every step was taking us farther from the camp round the sides of which we were travelling. Far to the south a few feathers of grey smoke in the frosty air marked the position of some of our out-posts. To the north, however, there was nothing between ourselves and the Russian winter-quarters. Twice on the extreme horizon I caught a glimpse of the glitter of steel, and pointed it out to my companion. It was too distant for us to tell whence it came, but we had little doubt that it was from the lances of plundering Cossacks.

The sun was just setting when we rode over a low hill and saw a small village upon our right, and on our left a high black castle, which rose steeply from amongst the pine-woods. A farmer with his cart was approaching us.

"What village is this?" asked Duroc.

"It is Arensdorf", he answered.

"Then here I am to stay the night", said my young companion. Then, turning to the farmer, he asked his eternal question, "Can you tell me where the Baron Straubenthal lives?"

"Why, it is he who owns the Castle of Gloom", said the farmer, pointing to the dark towers over the distant fir forest.

Duroc gave a shout like the sportsman who sees his game rising in front of him. The lad seemed to have gone off his head—his eyes shining, his face deathly white, and his mouth drawn into such a grim line that it made the farmer shrink away from him. I can see him now, leaning forward on his brown horse, with his eager gaze fixed upon the great black tower.

"Why do you call it the Castle of Gloom?" I asked.

"Well, it's the name it bears upon the countryside", said the farmer. "By all accounts it has seen some black doings. It's not for nothing that the wickedest man in Poland has been living there these fourteen years past."

"A Polish nobleman?" I asked.

"No", he answered, "we breed no such men in Poland."

"A Frenchman, then?" cried Duroc.

"They say he came from France."

"And with red hair?"

"As red as fire."

"Yes, yes, it is my man", cried my companion, quivering all over in his excitement. "It is the hand of Providence which has led me here. Come, Lieutenant Gerard, I must see the men safely quartered before I can attend to this private matter."

He spurred on his horse, and ten minutes later we were at the door of the inn of Arensdorf, where his men were to find their quarters for the night.

Well, all this was no affair of mine, and I could not imagine what the meaning of it might be. Rossel, the end of my journey, was still far off, but I determined to ride on for a few hours and take my chance of some wayside barn in which I could find shelter for Rataplan and myself. I had mounted my horse, therefore, after swallowing a glass of wine, when young Duroc came running out of the door and laid his hand upon my knee.

"Lieutenant Gerard", he panted, "I beg of you not to desert me like this!"

"My good sir", said I, "if you would tell me what is the matter and what you wish me to do, I should be better able to tell you if I could be of any assistance to you."

"You can be of the very greatest help", he cried. "Indeed, from all that I have heard of you, you are the one man whom I should wish to have by my side to-night."

"You forget that I am riding to join my regiment."

"You cannot, in any case, reach it to-night. To-morrow will bring you to Rossel. By staying with me you will do me the very greatest kindness, and you will aid me in a matter which concerns my own honour and the honour of my family. I am compelled, however, to confess to you that some personal danger may possibly be involved."

He could have said nothing else so likely to persuade me. I sprang from Rataplan's back and ordered a servant to lead him back into the stables.

"Come into the inn", said I, "and let me know exactly what it is that you wish me to do."

He led the way into a sitting-room, and fastened the door lest we should be interrupted. He was a well-grown lad, and as he stood in the glare of the lamp, with the light beating upon his earnest face and upon his uniform of silver grey, which suited him marvellously, I felt my heart warm towards him.

"I can explain it all in a few words", said he. "If I have not already satisfied your very natural curiosity, it is because the subject is so painful a one to me that I can hardly bring myself to mention it. I cannot, however, ask for your assistance without explaining to you exactly how the matter lies.

"You must know, then, that my father was the well-known banker, Christopher Duroc, who was murdered in Paris during the Revolution. As you are aware, when the Republic was formed, any of the upper classes who were suspected of favouring the old form of government were thrown into prison. Later, the mob, in its wild fury, took possession of the prisons, chose three so-called judges to pass sentence upon its unhappy opponents, and then tore them to pieces when they were passed out into the street. My father had been a good friend of the poor all his life. There were many to plead for him. He had the fever, too, and was carried before the judges, half-dead, upon a blanket. Two of them were in favour of acquitting him; the third, a fierce young revolutionary, whose huge body and brutal mind had made him a leader among these wretches, dragged him, with his own hands, from the stretcher, kicked him again and again with his heavy boots, and hurled him out of the door, where in an instant he was torn limb from limb. This, as you see, was murder, even under their own unlawful laws, for two of their own judges had pronounced in my father's favour.

"Well, when the days of order came back again, my elder brother began to make enquiries about this man. I was only a child then, but it was a family matter, and it was discussed in my presence. The fellow's name was Carabin, and he was a noted swordsman. A foreign lady named the Baroness Straubenthal having been seized by the revolutionaries, he had gained her liberty for her on the promise that she with her money and estates should be his. He had married her and taken her name and title; and when a new government came into power, intent on repairing the wrongs that had been done, he escaped out of France. What had become of him we had no means of learning.

"You will think, doubtless, that it would be easy for us to find him, since we had both his name and his title. You must remember, however, that the Revolution left us without money, and that without money such a search is very difficult. Then Napoleon became Emperor, and the search grew more difficult still, for, as you are aware, the Emperor soon made it known that, in the new order he was establishing in France, the past must be forgotten. None the less, we kept our own family story and our own family plans.

"My brother joined the army, and passed with it through all Southern Europe, asking everywhere for the Baron Straubenthal. Last October he was killed in battle, with his mission still unfulfilled. Then it became my turn, and I have the good fortune to hear of the very man of whom I am in search at one of the first Polish villages which I have to visit, and within a fortnight of joining my regiment. And then, to make the matter even better, I find myself in the company of one whose name is never mentioned throughout the army except in connection with some daring and generous deed."

This was all very well, and I listened to it with the greatest interest, but I was none the clearer as to what young Duroc wished me to do.

"How can I be of service to you?" I asked.

"By coming up with me."

"To the Castle?"

"Precisely."

"When?"

"At once."

"But what do you intend to do?"

"I shall know what to do. But I wish you to be with me, all the same."

Well, it was never in my nature to refuse an adventure, and, besides, I had every sympathy with the lad's feelings. I held out my hand to him, therefore.

"I must be on my way for Rossel to-morrow morning, but to-night I am yours", said I.

We left our troopers in comfortable quarters, and, as it was only a mile to the Castle, we did not disturb our horses. Two young hussars, one in blue and one in grey, we set out from the inn. We both carried our swords, and I slipped a pistol inside my cloak, for it seemed to me that there might be some wild work before us.

The track which led to the Castle wound through a black fir-wood, where we could see nothing except the ragged patch of stars above our head. Presently, however, it opened up, and there was the Castle only a short distance ahead of us. It was a huge, ugly place, and bore every mark of being exceedingly old, with small round towers at every corner, and a great square tower on the side which was nearest to us. In all its great shadow there was no sign of light except from a single window, and no sound came from it. To me there was something awful in its size and its silence,

which agreed well with its evil name. My companion pressed on eagerly, and I followed him along the ill-kept path which led to the gate.

There was no bell or knocker upon the great door, and it was only by beating with the hilts of our swords that we could attract attention. A thin, hawk-faced man, with a beard up to his temples, opened it at last. He carried a lantern in one hand, and in the other a chain which held an enormous black hound. His manner at the first moment, and until he caught sight of our uniforms and of our faces, was threatening.

"The Baron Straubenthal does not receive visitors at so late an hour", said he suspiciously.

"You can inform Baron Straubenthal that I have come two thousand miles to see him, and that I will not leave until I have done so", said my companion.

The fellow looked at us out of the corners of his eyes, and tugged at his black beard in his perplexity.

"To tell the truth, gentlemen", said he, "the Baron has a glass or two of wine in him at this hour, and you would certainly find him a more entertaining companion if you were to come again in the morning."

He had opened the door a little wider as he spoke, and I saw, by the light of the lamp in the hall behind him, that three other rough fellows were standing there, one of whom held another monstrous hound. Duroc must have seen it also, but it made no difference to his resolution.

"Enough talk", said he, pushing the man to one side. "It is with your master that I have to deal."

The fellows in the hall made way for him as he strode in among them, so great is the power of one man who knows what he wants over several who are not sure of themselves. My companion tapped one of them upon the shoulder as coolly as though he owned him.

" Show me to the Baron ", said he.

The man shrugged his shoulders, and answered something in Polish.

The fellow with the beard, meantime, had shut and barred the front door. " Well, you shall have your way ", said he, with a grim smile. " You shall see the Baron. And perhaps, before you have finished, you will wish that you had taken my advice."

We followed him down the hall, which was stone-paved and very spacious, with skins scattered upon the floor, and the heads of wild beasts upon the walls. At the farther end he threw open a door, and we entered.

It was a small room, almost empty of furniture, with the same marks of neglect and decay which met us at every turn. The walls were covered with discoloured hangings, which had come loose at one corner, so as to expose the rough stonework behind. A second door, hung with a curtain, faced us upon the other side. Between stood a square table, strewn with dirty dishes and the remains of a meal. Several bottles were scattered over it. At the head of it, and facing us, there sat a huge man with a lion-like head and a great mass of orange-coloured hair. His beard was of the same glaring colour, matted and tangled and coarse as a horse's mane. I have seen some strange faces in my time, but never one more brutal than that, with its small vicious, blue eyes, its white, wrinkled cheeks, and the thick, hanging lip which stuck out above his monstrous beard. His head swayed about on his shoulders, and he looked at us with the vague, dim gaze of a drunken man. Yet he was not so drunk but that our uniforms carried their message to him.

" Well, my brave boys ", he cried. " What is the latest news from Paris, eh? You're going to free Poland from the Russians, I hear."

Duroc advanced in silence, and stood by the ruffian's side.

"Jean Carabin", said he.

The Baron started, and the vague drunken look seemed to be clearing from his eyes.

"Jean Carabin", said Duroc once more.

He sat up and grasped the arms of his chair.

"What do you mean by repeating that name, young man?" he asked.

"Jean Carabin, you are a man whom I have long wished to meet."

"Supposing that I once had such a name, how can it concern you, since you must have been a child when I bore it?"

"My name is Duroc."

"Not the son of ——?"

"The son of the man you murdered."

The Baron tried to laugh, but there was terror in his eyes.

"We must let bygones be bygones, young man", he cried. "It was their life or ours in those days: the upper classes or the people. Your father was of the moderate party. He fell. I was of the extreme republicans. Most of my comrades fell. It was all the fortune of war. We must forget all this and learn to know each other better, you and I." He held out a red, twitching hand as he spoke.

"Enough", said young Duroc. "If I were to pass my sword through you as you sit in that chair, I should do what is just and right. I dishonour my blade by crossing it with yours. And yet you are a Frenchman, and have even held a commission under the same flag as myself. Rise, then, and defend yourself!"

"Tut, tut!" cried the Baron. "It is all very well for you hot-headed youngsters——"

Duroc's patience could stand no more. He swung his open hand into the centre of the great orange beard. I saw a lip fringed with blood, and two glaring blue eyes above it.

"You shall die for that blow."

"That is better", said Duroc.

"My sword!" cried the other. "I will not keep you waiting, I promise you!" and he hurried from the room.

I have said that there was a second door covered with a curtain. Hardly had the Baron vanished when there ran from behind it a woman, young and beautiful. So swiftly and noiselessly did she move that she was between us in an instant, and it was only the shaking curtains which told us whence she had come.

"I have seen it all", she cried. "Oh, sir, you have carried yourself splendidly." She stooped to my companion's hand, and kissed it again and again before he could free it from her grasp.

"Stop, madame", he cried. "Why should you kiss my hand?"

"Because it is the hand which struck him on his vile, lying mouth. Because it may be the hand which will avenge my mother. I am his step-daughter. The woman whose heart he broke was my mother. I loathe him, I fear him. Ah, there is his step!" In an instant she had vanished as suddenly as she had come. A moment later the Baron entered with a drawn sword in his hand, and the fellow who had admitted us at his heels.

"This is my secretary", said he. "He will be my second in this affair. But we shall need more elbow-room than we can find here. Perhaps you will kindly come with me to a more spacious apartment."

It was evidently impossible to fight in a room

which was blocked by a great table. We followed him out, therefore, into the dimly-lit hall. At the farther end a light was shining through an open door.

"We shall find what we want in here", said the man with the dark beard. It was a large, empty room, with rows of barrels and cases round the walls. A strong lamp stood upon a shelf in the corner. The floor was level and true, so that no swordsman could ask for more. Duroc drew his sword and sprang into it. The Baron stood back with a bow and motioned me to follow my companion. Hardly were my heels over the threshold when the heavy door crashed behind us and the key screamed in the lock. We were taken in a trap.

For a moment we could not realize it. Such incredible baseness was outside all our experiences. Then, as we understood how foolish we had been to trust for an instant a man with such a history, a flush of rage came over us, rage against his villainy and against our own stupidity. We rushed at the door together, beating it with our fists and kicking with our heavy boots. The sound of our blows and of our shouts must have resounded through the Castle. We called to this villain, hurling at him every name which might pierce even into his hardened soul. But the door was enormous—such a door as one finds in mediæval castles, —made of huge beams clamped together with iron. And our cries appeared to be of as little use as our blows, for they only brought for answer the clattering echoes from the high roof above us.

I was the first to recover calmness, and I persuaded Duroc to join with me in examining the apartment which had become our dungeon. There was only one window, which had no glass in it, and was so narrow that one could not so much as get one's head through.

It was high up, and Duroc had to stand upon a barrel in order to see from it.

"What can you see?" I asked.

"Fir-woods and an avenue of snow between them", said he. "Ah!" he gave a cry of surprise.

I sprang upon the barrel beside him. There was, as he said, a long, clear strip of snow in front. A man was riding down it, flogging his horse, and galloping like a madman. As we watched, he grew smaller and smaller, until he was swallowed up by the black shadows of the forest.

"What does that mean?" asked Duroc.

"No good for us", said I. "He may have gone for some more villains to help cut our throats. Let us see if we cannot find a way out of this mouse-trap before the cat can arrive."

The one piece of good fortune in our favour was that beautiful lamp. It was nearly full of oil, and would last us until morning. In the dark our situation would have been far more difficult. By its light we proceeded to examine the packages and cases which lined the walls. In some places there was only a single line of them, while in one corner they were piled nearly to the ceiling. It seemed that we were in the storehouse of the Castle, for there were a great number of cheeses, vegetables of various kinds, boxes full of dried fruits, and a line of wine barrels. One of these had a peg in it, and as I had eaten little during the day, I was glad of a drink of wine and some food. Duroc would take nothing, but paced up and down the room in a fever of anger and impatience. "I'll have him yet!" he cried, every now and then. "The rascal shall not escape me!"

This was all very well, but it seemed to me, as I sat on a great round cheese eating my supper, that this

youngster was thinking rather too much of his own family affairs and too little of the fine scrape into which he had got me. After all, his father had been dead fourteen years, and nothing could set that right; but here was I, Etienne Gerard, a spirited young lieutenant, in immediate danger of being cut off at the very outset of a brilliant career. I could not help thinking what a fool I had been, when I had a fine war before me and everything which a man could desire, to go off on a rash expedition of this sort, as if it were not enough to have a quarter of a million Russians to fight against, without plunging into all sorts of private quarrels as well.

"That is all very well", I said at last, as I heard Duroc muttering his threats. "You may do what you like to him when you get the upper hand. At present the question rather is, what is *he* going to do to us?"

"Let him do his worst!" cried the boy. "I owe a duty to my father."

"That is mere foolishness", said I. "If you owe a duty to your father, I owe one to my mother, which is to get out of this business safe and sound."

My remark brought him to his senses.

"I have thought too much of myself!" he cried. "Forgive me, Lieutenant Gerard. Give me your advice as to what I should do."

"Well", said I, "it is not for our health that they have shut us up here among the cheeses. They mean to make an end of us if they can. That is certain. They hope that no one knows that we have come here, and that no one will trace us if we remain. Do your hussars know where you have gone to?"

"I said nothing."

"Hum! It is clear that we cannot be starved here. They must come to us if they are to kill us.

Behind a barricade of barrels we could hold our own against the five rascals whom we have seen. That is, probably, why they have sent that messenger for assistance."

"We must get out before he returns."

"Precisely, if we are to get out at all."

"Could we not burn down this door?" he cried.

"Nothing could be easier", said I. "There are several casks of oil in the corner. My only objection is that we should ourselves be nicely roasted at the same time."

"Can you not suggest something?" he cried, in despair. "Ah, what is that?"

There had been a low sound at our little window, and a shadow came between the stars and ourselves. A small, white hand was stretched into the lamplight. Something glittered between the fingers.

"Quick! quick!" cried a woman's voice.

We were on the barrel in an instant.

"They have sent for the Cossacks. Your lives are at stake. Ah, I am lost! I am lost!"

There was the sound of rushing steps, a hoarse oath, a blow, and the stars were once more twinkling through the window. We stood helpless upon the barrel with our blood cold with horror. Half a minute afterwards we heard a smothered scream, ending in a choke. A great door slammed somewhere in the silent night.

"Those ruffians have seized her. They will kill her", I cried.

Duroc sprang down with the wild shouts of a madman. He struck the door so frantically with his naked hands that he left a smear of blood with every blow.

"Here is the key!" I shouted, picking one from the floor. "She must have thrown it in at the instant that she was torn away."

My companion snatched it from me with a shriek of joy. A moment later he dashed it down upon the boards. It was so small that it was lost in the enormous lock. Duroc sank upon one of the boxes with his head between his hands. He sobbed in his despair. I could have sobbed too, when I thought of the woman and how helpless we were to save her.

But I am not easily beaten. After all, this key must have been sent to us for a purpose. The lady could not bring us that of the door, because this murderous step-father of hers would most certainly have it in his pocket. Yet this other must have a meaning, or why should she risk her life to place it in our hands? It would say little for our wits if we could not find out what that meaning was.

I set to work moving all the cases out from the wall, and Duroc, gaining new hope from my courage, helped me with all his strength. It was no light task, for many of them were large and heavy. On we went, working like madmen, flinging barrels, cheeses, and boxes into the middle of the room. At last there only remained one huge barrel, which stood in the corner. With our united strength we rolled it out, and there was a little low wooden door in the wall behind it. The key fitted, and with a cry of delight we saw it open before us. With the lamp in my hand, I squeezed my way in, followed by my companion.

We were in the powder-magazine of the Castle—a rough, walled cellar, with barrels all round it, and one with the top broken in in the centre. The powder from it lay in a black heap upon the floor. Beyond there was another door, but it was locked.

"We are no better off than before", cried Duroc. "We have no key."

"We have a dozen!" I cried.

"Where?"

I pointed to the line of powder barrels.

"You would blow this door open?"

"Precisely."

"But you would explode the magazine."

It was true, but I was not at the end of my resources.

"We will blow open the store-room door", I cried.

I ran back and seized a tin box which had been filled with candles. It was large enough to hold several pounds of powder. Duroc filled it while I cut off the end of a candle. When we had finished, I put three cheeses on the top of each other and placed the box above them, so as to lean against the lock. Then we lit our candle-end and ran for shelter, shutting the door of the magazine behind us.

It was no joke, my friends, to be among all those tons of powder, with the knowledge that if the flame of the explosion should penetrate through one thin door our blackened limbs would be shot higher than the Castle. Who could have believed that a half-inch of candle could take so long to burn? My ears were straining all the time for the galloping hoofs of the Cossacks who were coming to destroy us. I had almost made up my mind that the candle must have gone out when there was a smack like a bursting bomb, our door flew to bits, and pieces of cheese, with a shower of turnips, apples, and splinters of cases, were shot in among us. As we rushed out, we had to stagger through blinding smoke, but there was a glimmering square where the dark door had been.

We had succeeded even better than we had ventured to hope. Our gaolers were shattered as well as our gaol. The first thing that I saw as I came out into the hall was a man with a butcher's axe in his hand, lying flat upon his back, with a gaping wound across his forehead.

The second was a huge dog, with two of its legs broken, twisting in agony upon the floor. At the same instant I heard a cry, and there was Duroc, thrown against the wall, with the other hound's teeth in his throat. He pushed it off with his left hand, while again and again he passed his sabre through its body, but it was not until I blew out its brains with my pistol that the iron jaws relaxed, and the fierce, bloodshot eyes were dimmed in death.

There was no time for us to pause. A woman's scream from in front—a scream of mortal terror—told us that even now we might be too late. There were two other men in the hall, but they shrunk away from our drawn swords and furious faces. The blood was streaming from Duroc's neck and dyeing the grey fur of his cloak. Such was the lad's courage, however, that he dashed ahead of me, and it was only over his shoulder that I caught a glimpse of the scene as we rushed into the room in which we had first seen the master of the Castle of Gloom.

The Baron was standing in the middle of the room, with his tangled mane bristling like an angry lion. He was, as I have said, a huge man with enormous shoulders; and as he stood there, with his face flushed with rage and his sword advanced, he looked a ferocious figure. The lady lay cowering in a chair behind him. A red mark across one of her white arms and a dog-whip upon the floor were enough to show that our escape had hardly been in time to save her from his brutality. He gave a howl like a wolf as we broke in, and was upon us in an instant, cutting and stabbing, with a curse at every blow.

I have already said that the room gave no space for swordmanship. My young companion was in front of me in the narrow passage between the table and the

wall, so that I could only look on without being able to aid him. The lad knew something of his weapon, and was as fierce and active as a wild cat, but in so narrow a space the weight and strength of the giant gave him the advantage. Besides, he was an admirable swordsman, as quick as lightning. Twice he touched Duroc upon the shoulder, and then, as the lad slipped forward he raised his sword to finish him before he could recover his feet. I was quicker than he, however, and took the cut upon the hilt of my sword.

"Excuse me", said I, "but you have still to deal with Etienne Gerard."

He drew back and leaned against the wall, breathing in little, hoarse gasps, for his evil living was against him.

"Take your breath", said I, "I will await your convenience."

"You have no quarrel with me", he panted.

"I owe you some little attention", said I, "for having shut me up in your store-room. Besides, if there was no other reason, I see cause enough upon that lady's arm."

"Have your way, then!" he snarled, and leaped at me like a madman. For a minute I saw only the blazing blue eyes, and the red point of his sword which stabbed and stabbed, driven off by my defence to right or to left, and yet ever back at my throat and my breast. I do not suppose that in all my life I have met six men who had a better knowledge of their weapon. But he knew that I was his master. He read death in my eyes, and I could see that he read it. The flush died from his face. His breath came in shorter and in thicker gasps. Yet he fought on, even after the final thrust had come, and died still stabbing and cursing, with foul cries upon his lips, and his blood staining his orange beard. I who speak to you have seen so many

battles, that my old memory can scarce contain their names, and yet of all the terrible sights which these eyes have rested upon, there is none which I care to think of less.

It was only afterwards that I had time to think of all this. His monstrous body had hardly crashed down upon the floor before the woman in the corner sprang to her feet, hardly able to believe that her tormentor was dead. I was searching for words with which to soothe and comfort her, when a strange, choking smell took the breath from my nostrils, and a sudden, yellow glare shone through the door.

"Duroc, Duroc!" I shouted, tugging at his shoulder. "The Castle is on fire!"

The boy lay senseless upon the ground, exhausted by his wounds. I rushed out into the hall to see whence the danger came. It was our explosion which had set alight to the dry framework of the door. Inside the store-room some of the boxes were already blazing. I glanced in, and as I did so my blood was turned to water by the sight of the powder barrels beyond, and of the loose heap upon the floor. It might be seconds, it could not be more than minutes, before the flames would be at the edge of it. These eyes will be closed in death, my friends, before they cease to see those crawling lines of fire and the black heap beyond.

How little I can remember what followed. Vaguely I can recollect how I rushed back into the room, how I seized Duroc by one limp hand and dragged him down the hall, the woman keeping pace with me and pulling at the other arm. Out of the gateway we rushed, and on down the snow-covered path until we were on the edge of the fir forest. It was at that moment that I heard a crash behind me, and, glancing round, saw a great tongue of fire shoot up into the wintry sky.

An instant later there seemed to come a second crash, far louder than the first. I saw the fir trees and the stars whirling round me, and I fell unconscious across the body of my comrade.

It was some days before I came to myself in the post-house of Arensdorf, and longer still before I could be told all that had befallen me. It was Duroc, already able to go soldiering, who came to my bedside and gave me an account of it. He told me how a piece of timber had struck me on the head and laid me almost dead upon the ground. From him, too, I learned how the Polish girl had run to Arensdorf, how she had roused our hussars, and how she had only just brought them back in time to save us from the spears of the Cossacks who had been summoned from their camp by that same black-bearded secretary whom we had seen galloping so swiftly over the snow. As to the brave lady who had twice saved our lives, I could not learn very much about her at that moment from Duroc, but when I chanced to meet him in Paris two years later, I was not very much surprised to find that I needed no introduction to his bride, and that by the queer turns of fortune, he had himself, had he chosen to use it, that very name and title of the Baron Straubenthal, which showed him to be the owner of the blackened ruins of the Castle of Gloom.

Exercises.

1. Lieutenant Duroc called Baron Straubenthal the murderer of his father. What had the Baron done?
2. How were Gerard and Duroc trapped in the store-room of the Castle?
3. How did the key, thrown through the window, help them to escape?

II

HOW THE BRIGADIER SLEW THE BROTHERS OF AJACCIO

THE year 1807, in which I had my adventure in the Castle of Gloom, saw a French victory which ended that campaign, though we paid another visit to Russia later.

When the Emperor returned to Paris, after the declaration of peace, he spent much of his time with the Empress and the Court at the palace of Fontainebleau. It was the time when he was at the height of his career. He had in three successive campaigns humbled Austria, crushed Prussia, and made the Russians very glad to retire within their borders. The old British bulldog was still growling, but he was on the other side of the Channel. If we could have made a perpetual peace at that moment, France would have taken a higher place than any nation since the days of the Romans. So I have heard the wise folk say, though, at the time, I was too young to give much thought to such things.

Our regiment of hussars was quartered at Fontainebleau. It is, as you know, but a little place, buried in the heart of the forest, and it was wonderful at this time to see it crowded with Grand Dukes and Princes, who thronged round Napoleon like puppies round their master, each hoping that some bone might be thrown to him.

And all the time our little man, with his pale face and his cold, grey eyes, was riding to the hunt every

morning, silent and brooding, all of them following, in the hope that some word would escape him. And then, when the humour seized him, he would throw a hundred square miles to that man, or tear as much from the other, round off one kingdom by a river, or cut off another by a chain of mountains. That was how he used to do business, this little man, who had started his career as an artillery officer, and whom we soldiers had raised so high with our swords and our bayonets. He was very civil to us always, for he knew where his power came from. We knew also. We agreed, you understand, that he was the finest leader in the world, but we did not forget that he had the finest men to lead.

Well, one day I was seated in my quarters playing cards with another young officer, when the door opened and in walked Lasalle, who was our Colonel. He was a big, handsome fellow, and knew more about the use of cavalry than any man in the army. When he came striding into my quarters, we both sprang to our feet.

"My boy", said he, clapping me on the shoulder, "the Emperor wants to see you at four o'clock."

The room whirled round me at the words, and I had to lean my hands upon the edge of the card-table.

"What?" I cried. "The Emperor!"

"Precisely", said he, smiling at my astonishment.

"But the Emperor does not know of my existence, Colonel", I protested. "Why should he send for me?"

"Well, that's just what puzzles me", cried Lasalle, twirling his moustache. "If he wanted the help of a good swordsman, why should he descend to one of my lieutenants when he might have found all that he needed at the head of the regiment? However," he added, clapping me on the shoulder again in his hearty fashion, "every man has his chance. I have had mine, otherwise I should not be Colonel of the Tenth. I must

not grudge you yours. Forward, my boy, and may it be the first step towards your promotion."

It was but two o'clock, so he left me, promising to come back and to accompany me to the palace. When he had gone, what a time I passed, and how many guesses did I make as to what it was that the Emperor could want with me! I paced up and down my little room in a fever of suspense. Sometimes I thought that perhaps he had heard of some deed of mine for which he wished to reward me. Then I would turn cold as I fancied that he might have some fault to find with my conduct.

But, no, it could not be that! I considered the words of Lasalle. "If he had need of a brave man", said Lasalle.

It was obvious that my Colonel had some idea of what the Emperor wanted. If he had not known that it was to my advantage, he would not have been so cruel as to congratulate me. My heart glowed with joy as this conviction grew upon me, and I sat down to write to my mother and to tell her of my good fortune.

At half-past three I heard a sword come clattering against every step of my wooden stair. It was Lasalle, and with him was a lame gentleman, very neatly dressed in black, with white lace at his throat and wrists. We soldiers did not know many civilians, but this was one whom we could not afford to ignore! I had only to glance at those twinkling eyes, the comical, upturned nose, and the straight, precise mouth, to know that I was in the presence of Talleyrand, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the one man in France whom even the Emperor had to consider.

"This is Lieutenant Etienne Gerard, sir", said Lasalle.

I saluted and the statesman took me in, from the top of my head to the heels of my boots, with a piercing glance.

" Have you explained to the lieutenant the circumstances under which he is summoned to the Emperor's presence ? " he asked in his dry, creaking voice.

They were such a contrast, these two men, that I could not help glancing from one to the other of them : the black-coated, sly politician, and the big, blue-uniformed hussar with one fist on his hip and the other on the hilt of his sword. They both took their seats.

" It's this way, youngster ", said Lasalle, in his abrupt fashion : " I was with the Emperor in his private room this morning when a note was brought in to him. He opened it, and as he did so he gave such a start that it fluttered down on to the floor. I handed it up to him again, but he was staring at the wall in front of him as if he had seen a ghost. ' The Brothers of Ajaccio ', he muttered ; and then again, ' The Brothers of Ajaccio '. I could make nothing of this. It seemed to me that he had gone out of his mind. There was a strange look in his eyes, too. He read the note, and then he sat for half an hour or more without moving."

" And what did you do ? " asked Talleyrand.

" Why, I stood there not knowing what I ought to do. Presently he seemed to come back to his senses.

" ' I suppose, Lasalle ', said he, ' that you have some gallant young officers in the Tenth ? '

" ' They are all that, sir ', I answered.

" ' If you had to pick one who was to be depended upon for action, but who would not think too much—you understand me, Lasalle—which would you select ? ' he asked.

" I saw that he needed a man who would not penetrate too deeply into his plans.

"'I have one', said I, 'who is all spurs and moustaches, with never a thought beyond brave deeds and horses.'

"'That is the man I want', said Napoleon. 'Bring him to my private room at four o'clock.'

"So, youngster, I came straight away to you at once, and mind that you do credit to the 10th Hussars."

I was by no means flattered by the reasons which had led to my Colonel's choice, and I must have shown as much in my face, for he roared with laughter and Talleyrand gave a dry chuckle also.

"Just one word of advice before you go, Lieutenant Gerard", said he: "you are now coming into troubled waters, and you might find a worse pilot than myself. We have none of us any idea as to what this little affair means, and, between ourselves, it is very important for us, who have the destinies of France upon our shoulders, to keep ourselves in touch with all that goes on. You understand me, Lieutenant Gerard?"

I had not the least idea what he meant, but I bowed and tried to look as if it was clear to me.

"Act very carefully, then, and say nothing to anybody", said Talleyrand. "Colonel de Lasalle and I will not show ourselves in public with you, but we will await you here, and we will give you our advice when you have told us what has passed between the Emperor and yourself. It is time you started now, for the Emperor never forgives unpunctuality."

Off I went on foot to the palace, which was not far distant. As soon as I gave my name, I was shown straight in, and I found myself in the Emperor's presence.

I had, of course, seen him in camp a hundred times, but I had never been face to face with him before. I have no doubt that if you had met him without

knowing in the least who he was, you would simply have said that he was a pale little fellow with a good forehead and fairly well-shaped legs. His tight white breeches and white stockings showed them off to advantage. But even a stranger must have been struck by the singular look of his eyes, which could harden into an expression which would frighten the bravest. He looked mildly enough at me, however, and signed to me to remain by the door, while he told his secretary to leave the room.

Then, when we were alone, he strode across with his hands behind his back, and he looked me up and down without a word. I raised one hand to the salute and held the other upon the hilt of my sword, looking straight ahead of me, as a soldier should.

"Well, Lieutenant Gerard", said he, at last, tapping his forefinger upon my chest, "I am informed that you are a very deserving young officer. Your Colonel gives me an excellent account of you."

I wished to make a brilliant reply, but I could think of nothing save Lasalle's remark that I was all spurs and moustaches, so it ended in my saying nothing at all. The Emperor watched the struggle which must have shown itself upon my features, and when, finally, no answer came, he did not appear to be displeased.

"I believe that you are the very man that I want", said he. "Brave and clever men surround me upon every side. But a brave man who——" He did not finish his sentence, and I could not understand what he had in his mind. I contented myself with assuring him that he could count upon me to the death.

"You are, I understand, a good swordsman?" said he.

"Fairly good, sir", I answered.

"I have need of your services, Lieutenant Gerard",

said he. "I may be safer with a good sword at my side, and there are reasons why yours should be the one which I select. But first of all I must bind you to secrecy. Whilst I live, what passes between us to-day must be known to no one but ourselves."

I thought of Talleyrand and of Lasalle, but I promised.

"In the next place, I do not want your opinions or ideas, and I wish you to do exactly what you are told."

I bowed.

"It is your sword that I need, and not your brains. I will do the thinking. Is that clear to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know also the large double fir-tree in the forest, where the hounds met on Tuesday?"

I bowed.

"Very good. You will meet me there at ten o'clock to-night."

I had got past being surprised at anything which might happen. If he had asked me to take his place upon the Imperial throne, I could only have nodded my head.

"We shall then proceed into the wood together", said the Emperor. "You will be armed with a sword, but not with pistols. You must address no remark to me, and I shall say nothing to you. We will advance in silence. You understand?"

"I understand, sir."

"After a time we shall see a man, or more probably two men, under a certain tree. We shall approach them together. If I signal to you to defend me, you will have your sword ready. If, on the other hand, I speak to these men, you will wait and see what happens. If you are called upon to draw your sword,

you must see that neither of them escapes from us. I shall myself assist you."

"Sir", I cried, "I have no doubt that two would not be too many for my sword; but would it not be better that I should bring a comrade than that you should be forced to join in such a struggle?"

"I was a soldier before I was an Emperor", said he. "Do you think that artillerymen have not swords as well as the cavalry? But I ordered you not to argue with me. You will do exactly what I tell you. If swords are once drawn, neither of these men is to get away alive."

"They shall not, sir", said I.

"Very good. I have no more instructions for you. You can go."

I turned to the door, and then, an idea occurring to me, I turned.

"I have been thinking, sir——" said I.

He sprang at me with the ferocity of a wild beast. I really thought he would have struck me.

"Thinking!" he cried. "You, *you!* Do you imagine I chose you because you could think? Never let me hear of your doing such a thing again! You, the one man—but, there! Meet me at the fir-tree at ten o'clock."

After that, I was heartily glad to get out of the room and into the fresh air again. I ran away up to my quarters like a schoolboy who has just escaped from his lessons.

But as I opened the door, the very first thing that my eye rested upon was a long pair of sky-blue legs with cavalry boots, and a short pair of black ones with knee-breeches and buckles. They both sprang up together to greet me.

"Well, what news?" they cried, the two of them.

"None", I answered.

"The Emperor refused to see you?" said Lasalle.

"No, I have seen him."

"And what did he say?" Talleyrand asked.

"Sir", I answered him, "I regret to say that it is quite impossible for me to tell you anything about it. I have promised the Emperor."

"Nonsense, my dear young man", said he persuasively, looking like a cat when it is about to rub itself against you. "This is all among friends, you understand, and goes no farther than these four walls. Besides, the Emperor never meant to include me in this promise."

"It is but a minute's walk to the palace, sir", I answered; "if it would not be troubling you too much to ask you to step up to it and bring back the Emperor's written statement that he did not mean to include you in this promise, I shall be happy to tell you every word that passed."

He showed his teeth at me then. "Monsieur Gerard appears to be a little puffed up", said he. "He is too young to see things in their just proportion. As he grows older, he may understand that it is not always very prudent for a young cavalry officer to give such very abrupt refusals."

I did not know what to say to this, but Lasalle came to my aid in his downright fashion.

"The lad is quite right", said he. "If I had known there was a promise, I should not have questioned him. You know, sir, that if he had answered you, you would have laughed to yourself and thought little of him. I promise you that the Tenth would have had no room for him, and that we should have lost our best swordsman, if I had heard him give up the Emperor's secret."

But the statesman became only the more bitter when he saw that I had the support of my Colonel.

"I have heard, Colonel de Lasalle", said he with an icy dignity, "that your opinion is of great weight upon the subject of cavalry. Should I have occasion to seek information about that branch of the army, I shall be very happy to apply to you. At present, however, the matter concerns affairs of state, and you will permit me to form my own views upon that question. As long as the welfare of France and the safety of the Emperor's person are largely entrusted to my care, I will use every means in my power to protect them, even if it should be against the Emperor's own temporary wishes. I have the honour, Colonel de Lasalle, to wish you a very good-day!"

He shot a most unamiable glance in my direction, and, turning upon his heel, he walked with little, quick, noiseless steps out of the room.

I could see from Lasalle's face that he did not at all like finding himself at enmity with the powerful Minister. He uttered an oath or two, and then, catching up his sword and his cap, he clattered away down the stairs. As I looked out of the window I saw the two of them, the big blue man and the limping black one, going up the street together. Talleyrand was walking very stiffly, and Lasalle was waving his hands and talking, so I suppose he was trying to make his peace.

The Emperor had told me not to think, and I endeavoured to obey him. I took up the cards from the table where we had left them, but I could not give my attention to them, and I threw them under the table in despair. Then I drew my sword and practised cuts and thrusts until I was weary, but it was of no use at all. My mind *would* work, in spite of myself. At

ten o'clock I was to meet the Emperor in the forest. Of all extraordinary events in the whole world, surely this was the last which would have occurred to my mind when I rose from my bed that morning. But the responsibility—the dreadful responsibility! It was all upon my shoulders. There was no one to halve it with me. It made me cold all over. Often as I have faced death upon the battle-field, I have never known what real fear was until that moment. But then I considered that after all I could but do my best like a brave and honourable gentleman, and above all obey the orders which I had received, to the very letter. And if all went well, this would surely be the foundation of my fortunes. Thus, torn between my fears and my hopes, I spent the long, long evening until it was time to keep my appointment.

I put on my military overcoat, as I did not know how much of the night I might have to spend in the woods, and I fastened my sword outside it. I pulled off my big boots also, and wore a pair of shoes and leggings, that I might be lighter upon my feet. Then I stole out of my quarters and made for the forest, feeling very much easier in my mind, for I am always at my best when the time of thought has passed and the moment for action arrived.

I passed the barracks and the inn beyond. The tables outside were all filled with uniforms. I caught a glimpse as I went by of the blue and gold of some of my comrades among the crowd. There they sat, sipping their wine and smoking their cigars, little dreaming what their comrade had on hand. One of them, the chief of my squadron, caught sight of me in the lamplight, and came shouting after me into the street. I hurried on, however, pretending not to hear him, so he, with a curse at my deafness, went back at last.

It is not very hard to get into the forest at Fontainebleau. Scattered trees steal into the very streets. I turned into a path which led to the edge of the woods, and then I pushed rapidly forward towards the old fir-tree.

There was a half-moon shining, and, as I came up to our meeting-place, I saw that I was not the first to arrive. The Emperor was pacing up and down, his hands behind him and his face sunk somewhat forward upon his breast. He wore a grey great-coat with a hood over his head. I had seen him in such a dress in our winter campaign in Poland, and it was said that he used it because the hood was such an excellent disguise. He was always fond, whether in the camp or in Paris, of walking round at night, and overhearing the talk in the inns or round the fires. His figure, however, and his way of carrying his head and his hands were so well known that he was always recognized, and then the talkers would say whatever they thought would please him best.

My first thought was that he would be angry with me for having kept him waiting, but as I approached him, we heard the big church clock of Fontainebleau striking the hour of ten. It was evident, therefore, that it was he who was too soon, and not I too late. I remembered his order that I should make no remark, so contented myself with halting within four paces of him, clicking my spurs together, and saluting. He glanced at me, and then without a word, he turned and walked slowly through the forest, I keeping always about the same distance behind him. Once or twice he seemed to me to look anxiously to right and to left, as if he feared that someone was watching us. I looked also, but although I have the keenest sight, it was quite impossible to see anything except the

ragged patches of moonshine between the great black shadows of the trees. My ears are as quick as my eyes, and once or twice I thought that I heard a twig crack; but you know how many sounds there are in a forest at night, and how difficult it is even to say what direction they come from.

We walked for rather more than a mile, and I knew exactly what our destination was, long before we got there. In the centre of one of the glades, there is the shattered stump of what must at some time have been a most gigantic tree. It is called the Abbots' Beech, and there are so many ghostly stories about it, that I know many a brave soldier who would not care about standing sentinel over it. However, I cared as little for such folly as the Emperor did, so we crossed the glade and made straight for the old broken trunk. As we approached, I saw that two men were waiting for us beneath it.

When I first caught sight of them they were standing rather behind it, as if they were not anxious to be seen, but as we came nearer they advanced from its shadow and walked forward to meet us. The Emperor glanced back at me, and slackened his pace a little so that I came within arm's length of him. You may think that I had the hilt of my sword well to the front, and that I had a very good look at these two people who were approaching us.

The one was tall, remarkably so, and very thin, while the other was rather below the usual height, and had a brisk, determined way of walking. They each wore black cloaks, which were slung right across their figures, and hung down upon one side. They had flat black caps, like those I have seen since in Spain, which threw their faces into darkness, though I could see the gleam of their eyes from beneath them. With

the moon behind them and their long black shadows walking in front, they were such figures as one might expect to meet at night near the Abbot's Beech. I can remember that they had a stealthy way of moving, and that as they approached, the moonshine formed two white diamonds between their legs and the legs of their shadows.

The Emperor had paused, and these two strangers came to a stand also within a few paces of us. I had drawn up close to my companion's elbow so that the four of us were facing each other without a word spoken. My eyes were particularly fixed upon the taller one, because he was slightly the nearer to me, and I became certain as I watched him that he was in an extreme state of nervousness. His lean figure was quivering all over, and I heard a quick, thin panting like that of a tired dog. Suddenly one of them gave a short, hissing signal. The tall man bent his back and his knees like a diver about to spring, but before he could move, I had jumped with drawn sword in front of him. At the same instant the smaller man bounded past me, and buried a long dagger in the Emperor's heart.

My God! the horror of that moment! It is a marvel that I did not drop dead myself. As in a dream, I saw the grey coat whirl violently round, and caught a glimpse in the moonlight of three inches of red point which struck out from between the shoulders. Then down he fell with a dead man's gasp upon the grass, and the assassin, leaving his weapon buried in his victim, threw up both his hands and shrieked with joy. But I—I drove my sword through his breast with such frantic force, that the mere blow of the hilt against the end of his breast-bone sent him six paces before he fell, and left my dripping blade ready for the other. I sprang round upon him with such a thirst for blood

upon me as I had never felt, and never have felt, in all my days. As I turned, a dagger flashed before my eyes, and I felt the cold wind of it pass my neck and the villain's wrist strike upon my shoulder. I shortened my sword, but he leapt away from me, and an instant afterwards was in full flight, bounding like a deer across the glade in the moonlight.

But he was not to escape me thus. I knew that the murderer's dagger had done its work. Young as I was, I had seen enough of war to know a mortal blow. I paused but for an instant to touch the cold hand.

"Sir! Sir!" I cried in an agony; and then as no sound came back and nothing moved, save an ever-widening dark circle in the moonlight, I knew that all was indeed over. I sprang madly to my feet, threw off my great-coat, and ran at the top of my speed after the remaining assassin.

Ah, how I blessed the wisdom which had caused me to come in shoes and leggings! And the happy thought which had made me throw off my coat. He could not get rid of his cloak, this wretch, or else he was too frightened to think of it. So it was that I gained upon him from the beginning. He must have been out of his wits, for he never tried to bury himself in the darker parts of the woods, but he flew on from glade to glade, until he came to the open ground which leads up to the great Fontainebleau quarry. There I had him in full sight, and knew that he could not escape me. He ran well, it is true—ran as a coward runs when his life is at stake. But, yard by yard, I gained upon him. He was rolling and staggering. I could hear the rasping and crackling of his breath. The great gulf of the quarry suddenly yawned in front of his path, and glancing at me over his shoulder, he

gave a shriek of despair. The next instant he had vanished from my sight.

Vanished utterly, you understand. I rushed to the spot, and gazed down into the black depths, Had he hurled himself over? I had almost made up my mind that he had done so, when a gentle sound rising and falling came out of the darkness beneath me. It was his breathing once more, and it showed me where he must be. He was hiding in the tool-house.

At the edge of the quarry and beneath the summit there is a small platform upon which stands a wooden hut for the use of the labourers. It was into this, then, that he had darted. Perhaps he had thought, the fool, that, in the darkness, I would not venture to follow him. He little knew Etienne Gerard. With a spring I was on the platform, with another I was through the doorway, and then, hearing him in the corner, I hurled myself down upon the top of him.

He fought like a wild cat, but he never had a chance with his shorter weapon. I think that I must have dealt him a mortal wound in that first mad rush, for, though he struck and struck, his blows had no power in them, and presently his dagger rattled down upon the floor. When I was sure that he was dead, I rose up and passed out into the moonlight. I climbed on to the level ground again, and wandered across it as nearly out of my mind as a man could be.

With the blood singing in my ears, and my naked sword clutched in my hand, I walked aimlessly on, until looking round me, I found that I had come as far as the glade of the Abbot's Beech, and saw in the distance that old shattered stump which must ever be connected with the most terrible moment of my life. I sat down upon a fallen trunk with my sword across my knees

and my head between my hands, and I tried to think about what had happened and what would happen in the future.

The Emperor had committed himself to my care. The Emperor was dead. Those were the two thoughts which rung in my head, until I had no room for any other ones. He had come with me and he was dead. I had done what he had ordered when living. I had revenged him when dead. But what of all that? The world would look upon me as responsible. They might even look upon me as the assassin. What could I prove? What witnesses had I? Might I not have been the accomplice of these wretches? Yes, yes, I was eternally dishonoured—the lowest, most despicable creature in all France. This, then, was the end of my fine military ambitions—of the hopes of my mother. I laughed bitterly at the thought. And what was I to do now? Was I to go into Fontainebleau, to wake up the palace, and to inform them that the great Emperor had been murdered within a pace of me? I could not do it—no, I could not do it! There was only one course for an honourable gentleman whom Fate had placed in so cruel a position. I would fall upon my dishonoured sword, and so share the Emperor's fate. I rose with my nerves strung to this last piteous deed, and as I did so, my eyes fell upon something which struck the breath from my lips! The Emperor was standing before me!

He was not more than ten yards off, with the moon shining straight upon his cold, pale face. He wore his grey overcoat, but the hood was turned back, and the front open, so that I could see his green coat and white breeches. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his chin sunk forward upon his breast, in the way that was usual with him.

"Well", said he, in his hardest and most abrupt voice, "what account do you give of yourself?"

I believe that if he had stood in silence for another minute, my brain would have given way. But that sharp military tone was exactly what I needed to bring me to myself. Living or dead, here was the Emperor standing before me and asking me questions. I sprang to the salute.

"You have killed one, I see", said he, turning his head towards the tree.

"Yes, sir."

"And the other escaped?"

"No, sir, I killed him also."

"What!" he cried. "Do I understand that you have killed them both?" He approached me as he spoke with a smile which set his teeth shining in the moonlight.

"One body lies there, sir", I answered. "The other is in the tool-house at the quarry."

"Then the Brothers of Ajaccio are no more", he cried, and after a pause, as if speaking to himself: "The shadow has passed from me for ever." Then he bent forward and laid his hand upon my shoulder.

"You have done very well, my young friend", said he. "You have lived up to your reputation."

He was flesh and blood, then, this Emperor. I could feel the hand that rested upon me. And yet I could not get over what I had seen with my own eyes, and so I stared at him in such bewilderment that he broke once more into one of his smiles.

"No, no, Lieutenant Gerard", said he, "I am not a ghost, and you have not seen me killed. You will come here, and all will be clear to you."

He turned as he spoke, and led the way towards the great beech stump.

The bodies were still lying upon the ground, and two men were standing beside them. As we approached I saw from the turbans that they were Roustem and Mustafa, his two Egyptian servants. The Emperor paused when he came to the grey figure upon the ground, and turning back the hood which concealed the features, he showed a face which was very different from his own.

"Here lies a faithful servant who has given up his life for his master", said he. "He was my secretary. He resembled me in figure and in manner, as you must admit."

What wild joy came upon me when these few words made everything clear to me! He smiled again as he saw the delight which urged me to throw my arms round him and to embrace him, but he moved a step away, as if he had guessed my impulse.

"You are unhurt?" he asked.

"I am unhurt, sir. But in another minute I should have killed myself in my despair."

"There was no cause for that", he said. "You did very well. He should himself have been more on his guard. I saw everything that passed."

"You saw it, sir."

"You did not hear me follow you through the wood, then? I hardly lost sight of you from the moment that you left your quarters until this poor fellow was killed. The imitation Emperor was in front of you and the real one behind. You will now escort me back to the palace."

He whispered an order to his servants, who saluted in silence and remained where they were standing. For my part, I followed the Emperor bursting with pride. I have always borne myself as a hussar should, but I never strutted and swung my cloak as I did that

night. Who should clink his spurs and clatter his sword if it were not I—I, Etienne Gerard, the chosen swordsman of the cavalry, the man in whom Napoleon had confided and who had slain his would-be assassins? But the Emperor noticed my bearing and turned upon me in a fury.

"Is that the way you carry yourself on a secret mission?" he hissed, with that cold glare in his eyes. "Is it thus that you will make your comrades believe that nothing remarkable has occurred? Have done with this nonsense, lieutenant, or you will find yourself worse off."

That was the way with the Emperor. If ever he thought that anyone might have a claim upon him, he took the first opportunity to show him the gulf that lay between. I saluted and was silent, but I must confess to you that it hurt me after all that had passed between us. He led on to the palace, where we passed through the side door and up into his own room. There were a couple of sentries at the staircase, and their eyes started out from under their fur caps when they saw a young lieutenant going up to the Emperor's room at midnight. I stood by the door, as I had done in the afternoon, while he flung himself down in an arm-chair, and remained silent so long that it seemed to me that he had forgotten all about me. I ventured at last upon a slight cough to remind him.

"Ah, Lieutenant Gerard", said he, "you are very curious, no doubt, as to the meaning of all this?"

"I am quite content, sir, if it is your pleasure not to tell me", I answered.

"Nonsense", said he, impatiently. "These are only words. The moment that you were outside that door you would begin making enquiries about what it means. In two days your brother officers would know

about it, in three days it would be all over Fontainebleau, and it would be in Paris on the fourth. Now, if I tell you enough to satisfy your curiosity, there is some reasonable hope that you may be able to keep the matter to yourself."

It was clear that the Emperor did not understand me, and yet I could only bow and be silent.

"A few words will explain it to you", said he, speaking very swiftly and pacing up and down the room. "They were Corsicans, these two men, from my native town, Ajaccio, I had known them in my youth. We had belonged to the same society—Brothers of Ajaccio, as we called ourselves. It was founded in the old days, you understand, when we Corsicans plotted to free our island from the rule of France; and the society had some strict rules of its own which it was perilous for members to break."

A very grim look came over his face as he spoke, and it seemed to me that all that was French had gone out of him, and that it was the pure Corsican, the man of strong passions and of strange revenges, who stood before me. His memory had gone back to those early days of his, before he left his little native land for the greater service of France, and for five minutes, wrapped in thought, he paced up and down the room with his quick short tiger steps. Then with an impatient wave of his hands he brought his thoughts back to his palace and to me.

"The rules of such a society", he continued, "are all very well for a private citizen. In the old days there was no more loyal brother than I. But circumstances change, and it would be neither for my welfare nor for that of France that I should now submit myself to them. They wanted to hold me to them, and so brought their fate upon their own heads. These were the two

chiefs of the order, and they had come from Corsica to summon me to meet them at the spot which they named. I knew what such a summons meant. No man had ever returned from obeying one. On the other hand, if I did not go, I was sure that disaster would follow. I am a brother myself, you remember, and I know their ways."

Again there came that hardening of his mouth and cold glitter of his eyes.

"You see my difficulty, Lieutenant Gerard", said he. "How would you have acted yourself, under such circumstances?"

"Given the word to the 10th Hussars, sir", I cried. "The regiment could have swept the woods from end to end, and brought these two rascals to your feet."

He smiled, but he shook his head.

"I had very excellent reasons why I did not wish them taken alive", said he. "You can understand that an assassin's tongue might be as dangerous a weapon as an assassin's dagger. I will not disguise from you that I wished to avoid scandal at all costs. That was why I ordered you to take no pistols with you. That also is why my Egyptian servants will remove all traces of the affair, and nothing more will be heard about it. I thought of all possible plans, and I am convinced that I selected the best one. Had I sent more than one guard with my secretary into the woods, then the brothers would not have appeared. They would not change their plans nor miss their chance for the sake of a single man. It was Colonel Lasalle's accidental presence at the moment when I received the summons which led to my choosing one of his hussars for the mission. I selected you, Lieutenant Gerard, because I wanted a man who could handle a sword, and who would not inquire more deeply into the affair

than I desired. I trust that, in this respect, you will satisfy me as well as you have done by your bravery and skill."

"Sir", I answered, "you may rely upon it."

"As long as I live", said he, "you never open your lips upon this subject."

"I dismiss it entirely from my mind, sir. I will blot it from my recollection as if it had never been. I will promise you to go out of your room at this moment exactly as I was when I entered it at four o'clock."

"You cannot do that", said the Emperor, smiling. "You were a lieutenant at that time. You will permit me, Captain, to wish you a very good-night."

Exercises.

1. Describe the appearance of Napoleon.
2. Who were the Brothers of Ajaccio? How was Napoleon connected with them?
3. Who was Talleyrand? Why was he angry with Gerard?

III

HOW THE BRIGADIER RODE TO MINSK

THIS evening, my friends, I will tell you a story of Russia. It was in June of 1812 that the Emperor with an immense army of over six hundred thousand men began his advance against the Russians, following after them as they retreated, first through Prussia, and then back over their own frontiers. In the autumn, Napoleon occupied Moscow, but already, in the fighting and from disease, he had lost one hundred and fifty thousand of his troops: he waited, hoping to gain a victory that would force the Russians to accept his terms. But the enemy took care to avoid a battle: they kept just out of reach, so that, without much risk to themselves, they could make raids on the French and prevent supplies of food from reaching them. Disease, too, among our men was terrible. At last the Russians set fire to Moscow, and then the Emperor could hold out no longer. In October, amid snow and frost, our army began its retreat.

Ah, what an evil dream of the night it seems! Blood and ice. Ice and blood. Fierce faces with snow upon the whiskers. Blue hands held out for help. And across the great white plain the one long black line of moving figures, trudging, trudging, a hundred miles, another hundred, and still always the same white plain. Sometimes there were fir-woods to limit it, sometimes it stretched away to the cold blue sky, but the black line stumbled on and on. Those weary, ragged, starving men, the spirit frozen out of them, looked neither

to right nor left, but with sunken faces and rounded backs crept onwards and ever onwards, making for France as wounded beasts make for their holes. There was no speaking, and you could scarcely hear the shuffle of feet in the snow.

But why was it that these helpless men were not destroyed by the Russians? Why was it that they were not speared by the Cossacks or driven as prisoners into the heart of Russia? On every side as you watched the black snake winding over the snow you saw also dark, moving shadows which came and went like clouds on either flank and behind. They were the Cossacks, who hung round us like wolves round the flock. But the reason why they did not ride in upon us was that all the ice of Russia could not cool the hot hearts of some of our soldiers. To the end there were always those who were ready to throw themselves between these savages and their prey. One man above all rose greater as the danger thickened, and won a higher name amid disaster than he had done when he led his troops to victory. That man was Marshal Ney, who commanded the rear-guard in the retreat. The enemy feared to tread too closely on Ney's heels. I can see him now, his broad white face convulsed with fury, his light eyes blue sparkling like fire, his great voice roaring and crashing.

Neither I nor the regiment of Hussars of Conflans were at Moscow. We were left behind on the lines of communication, at the village of Borodino, which was poisoned by the bodies of thirty thousand men who had lost their lives in the great battle there, during the Emperor's advance. I spent the late autumn in getting my horses into condition and reclothing my men, so that when the army fell back on Borodino my Hussars were the best of the cavalry, and were placed

under Ney in the rear-guard. What could he have done without us during those dreadful days? The rear-guard covered the army, and the Hussars of Conflans covered the rear-guard. Always the Cossacks were on us. Always we held them off. Never a day passed that we had not to wipe their blood from our swords.

But there came a time between Wilna and Smolensk when the situation became impossible. Cossacks and even cold we could fight, but we could not fight hunger as well. Food must be got at all costs. That night Ney sent for me to the waggon in which he slept. His great head was sunk on his hands. Mind and body, he was wearied to death.

"Colonel Gerard", said he, "things are going very badly with us. The men are starving. We must have food at all costs".

"We might kill the horses and eat their flesh", I suggested.

"Except your handful of cavalry, there are none left. But there is one chance for us yet, Gerard." He unhooked a lantern from the roof of the waggon, and he laid it on a map which was stretched before him. "To the south of us", said he, "there lies the town of Minsk. I have word from a Russian deserter that much corn has been stored in the townhall. I wish you to take as many men as you think best, set forth for Minsk, seize the corn, load any carts which you may collect in the town, and bring them to me between here and Smolensk. If you succeed, it is new life to the army."

It was a bold enterprise, and one full of danger, but I was proud that Etienne Gerard should be chosen for the task. I assured the Marshal that if mortal men could bring it, the corn should come from Minsk.

It was clear to me that in order to succeed, I should

take a small force and depend rather upon surrpise than upon numbers. A large body could not conceal itself, would have great difficulty in getting food, and would cause all the Russians around us to unite for its certain destruction. On the other hand, if a small body of cavalry could get past the Cossacks unseen, it was probable that they would find no troops to oppose them, for we knew that the main Russian army was several days' march behind us. This corn was meant, no doubt, for them. A squadron of Hussars and thirty Polish Lancers were all whom I chose for the venture. That very night we rode out of the camp, and started south in the direction of Minsk.

Fortunately there was only half a moon, and we were able to pass without being attacked by the enemy. Twice we saw great fires burning amid the snow, and around them thick rows of long poles. These were the lances of Cossacks, which they had stuck upright while they slept. It would have been a great joy to us to have charged in amongst them, for we had much to revenge, and the eyes of my comrades looked longingly from me to those red flickering patches in the darkness. I would gladly have given them permission, for it would have been a good lesson to teach them, that they must keep a few miles between themselves and a French army. A wise commander, however, keeps one thing before him at a time, and so we rode silently on through the snow, leaving these Cossacks camps to right and left. Behind us the black sky was streaked with a line of flame, which showed where our own poor wretches were trying to keep themselves alive for another day of misery and starvation.

All night we rode slowly onwards, keeping our direction by the stars. There were many tracks in the snow, and we kept to the line of these, that no one

might see that a body of cavalry had passed that way. It is little precautions like these which show the experienced officer. Besides, by keeping to the tracks we were most likely to find the villages, and only in the villages could we hope to get food. The dawn of day found us in a thick fir-wood, the trees so loaded with snow that the light could hardly reach us. When we had found our way out of it, it was full daylight, the rim of the rising sun peeping over the edge of the great snow-plain and turning it crimson from end to end. I halted my Hussars and Lancers under the shadow of the wood, and I studied the country. Close to us there was a small farmhouse. Beyond, at a distance of several miles, was a village. Far away on the skyline rose a considerable town with several church towers. This must be Minsk. In no direction could I see any signs of troops. It was evident that we had passed through the Cossacks, and that there was nothing between us and our goal. A joyous shout burst from my men when I told them our position, and we advanced rapidly towards the village.

I have said, however, that there was a small farmhouse immediately in front of us. As we rode up to it, I noticed that a fine grey horse with a military saddle was tethered by the door. Instantly I galloped forward; but before I could reach it, a man dashed out of the door, flung himself on to the horse, and rode furiously away, the crisp, dry snow flying up in a cloud behind him. I knew by his uniform that he was a Russian officer. He would raise all the surrounding country if we did not catch him. I put spurs to Violette and flew after him. My troopers followed; but there was no horse among them to compare with Violette, and I knew well that if I could not catch the Russian I need expect no help from them.

But it is a swift horse indeed and a skilful rider who can hope to escape from Violette with Etienne Gerard in the saddle. The young Russian rode well, and his horse was a good one, but gradually we gained upon him. He turned his face continually over his shoulder —a dark, handsome face, with eyes like an eagle—, and I saw as I closed with him that he was measuring the distance between us. Suddenly he half turned; there were a flash and a crack as his pistol bullet hummed past my ear. Before he could draw his sword I was upon him; but he still spurred his horse, and the two galloped together over the plain, I with my leg against the Russian's and my left hand upon his right shoulder. I saw his hand fly up to his mouth. Instantly I dragged him towards me and seized him by the throat, so that he could not swallow. His horse flew from under him, but I held him fast, and Violette came to a halt. Sergeant Oudin of the Hussars was the first to join us. He was an old soldier, and he saw at a glance what I was after.

"Hold tight, Colonel", said he; "I'll do the rest."

He slipped out his knife, thrust the blade between the clenched teeth of the Russian, and turned it so as to force his mouth open. There, on his tongue, was the little lump of wet paper which he had been so anxious to swallow. Oudin picked it out, and I let go of the man's throat. From the way in which, half strangled as he was, he glanced at the paper I was sure that it was a message of extreme importance. His hands twitched as if he longed to snatch it from me. He shrugged his shoulders, however, and smiled good-humouredly when I apologized for my roughness.

"And now to business", said I, when he had done coughing and gasping. "What is your name?"

"Alexis Barakoff."

"Your rank and regiment?"

"Captain of the Dragoons of Grodno."

"What is this note which you were carrying?"

"It is one that I had written to the girl I am to marry."

"Whose name", said I, examining the address, "is General Platoff. Come, come, sir, this is an important military document, which you are carrying from one general to another. Tell me this instant what it is."

"Read it, and then you will know." He spoke perfect French, as do most of the educated Russians. But he knew well that there is not one French officer in a thousand who knows a word of Russian. The inside of the note contained one single line which ran like this:—

"Pustj Franzuzy pridutt v Minsk. Min gotovy."

I stared at it, and I had to shake my head. Then I showed it to my Hussars, but they could make nothing of it. The Poles were all rough fellows who could not read or write, except the sergeant, and he knew no Russian. It was maddening, for I felt that I had possession of some important secret upon which the safety of the army might depend, and yet I could make no sense of it. Again I begged our prisoner to translate it, and offered him his freedom if he would do so. He only smiled at my request, in a way I could not help admiring.

"At least", said I, "tell us the name of this village."

"It is Dobrova."

"And that is Minsk over there I suppose?"

"Yes, that is Minsk."

"Then we will go to the village and we shall very soon find some one who will translate this despatch."

So we rode onward together, a trooper with his gun on either side of our prisoner. The village was only a little place, and I set a guard at the ends of the single street, so that no one could escape from it. It was necessary to halt and to find some food for the men and horses, since they had travelled all night and had a long journey still before them.

There was one large stone house in the centre of the village, and to this I rode. It was the house of the priest—a dirty, unpleasant-looking old man who had not a civil answer to any of our questions. An uglier fellow I never met, but it was very different with his only daughter, who kept house for him. She had skin as white as milk, black hair, and a pair of the most glorious dark eyes. She seemed as pleased with my appearance as I was with hers. As I took the simple meal which she laid before me, I chatted lightly with her, and we were the best of friends before an hour had passed. Sophie was her name, and I taught her to call me Etienne. I tried to cheer her up, for her sweet face was sad and there were tears in her beautiful dark eyes. I asked her to tell me what it was that was grieving her.

"How can I help being sad", said she, speaking French with very pretty accent, "when one of my poor countrymen is a prisoner in your hands? I saw him between two of your Hussars as you rode into the village."

"It is the fortune of war", said I. "His turn to-day; mine, perhaps, to-morrow."

"But consider, sir——" said she.

"Etienne", said I.

"Oh, sir——"

"Etienne", said I.

"Well, then", she cried, blushing, "consider, Etienne, that this young officer will be taken back to

your army and will be starved or frozen, for if, as I hear, your own soldiers have a hard march, what will be the fate of a prisoner ? "

I shrugged my shoulders.

" You have a kind face, Etienne ", said she ; " you would not condemn this poor man to certain death. I entreat you to let him go."

Her delicate hand rested upon my sleeve, her dark eyes looked eagerly into mine.

A sudden thought passed through my mind. I would grant her request, but I would demand a favour in return. At my order the prisoner was brought up into the room.

" Captain Barakoff ", said I, " this young lady has begged me to release you, and I am inclined to do so. I ask you to give your promise that you will remain in this house for twenty-four hours, and take no steps to inform any one of our movements."

" I will do so ", said he.

" Then I trust to your honour. One man more or less can make no difference in a struggle between great armies, and to take you back as a prisoner would be to condemn you to death. Depart, sir, and show your gratitude not to me but to the first French officer who falls into your hands."

When he was gone I drew my paper from my pocket.

" Now, Sophie ", said I, " I have done what you asked me, and all that I ask in return is that you will give me a lesson in Russian."

" Gladly ", said she.

" Let us begin with this ", said I, spreading out the paper before her. " Let us take it word for word and see what it means."

She looked at the writing with some surprise.

"It means", said she, "'If the French come to Minsk, all is lost.'" Suddenly a look of dismay passed over her beautiful face. "Great heavens!" she cried, "what have I done? I have betrayed my country! Oh, Etienne, your eyes are the last for whom this message is meant. How could you be so cruel as to make a poor, simple-minded, and unsuspecting girl betray the cause of her country?"

I consoled poor Sophie as best I could; and I assured her that it was no shame to her that she should be outwitted by so old a soldier and so sharp a man as myself. But it was now no time for talk. This message made it clear that the corn was indeed at Minsk, and that there were no troops there to defend it. I gave a hurried order from the window, the trumpeter summoned the men, and in ten minutes we had left the village behind us and were riding hard for the city, the gilded domes and spires of which glimmered above the snow of the horizon. Higher they rose and higher, until at last, as the sun sank towards the west, we were in the broad main street, and galloped up it amid the shouts of the peasants and the cries of frightened women until we found ourselves in front of the great town-hall. I drew up my cavalry in the square, and I, with my two sergeants, Oudin and Papilette, rushed into the building.

Heavens! shall I ever forget the sight which greeted us? Right in front of us was drawn up a triple line of Russian infantry. Their guns rose as we entered, and a crashing discharge burst into our very faces. Oudin and Papilette dropped upon the floor, pierced with bullets. My own cap was shot away and I had two holes through my cloak. The Grenadiers ran at me with their bayonets. "We are betrayed!" I cried. "Get to your horses!" I rushed out of the hall, but

the whole square was swarming with troops. From every side-street Dragoons and Cossacks were riding down upon us, and such heavy firing had burst from the surrounding houses that half my men and horses were on the ground. "Follow me!" I yelled, and sprang upon Violette, but a giant of a Russian Dragoon officer threw his arms round me, and we rolled on the ground together. He shortened his sword to kill me, but, changing his mind, he seized me by the throat and banged my head against the stones until I was unconscious. So it was that I became a prisoner of the Russians.

When I came to myself my only regret was that my captor had not beaten out my brains. There in the grand square of Minsk lay half my troopers dead or wounded, with triumphant crowds of Russians gathered round them. The rest, in a miserable group, were clustered by the door of the town-hall, with twice as many keeping guard over them. Alas! what could I say, what could I do? It was evident that I had led my men into a carefully laid trap. They had heard of our mission, and they had prepared for us. And yet there was that despatch which had caused me to neglect all precautions and to ride straight into the town. How was I to account for that? The tears ran down my cheeks as I surveyed the ruin of my squadron, and as I thought of the plight of my comrades of the Grand Army who awaited the food which I was to have brought them. Ney had trusted me, and I had failed him. How often he would strain his eyes over the snowfields for those cartloads of grain which would never gladden his sight! My own fate was hard enough. Exile in Siberia was the best which the future could bring me. But you will believe me, my friends, that it was not for his own sake, but for that of his

starving comrades, that Etienne Gerard's cheeks were lined by his tears, frozen even as they were shed.

"What's this?" said a gruff voice at my elbow; and I turned to face the huge, black-bearded Dragoon who had dragged me from my saddle. "Look at the Frenchman crying! I thought that Napoleon was followed by brave men, and not by children."

"If you and I were face to face and alone, I would let you see which is the better man", said I.

For answer the brute struck me across the face with his open hand. I seized him by the throat, but a dozen of his soldiers tore me away from him, and he struck me again while they held my hands.

"You dog", I cried, "is this the way to treat an officer and a gentleman?"

"We never asked you to come to Russia", said he. "If you do, you must take such treatment as you can get. I would shoot you this moment if I had my way."

"You will answer for this some day", I cried, as I wiped the blood from my moustache.

"If General Platoff thinks as I do, you will not be alive this time to-morrow", he answered, with a ferocious scowl. He added some words in Russian to his troops, and instantly they all sprang to their saddles. Poor Violette, looking as miserable as her master, was led round and I was told to mount her. My left arm was tied with a strap which was fastened to the stirrup-iron of a sergeant of Dragoons. So in a most miserable plight I and the remains of my men set forth from Minsk.

I have never met such a brute as this man Sergine, who commanded the escort. The Russian army contains the best and the worst in the world, but a worse than Major Sergine of the Dragoons of Kieff I have never seen. He was a man of great height, with a fierce, hard face and a thick black beard which fell

over his chest. I have been told since that he was noted for his strength and his bravery, and I knew that he had the grip of a bear, for I had felt it when he tore me from my saddle. He had no pity on his prisoners, but made continual remarks in Russian at our expense which set all his Dragoons and Cossacks laughing. Twice he beat my comrades with his riding-whip, and once he approached me with the lash swung over his shoulder, but there was something in my eyes which prevented it from falling. So in misery and humiliation, cold and starving, we rode across the vast snow-plain. The sun had sunk, but still in the long northern twilight we pursued our weary journey. Half-frozen, with my head aching from the blows it had received, I was borne onwards by Violette, hardly conscious of where I was or whither I was going. The little mare walked with a sunken head, only raising it to snort her contempt for the mangy Cossack ponies who were round her.

But suddenly the escort stopped, and I found that we had halted in the single street of a small Russian village. There was a church on one side, and on the other was a large stone house, the outline of which seemed to me to be familiar. I looked around me in the twilight, and then I saw that we had been led back to Dobrova, and that this house at the door of which we were waiting was the same house of the priest at which we had stopped in the morning. Here it was that Sophie in her innocence had translated the unlucky message which had in some strange way led us to our ruin. It was incredible that only a few hours before we had left this very spot with such high hopes, and that now only a few of us survived, waiting as beaten and humiliated men for whatever fate our brutal enemies might choose! But such is the life of the soldier, my friends, furs or rags, a full purse or an empty pocket,

ever changing from the best to the worst, with only his courage and his honour untouched.

The Russian horsemen dismounted, and my poor fellows were ordered to do the same. It was already late, and it was clearly their intention to spend the night in this village. There was great cheering amongst the peasants when they understood that we had all been taken, and they crowded out of their houses with flaming torches, the women carrying out tea and brandy for the Cossacks. Amongst others, the old priest came forth—the same whom we had seen in the morning, but now with a broad smile on his ugly face. Behind her father was Sophie. With horror I saw her clasp Major Sergine's hand as she congratulated him upon the victory he had won and the prisoners he had made. The old priest, her father, looked at me with an insolent face, and made insulting remarks at my expense, pointing at me with his thin and grimy hand. His pretty daughter Sophie looked at me also, but she said nothing, and I could read her tender pity in her dark eyes. At last she turned to Major Sergine and said something to him in Russian, on which he frowned and shook his head impatiently. She appeared to plead with him, standing there in the flood of light which shone from the open door of her father's house. My eyes were fixed upon the two faces, that of the beautiful girl and of the dark, fierce man, for my instinct told me that it was my own fate which was under discussion. For a long time the soldier shook his head, and then, at last, he appeared to give way. He turned to where I stood with a sergeant on guard beside me.

"These good people offer you the shelter of their roof for the night", said he to me, looking me up and down with hatred in his eyes. "I find it hard to refuse them, though I would rather see you on the snow.

It would cool your hot blood, you rascal of a Frenchman!"

I looked at him with the contempt that I felt.

"You were born a savage, and you will die one", said I.

My words enraged him, for he swore at me and raised his whip as if he would strike me.

"Silence, you insolent dog!" he cried. "If I had my way, some of the impudence would be frozen out of you before morning." Mastering his passion, he turned upon Sophie with what he meant to be a gallant manner. "If you have a cellar with a good lock", said he, "the fellow may lie in it for the night, since you have done him the honour to take an interest in his comfort. I must have his promise that he will not attempt to play us any tricks, as I am answerable for him until I hand him over to General Platoff to-morrow."

His superior manner was more than I could endure. He had evidently spoken French to the lady in order that I might understand the insulting way in which he referred to me.

"I will take no favour from you", said I. "You may do what you like, but I will never give you my promise."

The Russian shrugged his great shoulders, and turned away as if the matter were ended.

"Very well, my good fellow, so much the worse for your fingers and toes. We shall see how you are in the morning after a night in the snow."

"One moment, Major Sergine", cried Sophie. "You must not be so hard upon the prisoner. There are some special reasons why he has a claim upon our kindness and mercy."

The Russian looked with suspicion upon his face from her to me.

"What are the special reasons? You certainly seem to take a remarkable interest in this Frenchman", said he.

"The chief reason is that he has this very morning of his own accord released Captain Alexis Barakoff, of the Dragoons of Grodno."

"It is true", said Barakoff, who had come out of the house. "He captured me this morning, and he released me when I promised to remain in this house for twenty-four hours, rather than take me back to the French army, where I should have been starved."

"Since Colonel Gerard has acted so generously, you will surely, now that fortune has changed, allow us to offer him the poor shelter of our cellar upon this bitter night", said Sophie. "It is a small return for his generosity."

But the Dragoon was still in a bad temper.

"Let him give me his promise first that he will not attempt to escape", said he. "Do you hear, sir? Do you give me your promise?"

"I give you nothing", said I.

"Colonel Gerard", cried Sophie, turning to me with a persuasive smile, "you will give *me* your promise, will you not?"

"To you", I replied, "I can refuse nothing. I will give you my promise, with pleasure."

"There, Major Sergine", cried Sophie, in triumph, "that is surely sufficient. You have heard him say that he gives me his promise. I will be answerable for his safety."

The fellow gave an unwilling consent, though he was too ill-mannered to hide his disgust; and so I was led into the house, followed by the grim-faced father and by the big, black-bearded Dragoon. Downstairs, below the level of the ground, there was a large room,

where the winter logs were stored. Thither I was led, and I was given to understand that this was to be my lodging for the night. One side of the room was heaped up to the ceiling with firewood. The floors were of stone, and the walls bare, with a single, deep-set window upon one side, which was safely guarded with iron bars. For light I had a large stable lantern, which swung from the low ceiling. Major Sergine smiled as he took this down, and swung it round so as to throw its light into every corner of that dismal room.

"How do you like our Russian hotels, sir?" he asked, with his hateful sneer. "They are not very grand, but they are the best that we can give you. Perhaps the next time that you Frenchmen take a fancy to travel you will choose some other country where they will make you more comfortable." He stood laughing at me, his white teeth gleaming through his beard. Then he left me, and I heard the great key creak in the lock.

For an hour of utter misery, with my body chilled and my spirits low, I sat upon a pile of firewood, my face sunk upon my hands and my mind full of the saddest thoughts. It was cold enough within those four walls, but I thought of the sufferings of my poor troopers outside, and the thought of their sorrows increased my own. Then I paced up and down, and I clapped my hands together and kicked my feet against the walls to keep them from being frozen. The lamp gave out some warmth, but still it was bitterly cold, and I had had no food since morning. It seemed to me that every one had forgotten me, but at last I heard the key turn in the lock, and, to my surprise, my prisoner of the morning, Captain Alexis Barakoff, entered. A bottle of wine was clasped under his arm, and he carried a great plate of hot meat in front of him.

"Hush!" said he. "Do not say a word! Keep up your spirits. I cannot stop to explain, for Sergine is still with us. Keep awake and ready!" With these hurried words he laid down the welcome food and ran out of the room.

"Keep awake and ready!" The words rang in my ears. I ate my food and I drank my wine, but it was neither food nor wine which had warmed the heart within me. What could those words of Barakoff mean? Why was I to remain awake? For what was I to be ready? Was it possible that there was a chance yet of escape? When I thought of the salt-mines of Siberia on the one side and of my mother in France upon the other, a prayer rose from my heart, that the words of Barakoff might mean all that I hoped. But hour after hour struck upon the village clock, and still I heard nothing except the call of the Russian sentries in the street outside.

Then at last my heart leaped within me, for I heard a light step in the passage. An instant later the key turned, the door opened, and Sophie was in the room.

"Sir——" she cried.

"Etienne", said I.

"Nothing will change you", said she. "But is it possible that you do not hate me? Have you forgiven me the trick which I played you?"

"What trick?" I asked.

"Good heavens! is it possible that even now you have not understood it? You asked me to translate the despatch. I told you that it meant, 'If the French come to Minsk all is lost.'"

"What did it mean, then?"

"It means, 'Let the French come to Minsk. We are awaiting them.'"

I sprang back from her.

"You betrayed me!" I cried. "You drew me into this trap. It is to you that I owe the death and capture of my men. I was a fool to trust a woman."

"Do not be unjust, Colonel Gerard. I am a Russian woman, and my first duty is to my country. Would you not wish a French girl to have acted as I have done? If I had translated the message correctly, you would not have gone to Minsk and your squadron would have escaped. Tell me that you forgive me!"

She looked beautiful as she stood in front of me, begging for forgiveness. And yet, as I thought of my dead men, I could not take the hand which she held out to me.

"Very good", said she, as she dropped it by her side. "You feel for your own people and I feel for mine, and so we are equal. But you have said one wise and kindly thing within these walls, Colonel Gerard. You have said, 'One man more or less can make no difference in a struggle between two great armies.' Your kindness shall be rewarded. Behind that heap of firewood is an unguarded door. Here is the key to it. Go, Colonel Gerard, and I trust that we may never see each other's faces again."

I stood for an instant with the key in my hand. Then I handed it back to her.

"I cannot do it", I said.

"Why not?"

"I have given my promise."

"To whom?" she asked.

"Why, to you."

"And I release you from it."

My heart leapt with joy. Of course, what she said was true. I had refused to give my promise to Sergine. I owed him nothing. If she relieved me from my promise, my honour was clear. I took the key from her hand.

"You will find Captain Barakoff at the end of the village street", she said. "We of the North never forget either an injury or a kindness. He has your horse and your sword waiting for you. Do not delay an instant, for in two hours it will be dawn."

So I passed out into the starlit Russian night, and had a last glimpse of Sophie as she gazed after me through the open door. The door led into a narrow passage, and at the end of it stood a cloaked figure who held Violette by the bridle.

"You told me to be kind to the next French officer whom I found in distress", said he. "Good luck! A safe journey!" he whispered, as I jumped into the saddle. "Remember, 'Poltava' is the watchword."

It was fortunate that he had given it to me, for twice I had to pass Cossack sentries before I was clear of the lines. I had just ridden past the last outposts and hoped that I was a free man again when there was a soft thudding in the snow behind me, and a heavy man upon a great black horse came swiftly after me. My first thought was to put spurs to Violette. My second, as I saw a long black beard against a steel breast-plate, was to halt and wait for him.

"I thought that it was you, you dog of a Frenchman", he cried, shaking his drawn sword at me. "So you have broken your promise, you rascal?"

"I gave no promise."

"You lie, you hound!"

I looked round and no one was coming. The outposts were motionless and far distant. We were quite alone, with the moon above and the snow beneath. Fortune has always been my friend.

"I gave you no promise."

"You gave it to the lady."

"Then I will answer for it to the lady."

"That would suit you better, no doubt. But, unfortunately, you will have to answer for it to me."

"I am ready."

"Your sword, too! There is treason in this! Ah, I see it all! The woman has helped you. She shall see Siberia for this night's work."

When he said that, I determined that he should die. For Sophie's sake I could not let him go back alive. Our blades crossed, and an instant later mine was through his black beard and deep in his throat. I was on the ground almost as soon as he, but the one thrust was enough. He died, snapping his teeth at my ankles like a savage wolf.

Two days later I had rejoined the army at Smolensk, and was a part once more of that dreary procession which tramped onwards through the snow, leaving a long track of blood to show the path which it had taken.

I have told you enough, my friends. I cannot bear to revive the memory of those days of misery and death. They still come to trouble me in my dreams. When we halted at last in Warsaw, we had left behind us three-fourths of our comrades. But we did not leave behind us the honour of Etienne Gerard. They have said that I broke my promise. But no man dares to say it to my face, for the story is as I tell it, and old though I am, my finger is not too weak to press a trigger when my honour is in question.

EXERCISES.

1. Describe the French army's advance to Moscow, and its retreat.
2. What was the trick that Sophie played on Gerard?
3. What part does Sergine play in this adventure of Gerard?

IV

HOW THE BRIGADIER PLAYED FOR A KINGDOM.

AFTER the Russian campaign the remains of our poor army were stationed along the western bank of the Elbe, where they might warm their frozen blood and try, with the help of the good German beer, to put a little flesh between their skin and their bones. There were some things which we could not hope to regain, for, during that retreat, many of our soldiers had lost their fingers and toes, through frost-bite. Still, thin and crippled as we were, we had much to be thankful for when we thought of our poor comrades whom we had left behind, and of the snowfields—the horrible, horrible snowfields, stained with blood. To this day, my friends, I do not care to see red and white together. Even my red cap thrown down upon my white counterpane has given me dreams in which I have seen those monstrous plains, the reeling, tortured army, and the crimson smears which glared upon the snow behind them.

Of the half-million who crossed the Elbe in the year 1812, about forty thousand infantry were left in the following spring. But these forty thousand were terrible men: men of iron, who had lived on horse-flesh, and slept in the snow; filled, too, with rage and bitterness against the Russians. They would hold the Elbe until the great army, which the Emperor was raising in France, should be ready to help them to cross it once more.

But the cavalry was in a pitiful condition. When

I first paraded my own hussars, I burst into tears at the sight of them. My fine men and my beautiful horses—it broke my heart to see the state to which they were reduced. I set to work to repair their disasters, and had already constructed two good squadrons, when an order came that all colonels of cavalry should return instantly to the headquarters of the regiments in France to train fresh men and horses for the coming campaign.

You will think, no doubt, that I was overjoyed at this chance of visiting home once more. I will not deny that it was a pleasure to me to know that I should see my mother again; but there were others in the army who had a stronger claim. I would have given my place to any who had wives and children whom they might not see again. However, there is no arguing when the blue paper with the red seal brings your orders, so within an hour I was off upon my great ride from the Elbe to the French frontier. At last I was to have a period of quiet. War lay behind my mare's tail and peace in front of her nostrils. So I thought, as the sound of the bugles died in the distance, and the long, white road curled away in front of me through plain and forest and mountain, with France somewhere beyond the horizon.

It is interesting, but it is also fatiguing, to ride in the rear of an army. In the harvest time our soldiers could do without supplies, for they had been trained to pluck the grain in the fields as they passed, and to grind it for themselves when they halted for the night. It was at that time of year, therefore, that those swift marches were performed which were the wonder and the despair of Europe. But now the starving men had to be made strong once more, and I was forced to draw my horse into the ditch continually as flocks

of sheep and herds of bullocks came streaming past with waggon-loads of beer and brandy. Sometimes, too, I would hear the rattle of drums and the shrill whistle of the fifes, and long columns of our good little infantrymen would swing past me with the white dust lying thick upon their blue coats. These were old soldiers drawn from the garrisons of our German fortresses, for it was not until May that the new troops began to arrive from France.

Well, I was rather tired of this continual stopping and dodging, so that I was not sorry when I came to a place where the road divided, and found that I could take the southern and quieter branch. The road wound through groves of oaks and beeches, which shot their branches across the path. You will think it strange that a Colonel of Hussars should again and again pull up his horse in order to admire the beauty of the feathery branches and the little, green, new-budded leaves, but if you had spent six months among the fir trees of Russia, you would be able to understand me.

There was something, however, which pleased me very much less than the beauty of the forests, and that was the words and looks of the people who lived in the woodland villages. We had always been excellent friends with the Germans, and during the last six years they had never seemed to bear us any ill-will for having made free use of their country. We had shown them kindness and they had returned it, so that good, comfortable Germany was a second home to all of us. But now there was something which I could not understand in the behaviour of the people. The travellers made no answer to my greetings, the foresters turned their heads away to avoid seeing me; and in the villages the people would gather into knots in the roadway and would frown at me as I passed.

It was in a little village, just ten miles out of Altenburg, that this behaviour became most marked. I had stopped at the inn there just to moisten my lips and to wash the dust out of poor Violette's throat. It was always my way to pay some little compliment, if I could, to those I met, and I raised my glass in greeting to the folk who drank their beer by the door. But they all turned their backs on me, except one fellow, who cried to his companions, "Drink with me, boys! Drink success to the letter J!" At that they all emptied their beer mugs and laughed; but their laughter was not friendly.

I was turning this over in my head and wondering what their rude conduct could mean, when I saw, as I rode from the village, a great J freshly carved upon a tree. I had already seen more than one in my morning's ride, but I had given no thought to them until the words of the man at the inn gave them an importance. A respectable-looking person happened to be riding past me at the moment, so I turned to him for information.

"Can you tell me, sir," said I, "what this letter J is?"

He looked at it and then to me in the most peculiar fashion. "Young man", said he, "it is not the letter N." Then before I could ask more he dug his spurs into his horse's ribs and rode, at full speed, upon his way.

At first his words had no particular meaning in my mind, but as I trotted onwards Violette happened to turn her head, and my eyes were caught by the gleam of the brazen N's at the end of the bridle-chain. It was the Emperor's mark. And those J's meant something which was opposite to it. Things had been happening in Germany, then, during our absence, and

the country had begun to stir, like a giant awakening from a sleep. I thought of the discontented faces that I had seen, and I felt that if I could only have looked into the hearts of these people I might have had some strange news to bring into France with me. It made me the more eager to get my new men, and to have ten strong squadrons under my command.

While these thoughts were passing through my head I had been alternately walking and trotting, as a man should who has a long journey before him, and a willing horse beneath him. The forest was not thick at this point, and beside the road there lay a great heap of firewood. As I passed there came a sharp sound from among the wood, and, glancing round, I saw a face looking out at me—a hot, red face, like that of a man who is beside himself with excitement and anxiety. A second glance told me that it was the very person with whom I had talked an hour before in the village.

"Come nearer!" he hissed. "Nearer still! Now dismount and pretend to be mending your stirrup leather. Spies may be watching us, and it means death to me if I am seen helping you."

"Death!" I whispered. "From whom?"

"From the Servants of Justice. From the men who ride by night."

"But this is all strange to me", said I, still stooping over my horse's stirrup. "Who are these Servants of Justice?"

"They are a secret society which has planned a great rising that is to drive you Frenchmen out of Germany, just as you have been driven out of Russia."

"And these J's stand for it?"

"They are the signal. I should have told you all this in the village, but I dared not be seen speaking

with you. I galloped through the woods to cut you off, and concealed both my horse and myself."

"I am very grateful to you", said I, "and the more so as you are the only German that I have met to-day from whom I have had ordinary politeness."

"All that I possess I have gained through selling supplies of food to the French armies", said he. "Your Emperor has been a good friend to me. But I beg that you will ride on now, for we have talked long enough. But beware of the Servants of Justice."

"Are they a set of brigands?" I asked.

"No, no", said he. "Men of the best families in Germany. But I implore you to ride forwards, for I have risked my good name and my life in order to carry you this warning."

Well, if I had had plenty to think about before, you can fancy how I felt after my strange talk with the man among the firewood. What impressed me even more than his words was his shivering, broken voice, his twitching face, and his eyes glancing swiftly to right and left, and opening in horror whenever a branch cracked upon a tree. It was clear that he was in extreme terror, and it is possible that he had good reason, for shortly after I had left him I heard a distant gunshot and a shouting from somewhere behind me. It may have been some sportsman halloaing to his dogs, but I never again heard of or saw the man who had given me my warning.

I kept a good look-out after this, riding swiftly where the country was open, and slowly where there might be an ambush. It was serious for me, since five hundred good miles of German soil lay in front of me; but somehow I did not take it very much to heart, for the Germans had always seemed to me to be a kindly, gentle people, whose hands closed more readily round a

pipe-stem than a sword-hilt. I did not know then that that kindly appearance masks cruelty as fierce as, and far more persistent than, that of the Spaniard or the Italian.

And it was not long before I had proof that the French had worse things to face in Germany than rough words and hard looks. I had come to a spot where the road runs upwards through a wild tract of open land and vanishes into a wood. I may have been half-way up the hill when, looking forward, I saw something gleaming under the shadow of the tree-trunks, and a man came out with a coat which was so decorated with gold that he blazed like a fire in the sunlight. He appeared to be very drunk, for he reeled and staggered as he came towards me. One of his hands was held up to his ear and clutched a great red handkerchief, which was fixed to his neck.

I had reined up the mare and was looking at him with some disgust, for it seemed strange to me that a man who wore so brilliant a uniform should show himself in such a state in broad daylight. He looked hard in my direction and came slowly onwards, stopping from time to time and swaying about as he gazed at me. Suddenly, as I again advanced, he screamed out, and, stumbling forwards, he fell with a crash upon the dusty road. His hands flew forward with the fall, and I saw that what I had taken for a red cloth was a monstrous wound, which had left a great gap in his neck.

"My God!" I cried, as I sprang to his aid. "You are wounded: I though that you were drunk!"

"Not drunk, but dying", said he. "But thank Heaven that I have seen a French officer while I have still strength to speak."

I laid him upon the grass and poured some brandy

down his throat. All round us was the vast country side, green and peaceful, with nothing living in sight save only the dying man beside me.

"Who has done this?" I asked, "and what are you? You are French, and yet the uniform is strange to me."

"It is that of the Emperor's new guard of honour. I am the Marquis of Château St. Arnaud, and I am the ninth of my family who has died in the service of France. I have been pursued and wounded by Germans who call themselves the Servants of Justice, but I hid in the wood, and waited in the hope that a Frenchman might pass. I could not be sure at first if you were friend or foe, but I felt that death was very near, and that I must take the chance."

"Keep your heart up, comrade", said I; "I have seen a man with a worse wound who has recovered."

"No, no", he whispered; "I am going fast." He laid his hand upon mine as he spoke, and I saw that his finger-nails were already blue. "But I have papers here in my coat which you must carry at once to the Prince of Saxe-Felstein, at his Castle of Hof. He is still true to us, but the Princess is our deadly enemy. She is trying to make him declare war against the French. If he does so, others who are still undecided will join him, for the King of Prussia is his uncle and the King of Bavaria his cousin. These papers will keep him on our side if they can only reach him before he takes the last step. Place them in his hands to-night, and, perhaps, you will have saved all Germany for the Emperor. If my horse had not been shot, I might, in spite of my——" he choked, and the cold hand tightened into a grip, which left mine as bloodless as itself. Then, with a groan, his head fell back, and it was all over with him.

Here was a fine start for my journey home. I was left with a task of which I knew little, which would compel me to delay the urgent needs of my hussars, and which at the same time was of such importance that it was impossible for me to avoid it. I opened the Marquis's coat, the brilliance of which had been planned by the Emperor in order to attract those young men of good family from whom he hoped to raise these new regiments of his Guard. It was a small packet of papers which I drew out, tied up with silk, and addressed to the Prince of Saxe-Felstein. In the corner, in a large, untidy hand, which I knew to be the Emperor's own, was written: "Urgent and most important". Those four words were an order to me—an order as clear as if it had come straight from the Emperor's firm lips while his cold grey eyes looked into mine. My troopers might wait for their horses, the dead Marquis might lie where I had laid him on the grass, but if the mare and her rider had a breath left in them the papers should reach the Prince that night.

I should not have feared to ride by the road through the wood, for I have learned in Spain that the safest time to pass through an unfriendly country is after an outrage, and that the moment of danger is when all is peaceful. When I came to look at my map, however, I saw that Hof lay further to the south of me, and that I might reach it more directly by keeping to the moors. I set off, therefore, and had not gone fifty yards before two shots rang out from the wood and a bullet hummed past me like a bee. It was clear that the night-riders were bolder in their ways than most brigands and that my mission would have ended where it had begun if I had kept to the road.

It was a mad ride, that—a ride with a loose rein, over rough ground, plunging through bushes, flying

down hill-sides, with my neck at the mercy of my dear little Violette. But she never slipped, she never hesitated, as swift and as surefooted as if she knew that her rider carried the fate of all Germany beneath the buttons of his coat. I had long borne the name of being the best horseman in six brigades of cavalry, but I never rode as I rode then. The wild pigeons which flew overhead did not take a straighter course than Violette and I below. I had an object which was worth any risk, and I thought no more of my life than of the earth that flew from my horse's heels.

We struck the road once more as the light was failing, and galloped into the little village of Lobenstein. But we had hardly got into the village street, when one of the mare's shoes came off, and I had to lead her to the shoeing-smith. His fire was low, and his day's work done, so that it would be an hour at the least before I could hope to ride on to Hof. Cursing at the delay, I strode into the village inn and ordered a cold chicken and some wine to be served for my dinner. It was only a few miles to Hof, and I had every hope that I might deliver my papers to the Prince on that very night, and be on my way for France next morning with despatches for the Emperor in my coat-pocket. I will tell you now what happened to me in the inn of Lobenstein.

The chicken and the wine had been placed on the table, and I was about to begin my meal, when I was aware of a murmur and a scuffling in the hall outside my door. At first I thought that it was some quarrel between drunken peasants, and I left them to settle their own affairs. But suddenly there broke from among the low, angry growl of the voices a sound that would make Etienne Gerard leap from his death-bed. It was the cry of a woman in pain. Down clattered

my knife and my fork, and in an instant I was in the midst of the crowd which had gathered outside my door.

The landlord was there and his fair-haired wife, the two men from the stables, a maid-servant, and two or three villagers. All of them, women and men, were flushed and angry, while there in the centre of them, with pale cheeks and terror in her eyes, stood one of the loveliest women I have ever seen. With her queenly head thrown back, frightened but defiant, she looked as she gazed round her like a creature of a different race from the vile, coarse-featured crowd who surrounded her. I had not taken two steps from my door before she sprang to meet me, her hand resting upon my arm and her blue eyes sparkling with joy and triumph.

"A French soldier and gentleman!" she cried. "Now at last I am safe."

"Yes, madam, you are safe", said I, and I took her hand in mine in order that I might give her confidence. "You have only to command me and I will obey you", I added, kissing the hand as a sign that I meant what I was saying.

"I am Polish", she cried; "the Countess Palotta is my name. They abuse me because I love the French. I do not know what they might have done to me if you had not come to my help."

I kissed her hand again lest she should doubt my intentions. Then I turned upon the crowd with so fierce an expression that in an instant the hall was empty.

"Countess", said I, "you are now under my protection. You are faint, and a glass of wine is necessary to restore your strength." I offered her my arm and led her into my room, where she sat by my side at the table and took the refreshment which I offered her.

I had thought her beautiful when I first saw her, pale and frightened, but, now that her fears were gone, she looked still more lovely. She seemed to light up the room with her beauty. She must have read my admiration in my eyes, and it seemed to me that my own appearance did not displease her.

Her talk was as charming as her face. In a few words she explained that she was travelling to Poland, and that her brother who had been with her had fallen ill upon the way. She had more than once met with ill-treatment from the country folk because she could not conceal her good-will towards the French. Then turning from her own affairs she questioned me about the army, and presently drew me on to tell about myself, the countries I had seen and the adventures I had met with. Most women make the mistake of talking rather too much about their own affairs, but this one seemed fascinated by my tales. As soon as I had finished one, she asked for another, and then for more and more and more. The hours slipped rapidly by, and it was with horror that I heard the village clock strike eleven, and so learned that for four hours I had forgotten the Emperor's business.

"Pardon me, my dear lady", I cried, springing to my feet, "but I must go on instantly to Hof."

She rose also, and looked at me with a pale, reproachful face. "And what is to become of me?" she said.

"I am on the Emperor's business. I have already stayed far too long. My duty calls me, and I must go."

"You must go? And I must be left alone to these ruffians? Oh, why did I ever meet you? Why did you ever teach me to rely upon your strength?" Her eyes grew dim, and in an instant she was sobbing upon my bosom.

Here was a trying moment for me! I smoothed

her hair and whispered such comfort as I could think of in her ear, with one arm round her lest she should faint. She turned her tear-stained face to mine. "Water", she whispered. "For God's sake, water!"

I saw that in another moment she would be senseless. I laid her down upon a chair, and then rushed furiously from the room, hunting from chamber to chamber for a jug of water. It was some minutes before I could get one and hurry back with it. You can imagine my feelings to find the room empty and the lady gone.

Not only was she gone, but her cap and her gloves which had lain upon the table were gone also. I rushed out and roared for the landlord. He declared he knew nothing of the matter, had never seen the woman before, and did not care if he never saw her again. I shouted to the peasants at the door, asking if they had seen anyone ride away. No, they had seen nobody. I searched here and searched there, until at last I happened to find myself in front of a looking-glass, where I stood with my eyes staring and my mouth wide open.

Four buttons of my coat were open, and I did not need to put my hand up to know that my precious papers were gone. I had been fooled by a woman. The creature had robbed me, while she clung to my breast. Even while I smoothed her hair, and whispered kind words into her ear, her hands had been at work beneath my cloak. And here I was, at the very last step of my journey, without the power of carrying out this mission which had already deprived one good man of his life, and was likely to rob another one of his reputation. What would the Emperor say when he heard that I had lost his papers? I could have rolled upon the ground in my despair.

But one thing was certain—the uproar in the hall and the attack upon the so-called Countess had all been

a piece of acting from the beginning. This villainous innkeeper must be in the plot. From him I might learn who she was and where my papers had gone. I snatched up my sword from the table and rushed out in search of him. But the scoundrel had guessed what I would do, and was ready for me. I found him in the corner of the yard, a gun in his hands and a ferocious dog held upon a chain by his son. Two servants, with pitchforks, stood upon either side, and the wife held a great lantern behind him, so as to guide his aim.

"Ride away, sir, ride away!" he cried, in a frightened voice. "Your horse is at the door, and no one will interfere with you if you go your way; but if you come against us, you are alone against three brave men."

I had only the dog to fear, for the two forks and the gun were shaking about like branches in a wind. Still, I considered that though I might force an answer with my sword-point at the throat of this fat rascal, I should still have no means of knowing whether that answer was the truth. It would be a struggle then, with much to lose and nothing certain to gain. I looked them up and down, therefore, in a way that set their foolish weapons shaking worse than ever, and then, throwing myself upon my mare, I galloped away.

I had already made up my mind. Although I had lost my papers, I could make a very good guess as to what their contents were, and this I would say from my own lips to the Prince of Saxe-Felstein, as though the Emperor had commissioned me to convey his message in that way. It was a bold stroke and a dangerous one, but it was that or nothing. When all Germany hung in the balance the game should not be lost if the nerve of one man could save it.

It was midnight when I rode into Hof, but every window was blazing, which was enough in itself, in that sleepy country, to tell how excited the people were. There was hooting and jeering as I rode through the crowded streets, and once a stone flew past my head, but I kept upon my way, neither slowing nor quickening my pace, until I came to the palace. There were lights in every window, and the dark shadows, coming and going against the yellow glare, spoke of the turmoil within. I handed my mare to a servant at the gate, and striding in I boldly demanded of an official, whom I took to be one of the Prince's secretaries, to see his master instantly upon urgent business.

The hall was dark, but I was conscious as I entered of a buzz of innumerable voices, which hushed into silence as I loudly proclaimed my mission. Some great meeting was being held then—a meeting which, as my instincts told me, was to decide this very question of war and peace. It was possible that I might still be in time to turn the scale for the Emperor and for France. The secretary whom I had addressed looked blackly at me, and, showing me into a small room, he left me. A minute later he returned to say that the Prince could not be disturbed at present, but that the Princess would take my message.

The Princess! What use was there in giving it to her? Had I not been warned that she was German in heart and soul, and that it was she who was turning her husband and her State against us?

"It is the Prince that I must see", said I.

"No, it is the Princess", said a voice at the door, and a woman entered. "Von Rosen, you had best stay with us. Now, sir, what is it that you have to say to either Prince or Princess of Saxe-Felstein?"

At the first sound of the voice I had sprung to my

feet. At the first glance I had thrilled with anger. Not twice in a lifetime does one meet that noble figure, that queenly head, and those eyes as blue as the summer skies, and as chilling as the frosts of winter.

"I have little time to spare, sir!" she cried, with an impatient tap of her foot. "What have you to say to me?"

"What have I to say to you?" I cried. "What can I say, except that you have taught me never to trust a woman again? You have ruined and dishonoured me for ever."

She looked with raised brows at her attendant.

"Is this the raving of fever?" said she. "Perhaps a little blood-letting would do this gentleman good."

"Ah, you can act!" I cried. "You have shown me that already."

"Do you mean that we have met before?"

"I mean that you have robbed me within the last two hours."

"This is not to be borne", she cried, with an admirable pretence of anger. "You claim, as I understand, to be an ambassador, but there are limits to the privileges which such an office brings with it."

"You play your part admirably", said I. "Your Highness will not make a fool of me twice in one night." I sprang forward and, stooping down, caught up the edge of her dress. "You would have done well to change it after you had ridden so far and so fast", said I.

Her pale cheeks suddenly flushed crimson.

"You are insolent!" she cried. "Call the guard, Von Rosen, and have him driven out of the palace!"

"I will see the Prince first."

"You will never see the Prince. Ah! Hold him, Von Rosen, hold him!"

She had forgotten the man with whom she had to

deal—was it likely that I would wait until they could bring their rascals? One spring took me out of the chamber. In another I had crossed the hall. An instant later I had burst into the great room from which the murmur of the meeting had come. At the far end I saw a figure upon a high chair raised upon a platform. Beneath him was a line of high officials, and then on every side I saw vaguely the heads of a vast assembly. Into the centre of the room I strode, my sword clanking.

"I am the messenger of the Emperor", I shouted. "I bear his message to His Highness the Prince of Saxe-Felstein."

The man upon the platform raised his head, and I saw that his face was thin and pale, and that his back was bowed as though some huge burden weighed upon his shoulders.

"Your name, sir?" he asked.

"Colonel Etienne Gerard, of the Third Hussars."

Every face in the gathering was turned upon me, and I heard the rustle of the innumerable necks and saw the countless eyes without meeting one friendly one amongst them. The woman had hurried past me, and was whispering, with many shakes of her head and wavings of her hands, into the Prince's ear. I threw out my chest and curled my moustache, glancing round fearlessly at the assembly. They were men, all of them, professors from the college, some of their students, soldiers, gentlemen, work-people, all very silent and serious. In one corner there sat a group of men in black, with riding-coats drawn over their shoulders. They leaned their heads towards each other, whispering under their breath, and with every movement I caught the clank of their swords or the clink of their spurs. No doubt, they were some of the Servants of Justice,

the men who rode by night and who had killed my poor fellow-countryman.

"The Emperor's private letter to me informs me that it is the Marquis Château St. Arnaud who is bearing his despatches", said the Prince.

"The Marquis has been foully murdered", I answered, and a buzz rose up from the people as I spoke. Many heads were turned, I noticed, towards the dark men in the cloaks.

"Where are your papers?" asked the Prince.

"I have none."

A fierce clamour rose instantly around me. "He is a spy! He plays a part!" they cried. "Hang him!" roared a deep voice from the corner, and a dozen others took up the shout. All I did was to draw out my handkerchief and flicked the dust from the fur of my coat. The Prince held out his thin hands, and the tumult died away.

"Where, then, is your letter of introduction, and what is your message?"

"My uniform is my introduction, and my message is for your private ear."

He passed his hand over his forehead like a weak man who is at his wits' end what to do. The Princess stood beside him with her hand upon his throne, and again whispered in his ear.

"We are here in council together, some of my faithful subjects and myself", said he. "I have no secrets from them, and whatever message the Emperor may send to me at such a time concerns their interests no less than mine."

There was a hum of applause at this, and every eye was turned once more upon me. It was an awkward position in which I found myself, for it is one thing to address eight hundred hussars, and another

to speak to such an audience on such a subject. But I fixed my eyes upon the Prince, and tried to say what I should have said if we had been alone, shouting it out, too, as though I had my regiment on parade.

"You have often expressed friendship for the Emperor", I cried. "It is now at last that this friendship is about to be tried. If you will stand firm, he will reward you as only he can reward. It is an easy thing for him to turn a Prince into a King and a province into a power. His eyes are fixed upon you, and though you can do little to harm him, you can ruin yourself. At this moment he is crossing the Rhine with two hundred thousand men. Every fortress in the country is in his hands. He will be upon you in a week, and if you have played him false, God help both you and your people. You think that he is weakened because a few of us were frost-bitten last winter. Look there!" I cried, pointing to a great star which blazed through the window above the Prince's head. "That is the Emperor's star. When it fails, he will fail—but not before."

You would have been proud of me, my friends, if you could have seen and heard me, for I clashed my sword as I spoke, as though my regiment was waiting outside in the courtyard. They listened to me in silence, but the back of the Prince bowed more and more as though the burden which weighed upon it was greater than his strength. He looked round with careworn eyes.

"We have heard a Frenchman speak for France", said he. "Let us have a German speak for Germany."

The people glanced at each other, and whispered to their neighbours. My speech, as I think, had its effect, and no man wished to be the first to commit himself in the eyes of the Emperor. The Princess

"'THAT IS THE EMPEROR'S STAR. WHEN IT FAILS, HE WILL FAIL—BUT NOT BEFORE.'"

looked round her with blazing eyes, and her clear voice broke the silence.

"Is a woman to give this Frenchman his answer?" she cried. "Is it possible, then, that among the Servants of Justice there is none who can use his tongue as well as his sword?"

Over went a table with a crash, and a young man had bounded upon one of the chairs. He had the face of one inspired—pale, eager, with wild piercing eyes, and tangled hair. His sword hung straight from his side, and his riding-boots were brown with mire.

"It is Korner!" the people cried. "It is young Korner, the poet! Ah, he will sing, he will sing."

And he sang! It was soft, at first, and dreamy, telling of old Germany, the mother of nations, of the rich, warm plains, and the grey cities, and the fame of dead heroes. But then verse after verse rang like a trumpet-call. It was of the Germany of now, the Germany which had been taken unawares and had been overthrown, but which was up again, and snapping the bonds upon her giant limbs. What was life that one should cling to it? What was glorious death that one should shrink from it? The mother, the great mother, was calling. Her sigh was in the night wind. She was crying to her own children for help. Would they come? Would they come? Would they come?

Ah, that terrible song, the inspired face and the ringing voice! Where were I, and France, and the Emperor? They did not shout, these people—they howled. They were up on the chairs and the tables. They were raving, sobbing, the tears running down their faces. Korner had sprung from the chair, and his comrades were round him with their swords in the air. A flush had come into the pale face of the Prince, and he rose from his throne.

"Colonel Gerard", said he, "you have heard the answer which you are to carry to your Emperor. We have made our choice, my children. Your Prince and you must stand or fall together."

He bowed to show that all was over, and the people with a shout made for the door to carry the news into the town. I had done all that a brave man could, and so I was not sorry to be carried out amid the crowd. Why should I stay in the palace? I had had my answer and must carry it, such as it was. I wished to see neither Hof nor its people again until I entered it with the advance-guard of an army. I turned from the mob, then, and walked silently and sadly in the direction in which they had led the mare.

It was dark down there by the stables, and I was peering round for the servant, when suddenly my two arms were seized from behind. There were hands at my wrists and at my throat, and I felt the cold end of a pistol under my ear.

"Keep your lips closed, you French dog", whispered a fierce voice. "We have him, captain."

"Have you the bridle?"

"Here it is."

"Throw it over his head."

I felt the cold leather tighten round my neck. A servant with a stable lantern had come out and was gazing upon the scene. In its dim light I saw stern faces breaking everywhere through the gloom, with the black caps and dark cloaks of the night-riders.

"What would you do with him, captain?" cried a voice.

"Hang him at the palace gate."

"An ambassador?"

"An ambassador without papers."

"But the Prince?"

"Do you not see that the Prince will then be bound to our side? He will be beyond all hope of forgiveness. At present he may swing round to-morrow as he has done before. He may eat his words, but a dead hussar is more than he can explain."

"No, no, Von Strelitz, we cannot do it", said another voice.

"Can we not? I shall show you that!" and there came a jerk on the bridle which nearly pulled me to the ground. At the same instant a sword flashed and the leather was cut through within two inches of my neck.

"By heaven, Korner, this is mutiny", cried the captain. "You may hang yourself before you are through with it."

"I have drawn my sword as a soldier and not as a brigand", said the young poet. "Blood may dim its blade, but never dishonour. Comrades, will you stand by and see this gentleman ill-treated?"

A dozen swords flew from their sheaths, and it was evident that my friends and my foes were about equal in number. But the angry voices and the gleam of steel had brought the folk running from all parts.

"The Princess!" they cried. "The Princess is coming!"

And even as they spoke I saw her in front of us, her sweet face framed in the darkness. I had cause to hate her, for she had cheated and fooled me, and yet her beauty had thrilled me. I know not whether she lies under her German earth, or whether she still lives on, a grey-haired woman, in her Castle of Hof, but she stays ever, young and lovely, in the heart and memory of Etienne Gerard.

"For shame!" she cried, advancing towards me, and tearing with her own hands the bridle from my

neck. "You are fighting on the side of Justice, and yet you would begin with such a vile deed as this. This man is mine, and he who touches a hair of his head will answer for it to me."

They were glad enough to steal off into the darkness before those scornful eyes. Then she turned once more to me.

"You can follow me, Colonel Gerard", she said. "I have a word to speak to you."

I walked behind her to the room into which I had first been shown. She closed the door, and then looked at me with a merry gleam in her eyes."

"I wish to speak to you", said she. "But remember that it is the Princess of Saxe-Felstein who speaks, and not the poor Countess Palotta of Poland."

"Whatever the name may be", I answered, "I helped a lady whom I believed to be in distress, and have been robbed of my papers and almost of my honour as a reward."

"Colonel Gerard", said she, "we have been playing a game, you and I, and the prize was a great one. You have shown by delivering a message which was never given to you that you would stand at nothing in the cause of your country. My heart is German and yours is French, and I also would go all lengths, even to deceit and to theft, if at this crisis I could help my suffering fatherland. You see how frank I am."

"You tell me nothing that I have not seen."

"But now that the game is played and won, why should we bear ill-will towards each other? I will say this, that if ever I were in such a distress as that which I pretended in the inn of Lobenstein, I should never wish to meet a more gallant protector or a truer-hearted gentleman that Colonel Etienne Gerard. I had never thought that I could feel for a Frenchman

as I felt for you when I took the papers from your coat."

"But you took them none the less."

"They were necessary to me and to Germany. I knew the arguments which they contained and the effect which they would have upon the Prince. If they had reached him all would have been lost."

"Why should your Highness descend to such tricks when a dozen of these brigands, who wished to hang me at your castle gate, would have done the work as well?"

"They are not brigands, but men of the best families in Germany", she cried, hotly. "If you have been roughly used, you will remember the shame which every German has had to bear. As to why I did not have you seized upon the road, I may say that I had parties out on all sides, and that I was waiting at Lobenstein to hear of their success. When instead of their news you yourself arrived I was in despair, for there was only the one weak woman between you and my husband. You see that what I did was a last resource."

"I confess that you have conquered me, your Highness, and it only remains for me to retire."

"But you will take your papers with you." She held them out to me as she spoke. "The Prince has taken the plunge now, and he cannot turn back. You can return these to the Emperor, and tell him that we refused to receive them. No one can accuse you then of having lost your despatches. Good-bye, Colonel Gerard, and the best I can wish you is that when you reach France you may remain there. In a year's time there will be no place for a Frenchman upon this side of the Rhine."

And thus it was that I played against the Princess of Saxe-Felstein with all Germany for a prize, and lost

my game to her. I had much to think of as I walked my poor, tired Violette along the highway which leads westward from Hof. But amid all the thoughts there came back to me always the proud, beautiful face of the German woman, and the voice of the soldier-poet as he sang from the chair. And I understood then that there was something terrible in this strong, patient Germany, something too strong for us to conquer. And as I rode I saw the dawn was breaking, and that the great star at which I had pointed through the palace window was dim and pale in the western sky.

EXERCISES.

1. Who were the Servants of Justice? Why were they so called?
2. Describe what happened at the assembly in the Castle of Hof?

V

HOW THE BRIGADIER WON HIS MEDAL

I HAVE told you how Germany began to turn against France. The movement spread quickly. First Prussia joined the Russians against us: other German kingdoms followed, and then Austria went over to the side of our enemies. There was a great battle at Leipzig, which cost the Emperor more than a hundred thousand men and compelled him to retire out of Germany and over the French frontier. Early in 1814, the French army was at Rheims, between Paris and the enemies that threatened the capital, the Prussians, under Blucher, to the north, and Schwarzenberg, with an army of Austrians and Russians, on the south. Our situation was not a comfortable one, but we did not despair. So long as the Emperor was at our head, there was hope: the enemy never knew what he would do next, for he would dart out first against one of them, and then against another, and he was always inventing fresh plans for their defeat.

A day came when I received a message that I was wanted at the Emperor's headquarters. I hastened to obey, and, on my arrival, found another cavalry officer, Major Charpentier, already waiting there. The Duke of Tarentum, who was one of the Emperor's marshals, received us. "Brigadier Gerard and Major Charpentier", said he, while we saluted, "the Emperor has a mission for you." Then, without more words, he flung open the door and announced us.

It was Napoleon's custom to show himself to the troops rarely except on horseback, and I think he did

wisely, for he made a very good figure in the saddle. As we saw him now he was easily the shortest man in the room. It was evident, too, that his body was too long for his legs. With his big, round head, his curved shoulders, and his clean-shaven face, he was more like a professor at the university than the first soldier in France. He had a firm mouth, however, and his eyes were remarkable. I have seem them once turned on me in anger, and I would rather ride against a regiment of the enemy on an exhausted horse than face them again. I am not a man who is easily checked either.

He was standing at the side of the room, away from the window, looking up at a great map of the country which was hung upon the wall. Berthier, another of his Marshals, stood beside him, trying to look wise, and just as we entered, Napoleon snatched his sword impatiently from him and pointed with it on the map. He was talking fast and low, and I supposed that he was explaining some new plan of campaign. As we entered, an officer advanced to us, but the Emperor stopped him and beckoned us to his side.

"You have not yet received the cross of honour, Brigadier Gerard?" he asked.

I replied that I had not.

"And you, Major?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Then you shall both have your opportunity now."

He led us to the great map upon the wall and placed the tip of Berthier's sword on Rheims.

"I will be frank with you, gentlemen, as with two comrades. You have both been with me in many campaigns, I believe?" He had a strangely pleasant smile, which used to light up his pale face with a kind of cold sunshine. "Here, at Rheims, are our present headquarters. Very good. Here is Paris, distant by

road nearly a hundred miles. Blucher lies to the north, Schwarzenberg to the south." He pointed at the map with the sword as he spoke.

"Now", said he, "the further into the country these people march, the more completely I shall crush them. They are about to advance upon Paris. Very good. Let them do so. My brother, the King of Spain, will be there with a hundred thousand men. It is to him that I send you. You will hand him this letter, a copy of which I entrust to each of you. It is to tell him that I am coming at once, in two days' time, with every man and horse and gun to his relief. I must give the troops forty-eight hours to recover. Then I shall march straight to Paris! You understand me, gentlemen?"

Ah, if I could tell you the glow of pride which it gave me to be taken into the great man's confidence in this way. As he handed our letters to us I clicked my spurs and threw out my chest, smiling and nodding to let him know that I saw what he would be after. He smiled also, and rested his hand for a moment upon my shoulder.

"I will show you your route", said he, turning back to the map. "Your orders are to ride together as far as Bazoches. You will then separate, the one making for Paris by Oulchy and Neuilly, and the other to the north by Braine, Soissons, and Senlis. Have you anything to say, Brigadier Gerard?"

I am a rough soldier, but I have words and ideas. I had begun to speak about glory and the peril of France when he cut me short.

"And you, Major Charpentier?"

"If we find our route unsafe, are we at liberty to choose another?" said he.

"Soldiers do not choose, they obey." He bowed

his head to show that we were dismissed, and turned round to Berthier. I do not know what he said, but I heard them both laughing.

Well, as you may suppose, we lost little time in getting upon our way. In half an hour we were riding down the High Street of Rheims, and it struck twelve o'clock as we passed the Cathedral. I had my little grey mare, Violette, the fastest horse in six brigades of cavalry.

When we came out of the town we passed through the French camp, and then across the ground where a battle had taken place yesterday: it was still covered both by our own poor fellows and by the Russians. But of the two the camp was the sadder sight. Our army was melting away: and it was no longer possible to find men to replace those who were killed. When one considered that there were 80,000 Prussians to the north and 150,000 Russians and Austrians to the south, even the bravest man might feel grave.

I confess that I shed a tear until the thought came that the Emperor was still with us, and that on that very morning he had placed his hand upon my shoulder and had promised me a medal of honour. This set me singing, and I spurred Violette on, until Charpentier had to beg me to have mercy on his great, snorting, panting animal. The road was beaten into paste and cut into ruts two feet deep by the artillery, so that he was right in saying that it was not the place for a gallop.

I had never been very friendly with Charpentier; and now for twenty miles of the way I could not draw a word from him. He rode with his brows drawn together and his chin upon his breast, like a man who is heavy with thought. More than once I asked him what was on his mind. His answer always was that

it was his mission of which he was thinking, which surprised me, because, although I had never thought much of his intelligence, still it seemed to me to be impossible that anyone could be puzzled by so simple and soldierly a task.

Well, we came at last to Bazoches, where he was to take the southern road and I the northern. He half turned in his saddle before he left me, and he looked at me with a singular expression in his face.

"What do you make of it, Brigadier?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"Of our mission."

"Surely it is plain enough."

"You think so. Why should the Emperor tell us his plans?"

"Because he recognised our intelligence."

My companion laughed in a manner which I found annoying.

"May I ask what you intend to do if you find these villages full of Prussians?" he asked.

"I shall obey my orders."

"But you will be killed."

"Very possibly."

He laughed again, and so rudely that I clapped my hand to my sword. But before I could tell him what I thought of his stupidity and rudeness he had turned his horse, and was riding away down the other road. I saw his big fur cap vanish over the top of the hill, and then I rode upon my way, wondering at his conduct. From time to time I put my hand to the breast of my coat, and felt the paper crackle beneath my fingers. Ah, my precious paper, which should be turned into the little silver medal which I had wanted so long. All the way from Braine to Sermoise I was thinking of what my mother would say when she saw it.

I stopped to give Violette a meal at a wayside inn on the side of a hill not far from Soissons—a place surrounded by old oaks, and with so many crows that one could scarcely hear one's voice. It was from the innkeeper that I learned that the French under Marmont had fallen back two days before, and that Blucher had brought the Prussians across the river Aisne. An hour later, in the fading light, I saw two of their mounted sentries upon the hill to the right, and then, as darkness gathered, the heavens to the north were all glimmering from the lights of a camp.

When I heard that Blucher had been there for two days, I was much surprised that the Emperor should not have known that the country through which he had ordered me to carry my precious letter was already occupied by the enemy. Still, I thought of the tone of his voice when he said to Charpentier that a soldier must not choose, but must obey. I should follow the route he had laid down for me as long as Violette could move a hoof or I a finger upon her bridle. All the way from Sermoise to Soissons, where the road dips up and down, curving among fir woods, I kept my pistol and my sword ready, pushing on swiftly where the path was straight, and then coming slowly round the corners in the way we learned in Spain.

When I came to the farmhouse which lies to the right of the road just after you cross a wooden bridge a woman cried to me from the field, saying that the Prussians were in Soissons. A small party of their lancers, she said, had come in that very afternoon, and a whole division was expected before midnight. I did not wait to hear the end of her tale, but dug my spurs into Violette, and in five minutes was galloping her into the town.

Three Prussian lancers were at the mouth of the main street, their horses tethered, and they talking together, each with a pipe as long as my sword. I saw them well in the light of an open door, but all they could have seen of me was the flash of Violette's grey side and the flutter of my black cloak. A moment later I flew through a stream of them rushing from an open gateway. Violette's shoulder sent one of them reeling, and I stabbed at another but missed him. Pang, pang, went two guns, but I had flown round the curve of the street, and never so much as heard the hiss of the balls. Ah, we were great, both Violette and I. She stretched herself out like a hunted hare, the fire flying from her hoofs. I stood in my stirrups and waved my sword. Someone sprang for my bridle. I sliced him through the arm, and I heard him howling behind me. Two horsemen closed upon me. I cut one down and outpaced the other. A minute later I was clear of the town, and flying down a broad white road with tall black trees on either side. For a time I heard the rattle of hoofs behind me, but they died and died until I could not tell them from the throbbing of my own heart. Soon I pulled up and listened, but all was silent. They had given up the chase.

Well, the first thing that I did was to dismount and to lead my mare into a small wood through which a stream ran. There I watered her and rubbed her down. She was tired from the sharp chase, but it was wonderful to see how she recovered with a half-hour's rest. When my thighs closed upon her again, I could tell by the spring and the swing of her stride that it would not be her fault if I did not reach Paris safely.

I must have been well within the enemy's lines now, for I heard a number of them shouting one of

their rough drinking songs out of a house by the roadside, and I went round by the fields to avoid it. At another time two men came out into the moonlight (for by this time it was a cloudless night) and shouted something in German, but I galloped on, and they were afraid to fire, for their own hussars are dressed exactly as I was. It is best to take no notice at these times, and then they put you down as a deaf man.

It was a lovely moon, and every tree threw a black bar across the road. I could see the countryside just as if it were daytime, and very peaceful it looked, except that there was a great fire raging somewhere in the north. In the silence of the night-time, and with the knowledge that danger was in front and behind me, the sight of that great distant fire was very striking and awful. But I am not easily depressed, for I have seen too many singular things, so I hummed a tune between my teeth and thought of the friends whom I might see in Paris. My mind was full of them when, trotting round a corner, I came straight upon half-a-dozen German dragoons, who were sitting round a brushwood fire by the roadside.

I saw like a flash that I should be chased, and on a horse that had already done nearly forty miles. But it was better to be chased onwards than to be chased back. On this moonlit night, with fresh horses behind me, I must take my risk in either case ; but if I were to shake them off, I preferred that it should be near Senlis than near Soissons, for at Senlis I should be further on my journey to Paris.

All this flashed on me as if by instinct, you understand. My eyes had hardly rested on the bearded faces under the brass helmets before my spurs had touched Violette, and she was off at top speed. Oh, the shouting and rushing and stamping from behind

us! Three of them fired and three swung themselves on to their horses. A bullet rapped on the back of my saddle with a noise like a stick on a door. Violette sprang madly forward, and I thought she had been wounded, but it was only a graze upon her leg. Ah, the dear little mare, how I loved her when I felt her settle down into that long, easy gallop of hers, her hoofs going like the sharp beats of a drum. I could not hold myself. I turned on my saddle and shouted madly, "Long live the Emperor!" I screamed and laughed at the angry oaths that came back to me.

But it was not over yet. If Violette had been fresh she might have gained a mile in five. Now she could only hold her own with a very little over. There was one of them, an officer, quite a boy, who was better mounted than the others. He drew ahead with every stride. Two hundred yards behind him were two troopers, but I saw every time that I glanced round that the distance between them was increasing. The other three who had waited to shoot were a long way further back.

The officer's mount was a fine horse, though not so fine as Violette; yet it was a powerful animal, and it was fresh. It seemed to me that in a few miles it might catch us. I waited until the lad was a long way in front of his comrades, and then I eased my mare down a little—a very, very little, so that he might think he was really catching me. When he came within pistol-shot of me I drew and aimed my own pistol, and laid my chin upon my shoulder to see what he would do. He did not attempt to fire, and I soon saw the cause. The silly boy had taken his pistols from his saddle when he had camped for the night. He waved his sword at me now and roared some threat or other. He did not seem to understand that he was at my mercy. I eased

Violette down until there was not the length of a long lance between her tail and his horse's nostrils.

I rested my pistol upon my bridle-arm, which I have always found best when shooting from the saddle. I aimed at his face, and could see, even in the moonlight, how white he grew when he understood that it was all up with him. But even as my finger pressed the trigger I thought of his mother, and I put my ball through his horse's shoulder. I fear he hurt himself in the fall, for it was a fearful crash, but I had my letter to think of, so I stretched the mare into a gallop once more.

But these Prussian rascals were not so easily shaken off. The two troopers left their young officer to the others and thundered on after me. I had pulled up on the top of a hill, thinking that I had heard the last of them; but I soon saw there was no time for delay, so away we went, the mare tossing her head, and I waving my sword, to show what we thought of two dragoons who tried to catch a hussar. But at this moment, even while I laughed at the thought, my heart stood still within me, for there at the end of the long white road was a black patch of cavalry waiting to receive me. To a young soldier it might have seemed the shadow of the trees, but to me it was a troop of hussars, and, turn where I could, death seemed to be waiting for me.

Well, I had the dragoons behind me and the hussars in front. Never since Moscow have I seemed to be in such danger. I never drew bridle, or hesitated for an instant, but I let Violette have her head. I remember that I was trying to pray as I rode, when suddenly I heard French voices in front of me. Ah, what joy it was! They were ours—our own dear little rascals from Marmont's division. Round flew my two dragoons

and galloped for their lives, with the moon gleaming on their brass helmets, while I trotted up to my friends with no undue haste, for I wished them to understand that though a hussar may fly, it is not in his nature to fly very fast. Yet I fear that Violette's panting sides and foam-spattered mouth did not match my careless bearing.

Who should be at the head of the troop but old Bouvet, whom I saved at the battle of Leipzig! When he saw me his little pink eyes filled with tears, and, indeed, I could not help shedding a few myself at the sight of his joy. I told him of my mission, but he laughed when I said that I must pass through Senlis.

"The enemy is there", said he. "You cannot go."

"I prefer to go where the enemy is", I answered.

"But why not go straight to Paris with your despatch? Why should you choose to pass through the one place where you are almost sure to be taken or killed?"

"A soldier does not choose—he obeys", said I, just as I had heard Napoleon say it.

Old Bouvet laughed. "Well", said he, "you had best come along with us, for we are all bound for Senlis. Our orders are to get some information about the place. A squadron of Polish Lancers are in front of us. If you must ride through it, it is possible that we may be able to go with you."

So away we went, jingling and clanking through the quiet night until we came up with the Poles—fine old soldiers all of them, and faithful allies of the Emperor. We rode together, until in the early morning we saw the lights of Senlis. A peasant was coming along with a cart, and from him we learned how things were going there.

His information was certain, for his brother was

the Mayor's coachman, and he had spoken with him late the night before. There was a single squadron of Cossacks in occupation of the Mayor's house, which stands at the corner of the market-place, and is the largest building in the town. A whole division of Prussian infantry was encamped in the woods to the north, but only the Cossacks were in Senlis. Ah, what a chance to avenge ourselves upon these barbarians whose cruelty to our poor countryfolk was the talk at every camp fire.

We were into the town like a torrent, hacked down the sentries, rode over the guard, and were smashing in the doors of the Mayor's house before they understood that there was a Frenchman within twenty miles of them. We saw horrid heads at the windows—heads bearded to the temples, with tangled hair and sheepskin caps, and silly, gaping mouths. "Hourra! Hourra!" they shrieked, and fired at us, but our fellows were into the house and at their throats before they had wiped the sleep out of their eyes. It was dreadful to see how the Poles flung themselves upon them, for, as you know, the Poles have a blood feud against the Cossacks.

Well, it was at this point that I made an error—a very serious error it must be admitted. Up to this moment I had carried out my mission with remarkable success. But now I did a very foolish thing.

There is no doubt that the mare was tired, but still it is true that I might have galloped on through Senlis and reached the country, where I should have had no enemy between me and Paris. But what hussar can ride past a fight? It is too much to ask of him. Besides, I thought that if Violette had an hour of rest, I should, in the end, reach Paris more quickly. Then, when the Cossacks showed their heads at the windows, with their sheepskin hats and their barbarous cries,

I sprang from my saddle, threw Violette's bridle over a post, and ran into the house with the rest. It is true that I was too late to be of use, and that I was nearly wounded by a lance-thrust from one of these dying savages. Still, it is a pity to miss even the smallest affair, for one never knows what opportunity for promotion may arise.

When the house was cleared I took a bucket of water out for Violette, and our peasant guide showed me where the good Mayor kept his hay and oats. The good little mare was ready for them, I can tell you. Then I sponged down her legs, and leaving her still tethered I went back into the house to find a mouthful for myself, so that I should not need to halt again until I was in Paris.

Old Bouvet was waiting in the passage when I entered, and he asked me whether we might not open a bottle of wine together. "We must not be long", said he. "There are ten thousand Prussians in the woods outside the town."

"Where is the wine?" I asked.

He took a candle in his hand and led the way down the stone stairs into the kitchen. When we got there we found another door, which opened on to a winding stair with the cellar at the bottom. The Cossacks had been there before us, as was easily seen by the broken bottles strewn all over it. However, there was still plenty left for us. Old Bouvet had his hand outstretched to a bottle when there came a roar of musket-fire from above us, a rush of feet, and such a yelping and screaming as I have never heard since. The Prussians were upon us!

Bouvet is a brave man: I will say that for him. He flashed out his sword and away he clattered up the stone steps, his spurs clinking as he ran. I followed

him, but just as we came out into the kitchen passage a tremendous shout told us that the house had been recaptured.

"It is all over", I cried, grasping at Bouvet's sleeve.

"There is one more to die", he shouted, and away he went like a madman up the second stair. If I had been in his place, I should have gone to my death also, for he had done very wrong in not throwing out his scouts to warn him if the Germans advanced upon him. For an instant I was about to rush up with him, and then I remembered that, after all, I had my own mission to think of, and that if I were taken, the Emperor's letter would never reach Paris. I let Bouvet die alone, therefore, and I went down into the cellar again, closing the door behind me.

Well, it was not very cheerful down there either. Bouvet had dropped the candle when the alarm came, and I, feeling about in the darkness, could find nothing but broken bottles. At last I came upon the candle, which had rolled under the curve of a cask, but, though I tried again and again, I could not light it. The reason was that the wick had been wetted in some spilt wine; suspecting that this might be the case, I cut the end off with my sword. Then I found that it lighted easily enough. But I could not imagine what to do next. The scoundrels upstairs were shouting themselves hoarse, several hundred of them from the sound, and it was clear that some of them would soon come downstairs to look for the wine-cellar. There would be an end of me, of my mission, and of my medal. I thought of my mother and I thought of the Emperor. It made me weep to think of leaving them. But presently I dashed the tears from my eyes. "Courage!" I cried, striking myself upon the chest. "Courage! Is it possible that one who has come safely from Moscow

without even a frost-bite will die in a French wine-cellar?" At the thought I was up on my feet and clutching at the letter inside my coat, for the crackle of it gave me courage.

My first plan was to set fire to the house, in the hope of escaping in the confusion. My second to get into an empty wine-cask. I was looking round to see if I could find one, when suddenly, in the corner, I noticed a little low door, painted the same grey colour as the wall, so that it was only a man with quick sight who would have seen it. I pushed against it, and at first thought that it was locked. Presently, however, it gave way a little, and then I understood that it was held by the pressure of something on the other side. I put my feet against a huge cask of wine, and I gave such a push that the door flew open and I came down with a crash upon my back, the candle flying out of my hands, so that I found myself in darkness once more. I picked myself up and stared through the black archway into the gloom beyond.

There was a slight ray of light coming from some slit or grating. The dawn had broken outside, and I could dimly see the long, curving sides of several huge casks, which made me think that perhaps this was where the mayor kept his reserves of wine. At any rate, it seemed to be a safer hiding-place than the outer cellar, so picking up my candle, I was just closing the door behind me, when I suddenly saw something which filled me with amazement, and even, I confess, with a little fear.

I have said that at the further end of the cellar there was a dim grey bar of light striking downwards from somewhere near the roof. Well, as I peered through the darkness, I suddenly saw a great, tall man skip into this patch of daylight, and then out again

into the darkness at the further end. I gave such a start that I nearly fell over! It was only a glance, but, still, I had time to see that the fellow had a hairy Cossack cap on his head, and that he was a great, long-legged, broad-shouldered brigand, with a sword at his waist. Do you wonder if I was a little uncomfortable at being left alone with such a creature in the dark?

But only for a moment. "Courage!" I thought. "Am I not a hussar, a brigadier, too, at the age of thirty-one, and the chosen messenger of the Emperor?" After all, the stranger had more cause to be afraid of me than I of him. And then suddenly I understood that he was afraid—horribly afraid. I could tell it from his quick step and his bent shoulders as he ran among the barrels, like a rat making for its hole. And, of course, it must have been he who had held the door against me, and not some packing-case or wine-cask as I had imagined. He was the pursued then, and I the pursuer. I advanced upon him through the darkness!

At first I had feared to light my candle lest I should make a mark of myself, but now, after bruising my leg against a box, and catching my spurs in some canvas, I thought the bolder course the wiser. I lit the candle, therefore, and then I advanced with long strides, my sword in hand. "Come out, you rascal!" I cried. "Nothing can save you. You will at last meet with your deserts."

I held my candle high, and presently I caught a glimpse of the man's head staring at me over a barrel. He had a gold stripe on his black cap, and the expression of his face told me in an instant that he was an officer and a man of good education.

"Sir", he cried, in excellent French, "I surrender myself, if you promise to spare my life. But if I do

not have your promise, I will then sell my life as dearly as I can."

"Sir", said I, "a Frenchman knows how to treat an unfortunate enemy. Your life is safe." When he heard that, he handed his sword to me over the top of the barrel, and I bowed. "Whom have I the honour of capturing?" I asked.

"I am the Count Boutkine, of the Emperor's Cossacks", said he. "I came out with my troop to get information about Senlis, and as we found no sign of your people we determined to spend the night here."

"And may I ask", I said, "how you came into the back cellar?"

"That is easily explained", said he. "It was our intention to start at early dawn. I thought that I should like a cup of wine, so I came down to see what I could find. As I was hunting about, the house was suddenly captured by the French, so rapidly that by the time I had climbed the stairs it was all over. The only thing left for me to do was to save myself, so I came down here and hid myself in the back cellar, where you have found me."

I thought of how old Bouvet had behaved under the same conditions, and tears of pride sprang to my eyes. Then I had to consider what I should do next. It was clear that this Russian Count, being in the back cellar while we were in the front one, had not heard the sounds which would have told him that the house was once again in the hands of his own allies. If he should once understand this, our positions would be altered, and I should be his prisoner instead of his being mine. What was I to do? I was at my wits' end, when suddenly there came to me a brilliant idea.

"Count Boutkine", said I, "I find myself in a most difficult position."

"And why?" he asked.

"Because I have promised you your life."

His jaw dropped a little.

"You would not withdraw your promise?" he cried.

"If the worst comes to the worst I can die in your defence", said I; "but the difficulties are great."

"What is it, then?" he asked.

"I will be frank with you", said I. "You must know that our fellows, and especially the Poles, are so enraged against the Cossacks that the mere sight of the uniform drives them mad. They throw themselves instantly upon the wearer and tear him limb from limb. Even their officers cannot stop them."

The Russian grew pale at my words and the way in which I said them.

"But this is terrible", said he.

"Horrible!" said I. "If we were to go up together at this moment I cannot promise how far I could protect you."

"I am in your hands", he cried. "What would you suggest that we should do? Would it not be best that I should remain here?"

"That worst of all."

"And why?"

"Because our fellows will search the house presently, and then you would be cut to pieces. No, no, I must go and break the news to them. But even then, when once they see that hated uniform, I do not know what may happen."

"Should I then take the uniform off?"

"Excellent!" I cried. "But, stop, here is a better plan. Take off your uniform and put on mine. That will make you sacred to every French soldier."

"It is not the French I fear so much as the Poles."

"But my uniform will be a protection against either."

"How can I thank you?" he cried. "But you—what are you to wear?"

"I will wear yours."

"That is generous of you: but if you wear my uniform, your life may be in danger."

"It is my duty to take the risk", I answered; "but I have no fears. I will go up in your uniform. A hundred swords will be turned upon me. 'Stop!' I will shout, 'I am Brigadier Gerard!' Then they will see my face. They will know me. And I will tell them about you. In these clothes you will be sacred."

His fingers trembled with eagerness as he tore off his tunic. His boots and breeches were much like my own, so there was no need to change them, but I gave him my hussar jacket, my cape, and my sword-belt, while I took in exchange his high sheepskin cap with the gold chevron, his fur-trimmed coat, and his crooked sword. Be sure that in changing the coats I did not forget to change my precious letter also from my old one to my new.

"With your leave", said I, "I shall now bind you to a barrel."

He objected to this, but I have learned in my soldiering never to throw away chances, and how could I tell that he might not, when my back was turned, see how the matter really stood, and break in upon my plans? He was leaning against a barrel at the time, so I ran six times round it with a rope, and then tied it with a big knot behind. If he wished to come upstairs he would, at least, have to carry two hundred gallons of good French wine on his shoulders. I then shut the door of the back cellar behind me, so that he might not

hear what was happening, and tossing the candle away I ascended the kitchen stair.

There were only about twenty steps, and yet, while I came up them, I seemed to have time to think of everything that I had ever hoped to do. It was the same feeling that I had once in battle when I lay with a broken leg and saw the horse artillery galloping down upon me. Of course, I knew that if I were taken I should be shot instantly as being disguised within the enemy's lines. Still, it was a glorious death—in the direct service of the Emperor.

When I made my way out into the hall, with as cool a face and manner as I could assume, the very first thing that I saw was Bouvet's dead body, with his legs drawn up and a broken sword in his hand. I could see that he had been shot at close range. I wished to salute as I went by, for he was a gallant man, but I feared lest I should be seen, and so I passed on.

The front of the hall was full of Prussian infantry, who were knocking holes in the wall, through which to fire in case of another attack. Their officer, a little man, was running about giving orders. They were all too busy to take much notice of me, but another officer, who was standing by the door with a long pipe in his mouth, strode across and clapped me on the shoulder pointing to the dead bodies of our poor hussars, and saying something which was meant for a joke, for his long beard opened and showed every tooth in his head. I laughed heartily also, and said the only Russian words that I knew. They meant: "If the night is fine we shall meet under the oak tree, but if it rains we shall meet in the cow-shed." It was all the same to this German, however, and I have no doubt that he supposed I had said something very funny indeed, for he roared with laughter and slapped me on my shoulder again.

I nodded to him and marched out of the hall-door as coolly as if I were in command of the garrison.

There were a hundred horses tethered about outside, most of them belonging to the Poles and hussars. Good little Violette was waiting with the others, and she neighed happily when she saw me coming towards her. But I would not mount her. No. I was much too wise for that. On the contrary, I chose the roughest little Cossack horse that I could see, and I sprang upon it as though it had belonged to my father before me. It had a great bag of plunder slung over its neck, and this I laid upon Violette's back, and led her along beside me. You have never seen so complete a picture of a Cossack returning from a raid. It was magnificent.

Well, the town was full of Prussians by this time. They lined the streets and pointed me out to each other, saying, I suppose, "There goes one of those rascally Cossacks. They are wonderful fellows for finding plunder."

One or two officers spoke to me with an air of authority, but I shook my head and smiled, and said, "If the night is fine we shall meet under the oak tree, but if it rains we shall meet in the cow-shed", at which they shrugged their shoulders and gave the matter up. In this way I worked along until I was beyond the northern limits of the town. I could see in the roadway two lancer sentries, and I knew that when I was once past them I should be a free man once more. I made my pony trot, therefore, Violette rubbing her nose against my knee all the time, and looking up at me to ask how she had deserved that this hairy doormat of a creature should be preferred to her. I was not more than a hundred yards from the Prussians, when, suddenly, you can imagine my feelings when I saw

a real Cossack coming galloping along the road towards me.

It was hard for a man like me, who had gone through so many dangers and trials, only at this very last moment to be confronted with one which appeared to put an end to everything. I will confess that for a moment I lost heart, and was inclined to throw myself down in despair. But, no ; I was not beaten even now. I opened two buttons of my coat so that I might get easily at the Emperor's message, for it was my fixed determination when all hope was gone to swallow the letter and then die sword in hand. Then I felt that my little, crooked sword was loose in its sheath, and I trotted on to where the sentries were waiting. They seemed inclined to stop me, but I pointed to the other Cossack, who was still a couple of hundred yards off, and they, understanding that I merely wished to meet him, let me pass with a salute.

I dug my spurs into my pony then, for if I were only far enough from the lancers I thought I might manage the Cossack without much difficulty. He was an officer, a large, bearded man, with a gold stripe in his cap, just the same as mine. As I advanced he unconsciously aided me by pulling up his horse, so that I had a fine start of the lancers. On I came for him, and I could see wonder changing to suspicion in his brown eyes as he looked at me and at my pony, and at my uniform. I do not know what it was that was wrong, but he saw something which was as it should not be. He shouted out a question, and then when I gave no answer he pulled out his sword. I was glad in my heart to see him do so, for I had always rather fight than cut down an unsuspecting enemy. Now I rode straight at him, and, turning aside his sword, I got my point in just under the fourth button of his

coat. Down he went, and the weight of him nearly took me off my horse before I could withdraw my sword. I never glanced at him to see if he were living or dead, for I sprang off my pony and on to Violette, with a shake of my bridle and a kiss of my hand to the two Prussians behind me. They galloped after me, shouting, but Violette had had her rest, and was just as fresh as when she started. I took the first side road to the west and then the first to the south, which would take me away from the enemy's country. On we went and on, every stride taking me further from my foes and nearer to my friends. At last, when I reached the end of a long stretch of road, and looking back from it could see no sign of any pursurers, I understood that my troubles were over.

And it gave me a glow of happiness, as I rode, to think that I had done exactly what the Emperor had ordered. What would he say when he saw me? What could he say which would do justice to the incredible way in which I had risen above every danger? He had ordered me to go through Sermoise, Soissons, and Senlis, little dreaming that they were all three occupied by the enemy. And yet I had done it. I had borne his letter in safety through each of these towns. Hussars, dragoons, lancers, Cossacks, and infantry—I had passed through all of them, and had come out unharmed.

When I had got as far as Dammartin I caught a first glimpse of our own outposts. There was a troop of dragoons in a field, and of course I could see from their helmets that they were French. I galloped towards them in order to ask them if all was safe between there and Paris, and as I rode I felt such a pride at having won my way back to my friends again, that I could not help waving my sword in the air.

At this a young officer galloped out from among

the dragoons, also waving his sword, and it warmed my heart to think that he should come riding with such enthusiasm to greet me. I made Violette bound to left and to right, and as we came together I waved my sword more gallantly than ever, but you can imagine my feelings when he suddenly made a cut at me which would have certainly taken my head off if I had not fallen forward with my nose in Violette's mane. His sword whistled just over my cap like an east wind. Of course, it came from the Cossack uniform which, in my excitement, I had forgotten all about, and this young dragoon had imagined that I was some Russian champion who was challenging the French cavalry. You should have seen his face when he understood that he had nearly killed Brigadier Gerard.

Well, the road was clear, and about five o'clock in the afternoon I was in Paris. You cannot imagine the excitement which my appearance in such clothes made in Paris, and soon I had a quarter of a mile of folk riding or running behind me. Word had got about from the dragoons (two of whom had come with me), and everybody knew about my adventures and how I had come by my uniform. It was a triumph—men shouting and women waving their handkerchiefs.

I was hardly in fit clothes to visit a King; but my message was too urgent for delay. When I reached the palace I was shown up straight away to Joseph, whom I had often seen in Spain. He seemed as stout, as quiet, and as amiable as ever. Talleyrand, who, I fancy, had not liked me since the affairs of the Brothers of Ajaccio, was also in the room. He read my letter when Joseph Buonaparte handed it to him, and then he looked at me with the strangest expression in those funny little, twinkling eyes of his.

"Were you the only messenger?" he asked.

"There was one other, sir", said I. "Major Charpentier, of the Horse Grenadiers."

"He has not yet arrived", said the King of Spain.

"If you had seen the legs of his horse, sir, you would not wonder at it", I remarked.

"There may be other reasons", said Talleyrand, and he gave that singular smile of his.

Well, they paid me a compliment or two, and then I bowed myself out, very glad to get away, for I hate a Court as much as I love a camp. I went straight to an old friend who lent me a hussar uniform, which fitted me very well. He and his daughter and I had a meal together in his rooms, and all my dangers were forgotten. In the morning I found Violette ready for another sixty miles' ride. It was my intention to return instantly to the Emperor's headquarters, for I was, as you may well imagine, impatient to hear his words of praise, and to receive my reward.

I need not say that I rode back by a safe route, for I had seen quite enough of Prussians and Cossacks. In the evening I arrived at Rheims, where Napoleon still was. The bodies of our fellows and of the Russians had all been buried, and I could see changes in the camp also. The soldiers looked better cared for; some of the cavalry had received fresh horses, and everything was in excellent order. It is wonderful what a good general can do in a couple of days.

When I came to the headquarters I was shown straight into the Emperor's room. He was drinking coffee at a writing-table, with a big plan drawn out on paper in front of him. Berthier and the Duke of Tarentum were leaning, one over each shoulder, and he was talking so quickly that I don't believe that either of them could catch half of what he was saying. But

when his eyes fell upon me he dropped the pen on to the plan, and he sprang up with a look in his pale face which struck me cold.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he shouted. When he was angry he had a voice like a peacock.

"I have the honour to report to you, sir", said I, "that I have delivered your despatch safely to the King of Spain."

"What!" he yelled, and his two eyes pierced me like bayonets. Oh, those dreadful eyes, changing from grey to blue, like steel in the sunshine. I can see them now when I have a bad dream.

"What has become of Charpentier?" he asked.

"He is captured", said the Duke.

"By whom?"

"The Russians."

"The Cossacks?"

"No, a single Cossack."

"He gave himself up?"

"Without resistance."

"He is an intelligent officer. You will see that the medal of honour is awarded to him."

When I heard those words I had to rub my eyes to make sure that I was awake.

"As for you", cried the Emperor, taking a step forward as if he would have struck me, "you idiot, what do you think that you were sent upon this mission for? Do you imagine that I would send a really important message by such a hand as yours, and through every village which the enemy holds? How you came through them passes my understanding; but if your fellow-messenger had had but as little sense as you my whole plan of campaign would have been ruined. Can you not see, thick-head, that this message contained false news, and that it was intended to deceive the

enemy, whilst I put a very different scheme into practice?"

When I heard those cruel words and saw the angry, white face which glared at me, I had to hold the back of a chair, for my mind was failing me and my knees would hardly bear me up. But then I took courage as I reflected that I was an honourable gentleman, and that my whole life had been spent in toiling for this man and for my beloved country.

"Sir", said I, and the tears would trickle down my cheeks while I spoke, "when you are dealing with a man like me you would find it wiser to deal openly. If I had known that you wished the despatch to fall into the hands of the enemy, I would have seen that it came there. As I believed that I was to guard it, I was prepared to give my life for it. I do not believe, sir, that any man in the world ever met with more toils and dangers than I have done in trying to carry out what I thought was your will."

I dashed the tears from my eyes as I spoke, and with such fire and spirit as I could command I gave him an account of it all, of my dash through Soissons, my escape from the dragoons, my adventure in Senlis, my meeting with Count Boutkine in the cellar, my disguise, my fight with the Cossack officer, my flight, and how at the last moment I was nearly cut down by a French dragoon. The Emperor, Berthier, and the Duke of Tarentum listened with astonishment on their faces. When I had finished Napoleon stepped forward and patted me on the shoulder.

"Brigadier!" said he. "Forget anything which I may have said. I should have done better to trust you. You may go."

I turned to the door, and my hand was upon the handle, when the Emperor called upon me to stop.

" You will see ", said he, turning to the Duke of Tarentum, " that Brigadier Gerard has the special medal of honour, for I believe that if he has the thickest head he has also the stoutest heart in my army."

Exercises.

1. Describe the Brigadier's encounter with the Russian officer in the cellar.
2. Why did Napoleon send Gerard to Paris through towns occupied by the enemy ?

VI

MARSHAL HONEYSWEET

In the year 1810 my regiment, were part of the army which, under the command of Marshal Massena, was fighting the English, under Wellington, in Portugal. For a time all went well, and we pushed Wellington backwards until we hoped to drive him and his army into the river Tagus. But when we were still twenty-five miles from Lisbon we found that the English had built an enormous line of forts at a place called Torres Vedras. Wellington had prepared these defences so that, if he were hard pressed, he could slip behind them. So, when we reached Torres Vedras, we came to a standstill. The English were behind their lines, and we in front, and it was impossible for us to get through. All we could do was to sit still and wait. There we remained for six months, compelled to stay idle when we were thirsting for a battle.

One day I received a summons to Massena's head-quarters. I went gladly, for I was always a favourite of his. He was seated alone in his tent, with his chin upon his hand, and his brow full of wrinkles. He smiled, however, when he saw me before him.

"Good day, Colonel Gerard."

"Good day, Marshal."

"How are your hussars?"

"Seven hundred splendid men upon seven hundred excellent horses."

"And are your wounds healed?"

"My wounds never heal, Marshal", I answered.

"And why?"

"Because I always have new ones."

He smiled at that. "Knowing that you were hurt, Colonel", he said, "I have spared you of late."

"Which hurt me most of all."

"Never mind! Since the English got behind these cursed lines of Torres Vedras, there has been little for us to do. But now we are on the eve of action."

"We advance?"

"No, retire."

My face must have shown my dismay. What, retire before Wellington? I could have wept as I thought of it.

"What else can we do?" cried Massena, impatiently. "The lines are not to be forced. I have already lost more men than I can replace. On the other hand, we have been here at Santarem for nearly six months. There is not a pound of flour nor a jug of wine on the country side. We must retire."

"There are flour and wine in Lisbon", I persisted.

"Very likely, but an army cannot charge in and charge out again like your regiment of hussars. I sent for you, however, Colonel Gerard, to say that I have a very peculiar and important expedition which I intend to place under your direction."

I pricked up my ears, as you can imagine. The Marshal unrolled a great map of the country and spread it upon the table. He flattened it out with his little, hairy hands.

"This is Santarem", he said, pointing.

I nodded.

"And here, twenty-five miles to the east, is Almeixal, celebrated for its enormous Abbey."

Again I nodded; I could not think what was coming.

"Have you heard of the Marshal Honeysweet?" asked Massena.

"I have served with all the Marshals", said I, "but there is none of that name."

"It is only the nickname which the soldiers have given him", said Massena. "If you had not been away from us for some months, it would not be necessary for me to tell you about him. He is a Portuguese, and a man of good breeding. It is on account of his manners that they have given him his title. I wish you to go to this polite Portuguese at Almeixal."

"Yes, Marshal."

"And to hang him to the nearest tree."

"Certainly, Marshal."

I turned briskly upon my heels, but Massena recalled me before I could reach the opening of his tent.

"One moment, Colonel", said he; "you had best learn how matters stand before you start. You must know, then, that this Marshal Honeysweet is a man of very great ingenuity and bravery. He was an officer in the infantry, but having been deprived of his rank for cheating at cards, he left the army. In some manner he gathered a number of Portuguese deserters round him and took to the mountains. Some rascals from our own army and from the English, and some Portuguese brigands joined him, and he found himself at the head of five hundred men. With these he took possession of the Abbey of Almeixal, drove out the monks, fortified the place, and gathered in plunder from all the country around."

"It is time he was hanged", said I, making once more for the door.

"One instant!" cried the Marshal, smiling at my impatience. "You have two tasks to perform: To punish this villain; and, if possible, to break up his

nest of brigands. It will be a proof of the confidence which I have in you when I say that I can only spare you half a squadron, fifty men, with which to accomplish all this."

My word, I could hardly believe my ears! I thought that I should have had my regiment at the least.

"I would give you more", said he, "but I begin my retreat to-day, and Wellington is so strong in cavalry that every horseman becomes of importance. I cannot spare you another man. You will see what you can do, and you will report yourself to me at Abrantes not later than to-morrow night."

It was very complimentary that he should think so highly of my powers, but it was also a little embarrassing. I was to hang a Portuguese and to break up a band of five hundred assassins—all with fifty men. But after all, the fifty men were Hussars of Conflans. As I came out into the warm sunshine my confidence had returned to me, and I had already begun to wonder whether the medal on which my heart was set might not be waiting for me at Almeixal.

You may be sure that I chose my fifty men carefully. They were all old soldiers of the German wars, some of them with three stripes, and most of them with two. Oudet and Papilette, two of the best non-commissioned officers in the regiment, were at their head. When I had them formed up in fours, all in silver grey and upon dark brown horses, with their leopard skin saddle-cloths and their little red plumes, my heart beat high at the sight. I could not look at their weather-stained faces, with the great moustaches which bristled over their chin-straps, without feeling a glow of confidence, and, between ourselves, I have no doubt that they felt proud, too, when they saw their young Colonel on his great black war-horse riding at their head.

Well, when we got free of the camp and over the Tagus, I threw out guards in advance and on either side keeping my own place at the head of the main body. Looking back from the hills above Santarem, we could see the dark lines of Massena's army, with the flash and twinkle of the swords and bayonets as he moved his regiments into position for their retreat. To the south lay the scattered red patches of the English outposts, and behind the grey smoke-cloud which rose from Wellington's camp. Away to the west lay a curve of blue sea dotted with the white sails of the English ships.

As we were riding to the east, our road lay away from both armies. But bands of plunderers from our army, and the scouting parties of the English, covered the country, and it was necessary with my small troop that I should take every precaution. During the whole day we rode over desolate hill-sides, the lower portions covered by the budding vines, but the upper turning from green to grey, and jagged along the skyline like the back of a starved horse. Mountain streams crossed our path, running west to the Tagus, and once we came to a deep, strong river, which might have checked us had I not found the ford by observing where houses had been built opposite each other upon either bank. Between them, as every scout should know, you will find your ford. There was no one to give us information, for neither man nor beast, nor any living thing except great clouds of crows, was to be seen during our journey.

The sun was beginning to sink when we came to a valley clear in the centre, but covered with huge oak trees upon either side. We could not be more than a few miles from Almeixal, so it seemed to me to be best to keep among the trees, for the spring had been an early one and the leaves were already thick enough to

conceal us. We were riding then in open order among the great trunks, when one of my men came galloping up.

"There are English across the valley, Colonel", he cried, as he saluted.

"Cavalry or infantry?"

"Dragoons, Colonel", said he; "I saw the gleam of their helmets, and heard the neigh of a horse."

Halting my men I hastened to the edge of the wood. There could be no doubt about it. A party of English cavalry was travelling in a line with us, and in the same direction. I caught a glimpse of their red coats and of their flashing arms glowing and twinkling among the tree-trunks. Once, as they passed through a small clearing, I could see their whole force, and I judged that they were of about the same strength as my own—a half squadron at the most.

I was usually quick at making decisions, and prompt in carrying them out. But here I confess that I had difficulty in making up my mind. On the one hand there was the chance of a fine cavalry fight with the English. On the other hand, there was my mission at the Abbey of Almeixal, which seemed already to be so much above my power. If I were to lose any of my men, it was certain that I should be unable to carry out my orders. I was sitting my horse, turning these things over in my mind and looking across at the gleams of light from the further wood, when suddenly one of these red-coated Englishmen rode out from the trees, pointing at me and calling to his comrades. Three of them joined him, and one who was a bugler sounded a call, which brought the whole of them into the open. They were, as I had thought, a half squadron, and they formed a double line with a front of twenty-five, their officer at their head.

I had instantly brought my own troopers into the

same formation, so that there we were, hussars and dragoons, with only two hundred yards of grassy ground between us. They carried themselves well, those red-coated troopers, with their silver helmets, their high white plumes, and their long, gleaming swords; while, on the other hand, I am sure that they would acknowledge that they had never looked upon finer horsemen than the fifty hussars of Conflans who were facing them. They were heavier, it is true, and they may have seemed the smarter, for Wellington used to make them polish their metal work, which was not usual among us. On the other hand, it is well known that the English coats were too tight for the sword-arm, which gave our men an advantage.

Suddenly the English officer raised his sword to me as if in a challenge, and rode swiftly towards me, across the grassland. My word, there is no finer sight upon earth than that of a gallant man upon a gallant horse! I could have stopped there just to watch him as he came with such careless grace, his sword down by his horse's shoulder, his head thrown back, his white plume tossing —youth and strength and courage, with the violet evening sky above and the oak trees behind. But it was not for me to stand and stare. I may have my faults, but I have never been accused of being backward in taking my own part. The old horse, Rataplan, knew me so well that he had started off before ever I gave the first shake to the bridle.

There are some things that I am very slow to forget: and a fine horse is one of them. Well, as we drew together, I kept on saying to myself, "Where have I seen those great grey shoulders? Where have I seen those fine legs?" Then suddenly I remembered, and as I looked up at the reckless eyes and the brave smile of the rider, whom should I recognize but the man

who had saved me from El Cuchillo, the Spanish brigand ?

He had his arm raised for a cut, but when I brought my hilt to the salute he dropped his hand and stared at me.

" Halloa ! " said he. " It's Gerard ! " You would have thought by his manner that I had met him by appointment. I was so overjoyed to see him that I would have embraced him had he but come an inch of the way to meet me.

" I thought we were going to have some fun ", said he. " I never dreamed that it was you."

I found this tone of disappointment somewhat irritating. Instead of being glad at having met a friend, he was sorry at having missed an enemy.

" I should have been happy to join in your fun ", said I. " But I really cannot turn my sword upon a man who has saved my life."

" Oh, never mind about that."

" No, it is impossible. I should never forgive myself."

" You make too much of a trifle."

" My mother's one desire is to embrace you. If ever you should be in the South of France——"

" Lord Wellington is coming there with 60,000 men."

" Then one of them will have a chance of surviving ", said I, laughing. " In the meantime, put your sword in your sheath ! "

Our horses were standing head to tail, and he put out his hand and patted me on the thigh.

" You're a good chap, Gerard ", said he. " I only wish you had been born on the right side of the Channel."

" I was ", said I.

"Poor fellow!" he cried, with such pity in his tone that he set me laughing again. "But look here, Gerard", he continued; "this is all very well, but it is not business, you know. I don't know what Massena would say to it, but Wellington would jump out of his riding-boots if he saw us. We weren't sent out here for amusement—either of us."

"What would you have?"

"Well, if you remember, after we had got away from El Cuchillo and his gang of villains, we had a little argument about our hussars and dragoons. I've got fifty of my dragoons behind me. You've got as many fine-looking fellows over there, who seem anxious for a fight. If you and I rode on the right of our troops we should not spoil each other's beauty."

There seemed to me to be a good deal of sense in what he said. For the moment Marshal Honeysweet and the Abbey of Almeixal went right out of my head, and I could only think of the fine level turf and of the beautiful fight which we might have.

"Very good", said I. "We have seen the front of your dragoons. We shall now have a look at their backs."

"Well, come on!" he answered. "If we break you, well and good—if you break us, it will be all the better for Marshal Honeysweet."

When he said that I could only stare at him in astonishment.

"Why for Marshal Honeysweet?" I asked.

"It is the name of the rascal who lives near here. My dragoons have been sent by Lord Wellington to see him safely hanged."

"Why", I cried, "my hussars have been sent by Massena for that very object."

We burst out laughing at that, and sheathed our

swords. There was a rattle of steel from behind us as our troopers followed our example.

"We are allies!" he cried.

"For a day."

"We must join forces."

"There is no doubt of it."

And so, instead of fighting, we turned our half squadrons round and moved in two little columns down the valley, the hussars and the dragoons looking each other up and down, like old fighting dogs with torn ears who have learned to respect each other's teeth. Most of them could not help smiling when they found themselves in such strange company, but there were some on either side who looked black and threatening, especially the English sergeant and, on my side, Papilette. They were men of habit, you see, who could not change all their ways of thinking in a moment. Besides, Papilette's only brother had been killed in battle against the English. The English officer and I rode together at the head and chatted about all that that had occurred to us since our last meeting.

At the end of the valley the road curved over some rising ground before winding down into another wider valley beyond. We halted when we came to the top; for there, right in front of us, at the distance of about three miles, was a scattered, grey town, with a single enormous building upon the side of the mountain which overlooked it. We could not doubt that we were at last in sight of the Abbey that held the gang of rascals whom we had come to disperse. It was only now, I think, that we fully understood what a task lay in front of us, for the place was a fortress, and it seemed impossible for cavalry to force an entrance.

"You are senior officer", said the Englishman to

me. "Lead the way, and we'll see which are the better, your hussars or my dragoons."

"Well", said I, "whatever we do must be done at once, for my orders are to be on my way to Abrantes by to-morrow night. But we must have some information first, and here is someone who should be able to give it us."

There was a square, whitewashed house standing by the roadside, which appeared, from the sign hanging over the door, to be one of those wayside inns which are provided for the muleteers. A lantern was hung in the doorway and by its light we saw two men, the one in the brown cloak of a monk, and the other wearing an apron, which showed him to be the landlord. They were talking together so earnestly that we were upon them before they were aware of us. The innkeeper turned to fly, but one of the Englishmen seized him by the hair, and held him tight.

"For mercy's sake, spare me", he yelled. "My house has been plundered, first by the French and then by the English, and my feet have been burned by the brigands. I swear that I have neither money nor food in my inn, and the good Father Abbot, who is starving upon my doorstep, will be witness to it."

"Indeed, sir", said the monk, in excellent French, "what this man says is true. He is one of the many victims of these cruel wars, although his loss is but a feather-weight compared to mine. Let him go", he added, in English, to the trooper, "he is too weak to fly, even if he wished to."

In the light of the lantern I saw that this monk was a magnificent man, dark and bearded, with piercing eyes, and so tall that his hood came up to Rataplan's ears. He wore the look of one who had been through much suffering, but he carried himself like a king,

and we could form some opinion of his learning when we each heard him talk our own language as easily as if he were born to it.

"You have nothing to fear", said I to the trembling innkeeper. "And you, father, you are, if I am not mistaken, the very man who can give us the information which we require."

"All that I have is at your service, my son. But", he added, with a faint smile, "my food is always somewhat slight, and this year it has been such that I must ask you for a crust of bread if I am to have the strength to answer your questions."

We carried two days' rations in our haversacks, so that he soon had the little he asked for. It was dreadful to see the wolfish way in which he seized the piece of dried goat's flesh which I was able to offer him.

"Our time is short, and we must come to the point", said I. "We want your advice as to the weak points of that Abbey, and information concerning the habits of the rascals who live there."

He uttered a cry of joy, with his hands clasped and his eyes upturned. "My prayers are answered", said he, "more speedily than I had dared to hope. I am the unfortunate Abbot of Almeixal, who has been thrown out of my Abbey by these villains and their wicked leader. Oh! to think of what I have lost!" his voice broke, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Don't lose heart, sir", said my companion. "We'll give your Abbey back to you before to-morrow night."

"It is not of my own welfare that I think", said he, "nor even of that of my poor, scattered household. But it is of the holy relics which are left in the impious hands of these robbers."

"Let us hope you may still find them untouched", said the Englishman. "Show us the way inside the gates, and we'll soon clear out the place for you."

In a few words the good Abbot gave us the very points that we wished to know. But all that he said only made our task seem more difficult. The walls of the Abbey were forty feet high. The lower windows were heavily barred, and the whole building pierced with holes through which those inside could fire their guns. The outlaws kept military discipline, and their sentries were too numerous for us to hope to take them by surprise. It was evident that a battalion of infantry and a couple of artillery guns were what was needed. I raised my eyebrows, and the English officer began to whistle.

"We must make an attempt, whatever comes of it", said he.

The men had already dismounted, and, having watered their horses, were eating their suppers. We went into the sitting-room of the inn with the Abbot, that we might talk about our plans.

"It is unlikely", said I, "that those rascals know anything about our coming. I have seen no signs of scouts along the road. My own plan is that we should conceal ourselves in some neighbouring wood, and then, when they open their gates, charge upon them and take them by surprise."

My comrade was of opinion that this was the best that we could do, but, when we came to talk it over, the Abbot made us see that there were difficulties in the way.

"Except on the side of the town, there is no place within a mile of the Abbey where you could shelter man or horse", said he. "The townsfolk are not to be trusted. I fear, my son, that your excellent plan

would have little chance of success in the face of the strict guard which these men keep."

"I see no other way", answered I. "Hussars of Conflans are not so plentiful that I can afford to run half a squadron of them against a forty-foot wall with five hundred infantry behind it."

"I am a man of peace", said the Abbot, "and yet I may, perhaps, give a word of advice. I know these villains and their ways. Who should do so better, seeing that I have stayed for a month in this lonely spot, looking down in weariness of heart at the Abbey which was my own? I will tell you now what I should myself do if I were in your place."

"Pray tell us, father", we cried, both together.

"You must know that bodies of deserters, both French and English, are continually coming in to them, carrying their weapons with them. Now, what is there to prevent you and your men from pretending to be such a body, and so making your way into the Abbey?"

I was amazed at the easiness of the thing, and I embraced the good Abbot. My companion, however, had some objections to offer.

"That is all very well", said he, "but if these fellows are as sharp as you say, it is not very likely that they are going to let a hundred armed strangers into their fortress. From all I have heard of Marshal Honeysweet, or whatever the rascal's name is, I give him credit for more sense than that."

"Well, then", I cried, "let us send fifty in, and let them at daybreak throw open the gates to the other fifty, who will be waiting outside."

We discussed the question at great length. If it had been Massena and Wellington instead of two young cavalry officers, we could not have weighed it all with

more judgment. At last we agreed that one of us should indeed go with fifty men, under pretence of being deserters, and that in the early morning he should gain command of the gate and admit the others. The Abbot, it is true, was still of opinion that it was dangerous to divide our force, but finding that we were both of the same mind, he shrugged his shoulders and gave in.

"There is only one thing that I would ask", said he. "If you lay hands upon this Marshal Honeysweet —this dog of a brigand—what will you do with him?"

"Hang him", I answered.

"It is too easy a death", cried the monk with a revengeful glow in his dark eyes. "Had I my way with him—but, oh, what thoughts are these for a servant of God to harbour!" He clapped his hands to his forehead like one who is half maddened by his troubles, and rushed out of the room.

There was an important point which we had still to settle, and that was whether the French or the English party should have the honour of entering the Abbey first. It was asking a great deal of Etienne Gerard that he should give place to any man at such a time! But the poor Englishman pleaded so hard, urging the few fights which he had seen against my four-and-seventy engagements, that at last I consented that he should go. We had just clasped hands over the matter when there broke out such a shouting and cursing and yelling from the front of the inn, that out we rushed with our drawn swords in our hands, convinced that the brigands were upon us.

You may imagine our feelings when, by the light of the lantern which hung from the porch, we saw twenty of our hussars and dragoons all mixed in one wild heap, red coats and blue, battling with each other

to their hearts' content. We flung ourselves upon them, imploring, threatening, pulling at a lace collar, or at a spurred heel, until, at last, we had dragged them all apart. There they stood, flushed and bleeding, glaring at each other, and all panting together like a line of troop horses after a ten-mile chase. It was only with our drawn swords that we could keep them from each other's throats. The poor Abbot, in his long brown cloak, stood, terror-stricken, in the doorway.

He was, indeed, as I discovered, the innocent cause of all the uproar, for, not understanding how soldiers look upon such things, he had made some remark to the English sergeant that it was a pity that his squadron was not as good as the French. The words were not out of his mouth before a dragoon knocked down the nearest hussar, and then, in a moment, they all flew at each other like tigers. We would trust them no more after that, but my friend moved his men to the front of the inn, and I mine to the back, the English all frowning and silent and our fellows shaking their fists and chattering, each after the fashion of their own people.

Well, as our plans were made, we thought it best to carry them out at once, lest some fresh cause of quarrel should break out between our followers. The English officer and his men rode off, therefore, he having first torn the lace from his sleeves, and the sash from his uniform, so that he might pass as a trooper. He explained to his men what it was that was expected of them, and though they did not raise a cry or wave their weapons as mine might have done, there was an expression upon their calm, clean-shaven faces which filled me with confidence. Their coats were left unbuttoned, their scabbards and helmets stained with dirt, and their harness badly fastened, so that they might look the part of deserters, without order or

discipline. At six o'clock next morning they were to gain command of the main gate of the Abbey, while at that same hour my hussars were to gallop up to it from outside. The officer and I pledged our words to it before he trotted off with his detachment. My sergeant, Papilette, with two troopers, followed the English at a distance, and returned in half an hour to say that, after some talking at the gates, and the flash of lanterns upon them, they had been admitted into the Abbey.

So far, then, all had gone well. It was a cloudy night with a sprinkling of rain, which was in our favour, as there was the less chance of our presence being discovered. I placed my scouts two hundred yards in every direction, to guard against a surprise, and also to prevent any peasant who might stumble upon us from carrying the news to the Abbey. Oudin and Papilette were to take turns of duty, while the others with their horses had comfortable quarters in a great wooden barn. Having walked round and seen that all was as it should be, I flung myself upon the bed which the innkeeper had set apart for me, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

Bravery is the most necessary gift for a soldier, but there are others, very important, and one of them is that he should be a light sleeper. Now, from my boyhood onwards, I have been hard to wake, and it was this which brought me to ruin upon that night.

It may have been about two o'clock in the morning that I suddenly felt as if I could not breathe. I tried to call out, but there was something which prevented me from uttering a sound. I struggled to rise, but I could not move a limb. I was strapped at the ankles, strapped at the knees, and strapped again at the wrists. Only my eyes were free to move, and there at the foot

of my couch, by the light of a Portuguese lamp, whom should I see but the Abbot and the innkeeper!

The latter's heavy, white face had appeared to me when I looked upon it the evening before to express nothing but stupidity and terror. Now, on the contrary, every feature revealed brutality and ferocity. Never have I seen a more dreadful-looking villain. In his hand he held a long, dull-coloured knife. The Abbot, on the other hand, was as refined and as dignified as ever. His monk's gown had been thrown open, however, and I saw beneath it a military coat, such as I have seen among the Portuguese officers. As our eyes met he leaned over the wooden end of the bed and laughed silently.

"You will, I am sure, excuse my amusement, my dear Colonel Gerard", said he, in French. "The fact is, that the expression upon your face when you grasped the situation was just a little funny. I have no doubt that you are an excellent soldier, but I hardly think that you are fit to measure wits with Marshal Honeysweet, as your fellows have been good enough to call me. You appear to have given me credit for very little intelligence, which shows, if I may be allowed to say so, a want of cleverness upon your own part. Indeed, with the single exception of your thick-headed companion, the British dragoon, I have never met anyone who was less fitted to carry out such a mission."

You can imagine how I felt and how I looked, as I listened to this insolent speech, which was all delivered in that sweet tone which had gained this rascal his nickname. I could say nothing, but they must have read my threat in my eyes, for the fellow who had played the part of the innkeeper whispered something to his companion.

"No, no, my dear Chenier, he will be far more

valuable alive", said he. "By the way, Colonel, it is just as well that you are a sound sleeper, for my friend here, who is a little rough in his ways, would certainly have cut your throat if you had raised any alarm. I should recommend you to keep in his good graces, for Sergeant Chenier, late of the 7th Imperial Light Infantry, is a much more dangerous person than myself."

Chenier grinned and shook his knife at me, while I tried to look the disgust which I felt at the thought that a soldier of the Emperor could fall so low.

"It may amuse you to know", said the Marshal, in that soft voice of his, "that both your expeditions were watched from the time that you left your camps. I think that you will allow that Chenier and I played our parts with some skill. We had made every arrangement to receive you at the Abbey, though we had hoped to welcome the whole squadron instead of half. When the gates are secured behind them, our visitors find themselves in a very charming little courtyard, with no possible way of escape, commanded by gun fire from a hundred windows. They may choose to be shot down; or they may choose to surrender. Between ourselves, I have not the slightest doubt that your friends have been wise enough to do the latter. But since you are naturally interested in the matter, we thought that you would care to come with us and to see for yourself. I think I can promise you that you will find your companion waiting for you at the Abbey with a face as long as your own."

The two villains began whispering together, debating, as far as I could hear, which was the best way of avoiding my scouts.

"I will make sure that it is all clear upon the other side of the barn", said the Marshal at last. "You

will stay here, my good Chenier, and if the prisoner gives any trouble you will know what to do."

So we were left together, this murderous traitor and I—he sitting at the end of the bed, sharpening his knife upon his boot in the light of the single smoky little oil-lamp. I wonder now, as I look back upon it, that I did not go mad with self-reproach as I lay helplessly upon the bed, unable to utter a word or move a finger, with the knowledge that my fifty gallant lads were so close to me, and yet with no means of letting them know of my danger. It was no new thing for me to be a prisoner; but to be taken by these rascals, and to be led into their Abbey in the midst of their jeers, fooled and outwitted by their insolent leaders—that was indeed more than I could endure. The knife of the butcher beside me would cut less deeply than that.

I pulled softly at my wrists, and then at my ankles, but whichever of the two had secured me had done his work well. I could not move either of them an inch. Then I tried to get the handkerchief down from my mouth, but the ruffian beside me raised his knife with such a threatening look that I had to desist. I was lying still gazing at his bull neck, and wondering whether it would ever be my good fortune to fit a rope round it, when I heard returning steps coming down the inn passage and up the stair. What word would the villain bring back? If he found it impossible to remove me to the Abbey, he would probably murder me where I lay. I did not care which it might be, and I looked at the doorway with the contempt and defiance which I longed to put into words. But you can imagine my feelings, my dear friends, when, instead of the tall figure and dark, sneering face of the monk, my eyes fell upon the grey cloak and huge moustaches of my good little sergeant Papilette!

The French soldier of those days had seen too much to be ever taken by surprise. His eyes had hardly rested upon my bound figure and the grim face beside me before he had seen how the matter lay. Out flashed his great sword. Chenier sprang forward at him with his knife, and then, thinking better of it, he darted back and stabbed wildly at my heart. But I had hurled myself off the bed on the side opposite to him, and the blade grazed my side before ripping its way through blanket and sheet. An instant later I heard a heavy fall, which told me that the villain was dead. When Papilette had cut the straps from my wrists and ankles, and I had torn the handkerchief from my mouth, I asked him if all was well with the command. Yes, they had had no alarms. Oudin had just relieved him, and he had come to report. Had he seen the Abbot? No, he had seen nothing of him. Then we must form a ring and prevent his escape. I was hurrying out to give the orders, when I heard a slow step enter the door below, and come creaking up the stairs.

Papilette understood it all in an instant. "You are not to kill him", I whispered, and thrust him into the shadow on one side of the door; I crouched on the other. Up he came, up and up, and every footfall seemed to be upon my heart. The brown skirt of his gown was not over the threshold before we were both on him. Down we crashed, the three of us, he fighting like a tiger, and with such amazing strength that he might have broken away from the two of us. Thrice he got to his feet, and thrice we had him over again, until Papilette made him feel that there was a point to his sword. He had sense enough then to know that he was at our mercy, and to lie still while I bound him with the very cords which had been round my own limbs.

"The situation has changed, my fine fellow", said I, "and you will find that I have control this time."

"Luck always comes to the help of a fool", he answered. "Might I trouble you to lay me upon the bed? The floor of these Portuguese inns is hardly a fit resting-place for anyone who is in favour of cleanliness."

I could not but admire the coolness of the man, and the way in which he preserved the same insolent air in spite of his sudden downfall. I sent Papilette to summon a guard, whilst I stood over our prisoner with my drawn sword, never taking my eyes off him for an instant.

"I trust", said he, "that your men will treat me in a proper manner."

"You will get what you deserve—you may depend upon that."

"I ask nothing more. You are, no doubt, aware of my high birth. The straps are cutting my skin. Might I beg you to loosen them?"

"You do not give me credit for much intelligence", I remarked, repeating his own words.

"I see I have managed to teach you something", he replied. "But here come your men, so it matters little whether you loosen them or not."

I ordered the gown to be stripped from him and placed him under a strong guard. Then, as morning was already breaking, I had to consider what my next step was to be. My poor friend and his Englishmen had fallen victims to the deep scheme which might, had we followed all the suggestions of our adviser, have ended in the capture of the whole instead of the half of our force. I must rescue them if it were still possible. It was hopeless to think of capturing the Abbey, since its garrison was already aroused. All

depended now upon the value which they placed upon their leader.

It was hardly light before my bugler blew the summons, and out we trotted on to the plain. My prisoner was placed on horseback in the very centre of the troops. It chanced that there was a large tree just out of gun-shot from the main gate of the Abbey, and under this we halted. Had they opened the great doors in order to attack us, I should have charged home upon them; but, as I had expected, they waited to see what we should do, lining the long wall and pouring down a torrent of hootings and insults and jeering laughter upon us. A few fired their guns, but finding that we were out of reach they soon ceased wasting their powder. It was the strangest sight to see that mixture of uniforms, French, English, and Portuguese, cavalry, infantry, and artillery, all wagging their heads and shaking their fists at us.

My word, their uproar soon died away when we opened our ranks, and showed whom we had got in the midst of us! There was silence for a few seconds, and then such a howl of rage and grief! I could see some of them dancing like madmen upon the wall. He must have been a singular person, this prisoner of ours, to have gained the affection of such a gang.

I had brought a rope from the inn, and we slung it over the lower bough of the tree.

"You will permit me, monsieur, to undo your collar", said Papilette, with pretended politeness.

"If your hands are perfectly clean", answered our prisoner, and set the whole half-squadron laughing.

There was another yell from the wall, followed by a complete silence as the noose was tightened round Marshal Honeysweet's neck. Then came a shriek from a bugle, the Abbey gates flew open, and three men

" THE ABBEY GATES FLEW OPEN, AND THREE MEN RUSHED OUT.

rushed out waving white cloths in their hands. Ah, how my heart leaped with joy at the sight of them. And yet I would not advance an inch to meet them, so that all the eagerness might seem to be upon their side. I allowed my trumpeter, however, to wave a handkerchief in reply, upon which the three messengers came running towards us. The Marshal, still bound, and with the rope round his neck, sat his horse with a half smile, like one who is slightly weary and yet strives out of courtesy not to show it. If I were in such a situation I could not wish to carry myself better.

The messengers were a strange-looking set. One was a Portuguese in a dark uniform, the second a Frenchman in the lightest green, and the third a big English artilleryman in blue and gold. They saluted, all three, and the Frenchman did the talking.

"We have thirty-seven English dragoons in our hands", said he. "We give you our most solemn oath that they shall all hang from the Abbey wall within five minutes of the death of our Marshal."

"Thirty-seven!" I cried. "You have fifty-one."

"Fourteen were cut down before they could be captured."

"And the officer?"

"He would not surrender his sword except with his life. It was not our fault. We would have saved him if we could."

Alas, for my poor friend! I had met him only twice, and yet he was a man very much after my heart. I have always had a regard for the English for the sake of that one friend. A braver man I have never met.

I did not, as you may think, take these rascals' word for anything. Papilette was dispatched with one of them, and returned to say that it was too true. I had now to think of the living.

"You will release the thirty-seven dragoons if I free your leader?"

"We will give you ten of them."

"Up with him!" I cried.

"Twenty", shouted the Frenchman.

"No more words", said I. "Pull on the rope!"

We tightened the cord. We moved the horse. We did all but leave the Marshal suspended. If once I broke his neck the dragoons were dead men. It was as precious to me as to them.

I began to feel desperate, but at last I had my way. The messengers whispered together, and then the Frenchman cried, "We will give you them all."

"With horses and arms?"

They could see that I was not a man to play with.

"All complete", said the Frenchman, sulkily.

The dragoons were brought out with their horses and weapons, and the rope was taken from the Marshal's neck.

"Good-bye, my dear Colonel", said he. "I am afraid you will have rather a poor account to give of your mission, when you find your way back to Massena, though he will probably be too busy retreating to think of you. I must confess that you have got out of your difficulties with greater ability than I had given you credit for. I presume that there is nothing which I can do for you before you go?"

"There is one thing."

"And that is?"

"To give fitting burial to this young officer and his men."

"I promise you that."

"And there is one other."

"Name it."

"I give me five minutes in the open with a sword in your hand and a horse between your legs."

"Oh, no!" said he. "I should either have to cut short your promising career, or else to bid farewell to my dear friends. It is unreasonable to make such a request of a man who has just escaped being hung."

I gathered my horsemen together and moved them into column.

"Good-bye for the present", I cried, shaking my sword at him. "The next time you may not escape so easily."

"Good-bye", he answered. "When you are weary of the Emperor, you will always find a commission waiting for you in the service of Marshal Honeysweet."

Exercises.

1. Who was Marshal Honeysweet? Why was he given that name?
2. This is Gerard's sixth adventure, and it occurred in Portugal. What were the other five adventures of which you have read, and in what countries did they take place?