ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

THE CONSCRIPT: A STORY OF THE FRENCH WAR OF 1813

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Instead of following "Madame Thérèse" with stories celebrating the victories of Napoleon and thus appealing to their compatriots' love of glory and military illusions, MM. Erckmann-Chatrian take up next the tragic and far more significant story of 1812-13. With "The Conscript" begins their long, sustained, and eloquent sermon against war and war-wagers – the exordium, so to say, of their arraignment of Napoleon for wanton and insatiate love of conquest. "The Conscript" is certainly one of the most impressive statements of the darker side of the national pursuit of military glory that have ever been made. The first part of the book is taken up with a vivid and pathetic account of the passage of the *grande armée* through Alsace on its way to Moscow and the Beresina, of the anxious waiting for news of the battles that succeeded, of the first suspicions of disaster and their overwhelming confirmation, of

the final rout and awful straggling retreat and return of the great expedition, and its demoralized and harassed entry within the national frontiers once more. The second and major portion narrates the rude surprise of the continuation of warfare and the still more fatal campaign which opened so dubiously with Lutzen and Bautzen, and culminated so disastrously in Leipsic and the capitulation of Paris. Poor Joseph Bertha, who tells the affecting and exciting story, is snatched away from his betrothed and his peaceful trade by the conscription, and his individual experiences in the campaign are as interesting, from the point of view of romance, as their representative nature and his shrewd and simple reflections upon them are historically and philanthropically suggestive. Certainly, war, in the minutiae of its reality, has never been more graphically painted than in "The Conscript of 1813."

I

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

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

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

That was the place to see princes, ambassadors, and generals come and go, some on horseback and some in carriages drawn by

two or four horses; there they passed in embroidered uniforms, with waving plumes and decorations from every country under the sun. And in the highway what couriers, what baggage-wagons, what powder-trains, cannon, caissons, cavalry, and infantry did we see! Those were stirring times!

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

From morning until night, and even during the night, the "Red Ox" kept its tables in readiness. Through the long windows on the first story nothing was to be seen but great white table-cloths, glittering with silver and covered with game, fish, and other rare viands, around which the travellers sat side by side. In the yard behind, horses neighed, postilions shouted, maid-servants laughed, coaches rattled. Ah! the hotel of the "Red Ox" will never see such prosperous times again.

Sometimes, too, people of the city stopped there, who in other times were known to gather sticks in the forest or to work on the highway. But now they were commandants, colonels, generals, and had won their grades by fighting in every land on earth. Old Melchior, with his black silk cap pulled over his ears, his weak eyelids, his nose pinched between great horn spectacles, and his lips tightly pressed together, could not sometimes avoid putting

aside his magnifying-glass and punch upon the workbench, and throwing a glance toward the inn, especially when the cracking of the whips of the postilions, with their heavy boots, little jackets, and perukes of twisted hemp, awoke the echoes of the ramparts and announced a new arrival. Then he became all attention, and from time to time would exclaim:

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

But when he saw them shaking hands right and left in the street with those who recognized them, his tone changed; he wiped his eyes with his great spotted handkerchief, and murmured:

"How pleased poor old Annette will be! Good! good! *He* is not proud; he is a man. God preserve him from cannon-balls!"

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

Nearly every month *Te Deums* were chanted, and the cannon at the arsenal fired their salutes of twenty-one rounds for some new victory, making one's heart flutter. During the week following every family was uneasy; poor mothers especially waited for letters, and the first that came all the city knew of;

"such an one had received a letter from Jacques or Claude," and all ran to see if it spoke of their Joseph or their Jean-Baptiste. I do not speak of promotions or the official reports of deaths; as for the first, every one knew that the killed must be replaced; and as for the reports of deaths, parents awaited them weeping, for they did not come immediately; sometimes indeed they never came, and the poor father and mother hoped on, saying, "Perhaps our boy is a prisoner. When they make peace he will return. How many have returned whom we thought dead!"

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

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

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

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

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

Then I understood his meaning, and answered:

"Perhaps they returned by Mayence or some other route. It cannot be possible otherwise!"

But he only shook his head, and said:

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

Then we set about our work again; but the reflections of Monsieur Goulden gave me some terrible subjects for thought.

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

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

Catharine and I often went into the orchard behind the house; there we bit the same apples and the same pears; we were the happiest creatures in the world. It was I who took her to high mass and vespers; and on holidays she never left my side, and refused to dance with the other youths of the village. Everybody

knew that we would some day be married; but, if I should be so unfortunate as to be drawn in the conscription, there was an end of matters. I wished that I was a thousand times more lame; for at the time of which I speak they had first taken the unmarried men, then the married men who had no children, then those with one child; and I constantly asked myself, "Are lame fellows of more consequence than fathers of families? Could they not put me in the cavalry?" The idea made me so unhappy that I already thought of fleeing.

But in 1812, at the beginning of the Russian war, my fear increased. From February until the end of May, every day we saw pass regiments after regiments – dragoons, cuirassiers, carbineers, hussars, lancers of all colors, artillery, caissons, ambulances, wagons, provisions, rolling on forever, like a river which runs on and on, and of which one can never see the end.

I still remember that this began with soldiers driving large wagons drawn by oxen. These oxen were in the place of horses, and were to be used for food later on, when they should have used up their provisions. Everybody said, "What a fine idea! When the soldiers can no longer feed the oxen, the oxen will feed the soldiers." Unhappily those who said this did not know that the oxen could only make seven or eight leagues a day, and that for every eight days of marching, they must have at least one day's rest; so that indeed, the poor animals' hoofs were already dry and worn out, their lips drooping, their eyes standing out of their heads, and little but skin and bone left of them. For three

weeks they kept passing in this way, all torn with thrusts of the bayonet. Meat became cheap, for they killed many of the oxen; but few wanted their flesh, the diseased meat being unhealthy. They never went more than twenty leagues beyond the Rhine.

After that, we saw more lancers, sabres, and helmets file past. All flowed through the French gate, crossed the Place d'Armes, and streamed out at the German gate.

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

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

I was gazing at the carriage, when a horse crashed against the post to which the butcher Klein was accustomed to fasten his cattle. The dragoon fell heavily, his helmet rolled in the gutter, and immediately a head leaned out of the carriage to see what had happened – a large head, pale and fat, with a tuft of hair on the forehead: it was Napoleon; he held his hand up as if about taking a pinch of snuff, and said a few words roughly. The officer galloping by the side of the coach bent down to reply; and his

master took his snuff and turned the corner, while the shouts redoubled and the cannons roared louder than ever.

This was all that I saw.

The Emperor did not stop at Phalsbourg, and, when he was on the road to Saverne, the guns fired their last shot, and silence reigned once more. The guards at the French gate raised the drawbridge, and the old watchmaker said:

"You have seen him?"

"I have, Monsieur Goulden."

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

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

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

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

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

"Eh, Joseph! Another battle won! Fifty thousand men lost! Twenty-five standards, a hundred guns won. All goes well, all

goes well. It only remains now to order a new levy to replace the dead!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

II

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

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

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

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

You must know that for six months past I had wished to make Catharine a magnificent present for her birthday, which fell on the 18th of December. Among the watches which hung in

Monsieur Goulden's window was one little one, of the prettiest kind, with a silver case full of little circles, which made it shine like a star. Around the face, under the glass, was a thread of copper, and on the face were painted two lovers, the youth evidently declaring his love, and giving to his sweetheart a large bouquet of roses, while she modestly lowered her eyes and held out her hand.

The first time I saw the watch, I said to myself: "You will not let that escape; that watch is for Catharine, and, although you must work every day till midnight for it, she must have it." Monsieur Goulden, after seven in the evening, allowed me work on my own account. He had old watches to clean and regulate; and as this work was often very troublesome, old Father Melchior paid me reasonably for it. But the little watch was thirty-five francs, and one can imagine how many hours at night I would have to work for it. I am sure that if Monsieur Goulden knew that I wanted it he would have given it me for a present, but I would not have let him take a farthing less for it; I would have regarded doing so something shameful. I kept saying: "You must earn it; no one else must have any claim upon it." Only for fear somebody else might take a fancy to buy it, I put it aside in a box, telling Father Melchior that I knew a purchaser.

Under these circumstances, every one can readily understand how it was that all these stories of war went in at one ear and out at the other with me. While I worked I imagined Catharine's joy, and for five months that was all I had before my eyes. I thought

how pleased she would look, and asked myself, "What will she say?" Sometimes I imagined she would cry out, "Oh, Joseph! what are you thinking of? It is much too beautiful for me. No, no; I cannot take so fine a watch from you!" Then I thought I would force it upon her; I would slip it into her apron-pocket, saying, "Come, come, Catharine! Do you wish to give me pain?" I could see how she wanted it, and that she spoke so only to seem to refuse it. Then I imagined her blushing, with her hands raised, saying, "Joseph, now I know indeed that you love me!" And she would embrace me with tears in her eyes. I felt very happy. Aunt Grédel approved of all. In a word, a thousand such scenes passed through my mind, and when I retired at night I thought: "There is no one as happy as you, Joseph. See what a present you can make Catharine by your toil; and she surely is preparing something for your birthday, for she thinks only of you; you are both very happy, and, when you are married, all will go well."

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

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

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

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

"Our poor soldiers! our poor soldiers!"

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

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

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

Then he would be silent, and for hours I would think of what he had said to me; I pictured to myself our soldiers on the march, running to keep themselves warm. But the thought of Catharine always came back to me, and I have often thought since that when

one is happy, the misery of others affects him but little, especially in youth, when the passions are strongest, and when we have had little knowledge of great griefs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But," he said, "it is not such a watch as that you want, Joseph; you want one that will fill your pocket and mark the seconds.

Those little watches are only for women."

I knew not what to say.

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

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

I was all confusion.

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

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

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

The table was arranged, and then Monsieur Goulden took from a closet a bottle of his Metz wine, which he kept for great occasions, and we supped like old friends, rather than as master and apprentice; all the evening he never stopped speaking of the merry days of his youth; telling me how he once had a sweetheart, but that, in 1792, he left home in the *levée en masse* at the time of the Prussian invasion, and that on his return to Fénétrange,

he found her married – a very natural thing, since he had never mustered courage enough to declare his love. However, this did not prevent his remaining faithful to the tender remembrance, and when he spoke of it he seemed sad indeed. I recounted all this in imagination to Catharine, and it was not until the stroke of ten, at the passage of the rounds, which relieved the sentries on post every twenty minutes on account of the great cold, that we put two good logs on the fire, and at length went to bed.

III

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

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

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

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

I did not answer, but looked out to see if the fire was lighting; the embers burnt well; I heard the chimney draw, and at once

all blazed up. The sound of the flames was merry enough, but it required a good half-hour to feel the air any warmer.

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

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

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

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

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

I had not gone as far as the church when I turned up the fox-

skin collar of the cloak to shield my ears. The cold was so keen that it seemed as though the air were filled with needles, and one's body shrank involuntarily from head to foot.

Under the German gate, I saw the soldier on guard, in his great gray mantle, standing back in his box like a saint in his niche; he had his sleeve wrapped about his musket where he held it, to keep his fingers from the iron, and two long icicles hung from his mustaches. No one was on the bridge, not even the toll-gatherer, but a little farther on, I saw three carts in the middle of the road with their canvas-tops all covered and glistening with frost; they were unharnessed and abandoned. Everything in the distance seemed dead; all living things had hidden themselves from the cold; and I could hear nothing but the snow crunching under my feet. Running along the cemetery, where the crosses and gravestones glistened in the snow, I said to myself: "Those who sleep there are no longer cold!" I drew my cloak over my breast, and hid my nose in the fur collar, thanking Monsieur Goulden for his lucky thought. I also thrust my hands into the muffler to the elbows, and ran along in the deep trench, extending farther than the eye could reach, that the soldiers had made from the town as far as Quatre-Vents. On each side were walls of ice. In some places swept by the wind, I could see the oak forest and the bluish mountain, both seeming much nearer than they were, on account of the clearness of the air. Not a dog barked in a farm-yard; it was too cold even for that.

But in spite of all this the thought of Catharine warmed my

heart, and soon I descried the first houses of Quatre-Vents. The chimneys and the thatched roofs, to the right and left of the road, were scarcely higher than the mountains of snow, and the villagers had dug trenches along the walls, so that they could pass to each other's houses. But that day every family kept around its hearth, and the little round window-panes seemed painted red, from the great fires burning within. Before each door was a truss of straw to keep the cold from entering beneath it.

At the fifth door to the right I stopped to take off my mittens; then I opened and closed it very quickly. I was at the house of Grédel Bauer, the widow of Matthias Bauer, and Catharine's mother.

As I entered, and while Aunt Grédel, seated by the hearth, astonished at my fox-skin collar, was yet turning her gray head, Catharine, in her Sunday dress – a pretty striped petticoat, a kerchief with long fringe folded across her bosom, a red apron fastened around her slender waist, a pretty cap of blue silk with black velvet bands setting off her rosy and white face, soft eyes, and rather short nose – Catharine, I say, exclaimed:

"It is Joseph!"

And without waiting to look twice, she ran to greet me, saying:

"I knew the cold would not keep you from coming."

I was so happy that I could not speak. I took off my cloak, which I hung upon a nail on the wall, with my mittens; I took off Monsieur Goulden's great shoes, and turned pale with joy.

I would have said something agreeable, but could not;

suddenly I exclaimed:

"See here, Catharine; here is something for your birthday, but you must give me a kiss before opening the box."

She put up her pretty red cheek to me, and then ran to the table. Aunt Grédel also came to see the present. Catharine untied the cord and opened the box. I was behind them; my heart jumped, jumped, – I feared that the watch was not pretty enough. But in an instant, Catharine, clasping her hands, said in a low voice:

"How beautiful! It is a watch!"

"Yes," said Aunt Grédel; "it is beautiful! I never saw so fine a one. One would think it was silver."

"But it *is* silver," returned Catharine, turning toward me inquiringly.

Then I said:

"Do you think, Aunt Grédel, that I would be capable of giving a gilt watch to one whom I love better than my own life? If I could do such a thing, I would despise myself more than the dirt of my shoes."

Catharine, hearing this, threw her arms around my neck; and as we stood thus, I thought: "this is the happiest day of my life." I could not let her go.

Aunt Grédel asked:

"But what is this painted upon the face?"

I could not speak to answer her; and only at last, when we were seated beside each other, I took the watch and said:

"That painting, Aunt Grédel, represents two lovers who love each other more than they can tell: Joseph Bertha and Catharine Bauer; Joseph is offering a bouquet of roses to his sweetheart, who is stretching out her hand to take them."

When Aunt Grédel had sufficiently admired the watch, she said:

"Come until I kiss you, Joseph. I see very well that you must have economized closely, and worked hard for this watch, and I think it is very pretty, and that you are a good workman, and will do us no discredit."

I kissed Aunt Grédel's cheek, and from then until midday, I did not let go Catharine's hand. We were as happy as could be looking at each other. Aunt Grédel bustled about to prepare a large pancake with dried prunes, and wine, and cinnamon, and other good things in it; but we paid no attention to her, and it was only when she put on her red jacket and black sabots, and called, "Come, my children; to table!" that we saw the fine tablecloth, the great porringer, the pitcher of wine, and the large round, golden pancake on a plate in the middle. The sight rejoiced us not a little, and Catharine said:

"Sit there, Joseph, opposite the window, that I may look at you. But you must fix my watch, for I do not know where to put it."

I passed the chain around her neck, and then, seating ourselves, we ate gayly. Without, not a sound was heard; within, the fire crackled merrily upon the hearth. It was very pleasant

in the large kitchen, and the gray cat, a little wild, gazed at us through the balusters of the stairs without daring to come down.

Catharine, after dinner, sang *Der liebe Gott*. She had a sweet, clear voice, and it seemed to float to heaven. I sang low, merely to sustain her. Aunt Grédel, who could never rest doing nothing, began spinning; the hum of her wheel filled up the silences, and we all felt happy. When one song was ended, we began another. At three o'clock, Aunt Grédel served up the pancake, and as we ate it, laughing, like the happiest of beings, she would exclaim:

"Come, come; now, you are children in reality."

She pretended to be angry, but we could see in her eyes that she was happy from the bottom of her heart. This lasted until four o'clock, when night began to come on apace; the darkness seemed to enter by the little windows, and, knowing that we must soon part, we sat sadly around the hearth on which the red flames were dancing. Catharine pressed my hand. I would almost have given my life to remain longer. Another half-hour passed, when Aunt Grédel cried:

"Listen, Joseph! It is time for you to go; the moon does not rise till after midnight, and it will soon be dark as a kiln outside, and an accident happens so easily in these great frosts."

These words seemed to fall like a bolt of ice, and I felt Catharine's clasp tighten on my hand. But Aunt Grédel was right.

"Come," said she, rising and taking down the cloak from the wall; "you will come again Sunday."

I had to put on the heavy shoes, the mittens, and the cloak

of Monsieur Goulden, and would have wished that I were a hundred years doing so, but, unfortunately, Aunt Grédel assisted me. When I had the great collar drawn up to my ears, she said:

"Now, kiss us good-by, Joseph."

I kissed her first, then Catharine, who did not say a word. After that I opened the door and the terrible cold, entering, admonished me not to wait.

"Hasten, Joseph," said my aunt.

"Good-night, Joseph, good-night!" cried Catharine, "and do not forget to come Sunday."

I turned round to wave my hand; and then I ran on without raising my head, for the cold was so intense that it brought tears to my eyes even behind the great collar.

I ran on thus some twenty minutes, scarcely daring to breathe, when a drunken voice called out:

"Who goes there?"

I looked through the dim night, and saw, fifty paces before me, Pinacle, the pedler, with his huge basket, his otter-skin cap, woollen gloves, and iron-pointed staff. The lantern hanging from the strap of his basket lit up his debauched face, his chin bristling with yellow beard, and his great nose shaped like an extinguisher. He glared with his little eyes like a wolf, and repeated, "Who goes there?"

This Pinacle was the greatest rogue in the country. He had the year before a difficulty with Monsieur Goulden, who demanded of him the price of a watch which he undertook to deliver to

Monsieur Anstett, the curate of Homert, and the money for which he put into his pocket, saying he paid it to me. But although the villain made oath before the justice of the peace, Monsieur Goulden knew the contrary, for on the day in question neither he nor I had left the house. Besides, Pinacle wanted to dance with Catharine at a festival at Quatre-Vents, and she refused because she knew the story of the watch, and was, besides, unwilling to leave me.

The sight, then, of this rogue with his iron-shod stick in the middle of the road did not tend to rejoice my heart. Happily a little path which wound around the cemetery was at my left, and, without replying, I dashed through it although the snow reached my waist.

Then he, guessing who I was, cried furiously:

"Aha! it is the little lame fellow! Halt! halt! I want to bid you good-evening. You came from Catharine's, you watch-stealer."

But I sprang like a hare through the heaps of snow; he at first tried to follow me, but his pack hindered him, and, when I gained the ground again, he put his hands around his mouth, and shrieked:

"Never mind, cripple, never mind! Your reckoning is coming all the same; the conscription is coming – the grand conscription of the one-eyed, the lame, and the hunch-backed. You will have to go, and you will find a place under ground like the others."

He continued his way, laughing like the sot he was, and I, scarcely able to breathe, kept on, thanking Heaven that the little

alley was so near; for Pinacle, who was known always to draw his knife in a fight, might have done me an ill turn.

In spite of my exertion, my feet, even in the thick shoes, were intensely cold, and I again began running.

That night the water froze in the cisterns of Phalsbourg and the wines in the cellars – things that had not happened before for sixty years.

On the bridge and under the German gate the silence seemed yet deeper than in the morning, and the night made it seem terrible. A few stars shone between the masses of white cloud that hung over the city. All along the street I met not a soul, and when I reached home, after shutting the door of our lower passage, it seemed warm to me, although the little stream that ran from the yard along the wall was frozen. I stopped a moment to take breath; then I ascended in the dark, my hand on the baluster.

When I opened the door of my room, the cheerful warmth of the stove was grateful indeed. Monsieur Goulden was seated in his arm-chair before the fire, his cap of black silk pulled over his ears, and his hands resting upon his knees.

"Is that you, Joseph?" he asked without turning round.

"It is," I answered. "How pleasant it is here, and how cold out of doors! We never had such a winter."

"No," he said gravely. "It is a winter that will long be remembered."

I went into the closet and hung the cloak and mittens in their places, and was about relating my adventure with Pinacle, when

he resumed:

"You had a pleasant day of it, Joseph."

"I have had, indeed. Aunt Grédel and Catharine wished me to make you their compliments."

"Very good, very good," said he; "the young are right to amuse themselves, for when they grow old, and suffer, and see so much of injustice, selfishness, and misfortune, everything is spoiled in advance."

He spoke as if talking to himself, gazing at the fire. I had never seen him so sad, and I asked:

"Are you not well, Monsieur Goulden?"

But he, without replying, murmured:

"Yes, yes; this is to be a great military nation; this is glory!"

He shook his head and bent over gloomily, his heavy gray brows contracted in a frown.

I knew not what to think of all this, when raising his head again, he said:

"At this moment, Joseph, there are four hundred thousand families weeping in France; the grand army has perished in the snows of Russia; all those stout young men whom for two months we saw passing our gates are buried beneath them. The news came this afternoon. Oh! it is horrible! horrible!"

I was silent. Now I saw clearly that we must have another conscription, as after all campaigns, and this time the lame would most probably be called. I grew pale, and Pinacle's prophecy made my hair stand on end.

"Go to bed, Joseph; rest easy," said Monsieur Goulden. "I am not sleepy; I will stay here; all this upsets me. Did you remark anything in the city?"

"No, Monsieur Goulden."

I went to my room and to bed. For a long time I could not close my eyes, thinking of the conscription, of Catharine, and of so many thousands of men buried in the snow, and then I plotted flight to Switzerland.

About three o'clock Monsieur Goulden retired, and a few minutes after, through God's grace, I fell asleep.

IV

When I arose in the morning, about seven, I went to Monsieur Goulden's room to begin work, but he was still in bed, looking weary and sick.

"Joseph," said he, "I am not well. This horrible news has made me ill, and I have not slept at all."

"Shall I not make you some tea?" I asked.

"No, my child, that is not worth while. I will get up by and by. But this is the day to regulate the city clocks; I cannot go; for to see so many good people – people I have known for thirty years – in misery, would kill me. Listen, Joseph: take those keys hanging behind the door and go. I will try to sleep a little. If I could sleep an hour or two, it would do me good."

"Very well, Monsieur Goulden," I replied; "I will go at once."

After putting more wood in the stove, I took the cloak and mittens, drew Monsieur Goulden's bed-curtains, and went out, the bunch of keys in my pocket. The illness of Father Melchior grieved me very much for a while, but a thought came to console me, and I said to myself: "You can climb up the city clock-tower, and see the house of Catharine and Aunt Grédel." Thinking thus, I arrived at the house of Brainstein, the bell-ringer, who lived at the corner of the little place, in an old, tumble-down barrack. His two sons were weavers, and in their old home the noise of the loom and the whistle of the shuttle was heard from morning

till night. The grandmother, old and blind, slept in an armchair, on the back of which perched a magpie. Father Brainstein, when he did not have to ring the bells for a christening, a funeral, or a marriage, kept reading his almanac behind the small round panes of his window.

Beside their hut was a little box under the roof of the old hall, where the cobbler Koniam worked, and farther on were the butchers' and fruiterers' shops.

I came then to Brainstein's, and the old man, when he saw me, rose up, saying:

"It is you, Monsieur Joseph."

"Yes, Father Brainstein; I came in place of Monsieur Goulden, who is not well."

"Very good; it is all the same."

He took up his staff and put on his woollen cap, driving away the cat that was sleeping upon it; then he took the great key of the steeple from a drawer, and we went out together, I glad to find myself again in the open air, despite the cold; for their miserable room was gray with vapor, and as hard to breathe in as a kettle; I could never understand how people could live in such a way.

At last we gained the street, and Father Brainstein said:

"You have heard of the great Russian disaster, Monsieur Joseph?"

"Yes, Father Brainstein; it is fearful!"

"Ah!" said he, "there will be many a Mass said in the churches; every one will weep and pray for their children, the more that

they are dead in a heathen land."

"Certainly, certainly," I replied.

We crossed the court, and in front of the tower-hall, opposite the guard-house, many peasants and city people were already standing, reading a placard. We went up the steps and entered the church, where more than twenty women, young and old, were kneeling on the pavement, in spite of the terrible cold.

"Is it not as I said?" said Brainstein. "They are coming already to pray, and half of them have been here since five o'clock."

He opened the little door of the steeple leading to the organ, and we began climbing up in the dark. Once in the organ-loft, we turned to the left of the bellows, and went up to the bells.

I was glad to see the blue sky and breathe the free air again, for the bad odor of the bats which inhabited the tower almost suffocated me. But how terrible the cold was in that cage, open to every wind, and how dazzlingly the snow shone over twenty leagues of country! All the little city of Phalsbourg, with its six bastions, three *demilunes*, two advanced works, its barracks, magazines, bridges, *glacis*, ramparts; its great parade-ground, and little, well-aligned houses, were beneath me, as if drawn on white paper. I was not yet accustomed to the height, and I held fast on the middle of the platform for fear I might jump off, for I had read of people having their heads turned by great heights. I did not dare go to the clock, and, if Brainstein had not set me the example, I would have remained there, pressed against the beam from which the bells hung; but he said:

"Come, Monsieur Joseph, and see if it is right."

Then I took out Monsieur Goulden's large watch which marked seconds, and I saw that the clock was considerably slow. Brainstein helped me to wind it up, and we regulated it.

"The clock is always slow in winter," said he, "because of the iron working."

After becoming somewhat accustomed to the elevation, I began to look around. There were the Oakwood barracks, the upper barracks, Bigelberg, and lastly, opposite me, Quatre-Vents, and the house of Aunt Grédel, from the chimney of which a thread of blue smoke rose toward the sky. And I saw the kitchen, and imagined Catharine, in sabots, and woollen skirt, spinning at the corner of the hearth and thinking of me. I no longer felt the cold; I could not take my eyes from their cottage.

Father Brainstein, who did not know what I was looking at, said:

"Yes, yes, Monsieur Joseph: now all the roads are covered with people in spite of the snow. The news has already spread, and every one wants to know the extent of his loss."

He was right; every road and path was covered with people coming to the city; and looking in the court, I saw the crowd increasing every moment before the guard-house, the town-house, and the postoffice. A deep murmur arose from the mass.

At length, after a last, long look at Catharine's house, I had to descend, and we went down the dark, winding stairs, as if descending into a well. Once in the organ-loft, we saw that

the crowd had greatly increased in the church; all the mothers, the sisters, the old grandmothers, the rich, and the poor, were kneeling on the benches in the midst of the deepest silence; they prayed for the absent, offering all only to see them once again.

At first I did not realize all this; but suddenly the thought that, if I had gone the year before, Catharine would be there, praying and asking me of God, fell like a bolt on my heart, and I felt all my body tremble.

"Let us go! let us go!" I exclaimed, "this is terrible."

"What is?" he asked.

"War."

We descended the stairs under the great gate, and I went across the court to the house of Monsieur the Commandant Meunier, while Brainstein took the way to his house.

At the corner of the Hotel de Ville, I saw a sight which I shall remember all my life. There, around a placard, were more than five hundred people, men and women crowded against each other, all pale, and with necks outstretched, gazing at it as at some horrible apparition. They could not read it, and from time to time one would say in German or French:

"But they are not all dead! Some will return."

Others cried out:

"Let us see it! let us get near it."

A poor old woman in the rear lifted up her hands, and cried:

"Christopher! my poor Christopher!"

Others, angry at her clamor, called out:

"Keep that old woman quiet."

Each one thought only of himself.

Behind, the crowd continued to pour through the German gate.

At length, Harmantier, the *sergent-de-ville*, came out of the guard-house, and stood at the top of the steps, with another placard like the first; a few soldiers followed him. Then a rush was made toward him, but the soldiers kept off the crowd, and old Harmantier began to read the placard, which he called the twenty-ninth bulletin, and in which the Emperor informed them that during the retreat the horses perished every night by thousands. He said nothing of the men!

The *sergent-de-ville* read slowly; not a breath was heard in the crowd; even the old woman, who did not understand French, listened like the others. The buzz of a fly could have been heard. But when he came to this passage, "Our cavalry was dismounted to such an extent that we were forced to bring together the officers who yet owned horses to form four companies of one hundred and fifty men each. Generals rated as captains, and colonels as under-officers" – when he read this passage, which told more of the misery of the grand army than all the rest, cries and groans arose on all sides; two or three women fell and were carried away.

It is true that the bulletin added, "The health of his majesty was never better," and that was a great consolation. Unfortunately it could not restore life to three hundred thousand men buried in

the snow; and so the people went away very sad. Others came by dozens who had not heard the news read, and from time to time Harmantier came out to read the bulletin.

This lasted until night; still the same scene over and over again.

I ran from the place; I wanted to know nothing about it.

I went to Monsieur the Commandant's. Entering a parlor, I saw him at breakfast. He was an old man, but hale, with a red face and good appetite.

"Ah! it is you!" said he, "Monsieur Goulden is not coming, then?"

"No, Monsieur the Commandant, the bad news has made him ill."

"Ah! I understand," he said, emptying his glass; "yes, it is unfortunate."

And while I was regulating the clock, he added:

"Well! tell Monsieur Goulden that we will have our revenge. We cannot always have the upper hand. For fifteen years we have kept the drums beating over them, and it is only right to let them have this little morsel of consolation. And then our honor is safe; we were not beaten fighting; without the cold and the snow, those poor Cossacks would have had a hard time of it. But patience; the skeletons of our regiments will soon be filled, and then let them beware."

I wound up the clock; he rose and came to look at it, for he was a great amateur in clock-making. He pinched my ear in a merry mood; and then, as I was going away, he cried as he buttoned up

his overcoat, which he had opened before beginning breakfast:

"Tell Father Goulden to rest easy; the dance will begin again in the spring; the Kalmucks will not always have winter fighting for them. Tell him that."

"Yes, Monsieur the Commandant," I answered, shutting the door.

His burly figure and air of good humor comforted me a little; but in all the other houses I went to, at the Horwiches, the Frantz-Tonis, the Durlaches, everywhere I heard only lamentations. The women especially were in misery; the men said nothing, but walked about with heads hanging down, and without even looking to see what I was doing.

Toward ten o'clock there only remained two persons for me to see: Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlan, one of the ancient nobility, who lived at the end of the main street, with Madame Chamberlan-d'Ecof and Mademoiselle Jeanne, their daughter. They were *émigrés*, and had returned about three or four years before. They saw no one in the city, and only three or four old priests in the environs. Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlan loved only the chase. He had six dogs at the end of the yard, and a two-horse carriage; Father Robert, of the Rue des Capucins, served them as coachman, groom, footman, and huntsman. Monsieur de la Vablerie-Chamberlan always wore a hunting vest, a leathern cap, and boots and spurs. All the town called him the hunter, but they said nothing of Madame nor of Mademoiselle de Chamberlan.

I was very sad when I pushed open the heavy door, which closed with a pulley whose creaking echoed through the vestibule. What was then my surprise to hear, in the midst of general mourning, the tones of a song and harpsichord! Monsieur de la Vablerie was singing, and Mademoiselle Jeanne accompanying him. I knew not, in those days, that the misfortune of one was often the joy of others, and I said to myself with my hand on the latch: "They have not heard the news from Russia."

But while I stood thus, the door of the kitchen opened, and Mademoiselle Louise, their servant, putting out her head, asked:

"Who is there?"

"It is I, Mademoiselle Louise."

"Ah! it is you, Monsieur Joseph. Come this way."

They had their clock in a large parlor which they rarely entered; the high windows, with blinds, remained closed; but there was light enough for what I had to do. I passed then through the kitchen and regulated the antique clock, which was a magnificent piece of work of white marble. Mademoiselle Louise looked on.

"You have company, Mademoiselle Louise?" said I.

"No, but monsieur ordered me to let no one in."

"You are very cheerful here."

"Ah! yes," she said; "and it is for the first time in years; I don't know what is the matter."

My work done, I left the house, meditating on these occurrences, which seemed to me strange. The idea never

entered my mind that they were rejoicing at our defeat.

Then I turned the corner of the street to go to Father Féral's, who was called the "Standard-bearer," because, at the age of forty-five, he, a blacksmith, and for many years the father of a family, had carried the colors of the volunteers of Phalsbourg in '92, and only returned after the Zurich campaign. He had his three sons in the army of Russia, Jean, Louis, and George Féral. George was commandant of dragoons; the two others, officers of infantry.

I imagined the grief of Father Féral while I was going, but it was nothing to what I saw when I entered his room. The poor old man, blind and bald, was sitting in an arm-chair behind the stove, his head bowed upon his breast, and his sightless eyes open, and staring as if he saw his three sons stretched at his feet. He did not speak, but great drops of sweat rolled down his forehead on his long, thin cheeks, while his face was pale as that of a corpse. Four or five of his old comrades of the times of the Republic – Father Desmarets, Father Nivoi, old Paradis, and tall old Froissard – had come to console him. They sat around him in silence, smoking their pipes, and looking as if they themselves needed comfort.

From time to time one or the other would say: "Come, come, Féral! are we no longer veterans of the army of the Sambre-and-Meuse?"

Or,

"Courage, Standard-bearer: courage! Did we not carry the battery at Fleurus?"

Or some other similar remark.

But he did not reply; every minute he sighed, his aged, hollow cheeks swelled; then he leaned over, and the old friends made signs to each other, shaking their heads, as if to say:

"This looks bad."

I hastened to regulate the clock and depart, for to see the poor old man in such a plight made my heart bleed.

When I arrived at home, I found Monsieur Goulden at his work-bench.

"You are returned, Joseph," said he. "Well?"

"Well, Monsieur Goulden, you had reason to stay away; it is terrible."

And I told him all in detail.

"Yes; I knew it all," said he, sadly, "but our misfortunes are only beginning; these Prussians and Austrians and Russians and Spaniards – all the nations we have been beating since eighteen hundred and four, are now taking advantage of our ill luck to fall upon us. We gave them kings and queens they did not know from Adam nor Eve, and whom they did not want, it seems, and now they are going to bring back the old ones with all their trains of nobles, and after pouring out our blood for the Emperor's brothers, we are about losing all we gained by the Revolution. Instead of being first among the first we will be last among the last. While you were away I was thinking of all this; it is unavoidable – We relied upon soldiers alone, and now that we have no more, we are nothing."

He arose. I set the table, and, whilst we were dining in silence, the bells of the steeples began to ring.

"Some one is dead in the city," said Monsieur Goulden.

"Indeed? I did not hear of it."

Ten minutes after, the Rabbi Rose came in to have a glass put in his watch.

"Who is dead?" asked Monsieur Goulden.

"Poor old Standard-bearer."

"What! Father Féral?"

"Yes, near an hour ago. Father Desmarets and several others tried to comfort him; at last he asked them to read to him the last letter of his son George, the commandant of dragoons, in which he says that next spring he hoped to embrace his father with a colonel's epaulettes. As the old man heard this, he tried to rise, but fell back with his head upon his knees. That letter had broken his heart."

Monsieur Goulden made no remark on the news.

"Here is your watch, Monsieur Rose," said he, handing it back to the rabbi; "it is twelve sous."

Monsieur Rose departed, and we finished our dinner in silence.

V

A few days after, the gazette announced that the Emperor was in Paris, and that the King of Rome and the Empress Marie-Louise were about to be crowned. Monsieur the Mayor, his coadjutor and the municipal councillors now spoke only of the rights of the throne, and Professor Burguet, the elder, wrote a speech on the subject which Baron Parmentier read. But all this produced but little effect on the people, because every one was afraid of being carried off by the conscription, and knew that many more soldiers were needed; all were in trouble, and I grew thinner day by day. In vain would Monsieur Goulden say: "Fear nothing, Joseph; you cannot march. Consider, my child, that any one as lame as you would give out at the end of the first mile."

But all this did not lessen my uneasiness.

Monsieur Goulden, often, too, when we were alone at work, would say to me:

"If those who are now masters, and who tell us that God placed them here on earth to make us happy, would foresee at the beginning of a campaign the poor old men, the hapless mothers, whose very hearts they have torn away to satisfy their pride – if they could see the tears and hear the groans of these poor people when they are coldly told 'Your son is dead; you will see him no more; he perished, crushed by horses' hoofs, or torn to pieces by a cannon-ball, or died mayhap afar off in a hospital, after having

his arm or leg cut off, – burning with fever, without one kind word to console him, but calling for his parents as when he was an infant,' – if, I say, these haughty ones of earth could thus see the tears of those mothers, I do not believe that one among them would be barbarous enough to continue the war. But they think nothing of this; they think other folks do not love their children as they love theirs; they think people are no more than beasts. They are wrong; all their great genius, their lofty notions of glory, are as nothing, for there is only one thing for which a people should fly to arms – men, women, children – old and young. It is when their liberty is assailed as ours was in '92 – then all should die or conquer together; he who remains behind is a coward, who would have others fight for him; – the victory then is not for a few, but for all; – then sons and fathers are defending their families; if they are killed, it is a misfortune, to be sure, but they die for their rights. Such a man, Joseph, is the only just one, the one of which no one can complain; all others are shameful, and the glory they bring is not glory fit for a man, but only for a wild beast."

On the eighth of January, a huge placard was posted on the town-hall, stating that the Emperor would levy, after a *senatus-consultus*, as they said in those days, in the first place, one hundred and fifty thousand conscripts of 1813; then one hundred *cohortes* of the first call of 1812 who thought they had already escaped; then one hundred thousand conscripts of from 1809 to 1812, and so on to the end; so that every loop-hole was closed, and we would have a larger army than before the Russian

expedition.

When Father Fouze, the glazier, came to us with this news, one morning, I almost fell, through faintness, for I thought:

"Now they will take all, even fathers of families. I am lost!"

Monsieur Goulden poured some water on my neck; my arms hung useless by my side; I was pale as a corpse.

But I was not the only one upon whom the placard had such an effect: that year many young men refused to go; some broke their teeth off, so as not to be able to tear the cartridge; others blew off their thumbs with pistols, so as not to be able to hold a musket; others, again, fled to the woods; they proclaimed them "refractories," but they had not *gendarmes* enough to capture them.

The mothers of families took courage to revolt after a manner, and to encourage their sons not to obey the *gendarmes*. They aided them in every way; they cried out against the Emperor, and the clergy of all denominations sustained them in so doing. The cup was at last full!

The very day of the proclamation I went to Quatre-Vents; but it was not now in the joy of my heart; it was as the most miserable of unhappy wretches, about to be bereft of love and life. I could scarcely walk, and when I reached there I did not know how to announce the evil tidings; but I saw at a glance that they knew all, for Catharine was weeping bitterly, and Aunt Grédel was pale with indignation.

We embraced in silence, and the first words Aunt Grédel said

to me, as in her anger she pushed her gray hair behind her ears, were:

"You shall not go! What have we to do with wars? The priest himself told us it was at last too much, and that we ought to have peace! You shall not go! Do not cry, Catharine; I say he shall not go!"

She was fairly green with anger, and rattled her kettles noisily together, saying:

"This carnage has lasted long enough. Our two poor cousins, Kasper and Yokel, are already going to lose their lives in Spain for this Emperor, and now he comes to ask us for the younger ones. He is not satisfied to have slain three hundred thousand in Russia. Instead of thinking of peace, like a man of sense, he thinks only of massacring the few who remain. We will see! We will see!"

"In the name of Heaven! Aunt Grédel, be quiet; speak lower," said I, looking at the window. "If they hear you, we are lost."

"I speak for them to hear me," she replied. "Your Napoleon does not frighten me. He commenced by closing our mouths, so that he might do as he pleased; but the end approaches. Four young women are losing their husbands in our village alone, and ten poor young men are forced to abandon everything, despite father, mother, religion, justice, God! Is not this horrible?"

I tried to answer, but she kept on:

"Hold, Joseph," said she; "be silent; your Emperor has no heart – he will end miserably yet. God showed his finger this

winter; He saw that we feared a man more than we feared Him; that mothers – like those whose babes Herod slew – dared no longer cling to their own flesh when that man demanded them for massacre; and so the cold came and our army perished; and now those who are leaving us are the same as already dead. God is weary of all this! You shall not go!" cried she obstinately; "I shall not let you go; you shall fly to the woods with Jean Kraft, Louis Bême, and all our bravest fellows; you shall go to the mountains – to Switzerland, and Catharine and I will go with you and remain until this destruction of men is ended."

Then Aunt Grédel became silent. Instead of giving us an ordinary dinner, she gave us a better one than on Catharine's birthday, and said, with the air of one who has taken a resolution:

"Eat, my children, and fear not; there will soon be a change!"

I returned about four in the evening to Phalsbourg, somewhat calmer than when I set out. But as I went up the Rue de la Munitionnaire, I heard at the corner of the college the drum of the *sergent-de-ville*, Harmantier, and I saw a throng gathered around him. I ran to hear what was going on, and I arrived just as he began reading a proclamation.

Harmantier read that, by the *senatus-consultus* of the 3d, the drawing for the conscription would take place on the 15th.

It was already the 8th, and only seven days remained. This upset me completely.

The crowd dispersed in the deepest silence. I went home sad enough, and said to Monsieur Goulden:

"The drawing takes place next Thursday."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "they are losing no time, things are pressing."

It is easy to imagine my grief that day and the days following. I could scarcely stand; I constantly saw myself on the point of leaving home. I saw myself flying to the woods, the *gendarmes* at my heels, crying, "Halt! halt!" Then I thought of the misery of Catharine, of Aunt Grédel, of Monsieur Goulden. Then I imagined myself marching in the ranks with a number of other wretches, to whom they were crying out, "Forward! charge bayonets!" while whole files were being swept away. I heard bullets whistle and shells shriek; in a word, I was in a pitiable state.

"Be calm, Joseph," said Monsieur Goulden; "do not torment yourself thus. I think that of all who may be drawn there are probably not ten who can give as good reasons as you for staying at home. The surgeon must be blind to receive you. Besides, I will see Monsieur the Commandant. Calm yourself."

But these kind words could not reassure me.

Thus I passed an entire week almost in a trance, and when the day of the drawing arrived, Thursday morning, I was so pale, so sick-looking that the parents of conscripts envied, so to speak, my appearance for their sons. "That fellow," they said, "has a chance; he would drop the first mile. Some people are born under a lucky star!"

VI

The town-house of Phalsbourg, that Thursday morning, January 15, 1813, during the drawing of the conscription, was a sight to be seen. To-day it is bad enough to be drawn, to be forced to leave parents, friends, home, one's cattle and one's fields, to go and learn – God knows where – "*One! two!* one! two! halt! eyes left! eyes right! front! carry arms!" etc., etc. Yes, this is all bad enough, but there is a chance of returning. One can say, with something like confidence: "In seven years I shall see my old nest again, and my parents, and perhaps my sweetheart. I shall have seen the world, and will perhaps have some title to be appointed forester or gendarme." This is a comfort for reasonable people. But *then*, if you had the ill-luck to lose in the lottery, there was an end of you; often not one in a hundred returned. The idea that you were only going for a time never entered your head.

The enrolled of Harberg, of Garbourg, and of Quatre-Vents were to draw first; then those of the city, and lastly those of Wechem and Mittelbronn.

I was up early in the morning, and with my elbows on the work-bench I watched the people pass by; young men in blouses, poor old men in cotton caps and short vests; old women in jackets and woollen skirts, bent almost double, with a staff or umbrella under their arms. They arrived by families. Monsieur the Sub-Prefect of Sarrebourg, with his silver collar, and his secretary,

had stopped the day before at the "Red Ox," and they were also looking out of the window. Toward eight o'clock, Monsieur Goulden began work, after breakfasting. I ate nothing, but stared and stared until Monsieur the Mayor Parmentier and his co-adjutor, came for Monsieur the Sub-Prefect.

The drawing began at nine, and soon we heard the clarionet of Pfifer-Karl and the violin of big Andrès resounding through the streets. They were playing the "March of the Swedes," an air to which thousands of poor wretches had left old Alsace for ever. The conscripts danced, linked arms, shouted until their voices seemed to pierce the clouds, stamped on the ground, waved their hats, trying to seem joyful while death was at their hearts. Well, it was the fashion; and big Andrès, withered, stiff, and yellow as boxwood, and his short chubby comrade, with cheeks extended to their utmost tension, seemed like people who would lead you to the church-yard all the while chatting indifferently.

That music, those cries, sent a shudder through my heart.

I had just put on my swallow-tailed coat and my beaver hat, to go out, when Aunt Grédel and Catharine entered, saying:

"Good-morning, Monsieur Goulden. We have come for the conscription."

Then I saw how Catharine had been crying. Her eyes were red, and she threw her arms around my neck, while her mother turned to me.

Monsieur Goulden said:

"It will soon be the turn of the young men of the town."

"Yes, Monsieur Goulden," answered Catharine in a choking voice; "they have finished Harberg."

"Then it is time for you to go, Joseph," said he; "but do not grieve; do not be frightened. These drawings, you know, are only a matter of form. For a long while past none can escape; for if they escape one drawing, they are caught a year or two after. All the numbers are bad. When the council of exemption meets, we will see what is best to be done. To-day it is merely a sort of satisfaction they give the people to draw in the lottery; but every one loses."

"No matter," said Aunt Grédel; "Joseph will win."

"Yes, yes," replied Monsieur Goulden, smiling, "he cannot fail."

Then I sallied forth with Catharine and Aunt Grédel, and we went to the town square, where the crowd was. In all the shops, dozens of conscripts, purchasing ribbons, thronged around the counters, weeping and singing as if possessed. Others in the inns embraced, sobbing; but still they sang. Two or three musicians of the neighborhood – the Gipsy Walteufel, Rosselkasten, and George Adam – had arrived, and their pieces thundered in terrible and heart-rending strains.

Catharine squeezed my arm. Aunt Grédel followed.

Opposite the guard-house I saw the pedler Pinacle afar off, his pack opened on a little table, and beside it a long pole decked with ribbons which he was selling to the conscripts.

I hastened to pass by him, when he cried:

"Ha! Cripple! Halt! Come here; I have a ribbon for you; you must have a magnificent one – one to draw a prize by."

He waved a long black ribbon above his head, and I grew pale despite myself. But as we ascended the steps of the town-house, a conscript was just descending; it was Klipfel, the smith of the French gate; he had drawn number eight, and shouted:

"The black for me, Pinacle! Bring it here, whatever may happen."

His face was gloomy, but he laughed. His little brother Jean was crying behind him, and said:

"No, no, Jacob! not the black!"

But Pinacle fastened the ribbon to the smith's hat, while the latter said:

"That is what we want now. We are all dead, and should wear our own mourning."

And he cried savagely:

"*Vive l'Empereur!*"

I was better satisfied to see the black ribbon on his hat than on mine, and I slipped quickly through the crowd to avoid Pinacle.

We had great difficulty in getting into the townhouse and in climbing the old oak stairs, where people were going up and down in swarms. In the great hall above, the gendarme Kelz walked about maintaining order as well as he could, and in the council-chamber at the side, where there was a painting of Justice with her eyes blindfolded, we heard them calling off the numbers. From time to time a conscript came out with flushed

face, fastening his number to his cap and passing with bowed head through the crowd, like a furious bull who cannot see clearly and who would seem to wish to break his horns against the walls. Others, on the contrary, passed as pale as death. The windows of the town-house were open, and without we heard six or seven pieces playing together. It was horrible.

I pressed Catharine's hand, and we passed slowly through the crowd to the hall where Monsieur the Sub-Prefect, the Mayors, and the Secretaries were seated on their tribune, calling the numbers aloud, as if pronouncing sentence of death in a court of justice, for all these numbers were really sentences of death.

We waited a long while.

It seemed as if there was no longer a drop of blood in my veins, when at last my name was called.

I stepped up, seeing and hearing nothing; I put my hand in the box and drew a number.

Monsieur the Sub-Prefect cried out:

"Number seventeen."

Then I left without speaking, Catharine and her mother behind me. We went out into the square, and, the air reviving me, I remembered that I had drawn number seventeen.

Aunt Grédel seemed confounded.

"And I put something into your pocket, too," said she; "but that rascal of a Pinacle gave you ill-luck."

At the same time she drew from my coat-pocket the end of a cord. Great drops of sweat rolled down my forehead;

Catharine was white as marble, and so we went back to Monsieur Goulden's.

"What number did you draw, Joseph?" he asked, as soon as he saw us.

"Seventeen," replied Aunt Grédel, sitting down with her hands upon her knees.

Monsieur Goulden seemed troubled for a moment, but he said instantly:

"One is as good as another. All will go; the skeletons must be filled. But it don't matter for Joseph. I will go and see Monsieur the Mayor and Monsieur the Commandant. It will be telling no lie to say that Joseph is lame; all the town knows that; but among so many they may overlook him. That is why I go, so rest easy; do not be anxious."

These words of good Monsieur Goulden reassured Aunt Grédel and Catharine, who returned to Quatre-Vents full of hope; but they did not affect me, for from that moment I had not a moment of rest day or night.

The Emperor had a good custom: he did not allow the conscripts to languish at home. Soon as the drawing was complete, the council of revision met, and a few days after came the orders of march. He did not do like those tooth-pullers who first show you their pincers and hooks and gaze for an hour into your mouth, so that you feel half dead before they make up their minds to begin work: he proceeded without loss of time.

A week after the drawing, the council of revision sat at the

town-hall, with all the mayors and a few notables of the country to give advice in case of need.

The day before Monsieur Goulden had put on his brown great-coat and his best wig to go to wind up Monsieur the Mayor's clock and that of the Commandant. He returned laughing and said:

"All goes well, Joseph. Monsieur the Mayor and Monsieur the Commandant know that you are lame; that is easy enough to be seen. They replied at once, Eh, Monsieur Goulden, the young man is lame; why speak of him? Do not be uneasy; we do not want the infirm; we want soldiers."

These words poured balm on my wounds, and that night I slept like one of the blessed. But the next day fear again assailed me; I remembered suddenly how many men full of defects had gone all the same, and how many others invented defects to deceive the council; for instance, swallowing injurious substances to make them pale; tying up their legs to give themselves swollen veins; or playing deaf, blind, or foolish. Thinking over all these things, I trembled at not being lame enough, and determined that I would appear sufficiently forlorn. I had heard that vinegar would make one sick, and without telling Monsieur Goulden, in my fear I swallowed all the vinegar in his bottle. Then I dressed myself, thinking that I looked like a dead man, for the vinegar was very strong; but when I entered Monsieur Goulden's room, he cried out:

"Joseph, what is the matter with you? You are as red as a cock's comb."

And, looking at myself in the mirror, I saw that my face was red to my ears, and to the tip of my nose. I was frightened, but instead of growing pale I became redder yet, and I cried out in my distress:

"'Now I am lost indeed! I will seem like a man without a single defect, and full of health. The vinegar is rushing to my head."

"What vinegar?" asked Monsieur Goulden.

"That in your bottle. I drank it to make myself pale, as they say Mademoiselle Sclapp, the organist does. O heavens! what a fool I was."

"That does not prevent your being lame," said Monsieur Goulden; "but you tried to deceive the council, which was dishonest. But it is half-past nine, and Werner is come to tell me you must be there at ten o'clock. So, hurry."

I had to go in that state; the heat of the vinegar seemed bursting from my cheeks, and when I met Catharine and her mother, who were waiting for me at the town-house, they scarcely knew me.

"How happy and satisfied you look!" said Aunt Grédel.

I would have fainted on hearing this if the vinegar had not sustained me in spite of myself. I went upstairs in terrible agony, without being able to move my tongue to reply, so great was the horror I felt at my folly.

Upstairs, more than twenty-five conscripts who pretended to be infirm, had been examined and received, while twenty-five others, on a bench along the wall, sat with drooping heads

awaiting their turn.

The old gendarme, Kelz, with his huge cocked hat, was walking about, and as soon as he saw me, exclaimed:

"At last! At last! Here is one, at all events, who will not be sorry to go; the love of glory is shining in his eyes. Very good, Joseph; I predict that at the end of the campaign you will be corporal."

"But I am lame," I cried, angrily.

"Lame!" repeated Kelz, winking and smiling, "lame! No matter. With such health as yours you can always hold your own."

He had scarcely ceased speaking when the door of the hall of the Council of Revision opened, and the other gendarme, Werner, putting out his head, called me by name, "Joseph Bertha."

I entered, limping as much as I could, and Werner shut the door. The mayors of the canton were seated in a semicircle, Monsieur the Sub-Prefect and the Mayor of Phalsbourg in the middle, in arm-chairs, and the Secretary Freylig at his table. A Harberg conscript was dressing himself, the gendarme Descarmes helping him put on his suspenders. This conscript, with a mass of brown hair falling over his eyes, his neck bare, and his mouth open as he caught his breath, seemed like a man going to be hanged. Two surgeons – the Surgeon-in-Chief of the Hospital, with another in uniform – were conversing in the middle of the hall. They turned to me saying, "Undress yourself."

I did so, even to my shirt. The others looked on.

Monsieur the Sub-Prefect observed:

"There is a young man full of health."

These words angered me, but I nevertheless replied respectfully:

"I am lame, Monsieur the Sub-Prefect."

The surgeon examined me, and the one from the hospital, to whom Monsieur the Commandant had doubtless spoken of me, said:

"The left leg is a little short."

"Bah!" said the other; "it is sound."

Then placing his hand upon my chest he said, "The conformation is good. Cough."

I coughed as feebly as I could; but he found me all right, and said again:

"Look at his color. How good his blood must be!"

Then I, seeing that they would pass me if I remained silent, replied:

"I have been drinking vinegar."

"Ah!" said he; "that proves you have a good stomach; you like vinegar."

"But I am lame!" I cried in my distress.

"Bah! don't grieve at that," he answered; "your leg is sound. I'll answer for it."

"But that," said Monsieur the Mayor, "does not prevent his being lame from birth; all Phalsbourg knows that."

"The leg is too short," said the surgeon from the hospital; "it

is doubtless a case for exemption."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.