

How the Brigadier Slew the Brothers of Ajaccio The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard--III

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The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard.

By A. CONAN DOYLE.

III.—HOW THE BRIGADIER SLEW THE BROTHERS OF AJACCIO.

WHEN I told you some little time ago how it was that I won the special medal for valour, I finished, as you will doubtless remember, by repeating the saying of the Emperor that I had the stoutest heart in all his armies. In making that remark, Napoleon was showing the insight for which he was so famous. He disfigured his sentence, however, by adding something about the thickness of my head. We will pass that over. It is ungenerous to dwell upon the weaker moments of a great man. I will only say this, that when the Emperor needed an agent he was always very ready to do me the honour of recalling the name of Etienne Gerard, though it occasionally escaped him when rewards were to be distributed. Still, I was a colonel at twenty-eight, and the chief of a brigade at thirty-one, so that I have no reason to be dissatisfied with my career. Had the wars lasted another two or three years I might have grasped my baton, and the man who had his hand upon that was only one stride from a throne. Murat had changed his hussar's cap for a crown, and another light cavalry man might have done as much. However, all those dreams were driven away by Waterloo, and, although I was not able to write my name upon history, it is sufficiently well known by all who served with me in the great wars of the Empire.

What I want to tell you to-night is about the very singular affair which first started me upon my rapid upward course, and which had the effect of establishing a secret bond between the Emperor and myself. There is just one little word of warning which I must give you before I begin. When you hear me speak, you must always bear in mind that you are listening to one who has seen history from the inside. I am talking about what my ears have heard and my eyes have seen, so you must not try to confute me by quoting the opinions of some student or man of the pen, who has written a book of history or memoirs. There is much which is unknown by such people, and much which never will be known by the world. For my

own part, I could tell you some very surprising things were it discreet to do so. The facts which I am about to relate to you to-night were kept secret by me during the Emperor's lifetime, because I gave him my promise that it should be so, but I do not think that there can be any harm now in my telling the remarkable part which I played.

You must know, then, that at the time of the Treaty of Tilsit I was a simple lieutenant in the 10th Hussars, without money or interest. It is true that my appearance and my gallantry were in my favour, and that I had already won a reputation as being one of the best swordsmen in the army; but among the host of brave men who surrounded the Emperor it needed more than this to insure a rapid career. I was confident, however, that my chance would come, though I never dreamed that it would take so remarkable a form.

When the Emperor returned to Paris, after the declaration of peace in the year 1807, he spent much of his time with the Empress and the Court at Fontainebleau. It was the time when he was at the pinnacle of his career. He had in three successive campaigns bumbled Austria, crushed Prussia, and made the Russians very glad to get upon the right side of the Niemen. The old Bulldog over the Channel was still growling, but he could not get very far from his kennel. 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 for my part I had other things to think of. All the girls were glad to see the army back after its long absence, and you may be sure that I had my share of any favours that were going. You may judge how far I was a favourite in those days when I say that even now, in my sixtieth year—but why should I dwell upon that which is already sufficiently well known?

Our regiment of hussars was quartered with the horse chasseurs of the guard 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 Electors and Princes,

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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 his train, in the hope 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 off 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

artilleryman, whom we had raised so high with our sabres and our bayonets. He was very civil to us always, for he knew where his power came from. We knew also, and showed it by the way in which we carried ourselves. We were agreed, you understand, he was the finest leader in the world, but we did not forget he had the finest men to lead.



"I WAS SEATED PLAYING CARDS WITH YOUNG MORAT."

Well, one day I was seated in my quarters playing cards with young Morat, of the horse chasseurs, when the door opened and in walked Lasalle, who was our Colonel. You know what a fine, swaggering fellow he was, and the sky-blue uniform of the Tenth suited him to a marvel. My faith, we youngsters were so taken by him we all swore and dined and drank and played the deuce whether we liked it or no, just we might resemble our Colonel! We forgot it was not because he drank or gambled the Emperor was going to make him the head of the light cavalry, but because he had the surest eye for the nature of a position or for the strength of a column, and the best judgment as to when infantry could be broken, or whether guns were exposed, of any man in the army. We were too young to understand all that, however, so we waxed our moustaches and clicked our spurs and let the ferrules of our scabbards wear out by

trailing them along the pavement in the hope we should all become Lasalles. When he came clanking into my quarters, both Morat and I 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 sabre, why should he descend to one of my lieutenants when he might have found all 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. Forwards, my boy, and may it be the first step towards changing your busby for a cocked hat.'

It was but two o'clock, so he left me, promising to come back and to accompany me to the palace. My faith, what a time I passed, and how many conjectures did I make as to what it was the Emperor could want of me! I paced up and down my little room in a fever of anticipation. Sometimes I thought perhaps he had heard of the guns which we had taken at Austerlitz; but, then, there were so many who had taken guns at Austerlitz, and two years had passed since the battle. Or it might be he wished to reward me for my affair with the aide-de-camp of the Russian Emperor. But then again a cold fit would seize me, and I would fancy he had sent for me to reprimand me. There were a few duels which he might have taken in ill part, and there were one or two little jokes in Paris since the peace. But, no! I considered the words of Lasalle. 'If he had need of a brave man,' said Lasalle. It was obvious my Colonel had some idea of what was in the wind. If he had not known 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 the Emperor was waiting, at that very moment, to have my opinion upon a matter of importance. It made me smile as I wrote it to think that, wonderful as it appeared to me, it would probably only confirm my mother in her opinion of the Emperor's good sense. At half-past three I heard a sabre come clanking against every step of my wooden stair. It was Lasalle, and with him was a lame gentleman, very neatly dressed in black with dapper ruffles and cuffs. We did not know many civilians, we of the army, but, my word, 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 I was in the presence of the one man in France whom even the Emperor had to consider.

'This is Monsieur Etienne Gerard, Monsieur de Talleyrand,' said Lasalle.

I saluted, and the statesman took me in from the top of my panache to the rowel of my spur, with a glance that played over me like a rapier point.

'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, I could not help glancing from one to the other of them: the black, sly politician, and the big, sky-blue hussar with one fist on his hip and the other on the hilt of his sabre. They both took their seats as I looked, Talleyrand without a sound, and Lasalle with a clash and a jingle like a prancing charger.

'It's this way, youngster,' said he, in his brusque fashion; 'I was with the Emperor in his private cabinet this morning when a note was brought in to him. He opened it, and as he did so he gave such a start 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. "Fratelli dell' Ajaccio," he muttered; and then again, "Fratelli dell' Ajaccio." I don't pretend to know more Italian than a man can pick up in two campaigns, and I could make

nothing of this. It seemed to me he had gone out of his mind; and you would have said so also, Monsieur de Talleyrand, if you had seen the look in his eyes. He read the note, and then he sat for half an hour or more without moving.'

'And you?' 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, sire," 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 he needed an agent 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 women and horses."

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

'So, youngster, I came straight away to you at once, and mind 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, Monsieur Gerard,' said he: 'you are now coming

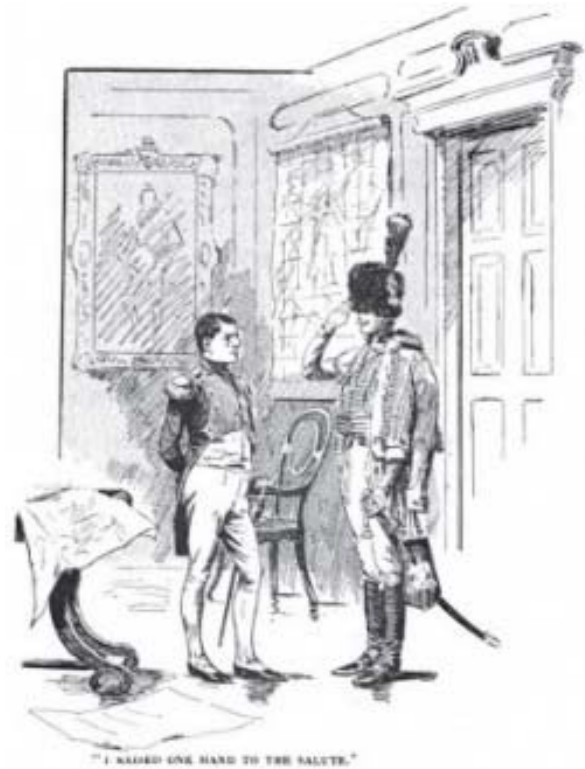
into troubled waters, and you might find a worse pilot than myself. We have none of us any idea as to what this little affair means, and, between ourselves, it is very important for us, who have the destinies of France upon our shoulders, to keep ourselves in touch with all that goes on. You understand me, Monsieur Gerard?'

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

'Act very guardedly, 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 only a hundred paces off. I made my way to the ante-chamber, where Duroc, with his grand new scarlet and gold coat, was fussing about among the crowd of people who were waiting. I heard him whisper to Monsieur de Caulaincourt half of them were German Dukes who expected to be made Kings, and the other half German Dukes who expected to be made paupers. Duroc, when he heard my name, showed me 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 if you had met him without knowing in the least who he was, you would simply have said he was a sallow little fellow with a good forehead and fairly well-turned calves. His tight white cashmere breeches and white stockings showed off his legs 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 a grenadier. It is said even Augereau, who was a man who had never known what fear was, quailed before Napoleon's gaze, at a time, too, when the Emperor was but an unknown soldier. He looked mildly enough at me, however, and motioned me to remain by the door. De Meneval was writing to his dictation, looking up at him between each sentence with his spaniel eyes.

'That will do. You can go,' said the Emperor, abruptly. Then, when the secretary had left the room, he strode across with his hands behind his back, and he looked me up and down without a word. Though he was a small man himself, he was very fond of having fine-looking fellows about him, and so I think my appearance gave him pleasure. For my own part, I raised one hand to



the salute and held the other upon the hilt of my sabre, looking straight ahead of me, as a soldier should.

'Well, Monsieur Gerard,' said he, at last, tapping his forefinger upon one of the brandebourgs of gold braid upon the front of my pelisse, 'I am informed 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 phrase 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 you are the very man 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 for my own part I could

not understand what he was driving at. I contented myself with assuring him he could count upon me to the death.

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

'Tolerable, sire,' I answered.

'You were chosen by your regiment to fight the champion of the Hussars of Chambrant?' said he. I was not sorry to find he knew so much of my exploits.

'My comrades, sire, did me that honour,' said I.

'And for the sake of practice you insulted six fencing masters in the week before your duel?'

'I had the privilege of being out seven times in as many days, sire,' said I.

'And escaped without a scratch?'

'The fencing master of the 23rd Light Infantry touched me on the left elbow, sire.'

'Let us have no more child's play of the sort, monsieur,' he cried, turning suddenly to that cold rage of his which was so appalling. 'Do you imagine I place veteran soldiers in these positions you may practise quarte and tierce upon them? How am I to face Europe if my soldiers turn their points upon each other? Another word of your duelling, and I break you between these fingers.'

I saw his plump white hands flash before my eyes as he spoke, and his voice had turned to the most discordant hissing and growling. My word, my skin pringed all over as I listened to him, and I would gladly have changed my position for that of the first man in the steepest and narrowest breach that ever swallowed up a storming party. He turned to the table, drank off a cup of coffee, and then when he faced me again every trace of this storm had vanished, and he wore that singular smile which came from his lips but never from his eyes.

'I have need of your services, Monsieur 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 today must be known to none but ourselves.'

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

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

I bowed.

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

'Yes, sire.'

'You know the Chancellor's Grove, in the forest?'

I bowed.

'You know also the large double fir-tree where the hounds assembled on Tuesday?'

Had he known I met a girl under it three times a week, he would not have asked me. I bowed once more without remark.

'Very good. You will meet me there at ten o'clock tonight.'

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 busby.

'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, sire.'

'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, you must see neither of them, in the event of there being two, escapes from us. I shall myself assist you.'

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

'Ta, ta, ta,' said he. 'I was a soldier before I was an Emperor. Do you think, then, artillerymen have not swords as well as the hussars? But I ordered you not to argue with me. You will do exactly what I tell you. If swords are

once out, neither of these men is to get away alive.'

'They shall not, sire,' 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, sire—' 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 out because you could think? Let me hear of your doing such a thing again! You, the one man—but, there! You meet me at the fir-tree at ten o'clock.'

My faith, I was right glad to get out of the room. If I have a good horse under me, and a sword clanking against my stirrup-iron, I know where I am. And in all that relates to green fodder or dry, barley and oats and rye, and the handling of squadrons upon the march, there is no one who can teach me very much. But when I meet a Chamberlain and a Marshal of the Palace, and have to pick my words with an Emperor, and find everybody hints instead of talking straight out, I feel like a troop-horse who has been put in a lady's calèche. It is not my trade, all this mincing and pretending. I have learned the manners of a gentleman, but never those of a courtier. I was right glad then to get into the fresh air again, and I ran away up to my quarters like a schoolboy who has just escaped from the seminary master. But as I opened the door, the first thing my eye rested upon was a long pair of sky-blue legs with hussar 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?'

'No, I have seen him.'

'And what did he say?'

'Monsieur de Talleyrand,' I answered, 'I regret to say it is quite impossible for me to tell you anything about it. I have promised the Emperor.'

'Pooh, pooh, my dear young man,' said he, sidling up to me, as a cat does 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, Monsieur de Talleyrand,' 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 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 like the old fox he was.

'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 it is not always very discreet for a subaltern of cavalry 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 very well, Monsieur de Talleyrand, if he had answered you, you would have laughed in your sleeve and thought as much about him as I think of the bottle when the burgundy is gone. As for me, I promise you the Tenth would have had no room for him, and 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 I had the support of my Colonel.

'I have heard, Colonel de Lasalle,' said he, with an icy dignity, 'your opinion is of great weight upon the subject of light cavalry. Should I have occasion to seek information about branch of the army, I shall be very happy to apply to you. At present, however, the matter concerns diplomacy, and you will permit me to form my own



"MONSIEUR GERARD APPEARS TO BE A LITTLE PUFFED UP."

views upon that question. As long as the welfare of France and the safety of the Emperor's person are largely committed to my care, I will use every means in my power to secure 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 he did not at all relish finding himself at enmity with the powerful Minister. He rapped out an oath or two, and then, catching up his sabre 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 rigidly, 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 Morat had left them, and I tried to work out a few combinations at *écarté*. But I could not remember which were trumps, and I threw them under the table in despair. Then I drew my sabre and practised giving point until I was weary, but it was all 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 combinations of events in the whole world, surely this was the last which would have occurred to me when I rose from my couch 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 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, swaying 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 hussar boots also, and wore a pair of shoes and gaiters, 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 of the Chasseurs of the Guards, and the line of cafes all filled with uniforms. I caught a glimpse as I went by of the blue and gold of some of my comrades, amid the swarm of dark infantry coats and the light green of the Guides. 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 to his wine bottle. It is not very hard to get into the forest at Fontainebleau. The scattered trees steal their way into the very streets, like the *tirailleurs* in front of a column. I turned into a path, which led to the edge of the woods, and then I pushed rapidly forward towards the old fir-tree. It was a place which, as I have hinted, I had my own reasons for knowing well, and I could only thank the Fates it was not one of the nights upon which Léonie would be waiting for me. The poor child would have died of terror at sight of the Emperor. He might have been too harsh with her—and worse still, he might have been too kind. There was a half moon shining, and, as I came up to our trysting-place, I saw I was not the first to arrive. The Emperor was pacing up



"THE EMPEROR WAS PACING UP AND DOWN."

and down, his hands behind him and his face sunk somewhat forward upon his breast.

He wore a grey great-coat with a capote over his head. I had seen him in such a dress in our winter campaign in Poland, and it was said 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 cabarets or round the fires. His figure, however, and his way of carrying his head and his hands were so well known he was always recognized, and then the talkers would say whatever they thought would please him best.

My first thought was he would be angry with me for having kept him waiting, but as I approached him, we heard the big church clock of Fontainebleau clang out the hour of ten. It was evident, therefore, it was he who was too soon, and not I too late. I remembered his order I should make no remark, so contented myself with halting within four paces of him, clicking my spurs together, grounding my sabre, 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 apprehensively to right and to left, as if he feared someone was observing 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 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 Abbot's Beech, and there are so many ghostly stories about it, I know many a brave soldier who would not care about mounting 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 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 emerged from its shadow and walked forward to meet us. The Emperor glanced back at me, and slackened his pace a little so I came within arm's length of him. You may think I had my hilt well to the front, and I had a very good look at these two people who were approaching us. The one was tall, remarkably so, and of very spare frame, 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, like the mantles of Murat's dragoons. They had flat black caps, like those I have since seen 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 they had a stealthy way of moving, and 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 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 he was in the last 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 sabre in front of him. At the same instant the smaller man bounded past me, and buried a long poniard in the Emperor's heart.

My God! the horror of that moment! It is a marvel I did not drop dead myself. As in a dream, I saw the grey coat whirl convulsively round, and caught a glimpse in the moonlight of three inches of red point which jutted out from between the



"I DROVE MY SWORD WITH FRANTIC FORCE."

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 midriff with such frantic force, the mere blow of the hilt against the end of his breast-bone sent him six paces before he fell, and left my reeking blade ready for the other. I sprang round upon him with such a lust 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 jar upon my shoulder. I shortened my sword, but he winced 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 the murderer's poniard 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.

'Sire! Sire!' 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 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 gaiters! And the

happy thought which had thrown off my coat. He could not get rid of his mantle, this wretch, or else he was too frightened to think of it. So it was 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 heath-land which leads up to the great Fontainebleau quarry. There I had him in full sight, and knew he could not escape me. He ran well, it is true—ran as a coward runs when his life is the stake. But I ran as Destiny runs when it gets behind a man's heels. Yard by yard I drew in 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 abyss. Had he hurled himself over? I had almost made up my mind 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, 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 I must have transfixed him with that first mad lunge, for, though he struck and struck, his blows had no power in them, and presently his dagger tinkled down upon the floor. When I was sure he was dead, I rose up and passed out into the moonlight. I climbed on to the heath 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 still clutched in my hand, I walked aimlessly on until, looking round me, I found I had come as far as the glade of the

Abbot's Beech, and saw in the distance that gnarled stump which must ever be associated with the most terrible moment of my life. I sat down upon a fallen trunk with my sword across



"I TRIED TO THINK WHAT HAD HAPPENED."

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 clanged 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 the great Emperor had been murdered within a pace of me? I could not do it—no, I could not do it! There was but 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, since I could not avert, 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 I could see the green coat of the Guides, and the 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 those sharp military accents were 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, jerking his head towards the beech.

'Yes, sire.'

'And the other escaped?'

'No, sire, I killed him also.'

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

'One body lies there, sire,' 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 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 little, plump palm 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



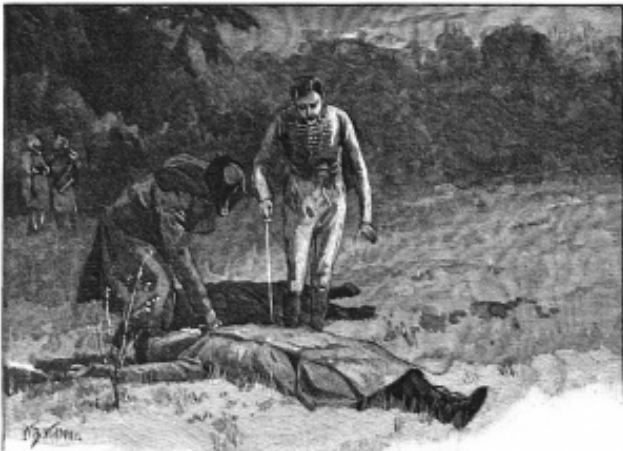
"THE EMPEROR WAS STANDING BEFORE ME!"

such bewilderment he broke once more into one of his smiles.

'No, no, Monsieur 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 they were Roustem and Mustafa, the two Mameluke servants. The Emperor paused when he came to the grey figure upon the ground, and turning back the hood which shrouded the features, he showed a face which was very different from his own.



"HERE LIES A FAITHFUL SERVANT," SAID HE.

'Here lies a faithful servant who has given up his life for his master,' said he. 'Monsieur de Goudin resembles me in figure and in manner, as you must admit.'

What a delirium of 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 divined my impulse.

'You are unhurt?' he asked.

'I am unhurt, sire. But in another minute I should in my despair—'

'Tut, tut!' he interrupted. 'You did very well. He should himself have been more on his guard. I saw everything which passed.'

'You saw it, sire!'

'You did not hear me follow you through the wood, then? I hardly lost sight of you from the moment you left your quarters until poor De

Goudin fell. The counterfeit 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 Mamelukes, who saluted in silence and remained where they were standing. For my part, I followed the Emperor with my pelisse bursting with pride. My word, I have always carried myself as a hussar should, but Lasalle himself never strutted and swung his dolman as I did that night. Who should clink his spurs and clatter his sabre if it were not I—I, Etienne Gerard—the confidant of the Emperor, the chosen swordsman of the light cavalry, the man who slew the would-be assassins of Napoleon? But he noticed my bearing and turned upon me like a blight.

'Is that the way you carry yourself on a secret mission?' he hissed, with that cold glare in his eyes. 'Is it thus you will make your comrades believe nothing remarkable has occurred? Have done with this nonsense, monsieur, or you will find yourself transferred to the sappers, where you would have harder work and duller plumage.'

That was the way with the Emperor. If ever he thought 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 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 cabinet. There were a couple of grenadiers at the staircase, and their eyes started out from under their fur caps, I promise you, when they saw a young lieutenant of hussars 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 it seemed to me he had forgotten all about me. I ventured at last upon a slight cough to remind him.

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

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

'Ta, ta, ta,' said he impatiently. 'These are only words. The moment you were outside that door you would begin making inquiries 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 appease your curiosity, there is some reasonable hope you may be able to keep the matter to yourself.'

He did not understand me, this Emperor, and yet I could only bow and be silent.

'A few words will make it clear to you,' said he, speaking very swiftly and pacing up and down the room. 'They were Corsicans, these two men. 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 Paoli days, you understand, and we had some strict rules of our own which were not infringed with impunity.'

A very grim look came over his face as he spoke, and it seemed to me all that was French had gone out of him, and 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, and for five minutes, wrapped in thought, he paced up and down the room with his quick little tiger steps. Then with an impatient wave of his hands he came 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 I should now submit myself to them. They wanted to hold me to it, 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 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 perceive my dilemma, Monsieur Gerard,' said he. 'How would you have acted yourself, under such circumstances?'

'Given the word to the 10th Hussars, sire,' I cried. 'Patrols 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 an assassin's tongue might be as dangerous a weapon as an assassin's dagger. I will not disguise from you I wished to avoid scandal at all cost. That was why I ordered you to take no pistols with you. That also is why my Mamelukes 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 I selected the best one. Had I sent more than one guard with De Goudin 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, Monsieur Gerard, because I wanted a man who could handle a sword, and who would not pry more deeply into the affair than I desired. I trust that, in this respect, you will justify my choice as well as you have done in your bravery and skill.'

'Sire,' 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, sire. I will efface it from my recollection as if it had never been. I will promise you to go out of your cabinet 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.'