

# For the Honor of France

by Thomas Allibone Janvier, 1849-1913

Published: 1891  
Harper & Brothers



„Pardon! Madame does not know that this is a smoking-carriage?“

„But yes. Monsieur is very good. It is that my husband would smoke. He is an old soldier. He smokes all the time. *Ciel!* They are like chimneys, these old soldiers. This man of mine regrets that he cannot smoke when he is asleep!“

While Madame delivered this address she continued also to mount the steps, and as she finished it she seated herself in the corner of the carriage opposite to me. She was short and round and sixty years old, and smiling like the sun on a fine day. Her dress was the charming dress of Aries, but over her kerchief she wore a silk mantle that glittered with an embroidery of jet beads. This mantle was precious to her. Her first act upon seating herself was to take it off, fold it carefully in a large handkerchief, and lay it safely in the netting above her head. She replaced it with a red knitted shawl, partly as a shield against the dust, and partly

as a protection against the fresh wind that was blowing briskly down the valley of the Rhône.

In a moment her husband followed her, bowing to me as he entered the carriage. Seating himself beside her, and giving her plump hand a little affectionate pat, he said: „It is all right, little one. Marie will receive her jelly in good condition. I myself saw that the basket was placed right side up in the carriage. The jelly will not spill.“ Then, turning to me, he added: „My wife makes a wonderful jelly of apricots, Monsieur. We are taking some of it to our married daughter, who lives in Avignon.“

He was a well set-up old boy, with a face most pleasantly frank, close-cut gray hair, short gray whiskers, and a bristling white mustache. Across his forehead, cutting through his right eyebrow, was a desperate scar, that I at once associated in my own mind with the red ribbon of the Legion that he wore in the button-hole of his black frock-coat. He looked the officer in retreat, and the very gentleness and sweetness of his manner made me sure that he had done some gallant fighting in his time.

As the train pulled out from the station—it was at Tarascon that they had joined me—he drew forth from his pocket a black little wooden pipe and a tobacco-bag. This was my opportunity. I also drew forth a pipe and a tobacco-bag. Would Monsieur accept some of my tobacco? I asked. I had brought it, I added, from America; it was tobacco of the Havana.

„Monsieur then is an American. That is interesting. And his tobacco is from the Havana, that is more interesting still. My cousin's son has been for many years in America. His name is Marius Guiraud; he lives in San Francisco; possibly Monsieur and he have met?“

Monsieur regretted that he had not had this pleasure, and explained that his home was in New York—three times as far from San Francisco as Marseilles was from Paris.

„Name of a name! Is it possible? How vast this America must be! And they tell me—“ Here he struck a wax match and paused to light his pipe. He drew a dozen whiffs in silence, while on his face was the thoughtful look of one whose taste in tobacco was critical and whose love for it was strong.

„Thunder of guns, but it is good!“ he exclaimed, as he took the pipe from his mouth and passed it lightly back and forth beneath his nose. „Had we smoked tobacco like this in the Crimea we should have whipped those rascal Russians in a single week. Ah, that we often were without tobacco was the hardest part of all. I have smoked coffee grounds and bay, Monsieur, and have been thankful to get them—I myself, who well know what is good and what is not good in a pipe! This tobacco—it is divine!“

„Monsieur served in the Crimea?“

„This is the proof of it,“ he said, a little grimly, touching the scar on his forehead.

„And this,“ his wife added, touching the bit of red ribbon in his button-hole. „He was the bravest man in all that war, Monsieur, this old husband of mine. His cross was given him by—“

„Tchut, little one! What does Monsieur care how I got my cross? It was not much that I did. Any man would have done the same.“

„But the others did *not* do the same. They ran away and left thee to do it alone. Did not his Majesty tell thee—“

„Ah, Monsieur hears what a *babillarde* it is. If she were given her own way she would swear that I commanded the allied armies, and that I blew up the Redan and stormed the Malakoff and captured Sebastopol all alone!“

„Tell Monsieur what thou didst do,“ said the little woman, warmly. „Tell him truly precisely what thou didst do, and then let him judge for himself if what I have said be one bit less than thy due.“

„And so bring Monsieur to know that I am a babbling old woman like thyself?“ He pinched her gently, and then settled himself back against the cushion as though with the intention of giving himself wholly to the enjoyment of his pipe: yet was there a look in his eyes that showed how strong was the desire within him—the desire that is natural to every brave and simple-minded old soldier—to tell the story of his honorable scars. Even had I felt no desire to hear this story, not to have pressed him to tell it would have been cruel. But little pressing was required.

„Since Monsieur is good enough to desire to hear what little there is to tell,“ he said, „and to show him how foolish is this old woman of mine, I will tell him the whole affair. It is a stupid nothing; but Monsieur may be amused by the trick that was put upon me by those great generals—yes, that certainly was droll.“

„Our regiment, Monsieur, was the Twenty-seventh of the Line. It was drawn almost wholly from the towns and villages in these parts: Aries and Tarascon and Saint-Remy and Salon and Maillane and Château Renard—there is the old château, over on the hill yonder, beside the Durance—and Barbentane, that we shall see presently around the corner of the hill. We all were *Provençaux* together, and the men of the other regiments of our division gave us the name of the Provence cats; though why they gave us that foolish name I am sure they never knew any more than we did ourselves. It was not because we were cowards, that I will swear: our regiment did some very pretty fighting in its time, as any one may know by reading the gazettes which were published in those days.“

„Our division held Mont Sapoune—the French right, you know—facing the Little Redan across the Carenage Ravine. It was early in the siege, and we had only drawn our first parallel: close against the Selinghinsk and Vallyrie redoubts, and partly covering the ground where we dug our rifle-pits later on. But we were going ahead with our work fast, and already we had thrown up the little redoubts known as No. 11 and No. 15, which covered the advancing earthwork leading to where our second parallel was to begin. Redoubt No. 11 was a good hundred yards, and Redoubt No. 15 was more than three times that distance outside of our lines; and everybody knew that these two advanced posts would be in great danger until our second parallel was well under way. So very possible was it that they might be surprised, and the guns turned on our own lines in support of a general attack, that in each of them spikes and hammers were kept in readiness against the need for spiking the guns before they fell into the enemy's hands. Our regiment lay just behind these redoubts, in the rear of the artillerymen who manned our trenches; and as the gunners had plenty to do all day long, and through the night too sometimes, the work of keeping up the night pickets fell to our share.“

„It was while things were this way that I was on picket early one morning on our extreme left, close over the edge of the Carenage Ravine. I had come on with the

midnight relief, and by five o'clock in the morning, when day was just breaking, my teeth were chattering and I was stiff with cold. Name of a name, but it was cold those winter mornings! We have nothing like it, even when the worst mistral is blowing, in our winters here in Provence. Down in the ravine there was a thick mist, into which I could not see at all; but every now and then a whiff of wind would come in from the seaward and thin it a little, and then I would give a good look below me, for it was along the ravine that any party sent out to surprise us almost certainly would come.

„It was while the light still was faint that I thought I heard, coming up through the mist, a little rattling sound, such as might be made by a man stumbling and dropping his musket among the broken rocks. Just then the mist was too thick for me to see twenty feet below me. I was sure that something bad was going on down there, but I did not want to make a fool of myself by giving a false alarm. All that I could do was to cock my musket and to hold it pointed towards where the sound seemed to come from, all ready, should there be need for it, to give the alarm and get in a shot at the enemy at the same time. Truly, Monsieur, it seemed to me that I stood that way, while my heart went pounding against my ribs, for a whole year! I was no longer cold: the blood was racing through my veins, and I was everywhere in a glow. Suddenly there came a puff of wind, and as the mist thinned for a moment I saw that the whole ravine was full of Russians. Their advance already was half-way up the bank nearest to our works. In less than ten minutes the whole of them would be dashing into our outlying redoubts. As I pulled the trigger of my musket I tried to shout, but my throat was as dry as a furnace and I could only gasp. And—will you believe it?—my musket missed fire! Name of a name, what a state I was in! There was the enemy coming on under cover of the mist; and there was I, the only man who could save our army, standing dumb like a useless fool!

„What I must do came to me like a flash. If I ran back inside of our lines to give the alarm, the chances were a thousand to one that the enemy would have the outlying redoubt, very likely would have them both, and would turn the guns before help could come. But I knew, at least I hoped, that there was time for me to get to the more exposed redoubt ahead of them and give the word to spike the guns. It was all in an instant, I say, that I found this thought in my mind, and my musket and cartridge-box thrown I don't know where, and myself dashing off through the mist across the broken ground like a deer.

„As I rushed into the redoubt our men thought that I was the Russians; and when they knew me by my uniform for a Frenchman, and heard me crying in a hoarse whisper, ‘Spike the guns!’ they thought that I was mad. But the lieutenant in command of the battery had at least a little sense, even if he did not have much courage, and he looked towards where I pointed—and then he saw the shakos, as the mist lifted again, not a hundred feet away.

„‘Save yourselves, I will make the guns safe,’ he cried to his men—he was not all a coward, poor fellow—and as they ran for it he picked up the spikes and the hammer. Tap! tap! tap! one gun was spiked. Tap! tap! tap! another. Then we heard the Russians beginning to scramble up outside.

„He swore a great oath as he dropped the hammer. ‘It can't be done. Run, cat!’ he cried—and away he started after his men. The name that I called him as he ran

away, Monsieur, was a very foul name; God forgive me for what I said! But I was determined that it should be done. In a second I had picked up the nails and the hammer, and—tap! tap! tap!—the third gun was safe. ‘Run, cat!’ I heard the lieutenant call again. But—tap!—I had the nail started in the last gun, and then, right above me, was a Russian major and with him a dozen of his men. Tap! and I had the nail half-way home as the major jumped down beside me, with his sword raised. I knew that I could parry his blow with the hammer and then, possibly, get away; but I wanted to make sure that that gun could not be turned. And so—it was quick thinking that I did just then, Monsieur—tap! and the gun was no better than old iron! At that same instant it seemed to me that the whole world burst into a tremendous roar and ten thousand blazing stars—but it only was the sword of that confounded Russian major banging against my skull!”

The little woman was almost sobbing. She took her husband’s hand in both of hers.

„But you see that I was *not* killed, little one,“ he said; and he raised her hands to his lips and kissed them.

„It was not until the next day, Monsieur,“ he went on, „that I knew anything. Then I was in the hospital.

„How did it go?’ I asked of the hospital-steward.

„Shut up,‘ said the steward.

„This made me angry. ‘How did it go, *polisson?*’ I cried. ‘Tell me, or I’ll crush your bones.’

„Then the man was more civil. ‘The Russians were driven back,‘ he said, ‘and a lot of them were captured. You owe it to the same Russian major who almost killed you that your life was saved. As soon as he was brought into camp he sent a message to the general begging that you might be looked after quickly. If there was any life left in you, it was worth saving, he said, for you were a brave man—and he told how you had spiked those last two guns! Parbleu, but for that message you would have died! When they brought you in here you were nearly gone!’

„And the lieutenant who ran away?’ I asked.

„Oh, he was killed—as he deserved. Now you know all about it. Hold your tongue.’

„I felt so foolishly weak, and there was such a pain in my head as I began to remember it all once more, that I could not ask any more questions. Presently my head began to buzz and the pain in it to get worse, and then for a week I had a fever that came near to taking me off. But I pulled through“—he squeezed his wife’s hand, that again had been laid in his—„and in three weeks I was back with the regiment again. It was all due to my having such a wonderfully thick skull, the doctors said, that the major’s sword had not broken it past all mending. When I came into camp the boys all cheered me, and I was as proud as a cock. And then, the first thing I knew, up came a corporal and a file of men and arrested me.

„What am I arrested for?’ I asked.

„For being absent without leave from your regiment during battle,‘ said the corporal, and marched me off to the guard-house. Then I was not proud at all. But I was very angry. That I should be arrested in this fashion did not seem to me fair.

„In half an hour back came the corporal and his file of men. This time they took me to headquarters. In we went; and the corporal stood beside me, and his men

behind me in a row. It seemed as though half the officers of our army were there: my colonel, the general of our brigade, the general of our division, half a dozen other generals, three or four English officers in their smart red coats; presently there was a stir—and in came the Emperor! What the deuce it all meant I could not tell at all!

„Private Labonne,“ said my colonel, he spoke in a very harsh tone, yet it seemed to me that there was an odd sort of twinkle in his eye—(you deserted your post, and you were absent without leave when your regiment went into action.)

„Yes, but—“

„Not a word of excuse, Private Labonne. You know the penalty.“ I did know the penalty, of course; it was to be taken out and shot. I began to think that this was worse than the Russians!

„When shall I order the court-martial, your Majesty?“ asked my colonel.

„I will be the court-martial,“ said the Emperor. (This is a serious matter; this is a matter to be dealt with in a hurry. The case is proved. There is no need for a trial. I order Private Labonne to be shot right away.)

„I shivered all down my back. It was worse than the Russians; very much worse.“

„Take him away,“ said my colonel.

„The corporal put his hand on my shoulder and the guard closed in. (March!)“ said the corporal.

„Stop!“ said the Emperor. (Private Labonne, before you are taken away and shot, tell me what you were doing in that battery.)

„Nothing, your Majesty.“

„Nothing? I thought that I heard something about guns being spiked. Did not you spike a gun, Private Labonne?“

„Yes, your Majesty.“

„Did not you spike two guns—and both of them after the gunners and the officer in command of the battery had run away?“

„Yes, your Majesty.“

„And why did you not run away, too, Private Labonne?“

„Because I wanted to spike the guns, your Majesty.“

„You did not think, then, that it was your duty as one of my soldiers to save your life by running with the others?“

„This question puzzled me, for I certainly never had thought of the matter in that way at all. It occurred to me that perhaps I really had not done my duty. But what the Emperor said, for all that he was the Emperor, did not seem reasonable, and I made bold to answer him: (If I had taken care of my own life, your Majesty, a great many of your soldiers would have died to pay for it. It would have been a bad day’s work if those two guns had not been spiked, for the Russians certainly would have turned them on our lines.)

„The Emperor turned to my colonel. (There is something in what Private Labonne says, eh, colonel? I suppose there really would have been the very devil to pay had the enemy turned those guns?)

„I suppose there would,“ said my colonel, a little grimly.

„Then the case is not quite so black against Private Labonne as it at first appeared?“

„Not quite so black,“ said my colonel.

„Perhaps we need not have him shot, after all?“

„Perhaps not—not this time, at least.“

„We might even compliment him a little upon his bravery. For it was rather brave—eh, colonel?—to stay in that battery and spike those guns, while a hundred Russians were tumbling in upon him, and his own comrades had run off and left him to do his duty and to die for it there alone.“

„My colonel’s voice broke a little as he answered, ‘It was very brave, your Majesty.’“

„Eh, well, Private Labonne,“ said the Emperor, turning again to me, ‘we won’t shoot you. Your colonel is right about your bravery; and to shoot a brave man, except in battle, is a mistake. The Russian officer who came so near to killing you was a major, I am told; well, you may happen to meet him again, and if you do it is only fair that your rank should equal his. Here is your commission, Major Labonne; and here is a little thing—it was his own cross of the Legion that the Emperor gave me—that I want you to wear in remembrance of that day when you did as brave a piece of work as ever was done by a French soldier for the honor of France!’“

„And so you see, Monsieur, it was only a comedy about my being shot, after all. Here is Avignon. You must wait for me a moment, little one, while I get the basket of jelly for Marie.““

