

A LUCKY SWORD-STROKE



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ONE fine summer evening about a hundred years ago there was a great uproar going on in the courtyard of the Pomme d'Or (Golden Apple), a quaint, little, old-fashioned inn upon the outskirts of Sarrelouis, on the northwestern border of France.

Voices were heard raised in loud and angry contention among the stalwart figures in the uniform of French dragoons who crowded the whole courtyard. Fists were shaken threateningly, and more than one sabre was seen glittering in the air above the heads of the throng.

Several small boys from the town were peeping through the gateway, half pleased and half frightened by the uproar. The landlady was watching the tumult with a pale, scared face from the window of the bar, while the landlord himself, assisted by his son and the two thin, sallow waiters, was getting all the plates and glasses out of harm's way as fast as possible, knowing by sad experience that whenever these hot-blooded troopers began to quarrel, the dispute was pretty certain to end in a general smash of everything breakable upon the premises.

The fact was that a number of soldiers belonging to the two cavalry regiments that were quartered in the town had been dining at the little inn that evening. As a matter of course, they began to boast of the exploits performed by their respective regiments; and, equally, as a matter of course, they soon got to high words over the question of which was the better regiment of the two.

The dispute was just at its hottest, when suddenly a voice was heard to exclaim: "Here comes 'Main-Rouge' (Red Hand)! He'll soon settle it!"

At that name the Light Dragoons looked visibly disturbed, while the "Heavies" brightened up at once; for this "Main-Rouge" was their regimental fencing-master, and the most famous swordsman in the whole district. His real name was Pierre Goriot, but the many fatal duels that he had fought had earned him the ominous nickname of "Red Hand."

In he came, a tall and powerful man, though already somewhat stouter than he should have been. His large hooked nose and keen black eye made every one who looked at him think of an eagle; and no eagle could have been quicker to pounce upon any one that came in his way.

"Delighted to find that I've come just in time to settle any disputed question," said the great swordsman, laying one hand upon the hilt of his sabre and twisting his huge black moustache defiantly with the other. "If

I can be of any service to you, pray command me."

(It was a common saying among the "Heavies," that "Red Hand" was always most dangerous when he was very polite; and he was extremely polite now.)

"If I'm not mistaken," continued Goriot, turning to the Light Dragoons, "there is a little discussion going on as to the merits of our two regiments. Well, that is surely a matter very easily settled by men who know how to handle their swords. Choose the best man among you to maintain the credit of your regiment, and I, if no better champion should come forward, will maintain the credit of mine."

But there was no answer to the challenge. Those who heard it were all brave men, but to be cut down like grass by this terrible swordsman, who had never met his match, and to bring disgrace upon the whole regiment by doing so, was a thing not to be lightly ventured on.

"What!" cried the bully, sneeringly, "among so many stout fellows, will no one dare to cross swords with me for the honor of his uniform?"

"I will!"

All turned round in amazement at this unexpected defiance; and when they saw who had uttered it, they wondered still more.

Behind the group stood a short, thick-set, swarthy young man of twenty, in the uniform of a Light Dragoon. He had a plain, course, rather heavy face, and there was certainly nothing in his appearance from which any one could have guessed that he was soon to become one of the most famous men in Europe.

But young Michael was already proverbial for a cool courage which nothing could shake, and in every dangerous emergency he seemed to take the lead among his comrades as a matter of course.

"Hadn't you better go back to your mamma for a year or two, my child?" said Goriot, staring scornfully at the lad's smooth face. "You're hardly fit to go among men yet."

"Well," answered the young dragoon, quietly, "I may not have learned much, but I think I have learned how to carve a fat goose."

This biting joke and the roar of laughter that followed it were too much for the hot-tempered Red Hand. With a growl of fury he tore off his coat and unsheathed his sabre, while Michael did the same.

As the swords crossed, a grim silence fell over the noisy crowd, for every one felt instinctively that there was serious work at hand.

It soon became evident that Michael, though the best swordsman of his regiment, was no match for the practiced fencer. But, on the other hand, his perfect coolness gave him a great advantage over his enraged enemy; and, moreover, as the younger and lighter man, he was less likely to be fatigued by the strain of a prolonged struggle.

Sparks flew in showers as the sabres clashed together again and again, while the whole courtyard echoed with the sharp clink of steel; but as yet neither man had got a scratch. At length Michael's shoulder was slightly wounded by a swift back stroke from Goriot, whose comrades set up a shout of triumph.

But Michael was not a whit disheartened. He saw that his bulky antagonist was losing breath, and kept drawing him hither and thither, guarding his blows without returning them. All Red Hand, enraged at being so stoutly opposed, began to strike recklessly, leaving himself for a moment quite unguarded.

Quick as lightning, Michael's sword flashed and fell, and a broad stain of crimson showed itself upon Goriot's left sleeve.

"He's Red Hand now, sure enough!" shouted the Light Dragoons, exultingly.

Furious at the pain and the taunting laughter, Goriot dealt a blow at his enemy which, had not Michael's guard partly broken its force, would have ended the fight there and then. Even as it was, although Red Hand's sword luckily hit him with the flat instead of the edge, it descended on his head with a force sufficient to beat him down upon his knees.

The in-drawn breath of the excited spectators sounded like a hiss in that dead silence; but all was not over yet. There came a quick trampling of feet, a sudden flash of steel, and then, as if by magic, Michael was seen upon his feet again, while Goriot's strong right hand, laid open by a fearful gash, hung powerless at his side.

"A lucky stroke for thee, Michael!" cried his comrades, rushing to embrace the conqueror.

"But not for Goriot," said the regimental surgeon, hastily examining the wound; "for this hand of his will never hold a sabre again."

That blow, however, was a lucky one for Goriot, after all. His disablement from active service saved him from being destroyed along with his regiment, which was cut to pieces soon after upon a Flemish battlefield, and it secured him in later days a pension of two thousand francs a year from his old antagonist Michael, who had by that time become General Michael Ney, Marshal of the French Empire, Prince of Moskwa, and favorite companion of the Emperor Napoleon himself.

A Collision at Sea

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off that my hopes of rescue were nearly dispelled. I saw that the sea was almost smooth, and only a gentle breeze blowing.

"She'll never see us," I said. "The afternoon is slipping away, and she can do nothing in the dark."

"She come close by, sah," continued the cook. "S'pose we holler? She hear us, perhaps."

Slowly the sun sank toward the western horizon; slowly did our hope of rescue loom larger as the breeze wafted her across the sea. Night at length shut out all hope of ever seeing her again. How anxiously did we watch as the stars shone out, but no sign of the ship could be discerned.

When day broke our weary eyes scanned the horizon in every direction. Not a speck was anywhere visible. Our injured companion was partly unconscious, but craved for water. Our own sufferings were considerable, but all strove to look the position calmly in the face.

Not a breath of wind stirred the sea, which was now smooth as glass. The sun shone fiercely on our heads, and a keen thirst raged within us. I think the cook had fallen asleep

and I, also, was in a half-unconscious state.

As the hours passed, a thin cloud appeared upon the eastern horizon, and I sprang to my feet in great excitement.

No, there was no mistaking its appearance. In a long, thin, black stream it floated just above the sea. As I watched it, the appearance became more and more distinct.

"Wake up, lads!" I shouted. "There's a steamer bearing down on us." Swiftly and surely the vessel approached. Our hearts beat loudly as we watched the splendid ship nearing the wreck.

Like madmen—as perhaps we were—our arms were thrown wildly in the air. Yes, she had seen us. The ensign was hoisted as a signal.

The black cloud of smoke suddenly ceased to pour from her funnels. A white, hissing cloud of steam took its place. She had stopped.

A boat quickly pushed off. Our voices were raised in a shout of joy as many willing hands lifted Tom carefully from the wreck and laid him in the boat.

We were saved! Every search was made for the rest of our ill-fated crew, but neither they nor the men of that unknown ship were ever heard of again.