

"A Soldier Of The Empire"

Thomas Nelson Page



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"A SOLDIER OF THE EMPIRE."

By Thomas Nelson Page

1891

It was his greatest pride in life that he had been a soldier—a soldier of the empire. (He was known simply as "The Soldier," and it is probable that there was not a man or woman, and certain that there was not a child in the Quarter who did not know him: the tall, erect old Sergeant with his white, carefully waxed moustache, and his face seamed with two sabre cuts. One of these cuts, all knew, had been received the summer day when he had stood, a mere boy, in the hollow square at Waterloo, striving to stay the fierce flood of the "men on the white horses"; the other, tradition said, was of even more ancient date.)

Yes, they all knew him, and knew how when he was not over thirteen, just the age of little Raoul the humpback, who was not as tall as Pauline, he had received the cross which he always wore over his heart sewed in the breast of his coat, from the hand of the emperor himself, for standing on the hill at Wagram when his regiment broke, and beating the long-roll, whilst he held the tattered colors resting in his arm, until the men rallied and swept back the left wing of the enemy. This the children knew, as their fathers and mothers and grandfathers and grandmothers before them had known it, and rarely an evening passed that some of the gamins were not to be found in the old man's kitchen, which was also his parlor, or else on his little porch, listening with ever-new delight to the story of his battles and of the emperor. They all knew as well as he the thrilling part where the emperor dashed by (the old Sergeant always rose reverently at the name, and the little audience also stood,—one or two nervous younger ones sometimes bobbing up a little ahead of time, but sitting down again in confusion under the contemptuous scowls and pluckings of the rest),—where the emperor dashed by, and reined up to ask an officer what regiment that was that had broken, and who was that drummer that had been promoted to ensign;—they all knew how, on the grand review afterwards, the Sergeant, beating his drum with one hand (while the other, which had been broken by a bullet, was in a sling), had marched with his company before the emperor, and had been recognized by him. They knew how he had been called up by a staff-officer (whom the children imagined to be a fine gentleman with a rich uniform, and a great shako like Marie's uncle, the drum-major), and how the emperor had taken from his own breast and with his own hand had given him the cross, which he had never from that day removed from his heart, and had said, "I would make you a colonel if I could spare you."

This was the story they liked best, though there were many others which they frequently begged to be told—of march and siege and battle, of victories over or escapes from red-coated Britishers and fierce German lancers, and of how the mere presence of the emperor was worth fifty thousand men, and how the soldiers knew that where he was no enemy could withstand them. It all seemed to them very long ago, and the soldier of the empire was the only man in the Quarter who was felt to be greater than the rich nobles and fine officers who flashed along the great streets, or glittered through the boulevards and parks outside. More than once when Paris was stirred up, and the Quarter seemed on the eve of an outbreak, a mounted orderly had galloped up to his door with a letter, requesting his presence somewhere (it was whispered at the prefect's), and when he returned, if he refused to speak of his visit the Quarter was satisfied; it trusted him and knew that when he advised quiet it was for its good. He loved France first, the Quarter next. Had he not been offered—? What had he not been offered! The Quarter knew, or fancied it knew, which did quite as well. At least, it knew how he always took sides with the Quarter against oppression. It knew how he had gone up into the burning tenement and brought the children down out of the garret just before

the roof fell. It knew how he had jumped into the river that winter when it was full of ice, to save Raoul's little lame dog which had fallen into the water; it knew how he had reported the gendarmes for arresting poor little Aimée just for begging a man in the Place de L'Opéra for a franc for her old grandmother, who was blind, and how he had her released instead of being sent to ———. But what was the need of multiplying instances! He was "the Sergeant," a soldier of the empire, and there was not a dog in the Quarter which did not feel and look proud when it could trot on the inside of the sidewalk by him.

Thus the old Sergeant came to be regarded as the conservator of order in the Quarter, and was worth more in the way of keeping it quiet than all the gendarmes that ever came inside its precincts. And thus the children all knew him.

One story that the Sergeant sometimes told, the girls liked to hear, though the boys did not, because it had nothing about war in it, and Minette and Clarisse used to cry so when it was told, that the Sergeant would stop and put his arms around them and pet them until they only sobbed on his shoulder.

It was of how he had, when a lonely old man, met down in Lorraine his little Camille, whose eyes were as blue as the sky, and her hand as white as the flower from which she took her name, and her cheeks as pink as the roses in the gardens of the Tuileries. He had loved her, and she, though forty years his junior, had married him and had come here to live with him; but the close walls of the city had not suited her, and she had pined and languished before his eyes like a plucked lily, and, after she bore him Pierre, had died in his arms, and left him lonelier than before. And the old soldier always lowered his voice and paused a moment (Raoul said he was saying a mass), and then he would add consolingly: "But she left a soldier, and when I am gone, should France ever need one, Pierre will be here." The boys did not fancy this story for the reasons given, and besides, although they loved the Sergeant, they did not like Pierre. Pierre was not popular in the Quarter,—except with the young girls and a few special friends. The women said he was idle and vain like his mother, who had been, they said, a silly lazy thing with little to boast of but blue eyes and a white skin, of which she was too proud to endanger it by work, and that she had married the Sergeant for his pension, and would have ruined him if she had lived, and that Pierre was just like her.

The children knew nothing of the resemblance. They disliked Pierre because he was cross and disagreeable to them, and however their older sisters might admire his curling brown hair, his dark eyes, and delicate features, which he had likewise inherited from his mother, they did not like him; for he always scolded when he came home and found them there; and he had several times ordered the whole lot out of the house; and once he had slapped little Raoul, for which Jean Maison had beaten him. Of late, too, when it drew near the hour for him to come home, the old Sergeant had two or three times left out a part of his story, and had told them to run away and come back in the morning, as Pierre liked to be quiet when he came from his work—which Raoul said was gambling.

Thus it was that Pierre was not popular in the Quarter.

He was nineteen years old when war was declared.

They said Prussia was trying to rob France,—to steal Alsace and Lorraine. All Paris was in an uproar. The Quarter, always ripe for any excitement, shared in and enjoyed the general commotion. It struck off from work. It was like the commune; at least, so people said. Pierre was the loudest declaimer in the district. He got work in the armory.

Recruiting officers went in and out of the saloons and cafés, drinking with the men, talking to the women, and stirring up as much fervor as possible. It needed little to stir it. The Quarter was seething. Troops were being mustered in, and the streets and parks were filled with the tramp of regiments; and the roll of the drums, the call of the bugles, and the cheers of the crowds as they marched by floated into the Quarter. Brass bands were so common that although in the winter a couple of strolling musicians had been sufficient to lose temporarily every child in the Quarter, it now required a full band and a grenadier

regiment, to boot, to draw a tolerable representation.

Of all the residents of the Quarter, none took a deeper interest than the soldier of the empire. He became at once an object of more than usual attention. He had married in Lorraine, and could, of course, tell just how long it would take to whip the Prussians. He thought a single battle would decide it. It would if the emperor were there. His little court was always full of inquirers, and the stories of the emperor were told to audiences now of grandfathers and grandmothers.

Once or twice the gendarmes had sauntered down, thinking, from seeing the crowd, that a fight was going on. They had stayed to hear of the emperor. A hint was dropped by the soldier of the empire that perhaps France would conquer Prussia, and then go on across to Moscow to settle an old score, and that night it was circulated through the Quarter that the invasion of Russia would follow the capture of Berlin. The emperor became more popular than he had been since the *coup d'état*. Half the Quarter offered its services.

The troops were being drilled night and day, and morning after morning the soldier of the empire locked his door, buttoned his coat tightly around him, and with a stately military air marched over to the park to see the drill, where he remained until it was time for Pierre to have his supper.

The old Sergeant's acquaintance extended far beyond the Quarter. Indeed, his name had been mentioned in the papers more than once, and his presence was noted at the drill by those high in authority; so that he was often to be seen surrounded by a group listening to his accounts of the emperor, or showing what the *manuel* had been in his time. His air, always soldierly, was now imposing, and many a visitor of distinction inquiring who he might be, and learning that he was a soldier of the empire, sought an introduction to him. Sometimes they told him that they could hardly believe him so old, could hardly believe him much older than some of those in the ranks, and although at first he used to declare he was like a rusty flint-lock, too old and useless for service, their flattery soothed his vanity, and after a while, instead of shaking his head and replying as he did at first that France had no use for old men, he would smile doubtfully and say that when they let Pierre go, maybe he would go too, "just to show the children how they fought then."

The summer came. The war began in earnest. The troops were sent to the front, the crowds shouting, "On to Berlin." Others were mustered in and sent after them as fast as they were equipped. News of battle after battle came; at first, of victory (so the papers said), full and satisfying, then meagre and uncertain, and at last so scanty that only the wise ones knew there had been a defeat. The Quarter was in a fever of patriotism.

Jean Maison and nearly all the young men had enlisted and gone, leaving their sweethearts by turns waving their kerchiefs and wiping their eyes with them. Pierre, however, still remained behind. He said he was working for the Government. Raoul said he was not working at all; that he was skulking.

Suddenly the levy came. Pierre was conscripted.

That night the Sergeant enlisted in the same company. Before the week was out, their regiment was equipped and dispatched to the front, for the news came that the army was making no advance, and it was said that France needed more men. Some shook their heads and said that was not what she needed, that what she needed was better officers. A suggestion of this by some of the recruits in the old Sergeant's presence drew from him the rebuke that in his day "such a speech would have called out a corporal and a file of grenadiers."

The day they were mustered in, the captain of the company sent for him and bade him have the first sergeant's chevrons sewed on his sleeve. The order had come from the colonel, some even said from the marshal. In the Quarter it was said that it came from the emperor. The Sergeant suggested that Pierre was the man for the place; but the captain simply repeated the order. The Quarter approved the selection, and

several fights occurred among the children who had gotten up a company as to who should be the sergeant. It was deemed more honorable than to be the captain.

The day the regiment left Paris, the Sergeant was ordered to report several reliable men for special duty; he detailed Pierre among the number. Pierre was sick, so sick that when the company started he would have been left behind but for his father. The old soldier was too proud of his son to allow him to miss the opportunity of fighting for France. Pierre was the handsomest man in the regiment.

The new levies on arrival in the field went into camp, in and near some villages and were drilled,—quite needlessly, Pierre and some of the others declared. They were not accustomed to restraint, and they could not see why they should be worked to death when they were lying in camp doing nothing. But the soldier of the empire was a strict drill-master, and the company was shortly the best-drilled one in the regiment.

Yet the army lay still: they were not marching on to Berlin. The sole principle of the campaign seemed to be the massing together of as many troops as possible. What they were to do no one appeared very clearly to know. What they were doing all knew: they were doing nothing. The men, at first burning for battle, became cold or lukewarm with waiting; dissatisfaction crept in, and then murmurs: "Why did they not fight?" The soldier of the empire himself was sorely puzzled. The art of war had clearly changed since his day. The emperor would have picked the best third of these troops and have been at the gates of the Prussian capital in less time than they had spent camped with the enemy right before them. Still, it was not for a soldier to question, and he reported for a week's extra guard duty a man who ventured to complain in his presence that the marshal knew as little as the men. Extra guard duty did no good. The army was losing heart.

Thus it was for several weeks. But at last, one evening, it was apparent that some change was at hand: the army stirred and shook itself as a great animal moves and stretches, not knowing if it will awake or drop off to sleep again.

During the night it became wide awake. It was high time. The Prussians were almost on them. They had them in a trap. They held the higher grounds and hemmed the French in. All night long the tents were being struck, and the army was in commotion. No one knew just why it was. Some said they were about to be attacked; some said they were surrounded. Uncertainty gave place to excitement. At length they marched.

When day began to break, the army had been tumbled into line of battle, and the regiment in which the old Sergeant and Pierre were was drawn up on the edge of a gentleman's park outside of the villages. The line extended beyond them farther than they could see, and large bodies of troops were massed behind them, and were marching and countermarching in clouds of dust. The rumor went along the ranks that they were in the advanced line, and that the Germans were just the other side of the little plateau, which they could dimly see in the gray light of the dawn. The men, having been marching in the dark, were tired, and most of them lay down, when they were halted, to rest. Some went to sleep; others, like Pierre, set to work and with their bayonets dug little trenches and threw up a slight earthwork before them, behind which they could lie; for the skirmishers had been thrown out, looking vague and ghostly as they trotted forward in the dim twilight, and they supposed that the battle would be fought right there. By the time, however, that the trenches were dug, the line was advanced, and the regiment was moved forward some distance, and was halted just under a knoll along which ran a road. The Sergeant was the youngest man in the company; the sound of battle had brought back all his fire. To him numbers were nothing. He thought it now but a matter of a few hours, and France would be at the gates of Berlin. He saw once more the field of glory and heard again the shout of victory; Lorraine would be saved; he beheld the tricolor floating over the capital of the enemies of France. Perhaps, it would be planted there by Pierre. And he saw in his imagination Pierre climbing at a stride from a private to a captain, a colonel, a—! who could tell?—had not the *baton* been won in a campaign? As to dreaming that a battle could bring any other result than

victory!—It was impossible!

"Where are you going?" shouted derisively the men of a regiment at rest, to the Sergeant's command as they marched past.

"To Berlin," replied the Sergeant.

The reply evoked cheers, and that regiment that day stood its ground until a fourth of its men fell. The old soldier's enthusiasm infected the new recruits, who were pale and nervous under the strain of waiting. His eye rested on Pierre, who was standing down near the other end of the company, and the father's face beamed as he thought he saw there resolution and impatience for the fight. Ha! France should ring with his name; the Quarter should go wild with delight.

Just then the skirmishers ahead began to fire, and in a few moments it was answered by a sullen note from the villages beyond the plain, and the battle had begun. The dropping fire of the skirmish line increased and merged into a rattle, and suddenly the thunder broke from a hill to their right, and ran along the crest until the earth trembled under their feet. Bullets began to whistle over their heads and clip the leaves of the trees beyond them, and the long, pulsating scream of shells flying over them and exploding in the park behind them made the faces of the men look gray in the morning twilight. Waiting was worse than fighting. It told on the young men.

In a little while a staff-officer galloped up to the colonel, who was sitting on his horse in the road, quietly smoking a cigar, and a moment later the whole line was in motion. They were wheeled to the right, and marched under shelter of the knoll in the direction of the firing. As they passed the turn of the road, they caught a glimpse of the hill ahead where the artillery, enveloped in smoke, was thundering from an ever-thickening cloud. A battery of eight guns galloped past them, and turning the curve disappeared in a cloud of dust. To the new recruits it seemed as if the whole battle was being fought right there. They could see nothing but their own line, and only a part of that; smoke and dust hid everything else; but the hill was plainly an important point, for they were being pushed forward, and the firing on the rise ahead of them was terrific. They were still partly protected by the ridge, but shells were screaming over them, and the earth was rocking under their feet. More batteries came thundering by,—the men clinging to the pieces and the drivers lashing their horses furiously,—and disappearing into the smoke on the hill, unlimbered and swelled the deafening roar; they passed men lying on the ground dead or wounded, or were passed by others helping wounded comrades to the rear. Several men in the company fell, some crying out or groaning with pain, and two or three killed outright.

The men were dodging and twisting, with heads bent forward a little as if in a pelting rain. Only the old Sergeant and some of the younger ones were perfectly erect.

"Why don't you dodge the balls?" asked a recruit of the Sergeant.

"A soldier of the empire never dodges," was the proud reply.

Some change occurred on the hills; they could not see what. Just then the order came down the line to advance at a double-quick and support the batteries. They moved forward at a run and passed beyond the shelter of the ridge. Instantly they were in the line of fire from the Prussian batteries, whose white puffs of smoke were visible across the plain, and bullets and shell tore wide spaces in their ranks. They could not see the infantrymen, who were in pits, but the bullets hissed and whistled by them. The men on both sides of Pierre were killed and fell forward on their faces with a thud, one of them still clutching his musket. Pierre would have stopped, but there was no time, the men in the rear pressed him on. As they appeared in the smoke of the nearest battery, the artillerymen broke into cheers at the welcome sight, and all down the line it was taken up. All around were dead and dying men increasing in numbers momentarily. No one had time to notice them. Some of them had blankets thrown over them. The infantry, who were a little to the side of the batteries, were ordered to lie down; most of them had already done so; even then they were

barely protected; shot and shell ploughed the ground around them as if it had been a fallow field; men spoke to their comrades, and before receiving a reply were shot dead at their sides. The wounded were more ghastly than the dead; their faces growing suddenly deadly white from the shock as they were struck.

The gunners lay in piles around their guns, and still the survivors worked furiously in the dense heat and smoke, the sweat pouring down their blackened faces. The fire was terrific.

Suddenly an officer galloped up, and spoke to the lieutenant of the nearest battery.

"Where is the colonel?"

"Killed."

"Where is your captain?"

"Dead, there under the gun."

"Are you in command?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, hold this hill."

"How long?"

"Forever." And he galloped off.

His voice was heard clear and ringing in a sudden lull, and the old Sergeant, clutching his musket, shouted:

"We will, forever."

There was a momentary lull.

Suddenly the cry was:

"Here they are."

In an instant a dark line of men appeared coming up the slope. The guns were trained down on them, but shot over their heads; they were double shotted and trained lower, and belched forth canister. They fell in swathes, yet still they came on at a run, hurraing, until they were almost up among the guns, and the gunners were leaving their pieces. The old Sergeant's voice speaking to his men was as steady as if on parade, and kept them down, and when the command was given to fire kneeling, they rose as one man, and poured a volley into the Germans' faces which sent them reeling back down the hill, leaving a broken line of dead and struggling men on the deadly crest. Just then a brigade officer came along. They heard him say, "That repulse may stop them." Then he gave some order in an undertone to the lieutenant in command of the batteries, and passed on. A moment later the fire from the Prussian batteries was heavier than before; the guns were being knocked to pieces. A piece of shell struck the Sergeant on the cheek, tearing away the flesh badly. He tore the sleeve from his shirt and tied it around his head with perfect unconcern. The fire of the Germans was still growing heavier; the smoke was too dense to see a great deal, but they were concentrating or were coming closer. The lieutenant came back for a moment and spoke to the captain of the company, who, looking along the line, called the Sergeant, and ordered him to go back down the hill to where the road turned behind it, and tell General ——— to send them a support instantly, as the batteries were knocked to pieces, and they could not hold the hill much longer. The announcement was astonishing to the old soldier; it had never occurred to him that as long as a man remained they could not hold the hill, and he was half-way down the slope before he took it in. He had brought his gun with him, and he clutched it convulsively as if he could withstand alone the whole Prussian army. "He might have taken a younger man to do his trotting," he muttered to himself as he stalked along, not knowing that his wound had occasioned his selection. "Pierre—" but, no, Pierre must stay where he would have the opportunity to distinguish himself.

It was no holiday promenade that the old soldier was taking; for his path lay right across the track swept by the German batteries, and the whole distance was strewn with dead, killed as they had advanced in the morning. But the old Sergeant got safely across. He found the General with one or two members of his staff sitting on horseback in the road near the park gate, receiving and answering dispatches. He delivered his message.

"Go back and tell him he *must* hold it," was the reply. "Upon it depends the fate of the day; perhaps of France. Or wait, you are wounded; I will send some one else; you go to the rear." And he gave the order to one of his staff, who saluted and dashed off on his horse. "Hold it for France," he called after him.

The words were heard perfectly clear even above the din of battle which was steadily increasing all along the line, and they stirred the old soldier like a trumpet. No rear for him! He turned and pushed back up the hill at a run. The road had somewhat changed since he left, but he marked it not; shot and shell were ploughing across his path more thickly, but he did not heed them; in his ears rang the words—"For France." They came like an echo from the past; it was the same cry he had heard at Waterloo, when the soldiers of France that summer day had died for France and the emperor, with a cheer on their lips. "For France": the words were consecrated; the emperor himself had used them. He had heard him, and would have died then; should he not die now for her! Was it not glorious to die for France, and have men say that he had fought for her when a babe, and had died for her when an old man!

With these thoughts was mingled the thought of Pierre—Pierre also would die for France! They would save her or die together; and he pressed his hand with a proud caress over the cross on his breast. It was the emblem of glory.

He was almost back with his men now; he knew it by the roar, but the smoke hid everything. Just then it shifted a little. As it did so, he saw a man steal out of the dim line and start towards him at a run. He had on the uniform of his regiment. His cap was pulled over his eyes, and he saw him deliberately fling away his gun. He was skulking. All the blood boiled up in the old soldier's veins. Desert!—not fight for France! Why did not Pierre shoot him! Just then the coward passed close to him, and the old man seized him with a grip of iron. The deserter, surprised, turned his face; it was pallid with terror and shame; but no more so than his captor's. It was Pierre.

"Pierre!" he gasped. "Good God! where are you going?"

"I am sick," faltered the other.

"Come back," said the father sternly.

"I cannot," was the terrified answer.

"It is for France, Pierre," pleaded the old soldier.

"Oh! I cannot," moaned the young man, pulling away. There was a pause—the old man still holding on hesitatingly, then,—"*Dastard!*" he hissed, flinging his son from him with indescribable scorn.

Pierre, free once more, was slinking off with averted face, when anew idea seized his father, and his face grew grim as stone. Cocking his musket, he flung it up, took careful and deliberate aim at his son's retreating figure, and brought his finger slowly down upon the trigger. But, before he could fire, a shell exploded directly in the line of his aim, and when the smoke blew off, Pierre had disappeared. The Sergeant lowered his piece, gazed curiously down the hill, and then hurried to the spot where the shell had burst. A mangled form marked the place. The coward had in the very act of flight met the death he dreaded. Pierre lay dead on his face, shot in the back. The back of his head was shattered by a fragment of shell. The countenance of the living man was more pallid than that of the dead. No word escaped him, except that refrain, "For France, for France," which he repeated mechanically.

Although this had occupied but a few minutes, momentous changes had taken place on the ridge above.

The sound of the battle had somewhat altered, and with the roar of artillery were mingled now the continuous rattle of the musketry and the shouts and cheers of the contending troops. The fierce onslaught of the Prussians had broken the line somewhere beyond the batteries, and the French were being borne back. Almost immediately the slope was filled with retreating men hurrying back in the demoralization of panic. All order was lost. It was a rout. The soldiers of his own regiment began to rush by the spot where the old Sergeant stood above his son's body. Recognizing him, some of his comrades seized his arm and attempted to hurry him along; but with a fierce exclamation the old soldier shook them off, and raising his voice so that he was heard even above the tumult of the rout, he shouted, "Are ye all cowards? Rally for France—For France——"

They tried to bear him along; the officers, they said, were dead; the Prussians had captured the guns, and had broken the whole line. But it was no use; still he shouted that rallying cry, For France, for France, "Vive la France; Vive l'Empereur"; and steadied by the war-cry, and accustomed to obey an officer, the men around him fell instinctively into something like order, and for an instant the rout was arrested. The fight was renewed over Pierre's dead body. As they had, however, truly said, the Prussians were too strong for them. They had carried the line and were now pouring down the hill by thousands in the ardor of hot pursuit, the line on either side of the hill was swept away, and whilst the gallant little band about the old soldier still stood and fought desperately, they were soon surrounded. There was no thought of quarter; none was asked, none was given. Cries, curses, cheers, shots, blows, were mingled together, and clear above all rang the old soldier's war-cry, For France, for France, "Vive la France, Vive l'Empereur." It was the refrain from an older and bloodier field. He thought he was at Waterloo.

Mad with excitement, the men took up the cry, and fought like tigers; but the issue could not be doubtful.

Man after man fell, shot or clubbed down, with the cry "For France" on his lips, and his comrades, standing astride his body, fought with bayonets and clubbed muskets till they too fell in turn. Almost the last one was the old Sergeant. Wounded to death, and bleeding from numberless gashes, he still fought, shouting his battle-cry, "For France," till his musket was hurled spinning from his shattered hand, and staggering senseless back, a dozen bayonets were driven into his breast, crushing out forever the brave spirit of the soldier of the empire.

It was best, for France was lost.

A few hours later the Quarter was in mourning over the terrible defeat.

That night a group of Prussian officers going over the field with lanterns looking after their wounded, stopped near a spot remarkable even on that bloody slope for the heaps of dead of both armies literally piled upon each other.

"It was just here," said one, "that they got reinforcements and made that splendid rally."

A second, looking at the body of an old French sergeant lying amidst heaps of slain, with his face to the sky, said simply as he saw his scars:

"There died a brave soldier."

Another, older than the first, bending closer to count the bayonet wounds, caught the gleam of something in the light of the lantern, and stooping to examine a broken cross of the Legion on the dead man's breast, said reverently:

"He was a *soldier of the empire*."

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