The Marriage of the Brigadier

By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

I AM speaking, my friends, of days which are long gone by, when I had scarcely begun to build up that fame which has made my name so familiar. Among the 30 officers of the Hussars of Conflans there was nothing to indicate that I was superior in any way to the others. I can well imagine how surprised they would all have been had they realized that young Lieutenant Etienne Gerard was destined for so glorious a career, and would live to command a brigade and to receive from the Emperor's own hand that cross which I can show you any time that you do me the honor to visit me in my little cottage—you know, do you not, the little whitewashed cottage with the vine in front, in the field beside the Garonne?

People have said of me that I have never known what fear was. No doubt you have heard them say it. For many years out of a foolish pride I have let the saying pass. And yet now, in my old age, I can afford to be honest. The brave man dares to be frank. It is only the coward who is afraid to make admissions. So I tell you now that I also am human, that I also have felt my skin grow cold and my hair rise, that I have even known what it was to run until my limbs could scarce support me. It shocks you to hear it? Well, some day it may comfort you, when your own courage has reached its limit, to know that even Etienne Gerard has known what it was to be afraid. I will tell you now how this experience befell me, and also how it brought me a wife.

For the moment France was at peace, and we, the Hussars of Conflans, were in camp all that summer a few miles from the town of Les Andelys, in Normandy. It is not a very gay place by itself, but we of the Light Cavalry make all places gay which we visit, and so we passed our time very pleasantly. Many years and many scenes have dulled my remembrance, but still the name Les Andelys brings back to me a huge ruined castle, great orchards of apple trees, and, above all, a vision of the lovely maidens of Normandy. They were the very finest of their sex, as we may be said to have been of ours, and so we were well met in that sweet sunlit summer. Ah, the youth, the beauty, the valor and then the dull, dead years that blur them all! There are times when the glorious past weighs on my heart like lead. No, sir; no wine can wash away such thoughts, for they are of the spirit and the soul. It is only the gross body which responds to wine; but if you offer it for that, then I will not refuse it.

Now, of all the maidens who dwelt in those parts there was one who was so superior in beauty and in charm that she seemed to be very specially marked out for me. Her name was Marie Ravon, and her people, the Ravons, were of yeoman stock who had farmed their own land in those parts since the days when Duke William went to England. If I close my eyes now I see her as she then was, her cheeks like dusky moss roses, her hazel eyes so gentle and yet so full of spirit, her hair of that deepest black which goes most fitly with poetry and with passion, her figure as supple as a young birch tree in the wind. Ah! how she swayed away from me when first I laid my arm round it, for she was full of fire and pride, ever evading, ever resisting, fighting to the last that her surrender might be the more sweet. Out of a hundred and forty women—but who can compare where all are so near perfection?

You will wonder why it should be, if this maiden was so beautiful, that I should be left without a rival. There was a very good reason, my friends, for I so arranged it that my rivals were in the hospital. There was Hippolyte Lescœur—he visited them for two Sundays; but if he lives I dare swear that he still limps from the bullet which lodged in his knee. Poor Victor also—up to his death at Austerlitz he wore my mark. Soon it was understood that if I could not win Marie I should at least have a fair field in which to try. It was said in our camp that it was safer to charge a square of unbroken infantry than to be seen too often at the farmhouse of the Ravons.

Now let me be precise for a moment. Did I wish to marry Marie? Ah, my friends, marriage is not for a Hussar. Today he is in Normandy; tomorrow he is in the hills of Spain or in the bogs of Poland. What shall he do with a wife? Would it be fair to either of them? Can it be right that his courage should be blunted by the thought of the despair which his death would bring, or is it reasonable that she should be left fearing lest every post should bring her the news of irreparable misfortune? A Hussar can but warm himself at the fire and then hurry onward, too happy if he can but pass another fire from which some comfort may come. And Marie, did she wish to marry me? She knew well that when our silver trumpets blew the march it would be over the grave of our married life. Better far to hold fast to her own people and her own soil, where she and her husband could dwell forever amid the rich orchards and within sight of the great Castle of Le Galliard. Let her remember her Hussar in her dreams, but let her waking days be spent in the world as she finds it.

Meanwhile we pushed such thoughts from our mind and gave ourselves up to a sweet companionship, each day complete in itself, with never a thought of the morrow. It is true that there were times when her father, a stout old gentleman, with a face like one of his own apples, and her mother, a thin, anxious woman of the country, gave me hints that they would wish to be clearer as to my intentions, but in their hearts they each knew well that Etienne Gerard was a man of honor, and that their daughter was very safe, as well as very happy, in his keeping. So the matter stood until the night of which I speak.

It was the Sunday evening, and I had ridden over from the camp. There were several of our fellows who were visiting the village, and we all left our horses at the inn. Thence I had to walk to the Ravons', which was only separated by a single very large field which extended to the very door. I was about to start when the landlord ran after me.

"Excuse me, lieutenant," said he, "it is farther by the road, and yet I should advise you to take it."

"It is a mile or more out of my way."

"I know it. But I think that it would be wiser," and he smiled as he spoke.

"And why?" I asked.

"Because," said he, "the English bull is loose in the field."

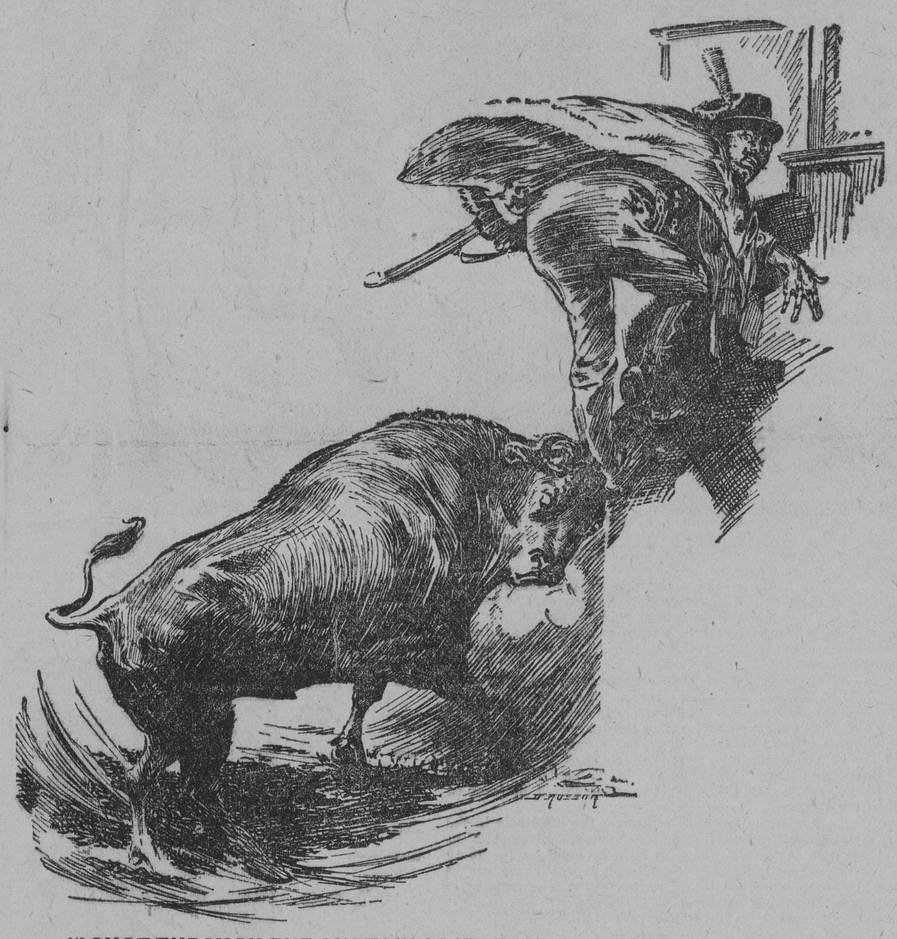
If it were not for that odious smile I might have considered it. But to hold a danger over me and then to smile in such a fashion was more than my proud temper could bear. I indicated by a gesture what I thought of the English bull.

"I will go by the shortest way," said I.

I had no sooner set foot in the field than I felt that my spirit had betrayed me into rashness. It was a very large, square field, and as I came farther out into it I felt like the cockle shell which ventures out from land and sees no port save that from which it has issued. There was wall on every side of the field save that from which I had come. In front of me was the farmhouse of the Ravons, with wall extending to right and left. A back door opened upon the field, and there were several windows, but all were barred, as is usual in the Norman farms. I pushed on rapidly to the door, as being the only harbor of safety, walking with dignity as befits the soldier, and yet with such speed as I could summon. From the waist upward I was unconcerned and even debonair. Below I was swift and alert.

I had nearly reached the middle of the field when I perceived the creature. He was rooting about with his forefeet under a large beech tree which lay upon my right hand. I did not turn my head, nor would the bystander have detected that I took notice of him, but my eye was watching him with anxiety. It may have been that he was in a contented mood, or it may have been that he was arrested by the nonchalance of my bearing; but he made no movement in my direction. Reassured, I fixed my eyes upon the open window of Marie's bedchamber, which was immediately over the back door, in the hope that those dear, tender, dark eyes were surveying me from behind the curtains. I flourished my little cane, loitered to pick a primrose and sang one of our devil-may-care choruses in order to insult this English beast and to show my love how little I cared for danger when it stood between her and me. The creature was abashed by my fearlessness, and so, pushing open the back door, I was able to enter the farmhouse in safety and in honor.

And was it not worth the danger? Had all the bulls of Castile guarded the entrance, would it not still have been worth it? Ah, the hours—the sunny hours—which can never come back, when our youthful feet seemed scarce to touch the ground, and we lived in a sweet dreamland of our own creation! She honored my courage and she loved me for it. As she lay with her flushed cheek pillowed against the silk of my dolman, looking up at me with her wondering eyes, shining with love and admiration, she marvelled at the stories in which I gave her some picture of the true character of her lover!



"I SHOT THROUGH THE CURTAIN AS IF I HAD BEEN FIRED FROM A GUN."

"Has your heart never failed you? Have you never known the feeling of fear?" she asked.

I laughed at such a thought. What place could fear have in the mind of a Hussar? Young as I was, I had given my proofs. I told her how I had led my squadron into a square of Hungarian Grenadiers. She shuddered as she embraced me. I told her also how I had swum my horse over the Danube at night with a message for Davoust. To be frank, it was not the Danube, nor was it so deep that I was compelled to swim; but when one is 20 and in love one tells a story as best one can. Many such stories I told her while her dear eyes grew more and more amazed.

"Never in my dreams, Etienne," said she, "did I believe that so brave a man existed. Lucky France that has such a soldier; lucky Marie that has such a lover!"

You can think how I flung myself at her feet as I murmured that I was the luckiest of all—I who had found someone who could appreciate and understand.

It was a charming relationship, too infinitely sweet and delicate for the interference of coarser minds. But you can understand that the parents imagined that they also had their duty to do. I played dominoes with the old man, and I wound wool for his wife, and yet they could not be led to believe that it was from love of them that I came thrice a week to their farm. For some time an explanation was inevitable, and that night it came. Marie, in delightful mutiny, was packed off to her room, and I faced the old people in the parlor as they plied me with questions upon my prospects and my intentions.

"One way or the other," they said in their blunt country fashion. "Let us hear that you are betrothed to Marie or let us never see your face again."

I spoke of my honor, my hopes and my future, but they remained immovable upon the present. I pleaded my career, but they in their selfish way would think of nothing but their daughter. It was indeed a difficult position in which I found myself. On the one hand I could not forsake my Marie. On the other, what would a young Hussar do with marriage? At last, hard pressed, I begged them to leave the matter, if it were only for a day.

"I will see Marie," said I; "I will see her without delay. It is her heart and her happiness which come before all else."

They were not satisfied, these grumbling old people, but they could say no more. They bade me a short good night and I departed, full of perplexity, for the inn. I came out by the same door which I had entered, and heard them lock and bar it behind me.

I walked across the field lost in thought, with my mind entirely filled with the arguments of the old people and the skilful replies which I had made to them. What should I do? I had promised to see Marie without delay. What should I say to her when I did see her? Would I surrender to her beauty and turn my back upon my profession? If Etienne Gerard's sword were turned to a scythe, then, indeed, it was a bad day for the Emperor and France. Or should I harden my heart and turn away from Marie? Or was it not possible that all might be reconciled, that I might be a happy husband in Normandy but a brave soldier elsewhere? All these thoughts were buzzing in my head when a sudden noise made me look up. The moon had come from behind a cloud and there was the bull before me.

He had seemed a large animal beneath the beech tree, but now he appeared enormous. He was black in color. His head was held down and the moon shone upon two menacing and bloodshot eyes. His tail switched swiftly from side to side and his forefeet dug into the earth. A more horrible-looking monster was never seen in a nightmare. He was moving slowly and stealthily in my direction.

I glanced behind me and I found that in my distraction I had come a very long way from the edge of the field. I was more than half way across it. My nearest refuge was the inn, but the bull was between me and it. Perhaps if the creature understood how little I feared him he would make way for me. I shrugged my shoulders and made a gesture of contempt. I even whistled. The creature thought I called it, for he approached with alacrity. I kept my face boldly toward him, but I walked swiftly backward. When one is young and active one can almost run backward and yet keep a brave and smiling face to the enemy. As I ran I menaced the animal with my cane. Perhaps it would have been wiser had I restrained my spirit. He regarded it as a challenge—which, indeed, was the last thing in my mind. It was a misunderstanding, but a fatal one. With a snort he raised his tail and charged.

Have you ever seen a bull charge, my friends? It is a strange sight. You think, perhaps, that he trots, or even that he gallops. No; it is worse than this. It is a succession of bounds by which he advances, each more menacing than the last. I have no fear of anything which man can do. When I deal with man I feel that the nobility of my own attitude, the gallant ease with which I face him, will in itself go far to disarm him. What he can do I can do, so why should I fear him? But when it is a ton of enraged beef with which you contend, it is another matter. You cannot hope to argue, to soften, to conciliate. There is no resistance possible. My proud assurance was all wasted upon the creature. In an instant my ready wit had weighed every possible course, and had determined that no one, not the Emperor himself, could hold his ground. There was but one course—to fly.

But one may fly in many ways. One may fly with dignity or one may fly in panic. I fled, I trust, like a soldier. My bearing was superb, though my legs moved rapidly. My whole appearance was a protest against the position in which I was placed. I smiled as I ran—the bitter smile of the brave man who mocks his own fate. Had all my comrades surrounded the field they could not have thought the less of me when they saw the disdain with which I avoided the bull.

But here it is that I must make my confession. When once flight commences, though it be ever so soldierly, panic follows hard upon it. Was it not so with the Guard at Waterloo? So it was that night with Etienne Gerard. After all, there was no one to note my bearing—no one save this accursed bull. If for a minute I forgot my dignity, who would be the wiser? Every moment the thunder of the hoofs and the horrible snorts of the monster drew nearer to my heels. Horror filled me at the thought of so ignoble a death. The brutal rage of the creature sent a chill to my heart. In an instant everything was forgotten. There were in all the world but two creatures, the bull and I—he trying to kill me, I striving to escape. I put down my head and I ran—I ran for my life.

It was for the house of the Ravons that I raced. But even as I reached it it flashed into my mind that there was o refuge for me there. The door was locked; the lower windows were barred; the wall was high upon either side, and the bull was nearer me with every stride. But, oh, my friends, it is at that supreme moment of danger that Etienne Gerard has ever risen to his height. There was but one path to safety, and in an instant I had chosen it.

I have said that the window of Marie's bedroom was above the door. The curtains were closed, but the folding sides were thrown open and a lamp burned in the room. Young and active, I felt that I could spring high enough to reach the edge of the windowsill and to draw myself out of danger. The monster was within touch of me as I sprang. Had I been unaided I should have done what I had planned. But even as in a superb effort I rose from the earth, he butted me into the air. I shot through the curtains as if I had been fired from a gun, and I dropped upon my hands and knees in the center of the room.

There was, as it appears, a bed in the window, but I had passed over it in safety. As I staggered to my feet I turned toward it in consternation, but it was empty. My Marie sat in a low chair in the corner of the room and her flushed cheeks showed that she had been weeping. No doubt her parents had given her some account of what had passed between us. She was too amazed to move, and could only sit looking at me with her mouth open.

"Etienne!" she gasped. "Etienne!"

In an instant I was as full of resource as ever. There was but one course for a gentleman, and I took it.

"Marie," I cried, "forgive, oh, forgive the abruptness of my return! Marie, I have seen your parents tonight. I could not return to the camp without asking you whether you will make me forever happy by promising to be my wife."

It was long before she could speak, so great was her amazement. Then every emotion was swept away in the one great flood of her admiration.

"Oh, Etienne, my wonderful Etienne!" she cried, her arms round my neck. "Was ever such love? Was ever such a man? As you stand there, white and trembling with passion, you seem to me the very hero of my dreams. How hard you breathe, my love; and what a spring it must have been which brought you to my arms! At the instant that you came I had heard the tramp of your war horse without."

There was nothing more to explain, and when one is newly betrothed one finds other uses for one's lips. But there was a scurry in the passage and a pounding at the panels. At the crash of my arrival the old folks had rushed to the cellar to see if the great cider cask had toppled off the trestles, but now they were back and eager for admittance. I flung open the door and stood with Marie's hand in mine.

"Behold your son!" I said.

Ah, the joy which I had brought to that humble household! It warms my heart still when I think of it. It did not seem too strange to them that I should fly in through the window, for who should be a hot-headed suitor if it is not a gallant Hussar? And if the door be locked, then what way is there but the window? Once more we assembled all four in the parlor, while the cobwebbed bottle was brought up and the ancient glories of the House of Ravon were unrolled before me. Once more I see the heavy-raftered room, the two old smiling faces, the golden circle of the lamp light and she, my Marie, the bride of my youth, won so strangely and kept for so short a time.

It was late when we parted. The old man came with me into the hall.

"You can go by the front door or the back," said he. "The back way is the shorter."

"I think that I will take the front way," I answered. "It may be a little longer, but it will give me the more time to think of Marie."

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