

# **A SERVICE OF DANGER**

Amelia B. Edwards



# Table of Contents

<u>A SERVICE OF DANGER</u> .....	1
<u>Amelia B. Edwards</u> .....	2

# A SERVICE OF DANGER

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I, FREDERICK GEORGE BYNG, who write this narrative with my own hand, without help of spectacles, am so old a man that I doubt if I now have a hundred living contemporaries in Europe. I was born in 1780, and I am eighty–nine years of age. My reminiscences date so far back that I almost feel, when I speak of them, as if I belonged to another world. I remember when news first reached England of the taking of the Bastille in 1789. I remember when people, meeting each other in the streets, talked of Danton and Robespierre, and the last victims of the guillotine. I remember how our whole household was put into black for the execution of Louis XVI., and how my mother who was a devout Roman Catholic, converted her oratory for several days into a chapelle ardente. That was in 1793, when I was just thirteen years of age.

Three years later, when the name of General Bonaparte was fast becoming a word of power in European history, I went abroad, and influenced by considerations which have nothing to do with my story, entered the Austrian army.

A younger son of a younger branch of an ancient and noble house, and distantly connected, moreover, with more than one great Austrian family, I presented myself at the Court of Vienna under peculiarly favourable auspices. The Archduke Charles, to whom I brought letters of recommendation, accorded me a gracious welcome, and presented me almost immediately upon my arrival with a commission in a cavalry corps commanded by a certain Colonel von Beust, than whom a more unpopular officer did not serve in the Imperial army.

Hence, I was glad to exchange, some months later, into Lichtenstein's Cuirassiers. In this famous corps which was commanded by his uncle the Prince of Lichtenstein, my far–off cousin, Gustav von Lichtenstein, had lately been promoted to a troop. Serving in the same corps, sharing the same hardships, incurring the same dangers, we soon became sworn friends and comrades. Together we went through the disastrous campaign of 1797, and together enjoyed the brief interval of peace that followed upon the treaty of Campo Formio and the cession of Venice. Having succeeded in getting our leave of absence at the same time, we then travelled through Styria and Hungary. Our tour ended, we came back together to winter quarters in Vienna.

When hostilities were renewed in 1800, we joyfully prepared to join the army of the Inn. In peace or war, at home or abroad, we two held fast by each other. Let the world go round as it might, we at least took life gaily, accepted events as they came, and went on becoming truer and stauncher friends with every passing day. Never were two men better suited. We understood each other perfectly. We were nearly of the same age; we enjoyed the same sports, read the same books, and liked the same people. Above all, we were both passionately desirous of military glory, and we both hated the French.

Gustav von Lichtenstein, however, was in many respects, both physically and mentally, my superior. He was taller than myself, a finer horseman, a swifter runner, a bolder swimmer, a more graceful dancer. He was unequivocally better–looking; and having to great natural gifts superadded a brilliant University career at both Göttingen and Leipzig, he was as unequivocally better educated. Fair–haired, blue–eyed, athletic — half dreamer and poet, half sportsman and soldier — now lost in mists of speculative philosophy — now given up with keen enthusiasm to military studies — the idol of his soldiers — the beau sabreur of his corps — Gustav von Lichtenstein was then, and has ever since remained, my ideal of a true and noble gentleman. An orphan since his early childhood, he owned large estates in Franconia, and was, moreover, his uncle's sole heir. He was just twenty when I first came to know him personally in Vienna in 1796; but his character was already formed, and he looked at least four years older than his age. When I say that he was even then, in accordance with a family arrangement of long standing, betrothed to his cousin, Constance von Adelheim, a rich and beautiful Franconian heiress, I think I shall have told all that need be told of my friend's private history.

I have said that we were rejoiced by the renewal of hostilities in 1800; and we had good reason to rejoice, he as an Austrian, I as an Englishman; for the French were our bitterest enemies, and we were burning to wipe out

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

the memory of Marengo. It was in the month of November that Gustav and I received orders to join our regiment; and, commanded by Prince Lichtenstein in person, we at once proceeded, in great haste and very inclement weather, to fall in with the main body of the Imperial forces near Landshut on the Inn. The French, under Moreau, came up from the direction of Ampfing and Mühldorf; while the Austrians, sixty thousand strong, under the Archduke John, advanced upon them from Dorfen.

Coming upon the French by surprise in the close neighbourhood of Ampfing on the 30th, we fell upon them while in line of march, threw them into confusion, and put them to the rout. The next day they fell back upon that large plateau which lies between the Isar and the Inn, and took up their position in the forest of Hohenlinden. We ought never to have let them so fall back. We ought never to have let them entrench themselves in the natural fastnesses of that immense forest which has been truly described as "a great natural stockade between six and seven leagues long, and from a league to a league and a half broad."

We had already achieved a brilliant coup, and had our General known how to follow up his success, the whole fortune of the campaign would in all probability have been changed. But the Archduke John, though a young man of ability and sound military training, wanted that boldness which comes of experience, and erred on the side of over-caution.

All that day (the 2nd of December) it rained and sleeted in torrents. An icy wind chilled us to the bone. We could not keep our camp-fires alight. Our soldiers, however, despite the dreadful state of the weather, were in high spirits, full of yesterday's triumph, and longing for active work. Officers and men alike, we all confidently expected to be on the heels of the enemy soon after daybreak, and waited impatiently for the word of command. But we waited in vain. At midday the Archduke summoned a council of his generals. But the council by-and-by broke up; the afternoon wore on; the early Winter dusk closed in; and nothing was done.

That night there was discontent in the camp. The officers looked grave. The men murmured loudly, as they gathered round the sputtering embers and tried in vain to fence off the wind and rain. By-and-by the wind ceased blowing and the rain ceased falling, and it began to snow.

At midnight, my friend and I were sitting together in our little tent, trying to kindle some damp logs, and talking over the day's disappointment.

"It is a brilliant opportunity lost," said Gustav, bitterly. "We had separated them and thrown them into confusion; but what of that, when we have left them this whole day to reassemble their scattered forces and reform their broken battalions? The Archduke Charles would never have been guilty of such an oversight. He would have gone on forcing them back, column upon column, till soon they would have been unable to fly before us. They would have trampled upon each other, thrown down their arms, and been all cut to pieces or taken prisoners."

"Perhaps it is not yet too late," said I.

"Not yet too late!" he repeated. "Gott im Himmel! Not too late, perhaps to fight hard and get the worst of the fight; but too late to destroy the whole French army, as we should have destroyed it this morning. But, there! of what use is it to talk? They are all safe now in the woods of Hohenlinden."

"Well, then, we must rout them out of the woods of Hohenlinden, as we routed the wild boars last Winter in Franconia," I said, smiling.

But my friend shook his head.

"Look here," he said, tearing a leaf from his pocket-book, and, with a few bold strokes, sketching a rough plan of the plateau and the two rivers. "The forest is pierced by only two great roads — the road from Munich to Wasserburg, and the road from Munich to Mühldorf. Between the roads, some running transversely, some in parallel lines, are numbers of narrow footways, known only to the peasants, and impassable in Winter. If the French have had recourse to the great thoroughfares, they have passed through ere this, and taken up their position on some good ground beyond; but if they have thrown themselves into the forest on either side, they are either taking refuge in thickets whence it will be impossible to dislodge them, or they are lying in wait to fall upon our columns when we attempt to march through."

I was struck by the clearness of his insight and his perfect mastery of the situation.

"What a general you will make by-and-by, Lichtenstein!" I exclaimed.

"I shall never live to be a general, my dear fellow," he replied gloomily. "Have I not told you before now that I shall die young?"

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

"Pshaw! — a mere presentiment!"

"Ay — a mere presentiment; but a presentiment of which you will some day see the fulfilment."

I shook my head and smiled incredulously; but Lichtenstein, stooping over the fire, and absorbed in his own thoughts, went on, more, as it were, to himself than to me.

"Yes," he said, "I shall die before I have done anything for which it might be worth while to have lived. I am conscious of power — I feel there is the making of a commander in me — but what chance have I? The times are rich in great soldiers .... Ah, if I could but once distinguish myself — if I could but achieve one glorious deed before I die!.... My uncle could help me if he would. He could so easily appoint me to some service of danger; but he will not — it is in vain to ask him. There was last year's expedition — you remember how I implored him to let me lead the assaulting party at Mannheim. He refused me. Von Ranke got it, and covered himself with glory! Now if we do have a battle to-morrow"....

"Do you really think we shall have a battle to-morrow?" I said eagerly.

"I fancy so; but who can answer for what the Archduke may do? Were we not confident of fighting to-day?"

"Yes — but the Prince of Lichtenstein was at the council."

"My uncle tells me nothing," replied Gustav, drily.

And then he went to the door of the tent and looked out. The snow was still coming down in a dense drifting cloud, and notwithstanding the heavy rains of the last few days, was already beginning to lie upon the ground.

"Pleasant weather for a campaign!" said Gustav. "I vote we get a few hours' sleep while we can."

And with this he wrapped himself up in his cloak and lay down before the fire. I followed his example, and in a few moments we were both fast asleep.

Next day — the memorable 3rd of December A.D. 1800 — was fought the famous battle of Hohenlinden; a day great and glorious in the annals of French military history, yet not inglorious for those who bravely suffered defeat and disaster.

I will not attempt to describe the conflict in detail — that has been done by abler pens than mine. It will be enough if I briefly tell what share we Lichtensteiners bore in the fray. The bugles sounded to arms before daylight, and by grey dawn the whole army was in motion. The snow was still falling heavily; but the men were in high spirits and confident of victory.

Divided into three great columns — the centre commanded by the Archduke, the right wing under Latour, and the left under Riesch — we plunged into the forest. The infantry marched first, followed by the artillery and caissons, and the cavalry brought up the rear. The morning, consequently, had far advanced, and our comrades in the van had already reached the farther extremity of the forest, when we, with the rest of the cavalry, crossed, if I may so express it, the threshold of those fatal woods.

The snow was now some fourteen inches deep upon the ground, and still falling in such thick flakes as made it impossible to see twenty yards ahead. The gloomy pine-trees closed round our steps in every direction, thick-set, uniform, endless. Except the broad chaussée, down which the artillery was lumbering slowly and noiselessly, no paths or side-tracks were distinguishable. Below, all was white and dazzling; above, where the wide-spreading pine-branches roofed out the leaden sky, all was dark and oppressive. Presently the Prince of Lichtenstein rode up, and bade us turn aside under the trees on either side of the road till Kollowrath's reserves had passed on. We did so; dismounted; lit our pipes; and waited till our turn should come to follow the rest.

Suddenly, without a moment's warning, as if they had sprung from the earth, an immense body of the enemy's foot poured in upon us from the very direction in which our left wing, under Riesch, had lately passed along. In an instant the air was filled with shouts, and smoke, and shots, and gleaming sabres — the snow was red with blood — men, horses, and artillery were massed together in inextricable confusion, and hundreds of our brave fellows were cut down before they could even draw their swords to strike a single blow.

"Call up the Bavarian reserve!" shouted the Prince, sitting his horse like a statue and pointing up the road with his sword.

The next instant I was rolling under my own horse's feet, with a murderous grip upon my throat, a pistol at my head, and in my ears a sound like the rushing of a mighty sea. After this I remember nothing more, till by-and-by I came to my senses, and found myself, with some five or six wounded cuirassiers, lying in an open cart, and being transported along a country road apparently skirting the forest. I thought at first that I also was wounded and that we were all prisoners, and so closed my eyes in despair.

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

But as the tide of consciousness continued to flow back, I discovered that we were in the care of our own people, and in the midst of a long string of ambulances bringing up the rear of the Imperial army. And I also found that, more fortunate than my companions, I had been stunned and badly bruised, but was otherwise unhurt.

Presently Gustav came riding up, and with a cry of joy exclaimed:—

"How now, lieber Freund! No broken bones? All well and safe this time?"

"All well and safe," I replied; "but sore from head to foot, and jolted almost to death. Where's my horse, I wonder?"

"Dead, no doubt; but if you can ride, take mine, and I'll secure the first I can get."

"Is the battle over?"

He shook his head.

"Ay," he said, gloomily. "The battle is over — and lost."

"Lost! — utterly?"

"Utterly."

And then, still riding beside the cart and bending towards me as he rode, he told, in a few bitter sentences, all he knew of the day's disaster.

Moreau, the Generals Groucy and Grandjean, had, it seemed, lain in wait with the main body of his army at the farther end of the forest, where the great Munich and Wasserburg road debouches upon the open plain, in order to drive our forces back as soon as the heads of the first columns should emerge on that side; while Ney, prepared to execute a similar manœuvre with his division, was stationed for the same purpose at the mouth of the other great chaussée.

Richepanse, meanwhile, separated by an accident from half his brigade, instead of retreating, advanced with great intrepidity, and fell upon us flank and rear, as I have said, when we least expected danger. Thus it was that the Imperial army was attacked and driven back upon itself from three points, and defeated with great slaughter.

"As for our losses," said Lichtenstein, "Heaven only knows what they are! It seems to me that we have scarcely a gun or a baggage-waggon left; while our men, herded together, trampled, cut down by thousands — Herr Gott! I cannot bear to think of it."

That night we retired across the Inn and halted upon the Tyrolean side, making some show of defence along the line of the river, in the direction of Saltzburg. Our men, however, had none of the spirit of resistance left in them. They seemed as if crushed by the magnitude of their defeat. Hundreds deserted daily. The rest clamoured impatiently for a retreat. The whole camp was in dismay and disorder.

Suddenly, none could exactly tell how, a rumour went about that Moreau was about to attempt the passage of the Lower Inn.

This rumour soon became more definite.

The point chosen was distant some three or four marches from that where we were now posted.

All the boats upon the Isar had been seized and sent down the river as far as Munich.

From Munich they were about to be transported overland to the nearest point upon the Inn.

Two bridges of boats were then to be thrown across the river, and the French battalions were to march over to our attack.

Such was the information which the peasantry brought to our camp, and which was confirmed by the scouts whom we sent out in every direction. The enemy's movements were open and undisguised. Confident of success and secure in our weakness, he disdained even the semblance of strategy.

On the 4th of December the Archduke called another council of war; and some hours before daybreak on the morning of the 5th, our whole right wing was despatched to the point at which we anticipated an attack.

At dawn, Gustav, who had been out all night on duty, came in wet and weary, and found me still asleep.

"Rouse up dreamer!" he said. "Our comrades are gone, and now we can sing 'De Profundis' for ourselves."

"Why for ourselves?" I asked, raising myself upon my elbow.

"Because Riesch is gone; and, if I am not very much mistaken, we shall have to fight the French without him."

"What do you mean? Riesch is gone to repulse the threatened attack down the river?"

"I mean that my mind misgives me about that attack. Moreau is not wont to show his cards so plainly. I have been thinking about it all night; and the more I think of it, the more I suspect that the French have laid a trap, and the Archduke has walked into it."



## A SERVICE OF DANGER

And then, while we lit our fire and breakfasted together off our modest rations of black bread and soup, my friend showed me, in a few words, how unlikely it was that Moreau should conduct any important operation in so ostentatious a fashion. His object, argued Lichtenstein, was either to mislead us with false rumours, and then, in the absence of Riesch's division, to pour across the river and attack us unexpectedly, or, more probably still, it was his design to force the passage of the Upper Inn and descend upon us from the hills to our rear.

I felt a sudden conviction that he was right.

"It is so — it must be so!" I exclaimed. "What is to be done?"

"Nothing — unless to die hard when the time comes."

"Will you not lay your suspicions before the Archduke?"

"The Archduke would not thank me, perhaps, for seeing farther than himself. Besides, suspicions are nothing. If I had proof — proof positive .... if my uncle would but grant me a party of reconnoissance .... By Heaven! I will ask him."

"Then ask him one thing more — get leave for me to go with you!"

At this moment three or four drums struck up the rappel — were answered by others — and again by others far and near, and in a few seconds the whole camp was alive and stirring. In the meanwhile, Lichtenstein snatched up his cap and rushed away, eager to catch the Prince before he left his tent.

In about half an hour he came back, radiant with success. His uncle had granted him a troop of twenty men, with permission to cross the Inn and reconnoitre the enemy's movements.

"But he will not consent to let thee join, mein Bruder," said Gustav, regretfully.

"Why not?"

"Because it is a service of danger, and he will not risk the life of a second officer when one is enough."

"Pshaw! as if my life were worth anything! But there — it's just my luck. I might have been certain he would refuse. When do you go?"

"At midday. We are to keep on this side following the road to Neubevern till we find some point narrow enough to swim our horses over. After that, we shall go round by any unfrequented ways and bridle-paths we can find; get near the French camp as soon as it is dusk; and find out all we can."

"I'd have given my black mustang to be allowed to go with you."

"I don't half forgive the Prince for refusing," said Gustav. "But then, you see, not a man of us may come back; and after all, it's more satisfactory to get one's bullet on the open battle-field than to be caught and shot for a spy."

"I should prefer to take my chance of that."

"I am not quite sure that I should prefer it for you," said my friend. "I have gained my point — I am glad to go: but I have an impression of coming disaster."

"Ah! you know I don't believe in presentiments."

"I do know it, of old. But the sons of the house of Lichtenstein have reason to believe in them. I could tell you many a strange story if I had time..... But it is already ten, and I must write some letters and put my papers in order before I start."

With this he sat down to his desk, and I went out, in order to leave him alone while he wrote. When I came back, his charger was waiting outside in care of an orderly; the troop had already assembled in an open space behind the tent; and the men were busy tightening their horses' girths, looking to the locks of their pistols, and gaily preparing to be gone.

I found Lichtenstein booted and spurred and ready. A letter and a sealed packet lay upon the table, and he had just opened a locker to take a slice of bread and a glass of kirschwasser before starting.

"Thank heaven you are come!" he said. "In three minutes more I should have been gone. You see this letter and packet? — I entrust them to you. The packet contains my watch, which was my father's, given to him by the Empress Catherine of Russia; my hereditary star and badge as a Count of the early Roman Empire; my will; my commission; and my signet ring. If I fall to-day, the packet is to be given to my uncle. The letter is for Constance, bidding her farewell. I have enclosed in it my mother's portrait and a piece of my hair. You will forward it, lieber Freund...."

"I will."

He took a locket from his bosom, opened it, kissed it, and gave it to me with a sigh.

"I would not have her portrait fall into rude and sacrilegious hands," he said; "if I never come back, destroy it."

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

And now for a parting glass, and good bye!"

We then chinked our glasses together, drank to each other in silence, clasped hands, and parted.

Away they rode through the heavy mire and beating rain, twenty picked men, two and two, with their Captain at their head. I watched them as they trotted leisurely down the long line of tents, and when the last man had disappeared, I went in with a heavy heart, telling myself that I should perhaps never see Gustav von Lichtenstein again.

Throughout the rest of the day it continued to rain incessantly. It was my turn that night to be on duty for five hours; to go the round of the camp, and to visit all the outposts. I therefore made up the best fire I could, stopped indoors, and, following my friend's example, wrote letters all the afternoon.

About six in the evening the rain ceased, and it began to snow. It was just the Hohenlinden weather over again.

At eight, having cooked and eaten my solitary supper, I wrapped myself in my rug, lay down before the fire, and slept till midnight, when the orderly came, as usual, to wake me and accompany me on my rounds.

"Dreadful weather, I suppose, Fritz?" I said, getting up unwillingly, and preparing to face the storm.

"No, mein Herr; it is a beautiful night."

I could hardly believe him.

But so it was. The camp lay around us, one sheet of smooth dazzling snow; the clouds had parted, and were clearing off rapidly in every direction; and just over the Archduke's tent where the Imperial banner hung drooping and heavy, the full moon was rising in splendour.

A magnificent night — cold, but not piercing — pleasant to ride in — pleasant to smoke in as one rode. A superb night for trotting leisurely round about a peaceful camp; but a bad night for a reconnoitring party on hostile ground, — a fatal night for Austrian white-coats in danger of being seen by vigilant French sentries.

Where now were Gustav and his troop? What had they done? What had happened since they left? How soon would they come back? I asked myself these questions incessantly.

I could think of nothing else. I looked at my watch every few minutes. As the time wore on, the hours appeared to grow longer. At two o'clock, before I had gone half my round, it seemed to me that I had been all night in the saddle. From two to three, from three to four, the hours dragged by as if every minute were weighted with lead.

"The Graf von Lichtenstein will be coming back this way, mein Herr," said the orderly, spurring his horse up beside mine, and saluting with his hand to the side of his helmet as he spoke.

"Which way? Over the hill, or down in the hollow?"

"Through the hollow, mein Herr. That is the road by which the Herr Graf rode out; and the river is too wide for them to cross anywhere but upstream."

"Then they must come this way?"

"Yes, mein Herr."

We were riding along the ridge of a long hill, one side of which sloped down towards the river, while on the other side it terminated in an abrupt precipice overhanging a narrow road or ravine, some forty feet below. The opposite bank was also steep, though less steep than that on our side; and beyond it the eye travelled over a wide expanse of dusky pine-woods, now white and heavy with snow.

I reined in my horse the better to observe the scene. Yonder flowed the Inn, dark and silent, a river of ink winding through meadow flats of dazzling silver. Far away upon the horizon rose the mystic outlines of the Franconian Alps. A single sentry, pacing to and fro some four hundred yards ahead, was distinctly visible in the moonlight; and such was the perfect stillness of the night that, although the camp lay at least two miles and a half away, I could hear the neighing of the horses and the barking of the dogs.

Again I looked at my watch, again calculated how long my friend had been absent. It was now a quarter past four A.M., and he had left the camp at midday.

If he had not yet returned — and of course he might have done so at any moment since I had been out on duty — he had now been gone sixteen hours and a quarter.

Sixteen hours and quarter! Time enough to have ridden to Munich and back!

The orderly again brought his horse up abreast with mine.

"Pardon, mein Herr," he said, pointing up the ravine with his sabre; "but do you see nothing yonder — beyond

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

the turn of the road — just where there is a gap in the trees?"

I looked; but I saw nothing.

"What do you think you see?" I asked him.

"I scarcely know, mein Herr; — something moving close against the trees, beyond the hollow way."

"Where the road emerges upon the plain and skirts the pine-woods?"

"Yes, mein Herr; several dark objects — Ah! they are horsemen!"

"It is the Graf von Lichtenstein and his troop!" I exclaimed.

"Nay, mein Herr; see how slowly they ride, and how they keep close under the shade of the woods! The Graf von Lichtenstein would not steal back so quietly."

I stood up in my stirrups, shaded my eyes with my hand, and stared eagerly at the approaching cavalcade.

They were perhaps half-a-mile away as the crow flies, and would not have been visible from this point but for a long gap in the trees on this side of the hill. I could see that they were soldiers. They might be French; but, somehow, I did not think they were. I fancied, I hoped, they were our own Lichtensteiners come back again.

"They are making for the hollow way, mein Herr," said the orderly.

They were evidently making for the hollow way. I watched them past the gap till the last man had gone by, and it seemed to me they were about twenty in number.

I dismounted, flung my reins to the orderly, and went to where the edge of the precipice overhung the road below. Hence, by means of such bushes and tree-stumps as were rooted in the bank, I clambered down a few feet lower, and there lay concealed till they should pass through.

It now seemed to me that they would never come. I do not know how long I waited. It might have been ten minutes — it might have been half an hour; but the time that elapsed between the moment when I dismounted and the moment when the first helmet came in sight seemed interminable.

The road, as I have already said, lay between a steep declivity on the one side and a less abrupt height, covered with pine-trees, on the other — a picturesque winding gorge or ravine, half dark as night, half bright as day; here deep in shadow, there flooded with moonlight; and carpeted a foot deep with fresh-fallen snow. After I had waited and watched till my eyes ached with staring in the gloom, I at last saw a single horseman coming round the turn of the road, about a hundred yards from the spot where I was lying. Slowly, and as it seemed to me, dejectedly, he rode in advance of his comrades. The rest followed, two and two.

At the first glance, while they were yet in deep shadow, and, as I have said, a hundred yards distant, I recognised the white cloaks and plumes and the black chargers of my own corps. I knew at once that it was Lichtenstein and his troop.

Then a sudden terror fell upon me. Why were they coming back so slowly? What evil tidings did they bring? How many were returning? How many were missing? I knew well, if there had been a skirmish, who was sure to have been foremost in the fight. I knew well, if but three or four had fallen, who was sure to be one of the fallen.

These thoughts flashed upon me in the first instant when I recognised the Lichtenstein uniform. I could not have uttered a word, or have done anything to attract the men's attention, if it had been to save my life. Dread paralyzed me.

Slowly, dejectedly, noiselessly, the first cuirassier emerged into the moonlight, passed on again into the gloom, and vanished in the next turn of the road. It was but for a moment that the moonlight streamed full upon him; yet in that moment I saw there had been a fray, and that the man had been badly wounded.

As slowly, as dejectedly, as noiselessly, with broken plumes and battered helmets, and cloaks torn and blood-stained, the rest came after, two and two; each pair, as they passed, shining out momentarily, distinctly, like the images projected for an instant upon the disc of a magic-lantern.

I held my breath and counted them as they went by — first one alone; then two and two, till I had counted eighteen riding in pairs. Then one alone, bringing up the rear. Then ....

I waited — I watched — I refused to believe that this could be all. I refused to believe that Gustav must not presently come galloping up to overtake them. At last, long after I knew it was in vain to wait and watch longer, I clambered up again — cramped, and cold, and sick at heart — and found the orderly walking the horses up and down on the brow of the hill. The man looked me in the face, as if he would fain have asked me what I had seen.

"It was the Graf von Lichtenstein's troop," I said, by an effort; "but — but the Graf von Lichtenstein is not with them."

## A SERVICE OF DANGER

And with this I sprang into the saddle, clapped spurs to my horse, and said no more.

I had still two outposts to visit before finishing my round; but from that moment to this I have never been able to remember any one incident of my homeward ride. I visited those outposts, without doubt; but I was an unconscious of the performance of my duty as a sleeper is unconscious of the act of breathing.

Gustav was the only man missing. Gustav was dead. I repeated it to myself over and over again. I felt that it was true. I had no hope that he was taken prisoner. No — he was dead. He had fallen, fighting to the last. He had died like a hero. But — he was dead.

At a few minutes after five, I returned to camp. The first person I met was von Blumenthal, the Prince of Lichtenstein's secretary. He was walking up and down outside my tent, waiting for me. He ran to me as I dismounted.

"Thank heaven you are come!" he said. "Go at once to the prince — the Graf von Lichtenstein is dying. He has fought a troop of French lancers three times as many as his own, and carried off a bundle of despatches. But he has paid for them with his life, and with the lives of all his men. He rode in, covered with wounds, a couple of hours ago, and had just breath enough left to tell the tale."

"His own life, and the lives of all his men!" I repeated hoarsely.

"Yes, he left every man on the field — himself the only survivor. He cut his way out with the captured despatches in one hand and his sword in the other — and there he lies in the Prince's tent — dying."

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He was unconscious — had been unconscious ever since he was laid upon his uncle's bed — and he died without again opening his eyes or uttering a word. I saw him breathe his last, and that was all. Even now, old man as I am, I cannot dwell upon that scene. He was my first friend, and I may say my best friend. I have known other friendships since then; but none so intimate — none so precious.

But now comes a question which I yet ask myself "many a time and oft," and which, throughout all the years that have gone by since that night, I have never yet been able to answer. Gustav von Lichtenstein met and fought a troop of French Lancers; saw his own twenty cuirassiers cut to pieces before his eyes; left them all for dead upon a certain hillside on the opposite bank of the Inn; and rode back into camp, covered with wounds — the only survivor!

What, then, was that silent cavalcade that I saw riding through the hollow way — twenty men without their leader? Were those the dead whom I met, and was it the one living man who was absent?