

The Game of Billiards

AS they have been fighting two days, and have passed the night with their knapsacks on, beneath a flood

of rain, the soldiers are completely exhausted. And yet for three mortal hours they have been left waiting,

with grounded arms, in the puddles of the highroads and the mud of the saturated fields.

Benumbed by fatigue, by sleepless nights, and with their uniforms drenched with rain, they crowd together to warm and comfort one another. There are some who sleep standing, leaning against a neighbour's knapsack, and weariness and privations can be read distinctly upon those relaxed faces, overcome with sleep. Rain, mud, no fire, nothing to eat, a low, black sky, and the enemy in the air about. It is funereal.

What are they doing there? What is going on? The guns, with their muzzles pointed towards the wood, have the appearance of watching something. The mitrailleurs in ambush stare fixedly at the horizon.

Everything seems ready for an attack. Why do they not attack? What are they waiting for?

They are awaiting orders, and headquarters sends none. And yet the headquarters are not far away. They

are at yonder stately Louis-Treize château, whose red bricks, scoured by the rain, glisten among the trees

half-way up the hill. Truly a princely dwelling, quite worthy to bear the banner of a marshal of France.

Behind a broad moat and a stone wall which separate them from the road, smooth green lawns, lined with

vases of flowers, extend to the porch. On the other side, the private side of the house, the hornbeam hedges show luminous gaps; the pond in which swans are swimming lies like a mirror, and beneath the pagodalike roof of an enormous aviary, peacocks and golden pheasants flash their wings and display

their plumage, uttering shrill cries amid the foliage. Although the owners have gone away, one does not feel the abandonment, the desolation of war. The oriflamme of the leader of the army has safeguarded

even the tiniest flowers in the lawns, and it is an impressive thing to find so near the battle-field that opulent tranquillity that is born of perfect order, of the accurate alignment of the shrubbery, of the silent

depths of the avenues.

The rain, which fills the roads yonder with such disgusting mud, and digs such deep ruts, here is nothing more than an elegant, aristocratic shower, reviving the red of the bricks and the green of the lawns, polishing the leaves of the orange-trees and the white feathers of the swans. Everything glistens, everything is peaceful. Really, but for the flag floating on the roof, but for the two soldiers on sentry-go before the gate, one would never suspect that it is the headquarters of an army. The horses are resting in

the stables. Here and there one sees a groom, or an orderly in undress uniform, loitering about the kitchen, or a gardener in red trousers placidly drawing his rake over the gravel in the great courtyards.

The dining-room, the windows of which look upon the porch, discloses a half-cleared table; uncorked bottles, soiled and empty glasses on the rumpled cloth; the end of a banquet, after the guests have gone.

In the adjoining room one may hear loud voices, laughter, the clicking of balls and the clinking of glasses. The marshal is playing his game of billiards, and that is why the army is waiting for orders.

When the marshal had begun his game, the heavens might fall, but nothing in the world could prevent him from finishing it.

Billiards! that is the weakness of that great warrior. He stands there, as grave as in battle, in full uniform, his breast covered with medals, with kindled eyes, flushed cheeks, excited by feasting, grog, and the game. His aides-de-camp surround him, zealous and respectful. uttering admiring exclamations at

each of his strokes. When the marshal makes a point, they all hasten to mark it; when the marshal is thirsty, they all rush to prepare his grog. There is a constant rustling of epaulettes and plumes, a jingling of medals; and to see all those sweet smiles, those artful, courtierlike reverences, all those new uniforms

and embroidery in that lofty apartment, with its oaken wainscoting, looking upon parks and courts of honour, recalls the autumn days at Compiègne, and affords the eyes a little rest from the stained cloaks that shiver yonder along the roads, forming such sombre groups in the rain.

The marshal's opponent is a young captain of the staff, belted and curled and light-gloved, who is in the first rank of billiard-players and capable of beating all the marshals on earth; but he has the tact to keep a

respectful distance behind his chief, and devotes his energies to the task of not winning, and at the same

time not losing too easily. He is what is called an officer with a future.

Attention, young man, let us be on our guard! The marshal has fifteen, and you ten. The point is to keep the game in that condition to the end; then you will have done more for your promotion than if you were

outside with the others, beneath those torrents of water which drown the horizon, soiling your natty uniform, tarnishing the gold of your aiguillettes, awaiting orders which do not come.

It is really an interesting game. The balls roll and clash and mingle their colours. The cushions send them merrily back; the cloth waxes hot. Suddenly the flash of a cannon-shot passes across the sky. A dull sound rattles the windows. Everybody starts, and they look at each other anxiously. The marshal alone has neither seen nor heard anything; leaning over the table, he is busily engaged in planning a magnificent draw-shot; draw-shots are his strong point.

But there comes another flash, then another. The cannon-shots succeed each other in hot haste. The aides-de-camp run to the windows. Can it be that the Prussians are attacking.

“Very well, let them attack!” says the marshal, chalking his cue. “It’s your turn, captain.”

The staff quivers with admiration. Turenne asleep upon a gun-carriage was nothing compared to this marshal, who plays billiards so tranquilly at the moment of going into action. Meanwhile the uproar redoubles. With the roar of the cannon is mingled the tearing sound of the mitrailleuses, the rattle of musketry. A red steam, black at the edges, rises around the lawns. The whole park is on fire. The terrified

peacocks and pheasants shriek in the aviary; the Arabian horses, smelling the powder, rear in the stables.

The headquarters begins to be excited. Despatch after despatch. Couriers arrive at full speed. They ask for the marshal.

The marshal cannot be seen. Did I not tell you that nothing could prevent him from finishing his game?

“It is your turn, captain.”

But the captain is distraught. That is what it is to be young. Behold he loses his head, forgets his tactics, and makes two runs in succession, which almost give him the game. Thereupon the marshal becomes furious. Surprise and indignation animate his manly face. Just at this moment a horse ridden at a hard gallop rushes into the courtyard. An aide-de-camp covered with mud forces his way past the sentries and

ascends the steps at one bound. "Marshal, marshal!" You should see how he is greeted. Puffing with anger and red as a rooster, the marshal appears at the window, his billiard-cue in his hand:

"What's the matter? What's all this? Isn't there any sentry there?"

"But, marshal—"

"All right, in a moment; wait for my orders, in God's name!"

And the window is violently closed.

Wait for his orders! That is just what they are doing, the poor fellows. The wind drives the rain and the grapeshot full in their faces. Whole battalions are wiped out, while others stand useless, with their arms in readiness, utterly unable to understand their inaction. Nothing to do. They are awaiting orders.

However, as one needs no orders to die, the men fall by hundreds behind the shrubs, in the moats, in front of the great silent château. Even after they have fallen, the grape tears them still, and from the open

wounds the generous blood of France flows noiselessly. Above, in the billiard-room, it is getting terribly warm too; the marshal has recovered his lead, but the little captain is defending himself like a lion.

Seventeen! eighteen! nineteen!

They hardly have time to mark the points. The roar of the battle draws nearer. The marshal has but one more to go. Already shells are falling in the park. Suddenly one bursts over the pond. The mirror is shattered; a swan in deadly alarm swims wildly about amid an eddy of bloody feathers. That is the last stroke.

Then, a profound silence. Only the rain falling on the hedges, a confused rumbling at the foot of the hill, and, along the muddy roads, a sound like the trampling of a hurrying flock. The army is in full retreat.

The marshal has won his game.