

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

19 *The Peasant's Confession*

“Si le maréchal Grouchy avait été rejoint par l’officier que Napoléon lui avait expédié la veille à dix heures du soir, toute question eût disparu. Mais cet officier n’était point parvenu à sa destination, ainsi que le maréchal n’a cessé de l’affirmer toute sa vie, et il faut l’en croire, car autrement il n’aurait eu aucune raison pour hésiter. Cet officier avait-il été pris? avait-il passé à l’ennemi? C’est ce qu’on a toujours ignoré.” — Thiers, *Histoire de l’Empire*. “Waterloo.”

Good Father! . . . It was eve in middle June,  
And war was waged anew  
By great Napoleon, who for years had strewn  
Men’s bones all Europe through.

Three nights ere this, with columned corps he’d cross’d                    5  
The Sambre at Charleroi,  
To move on Brussels, where the English host  
Dallied in Parc and Bois.

The yestertide we’d heard the gloomy gun  
Growl through the long-sunned day    10  
From Quatre-Bras and Ligny; till the dun  
Twilight suppressed the fray;

Albeit therein — as lated tongues bespoke —  
Brunswick’s high heart was drained,  
And Prussia’s Line and Landwehr, though unbroke,                    15  
Stood cornered and constrained.

And at next noon-time Grouchy slowly passed  
With thirty thousand men:  
We hoped thenceforth no army, small or vast,  
Would trouble us again.    20

My hut lay deeply in a vale recessed,  
And never a soul seemed nigh

When, reassured at length, we went to rest —  
My children, wife, and I.

But what was this that broke our humble ease? 25  
What noise, above the rain,  
Above the dripping of the poplar trees  
That smote along the pane?

— A call of mastery, bidding me arise,  
Compelled me to the door, 30  
At which a horseman stood in martial guise —  
Splashed — sweating from every pore.

Had I seen Grouchy! Yes? What track took he?  
Could I lead thither on? —  
Fulfilment would ensure much gold for me, 35  
Perhaps more gifts anon.

“I bear the Emperor’s mandate,” then he said,  
“Charging the Marshal straight  
To strike between the double host ahead  
Ere they co-operate, 40

“Engaging Blücher till the Emperor put  
Lord Wellington to flight,  
And next the Prussians. This to set afoot  
Is my emprise to-night.”

I joined him in the mist; but, pausing, sought 45  
To estimate his say.  
Grouchy had made for Wavre; and yet, on thought,  
I did not lead that way.

I mused: “If Grouchy thus and thus be told,  
The clash comes sheer hereon; 50  
My farm is stript. While, as for gifts of gold,  
Money the French have none.

“Grouchy unwarned, moreo’er, the English win,  
And mine is left to me —  
They buy, not borrow.” — Hence did I begin 55

To lead him treacherously.

And as we edged Joidoigne with cautious view  
Dawn pierced the humid air;  
And still I easted with him, though I knew  
Never marched Grouchy there. 60

Near Ottignies we passed, across the Dyle  
(Lim'lette left far aside),  
And thence direct toward Pervez and Noville  
Through green grain, till he cried:

"I doubt thy conduct, man! no track is here — 65  
I doubt thy gagèd word!"  
Thereat he scowled on me, and prancing near,  
He pricked me with his sword.

"Nay, Captain, hold! We skirt, not trace the course  
Of Grouchy," said I then: 70  
"As we go, yonder went he, with his force  
Of thirty thousand men."

— At length noon nighed; when west, from Saint-John's-Mound,  
A hoarse artillery boomed,  
And from Saint-Lambert's upland, chapel-crowned, 75  
The Prussian squadrons loomed.

Then leaping to the wet wild path we had kept,  
"My mission fails!" he cried;  
"Too late for Grouchy now to intercept,  
For, peasant, you have lied!" 80

He turned to pistol me. I sprang, and drew  
The sabre from his flank,  
And 'twixt his nape and shoulder, ere he knew,  
I struck, and dead he sank.

I hid him deep in nodding rye and oat — 85  
His shroud green stalks and loam;  
His requiem the corn-blade's husky note —  
And then I hastened home. . . .

— Two armies writhe in coils of red and blue,  
And brass and iron clang 90  
From Goumont, past the front of Waterloo,  
To Pap'lotte and Smohain.

The Guard Imperial wavered on the height;  
The Emperor's face grew glum;  
"I sent," he said, "to Grouchy yesternight, 95  
And yet he does not come!"

'Twas then, Good Father, that the French espied,  
Streaking the summer land,  
The men of Blücher. But the Emperor cried,  
"Grouchy is now at hand!" 100

And meanwhile Vand'leur, Vivian, Maitland, Kempt,  
Met d'Erlon, Friant, Ney;  
But Grouchy — mis-sent, blamed, yet blame-exempt —  
Grouchy was far away.

By even, slain or struck, Michel the strong, 105  
Bold Travers, Dnop, Delord,  
Smart Guyot, Reil-le, l'Heriter, Friant,  
Scattered that champaign o'er.

Fallen likewise wronged Duhesme, and skilled Lobau  
Did that red sunset see; 110  
Colbert, Legros, Blancard! . . . And of the foe  
Picton and Ponsonby;

With Gordon, Canning, Blackman, Ompteda,  
L'Estrange, Delancey, Packe,  
Grose, D'Oyly, Stables, Morice, Howard, Hay, 115  
Von Schwerin, Watzdorf, Boek,

Smith, Phelps, Fuller, Lind, and Battersby,  
And hosts of ranksmen round. . . .  
Memorials linger yet to speak to thee  
Of those that bit the ground! 120

The Guards' last column yielded; dykes of dead  
Lay between vale and ridge,  
As, thinned yet closing, faint yet fierce, they sped  
In packs to Genappe Bridge.

Safe was my stock; my capple cow unslain; 125  
Intact each cock and hen;  
But Grouchy far at Wavre all day had lain,  
And thirty thousand men.

O Saints, had I but lost my earing corn  
And saved the cause once prized! 130  
O Saints, why such false witness had I borne  
When late I'd sympathized! . . .

So now, being old, my children eye askance  
My slowly dwindling store,  
And crave my mite; till, worn with tarriance, 135  
I care for life no more.

To Almighty God henceforth I stand confessed,  
And Virgin-Saint Marie;  
O Michael, John, and Holy Ones in rest,  
Entreat the Lord for me! 140

1898

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