BOOK VIII.

CHAPTER I.

THE ADVANCE INTO FRANCE.

THE war in Italy had lasted for three years without any decisive result on either side. Here and there some unimportant advantages had been gained by the imperialists, which had then been balanced by some equally trifling defeats. The campaign had opened unfortunately. Against the advice of his generals, Victor Amadeus had given battle to General Catinat, near the abbey of Staffarda, and in spite of all that his kinsman Eugene could do by personal bravery to repair the blunder, the imperialists sustained a most humiliating defeat. Eugene, however, had the melancholy satisfaction of knowing that he had predicted the result, although his remonstrances had been unavailing to avert it.

This disaster had the effect of cooling the zeal of Victor Amadeus to such an extent, that he actually began to repent of having taken sides against the French. He was too wary to betray his state of mind; so he pretended great ardor, and called urgently for re-enforcements. Backed by the importunities of Prince Eugene, he succeeded in obtaining them, and at their head the Elector Max Emmanuel, commander-in-chief of all the imperial forces.

In spite of all this, the war was not vigorously prosecuted. Max Emmanuel, although brave and true, seemed to have lost the qualities that had made him a wise and energetic commander: he lacked coolness when plans were to be conceived, and decision when they were to be carried out. He left all supervision to the care of his subordinates, and spent his days in the pursuit of pleasure.

All this Prince Eugene perceived with unavailing regret. He was powerless to prevent it, for, as the youngest of the field-marshals, his duty was restricted to the mere execution of the orders of his superiors. The war dwindled down to an insignificant though bloody contest with the mountaineers of Savoy and the Italian peasantry, and things continued in this state until the allies of the emperor manifested their discontent, and called for the removal of Max Emmanuel. Field-marshal Carassa was recalled, and, at the beginning of the campaign of 1692, the command of the allied forces was given to Victor Amadeus, while Field-Marshal Caprara was appointed second in command.

Circumstances now seemed favorable to an earnest prosecution of the war. The imperialists were assembled at one point; they were superior in numbers to the enemy, and at their head stood a man who lost no opportunity to publish to the world his devotion to Austria, and his detestation of France.

Eugene was not as hopeful as the rest. He had had enough of valiant words, and was longing for valiant deeds.

"We must advance into France," said he, when the generals next assembled in council. "We must retaliate upon the people the persecutions of their army in Germany and Italy. We must enter by the pass of Barcelonetta, which for the present is unguarded. Before troops can arrive to succor the garrison, we shall have taken several more posts of importance."

"But should we take, will we be able to hold them?" asked Victor Amadeus, affecting wisdom.

Eugene's large eyes looked searchingly into the sealed book of his cousin's shrewd countenance.

"Your highness," replied he, "above all things let us have confidence in ourselves, and let us place some trust in the fortunes of war."

"Catinat is very sagacious," observed General Laganay, the leader of the Spanish forces. "As soon as we move in the direction of Barcelonetta, he will re-enforce the garrison."

"Then so much the more necessity for speed on our part," cried Eugene. "We must mislead the enemy, and make a feint on Pignerol. To this end, let us send a corps of obser-

vation into Piedmont, while we order a detachment of dragoons and infantry to possess themselves in all haste of the pass."

The Duke of Savoy looked thoughtful, and there was profound silence among the members of the war council. After a pause of some duration, Victor Amadeus raised his head, and gave a long searching look at the excited countenance of his cousin.

"The Prince of Savoy is right," said he, at length. "We must avenge our wrongs, and carry the war into France. Our way lies through the vale of Barcelonetta, and we must move without delay."

The face of Eugene was so lit up by joy that his cousin smiled, and gave him a significant look.

"I have an account of my own to settle with France," added he, "and personal affronts to resent. So has my cousin, who longs to avenge the injuries he has received from Louvois."

"I assure your royal highness," answered Eugene, eagerly, "that personal feeling has naught to do with my opinions as to the prosecution of this war. I would despise myself if, in what I have spoken regarding the interests of the emperor, I had been actuated by any secret motive of aversion toward his enemies."

There was something in this protest that annoyed Victor Amadeus, for his eyes flashed, and his brows were momentarily corrugated. But no one knew better than he how to suppress any symptoms of vexation. It was not convenient to evince displeasure, and he composed his features back to serenity.

"Members of this council of war, and officers of the imperial army," said he, with an appearance of solemn earnestness, "we must act promptly and energetically. Let us prove to our allies, and to all Europe, that we know how to avenge the wrongs of our countrymen. We pass the boundary-lines of France!"

And every preparation was made to carry out this determination. The army was to advance in three divisions, and Prince Eugene was to lead the vanguard.

His way lay through the mountainous districts of Savoy; but, with experienced guides to lead them, the dragoons were able to defile through secret passes unknown to any but the natives, and to arrive unsuspected upon the frontiers of France.

The peasant that preceded Prince Eugene stopped for a while, and, raising his arm, pointed onward.

"This is France," said he. "Yonder is Barcelonetta, and the towers you see beyond are those of the fortress of Guillestre."

Eugene thanked him, and put spurs to his horse. On the frontier he drew in his rein, surveyed the lovely green plain before him, and addressed the Prince de Commercy.

"I have kept the promise I made in Hungary," said he.

"I remember it," replied De Commercy. "I had been telling you that, after hearing of your heroic deeds in the emperor's service, Louvois had said: 'Let Prince Eugene beware how he attempts to return to France!' And your reply was this: 'I shall return, but it shall be sword in hand.'"*

"And we are here—my good sword and I. Nine years ago, I left my native country, a miserable and despairing youth."

"And you return a great general, and one of the happiest men alive," cried De Commercy.

"Ay," murmured Eugene, "one of the happiest men alive!—so happy, that methinks the contrarieties of life are so many vaporous clouds, that throw but a passing shadow over the face of heaven, and then melt into the azure of resplendent day. From my heart I thank indulgent Destiny for her blessings!"

"Destiny that was mightier than the puny enmity of a Louvois! Well—we have had our fill of glory in Hungary and Italy. I hope we shall find a few laurels here in France."

"I hope so," said Eugene, moodily, "though oftentimes I—"

"Why do you hesitate? What do you fear?" asked De Commercy.

"I fear," replied Eugene, lowering his voice, "that we will not be allowed to pluck laurels that grow on French soil."

"Do you think the French will outnumber us?"

"No," sighed Eugene, "the enemy's numbers give me no

* Historical.—See Armath, "Prince Eugene of Savoy," vol. i.

uneasiness: I am afraid of our own weakness. We lack the *morale*—the will to conquer."

"Why surely, Eugene, you lack neither," replied De Commercy.

"As if *I* had any voice in these councils! Were it left with me to manœuvre this army, I would lead it to Paris in two weeks. But, unhappily, you and I are but the instruments of the will of our superiors. I will not conceal from you, my friend, the impatience with which I submit to carry out orders against which my judgment continually rebels; and how weary I am of serving, where I feel that I ought to command. You know me too well to suspect me of the meanness of a mere lust for distinction. Had we a true or competent leader, I would be content to remain where I am, as youngest field-marshal in the army—in the fifth rank; but—"

"But you consider Victor Amadeus as incapable as Max Emmanuel?"

"Max was not incapable," said Eugene, as though speaking to himself. "True, he exhibited none of those great qualities which distinguished him in Hungary; or perhaps he was shrewd enough to perceive that no amount of generalship could prevail against the dulness of his German officers, the ill-will of the Spaniards, and the irresolution of the Duke of Savoy. I believe he concluded to let things take their course, and cause his own removal. But he, at least, was honest. He was not casting his eyes about, to see on which side lay his own interest. His countenance is a true reflex of his soul—and what he says, he means."

"And by this you wish me to infer that such is not the case with our present commander-in-chief?" asked De Commercy.

Eugene bent his head in token of assent, and gazed for a moment at the country which lay before them. "We will capture Barcelonetta," said he, "Gillestre, and perhaps Embrun, provided we are too rapid in our movements for the duke to circumvent us by countermanding orders. We must strive to make retreat impossible, but we must not lose sight of Victor Amadeus. We must watch him closely, and be on our guard against—"

"Against what?" asked De Commercy.

"Against treason," whispered Eugene.

"How! You think it possible that—"

"That while the road to Paris is open before us, we never get farther than Embrun. Unless we are wary, De Commercy, we shall be betrayed and sold to the enemy.—But look! Here come our vanguard. You can indulge your fancy for rural scenery, while I go to receive them." And Eugene galloped back to his men, who received him with shouts of enthusiasm.

"My braves," said he, unsheathing his sword, and pointing to the smiling plains beyond, "my braves, this is France! the enemy's country, which we are here to conquer!"

The troops responded with a yell that betokened their readiness for the bloody work.

CHAPTER II.

THE RAVENS.

THE men were allowed an hour's rest to feed their horses and prepare their dinners. Fires were lighted, vivandières went hither and thither, wishing that they could multiply themselves to answer the demands of the hungry soldiers. Here and there were picturesque groups of men reclining under the trees, some chatting, some smoking, others singing songs of home.

This bivouac was a pleasant scene to look upon; but its peace was like the stillness that precedes a storm. A few hours might change these light-hearted human beings into mangled corpses, and dye this velvet sward with human blood.

Eugene had dismounted, and, accompanied by one of his staff-officers, mingled with the merry crowd. Everywhere he was greeted with demonstrations of affection and contemplated with unmistakable admiration. Sometimes he paused awhile to chat with the soldiers, of their families at home; often accepting the bread they offered, and tasting of the soup that was being distributed by the vivandières.

Now and then a gruff voice was heard calling out to the "little Capuchin," as the soldiers were accustomed to designate Eugene, through fondness. At such times, he smiled, nodded, and, when his officers would have chided the men for their familiarity, besought them not to reprove them for a jest so harmless.

"Why do you look so melancholy, lieutenant?" asked he of a young officer, who, apart from his comrades, was leaning against a tree, gazing intently in the distance.

The officer appeared to waken from a fit of abstraction, for he gave a slight start, and removed his cap.

"Are you not pleased at our invasion of France?" asked Eugene.

"Ay, that am I," replied he, with a bitter smile. "I have long hoped for this invasion, and I thank God that it is at hand."

"You are ambitious to wear the epaulets of a captain, I presume?"

"No, general, no. I care nothing for military finery."

"Why, then, have you longed to march to France?"

"Because I hunger and thirst for French blood. General, I implore you, give me a body of men, and let me initiate our invasion of France by giving the French a taste of guerrilla warfare."

"Are you so sanguinary, young man?" asked Eugene, in amazement. "Do you not know that war itself should be conducted with humanity, and that we should never forget our common brotherhood with our enemies!"

"No, general, I know it not, nor do I wish to know it. I know that the French have left me without kindred, without home, without ties; and that they have transformed me—a man whose heart once beat with sympathy and love for all living creatures—into a tiger, that craves blood, and mocks at suffering."

"Unhappy man!" exclaimed Eugene, sadly. "Then you have suffered wrong at the hands of the French?"

The young man heaved a convulsive sigh.

"I come from the Palatinate," said he. "My parents' house was fired, my father murdered, and my mother driven out into

the woods, where she perished. But this is not all. I loved a maiden—a beautiful and virtuous maiden, to whom I was betrothed. O God! that I should have lived to see it! General, the name of my betrothed was Marie Wengelin."

"Marie Wengelin!" echoed Eugene, with a shudder. "I have heard of her tragic end. It was she that delivered Esslingen, but was—"

"Marie! Marie!" cried Caspar, hiding his face with his hands.

Eugene kindly touched him on the shoulder. "Unfortunate young man," said he, "from my soul I pity you, and well I understand your hatred of the Frenchman."

"Dear general, give me the command of a body of marauders that shall clear the way for our army. There is many a man in our regiment as eager for revenge as I; let us be consolidated into one corps, and where bloody work is to be done, confide it to us."

Eugene thought for a moment, and then replied: "So be it; you shall have your wish. Select one hundred men, of whom you shall be captain, and come to me, individually for your orders, reporting also to myself, and not to my officers. I will give you opportunity to distinguish yourself, young man; but remember that it is one thing to be a hero, and another to be a cutthroat. Retaliate upon the men, but spare the women. If, in every Frenchman, you see a Melac, look upon every woman as your Marie. Will you promise me this?"

"I will, general. At last I shall have vengeance, I shall serve my country, and when my work is done, may God release me from this fearful earthly bondage!"

"Utter no such sinful wishes. Believe me, there is balm for every wound; and I, who tell you this, have suffered unspeakably."

"General, my Marie is dead, and died by her own hand."

"She died the death of a heroine. But for you, it is heroism to live, and so to live that the world may esteem you worthy of having been loved by Marie Wengelin. Ah! you are no cutthroat. I see it in the glance of your eye, in the tremor of your lip. You shall have command of the guerrillas;

for you will not be barbarous in your warfare. What is your name?"

"Caspar Werner."

"Give me your hand, Caspar Werner, and promise me that you will go through life with the fortitude that becomes a brave man."

Caspar grasped Eugene's extended hand. "Yes, general, I promise. I will be worthy of my Marie—worthy of your kindness to-day; and from this hour forth I am yours for life or death."

Eugene gazed admiringly into the handsome face of the trooper. "I will do all that lies in my power to lessen your troubles, Caspar, and you shall be under my own special protection. How soon will you be able to organize your corps?"

"In ten minutes, general."

Eugene shook his head incredulously.

"You will see, general," said Caspar. "We are all prepared, and awaited nothing but your consent. Now look! The men have just risen from dinner. Will you allow me to present them now?"

"Certainly. I will wait for them here."

Caspar leaped on his horse, which was close at hand, grazing, and galloped to the spot where the soldiers had bivouacked. Eugene, who was now joined by several of his staff, followed his movements with great interest.

The trooper came so suddenly upon his comrades, that not one of them had been aware of his approach. They went on chatting and smoking until, all of a sudden, were heard these few words: "Ravens, to horse!"

In the twinkling of an eye, every man stood erect. For the second time, Caspar called out, "Ravens, to horse!" when their hands were on the bridle, and in less than five minutes they were all mounted.

Before ten minutes had expired, the Ravens had defiled before Prince Eugene, who contemplated, with a sort of grim satisfaction, their stalwart forms, their resolute, bronzed faces, and their fiery, flashing eyes.

He signed to Caspar to approach.

"Gentlemen," said he to his officers, "let me present to you Captain Werner of the —th. He is in command of an independent corps who call themselves 'The Ravens,' but in their aspirings emulate the eagle."

"General," said Caspar, "give the word, and let your Ravens fly."

"You have it," replied Eugene, smiling. "Yonder are the towers of Barcelonetta. On our march thither are two forts; they would inconvenience our advance, and must be taken."

"They shall be taken," was the reply, and in a few moments the Ravens had flown, and were no longer to be seen.

One hour later the vanguard of the imperial army resumed its march. Nothing checked their advance, for the Ravens had carried every thing before them. Barcelonetta, terrified at the fate of the two other forts, held out the white flag; and, by the time Prince Eugene had arrived, a procession was on its way to deliver into his hands the keys of the fortress. The clergy, in full canonicals, were at their head, and after them a troop of young girls dressed in white, the first of whom presented the keys on a silk cushion, and petitioned "the great hero" for mercy.

"Oh, my mother!" thought he, as he took the keys, "you are avenged. The despised abbé has proved to the King of France that he is not a weakling unworthy of wearing a sword!"

They tarried but a night at Barcelonetta. On the morrow they captured Guillestre, and set out for Embrun, where they expected to be joined by the main army.

Embrun resisted for twenty-four hours, but at the end of that time it fell, and Victor Amadeus took up his headquarters there, while Eugene marched on to Gab. He had been preceded by the Ravens, who, in imitation of their enemies, had driven the people from their houses, and had set fire to whole villages, cutting down all who offered resistance.

And, while they transformed the beautiful plains of Dauphiné into a waste, and marked their path forward by smoking ruins, they shouted in the ears of the unhappy fugitives: "Revenge! Revenge for the woes of Germany!"

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"Revenge for the woes of Germany!" cried the Ravens, as they leaped from their horses to storm the walls of Gab.

But no answer was made to their challenge, for not a soul was there to give back a defiant word. The gates stood open, the walls were unguarded, and, when the dragoons entered the town, they found not one living being whereon to wreak their vengeance. So hasty had been the flight of the inhabitants that they had left their worldly goods behind, and their houses looked as though the owners had but just absented themselves for an hour or so to attend church, or celebrate some public festival.

The Ravens took possession, and, when Prince Eugene arrived, he found the Austrian flag waving from the towers, and that of Savoy streaming above the gates.

"You have done your work quickly," observed he to Caspar.

"There was nothing to do, general," was the reply. "There is not a living soul of them within the walls. And now, your highness—a boon!"

"What is it?"

"General, recall to your mind Speier and Worms, and grant us leave to find our retaliation for their destruction in Gab."

"You say there is not a living soul in Gab? Are there, then, no women, no children, no superannuated or infirm?"

"General, every house is empty. I found but one living creature in Gab—a young girl who lay sick in bed—too sick to move."

"Alone? forsaken?"

"Forsaken, general, save by one little dog that had just expired at the side of her bed, for its body was warm and supple."

"And the poor girl?"

"She was dying."

Eugene's large, questioning eyes were upon Caspar's face, and their expression was anxious and painful. "Caspar, did you remember your promise?"

"Yes, general, I did. The maiden asked for water, and I held the cup to her lips. I seated myself at her bedside, and, while my comrades sacked the town, I soothed her last moments. When all was over, I covered her face, and left the house."

Eugene extended his hand. "You acted nobly, Caspar."

"Nay, general," replied Caspar, his eyes filling with tears, "her name was—Marie!—But now, that I can assure you on my honor that there is no creature to molest in the town, I once more present the petition of my men. They ask for permission to destroy Gab."

Eugene pondered for a moment, and then gave his consent. "Let them do what they choose with the town."

Then, turning to the Prince de Commercy, "I begin to think," said he, "that I have done injustice to Victor Amadeus. It was he who, contrary to the opinions of his officers, ordered the advance to Gab. He will be delighted and surprised to hear that we have possession of the fortress already, for he was anxious to be with us at the siege."

"I can believe it: he may well desire the honor of capturing one stronghold in France, when his cousin has already reduced two.—But look, Eugene, at yonder courier coming toward us—he seems to be in haste."

The courier came on, his horse flecked with foam, himself covered with dust; and, no sooner had he approached within hearing, than he called in a loud voice for "Field-Marshal, the Prince of Savoy."

An orderly conducted him at once to the prince, to whom he delivered a package from his highness the Duke of Savoy.

Eugene broke the seals, and began to read. His brows met, and, as he looked up from the perusal of his dispatches, his face was expressive of extreme annoyance.

"It is well," said he to the courier. "Say to his highness that we will obey. Monsieur de Commercy, let us ride together up the heights, whence we may have a full view of Gab and our troops."

They set their horses in motion, and in a few moments had reached the summit of the hill. Here Eugene reined in his horse, and reopened his dispatch.

"Here we are alone, Commercy. Let me read you the letter of my well-beloved cousin and commander-in-chief:

"'My dear kinsman and distinguished field-marshal: To my unspeakable regret, I am deprived, by a serious illness, of taking part in the attack upon Gab. My physicians have ordered me back to Embrun, there to await the result. These presents will convey to the advance guard my command to retreat to Embrun until further orders. It is my intention (unless I succumb before your arrival) to hold a council of war; and, to this intent, I require the presence of all the general officers. Hasten, therefore, my dear Eugene, lest you should find me no longer alive; and believe that, living or dying, I am, as ever, your devoted kinsman and friend.

(Signed) "'VICTOR AMADEUS, Duke of Savoy.'"

"Do you believe all this?" asked De Commercy.

"Stay till you hear the postscript from his own hand:

"'My dear cousin: You must pardon my egotistic ambition, if I do not allow the siege of Gab to be prosecuted without me. I am very desirous of glory, and perchance your laurels have contributed to my indisposition. At any rate, before you take a third fortress, I must have my opportunity of capturing two. So, instead of attacking Gab, come to Embrun to the relief of

"'Yours, besieged by illness, V. A.'"

"I repeat my question—do you believe in his illness?"

"And you—do you believe in his ambition?"

"Why not? He avows it openly."

"For which very reason, it has no existence. Victor Amadeus is too crafty to make such an avowal in good faith. He never says what he thinks, nor does he ever think what he says. No, no—my poor little leaflets of laurel would have given him no uneasiness, had they not been plucked on French soil!—But we must wait and see. The main point is to retreat to Embrun."

"And Gab? Will you retract your gift of its empty houses to the Ravens?"

"No. My instructions were not to besiege Gab. It surrendered before they reached me, and I shall leave it to the soldiery. As for you and me, we must hasten to Embrun to try to break the seal of my cousin's impassible countenance, and read a few of his thoughts. Did I not tell you that we would march no farther than Embrun?"

CHAPTER III.

SICK AND WELL.

THE Duke of Savoy had taken up his residence at the castle of Embrun, where, as soon as the officers had arrived, his highness called a council of war. They were assembled in the council-chamber, awaiting the appearance of the invalid.

The doors leading to a room beyond, were opened to give passage to a huge arm-chair on rollers, which was wheeled by four lackeys, to the centre of the hall. The duke's head reclined on a cushion which had been fastened for the occasion to the back of the chair: the remainder of his person was buried under a purple velvet coverlet, except his neck and arms, which were clothed in a black doublet, the whole costume being eminently calculated to heighten the pallor of the duke's cheeks, and increase the whiteness of his hands as they lay limp and helpless on the velvet covering. His eyes were half-closed, and as he made a feeble attempt to survey the assemblage before him, they appeared to open with difficulty. With a faint motion of the hand, he signed to the lackeys to retire, and then made a painful effort to raise his head.

Deep silence reigned throughout the council-chamber, but the gaze of every man there was fixed upon the pallid face of him in whose trembling hands lay the destinies of four different armies. His dim eyes wandered slowly about the room until they rested on the person of Prince Eugene, who, hot and dusty, presented an appearance that contrasted strongly with that of his brother-officers.

"Our dear kinsman Eugene has arrived, I see," said the duke, in a faint voice. "We were afraid that we would be obliged to hold this important council without your presence."