Chapter 51

THE ARMY OF THE RESERVES

The First Consul had reached the point he desired. The Companions of Jehu were destroyed and the Vendée was pacificated.

When demanding peace from England he had hoped for war. He understood very well that, born of war, he could exist only by war. He seemed to foresee that a poet would arise and call him "The Giant of War."

But war--what war? Where should he wage it? An article of the constitution of the year VIII. forbade the First Consul to command the armies in person, or to leave France.

In all constitutions there is inevitably some absurd provision. Happy the constitutions that have but one! The First Consul found a means to evade this particular absurdity.

He established a camp at Dijon. The army which occupied this camp was called the Army of the Reserves. The force withdrawn from Brittany and the Vendée, some thirty thousand men in all, formed the nucleus of this army. Twenty thousand conscripts were incorporated in it; General Berthier was appointed commander-in-chief. The plan which Bonaparte explained to Roland in his study one day was still working in his mind. He expected to recover Italy by a single battle, but that battle must be a great victory.

Moreau, as a reward for his co-operation on the 18th Brumaire, received the command he had so much desired. He was made commander-in-chief of the Army of the Rhine, I with eighty thousand men under him. Augereau, with twenty-five thousand more, was on the Dutch frontier. And Masséna, commanding the Army of Italy, had withdrawn to the country about Genoa, where he was tenaciously maintaining himself against the land forces of the Austrian General Ott, and the British fleet under Admiral Keith.

While the latter movements were taking place in Italy, Moreau had assumed the offensive on the Rhine, and defeated the enemy at Stockach and Moeskirch. A single victory was to furnish an excuse to put the Army of Reserves under waiting orders. Two victories would leave no doubt as to the necessity of co-operation. Only, how was this army to be transported to Italy?

Bonaparte's first thought was to march up the Valais and to cross the Simplon. He would thus turn Piedmont and enter Milan. But the operation was a long one, and must be done overtly. Bonaparte renounced it. His plan was to surprise the Austrians and to appear with his whole army on the plains of Piedmont before it was even suspected that he had crossed the Alps. He therefore decided to make the passage of the Great Saint-Bernard. It was for this purpose that he had sent the fifty thousand francs, seized by the Companions of Jehu, to the monks whose monastery crowns that mountain. Another fifty thousand had been sent since, which had reached their destination safely. By the help of this money the monastery was to be amply provisioned for an army of fifty thousand men halting there for a day.

Consequently, toward the end of April the whole of the artillery was advanced to Lauzanne, Villeneuve, Martigny, and Saint-Pierre. General Marmont, commanding the artillery, had already been sent forward to find a means of transporting cannon over the Alps. It was almost an impracticable thing to do; and yet it must be achieved. No precedent existed as a guide. Hannibal with his elephants, Numidians, and Gauls; Charlemagne with his Franks, had no such obstacles to surmount.

During the campaign in Italy in 1796, the army had not crossed the Alps, but turned them, descending from Nice to Cerasco by the Corniche road. This time a truly titanic work was undertaken.

In the first place, was the mountain unoccupied? The mountain without the Austrians was in itself difficult enough to conquer! Lannes was despatched like a forlorn hope with a whole division. He crossed the peak of the Saint-Bernard without baggage or artillery, and took possession of Châtillon. The

Austrians had left no troops in Piedmont, except the cavalry in barracks and a few posts of observation. There were no obstacles to contend with except those of nature. Operations were begun at once.

Sledges had been made to transport the guns; but narrow as they might be, they were still too wide for the road. Some other means must be devised. The trunks of pines were hollowed and the guns inserted. At one end was a rope to pull them, at the other a tiller to guide them. Twenty grenadiers took the cables. Twenty others carried the baggage of those who drew them. An artilleryman commanded each detachment with absolute power, if need be, over life and death. The iron mass in such a case was far more precious than the flesh of men.

Before leaving each man received a pair of new shoes and twenty biscuits. Each put on his shoes and hung his biscuits around his neck. The First Consul, stationed at the foot of the mountain, gave to each cannon detachment the word to start.

A man must traverse the same roads as a tourist, on foot or on mule-back, he must plunge his eye to the depth of the precipice, before he can have any idea of what this crossing was. Up, always up those beetling slopes, by narrow paths, on jagged stones, which cut the shoes first, the feet next!

From time to time they stopped, drew breath, and then on again without a murmur. The ice-belt was reached. Before attempting it the men received new shoes; those of the morning were in shreds. A biscuit was eaten, a drop of brandy from the canteen was swallowed, and on they went. No man knew whither he was climbing. Some asked how many more days it would take; others if they might stop for a moment at the moon. At last they came to the eternal snows. There the toil was less severe. The gun-logs slid upon the snow, and they went faster.

One fact will show the measure of power given to the artilleryman who commanded each gun.

General Chamberlhac was passing. He thought the advance not fast enough. Wishing to hasten it, he spoke to an artilleryman in a tone of command.

"You are not in command here," replied the man; "I am. I am responsible for the gun; I direct its march. Pass on."

The general approached the artilleryman as if to take him by the throat. But the man stepped back, saying: "General, don't touch me, or I will send you to the bottom of that precipice with a blow of this tiller."

After unheard-of toil they reached the foot of the last rise, at the summit of which stands the convent. There they found traces of Lannes' division. As the slope was very steep, the soldiers had cut a sort of stairway in the ice. The men now scaled it. The fathers of Saint-Bernard were awaiting them on the summit. As each gun came up the men were taken by squads into the hospice. Tables were set along the passage with bread and Gruyere cheese and wine.

When the soldiers left the convent they pressed the hands of the monks and embraced the dogs.

The descent at first seemed easier than the ascent, and the officers declared it was their turn to drag the guns. But now the cannon outstripped the teams, and some were dragged down faster than they wished. General Lannes and his division were still in the advance. He had reached the valley before the rest of the army, entered the Aosta, and received his orders to march upon Ivrea, at the entrance to the plains of Piedmont. There, however, he encountered an obstacle which no one had foreseen.

The fortress of Bard is situated about twenty-four miles from Aosta. On the road to Ivrea, a little behind the village, a small hill closes the valley almost hermetically. The river Dora flows between this hill and the mountain on the right. The river, or rather, the torrent, fills the whole space. The mountain on the left presents very much the same aspect; only, instead of the river, it

is the highroad which passes between the hill and the mountain. It is there that the fortress of Bard stands. It is built on the summit of the hill, and extends down one side of it to the highroad.

How was it that no one had thought of this obstacle which was well nigh insurmountable? There was no way to assault it from the bottom of the valley, and it was impossible to scale the rocks above it.

Yet, by dint of searching, they did find a path that they were able to level sufficiently for the cavalry and the infantry to pass; but they tried in vain to get the artillery over it, although they took the guns apart as at the Mont Saint-Bernard.

Bonaparte ordered two cannon levelled on the road, and opened fire on the fortress; but it was soon evident that these guns made no effect. Moreover, a cannon ball from the fortress struck one of the two cannon and shattered it. The First Consul then ordered an assault by storm.

Columns formed in the village, and armed with ladders dashed up at a run and reached the fortress at several points; but to insure success, not only celerity, but silence was needed. It ought to have been a surprise; but Colonel Dufour, who commanded one column, ordered the advance to be sounded, and marched boldly to the assault. The column was repulsed, and the colonel received a ball through his body.

Then a company of picked marksmen were chosen. They were supplied with provisions and cartridges, and crept between the rocks until they reached a ledge, from which they commanded the fort. From this ledge they discovered another, not quite so high, but which also overlooked the fort. To this they contrived, with extreme difficulty, to hoist two guns, with which they formed a battery. These two pieces on one side, and the sharpshooters on the other, began to make the enemy uneasy.

In the meantime, General Marmont proposed a plan to the First Consul, so bold that the enemy could not suspect it. It was nothing less than to move the artillery along the highroad, notwithstanding that the enemy could rake it.

Manure and wool from the mattresses were found in the villages and were spread upon the road. The wheels and chains, and all the jingling portions of the gun-carriages were swathed in hay. The horses belonging to the guns and caissons were taken out, and fifty men supplied their places. This latter precaution had two advantages: first, the horses might neigh, while the men had every interest in keeping dead silence; secondly, a dead horse will stop a whole convoy, whereas a dead man, not being fastened to the traces, can be pushed aside and his place taken without even stopping the march. An officer and a subordinate officer of artillery were placed in charge of each carriage or caisson, with the promise of six hundred francs for the transport of each gun or wagon beyond the range of the fort.

General Marmont, who had proposed the plan, superintended the first operation himself. Happily, a storm prevailed and made the night extremely dark. The first six cannon and the first six caissons passed without a single shot from the fortress. The men returned, picking their steps silently, one after another, in single file; but this time the enemy must have heard some noise, and, wishing to knew the cause, threw hand-grenades. Fortunately, they fell beyond the road.

Why should these men, who had once passed, return? Merely to get their muskets and knapsacks. This might have been avoided had they been stowed on the caissons; but no one can think of everything, and, as it happened, no one in the fort at Bard had thought at all.

As soon as the possibility of the passage was demonstrated, the transport of the artillery became a duty like any other; only, now that the enemy were warned, it was more dangerous. The fort resembled a volcano with its belching flames and smoke; but, owing to the vertical direction in which it was forced to fire, it made more noise than it did harm. Five or six men were killed to each wagon; that is to say, a tenth of each fifty; but the cannon once safely past, the fate of the campaign was secure.

Later it was discovered that the pass of the Little Saint-Bernard would have been practicable, and that the whole artillery could have crossed it without dismounting a gun or losing a man. It is true, however, that the feat would have been less glorious because less difficult.

The army was now in the fertile plains of Piedmont. It was reinforced on the Ticino by a corps of twelve thousand men detached from the Army of the Rhine by Moreau, who, after the two victories he had just won, could afford to lend this contingent to the Army of Italy. He had sent them by the Saint-Gothard. Thus strengthened, the First Consul entered Milan without striking a blow.

By the bye, how came the First Consul, who, according to a provision of the constitution of the year VIII., could not assume command of the army, nor yet leave France, to be where he was? We shall now tell you.

The evening before the day on which he left Paris--that is to say, the 15th of May, or, according to the calendars of the time, the 15th Floreal--he had sent for the two other consuls and all the ministers, saying to Lucien: "Prepare a circular letter to the prefects to-morrow." Then he said to Fouché: "You will publish the circular in all the newspapers. You are to say that I have left for Dijon to inspect the Army of the Reserves. Add, but without affirming it positively, that I may go as far as Geneva. In any case, let it be well impressed on everyone that I shall not be absent more than a fortnight. If anything unusual happens I shall return like a thunderclap. I commend to your keeping all the great interests of France; and I hope you will soon hear of me by way of Vienna and London."

On the 6th he started. From that moment his strong determination was to make his way to the plains of Piedmont, and there to fight a decisive battle. Then, as he never doubted that he would conquer, he would answer, like Scipio, to those who accused him of violating the constitution: "On such a day, at such an hour, I fought the Carthagenians; let us go to the capitol, and render thanks to the gods."

Leaving France on the 6th of May, the First Consul was encamped with his whole army between Casale and Turin on the 26th of the same month. It had rained the whole day; but, as often happens in Italy, toward evening the sky had cleared, changing in a few moments from murky darkness to loveliest azure, and the stars came sparkling out.

The First Consul signed to Roland to follow him, and together they issued from the little town of Chivasso and walked along the banks of the river. About a hundred yards beyond the last house a tree, blown down by the wind, offered a seat to the pedestrians. Bonaparte sat down and signed to Roland to join him. He apparently had something to say, some confidence to make to his young aide-de-camp.

Both were silent for a time, and then Bonaparte said: "Roland, do you remember a conversation we had together at the Luxembourg?"

"General," said Roland, laughing, "we had a good many conversations together at the Luxembourg; in one of which you told me we were to cross into Italy in the spring, and fight General Mélas at Torre di Gallifolo or San-Guiliano. Does that still hold good?"

"Yes; but that is not the conversation I mean."

"What was it, general?"

"The day we talked of marriage."

"Ah, yes! My sister's marriage. That has probably taken place by this time, general."

"I don't mean your sister's marriage; I mean yours."

"Good!" said Roland, with a bitter smile. "I thought that had been disposed of, general." And he made a motion as if to rise. Bonaparte caught him by the arm.

"Do you know whom I meant you to marry at that time, Roland?" he said, with a gravity that showed he was determined to be heard.

"No, general."

"Well, my sister Caroline."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Does that astonish you?"

"I had no idea you had ever thought of doing me that honor."

"Either you are ungrateful, Roland, or you are saying what you do not mean. You know that I love you."

"Oh! my general!"

He took the First Consul's two hands and pressed them with the deepest gratitude.

"Yes, I should have liked you for my brother-in-law."

"Your sister and Murat love each other, general," said Roland. "It is much better that the plan should have gone no further. Besides," he added, in muffled tones, "I thought I told you that I did not care to marry."

Bonaparte smiled. "Why don't you say offhand that you intend becoming a Trappist father?"

"Faith, general, re-establish the cloisters and remove these opportunities for me to try to get myself killed, which, thank God! are not lacking, and you have guessed what my end will be."

"Are you in love? Is this the result of some woman's faithlessness?"

"Good!" said Roland, "so you think I am in love! That is the last straw!"

"Do you complain of my affection when I wished to marry you to my sister?"

"But the thing is impossible now! Your three sisters are all married--one to General Leduc, one to Prince Bacciocchi, and the third to Murat."

"In short," said Bonaparte, laughing, "you feel easy and settled in your mind. You think yourself rid of my alliance."

"Oh, general!" exclaimed Roland.

"You are not ambitious, it seems?"

"General, let me love you for all the good you have done to me, and not for what you seek to do."

"But suppose it is for my own interests that I seek to bind you to me, not by the ties of friendship alone, but also by those of matrimony. Suppose I say to you: In my plans for the future I cannot rely upon my two brothers, whereas I could never for one instant doubt you?"

"In heart, yes, you are right."

"In all respects! What can I do with Leclerc--a commonplace man; with Bacciocchi--who is not French; with Murat--lion-hearted and feather-brained? And yet some day I shall have to make princes of them because they are my sisters' husbands. When that time comes, what can I make of you?"

"A marshal of France."

"And afterward?"

"Afterward? I should say that was enough."

"And then you would be one of twelve, and not a unity of your own."

"Let me be simply your friend. Let me always thresh out the truth with you, and then I'll warrant I shall be out of the crowd."

"That may be enough for you, Roland, but it is not enough for me," persisted Bonaparte. Then, as Roland said nothing, he continued, "I have no more sisters, Roland, it is true; but I have dreamed that you might be something more to me than a brother." Then, as Roland still said nothing, he went on: "I know a young girl, Roland, a charming child, whom I love as a daughter. She is just seventeen. You are twenty-six, and a brigadier-general _de facto_.

Before the end of the campaign you will be general of division. Well, Roland, when the campaign is over, we will return together to Paris, and you shall marry her--"

"General," interrupted Roland, "I think I see Bourrienne looking for you."

And in fact the First Consul's secretary was already within two feet of the friends.

"Is that you, Bourrienne?" asked Bonaparte, somewhat impatiently.

"Yes, general, a courier from France."

"Ah!"

"And a letter from Madame Bonaparte."

"Good!" said the First Consul, rising eagerly, "give it to me." And he almost snatched the letter from Bourrienne's hand.

"And for me?" asked Roland. "Nothing for me?"

"Nothing."

"That is strange," said the young man, pensively.

The moon had risen, and by its clear, beautiful light Bonaparte was able to read his letters. Through the first two pages his face expressed perfect

serenity. Bonaparte adored his wife; the letters published by Queen Hortense bear witness to that fact. Roland watched these expressions of the soul on his general's face. But toward the close of the letter Bonaparte's face clouded; he frowned and cast a furtive glance at Roland.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young man, "it seems there is something about me in the letter."

Bonaparte did not answer and continued to read. When he had finished, he folded the letter and put it in the side pocket of his coat. Then, turning to Bourrienne, he said: "Very well, we will return. I shall probably have to despatch a courier. Go mend some pens while you are waiting for me."

Bourrienne bowed and returned to Chivasso.

Bonaparte then went up to Roland and laid his hand on his shoulder, saying: "I have no luck with the marriages I attempt to make."

"How so?" asked Roland.

"Your sister's marriage is off."

"Has she refused?"

"No; she has not."

"She has not? Can it be Sir John?"

"Yes."

"Refused to marry my sister after asking her of me, of my mother, of you, of herself?"

"Come, don't begin to get angry. Try to see that there is some mystery in all this."

"I don't see any mystery, I see an insult!"

"Ah! there you are, Roland. That explains why your mother and sister did not write to you. But Josephine thought the matter so serious that you ought to be informed. She writes me this news and asks me to tell you of it if I think best. You see I have not hesitated."

"I thank you sincerely, general. Does Lord Tanlay give any reason for this refusal?"

"A reason that is no reason."

"What is it?"

"It can't be the true one."

"But what is it?"

"It is only necessary to look at the man and to talk with him for five minutes to understand that."

"But, general, what reason does he give for breaking his word?"

"That your sister is not as rich as he thought she was."

Roland burst into that nervous laugh which was a sign with him of violent agitation.

"Ha!" said he, "that was the very first thing I told him."

"What did you tell him?"

"That my sister hadn't a penny. How can the children of republican generals be rich?"

"And what did he answer?"

"That he was rich enough for two."

"You see, therefore, that that was not the real reason for his refusal."

"And it is your opinion that one of your aides-de-camp can receive such an insult, and not demand satisfaction?"

"In such situations the person who feels affronted must judge of the matter for himself, my dear Roland."

"General, how many days do you think it will be before we have a decisive action?"

Bonaparte calculated.

"Not less than fifteen days, or three weeks," he answered.

"Then, general, I ask you for a furlough of fifteen days."

"On one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you will first go to Bourg and ask your sister from which side the refusal came."

"That is my intention."

"In that case you have not a moment to lose."

"You see I lose none," said the young man, already on his way to the village.

"One moment," said Bonaparte; "you will take my despatches to Paris, won't you?"

"Ah! I see; I am the courier you spoke of just now to Bourrienne."

"Precisely."

"Come then."

"Wait one moment. The young men you arrested--"

"The Companions of Jehu?"

"Yes. Well, it seems that they were all of noble families. They were fanatics rather than criminals. It appears that your mother has been made the victim of some judicial trick or other in testifying at their trial and has called their conviction."

"Possibly. My mother was in the coach stopped by them, as you know, and saw the face of their leader."

"Well, your mother implores me, through Josephine, to pardon those poor madmen--that is the very word she uses. They have appealed their case. You will get there before the appeal can be rejected, and, if you think it desirable, tell the minister of Justice for me to suspend matters. After you get back we can see what is best to be done."

"Thank you, general. Anything more?"

"No," said Bonaparte, "except to think over our conversation."

"What was it about?"

"Your marriage."