

LEIPZIG

(1813)

Scene: The Master-tradesmen's Parlour at the Old Ship Inn,
Casterbridge. Evening.

"Old Norbert with the flat blue cap--

A German said to be -

Why let your pipe die on your lap,

Your eyes blink absently?" -

- "Ah! . . . Well, I had thought till my cheek was wet

Of my mother--her voice and mien

When she used to sing and pirouette,

And touse the tambourine

"To the march that yon street-fiddler plies:

She told me 'twas the same

She'd heard from the trumpets, when the Allies

Her city overcame.

"My father was one of the German Hussars,

My mother of Leipzig; but he,

Long quartered here, fetched her at close of the wars,

And a Wessex lad reared me.

"And as I grew up, again and again
She'd tell, after trilling that air,
Of her youth, and the battles on Leipzig plain
And of all that was suffered there! . . .

"--'Twas a time of alarms. Three Chiefs-at-arms
Combined them to crush One,
And by numbers' might, for in equal fight
He stood the matched of none.

"Carl Schwarzenberg was of the plot,
And Blucher, prompt and prow,
And Jean the Crown-Prince Bernadotte:
Buonaparte was the foe.

"City and plain had felt his reign
From the North to the Middle Sea,
And he'd now sat down in the noble town
Of the King of Saxony.

"October's deep dew its wet gossamer threw
Upon Leipzig's lawns, leaf-strewn,
Where lately each fair avenue
Wrought shade for summer noon.

"To westward two dull rivers crept
Through miles of marsh and slough,
Whereover a streak of whiteness swept -
The Bridge of Lindenau.

"Hard by, in the City, the One, care-tossed,
Gloomed over his shrunken power;
And without the walls the hemming host
Waxed denser every hour.

"He had speech that night on the morrow's designs
With his chiefs by the bivouac fire,
While the belt of flames from the enemy's lines
Flared nigher him yet and nigher.

"Three sky-lights then from the girdling trine
Told, 'Ready!' As they rose
Their flashes seemed his Judgment-Sign
For bleeding Europe's woes.

"'Twas seen how the French watch-fires that night
Glowed still and steadily;
And the Three rejoiced, for they read in the sight
That the One disdained to flee . . .

"--Five hundred guns began the affray

On next day morn at nine;
Such mad and mangling cannon-play
Had never torn human line.

"Around the town three battles beat,
Contracting like a gin;
As nearer marched the million feet
Of columns closing in.

"The first battle nighed on the low Southern side;
The second by the Western way;
The nearing of the third on the North was heard:
--The French held all at bay.

"Against the first band did the Emperor stand;
Against the second stood Ney;
Marmont against the third gave the order-word:
--Thus raged it throughout the day.

"Fifty thousand sturdy souls on those trampled plains and knolls,
Who met the dawn hopefully,
And were lotted their shares in a quarrel not theirs,
Dropt then in their agony.

"'O,' the old folks said, 'ye Preachers stern!
O so-called Christian time!

When will men's swords to ploughshares turn?

When come the promised prime?' . . .

--The clash of horse and man which that day began,

Closed not as evening wore;

And the morrow's armies, rear and van,

Still mustered more and more.

"From the City towers the Confederate Powers

Were eyed in glittering lines,

And up from the vast a murmuring passed

As from a wood of pines.

""Tis well to cover a feeble skill

By numbers!' scoffed He;

'But give me a third of their strength, I'd fill

Half Hell with their soldiery!'

"All that day raged the war they waged,

And again dumb night held reign,

Save that ever upspread from the dark deathbed

A miles-wide pant of pain.

"Hard had striven brave Ney, the true Bertrand,

Victor, and Augereau,

Bold Poniatowski, and Lauriston,

To stay their overthrow;

"But, as in the dream of one sick to death

There comes a narrowing room

That pens him, body and limbs and breath,

To wait a hideous doom,

"So to Napoleon, in the hush

That held the town and towers

Through these dire nights, a creeping crush

Seemed inborne with the hours.

"One road to the rearward, and but one,

Did fitful Chance allow;

'Twas where the Pleiss' and Elster run -

The Bridge of Lindenau.

"The nineteenth dawned. Down street and Platz

The wasted French sank back,

Stretching long lines across the Flats

And on the bridge-way track;

"When there surged on the sky an earthen wave,

And stones, and men, as though

Some rebel churchyard crew updrave

Their sepulchres from below.

"To Heaven is blown Bridge Lindenau;
Wrecked regiments reel therefrom;
And rank and file in masses plough
The sullen Elster-Strom.

"A gulf was Lindenau; and dead
Were fifties, hundreds, tens;
And every current rippled red
With Marshal's blood and men's.

"The smart Macdonald swam therein,
And barely won the verge;
Bold Poniatowski plunged him in
Never to re-emerge.

"Then stayed the strife. The remnants wound
Their Rhineward way pell-mell;
And thus did Leipzig City sound
An Empire's passing bell;

"While in cavalcade, with band and blade,
Came Marshals, Princes, Kings;
And the town was theirs . . . Ay, as simple maid,
My mother saw these things!

"And whenever those notes in the street begin,
I recall her, and that far scene,
And her acting of how the Allies marched in,
And her touse of the tambourine!"