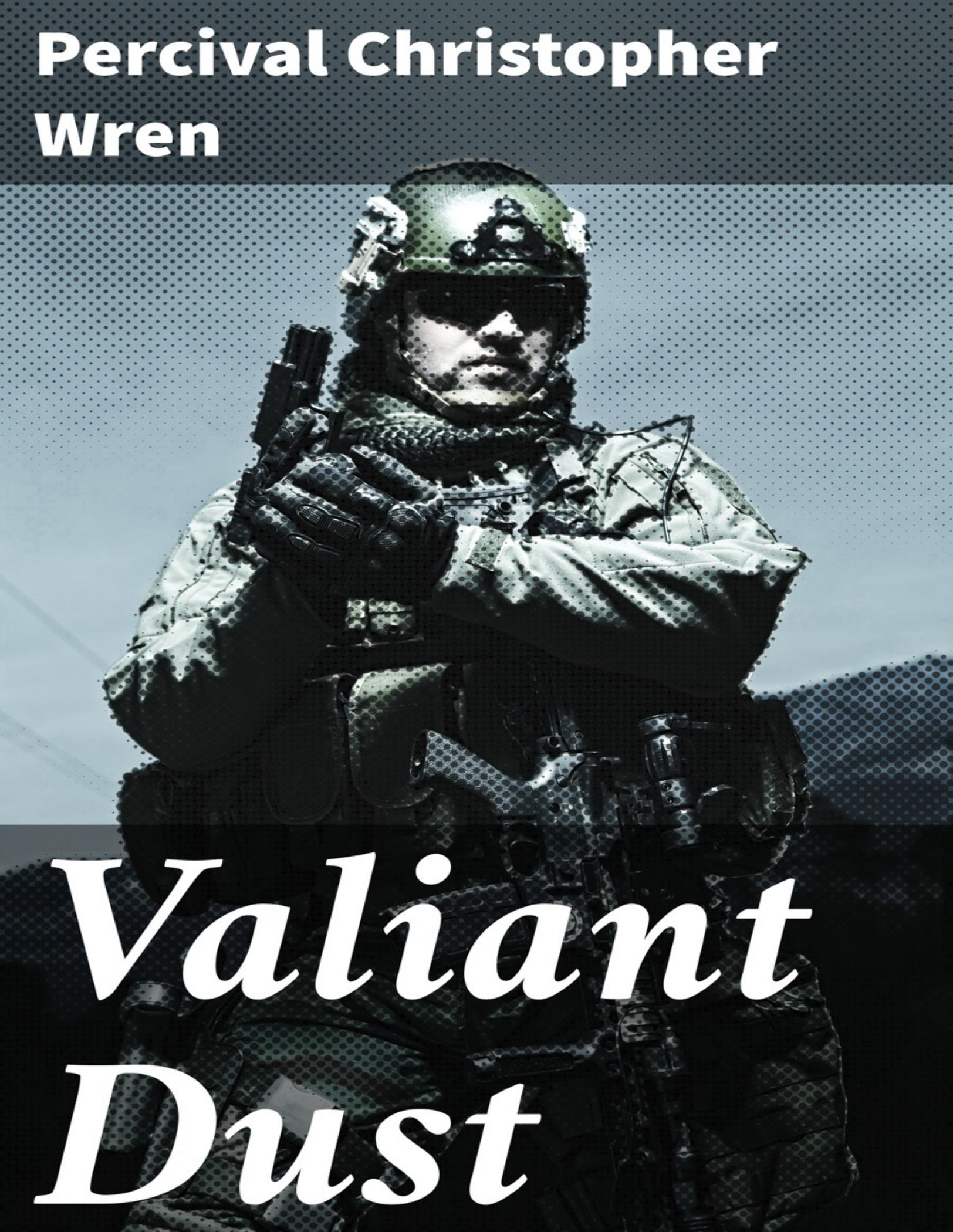


**Percival Christopher  
Wren**

A full-page photograph of a soldier in combat gear. The soldier is wearing a green helmet with a night vision device, goggles, and a tactical vest. He is holding a rifle and looking directly at the camera. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

*Valiant  
Dust*

**Percival Christopher Wren**

# **Valiant Dust**



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# PROLOGUE

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# PROLOGUE

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The news spread like wild-fire throughout Cantonments that big Lieutenant Le Sage, returning from furlough, had brought his notably beautiful, extremely fascinating, and provocatively charming and intelligent wife with him to Morocco.

The joy of the officers of the garrison of Mellerat was unconcealed; that of their wives, well concealed.

Within a month, the popular, brilliant, and successful Lieutenant Riccoli made no secret of the fact that he was head over ears in love with her.

Indeed, he boasted of it—loudly; and bade folk watch.

Folk did—and speculated in messes, clubs, and drawing-rooms, as to whether the gay spark Riccoli had taken the measure of the giant Lieutenant Le Sage as accurately as Lieutenant Le Sage had taken that of the accomplished Riccoli.

Most intriguing ...

## § 2

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The moon-drenched African night was very hot and very still, the air electric with presage of thunder; a brooding, bodeful night, disturbing and unsettling.

So, at any rate, Madame Le Sage appeared to find it, as she moved restlessly about the tiny pathetic drawing-room

of her little bougainvillea-covered bungalow, set amongst its dusty palms.

“Do sit down, darling ... Come and sit here,” begged Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli, patting the cushions of the divan on which he sprawled.

Madame Le Sage stepped out on to the verandah and looked forth into the night.

“Although the stars are so huge and near, and the moon so wonderful, I feel that we’re going to have a storm,” she said.

“I did not come here to-night ... to discuss the weather,” replied Riccoli.

“No?” said Madame Le Sage, turning and eyeing her guest steadily.

How extraordinarily handsome he was, this Corsican, in spite of his high narrow forehead, too large and limpid eyes, and girlish mouth. And how, too, terribly charming, in spite of his amazing conceit and self-satisfaction.

“No,” repeated Riccoli, “I did not ... Sit down here, and I’ll tell you why I came.”

Madame Le Sage, with a pretty and attractive grimace at her admirer, coquettishly disobeyed. Turning from the moonlit doorway, she came and stood erect before him, her hands behind her back.

“I think I’ll stand and hear it,” she laughed.

“Then I’ll stand—and tell it,” observed Riccoli, and rising to his feet, put his arms about her, and, as she threw back her head, whether in invitation or alarm, drew her to him and kissed her passionately on the lips.

“That’s what I came for,” he said unsteadily. “Now sit down by me, and I’ll give you further—reasons.”

Wiping her lips with a tiny lace handkerchief, Madame Le Sage obeyed.

“Before producing any more—er—reasons,” she said, “will you tell me why you think they should interest me?”

“Well,” drawled the ardent officer, placing his right arm about the waist of his hostess, “you are a clever woman as well as a lovely one, and I am the Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli.”

“And therefore what else could I do but fall in love with you?” laughed Madame Le Sage.

“Precisely, *mon ange*. What else should happen? I fancy I am worthy of you ... And you—are worthy of me ...”

“Of *Monsieur le Lieutenant* Napoleon Riccoli!” murmured the lady.

“Yes. Beautiful, witty, charming, clever ... You and I, Marie, are a pair ... Nay, we are one.”

“Have you given yourself the trouble to consider what might be my husband’s views on that?” asked Madame Le Sage.

“No, they do not interest me.”

“They might.”

“They don’t.”

“His views *might*, at some time, interest you, I think.”

“The views of Lieutenant Le Sage!” laughed Riccoli.

“Still, he is Lieutenant Le Sage, you know, and my husband.”

“But I am Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli, and your lover.”

“You are?”

“I am. I declare it here and now. And I am going to be something even more than that.”

“*Really?* More than ... ?”

“Yes. More than the good Le Sage ever even dreams of being. I am going to be a great soldier, a General, a Field-Marshal, a Conqueror ...”

Madame Le Sage opened wide eyes of admiring wonder—of wonder, at any rate.

“Yes, and more than a great soldier ... A great leader of men ... A great ruler ... A Dictator ... Is not this the day of such men? Look at Russia ... Look at Turkey ... Look at Spain ... Look at Italy ... Look at Poland ... Were not those Dictators once Lieutenants, and less than Lieutenants? Was not Mustapha Kemal Pasha once a Lieutenant? Was not Primo de Rivera once a Lieutenant? Was not Marshal Pilsudski once a Lieutenant? Was not Mussolini a Corporal? And what were Lenin and Trotski? Gutter-snipes ...”

“And you?” interrupted Madame Le Sage, at this, perhaps, unfortunate point.

“I? A Corsican,” was the portentous reply.

“Like the other Napoleon,” observed Madame.

“Like the other Napoleon,” agreed Riccoli.

“And, like him, a lieutenant ... Poor, obscure ambitious, but with a brain ... a brain ...”

“And a heart,” he added, turning to more immediate matters and Madame Le Sage. “I lay it at your feet, and the day will come when I will lay a kingdom there.”

“And meanwhile?” smiled Marie Le Sage.

“More reasons,” replied Riccoli, and, drawing her closely to him, he again kissed her smiling lips.

And again.

Indeed, clasping Madame Le Sage with all the ardour of his recently declared love, Lieutenant Riccoli pressed his lips so firmly upon hers that the impassioned kisses became one long kiss, the while Madame, both hands against his breast, thrust with all her strength, in her endeavour to free herself from his embrace.

“Why are you so cold? Why do you pretend that you wish to escape? Why do you struggle?” he asked with tender reproach, as he drew breath.

“Because my husband is standing staring at us,” replied Madame reasonably.

---

And indeed, Lieutenant Le Sage, tall, thick-set, powerful, hands on hips and arms akimbo, stood at the big unglazed window of the verandah and smiled pleasantly upon the pretty scene.

“Done?” he inquired conversationally.

Madame Le Sage did not scream, nor, rising dramatically to her feet, cast herself at those of her husband. Moving to the end of the divan she folded up her handkerchief neatly.

“I am at your service, Lieutenant Le Sage,” said Riccoli, as he rose and bowed with great dignity.

“You are,” agreed Le Sage.

“The choice of weapons shall be yours,” said Riccoli.

“Only one weapon,” replied his brother officer.

“Eh?”

“I’ll get my revolver.”

“Murder? You will kill your wife and me?”

“Oh, no.”

“Suicide? I am to commit ...” stammered Riccoli.

“Oh, no.”

“You, perhaps? You will commit ...” suggested the unhappy lover.

“Oh, no.”

Crossing to his bureau, Lieutenant Le Sage took his revolver and a packet of army cartridges from a drawer. Opening the paper packet, Le Sage took out a cartridge, broke open the breach of the revolver, and spun the chamber round.

“Empty,” he said, and, exhibiting the cartridge between finger and thumb, thrust it into one of the six compartments of the chamber.

Again he spun the chamber round and round, and then shut the revolver with a snap.

“One cartridge,” he observed, and with a courteous bow, presented the revolver, handle first, to Riccoli.

“*Suicide!*” cried that gentleman, and placed his hands behind his back. “No. A thousand times, no. I will not commit suicide for so little ... so little reason ...”

Madame coughed.

Lieutenant Le Sage placed the muzzle of the revolver against his own temple.

“*Ah!*” gasped Riccoli.

Madame covered her face.

Le Sage pulled the trigger.

A sharp click fell upon the silence of the room.

“Your turn,” said Le Sage, and again offered the pistol to Riccoli.

White-faced, the Corsican glared at his friend.

“Take it, man,” said the latter, with quiet patience.

“I will *not* commit suicide,” cried the Corsican at length.

“A chance or a certainty?” replied Le Sage. “Take your chance, or I will give you a certainty.”

Riccoli drew a deep breath through nostrils that quivered slightly, and extended his hand.

“I am protected,” he whispered, as he took the pistol. “I am a Man of Destiny.”

“Pull the trigger then, Man of Destiny,” said Le Sage quietly.

With a dramatic gesture, a flourish of the left hand, and eyes turned heavenward, Riccoli placed the muzzle of the pistol to his temple, closed his fine eyes, whispered:

“Nothing can hurt me!” clenched his teeth and, with visible effort, a shudder, and a grimace, pulled the trigger.

Again a sharp click broke the breathless silence.

Riccoli relaxed, sighed deeply, and, lowering the pistol, reversed it, and handed it to Le Sage.

“One each ...” breathed Riccoli. “A fair duel ... Honour is satisfied.”

And he smiled almost affectionately at his friend and brother-in-arms.

“Don’t you believe it, my son,” replied that gentleman, and promptly pointed the pistol at his own forehead.

Again Madame Le Sage buried her face in her hands as her husband pulled the trigger.

For the third time the hammer fell with a harmless click, and a look of mingled disappointment, wrath, and despair clouded the handsome countenance of Lieutenant Napoleon Riccoli.

With a cheerful smile, Le Sage offered him the pistol, while Madame sat erect and watched him with the deepest interest.

“No, no! Enough of this folly. This is sheer madness. I will not do it,” cried Riccoli, exhibiting the anger of fear. “I am not a dog ...”

“No,” agreed Le Sage. “Dogs are nice beasts.”

“... and I will not die the death of a dog,” continued Riccoli. “This is murder, I say.”

“It will be, if you don’t obey,” agreed Le Sage. “Take your chance, like a man, since you’re not a dog.”

“I protest. I will not be hectored by a great blustering bully such as you. It is a trap. Your wife invited ...”

“I’ll give you one minute,” interrupted Le Sage, glancing at his watch. “If at the end of that minute you have not taken your chance, I will shoot you—like a dog. Which will be an honour for you. Now ...”

Looking more like a trapped jackal than any kind of dog, Riccoli extended a slightly trembling hand, took the pistol, and held it to his head.

His face cleared, and he smiled.

“Fate has great things in store for me,” he said. “Not for nothing was I born, not only in Corsica, but, mark you, in Ajaccio itself! Not for nothing was I named Napoleon. Not for nothing did I, from childhood, daily haunt the house of my great prototype, that Greatest of all Great Men. Not for nothing have I ...”

“Speech!” interrupted Lieutenant Le Sage ... and, with an angry glare at that imperturbable man, Riccoli pulled the trigger.

For the fourth time a sharp click sounded through the little room, startling, by its mighty smallness, the ears of the three protagonists of this drama.

“You see?” Riccoli smiled palely. “I am protected ... I am a Man of Destiny.”

“So far, so good—or so bad,” observed Le Sage, and taking the pistol, turned it upon himself.

“Stop,” cried Riccoli. “I give you notice that, whether you pull that trigger or not, I myself will not do so again ... This is uncivilized ... This is barbarous ... Are we gentlemen or ...”

“Yes, are we gentlemen, Riccoli—both of us?” asked Le Sage.

“Of course we are. Let us behave as such. We have had the courage to fight two rounds of your terrible duel, and that is enough. As I said before, Honour is satisfied.”

“Yours, or mine?” inquired Le Sage.

“Honour is satisfied, I say, and if it is not, I will agree to fight yet a third duel with you. But it shall be the duel of civilized people ... of gentlemen ... of men of honour ... of soldiers ...”

“Swords, eh?”

“Yes, swords.”

“You are the champion swordsman of the Nineteenth Army Corps, one recollects,” observed Le Sage.

Riccoli bowed.

“Then I think we’ll go on with our present effort,” continued Le Sage. “In the circumstances, I think I’ll trust to chance rather than skill, eh?”

And putting the pistol to the side of his head, Le Sage pulled the trigger.

Again Madame Le Sage's lovely face was hidden by her beautiful hands.

For the fifth time the hammer clicked harmlessly.

"*Now, Man of Destiny,*" said Le Sage, and offered the pistol, handle foremost, to Riccoli.

That gentleman again placed his hands behind his back and violently shook his head.

"*I will not,*" he shouted. "Before you pulled that trigger I gave you fair warning that I would not."

"You will," contradicted Le Sage, "or I will pull it for you."

"*Murder,*" shouted Riccoli.

"As you please," replied Le Sage. "It's certainly suicide if it isn't murder, now that we've come down to number six."

"*Murder, I say,*" cried Riccoli again, and clutched his throat.

"Or suicide," agreed Le Sage.

"*Neither,*" cried Riccoli.

"But surely you couldn't walk away from here, and look yourself in the face again?" asked Le Sage. "What is life worth to a man who has lost self-respect, lost the respect of his brother officers, his Regiment, his Brigade, his Division, his Country, his Army, eh?"

"No one would ..." began Riccoli.

"Oh, yes, they will," interrupted Le Sage. "Everyone will. I shall tell every man I know, and my wife will tell every woman she knows ... You'll have to leave the Army, Riccoli, and change your name. You might enlist in the Foreign Legion, of course. A rotten Destiny."

He thrust the handle of the pistol against Riccoli's chest.

"Take it, man," he said, "and shoot yourself—like a man."

"I *won't*! ... I will fight you with swords. I will not commit suicide ... I, at my age ... I, Napoleon Riccoli ... I will *not*."

"You will. I pulled that trigger three times, and you're going to pull it three times."

Riccoli's hands fell to his sides.

"Very well," he said resignedly. "So be it. Have your own way."

And taking the pistol he added:

"Since you insist, I will pull that trigger a third time."

And swiftly raising the pistol, he pointed it full in the face of Lieutenant Le Sage, and pulled the trigger.

---

For the sixth time the hammer clicked harmlessly.

---

"Now, aren't you a dirty dog!" observed Le Sage, shaking his head sadly.

"Trickery!" cried Riccoli.

"Yes," agreed Le Sage.

"I saw you put that cartridge in," faltered the puzzled Corsican.

"You did," agreed Le Sage. "But you didn't see me take it out again," he added.

With parted lips Riccoli stared at the face of the big man towering above him.

"Slink off, Man of Destiny," said Le Sage, at length, breaking the tense silence and pointing to the open door with one huge hand, while the other rose, open, clutching and ominous, in the direction of Riccoli's neck.

In silence Riccoli departed with what dignity he might, and Lieutenant Le Sage turned to his wife.

“Thank you, my dear,” he said. “An unpleasant job, but useful and valuable. The Chief shall thank you himself.”

“Well, that settles the question of Riccoli,” observed Madame, moving her hands together, with the action of one who dusts her fingers.

“Absolutely,” agreed Le Sage. “I shall report that he failed utterly and completely; and that in spite of his perfect knowledge of Italian, Spanish, English and Arabic, his great histrionic ability, his splendid swordsmanship, and his extreme cleverness, he is wholly unfit for the Secret Service. No real nerve and far too—amorous.”

# **PART I**

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On in the snow—on in the snow—  
Blinded and numbed, the soldiers go.  
With footfall silenter than theirs  
Death dogs their steps: and, unawares,  
Strikes down his victims one by one.  
Pursuit is distanced; doom begun.  
Frost-bitten fingers, stiff with cold,  
Seem frozen to the gun they hold.  
The icicles hang on beard and hair;  
The breath like smoke goes out in the air;  
Till reason and thought begin to wane.  
And only the dull, blind sense of pain,  
And the instinct of Duty till Death, remain.  
On in the snow—on in the snow—  
The cruel, drifting, deadly snow—  
They march in silence, with muffled tread:  
Till one of them stumbles,—and drops behind, dead!  
And the others shudder, and glance around—  
For they hear, growing nearer, an ominous sound  
In the woods—the dismal howl  
Of the wolves that after them stealthily prowl.  
By open waste: by dreary wood:  
By rivers black and frozen flood—  
On in the snow—on in the snow—  
Ever, with thinning ranks, they go.  
*Clifford Harrison.*

# CHAPTER I

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“On in the snow—on in the snow—  
Blinded and numbed, the soldiers go.”

Major Napoleon Riccoli rode at their head, looking, according to his wont, as Napoleonic as possible. Thus, he reflected, must his great ancestor—well, no, perhaps not exactly ancestor—his great namesake, prototype, forerunner, exemplar, what you will, have looked on the Retreat from Moscow.

Not that this Napoleon was retreating, of course. *Au contraire*, advancing. Very much so. Advancing a good deal farther than some people proposed, expected or intended.

Ho, ho! Advancing indeed ... And with an independent command. An independent command at last; the chance for which this Man of Destiny had waited so long; worked and waited, plotted and schemed.

And actually on the very borders of Mekazzen!

Now the world should hear something; hear of a newer—and a greater—Napoleon.

A new Napoleon.

New worlds to conquer ...

A new Jerusalem.

Napoleon Buonaparte—a back number.

Napoleon Riccoli—a new Man of Destiny.

Emperor Napoleon Buonaparte—Emperor of France.

Emperor Napoleon Riccoli—Emperor of the Sahara.  
Emperor of Northern Africa.

Emperor of Africa. Emperor of Africa and France.  
Emperor of Africa and Europe.  
Emperor of the World!

---

And meanwhile it was extremely cold, and the future Emperor had no handkerchief.

---

At the heels of the weary and half-starved horse that had the honour to carry Major Napoleon Riccoli—a horse named Marengo after another famous charger—strode Major Napoleon Riccoli's humble relative, henchman, and fervent admirer, the excellent Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

Excellent indeed from the point of view of his superior officers, though the soldiers of his Section used other, many other, adjectives when describing Sergeant-Major Vittorelli.

In justice it must be admitted that soldiers rarely apply the term "excellent" to their Sergeant-Major, and it is probable that one so described would be a man of unusual and peculiar traits, if not virtues.

What his men knew of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was his harshness, brutality, love of fault-finding, merciless cruelty when provoked, his injustice; and, be it admitted, his ability, hardihood, and high courage.

What Major Napoleon Riccoli knew of Sergeant-Major Vittorelli was his absolute unswerving fidelity to, and burning faith in, Major Napoleon Riccoli. Where Riccoli led, Vittorelli would follow. What Riccoli ordered, Vittorelli would do.

---

“Thought you said this Africa was a ’ot country,” grumbled *le Légionnaire* William Bossum to his comrade Sailor Harris, marching on his right, near the head of the little column led by Major Napoleon Riccoli.

“So it is ’ot in the ’ot parts—and the ’ot times,” was the cold reply. “You’ll be grumblin’ because it’s too ’ot, soon.”

“Roll on, the ’ot,” observed *le Légionnaire* William Bossum, and, bent almost double against the bitter chill of the icy blast and beneath the weight of his snow-laden pack and sodden clothing, he breathed hard upon numbed fingers.

“*Cor!*” he said, in general comprehensive comment and condemnation.

“’Tain’t no worse for you than what it isn’t for nobody else, is it?” expostulated Sailor Harris.

“That don’t make it no better for me, do it?”

“Not ’arf it don’t. Course it do.”

“’Ow?”

“Well, don’t it make you feel no better to know ’ow bad I feel?”

“Ar,” agreed *le Légionnaire* William Bossum. “There’s somethink in that, as the monkey said when he sat on the bee-’ive.”

“Besides,” continued Sailor Harris, “ain’t you never ’ad it worse than this? Reefin’ sails in the middle of the night and a ’owlin’ blizzard abaft the beam, fit to blow you off the yard-arm; with the sail froze ’ard as wood and the ropes and spars an inch thick in ice? Eh? Ain’t you ever laid out along the bowsprit, twenty below zero, snowin’ thicker than this, foot-ropes under the sea ’arf the time, with a jib-sail broke

adrift, and flappin' over the knightheads—and you findin' yerself knocked off by a bloomin' great wave as the bowsprit dives down, and then 'angin' by one frozen 'and to the jackstay as it shoots up to the sky? 'Aven't you?"

"No. I 'aven't," replied William Bossum. "I bin in the Navy; a gentleman's life."

"*Ho!*" observed Sailor Harris and fell silent.

---

"Give us your *bundook*, William Bossum, you miserable flat-footed mouldy matlow," said *le Légionnaire* Joe Mummery, marching on complainant's left hand. "I haven't got no smelling-salts to offer you."

"I don't want no smellin'-salts, Joe, and I don't want no one to carry me gun. I could carry yours as well as mine, and yer pack too. I wasn't grumblin', was I? I only said it was cold, didn't I? So it is, ain't it? You don't expect me to *sing*, do yer?"

"Gord, no!" ejaculated Sailor Harris.

"All I wants," continued *le Légionnaire* William Bossum, "is a cosy, warm little pub, with red blinds and a blazin' fire and a nice good-'earted gal 'andin' you a drop o' somethink 'ot acrost the bar, and you lightin' up a pipe o' real tobaccer ... Down Gosport way! Ar!"

"Goin' strong, boy?" said *le Légionnaire* Joe Mummery to his left-hand man.

"Eh? What? 'Pon my word, I believe I was asleep," replied *le Légionnaire* Otho Bellême.

"Well, turn over and have another snooze, mate, and don't pinch all the clothes," said *le Légionnaire* Sailor Harris, and the four Englishmen laughed, causing a crapulous and

liverish old *légionnaire*, known as Tant de Soif, to growl that, by the Name of a Name, the sacred dogs of Englishmen grew madder every day.

On in the snow ...

Trudging on dead feet through snow and slush and mud and water; through little sudden mountain torrents; over boulders; up wet and slippery precipitous slopes; at times almost leaning against the howling biting wind; starving, ragged, with outworn, burst and sodden boots, the soldiers go ...

Nor are their sufferings lessened, their courage stiffened, by the knowledge that they are approaching barracks, a fort, an outpost, nor even a native village, for they have left civilization far behind, and are daily penetrating farther and farther into the mountains.

They know that when they halt they will lie down as they are; lie down on the wet ground beneath the pitiless rain, the stinging sleet, or the driving snow; unfed, unwarmed, unsheltered. It will be impossible to light fires, to cook food, to boil water, and make coffee.

However, *que voulez-vous? C'est la Légion! À la guerre comme à la guerre ...* They are soldiers, and take life—and death—as it comes. But a few days ago, men suffered sunstroke. To-night they suffer cold, exposure. Heat-stroke then; frost-bite now.

Some may die of ...

*Bang!*

What is that?

Automatically the little column staggers to a standstill. Major Napoleon Riccoli halts, wheels about, and rides back.

There is confusion in the ragged straggling ranks.

What is it?

An attack? ... When frozen, starving men can scarcely stand; when numbed, dead hands can scarcely feel the ice-coated rifle; can scarcely open stiff, ice-coated cartridge-cases?

What dirty dogs to attack when ...

No, only a single shot.

Only young Ramononez, it appears, has had enough.

Suddenly he has lurched from the ranks, placed the butt of his rifle upon the ground, its muzzle beneath his chin and, bending over, has pressed the trigger with his thumb.

The Legion shrugs its shoulders. *Chacun à son goût*. *Le Légionnaire* Ramononez will not suffer from the cold tonight.

"*Au contraire*, it may be of heat that he will complain," suggests old Tant de Soif, rubbing the end of his blue nose with the back of his shrivelled hand.

"It will be of heat that we shall all be complaining in a day or two, look you," observed old Tant de Soif's *copain*, another old man, veteran of Cochin-China, Madagascar, Senegal, and the Western Sahara in general.

"... Those of us who do not die of cold up here ... When we've crossed these mountains and get down into the valleys and the plains, we shall be in the hottest place in the world. I know, I who speak. I have soldiered there before. The Sultan of Mekazzen hunted us and hounded us and cut off stragglers, but it was the heat that killed us. Yes, had young Ramononez been a sensible Frenchman instead of an excitable Spaniard, he could have found plenty of warmth

without going to Hell for it ... Yes ... He could have died like a soldier at his post on active service, beloved of his officers, cherished by his non-commissioned officers, and admired by his comrades ... He could have had a military funeral, and a nice grave with a wooden cross and his name on it, decipherable for at least a year, and everybody quite pleased about it, including himself ...

“He should have consulted me before ...”

“Hold your tongue, my grandchild,” interrupted Tant de Soif. “You talk too much, like all young people.”

As the beard of “Père Poussin” was not quite so long, nor quite so light a grey as that of Tant de Soif, nor his years of service probably quite as many, it was the custom of Tant de Soif to treat his fellow *ancien* as a boy, indiscreet, rash and voluble, a person whose ignorance, inexperience and immaturity should keep him silent and respectful in the presence of his elders and betters, or rather of that elder and better soldier, Tant de Soif.

A garrulous old gentleman, especially when under the influence of alcohol—his normal condition—he suffered sorely, though not in silence, from Tant de Soif’s sense of duty, the duty of keeping his junior in his place, and in a sense of his unworthiness.

“Am I, then, a child that ...”

“Yes. In intellect,” interrupted Tant de Soif, “though your never still tongue runs in an unwise old head.”

Père Poussin fell silent.

It was hard, very hard, that he who had soldiered all over the world, been in twenty-three engagements, wounded seven times and thrice decorated, should not be allowed to

give, and give generously, of his garnered stores of wisdom, knowledge and experience ... Well, one of these days old Tant de Soif would die. No, old soldiers never die. He would be killed in battle, and then Père Poussin would be Father of the Battalion. But as he would indubitably himself die of grief within twenty-four hours of the death of his comrade, there was not much consolation in that.

There was, however, in neat rum—and once again he hitched his “water-bottle” forward.

“You drink too much, you know,” observed Tant de Soif. “Far too much.”

“What?” ejaculated Père Poussin.

“Too much. Too fast, and too often,” continued Tant de Soif. “The next thing will be that I shall find that your water-bottle is empty when I want a drink.”

“Oh, *pardon*. I understand,” replied Père Poussin. “Might one suggest that you husband the rum in your own bottle?”

“I have no rum in my bottle,” was the cold reply. “I have red wine. And when I have drunk that miserable pint or so of *pinard*, I shall be glad of some rum.”

“I will save you some, *mon vieux*.”

“Do so. Rum is bad for boys. It stunts their growth and fuddles their intellects.”

“If any,” he added.

---

“Christ! It’s cold!” cried a voice with a ring of protesting, shivering agony.

“For God’s sake let’s march—or lie down and die,” growled a big German.

A bigger Russian, bearded, bear-like, enormous, laughed.

“*Cold!*” he said. “I wish I had got you all back in Siberia with me, in the world-famous Preobrazhensky Regiment, of which I was once Regimental Sergeant-Major ...”

“*En avant! Marche!*”

And once more the little column staggers forward, Major Riccoli rides back to his place at its head, thrusts his right hand inside his *capôte* and broods Napoleonicly.

Napoleon the Fourth?

But why be Fourth to anybody? Why not Riccoli the First?

No, better keep to the name Napoleon; and many of the greatest Kings and Emperors had not been the First of their name.

Louis the Fourteenth ... Charles the Fifth ... Henry of Navarre, who became Henry the Fourth of France.

Or perhaps just Napoleon Riccoli, like Gustavus Adolphus, Ghengis Khan or Attila the Hun.

William the Conqueror... What about Riccoli the Conqueror?

Alexander the Great... What about Riccoli the Great?

But, after all, the world would choose for itself. These names are given, not chosen. Look at Pedro the Cruel; Philip the Beautiful; Louis the Good; Peter the Great. Obviously these men did not choose their names.

It would be for History to name him Napoleon the Fourth, Riccoli the Redeemer—or just plain simple Napoleon Riccoli like plain simple Julius Cæsar—greatness unadorned.

Meanwhile the first step. *C'est le premier pas qui coûte.*

The first step—the capture of the impregnable stronghold, perhaps in these days the last truly impregnable stronghold, the great citadel of Mekazzen.

If a barbarous uncivilized bandit like the Kaid of Mekazzen could defy and defeat a Great Power—not only a Great Power but a combination of Great Powers—what could not a highly trained, widely experienced, and brilliantly clever modern soldier do? And not only soldier, but diplomat, statesman, and born leader of men.

Why, suppose he embraced Islam and became a leader in Islam—organized, co-ordinated, and united, the greatest force in the world to-day?

Kaid of Mekazzen ... Sultan of Morocco ... Algeria ... Tunisia ... Tripoli ... Egypt ... Arabia ... Persia ... Afghanistan ... India ... half the world, for a start.

Might and power and glory.

Power ...

The things one could do to one's enemies!

That fellow Le Sage, rival and enemy, the only man who had ever made Napoleon Riccoli feel small and look ridiculous ... Le Sage and his empty revolver! ... A damned rascally trick to play on a gentleman.

What should Napoleon the Fourth do to Le Sage?

Something with a revolver—and show Le Sage that he was not the only one who could play tricks.

An idea! Offer a big reward and capture him, some time, when he was running about in one of his fool disguises playing at Secret Service mysteries. Capture him, put him in a cell, and go in with a revolver ... Give him the revolver and say,

“Look here, le Sage—that bright and clever duel-idea of yours, in which you ran no danger, because it was a rascally trick! We're going to fight that duel now, and fight it

properly, for there *is* a cartridge in the revolver, this time. I give you my word of honour there is. And as the brilliant idea was yours, you shall have the first turn.”

And, banking on his luck, the good Le Sage would grin and take the revolver, and put it to his thick head and pull the trigger.

And that would be the end of the good Le Sage, for there would be, as he told him, a cartridge in the revolver—and it would have five companions. In fact, the pistol would be fully loaded! Ha, ha, *ce bon* Le Sage. Such a clever man. Such a rising star in the Secret Service.

And his wife, the beautiful Madame Le Sage, also brilliantly clever, who helped him play his foul trick upon Napoleon Riccoli, the man who had honoured her by his notice. What of Madame Le Sage—after she had witnessed the beginning (and end!) of the second “duel” between her husband and Napoleon Riccoli?

One wondered if she were aware that there are still perfectly good slave-markets south of Morocco, where negroes and negresses are brought from the interior and bought and sold like other cattle—and where a white woman would be an interesting novelty.

Yes, that would do. That would dispose of the Le Sages.

And meanwhile how to dispose of oneself now for the night? The other Napoleon had a carriage in which to sleep....

## § 2

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A week later ...