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Exploits and Adventures of Brigadier Gerard

THE BOOK

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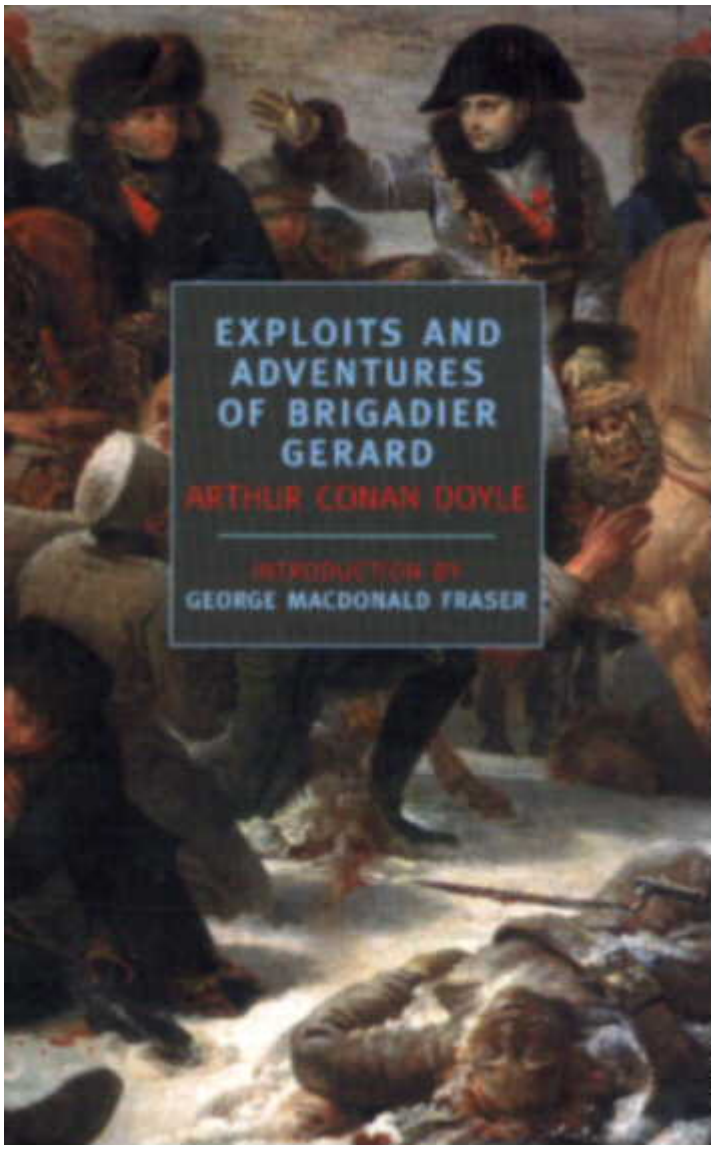
GOOD READ

Exploits and Adventures of Brigadier Gerard *by* Arthur Conan Doyle, paperback
New York Review of Books, 1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019, , : xi+417 Pages: Publication Date: May, 2001: ISBN 0-940322-73-0: Price $13.95



The mere appellation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle conjures the aquiline profile of the greatest detective of fiction, Sherlock Holmes. As the creator of the super sleuth-possibly the most famous character ever penned in literature, Sir Doyle needs no introduction to the readers in any parts of the world. Having completed his Sherlock Holmes omnibus of four novels and 56 stories, Sir Conan Doyle turned his attention to other kind of writings too, each one a jewel of English literature, thus proving his genius in all kinds of fiction genre. Among the very last of his writings, Conan Doyle brought to life the exploits and adventures of Brigadier Gerard, of the Hussars-the pride of Napoleon's Cavalry and the finest swordsman in the entire French army. It's difficult to contemplate that how was he inspired to create a character so singularly different from the rest of his works, but Conan Doyle had admitted on several occasions that though he would always be remembered for his Sherlock Holmes stories, he personally held a soft corner for the dashing Cavalry officer who never allowed any perils to stand between him and his duty towards the country and the emperor Napoleon. Collectively called the Napoleonic tales, all the adventure stories of the incomparable Brigadier is brought within one cover in the book under review. That it would delight Doyle aficionados and even the new initiates to the life of Brigadier Gerard is a foregone certainty, since everything said and done the Brigadier is immensely affable despite being profane and conceited to the point of absurd.

Brigadier Gerard is perhaps the most likeable and the most human characters of Conan Doyle whose mention is always accompanied by a smile. He epitomizes the inner quest of each one of us to excel in our chosen field, without being unduly humble or overtly vain about it. He has the rare trait of self-acknowledging ego that he is the best and nothing in the world can alter that opinion. In battlefield or love affairs, in matters of secret missions or feminine heart, the inimitable Cavalry Commander is equanimously gallant and accomplishes all missions with equal élan and his characteristic flamboyance that leaves everyone-friend or foe-gasping out of sheer admiration. The single most shade of Brigadier Gerard's larger than life character, which makes him so endearing, is that he is decidedly funny and is essentially a comic figure, even when he clicks his heels and draws himself up to his mere five foot seven frame, his moustache bristling in anticipation of the enemy, or twirling a delicate lady on the dance floor. Ironically it never crosses the simple Gerard's mind that despite whatever he does, he always stands out as a humorous figure, and those applauding his efforts might actually be looking for a comic relief and are not necessarily earnest in their praises. All his virtues cannot veil the fact that he is vain, sentimental, foolhardy, boastful, and a little less than a genius. This optimum amalgamation of self-lauded virtues along with human follies is what makes the life and adventures of Brigadier Gerard of the Hussars of Napoleon's army such an interesting and memorable saga for readers to pursue.

The Exploits and Adventures chronicle Gerard's career in the Napoleon's Grand Army from 1807, when he met the Emperor for the first time, to the Emperor's demise in 1821, through seventeen stories. Though the stories are set against the backdrop of grand wars and some of the most spectacular mass military campaigns in the history of mankind, Conan Doyle opted to depict his hero as a lone operator, involved in clandestine missions and reconnaissance, capturing renegades, operating deep into enemy territory in disguise, encountering gorgeous adventuresses, besieging mysterious fortresses, evading frightful and tortuous deaths, body guarding the Emperor, being imprisoned by none other than the Duke of Wellington in person, and escaping out of the infamous Dartmoor prison.

> *...Conan Doyle created Brigadier Gerard, possibly through the views of Anglo-Saxon humor that imagined a funny Frenchman as small, voluble, temperamental, attitudinal and also handsome beyond measure with upright bearings and the best of mannerisms with an effulgent charm to melt the heart of the vainest of women. The timeless character of Brigadier Gerard will remain forever and always memorable for his worship of honor, women, France, Napoleon-and Etienne Gerard...*

The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard contains eight of his swashbuckling adventures encompassing all kinds of missions that Napoleon trusted the Brigadier with. In the first exploit, the Brigadier and his comrade in arms, Major Charpentier of the Horse Grenadiers, are entrusted by the Emperor to accomplish a most secret mission of carrying a vital military document through some of the most enemy infested territories to the Napoleon's ally, the King of Spain. Aimed as a grand deception, the Brigadier inadvertently, with his sheer bravery, foils Napoleon's plan, though his companion falls in the enemy hand and accomplishes what the Emperor had actually planned, thereby receiving the coveted medal of honor. As to the Brigadier, he is immortalized by Napoleon as *If he has the thickest head he has also the stoutest heart in my army*. And capping it up by bestowing onto him the special Medal of Honor.

In the next two exploits we come across the ingenious way in which Lord of Wellington holds Gerard, then Colonel, prisoner in the Dartmoor prison and his subsequent daredevil escape from

the prison that ended into a comic situation when it is revealed that for the previous two days while Gerard had been fleeing the English pursuers, his own release orders had remained buried safely on his person. Impervious to such magnanimous follies, Brigadier Gerard joins the laughing English soldiers at the conclusion of the tale.

The succeeding stories tell the meteoric rise of young Gerard from a Lieutenant, to Captain and finally to a Brigadier of the Hussar, as he fulfilled missions after mission with panache and undying valor for the Emperor and his motherland. The final story speaks of the subterfuge that a German princess plays to win Gerard's valiant heart, and defeats his purpose for Napoleon. Although she is so enamored by Gerard that she confesses in the end and allows him to escape, pleading him to bear no ill will against her, as she was a patriot too for her country as Gerard was to France.

The nine stories contained in *The Adventures of Brigadier Gerard* continues to amaze us with heart-stopping tales of courage and acts of war that immortalized Brigadier Gerard for eternity. Two of the stories tell of the Brigadier's close encounters with the English Army and how he picked up some of the *Barbarian* nuances of life from them. The concluding tale recounts the final defeat and the uncertain fate of Napoleon, which has puzzled historians ever since. Brigadier Gerard too tapers off with a subtle ending without making the ending obvious, which in effect maintains the romance and the enigma that his life had come to depict. He salutes off with the haunting words: *I go to Gascony, but my words stay here in your memory, and long after Etienne Gerard is forgotten a heart may be warmed or a spirit braced by some faint echo of the words that he has spoken*. And what words they were-it is with a heavy heart that the reader realizes that the debonair Brigadier shall speak no more, and the old soldier has bid his final farewell.

The Appendix tells the story of his early days when Gerard was very briefly betrothed to a hauntingly beautiful lady of delicate upbringing. She was full of fire and spirit and had captured Gerard's imagination to no end. The otherwise reckless life of Gerard, as epitomized in the preceding stories belie the fact that the ever-bachelor could ever fall so hopelessly for a woman, though he was chivalrous to the point of distraction and often fell prey to feminine charm. Conan Doyle told this particular story elsewhere, and not necessarily as a part of the Napoleonic Tales.

Conan Doyle created Brigadier Gerard, possibly through the views of Anglo-Saxon humor that imagined a funny Frenchman as small, voluble, temperamental, attitudinal and also handsome beyond measure with upright bearings and the best of mannerisms with an effulgent charm to melt the heart of the vainest of women. The timeless character of Brigadier Gerard will remain forever and always memorable for his worship of honor, women, France, Napoleon-and Etienne Gerard.



-Satyabrata Dam
Satyabrata Dam is a leading crime fiction writer. His book "Eyewitness and other tales of detection" published by Minerva Press has been hailed as a landmark in Crime fiction.

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-Editor-in-Chief