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Leonie and the last Napoleon

by Tony Boullemier

Excerpts from the book

Excerpt 2

The way to stay alive against a lancer is to get inside the reach of the nine-foot ash shaft and its razor-sharp blade. Friant ducked under the pennant of a leading lieutenant and hefted his sabre with all his strength at the crouching figure in the saddle. As the soldier galloped past, it bit deeply into his side and he slid from his horse with a gurgling scream.

Friant was unbalanced and as he turned to face the next threat, he felt a searing pain in his left arm. A lance blade ripped into it, entering above the elbow and carving down to slice his forearm and hand horribly in two. With a last enraged effort, Friant swung his sabre again but caught his attacker no more than a glancing blow. The general, fell to his knees, clutching his arm. In a blurred rush, images flashed across his mind: his childhood in Normandy; his sister Coraline; the barricades; Paulette; the vineyard on the Alma; the Tuileries; the boulevards; Cora Pearl; Erotica; Paulette again . . . and then he passed out.

A lieutenant dashed to his side, took one horrified look at the arm, and ordered a trooper to drag him back to where the last desperate line of defence was forming. Then they turned to brace themselves for the crushing final charge.

But it never came. Instead, it was the Austrians' turn to smell the sour stench of fear for thundering down the slope towards them was the Emperor's heavy cavalry. They were cuirassiers of the Imperial Guard and Louis Napoleon had sent them to save Friant. They made a glorious and terrifying sight with their high helmets and long black plumes, their heavy horses churning up the turf and the sun glinting menacingly on steel breastplates as they bore down on the hapless Austrians.

Bugle calls urged the lancers to turn and reform but they were spread out over hundreds of paces and were still virtually stationary when the full force of the Guard ripped into them. A lancer standing still is almost helpless against heavy cavalry at full speed and the sabres of the big guardsmen wrought havoc. The Austrians turned and fled, their white uniforms soaked with their own blood. And as they ran, the wild cheers of the exhausted French infantry followed them through the smoke.