The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard

Arthur Conan Doyle · *1896 · original English text*

Etienne Gerard, an old hussar officer of Napoleon's army, tells his adventures to an admiring café audience in a small French town. He is vain, brave, and slightly absurd, and he cannot see the joke. Doyle's eight stories take Gerard from a haunted castle and a secret mission for the Emperor to Spanish guerrillas, Dartmoor prison, and the last days of the Empire, and each is a comic miniature of the Napoleonic wars.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How can a man be both a fool and a hero, and what does it say about an age that its legend is told by someone like that?

Gerard's boasts make him a comic figure, and his courage and loyalty are real. The reader laughs at him and also cheers for him. Under the humor is a warm view of the old soldier's devotion to France and the Emperor, and an awareness that the glory is gone. The stories give a tour of the Napoleonic wars through the eyes of a man who sees himself in every picture.

KEY CHARACTERS

Etienne Gerard
A hussar officer, vain, brave, and loyal.

Napoleon
The Emperor, who appears in several stories.

Masséna
A one-eyed marshal who commands in the Peninsula.

Macdonald
The Duke of Tarentum, a grim marshal.

Duroc
A young officer who asks Gerard to join a mission to a castle.

the café audience
The listeners to whom the old man tells his tales.

Grades 7–12
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01
The Castle of Gloom
STORY 1

Gerard opens by claiming the café's respect. A young officer, Duroc, asks him to ride to a castle on a mission whose purpose he will not at first explain.

- The old brigadier is half asleep until a memory of the Emperor wakes him.
- The castle is a gothic setting for a comic hero.
- The story ends two years later, after Wagram, with a surprise of names and titles.

02
A Secret for the Emperor
STORY 2

At the time of the Treaty of Tilsit, Gerard is a lieutenant of the 10th Hussars with no money. The Emperor gives him a secret errand, and he promises never to speak of it.

- Gerard's reputation as a swordsman is already well known.
- The brothers of Ajaccio are the danger in the middle of the story.
- Even Talleyrand cannot get a word out of him.

03
In Spain, a Prisoner
STORY 3

Wounded in Spain, Gerard longs to rejoin his regiment, which is facing the English. He is taken by guerrillas, whose chief writes verses, and he plays cards for his freedom.

- His love for his regiment is as great as his vanity.
- The guerrilla chief is a poet, and his verse is part of the joke.
- The card game ends with a pun on the king in his hand.

04
Dartmoor
STORY 4

Gerard is shipped to England and held in the prison at Dartmoor, since he will not give his parole. He plans an escape with a tall comrade and meets with reverses.

- The French prisoners call the prison 'L'hôtel Français, et Pension.'
- His two reasons for refusing parole are part of his character.
- Courage and his mother's thought sustain him when the plan goes wrong.

05
Marshal Millefleurs
STORY 5

Back in Spain, Colonel Gerard of the Third Hussars is sent against a rival who styles himself a marshal. Masséna, one-eyed and sharp, sets the mission.

- The Torres Vedras lines have stopped the campaign.
- Gerard says his wounds never heal because he is always getting new ones.
- The adversary parts with a mock-courteous offer of a commission.

06
Kingdoms and Medals
STORIES 6–7

After the snows of 1812, Gerard shelters a German woman in a palace and hears a soldier-poet sing. Another story takes him before Napoleon and Macdonald, where the Emperor awards him a medal.

- He will not tell of the retreat from Moscow.
- The German woman's plea touches his sense of chivalry.
- Napoleon is shown at his map of the Meuse valley, speaking of Berlin.

07
The Devil and the Forest
STORY 8

In spring, Gerard tells his last story, from the end of the Empire after Fère-Champenoise. A new and intimate commission from the Emperor tests his loyalty.

- He is on half-pay of a hundred francs a month.
- Despienne and his comrades agree to meet at a milestone on the Paris road.
- The end is a note of loss for the vanished age.

Vanity and Courage | War | Loyalty | Memory

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 7–12

1. Gerard is the narrator. Notice where his version of events does not match what the reader sees.
2. Each story is a short, complete tale. Ask how Doyle ends each one.
3. The humor depends on Gerard's earnestness. See how Doyle keeps from mocking his courage.
4. Look for places where the old soldier's grief shows through the boasting.

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