

# **COME WHAT WILL**

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The rain and mud were everything. My uniform was indistinguishable from the earth and grass; my face, hand and musket indistinguishable from my uniform; my comrades indistinguishable from me. Under a dark sky and pelting rain we stumbled through the mud and brush along the road from Ligny to Liege.

A fierce battle had erupted yesterday near Ligny. The Emperor Napoleon had directed his troops against our Prussian Army. Of course, my Rhinelander mates and I had rarely spoken to a Prussian and could barely understand their dialect. We had been conscripted into Field Marshal Blucher's Prussian Army almost immediately after having escaped from our forced French Army service. Napoleon's defeats in 1812 had allowed foreign conscripts, such as ourselves, to melt away. But now, forced into Prussian service, I was facing the French on a battlefield south of the city of Brussels.

The artillery belched fire and smoke. Shells were flying high into the sky and then down. We stood as ordered, waiting. At first, standing in an artillery barrage it is all thunder, howling and crashing. The shells just keep coming. We were trained to stand still, seemingly indifferent to the slaughter. However, a metallic bile rises in the throat as panic grips the soul. Time expands and the body tenses, waiting for the impact. It becomes very warm inside one's clothes. After a while the earth, the sky, the very air take on a rust-colored tint and the sound diminishes. One can almost see individual cannon firing and the arching shot. The impacts are now more like a blossoming than a

blinding flash. One can actually see the earth absorbing the shock, the flying dirt, equipment and body parts. Instead of thunder, now the sound is more like gurgling water. Each moment lengthens and I can hear my own breathing. Afterwards the exhaustion is such it feels like days have passed.

As the smoke cleared I recognized the various kits of the French battalions as they maneuvered into position before us. I had acquaintances in those uniforms. I recognized their songs and cheers as they swung to the attack formation. I felt their excitement and energy; it was as contagious now as when I had worn the tricolor. We removed bodies and debris so we could reform our lines and bring up men to replace the dead and wounded. I could see that some of my comrades had not stood through an artillery barrage before. Eyes and bowels were equally watery. Tremors in the hands made them clumsy.

Suddenly the French covering cannon resumed firing and holes again appeared in our ranks. The French skirmishers' muskets spattered our line. As we scrambled to fill the gaps, I could hear the music and cheers of my former comrades as they charged through the smoke and fire, bayonets fixed. I knelt, a single shot ready, my bayonet fixed. Out of the craters and smoke they came, incredibly grinning and shouting as they ran, fired and fell. I fired and turned to reload as my mates stepped up to fire into the charging mass. I was buffeted by falling bodies and deafened by the roar of battle. My powder was knocked from my hand and lost.

Somehow we Rhinelanders were retreating to another line. A timely cavalry charge had checked the French and saved us. I do not know what happened over the next hours. All was a swirl of noise and confusion. Near sundown, when we were collapsing with exhaustion, Napoleon sent the Imperial Guard into the center of our line. They crashed into us, killing and maiming. Only the arrival of darkness saved us from further suffering. As it was, we heard the French loudly celebrating their annihilation of the Prussians that day.

We were told later that we had managed a tactical retreat, grudgingly falling back under the relentless assault of the French until mutual exhaustion and darkness resulted in disengagement. Blucher's staff directed the retreat from Ligny, to regroup the army and form the left pincer of the Allied Army. The right pincer was to be directed by the English general, Wellington, from his base near Waterloo. It poured rain. At first, we were merely seeking firmer ground on which to stand, ground not blasted and trampled into deep, sucking mud. There were seven or eight thousand of us Rhinelanders, who had been pressed into Prussian service. In the beginning, we appeared to be marching parallel to the Prussians. But gradually we veered further east toward Liege. After all, the Prussian communications and supply lines went through Liege; it was natural to fall back to supplies along a known route. I don't know if we were consciously separating from the army, but at some point we all knew the main Prussian Army was moving north, and we Rhinelanders were walking east and looking over our shoulders, fearing to be noticed and ordered back. We endured a wet night in the open.

As the light came up my mood lifted as I realized that we were leaving the battles and headed home. Mid-morning the rain stopped. The puffs of cannon smoke on the horizon grew smaller. The sounds of armies grew fainter as we walked. If I just kept walking into the rising sun I would reach the Rhine. I could then follow its west bank toward the river Mosel, to my home in the Eifel.

Late in the day, battle trumpets blared far behind us and the dull, pounding roar of many horses could be faintly heard. The trumpets became more urgent as they came closer and the thunder of hundreds of galloping horses seemed to control my breath and heartbeat. Fear filled my throat. Our shambling march away from battle and towards home turned to a stumbling run; packs and muskets dropped to the ground as we Rhinelanders fanned out, running for our lives. It was a large body of French cavalry running us down. Did they know that we were leaving the battle; slinking off home, hoping for a day or two before our Prussian masters noticed our leaving? Would we be slaughtered? Or, forced back into French service?

I don't know about the others, but a few near me and I threw ourselves into a thickly overgrown depression in the earth. Fellow Rhinelanders and French all passed by in a confusion of shouts, screams, and pounding horses. We lay as quietly as possible under the brush for many hours. I thought of home.

My name is Hans Frank and my family has lived in the Eifel district of the Rhineland for as long as any man can know. Mine had been a happy childhood in a prosperous family.

In time I owned the family farm with my wife, Ursula. We were children when I first met Ursula. She was so lively and certain about everything that it was both attractive and frightening at the same time. She was not like the other girls who were quiet, reluctant to express opinions or ideas. Ursula would say anything; funny, provocative, smart, silly things all came tumbling out. Some people did not like this about her. It seemed like we were destined to be together from the beginning. Our parents desired the match, and Ursula seemed to have decided on the match while we were still children. As we matured, the physical attraction became powerful. Ursula was not afraid of removing her clothing and exploring all the possibilities of a man and a woman. She was assertive in her nakedness and greedy for every drop of pleasure. Her face a mask of fierce concentration, her body seemed to act entirely on its own with surprising strength and passion. I found this intoxicating. The fierceness of her passion increased my own. I had never experienced anything like this before and I would not give it up for anything. So, I married her. We had our son, Bernard. We worked hard, but life was good. What had happened to the wife and baby boy I had left so long ago? Were they safe? What had happened to the village?

It was growing dark when we emerged from our hiding place and continued in the direction of the Rhine. Over the next few days we came upon other Rhinelanders, singly and in small groups, all headed home. As we walked we talked, as men do, to pass the time. It was going to be a long walk, we might need each other's help and we may have to fight again before the end; it was better to know one's companions.

I only listened at first. I hardly knew what to think, let alone speak. The last thirteen years of my life could have been another man's life, or perhaps a bad dream. In 1802, I had been twenty-five, my wife nineteen and our son three years old. I was established on our family farm with a field hand and a housemaid to help Ursula. We required the help to produce enough grain, cheese and flax for sale to pay off the debt incurred for me to take the farm intact. It was long days of hard work and close figuring to manage, but we were so pleased to have our own home and land that we were content and could see a secure future for ourselves, and several more children.

Then the wars came to the Eifel. Our lands had seen many wars. Several generations earlier the French King Louis XIV had sent his armies to ravish the land and destroy what they could not carry off. Before that, our lands had been fought over and occupied for thirty years by either Protestant armies or the Catholic forces of the Emperor. So, we Rhinelanders had known invasion and destruction for many generations. Now, a revolution in Paris had overturned the old order entirely. The King and Queen of France beheaded, priests and bishops slaughtered or fled, the nobility fleeing France or turning their coats inside out to take a leading part in the new order. We heard about all these things in the years after the great uprising in Paris. We saw the French clerics and nobles streaming into our lands seeking a place to perch. They were followed by the Citizen Armies of the new Republic of France. The Republic was at war with every monarchy in Europe.

As our Eifel is situated near the French border, we were among the first to be liberated by

the Republican armies. Our lords and bishops were defeated or fled and we were told to organize ourselves in the new French manner, but we did not know how. Then Napoleon took control. We did not know much of the story, but he had a tremendous reputation: never defeated, perhaps impossible to defeat. In 1802 he declared our part of the Rhineland to be part of France. He appointed officials to run things and collect taxes. We were stripped of everything movable, but we had our land. It was those above us who lost everything or disappeared.

I only hoped that the turmoil might end. After years of contending armies, war taxes and uncertainty, I just wanted it to end so that we could rebuild our lives to what they had been. Then, I was taken into the army of France. Now our Eifel was French, and all France was mobilized. All men past childhood and before old age had to serve in the army. All youths, elders and women had to work to produce the food, munitions and supplies for the army that was to defend France and spread Republican ideas. I was taken, clothed and armed, trained and drilled. Then we marched away in the service of France. For ten years, I marched Europe east-west and north-south. No foot soldier has a good life. But being with a winning army is much better than marching in a losing army. In the years I was with them, France's Armies of the Republic almost always won. While our casualties were usually very near the levels of the losing side, those of us that survived the battles were better supplied and better treated by our officers.

While I had not seen my home or family in all those years, I considered my military life temporary only, certainly not the life I hoped to have. During those years on the march, in



the long nights, I told myself that this was not my actual life. My life was in the Eifel with my wife and son. I imagined myself home, working my fields, loving my wife, holding my son. I imagined talking with Ursula, telling her how difficult this journey was, how lonely, how terrifying. In my mind she held me, soothed me and thanked me for being so brave and surviving. I imagined telling my small son colorful and amusing stories about the details of camp life and military absurdities. My son and I laughed together. It was those thoughts and daydreams that kept me alive, gave me hope and respite from the reality of the wars.

We walked for many days, sleeping in the open and always on the lookout for food. Many men's stories were much like my own: pressed into one army, then another. We had done what was necessary to survive, ants scurrying among horses' hooves, now looking for a way home. My service with the French had ended informally. After years of victory upon victory, the Emperor Napoleon overreached. He raised the largest army ever seen and marched east to Russia. Praise God, my mates and I were left to garrison a fortress in the area where Polish, Prussian and Lithuanian lands met. We felt alone and isolated in our windswept, cold quarters; but, when we heard what befell the mighty army that marched to Moscow, we felt less cold and damp. Then the retreating troops began to appear. All order and discipline gone, all pride stripped, they were more like a horde of beggars. Of course, there was nothing we could do: their needs were too great, our supplies too small. More importantly, our officers feared that any contact would spread the disease of defeat and fear. We were forbidden to open the gates. Before long we could not think why we Rhinelanders should be holding a fortress on a forlorn, God forsaken

plain among Poles, Prussians and Lithuanians. Even our officers began to doubt our purpose. Soon, we too were walking west. I allowed myself to hope. While faced with a long journey through hostile lands, I was headed home. I could almost smell the grass and trees of the Eifel as I walked. Soon I would be together with my wife and son on my land.

After several miserable weeks, trudging through spoiled, chaotic country, we were intercepted by Prussian units. While we spoke German and swore we hated the French, we were in French uniforms. Many of us were Catholic, like the French, rather than followers of Luther, like the Prussians. In the end we persuaded them that we had been conquered by the French and been forced to comply with orders. To prove ourselves, they demanded that we join the Prussian King's service on the spot. With minor modifications of our kit, we were sworn in as a Rhinelander company in the Prussian Army. Thus, we were assured our lives, at least until the next battle.

And so, in 1815, I was marching with the Prussians under Marshal Blucher against France, against my former comrades. We marched to the Low Countries, right past my homeland. We were not allowed to stop. Napoleon planned to separate the English and Prussian armies then in Belgium and defeat them one after the other. He had us right where he wanted us, and he thought he had decisively defeated the Prussian Army at Ligny. So had my fellow Rhinelanders and I, as we sidled off towards the Rhine after the battle.

As we walked to the east, away from the battle, men talked and I listened. We were all from the Rhineland. I am from Langenfeld. There were men from other villages in the Eifel, all speaking the same dialect as me. Now we were walking home. We reached the Rhine and turned south, following the left bank. Soon we reached the place where the Mosel joins the Rhine. We could see Koblenz across the Mosel where the two rivers meet. I knew I was close to home and could find my way. Our traveling group continued to fragment as men went their separate ways to their home villages.

I entered Langenfeld as though in a dream. My eyes looked for details that matched my memories of my earlier life. Trees, hills, buildings I remembered, faces I almost remembered. Some approached tentatively, spoke my name, not sure if it was actually me returning. I had been thirteen years soldiering, now there were no French soldiers or officials in the village; they had run off with the Emperor's Russian defeat. I strode down the lane, past familiar fields towards my cottage. I saw a young man in the field. Could that be my little Bernard grown tall and broad? He looked at me warily from across the field. My feet broke into a run of their own accord. I shouted. Ursula stepped out of the cottage door. She put her hand to her mouth, then looked to the young man in the field. Ursula patted her hair and removed her apron as I ran to her. I swept her into my arms and kissed her lips, eyes, ears and hair. I held her tightly, scarcely believing that I had survived the years and now held my love again. I melted into the warmth. Now my mind could rest, not be terrified. I knew what was to come each day: my fields, my stock, my family; the peaceful monotony of my old life. I would work hard each day, but it was work I knew and it was for my family and me. I would sleep deeply each night, fatigued

in body but refreshed in my soul. I was home.

Ursula squirmed out of my arms. “So, you’ve come back” she said, sounding as though she had lost a bet. I followed her into the cottage. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dim interior. The two rooms were the same, but most of the furnishings were unfamiliar. Only the bed frame was the same. Crouched in the corner was a young girl, four or five perhaps, surely too young to be a servant. Who was she?

“Ah, Bernard is here,” Ursula said as she fussed over the tall young man from the field, now standing in the doorway. He shrugged her off. “This is your father”, she said. I thought I could see my little Bernard in his eyes, but the rest of his face was unfamiliar. My little slip of a child was now a tall young man with a shadow on his chin. The shrugging and tilt of his head, though, were just as my little boy used to do. My heart swelled and I wished to hug him, but he would not look at me and held back by the door. Perhaps he is shy. It has been so long. I greeted my son and asked how he had been. Bernard raised his eyes, regarded me silently, then left the cottage.

Ursula began to speak about little Bernard’s grief when I had left with the army. Soon she was talking about other things. She mentioned in the course of rattling on that she had told our little boy that I was dead. I stopped her. “Why did you tell him I was dead?” Ursula replied: “Really, Hans, you are being ridiculous. You were in the wars. Everybody knows that men do not return from conscription. You fight until you are killed. The longer you live, the longer your service. When you were taken, that was the end. I was not alone in this. The other girls thought the same. When you were taken by

the French, it was the same as a funeral. I had to look out for me and mine.”

I was disappointed and sad to learn that my wife and son had not kept me in their thoughts. “Ursula, I lived each day with one thought: to return home to my wife and boy. I marched, stood before cannon, assaulted cities, was wounded. I survived all of this by praying for God’s protection and aid in returning to my wife and son. I thought that we two were praying for the same thing.”

“Well,” she said, “I am glad those thoughts kept you alive and so on, but life was different here. When you were taken into the army we were left without men, cattle or food. We women and children were on our own. It was all very well for you in the army. They gave you clothes and food. We had nothing.” I told her: “My darling, I did not wish to leave you. I was forced to go.”

Ursula glared at me. “Well, I was forced too. I had no choice in the matter.”

I was taken aback by her vehemence. Her eyes shifted to the little girl. “This is our daughter.” My face showed my surprise. “Johanna is a child of this house,” she said. “She is five years old.” I sought to question Ursula but she stopped me. “Hans, she is a child of this house, your child if you live here. I told you before; I had no choice either.”

I left the cottage and walked. I could not think about it. As I wandered I saw land that I remembered as cultivated now overgrown. Formerly tidy terraces on the hillside were gone, small trees and brambles overrunning generations of hard work. Well-marked

fields and pasture boundaries blurred; land and buildings abandoned. How could I have been so wrong about everything? As I sit here now, I can see what happened and even why. But at that moment, all I could think about was running.

In the end, I stayed. She was still my wife; he was still my son. I still could hope that in time we would be a happy, loving family. And, the reality was that all the Rhineland was degraded and many families were shattered. There was nowhere else to go. At least in Langenfeld I was on my family land.

However, ours was not a happy home. Ursula was defensive and took everything I said in the wrong way. Her assertion of necessity to explain her infidelity made some sense, but did not explain her attitude toward me. She showed no love or affection towards me. At best, she was indifferent; any relations with me felt impersonal. It was clear that my efforts to reconnect with her, to establish an intimacy of feelings were not welcome. Perhaps her experience had driven all feelings from her. Perhaps she had never loved me. Had I loved her? We had been so young, pre-occupied with making a success of the farm. How was it between us, so long ago? I do not know anymore. Perhaps it was all just passion.

Bernard was very angry with me and only spoke to me when absolutely necessary. I know that he had felt I had abandoned him when I was forced into the French Army. In his child's mind, I had the power to protect him; I was not merely a man like other men. At his age he could not have known that I had no choice. He just knew that I had left him

and did not return to rescue him, despite his prayers. It was very difficult being such a disappointment to my son. My experience of the last 13 years was so different from his experience and he was not interested in hearing my story. He only knew what he had experienced and the pain he had felt all those years. He refused all my attempts to make amends to him.

Ursula was very defensive toward Bernard, with good reason. Bernard was surly and showed his contempt for his mother in many ways. His boyhood had been lonely and confused. He had felt betrayed by both his parents and Johanna's presence provoked his still burning humiliation and anger.

Ursula's distance from Johanna was more puzzling. Johanna was a delightful girl; beautiful and sweet. Even I could see that. But, Ursula seemed to view her as a badge of dishonor. Either she ignored or was dismissive of her daughter. Perhaps she sought to sacrifice her relationship with Johanna to mollify Bernard, or perhaps to mollify me. But if so, why did she keep so distant from Bernard and me? Ursula was distant from all of us.

It seemed the only happy person in the cottage was little Johanna. She was a sweet bundle of energy. She was always talking: to people, to her dolls, to animals and to no one at all. Her voice was light and cheerful, like the music of birds. Her voice gave me peace and made me happy, even when I did not understand the words. Her hair was thick and wavy, but light as air. Her face and limbs were round and as sweet looking as

marzipan. She was delighted with my arrival each evening. She ran to me, greeted me and wanted a hug. Even when I tried to ignore her, she was not deterred. She was always bright, happy and loving. Gradually, I stopped pushing her away. I began to return her greetings, and then her hugs. She called me "papa." I could not resist, could not correct her. My heart opened to her. All my tenderness and love poured out and she took it all happily. She was starved for affection and I was longing to give it. I was starved for love and she was overflowing with love. I called her "Jo". In the evenings she walked with me. Jo told me about her day and was eager to hear me tell stories about my life. She was full of questions and listened to my rambling answers. We became very close. I came to love Jo and cherish our time together.

Not too long after my return to Langenfeld I learned through others in the village that I no longer owned my family's farm. During the French occupation, Ursula had become close to various French officials and soldiers. One, possibly Jo's father, had even lived in our cottage. Using these connections, Ursula had arranged to have my family land transferred to her and her children. I was considered dead and gone. I was very upset about this; another thrust through the heart by Ursula. My family had lived on this land from ancient days. How dare she steal it behind my back? Once again, rather than wait for me and protect what we had together, at the first opportunity she put me out of her mind and looked to her own comfort and security. My anger and frustration made me physically ill. How was I ever to have a harmonious life with Ursula? I began to feel hopeless about my relationship with her. I suspected that the future held revelations of still more betrayals.



With the French now gone I could have tried to get my land back, but I did not try. After Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo, our district was awarded to Prussia. Again we were taxed to the extreme to pay for our liberation. It was excruciating to choke down the anger and humiliation of losing my family land. Worse was Ursula knowing that I was unable to do anything to right the wrong; but, given my manner of leaving the Prussian Army, it would have been folly to draw attention to myself with a court case. I had to live with this demeaning situation; and, Bernard had another reason to despise me.

So, the seasons went by. Ursula, Bernard and I were tense and on guard. Only little Jo gave me happiness. The third year after my return, Bernard decided to leave. He said that he saw his future in America. The Eifel was in decline and the future bleak. Taxes were high and opportunity lacking. I could not disagree with him. Harvests had been very poor and others were leaving. Many farms and even entire villages were abandoned. I asked Bernard to consider his family; beside the land, he had family here. While he might find land elsewhere, his only family was here. All his anger and shame came out in a torrent. He despised me for leaving the battle just before the decisive defeat of the French at Waterloo. He could not accept that I chose to keep my wife and live in my house, after what he had witnessed there. He despised Ursula for taking French lovers, bringing one into the house and then bearing his child. Finally, my relationship with little Johanna was an insult to him that was too much to bear. For him family was not a warm cloak against a winter chill. It was a smothering, smelly blanket to be shaken off and discarded. It hurt me, but nothing I said could change his feelings. As he was determined,

I offered my blessing on his journey. Bernard stood for it, but without gratitude.

After Bernard left, Ursula went from being distant to being absent. As Jo grew and was able to take on more of the household chores, Ursula would leave the cottage without explanation. She spent more and more time off on her own. When I asked on an evening where she had been or what she had been doing, her hackles flew up. She bristled with hostility and accused me of accusing her of misconduct. When I pointed out that I merely had been making conversation a long argument always started about how dare I accuse her of anything. Eventually I stopped asking her about her days.

As time went on, Ursula became more like a boarder in our home. Then one day she was gone. Without saying a word, she had gathered a few items and left the house and the village. I was told she had been seen with a Prussian officer passing through Langenfeld. I was left with Jo. Jo was growing into a young woman and cheerfully performed her tasks. We were content and life was good.

As I worked the fields, I thought a lot about how my life, which had started so well and which I had expected to be prosperous and happy, had gone so differently than I had expected. I thought about my wife and son, both now gone, and on bad terms. I spent time blaming the French, the Prussians, Ursula and even Bernard for the loss of my family. If only they had not done thus and so, my life would have been happy and prosperous. Gradually, these thoughts lost their heat. I came to believe that people and nations act, and events occur, for their own reasons, even if I cannot see or understand the

reasons. Like the weather – it's not personal. All I can do is adapt to the conditions and keep my spirits up; I have fields to cultivate. What good does it do to be angry, resentful or depressed about the weather?

This attitude was much easier with regard to the French and the Prussians. It was more difficult to find peace with Ursula and Bernard. With the French or the Prussians, I felt no sense of deep hurt and betrayal when they acted as nations act. I did not like what they did to me, but I was not pierced through the heart. I had opened my heart to Ursula and Bernard and they had hurt me deeply. I may never heal that hurt completely. But I tried to find understanding and forgiveness. After all, if I carry anger and pain around with me, who am I hurting? Only myself and, of course, those around me. I had Jo in my life and she was all I had hoped for in a child. I wanted to bask in her love and return it. I did not wish to bring pain and resentment into our happy home. So, I did my best to leave pain behind and live in the present.

Then, one day, five Prussian soldiers came to the farm and arrested me. While I always knew it was possible, it was a shock when they marched up, charged me with desertion and took me away. It was worse for Jo. She witnessed their ruthless arrest, was given no leave to speak to me nor gather clothes and food for me. They took me quickly as I stood, and left Jo completely alone on the farm. I was concerned about my future and terribly worried about Jo and how she would manage alone.

Other men in Langenfeld and then other villages were arrested. We eventually learned that the Prussians had an informer, someone who had told them of the Rhinelanders

leaving the battle. It was Ursula. She had gone to them with the story and my name only. I guess she could no longer tolerate my presence in the cottage. Perhaps she feared I would try to take back my family land. But, if she thought she could simply use the Prussians to rid herself of me, she was wrong. Once they had the story and my name, they opened Ursula easily, like a ripe melon. She would probably claim they tortured her, but anyone who knew her knew that they did not. Ursula had always had a compulsion to curry favor with anyone in authority. She had been sweet and sexy with me when she wanted a marriage. Then came the French and the Prussians, so many men and opportunities for her to shine. I know it could be said that I cooperated with authority. It is true that when the French came I did as they required. Same with the Prussians. Faced with unalterable facts, I did as ordered to survive. But while I tried to avoid making unnecessary enemies, I did not set out to seduce anyone either.

It appears that once Ursula went to the Prussians about me, it wasn't long before she was giving lots of names of men who had served. She must have realized at some point that the situation was out of her control and she could not remain in Langenfeld, or anywhere in the Eifel, once the arrests started. Now I understood her abrupt departure.

All of us Rhinelanders who had left the battlefield to return home were accused of desertion. Many suspected that the reason the Prussians were pursuing us so many years later was financial. If convicted of desertion, a man's property could be confiscated by the State. With the passage of years and what we had learned later about the battle, we had thought we were free. But apparently the taxes that the Prussians extracted were not

enough.

Men gathered to talk about our defense. We could not deny walking away; but whether that was desertion, or a stroke of strategic genius was a valid question. By this time everyone knew the true story of Waterloo. After Napoleon defeated the Prussians at Ligny, he calculated that they would retreat east, up their supply lines. He sent Field Marshall Grouchy with 33,000 men and 80 cannon after them, with instructions “to keep his sword point in the Prussians’ arse.” When Grouchy caught up with his quarry he found, not the main Prussian Army, but us Rhinelanders, walking home. Realizing his mistake too late, Grouchy broke off his attack on us to search for the Prussian Army.

In the meantime, Napoleon had attacked the outnumbered Anglo-Allied Army where they had dug in after retreating the previous day. It was a desperate battle, back and forth. If Napoleon had had Grouchy's men and cannon, he would have easily overwhelmed Wellington. As it was the French were furiously assaulting the ridge yet again when the Prussian Army unexpectedly appeared on the unprotected French right flank. The Prussians rolled up the exposed French line and a rout ensued. Napoleon never saw it coming; he had believed that Grouchy was pursuing the Prussian Army away from the battle.

So, we believed that we Rhinelanders had provided the crucial element in what was a very lucky win for Wellington and Blucher. If we had not provided a false trail for Grouchy to follow exactly where he expected it to be, he would have pushed the Prussian withdrawal from Ligny into a headlong retreat, allowing Napoleon to conclusively defeat the outnumbered Wellington at Waterloo. Because we had deceived Grouchy completely,

not only was Napoleon deprived of a third of his army, he was completely surprised by the Prussian Army at the crucial moment. We Rhinelanders all deserved medals. But, were we given any credit? No. We were deserters.

Now, I am a prisoner in a makeshift camp while the Prussians decide what to do with me. I have nothing but time to look back on my life. Nothing happened as I expected; all of my plans came to nothing. I am tempted to try to make sense of it all, but I know that is futile. It is simply what happened. I cannot change it. I cannot make it fair or just. I can only make peace with it and find some joy and contentment where I may. Looking back, I had some good times and some adventures, and I have Jo.

As for now, I have no property to confiscate, thanks to Ursula. I take some satisfaction from that. My Jo will be secure with the land. She will marry and there will be children on the Frank farm again. This makes me happy when I think about the future.

The French gave us some good things. I am told that the great Voltaire wrote: "Uncertainty is uncomfortable, but certainty is absurd." My life has taught me that the only way to be content each day is to become comfortable with uncertainty. What will the Prussians do with me? I do not know, but come what will, I am at peace.