



**EXPLOITS AND  
ADVENTURES  
OF BRIGADIER  
GERARD**

**ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE**

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**INTRODUCTION BY  
GEORGE MACDONALD FRASER**

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
CLASSICS

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SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (1859–1930) was born in Edinburgh and worked as a doctor before abandoning his meager practice to take up writing. His first book, *A Study in Scarlet*, introduced the characters of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson to a wildly enthusiastic public. His subsequent works included further stories about Sherlock Holmes, among them *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes*; a pioneering work of science fiction, *The Lost World*; the historical romances *The White Company* and *Sir Nigel*; and the Napoleonic tales collected here in *Exploits and Adventures of Brigadier Gerard*.

GEORGE MACDONALD FRASER was born in England and schooled in Scotland, served in a Highland regiment in India, Africa, and the Middle East, and now lives on the Isle of Man. In addition to eleven volumes of *The Flashman Papers* and several other novels, Fraser has written screenplays, most notably for Richard Lester's *The Three Musketeers* and *The Four Musketeers* and for the James Bond film *Octopussy*.

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**nyrb**

*New York*

THIS IS A NEW YORK REVIEW BOOK  
PUBLISHED BY THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS

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Published in the United States of America by  
The New York Review of Books, 1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Doyle, Arthur Conan, Sir, 1859-1930.

The exploits and adventures of Brigadier Gerard / Arthur Conan Doyle ;  
introduction by George MacDonald Fraser.  
p. cm.

ISBN 0-940322-73-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. France—History, Military—19th century—Fiction. 2. Napoleonic  
Wars, 1800-1815—Fiction. 3. Adventure stories, English. 4. War  
stories, English. I. Title.

PR4622 .E96 2001

823'.8--dc21

00-013222

ISBN 0-940322-73-0

Cover painting: Antoine Jean Gros, *Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau*, 1808

Erich Lessing/Art Resource

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

May 2001

[www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com)

## INTRODUCTION

BRIGADIER GERARD, the swaggering little *beau sabreur* who is the pride of Napoleon's cavalry (and doesn't care who knows it), the bantam hussar whose bravery in battle and gallantry to the ladies are matched only by his conceit, is not the best-known of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's creations. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are incomparably more famous, *Sir Nigel* and *The White Company* rank second only to the historical novels of Scott and Dumas, and the irascible Professor Challenger has a special place in the pantheon as the author's personal favorite, possibly because he is a partial self-portrait. But what makes Gerard stand out from all Conan Doyle's other characters is that he is easily the most likable and the most human, one whose name is always recalled with a smile.

For one thing, he is funny, which is rare in a hero of romance, and unique among swashbucklers, and his most endearing trait is that he never even suspects it. Through all the stories in the *Exploits* and *Adventures*, a splendid catalog of secret missions, escapes, love affairs, duels, disguises, pursuits, triumphs, and occasional disasters, which he relates in his own inimitable mock-French style, Gerard sees himself as the "parfit gentil knight," the very model of a hero. As he clicks his heels and draws himself up to his dapper five foot seven, his moustache bristling at his enemies or being twirled gallantly at his latest inamorata, it never crosses his simple mind that he may be a rather comic figure whose undoubted virtues cannot conceal the fact that he is vain, touchy, obstinate, reckless, boastful, and none too bright; his

cheerful self-confidence leaves no room in his mind for doubt that he is invincible against men and irresistible to women.

But if one laughs at him it is with affection and admiration, for with all his shortcomings the plain truth is that jaunty little Gerard really is the finest swordsman, the best rider, the truest lover, the most upright gentleman, and the bravest of the brave in the whole Grande Armée. If there is a desperate venture, a vital mission, a forlorn hope, or a damsel in distress, then Gerard is the man—and the fact that he knows it, and never tires of telling the world so, is part of his charm, for beneath all the brag and swagger there is a child-like innocence and kindly spirit that make him simply one of the nicest characters in fiction. He may be funny, but he is never ridiculous, touching but never pathetic, a truly decent young man whose only real faults (if they can be so called) are that monumental conceit and an unquenchable thirst for glory. He was born out of his time, a throwback to the age of chivalry, always ready to admire a brave adversary or pity a beaten foe, a wildcat in action who can be moved to tears where the honor of France or the beauty of women are concerned.

Because he is a man of strong, straightforward emotions and honest good nature, Gerard tends to think the best of people. A paradox of his character is that he can be genuinely sensitive, usually where he feels his credit and honor are involved, yet on other occasions he has the hide of a hippo. He can readily mistake an insult for a compliment, but if he is quick to take offense he is equally ready to make gracious amends; sarcasm and irony are lost on him. Like many ingenuous folk, he is convinced of his own deep shrewdness (Gerard being cunning is visible for miles), but when he meets real subtlety, especially in female shape, he is easily taken in. He is fatally ready to judge at face value when the face is pretty, and so sure of his way with women that they can do anything with him. But even when they outwit him or fail

to be captivated, he can be magnanimous, consoling himself with the thought that in their old age they will sigh for him with tender regret.

Perhaps they will, at that, for if Gerard has all the characteristics of the funny Frenchman as seen through the eyes of Anglo-Saxon humorists and cartoonists, being small, voluble, excitable, and given to striking attitudes, he is also extremely handsome (and knows it), with his dark curls, trim moustache, soldierly bearing, and elegant cavalry figure. His manners are faultless, whether paying tribute to beauty or challenging to a duel, his dignity is never ruffled (in his own eyes, at least), his charm is unfailing—and no one is more under its spell than Gerard himself.

Conan Doyle wrote seventeen stories about this happy warrior, all but one of them being contained in the *Exploits and Adventures*; the odd one out, "The Marriage of the Brigadier," was published elsewhere, and appears to have been a careless afterthought, since it contradicts a fundamental feature of the other stories, which suggest that Gerard was a lifelong bachelor. But that kind of inconsistency never worried Conan Doyle; in one of his historical novels a character's eyes change color three times in the course of the story.

The *Exploits and Adventures* cover Gerard's career in the Napoleonic era from 1807, when as a young officer he meets Bonaparte for the first time, to the Emperor's death in 1821, but most of the episodes deal with the war from 1808, when Gerard captures Saragossa single-handed, to the crowning moment of his career at Waterloo in 1815.

Although the stories are set in one of the most colorful and spectacular of wars, in which Gerard sees action from Russia to the Peninsula, they have comparatively little to do with great battles or massed armies. Conan Doyle preferred to turn his hero loose as a solo operator, on clandestine missions and reconnaissances, hunting renegades, hiding out disguised, encountering gorgeous adventuresses, penetrating

besieged cities and mysterious fortresses, escaping frightful deaths and tortures, bodyguarding Napoleon, being captured by the Duke of Wellington in person, and breaking out of Dartmoor prison.

These two volumes show Conan Doyle the short-story writer at his best. No one ever paced a tale more expertly, or had a better sense of timing. He was a master of suspense and the unexpected, mingling cliff-hanging action and swordplay with romance, homely philosophy, and humor, this last coming from Gerard's gift of eccentric narrative and the author's expertly handled contrast between his hero's blandly egotistic view of events and what is actually happening. Among the best examples of this are the brigadier's most famous adventure in which, scouting behind enemy lines, he finds himself in the middle of a British fox-hunt, and joins in with typical uncomprehending enthusiasm, and the chapters in which, as a prisoner of war, he is initiated by his captors into the mysteries of cricket and boxing—Gerard sails through it all in blissful ignorance, viewing events with his unwavering romantic optimism, and when the crises come, displaying that reckless bravery, fighting skill, instinctive ingenuity which seems to startle him as much as it does the reader, and talent for survival which, with his sublime simplicity, have earned for him from a grateful but impatient Napoleon the title of "the thickest head and the stoutest heart" in the French army.

As one is swept along by these splendid entertainments, it is easy to overlook the unusual thing which Conan Doyle accomplished in the Gerard stories: he took his hero from the enemy side, so far as his British readers were concerned, and more than that, he made them like him. I don't know of a parallel in literature; antiheroes who enlist our sympathy are common enough, but Gerard is no antihero, but the real thing, fighting for the Corsican tyrant and the detested French who had been potential invaders within living memory when

Conan Doyle published the *Exploits*, and even today are not notably popular north of the Channel. Of course Gerard was funny, and the English-speaking public could follow his adventures in the comforting knowledge that it all came right at Waterloo anyway; even so, it is testimony to the skill of the author, and the engaging character of his creation, that true-blue British Victorians and Anglophile Americans rooted for Gerard all the way.

They still do, and probably always will, and one of the reasons is that Arthur Conan Doyle was touched with genius. It is not a word that is commonly applied to him; the literary hierarchy takes a patronizing view of him as a "popular" rather than "serious" writer, as though the terms were mutually exclusive. His admirers can rest their case on the claim that the man who invented, in Sherlock Holmes, the most famous character in all fiction, has no need of highbrow approval.

And they might justly add that it takes an uncommon talent, and a good heart, to create as timeless a character as his dashing, gallant little brigadier, who seems to embody all that is brightest in the human spirit: a Rupert of Hentzau without evil, a Casanova without vice, an Alan Breck without guile, who, if his world sometimes fails to recognize his brilliance, can take it with a careless shrug, secure in his worship of honor, women, France, Napoleon—and Etienne Gerard.

—GEORGE MACDONALD FRASER