

Illustrated Interviews.

LXIX.—M. EDOUARD DETAILLE.

THE GREATEST LIVING BATTLE PAINTER.

BY MARIE A. BELLOC.



NATIONAL army, like a crowned head, cannot make any direct reply to criticism or to insult, and those of her chiefs who come forward as her apologists are, not unnaturally, accused of partiality or of actual complicity in the abuses which are laid to her door. Those Englishmen and Englishwomen who find it hard at the present time to believe that anything good can come out

but who went through that dread experience at a most impressionable age. That he should have retained throughout the last thirty years so noble and, indeed, so heroic a conception of the episodes which went to make up "The Terrible Year" says much not only for the man himself, but also for his comrades in arms, the more so that it has been his fate to picture for future generations not a victorious but a vanquished army.

To the casual visitor introduced by some



From a]

M. DETAILLE IN HIS STUDIO.

[Photograph.

of France should study, if only for a brief space, the life-work of Edouard Detaille, the greatest military painter of modern days, who though, as yet, in the prime of life, has already achieved an imperishable record of his country's past and present military history.

M. Detaille is the only military painter now living who not only served in the ranks and commanded as an officer during, perhaps, the greatest war of modern days,

happy chance into the vast pine-panelled studio which is situated just off one of the quietest and most spacious of Parisian boulevards M. Detaille would seem a soldier rather than a painter. His tall, well-knit figure gives the impression of a man who devotes most of his time to the pursuit of athletic exercises and outdoor sports, and this is so far the case that his painting probably owes not a little of its life-like character to the fact that, whenever it be

possible, he makes his preliminary studies in the open air, and preferably on the very spot where the incident he is recording actually took place.

"I owe my first love of, and interest in, the army to the fact that my grandfather was closely connected with the administrative side of Napoleon I.'s military life; it was to him that the Emperor intrusted the management of some of the most important of his transports, and my great-aunt was Madame Garnier, the wife of the Admiral Ducrest de Villeneuve. Thus my childhood was spent among those to whom the very word 'l'Empereur' conveyed magic memories, and while all the world around us was discussing the Crimean War, or, later, the Italian campaign, my forebears were still fighting the Napoleonic battles over again, and recalling to one another stories of a far more heroic age than the present seemed to them to be."

"I suppose you early made up your mind to become a soldier?"

"No, indeed," answered M. Detaille, quickly; "my one ambition was always to be an artist. At the time when I had the good fortune to enter Meissonier's studio France was at peace, and no warning shadows presaged 1870. In 1867—that is to say, when I was nineteen—I exhibited at the Salon a highly finished study of Meissonier's studio. Encouraged by a modest success, I next year ventured to show a military painting, 'The Drummer's Halt,' but, of course, I need hardly tell you that this piece of work, as, indeed, all those of my military studies done before the Franco-Prussian War, was an effort of imagination. In those days I had no leaning to any particular form of art. Like most young painters, I wished to study everything. Then came the spring and summer of 1870. I think," continued M. Detaille, slowly, "that it is impossible for any Englishman, however sympathetic and intuitive be his perceptions, to realize what such a struggle as the Franco-Prussian War meant to those engaged in it. You must suppose before you can understand even in a remote degree what a Frenchman feels concerning '*l'année terrible*'—you must suppose your own country, your own beautiful home counties, your pretty, peaceful English towns, overrun by an invader who, in spite of your desperate efforts, gains ground steadily, until he is able to impose what you yourself consider intolerable and unfair conditions. Such a war becomes in an incredibly short space of time a national conflict, in which personal and

political differences are brushed aside, and every able-bodied man is simply in his own eyes, and in those of his fellows, a defender of his country."

M. Detaille has every right to speak as a representative Frenchman, for, though he was himself doubly exempt from military service, both as being the eldest son of a widow and as having a brother a soldier, he lost not a moment in volunteering in the 4th Company of the 8th Battalion of Mobiles, and it was in this capacity that he was present at many of the notable sorties and skirmishes round Paris; he also took part in the Battle of Champigny, of which he afterwards executed a famous panorama.

"I suppose you never wholly merged the painter in the soldier?"

"No; I must admit that my happiest moments were spent in sketching under fire. My excuse must be that to any artist there would have been something absorbingly interesting in the lurid scenes by which I was constantly surrounded. And yet," he added, thoughtfully, "war and its attendant horrors are not really picturesque, and, though I am so far a realist that I abhor the presentation in pictorial art of what is not true, I hold most strongly that certain battle-scenes ought not to be shown in all their naked horror on canvas. I will give you one example. Take what occurs immediately after a battle. Many such scenes are ineffaceably impressed upon my mind, but, interesting as it would be from some points of view to reconstitute the picture, what can be more cruel and, it may be added, more useless than to do so? In every disfigured corpse, in every armless and legless trunk, those whose loved ones have died a glorious death would see a terrible vision of the 'may have been.' The only time I ever attempted to give that touch of real horror to a picture was in a painting of mine, entitled '*Un Coup de Mitrailleuse*,' in reality a reconstitution of what I once saw in a hollow lane—namely, a mass of soldiery, dismembered and blown to pieces by a shell."

"And as time goes on, do not your impressions of what then occurred become more or less blurred?"

"No, indeed; on the contrary, certain scenes and certain episodes tend to become clearer, especially those, I am glad to say, which reveal the soldier in a heroic and in a touching light. As was perhaps not unnatural, bitterness overcame every feeling during the first few months and years which



[By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.

"SALUTING THE WOUNDED."

From the Picture by M. Detaille.]



From the Picture by]

"THE BATTERY TO THE FRONT!—1870."

[M. Detaille.

By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.

followed the war. At the close of the war, just before the Commune broke out, I went to Holland; but on my return, finding my country was still in the occupation of the Germans, I painted, as a result, two pictures, one of which was entitled 'The Conquerors.' Although it was sent to the Salon of 1872, the Government ordered it not to be shown."

"I suppose you are not one of those who deprecate war, and who would like to see the great international struggles of the world fade away in universal peace?"

"It is impossible for one who has fought in a war not to realize that warfare brings out, as it were, the heroism of which the world is always in need. I could tell you many incidents of simple, sober, bourgeois being transformed by their country's danger into true heroes. I would even go so far as

to say that defeat has its noble attributes. How many men I have seen go to their death animated by the spirit which inspired the splendid verses of Paul Déroulède, whom it has now become the fashion to laugh at and revile:—

En avant ! Tant pis
pour qui tombe ;
La mort n'est rien.
Vive la tombe !
Quand le pays en sort
vivant !
En avant !"

"I suppose I need hardly ask you if you approve of conscription?"

"On the whole, I do not," was the unexpected answer. "Rightly or wrongly, I have always held the theory that a commander finds it far more easy to manage a small army of highly-trained troops than a huge, unwieldy mass of men who,

whatever be their willingness and individual valour, have not received the kind of training which goes to make a good soldier. I feel this to be particularly the case in these days of modern warfare, when every month we hear of some modification not only in the type of arm actually used, but in the more complicated pieces of artillery."

"Do you believe that the motor-car and the cycle will play any very great part in the wars of the twentieth century?"

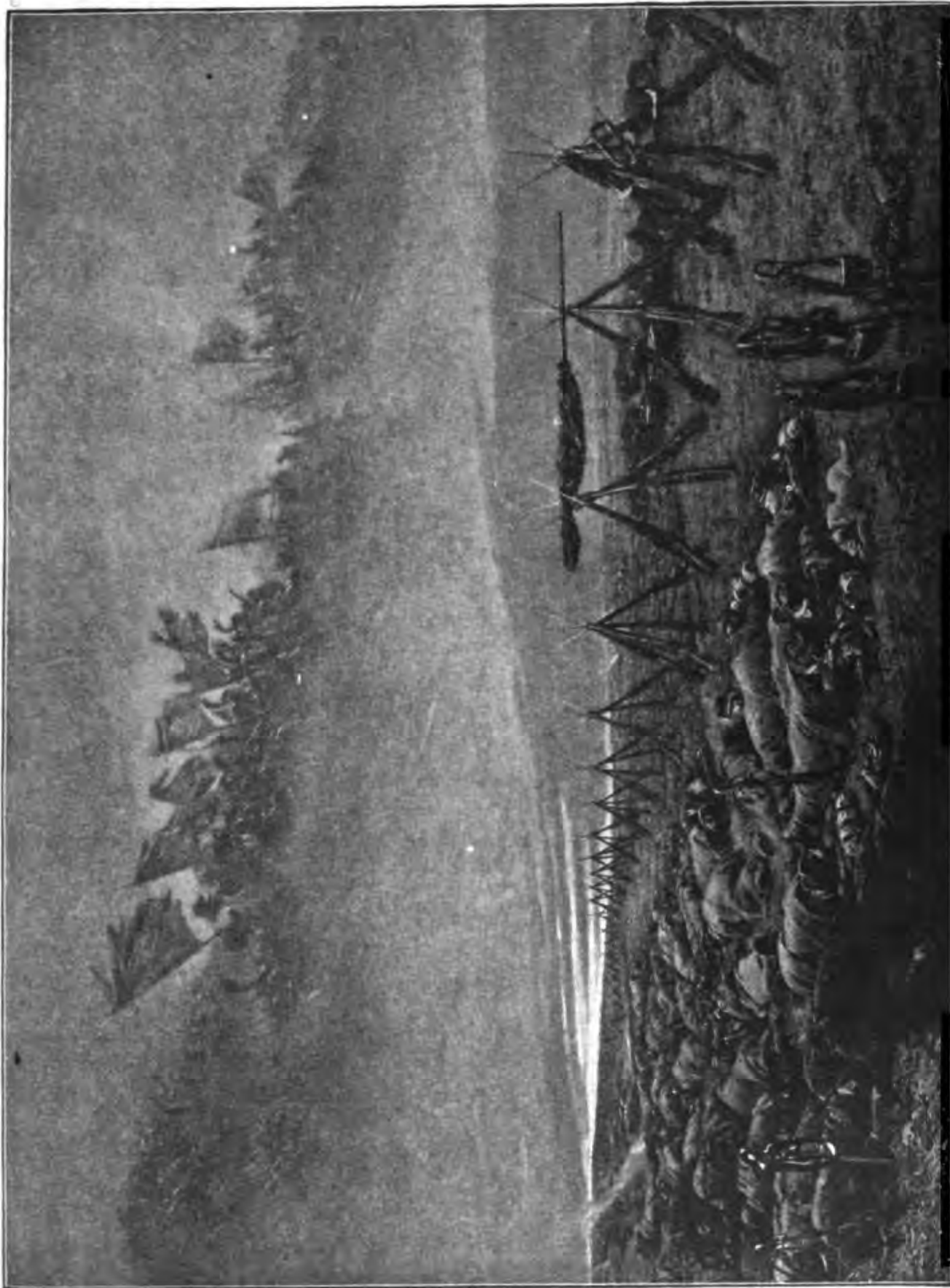
"Here again I do not much believe in the triumph of machines over humanity. Even nowadays what tells in modern warfare is, first, leadership; and, secondly, right down physical courage; and my imagination cannot conceive a battle in which these two agencies would not each play a preponderant part in deciding the fortunes of the day."

"I suppose you have not seen actual warfare since the Franco-Prussian War?"

"Well, in 1881 I obtained leave from our Minister of War to join a brigade in the Tunis campaign. Of course this little

North Africa, while the Arabs make, as you are probably aware, ideal soldiery."

"Are you familiar with the appearance and the personnel of the English and of the other great non-French armies?"



[By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.]

"THE SOLDIER'S DREAM."

From the Picture by M. Detaille.]

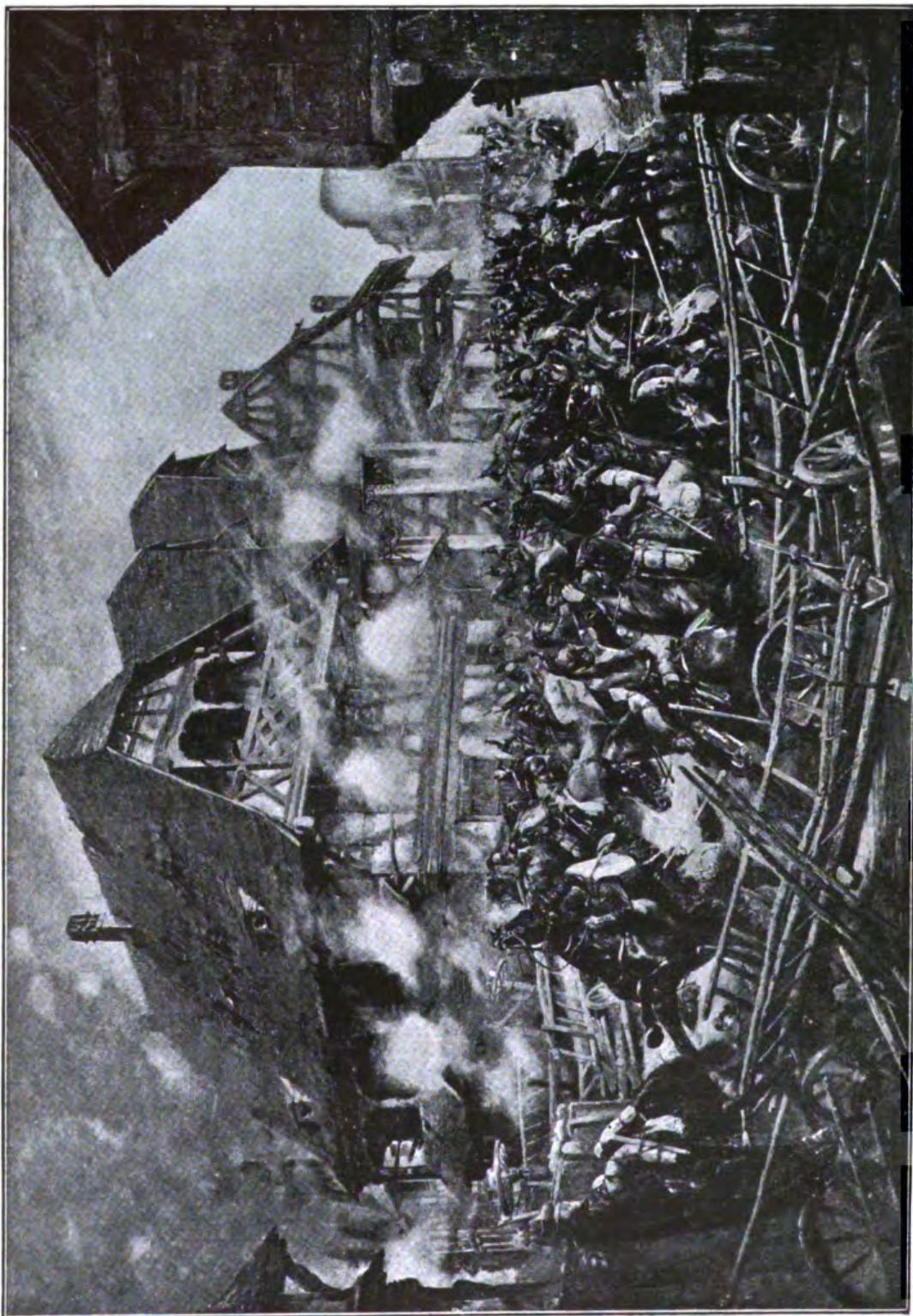
expedition was extremely interesting to me as being quite unlike anything to which I was already accustomed, and from an artistic point of view there could not be a more picturesque and striking background than

Vol. xix.—18.

"Yes, I have made a special study of what may be grouped together as the modern military world. My first visit to England," he added, smiling, "was when I was only five years of age, and I spoilt our passport by draw-

Original from

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



From the Picture by M. Detaille.]

"CHARGE OF THE 9TH CUIRASSIERS AT MORSBRÖNN."

[By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.]

ing little pictures all over it. But since that far-off day I have been constantly across the Channel, and I think I can claim to have made a very special study of the British Army. This was made the more easy owing to the great courtesy and kindness both of the Prince of Wales and of the Duke of Connaught."

"I believe you have done a portrait of the two Royal brothers, which is now in the Queen's possession?"

"Yes; and this, I may say, was the first large portrait work of the kind I ever attempted. This picture was given by the Prince of Wales to the Queen as a Jubilee gift, and I found the painting of it very

Original from
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

interesting. I often regret that we do not see more equestrian portraits nowadays; to my thinking, a man never looks to more advantage than when on horseback."

"I suppose it would be invidious to ask you what you think of our leading military painters?"

"On the contrary, I am keenly interested in the really splendid black and white work which has been done during the last few years by those who so modestly style themselves war specials and war sketchers; but still I must admit that I was surprised, when I first went to England, to find how comparatively few military painters there were, and especially to discover that the great military artist of that day was a lady; I refer, of course, to the brilliant painter of 'The Roll Call'; then again, I greatly admire the fine work of Caton Woodville. I cannot help thinking that if ever British artists had a chance of seeing war at home, there would be founded in England a wonderful school of military painting. I cannot fancy any army more interesting from the painter's point of view than the British Army. Of course, one thing which strikes the foreigner pleasantly in London is the London soldiery. Tommy Atkins seems to be ubiquitous, and it is wonderful to think that the smart, well-turned-out young fellow, who is the cynosure of all eyes, was perhaps only yesterday the idle good-for-nothing, who seemed determined to settle down to no honest work, that most miserable of God's creatures.

"As to whether I have ever done any large paintings of British military life, I can claim to have exhibited three—one, 'The Scots Guards Returning from Drill'; another, 'The Tower of London,' in which I made use of the highly picturesque and beautiful uniform of the Yeomen of the Guard; and, thirdly, a somewhat realistic presentment of a recruiting station near the Houses of Parliament. Both when following the manœuvres at Aldershot and when in London, I sketched incessantly at the various picturesque types of the British Army. By the courtesy of the officer commanding I was allowed to make a number of special studies of the Horse Guards' equipment, the uniform, breastplate, harness, knapsack, and so on."

"And have you made an equally exhaustive study of any other European army?"

"Yes, of that of Russia; for, in 1884, Alexander III. invited me to the camp of Krasnoe Selo, and for an unforgettable six weeks I accompanied my Imperial host everywhere, receiving not only from him, but

from all his entourage, innumerable courtesies and kindnesses. I worked exceedingly hard, and fortunately for me there were no great ceremonies to distract my attention, for we all lived, from the Emperor to the youngest drummer-boy, the life of soldiers. Of course the Russian army is very distinctive; thus, in Russia alone the peasant's costume as now worn may be said to have been the prototype of the modern Russian soldier's uniform, and each regiment is only distinguished by what appear to the non-Russian eye quite insignificant distinctions.

"Another curious peculiarity of the Russian army is that there—as must have been the case in the great mediæval armies—is to be found every kind of mount. This, of course, makes it peculiarly interesting from an artistic point of view."

"I suppose, M. Detaille, that you have made a very special study of the Napoleonic legions?"

"Yes, or perhaps it would be truer to say that I have made a special study of the French army throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, of course, during these two hundred years the Napoleonic epoch stands out supreme."

"Your historical work must involve an immense amount of study and research," I observed, looking round the great studio, certain portions of which might well be sections of a military museum, for M. Detaille is constantly adding to his collection of uniforms and arms.

"Yes, an historical painter must be prepared to go through a good deal of drudgery which, though interesting in itself, does not directly bear on his art. When I was preparing for my large picture, 'The Surrender of the Heroic Huningue Garrison,' I not only went to the place itself, but I took endless pains to discover a plan and sketches of the old fortified town. In order to achieve this I put myself in communication with the principal residents of Huningue, many of whom kindly assisted me by looking among their family papers. Again, it was only by diligent seeking that I discovered the, in most cases, private family portraits of the principal defenders of the heroic city; and I had to go to Vienna for the portraits of the Austrian generals who acted in so chivalrous a manner to their defeated enemy."

"Then even during your holidays you never lose sight of your work?"

"Yes, in spite of the good old English proverb, 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,' I consider that any artist, and



"THE PRINCE OF WALES AND THE DUKE OF CONNAUGHT AT ALDERSHOT."

From the Picture by M. Detaille. By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris. Copyright, 1897, by Jean Boussod, Manzi, Joyant & Co., Paris.

especially I would say any young artist, must give himself up entirely to his art. People thoroughly realize this fact in the case of a man who has charge of a large financial business; how much more should it be true when such an art as painting is in question? The artist must never be content with '*l'à peu près*,' that is to say, 'the pretty well.' What is worth doing at all is worth doing well."

"Then I suppose each of your paintings means an extraordinary amount of preparation in the way of preliminary sketches?"

"Yes, and no. I never begin a piece of work until I have mentally completed every detail. In this I suppose my method is not unlike that pursued by the musician who

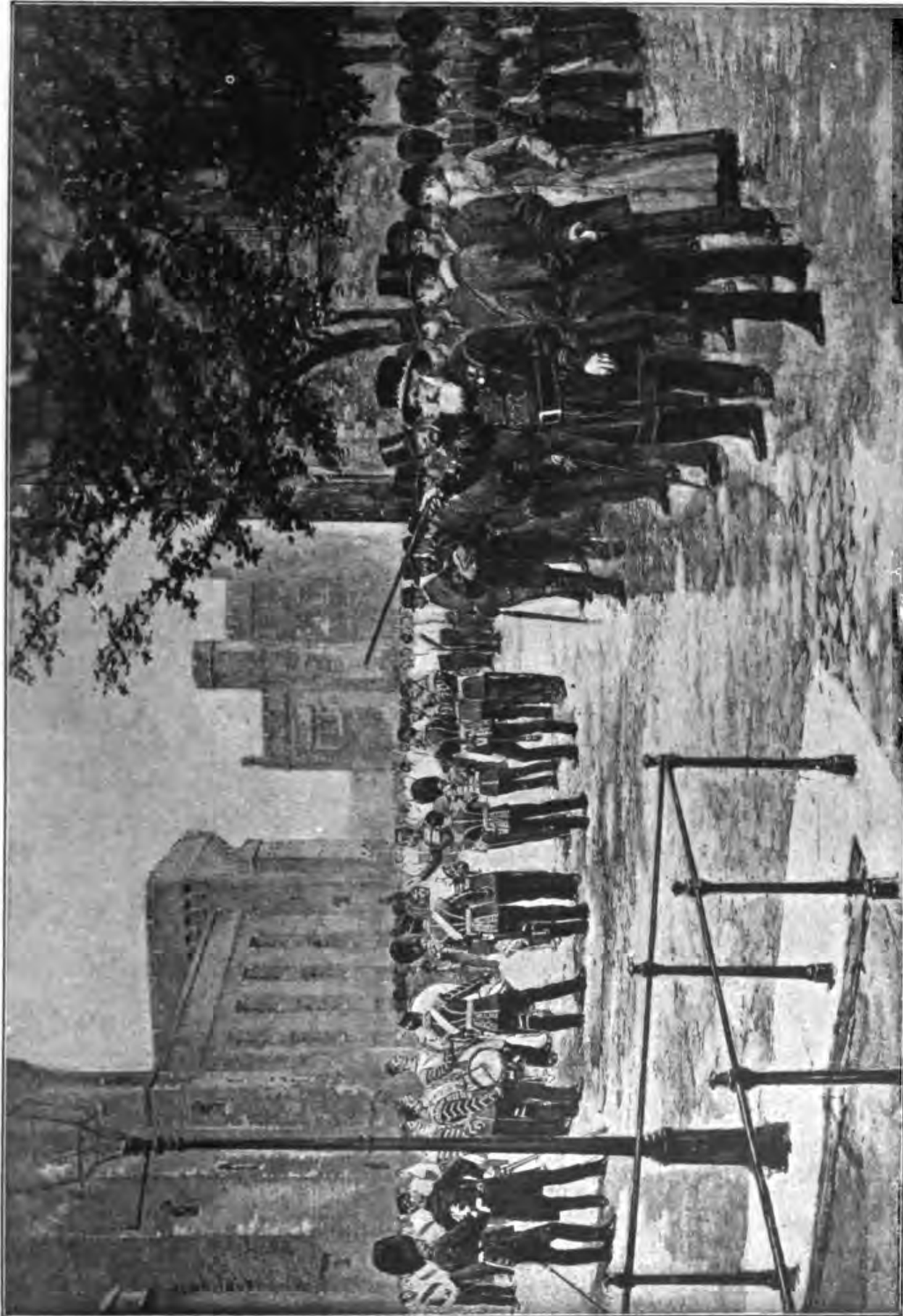
composes without the assistance of an instrument. Some of my pictures have been thought out very rapidly; others have taken years before I saw them, as it were, quite clearly focused in my mind. I rarely modify my original conception. Unlike many of my comrades, whose pictures, however, I must confess, do not seem to suffer from their lack of method and careless manner of working, I leave nothing to chance, and whenever it be possible, I paint directly from Nature. I find it far easier to paint in the country than in town. I do not believe in the system of making an immense number of sketches and studies, for personally I should lose all my *en train* if my work consisted of a series of more or less elaborate copies from

a preliminary sketch. When working at a battlefield, whether my painting be an easel picture or a panorama, I settle myself in where the action actually took place, and so at least insure the accuracy of the landscape."

"And what first made you turn your attention to panorama?"

"I have always delighted in making

experiments, and when my friend, Alphonse de Neuville, and myself were asked to undertake a panorama of the Battle of Champigny, we made up our minds that it would be an interesting experiment. And the result more than fulfilled our expectations, for it taught me, at least, to paint on a much larger scale than I had ever done before; but I need hardly tell you that it involved a very



[By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.]

"THE TOWER OF LONDON."

From the Picture by M. Detaille.]

great deal of heavy work, the more so that we did every inch of the painting ourselves with the exception of certain portions of the sky."

Those who had the good fortune of seeing the panorama in question will never forget

that staff officers belonging to every nation in the world came to Paris on purpose to see it. And equally successful was another panorama of M. Detaille's, namely, the Battle of Rezonville.

"In this panorama I tried," he observed,



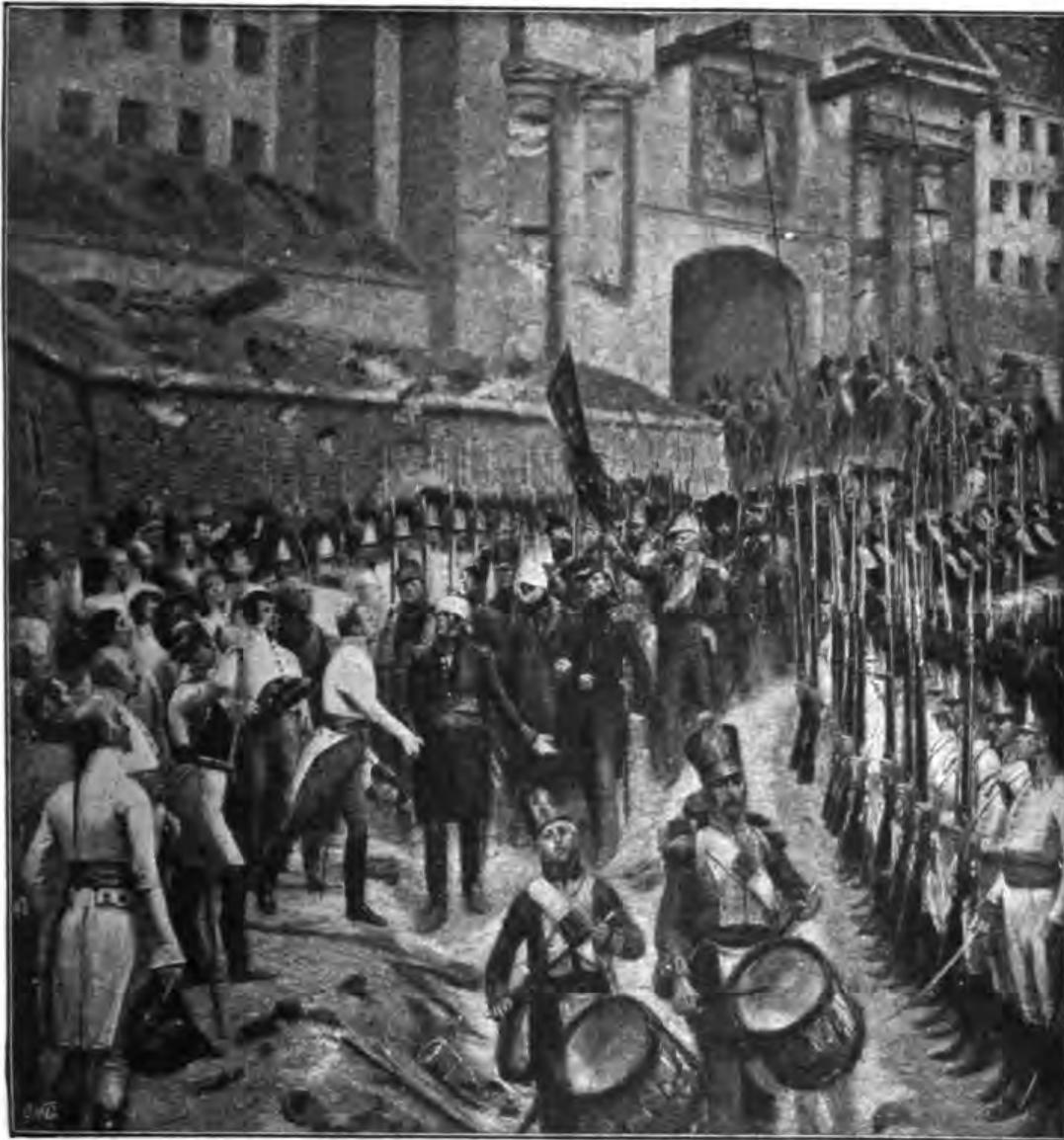
[By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris.]

"THE SCOTS GUARDS RETURNING FROM DRILL"

From the Picture by M. Detaille.]

this wonderful reconstitution of a battlefield. The moment chosen by the two artists was three o'clock in the afternoon of the second day of the battle (December 2nd, 1870). So astonishing and remarkable was the result,

"to show a battlefield as it really is, and I chose the hour of 7.30 p.m., for I considered it would then be more easy to express the strange, silent twilight that falls on such a scene—for when the fighting is



From the Picture by

"SURRENDER OF THE GARRISON OF HUNINGUE—1815."

[*M. Detaille.*

By permission of Goupil & Co., Paris. Copyright, 1893, by Boussois, Valadon & Co., Paris.

hardest, that is between the thunder of the artillery and the sharp rifle detonations, descends a silence which may be felt. Personally I preferred the panorama of Rezonville to that of Champigny, for I consider that in it a far more real impression of what actually took place was conveyed to the spectator."

"I suppose you have not had much occasion to turn your attention to the humorous side of army life?"

"I admit I have more or less left that side of military life to my brilliant young friend, Caran d'Ache, but of course I have done

innumerable sketches showing the lighter side of military life. Laughter and tears have always been closely connected, and when I look back on the Franco-Prussian War, I remember many incidents which may be regarded from either point of view. It pains me to see any army, French or foreign, caricatured in a disagreeable and insolent manner; on the other hand, it must be admitted that both Tommy Atkins and our own Piou-Piou often lend themselves—in times of peace, be it said—to the exercise of a little gentle ridicule."