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Castle Oron

The Cuirassier's Armour



A cuirassier is a heavily equipped and armed military horse rider. The cuirassiers were protected by a cuirass, hence their name. The first cuirassiers appeared in France in 1665.

The armour on display:

While unsuccessfully fought against from the inside, the French Second Empire was to crumble from the outside, due to the war with Prussia, which was declared on July 19th, 1870. Indeed, following the defeats at Reichsoffen, Gravelotte and Sedan, Napoleon III surrendered on September 2nd. We know about the extraordinary patriotic and republican convulsive effort that ensued, with mass enrolment of volunteers equipped with odds and ends, and without real training of efficient communications means. Opposed to Prussian professionalism, the army of the East, nicknamed "Bourbaki Army", set to free Belfort, loses the battle at Héricourt on January 17, 1871. Hun-

ger, a cold and hard winter and the incompetence of command completed the deed. Having dealt in railways for a long time, Adolphe Gaïffe met his cohort from Marseilles, Louis-Charles Freycinet, all the sudden the improvised minister of war within the national defence government and thus having to face rout and disorder. Without any specific instruction, Freycinet entrusts Gaïffe with a mission: to do in Switzerland whatever is possible to help the retreating army and the Republic. Adolphe Gaïffe reveals the depth of his character in this situation: without real orders, having to improvise everything in a happy-go-lucky way, he negotiates the arrival in Switzerland of the Bourbaki Army, which is not obvious as this troop is hit by smallpox and typhus. Thanks to his successful discharge of this mission, 87,847 retreating men, 11,800 horses and 285 cannons found a refuge in Switzerland on January 31st, and were disarmed on February 1st. Adolphe Gaïffe was commissioned to take on this mission because he owns the castle of Oron in the Vaud canton since August 1870. This business causes a great shock to him. What unsettles him is not so much the soldiers' distress, as he became aware of it during the preceding months, as the quality of the welcome extended to them, despite the legitimate fear of smallpox and typhus, in a Switzerland which is far from being as prosperous as it is today: a huge impetus of solidarity by associations, the cantonal authorities and the Swiss federal army transformed schools, churches and temples into makeshift hospitals to care for the 12,000 sick and wounded. Warm-hearted and generous individuals welcome the vanquished in their homes despite the risk of contagion. Adolphe Gaïffe will stay on the ground several months to take part in the repatriation of the living and the burying of the dead will come to consider Switzerland as his heart's fatherland. The Gaïffe mandate will end on August 22nd, 1872 when the last artillery pieces stashed in Switzerland are shipped back to France.

The armour on display is probably a gift bestowed on Adolphe Gaïffe on this occasion.

